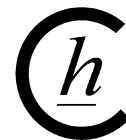


Trapped by the Past



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A talk given by Julian Meyrick
at the launch of Platform Paper No 3, "Trapped by the Past"
SBW Stables Theatre, 20th January, 2005

Over the last year or so, it has felt to me, and perhaps others, as if there has been a continual and unending wave of illness, absence and death in the theatre community. Many practitioners we know and like have struggled or are struggling against difficult odds, to preserve their dignity and sometimes their lives. And these are people, artists and non-artists alike, who we might be proud to call 'our colleagues'. What does this term mean? What is the nature of an association between those who may not be friends, exactly, in the social sense; who may not know details of each other's lives in the way family members do; but who nevertheless share a common language, a common struggle and, from time to time – and eventually, of course – a common fate.

I wrote this book partly out of a desire to express again certain arguments about the nature of the theatre here in Australia which I felt were worth bringing up to date, or rounding out. But mainly I wrote it in response to a strong feeling that a life spent in Australian theatre was an honourable one; that it was, in the deepest sense, a fully serious enterprise, even when, if not especially when, it aimed at having fun. The activity of staging plays, or putting on performances, is, to borrow a notion of the philosopher George Santayana, part of the general conversation a society has with itself. As such it has shape, coherence, meaning and force. It lives and breathes with an energy all of its own. It is something individual practitioners create; but equally it creates them because it is the common substance whereby our art is lifted out of the rut of personal vanity and becomes a public act, something that impacts on the minds of all those who come to view it, leaving them, hopefully, enriched.

This is what I feel. What I know – in a real sense, all I know – is contained in this small book. I have synthesised three aspects of my own experience as a scholar and director which were always part of the same mental landscape, but which I have usually had to address separately. I never really believed, after the launch of my history of the Nimrod Theatre a few years ago, that the critical edge of that book concerning the absence of co-operation between different generations of theatre workers, was truly heard. And this dismayed me, because the past isn't the past until it is understood as such. If it isn't, it lives on as a shaper of the present. There is a real job of work to be done now in binding different age cohorts of practitioners together, in helping them discover their common values and purpose. The recent history of Australian theatre suggests something like the opposite: that different strands of practice have been largely age-specific, and that they have sought to underscore their own cultural position by defining themselves aggressively against other forms of theatre – and therefore other generations. Australian theatre has thus often shaped itself through a series of torturous definitions of what it is not: not English; not American; not commercial; not mono-cultural; not just text-based; and so on. It always had a positive shape, but only rarely, and in cack-handed way, was this presented as a worthy matter of contemplation and debate.

A second strand of my experience came about through running kickhouse theatre, a tiny, Melbourne-based company doing a range of weird work at a time when weird work was more the order of the day than it is now. In 1996 I became involved in a consortium of four small theatre companies trying to construct a shared administrative and marketing umbrella, thus launch a shared season, and so eventually run a shared venue. The Melbourne Independent Theatre Project, as we called ourselves, started hopefully and ended in a morass of meetings. But it was always a good idea. It was one way by which the artists involved in the participant companies - \$5, Chameleon, Hungry Ghost and kickhouse – could transcend their particular origins and individual needs and move on to something larger, more financially viable, and more culturally responsible. Its demise was for Melbourne, I think, an opportunity missed. I kept every scrap of paper relating to the project during its two year duration, and have sought to tell at least part of its story so that the idea of it, and the collective impulse behind it, might not be entirely forgotten.

Finally, I have been involved in the development of new stage writing in Australia for the best part of sixteen years now and in that time I have seen an industry making it difficult for itself, and for its potential playwrights, by a mixture of indifference, poor resourcing, faddism and lack of thought. When money has been spent in the area it has not always been spent well. And the results have thus been – I think predictably – poor. This is often no fault of the artists – or not of them especially. When will we ever learn that if the collective structure and logic behind any creative endeavour is faulty or insufficient, no amount of individual talent is going to see if over the line? Producing theatre in a country as geographically dispersed and culturally diverse as Australia is difficult enough, without the added burden of public policies that seem to have been conceived on Mars. More of my life than I care to admit has been spent studying the various arts initiatives of state and federal governments. And what depressing reading they make. The assumption behind them is so often that it is the job of practitioners to explain and convince about activities which the bureaucratic mind has only a tentative and partial grasp. Developing new work is – I can say with feeling – an absolute nightmare. It is slow, hard, demanding, inglorious and fraught. I have never walked away from a reading or a workshop with which I have been happy. New work flattens your emotions out, as a director, and teaches you the limits of your craft in no uncertain terms. If we are to have public support in this area – if the community at large and governments in particular, care about having their own images and stories seen and heard – then a much better understanding of it needs to be on show, and a clearer, more sensitive, more detailed dialogue between on the one hand, the industry and on the other, outside parties needs to be in place.

But the rewards are wholly unique. They are to articulate a sensibility which, though it may take many forms, is fashioned at the level of a general imagination, and thus may be seen and heard by all. All practitioners are engaged in excavating this task, of course, but I know the coalface of new writing the best. Running through it is a seam of more precious metal which from time to time, by dint of that magical mix of hard graft and imagination, produces work of a boldness and cultural specificity that puts real feeling into that anaemic term 'Australian theatre'.

And so, for me, the circle closes: we as practitioners are informed by shared ideas, values and methods of work. We have our differences, but we have our common ground. This last gives rise to drama which is unique to our conditions as a country, as a culture. It is our heart and minds put into stage terms. My continuing desire to clarify and understand the special features of what for me is, both literally and metaphorically, my mother culture, has led me – driven me – to write this book. It honours an idea – the idea of Australian theatre – by taking it seriously; as so many men and women give their working lives to its expression, we can hardly do less. We are – as colleagues – all in this together.