



INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENT : A CASE FOR THE CLASSICS

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I have over the years been fortunate enough to see a great deal of theatre throughout the world that would come under the term "experimental". Very broadly they seem to me to fall into three kinds of experiment:

- 1) Rough and informal groups, which tend to be improvisatory, such as Julian Beck's LIVING THEATRE from the U.S.A., Jerome Savary's LE GRAND MAGIC CIRCUS from France, and THE RED TENT from Japan.
- 2) Highly disciplined and formal groups such as Grotowski's POOR THEATRE and Kantor's CRICOT 2, both from Poland, Suzuki's WASEDA SHO-GEKIJO from Japan, and Mnouchkine's THEATRE DU SOLEIL from France.
- 3) Groups whose main preoccupation is with images and scale (either large or minimalist) such as England's WELFARE STATE or America's Robert Wilson, or the Canadian group MABOU MINES.

Finally there are some very exceptional directors of particular theatre companies, presumably influenced by the more esoteric work of such above groups, who assimilate and apply these experiments and techniques into traditional, usually CLASSIC, texts, producing works of startling originality and innovation: groups such as Peter Stein's SCHAUBUHNE THEATRE in Berlin, Spain's NURIA ESPERT, Georgio Strehler's PICCOLO THEATRE DI MILANO, Roger Planchon's company in Lyon, and most famously Peter Brook's international group CICT. I am at pains to have to give the background to my argument because the case I wish to put for the classics can only be understood in the context of what has been happening in experimental and new forms of theatre.

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What factors are involved in experiment?

1. The Space

Starting afresh from what Peter Brook called "the empty space", experiment almost invariably involves a breaking down of the traditional proscenium arch relationship between audience and stage, e.g. Grotowski's "operating theatre", Mnouchkine's "industrial platform", and Brook's quarry.

The exceptions are those groups emphasising IMAGES whereby of necessity they tend to need to create "a picture" in a picture frame while they still experiment in scale.

2. The Mode of Communication

Experiments almost invariably break away from the linear narrative conversational form of dialogue. Most extremely there will be no or minimal text where the accent is on images, stylised movement sequences, etc. More commonly differing modes of text will be used with not necessarily any logic in the form or sequence or style.

3. The Production Values

Often a great use is made of special aural and visual effects, by which I mean sound and light. Again with the exception of "IMAGIST" theatre, "design" as such will be via music, (concrete or popular perhaps), and special lighting effects rather than the decorative in the form of sets.

4. "Free Form" Techniques

Whereby improvisations and audience participation will replace the more formal and traditional concepts of set texts and rigid structures.

The more extreme and radical of these experiments I believe, whether by design or circumstance, have their function and value more for the profession itself than for a general public.

It is very hard to make sense out of our existence, illuminate human experience, analyse social change, stimulate our deepest thoughts on feelings - all the things that theatre and all art can and should do - when the form and content of expression is so unfamiliar or esoteric that we cannot connect it with our everyday lives. For me it has generally been the case that the most exciting theatrical experiences have been those in which innovative concepts have been applied to essentially traditional texts, thus that not only have these works been revealed freshly for their own inherent genius, but also the horizons have been broadened as regards what theatre by its very nature can do.

Thus I see that what Brook and Strehler and Stein do in the theatre is rather like what Picasso or Magritte did to art or Stravinsky and Schoenberg did to music - their experiments shocked and challenged and broadened horizons but still connected at some point with the familiar. Whoever it was who influenced Picasso and Magritte and Strevinsky and Schoenberg I suspect are less familiar to art and music lovers, but their import lay in the influence on their "assimilators". In the same way most theatre lovers would be unfamiliar with Grotowski but he, I'm sure, has been the major influence on Brook and Suzuki as, I expect, has Robert Wilson on MABOU MINES and the WELFARE STATE.

Herein lies the key and vital and essential need for experiment, for without it, obviously the art would become static, moribund, and lifeless as opposed to dynamic, progressive and alive.

But at the same time we must remember one thing: experiments are by definition a search for the new and a reaction against the old. I believe it is very difficult if not impossible to explore new techniques and concepts without at first having mastered conventional and traditional ones. You generally need to know what you're reacting against in order to progress in search for the new.



I have two major concerns : one, that the encouragement and assistance to "New Form" in Australia, from the established profession itself as well as critics and funding bodies, is distressingly ignorant and woefully inadequate; two, that quite often the clamour for recognition of and assistance for New Form comes from groups and individuals who have not had in the first place the experience or basis in the traditional to know exactly what it is they are experimenting against. I think very often it is experiment for experiment's sake, practised by those who by nature are disposed to the radical rather than by experience frustrated by the conventional. The stridency and hysteria with which "establishment" theatre is sometimes denigrated as irrelevant and moribund by those who have never worked in it supports my case.

This is my point. Without the classics we have no theatre tradition. And for as much as they may hate the past, those that so vehemently push the local and the contemporary must face the fact that our, i.e. Australia's, theatre tradition is foreign in origin - in Sophocles, Shakespeare, Sheridan, Shaw et al. It is sometimes ironic, indeed sometimes strange, to me that while my theatrical origins and major experience has been with the avante garde (Littlewood, Brecht, Handke) and the local contemporary (nearly all my productions at Nimrod were new Australian plays), I now head a company whose priority is the classic repertoire. But that I believe is our brief, indeed our raison d'etre. And very simply I do not believe we do them, the classics, well enough. Mind you, I think we do them, for the most part, as well as any other company in the country, and occasionally (CYRANO, AS YOU DESIRE ME, YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU) we do them very well. Nonetheless I believe in the main, neither we, nor any other company in the country, has a track record of constantly presenting the classics in such a way, as I've defined above, as to illuminate our human experience as well as broaden our horizon of what theatre can do. Generally what we get is at best interesting, historically revealing, earnestly worthwhile.

