

Introduction

The proposition

The influences which supported the adoption of modern theatre and postmodern theatre in Australia in the period 1965 to 1985 provided a framework for the articulation of a diversity of representations of Australian-ness and a plurality of Australian voices. The international social flux expressed in the radicalisation of youth culture, the counter-culture and the New Left vitalised avant-garde theatre practice and, in Australia, this converged with a reaffirmation of nationalism. These cultural mechanisms shifted the neo-colonial constraints on Australian theatre and allowed cosmopolitan and contemporary theatre (as defined on page 14) to become established in Australia.

The New: Radical, Experimental and Avant-garde

The intention in this thesis is to describe a major, but largely unrecorded, section of *new* Australian theatre from 1965 to 1985, out of which have come many of the defining characteristics of Australian theatre as it now is practiced and understood.

I am setting out to make a straightforward historical account of a very un-straightforward category of work, which is, nonetheless, largely self-defining. The makers of the work used labels that - with only a very few expectations, discussed later - signal their inclusion in this category of new work. These labels were clear markers, but, as is frequently the problem with critical terms, the meaning and application shifted and contained contradictions. Such contradictions in the way key terms were used were characteristic of this shifting period between modernism and postmodernism. There are also contradictions in the values of science and mysticism (discussed on page 5), notions of success and failure (page 6) and the responsibility taken by individuals and groups collectively (pages 5, 8 and throughout). Above all - and foundational to this thesis - there

was a characteristic contradiction between the impulse towards inclusiveness and the exclusion of a non-coterie audience (usually *the middle-class*), at whose expense work was often directed in an active attack. That which was not *of the moment*, the old fashioned and *the past* itself became the enemy, as it had become for the historical avant-gardes.¹ Rosalind Krauss (1986: 157) has noted the “many guises” of the avant-garde artist, pointing to the concept of originality as the apparently common thread that she then takes further, commenting that the Futurists saw themselves within a “parable of absolute self-creation.” It is a “metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition...” This conception of the *original present opposed to the past*, describes a significant element in the culture of the later twentieth century, which is also found manifest in the counter culture, rock and roll and experimental theatre. It is ironic that, in itself, this concept became a tradition.

The period

The period 1965 to 1985 was marked by major changes in Australian society and cultural life. If the preceding decade, 1955 to 1964, produced a growing number of instances of modern theatre and the first modern Australian vernacular theatre to be acclaimed, it was still a promise rather than a fulfilment of a modern Australian theatre. Major contributors to modern theatre in Australia, Barry Humphries and Ray Lawler both went to England to prove their mettle in this earlier period, and, in the neo-colonial manner, they stayed. This suggests the potential shift which was to occur in the following decade when artists stayed in Australia (some even returned from overseas) and prospered. A viable modern national theatre grew, catalysed by active avant-garde theatre. The avant-garde theatre challenged the conservative mainstream theatre and prompted change. The two were mutually dependent in their historical and critical emergence.

A national theatre in an international context

The theatre in the years 1965 to 1985 in Australia was exposed to a period of dynamic social change. Advocates of the new Australian plays described them, at the time, as an ‘indigenous’ flowering of national theatre that was not beholden to anywhere else. However, this study will argue that Australian theatre in this period was deeply influenced by a number of currents in the international cultural environment that were expressed in avant-garde theatre. These included the

emergence of youth culture, music, and the celebration of liberty and the opposition to the institutions of authority encapsulated in Theodore Roszak's term the *counter culture*. There was a slow realisation of Australian identity in the post-colonial context and a recognition of modernism in the Australian theatre after a long period of resistance. The women's liberation movement placed an emphasis on matters of gender and sexuality that had a pervasive influence. This international context did not weaken the significance or artistic viability of the Australian avant-garde theatre that emerged. To the contrary, it provided an abiding framework within which to place the ephemera of performances that might otherwise remain unrecognised critically.

The development of air transport and electronic communications technology in this period shifted Australia into a closer relationship to the rest of the world and gave greater exposure to international trends. For a nation with relative wealth and a small population that had been locked out of the contemporary world by its unequivocal geographic isolation, Australian society was profoundly changed by the development of larger passenger aircraft that allowed an unprecedented movement of individuals within Australia and internationally. The spread of television to virtually all Australian households occurred in this period. Australia was now linked to the world through this medium and the use of coaxial telecommunication cables and satellites that linked us instantaneously to the rest of the world. With this dynamically increased mobility international visitors now fell into a different juxtaposition to local theatre. There was an outright change in the types of artists to visit Australia: from the trickle employed by the commercial theatres to a steady flow as part of a newly established *international festival circuit*. Instead of these visitors standing as the sole carrier of the cultural authority, theatre practitioners visiting Australia were now part of a more equal flow of major ideas internationally.

Major international influences on avant-garde theatre in Australia in this period included off-Broadway plays and venues that were economically and creatively self-generated, as well as the New York experimental theatres. Also from the United States of America, street theatres associated with student political movements were influential in Australia, as were the *alternative theatres* working in the community in the United Kingdom. Modern European theatre - then obscured by Martin Esslin's critical construct of a *Theatre of the Absurd* - was taken up in the margins; as was the intensely disciplined work of Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and Peter Brook with his Centre for International Theatre Creations with its pursuit of a universal

theatre language. The highly physical homoerotic theatre of Lindsay Kemp, and the painterly conceptual theatre of Tadeusz Kantor, had an impact on theatre making in Australia. There were also a few instances of the theatres of Asia influencing Australian work. Various projects in Australia took up these influences in different ways, but the local work entered new territory and - with considerable vanity - generally rejected mere emulation. Nonetheless, Australian avant-garde theatre was frequently chastised by local critics for 'imitating' overseas models. Overseas groups, which increasingly visited Australian arts festivals, were not criticised by the same critics for their participation in an ongoing tradition that entailed *influence*, *emulation* and *quotation of other's work*. It took time for critics to regard local work as part of a set of international concerns. This critical parochialism reflected a continuing reluctance to acknowledge the viability of modern ideas, and subsequently postmodern ideas, in the arts and the social environment in Australia.

The particularly dynamic time of change in neo-colonial Australia saw the overturning of a notion of *assimilation* as a dominant social principle. The conservative emphasis on assimilation insisted that Australia should be a homogeneous society, in which 'stability' was to be valued above all and *diversity* was to be rejected. Australia was never such a society. This attitude, however, served the interests of a ruling elite and propped up the 'right to rule' of conservative Liberal Party governments in the postwar years: their supporters who were wealthy families and the upwardly mobile middle-class who wanted to join the rulers in a maverick society that cherished civility. These had been the prevailing values in Australian national discourse prior to this time, and remained influential ideas that have focused key national debates.

