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When the way out was in: avant-garde theatre in Australia, 1965-1985

Adrian John Guthrie

University of Wollongong

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WHEN THE WAY OUT WAS IN: AVANT-GARDE THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA 1965 - 1985

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

ADRIAN JOHN GUTHRIE, MCA (Wollongong)

FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS

1996
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Above all, my efforts have been supported by my wife and children: Liliana Licina has her own theatre credits and together we have Rhys, Imogen and Cynthia who are our best productions by far. Although Liliana may have feared me lost to the brazen IBM in my study, it is with her that I have parented this other, troublesome offspring, the manuscript before you now.
Abstract

The advent of modern and postmodern theatre in Australia in the years 1965 to 1985 was stimulated by increased communication and travel between Australia and the rest of the world and this reflected international trends associated with youth culture and the counter culture. Conservative discouragement of modern theatre in Australia was overcome by broadly-based support for 'alternative' cultural activity in this period. The international model of the *theatre experiment* and the *theatre laboratory* were widely influential in Australia, as was the practice of the *theatre workshop*. These were key means of the production of performances within modern theatre and laid the ground for the reflection of feminist, poststructuralist and formalist discourses in the postmodern theatre of the nineteen-eighties in Australia. The college and university sector were vital in providing environments for the emergence of an Australian theatre. A nationalist theatre emerged from the anti-establishment and anti-colonial alternative theatres and was rapidly transferred to the mainstages of the state theatre companies.
**Abbreviations used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AETT</td>
<td>Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust</td>
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<td>APG</td>
<td>Australian Performing Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTC</td>
<td>Melbourne Theatre Company</td>
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<td>MWTG</td>
<td>Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
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<td>PAYBA</td>
<td><em>Performing Arts Year Book of Australia</em> volumes 1 - 6, Sydney: Showcase Publications, 1977 - 1982, various editors. [From 1976 to 1979 PAYBA was published the following year. For example PAYBA 1976, was published in 1977. There was no volume titled, PAYBA 1980. PAYBA 1981 and 1982 list activities of the previous years, 1980 and 1981, respectively. In this study PAYBA are refered to by title, not presumed publication date.]</td>
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Introduction
Introduction

The proposition

The influences which supported the adoption of modern theatre and postmodern theatre in Australia in the period 1965 to 1985 provided a framework for the articulation of a diversity of representations of Australian-ness and a plurality of Australian voices. The international social flux expressed in the radicalisation of youth culture, the counterculture and the New Left vitalised avant-garde theatre practice and, in Australia, this converged with a reaffirmation of nationalism. These cultural mechanisms shifted the neo-colonial constraints on Australian theatre and allowed cosmopolitan and contemporary theatre (as defined on page 14) to become established in Australia.

The New: Radical, Experimental and Avant-garde

The intention in this thesis is to describe a major, but largely unrecorded, section of new Australian theatre from 1965 to 1985, out of which have come many of the defining characteristic of Australian theatre as it now is practiced and understood.

I am setting out to make a straightforward historical account of a very un-straightforward category of work, which is, nonetheless, largely self-defining. The makers of the work used labels that - with only a very few expectations, discussed later - signal their inclusion in this category of new work. These labels were clear markers, but, as is frequently the problem with critical terms, the meaning and application shifted and contained contradictions. Such contradictions in the way key terms were used were characteristic of this shifting period between modernism and postmodernism. There are also contradictions in the values of science and mysticism (discussed on page 5), notions of success and failure (page 6) and the responsibility taken by individuals and groups collectively (pages 5, 8 and throughout). Above all - and foundational to this thesis - there was a characteristic contradiction between the impulse towards inclusiveness and the exclusion of a non-coterie audience (usually the
(usually the middle-class), at whose expense work was often directed in an active attack. That which was not of the moment, the old fashioned and the past itself became the enemy, as it had become for the historical avant-gardes. Rosalind Krauss (1986: 157) has noted the “many guises” of the avant-garde artist, pointing to the concept of originality as the apparently common thread that she then takes further, commenting that the Futurists saw themselves within a “parable of absolute self-creation.” It is a “metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition...” This conception of the original present opposed to the past, describes a significant element in the culture of the later twentieth century, which is also found manifest in the counter culture, rock and roll and experimental theatre. It is ironic that, in itself, this concept became a tradition.

The period

The period 1965 to 1985 was marked by major changes in Australian society and cultural life. If the preceding decade, 1955 to 1964, produced a growing number of instances of modern theatre and the first modern Australian vernacular theatre to be acclaimed, it was still a promise rather than a fulfilment of a modern Australian theatre. Major contributors to modern theatre in Australia, Barry Humphries and Ray Lawler both went to England to prove their mettle in this earlier period, and, in the neo-colonial manner, they stayed. This suggests the potential shift which was to occur in the following decade when artists stayed in Australia (some even returned from overseas) and prospered. A viable modern national theatre grew, catalysed by active avant-garde theatre. The avant-garde theatre challenged the conservative mainstream theatre and prompted change. The two were mutually dependent in their historical and critical emergence.

A national theatre in an international context

The theatre in the years 1965 to 1985 in Australia was exposed to a period of dynamic social change. Advocates of the new Australian plays described them, at the time, as an ‘indigenous’ flowering of national theatre that was not beholden to anywhere else. However, this study will argue that Australian theatre in this period was deeply influenced by a number of currents in the international cultural environment that were expressed in avant-garde theatre. These included the emergence of youth culture, music, and the
celebration of liberty and the opposition to the institutions of authority encapsulated in Theodore Roszak's term the *counter culture*. There was a slow realisation of Australian identity in the post-colonial context and a recognition of modernism in the Australian theatre after a long period of resistance. The women's liberation movement placed an emphasis on matters of gender and sexuality that had a pervasive influence. This international context did not weaken the significance or artistic viability of the Australian avant-garde theatre that emerged. To the contrary, it provided an abiding framework within which to place the ephemera of performances that might otherwise remain unrecognised critically.

The development of air transport and electronic communications technology in this period shifted Australia into a closer relationship to the rest of the world and gave greater exposure to international trends. For a nation with relative wealth and a small population that had been locked out of the contemporary world by its unequivocal geographic isolation, Australian society was profoundly changed by the development of larger passenger aircraft that allowed an unprecedented movement of individuals within Australia and internationally. The spread of television to virtually all Australian households occurred in this period. Australia was now linked to the world through this medium and the use of coaxial telecommunication cables and satellites that linked us instantaneously to the rest of the world. With this dynamically increased mobility international visitors now fell into a different juxtaposition to local theatre. There was an outright change in the types of artists to visit Australia: from the trickle employed by the commercial theatres to a steady flow as part of a newly established *international festival circuit*. Instead of these visitors standing as the sole carrier of the cultural authority, theatre practitioners visiting Australia were now part of a more equal flow of major ideas internationally.

