



JOHN MCCALLUM

PUTTING IT BACK TOGETHER AND GETTING IT ON THE ROAD - AUSTRALIAN THEATRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The 2010 Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture

Before I start I would like to pay tribute to Philip Parsons. He was my mentor when I was a student in the early 1970s. He taught a pioneering course in 1972 – that golden year of the New Wave revolution. It was a course that you could never mount in the new corporate university climate now. It involved two complete productions of classic plays, and all the background study that is needed. We didn't have a theatre back then at UNSW but one of us had a Porsche so one night very late after rehearsals three of us took it for a spin and climbed over the Cyclone wire fence surrounding a building site on campus and stole 7 sheets of Gyprock and took them down in the back of the little car (I hope you're picturing this) to create a black-box studio which is still being used by students today. Philip came in the next morning and saw our nice new walls and said, 'I don't want to know where that came from, but let's start working.'

Philip's greatest legacy, apart being an inspiring teacher and starting Currency Press with Katharine and all the rest of his achievements, was his lifelong attempt to build bridges across the gaps that then divided - and to some extent still do - the teaching and the theatre professions. He wanted people from across the performing arts to come together and share knowledges. Inspired by him this is something I have been trying to do for many years. There are other divides that have been bridged, sometimes patchily, in the decades since he came to Sydney to teach us, and some of those I will return to later.

Another preliminary note: The title of this lecture refers, obviously, to the old show-biz-inspired expression, 'We're getting our act together and putting it on the road.' But I like my image better, because what I want to argue this afternoon is that all the components we need, to create exciting

theatre that will draw in our past and help us move on into the future, are lying around us like pieces of a beat-up car on the side of a dusty road, waiting to be picked up and put together for the next part of the journey.

A title I toyed with for a while, though, is ‘Theatre wasn’t meant to be easy.’ As a teacher and critic I have for better or worse always seen it as my job to tell it like is not like I want it to be. But now I am tired of audiences who just want a good night out, and tired of theatre companies who only want to provide them with that. Theatre wasn’t meant to be easy.

We don’t make nearly enough demands on our audiences. We let them get away with murder – whinging and whining incessantly that all the theatre they see is ‘too difficult’, ‘too confronting’ or ‘too depressing’. These are expressions I would like to see banned from all discussion of the theatre, to be replaced with ‘too easy’, ‘too bland’ and ‘too cheerful.’ I know there are box-office constraints and funding restrictions but just for today I would like to set those aside. Confront the audience, I say, and if they don’t like it there’s always the movies. I will return to this theme later, too.

I’d like to start with three personal stories. After that I will talk of some of the tools that we have lying about that we are not using, and then I’d like to suggest that we should pick up those tools and use them to bash the audience over the head.

The first personal story concerns my first experience of epiphany in the theatre – when I first got it, first knew what all the fuss was about, first felt it in my guts. It was a production of *Othello* at Sydney’s Old Tote Theatre, with Alexander Hay and Ron Haddrick. My parents took me – I was 13. To this day I remember staggering out of that theatre ‘banged’, in the words of the great American poet e.e. cummings, ‘with terror’. I couldn’t believe that that man would actually go through with killing her. Still can’t. I’ve since been told that this was generally considered to be a rather poor production. It was certainly what I now might think of as old-fashioned, hammy perhaps, in a pokey little theatre, with nothing of the transformational theatrical vision that I’m about to argue ought to be the goal of our theatre in the 21st century. The point, for all the theatre-makers here, is that you can never know what long-term effect you’re going to have. That was 45 years ago and I can still see him snuffing out that little candle and the whole world suddenly going dark.

The second story is more trivial, but I still remember the moment vividly. By 1979 I'd grown up during the exhilarating times of the New Wave of Australian theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and had started writing about it. At a forum at what was then the Australian National Playwrights Conference, Bob Ellis, who used to prowl around at the Conference preparing notes for his witty conference-dinner-speeches, made a joke about the absurdity of any Australian playwright setting a play in Russia or Paraguay. He was referring to the early work of Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra. Like many people then I was tiring of the narrowly strident nationalism of the New Wave and so I was shocked to hear gales of sympathetic laughter from the audience. The point, for all the theatre-makers here, is that you can never know how important your striking-out into new territory will one day become. Sewell and Nowra went on to become two of the most important and exciting playwrights of the last part of the last century. Ellis's joke was made 31 years ago and I can still feel the prickle of shame I felt then, that I adored the work of these two new young writers.