The fact is, the classics are very, very hard to do. On matters of interpretation, style, language, there are for every classic particular problems to be solved, which generally don't apply at least to more conventional contemporary plays. And though it is its ability to speak to any and all times that makes a play a classic, it is nonetheless very hard to realise that "contemporariness" in it. The problem for most of us, particularly actors, is that we have simply had so little experience, so little basic practice, in the classics. And of course, those problems - of interpretation, style, and language - differ from one genre and one kind of classic to another. Even with Shakespeare, probably the most frequently performed classic author, a very very few actors would have the opportunities, as is fairly common practice in England, to begin playing small parts and develop gradually to leads, which in turn requires frequent experience before one is ready, as Olivier puts it, "to scale the heights" of Othello, or Cleopatra, or Lear. I would argue here of our own younger actors, only John Bell has had that kind of experience: an apprenticeship (with the RSC in fact) leading to a Henry V, two Hamlets, a Romeo, a Petruchio, a Richard III, a Berowne, a Prince Hal, and a Macbeth, all of which adds up to a reasonable preparation for his Lear <sup>this</sup> year, and hopefully Othello (or better Iago), and Antony yet to come! Meanwhile our other "classical" actors such as John Gaden, Robyn Nevin, Peter Carroll, David Downer, Helen Morse, have had relatively little experience in Shakespeare. For the remainder of the classic repertoire - the Greeks; Restoration; nineteenth century realism of Chekhov, Gorki, Ibsen, Strindberg, etc; to English Comedy of Manners of Sheridan, Shaw, and Wilde; and on into the twentieth century greats of Brecht, Beckett and Pinter - as well as the vast area of lesser known classics - such as the Spanish de Vega, Calderon and Lorca; the German Kleist and Geothe; the Russians Andreyev and Bulgakov; as well as Pirandello, Capek, Vian - for most actors it will be the case that they've had no prior experience in a genre when the opportunity arises to play in it. Certainly this was so with the STC's THE WAY OF THE WORLD last year, including Robyn Nevin in the lead role of Millamant.

So what should we do? At long last the STC will very soon be functioning in a second venue, the existence of which has always been intended to provide us with the means to do work relatively free from box office pressure. What sort of work should this be?

There are a number of alternatives:

- 1) We could confine ourselves exclusively to new Australian works. While indeed there is still more works and new writers clamouring to be seen and heard than there are outlets to do them in, there are a number of small theatres both in Sydney and the regions supplying opportunities. I would rather do at the Wharf only those new works for which we have a particularly strong commitment and which we feel would not fare favourably at the Drama Theatre.
- 2) We could confine ourselves to experiments in form or content of the kinds I have discussed above. But this I feel runs the risk of becoming a hothouse and esoteric exercise which could interest the profession greatly but audiences very little!
- 3) Or we could take classic texts and find new ways of presenting them with the aim that the concentration of practice on these texts would provide a firm foundation for a number of actors that would be invaluable experience for the future in the classic disciplines. Clearly the implication of my arguments here is that this is my preference.
- 4) Or, best of all, we could do all three of the above, the priority being experimentation in the presentation of the form and content of classic texts, with new Australian work providing the relief and the balance.

This is our choice.

In turn, this choice implies a need for the establishment of an acting company.





In all our discussions, the examples we have constantly referred to, as to where the best work has existed, have all been ones where a permanent company of actors was involved. Indeed in Sydney itself some of the best work seen in the last 15 years was that done by the Performance Syndicate under Rex Cramphorn between 1970 and 1974. Arguably it has been only this group that has truly functioned as an acting company in this city, those examples at the Tote, Nimrod, and the STC all being too brief, or too small, or too compromised to legitimately lay claim to the title "company".

We feel that there is a size of group below which the concept of a true company rapidly ceases to be. We would fix this at 10 people. We feel that there is a period of time spent together less than which the concept of a true company rapidly ceases to be. We would fix this at 12 months. We feel that there is a degree of commitment which defines the concept of a company, (except of course the word "commitment" admits to no modification!). We feel the commitment of the group has to be one that excludes all alternative sources of work.

And finally this leads to a concept that there is an approach to work which defines a company, indeed which distinguishes an "acting company" from a "cast of actors". At the outset this requires that the approach is communal - shared by the group as a whole. This can only be arrived at when the group works exclusively together, with exclusively in-house directors. And can only be arrived at when there is a clear policy (philosophy, ideology) guiding the work which is capable of being shared.

The alternative is an ad hoc mixture of actors, changing in number and composition with each production and, as a result of changes in director, changing its philosophy of approach so that it is impossible for any communality to develop.

## A CASE FOR A COMPANY (contd.)

So we believe that Sydney has not seen for 10 years, and perhaps has never seen

- a group of 10 actors or more,
- working together on a full-time basis for 12 months or more,
- with a commitment to that work at the exclusion of all other,
- working exclusively together on every project and always with the same directors,
- and thus developing a shared approach to the work with the aim of developing that approach into something unique in both style and quality.

Such a company we would like to develop the concept is as follows:

- a group of at least 10,
- on a two year contract. The first year would be spent at the Wharf, the second would open up to include work at the Drama Theatre (and anywhere else the company may be playing).
- Drama Theatre average cast size being 14, this retains the possibility of employing "stars" (who inevitably would not wish to take an exclusive contract) which is essential for the prestige of the company's reputation and for their support to the mainhouse box office.
- the ensemble developed at the Wharf each year would always provide the core or centre to the work done elsewhere, thus meaning that the method of approach would spread to that work, and a measure of the uniqueness of style and quality realised in the second house would be maintained at the first.