Major international influences on avant-garde theatre in Australia in this period included off-Broadway plays and venues that were economically and creatively self-generated, as well as the New York experimental theatres. Also from the United States of America, street theatres associated with student political movements were influential in Australia, as were the *alternative theatres* working in the community in the United Kingdom. Modern European theatre - then obscured by Martin Esslin's critical construct of a *Theatre of the Absurd* - was taken up in the margins; as was the intensely disciplined work of Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and Peter Brook with his Centre for International Theatre
Creations with its pursuit of a universal theatre language. The highly physical homoerotic theatre of Lindsay Kemp, and the painterly conceptual theatre of Tadeusz Kantor, had an impact on theatre making in Australia. There were also a few instances of the theatres of Asia influencing Australian work. Various projects in Australia took up these influences in different ways, but the local work entered new territory and - with considerable vanity - generally rejected mere emulation. Nonetheless, Australian avant-garde theatre was frequently chastised by local critics for 'imitating' overseas models. Overseas groups, which increasingly visited Australian arts festivals, were not criticised by the same critics for their participation in an ongoing tradition that entailed influence, emulation and quotation of other's work. It took time for critics to regard local work as part of a set of international concerns. This critical parochialism reflected a continuing reluctance to acknowledge the viability of modern ideas, and subsequently postmodern ideas, in the arts and the social environment in Australia.

The particularly dynamic time of change in neo-colonial Australia saw the overturning of a notion of assimilation as a dominant social principle. The conservative emphasis on assimilation insisted that Australia should be a homogeneous society, in which 'stability' was to be valued above all and diversity was to be rejected. Australia was never such a society. This attitude, however, served the interests of a ruling elite and propped up the 'right to rule' of conservative Liberal Party governments in the postwar years: their supporters who were wealthy families and the upwardly mobile middle-class who wanted to join the rulers in a maverick society that cherished civility. These had been the prevailing values in Australian national discourse prior to this time, and remained influential ideas that have focused key national debates.

From the contemporary international arena came the formative issues that were to shift Australian society in this period. The national liberation struggles and processes aimed at ending colonialism has a deep impact in Australia, evident in the theatre of the time. Global action to end racism, and the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements, as well as women's liberation, reflected a trend towards direct popular political action. These were cause for public protest and debate in Australia in the context of the stasis of the cold war. From the geographic margins of formerly colonised nations gathered at the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in 1963 came a widespread acceptance of the expression, 'the third world'. Australia began to see its place in the world with a new strategic geographical
perception linked to Asia and the Pacific. Globally there were parallel impulses towards nationalism and beyond nationalism towards a new internationalism, other than international socialism, based on economic common interests and indicated by emerging international organisations known by clusters of initials, such as, EEC, OECD, OPEC and ASEAN. Australia was no longer linked to Britain as it had been. The trend in the theatre to establish recognisable statements of Australian nationalism was followed almost immediately by material which went beyond mere nationalism to an internationalist or non-nationalist postmodernity. The emergent Australian nationalism was imbued with high levels of self-consciousness and even self-parody in its new representations of Australian identity

The other: alternative society, counter culture, subculture

Within the counter culture there was a utopian search for principles of socialisation opposed to the bourgeois family, which had a direct impact on many theatre groups aspiring to create avant-garde theatre at this time. The new social patterns of group households and other ersatz-families were seen as a new tribalism, which attempted to unify belief, art and life. This came close to a restatement of a condition of the historical avant-gardes. At this time there was a profound ambivalence towards technology within the counter culture, which was divided between ‘good’ technology, like lysergic acid diethylamide and geodesic domes, for example, and ‘bad’ technology, such as nuclear technology.

The models that had an impact on the formation of avant-garde theatre in Australia, it can be argued, had their origins in the key ideas of the historical avant-gardes and their continuing influence. Antonin Artaud’s proposed post-colonial project was, in effect, to materialise in Australia in the work of Nightshift, and the All Out Ensemble. In both aesthetically and politically radical avant-garde theatres there were key strategies embraced in this period that challenged the conventions governing the presentation and representation of violence and sex. These can be viewed as a testing of the issues of power and freedom through manipulation of the sites of transgression. Such work also provided indicators of the extent of the domain of the sovereign individual. From a conventional Marxist position individualism and artistic autonomy were the abhorrent apotheoses of the bourgeois condition, but from the more liberal position of the New Left this was a legitimate site for social action to shift society towards revolutionary renewal.
The avant-garde theatre was concerned with developing the theatre through a process of experimentation. The theatre laboratories of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, and later Grotowski, were the models for this trend. A scientific process was suggested by their systematic application of highly developed regimes of bodily and mental exercise. Also they developed apparently scientific formulations of theory, based on acute observations that were then the basis for careful modification of their processes in response to the results achieved. Contrary to this identification with conventional science, however, there were in these models a metaphysical preoccupation and a tendency to outright mysticism.

The experimental theatres of the study period were also often ecstatic theatres with tribe-like social structures. They embraced apparently eclectic historical and contemporary influences, but there were a number of key preoccupations that were broadly thematic through many of these groups. The central issues were cruelty and challenges to the civil authority through works of art that transgressed sexual and social norms similar to the strategies of the historical avant-gardes. Beyond this there was a widespread refusal to site work in conventional contexts. The problematisation of theatre representation, and the tension between the real and the performed, focused avant-garde work on various approaches to the artifice of the performance of spectacle, and led to a concentration upon the visual aspects of the theatre. At this time, the focus was generally (although not exclusively) away from language-based performances, and work was frequently identified as 'visual theatre'. The development of the performer through the systematic broadening of their skills and the deepening of their grasp of cultural traditions, produced a generation of accomplished artists empowered to engage in many levels of the creative activities of the theatre and to challenge this institution. The performer was now seen as a cultural medium. Projects in this period frequently explored the interaction of music and visual information in the performance, and developed increasing understanding and facility in harnessing for an audience this multi-sensorial realm of interacting elements.

Notions of 'success' and 'failure' for the avant-garde abound with ironies, and the origins of these lie in the historical model of the avant-garde. Appropriations from the avant-garde by the mainstream although often incongruous were not infrequent, and such commodifications were usually seen from the conventional perspective as 'successes'. From the outlaw's perspective, however, these were seen as treachery and a 'failure' of the avant-garde. It can be argued that even with the historical avant-gardes and their apparent 'purity'
of revolutionary position - 'to destroy the institution of art' - that this was a battle-cry rather than a plan of action. In the increasingly complex context of the decades to follow, the oppositional stance of the avant-garde has remained primarily rhetorical. These paradoxical relationships are nowhere more apparent than in the clear switching of marginal status to mainstream status that have occurred in the period this work describes.

By the end of the study period, despite economic rationalism, cutbacks, and political reversals that tended to push society and culture back into the mould of the neo-colonial order, Australia retained the substance of the social innovations of the period. Many of the new voices were not silenced, and diversity and pluralism were not reduced to a singular identity. By the nineteen-eighties, as Paul Taylor proposed in his editorial writing in *Art and Text*, a single oppositional counter culture had transformed into diverse subcultures. This complex interplay of many voices meant that commodification and appropriation could be negotiated in a multidimensional cultural environment. The conservative forces could not buy-out or suppress the multitude of other voices. What occurred was a sophisticated series of transactions and negotiated outcomes, in which cultural issues came to include the environment, gender and sexuality, and ethnicity. In this new democratic context, these 'forces' had to parley with 'traditional' political groups, and the trade unions, churches, social service organisations, educational lobby groups and the arts. This was a cacophonous exchange without the symmetry of a dialectic, but it has become increasingly the manner of postmodernism. The simple oppositional relationship disappeared amid a multitude of voices and mediated representations. In this context the avant-garde have, in a sense, a 'generic' role.

