

**JIM SHARMAN*****IN THE REALM OF THE IMAGINATION: AN
INDIVIDUAL VIEW OF THEATRE*****The inaugural Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture**

This version was revised after the lecture by Suzanne Kiernan at the request of and in consultation with Jim Sharman. It first appeared in the Sydney Review 79 (September 1995): 10-12.

Rex Cramphorn was a gifted theatre director who relished ideas. He was certainly a great advocate of theatre having a philosophical base, and for many he was a guru in the area of performance. He emerged from Brisbane in the 1970s, and along with his fellow Queensland contemporaries David Malouf, Rodney Fisher and William Yang, has contributed mightily to the arts in this country. I'm sure Rex would be grateful that his friends have established, in his name, a public forum for present and future generations of theatre artists to offer their views on our theatre and our culture.

Historically, we have had little concern with acknowledging and recording the work of our theatre practitioners. Without the patience and tenacity of Philip Parsons and Katharine Brisbane in establishing Currency Press, we wouldn't even have a record of the decades of drama that now constitute the basic literature of our theatre. As for the history of our actors, directors and designers, the written record of their lives, times or ideas is minimal. What does exist tends to be a dry-facts rather than a living document of their thoughts and experience. Mention the roll-call of previous generations of Australian directors who were influential in the creation and shaping of our theatre culture - Robert Quentin, Stefan Haag, Robin Lovejoy, John Sumner, Tom Brown, Peter Summerton, John Tasker - and they would mean next to nothing. Theatre practitioners are like a lost tribe with only an oral tradition handed down erratically from person to person, usually as gossip. Without access to history, the growth of our theatre is inhibited. For while an absence of tradition can be liberating, it can also be wasteful as

each new generation earnestly sets about reinventing the wheel. The value of the Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture is that, over time, it might fulfil an important role in correcting this regrettable situation.

Australian theatre began with the corroboree, a ritual dance-theatre integral to the lives and culture of its community. It continues in tribal situations, though city dwellers are more likely to come across the tourist version; the subtle influence of this important tradition remains in fine theatre pieces such as Bangarra's *Ochres* or Meryl Tankard's *Furioso*. The notion that theatre, and art in general, are divorced from life and its rituals, as a diversion from life, took root with the arrival of European culture. It is now the accepted view. Storytelling would also have been part of traditional culture. In the legends and tales crucial to any society is a direct connection between past and present. It's a small step from the tribe clustered in a cave around a storyteller silhouetted by a camp-fire's reflected flames to our modern tribes gathered in a theatre, or in that labyrinth of caves known as a cinema-complex. A movie audience sits in the dark, hypnotised by coloured light reflected onto a sheet, collectively agreed that this play of shadow and light represents real people in real situations, telling of universal legends. Most of these legends, incidentally, are manufactured in America.

This last fact should not be overlooked. It explains in part why resources are readily available for film and television, while theatre remains the poor relation. The power of technology to create images to amuse, enslave and inspire the masses has not been lost on imaginative governments: the American domination of this century has been accompanied by such images. Earlier, the tiny island of Britain was accompanied in its mercantile and imperial pursuits by the plays of Shakespeare, the sound of Gilbert and Sullivan and quotations from the English Bible. Only a little of this influence now remains. British musicals have successfully replaced Gilbert and Sullivan, while the finest Shakespearian actors are often reduced to a reflection of British political leaders, playing butlers in American movies, usually offering beautifully intoned advice to chunky super-heroes.

Politics aside, our modern tribal gathering is engaged in what has been termed 'public dreaming', an extraordinary act of imagination by the audience. Let us rid ourselves of the notion that the long-suffering audience lacks imagination. Whether we're at the movies, collectively accepting that

a spray of light is a person or place, or in the theatre, moved by an actor to summon up images of other worlds, we in the audience are active players in the game of art. Theatre exists in that mysterious imaginative space between the artist and the audience. In an age dominated by the novelty of new technology, over-obsessed with often useless and distracting information, it is one of the last of the cottage industries servicing the human imagination. Theatre is a tiny realm of the imagination that nonetheless maintains the power to influence our thoughts, our feelings and our actions in the greater realm of human society.

For me, theatre is at its purest and most alive when it appeals directly to the imagination, when it offers the least literal and most poetic use of words and images, when it acknowledges the presence of the audience, and requires its active participation in what amounts to a spiritual communion. This is the alchemy of artists and audiences creating, out of the air, something that is not actually present; it hovers in the air, in the realm of the imagination.

