

Bell Hath a Way



John Bell as Shylock, *Merchants of Venice*

John Bell's new Shakespeare company aims to unite the Bard and Australian idiom. But Jeremy Eccles asks whether the theatre industry is really up to a populist Hamlet.

At a time of confused direction in the Australian arts, the arrival of a new, half-a-million-dollar theatre company devoted to the works of Shakespeare has not been received with unfettered enthusiasm.

Is the Bell Shakespeare Company part of a retreat from the commitment by major theatre companies putting on 50% or so local product when there's little new writing—and when the recession anticipates an audience preference for the big and the conservative? Do we need more Shakespeare anyway? And if we do need the Bard, then in what style should he be

played...Ozzified, poetic, highly interpreted, or what?

To begin, some personal bias. It is hard to imagine too much Shakespeare in an English-speaking country. It is not, I believe, a sign of cringe to delve into plays which offer a wealth of interpretation suitable for any time or place. Of course, we need to tell our own stories too. But it's significant that one of the most memorable successes of the Adelaide Lighthouse Company's two-year existence was Neil Armfield's localised, beach-side *Twelfth Night*. Perth's revitalised Swy Company plans a Broome-based multi-racial production of the same play later this year. And feeding the Bard into such local works as Michael Gow's *Away* and David Malouf's

Blood Relations adds a dimension to them, though it relies on a familiarity with the original, which can only come from a greater exposure to the original than is offered at present.

Not that John Bell is seeking to emulate either the Royal Shakespeare Company—with which he acted under Peter Hall in the 60s—or the English Shakespeare Company—currently touring—in imposing strong interpretations on his chosen texts. Not for him a Romanian setting for *Coriolanus* or a magical garden for *The Dream*. It's almost as though he wants to take us back to basics in Australian relations with Shakespeare. "Our aim is to rediscover the shock value and direct earthy colloquy which the original productions had with the audience", he states in his outline for the BSC.

This outline played a major part in establishing the company. It brought him initially together with businessman Tony Gilbert who'd been seeking ways of boosting Shakespeare in Australia and who



was linked to Bell by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust which now manages the company. It went on to win the financial support of an amazing 85 individual donors who, in the characteristic American style of supporting the arts, have given half of the necessary money to a project the only return for which will be the warm feeling of cultural contribution. It also wooed the more hard-nosed sponsorship of Natwest Australia Bank (seeking to link itself to British quality) and Daikyo Australia (which may be said to have image problems in Queensland, where it is the largest Japanese investor in the leisure industry, and is facing investigations by the Foreign Investment Review Board and the Trade Practices Commission). Finally, the outline won the imprimatur of the Shakespeare Globe Centre in Australia.

It took John Bell and the Trust just six months to set it all up. Bell himself has

enormous personal standing—he chose the perfect moment to return from the English stage and found the famous Nimrod Company. This was Sydney's stake in the Australian theatre revolution of the early 70s, offering local works in a variety of popular styles and lively versions of the classics, including Shakespeare. Since Nimrod folded Bell has maintained his reputation as the actor most likely to make sense of great parts from *Cyrano* to *Arturo Ui* to *Prospero*.

The Trust is now doing what it was set up to do 30 years ago—before it was waylaid into over-optimistic entrepreneurial ventures like *Sugar Babies* and *Lennon*. In the same way that it brought business expertise to the nascent Australian Opera, Ballet and various orchestras before launching them as established entities, it has used its political, social and business contacts to bring the BSC to life. "We're pretty battle hardened," says

Trust director and BSC Chairman, Adam Salzer, "aggressively cheese-paring in administration and able to call on a network of deeply caring, influential people. John, who's fabulous at raising money, was able to bring in the Labor lawyers like Wran, Whitlam and Horler, who are part and parcel of his background.

"But it's hard work...lunching and dining for weeks on end. The US way of fund-raising is so cold...it's hard not to cheapen a product, especially in a buyers' market.

"But we knew we couldn't ask any government for half a million dollars without depriving other arts bodies. Government, anyway, gives too little and expects too much...But, having got an unsubsidised company, we're marketing it differently too - aiming to get two thirds of the audience from 'events-based' shows like *Aida* and *Carmen*, the arena operas."

Is this the way John Bell really wanted it? Playing on a raised circular stage in the centre of a hot tent with lousy sightlines and no scenery to a couple of rows of punters paying \$45 to subsidise the rest at \$29, and kids expected to stump up \$19? Can this be the "widespread and unconventional audience" that he set out to find in his outline—and can this audience be found anyway by a company which also has to be a business?

The BSC will certainly have to raise more money in the future to subsidise seats on the small town and western suburbs visits it plans; and, more importantly, to find the million dollars needed for the demountable Globe-style theatre which has always been an essential part of Bell's dream for achieving the intimacy and touring capacity needed to present Shakespeare in his chosen style.

