

THE ALLURE OF MADNESS

by Roslyn Oades

A response to:

Cosi

by Louis Nowra



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Author's Biography



ROSLYN OADES' theatre-making practice has been largely defined by her work in the field of headphone-verbatim performance. Between 2003–2012 she created the headphone-verbatim trilogy: *I'm Your Man* (Belvoir/2012 Sydney Festival/2013 Mobile States National tour), *Stories of Love & Hate* (Urban Theatre Projects (UTP), 2008/Sydney Theatre Company, 2011) and *Fast Cars & Tractor Engines* (UTP/ Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS), 2005). In 2012 she created *Cutaway: A Portrait* for Vitalstatistix. She was the 2013 Female Director-in-Residence at Malthouse Theatre where she developed *Hello, Goodbye & Happy Birthday*—which premiered at the Malthouse Theatre in a co-production with the 2014 Melbourne Festival. Roslyn is a contributing author on the Currency Press publication *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community* (2010), edited by Paul Brown. She also works as a voice artist and performer.

Roslyn's experimentations with headphone-verbatim performance began in 2001 at the London Actors Centre. She would like to acknowledge the early mentorship of UK director Mark Wing-Davey; the generous contributions of long-term Australian collaborators Michael Mohammed Ahmad, Katia Molino, Tim Carroll (BYDS), Bob Scott, Neil Simpson and Alicia Talbot (UTP), as well as choreographer Lee Wilson (Branch Nebula)—all of whom have had a profound impact on the development of her practice.

THE ALLURE OF MADNESS

“Everything’s got a moral if only you can find it.”

The Duchess - *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

What is it about “madness” that is so damn attractive to young actors? As an aspiring actor I couldn’t get enough. Unstable characters were at the top of my wish list. My all-time favourite audition monologues were Lady Macbeth’s ‘Out Damn Spot’, Ophelia’s final speech before drowning herself (of course) and Dorothy Hewett’s addled and alcoholic Belle of Bundaberg from *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*. I loved, loved, *loved* pulling out these characters time and again. Unpicking their psychology and carefully mapping out the journey of guilt or grief or despair, which had ultimately pushed a dangerously taut psyche into a darkness beyond repair.

I imagine there’s a whole swag of male actors with the tragic descents of King Lear, Hamlet and Oedipus with his eye-popping antics at the top of their lists too. Perhaps it is the opportunity to escape one’s self so completely; to play out heightened emotions with abandon; to try on the strange freedom of no longer being held accountable for your actions. I can certainly see how this theory would have appealed to my teenage sensibility at a time when I was overwhelmed by the harsh reality of navigating employment options, my identity as a would-be artist and a sense of belonging in the intimidating world of post-school life. With current mainstage Australian theatre being very much grounded in naturalistic acting forms – which for the most part asks actors to play characters close to their own appearance/age/life experience – perhaps “mad” roles also represent a rare opportunity for the young and half-baked to fully spread their acting wings. Whatever the reason, it’s definitely *a thing*.

And so to *Cosi* – Louis Nowra’s much loved, and oft performed Australian classic – set in 1971 within the grounds of a Melbourne mental institution (*Sounds wonderful!* my younger self squeals). The

plot follows Lewis, a recent university graduate, issued with a daunting task: to direct a cast of mentally ill patients in Mozart's famous comic opera, *Così fan Tutte*. According to the Currency Press publication notes in my edition of *Così*, the play has been reprinted every year bar two since its 1992 release – and in 1997, 1998 and 2010 it was reprinted twice. At the time of writing this paper, the most recent professional production was mounted within the last year to glowing reviews (for the most part) and sold-out houses at La Boite Theatre in Brisbane. For many years now *Così* has been an endearing staple of our high school Drama and English syllabuses. Google confirms the play as a popular choice among amateur theatrical companies – and in what sounds like a fascinating interpretation, I've even heard rumour of a production being presented by a group of mentally ill performers. Then of course, in 1996, there was the star-studded film adaptation whose cast list reads like a virtual roll call of our most successful leading actors: Toni Collette, Rachel Griffiths, Ben Mendelsohn, David Wenham, Jackie Weaver, Colin Friels, Aden Young, Pamela Rabe and Barry Otto. In summary, I think we can confidently say that *Così* has a firm hold on its place in Australia's theatrical canon.

Così is a rollicking ride. Like Alice in Wonderland, Lewis has stumbled into an alien world where everything seems back-to-front and upside down. The actors have chosen the play and proceed to direct the director. There's a big hole in the roof, the lights won't behave, no one can sing and Lewis is supposed to stage an Italian opera without music *or* any Italian speakers. While he struggles to find his bearings the inhabitants bombard him with their inappropriate questions, confounding philosophies, startling frankness and random acts of passion. He's completely lost (and at times frustratingly passive) for the entire first act as these eccentric characters bounce him about: his name is changed, the parameters keep shifting, and he's never sure what'll happen next – or indeed, under frequent threat of violence, whether he'll survive with his head as the tale goes. And although there aren't any smoking caterpillars, there's a hell of a lot of doping going on – complete with a character who falls asleep mid-sentence like a dormouse at the proverbial tea party.