From the contemporary international arena came the formative issues that were to shift Australian society in this period. The national liberation struggles and processes aimed at ending colonialism had a deep impact in Australia, evident in the theatre of the time. Global action to end racism, and the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements, as well as women's liberation, reflected a trend towards direct popular political action. These were cause for public protest and debate in Australia in the context of the stasis of the cold war. From the geographic margins of formerly colonised nations gathered at the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in 1963 came a widespread acceptance of the expression, 'the third world'². Australia began to see its place in the world with a new strategic geographical perception linked to Asia and the Pacific. Globally there were parallel impulses towards nationalism and beyond nationalism towards a new

internationalism, other than international socialism, based on economic common interests and indicated by emerging international organisations known by clusters of initials, such as, EEC, OECD, OPEC and ASEAN. Australia was no longer linked to Britain as it had been. The trend in the theatre to establish recognisable statements of Australian nationalism was followed almost immediately by material which went beyond mere nationalism to an internationalist or non-nationalist postmodernity. The emergent Australian nationalism was imbued with high levels of self-consciousness and even self-parody in its new representations of Australian identity

The *other*: alternative society, counter culture, subculture

Within the counter culture there was a utopian search for principles of socialisation opposed to the bourgeois family, which had a direct impact on many theatre groups aspiring to create avant-garde theatre at this time. The new social patterns of group households and other ersatz-families were seen as a new *tribalism*, which attempted to unify *belief*, *art* and *life*. This came close to a restatement of a condition of the *historical avant-gardes*. At this time there was a profound ambivalence towards technology within the counter culture, which was divided between ‘good’ technology, like lysergic acid diethylamide and geodesic domes, for example, and ‘bad’ technology, such as nuclear technology.

The models that had an impact on the formation of avant-garde theatre in Australia, it can be argued, had their origins in the key ideas of the *historical avant-gardes* and their continuing influence. Antonin Artaud’s proposed post-colonial project was, in effect, to materialise in Australia in the work of Nightshift, and the All Out Ensemble.³ In both aesthetically and politically radical avant-garde theatres there were key strategies embraced in this period that challenged the conventions governing the presentation and representation of violence and sex. These can be viewed as a testing of the issues of *power* and *freedom* through manipulation of the sites of transgression. Such work also provided indicators of the extent of the domain of the *sovereign individual*. From a conventional Marxist position individualism and artistic autonomy were the abhorrent apotheoses of the bourgeois condition, but from the more liberal position of the New Left this was a legitimate site for social action to shift society towards revolutionary renewal.

The avant-garde theatre was concerned with developing the theatre through a process of

experimentation. The theatre laboratories of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, and later Grotowski, were the models for this trend. A scientific process was suggested by their systematic application of highly developed regimes of bodily and mental exercise. Also they developed apparently scientific formulations of theory, based on acute observations that were then the basis for careful modification of their processes in response to the results achieved. Contrary to this identification with conventional science, however, there were in these models a metaphysical preoccupation and a tendency to outright mysticism.

The experimental theatres of the study period were also often *ecstatic theatres* with tribe-like social structures. They embraced apparently eclectic historical and contemporary influences, but there were a number of key preoccupations that were broadly thematic through many of these groups. The central issues were *cruelty* and challenges to the civil authority through works of art that transgressed sexual and social norms similar to the strategies of the historical avant-gardes. Beyond this there was a widespread refusal to site work in conventional contexts. The problematisation of theatre representation, and the tension between *the real* and *the performed*, focused avant-garde work on various approaches to the artifice of the performance of spectacle, and led to a concentration upon the visual aspects of the theatre. At this time, the focus was generally (although not exclusively) away from language-based performances, and work was frequently identified as ‘visual theatre’. The development of the performer through the systematic broadening of their skills and the deepening of their grasp of cultural traditions, produced a generation of accomplished artists empowered to engage in many levels of the creative activities of the theatre and to challenge this institution. The *performer* was now seen as a cultural medium. Projects in this period frequently explored the interaction of music and visual information in the performance, and developed increasing understanding and facility in harnessing for an audience this multi-sensorial realm of interacting elements.

Notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ for the avant-garde abound with ironies, and the origins of these lie in the historical model of the avant-garde. Appropriations from the avant-garde by the mainstream although often incongruous were not infrequent, and such commodifications were usually seen from the conventional perspective as ‘successes’. From the outlaw’s perspective, however, these were seen as treachery and a ‘failure’ of the avant-garde. It can be argued that even with the historical avant-gardes and their apparent ‘purity’ of revolutionary position - ‘to

destroy the institution of art' - that this was a battle-cry rather than a plan of action. In the increasingly complex context of the decades to follow, the oppositional stance of the avant-garde has remained primarily rhetorical. These paradoxical relationships are nowhere more apparent than in the clear switching of marginal status to mainstream status that have occurred in the period this work describes.

By the end of the study period, despite economic rationalism, cutbacks, and political reversals that tended to push society and culture back into the mould of the neo-colonial order, Australia retained the substance of the social innovations of the period. Many of the new voices were not silenced, and diversity and pluralism were not reduced to a singular identity. By the nineteen-eighties, as Paul Taylor proposed in his editorial writing in *Art and Text*, a single oppositional counter culture had transformed into diverse subcultures. This complex interplay of many voices meant that commodification and appropriation could be negotiated in a multidimensional cultural environment. The conservative forces could not buy-out or suppress the multitude of *other voices*. What occurred was a sophisticated series of transactions and negotiated outcomes, in which cultural issues came to include the environment, gender and sexuality, and ethnicity. In this new democratic context, these 'forces' had to parley with 'traditional' political groups, and the trade unions, churches, social service organisations, educational lobby groups and the arts. This was a cacophonous exchange without the symmetry of a dialectic, but it has become increasingly the manner of postmodernism. The simple oppositional relationship disappeared amid a multitude of voices and mediated representations. In this context the avant-garde have, in a sense, a 'generic' role.

In this thesis it has not been assumed that work that is avant-garde existed in a single clearly defined domain. Avant-garde theatre was found in many different contexts in the period, including of course, the groups dedicated to experimental theatre, and the, so called, 'alternative theatres' of the nineteen-seventies. Yet avant-garde theatre was frequently produced in other contexts: within the output of regional theatres, and among works ostensibly for young audiences and schools, within the work produced for the generalised 'community theatre' and that for specific communities. On exceptional occasions avant-garde theatre was even produced within the confines of the inherently conservative state theatre companies and amateur theatres. Many theatre artists in Australia 'exploited' opportunities to do work provided by the 'niches' created

by funding policies. Such artists as Terry O'Connell, Rex Cramphorn and Mike Mullins, for example, did not necessarily stay within an 'alterative' or avant-garde category, but developed work where they could, over time in several different contexts, but frequently with avant-garde intentions.

In this period, no cases can be seen in Australia of avant-garde artists who achieved widely acclaimed international success and considerable levels of support, comparable to international theatre figures such as Robert Wilson or Pina Bausch. Although, within the context of an environment of more modest funding, Nigel Triffitt and Meryl Tankard have since become examples of artists whose work has substantial credibility *because* of its audacity and innovation. They represent a growing category of *accepted avant-garde* - to indulge an oxymoron - and are funded on that basis.

In Australia *politically radical* theatre and theatre with an *aesthetically radical* approach had a complex relationship. In the nineteen-seventies they were frequently identified as being at odds; however, artists and groups often slipped between these supposed contraries. Apparently aesthetically constructed groups were politically sophisticated. For example, Claremont was contrasted with La Mama and the Australian Performing Group, which were much more overtly political. Claremont, however, was structured as a collective and included individuals who were politically active, such as the writer John Mester and Alison Richards who was a political scientist. Within the Australian Performing Group smaller ensembles operated with their own aesthetics: Stasis was a long-running theatre laboratory. Nightshift was an 'underground' theatre committed to the subversion of bourgeois art forms and bourgeois society.

