

## 2002 Rex Cramphorn Lecture by Nick Enright

*Collaboration & Community - An investigation into the craft of the actor and its contribution to the process of making new work for the theatre*

*Given by Nick Enright at the Belvoir St Theatre on Sunday 24 November 2002.*

To begin at the beginning, with the man himself, Rex Cramphorn, who died too early at 50, in November 1991, was that rare and important figure, a philosopher and visionary of the arts.

Many of you here today know better than I that he led and collaborated in the creation of a considerable body of work. There was a *Revenger's Tragedy* in, of all places, Hobart; *Ten Thousand Miles Away*, created with the Jane Street company while Rex was acting in *The Legend of King O'Malley*; with his group The Performance Syndicate, *Orestes*, an adaptation of Andersen's *The Marsh King's Daughter*, and the miraculous *Tempest* which toured the country for the Arts Council; a double bill of *Berenice* and *Scapin*; the haunting *Muriel* at Jane Street; a delightfully silly *Rio Rita* at NIDA; a series of four examinations of *Measure for Measure*, which began at the SATC in 1973; the 1978 Paris company, founded by Jim Sharman and Rex in outrage at the Old Tote's abandonment of a whole season of new work; the Playbox years, where he directed dozens of plays old and new, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *A Spring Song*, *The Golden Age*, *Insignificance*, and one of my personal favourites, *Master Harold... And The Boys*. The list is far from exhaustive; you will have your own favourites, productions you saw, or lit or acted in.

In between those highlights were other productions; a good deal of teaching and laboratory work in institutions like NIDA and the Performance Studies unit at Sydney University, both of whom were among his most loyal supporters. There was some reviewing, for the *Sunday Australian* and the *Bulletin*. He worked only rarely for the state theatre companies (never, I think, for the Melbourne Theatre Company) and only once in the commercial theatre, as costume designer for Jim Sharman's celebrated production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

But the list of his achievements is not the point of our being here. I believe this annual lecture was set up to honour not so much the body of Rex's work, substantial as it was, as his ethos and his practice, and to see how they reflect on the state of the art today.

What are the lessons of his twenty-five years in the Australian theatre? To examine that question, let us start with Rex's definition of his own most important function as a director: 'to establish an atmosphere in which the grace of creativity might fall on any member of the group, giving him or her the right to lead the work'. As a writer and performer, I applaud this definition of the director's function. Leadership is still implied by the first four words: 'to establish an atmosphere' but when we hear the key phrase 'the grace of creativity' we begin to understand the influence of communality on Rex's work in the theatre. The actors and other collaborators on the project were respected, included, listened to; they responded with clarity, humility and openness. The approach suggested by Rex's statement does not imply that the director starts without a concept, or even a strong instinctive response to the play; it does imply that the concept is shaped by the contributions of all who make the play. One important benefit of this is that the contradictions and ambiguities of the work – which are crucial to areas of the repertoire that Rex revisited throughout his working life, Greek drama, the Elizabethans and Jacobean, the French neo-classicists – are allowed to stand.

No wonder then, that Rex would keep returning to *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's maddening, insoluble parable of mercy and justice, by turns biblical fable, social comedy, folk tale, psychological tragedy and black farce, rather than putting his mind to the tonal and moral consistency of Ibsen or Arthur Miller. He was not much interested in the Freudian/Stanslavskian bent of much of our theatre. His influences were various and surprising, as much Asian and indigenous as European, as much visual and philosophical as theatrical. He was a man of finely-cultivated sensibility and intense and wide-ranging curiosity.

For him, I imagine, the making of theatre was an encounter between actor and text in a physical environment that illuminated the world of the play. This is surmise on my part. I scarcely knew Rex, and worked with him only once, as a production assistant during my apprenticeship with Nimrod at the Stables in 1972. Directing a cast led by Bob Hornery, Kate Fitzpatrick and Jane Harders, he designed and staged a new play by Helmut Bakaitis, inspired by works of Edgar Allan Poe, *Shadows Of Blood*.