The third story is much more recent. In 2006 I went to the old Performance Space on Cleveland Street, just down the road from here, right next to Currency Press, to see a show by a new company named, oddly, 'My Darling Patricia'. They had set up a convoluted maze of a set that led us progressively through passages and tunnels, from a 1950s night-club down into dark rural-gothic scenes of early Australia, scenes that had first been evoked on the stage by the now mostly forgotten early 20th century Australian playwrights that I had been researching for my book. I will never forget the experience of coming up out of those dark inner spaces onto a high platform where we looked down on the bodies of the performers floating like the ghosts of drowned pioneering women in a pool of tangled reeds. That was only four years ago, and the point, for all the theatre-makers here, is that the more new performance tools you discover the more important it is to go back to the past, to re-witness it and to re-configure it in all the theatre that you create. We forget our past at great cost. As Mark Twain said, 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.' We need to hear those rhymes now.

Putting it back together

I want to argue in this bit that after a century of theatrical stumbling, driven hither and yon by now forgotten practices and arguments, and a century

of being buffeted by theatrical winds from over the seas – Williamson and Musgrove, Gilbert and Sullivan, Olivier and Leigh, Stanislavsky and Strasberg, and, in the latter decades, Jacques le Coq (whom my friend and colleague David Watt happily calls Jack the Chook), and, more recently, Thomas Ostermeier – I want to argue that all these influences on our theatre, but especially the most recent ones, have left shiny tools lying around in the desert of our culture, and that in this new century it is time to pick them up and make them ours.

After a century of being theatrical bower-birds picking up the bright blue bits of world culture we now have the skills, techniques, dramaturgy and theatrical vocabulary to revisit our past and use it to move on. There are dozens of plays written by visionary Australian writers in the early part of the last century that could never be done then, because the prevailing largely naturalistic forms and conventions simply couldn't cope. We need to find a way of bringing together the discoveries of the post-dramatic theatre – that actual events in the shared space of performance have an immediacy that mimetic theatre can never hope to have – with the urgent need that we all still have to experience dramatic stories. We need to create in our theatre a new balance between actuality and representation.

When a playwright calls for a mighty avalanche to sweep away all his characters in the final Act, as Ibsen did in 1899 in his last play, *When We Dead Awake*, the 19th century spectacular theatre could do it because it had the sort of money and resources that Hollywood has now. But for most of the 20th century the naturalistic theatre was wringing its hands. 'Omigod!', you can hear them cry, 'where are we going to get all that snow?'

When a story calls for a damaged boy in a rowing boat on the Swan River to fly up into the stars, as Tim Winton's story did in *Cloudstreet*, the theatre can do that now. Neil Armfield did it, with a hanging boat and a descending array of naked lightbulbs. Several people said to me after they saw that legendary production, 'I don't know how he got the boat to fly!' It didn't actually fly. They just thought it did. That is the magic of theatre.

It's brilliant, but easy to do, partly thanks to belated impact in this country of the great early Soviet Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of Barrie Kosky's great influences. It's partly the rediscovery of Meyerhold's concept of stylisation and partly his then extraordinarily visionary 'nothing-

up-my-sleeves' presentational approach, which ante-dated Brecht by many years. Stylisation and the Meyerholdian grotesque are two of the tools lying by the road.

Let's pick them up.

A similar, frankly theatricalist, 'nothing-up my sleeves', approach was rediscovered during the New Wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s by a new generation drawing for the first time in Australian drama on the traditions of popular theatrical culture – the music hall, vaudeville, burlesque and the circus. These are theatrical tools that are being re-used now for many transgressive purposes, particularly in the new burlesque.

Let's pick those up too.

