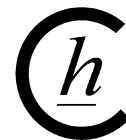


The Next Wave...



CURRENCY HOUSE

Paper given by Lyn Wallis, director of Company B Belvoir's B Sharp program at the launch of Platform Paper No 3, "Trapped by the Past" SBW Stables Theatre, 20th January, 2005

The times they are a 'changin'...

When I saw the sub-title of Julian's paper, '*Why our Theatre is Facing Paralysis*' I was filled with dread, because nothing interests me less than another gloom and doom biography of our supposedly decomposing artform. But more than that, the mental image of a wheelchair-bound invalid, just seems so out of kilter with my day-to-day existence at B Sharp; my working life is filled with artists, whose unpredictable flexing and cart wheeling through my world each day, keeps me very much on my toes. After reading the essay a couple of times, I could see that the title is really more about getting our attention, that it poses many fascinating questions about the links between generations of artists, and gives us a great deal to talk about.

Tonight, I will stick to talking about what *I* know about. I'm thankfully too young to have been a practitioner in the 1970s, but I'm old enough to have been an attender during the mid-to-late 70s, when as a teenage I saved every penny I had to buy theatre tickets. It was when and how I fell in love with theatre; productions felt alive and wild, and naughty when there were naked people on stage, and there is no doubt those trips to the Nimrod on a Sunday afternoon at the age of 16 or 17, altered the course of my life.

I'm also one of the last wave of theatremakers to have enjoyed the nurturing support of one particular segment of the 'middle ground' (discussed in broader terms in Julian's essay), before it crumbled in the wake of 'mainstream-to-the-regions' touring initiatives such as Playing Australia. For myself and many artists my age, the middle-ground was represented by the regional and community theatre circuits. I got my first breaks through Theatre South and the New England Theatre Company; others got theirs through the Hunter Valley Theatre and Riverina Theatre Companies and The Q Theatre. When the death knell sounded for many of them, another valuable commodity was also lost; a vital *training ground* for artists at entry level. This was a place where you learned on your feet through practice, and through talking and working with artists more senior than yourself. Now, I'm not actually making a judgment here; times change, and many other good things have happened in the community arts sector, but in terms of an organic system of development and mentorship through intergenerational contact, nothing has really replaced it.

Twenty years on, I find myself working as a mentor and facilitator with the *Next Wave*. I have no problem using this term; I think it's really important to identify this group of theatremakers, and they need identifying, as for the most part they are roundly ignored. When Richard Wherrett delivered his controversial keynote address at the National Performance Conference in 2001, what astounded me much more than his highly-charged attack on industry in general, was the complete absence of any mention of the Next Wave, and it's continued dismissal in the

flurry of press articles and responses the speech engendered. Here we were discussing the future, with absolutely no mention of the artists that would constitute a good proportion of it.

In terms of the ability to be heard, things haven't really got much better; there are a few writers and directors such as Brendan Cowell and Kate Gaul who thankfully, get media opportunities from time to time to speak their minds, but if I mention names like Chris Kohn and Christian Leavesley from Melbourne, Matt Lutton from Perth, Sydney directors Robert Kennedy, Sarah Goodes, Joseph Uchitel, Tanya Goldberg and Lee Lewis, producers Michaela Kalowski, Sam Hawker and Kar Chalmers and the list goes on and on ... well, you will probably only have heard about their work-related opinions if you know them personally or have worked with them.

Well, remember those names, and the dozens of others I don't have time to mention, because together with dynamic indie [independent] companies being primed and preened by B Sharp and our brothers and sisters in arms, Darlinghurst Theatre, the Old Fitzroy, in a larger setting the Studio, and a soon to be announced Stables indie season, this Next Wave of artists and producers are staging a little cultural tsunami all of their own.

There has been no middle-ground for them, and in response to being exiled, they've grabbed some tools from the family shed and determinedly dug themselves a corner patch in some bloody hard soil. Now some of you will be thinking, "I've heard this story before, there's always been a fringe, we've all done co-op work", but I'm not sure it's ever been done *quite* like this. It's certainly not like the early to mid-80's when a handful of fringe companies, of which mine was one, struggled to get the Sydney scene on its feet again - we almost succeeded too, but were defeated by the rapid demise of a number of fringe venues. I strongly suspect that *this* wave is a lot like the *old* New Wave; they are a rambunctious, confident and slightly anarchic lot who certainly aren't thinking about what they are creating in a cohesive way at all; they are responding purely out of *need* and out of an instinct that tells them what's missing in the general scene, both for themselves and for audiences. No amount of sitting around in a room discussing 'issues' or fabricating superficial solutions will ever compete with this raw savant-like 'genius'. The Next Wave, a group of individuals who work collectively in a very fluid way, is unwittingly addressing some of our past mistakes and we should pay this some attention.