That tiny kite-shaped space, with its ever-present 'pole', a solid beam running from floor to the low ceiling, has never been so well used, I think. The entire playing space was encased in blood-red scrim, so that when we entered the theatre were outside an enclosed chamber gazing at a faded figured wallpaper, which when lit from within, bled through – apt phrase! – to the charnel house of Poe's and Bakaitis's horrid world. The obsessive-compulsive nature of this play and the heightened tone of its language put it at odds with the new orthodoxy of Australian drama in 1972, let alone the emerging Nimrod house-style. The play did not draw the town; but it was a mark of Rex's work – and one possible legacy to us, thirty years on – that he led his collaborators calmly and patiently to the creation of an event which had its own idiosyncratic life, an event which he wanted to share with an audience. Typically, he and Helmut returned to the material at Jane Street a few years later. I was out of the country at the time, but would have been interested to see what changes were made by a mind that seemed to like examining old experience from new angles.

That Nimrod show, though was nonce-work – Rex as hired director with a scratch cast. Let's look at a longer-term, and perhaps more instructive example of this director at work. At the Seymour Centre for six months from July to December 1980, Rex led a Shakespeare project funded by a 'limited life' grant from the Australia Council. This provided a rare opportunity for actors – leaders of the profession side by side with younger colleagues like Kerry Walker, Robert Menzies and John Howard – under Rex's guidance to address themselves to the challenges of communicating great but demanding poetic texts to a present-day Australian audience.

We might note several things about this experiment. First, it was actor-driven, which is to say that the actors exerted some influence on artistic decisions; second, it encouraged autonomy and intellectual independence in the actors; third, it favoured process over product, so that the public performances at its conclusion were part of the experiment but not its goal; and finally, though it was criticised in some quarters as an exercise in self-indulgence, its outcome was not only the enrichment of the already considerable skills of the participants, but a greater social good: the dissemination of its lessons through their subsequent work as actors, teachers and directors, work which continues to this day. The whole thing cost about \$100,000, which sounds like a lot of money till we consider that for the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the music clearances alone cost more than a million dollars.

I saw the final showings of both plays, *Measure for Measure* and *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona* – and remember the work for its clarity, and its simplicity. In an unostentatious way it was startlingly innovative – Ron Haddrick played the heroine Julia that night in *The Two Gentlemen*, Jennifer Hagan was her faithless lover Proteus, John Gaden was the most beautiful woman in Italy, Silvia, what is she that all our swains commend her, Arthur Dignam the maid, Ruth Cracknell the servant Launce, with his dog Crab at his side. (The dog was sensibly contained in a shopping bag.) This casting provided a series of displacements that somehow made a fairly unpalatable play fresh and interesting. But I remember more than anything the calm and witty confidence of the playing.

Contrast this with a notable event of this decade, a recent *Three Sisters*, whose gifted director, perhaps concerned to illuminate one aspect of the play, its nihilism, obscured – for me, at any rate, though it must be said the production was a critical success – its humanity, its humour and its communality, as well as its complex critical discourse about family. The play became a theatrical event I can only describe as autistic, in that I felt nobody was affecting or affected by anybody else. I was constantly aware of the director's view of the material – a startling and occasionally persuasive view – but not of the piece itself in all its contradictions and complexities. Director and translator even cut Masha's Act Two 'There's more light over here,'

one of the significant turning points in the text. And there was no sense of a living world that can be created by a cohesive ensemble.

Compare and contrast that production in turn with Aubrey Mellor's luminous 1981 *Nimrod* version on this stage, where the actors were palpably in possession of the material and in tune with each other, partly because of their communal work as a de facto ensemble, partly because of the director's deep understanding of the acting process and empathy with actors.

Which brings us back to Rex's phrase 'the grace of creativity'. It underlines one of the paradoxes of our work in the theatre, that the making of a production is in the unpredictable alchemy of instinct and science. Science provides the ground plan, the palette, the elucidation of meaning, the matrix for the event; but it is the grace of instinct, and the director's encouragement of it in his or her collaborators, that I believe creates the most satisfying and wholehearted work. In short, the freedom to contribute – or what I would call a sense of ownership on the part of actors, designers and technicians – informs the whole event, putting the focus where it needs to be, not on brilliance of production or virtuosity of performance, but on the meaning of the play, its intention, as realised in sound, light, gesture, movement, music and text.