I first read *Così* as a student. My predominant memory is of a playful, heart-warming story, with the lingering image of a pig slaughterhouse lurking in the background. The ugliness of the outside world was temporarily overshadowed by the colourful, quirky characters of Nowra's asylum – their irrepressible desires, their stark vulnerability and of utmost importance, the contagious vision of enthusiastic ring-leader, Roy, with grand plans to stage his favourite opera in an old burnt-out theatre on the asylum grounds:

ROY: *Così fan Tutte* is an opera by Mozart. It's the greatest opera in the whole world. You'd be intimate with it, wouldn't you Jerry [Lewis]? You're university educated.

LEWIS: [*plainly not intimate with it*] Mozart is not one of my big–

ROY: Favourites? But he will be. He will be. (pg.8)

Lewis is concerned the opera is unfashionable and overly romantic in a bourgeois, patriarchal way. He initially resists, “In these days, you know, the Vietnam war [...] Love is not so important these days” – but Roy won't partake of this reasoning for a second and replies, “What planet are you from?” It's hard not to be seduced by his passion:

ROY: Without this, the world wouldn't be the same. It would break, like a voice in despair shattering glass. There is the harmony of the spheres and that harmony is Mozart's music. *Così fan Tutte*. Without this opera having been composed, there would be just a clanging, banging, a bedlam all around us. The music of this opera keeps the world in harmony. (pg.12)

As a teenager, I was gunning for this unruly mob of patients from page one and likewise for Lewis – our identity figure from the outside – who by act two has taken up Roy's proposal whole-heartedly, guiding the patients safely through this enormously challenging, yet ultimately triumphant theatrical quest.

On revisiting the text I'm impressed by Nowra's muscular storytelling. *Cosi* is without doubt a well-structured, dynamic, accessible piece of writing. Yet, I am surprised to find the journey considerably less comfortable twenty years on. On the page, the depiction of vulnerable people as farcical characters and Nowra's decision to set the work in 1971 – with pointed references to the Vietnam War moratoriums and the assertions of second wave feminism – is unsettling. As a student, I don't recall retaining much of the play's political perspective. I suspect this is partly because I was too young at the time to fully appreciate the significance of these historical struggles (of which I am a direct beneficiary) – or perhaps because the play's political context was omitted in Nowra's screenplay for the 1996 Miramax film adaptation. An alternative theory, and one I'd like to explore here, is that Nowra's position on these burning issues of the day is deliberately opaque in the play – to the point of being dismissive. A conservative position of this nature would surely have been out of step with traditionally left-leaning theatre audiences? Yet the play premiered at Belvoir Street Theatre in 1992 to great acclaim. "Curiouser and curiouser", as Alice would say.

Lewis along with the other two outside-world characters, his girlfriend Lucy and flatmate Nick, are a tight trio whose friendship unravels over the course of the play. Nick and Lucy are defined as committed political activists with their idealistic eyes set on changing the world for the greater good. They are actively involved in organising the Melbourne arm of the National Vietnam War Moratoriums – as a point of reference, the third Vietnam Moratorium referenced in the play saw 100,000 people in Melbourne march against Australia's involvement in the war. Lucy also clearly identifies as a feminist – marriage is not a priority and she actively questions the sexist worldview that dominates Western society's literary canon (this naturally includes the plot of *Così fan Tutte*, in which two men don disguises to test the fidelity of their fiancées). Yet from the onset these outside characters are painted as self absorbed and lacking in compassion. Nick, who also happens to be a theatre director Lewis admires, backs away from his commitment to help out on the first day of rehearsals – a day Lewis is obviously terrified about. And when Nick reluctantly drops in to a

rehearsal further down the track, his attitude towards the patients is unnecessarily cruel:

NICK: A fuckin' Mozart opera. Lucy can't believe it either. I mean, I directed you in two of Brecht's plays, didn't you learn anything?

LEWIS: They want to do it.

NICK: Only mad people in this day and age would do a work about love and fidelity. They're definitely mad. [*Softly singing*] 'They're coming to take you away, ha, ha, to the funny farm...' (pg.40)

The potentially noble intentions of the outside-world characters are constantly undermined by their self-righteous behaviour. The mentally ill patients on the other hand, get away with all manner of politically incorrect declarations – and with many patients barely even aware of the war, Nick and Lucy's urgent causes are rendered impotent.

CHERRY: What's this about Vietnam?

RUTH: It's a place somewhere in Asia. There's a war going on.

