Moving up to a broader stage

Fresh from winning a coveted Yale scholarship, playwright Amelia Roper is intent on shaking up Australian theatre, writes Robin Usher.

AMELIA Roper is so fresh-faced that she still gets asked for her ID in bars, but her youthful appearance belies the maturity of her artistic concerns. Roper is on a mission to change the course of Australian theatre and has suddenly become much better placed to achieve her aims.

She believes she is the first Australian to win a scholarship to study theatre at Yale University in the United States. She will combine this with an Australia Council mentorship scheme to work with New York playwright Will Eno on her latest play in August.

Both are stunning achievements for a 27-year-old playwright who has yet to have her work presented by a mainstage company, but she is not taking either of them for granted.

“I know it is a real privilege because it means that someone else didn’t get the chances that I have,” she says. “They make me feel humble and with a huge sense of responsibility.”

She is keen to explore the great feat of American migrant involvement in the arts during her studies. She says this is very different to Melbourne theatre, which is dominated by white actors and male directors.

“‘Theatre for me should always offer an alternative national vision that attracts people who feel uncomfortable with the world they see in the tabloids and on TV,’ she says.

“Theatre should be bolder and braver. We don’t need artists to have answers but we need them to have the ideas.”

The Monash University history and theatre graduate won her first playwriting competition seven years ago. She has since written three full-length plays, won two national awards and worked as a lighting designer on shows in the Adelaide and Melbourne international arts festivals.

Her plays include Big Sky Town, which was on last year’s VCE drama syllabus and had two seasons at the Arts Centre, as well as a regional tour.

Her latest, Hong Kong Dinosaur, was an emerging artist commission at the Melbourne Theatre Company.

The manuscript was also central to her Yale success. The Connecticut institution only awards three postgraduate theatre scholarships a year and they usually go to Americans. But Roper won her place after making a shortlist of nine and being interviewed last month.

She says the play, which features a multiracial cast, partly arose from the anger she feels at Australia’s big theatre companies presenting work that does not reflect the diversity of contemporary culture. “It is the artist’s job to contribute to defining what our country is. I think the audiences will be bigger if people are offered stories that reflect the multicultural world they come from.”

The contrast with the American tradition is marked. “New York was ready for Show Boat in 1927,” she says, referring to the musical that featured the then-radical concept of interracial marriage. “Show Boat, West Side Story and South Pacific all use stories of cross-racial romance to articulate racial inequality in America. We need to give our audiences more respect because they are open to being challenged by new ideas.”

But she says her first priority as a writer is to entertain, and she hopes to learn how to do that better during the next three years at Yale. “You can’t convince people of anything if they aren’t being entertained.”

Her US trip will begin with Eno working on the play under the Australia Council’s mentoring scheme, JUMP. This will culminate in a rehearsed reading in New York.

Roper met Eno at a playwriting workshop he conducted at the MTC earlier this year and after a week he agreed to be part of the scheme. Eno, who wrote the international hit Thom Pain (based on nothing), was in Melbourne for the premiere of another of his works, Lady Grey.

“We are very different stylistically but I think our hopes for what art can achieve in the world are similar,” says Roper. “We share the same sense of artistic responsibility.”

Roper plans to return to Melbourne when she has completed her master’s degree at Yale. “There is so much I want to do and America has enough of its own writers to tell its stories.”

Amelia Roper’s Camberwell House is being produced by Forty Forty Home at Footscray’s Dog Theatre along with To See Her by Laura Jean McKay, until Saturday. Book at thedogtheatre.com.
Amelia Roper will be mentored by famed New York playwright Will Eno on her latest play.