

# Yes, but what are you going to do when you grow up?



*Reflections on a life full of theatre*

an Arts and Public Life Breakfast Lecture

at the **Sofitel Wentworth Hotel**, Sydney, 13th July, 2005

by Carrillo Gantner AO, President of the Myer Foundation

The perilous juggle between art and business is in my blood, though I was not aware of that when I started the journey. I was born in San Francisco. My American father had been an actor who appeared in plays in San Francisco and some early films, including Cecil B. DeMille's *The Crusades*, before being drawn as a partner responsible for design and marketing into his father's California knitwear business. My mother was a writer who kept her father, Sidney Myer's Australian retail business firmly at arm's length, in those days all the way across the Pacific..

When I was 35, my dear grandmother Merlyn asked me, "Yes, but what are you going to do when you grow up?" I was probably meant to answer "Retailing" but instead I said, "It's already too late". After all, by this time I had already subverted my undergraduate education in Melbourne with a hyperactive life in student theatre alongside Graeme here, and then done a Masters in Drama at Stanford University. I then went through the national auditions for graduates from the major drama schools, was offered a year's contract with a Broadway company, but quickly found myself back at Stanford as a Fellow teaching acting and directing undergraduate productions. One week off the start of rehearsals, Actors Equity had threatened to strike because I was, by then, an Australian.

I didn't like teaching and, after a year, I returned to Australia to take up the first arts management training position with the Adelaide Festival funded by the, then, very new Australian Council for the Arts. Sir Robert Helpmann was the Festival's Artistic Director and people were fond of asking me if I worked under him. I always denied it strenuously. I then came to Sydney as the first Drama Officer at the Australia Council itself for three years, with the extraordinary Nugget Coombs as first Chairman. John Sumner, the founding director of the Melbourne Theatre Company and a very formidable figure, was on the Council's first Drama Committee and, I think to stop me recommending government assistance for companies other than his own, he appointed me as General Manager of the MTC, then the oldest and largest resident professional theatre in Australia. I lasted three years until I ran aground on the rock that was John Sumner whose fiefdom the Company was for an extraordinary 35 years.

Then with Graeme I started the Playbox Theatre Company and ran it for 16 years after he had moved on to Sydney to pursue a successful career in the burgeoning Australian film industry. Over the years at Playbox I acted in many productions. In more recent years I have played other roles in private business and public affairs. My wife would say it is all acting, and perhaps she is right.

If today I tell you about some of those roles, it is not to boast of a colourful or even a privileged life, though it has been both. Rather it is to illustrate how a life in and around the theatre, on the stage and in the office, has helped me to cope with the demands and stresses of other roles beyond the footlights and the stage door.

It is very obvious that theatre is a collective and collaborative art. Getting any show together is an accumulation of creative partnerships and management support. Even a one man show requires a director, designer, stage manager, producer, lighting and sound technicians, a publicist, accountant, venue manager and front of house staff, a hairdresser and probably many others. Maybe even a psychiatrist too! In addition, in this age of governance and accountability, there is almost certainly a board of worthy citizens and the federal, state and local government arts funding agencies. There are probably corporate sponsors, a foundation or two, and individual patrons, all of whom demand their pound of flesh, however sweetly their request may be phrased. And then there are the audience, the subscribers and the general public.

People skills are thus at the very centre of the whole process of theatre and people skills have been central to every other part of my life, be it diplomacy, business, philanthropy, the non-profit sector or even Collins Street farming.

High level people skills, along with the ability to make a little go a long way, to understand the value of a dollar, are why the very good arts managers are among the most versatile, entrepreneurial, imaginative, motivated and outstanding managers in the entire country and why some of their peers in the corporate world seem so lacklustre and self-interested by comparison. The best arts managers, like the best entrepreneurs in any field, can be creative while standing still in the centre of the typhoon.

It seems to me that the arts, and particularly the performing arts, are frequently more entrepreneurial than much of the business world, at least those bits of it that I see in the context of a conservative family investment company. Let me give a personal example.

