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# Don't come the raw prawn over creative rights



**DAVID  
WILLIAMSON**

**A** lot of people used to say to me, “you’re lucky to have this gift” — people who declare they are not creative and could never do what I do. And yes, I may have been lucky enough to have been gifted some native talents, but the ability to be able to do what I do, to create unique voices, to craft humour and emotional punch on the page, didn’t appear magically the first time I sat down at a typewriter.

It was a hard-won and often emotionally demanding learning curve. In short, it was hard work — as any other artist who has achieved success, like Jessica Mauboy or Jimmy Barnes, Baz Luhrmann, Leah Purcell or Ivan Sen, could tell you.

And the hard work isn’t over after you’ve had your first success. Let me give you a quick reality check. With any creative work brought to the stage, there has been years of development time — usually not paid (unless a grant has come along).

Once a play does go on to a stage, there is a payment, and then potentially some other channels to receive an income — for instance, if the play is studied in the classroom, like *The Removalists*, which I wrote in 1971, I

might receive a copyright royalty.

That’s because Australia has an education copyright licence that allows every student, teacher and school access to everything ever published.

Education systems pay the Copyright Agency about 30c per week per student for all this access.

The Agency then surveys teachers and pays the creators whose work has been copied. For playwrights, this helps sustain our practice. But it’s not just plays, it’s poems, short stories, journalism, illustrations, science, maths and English resources.

It’s everything from documentaries like *First Australians* to the homegrown international export *Mathletics*; creative content supporting the next generation of business

people, leaders, artists, engineers, doctors, nurses and teachers.

So when high-powered economists, chairs, commissioners and, even recently, Wikipedia, bang on about entrenched players wanting to protect their copyright, I see red.

Copyright is the cornerstone of creativity in this country and those who create original work have a right over that work to say whether or not it can be exploited by someone else.

There are people who want to change that and they are backed by global technology giants whose business model is to free-ride on the coattails of others because the algorithm is more important than the content.

These big-tech players want to

water down copyright so it’s easier for

them to use the work of playwrights, songwriters and authors for free or for minimum payment.

Don’t come the raw prawn with me, as Barry Humphries would say.

I grew up watching everything from *Skippy* to *Mad Max*, listening to *Cold Chisel*, laughing with *Magda’s Pixie-Anne* and being taken on an epic journey by *Tom Keneally*.

Those creations, those people, all rely on the Australian copyright system to do its job, so making poorly considered changes will undermine all that. It’s a fair system, it employs people and it ensures we hear our own voices in this homogenising world.

David Williamson AO is one of Australia’s best-known and successful playwrights. He has won 11 AWGIE awards and four AFI awards.