In this thesis it has not been assumed that work that is avant-garde existed in a single clearly defined domain. Avant-garde theatre was found in many different contexts in the period, including of course, the groups dedicated to experimental theatre, and the, so called, 'alternative theatres' of the nineteen-seventies. Yet avant-garde theatre was frequently produced in other contexts: within the output of regional theatres, and among works ostensibly for young audiences and schools, within the work produced for the generalised 'community theatre' and that for specific communities. On exceptional occasions avant-garde theatre was even produced within the confines of the inherently conservative state theatre companies and amateur theatres. Many theatre artists in Australia 'exploited' opportunities to do work provided by the 'niches' created by funding policies. Such artists
as Terry O'Connell, Rex Cramphorn and Mike Mullins, for example, did not necessarily stay within an ‘alterative’ or avant-garde category, but developed work where they could, over time in several different contexts, but frequently with avant-garde intentions.

In this period, no cases can be seen in Australia of avant-garde artists who achieved widely acclaimed international success and considerable levels of support, comparable to international theatre figures such as Robert Wilson or Pina Bausch. Although, within the context of an environment of more modest funding, Nigel Triffitt and Meryl Tankard have since become examples of artists whose work has substantial credibility because of its audacity and innovation. They represent a growing category of accepted avant-garde - to indulge an oxymoron - and are funded on that basis.

In Australia politically radical theatre and theatre with an aesthetically radical approach had a complex relationship. In the nineteen-seventies they were frequently identified as being at odds; however, artists and groups often slipped between these supposed contraries. Apparently aesthetically constructed groups were politically sophisticated. For example, Claremont was contrasted with La Mama and the Australian Performing Group, which were much more overtly political. Claremont, however, was structured as a collective and included individuals who were politically active, such as the writer John Mester and Alison Richards who was a political scientist. Within the Australian Performing Group smaller ensembles operated with their own aesthetics: Stasis was a long-running theatre laboratory. Nightshift was an ‘underground’ theatre committed to the subversion of bourgeois art forms and bourgeois society.

Within the counter culture there was a thrust to place political responsibility within the domain of the individual. This social and personal political ‘development’ prefigured the feminist axiom: the personal as political. The work of many artists can be seen to reflect this, including Lyndal Jones, Jenny Kemp, Bruce Keller and Derek Kreckler. The women’s movement, feminism and women’s theatre had an unequalled critical impact on the development of theatre in Australia. Influence occurred within the counter culture through informal networks. Local artists knew each other and knew each other’s work, and this extended to the international context where youth culture, rock and roll and drug culture provided a lingua franca.
Definitions

‘Avant-garde theatre’

This thesis seeks to embrace the shifting meanings for the term ‘avant-garde’ in the period so that this study might include new work that was placed in opposition to the current conventions. There was a range of oppositional positions, at the extreme end of which was work that was aimed at destroying the conventions of art making and the institution of art itself. Renato Poggioli’s theory of the avant-garde suggested a “cult of novelty” with its origins in the Romantic movement that prefigured the avant-garde in twentieth century modernism. (Poggioli 1984: 50) Peter Bürger’s theorisation of the avant-garde argued further that the historical avant-gardes set out to destroy the ‘institution of art’ and to place art practice in the everyday living of all people. (Bürger 1984: passim)4 This was a more explicitly political analysis and describes the preoccupation of the period. In an essay titled ‘The Politics of the avant-garde,’ Raymond Williams (1988: passim) pointed to the ambivalent role of radical politics within modernism throughout the twentieth century. This is the case in Australia in the period of this study only to the extent that some groups espoused political motives but adopted aesthetic means; while others denied political motives - some even denied politics itself - but embraced alternative social postures in opposition to bourgeois society, which were arguably as committed to the subversion of bourgeois values as conventional political action.

In some cases this theatrical field has been called: alternative, experimental, fringe, innovative or radical. These terms are themselves burdened with ambiguities, and none are simple alternatives for the other. The descriptive term, alternative, is entirely premised upon an oppositional position to something else, for example. ‘Experimentation’ is a process. ‘Fringe’ meant one thing in Melbourne, where the Fringe Network had great credibility as the opposition to the mainstream theatres. While in the early nineteen-eighties, it described something different in Sydney, where it was a name for a network of amateur theatres. ‘Innovative’ sits more coolly poised, and was the term used in Federal government funding policies through this period and was used arbitrarily, as a result. ‘Radical’ suggests a politically committed theatre, but also was used to describe the audacity of the aesthetically radical; as was the term, underground, which was associated mostly with film and the counter culture.
By assuming a position of oppositionality, which problematised the relationship of their work with proceeding conventional work, the makers of new theatre and performance material in this period were going beyond a notion creating cutting-edge work as an effect or style. When the avant-garde is defined by its capacity to ‘open the new ground beyond the frontier of the respectable mainstream’, this can mean little more than to be ahead of its time. Richard Kostelanetz (1982: 3), for example, has suggested that avant-garde work should satisfy three criteria: “transcend [...] current artistic conventions [...] establishing a discernible distance between itself and the mass of current practices; second, avant-garde work will necessarily take considerable time to find its maximum audience; and, thirdly, it will probably inspire future, comparably advanced endeavours.” This is the most modest of definitions and says nothing of the tradition of confrontation and rupture which is essential to the critique of art theorist Marjorie Perloff (1986). In her study, The Futurist Movement: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture, she is explicit in the necessity of such an oppositional strategy in the avant-garde. In art theory there is a widespread critical usage in which the avant-garde will entail the disruption or the radical rearrangement of prevailing codes in the making and receiving of art. (Krauss 1986: passim; Bürger 1984: passim; Călinescu 1987: 97-148)

The avant-garde performance of the period challenged the normative parameters of theatre practice. For example, there was work that explored improvisation and challenged the creative prerogatives allowed to actors, and questioned the authorship of the theatre work. There was work which breached the conventional disciplinary divisions, creating work that was inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary. There were investigations of the organisation of space and the ordering of place for performance. There were innovative ways developed of framing intercultural material; and exploring the functions of narrative. The new work of the period was often original in substance and usually created original juxtaposition for its contents, but originality itself was increasingly problematised with the emergence of postmodern work. There was a longstanding concern with exploratory processes through which new means of performance might be developed. Avant-garde theatre consistently tested the dialectic between form and content, and between life and art. The ‘failure of language’ is a key to modernism and postmodernism that has an especially central place in the avant-garde theatre in Australia, where language itself has been problematic in the Australian experience. Overall, avant-garde theatre of that time can be characterised by the
new evaluations it made of the relationship of performance to audience, and the new theatre practices that it developed from these explorations. One of the most significant characteristics of avant-garde theatre is that it has a 'coterie audience' and is contemptuous of a 'respectable' bourgeois audience.  