In the early days of Playbox, 1980 in fact, with Melbourne theatrical entrepreneur Clifford Hocking we undertook to tour the 50-member Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe from China around every Australian capital city. The budget for the six week tour was well over a million dollars which, at that time, was more than twice the annual turnover of the entire year's program at Playbox. The board were quite properly nervous but let me do it provided we set up a separate legal entity which we called Playking – we thought that sounded more felicitous and more Chinese than Hockbox. We made our money back on the tour and then, to everyone's amazement, not least the board's, in 1983 we risked \$2 million touring the Jiangsu Peking Opera Company around Australia and actually made money. Not as much as putting the money on term deposit for the year, but a profit none-the-less.

I am obviously now getting old and conservative myself because, when my older sons said they were planning to invest in a boutique brewery and a bar, I doubted their judgment. Now, as children should, they have proved me wrong and are doing very well in both ventures.

In the early years of Playbox my brochure catchphrase was: "Making the Improbable Inevitable". It is a pretty good description of what we were trying to do. In commercial terms we succeeded with those big Chinese companies and other entrepreneurial ventures in large commercial theatres. From 1989 onwards we did it in artistic terms by being the first professional theatre company ever to construct its on-going annual program 100% from new Australian plays. And in raising \$6 Million to build our own two-theatre home at The Malthouse which we opened in 1990.

In these adventures I learnt about raising money and about investing money. Most importantly I learnt that one should never underestimate the value of a good idea, nor the amount of sweat and time that are necessary to realize it, nor the importance of working with people who share the same dream. These lessons have been very useful for business, the community sector and for philanthropy. In looking at investment opportunities, I sometimes have a smell for pursuing entrepreneurial flair that can make my colleagues nervous – for instance a Chinese internet company whose name *Tencent* might not inspire confidence. Asialink, an NGO which I chair, has a Chief Executive with exceptional entrepreneurial skills in program development which I respect and am happy to support.

A dear friend and theatrical colleague once said to me: “Your next line is in the eyes of your fellow actor.” This is true in every single thing we do in life. Look closely into people’s eyes, listen closely to their speech, and you learn not just the actor’s skills to mimic movement and voice, but also to read character, to anticipate behaviour, to prepare your next line or next move. I can tell you this helped enormously when I was elected to the Melbourne City Council. You could say that I was the Lord Mayor’s numbers’ man and, with a Council of nine, I only ever needed one hand. When the rats in our ranks were plotting what they thought would be a brilliant ambush around the budget or a major planning issue, it was too frequently transmitted by tense body language or the vocal mannerisms of anticipated triumph. So we were ready and, by the next Council meeting, had entirely changed tack. If you are a bit cross eyed as I can be when tired, it’s even better as you offer no reciprocal viewing rights, even to those trained in this special actor’s language.

I like going to the theatre in any country in the world. While it is great to understand the language, language itself is not critical to an intelligent assessment of the quality of performance, nor to an understanding of the relationships unfolding on stage. The skills of empathy and intuition are at the heart of dealing with other peoples and cultures. To get by successfully in Asia as a tourist or a businessman, you do not need to know every last detail of how to handle name cards in Japan or the protocols of hierarchy at an official Chinese banquet. What you do need in these situations is what you learn in the theatre: curiosity, respect and good humour. When I don’t know, I ask about the customs, I call the stranger by his title of respect, and I apologise and laugh gently at my own ignorance. It usually works.

Actors most of all, but all people like to tell you about themselves, their families and jobs, their customs and their country. If you get that far, you are already some way to understanding, and on the road to personal connection. In most Asian countries the personal connection or relationship comes first in both chronology and importance. Indeed the relationship is considered far more central than any business deal that might follow. You can enjoy the relationship without the business but you won’t enjoy the business without the relationship.

I am currently Chairman of a joint venture property company in Vietnam. I get by on common sense, inter-cultural skills and an excellent CEO rather than any specific knowledge of the property business. Some years ago we had a board member from the United States who represented a major fund manager and shareholder. He opened one meeting by telling our JV partners from the powerful Ministry of Defence in Hanoi that they were all corrupt. He had no evidence, no people skills, no relationship and, soon thereafter, no board seat. It was the end of that meeting too, though harmony has subsequently been restored.