Within the counter culture there was a thrust to place political responsibility within the domain of the individual. This social and personal political 'development' prefigured the feminist axiom: *the personal as political*. The work of many artists can be seen to reflect this, including Lyndal Jones, Jenny Kemp, Bruce Keller and Derek Kreckler. The women's movement, feminism and women's theatre had an unequalled critical impact on the development of theatre in Australia. Influence occurred within the counter culture through informal networks. Local artists knew each other and knew each other's work, and this extended to the international context where youth culture, rock and roll and drug culture provided a *lingua franca*.

Definitions

‘Avant-garde theatre’

This thesis seeks to embrace the shifting meanings for the term ‘avant-garde’ in the period so that this study might include *new* work that was placed in opposition to the current conventions. There was a range of oppositional positions, at the extreme end of which was work that was aimed at destroying the conventions of art making and the institution of art itself. Renato Poggioli’s theory of the avant-garde suggested a “cult of novelty” with its origins in the Romantic movement that prefigured the avant-garde in twentieth century modernism. (Poggioli 1984: 50) Peter Bürger’s theorisation of the avant-garde argued further that the historical avant-gardes set out to destroy the ‘institution of art’ and to place art practice in the everyday living of all people. (Bürger 1984: *passim*)⁴ This was a more explicitly political analysis and describes the preoccupation of the period. In an essay titled ‘The Politics of the avant-garde,’ Raymond Williams (1988: *passim*) pointed to the ambivalent role of radical politics within modernism throughout the twentieth century. This is the case in Australia in the period of this study only to the extent that some groups espoused political motives but adopted *aesthetic means*; while others denied political motives - some even denied politics itself - but embraced *alternative social postures* in opposition to bourgeois society, which were arguably as committed to the subversion of bourgeois values as conventional political action.

In some cases this theatrical field has been called: *alternative, experimental, fringe, innovative* or *radical*. These terms are themselves burdened with ambiguities, and none are simple alternatives for the other. The descriptive term, *alternative*, is entirely premised upon an oppositional position to something else, for example. ‘Experimentation’ is a process. ‘Fringe’ meant one thing in Melbourne, where the Fringe Network had great credibility as the opposition to the mainstream theatres. While in the early nineteen-eighties, it described something different in Sydney, where it was a name for a network of amateur theatres. ‘Innovative’ sits more coolly poised, and was the term used in Federal government funding policies through this period and was used arbitrarily, as a result. ‘Radical’ suggests a politically committed theatre, but also was used to describe the audacity of the *aesthetically radical*; as was the term, *underground*, which

was associated mostly with film and the counter culture.

By assuming a position of *oppositonality*, which problematised the relationship of their work with proceeding conventional work, the makers of new theatre and performance material in this period were going beyond a notion creating cutting-edge work as an effect or style. When the avant-garde is defined by its capacity to ‘open the new ground beyond the frontier of the respectable mainstream’, this can mean little more than to be *ahead of its time*. Richard Kostelanetz (1982: 3), for example, has suggested that avant-garde work should satisfy three criteria: “transcend [...] current artistic conventions [...] establishing a discernible distance between itself and the mass of current practices; second, avant-garde work will necessarily take considerable time to find its maximum audience; and, thirdly, it will probably inspire future, comparably advanced endeavours.” This is the most modest of definitions and says nothing of the tradition of confrontation and rupture which is essential to the critique of art theorist Marjorie Perloff (1986). In her study, *The Futurist Movement: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, she is explicit in the necessity of such an oppositional strategy in the avant-garde. In art theory there is a widespread critical usage in which the avant-garde will entail the disruption or the radical rearrangement of prevailing codes in the making and receiving of art. (Krauss 1986: *passim*; Bürger 1984: *passim*; Calinescu 1987: 97-148)

The avant-garde performance of the period challenged the normative parameters of theatre practice. For example, there was work that explored *improvisation* and challenged the creative prerogatives allowed to actors, and questioned the *authorship of the theatre work*. There was work which breached the conventional *disciplinary* divisions, creating work that was interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary. There were investigations of *the organisation of space* and the ordering of *place for performance*. There were innovative ways developed of framing *intercultural material*; and exploring the functions of *narrative*. The new work of the period was often original in substance and usually created original juxtaposition for its contents, but originality itself was increasingly problematised with the emergence of postmodern work. There was a longstanding concern with *exploratory processes* through which new means of performance might be developed. Avant-garde theatre consistently tested the dialectic between *form and content*, and between *life and art*. The ‘failure of language’ is a key to modernism and postmodernism that has an especially central place in the avant-garde theatre in Australia, where

language itself has been problematic in the Australian experience. Overall, avant-garde theatre of that time can be characterised by the new evaluations it made of *the relationship of performance to audience*, and the new theatre practices that it developed from these explorations. One of the most significant characteristics of avant-garde theatre is that it has a ‘coterie audience’ and is contemptuous of a ‘respectable’ bourgeois audience.⁵

The term ‘avant-garde’ has had revolutionary connotations and a dominantly political usage for over a century. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin produced a periodical called *L’Avant-garde*, while in exile in Switzerland in 1878. (Poggiolo 1968: 8) Elsewhere Bakunin wrote that, “the joy of destruction is also a creative joy.” (Enzensberger 1988: 146) This is often rendered: *To destroy is to create*. As Calinescu (1987: 117) points out, this axiom “is actually applicable to most of the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde.” In 1902 Lenin wrote of the Communist Party as the *avant-garde* of the working class. There came to be a clear association of the term with the Communist Party. By 1912 Apollinaire had used *avant-garde* in writing of art: “The young Futurist painters can compete with some of our avant-garde artists.” Calinescu judged that, “by the second decade of our century, avant-garde, as an artistic concept, had become comprehensive enough to designate not one or other, but *all the new schools* whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and cult of the new.” (Calinescu 1987: 114-117)

In the revolutionary impulse common to the *historical avant-gardes* we find the origins of an abiding paradox: where, in an inversion of the hierarchy, *the ruled rule*. (Calinescu 1984: 104) This oxymoron may be a key to the avant-garde. It is analogous to a revolution in which a proletarian *elite* assume the absolute prerogatives of a ruling order to bring about an egalitarian, utopian state. In this is to be found the profound ambivalence of elitist/anti-elitist values that adhere to a notion of the avant-garde. Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ employed ‘avant-garde’ as a descriptor of, in effect, *high art*. This was in opposition to “a rear-guard,” Greenberg added, “to which the Germans give the wonderful name *Kitsch*.” (Greenberg 1986: 11) Positioning together *the revolutionary* and *the avant-garde* in opposition to bourgeois society, Greenberg presented it with a gloss of romanticised revolutionary heroism.

Until late in the nineteen-eighties the term *avant-garde* was conspicuously absent from the terms

used to describe the new theatre emerging in Australia in the preceding twenty year period. The critical writing in the *Bulletin* magazine was the notable exception as it assumed a tone of informed internationalism. Perhaps fashion had something to do with the disfavour for the term. It was also an aspect of the Australian inclination to downplay self-image. On top of this was the anti-intellectualism that characterised the counter culture in the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies. This mistrust of the intellect was not exclusive to Australia, and Bonnie Marranca chided in 1977, “that the avant-garde audience in New York is, in general, an *anti-intellectual* elite rather than an intellectual one.” (Marranca 1984: 116 Italics in the original.)

