

## **The conclusion**

*Avant-garde theatre in the period between the mid-nineteen-sixties and the mid-nineteen-eighties was the forum in which innovations were tested that progressively changed the nature of theatre in Australia. International modernism, first seen in alternative theatres, took hold in Australian theatre generally. The political radicalism of the New Left, youth culture and the counter culture were the agents of this modernisation, which, along with a reassertion of Australian nationalism and the expression of a local vernacular drama, overturned the conservative neo-colonial norms of theatre practice in Australia. The theatre laboratory method, and a notion of theatrical experimentation were major means of change. The national policies of community art brought about a democratisation of the theatre institution that asserted a non-colonial ownership of theatre newly vested in communities or subcultures within Australian society.*

### **Gestures towards modern theatre...**

The historical avant-gardes were the models for the innovations which occurred in radical, experimental and avant-garde theatres in Australia between 1965 and 1985. Experimentation with theatre form became a prevalent activity in Australian theatre. A notion of *performance* loosened the theatrical tradition, which in Australia had been bound to the hierarchy of a dramatic canon derived from the stages of London and Broadway. In its place a nationalist vision of a theatre emerged and rapidly became established as the dominant mode, while simultaneously new subcultural expressions grew to have their own theatrical voices on Australia. Within a growing complexity of postmodern pluralism, artists were emerging who achieved recognition for the integrity and originality of their work, and not for the closeness of its resemblance to a London or New York model.

Since the commencement of government funding for theatre companies in the nineteen-fifties there

has been the opportunity for programming theatre offerings with freedom from commercial considerations. At their commencement the state theatre companies indicated a commitment to aesthetically driven choices in repertoire by first presenting modern European plays. These initial choices of repertoire were a signal that modernity was the new benchmark by which the artistic leaders of these companies first believed their work should be judged. Yet in all cases this early commitment to modern theatre was not followed up in the subsequent planning of the state theatre companies' programs. The predominantly conservative views in Australia of Australian theatre critics and the membership of the boards of state theatre companies strongly counselled the new artistic directors away from 'radical' choices. Modern theatre was an aspect of aesthetic modernism upon which conservative Australia had firmly turned its back.

The foundations of the so-called national drama were laid down in the 'ensemble' groups, especially Emerald Hill and the Ensemble theatre, and in the socialist New Theatre movement. These groups were concerned with international practices that suggested to them new methods of working. The newly available strategies which were broached in the 'ensemble' companies' work but not always fully engaged, included new systems of actor training, the process of the theatre workshop, experimental theatre and the use of improvisation with actors researching and devising material according to broadly sociological investigation of themes. These methods were to come to have an important role in Australian theatre practice when they were more fully realised at La Mama, the APG, Nimrod, the Popular Theatre Troupe and Troupe in Adelaide.

Speaking to John Allen in 1968, Robin Lovejoy described what he saw as the weakness in the Australian theatre in terms of an incomplete hierarchy. "The ideal circumstance would be one in which there were many small workshop theatres which took plays on bravely, went out on a limb. And then more theatres at Old Tote level which took the next stage of development or polish in the play and presented that. And finally, a paternal theatre which was embracing and developing the quarter of an inch of cream made up from the bottle which came out of the other two theatres," Lovejoy suggested. (Allen 1968a: 7) The spectre of a National Theatre has died hard in Australia. Lovejoy's hierarchy might be fairly representative of conservative views of the time. Little theatres at the bottom, with state theatre companies polishing their products and talents while operating 'commercially,' and overlain by the ultimate refinement of Australian theatre: a National Theatre. The states vied to be host to such a national institution. And some companies

simply assumed that mantle in name (National Theatre Company, in Perth, and Nimrod National Theatre) or in the conduct of their activities (as Sumner's Melbourne Theatre Company might have done, or more recently the Sydney Theatre Company under Wayne Harrison).

The great distances to the rest of the world had always caused delays in the arrival of cultural innovations in Australia; however, this time-warp progressively ceased to be a dominating factor during the nineteen-seventies, with satellite communications and accessible rapid air transport. Radical youth and student culture disseminated radical theatre in Australia, as it had in other parts of the world, during the nineteen-sixties and into the nineteen-seventies. Something of the fervour for social renovation, which had died down in Europe after 1968, was still building in Australia towards the major social revisions to come with the election of a nationalist government in 1972. There was a new focus in the Australian ethos that was evident throughout society, including the media and the theatre. It rejected colonial structures and implied a new nationalism, although many of those actively and passionately espousing this at the time were reluctant to use that name.

During this time political theatres experimented with new forms and strategies of making performances. Although politically driven this innovative work, within the APG and elsewhere, was aesthetically informed. Theatre was produced in new contexts with new relationships to its audience, for example theatre restaurants and street theatre, which blurred the distinctions of popular entertainment and art-theatre, and allowed a synthesis of work which articulated Australian identity.

Internationally, the counter culture gave rise to alternative theatre practices, and this had a considerable impact in Australia where experimental theatre and the avant-garde became focal models for new theatre projects. The model of the oppositional avant-garde in international and local alternative theatres was built on a foundation of knowledge of their antecedents in the historical European avant-gardes. There was in Australian non-mainstream theatre, as with the counter culture generally, a close proximity between life and art. Political anarchy was manifesting itself in this generation with its co-operatives and the collectives, which were self-generated social and industrial structures. Above all in its motive and its essence the alternative theatre was oppositional. John Allen wrote that, "an experimental theatre movement is taking place in Australia," adding that, "some unity of feeling has arisen about the shortcomings of theatre of the

past. There is yet, happily, no agreement on the next stage of the theatre' s development.” (Allen 1969: 29)

The postwar baby-boom generation focused society on the aspirations of youth. They took to the streets to take up the promises held out in the common social vision in those years of affluence. They demanded peace and freedom immediately, to complement the relative wealth and leisure they enjoyed. This was not the reading of the social contract which the conservative powers had intended, and it caught the Western world by surprise. This instantaneous social volatility peaked in the conflicts in Paris in 1968, where it had at once flared and failed to take the political power from the established institutions. With its inherent anarchic nature as a movement it had failed to create institutional structures of its own to challenge those already in place. In the adaptive manner of capitalism the existing institutions rapidly appropriated many aspects of the demands made by the young.

