

THE ROLE OF THE THEATRE DIRECTOR IN AUSTRALIA

What is theatre?

At base level — any performance witnessed by an audience! A football match might well be regarded as 'improvised theatre.' Theatre is nothing to do with a building; all you need is an empty space (to use Peter Brooks' term), performers and an audience. 'Theatre' per se takes endless forms, including Music Hall, Circus and, of course, Drama.

I consider the term 'theatre company' usually misapplied — because what is generally meant is 'drama company.' If it is a *theatre* company, subsidised through Federal and State funds, it has a responsibility to provide a fuller range of theatrical events, not merely drama for the intellectually elite. Apart from establishment theatre, there are many fringe groups, usually 'point of view' theatre companies which seek to change peoples' attitudes (for example, political); however, they usually attract people with interest in the point of view expressed, thus, if presented in a formal theatre situation, often preach to the converted and so have little effect in their quest for change of attitude. Only street and factory theatre, which takes its performance to the people, is likely to achieve the desired effect.

In the final analysis, I believe theatre's role is to entertain. However, what constitutes entertainment will differ from person to person. For some, it will be stimulation of the emotions, for others, the intellect. For the greater bulk of an audience, perhaps a time to forget.

Elizabeth Drew defined drama as "life in terms of the theatre." As such, it reflects society past and present. Australian theatre for the bulk of this century drew its material from overseas and thus didn't reflect the society in which its performers and audience live. This is not to say that there are not parallels to be drawn or that presentation of overseas material is invalid.

Australian theatre derives its origins from England, both in terms of structure of companies, approach to presentation and content. Not until the late '60s was there a marked change the seeds of which emanated from the establishment of NIDA, La Mama in Melbourne, which gave birth to the APG, Wal Cherry's Emerald Hill Theatre and Hayes Gordon's

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Ensemble in Sydney.

In the '40s and '50s Australia produced *Rusty Bugles*, *One Day of the Year* and *The Doll*, which many hoped heralded the beginning of exciting things to come, but somehow it never did until the '70s. In a relatively short space of time it has become artistic policy in all major companies to include Australian material, which previously was a rare event.

Powers, Hibberd, Buzo, Hewett, Keneally, Williamson and Blair (to name but a few) now have their work given the full treatment by our subsidised State companies. Two factors have brought this situation about: strong financial support under the Whitlam government and pressure from artistic directors. However, decisions are made by Boards of Management, often with limited attention to the Director's views. The cohesion between the administration and the artistic directors of Sydney's Nimrod Theatre is, I feel, one of the main reasons for its outstanding artistic and commercial success.

Rex Reed (an American film critic), on a recent trip to Australia, made the following statement about local scripts in *The Australian* newspaper, April 28/9, 1979:

The problem with most of these films is that, although beautifully photographed, well acted and technically proficient in every way, they demonstrate weaknesses in the scripts that seem to be common afflictions suffered by all Australian filmmakers.

Unfortunately, I tend to agree with Mr Reed. I get the feeling that in both theatre and film spheres, works are hurried into production without being given sufficient workshop and rewrite time. Obviously, there is a financial factor involved here. Also, in an effort to create truly indigenous material, our writers (in general) tend to produce works with a self-conscious air about them. However, the emergence of playwrights during the '70s has been dramatic and the quality shows constant improvement. I feel we can look forward with confidence to the future.

The Director

In Australia, many directors have made valuable contributions. These include Wal Cherry, particularly with his early Brecht productions; John Tasker, through experiments in 'Total' theatre; John Bell, making Shakespeare relevant and accessible to Australian audiences; and Jim Sharman with work in the area of improvised theatre. John Clark, George Ogilvie, John Sumner and, more recently, Mick Roger, have also contributed tremendously to the development of Australian theatre.

I consider the role of the artistic director in this country is to:

- (a) Foster *local* talent; writers, performers and technicians;
- (b) Present a wide range of material, while recognising the constant need for bold experiment. Theatre must be a living organism, reflecting not only the past and present but also projecting into the future;
- (c) Not lose sight of the fact that theatre is a business, and that a product must be marketed as with any other business!

To direct, one must fully understand the acting process. During the Twentieth Century there have been three major influences on the actors' approach to the task and, in consequence, that of the Director.

At the turn of the century, Constantin Stanislavsky developed a 'systematic' approach to acting, based on the following:

the concept of major action, use of 'affective memory,' the 'if' factor, the use of self-criticism, energy, relaxation, concentration and inner and outer action.

For the purpose of this exercise, I shall not elaborate on these further.

The second influential figure, Bertold Brecht, certainly didn't totally reject Stanislavsky's 'system'; however, he was more concerned with 'how' things were done, in contrast to Stanislavsky who was preoccupied with 'why'. Stanislavsky asked for total absorption in a role — basic 'inner truth.' In contrast, Brecht demanded the retention of a 'critical distance' between the actor and the role he played.