If, in the European perception, there was a sense of loss at the failure of the direct political action of students and workers in 1968, this contrasted with the Australian experience at this time, which was suffused with revolutionary optimism. The nationalist Labour Party under the charismatic Gough Whitlam narrowly failed to win the Federal election held in 1969 and Australia continued its increasingly unpopular involvement in the war in Vietnam. But this was reversed in 1972 with the electoral success of Labour. This win gave an opportunity for an unprecedented Australian nationalism that shifted institutions away from the colonial patterns. The arts prospered in a climate created by a conscious attempt to reform Australian society and culture. This historical disjunction saw much of the cultural innovation that had occurred internationally throughout the nineteen-sixties focused in Australia in the first years of the nineteen-seventies. The elegiac tone in Europe that followed 1968 was deferred in Australia until 1975 with the controversial dismissal of this reformist government by the representative of the Queen.

Within left leaning theatre organisations in Australia the advent of the New Left prompted opportunities for art making with a broad range of aesthetics beyond the strictures of social realism. If marked political ambivalence characterised the historical avant-gardes, this was not so in Australia in the early period of this study. There were no ‘progressive’ right-wing theatres in Australia at this time. Little significant innovation occurred within conservative theatres typified by the state theatre companies and the amateur theatre societies. A reverence for a narrow notion of the theatre tradition caused their common conservatism, and produced a cultural paralysis that stripped their repertoire of any social criticism.⁶ The avant-garde theatres held state theatre companies and the amateur theatres in contempt for these reasons.

On the other hand there were other limitations on the contribution made by avant-garde theatre, and it was not an automatic blue-print that anticipated the direction of the mainstream. The alternative social movement and the alternative theatres with their ecstatic projects tended to be marginalised by their own insularity and eccentricity. As the period continued, these theatres were increasingly “dispersed,” Berringer observed internationally, or they were “assimilated into the mainstream fashion and media.” (Berringer 1993:42) He argued that fashion and marketing were able to subvert the radicalism of the Living Theatre, for example, despite that group’s intention to operate outside the institution of the theatre and to attack and destroy it. This view is similar to Bürger’s belief that the avant-garde failed when it was faced with late capitalist pluralism or postmodernism. (Bürger 1984: 99) For Berringer the problem was with the functions of postmodernism and its “culture industry looking for *style* and *posture* of radicalism marketable as sentimental or ironic fashions.” (Berringer 1993: 44 Italics in the original.)

The White Company in Australia were politically acute in some of their work in the early nineteen-seventies, and within an anarchic organisation they harnessed some of the vitality of campus revolt and social action around issues of race and the environment. Yet they were an essentially aesthetically defined ‘experimental theatre’, with an international perspective that acknowledged the influence of the Living Theatre. Ultimately their work was diffused, and its impact held almost entirely at a personal level. There was little or no appropriation - whether this is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ - little or no commodification of the White Company. At a more general level however, innumerable details of the counter culture were appropriated and marketed to a new generation, and even ironically to those who had originally had whole foods and body oils, ambient music and therapy sessions, in their possession.

‘Modern’ and ‘postmodern’ theatre

Berringer suggests that the historical moment of transition to postmodern cannot be located, but Jameson places it around the beginning of the nineteen-sixties. (Jameson 1991: 1) Berringer identifies a principle of postmodernity that grounds it firmly upon the modern. “A radical theatre practice always wanted to abolish the margin of pretense, appearing and pretending to be alive and present to itself,” he wrote. (Berringer 1993: 45) Jonathan Kalb has observed that in the heart of modern theatre, “for Beckett, as for Artaud, artificiality is a natural state, and part of the

theatre's job is to demonstrate that: it is not mendacious when it avoids explicit contact with social issues; it is rather mendacious and manipulative when it fails to proclaim its duplicity, the essential collusion of its natural and artificial natures." (Kalb 1988: 29) This was increasingly the case as modernism slipped or grew into postmodernism.

Raymond Williams has described *modern drama* as characterised by five criteria: *contemporary* contents, *indigenous* characters, *vernacular* speech, with *egalitarian* and *secular* principles. (Williams 1988: 309-310) These characteristics are easily discernable in the Australian theatre generally called *modern*, created after 1955, including the plays of Lawler and Williamson, and the work of the ensemble companies.

Throughout all varieties of modernism the essential principle is one of *progress*. It underpins such apparently diverse aspects of modernity as Darwinian evolutionary theory, and the dialectical models of Hegel and Marx, as well as the ideology of industrial development and technological advancement. This principle is vital to the concept of *revolution*, Tom Paine's metaphor for convulsive political change. Progress was a determinant of modernism. This condition necessitated the formulation of a *postmodernity* in which progress was not the dominant principle, though much else may be similar. Arnold Toynbee coined this useful term in the context of Europe in the immediate postwar period. Rather than an unquestioning re-engagement with the primary focus of modernism, *making the new*, progress has been problematised in postmodernism and the focus given to values other than originality.

For some critics and artists this precipitated a crisis. Bürger identified the avant-garde with the progressive principle within modernism. By defining the avant-garde in terms of its revolutionary potential, Bürger saw the pluralism of the late twentieth century as "a simultaneity of the radically disparate" which denied the viability of an avant-garde, because, "no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced *as art* than any other." (Bürger 1984: 63 Italics in the English text.) For others this disruption quite simply did not matter. Innovations became strategic and formal, and art returned to an autonomy that was moderated by the truly vast levels of consumption through the media, which arguably left the interface between art making and life extremely permeable. The distance between the "radically disparate" and the *social activism* of the political commitment have become increasingly unstable amid the

constantly shifting surfaces of mediated postmodernity.

The problematic nature of the avant-garde within postmodernism is that it is simultaneously an icon and yet it functions iconoclastically. Currently in a postmodern pluralist environment the historical avant-gardes have come to represent revered icons, and the coercive strategies of the avant-garde have come to dominate much popular culture. In the broader culture the avant-garde has recently provided crucial turning points around which some of the rapid and complex inversions of marginality and cultural centrality have switched. This seeming contradiction has developed through the ‘maturing’ of modernism into postmodernism. While Bürger rejected the possibility of a contemporary avant-garde, and Raymond Williams expressed a fear that it may decay into a reactionary mode, nevertheless, within postmodernism the avant-garde has remained a vital model for theatre in Australia, as the final part of this thesis demonstrates.

The expressed political radicalism of groups within the Australian theatre varied within the study period. Virtually no politically right wing avant-garde groups or individuals developed in Australia, except perhaps the special case of the expatriate Barrie Humphries.⁷ However there were expressly left wing theatres, such as the Australian Performing Group. The social radicalism broadly associated with *alternative society*, at times tended to reject politics *per se*. The counter culture was often contemptuous of politics, and at times was simply uninterested in engaging in the conventional political discourse. This rejection was not uninformed, however. It was the product of a highly educated generation born after World War Two. Anarchy was *being lived* by a generation privileged to grow up in a time and place of sufficient wealth to allow them the leisure to ‘drop out’ of the bourgeois capitalist world, if they wished. The radicalism of Bakunin’s *L’avant-garde* was bearing fruit in Australia in the profound anarchy of the youth movement in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies. This occurred globally, and the proximity of life and art was celebrated on an unprecedented scale.

