

Australian Writing For The Stage... a health report

Speakers: **Stephen Sewell**, acclaimed film and stage writer whose credits include *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, *Myth*, *Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany* and *The Boys*.
Alan Flower, actor, writer and director. Co-artistic director Tamarama Rock Surfers, teacher and director at the Darlinghurst Theatre; has directed productions for the Old Fitzroy Theatre.
David Berthold, Artistic Director, Griffin Theatre Company.
Stephen Dunne, Writer and theatre critic, currently with the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Guest chair: **Dr Laura Ginters**, lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Sydney with a doctorate in Germanic Studies and Performance Studies.

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By Tracy Ellis

In 2004, Sydney theatre critic **Colin Rose** expressed his concerns about the health of Australian theatre in his column in the *Sunday Herald*. He said, "there's been no shortage of terrific new plays, what is dismaying is how few of them are Australian."

This article was cited as being the catalyst for the June SAMAG seminar, and it was the liveliest Seminar this year, attracting a large crowd of passionate theatre aficionados on a cold and rainy night.

Ginters opened the discussion by pointing out all the achievements the current Sydney theatre scene can be proud of and asking, "So why is there still this sense of nagging inadequacy? Is it justified, and if it is, how do we begin to address it?"

Stephen Sewell

"There are a great many Australian writers," says Sewell, "and certainly, when I started writing 30 years ago we didn't have that stellar group [of] not only good writers, but internationally known and translated writers."

Sewell proposes that we are in a much better position in 2005. At the same time, he acknowledges the difficulty "and the frustrations that young writers and new writers experience."

"It's not a new speculation that writers have a hard time," he says, "My career as a writer has been punctuated by very public accusations against mainstream theatre about why I'm being kept out."

"30 years ago, when I first started writing," he adds, "we were having exactly this debate ... and the way it eventually finds its way into the domain is 'we want more money'. And I think, to some extent, the public are sick of listening to people like us saying 'we want more money',"

Sewell recalls how, in 1977 he attended his first National Playwrights Conference in Canberra with 300 to 400 others. "It was an exciting, vibrant collection of people from across the nation – theatre people and writers ... who were all there to talk about one thing – Australian theatre; where it was going and what we were doing with it, and how we were going to make an Australian Theatre."

In contrast, he adds, "I attended the Playwrights Conference the other day in Newcastle. I think that there were 30 participants and those that were there were doing – important work obviously, but the craft work –

how to craft a play, how to write a play ... workshoping a play from the first draft. It was a very technical exercise, sort of like writer's school."

"At a certain point in our history Australian Theatre was actually about something and what it was about was building an Australian culture that was separate and independent, in contradiction to the imperialist cultures that we were experiencing.

"People like John Bell made the revolutionary assertion that the Australian accent, for example, could exist on the Australian stage. These were important and powerful claims."

"But what we have done, I think, as writers especially, is that we have withdrawn from the challenge of creating a powerful and important Australian culture. We have retreated from those goals and those ambitions and we've degenerated into a kind of technical, writerly acceptance of a status quo," says Sewell.

"I would like to say to you, and to every writer here, that it's not just a question of passion, but passion about something, and it's time that we, as writers, started to engage with the world and engage with the diabolical difficulties that we have in the world and start saying things to our fellow Australians that our fellow Australians are actually interested in listening to."

Alan Flower

Through his work with the Tamarama Rock Surfers, the Darlinghurst and Old Fitzroy theatres, Flower sees a lot of great promising new scripts from young and emerging writers. "There are a lot of great young writers out there – I've never seen so many, we get tonnes and tonnes of beautiful scripts..."

But Alan admits that the full potential of those promising scripts isn't always being fully realised on stage. "The dramaturgeical process doesn't put plays on my desk that are ready to produce. There are writers out there but they need to be developed."

And, although that late Arthur Miller said 'theatre is the art of the present tense', getting a new play into production can be convoluted. "We'll get some funding money, there's another round in November, six months later we'll find out ... two years have passed before we can even start writing the thing again. It's a really difficult and slow process and I think it's a problem for young writers."

But Flower has a dream: "I imagine a dream world of development: A small theatre company, a small theatre attached – 120 seats maybe – an artistic director and a lot of experienced directors, people like Berthold who've actually worked on developing new Australian plays, and then, kind of loosely attached to this company, actors who work on your scripts.

"In my dream world this company would be funded for five years, so the resources wouldn't have to be wasted on trying to seek money. They might attract maybe, 30 writers, the idea being that you put thirty writers into development over five years ... and over five years you look to produce all these thirty works, and the writers can come in and say, 'I've just spent all weekend finishing my seventh draft. Can I get three people to read it and one director, and a dramaturge' and ... you actually have a facility where these people are sitting around in a room waiting for the scripts to come, and that's how I think scripts could be made better. I think directors and writers need to be in the room, as well as dramaturges.

