

Foreword

This essay is about the role of theatrical satire in contemporary Australia. It is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the state of political writing for the stage in this country, but rather an account of the personal experience of a creator and performer of satirical revue. More specifically, it recounts the history of the Sydney Theatre Company's *Wharf Revue*—why and how it began and, particularly, the manner in which, over its six-year lifespan since 2000, it has evolved from broad, knockabout cabaret to exclusively political satire.

Australians have a long and healthy history of respectful disrespect for their social institutions and political leaders, underpinned by a general tolerance born of egalitarianism. In fact, to borrow the logic of Joseph Heller, it has long been un-Australian to use the term 'un-Australian'. Revue, emerging as it did from the populist traditions of the music hall and vaudeville, reflected a national ability to laugh at oneself. In many ways, political revue is the theatrical equivalent of the great Australian symbol of irreverence, the black-and-white political cartoon. One might legitimately ask how that has come about. What is so appealing about revue as a dramatic form that has ensured the ongoing vitality of this venerable genre? Is the theatre

really the best place for effective, topical satire, given the ability of radio and television to present material far more swiftly? However we answer these questions, there would seem to be a widespread belief that there's not enough political satire in this country. The *Wharf Revue* has tried to answer that particular call.

In its short history the *Wharf Revue* has charted the contraction of the democratic tradition of parliamentary debate in this country. It has been the response of one team of writer-performers to an increasingly vociferous audience demand for an oppositional viewpoint to the monolith of the party-political system. The Federal Government's introduction in late 2005 of anti-terrorism legislation, which included reinvigorated sedition laws, provoked an angry reaction from a wide coalition of civil libertarians, authors, publishers, artists and performers, who saw the laws as a threat to free speech.

For a brief, frightening period, the right of the theatre to speak freely about issues of social and political importance was directly challenged. It was only after an intense campaign by this wide coalition that amendments to the proposed laws were made. Even then, the laws retained worrying implications for the writers and performers of satire. Furthermore, for us, as for other artists who work within a subsidised-company structure, does there not still remain an implicit threat of self-censorship? Are not the major theatre companies, or public broadcasters like the ABC and SBS, likely to think twice before presenting material that might fall within the ambit of the sedition laws, or at best provoke lengthy and costly legal action?

Satire—or Sedition?

The amended statutes have been the subject of a review by the Australian Law Reform Commission and their initial discussion paper, which was released in late May 2006, proposed some changes. However, even if all the recommended changes are implemented by the Attorney-General—and there is no certainty of that, of course—the freedom of artists to argue contentious, oppositional points of view remains under threat. Central to the proposed changes is the introduction of a contextual defence: when considering charges of incitement to violence, the jury should be asked to consider whether the alleged criminal acts were perpetrated as, or during the performance of, a work of art.

But how are we to define a work of art? Is it likely that a consensus of definition, something that has challenged expert minds for at least a century and a half, will be quickly reached by a jury of ‘ordinary citizens’? As has been demonstrated so many times in the past, the definition of what constitutes artistic merit or integrity is subjective at best. And it is likely to be all the more so in the current climate of suspicion and fear, the very climate that demands healthy political satire.

The tradition we inherited

What, exactly, is revue? It has similarities to cabaret, vaudeville, variety and music hall, but, for our purposes, we can safely say that it is a collection of songs, sketches and comic pieces reflecting on topical themes, often of a socio-political or satirical nature. Parody and lampooning are a great Australian pastime that has