Jan Kott has identified two ostensibly political pronouncements which were emblematic of the time: “Sois réaliste. Faites L' impossible,” and “L' imagination au pouvoir!” (Kott 1984: 148) These self-conscious paradoxes were written on the walls of the Sorbonne and the Odeon Theatre by student protesters in 1968. In these slogans Kott found a linguistic and psychological closure, a turning away from the broad cultural traditions towards a subculture. This he likened to the self-constraints evident in cult practices. Discussing Grotowski, the key model of the experimental theatre of the period, Kott' s view was apocalyptic. There was, however, an outright utopian reading of the actions and words of 1968. The graffitied cries resounded with a surreal poetry similar to many of the lyrics of the contemporary anthems of self-affirmation sung by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. This was a millennial view of social patterns ending - perhaps violently - but there was stated and implied renewal. From within the counter culture there was a utopian faith in the future, and this was common to the streets of Paris and the campus of Monash University in 1968.

A re-assertion of Australian nationalism converged in this period with the revolutionary intentions of young people. In rejecting Australia' s neo-colonial ‘ British-ness’ , young middle-class Australians found in the larrikin persona a viable ‘ new’ identity for themselves. The easygoing anti-authoritarian stance of the larrikin was increasingly attractive to the educated middle-class. They enjoyed a new affluence and easily put aside the reticence which had once kept the middle-

class at a remove from the down-at-heel larrikin. In the streetwise manner of the larrikin persona there was a potential revolutionary nationalist.

The new nationalist drama emerged from the alternative theatres, and with its 'rough' new acting style it conveyed an irreverent vitality that made these new plays hot commercial properties and the core of the state theatre repertoires. The closed *cognoscente* audience rapidly switched to a wider following broadly appreciative of the new popular nationalism. Audiences of the state theatre companies enjoyed the oppositional rude gestures in the direction of the colonial theatre, often unaware that this had been learned in the avant-garde theatres.

### **When the *way out* was...*in***

In the common parlance of the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies what was pleasing, new and challenged the norm, was 'way out'. *Way out* indicated more than fashionableness, it was a shorthand for those things which aligned with a radical alternative set of social values: the counter culture. The counter culture was a manifestation of modern society that was driven by similar social and political tendencies that had produced the historical avant-gardes earlier in the century. Challenging the *status quo*, the new theatre practices adopted the iconoclasm of the avant-garde.

The corollary of being 'way out' was, ironically, 'to be in'. *To be in* was to be one of the 'in crowd', one of the *cognoscenti*. To be in, was also 'to be in fashion'. When *the way out* was *in*, during this period, the extreme elements in radical art practice and social action formed coterie of adherents in the convention of *avant-garde* art.

The APG was not alone in its utopianism or its *modus operandi*. Companies such as the Performance Syndicate, Claremont, Mushroom, the White Company and Technical Smile, struggled with the same set of key issues argued in the APG monthly collective meetings: the search for structures which were non-hierarchical, the debate between 'process' and 'product', the place of the director in an egalitarian structure, and the role of women in the group. These issues also continued to be the dominant issues within the internal processes of the community theatres of the late nineteen-seventies and the nineteen-eighties. Robin Laurie reminded us of this when she described the APG as "a group founded by actors and writers totally opposed to the

‘ traditional’ power of the director and aimed at creating a genuinely popular Australian theatre.”  
(Laurie 1987: np)

The international models for this activity were to be found in the counter culture and the surge in international avant-garde theatre in the nineteen-sixties. The reassertion of feminism in the Western world in the nineteen-sixties was also profoundly important. There was a utopian idealism - still redolent with the values of the historical avant-gardes - and animated by the actions of youth in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, which Robin Laurie referred to, speaking at the National Community Theatre Conference in 1987: “We could do ANYTHING! The Living Theatre were our heroines and heroes. Life, Art and Politics were inescapably intertwined.” She continued, “It was assumed your politics were communicated not only through what you said, but in what you did and how you did it. We wanted to live the future now!” she recalled. (Laurie 1987: np Orthography as in the original transcript.)

It was an aspect of the radicalism of this period that the worker was to be respected and the traditional power structure was to be overturned. Avant-garde theatre groups placed a priority on the importance of actors as creative artists. Robin Laurie recalled the sentiments of the APG that the “revolution must liberate the imagination - ‘ Be Realistic - Demand the Impossible’ . There was stress on the subjective feelings, on the performer as source of material, as an artist in their own right, not ‘ just’ an interpreter of the text.” Privileging the actor redressed the historically short-lived imbalance in Western theatre this century. In the late nineteen-sixties - coinciding with news of the Cultural Revolution in China - redress was sought for the actor in the West. “We were impressed by the Chinese idea of breaking down the distinction between intellectual and manual labour - let the Administrator clean the dunnies!” Laurie recalled. “Anyone could be an artist. All jobs could be done by anyone who wanted to.” Challenging the hierarchy of the art market was a strategy of the historical avant-gardes. Subverting the hierarchy of the patriarchy was a broader social goal of the women’ s movement, which was taken up by the community theatre movement. “We wanted genuine participation, everyone to be equal, we rejected notions of ‘ skill’ and ‘ talent’ that capitalism used to divide people, to create hierarchies, to make some people feel superior or to assume more power than others.” (Laurie 1987: np) In a strategy derived from feminist discourse, community theatre generally sought to validate marginal status and in so doing to deny the traditional masculine criteria of success which were excellence, domination and

ownership. The thrust of this movement was to throw-over these values in favour of *living in the present* and *being in touch* with the individual, their senses and with the community.