There is also the question of excess, something that the naturalistic theatre, which in this country dominated the 20th century, loathed, and which both the 19th century and, I hope, our times love. I wrote in my book about a neglected early 1920s play by the otherwise drab supposed pioneer of 20th Century drama Louis Esson. It was called *Shipwreck* and his wife Hilda, who in many ways was more of a pioneer than he was, left it out of the tribute volume of his plays because, she said, its excess didn't quite suit his temperament. It is a wonderful gothic bush melodrama, with echoes of Euripides and Racine, set on a wild cliff overlooking the Great Southern Ocean, with a hinterland of blasted country cursed by a massacre of indigenous people. We could so do it now.

Excess is good. It sharpens our attention and focuses our minds on important issues. So let's also pick up that tool and that spirit.

Before I move on to how we can now use these and other tools to confront the audience, I should note some of the old divisions that have begun to break down since Phillip Parsons embarked on his great campaign.

The distinction between professional and amateur.

This was one of the biggest issues in the 1950s when the non-commercial theatre was first looking to go professional, with the slow introduction of public subsidy. Many of the old established amateur companies, such as Sydney's Independent Theatre, which had been around since the late 1930s, were outraged when new parvenu companies such as the Old Tote Theatre

were anointed and the old companies were passed over.

In this new age of indie theatre and co-ops, what on earth does that distinction mean? Let me acknowledge and then skate over the outrage that we all feel that professional actors often have to perform now without wages just to keep working at their craft. A few years ago I saw Ron Haddrick, the lingo in my theatrical epiphany in 1965, performing in an indie show at Belvoir Downstairs. The old distinction between professional and amateur, supposedly based on ‘standards of excellence’, has now clearly broken down.

The distinction between mainstream and alternative

This is an old dichotomy, dating back to the early 1970s, when John Bell first defined ‘alternative’ in relation to his new company, the Nimrod Theatre. Neil Armfield kept the spirit of Nimrod alive, with Company B Belvoir, which has occupied this building ever since Nimrod folded and there was that splendid public campaign, partly led by Patrick White but supported by many people, which saved this great theatre that we are gathered in today. Neil built up a feeling of family and community here that included the audience and made it a pleasure simply to walk into the foyer.

Another moment of theatrical epiphany for me was Neil’s stunning Hamlet here in 1994. It was ‘set on the stage’, as Neil has always said when asked where he is going to set a new production of a classic, but we watched it in the context of the break-up of the old Yugoslavia. Richard Roxburgh was a magnificent Hamlet but Geoffrey Rush was Horatio, always on stage, even when not in the action, silently observing with compassion and bewilderment a once great family tear itself apart. His look said it all. ‘What on earth are these people doing to each other?!’ We were thinking that about the Bosnians, the Serbians and the Croats at the time. It was a decisive production that turned Company B into something much more than ‘the alternative’.

Now, under Ralph Myers, this great company is simply called ‘Belvoir’, and is doing a season next year that includes the sort of popular classics that the STC used to do – an Ibsen, a Chekhov, a Shakespeare and that Lawler play - together with a swathe of new Australian plays. Meanwhile the STC, under Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett, is mounting a left-of-field season next year that seems to have colonised what in my old days we would have called a Nimrod or Company B repertoire. The two companies seem to have swapped

roles. STC's classics next year include two Brechts, one of them obscure, and a Botho Strauss.

I find this astonishing and strangely exhilarating.

There are other major blurrings of the old dichotomies. There is a totally new understanding now of what it means to be 'live', bridging the old representational dramatic theatre and what used to be called 'contemporary performance' and is now the 'post-dramatic' theatre that I referred to earlier. New media, including the new social media, are now routinely used in performance. In a Version 1.0 show someone with a camera streams images of the performers and the audience live back into the space. At the Sydney Theatre people in the audience are invited to tweet their thoughts to their followers during the show.

Another division that has become blurred is the old excellence/access debate that dominated funding arguments in the early to mid 1980s, surrounding the rise of the community theatre movement. Excellence and access were assumed to be incompatible in those distant times but the rise of CCD and social theatre, embodied in the success of Big hART, with such project/productions as Stickybricks, Njapartji Njapartji and the recent Namatjira has totally blurred that old distinction. Those of you who weren't around in the 80s, and who saw Namatjira recently, will have no inkling of why 'excellence' and 'access' were once thought to be incompatible.