My own introduction to this kind of theatre was at the circus. I grew up in a world of travelling sideshows, carnivals, circuses, boxing troupes, Chinese acrobats and tent-show vaudeville. These forms of theatre, moving around the country from town to town in an age before television and advanced communications made them redundant, would now be seen as primitive, possibly romantic and certainly nostalgic forms of entertainment. These entertainments - for they had no loftier purpose - offered some valuable and enduring insights into the nature of performance. I have recollected this early influence of circus and carnivals in a short piece entitled 'The Aerialists', written for a book marking the sixtieth birthday of Barry Humphries, an Australian theatre artist whose work owes a great deal to these traditions, and to whom we all owe a great deal.

Before being shuffled off to school, I filled in time around showgrounds, sideshows and, especially, the circus. I came to admire those artists who performed on the trapeze and the high-wire - the aerialists. Artists who worked without a net seemed to my young eyes the true aristocrats of this vagabond world and the real icons of the circus. It was only for the aerialists that the crowd would hold its collective breath. My strongest memory is of a masked face, fear painted white, with a slash of red lips and a blotch of blue mascara, nailed to the sky-blue canvas by a cruel spotlight - or was it,

in my child's imagination, an apparition from the heavens? Anyway, Icarus incarnate. A drum roll would cut through the dusty silence and we, the voyeurs, surrendered to a shared hallucination. A terrible clunking sound announced that the safety-net had dropped. Mortality hung in the air. A step, then a glide, suddenly a stumble. The crowd gasped before balance was slowly returned. Sighs of collective relief. A flourish, a bow, bravura gestures, wild applause, etc. etc. The beckoning void had been traversed and the crummy world of canvas and sawdust had been transformed into grand architecture worthy of sacrificial rites.

I cannot name the force that was so miraculous in all this. It might have something to do with the electricity contained in the solitude of the endeavour. Certainly, I cannot forget it or erase the memory; it haunts my dreams and guides my own clumsy progress. I am, it seems, destined only to admire those artists who work without a net. Consequently, I admire very few. Barry Humphries sits high in my personal pantheon, up there with Patrick White and the astonishing German choreographer Pina Bausch. On reflection, this introduction to illusion through carnival life was ritual theatre at its most elemental: the circus, boxing matches fought in sawdust-strewn tents (an appropriate preparation for directing the plays of Strindberg!), Chinese acrobats in silk pyjamas spinning plates and then, bare-chested, leaping through hoops of fire. All this non-verbal theatre constituted a kind of dance, communicated without words, beyond words.

Australians have always been suspicious of words, partly, I think, because of an innate distrust of language. David Hare once pointed out to me that the English have always used language and manners as weapons in global conquest and to keep people in their place. Presumably, it was in fine language that many of our ancestors were sentenced to deportation, to fill the convict ships and help populate the concentration camp from which this city has emerged. No wonder we're suspicious of words. We prefer an 'um' or an 'ah' or an enigmatic silence. The landscape seems to encourage this silence. Perhaps it explains our suspicion of plays, and our pleasure at musicals and spectacle, our enthusiasm for opera in languages we don't speak, the success of our dancers and painters and sporting stars and film-makers. Perhaps it is why our early silent cinema gained international popularity - until, that is, the introduction of sound. Recently it has regained some of this attention,

partly through films like *Strictly Ballroom* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

Because they dabble in words and tend to judge things from a literary perspective, critics tend to be wary of films like these that tell their story essentially through images, music and dance; audiences love them. Not that there was any shortage of sound on the showgrounds. The beating of drums and clanging of bells added another essential element rhythm. From the choral chant in a Greek tragedy, to the way a line is phrased in a play, or a door opens or a prop is put down, the rhythm of a piece of theatre communicates the meaning ahead of its literal sense. Language is merely the top-soil of a play, while its roots are in rhythm and action. It explains why Shakespeare, who is thought to represent the pinnacle of English language, works so well in foreign languages. It's why we can enjoy the Rustaveli Company performing *Richard III* in Georgian, or Kurosawa's *Noh Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*. It's why we know within thirty seconds whether we like a film. The rhythm of the montage - action, sound and editing - tells us. It's what audiences respond to instinctively and why the same play can offer an utterly different experience from one performance to another.

