

**RICHARD WHERRETT*****FOR SOME SERIOUS R & R***

The fourth annual Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture

Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 2 December 1996

It is my pleasure to deliver the fourth Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture.

My purpose here is to argue the case for Research and Risk-taking in our theatre ahead of Rest and Recreational theatre. Ahead of 'comfortable' theatre. A few weeks ago one of my colleagues at a similar forum argued a similar theme. I don't intend here to Mount Kosciuszko - I agreed with a great deal he said.

But - where did it all begin?

Let me begin with an overview - what's happened since 1975? I was thrilled that Australia's Brian Thomson and Roger Kirk won Broadway Tony Awards for set and costume designs this year; I was deeply disappointed that these gold medal achievements were not acknowledged with a ticker tape parade. It is tremendously significant that audiences for the performing arts generally, and theatre in particular, have continued increasing in huge numbers over the last twenty years, it is in fact critically significant because these numbers have helped close the gap between income and expenditure that in real terms decreasing subsidy has regrettably widened. I am not convinced that it is yet accepted that the high arts need patronage before they might become commercial, and that a de Medici or Rockefeller, in the form of government, must help foot the bill. The high arts are labour-intensive, but are not an 'industry'. On this one Mr Keating got it wrong, as Katharine Brisbane clarified here three years ago.

It is wonderful that Melbourne has brilliantly refurbished the Princess, the Regent and the Forum theatres to complement the superb Playhouse and the charming Comedy and Athenaeum theatres; it is appalling that Sydney cannot claim one first-rate drama theatre. Promises! Promises!

It is exciting that we now have a healthy number of regional theatres and a diversity within the capital cities; that there is, even if under threat, a large quota of Australian content on television; and that we have a thriving film industry. It is extremely depressing that wages for most theatre workers, and actors most of all, in all media, remain so low and in many instances are going backwards, as John Derum lamented here one year ago.

It is gratifying that politicians are in most cases acknowledging the importance of the arts to a civilised society as reflected in the tendency for Premiers frequently, and Prime Ministers occasionally, to take on the portfolios themselves, as opposed to the days they were relegated to an *ignoramus* in the outer ministry; it is ridiculous that in budget cutting times an exception can't be made for the relatively tiny portion of it that the arts gets.

I applaud the new streamlined procedures for applications for grants to the Australia Council; I regret they're not tougher. No grants under 30 I say. As simple and clear as that. And on the same grounds I deeply regret a proposal to replace the Creative Fellowships with Emerging Artists Fellowships. There are so many emerged artists out there, who perhaps now should not have to wait tables or clean houses, who have been subsidising the arts all their lives. Give me a break! Give them a break. And I hope the new Registrar of Peers allows for the inclusion of any and all kinds of people knowledgeable in the theatre such as publishers, festival directors, or even ex-Australia Council project officers. I think it's absurd that there is an increasing tendency away from the practice of appointing artists as Chief Executives, as was a condition of the appointment to the Director of the Sydney Theatre Company in 1979, and towards image-conscious, market-driven MBA-trained financial administrators. General managers have to have a product to manage and artists can be financially astute and responsible.

It's great that we now get quite extensive coverage in the press and, even if under threat, in the electronic media. But we need more tough investigative journalism which could press us practitioners to tougher choices, as Wayne Harrison pleaded here two years ago. I'm sick of reading reports from strident artistic directors or general managers which jubilantly declare 'box office targets are met' without a declaration on the expenditure budget. One is meaningless without the other.

And it is most of all thrilling that the last 20 years have seen the growth of a strong Australian dramatic literary heritage, as reflected in an audience hungry for Australian works, Australian works being set for study in schools, and publication of a great number of Australian works spearheaded by Currency Press; it is alarming that this has been achieved at serious costs. It is to this last dichotomy that I give my attention this evening.

So let me narrow my field of vision a little.

