

**NEIL ARMFIELD*****AUSTRALIAN CULTURE: CREATING IT AND  
LOSING IT*****The fifth annual Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture**

Dear Friends

Unlike all of the earlier speakers of the Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture, I never worked with Philip though I knew him and admired his work and his diligent commitment to the development of Australian Theatre. I must also say I find the prospect of delivering this speech somewhat daunting — being someone who prefers to explore my own mind in the physical playground of the theatre — behind the mask that someone else's story provides and through the collaboration of those magical creatures of freedom — the actors. So I will try to speak from my heart and hope that I pop out something that makes sense and doesn't, at the least, dishonour the memory of Philip Parsons. I am reminded of Philip and his love of the plays of Patrick White, and that he and Katharine Brisbane came to Adelaide in 1987 to see the final performance I think of Patrick's last play *Shepherd on the Rocks* which I directed.

It was a tricky show which featured a large cast, including a dwarf, about a priapic Church of England priest played by John Gaden, who falls foul of the conservative Sydney diocese and is kicked out of his parish of Budgiwank by Archbishop Bigge, played by Geoffrey Rush, thereupon turning unsuccessfully to vaudeville, to wandering the NSW coast until he comes to a travelling circus in the holiday town of Jerusalem. On arrival he enters the lions cage and is devoured, but not before delivering a sermon of transcendent beauty. The extraordinary thing was that the play was based on a true story.

I remember bumping into Philip wandering the labyrinth of corridors backstage at the Playhouse after the show looking rather dazed — a condition not uncommon in those corridors especially after that particular one of Patrick's plays. He took my arm and said simply 'It's his *Tempest*'. Philip saw,

typically generously, to the heart of a difficult work and blessed our labour with an absolute clarity of perception. In the inaugural Philip Parsons lecture, Katharine Brisbane said of him: ‘he tried to instil into his students and the playwrights he worked with a desire to bring poetry to the Australian stage and to counter the increasing passivity of audiences submitted to the ready-made imagination of film, television and the commercial theatre’!

It is really the idea contained in this perception that I want to applaud, and to talk about today. Because it seems to me it is under threat. Before going any further I think it is worthwhile to consider for a moment the value of theatre — why we keep doing it, why we keep going to it. Because God knows it can be crook. How many times have we sat there and after a few minutes you know the night’s not going to get any better — and somehow, because you’re actually sharing the space with actors, unlike a film where you can detach, quite easily and just slip away, in theatre it involves a painful and gauche extraction — you feel embarrassed — and you tend to stay on with the slim consoling hope that ‘something might happen’. It is of course that very actuality that makes us keep going — the confidence that sooner or later there will be an experience that is utterly unique, that fills your soul, and sitting there in the dark, breathing the same air as the actors, you will witness it happen, in fact you will participate in it happening.

When you sit with a child and tell a bedtime story that is theatre. As you hold up a book and point to the characters in the pictures and the child’s eyes watch and connect and imaginatively see them at work, playing their roles in the story, that is theatre. Through story we discover the world, we test our experiences, we look inside ourselves by projection into imagined characters in imagined worlds. A child without imagining stories, is a child with the blank stare of madness. The dressing-up box, doctors and nurses, shopping, any child’s game is a playground in which life is first lived, or tested. The theatre and the ritual form of storytelling inside it are the relics of the oldest form of social connection — perhaps, after eating — people coming together to witness a story being told that somehow will expand their sense of their own lives — if it’s a true story it is their history, if it’s a fantasy it will invariably work from identification and projection and then lead the spectator back inside themselves to a fuller understanding of life and the world.

That's rather clumsily put but you know where I'm heading. And I'm not saying anything new here but somehow it's something that is so simple yet so easily overlooked: our theatre is our oldest and purist place of social connection and an absolute index of our civilisation.

And at a time when information technologies are conspiring to keep us at home, to separate us into smaller and smaller units of social interaction the theatre could well be the institution that keeps our society from that blank stare of madness. For it is not only in the story told, but in how it is told, how an audience sits and stands together, how they spatially connect to the story tellers, that the true meaning resides. So that, as well as an unstoppable compulsion to camp about and in Beaumarchais' words 'to show off in wigs' is why we keep doing it. A chill wind blew through many of our minds a few weeks before the recent federal election campaign when the ads went out suggesting that a vote for Labor was a vote for the 'elite' arts. What did they mean? Well, our General Manager Rachel Healy tried to find out. She rang the Liberal party, was told someone would call back. No one did. She rang a Liberal Party Information Officer who couldn't help. Posing as a swinging voter, she rang the Minister's office in Canberra. They said they'd call back. No one did. She rang their office again the next day and the office said it had nothing to do with the ad and gave her a number in Melbourne. The man in Melbourne was very aggressive and said he wasn't prepared to discuss the meaning of 'elite' and hung up. The Minister for the Arts, Senator Alston, finally publicly defended the ad, saying that it was in reference to the Keating initiated Australian Artists Creative Fellowships — that rather quixotic scheme to give a group of outstanding mid-career artists a wage for a few years, roughly equivalent to half the annual salary of a back bench politician.