Now what does this imply about the function and position of the actor? Surely it argues that he or she should be central to the process? And equally it argues that the more experienced the actor, the more value – and, dare I say, status – he or she should have in our professional structures. I don't mean this in any sentimental fashion, tributes and garlands to the gallant old troupers – though there's nothing wrong with a bit of that! – but in the most pragmatic sense: the mature actor can bring to the work not only talent and sensibility, a good resonant voice and expressive body, but a critical intelligence, a practical wisdom, and a strong dramaturgical acumen.

So why on our stages and screens are our senior actors less and less visible, and why do they have so little influence on our practice?

I rejoice in the opportunities for development offered to young Australian artists, otherwise I would not spend a portion of every year working in drama schools, participating in the training process. But I am alarmed – perhaps my alarm is heightened by a sense of encroaching age – that so much effort and money, so many resources are applied to young people at the beginning of what may or may not be a productive life in art, and so little to sustaining artists in mid-career, and using their skills and wisdom for the good of the art form and the society. It has been said of Los Angeles, or at least of its film industry, that it is a place where you can die of encouragement. No senior Australian artist is likely to perish in this manner.

In an address to the NIDA graduands earlier this year, a speech whose theme was the Australian actor as endangered species, I made some observations which I think motivated the Cramphorn committee's invitation for me to speak today, so I précis some of that speech here in a different context...

I believe that we are losing sight of the value and dignity of the actor in our society, and of the importance of continuity, tradition and experience in this most ancient and essential art form. Actors may not be the unacknowledged legislators of human kind – we're told that title belongs to poets – but they enact those laws daily in their work. To paraphrase Hazlitt, the actor shows us who we are, who we hope to be, and who we fear we may be. So we need to recognize that by demeaning, marginalizing and superannuating actors, society cheats itself.

I think if you canvas middle-aged actors and free-lance directors, you will probably find them acknowledging some feeling of exclusion from the community they have helped to create. It is that notion of community which is part of my theme today. It is the ethos I seek in my life as an artist, the sense of calm and communal creativity, the serious yet entirely playful focus on a common goal whose ultimate aim is communication with the wider community, the audience. I believe we have largely lost that sense of community, and with it the sense of enterprise, initiative and collaboration.

It is still possible to reclaim it. One of the many pleasures of our work on bringing Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* to the stage was the melding of experience and enthusiasm in the process.

When a Kris McQuade or Gillian Jones or Judi Farr enters the room, she brings not only talent and skill but judgment and intuition which contribute to the shaping of the whole piece, not just the actor's role in it. These are precious resources, particularly if marshalled as astutely as they were by our director, Neil Armfield; but however precious, they are commodities too often wasted in our theatre.

This has two connected causes, I think; we no longer have performing ensembles, and our companies are not developing enough new work. It is hard to blame the companies themselves for either cause. Strapped for cash and obliged to earn the bulk of their income at the box office, they mostly cannot afford the time and resources needed for the proper development of new work; and a permanent ensemble of experienced actors is probably not the ideal casting pool for the small-cast contemporary work, foreign or domestic, which now makes up the bulk of our repertoire.

But the quest for survival seems to have made us believe that survival itself is enough. Certainly it has drained us of the spirit of enterprise and risk, together with the sense of the theatre as a reflection of our own society. Few would deny that in the efflorescence of Australian drama in the 1970s a lot of bodgy work was produced – as well as some that was excellent, and a good deal in both categories which was highly popular – but the work itself was motivated by a commitment – defiant, callow, sometimes crass – to place our society on the stage. Where is it today?

Last year on this stage we saw *The Laramie Project*, a piece made by a New York ensemble after its members made an investigative visit to the Wyoming town where a young man had been tortured and murdered. It was well acted and directed, and widely enjoyed, but I was disappointed that one of this important theatre's five or six yearly productions was a piece – well-crafted, decent and humane as it was – whose development had already been concluded, and whose resonance for Australian society was already weakened by the irritating device of having the actors impersonate their American predecessors: I'm actor Troy McClure, as it were, when we can see that the man addressing us is Australian actor Mitchell Butel. I don't want to labour this point. There is nothing wrong with producing this piece; but in a theatre of limited resources, I would argue for the greater risk – and the greater good – of developing a thematically related new work with its own organic life, to be performed by its co-creators.