A dramatic political shift occurred in Australia with the sacking of the Whitlam Labour government in 1975. There was a widespread sense of loss which overwhelmed the optimism of this brief period of radical innovation in Australia. A general sense of disillusionment took over the arts in Australia in the latter years of the nineteen-seventies. Nonetheless, there was an increasing diversity of cultural expression as the seeds sown during the previous decade grew despite a climate of general conservative reaction. The so-called *alternative theatres* came and went at an individual level; however, the thrust to create such enterprises continued despite some blustering from a new Liberal Federal government. The Community Arts Board of the Australia Council was *devolved* - but later reinstated. Their work was generally more controlled by funding parameters and policies.

In the late nineteen-seventies comedy venues sprang up in Australia and reflected a strong anti-establishment sentiment, with Dada-like work increasingly popular. Theatre-in- education, theatre for young people and regional theatres allowed new opportunities of diversity and experimentation. The inter-disciplinary nature of modern dance and the progressive impulse from new technologies stimulated a flux of innovation on the parameters of the performing arts. Festivals became more numerous and significant throughout Australia. With government support, festivals increasingly provided a means to patch together fluctuating opportunities for avant-garde theatre groups.

The co-founder of Nimrod Theatre, John Bell, had been invited to give the Kathleen Robinson Lecturer at Sydney University in 1973, where he had linked the work of alternative theatres in Australia with contemporary avant-garde theatre activities in Europe, Britain and America. Bell had advocated a vital role in Australia for the alternative theatre as the “real alternative to the Established Theatre.” He had also argued for more generous financial support for such work, to encourage new and experimental theatre. “Alternative Theatre needs to be brave, to defy the box-office and the critics and to employ the best actors and directors available,” Bell said in 1973. (Bell 1976: 17) By the time his lecture was published by the University in 1976, Nimrod Theatre had gained preeminence among Australian theatres, and Bell’ s original identification with ‘alternative theatre’ was no longer in his theatre’ s interests. He added a postscript in which he

suggest that if he were to “lecture on the same subject today” he would no longer define Alternative Theatre as a “branch of the ‘established’ theatre balancing the policy of its neighbours.” Bell now argued, instead, that “theatres such as Nimrod cannot be called ‘alternative’ simply because we produce some of the plays you’d be unlikely to see at the Old Tote.” he argued that they were “doing the same job as the Tote - producing a professional repertory of entertainment for a paying audience.” (Bell 1976: 19) Why should Bell have represented Nimrod as a mere alternative to the Old Tote? This state company was, arguably, by then artistically moribund, and was to cease operations by the end of the nineteen-seventies. Bell’s comments point to a shift in identification at Nimrod: from the avant-garde to the second tier of the mainstream.

The fleeting avant-garde status of vernacular texts was gone. Jack Hibberd commented, ten years after the establishment of the APG, that there was a “general acceptance of local plays and the Australian dialect. It is now no longer experimental or radical to present Australian works.” It seemed to Hibberd, that “these early endeavours” had been assimilated into the “theatrical status quo.” (Hibberd 1979: 475-6) More than the wild anarchy and rapture had gone; once established, there was little disruptive potential in these vernacular voices, no longer any ability to rupture the conventional social commerce. The decade had been both rewarding and hard on Hibberd. There was growing difficulty in his position as an innovative artist, who had not commodified his work, as arguably, David Williamson had done, for example. Hibberd found himself in a rapidly contracting creative environment.

Support for the arts in Australia was constrained by a lack of tradition, and by limited opportunities available in a country with a small population. This was all the more so for avant-garde theatre which could be ‘difficult’, aggressive and unconventional. Australia had little capacity in the nineteen-seventies for a category of avant-garde artists, who could survive and even gain public acclaim and notoriety, whilst they retained their status as iconoclasts. The idea persisted in Australia, from days dominated by commercial theatre, that *a star was someone who made a name for themselves overseas*. Hibberd was hilariously sarcastic and without mercy in identifying his enemy. “We need more antipodean actors, dingo performers, not elocutionary puffballs,” Hibberd urged. “We need interpretive dingo directors, not cravat-necked Londoners.” There were only two ways for the avant-garde to go in Australia: into the

mainstream as soon as possible; or the way of the larrikin: shrouding doubt in pugilistic “feats of self-assertion and self-fabrication.” (Hibberd 1979: 478)

One of the results of a critical romanticisation of the larrikin beginnings of the APG was that it suggested a kind of wilful ignorance or denial of history and tradition by the members of the APG and their contemporaries. They were not, however, ignorant of history or tradition, although they may have denied the colonial models. These were highly educated and informed individuals, some number of whom had travelled widely and knew at first hand what was going on internationally.