It is my pleasure to deliver the fourth Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture because Philip had a significant impact on my thinking about drama and theatre, particularly theatre in Australia. In two particular ways: first, he helped me understand the need for and the value of quality dramaturgical input. In late 1975 I was using Philip as dramaturg for my production of *Richard III* for Nimrod Theatre. On one extraordinary day - the 11th of the 11th in fact, and probably around 11am - our rehearsal for an 'off with his head' scene on stage was interrupted by an 'off with his head' scene off stage. 'Gough's been sacked,' the messenger hysterically reported. The rehearsal dribbled to a miserable close - after all, at that time Nimrod was being very handsomely subsidised by Gough's revamped Australia Council. I was having difficulty making the scene work where Richard is testing the people's reactions to the prospect of him becoming king. The text made it clear that, by and large, they hated the idea. My trouble was I had no people, no crowd. A cast trimmed to its essence precluded any left-overs for resentful London masses. Philip urged me to consider using the audience as crowd, as would have been the case at the Globe in 1600. 'I'm quite sure,' he said, 'that the politeness and embarrassment of your middle-class audience when confronted by a raging John Bell as Richard will balk at any response whatsoever'. At the first preview when we got to that scene, the house lights came up and Richard, protesting too much, humbled himself before the audience with: Alas, why would you heap this care on me? I am unfit for state and majesty. The frozen silent horror at being asked to participate by refuting this truth was of course exactly the reaction required, sending Richard in to an apoplectic fury. It worked like a dream. Thank you Philip.

Some eight years later at the Sydney Theatre Company I proposed to Wayne Harrison, then employed as my Literary Advisor, that we rename his position 'Dramaturg'. The title 'advisor' did not accurately reflect the

position as I wanted it, which was not only to advise on the best new plays, both locally and internationally available. I wanted him also to scour the classic repertoire in pursuit of those works which could speak to us most relevantly, here and now. (If only I'd done *Richard III* in 1975 suits!). And in turn I wanted the position via the research involved to contribute equally, along with director and designer, to the concept and line of the production, to its direction. It was the contemporary German, and indeed European, model of literary advice I had in mind, based on my belief that the best theatre in the world in the mid-'80s was happening in Europe - the Stein's in Berlin, the Chereau's in Paris, the Stroehler's in Milan et al. It seemed therefore that the German term for the position should be used. And so we did. Initially our move was received, particularly by newspaper critics, with howls of derision, primarily based on our pretension. Well, the rest is history. In just ten years the term, and for a while the position, of dramaturg entered theatre parlance at all levels.

For example a recent review by Peter Ward of Daniel Keene's latest play regretted the lack of 'needy dramaturgical input'. Script editing is what I think he meant the play needed, as most do, which is not quite the same thing as conceiving the classics, but is also a major part of the job. I was amazed, and delighted, to discover last year, sitting for the Drama Committee of the Australia Council, that the vast majority of applications included in the creative team the services of a dramaturg, even for the most humble requests for a Creative Development grant. I was delighted, I suppose, because I felt our one small step in 1985 has become a giant leap in so short a time. I was amazed because with the exception of my years at the STC, I've always had to function as my own dramaturg, and when money is tight, as in our case where 86 per cent of the Creative Development grants were being rejected, perhaps the dramaturg was a luxury. Money must be tight now. The presence of a dramaturg on the credit list of any one production's creative team as well as any one company's artistic personnel is again rare, if not exceptional. I mean a dramaturg who does more than compile the programme notes. The significance of good dramaturgy is invaluable, not least of all because it provides for the director an additional, and a more objective, critical viewpoint. This I learnt from that dramaturg par excellence, Philip Parsons. And I pay this tribute now because, while I applaud the ascendance of the notion of dramaturgy, I deplore the relative lack of its practice in

current theatre.

I think, with a few notable exceptions, our theatre is in the doldrums - that is, stuck in a very hot zone but lacking strong directional winds to get it moving again. Too little dramaturgy? Too little funding assistance? Too little dramaturgy because too little funding? Too few good directors? Too few good scripts? Or even perhaps - too many Australian scripts? Too many rhetorical questions! More of this later.