Another aspect of the carnival world was its racial mix, which we would now call 'cultural diversity'. The carnival world spoke many languages. It included Anglo, Irish and Aboriginal Australians, Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Slavic and American Australians and, especially, Chinese Australians. (When I returned to Sydney and to school, it was so boring - like going from the set of *Heartbreak High* to *Neighbours*.) From as early as the production of *Hair*, I have attempted to accustom audiences to the world we are going to live in, rather than to the middle-class, Anglicised ghetto that so often prevails. Mainstream culture has only begun to address this reality; the delay in encouraging, training and learning from non-Western cultures has cost our theatre the possibility of truly reflecting our present society. It explains why theatre audiences bear so little relationship to the mix of faces we meet on the street. I recall, only a few years ago, wandering through the Art Gallery of South Australia behind a group of schoolkids, including a few Chinese-Australian children. Their distress and dismay was obvious: they didn't exist on the walls of that gallery. Chinese-Australians have been here since the gold rushes but, as far as art was concerned, they were invisible. They are part of our invisible theatre.

Though it may seem a big step from sideshows and circuses to mainstream theatre, the distance is not so great. You have only to look below the surface of a seminal play like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to sense a vaudeville routine waiting in the wings. The source of most sophisticated theatre is to be found in popular culture. Directing Strindberg's *Dance of Death*, I was often reminded of *Punch and Judy*. Handke's *The Hour We Knew Nothing Of Each Other* seems to owe something to that sight-gag with a waiter constantly crossing the stage balancing an awkward tray. Gloria Dawn, the soubrette in Sorlie's *Varieties*, went on to play *Mother Courage* in an MTC production staged by a Berliner Ensemble director, and also played Mrs Peachum in my staging of *The Threepenny Opera*. This production - in the opening season of the Drama Theatre of the Opera House - made a direct connection to the vaudeville tradition, though I have generally avoided specific reference to my colourful past, choosing to let its influence be felt in more subtle ways.

The exception was *The Rocky Horror Show*. Here, Brian Thomson's blue-canvassed cinema-under-demolition set turned virtually every theatre or old cinema we played in into a tent. The transvestite hero of that musical might have owed something to German Gothic cinema, but was also derived from childhood memories of Bobby Le Brun, Sorlie's famous Panto Dame, who looked like a stevedore in drag. Tim Curry, who created Frank in my original production at the Royal Court, kept asking 'How far should I go?', and I always replied 'Just stop before you throw Fantales to the kiddies'. The audience thought they were seeing a hip, streetwise character in a rock 'n' roll show; we knew it was a panto dame in mufti. The vaudeville tradition was a strong influence on the wonderful *Hills Family Show* from the Pram Factory and on John Bell's, Richard Wherrett's and Ken Horler's *Nimrod Company*. Barrie Kosky uses the Yiddish vaudeville tradition in his marvellous work for the *Gilgul Company*. In their differing ways, Barry Humphries, Reg Livermore and Garry McDonald have all kept vaudeville alive. These days, the tradition is seen lurking around the likes of Gerry Connelly and on TV comedy shows. When I invited English comedians from the *Comic Strip* to the 1982 Adelaide Festival, they were thought a curious and slightly tasteless choice, and passed without much attention. Today, having made *French and Saunders*, *The Young Ones* and *Absolutely Fabulous*, no doubt they'd be found more culturally acceptable.

Both Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* and Stefan Elliot's *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* have a vaudeville grin. (A memorable scene in *Priscilla* is a mediocre drag-queen dancing in the desert and miming 'I Will Survive' to a dismayed, if amused, Aboriginal tribe. It sums up one view of Australian culture - miming other people's cultures in a desert.) My introduction to travelling vaudeville led to the city version. I witnessed Tivoli shows with the comedians George Wallace, Buster Fiddess and the very Jewish - and very blue - Roy Rene, or Mo. (A favourite memory of the vaudeville era is the staunchly Catholic Gloria Dawn pronouncing 'I don't work blue!'.) Vaudeville gave way to American musicals and my life changed at fourteen when I saw the visiting production of *West Side Story*, still the greatest of American musicals. The Tivoli also housed visits by the emerging Australian Opera (then the Elizabethan Trust Opera); the season which included my first major production, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, was the last in that venue. I remember staying back one night, after rehearsal, just to wander alone in a theatre that had meant so much to me, and soon to be demolished and replaced by an indifferent office block.

All the theatres of that era went: the Empire, the Palladium, the old Royal, Phillip Street (the home of revue), and the Palace, where as a teenager I first saw Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral*. Later, I was pleased to help encourage Harry M. Miller to revive the old Minerva at Kings Cross as the Metro for the long run of *Hair*, the Capitol for *Superstar*, and the Paris Theatre - designed by Walter Burley Griffin - for a brave if short-lived experimental theatre company created with Rex Cramphorn. The Paris Company heralded a change of era: it brought a new generation of theatre artists to the fore and paved the way for the creation of the now prospering Sydney Theatre Company. Located on what is now known as Whitlam Square, the Paris Theatre was knocked down and replaced by the relatively charmless Connaught Apartments. (In this vista of demolition we owe considerable thanks to Cameron MacIntosh for doing what nobody here had the sense or the will to do: revive the Capitol for *Miss Saigon*.)

