

Introduction

What is Australian theatre? The simplicity of the question belies the complexity of the answer, which varies according to who is asked. For theatre practitioners it is primarily an art form. For audiences a choice of stage productions. For critics a collation of aesthetic norms. For governments an area of social policy. For academics an object of scholarly attention. For donors an occasion for charity. For sponsors an opportunity for marketing. For administrators an endless procession of tight budgets and impossible standards. And so it goes on. To say that theatre, in Australia, is a creative activity that puts a particular artwork—a stage show—before a particular public is to say little about the myriad dimensions of its being. To get a handle on what Australian theatre is as an artistic, economic and institutional entity, we need to synthesise all such understandings and reflect on the results.

This is rarely done. Debate about theatre in Australia today means either arguments over resources and/or spats about personalities. The former involves the statistical analysis of generalised data, and is the preserve of governments and other official bodies. A surge in quantitative research in the cultural sector over the last twenty years has seen an avalanche of reporting on various

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computational aspects of theatre's existence. How theatre is housed, priced, sold, how it manages its revenue and cost streams—even, when the mood dictates, its artistic and cultural priorities—all these things have come under official scrutiny since the father of public inquiries into the performing arts, the much-maligned Guthrie Report, first showed governments how to do it in 1949. As for the personalities, praise and blame are heaped irregularly on individuals and organisations according to obscure, rapidly changing agendas. In a country where sport supplies the majority of life's master-metaphors, it is unsurprising that theatre should find itself wracked on the sterile binaries of an attenuated pseudo-athleticism. State theatres, international festivals, community theatres, fringe theatre and amateur theatre are taken up in a cause-ish way, treated like so many competing football teams. In the flurry of names and categories, practitioners conduct a deadly struggle for scarce resources with the gloves-off attitude of the not-so-quietly desperate.

Patronage and personalities: for a depressing number of people involved in theatre, and for many who wish it well, or tune in now and then for the latest developments, Australian theatre is a straightforward, if high-stakes, exercise in arithmetic. Take a bunch of money, give it to a bunch of artists and, hey presto, you've got theatre. All that remains is a war of attrition over secondary, related matters: how much money, through what means and to whom. And this war can be waged with weapons familiar since the art form's genesis as a state-supported industry in 1954—statistics and character assassination. From time to time, a form of theatre will find itself ensnared in the rhetorical crossfire, at which point it is quickly reduced to caricature (as New Wave drama found itself in the Whitlam

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years, or community theatre fifteen years later). But this happens less now than formerly. As a mark of general weediness, Australian theatre has succumbed to homogenisation and few outside the industry can tell apart its different strata, much less assign them specific cultural significance.

Such ‘debates’ about theatre do not tell us much about it. They do not tell us what intrinsically it is, or how it has developed. They do not say how we are to know when it is being done well or why it is worth doing at all. They do not fill us with hope for its future or knowledge of its extraordinary past—though theatre is an art form which is passionately historical and whose 2,500-year-old evolution is richly inscribed on its present shape. In short, they omit most of what we need to know about its purpose, value and methods of work, focusing instead on its social effects or on the vicissitudes of personal creativity. It’s like trying to walk down the street with a telescope clapped to one eye and a microscope to the other. You can see everything except what you need to. If only we could leave aside these optical devices—useful after their fashion, but seriously compromised—and look with plainer sight. No government report or Sunday magazine article is going to help us here. To understand Australian theatre as a deep set of forces an entirely different approach is needed.

This essay attempts to provide just that. Like all points of view that seek to be broadly persuasive, it is part analysis, part adventure. The analysis is historical. Since I am a theatre historian and since the dimension missing from talk about Australian theatre is, above all, to do with its temporal development, then such an account is long overdue. The adventure is my own—the story of a theatre director, Anglo-Australian by birth, raised in one culture