The point of all this is, yet again: we have all the tools in place now, we just need to put them together. We have a theatrical and performance vocabulary that is capable of anything. We have Meyerholdian auteur directors. We have stylised theatrical design and performance styles, capable of dealing with the most outlandish demands of writers such as Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill or Patrick White. We are finally over being constrained and have discovered the delights of excess. We have instant access to popular culture and we have new electronic media, live on stage. And, with all these thrilling tools in place, we have a dramatic repertoire that we have scarcely begun to explore.

I'm not just talking about the Australian repertoire that I tried to describe in *Belonging*. Why does no-one ever do the Jacobean, the Spanish Renaissance or the German Romantics? I teach a course at UNSW called

‘Building a Repertoire for the Contemporary Stage’ in which students read as much as they can manage of the repertoire and plan an imaginary season of classics. Every year they come up with plays they love that are very rarely seen on the Sydney stage: Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore (which Malthouse announced recently will open their season next year), Calderon’s *Life Is a Dream*, Lope de Vega’s *Fuente Ovejuna*, Kleist’s *The Prince of Homburg*. Many of my students are surprised to discover that they love Tolstoy’s extraordinarily grim play *The Power of Darkness*. The list goes on and on. I even had a student a couple of years ago who was passionate to do a full 8-hour production of both parts of Goethe’s *Faust*. She’d read it and loved it and insisted that it should be done complete and uncut. The things that young people come up with continue to astonish me.

These are all great, huge, wonderful plays. I know they are big to mount but, again, we have all the tools in place now. We can adapt them, stylise or carnivalise the playing style and stage their great vision, urgently, for our times, without a hint of the dull respect that I encountered so often when I was growing up as a theatregoer in the 60s and 70s.

Barrie Kosky led the way, especially with his legendary production in 2006, *The Lost Echo*. And here I’d just like to remind you that this magnificent, ground-breaking production was put on by the STC, under Robyn Nevin, as part of their normal subscription season. It wasn’t a special festival highlight, although it felt like one. In it Kosky and his collaborator on the text, Tom Wright, who has always revisioned the classics in challenging ways, performed huge stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and included, almost as if incidentally, an utterly brutal complete production of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and an astounding and confronting staged version of Franz Schubert’s song cycle *Winterreise*.

Benedict Andrews has followed in Kosky’s path, with his great condensation of 8 Shakespeare history plays in *The War of the Roses*, also in collaboration with Tom Wright. This was a stunning example of the new marriage of actuality-theatre and story-telling. People who saw it spent as much time astonished at what the director was making his actors endure as they did taking in the magnificent story that those plays tell. The experience of the story and the experience of the performance were brought together astoundingly.

For more than an hour, many of you will remember, that magnificent golden rain fell on still standing actors who were simply speaking the text of Richard II. Some of them fainted. In the final act, also for more than an hour, ashes fell on the same actors, as the characters they were playing kept dying and being buried under the ash. A distinguished older actor, whose work I have admired since the early 1970s, phoned me later, outraged, to say ‘I can’t believe what he put those actors through!’ I didn’t say this at the time, and I wish I had, so I will now: ‘Sure, okay, but what did he put the audience through?’ We have all the tools in place. We can do this. We can do anything. We can take our theatre into the 21st century. So why aren’t we?

At this point I have to start talking about the audience.

Confronting the audience

Barrie Kosky’s production of Euripides’ *The Women of Troy* at the STC in 2008 was one of the most harrowing nights in the theatre that I have ever spent. It was too harrowing for many – some people I love and respect refused to see it and there were apparently many walkouts every night. We’re talking about a show with no interval, so walking out is a big statement.

For those of you who don’t know the play, it shows the grieving women after the fall of Troy waiting for their enslavement by the Greeks, led by their fallen queen, Hecuba. The story inspired Shakespeare in one of his most famous tributes to the great power of the theatre, when Hamlet is so astonished by the performance of the Player King that he exclaims, ‘What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her!?’