Now we know that they didn't run the 'elite' artists ads in Victoria for fear of upsetting Jeff Kennett but what is important here is not what the hidden target of the ads was but the perceived and therefore intended target — any recipient of arts funding. Any, because it is setting up a term that then plays straight into the prejudice in the mind of the mean-spirited and worried swinging voter. How dare they. We know that Senator Alston had made a number of submissions to Cabinet in relation to increasing Arts Funding, all of which the Prime Minister summarily rejected saying 'there are

no votes in the Arts', but Mr Howard obviously took this idea a step further to 'there are votes in 'no arts'. For the first time the implicit bi-partisan notion that the arts were a worthy and noble recipient of Government support was being broken. Watch this space. In doing this it seems clear to me that Mr Howard was quietly following Pauline Hanson's lead as he had done so weakly on immigration and on Aboriginal affairs. Just hanging out a net to catch any voters mean-spirited and fearful enough to follow the lure. The damage of this kind of policy is much more serious than the votes gained or lost. Because it brings out into the open and legitimises prejudices that ought to be a reason for shame. It sets the debate back fifty years. Or rather, it eliminates debate. Where the government should be informing the community, leading, pursuing moral certainty, it is instead punishing the arts for its perceived identification with Labor. Everything is seen in embattled party political terms. And our culture is being sacrificed to the stoush. Just look at the collateral damage that has hit the ABC. It is being punished for its independence. It may well pay with its life. The irony of all of this is how deeply Mr Howard himself is in need of a defining experience of theatre. We have all cringed in embarrassment at those images of our Prime Minister looking timidly into some piece of traditional Aboriginal performance, and you can see the panic rising behind his glasses — 'what am I expected to feel?' 'Is someone taking the mickey here?' And beyond the comedy of this moment you actually feel more than anything else an overwhelming sadness for this lost man.

The saddest sight of all was the entire audience of the Australian Reconciliation Convention turning its back on Howard when it became clear that he wouldn't apologise on behalf of the Australian Government for the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children. Who will forget that image — one of the most chilling and memorable events of our history. But Mr Howard reacted to his shame angrily, like a child. Mr Howard, there is no gap. Use the love that lurks inside your frightened body, the love you feel for young children, for your parents, for your language and make the leap. Identify. That's what you can get from the theatre. It teaches you how to identify.

Now that Pauline Hanson has been locked back in the Queensland closet of viscous political loons, she will hopefully be remembered by her only slightly more vivid, but much more real, drag nemesis, her Edna, Pauline

Pantsdown. All we can do is cheer her inevitable downfall and say together: 'I don't like it.'

And so I have the image of Australia blindly nudging its way forward, led by a Prime Minister for all the world like a blind mole, shoulders hunched, smelling out the path of least resistance. It is up to us to resist loud and strong. And now we have two federal Arts ministers. Not only the already ignored Senator Alston, but the National Party's Peter McGauran. The brother, by the way of Julian McGauran who hounded Pasolini's film *Salo* into extinction in this country and when asked about the implications for the Arts generally said 'I don't care about art, I'm from the National Party.' A lamentable lack of stories in his childhood, I'd say. Let's hope it was because his brother Peter was hogging the dress-up box. But I want to get away from talking about politics and government, but not before I say how dangerous for all of us, for our culture, is this new-found evangelical zeal in the Arts towards sponsorship. Okay so we have to have it, but why do we all have to be so ham about it. It is of course wonderful when an altruistic company or individual will give massive support for discreet acknowledgment — it has happened occasionally at Company B and I'm very happy about that. But what did Mal Fraser say about 'a free lunch'? No such thing.

I remember in the early Eighties going on a trip to Indonesia and seeing a performance where the entire proscenium was constructed out of banners and signs of the sponsoring corporations — I thought at the time how bizarre that was. I went to America, to Nashville, and saw much the same thing at the Grand ol' Opry and the constant refrain of Goo-goo candy clusters: 'Go for a Goo-Goo. It's good!' and I thought 'how crass' But, you know, America puh. Well, I've just directed *The Marriage of Figaro* to open the Optus Playhouse which was one of the major events of the Energex Brisbane Festival and I thought — enough's enough, Energex was always capitalised, what's more, so whenever you read it you got this kind of jumping shudder and an image of sparks and electrocution and confusion. Is this how it was meant to be? I think not. It's like those stickers they put on apples and bananas and oranges now. Tomatoes even. World capitalism — nothing can be itself any more — it has to be owned, it has to declare its brand.