The term ‘avant-garde’ has had revolutionary connotations and a dominantly political usage for over a century. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin produced a periodical called L’Avant-garde, while in exile in Switzerland in 1878. (Poggiolo 1968: 8) Elsewhere Bakunin wrote that, “the joy of destruction is also a creative joy.” (Enzensberger 1988: 146) This is often rendered: To destroy is to create. As Călinescu (1987: 117) points out, this axiom “is actually applicable to most of the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde.” In 1902 Lenin wrote of the Communist Party as the avant-garde of the working class. There came to be a clear association of the term with the Communist Party. By 1912 Apollinaire had used avant-garde in writing of art: “The young Futurist painters can compete with some of our avant-garde artists.” Călinescu judged that, “by the second decade of our century, avant-garde, as an artistic concept, had become comprehensive enough to designate not one or other, but all the new schools whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and cult of the new.” (Călinescu 1987: 114-117)

In the revolutionary impulse common to the historical avant-gardes we find the origins of an abiding paradox: where, in an inversion of the hierarchy, the ruled rule. (Călinescu 1984: 104) This oxymoron may be a key to the avant-garde. It is analogous to a revolution in which a proletarian elite assume the absolute prerogatives of a ruling order to bring about an egalitarian, utopian state. In this is to be found the profound ambivalence of elitist/anti-elitist values that adhere to a notion of the avant-garde. Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ employed ‘avant-garde’ as a descriptor of, in effect, high art. This was in opposition to “a rear-guard,” Greenberg added, “to which the Germans give the wonderful name Kitsch.” (Greenberg 1986: 11) Positioning together the revolutionary and the avant-garde in opposition to bourgeois society, Greenberg presented it with a gloss of romanticised revolutionary heroism.

Until late in the nineteen-eighties the term avant-garde was conspicuously absent from the terms used to describe the new theatre emerging in Australia in the preceding twenty year
period. The critical writing in the *Bulletin* magazine was the notable exception as it assumed a tone of informed internationalism. Perhaps fashion had something to do with the disfavour for the term. It was also an aspect of the Australian inclination to downplay self-image. On top of this was the anti-intellectualism that characterised the counter culture in the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies. This mistrust of the intellect was not exclusive to Australia, and Bonnie Marranca chided in 1977, “that the avant-garde audience in New York is, in general, an *anti-intellectual* elite rather than an intellectual one.” (Marranca 1984: 116 Italics in the original.)

If, in the European perception, there was a sense of loss at the failure of the direct political action of students and workers in 1968, this contrasted with the Australian experience at this time, which was suffused with revolutionary optimism. The nationalist Labour Party under the charismatic Gough Whitlam narrowly failed to win the Federal election held in 1969 and Australia continued its increasingly unpopular involvement in the war in Vietnam. But this was reversed in 1972 with the electoral success of Labour. This win gave an opportunity for an unprecedented Australian nationalism that shifted institutions away from the colonial patterns. The arts prospered in a climate created by a conscious attempt to reform Australian society and culture. This historical disjunction saw much of the cultural innovation that had occurred internationally throughout the nineteen-sixties focused in Australia in the first years of the nineteen-seventies. The elegiac tone in Europe that followed 1968 was deferred in Australia until 1975 with the controversial dismissal of this reformist government by the representative of the Queen.

Within left leaning theatre organisations in Australia the advent of the New Left prompted opportunities for art making with a broad range of aesthetics beyond the strictures of social realism. If marked political ambivalence characterised the historical avant-gardes, this was not so in Australia in the early period of this study. There were no ‘progressive’ right-wing theatres in Australia at this time. Little significant innovation occurred within conservative theatres typified by the state theatre companies and the amateur theatre societies. A reverence for a narrow notion of the theatre tradition caused their common conservatism, and produced a cultural paralysis that stripped their repertoire of any social criticism. The avant-garde theatres held state theatre companies and the amateur theatres in contempt for these reasons.
On the other hand there were other limitations on the contribution made by avant-garde theatre, and it was not an automatic blue-print that anticipated the direction of the mainstream. The alternative social movement and the alternative theatres with their ecstatic projects tended to be marginalised by their own insularity and eccentricity. As the period continued, these theatres were increasingly “dispersed,” Berringer observed internationally, or they were “assimilated into the mainstream fashion and media.” (Berringer 1993: 42) He argued that fashion and marketing were able to subvert the radicalism of the Living Theatre, for example, despite that group’s intention to operate outside the institution of the theatre and to attack and destroy it. This view is similar to Bürger’s belief that the avant-garde failed when it was faced with late capitalist pluralism or postmodernism. (Bürger 1984: 99) For Berringer the problem was with the functions of postmodernism and its “culture industry looking for style and posture of radicalism marketable as sentimental or ironic fashions.” (Berringer 1993: 44 Italics in the original.)

The White Company in Australia were politically acute in some of their work in the early nineteen-seventies, and within an anarchic organisation they harnessed some of the vitality of campus revolt and social action around issues of race and the environment. Yet they were an essentially aesthetically defined ‘experimental theatre’, with an international perspective that acknowledged the influence of the Living Theatre. Ultimately their work was diffused, and its impact held almost entirely at a personal level. There was little or no appropriation - whether this is ‘good’ or ‘bad’- little or no commodification of the White Company. At a more general level however, innumerable details of the counter culture were appropriated and marketed to a new generation, and even ironically to those who had originally had whole foods and body oils, ambient music and therapy sessions, in their possession.

‘Modern’ and ‘postmodern’ theatre

Berringer suggests that the historical moment of transition to postmodern cannot be located, but Jameson places it around the beginning of the nineteen-sixties. (Jameson 1991: 1) Berringer identifies a principle of postmodernity that grounds it firmly upon the modern. “A radical theatre practice always wanted to abolish the margin of pretense, appearing and pretending to be alive and present to itself,” he wrote. (Berringer 1993: 45) Jonathan Kalb has observed that in the heart of modern theatre, “for Beckett, as for Artaud, artificiality...
is a natural state, and part of the theatre’s job is to demonstrate that: it is not mendacious when it avoids explicit contact with social issues; it is rather mendacious and manipulative when it fails to proclaim its duplicity, the essential collusion of its natural and artificial natures.” (Kalb 1988: 29) This was increasingly the case as modernism slipped or grew into postmodernism.

Raymond Williams has described modern drama as characterised by five criteria: contemporary contents, indigenous characters, vernacular speech, with egalitarian and secular principles. (Williams 1988: 309-310) These characteristics are easily discernable in the Australian theatre generally called modern, created after 1955, including the plays of Lawler and Williamson, and the work of the ensemble companies.

Throughout all varieties of modernism the essential principle is one of progress. It underpins such apparently diverse aspects of modernity as Darwinian evolutionary theory, and the dialectical models of Hegel and Marx, as well as the ideology of industrial development and technological advancement. This principle is vital to the concept of revolution, Tom Paine’s metaphor for convulsive political change. Progress was a determinant of modernism. This condition necessitated the formulation of a postmodernity in which progress was not the dominant principle, though much else may be similar. Arnold Toynbee coined this useful term in the context of Europe in the immediate postwar period. Rather than an unquestioning re-engagement with the primary focus of modernism, making the new, progress has been problematised in postmodernism and the focus given to values other than originality.

For some critics and artists this precipitated a crisis. Bürger identified the avant-garde with the progressive principle within modernism. By defining the avant-garde in terms of its revolutionary potential, Bürger saw the pluralism of the late twentieth century as “a simultaneity of the radically disparate” which denied the viability of an avant-garde, because, “no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced as art than any other.” (Bürger 1984: 63 Italics in the English text.) For others this disruption quite simply did not matter. Innovations became strategic and formal, and art returned to an autonomy that was moderated by the truly vast levels of consumption through the media, which arguably left the interface between art making and life extremely permeable. The distance between the “radically disparate” and the social activism of the
political commitment have become increasingly unstable amid the constantly shifting surfaces of mediated postmodernity.

