

## Australian Theatre: Beyond Experimentalism

Experiment in the theatre is spasmodic, at least in this century and in the English-speaking world. Theatre depends on people coming to see it, and it is only occasionally that significant numbers wish to think anew about human nature or behaviour. Since theatre explores human action, and experimental theatre challenges notions of that action and how it is to be represented, experiment is only tolerated, let alone sought, at particular periods of history.

Indeed new departures in theatre are nearly always connected with periods of social upheaval, when given modes of existence are questioned and new ones sought: for example, the experiments of Stanislavsky in the years leading up to the Russian revolution; the Public Theatre in the U.S.A. in the 1930s; the experiment of Greek Tragedy in a time of social, political and intellectual experiment in fifth century Athens. In our society (and in certain others) a major experimental movement was born in the late 1960s with the struggle against the Vietnam war and the growth of counter cultures.

In Australia experiment has always been associated, not simply with the development of theatre language and the exploration of human action, but with the quest for an indigenous theatre. The experiments of Esson and the Palmers were directed to that end, and the innovations here of the 60s were distinguished from those of, say, New York of the same period, by being the occasion of the rise of a theatre that Australia could call its own.

We could no longer be said to be living in an experimental period. Most of the groups spawned in the late 60s and early 70s have passed away or are no longer productive. And the fruits of those experiments have scarcely passed into the 'public theatre' in any very wholehearted way. (An important exception would be the appointment of Rex Cramphorn to the Playbox Theatre and the group of actors developing around him.) There

are, of course, some new groups, and in any given year there are productions that could be called experimental, but there is little drive or challenge. The events seems isolated from each other and, even more than experimental theatre usually is, from other streams in the theatre.

I was in New York in the Fall of 1982. Many of the groups of the experimental phase were still working — the Mabou Mines, Meredith Monk, the Performing Garage — but new territory was not being charted. The groups and their audiences had turned in on themselves, asserting their own identity, playing out rather private rituals. My predominant visual memory is of a back half-turned, the actor facing the centre of the stage where something secret and slightly impenetrable was being enacted by and for people who knew better than I what was going on. There was a sense of experimental theatre as a way of life, a performance for a particular sort of person living in a particular area.

Perhaps this should not surprise us; this is not a time of intellectual enquiry or experiment. Individuals or groups prominent in the experiments of the 60s having settled for a quieter and more private mode of expression, it is perhaps inevitable that experimental theatre should now seem like an activity carried on by consenting adults in private. But in Australia the experiment of the 60s is unfinished precisely in what was distinctive to it, its quest for an *Australian* theatre. This was not simply to give Australian colour to the theatre that already existed (to some extent this had already happened), but to create a theatre that mattered to a large number of people in this country. In this we still have some way to go.

At the heart of this quest is the matter of what the actor does. What must acting or performing be to make it worth watching? What is happening which draws attention and holds the eye from moment to moment? The question is not what does the actor mean, what style does she use, what genre does she operate within, but what is she doing that matters? Whatever one thinks of the work of Pina Bausch or Bertolt Brecht or Jerzy Grotowski, their actors are doing something that actors in other plays, and from other places do not do. If we pursue the question radically enough our theatre will be quite unlike that of other countries, as different as Circus Oz is from the traditional European circus, or Los Trio Ringbarkos at their best from international cabaret. This will not be because there is any inherent value in being distinctive but because, being distinctive anyway, our acting must be distinctive for our theatre to be our own.

Such a quest cannot be pursued in isolation. It is not just, what can an actor do (that was the question of the 60s), but how that matters to those around. This question can only be asked with others. We need to be able to say, what mattered to you here, when did we capture your attention and when lose it, how should we do differently so as to make it more important? Thus we need to try our work out in situations which are not normally characterised by performance and in which there is room and time for conversation with the audience. Too much performance, even that which describes itself as community theatre, consists in delivering a tightly structured package in circumstances where there is no room for exchange. The

audience can take it or leave it, and is expected to take it. Instead we need to be among the people for whom we perform so that our performance may grow in response to the way others experience it. Otherwise performance inhabits a world of its own as private as experimental theatre in today's New York.

If we do this, we may find that room is made for the audience in our performances. 'Useful work requires people', said Brecht. I will give two examples from the recent work of the Mill Theatre. Neil Greenaway created a solo for the lines his body could make in the theatre using a frame and a pole. At a Mill Night (an open evening at the theatre) we invited a group of people to collaborate in and extend the piece. First they considered the principles that underlay Neil's work; then they improvised in accordance with these principles; finally we firmed up a structure within which those improvisations could work. The eventual performance, made at the end of the evening for others who had attended it, was one of the most exciting that has taken place in the theatre.

The Mill company as a whole has created another piece whose choreography is based on acrobatic work directed by Robert Draffin and whose text is a series of wishes, lies and dreams written by the company (thanks to Kenneth Koch). We recently took the piece into an old peoples' home. We started by performing it in its original form. We then asked the 'audience' if they would join with us in creating a new version made up of *their* wishes, lies and dreams. We circulated among them, eliciting a new text, which the authors memorised at top speed (mostly written down on hands and arms). The resultant performance, made up of our action and their work, became a shared event between performer and audience. Pursued in this way, performance can spread.

Recent developments in dance — the introduction of radically simplified language, ordinary gestures, everyday actions, and the use of outdoor environments — offer another way forward. Dance is being opened up to structures of improvisation and play and developing a language which, rather than proclaiming itself as art, creates events that can phase in and out of other events, whether other forms of art, or other occasions within society. It is offering not simply a new language from which artists may build their pieces (when that happens the result is often impoverished and curiously obscure), but a path by which dance, and by analogy other forms of performance, no longer separate events demarcated as art, may become a more natural part of the life of the community.

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