The most influential plays of my youth were Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* and *The Season at Sarsaparilla*. The first, written in London, was considerably influenced by European expressionism - notably by Wedekind and by Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*. To see, in the second, the suburban

landscape of my own childhood placed in some sort of mythical context and to hear, from a stage, the language of our own streets - wonderfully heightened - was a revelation. Sarsaparilla painted my own familiar world in a completely new light; it revealed the extraordinary in the ordinary, and began a new phase of theatrical and personal exploration.

At this time - 1976 - I had been directing for a decade. My first production had been a revue, *On Stage Oz*. I had continued with a volley of mostly experimental work until I earned my professional wings and took off to create a series of populist musicals that spanned the globe. They culminated in *The Rocky Horror Show*, the one musical I was involved in creating from its first tentative steps, through a series of stage productions in London, America and Australia, to the now well-known film. After this, it was to Sydney and Sarsaparilla that I returned. My interest now was in Australia and its writing.

Along with Ray Lawler, Barry Humphries and others, Patrick White undertook the laborious task of making the much-distrusted language our own. Unlike most other writers, who crafted their plays within a more realistic social context, White operated in the realm of the imagination. My involvement with his work began a journey that involved European surveyors of the soul such as Wedekind, Lorca, Strindberg and Genet, presenting their works in new adaptations that spoke with our own rhythm and language. These productions were interspersed with revivals and with new productions of plays by White, our own explorer of the soul. He opened the doors to a dramatic tradition and created the landscape now inhabited by the likes of Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and Michael Gow. Co-existing with it is the more realistic - and more popular - school of Ray Lawler and *The Doll*; Lawler, in turn, heralded David Williamson. In retrospect, the pleasure of all this is that we finally have the beginnings of a tradition. We have Patrick White actors, Williamson actors, etc; we have standards of production to compare and enjoy.

It's actors and audiences, finally, who keep the theatre alive. Shakespeare wrote great plays, but it's the killer roles that keep even the messy ones alive: *King Lear*, for example. (I'd like to see that play survive a playwrights' conference!) White understood the need for great roles, and our best writers are beginning to understand the importance of humanising ideas through a powerful central character - even one like Brecht's *Mother-Courage*, written

in contradiction to the playwright's own point-of-view. As a repetiteur at the Australian Opera once said about singers performing in new operas: if they want to sing it, it will be sung - for ever, regardless of managements. And the same goes for actors. When we have not only a body of good plays, but a brace of great roles for actors too, we'll be speaking in our own voice, facing our own experience and enjoying our own realm of the imagination. White understood this, and his novels and plays abound with such characters. It was White who was the source of the first major Australian addition to the Australian Opera repertoire when composer Richard Meale and librettist David Malouf created the operatic adaptation of White's novel *Voss*.

I'm sure Alan John and Dennis Watkins, about to go into rehearsal with their new opera, *The Eighth Wonder*, are grateful for this charted territory, for the footprints in the quicksand of new operatic endeavour. I am looking forward to *The Eighth Wonder* - for the promise of Alan John's beautiful score and for Dennis Watkins' dexterous treatment of a complex scenario. It also rounds off a phase of my own activity: the nurturing of new works for the Australian stage. In this, I too am grateful for the inspiration of Patrick White, which I will continue to draw upon in the next phase of my own work, where the emphasis will be more on writing and film. As to the vexed question of the lasting value of Patrick White's plays, time be the judge. *A Cheery Soul* will always have a special place in my heart and in those of many a local theatre practitioner, including Nita Pannell, Robyn Nevin and Carol Skinner, who have each incarnated the demonic Miss Docker. (Barry Humphries once said that Edna could play her - as a classical role!) After offering a chunk of your life to the Australian theatre, you can't help feeling a certain sympathy for White's marvellous and terrible Miss Docker. The obsessive nature of many theatre practitioners and artists in general, bears a disturbing resemblance to that eternally cheery soul.

After thirty years spent creating theatre, film, musicals and opera, I must confess to now having little sense of anything but the present moment. It is almost as if someone else created that body of work, and I am sure that many - of my colleagues privately share this curious feeling of having participated in the art of creating forgettable illusions. For theatre exists only as a shared moment between artists and audience. Once that moment has passed, it resides solely in the realm of individual memory, there to

be reinvented in some other way, at some other time, with the assistance of scripts, production photos, old programmes, archives of contemporary reportage and the regenerative power of the human imagination.