The problematic nature of the avant-garde within postmodernism is that it is simultaneously an icon and yet it functions iconoclastically. Currently in a postmodern pluralist environment the historical avant-gardes have come to represent revered icons, and the coercive strategies of the avant-garde have come to dominate much popular culture. In the broader culture the avant-garde has recently provided crucial turning points around which some of the rapid and complex inversions of marginality and cultural centrality have switched. This seeming contradiction has developed through the ‘maturing’ of modernism into postmodernism. While Burger rejected the possibility of a contemporary avant-garde, and Raymond Williams expressed a fear that it may decay into a reactionary mode, nevertheless, within postmodernism the avant-garde has remained a vital model for theatre in Australia, as the final part of this thesis demonstrates.

The expressed political radicalism of groups within the Australian theatre varied within the study period. Virtually no politically right wing avant-garde groups or individuals developed in Australia, except perhaps the special case of the expatriate Barrie Humphries. However there were expressly left wing theatres, such as the Australian Performing Group. The social radicalism broadly associated with alternative society, at times tended to reject politics per se. The counter culture was often contemptuous of politics, and at times was simply uninterested in engaging in the conventional political discourse. This rejection was not uninformed, however. It was the product of a highly educated generation born after World War Two. Anarchy was being lived by a generation privileged to grow up in a time and place of sufficient wealth to allow them the leisure to ‘drop out’ of the bourgeois capitalist world, if they wished. The radicalism of Bakunin’s L’avant-garde was bearing fruit in Australia in the profound anarchy of the youth movement in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies. This occurred globally, and the proximity of life and art was celebrated on an unprecedented scale.

Some of the innovations of the avant-garde in Australian theatre were taken up by the mainstream almost immediately. Williamson’s work at La Mama was accepted by the state theatre companies within months of the Australian Performing Group moving into the Pram Factory. This rapid transition from the perimeter to the cultural centre does not deny the
marginal and radical nature of Williamson's work with the La Mama Group, which was later to become the Australian Performing Group. The group's terms of working and its means of working were contrary to the prevailing cultural mode at the Melbourne Theatre Company and in the social milieu of Melbourne at the time. The rapid adoption of the new vernacular drama by the mainstream need not render its avant-garde origins bankrupt. In the avant-garde generally, there is an inherent ambiguity in the terms success and failure. If the avant-garde feeds the mainstream, it is successful in its own demise.
Background to this thesis

The colonial larrikin tradition in neo-colonial Australia: vernacular or creole?

The oppositional avant-garde may have its cultural and historical origins in Europe, but it is prefigured in a significant way in Australia by the manner and means of the larrikin character: the wild colonial. These cultural phenomena converged in the late twentieth century as part of a major flowering of nationalism in Australia, and the outcome included the avant-garde theatre of this period.

What is the value of civilization in a land stolen and plundered by force? The colonisers of Australia saw themselves bringing civilization to an empty territory. Popular expressions of national culture are frequently caught between this conservative veneration of the strong and silent authority, and a brash egalitarian irreverence. Far from being in any way exclusive of each other, these contradictory attitudes are expressions of a single fundamental crisis. The wildness of the wild colonial boy, and the patriotism of the digger, stem from the same chip-on-the-shoulder. In a hostile environment in which the youth (for he is a young man) is neither an indigene, nor a newcomer. The native born - that is the colonial born European - is forever beyond the reach of the parental security of the mother country. Ever required to specify identity in terms of that maternal national origin and language, yet expelled by distance and circumstance from that comfortable and rich home. This can be regarded as the cause of a deep collective psychic scarring.

The foundation of the Australian nation was never clearly marked by a decisive break from its imperial possessor, Britain. The metropolitan colonial power simply shifted the administrative thresholds from several semi-autonomous colonies to a largely autonomous federated Dominion, effectively retaining responsibility for foreign relations for a further forty years. By contrast, the United States of America was clearly and unambiguously established by the American Revolution. For royalist or revolutionary alike the significance of the victory of the American colonies and their Union was a fact upon which a national (dramatic) literature could be built. (Ashcroft 1989: 16) The establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia at the dawn of the new century was suffused with great idealism, and Australia was seen internationally as the new nation, the great social experiment. The articulation of national identity in Australia involved the negotiation of
the contention between the ‘native born’ larrikin rhetoric, exemplified by the Bulletin magazine, and the gentry-view, which was sometimes more British than the British, that Australia was a dominion outpost of Empire. There was a remarkable synthesis of these views in the initial degree of support for Australian forces going to the aid of Empire in the First World War. Australian fighting men, it was thought, would stand the equal of any in the war that was to end all wars.

The collective spirits of the nation were high in the decade leading up to the Great War. Thus, the appalling outcome of that distant conflict on the small population of Australia is difficult now to imagine. With a population of 4,875,325, Australia had sent 331,781 into battle in the First World War: 59,342 were killed and 152,171 wounded. (Souter 1976: 209) A generation of young men was decimated. Australia has never really found a cultural expression for this catastrophic loss. The horror was too great, and a mass denial eventually set in. The returning soldiers huddled together for mutual understanding of an experience that was literally beyond explanation.

The nationalist bubble, which they had raised so high at Federation, had burst. The eyes of the world had shifted from Australia to the Russian revolution, which became the new global laboratory for social reform. The young nation had laid its bets on the prowess of its young men and the brave romance of its progressive reforms, and it had lost heavily and painfully on both. There seemed to be no solace but to withdraw into the embittered mode of the bushie weathering the bad times, the other side of the wild colonial boy: the battler, the little digger.

Residual institutions of British rule still masked the emergence of an Australian cultural identity. Even the radicalism and artistic bohemianism of the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties fell short of the promise at Federation. Louis Esson’s plays and his amateur company, the Pioneer Players, did not lead to the establishment of a national dramatic literature, as had occurred in Ireland with the writing of Yeats, O’Casey and Synge, and was happening in the United States of America with O’Neill and others. The population of Australia was small and turned culturally inwards with a collective self depreciation that froze the national narrative in a select vision of the pioneer suffering in the landscape. This view was only contested by a perspective that deferred to the mother culture in Britain: the colonial seeking assurance of a cultural authenticity from abroad.
The introduction of modernism to Australia faced active opposition. Australia was poised for much of this century between political extremes of right and left, and in this context the role of the anti-authoritarian larrikin figure was a means asserting an Australian identity. The relationship of the marginal culture to the imperial centre for Australia was figured in the role and narratives of the *wild colonial boy*, that is, the *larrikin*.

There is now a question - unthinkable earlier in Australia’s white history - but perhaps, at the end of the twentieth century, it might be asked, if this larrikin figure is not a type of *creole* identity? That is, in the generic sense, one who is born of European parentage in a land distant from that centre.