"Getting a script up on the floor is very different to seeing it on the page," says Flower. "Theatre is a live art. It needs to be walked around."

David Berthold

Berthold has some conflict about the current state of theatre writing in Australia. While it is prolific and positive, it may be that the rewards of a slower developmental process may be lost to some writers. In addition, rising production costs may prevent existing theatre companies from keeping up with the output.

"I think the way in which we deal with this kind of cultural momentum is something that comes as a challenge to us now," he says.

Berthold names several promising young writers working in Sydney theatre at the moment, names like Brendan Cowell, Tommy Murphy, Jonathan Gavin, Kate Mulvaney, Ben Ellis, Caleb Lewis, Toby Schmidt, "and quite a few others," and points out that when he arrived in Sydney, ten years ago, "it was almost impossible to name a list as extensive."

He also notes that, "most of those writers are of the theatre – they also work as actors and directors and so on" and are "not caught in a developmental cycle."

But, ten years ago, it might have been easier for a writer to be working on the same play for a long period of time, "draft by draft," and Berthold admits that here he becomes torn.

Of the current crop of writers, he says, "I think there is something to be said for their prolific nature. They're not so concerned with working for a long period of time on one particular play ... probably something that, in the long term, might be beneficial for the career of those writers and for our culture."

At a time when there are no full-time tertiary playwrighting courses available, that might also be the only way those writers can get the training they need.

Berthold also observes that, "mid-career writers seem to be entering a kind of Renaissance – Stephen Sewell, Loius Nowra and so on."

"There is activity, there is talent – that's clear," says Berthold. "How we deal with that is not clear. There is probably a distance between commerce and delivery, and that seems to me to be a structural concern. How do companies like Griffin, or Compnay B, or Ensemble, or STC, deal with that momentum?"

"I hear the key warning of the Roberts report, [the Australia Council report into triennially-funded theatre organisations, researched by Ian Roberts, former general manager of the Melbourne Festival] which is, in essence, an economic one: That the costs of producing theatre are increasing at a faster rate than theatre companies' ability to recoup."

Berthold suggests that the inevitable result of that will be that, "companies will either do fewer productions or do smaller productions, and that's an economic reality for, particularly, the small to medium sector, but I imagine the major performing arts sector as well. There's an economic imperative for doing less, and smaller, things which works against, and in opposition to, the idea of their being promise."

Stephen Dunne

Because this seminar purports to be a health report, Dunne offers his diagnosis: "Despite all the moanings of impending doom the patient is still with us – and occasionally kicking – but said patient could do with cheaper drugs and more carefully targeted care."

"I'm finding myself in an odd position of optimism," he says. "We've never had as much new Australian work on Sydney stages."

Dunne points out that "even a moderately successful season at Belvoir Downstairs will be seen by circa 2000 people ... equivalent to the print run of a most new Australian novels."

"We're in a rare position of both suffering and benefiting from a crisis of abundance, a desperate cornucopia," says Dunne.

He explains that, between Belvoir Downstairs, The Stables, Darlinghurst Theatre and the Old Fitzroy, "this town needs more than 20 competent, worthwhile, funded, independent productions a year ... a lot of these productions are going to be new Australian works."

And he reminds us that "almost all humans have a self-important fantasy of cultural decline: 'I am living in the worst of times'."

And, calling on his 14 years as a theatre critic, he assures us that "there was just as much bad, lazy, poor and shoddy work in 1992."

"Yes, it could be better," he admits. "Our arts funding is far too skewed towards fantasies of packages and big names, and severely under-invests in script funding. This is a terrible false economy, as fixing problems at script stage is very cheap, as opposed to wasting \$50,000 of taxpayer's money on producing sad rubbish that benefited from a kick-arse, no hedge un-jumped, and partially untruthful, funding application"

In summing up, Dunne concludes, "If our culture survives peak oil, fundamentalist Christian fascism, global warming, Fox News, fundamentalist Islamic fascism, rising sea levels, the abandonment of rationality and the reign of corporations, I might just live long enough to see a Sydney revival of **"Myth, Propoganda and Disaster..."** [Stepehn Sewell's most recently staged play] or a Sydney premier of **Shepherd on the Rocks**, [Patrick White] or a revival of **Clark in Sarajevo**, [Catherine Zimdahl] or Enright's **Good Works**, or hopefully, a revival of whatever I'm going to see next week."

For details on SAMAG seminars and membership: www.sama.org.au or info@samag.org