Perhaps there is value in the fact that our theatrical illusions are swept away along with the other achievements and with the detritus of our lives and times. Perhaps it's better that only the song survives, and only the one with a strong and memorable melody at that. Maybe art in general - and theatre in particular - is a perfect reflection of our lives. Passionate and central to our experience in the present, quick to evaporate, lingering in spirit as a record of our inner life which is lived in dreams, in the imagination, in memories that form part of our link with other lives and other illusions in some infinite, if elusive, universal continuum.

The fact that we theatre practitioners might be creating nothing but energy in a void shouldn't invite a sense for cynical nihilism. Quite the reverse: it should inspire us with genuine concern for the quality of our illusions. It is on those, after all, that we must rely for spiritual sustenance; it is in the play, the song, the drawing, the poem, that our true history finally resides. The play's the thing, as the man said. And, after all, it is Shakespeare's poetic and fictional versions of the kings of England that sustain our interest, not the real ones. Artists are both the creators and curators of the illusions that speak of our lives and times in beautiful lies that, at their best, reflect universal truths about the terror and wonder of our lives.

In a young and developing culture it is difficult to establish any genuine sense of our cultural worth, noble or ignoble. Achievements are over-inflated in conformity with the media's notion of world-beating status, or dismissed as worthless efforts in a vacuum. Fashion also plays its part: at one moment it might seem unfashionable to borrow ideas from a touristy outfit like the RSC, but fashionable to borrow from William Forsythe or Théâtre de Complicité. Frankly, I don't see the difference. Either way, it means we're missing the point, missing an idea, and we've all gone shopping! We must learn to value what is most original in us, not our cultural 'credentials'. Creativity, our endeavour to inspire, challenge, reveal - these cannot be imposed.

We must continue developing and working with this idea while remaining open to new cultural influences and new generations of practitioners with new and probably quite startling ideas if we are to exorcise finally the

ghosts of a lingering colonial mentality and emerge to take our place in the post-colonial world. Otherwise, Australian theatre will remain a quaint relic of lingering provincialism, a colonial rep company stranded between an Aboriginal past and a Eurasian future, a relic soon to be replaced by a compelling form of internationalism in state-of-the-art technology. The Pram Factory, Circus Oz, the Nimrod Theatre, Rex Cramphorn's Performance Syndicate, my own efforts with Lighthouse, Neil Armfield's at Belvoir and those of many others have all been directed towards evolving a more mature theatre culture in this country. They envisage a theatre less driven by commercial and bureaucratic imperatives, more open to the encouragement and development of our finest individual and collective talents. This theatre has a strong philosophical commitment to our own creativity, to writers, actors, musicians, dancers, acrobats, directors, designers working together to challenge the boundaries of their talent and experience.

It is a theatre that places our own concerns in the context of international theatre and of classical traditions dating back to that fire in the cave. It's 1995. We have arrived at a national pattern of dramatic activity based on existing structures: a mainstream theatre company in each city, a strong alternative theatre company, a number of smaller theatres servicing the specific needs of either conservative or adventurous audiences, a Festival or three, and a commercial theatre based pretty much on high-quality productions of imported musicals. This, along with vastly improved standards of acting, design and production, is the legacy of the postwar generation.

It's not bad going, but is it enough for the future? I doubt it. We have provided these structures, but do we nurture individual talents? Is the theatre we have created responding to the needs of our most outstanding and original artists? Or are they merely hired hands engaged to fit into programming schedules, to fulfil an essentially bureaucratic vision? Most established companies are too busy putting on shows to have time to consider, to have an overview, to ask hard questions. Are our actors in a position to develop their craft in new and adventurous ways, or are they too busy perpetuating expected standards? Are we offering our best and finest talents the right conditions to create their work? Having established standards of performance excellence, should we now test them more often?

Should we invite more outstanding artists from other cultures and

countries to work with us? Are we asking new generations of emerging practitioners their views on what the future holds, or might hold?

It seems to me that, after sustaining a few decades of remarkable activity, Australian theatre has settled into a comfortable complacency. Who will offer new visions, energy and ideas? While we wait, I hope our attention, enthusiasm, and resources will be put at the disposal of some of the outstanding individual theatre practitioners who have already demonstrated their skill and commitment to the realm of the imagination. They include Neil Armfield, Meryl Tankard, Barrie Kosky, Baz Luhrmann and Stephen Page; I trust that one such artist will be offering thoughts on the theatre and its future in the 1996 Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture.

Jim Sharman