The problem of the terrible relationship between the blundering and tyrannous European invaders and the Aborigines remained largely unarticulated for two hundred years. This silence served the interests of the conquerors. Any collective guilt or apprehension of the enormous crimes committed in the name of civilisation were beyond easy articulation. The word ‘genocide’ itself is a creation of the postmodern world. Australia was a place apart from Europe. Its *otherness* and its strange alien natural environment were essentially without names or descriptive terms for the Europeans. What was *unnamed* was usually *unseen*. The Latin label, *Terra Nullius*, suggested an empty or un-peopled land and this denial was part of the justification of occupation by the British. The Orphans’ Home at Cabramatta was the institutional repository for many children of Aboriginal women by white men. This first inter-racial generation were denied inclusion in both societies. This perpetuated a bondage that was the corollary of convict status. It added a further remove in the alienation of the *wild colonial* children, the name given to these urchins who had to make their own way in the world. They were marginalised and vilified within a society that was itself construed by its European patrons to be the extremity of isolation and undesirability.

The wild colonial boy, far from the culture of authenticity, adopted a pugnacious stance that was seemingly anti-authoritarian. His impatience and his verbal blows were aimed at the high culture that was represented by the new arrivals from the mother country. The newcomer offended the ‘old lad’ with their authoritative accents and fashionable clothes that betokened recent proximity to their cultural origin. In response the colonial celebrated his vulgarity and encoded, in his street-talk, his trust in himself and his resentment of the
maternal order.

True to its Latin origin, the model of vernacular language clearly proposes a cultural hierarchy: The imposed imperial language of occupation above the substratum of native language, that is, the vernacular language. There are ironic complexities in the case of Australian language because of the existence of genuinely indigenous Aboriginal culture, which leaves all discussion of 'authenticity' within the invading culture to pall. When we speak of 'vernacular literature' in English we are compounding a further displacement in which Aborigines "are doubly marginalized - pushed to the psychic and political edge of societies which themselves have experienced the dilemma of colonial alienation" (Ashcroft et al 1989: 144) The nineteenth century usage, exemplified by John Dunmore Lang, which has the child of European parentage born in Australia called a native, is clearly ironic. Until the nineteen-nineties it was a common usage to speak of 'an indigenous Australian culture' and not mean Aboriginal culture. The denial of the meaning of this phrase suggests the widespread and profound lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal people and culture. The appropriation of Aboriginal prerogatives, even in language, has been almost absolute.

Further contradictions compound the metaphoric use of the term vernacular to describe the local culture in contemporary Australia. The model proposes a language of occupation overlaying the vernacular language, but we are referring to forms of the same language, English, and not separate languages. There is a distinction between British-English and local English, but more than this, there is a special role for the language of the larrikin. This vital form of local English is more than a regional idiom or style. It has become the signifier of national identity. This potent language is a form of argot - a secret language of rogues and thieves - and it is charged with social and subcultural codes to exclude outsiders. In both the Latin sense and in the modern usage this language is vulgar. Its vulgarity is gauged to mark out whom it will exclude and whom it will include. The mechanism of exclusion/inclusion is parallel to the function of the coterie audience of the avant-garde. Paradoxically this allows one group to identify as 'belonging' to the clique while everybody else is outside, and it also allows one to identify with these groups. Significantly it recalls the paradoxical shift imbedded within the concept of the revolution: After the revolution, those ruled rule. There is a similar duality of inclusion and exclusion implied in the concepts of the avant-garde, the revolutionary model and the mechanism of an argot.
In Australia there are social hierarchies, but they are not predominantly ordained by social class, and do not carry with them widely recognised ‘acceptable’ accents or patois. To the contrary, recently in Australia there have been many examples of successful and powerful people who adopt a ‘common’ language mode. This can be seen to be a general trend. Beyond the laudable egalitarianism of this trend, lies the tricky persona of the larrikin, and the mechanism of assimilation of divergent communities into a normative bourgeois society that displays mere tokens of freedom and equality.

Vernacularisation has displaced the cultural synthesis that might be implicit in creolisation. The vernacular is a substratum beneath the official language, the creole is an alternative language that contends with the dominant language for legitimacy. The oppositional stance of the colonial employed a closed language of abuse, and a streetwise facility to dismiss with cutting wit anything and anyone who might challenge the legitimacy of the place and power-base established by the old chum.

For the colony there appeared no alternative to its possession by the parent culture. This was a given value, despite the evident reality that this possession was disrupted by distance and the time taken to exchange communications around the globe. This was an idea of possession. Although the interlopers were initially numerically weak and perilously remote, it was the very abstraction of the notion of colonial possession that appeared to strengthen the bond, rather than weaken it.

Because the Australian colonies did not see themselves as a newly emergent melange - with their traditions in their European parentage as well as the local environment and possibly the indigenous culture - the cultural wealth of an acknowledgement of creole identification has been denied in Australia. Instead in the nineteen-fifties Australia sought to achieve a homogeneous cultural makeup, and adopted official policies of ‘assimilation’. At the same time, however postwar migration was creating a society with levels of cultural diversity which were to overwhelm these policies aimed at homogeneity. By the mid-nineteen-seventies new policies of multiculturalism articulated a growing recognition of the possibilities contained within Australia’s cultural diversity. Yet the hierarchy of old chum over new chum still holds sway. To this day, recently arrived migrant groups - Turks, Poles, Chinese, Vietnamese - get the traditional ‘raw deal’ handed out to the pom.
A crisis of language

When Peter O’Shaughnessy and Barry Humphries performed Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in 1957, audiences received it well. The ‘failure of language’, which was a concern of both modern theatre and postmodernism, was not a crisis for the Australian audience as it had been in Europe. For Australians, hearing great silences was not new. Faced with the unspeakable, the lugubrious *Aussie digger*, the *battler*, the *wild colonial* was still, was silent, then cracked a not-so-funny joke, spat on the ground, thought about the difficulty of speech in silence, and perfected the laconic utterance. In Australia, at the apparent end of the Earth, Beckett’s play met the world, as migration had produced in Australia a complex and cosmopolitan society that included people and cultures of much of the globe. This was to be even more so after the demise of the infamous white Australia policy in 1972, and the introduction of policies which recognised and articulated Australia’s multicultural composition. By the period of this study, Australian society was changing and was to allow the development of a diversity of approaches to theatre including an avant-garde.
Methodology

The term: ‘theatre artists’

In this thesis I write of ‘theatre artists’, using this inclusive term, ‘artists’, to describe the group of individuals who work creatively in the theatre as actors, directors, playwrights, designers, dramaturgs and in combinations of these as performance-makers and in other roles. The term ‘artist’ also serves to suggest that theatre artists have an equal standing with those in other disciplines, such as painting or literature. In our culture ‘the artist’ is privileged with a creative autonomy and freedom to voice even dissident ideas. In twentieth century modernism, ‘the artist’ is seen to have an obligation to stand critically outside the norms and accepted structures of middle-class society.

The approach in this thesis

This thesis is concerned with theatre influenced by ideas of the avant-garde that was made in Australia in the years 1965 to 1985 when both modern and postmodern practices were operating, sometimes simultaneously. It is concerned with the formal qualities of this work and the then contemporary critical and social influences that stimulated the creation of this work and allowed it to occur. Through an analysis of how and where work was presented and by whom, and what was the reception given to this work, this thesis examines the significance of avant-garde theatre in Australia in the context of the impact of international modernism and postmodernism and the restatement of Australian nationalism.