In a very specific sense, then, all the skills of the actor – and the designer, the stage manager and the other collaborators – are engaged in the organic life of the work and its communication to its audience. I would presumably be part of what is now called the target demographic for *The Laramie Project*; but, though respectful of the talent of all involved, I was scarcely moved at all by the event. I was, however, powerfully moved by *Aftershocks* on this stage and in Melbourne, and regret not having seen its original production in Newcastle, in performance by those who had created it with the writer Paul Brown.

Australia is undergoing what is arguably the most volatile period in its history – certainly in my lifetime – and its issues and divisions, however regrettable, should be rich material for our artists. But where is this material being examined on our stages? In the 2003 Company B brochure was a moving statement by the artistic director on the state of our nation; but where in the season is the work that embodies those views? Where on our national stages is the work that seeks to show us who we are, where we are, what we are? Jim Sharman has argued cogently that the theatre should not attempt to do what television does better; and it is unarguable that certain social and political issues are much more powerfully dealt with on the small screen, either directly in documentary form, or in the higher journalism of good TV drama.

But in a wider and deeper sense, the moral and spiritual crisis in which we find ourselves, could surely be reflected on our stage. Step into any suburban train carriage and see the diversity of faces and experiences. Where is that reflected on the stage? Open the newspaper, turn on the TV news. I imagine your response to either is like, mine, highly emotional. Where is that emotional response being transmuted into theatre? Even in Aboriginal theatre, which has its own life and vitality and its own continuity, are the tough dialectical questions being asked? In our mainstream theatre, where are the theatrical characters with the stature of Noel Pearson,

the moral complexity of Philip Ruddock or Kim Beazley, the serio-comic grotesquerie of Alan Jones, where were the Brechtian contradictions of Pauline Hanson, the not-so-good person of Ipswich? More fundamentally, where is the face of Australia?

Not that I'm arguing against foreign plays, or revivals or the reinterpretation of classics – think of the terrific *King Ubu* on this stage last year, a classic text brilliantly revived. I'm merely urging that whether the text is a great one from the past, or a new one created in the rehearsal room, it should feel urgent, present, immediate and communal in its creation. But surely some of the work on our major stages could reflect the life of the street and the nation? We know all the arguments against this kind of 'living newspaper' approach. Work that is created in this way, and thrust out on a public stage with the paint still wet, is a risky proposition. It can look crude, unfinished, undergraduate, callow, self-consciously trendy, even embarrassing. They are the risks. Surely they're worth taking? And anyway, it seems to me that a converse set of risks attends a revival of *Trelawney Of The Wells* or *She Stoops To Conquer*.

By now you'll be aware that I've brought you some distance from where this discourse began. The sort of work I'm espousing is not the sort of work with which Rex concerned himself. But its process is closely akin to his principle of collaborative creation. Which brings me to the core of my own argument, or rather my assessment of my own strengths and weaknesses as an artist, and of my potential contribution to the theatre.

I want to be a collaborator, working as part of a community. That seems to be an almost impossible goal at this time. Perhaps the very ideal is unfashionable now. Drama schools, where more of our professional practice is defined than we realise, profess a strong commitment to the notion of ensemble, and do some work towards the creation of a communal ethos. But the whole process of showcasing and launching graduates effectively nullifies that work by focusing the actor's attention on personal rather than communal goals; and in any event, there are very few artistic communities which they can aspire to join. It's interesting that drama schools are constantly being assailed by the needs of that entity called The Industry (a title unknown in my youth) which seeks younger and prettier faces, and demands more training in work for the camera. I would suggest that the most valuable and useful actor is not one who can hit marks and find Camera Three, but one who knows how to analyse, to assess, to think, to argue, to listen, to collaborate, whatever the medium or professional environment. But the cry goes on: 'Train them for film and television,' which is only another way of saying, 'Train them in solipsism, make them see other artists as rivals and competitors rather than colleagues or mentors.'

There are still many artists who believe in the communal ethos. Robyn Nevin, who was part of that 1970 Jane Street company led by Rex and John Bell, and who had some significant collaborations with Rex through the 1970s, is a believer; She has been trying for several seasons to establish an ensemble at the STC, but cannot attract the necessary funds. John Bell himself, with his Shakespeare Company, is keeping the ensemble ideal alive in some form. And of course important companies and entities like Circus Oz, Sidetrack, Legs On The Wall, and others work from a communal base; and more power to them.