CHERRY: You're always the last to know in an asylum. (p.46)

The manic Roy asserts that *Così fan Tutte* is “about testing how true your love is”. And like this ‘play within the play’ Nowra’s *Così* holds Lewis’s closest relationships to account. By the end of act one he sees Nick and Lucy in a new light. Their uncompromising ideas on social responsibility appear pretentious and narrow-minded from this perspective. This unlikely cast of mentally ill misfits remind Lewis of the importance of love and lived humanity – values his friends seem to neglect in their blinkered pursuit of social revolution. On this level the narrative serves as a warning not to ‘throw the baby out with the bath water’ so to speak; or at least, as a call for a more complicated vision of society – a vision that embraces illogical notions like love, fragility and the transcendent power of art. Are these ideologies necessarily

incompatible? It's slippery terrain. Although one thing seems certain: despite the play's specific political setting – and an interest in power and its abuses – Nowra is keen to avoid being boxed or message-driven. There are plenty of wry digs at Brecht's 'worthiness' scattered throughout the play to support this theory.

Nowra has spoken of *Cosi* as being among his autobiographical works (the first being *Summer of the Aliens*) and loosely based on events and people from his own life. Despite my earlier comparisons to Lewis Carroll, it's hard to ignore that the protagonist's name 'Lewis' is deliberately close to the playwright's own, Louis. In a recent, and rather remarkable interview on *Cosi*, as part of Currency Press's *Not in Print* podcast, Nowra revealed that both his grandmothers (one of whom was a pyromaniac like the character of Doug) were institutionalised at Mont Park Asylum in Melbourne – where as a young first-time director Nowra was employed to stage a Gilbert and Sullivan play with the patients. Nowra's mother also struggled with mental health issues, which in a tragic turn of events, contributed to her murdering her own father (Nowra's grandfather). Nowra also recounts that while writing *Cosi* his partner of the time was experiencing psychotic episodes, which contributed to the choice of content:

"I thought, why don't I write a play about madness? [...] But let's make madness funny. Humour works as a way of being victorious over circumstances you're in [...] To me [as a child] madness represented impermanence and constant changes that had entered that person's personality. And I couldn't deal with it." (Louis Nowra, *Not in Print* interview, Currency Press, 11 July 2013)

While a work must stand on its own merits, it is hard to prevent this information affecting my reading of the *Cosi* patients. My hesitation around their slap-stick, over-the-top, capital-M "Mad" character traits slides closer towards an appreciation of Nowra's gallows humour. Having said that, I would hate to see this play in the wrong hands (among which, I include my younger self!). The script's uncluttered, pacey narrative – along with the 'madness-attraction *thing*' – makes *Cosi* a popular choice for student and amateur groups. Yet, it is

worth noting that a successful production of *Cosi* would rely heavily upon the combined efforts of a talented cast and a smart, empathetic director to avoid the work slipping into simplistic caricature – and the potential for trivialising some of the most vulnerable members of our society. Nowra's very particular personal lens makes its presence felt throughout the text (*Cosi* is not a social realist play by any means). In performance the writer's delicate balance of comedy and tragedy, as well as truth versus representation, would need to be mindfully weighed, in order to maintain the play's more sophisticated intentions. This is not to suggest a young cast couldn't give *Cosi* a fair shot. In fact, as a culture our awareness and understanding of mental health issues has increased manifold since 1992 – evident nowhere more so than among our current generation of young people.

It is worth reflecting at this point on the final words of *Cosi*. In a singular moment of direct audience address, the character of Lewis steps out of the life of the play to offer an epilogue on the future of the merry band of misfits we have been laughing along with:

“... Ruth left the institution to become a time and motion expert. Henry? He died soon after *Cosi*. Roy? He went from ward to ward after his fellow patients took up petitions to get rid of him. By the following year I was in Sydney and not long after that I saw Julie's name in the paper. She had died of a drug overdose. And Zac? He left the asylum and founded a rock and roll group called The Psychotic Wagners. They had a minor hit. A few years later I heard he had started a polka band which was very big in the Melbourne German and Austrian club circuit. [*A beat*] Time to turn out the lights.” (p.89)

In stark contrast to the conclusion of *Così fan Tutte*, no hidden identities are set aside. For the patients there is no happy ending that sees mayhem overthrown and balance restored. Staging the opera was a transcendent, unifying moment and yet it was just that – a brief reprieve from a fraught existence. The ongoing struggles of those living with mental illness, depression and addiction is, of course, not an absurdist wonderland that disappears upon waking. As is the case with many

well-intended community art projects – at the end, the artist is paid and leaves while the participants are left behind, still stuck in a difficult reality. Lewis's job is over and he will return to the outside world changed. The story of our hero's journey towards enlightenment is complete – he has gained a new understanding of love and compassion – and yet for the patients nothing is changed. Roy's manic personality has been hilarious and charming on stage at arms-length, but in reality he'd be an extremely challenging personality for audience members to engage with – as would Cherry, Ruth, Zac, Henry, Julie and Doug. While we've all enjoyed one hell of a ride, these closing lines call us to account. We are reminded that the lived experience of mental illness is not at all funny – and that is the bittersweet high-wire this enduring classic asks us to walk.

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The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.

'Teacher resources have so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.'

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