It is my intention in this thesis not to quarantine women’s theatre, or gay theatre, or theatre from non-English speaking communities but to be inclusive and, at times, to exercise a type of discriminatory blindness towards these otherwise marginalising factors: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, popular/high art, excellence, and to a significant degree to ‘ignore’ even the matter of divisions into forms. I aim to value equally theatre with a text that has literary merit and work that deliberately sets out to treat such values as literary narrative with contempt. Initially the strategy to be blind to category divisions was intended to allow a survey undertaken to resolve where avant-garde work had occurred, in the absence of an articulated and detailed ongoing critical evaluation in either academic journals or in the daily press. Undertaking this it became clear that such categories had only indirect relationship
to where work, characterised as avant-garde, had been attempted.

In Australia these categories have been reinforced by funding policies. Although it may appear that these categories are the products of arts funding programs: theatre-in-education, community arts, art and working life, a recent focus on Asia. To ignore these categories in seeking out avant-garde theatre is to acknowledge that artists used these programs as a way to support their work by adapting to funding programs. Some proportion of the work created in the programs listed above was opportunistic occupation of those niche positions in funding programs by groups and individuals creating avant-garde theatre. A review of the Australia Council’s grants indicates that the greatest diversity of theatre work was supported in 1984, at the culmination of the period covered by this thesis. (Australia Council Annual Reports) I have not focused on categorisations derived from either funding sources or the form, style or politics of the work, nor on work by particular groups or sited in particular places.

**Research and interviews**

This study has been based on consideration of documents in the archives at the Dennis Wolanski Library in Sydney, and at the Performing Arts Museum and the LaTrobe Library in Melbourne. A substantial number of interviews with practitioners who worked in avant-garde theatre were recorded for this thesis. I interviewed artists with the help of Howard Stanley and Errol Bray, who interviewed people on my behalf. These interviews were tape-recorded on cassettes and transcribed. In most cases the interviewers gave the respondents a printed questionnaire which was the basis for the discussion/interview; this framed a standard set of enquiries which included questions on influences and working methods, the place that had been given to experimentation and the sources of support received. The transcribed interviews were compared with any other published interviews, press clippings and critical evaluations.

**Literature**

In the period there were a number of publications on avant-garde theatre in America which were available in inexpensive paperback editions and were widely read in Australia: Arthur Sainer’s *The Radical Theatre Notebook* (1975), Henry Lesnick’s *Guerilla Street Theatre*,

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and Pierre Biner’s (1972) account of the “experimental” Living Theatre. Julian Beck (1972) wrote his own reflections on the journey of the Living Theatre, in keeping with the time, it was couched in terms that were both revolutionary and transformational. One of the most influential publications about English theatres in this period was James Roose-Evans’ *Experimental Theatre* (1970). Eugenio Barba edited Grotowski’s writing in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) and later collected his own writing on laboratory theatre in *Beyond the Floating Islands* (1986).

No single history of the avant-garde theatre in Australia has been published, however, Margaret Williams’ essay, ‘Alternative Theatre (1966-1980)’ in Harold Love’s *The Australian Stage* (1984) is a brief and useful guide to the ‘alternative theatre’ category encompassed by this study. While considering the social context, Williams is inclined to record theatre spaces and companies rather than actors or directors or bodies of work with other common links.

Leonard Radic called his history of recent Australian theatre, *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre since the 1960s*. The title suggested that Radic believed profound changes, amounting to a revolution, had occurred in the period. His history, unlike the promise implied in the title, documents little theatre which is dissident or outright rebellious. Radic’s focus was directed primarily at mainstream theatre and the larrikin successes of the Carlton theatres and Jane Street. His account is slightly biased towards theatre in Melbourne, where he was based, and his writing reflects his position as writer for the daily press, where the margins of theatre activity remained largely unreported. Radic’s complete failure to record or analyse Anthill’s work, for example, is inexcusable.

Early in the study period, Katharine Brisbane had a column in the *Australian* newspaper, which had a nationwide overview. It was of unequalled critical importance, as she recognised and spoke of the new national drama as it emerged from small venues in Melbourne and Sydney. Journalists writing for the *Bulletin* had a national overview and an international critical perspective in this period; they included, Phillip Adams, Rex Cramphorn, Denis O’Brien and Brian Hoad.

Many playscripts, relevant to this study, emanated from Currency Press from 1972. This crucial venture to publish Australian plays was initiated by Phillip Parsons and Katharine
Brisbane. The publication of local plays was also undertaken enthusiastically by two small presses: Yackandandah Playscripts in Melbourne, and the Playlab Press in Brisbane. Heinemann produced an educational drama series for over a decade. Graeme Blundell's introduction to *Four Australian Plays* published by Penguin in 1970 was a landmark in the recognition of a national drama. Two recent series of monographs on Australian playwrights have been published, one series by Methuen in Australia, and the other by Rodopi in Holland.

Several specialist theatre journals came and went within the period of this study. From within the University of New South Wales, John (Johnny) Allen and a collective of others, edited *Masque* from 1967 to 1970. Later *Theatre Australia* was initiated by University of Newcastle theatre academics Robert Page and Bruce Knappett, with Page and Lucy Wagner editing the magazine from 1976 to 1981. The journal, *Australasian Drama Studies* has been produced since 1982 within the English Department at the University of Queensland, with Veronica Kelly and Richard Fotheringham as its main editors. *Meanjin* contributed provocative articles and a special edition on Australian Drama during the period. Later there was *New Theatre: Australia*, edited for the most part by James Waites, from 1987 to 1989. In Melbourne from 1981 to 1990, Katharine Sturak and later Anne Murch edited *Antnews*, which was a significant critical and historical forum, although nominally the newsletter of Australian Nouveau Theatre. From the Performance Space in Sydney, *Spectator Burns* appeared with four provocative numbers in 1988 and 1989, edited by Nicholas Tsoutas, Sarah Miller, with Christopher Allen and John Baylis. The newsletters of the community arts organisations carried notices and some analysis of theatre projects in this sector, as have periodical publications of the Australia Council.

Feminism was a major critical force shaping new theatre emerging in this period. Peta Tait’s *Original Women’s Theatre*, and her more recent, *Converging Realities*, have helped place women’s theatre in Australia in a detailed perspective. Besides the limitations of marginalisation, Tait’s studies have shown an ironic advantage of the marginalisation of women’s theatre in our society. Freed from a preoccupations with ‘success’ and commercialism, women’s theatre was given a freedom to create innovative work and to explore with a personal perspective that allowed women to produce work which was often highly original. Anne Marsh’s work on performance art, especially *Body and Self*, has demonstrated similar achievements in that field by women. Often working alone, women
in performance art found original means to make performances. They used new and often interdisciplinary approaches to structuring material and to narrative content. Ironically, with little pressure for commercial success these women were less constrained, and in a sense, turned their marginalisation to an advantage. Case, Reinelt and Austin in their various works show the breadth of the influence of feminism in theatre practice both within and beyond women’s theatre work.

Gay Hawkins wrote a well-researched history of the community arts in Australia, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts*. It considered the policies of the Australia Council and their internal debates and the way these led to major changes in arts practice nationally. Its title refers to two key community events that Hawkins suggested span the decade of the development of community arts.

Philip Parsons’ *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, was published at - even a little beyond - the eleventh-hour for the work done on this thesis. It is an invaluable guide including much that has helped check the facts in this work. It is remarkably complete, and so its omissions are striking: Jenny Kemp, for example is treated very inadequately. Can Kemp’s significant output over twenty years be so much less important than some of the bit-players from last century who are recorded with such care? Now, had she been working in the nineteenth century she may have rated a full column to herself!