John Bell had suggested that alternative theatre was an aspect of alternative society. ‘Experimental theatres’ or ‘alternative theatres’ such as the Performance Syndicate, the White Company, Claremont, Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe, and the Theatre Research Group, may have exemplified the totality of cultural displacement implied in Bell’s comments. However, members of these companies might or might not have seen themselves as “manifestations of an Alternative Society,” in the terms of Bell’s postscript. (Bell 1976: 19) Their marginality was not because they were part of an alternative society or counter culture, but because they had undertaken aesthetic and strategic directions which were at odds with the prevailing conventional theatre and also different to the ‘new Australian plays’. The social forces of the early nineteen-seventies that were suggested in the term ‘counter culture’ made these projects feasible, and this culture also provided occasion for such radical, experimental and avant-garde activity. This however, fell short of being the cause of this work.

The women’s movement had a widespread impact in Australian society at large and in the theatre, especially the avant-garde theatre. Women had a high level of involvement in marginal theatre activities: theatre with young people, dance-theatre and theatre-in-education, for example employed many women in leading positions. Gradually the barriers became easier to cross for women to progress upwards to more influential roles and laterally into their chosen fields. This was a slow process, which Colleen Chesterman in her study, *Playing with Time: Women writing for performance* (1995), has shown continued well beyond the mid-nineteen-eighties. Significantly, however, women’s theatre practice tended, in this period, to focus on non-conventional dramatic forms. In discussing the role women have taken in avant-garde theatre in Australia Miller and Janaczewska have commented that they “partook of a range of movements

which sought to challenge the dominant paradigms and to open out the possibilities for heterogeneity and alternative political communities.” (Miller & Janaczewska 1990: 5) Monodramas were a prevalent form that reflected a preference in women’s writing for the personal perspective. There was also a tendency toward undramatised narratives, that is, stories in which conflict was not essential. Theatre created by women was inclined to place an emphasis on spatial, visual and contextual values and these, over time, came to enter the mainstream. Miller and Janaczewska have commented that women in avant-garde theatre in Australia “partook of a range of movements which sought to challenge the dominant paradigms and to open out the possibilities for heterogeneity and alternative political communities.” (Miller & Janaczewska 1990: 5)

In her book on Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group Peta Tate wrote that, in the nineteen-seventies “it was women working in the arts, the union movement and social welfare who constructed theory from practice, developing cohesive frameworks often from the discourse taking place at women’s gatherings and conferences.” (Tate 1993:3) There was a fear of theory and a reluctance to use theory among people working in the theatre. Speaking about women in community theatre, Robin Laurie advised her feminist colleagues, that “we must not be afraid of theory. We need to be articulate, we need to be powerful.” (Laurie 1987: np) Women in the theatre disclaimed theory as a tool of their professional activities for the greater part of the period of this study. This is generally true of women and men across the alternative theatres throughout the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. The denial of theory can be identified as a general weakness of the inward-looking stance of social action in the nineteen-seventies.

There were a few exceptions in this period, when theatre organisations and individuals spoke about their theoretical positions. At the Performance Space in Sydney in the early nineteen-eighties, the rhetoric was about *new form*. This term embraced a rediscovery of the intention within the historical avant-gardes to avoid or to destroy narrative. It was, perhaps, a restatement of formalism. Later, also at the Performance Space, Mullins’ successors, Tsoutas and Miller, jointly edited the short-lived theoretical journal, *Spectator Burns*.

The *personal is political* has implications beyond women’s art practice. It is an axiom with a bearing on alternative art practices generally. The political nature of the personal dimension can

answer the occasional attacks of ideologues who criticise personal work as *art for art's sake*, suggesting that it therefore lacks political credibility. Jenny Kemp created highly personal theatre, and she has claimed that it has an underlying political dimension. Kemp commented that, she is “concerned to critique the society.” Kemp explained this to Stanley in terms of redressing what she saw an “imbalances” in the wider social arena. She gave this example of her attitude: “Some inner resources seem to be ignored as potent resources. And I actually think that it is quite political that they are not encouraged.” She identified these exclusions as mechanisms of social control that “disempower the individual.” Kemp was concerned that this would “nurture fascism.” Her response was politically forthright. “In that way I feel anarchic: to empower the individual to think for themselves,” Kemp said. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991)

The Melbourne Women's Theatre Group and other feminist groups, as well as the APG, the Performance Syndicate and Claremont had crises over the role of the director. These disputes were in part human discord, and in part ideologically constructed. Beyond this however, such conflicts were endemic in chronically under-resourced groups, where to continue at all - often with no money - meant these companies were forced to ‘exploit’ the enthusiasm, skills and talents of their members. Eventually individuals became emotionally too aggrieved to support the group activities any longer, and discord broke out, often aimed at the director. The limited funding available to such groups was a crucial factor in causing or worsening these break-downs and the abuse of individual artists.

In the early nineteen-eighties there was a paradoxical social environment in which strong conservative forces - reflected in the governments of the day - accommodated progressive and radical activities which had been associated with the counter culture. Radical and avant-garde theatre were supported in Australia, but there was a trend to turn such theatre into a commodity. Examples of this transition include alternative comedy, festival fringe activities, some rock and roll, performance art, art events, and advertising's use of avant-garde performance.

At this time in Australia avant-garde practice was not exclusive to any type of theatre or context where performances might be found. The growing diversity of theatre activity provided more opportunities for avant-garde work, although the occurrence was essentially unplanned and often quite opportunistic. People were pushed by the funding policies to go into new places and to use

new means of making performances; and for some, this was a prompt to investigate the nature and means of theatre itself.

The great expansion and development of theatre available in Australia at this time was the result of government funding programs, especially the Community Arts program which manifest projects in marginal contexts. Federal, State and local government programs began to coordinate their funding policies more deliberately, and the support for radical, experimental and avant-garde theatre achieved its broadest financial base. New and original types of theatre were brought to new theatre audiences, not always as a conscious result of a policy, but as a consequence of the policy thrust to generally broaden the base of arts production and consumption in Australia.