And what of the first two productions—*Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*? It has to be said right away that they were personal triumphs for John Bell...if all his actors came anywhere near matching his Shylock, then he'd be home and hosed. And in his direction of *Hamlet*, I believe he has laid down the pattern for his overall goal of the "theatre of thought-out words". *Hamlet* is a detective story in which a

teenage Hamlet struggles to find his way through the complexities of human relations and the mysteries of politics. Actor John Polson is rarely beautiful; he's acne and whole-hearted, suffering with his character, and only lapsing occasionally in that huge part from thinking his way through lines that so often are merely spouted.

Apart from Bell's Shylock, the attempt in the *Merchant* at simple story-telling had just enough interpretive graftings by director Carol Woodrow to reveal the flaws in the play without sweeping me along with the plot. What is the "love" between Antonio (the merchant) and Bassanio; and why is the latter described as a "soldier and a scholar", yet dresses like a pop star and acts like a gigolo? And why does Susan Lyons's delightful, intelligent Portia fall for him and put herself completely in his charge? And what was the Jew's daughter, Jessica, saying about her feelings of guilt over her father's flesh-craving behaviour or at having deserted him by wearing a bewildering series of lycra cycling outfits?

Shylock is just so watchable that the others hardly need to be on stage. From his entrance, eased by Hatton Garden Jewish jokes, through the

episodes of Christian intolerance emphasised by the loss of Jessica (and his ducats) to a gentile, to the opening of the court case, one follows him with inexorable logic. And then - shades of Saddam Hussein - when one expects him to pull back, he calmly produces a knife, a whetstone and the scales to weigh Antonio's pound of flesh, and one realises that behind those myopic glasses there is a man one doesn't understand. And as he sidles crablike and broken offstage between pillars of Christian hatred, one is incapable of weighing him on the normal scales of justice - as one is incapable of judging so much of the morality in this play. Perhaps that's what Shakespeare intended - and perhaps that justifies the Bell Shakespeare Company's continued existence?

The Bell Shakespeare Company visits Melbourne's Athenaeum Theatre (the city's impoverished condition did not encourage the full tented version) from 6 March, and Brisbane—in the tent on the riverbank by QPAC—from 3 April. Every capital is promised a visit during the first three seasons. Negotiations are already in train with Japan for a tour in 1992.

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Rude Awakenings

Almost alone among the chief intellectuals of the old GDR, Heiner Müller refused to accept the ruling myths. Paul Hockenos spoke to him in his Berlin flat.

1 1990 was a rough year for intellectuals in the now-defunct German Democratic Republic (GDR). However curbed under the dictatorship, culture func-

tioned as one of the only mediums for social critique and protest.

During the fleeting days of last autumn, the population and its artists appeared united on the streets of Leip-

zig and East Berlin. But the hopes of the country's foremost intellectuals were quickly dashed. The outpouring of resentment against society's privileged elite shocked the painters and authors, directors and poets. They retreated to their desks, ideals shattered.

Even for arch-sceptic Heiner Müller, known as the GDR's Beckett for his grim, apocalyptic plays, the depth of embitterment proved a rude awakening. A notorious outsider, the playwright stayed mostly on the sidelines while the Christa Wolfes and Barbel Bohleys petitioned their visions of a new society. But when the most celebrated dramatist-director since Bertolt Brecht made his appearance on the revolution's stage, he fared no better than the rest. Before he had stumbled through a text prepared for him by the Initiative for Independent Trade Unions at a November rally, the crowd booed him.

Müller's reticent political debut was as out of character as it was ill-timed. Although loose and congenial in the confines of his East Berlin flat, the 61-year-old writer is obviously uneasy with the crowds of critics and fans that now swamp him in theatre lobbies. In his output of plays, poems and essays over three decades, the tragedy of cultural elitism and revolutionary utopias have been dominant themes. In press interviews, the often caustic Müller has come down hard on the naivety of the Wolfes and Bohleys.

"One aspect of State policy was to drive a wedge of privilege between the intellectuals and the population," Müller explains in his raspy voice. "You may travel, the other may not. The privileged cannot speak for the under-privileged."

Last autumn, the people who had been silenced for 40 years finally had the chance to speak for themselves. As usual, he argues, the intellectuals tried to formulate goals too early in the name of the people. "They always want to build something, when first the masses must tear it down," he adds.



The striptease of humanism lays bare the bloody roots of culture.
—Heiner Müller.