The second significant impact Philip had on my theatre thinking, and practice, was the acquisition of a concern for the development of a classic Australian theatre repertoire. Currency Press had begun this process for me with the first of its National Theatre Series publications in 1973 of Louis Esson's *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe*. When I was appointed to the Sydney Theatre Company in June 1979, I had no hesitation in kicking off with George Darrell's *The Sunny South*. I wanted to demonstrate that my written commitment (in the mission statement) to Australian classics would not be all talk and no action. By 1979 Currency Press had published only six works in the National Theatre series. The problem of course was that there weren't too many Aussie classics. What many of us wanted, not least of all Philip and Katharine Brisbane, was not just the publication and performance of retrospective classic works but also of prospective classic works. In 1970 the Australian theatre scene was distinguished by the existence of two theatre companies, the Pram Factory in Melbourne and Nimrod in Sydney, which had as their primary, if not exclusive concern, the production of new Australian plays. Such companies in the 1990s are the norm rather than the exception - more of this later. My point here is that by 1979 a small number of new Australian works had been produced and published which had the potential to become classics of the future. The publication of the works was arguably the most crucial factor here. Sometimes publication preceded production; sometimes publication followed a production; and indeed sometimes publication proceeded without production. Most dangerously, many texts were never published at all and perhaps have, as a result, been lost forever. Michael Cove's *Kookaburra*? Ken Horler's *Ginge's Last Stand*? for example.

But without publication most of the works with any 'classic' potential would have been, will be lost. Jim Sharman had said to me once in the early '70s that if all Australian theatres were required to do only new Australian

plays for five years - voila, we would have, inevitably, a viable Australian body of theatre work. It is interesting to note that twenty-odd years later one Australian theatre has made a commitment to mount only existing Australian plays for five years. The dangers to the box office of the State Theatre Company of South Australia are great - this is extreme risk-taking! - but I applaud the intent wholeheartedly and wish the project, as indeed we all must do, great success. I dearly hope to be part of it. But it could only happen now because there is only now, 25 years after Nimrod and the Pram Factory began, a viable body of Australian works that has come about without the extremity of Jim's proposition, and which now needs to be seen again to test their potential for classic status. Good new works can suffer a bad first production. Belvoir's brilliant recent revival of Stephen Sewell's *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* is a case in point, which had suffered at the Drama Theatre in 1984. New works can also have a good production first time round, but perhaps in the wrong circumstances, for example the wrong venue. Two of Louis Nowra's works come to mind. When we had just decided to use the then Downstairs Nimrod theatre as a theatre, we squeezed into it Louis' *Inner Voices*. In the mid-1970s new Australian works by unknown authors were still a risk. Now, our hunger for all things Australian makes such a notion very hard to believe. But it was the case, and so *Inner Voices* was 'downsized' - in cast numbers and production scale - to fit the limited physical and financial strictures of Nimrod Downstairs. A few years later I would argue the same thing happened with *Inside The Island* at Nimrod Upstairs. This epic play needed - still needs - the Drama Theatre stage, or similar, to fully realise its epic potential. I think I'm right in saying that neither play has been seen since, yet they are two of many such works that need to be reassessed. I was delighted recently that Alex Buzo's *Coralie Lansdowne Says No* was reassessed by the Griffin production, but I'm disappointed it was in the same venue as when it premiered in 1973, a venue which had difficulty realising the splendour of Coralie's borrowed Palm Beach eyrie. Stephen Sewell's *Welcome The Bright World* needs another look, as does Steve J. Spears' *Young Mo* and Alma de Groen's *Going Home* and many more. I want to see such works celebrated afresh and with the resources, when needed, of bigger circumstances than they experienced first time round. Until Wayne Harrison and I codirected it on a very large scale at the Drama Theatre in 1986 for the STC, John Romeril's marvellous, seminal, and again physically and thematically epic play *The*

Floating World had not been seen outside small venues on small budgets.

At least no longer do our theatre critics talk of Australian theatre as undergoing a 'renaissance' as they did into the early '80s, implying not only 'rebirth' but also, I think, 'short life'. The Australian dramatic heritage is established, in that a large body of work exists. What we still need to know is what will last. I believe it is crucially time that, come the choice, we look more often at revivals of existing works before, just to fill a quota perhaps, we mount new works.