But though we have national ensembles for opera and ballet, as well as state-based modern dance companies (which can also offer their artists constant in-service training, something we largely lack in the theatre) there are really no equivalent mainstream theatre companies. And, in the same way that the ABC got a spruce new set of studios in Ultimo at exactly the time when local radio production was being decimated by government, most Australian cities acquired big new stages in large arts complexes at exactly the time when we lost the means, the funds or the will to people those stages with large ensembles creating big theatrical events.

I would argue that this has the two effects I've already outlined; actors are marginalized in our theatre, and the development of new work suffers for lack of the resources of a permanent ensemble. And so our national repertoire is increasingly solipsistic – we are the land of the one person show, the small-cast play, the domestic issue.

Twenty years ago, Jim Sharman at Lighthouse in Adelaide created an ensemble, which in the way of these things, seems more remarkable now than it was then – actors Robynne Bourne,

Melissa Jaffer, Gillian Jones, Melita Jurisic, Jacqy Phillips, Kerry Walker, Peter Cummins, Robert Grubb, Alan John, Russell Kiefel, Robert Menzies Geoffrey Rush and John Wood, associate directors Louis Nowra and Neil Armfield and a roster of notable designers and composers. This ensemble in two seasons gave premieres of large-scale new work by Patrick White, Bill Harding, Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell, as well as equally large-scale work by Shakespeare, Kleist, Beaumarchais, Lorca and Rodgers and Hart. I will never forget the impact of Neil Armfield's production of Sewell's *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, a persuasive melding of social critique, theatrical poetry and sizzling rhetoric, conveyed by performances of eloquence and passion. Would a program and a vision like Jim's be possible now? Not likely. Would the 1980 Shakespeare experiment be possible in 2003? Even less likely. Would a career like Rex Cramphorn's with its devotion to process be possible in the contemporary theatre? I'll leave that question in the air.

I'd like to end as I began, with Rex. But before I do, some personal history. I began working in the Australian theatre at sixteen, in the commercial theatre of J. C. Williamson where one was given only one's 'sides', a slim pamphlet with the text of one's role and only the last few words of each cue line. Thrilling as it was to be working for the Firm in the kind of big musical I'd been sneaking out of boarding school to watch throughout my teens, when I joined the circus I didn't even own my performance, let alone share in any creative process.

Then, after an exciting apprenticeship at Nimrod, and a rather more stifling one at the Melbourne Theatre Company – where at least I was on the fringes of a large standing company doing a range of major new and old work – and two years of training in New York, I served my real apprenticeship at the Playhouse in Adelaide, devising and creating shows for Magpie the TIE company, for the community roadshows that were part of our brief. Eventually I was given the main stage and fourteen highly skilled actors – led by Nancye Hayes and Edwin Hodgman – and allowed to make a big popular documentary musical about Adelaide in the Depression: an opportunity I now think I took for granted, and one that is unimaginable today.

Nearly all the subsequent high spots in my work have been communal and collaborative. John Bell gave Terry Clarke and me the opportunity to make two new musicals for Nimrod; John Clark invited us make *Summer Rain* for the graduating students at NIDA; Richard Wherrett, and later and more felicitously Robyn Nevin, gave us time and space to develop it further. Sandra Bates let me make the Ensemble Theatre a home for three plays over a decade. Freewheels in Newcastle commissioned a community play I called *A Property Of The Clan*; Wayne Harrison and David Berthold at the Sydney Theatre Company offered the company's resources to rework the material as a main stage play for adult as well as young audiences, and so the play *Blackrock* was born. Helmut Bakaitis, as artistic director of the Q Theatre in Penrith offered George Ogilvie and myself, and later Adam Cook, opportunities to develop three new projects. Similar opportunities have been provided by Australian Theatre for Young People and Marian Street. The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts have several times invited me, either solo or with collaborators like the composers Max Lambert and David King to devise work with and for the students, some of which, like *A Man With Five Children*, has gone on to further development and to a life in the mainstream theatre. And, for me most memorably of all, when Justin Monjo invited me to collaborate with him on a play adapted from Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*, Neil Armfield and his colleagues at Company B and Black Swan formed our dream team of collaborators.

