

**Staging the Sydney Festival:
a conversation with Fergus Linehan and John Bayley**

Monday 21 March 2005 – Australia Council for the Arts: 372 Elizabeth St SURRY HILLS

By Tracy Ellis

For the March seminar, SAMAG brought in the two people responsible for the prestigious Sydney Festival to discuss both the artistic vision of the festival and the practicalities of running such a major event.

Fergus Linehan is the new Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the Sydney Festival. To take up this position he came all the way from Ireland where he worked as artistic director of the Dublin Theatre Festival, regarded as that county's most prestigious cultural event. He was appointed to that position at only 29 years of age. Linehan replaces Brett Sheehy who, after ten years with the Sydney Festival (four years as director), is off to South Australia to take the reins at the Adelaide Festival. Linehan will stage his first Sydney Festival in January 2006.

John Bayley has been Head of Production at the Sydney Festival since 2002, responsible for staging around 57 events in 21 venues in 18 days. He previously worked for ten years at the Sydney Theatre Company as Technical Director and prior to that at Marion Street as Production Manager.

"Running a festival to my mind is actually quite a servile task" says Linehan, "because you're very much interconnected with so many different stakeholders ... there are so many people that feel ownership of it."

So where does a new director, ready to serve a new bunch of stakeholders start?

"I guess the starting point is kind of getting a sense of where all of those people and all of those organizations stand and somewhere in the middle all our needs should intersect.

"Once you have that there are some really practical considerations. You would try and build that first layer of the festival that's going to deliver the names you can name-check when you're selling the festival and the main bulk of the box office."

During the year the Sydney Festival team have to hit the road to start selling the festival to the many artists, sponsors and other stakeholders they hope to attract and also to audition shows around the world, but there's a lot of work to be done before the roadshow.

When based in Ireland, Linehan had the luxury of being able to check out artists and shows across Europe in a more spur-of-the-moment fashion, flitting between Paris, London, Berlin and Milan. "Even New York was only seven hours away," he says. He was constantly on the move. Here, he has to be "far more disciplined."

"You need to have done a huge amount of homework and then do it all in one go," he says.

While the programming process might be less spontaneous, he baulks at using the cliché 'the tyranny of distance'. "I think sometimes that's over-stated and it's becoming less and less relevant because people are getting used to travelling long distances," he says, "It's just a different way of planning. It works perfectly well and in some ways you probably don't waste time going to see things on a whim that actually you were never going to be able to do."

As for Production Manager John Bayley, at this time of year he is doing a lot of site visits, checking out venues, as well as showing the new Artistic Director around. "We're also just finishing up cleaning up and coming out of '05." The Sydney Festival has a rigorous debriefing process where everyone is given the chance to submit feedback and it is up to Bayley to debrief all the Production Coordinators. "I individually debrief each one of the festival staff members. And then all of that is then taken to a heads of department debrief, and from that comes an action list that is date-stamped so it gets opened up again throughout the year."

In terms of how far ahead the Festival plans, Linehan admits they already have much of the '06 program locked in. "But lots that can fall over, so even though you have it all planned you are also constantly looking at things that will back other things up. So we're starting the process of '07 now."

If a show looks attractive to the festival "there's a whole process to go through in terms of seeing if we could we present it," says Linehan. "What would it cost, would they want to come and all of those issues."

With 50 odd events in any Sydney Festival and one in five or ten of all the possibilities selected actually coming to fruition, you can imagine the sheer volume of material that the programming staff study each year. "If a work is existing internationally it's much easier to present than a work that is just in development or in the form of a script ... a lot of that material needs to be gone through as well," says Linehan.

Linehan works across all the issues that relate to the management of the festival and programming is just one of those issues. Bayley's department is "basically supporting the programming department. Our entire time is spent contacting companies and doing feasibility studies on venues, starting to work-up budgets, [work out] logistics ... will it fit in a container, can we get a flight between here and there and will it fit in a theatre - those kind of things."

With sponsorship accounting for 40 per cent of the festival budget, how do they work out exactly how much they have to spend, and what happens if a major sponsor pulls out?

"When is there a year when you don't have a major sponsor pull out?" says Bayley.

"Effectively what happens is usually you lose shows." Says Linehan, "The issue is always one of timing."

Still, the Sydney Festival has managed to record a budget surplus every year for at least the last five years.

"The timeline that we're working towards is that really by the end of May and beginning of June the programming needs to be in place," says Linehan. "Things can change after that but really the whole thing needs to be locked down."

"You certainly wouldn't be budgeting off a major \$200,000 sponsor who hadn't confirmed and be putting that into a balanced budget in July or August."

When it comes to artistic vision, how much of the festival is for the artists and how much is for the audience?

"Different festivals do different things and it's important not to assess them against each other," says Linehan. "Some festivals are more artist-driven and some are more about changing artistic practice in that country."

Linehan sees Sydney Festival as "more driven by the audience ... more about the people of the city having a chance to celebrate through art."

So, being an audience-driven festival, it would be a nice if more people could afford to attend. Ticketed events are expensive and come at a time of year when many have blown their budgets on Christmas.

“Peter Brook made the quote ‘the future of theatre is in the cheap seats’, and I think it’s true,” says Linehan. “In a sense you exist within the economic framework of the entertainment industry within this city and therefore all of the costs are based on that ... and the fact is that, in this city, if the event is right, people will pay an extraordinarily high price and the average ticket price is going up and up.”

“The danger with the Sydney Festival is that the free program and the ticketed program could actually begin to drift apart.

“At the moment we’re trying to make sure that the free side of the program absolutely gets the same curatorial rigour as the ticketed side ... there’s a couple of things we’re looking at. There’s a possibility that there is a missing layer of programming”

So, what kind of work do Linehan and Bayley enjoy on their night off?

“I like work that isn’t conscious of it’s own greatness, that has a sort of spontaneity about it and is kind of at ease with itself and at its best can be approached in the way the people who might just go to the cinema on a Friday night,” says Linehan. “I think you can develop this great curse called greatness and I think theatre has suffered from it more than anything else. The pressure is on you to be important in some way.

“I really like the way a lot of American writing gets over that ... people like Sam Shephard and David Mamet. Similarly in music I do like people who manage to work in a rock ‘n’ roll environment but can produce kind of intelligent coherent art, but still manage to appeal to that much younger and broader audience.”

Bayley admits that, “it was only five years ago that I actually crawled out of stage door and discovered other art forms.

“The fantastic thing about the festival is that I’ve developed a love of contemporary dance that I would never have thought I would, and an appreciation of visual arts.”

He recalls fondly his first Sydney Festival opening in 2002 when, after installing a challenging visual arts piece in the Queen Victoria Building at 7am, his phone rang for the next show, “I ran around like a mad thing and I got to the end of the day and thought ‘this is as much fun as a production manager can have standing up’. Just absolutely remarkable.”

When asked what the most valuable lesson he had learnt was, Bayley replies that he planned to print a tee-shirt with the words: “good, fast, cheap ...you can have any two.”

“Any time I have breached that and tried to get all three it’s not been possible,” he says.

For Linehan the rewards of the job have come when he’s had to fight for something he believed in, be it a controversial work or an artist that takes time to develop but goes on to achieve international acclaim.

“When you really do fight something through and you get to the moment of truth and you realise everything is riding on this ... to be that involved in something and to feel that you’re actually contributing, you’re more than a booking agent, you’re helping a young artist.”

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