Where did it all begin?

Leonard Bernstein's wonderful *Wonderful Town* is an example of Rest and Recreational Theatre. *Moby Dick* on the other hand, as a novel, is, with capital letters, a Major Tome. I was revisiting *Beauty and The Beast* the other night. At the conclusion Edna Everage behind me turned to her husband Norm and chirruped, 'Lovely wasn't it? Takes you out of yourself'. The best criticism we can ask for. *Beauty and The Beast* has a wonderful message at its heart: don't judge a book by its cover. But nevertheless *Beauty and The Beast* is certainly Rest and Recreational theatre. As a freelance director I've had in 1996 a very good year. I've been employed. Not only that, my work has been with Brecht's *Galileo* and *Beauty and The Beast*, and the opera *Summer Of The Seventeenth Doll*, and *The Music Of Andrew Lloyd Webber*. *Galileo* and *The Doll* are the theatre equivalents of *Moby Dick* - they are Major Tomes. So I've been able to swing between two pieces of Escapist Fantasy, which have played to huge audiences, and two pieces of Serious Theatre, which have played to small audiences. Which is more important? The money or the box? Which is more significant? Which is more memorable? If you were 8 years old, *Beauty And The Beast* might be an unforgettable experience. Indeed it might get you, ten years later, to a *Galileo* or *The Doll*. But in terms of discovering something about the Australian identity, heightened by the joy of music; in terms of appeal to the challenge of ideas; in terms of the potential for theatre to be unforgettable because it can change our lives, we cannot do without the *Galileos* and the *Dolls* of this world.

And let's be quite clear about this. Rest and Recreational Theatre inspires only other examples of Rest and Recreational Theatre. The Big Tomes, Serious Theatre, inspire countless and unimaginable other kinds of works, in both form and content. And Serious Theatre needs a great deal of Research

and Risk-taking.

What is great about Recreational Theatre is that it doesn't require us to think - we can escape for a moment from the harsh realities of life. This is its great, its popular, appeal. But this doesn't mean to say it's good for us. Kids will usually prefer fairy floss to green beans. Extremist political views will often have popular support, even the support of a majority, but that doesn't mean they're right, that they're good for us. Democracy is not a perfect system of government - E. M. Forster could give it only two-and-a-half cheers. I've been disappointed during the recent race debate that, with the exception of Geoffrey Cousins, no one seems to have challenged the notion that even if Pauline Hanson has majority support, she and her supporters are wrong. The perils of Pauline - the girl certainly takes risks - but Risk without Research is useless. Theatre and politics need research - of the facts, and risk - in facing truth, to elevate their forums into the realms of the high and the mighty.

I deplore, I am frightened by, the serious lack of Research and Risk-taking in our current theatre scene. Research and Development in the theatre, as in industry, is that seed, experiment with and exploration of form and content without which new products, great products, are unlikely. Galileo would not have been written without the crude experiments of *The Measures Taken* or *Roundheads and Peakheads*. Research and Risk require a very crucial and quite particular kind of by-line funding because very often they are, for a long time, apparently unproductive. Risk-taking is not only the punt that producers will often want to take with new and untried works by a new and unknown author; it is also perhaps a new vision of an old and neglected work that might cost heaps to mount and has as much risk of failing completely as it does of striking gold. The classics are usually both very expensive and very difficult - risky. And this particular kind of risk is being neglected at our peril. So let me narrow my field of focus even further.