Some of the innovations of the avant-garde in Australian theatre were taken up by the mainstream almost immediately. Williamson’s work at La Mama was accepted by the state theatre companies within months of the Australian Performing Group moving into the Pram Factory. This rapid transition from the perimeter to the cultural centre does not deny the marginal and radical nature of Williamson’s work with the La Mama Group, which was later to become the Australian

Performing Group.⁸ The group's terms of working and its means of working were contrary to the prevailing cultural mode at the Melbourne Theatre Company and in the social milieu of Melbourne at the time. The rapid adoption of the *new vernacular drama* by the mainstream need not render its avant-garde origins bankrupt. In the avant-garde generally, there is an inherent ambiguity in the terms *success* and *failure*. If the avant-garde feeds the mainstream, it is successful in its own demise.

Background to this thesis

The colonial larrikin tradition in neo-colonial Australia: vernacular or creole?

The oppositional avant-garde may have its cultural and historical origins in Europe, but it is prefigured in a significant way in Australia by the manner and means of the larrikin character: the wild colonial. These cultural phenomena converged in the late twentieth century as part of a major flowering of nationalism in Australia, and the outcome included the avant-garde theatre of this period.

What is the value of *civilization* in a land stolen and plundered by force? The colonisers of Australia saw themselves *bringing civilization* to an empty territory. Popular expressions of national culture are frequently caught between this conservative veneration of the strong and silent authority, and a brash egalitarian irreverence. Far from being in any way exclusive of each other, these contradictory attitudes are expressions of a single fundamental crisis. The wildness of the wild colonial boy, and the patriotism of the digger, stem from the same chip-on-the-shoulder. In a hostile environment in which the youth (for he is a young man) is neither an indigene, nor a newcomer. The *native born* - that is the colonial born European - is forever beyond the reach of the parental security of the mother country. Ever required to specify identity in terms of that maternal national origin and language, yet expelled by distance and circumstance from that comfortable and rich home. This can be regarded as the cause of a deep collective psychic scarring.

The foundation of the Australian nation was never clearly marked by a decisive break from its imperial possessor, Britain. The metropolitan colonial power simply shifted the administrative thresholds from several semi-autonomous colonies to a largely autonomous federated Dominion, effectively retaining responsibility for foreign relations for a further forty years. By contrast, the United States of America was clearly and unambiguously established by the American Revolution. For royalist or revolutionary alike the significance of the victory of the American colonies and their Union was a fact upon which a national (dramatic) literature could be built. (Ashcroft 1989: 16) The establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia at the dawn of the new century was suffused with great idealism, and Australia was seen internationally as *the new*

*nation, the great social experiment.*⁹ The articulation of national identity in Australia involved the negotiation of the contention between the ‘ native born’ larrikin rhetoric, exemplified by the *Bulletin* magazine, and the gentry-view, which was sometimes more British than the British, that Australia was a dominion *outpost of Empire*. There was a remarkable synthesis of these views in the initial degree of support for Australian forces going to the aid of Empire in the First World War. Australian fighting men, it was thought, would stand the equal of any in the war that was to end all wars.

The collective spirits of the nation were high in the decade leading up to the Great War. Thus, the appalling outcome of that distant conflict on the small population of Australia is difficult now to imagine. With a population of 4,875,325, Australia had sent 331,781 into battle in the First World War: 59,342 were killed and 152,171 wounded. (Souter 1976: 209) A generation of young men was decimated. Australia has never really found a cultural expression for this catastrophic loss. The horror was too great, and a mass denial eventually set in. The returning soldiers huddled together for mutual understanding of an experience that was literally beyond explanation.

The nationalist bubble, which they had raised so high at Federation, had burst. The eyes of the world had shifted from Australia to the Russian revolution, which became the new global laboratory for social reform. The young nation had laid its bets on the prowess of its young men and the brave romance of its progressive reforms, and it had lost heavily and painfully on both. There seemed to be no solace but to withdraw into the embittered mode of the *bushie weathering the bad times*, the other side of the wild colonial boy: the *battler*, the *little digger*.

Residual institutions of British rule still masked the emergence of an Australian cultural identity. Even the radicalism and artistic bohemianism of the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties fell short of the promise at Federation. Louis Esson’s plays and his amateur company, the Pioneer Players, did not lead to the establishment of a national dramatic literature, as had occurred in Ireland with the writing of Yeats, O’ Casey and Synge, and was happening in the United States of America with O’ Neill and others. The population of Australia was small and turned culturally inwards with a collective self deprecation that froze the national narrative in a select vision of the *pioneer suffering in the landscape*. This view was only contested by a perspective that deferred

to the *mother culture* in Britain: the colonial seeking assurance of a cultural authenticity from abroad.

The introduction of modernism to Australia faced active opposition. Australia was poised for much of this century between political extremes of right and left, and in this context the role of the anti-authoritarian larrikin figure was a means asserting an Australian identity. The relationship of the marginal culture to the imperial centre for Australia was figured in the role and narratives of the *wild colonial boy*, that is, the *larrikin*.

There is now a question - unthinkable earlier in Australia's white history - but perhaps, at the end of the twentieth century, it might be asked, if this larrikin figure is not a type of *creole* identity? That is, in the generic sense, one who is born of European parentage in a land distant from that centre.

The problem of the terrible relationship between the blundering and tyrannous European invaders and the Aborigines remained largely unarticulated for two hundred years. This silence served the interests of the conquerors. Any collective guilt or apprehension of the enormous crimes committed in the name of civilisation were beyond easy articulation. The word 'genocide' itself is a creation of the postmodern world. Australia was a place apart from Europe. Its *otherness* and its strange alien natural environment were essentially without names or descriptive terms for the Europeans. What was *unnamed* was usually *unseen*. The Latin label, *Terra Nullius*, suggested an empty or un-peopled land and this denial was part of the justification of occupation by the British. The Orphans' Home at Cabramatta was the institutional repository for many children of Aboriginal women by white men. This first inter-racial generation were denied inclusion in both societies. This perpetuated a bondage that was the corollary of convict status. It added a further remove in the alienation of the *wild colonial* children, the name given to these urchins who had to make their own way in the world. They were marginalised and vilified within a society that was itself construed by its European patrons to be the extremity of isolation and undesirability.

The wild colonial boy, far from the culture of authenticity, adopted a pugnacious stance that was seemingly anti-authoritarian. His impatience and his verbal blows were aimed at the high culture that was represented by the new arrivals from the mother country. The newcomer offended the

‘ old lad’ with their authoritative accents and fashionable clothes that betokened recent proximity to their cultural origin. In response the colonial celebrated his vulgarity and encoded, in his street-talk, his trust in himself and his resentment of the maternal order.

True to its Latin origin, the model of vernacular language clearly proposes a cultural hierarchy: The imposed imperial language of occupation above the substratum of native language, that is, the vernacular language. There are ironic complexities in the case of Australian language because of the existence of genuinely indigenous Aboriginal culture, which leaves all discussion of ‘ authenticity’ within the invading culture to pall. When we speak of ‘ vernacular literature’ in English we are compounding a further displacement in which Aborigines “ are doubly marginalized - pushed to the psychic and political edge of societies which themselves have experienced the dilemma of colonial alienation” (Ashcroft *et al* 1989: 144) The nineteenth century usage, exemplified by John Dunmore Lang, which has the child of European parentage born in Australia called a *native*, is clearly ironic. Until the nineteen-nineties it was a common usage to speak of ‘ an indigenous Australian culture’ and *not* mean Aboriginal culture. The denial of the meaning of this phrase suggests the widespread and profound lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal people and culture. The appropriation of Aboriginal prerogatives, even in language, has been almost absolute.

