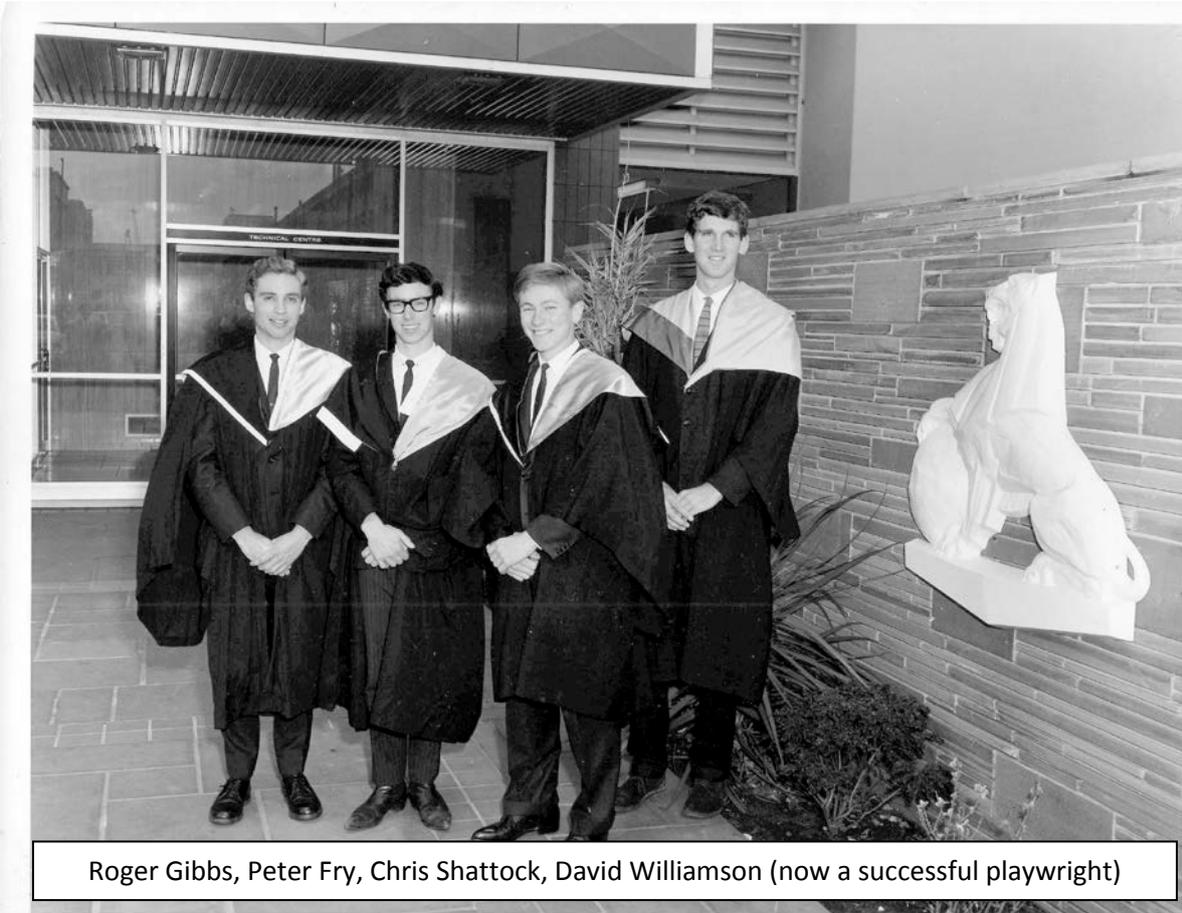


Four Young Engineers – 1965



Roger Gibbs, Peter Fry, Chris Shattock, David Williamson (now a successful playwright)

My useless Holden days

DAVID WILLIAMSON - MY FIRST JOB

TO say I wasn't suited to my first job as a design engineer at General Motors Holden in Fisherman's Bend, Melbourne is a huge understatement. I'd just graduated from Monash University in mechanical engineering, in which I had no interest. When I arrived on my first day as an engineering student and looked around at a collection of large greasy machines in the lab I felt a wave of repulsion that still occurs when I'm near mechanical objects. I had an old car but I had never looked under the bonnet. I knew that petrol burned, pistons went up and down and that was about it. At school, under the influence of a brilliant English teacher who brought Shakespeare to life by acting him in front of us, I'd been much more interested in drama and literature than anything else, but unfortunately I was also adept at mathematics and physics. In those days the general rule was that girls did arts and boys did science and so at the end of Year 10, I succumbed to the pressure and dropped the subjects I liked, including French, and took the standard physics, two maths and chemistry. Chemistry I loathed with a passion. All those formulae to learn and dreary experiments in which the level would drop 23 per cent in the bell jar when the oxygen was burnt. If it didn't, you'd just say it did. In my matriculation year I did very well in physics, well in maths, and just scraped through in chemistry. The vocations ahead of me at university were pretty limited: medicine, science or engineering. I had only one question to put to the vocational guidance guy. "Which has the least

chemistry?" The answer was mechanical engineering. So there I was at the start of 1965 in my first paid job with two other fellow mechanical engineering graduates who both went on to have stellar careers. I didn't. Fisherman's Bend, Port Melbourne, was a huge sprawl of exceedingly ugly buildings without the softening effect of any trees or vegetation. Just to arrive at work was depressing. My first assignment was to assist in the design and development of an engine destined for the Holden HD. This consisted of taking all the measurements of an existing General Motors engine from some years before and transferring it to our drawing boards. The contribution of Australian creativity to this exercise was precisely zero. The draftsmen I was working with were quite genial. The relationship of engineer to draftsman is rather like doctor to nurse. The nurses always know more than the doctors but have to pretend they don't. In my case they quickly realised I was an engineering idiot and they didn't need to pretend. The atmosphere was quite relaxed. They did the drawing and I read under the desk *A Treasury of the Theatre*, an anthology of plays from Ibsen to Odets. I still have it and when I turn the first page the name of the engineer who owned it, Barry Dundas, is written there. I hope Barry went on to have a great career because he very kindly realised that my heart was not with the Holden HD engine and gave it to me. I had no guilt at all about not doing much. I fancied myself as a bit of a firebrand socialist in those days and I thought that in my own quiet way I was decreasing the profit levels of one of the world's largest corporate capitalists. While Barry was very tolerant, others in the hierarchy weren't. They sensed that my work output was not what an aspiring young executive should be achieving so they gave me added responsibility, the design of the HD handbrake. It's very fortunate that my design was deemed substandard and its development re-allocated to someone more competent. If mine had been installed many parked HDs would have rolled down hills and caused God knows what havoc. This second failure of mine demanded action. I was called into the office of the divisional manager. The interview didn't start well when I saw a copy of *Time* magazine on his desk and expressed surprise that he would find such a far right-wing publication of any interest. He read from my report. The most disappointing thing about my assessment, he told me, was not that my engineering expertise left a lot to be desired, nor that my motivation was poor, it was that in the opinion of all those that mattered I showed absolutely no potential for leadership. To not be good at anything wasn't necessarily a drawback in corporate life if you could lead those who were. But I didn't even have that potential. I left Holden soon after. No one seemed very sorry.

David Williamson, AO, is one of Australia's most famous playwrights.

First published in *THE AUSTRALIAN*, JANUARY 07, 2008