I rehearse this list partly to remind myself of my continuing good fortune, but also to underline to you how essential these collaborations are to the development of new work, and how crucial to that development is the involvement of actors. For example, when Rhys McConnochie directed the first production of my play *Mongrels* in 1991 at the Ensemble Theatre, we worked on the text with the full cast at regular intervals over a period of nine months before rehearsals began, paying them for their time, giving them time to acquaint themselves with the material and giving us the benefit of their advice.

I like to work on this way for a number of reasons. First, it helps to ensure that a rehearsal period is just that, and not a workshop for the text (though I acknowledge that in the case of group-devised work, the transition between devising and rehearsing is necessarily more fluid).

Second, it engages the dramaturgical responses of the actors in a more relaxed and creative way. Actors, who are in direct contact with the audience, the vital final element in the theatrical event, thus acquire valuable insights on the process of communicating a story in the theatre. Third, it makes playmaking a more wholeheartedly communal event.

You will notice an implicit contradiction in the two streams of my argument today; on the one hand, I'm urging the involvement of actors over a significant period in the thorough development of new material; on the other, I'm begging for more immediacy and spontaneity in the response of our theatre to the life of our society. Yes, there is a possible contradiction in the two arguments. I've said elsewhere that new work mostly goes on before it's ready; but my experience of working on *Country Music* this year at NIDA makes me believe that, rough and ready and overlong and shapeless as it was, it still spoke to audiences in a very direct way, mostly because it became a vessel for the passion of its co-creators, the student actors, designers and technicians who collaborated on its making. But though I would value the chance of refining and rewriting it, not a single theatre company in the country has asked to see a script. Still, I wouldn't have missed the experience for quids.

Now I shall end where I began, with Rex, or rather with 'the Rex', the studio at Sydney University which is named in his memory. Thanks to the generosity of the Performance Studies department, for the last two years this space has been home to an ensemble that Jessica Machin, Julian Louis and I formed at the end of 2000, a group called State of Play. We have our first public showing of work in the next Sydney Festival. State of Play is an ensemble of young professional performers, alumni of the Victorian College of the Arts, WA Academy of Performing Arts, NIDA, Queensland University of Technology, Theatre Nepean, The Actors' Centre, Charles Sturt University and the Australian Theatre of Young People. They represent all that I seek in a team of collaborators; they are calm, curious, intelligent, resourceful, skilled, and communicative. They are fundamentally interested in the theatre as a medium of communication, imagery and narrative, and more concerned about the making of good work than about their own personal career paths.

And they're courageous. Collaboration, especially when it involves the making of work *de novo*, is hard and often alarming; and I know many fine actors who abhor the process. Those who embrace it need to be patient and tolerant as well as passionate and fearless.

We find, as I found repeatedly during the experience of *Country Music*, that the most valuable skill is hardest to practice: the ability to listen. The necessary first step of collaboration is agreement about the nature and intent of the project; that agreement can only be achieved by listening and contemplating before an opinion is offered. Collaboration starts in humility, tranquillity and mutual respect. We are working on it!

What the fate of State of Play will be, I don't know. I wanted to help form such a group, not as a medium for the performance of my own work, but because I like being part of a group. Indeed, I am sustained by the sense of continuity and community that is provided by membership in an ensemble. It's hard to stay open, at my age; it's hard to shut up and listen, to be humble, tranquil and respectful; and it's hard to maintain an ensemble without money, when the work is constantly being fitted in around the members' other commitments. I hope we'll grow together over the next few years; but as you know, in these matters there are no certainties.

On the wall by the door of the Rex Cramphorn Studio is a photo of Rex himself, looking impossibly healthy, fit and tanned. It seems apt for an Australian artist that he's sunning himself in a desert landscape, while reading a book. That happy conjunction of the sensual, the spiritual and the intellectual is probably a good model for any work that happens in the Rex, or elsewhere, and I hope that it inspires us to do our best there and elsewhere.

Thank you for coming today, and thank you for listening.

Nick Enright

November 24, 2002