Further contradictions compound the metaphoric use of the term *vernacular* to describe the local culture in contemporary Australia. The model proposes a *language of occupation* overlaying the vernacular language, but we are referring to forms of the same language, English, and not separate languages. There is a distinction between British-English and local English, but more than this, there is a special role for the language of the larrikin. This vital form of local English is more than a regional idiom or style. It has become the signifier of national identity. This potent language is a form of *argot* - a secret language of rogues and thieves - and it is charged with social and subcultural codes to exclude outsiders. In both the Latin sense and in the modern usage this language is *vulgar*.¹⁰ Its vulgarity is gauged to mark out whom it will exclude and whom it will include. The mechanism of exclusion/inclusion is parallel to the function of the coterie audience of the avant-garde. Paradoxically this allows one group to identify as ‘ belonging’ to the clique while everybody else is outside, and it also allows one to identify with these groups. Significantly it recalls the paradoxical shift imbedded within the concept of the revolution: After the revolution,

those ruled *rule*. There is a similar duality of inclusion and exclusion implied in the concepts of the *avant-garde*, the *revolutionary* model and the mechanism of an *argot*.¹¹

In Australia there are social hierarchies, but they are not predominantly ordained by social class, and do not carry with them widely recognised ‘acceptable’ accents or patois. To the contrary, recently in Australia there have been many examples of successful and powerful people who adopt a ‘common’ language mode. This can be seen to be a general trend. Beyond the laudable egalitarianism of this trend, lies the tricky persona of the *larrikin*, and the mechanism of *assimilation* of divergent communities into a normative *bourgeois society* that displays mere tokens of freedom and equality.

Vernacularisation has displaced the cultural synthesis that might be implicit in creolisation. The vernacular is a substratum beneath the official language, the creole is an alternative language that contends with the dominant language for legitimacy. The oppositional stance of the colonial employed a closed language of abuse, and a streetwise facility to dismiss with cutting wit anything and anyone who might challenge the legitimacy of the place and power-base established by the old chum.

For the colony there appeared no alternative to its *possession* by the parent culture. This was a given value, despite the evident reality that this possession was disrupted by distance and the time taken to exchange communications around the globe. This was an *idea of possession*. Although the interlopers were initially numerically weak and perilously remote, it was the very *abstraction* of the notion of colonial possession that appeared to strengthen the bond, rather than weaken it.

Because the Australian colonies did not see themselves as a newly emergent melange - with their traditions in their European parentage as well as the local environment and possibly the indigenous culture - the cultural wealth of an acknowledgement of creole identification has been denied in Australia. Instead in the nineteen-fifties Australia sought to achieve a homogeneous cultural makeup, and adopted official policies of ‘assimilation’. At the same time, however postwar migration was creating a society with levels of cultural diversity which were to overwhelm these policies aimed at homogeneity. By the mid-nineteen-seventies new policies of multiculturalism articulated a growing recognition of the possibilities contained within Australia’s cultural diversity.

Yet the hierarchy of *old chum over new chum* still holds sway. To this day, recently arrived migrant groups - Turks, Poles, Chinese, Vietnamese - get the traditional 'raw deal' handed out to the *pom*.

A crisis of language

When Peter O' Shaughnessy and Barry Humphries performed Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1957, audiences received it well. The 'failure of language', which was a concern of both modern theatre and postmodernism, was not a crisis for the Australian audience as it had been in Europe. For Australians, hearing great silences was not new. Faced with the unspeakable, the lugubrious *Aussie digger*, the *battler*, the *wild colonial* was still, was silent, then cracked a not-so-funny joke, spat on the ground, thought about the difficulty of speech in silence, and perfected the laconic utterance. In Australia, at the apparent end of the Earth, Beckett's play met the world, as migration had produced in Australia a complex and cosmopolitan society that included people and cultures of much of the globe. This was to be even more so after the demise of the infamous white Australia policy in 1972, and the introduction of policies which recognised and articulated Australia's multicultural composition. By the period of this study, Australian society was changing and was to allow the development of a diversity of approaches to theatre including an avant-garde.

Methodology

The term: ‘ theatre artists’

In this thesis I write of ‘ theatre artists’ , using this inclusive term, ‘ artists’ , to describe the group of individuals who work creatively in the theatre as actors, directors, playwrights, designers, dramaturgs and in combinations of these as performance-makers and in other roles. The term ‘ artist’ also serves to suggest that theatre artists have an equal standing with those in other disciplines, such as painting or literature. In our culture ‘ the artist’ is privileged with a creative autonomy and freedom to voice even dissident ideas. In twentieth century modernism, ‘ the artist’ is seen to have an obligation to stand critically outside the norms and accepted structures of middle-class society.

The approach in this thesis

This thesis is concerned with theatre influenced by ideas of the avant-garde that was made in Australia in the years 1965 to 1985 when both modern and postmodern practices were operating, sometimes simultaneously. It is concerned with the formal qualities of this work and the then contemporary critical and social influences that stimulated the creation of this work and allowed it to occur. Through an analysis of *how* and *where* work was presented and *by whom*, and what was the *reception given to this work*, this thesis examines the significance of avant-garde theatre in Australia in the context of the impact of international modernism and postmodernism and the restatement of Australian nationalism.

It is my intention in this thesis not to *quarantine* women’ s theatre, or gay theatre, or theatre from non-English speaking communities but to be inclusive and, at times, to exercise a type of *discriminatory blindness* towards these otherwise marginalising factors: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, popular/high art, excellence, and to a significant degree to ‘ ignore’ even the matter of

divisions into *forms*. I aim to value equally theatre with a text that has literary merit and work that deliberately sets out to treat such values as literary narrative with contempt. Initially the strategy to be *blind* to category divisions was intended to allow a survey undertaken to resolve where avant-garde work had occurred, in the absence of an articulated and detailed ongoing critical evaluation in either academic journals or in the daily press. Undertaking this it became clear that such categories had only indirect relationship to where work, characterised as avant-garde, had been attempted.

In Australia these categories have been reinforced by funding policies. Although it may appear that these categories are the products of arts funding programs: theatre-in-education, community arts, art and working life, a recent focus on Asia. To ignore these categories in seeking out avant-garde theatre is to acknowledge that artists used these programs as a way to support their work by adapting to funding programs. Some proportion of the work created in the programs listed above was opportunistic occupation of those niche positions in funding programs by groups and individuals creating avant-garde theatre. A review of the Australia Council's grants indicates that the greatest diversity of theatre work was supported in 1984, at the culmination of the period covered by this thesis. (Australia Council Annual Reports) I have not focused on categorisations derived from either funding sources or the form, style or politics of the work, nor on work by particular groups or sited in particular places.

Research and interviews

This study has been based on consideration of documents in the archives at the Dennis Wolanski Library in Sydney, and at the Performing Arts Museum and the LaTrobe Library in Melbourne. A substantial number of interviews with practitioners who worked in avant-garde theatre were recorded for this thesis. I interviewed artists with the help of Howard Stanley and Errol Bray, who interviewed people on my behalf. These interviews were tape-recorded on cassettes and transcribed. In most cases the interviewers gave the respondents a printed questionnaire which was the basis for the discussion/interview; this framed a standard set of enquiries which included questions on influences and working methods, the place that had been given to experimentation and the sources of support received.¹² The transcribed interviews were compared with any other published interviews, press clippings and critical evaluations.