Kosky revisioned this great classic in brutally confronting terms, with references to the war in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. His Chorus was a trio of bruised, bloodied and abused women, but he cut the speeches that Euripides had written for them and replaced them with beautiful music. They were singing sublimely in the face of all this savagery. And then, and this is the point, he had them shot! At the end of the performance a sullenly professional prison guard, who has been packaging up the raped women into cardboard boxes and shipping them off for the Greeks’ pleasure back home, takes out a gun and shoots the Chorus which has been the only source of beauty in the world of the production. You don’t kill the Chorus! You kill the protagonists, the leaders, the individuals, but in classical Greek tragedy you don’t kill

ordinary people. It was a deeply shocking moment for me, because it rang so true. Because, of course, we do now, in modern warfare. I went back to see it again. I took my daughter and her partner. I wanted to put people I loved through this terrible and cathartic experience. And they felt it.

And so here is another point, for all the theatre-makers here. If you challenge and confront your audience in the visceral space of live theatre, if you refuse to pander to their desire to be merely entertained, then some won't come, and some will walk out, but some – the ones you want - will be changed forever.

I want to conclude with an attack on the type of theatre audiences who complain all the time and who are doing so much damage to our theatre, by not going out more to the movies. I know that our theatres need to pay attention to the box-office, but really, some of the people you have to play to are simply dreadful. We have all seen them sleeping off their dinner, dozing next to their wives, through shows that are utterly electrifying and mind-smashing. They could just as easily be sleeping in a cinema or in their lounge rooms. It would be a lot cheaper. I think we have to be much more elitist about what we expect from audiences. We need to say to them, 'If you don't get it, and don't want to try, then stay home!'

It still astonishes me when people say things like 'oh, Barrie Kosky is just an egotistical bad boy out to shock.' He is clearly, to anyone who is paying attention to what he is doing – with his mixture of pop-culture playfulness, visceral theatrical effects and serious classical learning - one of the greatest directors of our times. When they walk out of a new Stephen Sewell play like *The Three Furies*, claiming not to understand it. He has been one of our greatest playwrights for over 30 years – one who has kept re-making himself, moving on triumphantly, always leaving behind people who find him difficult to become difficult in a new way. When they refuse to go to a Performance Space festival at Carriageworks because they might not be able to sit sleepily in the dark in upholstered seats. If you go to the theatre you are sharing a space – surely you want sometimes to get up and move around.

We all understand, I hope, the expression 'mind-fucked'. It refers to that explosion that we sometimes feel in our heads after some exciting person has been talking with us. It refers to that feeling when our boring everyday

thoughts - that endless internal monologue that keeps distracting us in our everyday interactions - have been messed up in thrilling, enlightening and often threatening ways. We need something like in for our theatre in the 21st century.

I mean theatre that messes with your head, your emotions and your soul. I have been a university teacher and a critic for more than 30 years and it has always been part of my job to explain, as far as I can make it out, what it is that theatre-makers are trying to do. But all the best theatre and performance that I have ever experienced has been theatre that, in the space and in the moment, has messed with my head. I can only try to explain it later. Understanding? – that’s for later. Emotion? – that’s for later. In the theatre you have to feel it first in your nerves, bones and flesh.

At each of the three intervals in *The Lost Echo*, I walked out physically stunned, dissociated from my sense of myself. Great theatre, live in the space, has an affect-level that is so high that you feel it in your body. Great theatre doesn’t happen on a stage, and it doesn’t happen in our heads. It happens in the whole room. It is something in the space that you are physically sharing with the performers. You laugh, get tense, sweat, flush hot. You can feel it in the prickling of your skin or as a knot in your stomach. All the phrases that we use to describe great performance – belly-aching, spine-tingling, gut-wrenching, heart-stopping, breath-taking – refer to biology. Before it is understood or felt it is experienced in the body.

This sort of theatre is difficult, it is challenging. But difficult is good. Challenging is good. That is what theatre and performance should be. If you don’t like it then visit the ‘uplifting’ museum theatre of clever Pulitzer Prize-winning lounge-room comedies about people having trouble with their relationships; sit bereft at home on a Saturday night lamenting the passing of *The Bill*; get a Gold Ticket to Hoyts and sink into a plush chair with the 3D glasses and the popcorn; or float down in merry laughter, as the great transgressive American comedian Bill Hicks said just before he died, onto the comfy soft scrotum cushion of *Dick-Joke Island*.

If theatre can’t do more than that then I’ve wasted my life. The next time I go to a show I want to be theatre-fucked.

Thank you, John McCallum