

# The complexities of success and failure in 'cosi'



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Set in the 1970s, against a backdrop of social and cultural revolution in terms of the feminist and anti-Vietnam movements in Australia, Louis Nowra's play 'Cosi', focuses on the lives of a few individuals. By exploring the situation and characters of specific mental patients in an institution in Melbourne who represent society's idea of "failures", Nowra encourages the audience to question their ideas regarding success and failure. The contrast between the patients and Nick, a "successful" and "normal" character draws attention to Nick's failure as an individual due to his lack of empathy. Furthermore, raising the question of whether the patients' production of 'Cosi Fan Tutte' is a success allows Nowra to further explore the complexities of success and failure. Through these elements, Nowra seems to contend that valuing individuals with empathy and kindness constitutes true success, and recognition from society or societal change is not a true success unless it first achieves this.

While Roy tells Henry, "you're a failure as a human being and as a lawyer", Nowra suggests that the patients are not failures, as their current situations are due largely to the faults of others. Ruth's situation, in which she is "in and out of mental institutions", can be seen as a consequence of her boyfriend's abuse when he "used to tie (her) up in the cupboard" so she "wouldn't run away". Ruth's uncertainty regarding the number of knots around her wrists, "three or four", suggest that at the time she did not notice these tiny details. Thus it seems that this traumatic experience may have caused her "obsessive personality". Far from depicting Ruth as a failure, Nowra suggests that she is merely a victim, suffering from her boyfriend's failure to fulfil his role as a loving boyfriend: as Ruth says, "he

only wanted me for sex". In contrast to Roy's view of Henry, Nowra, suggests that given the stress of being a "lawyer", coupled with his wife's "infidelity", his break down was understandable. He does not seem to contend that this makes Henry a failure, merely depicts it as sad for Henry. While Julie's suffering from the side effects of drugs may be seen as self-inflicted, Nowra does not condemn her as a failure, but rather encourages the audience's sympathy towards her. He suggests that her life must have been very hard as drugs are the only thing that can make her feel "living", and the difficulty of her life is again hinted at when she tells Lewis that her parents' reaction to her drug addiction was to "commit" her to the institution. Thus, through the presence of the patients, representatives of society's idea of "failures", Nowra examines the complexities of success and failure, suggesting that the patients have not failed as the events that led to their situation were largely beyond their control.

While Lewis contends that "no one is a success or a failure", Nowra depicts Nick as the only character who really does fail. A successful character in society's terms, Nick eventually becomes "a Labour MP in the upper house". However, he is shown to be a flawed character. His arrogance is demonstrated to hinder him from caring about or bothering to understand other people. Dismissing the patients as "nuts", when Henry becomes upset by Nick's support of the "Viet Comm", Nick shows lack of understanding of the patients by saying to Lewis "you'd better get some nurses". Extremely self-centred, Nick only values people for how he can benefit from them. This can be seen by his womanising comment regarding Julie, "she's not half bad", and his affair with Lucy. His selfishness and arrogance are most

obvious when Nick seems surprised that Lewis is upset by Nick's affair with Lucy, "she's not possessive about you, I'm not possessive about her, what's the fuss?" What makes Nick's flaws inexcusable is, with his education, and the talents and intelligence he is shown to have, he should know better.

While the patients are shown to be victims of unfortunate backgrounds, Nick has no such excuse. Thus, through examining Nick's character, Nowra explores success and failure and suggests that, in success, societal recognition is not as important as understanding, and caring for the individuals around you.

By raising the question of whether the patients' production of 'Cosi Fan Tutte' is a success and comparing it to Nick's moratorium, Nowra examines the constituents of "success". It is Roy who brings up whether "Cosi Fan Tutte" will or will not be a success, saying to Henry "Cosi offers you a chance to do something successful at least once in your dismal life." Nick and Lucy scoff at the idea of "Cosi Fan Tutte" being a success as they are preoccupied with the moratorium and other projects that society view as "meaningful". However, the success of "Cosi Fan Tutte" seems not to lie in the effect it has on society, but as Justin states the effect it has on the individual patients: the aim being to "bring them out of their shells". Nowra suggests that the popular idea of success does not involve caring about individuals. Justin says one cannot "learn anything" "about people" "at a university", suggesting that the elite who run universities, and society in general, do not value individuals. Lewis' initial failure to recognise the potential "success" of the project, claiming that he is merely "doing it for the money", seems to stem from a view of success similar to Nick's.

However, his later realisation that 'Cosi Fan Tutte' is "more important" than the moratorium, indicates an appreciation for the individuals that he is helping. Thus, through examining whether "Cosi Fan Tutte is a success Nowra explores the constituents of "success", seeming to support the idea that helping individuals is more important than gaining the admiration of society.

The complexities of success and failure are explored in depth in 'Cosi'. While Nowra does not seem to completely corroborate Lewis' assertion that "no one is a success or a failure", he does condone a view of success and failure different to that generally accepted by society. By contending that the mental patients are not failures, Nowra suggests that unfortunate, uncontrollable circumstances, cannot make someone a failure. Conversely, it is Nick's numerous amounts of opportunity and his talents that make his failure to care about other people so inexcusable. Through Nick, Nowra suggests that societal recognition is not as important as understanding, and caring for the individuals around you. This idea is further emphasised through the comparison between the 'success' of the moratorium and the 'success' of 'Cosi Fan Tutte', whereby Nowra suggests that valuing individuals is more important than 'radicalising the nation', or gaining recognition from society.