Literature

In the period there were a number of publications on avant-garde theatre in America which were available in inexpensive paperback editions and were widely read in Australia: Arthur Sainer's *The Radical Theatre Notebook* (1975), Henry Lesnick's *Guerilla Street Theatre*, and Pierre Biner's (1972) account of the "experimental" Living Theatre. Julian Beck (1972) wrote his own reflections on the journey of the Living Theatre, in keeping with the time, it was couched in terms that were both revolutionary and transformational. One of the most influential publications about English theatres in this period was James Roose-Evans' *Experimental Theatre* (1970). Eugenio Barba edited Grotowski's writing in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) and later collected his own writing on laboratory theatre in *Beyond the Floating Islands* (1986).

No single history of the avant-garde theatre in Australia has been published, however, Margaret Williams' essay, 'Alternative Theatre (1966-1980)' in Harold Love's *The Australian Stage* (1984) is a brief and useful guide to the 'alternative theatre' category encompassed by this study. While considering the social context, Williams is inclined to record theatre spaces and companies rather than actors or directors or bodies of work with other common links.

Leonard Radic called his history of recent Australian theatre, *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre since the 1960s*. The title suggested that Radic believed profound changes, amounting to a revolution, had occurred in the period. His history, unlike the promise implied in the title, documents little theatre which is dissident or outright rebellious. Radic's focus was directed primarily at mainstream theatre and the larrikin successes of the Carlton theatres and Jane Street. His account is slightly biased towards theatre in Melbourne, where he was based, and his writing reflects his position as writer for the daily press, where the margins of theatre activity remained largely unreported. Radic's complete failure to record or analyse Anthill's work, for example, is inexcusable.

Early in the study period, Katharine Brisbane had a column in the *Australian* newspaper, which had a nationwide overview. It was of unequalled critical importance, as she recognised and spoke of the new national drama as it emerged from small venues in Melbourne and Sydney. Journalists

writing for the *Bulletin* had a national overview and an international critical perspective in this period; they included, Phillip Adams, Rex Cramphorn, Denis O' Brien and Brian Hoad.

Many playscripts, relevant to this study, emanated from Currency Press from 1972. This crucial venture to publish Australian plays was initiated by Phillip Parsons and Katharine Brisbane. The publication of local plays was also undertaken enthusiastically by two small presses: Yackandandah Playscripts in Melbourne, and the Playlab Press in Brisbane. Heinemann produced an educational drama series for over a decade. Graeme Blundell's introduction to *Four Australian Plays* published by Penguin in 1970 was a landmark in the recognition of a national drama. Two recent series of monographs on Australian playwrights have been published, one series by Methuen in Australia, and the other by Rodopi in Holland.

Several specialist theatre journals came and went within the period of this study. From within the University of New South Wales, John (Johnny) Allen and a collective of others, edited *Masque* from 1967 to 1970. Later *Theatre Australia* was initiated by University of Newcastle theatre academics Robert Page and Bruce Knappett, with Page and Lucy Wagner editing the magazine from 1976 to 1981. The journal, *Australasian Drama Studies* has been produced since 1982 within the English Department at the University of Queensland, with Veronica Kelly and Richard Fotheringham as its main editors. *Meanjin* contributed provocative articles and a special edition on Australian Drama during the period. Later there was *New Theatre: Australia*, edited for the most part by James Waites, from 1987 to 1989. In Melbourne from 1981 to 1990, Katharine Sturak and later Anne Murch edited *Antnews*, which was a significant critical and historical forum, although nominally the newsletter of Australian Nouveau Theatre. From the Performance Space in Sydney, *Spectator Burns* appeared with four provocative numbers in 1988 and 1989, edited by Nicholas Tsoutas, Sarah Miller, with Christopher Allen and John Baylis. The newsletters of the community arts organisations carried notices and some analysis of theatre projects in this sector, as have periodical publications of the Australia Council.

Feminism was a major critical force shaping new theatre emerging in this period. Peta Tait's *Original Women's Theatre*, and her more recent, *Converging Realities*, have helped place women's theatre in Australia in a detailed perspective. Besides the limitations of marginalisation, Tait's studies have shown an ironic advantage of the marginalisation of women's theatre in our

society. Freed from a preoccupation with 'success' and commercialism, women's theatre was given a freedom to create innovative work and to explore with a personal perspective that allowed women to produce work which was often highly original. Anne Marsh's work on performance art, especially *Body and Self*, has demonstrated similar achievements in that field by women. Often working alone, women in performance art found original means to make performances. They used new and often interdisciplinary approaches to structuring material and to narrative content. Ironically, with little pressure for commercial success these women were less constrained, and in a sense, turned their marginalisation to an advantage. Case, Reinelt and Austin in their various works show the breadth of the influence of feminism in theatre practice both within and beyond women's theatre work.

Gay Hawkins wrote a well-researched history of the community arts in Australia, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts*. It considered the policies of the Australia Council and their internal debates and the way these led to major changes in arts practice nationally. Its title refers to two key community events that Hawkins suggested span the decade of the development of community arts.

Philip Parsons' *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, was published at - even a little beyond - the eleventh-hour for the work done on this thesis. It is an invaluable guide including much that has helped check the facts in this work. It is remarkably complete, and so its omissions are striking: Jenny Kemp, for example is treated very inadequately. Can Kemp's significant output over twenty years be so much less important than some of the bit-players from last century who are recorded with such care? Now, had she been working in the nineteenth century she may have rated a full column to herself!

Memory and oral history

The self-defining nature of each person's history of themselves, and the fallibility of memory, are among the problems of using oral histories to record past theatre practices. Often the theatre practitioner's memory of work is part of a personal mythology, which is constantly revised to accommodate and support the present. I have sought to bring this into resolution by cross-referencing with other documentary records and interviews.

On the other hand, memories have played an especially vital role, because there is an oral culture which operates in the theatre in Australia, in which *anecdote* has been the dominant means of transmission of performance practice and theatre culture from individual to individual, group to group, place to place and time to time. In the absence of a dynamic critical engagement with the relatively small world of the theatre in Australia, *anecdotes* have been personal and collective mnemonic constructions, which have unselfconsciously carried the cultural traditions.

The theatre world is structured as a *network*. Within it, practitioners understand their own work in relationship to other individual practices through the mediation of this network, but not, on the whole, formed by any strong critical framework or tradition, movement, or school. The lack of conscious acknowledgement of these concepts, rather than their actual absence, has been the marked characteristic. In other words, there are critical frameworks, traditions, and movements and schools which have operated in the theatre practice in Australia; but these were not the primary moderating structures within which individuals have orientated their work. Instead theatre practice has been seen dominantly in relationship to genealogy, conveyed in anecdotal exchanges. The practice of an individual stands in relationship to the practice of others known to them, not in primary relationship to broader historical, social, political values. The role therefore of *memory* in the carriage of this unacknowledged tradition is fundamental.