There was, however, little significant financial assistance to these sorts of theatre activities from private sector sponsors. Several alternative commercial entrepreneurs - most notably John Pinder - made some new opportunities for diversity of theatre on offer in Australia. Unlike the experience in America, where arts facilities were often privately endowed and available to avant-garde arts projects; in Australia there was little private philanthropy. In Australia - as it was in America - theatres were often associated with universities. It was these publicly funded institutions in Australia, which provided occasional opportunities for unconventional theatrical endeavours.

Within the tertiary education systems there were a variety of environments which allowed the development of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Besides the provision of government support for theatre the part played by the colleges and university was the single most significant factor allowing the development of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Universities and colleges contributed materially and in-kind to the development of theatre in Australia generally. On their campuses new theatrical ideas were nurtured, allowed to gestate and from there they were disseminated. Avant-garde theatre was often made possible because of access to the resources within institutions of tertiary education, and such work was often informally allied to the surrounding campus culture. The advent of quality professional training for performers had a significant impact on the development of a comprehensive basis for the stage tradition in Australia. Although there was a stand-off between the formal training institutions and the alternative theatres, which also offered training in workshops and classes as off-shoots of marginal theatre activities, each provoked the other to establish further workshop-based training.

There have been few opportunities, however, offered in the Australian theatre to sustain commitment to developing work over a long period so that interesting work can be allowed to mature. Several elements were not aiding the development of an avant-garde theatre in the Australian context. There was not a strong enough tradition of try-out venues, and try-out opportunities, so that plays and production concepts could be tested before they were put before a critical audience. There was also little in the way of any understanding or acceptance that promising new work needed to be supported for years, if necessary, to allow it to be strengthened and refined, and to emerge with the kind of quality which these processes had allowed international examples of the avant-garde to achieve.

There was no sense of confidence about the support available for avant-garde theatre in Australia. Even the Australia Council programs designed to support innovation, such as Limited Life Grants and Pilot Project Grants, were administered in a way which did not encourage risk-taking or genuinely unconventional work. The title, *Limited Life Grant*, suggested the extreme constraint placed on such support under this funding program.

Artists wanting to explore avant-garde theatre were forced to find niches within funding programs such as the Community Arts or later the Community Cultural Development programs. This funding was usually offered on a project-by-project basis. A significant number of regional companies with annual funding and marginal companies with reasonable levels of support had agendas which included theatrical experiments or developmental workshops, but these were often not presented to the funding authorities in these terms.<sup>1</sup>

No policy was effective in supporting avant-garde theatre in Australian theatre in the period of this study. This was a failure of the policies themselves and of the peer assessment committees of the Australia Council, where too often the representative artists supported the organisations in which they worked and other similar organisations nationally. These committees allowed the mainstream companies to dominate calls on the ‘innovation’ criteria for funding on all but rare occasions.

**Not another death of the avant-garde!**

Paul McGillick lamented the lack of exploratory avant-garde theatre in the nineteen-eighties, speaking at a forum during the Griffin Theatre's D week in November 1989. He pointed out, that nobody in Australia took the time to painstakingly develop disciplined ensemble work, as Grotowski had done, and that the groups that had used this type of process in Australia in the nineteen-seventies were no longer to be found.<sup>2</sup> Mark Gould responded to these comments by pointing out that funding was largely based on projects, and did not support this sort of work, which required months or even years of intensive group exploration without necessarily any outcome.

Chris Westwood answered McGillick's regret, that avant-garde theatre in Australia had died with the nineteen-seventies, with a firm assertion that theatre by and about women, and Aborigines, gay theatre and theatre within the community had become dynamic sources of innovations. These were, she said, the avant-garde theatres of the nineteen-eighties. A Grotowski-like process of long-running laboratory activities resulting in near-sacred performances was not necessarily the only appropriate model for innovative work and it was no longer the dominant model. Issues of gender, ethnicity and marginal identity were more than the contents of the theatre of the nineteen-eighties. By voicing marginal positions, the actual nature of theatre practice changed in this period. Language changed, dramaturgy and scenography changed and, most profoundly, the relationship of the performance to its audience changed. By placing performances outside conventional theatres - in work places, parks, pubs, schools, the street - the nature of the theatre experience changed for Australian audiences irreversibly.

Jan Bruck has suggested, provocatively, that "Australian playwrights have not produced much in terms of avant-garde experiments or radical theatre, as political pragmatism and cultural conservatism have discouraged the use of criticism and aesthetic shock." Bruck regretted that Australian "audiences are correspondingly less inclined to be entertained by the bizarre or activist happenings of the European and American avant-garde." (Bruck 1986: 20) However, Bruck's Eurocentric evaluation demonstrates that the tone of disapproval associated with the colonial cringe is not exclusive to the Anglophile cynic.

On the other hand, there was a recognition, in this period, that the Australian audience was both specific and multi-faceted, and that generalities of imported English and American drama did little

to represent this. A convergence had occurred of the nationalism of the Whitlam years and the modernist means to convey Australia's pluralism. Nationalism meant the validation of many voices which were hitherto unacceptable on the stage, and in the media. Initially the vernacular voices and manners of the white Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Australian working-class and middle-class were put on stage; but subsequently gay theatre, non-English language theatre, and theatre for or about groups which were marginalised or disabled became prevalent in this sphere of alternative theatre. In turn, the mainstages of the state theatre companies and commercial managements took up and adopted parts of this new work and some of it quickly became an accepted part of the established theatre repertoire. The modern national vernacular rapidly became an orthodoxy, and dissenting voices took up new avant-garde positions.