And speaking of world capitalism, I think we should be very careful of all those cloned productions that are dropping in. I have some ambivalence

here, because of course we get to see fabulous productions, of course our actors and technicians are given sure-fire successful work but I sat in Her Majesty's in Melbourne watching Chicago knowing that it was a carbon copy of the New York original — where originally highly creative decisions like telling the cast to dress themselves — just wear something black and sexy — had now slavishly become the show, reproduced in every town along with every moment of choreography, every look, every apparently spontaneous joke. I wished I was in New York or better still back at the opening of Richard Wherrett's wonderful STC production in 1980. The lead man in Rent in every production subsequent to the original, I believe is given red hair and glasses because that's what the original had. There is a generation of dancers whose bodies have been ruined because of the cloning and reproducing of the original choreography of Cats — 'Cats knees' it's called — the imposition of choreography onto bodies for whom it was not developed and whom it does not suit. But each of these shows comes with its own in-built success, the multi-million dollar marketing, the proven images, the pre-written reviews where basically the old names get taken out and the new ones typed in.

This is finally pernicious, I believe, because a production can only be truly great if it is an expression of all of its participants, if it is owned by its performers. Halleluiah and thank God for The Boy From Oz, is all I can say, for at last we have broken the curse of the unattainable 'Great Australian Musical'. And theatre doesn't belong in casinos. For the auspicious opening of Kennett's Temple of Doom where the torches fired and turned thousands of pigeons into scorching fireballs of pain, to our own watery version, where you pick your way through the rows of lost souls in the gaudy aquarium, past rows of machines swallowing next week's food budget for a family — and you reach the theatre and sit in the darkening velvet hush sucking on chocolate to disguise the taste of blood in your mouth. No, Mr Premiers, its not a healthy way to fund a State's treasury, and in any case, Packer still seems to control the bank.

And while the pressure of staying alive might force us to some extreme jokes, theatre is not fashion. Fashion, with a few exceptions, is inane, elitist, mindless and exploitative, and in Australia it's always six months behind London and New York. Our theatre should be the opposite of that. I had an interview last week with Stuart Hawkins who revealed something to me

about myself and my work for which I am very grateful. I realised that the thing I am drawn to dramatise is the moment of passing from isolation to community, and when I think of the images of my work and others that I remember and treasure most, that is the drama that is being enacted, the story that is being told.

And so I remember Geoffrey Rush's mad Popproshin screaming from the corner of this theatre for his mother; Kerry Walker and Catherine McClements reaching across the gap of age and class and religion in that most brilliant of scenes in the silent kitchen of Stephen Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing*; Carole Skinner's *Goat Lady* and Gillian Jones's alcoholic wife finding peace together in some cheap Australian whisky in Patrick White's *Night on Bald Mountain*; Robyn Nevin struggling against the wind, clinging to her hat as the world tries to tear the flesh from her bones in Jim Sharman's version of White's *A Cheery Soul*; David Field's loving, lost soul sitting outside the circle of family and connection in Jack Davis' *No Sugar*; Julie Forsyth's heartbreaking *Grusha* reaching for Mikael in Michael Kantor's brilliant *Caucasian Chalk Circle*; Daniel Wyllie's *Fish Lamb* silently farewelling his family at the end of *Cloudstreet*...

There is a line in that movie not known for its good lines, *Elizabeth*, a film saved I should add, by the performances of our Geoffrey and our Cate, but this line sang out: 'we need to touch the divine, here on earth'. It seems to me that is what theatre can do. And in so doing it can reconcile, and teach, and bind and transport, and give us great pleasure. I fear we have rather tough times ahead. We must keep our faith and keep working. I want to finish with something for Philip, that last speech from Patrick's *Tempest*, *The Shepherd on the Rocks*:

Are you for magic? I am. Inadmissible when we are taught to believe in science or nothing. Nothing is better. Science may explode in our faces. So I am for magic. For dream. For love. The pervasive dream which becomes more real than reality if we have faith in it. If we can resist abusing them, all our dreams can amount to a world faith. If we can pursue our dream of faith to the end, to the death if necessary. Whatever death it remains to be seen. Another facet of life? Not — I refuse to believe — what certain scientists, academics, and a variety of non-human beings try to persuade me — I should say — US — because you are part of ME — and we are all part of one another.

At the gates of death — which is not hell, as Church voices have so often promised, I hope to shed my doubts, fears, obstinacy, lust. I do not expect an easy transition. I believe that renewal can only be reached through blood and ash. While many of us will continue pursuing false dreams, worshipping sun, yachts, monuments, money, and beaches — that's where the votes are to be caught (all you need is a shrimping net and a fair measure of hypocrisy). I pray for grace — for the deceived shrimps — the monsters of power — and the least deserving creature — myself.

Thank you

Neil Armfield