Language is vitally important as the best entry point into an understanding of any culture, our own or that of others. A majority of Australians seem to think that English is enough, that everyone should learn our language. Computer-speak reinforces this unfortunate tendency. Everyone wants to know about China these days but few want to tackle the challenge of learning its language. In my days at school and university I did nine years of Latin and five years of French. Fat lot of good that did me as a director trying to take the Playbox Theatre into Asia. If I were starting out again today, I would spend those years learning Chinese and Japanese properly. About fifteen years ago I said at a national theatre conference in Canberra that there were only two and a half arts managers in Australia who could speak any Chinese, and I was exaggerating about my half. I don't think this has improved much since, yet the opportunities in our region for Australian arts, as for Australian business, demand we lift our game. Now I am fortunate to go to China regularly as my wife's handbag, while she does co-production film deals and joint ventures in her native tongue and I struggle to keep up.

While I can enjoy theatre in any language and while I believe passionately that we need to invest much more in the development of Asian language skills across the national schools curricula, one of the greatest gifts I carry from my life in the theatre is a love of my own tongue, English, American and Australian. Pure obsessive love. When you have to learn lots of lines you not only improve your memory, you polish your mind with the steel wool of words. Years ago at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival I played Claudius in *Hamlet*, Iachimo in *Cymbeline* and Touchstone in *As You Like It* in nightly rotation for a whole summer. Lots of words. Buckets of bloody subtext. The stage littered with meaning. Like the focus of any love affair, words sometimes get me into trouble. I know what words mean. I treasure irony, bad puns and word games. I abjure inaccuracy. I can drive my family and friends to distraction with linguistic pedantry. Ask my secretary who must endure my 'craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the split infinitive'. I punctuate meticulously not just for accurate sense but, like an actor, as a guide to breathing.

I frequently find myself in agreement with Christopher Hampton's line at the start of his play *The Philanthropist*: "I don't know what you meant to say but I know what you said." I read proposals with a critical eye. Sometimes the use of buzz-words and obfuscating language are a clear give-away that the writer does not know his or her subject. Why then should we invest in, or offer funding for, such a proposal?

The ability to use language meaningfully is one of the reasons I respect good playwrights so highly. Indeed all good writers. The best of them have the ability to craft words into muscular, evocative and coherent metaphor, dialogue and insight. What they do is very important to the health of any society. As Hamlet says of the troupe of players visiting Elsinore: "Let them be well used; for they are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time; after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live". It would be a long time between drinks if you were expecting to read investment newsletters or corporate annual reports written with the clarity, passion and humour of David Williamson, Hannie Rayson, Barry Dickins or Stephen Sewell. As a modest example of what I mean, let me read you one small paragraph lifted from a recent investment prospectus from a major international investment firm. I quote:

"It is expected that approximately 100% of the Investment Proceeds will be allocated to the Emerging Markets Debt Fund on the Acceptance Date. Thereafter, the Reference Portfolio is rebalanced by the Trading Administrator according to...(the company's)...proprietary Variable Proportion Portfolio Protection (VPPP) Trading Rules. VPPP is a dynamic portfolio allocation methodology, which is designed to target a high initial exposure to the Emerging Markets Debt Fund and preservation of an amount per Reference Asset equal to the Capital Protected Amount at Maturity". End quote.

As our Chief Investment Officer Hamlet might have said, "To invest or not to invest, that is the question".

The live theatre teaches courage. It requires enormous bravery to go on stage every night and, metaphorically speaking, drop your pants in front of hundreds of people who, while they generally want you to succeed, are also ever ready to condemn your smallest failing. The stress of this used to make me feel sick half an hour before every performance, even in a long running show. Over the years I tried relaxation exercises, breathing routines, yoga and even prayer. I'd rush to the toilet three times in the last ten minutes, and then, when the moment comes, the stage manager calls, you listen acutely for your cue and suddenly you are hurled into the light. Only a public execution could feel worse. I think that must be why they say an actor "dies" on stage. Often we fail, sometimes badly. We usually know it ourselves first and worst, but then we suffer secondary burns from the public humiliation of critics and empty seats for the remainder of the season. It is salutary and spiritually toughening.

In 1986 I directed Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of The Imagination* in Chinese for the Shanghai People's Art Theatre. Two weeks before our opening, I was informed that the company leaders and senior officials from the Shanghai Cultural Department were coming to see a run through. Afterwards we all sat together for two hours in a massive session of criticism and self-criticism. Not political, ideological or even moral criticism, but just searching, rigorous, yet generous artistic assessment of work which up till now we had been doing by ourselves in the rehearsal room, given by professional colleagues entirely without malice. It was hard to receive but it was enormously helpful to me and to the production. Learning to accept constructive criticism is an important lesson for life.