Gay Hawkins has commented that, support of the avant-garde or experimental work within the Australia Council was "hardly central or secure." She has disinterred a report prepared by Kevin Morgan which stated that, "The avant-garde does not necessarily belong with audiences encountering the arts for the first time, and it will be self defeating and paternalistic to think of factory workers, for example, as guinea pigs to be exposed to a theatre experience which may be challenging to the conventional expectations of even the habitual theatregoer." Morgan went on, "quality work in traditional forms has in the short term been a rewarding introduction to the arts." Then he added a disclaimer, "this is not to prejudge the capacity of any audience to enjoy and assimilate innovative work." (Morgan 1977:8 cited Hawkins 1993:40) By the early nineteen-eighties, Hawkins recorded, the Community Arts Board (CAB), "openly rejected projects which were committed only to aesthetic innovation." (Hawkins 1993:62)

A little later, Pilot Projects funded by the CAB were an important avenue, however, through which radical work still received CAB support. Hawkins quoted Andrea Hull's report on CAB Pilot Projects, written in 1981 when Hull was Director of Policy and Planning: "Proposals must be related to a known community context and, whilst experimental, should relate to a new application of the arts or a new artistic experience for the people, rather than experimentation for art's sake" (Hull, cited Hawkins 1993:62) Hull used the paradigmatic axiom of the historical avant-gardes - *art for art's sake* - to invalidate such work as acceptable community arts practice.

In all this, there is a dialogue to be read between the rhetoric from Australia Council, and the demand for support from the field. Guidelines and policy utterances were made in response to a flood of applications, which carried their own rhetoric. Hawkins' analysis of the policy rhetoric does not acknowledge these other voices in the dialogue. The policy utterances represented attempts to turn the flow of funds toward specific desired outcomes. They ran counter to *the pull of demand*. The policy utterances did not represent the actual outcomes of funding decisions; almost the contrary, at times, was true.

The CAB was funding some avant-garde work which may have subverted the intentions of the funding body and this prompted further policy formulation to 'rectify' this trend. The policies so articulated did not necessarily override the multitude of criteria the peer group committees needed to consider in making grants. Aesthetic considerations, equitable state distribution, track record, demographics, peer regard, are among the factors which we can assume were influential, along with policy guidelines, and reports developed by Australia Council staff or consultants. Not specific policy statements, but the work funded during that period, should be considered as the primary evidence of the effects of Australia Council grants. A significant level of radical, experimental and avant-garde theatre was supported under the rubric of community art. Policy developments tending away from this, such as those cited by Hawkins and quoted above, are a kind of inverse proof of this trend.

What might be the border between modern and postmodern has been much discussed. The dependency which postmodernism has on the pre-existence of *the modern* is problematic. This is exacerbated in the Australian experience because, in sense, modernism and postmodernism emerged concurrently in the period of this study. Because of the resistance to modernism in Australia earlier in the century, the international manifestations of modernity were still becoming newly established when postmodernism arrived in the theatre. This is markedly apparent in the work of Nicholas Tsoutas, Michael Mullins and Lyndal Jones, for example. By the mid-nineteen-eighties new work emerged within a progressively more complex continuum of performance forms and genres. The value of differentiation between categories can become a misleading activity here, because projects rested between and among categories.<sup>3</sup>

If postmodern theatre in the United States of America and Europe has been characterised by

surface qualities, pastiche and complex strategies of assemblage, as well a bravado that refused to differentiate between street-wise irony and traditional wisdom; these were similar qualities to those in evidence in the modern avant-garde theatre of the nineteen-seventies in Australia. If, too, as Auslander has summarised, there is a generalised view “that postmodern culture seems unlikely to provide much foothold for political art practices as traditionally conceived,” this was the kind of view frequently taken of the formal theatre experiments in Australia in the nineteen-seventies. (Auslander 1992:21) However, this thesis has contested any simplified assumption that political radicalism was absent from alternative theatre in the nineteen-seventies. So too, it is strongly evident that the major proponents of postmodern performance in Australia in the early nineteen-eighties - including Jenny Kemp, Virginia Baxter and Keith Gallasch, Don Mamouny, John Baylis and Nigel Kellaway - were not apolitical, nor were they cynically turning away from political issues to the postmodern pleasures of surface and form. Indeed the surfaces and forms employed in their work were harnessed to both overtly political and implicitly political intentions.

The avant-garde introduced the emergent national drama and the accompanying presentation of community theatre that articulated specifically nationalistic material. The “rejection of history” in the case of Australian postmodernism has been dominantly a rejection of the colonial history, both among the consciously political theatres and the groups devoted to formal experimentation. Rather than a depoliticising process this had been expressly political. Auslander has noted that, as a term, ‘postmodernity’ has generally been used to describe both a period and a style. The greatest value in the Australian context is the term’s usefulness to describe the period at the climax of the twentieth century when ‘progress’ became problematic. Distinct from any inclination to a millennial summing-up of the period, such as Fredric Jameson’s “gloomy view of a society that has surrendered its sense of history to the cynical embrace of commodity capitalism.” Auslander cites Hal Foster’s view that within postmodernism there is “reaction” and “resistance”. For Auslander, resistance to the powerful forces of commodification within postmodernity suggests a potential for the reassertion of political contents into postmodern American theatre. (Auslander 1992: 31) In Australia, Auslander’s insights are congruent with a theatre where postmodern work did not generally abandon its political purposes in an attitude of cynicism, but used the heightened self-consciousness offered by postmodernity to interlink comment and commentary of the inner workings of the performance and the external world, the societal and, often, the global environment.

