

INTERVIEW

*Michael Lanchbery has had a very interesting non-stop career. The culmination of his early career was as a singer with the English National Opera (formerly Sadler's Wells). After a car accident he worked as a House Director with the same company. His arrival in Australia ten years ago coincided with the opening of the Sydney Opera House. Michael was asked to form the new Tasmanian Opera Company and he remained with that Company for five years at the end of which the cut in Federal Government funding caused the Company to close. From Tasmania he moved to Canberra to act as Artistic Director. During that time he has been a guest director at the Australian National University, University of Tasmania, and the University of Newcastle. At the beginning of 1981 Michael took up his present appointment at James Cook University of North Queensland where he set up the Performing Arts Course.*

- P. What do you think comprises the performing arts?
- M. Well, I think we'll talk specifically about this course because the most interesting thing about it, and the reason why I came to do it, is that it, I think, more successfully than any other written course in Australia undertakes the unity of the arts. It says that music, theatre, and visual artistic things are linked, are integral, and I think that philosophy has been grasped much more strongly in the writing of this course and certainly in our practical exposition of that writing.
- P. What was your greatest challenge in coming to North Queensland to take up the position of Senior Lecturer in the Performing Arts Course?

- M. I think to start something from scratch is always a challenge. To start something from scratch in an isolated, and it still is isolated, community like North Queensland produces an even greater challenge in that people don't really know what you're attempting to do and why. I think that, as well as having the battle of motivating young people into the high discipline we expect, we have the difficulty of not justifying, but making people in the community, and indeed in the academic community, understand what we see as our function. I think there's always one very great misuse of a word. You notice that when people speak of an instrument they say you *play* the piano, you *play* the cello. I've never understood that because it seems to me that playing the piano or playing the cello is, in fact, damned hard work. I've never understood that use of the word "playing". And it's the same in the theatre. People think from the outside that it's people getting up and play-acting. It's very difficult from the outside to understand the intense discipline, the long hours, the pushing of oneself to the limits of endurance that goes into the making of an artistic work, because all our skills are designed to hide that very fact, that we make that which is very difficult appear easy. Because of that, in an unsophisticated community (and this community is unsophisticated, I think, in general), people don't understand the demands that the art form creates.
- P. What is the chief responsibility of a Performing Arts course in North Queensland?
- M. I think our first responsibility is to show young people the potential of a discipline that, as the world becomes more technical, as the world becomes more pressured, becomes more valuable. I think that a society is always judged by its artistic form. I think that our strongest relation, for instance, to the Greek City States is their artistic achievement as much as their political achievements. I think, when we look at the Renaissance, especially the Elizabethan Renaissance, it's the artistic form that interests us as much as the political. Certainly hand in hand they go and I think that our job here is to create an artistic awareness, that hasn't been seen hitherto, to a level of discipline that

makes it good so that people can really get the emotional resource that the art form is capable of giving. I think what I'm trying to say is that I try to get a stronger awareness of the potential of the art form, the serious potential, the immense joy, satisfaction, and comfort that a sympathy to the performing arts, the theatre, and music, gives to people in this modern age. Our responsibility here is to take young people, without that background, and to show them what it is, to show them the potential, and show them how to do it. But then, allied to that, we must look at the not-so-young people, people who have been aware of it, who have felt a need for a long time. Now, we say, here is an opportunity to bring that to some sort of a fruition.

- P. You've been associated with a number of courses in other parts of Australia and in other parts of the world, Michael. Do you think that a course offered in North Queensland has any essential differences from those offered in other parts of Australia?
- M. No, I don't. I think that the art form is the art form. I think that music and theatre and painting, all the visual things, are the same wherever you go. They take their own regional bias, shall we say, in that one picks up visually the light of the place, one picks up vocally the speech rhythms, the speech dynamics of a place, and in music one picks up what is always there—an inherited local culture. And one then melds them and whilst what we do in North Queensland is probably different from that which I have done and would do again in Tasmania, there is the same form, the same approach, and the same level of discipline. There is the same level of discipline, for instance, in the Cowshed\* as on the stage of the Royal Opera House.
- P. You have also repeated some of the same productions here, haven't you, as you did in the south?

\*The Cowshed is the barn-like acting space at J.C.U.N.Q. which is used for classes and production alike.

- M. I've repeated many productions. For instance, I've directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* five times. The reason for that isn't laziness at all, but is, I would suggest, my own attitude to my own work. The person who first directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the age of eighteen isn't the same as the person who is forty-five and did it for the fifth time in Townsville. Quite a different production, quite a different approach, in fact, a different play! That comes about from the very nature of the theatre. We are given a text, we are given a man's inspiration. Remember that the performing artist's approach to a text is quite different from an academic's approach. An academic must scrutinize it with a high degree of discipline to say 'What does this text actually say?' I think an artistic approach, a director's approach, is 'What can this text say, what is a valid interpretation of these words, how can my imagination flesh out these words to make the meaning of four hundred years ago immediately relevant and understandable to a present day audience in North Queensland?' That's a flight of imagination to do that successfully, and obviously one's own growth continues throughout one's life. Therefore one looks again and again at a great text. I've never directed a rubbish play more than once.
- P. Could I take you back now to when you first came to Townsville. What were your major difficulties in establishing the Performing Arts Course?
- M. Well, curiously enough, not shortage of money, although there always has and always will be that. There's never enough money to do those things that we want. But really, as I said previously, getting people to understand what we were trying to do was the major difficulty. People don't, won't accept, I think, the validity of people taking time to explore words and emotions in the same way as they will take as valid people exploring how to write a set of accountancy books. In fact the discipline of both is equal and, indeed, in the performing arts probably even greater than in an accountancy course. If you do a business studies course or if you study a science discipline, there's a body of information that you must absorb and then logically dissect or develop. With the performing arts, with anything

in the theatre or music there's a body of information you must absorb, but then that's only the beginning because the real discipline is allowing the imagination's flight to take place. I think getting people to understand that has always been difficult and particularly difficult for me in North Queensland. I think people now are understanding it, because I think gradually, with the evidence for instance of our high success rate in placing our graduates, with the obvious evidence of young people maturing and growing and coming to terms with themselves, the social aspects of our work are much better understood than when we first started. But at the beginning I think it was a pretty rocky road, in that people had great difficulty in coming to terms with why we are here.