Acting requires physical fitness and endurance too. You breathe better and think more clearly when you take care of your body. You can push the envelope – what a great phrase that is! Working with the famous Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi was, if you will excuse an analogy in poor taste, my small, personal *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Not just the endless hard stomping exercises that gave me tendonitis in the feet, but the testing of physical limits well beyond where you thought you could go. 'Samurai training' for actors. I recall opening night in Tokyo in his *Chronicle of Macbeth* where Suzuki made us do a complete and full-force run of the play that ended thirty minutes before the curtain of the premiere. He then screamed at us that it wasn't enough and sent us out again still pouring sweat to give much more in the opening performance. Actor's Equity wouldn't approve. We hated him but we did it, and afterwards we felt exhilarated - proud of ourselves and admiration for the master. The lesson is that all of us are capable of giving more and better of ourselves if we challenge the limits of our comfort, or if we are properly led by those who have been there and back.

What other lessons from my time in the theatre do I draw on in business and philanthropy? Let me list a few:

- The arts offer a very egalitarian culture. Personal history does not matter; ability does.
- The theatre is non-sexist, at least more so than any other profession I know. At Playbox our General Manager, Production Manager, Marketing Manager and just about every other manager was a very able woman. The opening season in the new Malthouse Theatre complex had a majority of plays by women, not as a matter of policy but because they had written the best plays that crossed my desk during the year of planning. Not to use properly the intelligence and strength that exists within 50% of our population is simply a waste.

- Theatre is a personality business. The Bell Shakespeare Company is successful not just because John Bell is a wonderful actor and director but because John is a big personality who is absolutely identified with the Company. In many large corporations the brand has become a kind of pseudo personality. Occasionally a large personality like Richard Branson becomes the pseudo brand.
- Money is not central to the artist's motivation. If I may quote myself from a presentation I made for the Australian Business Arts Foundation: "The artist's currency is creativity, emotion and imagination. For business, the currency is currency, the bottom line. Business generates wealth and jobs that build community. Arts generate passion and ideas that define community. Artists need wealth and jobs. Business needs passion and ideas. A healthy community needs both."
- Losing money in the arts is not a sin. Corporate heavies who come on to not-for-profit boards often assume that something is wrong when they find that the more you produce, the more you lose. They have to be educated gently to understand that some important things exist for reasons other than profit, that government support, private patronage and philanthropy play a critical role in a dynamic society and should be seen as evidence of success. Of course the arts have to be business-like but they don't have to be like business.
- The theatre has taught me that Einstein was right: "Imagination is more important than knowledge."
- In the arts you learn quickly that, even when you do something well, someone can do it even better. The Chinese say: "Shan wai you shan" - "Beyond the mountains there are more mountains." Or, "San ren xing bi you wo shi" - "Three people walking, one must be my teacher." These ideas are both a useful admonition to humility and a challenge to do better. They are also a reminder of why in art, business, philanthropy or any other serious pursuit, a mentor or exemplar can play a very useful role.
- On a deeply personal basis, I have learnt that acting is a powerful form of self-repair and personal reconciliation. To take on a role as someone else is to have a healing internal conversation with yourself and others very close to your heart. Playing *Lear* I found myself having nightly conversations with my own handicapped daughter who had died many years earlier and whom I had failed badly while she lived. Playing any role on stage is to learn something of both yourself and of a different life, and therefore to learn something of respect and compassion.

To learn about one's self is perhaps life's greatest lesson from the theatre or from any art. I have learnt that my skills are not the same as many others' around the board tables at which I now sit. I like to think that makes me more useful, not less. I act and react differently. I place more trust in my intuition about people and projects than in their power point presentations. I can read the P & L but I can also imagine outcomes not shown there. I have learnt to move between the world of the arts and the world of business without anxiety. I have friends in both worlds, and in other worlds.

In short, I may not think like many business people but I can play the role convincingly, both in actuality and in fiction. My most recent role was, in fact, to play a foreign businessman in four episodes of a Chinese television soap opera that goes to air soon on CCTV, the national broadcaster which reaches every last hidden valley and village of that vast country. I am told I will have an audience north of 500 million viewers so, in that respect at least, it's probably the biggest deal I'll ever do.

When my grandmother asked me what I was going to do when I grow up, I wish I'd had the wit to say:

"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts."

Thank you.

Carrillo Gantner

July, 2005