The motif of *the journey* - key to the alternative culture of the nineteen-seventies - was still a figure for postmodern theatre practice. Jenny Kemp spoke in these terms to Stanley, but the heroic journey has been repositioned. “The travelling is being done in the audience’s mind, it’s not being presented, or laid out on the stage so much,” Kemp said. This has become an internal, female world. “On stage is a provocation. On stage is an enigma, or a knot, or a catalyst,” she proposed. “My work functions in that catalytic way, causing the audience to start working,” she emphasised. “The audience starts feeling all these possibilities of thinking associatively, and of being receptive to fantasy, to imagination and dream, and linking those with the intellect, so that they are working with each other,” Kemp explained of her stage works. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991) Women had a growing importance in the margins in Australia at this time, and made some impact as directors on the mainstages.

By the nineteen-eighties a proposition of the avant-garde as a future-in-the-present no longer held good: in postmodernity progress toward the future was problematic, and the future itself was no longer an irresistible lure. Andreas Huyssen noted that “since Saint Simon, the avant-gardes of Europe have been characterized by a precarious balance of art and politics”, and he suggested that after the flourish of the historical avant-gardes politics and art “went their separate ways.” (Huyssen 1988: 6) In Australia between 1965 and 1985 the opposite occurred. In a climate charged with a strong national political current the international cultural concerns which arrived in Australia - youth culture, counter culture, popular anarchy - were politically more formative than, perhaps, elsewhere, because they were able to rapidly coalesced with the local forces for social changes.

Jean Baudrillard has identified May 1968 in Paris as “the first shock-wave” of the crisis upon which postmodernity may be premised: in which the struggle to synthesise original creations (productions) is reduced to mere repetitions (reproductions). (Baudrillard 1990b: 122) But the huge anti-war marches in Australia beginning in 1968 gave the impression that change was possible and was about to occur; and the nationalist Labour government of the early nineteen-seventies put in place public institutions which irreversibly altered the type of society that Australia was to be into the future. Postmodernity had to mark-time in Australia, at least until the malaise following the 1975 sacking of the Whitlam government. Radical political views were not then

silenced but intensified and made more strident with the step backwards which the election of a conservative government was seen to represent. The populist cultural devices and the mediated nature of postmodern theatre (and other arts) in the nineteen-eighties, was galvanised in Australia by the nationalism implicit and explicit in that time and place: it was not reduced to “radicalism marketable as sentimental or ironic fashions,” as Berringer had noted in the United States of America and Europe. (Berringer 1993: 44)

In 1940 Walter Benjamin had already questioned the “concept of progress” and reflected on the paradox that while Judaism prohibited Jews “investigating the future” and “the Torah and prayers instruct them in remembrance,” it had a contradictory effect because this focus insisted that “every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter.” (Benjamin 1969: 264) The manipulation of time in modernism and postmodernism is fraught with irony and potential. Jürgen Habermas has noted that modernity is focused on defining itself and not relying on other past periods to define it. He also commented on Benjamin’s linkage of a millennial Judaic tradition with the ‘futurism’ of modernity, suggesting that Benjamin proposed “a drastic reversal of the horizon of expectation and space of experience [...] the present responsible for the ‘sins’ of the past through remembering.” This he comments is served by barbarianism as well as by civility. (Habermas 1990: 7-14)

The theme of cruelty in theatre, so characteristic of the period, has a longer presence than at first appears to be the case. The genesis is often seen to rest at the foundation of the historic avant-gardes with Jarry and Wedekind at the turn of the century and in the nineteen-thirties with Artaud; and it also had romantic antecedents with Mary Shelley and Byron and their fabrication of Gothic tales. But before them, as Jean-François Lyotard has noted, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant had described an aesthetics of the sublime, comparable with a Judaic prohibition on representations of the divine intensifying the ‘contemplation of the infinite.’ Burke suggested that “the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening,” Lyotard records. ‘Terrors’ caused by “privations” are the nature of this hapless state: “privations of others, a terror of solitude; privation of language, a terror of silence.” The role of art proposed by Burke was to “suspend” the threat of such privations, and return us to a realm of satisfactory levels of stimulation (agitation). Burke called this pleasure of relief, “delight”. But more pointedly he suggested that to fulfill this function art needed to “search for intense effects, and must give up the

imitation of models that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations.” Lyotard commented that “shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing, suspended privation.” (Lyotard 1989: 204-5) So the crisis the heart of modernism and postmodernism has been anticipated in Burke’s eighteenth century reflections.

The ‘crisis of language’ in modernism and the crisis of ‘Is there anything further to say?’ in postmodernism have their antecedents in this stream of Western philosophical discourse. The way the Australian experience of ‘silence’ and the ‘unsayable’ have informed theatre in the period has been discussed. A crisis over authority characterises international modernism’s split between political right and left. This can be compared to the crisis identifiable as a key Australian preoccupation since white settlement: the battler supporting civil authority whilst simultaneously (or not) maintaining a larrikin rebelliousness.

The director’s role was frequently challenged in the collective companies of the nineteen-seventies, and it was still in question in the processes of several of the most radical theatres, such as the Mill and Sidetrack, during the nineteen-eighties; although there was some evidence of the reassertion of the dominant place of the director in the work of the nineteen-eighties. The success of directors like Triffitt and even Jenny Kemp and the dancer-choreographer Meryl Tankard indicate the acceptance of a leading role, and even a visionary role for the director. However, smaller artistic collectives remained the outstanding examples of contemporary work at the end of the period: Whistling In The Theatre, Sydney Front and Open City.