In avant-garde theatre in Australia since the mid-nineteen-sixties, there were growing links with networks beyond Australia. These international influences were acknowledged, although they were often jostled by a larrikin impulse to assert that: *we didn't really need them anyway*. The active suppression of aesthetic modernism in Australia meant that the theatre - arguably the least theorised of the arts - only really began to feel the impact of this century's early innovations during the heady days of the early nineteen-seventies.

It is the nature of a work like this that it will omit worthy examples of what is being discussed. There are areas of the research which were not as thoroughly investigated as I would, initially, have wished. I was not able to obtain support to visit and record interviews with practitioners in Western Australia, for example. This study has been organised to discuss major themes in the establishment of a modern Australian theatre and the part played by the avant-garde in this.

Beyond these chapter divisions the approach is broadly chronological.

Notes

1. Those radical cultural statements of *the new* in the period around the First World War, including Futurism, Constructivism, Vorticism, Cubism and Dada, can be designated as the *historical avant-gardes*, or the *European avant-gardes*. They attacked the art institutions of the day - including modernity - yet, ironically, they are now seen as emblematic of *modern art*.

2. The term “third world” had been first used in 1952 by the economist Alfred Sauvy.

3. In his Second Manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty Artaud proposed a hypothetical production based on the ruthless European conquest of Mexico: “From the historical point of view, The Conquest of Mexico raises the question of colonisation. It revives Europe’s deep-rooted self-conceit in a burning, inexorable bloody manner, allowing us to debunk its own concept of its supremacy.” (Artaud 1977: 85) Artaud was ahead of his contemporaries in the nineteen-thirties in understanding the central place of this issue. His vision has been taken up in aspects of modern/postmodern Australian theatre, such as Nicholas Tsoutas’ work, as it has in recent work in Central and South America.

4. Bürger contended that the historical avant-garde movements made apparent, for the first time, the *institution of art*: the nature of the sociological phenomenon, including the forces that drove art within bourgeois society. This decisive event, Bürger puts forward as a turning point in the history of Western art, and a *benchmark* by which the efficacy of other movements and other bodies of work may be gauged. The historical avant-gardes allow an assessment of the political engagement of art, in the knowledge, he suggested, that “the institution of art neutralises the political content.” (Bürger 1984: 90)

Bürger observed in Hegel’s aesthetic theories, “the shift in the form-content dialectic in favour of form, a development that characterises the further development of art.” (Bürger 1984: 93) He identified a key transition at the beginning of the century from aestheticism to the avant-garde, which came about because of a rejection by the avant-garde of the “autonomy of art” and an attempt “to lead art back into social praxis.” (Sculte-Sasse 1984: xiv)

5. A paradoxical similarity exists between the way an avant-garde coterie audience is ‘cultivated’ and the cultivation of a fashionable *chic*. Both reject middle-class taste, and propose an identification with a new ‘cool’ image. However it is the followers of the avant-garde who enjoy the outright attack upon the bourgeoisie; whereas the followers of fashion are fulfilled by owning what has already been packaged for consumption. One is an aesthetic pleasure and a pleasure in identifying with the *rude* gesture. The other is a pleasure of ownership.

6. The Old Tote’s 1978 production of Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, is a case in point. The satire is based on issues of class, gender, and fidelity and the relationship of private to public responsibility. All this had a relevance in Australia at that time, and it was treated as banal banter and covered up with unfunny horse-play.

7. Behind his multiple public personas as Edna Everage, Sandy Stone, and the others, Humphries constructed for himself an identity which was hardly less fanciful. He poses as a flamboyantly dressed art connoisseur and a mannered arbiter of taste, who looks down critically on the middle-class, the values which he now, in so many ways, represents. We can wonder if this is not the final and most perverse of Humphries’ hoaxes on the self-loathing but proper middle-class suburban Australia of his youth. ‘Look at me, Mum. I’m an English toff now!’ comes very close to the utterance of a wild colonial boy in his hand-me-down tweed jacket.

8. Williamson’s play *The Removalists* was premiered at La Mama in 1971 and went on to win the George Devine Award in London. If this was a neo-colonial accolade, Williamson did not follow other successful Australian playwrights of the previous decade and become an expatriate. He was commissioned to write plays by the state theatre companies and with the minor success of the film based on his stage play *Stork* and the much more significant success of the film of *The Removalists*, Williamson’s career diversified into film. His success was such that the APG collective voted him out, as he either did not attend enough collective meetings, or he had ‘sold out’.

9. The new nation, Australia, was proud of its social innovations. These included giving women the vote and setting up a social security system including the old age pension; the acceptance of trade unions to protect the interests of workers and the creation of an industrial arbitration system.

10. In the medieval period the Bible was translated into the ‘common’ language of the day, that is, the most generally accessible language, Latin. This was known as the *vulgate*, and it was seen to open a wider access to the Christian texts.

11. In an introductory essay to the *Macquarie Dictionary*, J. R. L. Bernard suggests that “there is a spectrum of Australian English” which he notes ranges through a scale of formality he terms: “Broad-General-Cultivated-Modified”. Language is used to place the individual in a social context.

Interestingly Bernard comments that, “Australians may adjust their choices either casually, as temporary circumstances dictate, or habitually, as more permanent changes in situation seem to require. Most Australians have the ability to upgrade at will some distance in the spectrum in the direction of Cultivated when it seems appropriate under certain social pressures, and to drift unconsciously back again when relaxed” (Bernard 1981: 19). There are “cultivated” voices in both expression and delivery; and “common” voices which are vulgar in both the classical and conversational senses. These two voices once reflected the voice of the occupying authority and the voice of the alienated colonials. (influenced pervasively by the subjugated indigens). Beyond Bernard’s view there has been an expansion in the complexity represented in Australian usage. In contemporary society Australians use a range of ‘voices’ where they feel them to be socially and culturally applicable.

12. The questionnaire contained these questions: AVANT-GARDE THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA - A SURVEY 1. Respondent’s name. 2. Contact address. 3. Contact phone number(s). 4. Name of the company/group/individual. 5. Address. 6. Dates of work - indicate years. 7. Place(s) where work presented. 8. Key people involved. 9. What priority did/do you give to innovation/experimentation in your work? 10. Have you described your work as experimental/ innovative/ avant-garde? 11. What is your artistic policy? Is it written, discussed or implicit? 12. What sources of income/funding did you have? Indicate percentage? Australia Council, State Government, Other government programs (eg: CYSS, Carnivale, International Women’s Year, Bicentenary, etc), Local Government, Foundations, Corporate Sponsorship, Box Office, Fees, Fund raising, Other? 13. Where you specifically funded to do avant-garde work? 14. What is the structure of your organisation? 15. List productions/events. 16. Number of members of company/active participants. 17. Estimate of audience numbers. 18. What work process has been used (group devising, rehearsals with a director and cast, workshop with director, playwright...)? 19. What has been the general function of these roles in your work? The actor. 20. The director. 21. The playwright. 22. The composer. 23. The musician. 24. The designer. 25. The choreographer. 26. A co-ordinator. 27. Other. 28. How long were projects worked on? 29. What other work influenced your work? 30. Who is your work aimed at? Which audience? For its own sake? The general public? For an audience who understands such work? Who are they? 31. Whose work has your work influenced? 32. What records have been kept of your work? Where are they kept? 33. Would you be prepared to have your records lodged in an archival collection (eg. A state performing arts collection, or The National Gallery)?