The third major influence was Lee Strasberg's 'method' approach to acting which was an adaptation of Stanislavsky's 'system.'

In addition to those already mentioned, many other directors have exerted a tremendous influence on theatre during the course of the Twentieth Century, among them Meyerhold, Craig, Guthrie, Reinhardt, Gielgud, Piscator, Hall, Brook, Littlewood, Beck and Grotowski.

The role of the theatre director in Australia (as distinct from the Artistic Director) does not really differ from his or her counterpart in any other western country. They must have the ability to understand and deal with people and the capacity to instil a feeling of confidence and trust in the performers; be an all-round theatre person, organiser, teacher and, above all, someone able to respond positively to criticism — also creative, not merely an imitator, however able to capitalise on past experience. As Harold Clurman observes: "Like all good artists, the Director must also be a canny plagiarist."

The Director's job is to weld all elements into a corporate body. He or she has a responsibility to the author's script, to the actors and, finally, to the audience.

When selecting material for presentation, three questions must be asked: "Can I cast it?", "Can I mount it?" and "Does it have something to say?"

Ultimately, through application of intellect, sensitivity and knowledge of the craft, the Director should produce a 'product' that is meaningful, artistically truthful and dramatically exciting.

Every Director has strengths and weaknesses and the capacity to work with certain material, and certain types of people, more effectively than with others.

The two things controlling these variables is the type of organisation the Director is employed by and the money available for the specific project. This determines the choice of play, designer, casting and extent of technical resources.

The freelance Director will usually be employed to direct material for which he has a particular flair, for example, Tyrone Guthrie spent most of his life directing Shakespeare, however, the 'resident Director, of a subsidised Theatre Company can sometimes be called upon to work from a script for which he has little or no respect. Often, the choice of a play is a collective decision made by a Board of Management. Whether the choice of material falls into the loose category of Classical, Realistic, Naturalistic, Musical, Absurd or Experimental will, to a large extent, determine the Director's approach to it.

In the College, University or Amateur Theatre, many other problems face the Director. The criteria for selection of play and actors is often influenced by different factors from those that confront the professional. Summerstock falls into this category of amateur theatre under professional guidance.

SUMMERSTOCK: PLANS AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

The Summerstock programme is run under the auspices of the Townsville City Council, through the Civic Theatre's entrepreneurial fund. Its role is to develop local talent. . . and to supply the Civic Theatre with a product of the highest possible amateur standard. In the event that the proposed professional touring company, based in Townsville, becomes a reality, it is envisaged that Summerstock would continue alongside its professional counterpart. The role of the Director of Summerstock is to:

- (a) run training programmes;
- (b) co-ordinate and direct a series of theatrical productions;
- (c) extend the scope of Summerstock to involve a maximum number of interested local artists while maintaining the highest possible standards.

To continue its development, I believe it should:

- (a) be Council funded, independent of the theatre, to allow greater

flexibility;

- (b) appoint a full-time Director and assistant (the task being beyond one individual);
- (c) employ a core of 3 multitalented professional actors and an actress. (Townsville seems to have a singular lack of interested male talent.) This group would supplement Summerstock's regular productions and provide a 'Theatre in Education' team and play reading service.

I believe it is a misconception that people will only come to shows in the Civic Theatre and no longer be interested in our small theatres. Providing the product is of sufficiently high standard and well presented, the small theatres do, in fact, have advantages over Summerstock which is bound to working in "The Civic":

- (a) the running costs are much higher;
- (b) the theatre is not a drama theatre and places limits on selection of material (as do the small stages at TLT and Stage Door, in a different way);
- (c) the big stage at the Civic pinpoints faults in amateur performances more so than in a more intimate setting;
- (d) very limited time is possible for rehearsal on the set.

Ideally, it would be good to 'establish' a production in one of our smaller theatres and then transfer; however, the inbuilt problem lies in the 'restaging' that such action would necessitate.

Summerstock has been set up to stimulate amateur theatre. The rationale behind nominal payment to people involved in Summerstock presentations is this: each show can potentially make money, therefore total non-payment of performers could be regarded as a rip-off in the event a show did, in fact, make money. Therefore, the policy of paying artists an honorarium was established. However, this does not make the individuals involved 'professionals' nor, I believe, should it affect other amateur theatre groups. After all, Summerstock can only produce a small number of shows per year and not all interested parties can be accommodated in these presentations. Incidentally, I regard a 'professional' actor as one who

- (a) earns his living by acting;
- (b) is trained for the profession, thus going some way to guaranteeing development in performance standards in Australia; and
- (c) is a member of Actors Equity.

Summerstock's role is to present a wide range of material at the highest possible standard, provide a training ground for those interested in developing theatre crafts and also to establish a stronger theatre-going

tradition within the community. One hopes that it does make a *positive* contribution to Townsville's cultural life and will continue to do so.