Firstly, they are actively bridging the divide between artists and facilitators. I remember a time not too long ago when I was working in Canberra, where a well-known choreographer actually locked their general manager out of the rehearsal room; I witnessed several company scenarios where artists lived in one room and administrators in the boiler room. It's now a joy to have joint meetings with Next Wave directors and producers, where conversations about art, money and audiences overlap and intertwine, where there is mutual admiration and support, and a recognition that one would have a much more difficult time of it without the other.

Secondly, the Next Wave is not altogether abandoning their patch of soil when more lucrative opportunities come along. Like all fringe scenes in the past, artists move freely between co-op and paid work, but you'll notice, that whilst there are always fresh names popping up, there are a number who continue to work in indie shows even when they are jobbing regularly on the mainstage and in film and television. There is an investment going on here which is not just about using the fringe as a stepping stone, or a place to work when there is no other work, but as a place to work willfully, to engage with peers in a passionate endeavour, to create a kind of theatre that may not be happening elsewhere and to sometimes do *great* work. And there's more honey in this pot, but I don't have time to give more than a taste of it here.

So how is this wave of indie artists hanging in there, albeit by their fingernails? The creation of Season Hubs has certainly got a lot to do with it. Sydney is at the forefront of this trend and I've mentioned those seasons, but there are also examples of it to be found in Perth with the Blue Room, at Metro Arts in Queensland and thankfully, now in Melbourne with the Malthouse's

proposed Tower Room. Melbourne, a city rich with highly imaginative indie work has been crying out for support from the mainstream for many years, and it looks as though they are about to get it. Some venues simply offer a space and some marketing support, but the ones that are really starting to make a difference are recognising that it isn't enough to throw a meager handful of resources at these companies, but that some form of mentoring whether it be artistic, or centred around producing or infrastructure is vital to the success of the whole venture. An example of this is the fantastic producer mentoring schemes run by Darlinghurst Theatre and funded by the Australia Council.

So, is this relatively new territory, *solid* ground? No, it isn't. I am sometimes so fearful, because I see this fantastic new bit of turf erupting before my very eyes, and yet in my heart I know it could just be like Brigadoon, a beautiful, unreal place that only appears for a day every hundred years. The reality is that most of these artists, producers and technicians are working for next to nothing and that without their blood, sweat and tears pouring into those little patches of earth, we wouldn't have the jewel-like flower we have now; the liveliest, best and most cohesive indie scene we may *ever* have had. It desperately needs more resources before these groups get sick of the penniless grind, and whether that comes through supporting hubs so that they can in turn nurture more effectively, or feeding the groups themselves is worthy of lengthy discussion.

There is also the issue of *formal* development. In 2003, I visited the Battersea Arts Centre in London, one of the few places in the world dedicated to the development of artistic teams. I spent three weeks with them, observing the way new companies and projects worked their way up a 'Ladder of Development'. It often took a show two years to get to the top of the ladder. There were some misses, but I saw a handful of beautiful, *finished* indie shows that made me realise that consistently good new work is possible, but needs to be approached in a way we are not even thinking about in Australia.

At present, our most damaging 'development strategy' is to identify the best and brightest and propel them with all the force of a Saturn V rocket into the stratosphere. Yes, it's the 'Hot Young Thing Ballistic Arts Program'; guaranteed to get your picture on the tele, but also to render you paralysed by motion-sickness and lofty heights, and then of course there's re-entry. Without a heat-shield. And we will convince you this is fun to do! But surely we are helping here? No, it isn't help, it isn't development, and in truth it's rarely survivable. As we jump up and down in our desperation and good-hearted enthusiasm to get the future on the road, we had better make damn sure that we're not trampling our prodigies to death in the process.

But here I am ending with doom and gloom. Are we all just bad mothers and fathers, keeping the choccie biscuits hidden from the kids, failing to pass on the facts of life? And are we as an Australian sector particularly remiss in our failure to thrive? No, let's shrug a bit of that guilt off, for I suspect that most sectors face the tyranny of as many economic, social and cultural shifts as the arts, and are as *terrifically bad* at developing new generations as we are.

Why, in their search for a viable, sexy leader that can take them into the future, the Australian Labor Party recently created a 'Hot Young Political Thing Ballistic Program' all of its own. It's strangely amusing to watch people who plan on running a whole country, and who get paid a hell of a lot more than us, struggling just as badly with exactly the same issues.

I'll end on an even brighter note; let's turn the spotlight off ourselves and onto the face of true evil, our most over-resourced rival, the sporting fraternity. I came across an article a couple of weeks ago in the SMH, entitled '*Court Short*'. And I quote:

"Despite a proud history, Australian tennis has an image problem. On the eve of the 100th Australian Open, Allan Attwood reports on a sport that is failing to compete ... long gone is the era when Roy Emerson and Margaret Smith won the singles titles year after year. Lleyton Hewitt is now the only Australian man ranked in the world's top 100 players, and there are only three Australians in the women's top 100. Not only that, there are no red-hot juniors on the horizon ..."

But my favourite bit is the photo with the caption:

“Spreading the Word ... Alec Pero, an Illawarra-based coach, believes children must be convinced that tennis is fun to play”.

Oh, the times, they are a changin' ...