Twelve months ago I had just finished sitting on the Drama Committee of the Australia Council, grants having been decided for 1996. The Council was funding 45 companies on an annual grant basis, this including those with the Major Organisations Board. Let me ask you - what do you think might be the average percentage of Australian content programmed by these forty-five companies? In my experience of asking this question before, I

reckon you'd be thinking perhaps 30%, maybe 50%, or even as high as 60%. Well let me tell you: the figure was, for 1996, 86%. The Bell Shakespeare Company does no Australian content - thank God. Thank God because, as used to be the case with Anthill who did at first and at its height only classic theatre, so long as the national balance is right, there is health in having a company exclusively devoted to the classics. Or whatever. I would like to see a company exclusively devoted to musicals, including the vast repertoire of neglected musical theatre of this century. Along with cinema, the musical is the great entertainment form of the 20th century. I want to see *Lady in the Dark* and *Pal Joey* and yes, even *The Desert Song*. Aubrey Mellor was somewhat deluded when he announced the program for the 1997 season a few weeks ago in describing Playbox as 'unique' for its exclusive commitment to Australian plays. twenty-five of the forty-five Australia Council's companies do 100% Australian content. So, averaged out, the forty-five companies have Australian works as 86% of their programme. Generally, the overlap of companies funded by the State Ministries would reinforce this figure.

This statistic has some very serious implications, none of them to me at all healthy. It means that the choice from the whole of the world's repertoire - from Sophocles to Arthur Miller and John Osborne and Dario Fo, and from all the new plays that are being produced throughout the world tonight - must be squeezed in to 14%. So we're lucky to get a few Shakespeares but never, I repeat never in Australia, the great *Troilus and Cressida*, or *Henry VI Part 3* or *Henry IV Part 2*. And while we get the occasional Chekhov, Ibsen, Molière and Brecht, what about Lorca and Lope de Vega, Turgenev and Bulgakov, Schiller and Kleist; what about Marlowe and Middleton and Marivaux; Goldoni, Gorky and Giradoux; O'Casey and Synge and Yeats? I've never seen *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Wild Duck*, *Arms and the Man*, *The Rules of The Game*, *Golden Boy* or *Desire Under the Elms* in forty years of theatre-going. I want to, and I want to see them here and not in London. Of course I don't mean slavish productions of the classics as they were, but reinterpreted ones that reveal why they still speak to us here and now: Neil Armfield's *The Country Wife*, Graeme Murphy's *Nutcracker* and Baz Luhrmann's *La Bohème*. And is this 14% trying to tell me that with the rare exceptions of Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn there are so few compelling new works - from America or England, let alone France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Argentina, Venezuela, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia or Indonesia to name but a few - to ignore them. No, I

don't believe it. Do we want to know what's going on in the rest of the world apart from what CNN tells us or don't we? Do we want not to be condemned to repeat the past by allowing it to speak to the present or don't we? We are doing too many new Australian plays.

Heretical? So be it. Few directors have done more in this country to promote Australian playwriting than myself, directing many and producing many more. And I'm delighted to be premiering Katherine Thompson's *Navigating* next year. But I want to see other playwrights as well. And I want the best foreign plays of the past and present to inspire and challenge our writers. With the exception of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, most of this 86% is new work. Perhaps a great deal of it is the same new work doing the rounds. But I don't believe we have enough writers to fill 86% of the nations theatres with first-rate new work, and if it isn't first rate then audiences are an endangered species, and we all risk extinction. And in turn the shortage of supply to meet demand affects film scripts and television scripts. Have you seen an episode of *Medivac*? or *The Territorians*?! Incidentally 95% of the Creative Development and Performance Project grants were for new Australian work also. I want fewer but better works on our stages. I don't want our authors writing only for small cast sizes and small stages. I want more *Floating Worlds* and *Traitors* and *Macquaries* and *Mukinupins* - epic works - on our big stages. I want theatricality, and poetry, and big ideas and big emotions. And frankly if it comes to a desperate choice between Research and Risk then I want Risk. And I say no more grants below 30. I got sick to death of applications that were going to be multi-media and multi-layered and multi-cultural and visual theatre and physical theatre and cross-artform theatre and all the old-hat *Suzuki* and *Butoh* and *Lecoq*-based gestural, nonlinear theatre that 86% of the directors under 30 wanted to experiment with when they've never ever tackled conventional and traditional theatre. You really need to know what you're reacting against in order to progress in a search for the new.