P. You came into a course that was already planned, Michael. Did you have to make any changes to the original concept of the course?

M. No, we've actually been very good. We've been very good boys and girls in that we have done our utmost to teach the course as written, as presented. It has great strengths, it has many weaknesses, and I think those weaknesses would be inevitable with anyone sitting down to write a book about a practical thing when only the practical exposition of it is going to show up those weaknesses. We know that there are things wrong, we know that we are going to make some quite definite changes from next year in the way in which we teach things, in the way courses are interlinked. The course is due for a major review in another two years' time and at that time I think we will probably be looking very closely at a greater, even greater integration of the various art forms that are represented.

P. Would you like to expand upon the strengths of the course?

M. The strengths of the course are that we have achieved a quite incredible quantity of performance with, I think, on the whole, a gratifyingly good level of production. I think that most of the things we've done people have been glad to see. I think a couple of the things we've done have been quite outstanding. Our strength is that it's a working situa-

tion, the young people are working everyday without having to be chivvied into doing the work. They show up on time for their classes, prosaic things like that. In fact, they're a very good pointer to the success or otherwise of an endeavour. I think always the first thing to look at when one measures a success thing is the prosaic thing of looking at attendance records. They're exemplary and so, therefore, we know that we are getting through to the young people we are working with. We believe also that we are getting through to the community on quite a serious level of achievement. We've just had a very great success in our first touring venture. We went to the lovely new theatre at the Burdekin – the Burdekin Theatre of Ayr. Our whole course moved down there for a week and there was very strong interaction between our students, the theatre personnel and the community at large, and I would present that as evidence of the success of what we're doing.

- P. Do you want to elaborate on the weaknesses of the course as you see them?
- M. Our biggest weakness is something that we can't put right and that's because of the isolation of our workplace. I think the community and our students don't see enough of other people at work to be able to truly gauge their own strengths and weaknesses. We often feel that we are working in a vacuum and I think that that's something that only time, and a lot of time, twenty or thirty years, can put right, as the community grows. But you notice that even that weakness is a weakness that time will put right as more and more people come to live in this part of the world.
- P. What has been your greatest achievement during the last two and a half years?
- M. That question's a bit like saying, 'Who's your favourite writer? Who's your favourite composer?' I think the greatest achievement we've made is the sense of unity between the students and the staff in Performing Arts and the visiting artists. The usual gulf that exists between us and them, as it were, doesn't exist with us. That strong

sense of unity, the idea of performing arts as being an entity, is perhaps the strongest achievement. In theatre terms it's invidious really to sort out any one production, but I think that the Sylvia Plath play, *Three Women*, was probably our strongest achievement. That whole evening of three one-act plays—there was a Tennessee Williams you'll remember, the Sylvia Plath play, and a piece by a young American called John Berry—was an evening I think of true theatre where there was a strong commitment on the stage that leapt right across into an audience involvement. The sort of feeling that one achieves only now and then and in really big centres of the world I think was there very strongly and I think it was theatre to an excellent standard. What was so important was that it proved that it can be done in this community.

- P. What have been your disappointments during that time?
- M. I don't really think I've had any disappointments. I think that what I've had is much more than I could have expected when I came here in terms of student development, students growing into real people and turning into fine young actors. I think I've been superbly supported by the staff and visiting artists who have worked with us. My only disappointment really, I think, is this continuing misunderstanding of the social and emotional benefits of our work within a university and indeed a town community.
- P. What part of your work gives you the greatest satisfaction?
- M. I think any teacher gets immense satisfaction from a session well done, when one has watched an artist emerge and give the very best of which he or she is capable. And that's happened many times here.
- P. Does anything give you dissatisfaction?
- M. The thing that's always going to happen in a job like mine, the paperwork. It's always a constant division of oneself between, quite naturally, wanting to get on with the job of being a teacher, wanting to get on with the job of being a theatre person and making it happen, wanting to get on

with the job of being a musician and make wonderful music happen, but there's always that desk looming. But the paperwork and all those administrative things have to be done. It gives me the least satisfaction because I suspect I'm very bad at it.

- P. Michael, you've seen the Performing Arts then pass through its teething stages. What are your predictions for the future of the course and the performing arts in general?
- M. Well, we've certainly teathed, but the performing arts by its very nature of the theatre or music is never a stand still situation. You never say, 'Well, we've reached the level of excellence and here we are!' Like any artist or any artistic endeavour you're as good as the last thing you've done. I think that we've established in the community proof of the need for this undertaking. I think the future's set fair for a growth thing where people will gradually accept the Performing Arts, shall we say, as a jewel in the crown of the university. I don't think that's too highflown a phrase to use about something as fundamental to the excellence of being a human being as the theatre gives us. I think we will grow steadily and modestly, but I think that the generations to come will have something upon which they can focus. That focus and the excellence that those young people bring to us will see that our future is secure and that we continue to deliver to the community that awareness of the value of the theatre and music.

Interview with Michael Lanchbery for *LiNQ* by Pam Lythgo, 4th July 1983.