### **Concluding summary**

The continuing output of La Mama was a testimony to the need for simple low-cost venues to try-out theatrical ideas. Numerous enormous theatres were built in Australia to celebrate the bicentennial in 1988, none of them with anything like the significance of La Mama. In dance and in outdoor theatre there were ongoing innovations into the nineteen-eighties in Australia; and circus was rehabilitated as a performance medium in this period to become a leading theatrical form with impacts across the theatre. Significantly circus was first rediscovered by political theatres, especially the APG; and has retained to some degree its politically radical orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Avant-garde theatre developed rapidly in Australia between 1965 and 1985 because of the convergence of three factors; first, the diminution of the conservative constraint placed on modernism in Australia; secondly, international agitation for radical social and political change within youth and student cultures and the counter culture; and thirdly, a restatement of Australian nationalism. International influences had a formative impact on the dynamic emergence of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Some of the diverse work that resulted also influenced later theatre practice.

The virtual suppression of modern theatre in Australia had been an aspect of the neo-colonial status from which the country emerged during the study period. The initial appearance of vernacular theatre in the mid-nineteen-fifties had been heralded because of its acceptance in London. It was towards the colonial centre that the mainstream theatres established in that period had turned for their authority. Before 1965 the neo-colonial cultural environment in Australia had encouraged an old-fashioned set of theatre practices, which the academic community had been slow to moderate. Press reportage was poorly informed and it discouraged new ideas. Commercial theatre managements had been principally concerned with touring successes from London and Broadway, and had little interest in innovation.

The London stage had lost its authority by the mid-nineteen-sixties in Australia, because the volume of postwar migration had produced a society in which the principle of assimilation into an Anglophile culture could no longer function. Australia was a society with manifest differences, a society where ironically, displacement was not only a cause of division, but it had become, conversely, a common denominator bringing communities together. This pluralist context was the ground for the development of avant-garde theatre in the decades that are the focus of this study.

Because of the constraints which had been placed on the introduction of modern theatre into Australia, when it arrived, in the period of this study, there was a backlog of ideas and cultural material. Modernity and postmodernity arrived in Australia concurrently in this period. The disjunction between modernism's progressive premise and postmodernism's apparently non-forward looking and sometimes cynical attitude, fell into a different cultural context in Australia than it did in Europe or America. There was an outright optimism growing in Australian society. Several 'new' values that came to dominate postmodern art in fact were well-worked themes,

even commonplaces belonging to an earlier generation in Australia: survival despite isolation and cultural sterility, the subverted embrace of surface pleasures, camp, self-parody and self-pity.

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1. The quantity and access to public funding for avant-garde theatre was at a peak in the first half of the nineteen-eighties and declined to the end of the decade. There was an even more marked decline in the years since, despite initiatives such as the creation of the ironically titled, 'hybrid arts' funding category. Community, regional and otherwise marginal theatres have generally been fewer in number and funded less generously.
  2. McGillick's contribution to Parsons 1995 is of the same stamp. Paul McGillick, who had been the director of the International Society for Contemporary Art (ISCA) in Sydney in the nineteen-seventies, now took up an increasingly conservative set of positions on new theatre in Australia.

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3. A representative example of the postmodern phenomenon may be People Next Door. An interesting ‘ hybrid’ company this Canberra-based duo created work of different sorts in a number of categories: they toured schools with TIE, they toured the Philippines and worked with the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) and they created avant-garde theatre works. In 1990 they adapted Mary Shelley’ s text to create a piece called *Frankenstein’s Shadow*, which was directed by Richard Murphet, and had music by the Original Otto Orchestra. (Trail 1991: *passim*) They were part community theatre, part regional theatre, part conceptual art project and part intercultural experiment: for People Next Door the categories no longer held.

4. Dance continued to be a focus for innovation in Australian performing arts as shown by the vitality of the Green Mill Dance Project and the acceptance of Meryl Tankard. Interestingly, the strong interest in opera in Australia generated a number of innovative groups and individuals reacting to this field. Richard Vella was the founder and Artistic Director of the Calculated Risks Opera Company. *Tales of Love* was their first production, and *Volcano and Vision*, with music by Rainer Linz and text by Paul Greene, was their second production which was staged at the Performance Space in Sydney. Directed by Nigel Kellaway, this work was presented with a small instrumental ensemble, and three vocalists, including Annette Tesoriero. The composer Con Koukias is the creator of opera performances in acoustically rich disused industrial sites, wharves and warehouses: the architectural equivalents for our times of the castles and the cathedrals of the past. He is also the co-founder and artistic director of IHOS Opera.

Barrie Kosky was a *wunderkind* from Melbourne University, and started by directing strikingly original opera productions when still an undergraduate. He set up his own company, *Treason of Images* - named after the Magritte painting - in 1985, when he was eighteen. Starting with one of the foundational works of western music theatre: *Orfeo*, by Monteverdi, in 1986, Kosky followed this with a radical versions of Mozart’ s *Don Giovanni*. At the 1988 Spoleto Festival in Melbourne, he directed Berg’ s *Lulu*; and for this festival the following year, he directed Michael Tippett’ s *The Knot Garden*. Barrie Kosky was to found the Gilgul Theatre, for which he directed daring productions of Jewish classics, *The Dybbuk* (1991), and later the remaining plays in the *Exile Trilogy: Es Brent* (1992), and *Levad* (1993). (Shmith 1993: *passim*) These were seen on the mainstages of the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne, and Belvoir St Theatre, in Sydney.