And many of these applications were for group-devised projects with no assigned writer. This way madness lies. Theatre has always needed the writer and always will. And while it may be a 20th century term, there's always been a director, a driving cohesive force, too. Frankly I think the predicted revolution coming with the 'information superhighway' will serve theatre

rather than threaten it. Theatre is, and always has been, an event where people gather together and interact, and we need this as we need food and drink. I wish our theatres were still located in red-light districts, with bear-baiting and two-up joints next door, as was the case in 16th century London and Tokyo - vibrant, sexy and vulgar, stimulating all the senses at once.

Nobody seems to complain very much when 86% of our opera and music programming is the classic repertoire. We should be - there's not enough Australian, and not enough new foreign work. Where are the new operas such as *The Ghost of Versailles*, or *McTeague* (from the movie *Greed*), or *The Black Rider* with libretto by William Burroughs and a score by Tom Waits, premiered in Paris by Robert Wilson in the late '80s. Concert- and opera-going is inconceivable without Puccini and Verdi or Beethoven and Brahms let alone without the lesser known lights Berg or Monteverdi or de Falla or Piazzolla or Satie or Respighi or Jacopo Peri and so on. Music audiences seem to be still strangely resistant to 20th century music when we're only four years away from the 21st century! But while our trade and industry, science and medicine, look out to the rest of the world, our theatre is looking in upon itself. Dangerous.

There is this fabulous thing that is the human being. There are more wonders in this organism than could be dreamt of in any philosophy, and while national characteristics are marvellously distinguishing aspects of identity, we all finally share the same essential qualities on the parameters of good and evil, honesty and hypocrisy, saintliness and sin. These universal qualities we need to identify and connect with other nations and races.

Where did it all begin?

The classic traditions are, it seems, generally in disrepute and in retreat. I read that Melbourne University for one is cutting back on its teaching of the classics. You would only know that 51% of Americans are factually idiots if you know that 'idiot' is an ancient Greek word for 'non-voter'. Like it or not our theatre and dramatic traditions are sourced from the classics. This is where it all began. We are already in so many ways dangerously marginalised. We cannot afford to ignore our non-Australian traditions and inspirations.

There are still a few antediluvian theatre producers around who believe we cannot produce the talent to fill a juve lead role or direct a Broadway

musical. Happily they are a rare exception. And it is pathetic that we directors, myself included obviously, have taken no steps towards preventing second-rate foreign directors from taking our work in this country. Note that Christopher Renshaw did not win the Tony.

These few producers excepted, it seems that while the cultural cringe receded with the flood waters of pro-English sentiment years ago, now there is a prevalent and rampant strut - a chauvinism that believes We Can Do Anything Better Than You Can. Who cares about the rest of the world, who cares about the past in any form, most of all theatre? Knock it down. Throw it out with last year's antiquated mobile phone. For theatre neophiliacs - the lovers of new things - its simple, or simplistic: old plays are old-fashioned. Who cares? Forget 'em! This isn't provincial insecurity, this is adolescent arrogance on fast forward. I'm frightened we're throwing the baby out with the bath-water and we're pushing shit uphill and the result will be that we'll be up shit creek without a paddle.

The problem is money isn't it? The amount of Australian work being done is, I've no doubt, to a very large extent the result of the fact that for a number of years the Australia Council's guidelines included Australian content as one of its criteria. More Australian content might mean more cash, so lets do 100% Australian content. But it is no longer. Have the general grant companies read the new guidelines? Even as I write these very words the ABC's Review programme is telling me tax deductions for artists are under threat unless it can be shown the art is showing a profit! Good God! The arts 'industry' must now also be profitable! This defies all possibility of Research and Risk. Review is getting the axe anyway so does it really matter what it says? Or if we have an ABC at all? Nothing really matters. Anyway the wind blows. Bohemian Rhapsody. Queen, 1975. It's a deliberately ambiguous statement. Nothing really matters.

I believe Sydney and Australia have the opportunity to be as stimulating and as vibrant in our artistic endeavours in 2000 as Vienna and Paris were in 1900. So long as the winds blow. Let's get out of the doldrums.

Thank you.

Richard Wherrett