On the 14th floor of a uniform cement tower block, the author's flat looks hardly like the abode of privilege. Topped stacks of books and aging newspapers lie scattered across the yellow-brown lino floor. Müller grins. He lights another 8-inch cigar. An open bottle of scotch sits on the kitchen table. He locates his guest a clean glass. In his standard attire of a black T-shirt, jeans and polyester jacket, he reflects on his own complex relationship with the GDR. As the son of a textile worker imprisoned in 1933 for his work with the Social Democrats, the young Müller first saw the socialist state through the eyes of his anti-fascist upbringing. "I was raised in one dictatorship and then came the anti-dictatorship," he says. "It was the liberation from 'the other', but I couldn't identify with that system either."

After a short stint as a journalist for the weekly *Sonntag* and *New German Literature* journal, he concentrated on his creative work from the early 1950s. The 27-year-old writer's first plays reflect his own internal struggle over the goals and the realities of the new state. As his tone became more abrasive, his works were banned for their "perspectiveless defeatism". In 1961, he was finally expelled from the Writers Union. Four years later, his wife and co-worker, the poet Inge Müller, committed suicide.

Even during the hardest years of stalinism and neo-stalinism, intellectuals like Müller enjoyed a modicum of freedom to write and produce. Then, as now, the dramatist drew heavily on the classics and, above all, upon Shakespeare. It was impossible to write a piece directly about stalinism in the early 60s, he explains above the city din. "One needed these models when one really wanted to pose questions." In this way, theatre had an immediate, vital function in the GDR. Pieces may have been censored or banned, but when one finally got two or three hours of stage time, it was free. It was similar in Shakespeare's day, he contends, with the monarchy and the proletariat: "For the proletariat theatre was actually the first attempt at democracy."

Yet for Müller, the relationship between theatre and democracy, between politics and culture, is far from

clear cut. "The problem with theatre is that it is allowed everything and can do nothing," he grins again. Smack in the middle of the heated debate over the role of art and the artist in the new Germany, the maverick finds himself still at odds with the establishment. The playwright scorns the idea that 'high culture' or the fashionable concept of a German Kulturation can somehow prevent a relapse into the political atrocities of the past. In fact, he maintains, high culture itself is deeply complicit in the legacy of modern barbarism. "As long as freedom is grounded on violence and art on privilege," he argues, "art works will have the tendency to serve as prisons, the masterpieces themselves complicit with the ruling power."

The 80s brought Müller from relative obscurity to the forefront of European theatre. Since the wall's removal, his pieces are the most played in Germany, running to overflow crowds from Freiburg to Rostock. Müller's subject seems an unlikely one for box office records: his problematic is history, above all German history. The condition of the *Deutsche Misere* and the continuity of tragedy and violence in history thread their way as common themes through every play. His works deconstruct the modern condition, exposing the conscious and unconscious structures that have perpetuated themselves from medieval Prussia to the newly united Germany. Like an archaeologist, the director-writer unearths layer after layer of ossified lies and silence. At the bottom, the structures of modern socialism, as well as those of post-industrial capitalism, rest on the same foundations that justified Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen.

From his earliest pieces, Müller's work has been a polemic with the master of socialist drama himself, Brecht. In the 1956 play *The Wage Squeezed*, he juxtaposes the new-found 'socialist consciousness' of the party-true worker in the late 40s to the resistance he meets from his former Nazi colleagues. The piece, done roughly in the style of Brecht's didactic theatre, won him the stage's highest prizes in the GDR. But the regime soon soured "on the playwright's increasingly bleak evaluation of the East German state. His art's form moved steadily away

from the Brechtian model, becoming ever more surreal, obtuse, fragmented.

While his focus shifted from the building of German socialism to the larger dilemmas of contemporary Europe, the German questions have always served as Müller's reference point. "There never was a Zero Hour and there never will be," comments Müller from behind his thick, black-framed glasses. The West German politicians are peddling the fiction that the 'post-war' chapter of their history has finally come to an end. "Politics survives on dispossession and forgetting," he elaborates. "The Federal Republic is simply using the 40 years of the GDR to bury the 12 of the Nazi era. But Auschwitz existed and will always exist—whether the Germans want to forget it or not."

Müller's views on politics and culture must be difficult to reconcile with his new position as president of the still-East Berlin Academy of Arts. For decades compromised with the cultural policies of the old regime, the institution looked hard for a clean name to put it back on its feet. "I had only one argument against it: I don't have the slightest desire to take this post. And that's no argument," explains the freshly-elected president. The new chief wants to convert the former bastion of provincialism into an international organisation with a rotating presidency occupied by a non-German. No less contrary to his decades-long themes, he hopes to cultivate a "state and ideology free space" where innovation in all the parts may occur.

Müller's unlikely position is, in fact, the ultimate statement of his art's form. Neither his plays nor his politics offer the ready-made solutions that people await so eagerly from their public figures. Müller's dialectic of contradiction is an initial impulse toward confronting the vicious cycle of history. "Naturally art must disturb," he argues, reflecting on the united Germany. "And now we must determine how and what it can and must disturb."

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