**Memory and oral history**

The self-defining nature of each person’s history of themselves, and the fallibility of memory, are among the problems of using oral histories to record past theatre practices. Often the theatre practitioner’s memory of work is part of a personal mythology, which is constantly revised to accommodate and support the present. I have sought to bring this into resolution by cross-referencing with other documentary records and interviews.

On the other hand, memories have played an especially vital role, because there is an oral culture which operates in the theatre in Australia, in which *anecdote* has been the dominant means of transmission of performance practice and theatre culture from individual to individual, group to group, place to place and time to time. In the absence of a dynamic critical engagement with the relatively small world of the theatre in Australia, *anecdotes*
have been personal and collective mnemonic constructions, which have unselfconsciously carried the cultural traditions.

The theatre world is structured as a network. Within it, practitioners understand their own work in relationship to other individual practices through the mediation of this network, but not, on the whole, formed by any strong critical framework or tradition, movement, or school. The lack of conscious acknowledgement of these concepts, rather than their actual absence, has been the marked characteristic. In other words, there are critical frameworks, traditions, and movements and schools which have operated in the theatre practice in Australia; but these were not the primary moderating structures within which individuals have orientated their work. Instead theatre practice has been seen dominantly in relationship to genealogy, conveyed in anecdotal exchanges. The practice of an individual stands in relationship to the practice of others known to them, not in primary relationship to broader historical, social, political values. The role therefore of memory in the carriage of this unacknowledged tradition is fundamental.

In avant-garde theatre in Australia since the mid-nineteen-sixties, there were growing links with networks beyond Australia. These international influences were acknowledged, although they were often jostled by a larrikin impulse to assert that: we didn't really need them anyway. The active suppression of aesthetic modernism in Australia meant that the theatre - arguably the least theorised of the arts - only really began to feel the impact of this century's early innovations during the heady days of the early nineteen-seventies.

It is the nature of a work like this that it will omit worthy examples of what is being discussed. There are areas of the research which were not as thoroughly investigated as I would, initially, have wished. I was not able to obtain support to visit and record interviews with practitioners in Western Australia, for example. This study has been organised to discuss major themes in the establishment of a modern Australian theatre and the part played by the avant-garde in this. Beyond these chapter divisions the approach is broadly chronological.
Part one:
Becoming modern...
Modernism suppressed in the theatre in Australia (before 1965)

The aim in this chapter is to describe efforts to establish a modern theatre practice in Australia before 1965. These efforts were met with active and implicit opposition, because modernity, often linked with the politics of the left, was seen as a threat by a powerful ruling elite in Australia. The succession of events that moved towards the establishment of modernism in Australian theatre were catalysed by aesthetically radical and sometimes politically radical work modelled on the historical avant-gardes and the national theatres. Changes towards modernity that occurred in Australian theatre before the mid-nineteen-sixties were relative and incremental when compared with the major shift which later chapters will argue occurred in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.

Modernism: National theatre and vernacular drama

Just as the nation state itself was a phenomenon of the modern period, so too vernacular theatres were tied to the expression of modern national identity. The national dramas of Ireland, America and some parts of Europe were consciously emulated in Australia. The efforts of Louis Esson, and a few others, in the nineteen-twenties were antecedents of the Australian vernacular drama that was to gain acceptance by the early nineteen-seventies. A number of individuals campaigned for a modern theatre repertoire in Australia. Leon Brodzky was notable among them. He set up the Australian Theatre Society in Melbourne in 1904 and presented plays by Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Shaw and Yeats. (Fitzpatrick 1995b: 105) The Adelaide Literary Theatre was instigated by Bryceson Treharne in 1908 and presented a similar repertoire along with Chekhov and Strindberg.² (Brisbane 1995: 39; Wilson 1995: 614) Duncan MacDougall started the Playbox Society in Sydney in 1923. MacDougall had been associated with early New York productions of Eugene O’Neill’s plays, and his first Sydney production was O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape. He also presented vernacular Irish drama and avant-garde German expressionist plays including, Masses and Man by Ernst Toller and From Morn ’til Midnight by Georg Kaiser. (Brisbane 1991: 195; Love 1984: 182; Coy & Wright 1995: 334)³
These individuals and groups presented the contemporary international repertoire and expressed a clear vision of the way they believed modern Australian theatre should emerge. They paved the way for the producers and playwrights who later made attempts to articulate a national dramatic idiom. The annual Australian Drama Nights, organised in Melbourne by William Moore between 1909 and 1913, provided one of the first showcases for modern plays written in Australia. He presented works by Louis Esson and Katharine Susannah Prichard, who were consciously aiming to realise an Australian national drama. (Rees 1978: 113; Hutchinson 1984: 51) Both these playwrights had clear social criticisms articulated within their works, although their positions with respect to social realism were different. The modernity of the later work of both playwrights is clear. In their works was a concurrence of the aesthetics of modernity and of political radicalism, but Esson’s socialism was milder than Prichard’s communism. John McCallum makes fair comment on Esson’s major play, suggesting that despite its Shavian wit, The Time is Not Yet Ripe, revealed “the extent to which Esson’s socialism was more aesthetic than political.” (McCallum 1995: 599)

In the early twenties in Melbourne Louis Esson with his wife Hilda, Vance Palmer and Stewart Macky, formed the Pioneer Players. (Brisbane 1991: 194; Hutchinson 1984: 52). The suggestion of ‘pioneering’ in the title they gave the group clearly proclaimed the vanguard nature of the enterprise. Although an amateur group, Pioneer Players struggled to present the work of local playwrights, including Esson, Prichard and Frank Wilmot. (Hutchinson 1984: 52) They consciously emulated the model of the Irish national drama and the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Pioneer Players, however, lacked the luxury of the aristocratic patronage that underpinned the Abbey Theatre; and they were given small acknowledgement by the critics and arbiters of taste of their day. Their audiences were always few, and they had little impact of the commercial stage at the time. Pioneer Players were to be identified, nonetheless in later decades, by the Emerald Hill Theatre and the Australian Performing Group as their antecedents.

In Esson’s plays, despite his sustained ability to depict differences within his Australian characters, we can register a shift from modern urban concerns to a nostalgia for bush legends. In the theatre of the day generally, this increasingly anachronistic concern with rural myths became a major impediment to attempts to create a modern theatre. Rural idylls
and opposition to modernism became dominant characteristics in the middle years of the twentieth century in Australian culture, including the theatre. The idealisation of a rural past stood in the way of a more interrogative review of the national character. Narratives of discovery, with heroic figures in the otherwise supposedly empty landscapes, supplanted any widespread recognition of the savage repression of Australia's indigenous people. The ideal of an egalitarian community was steadily subsumed by a notion of a homogenous society, dominated by the principle of 'assimilation'. Any depiction of diversity was shunned.

The usual pattern to modern nation-building promoted notions of 'folk' and 'folk culture' as defining elements in the rationale of the nation state. In Australian there was an ironic twist in which rural 'folk culture' was used to bolster a less-than-independent national status. The dominant conservative national ethos emphasised innocuous rural nostalgia to match a Dominion status within British Imperialism. These ersatz-national expressions blocked the articulation of either social realist expressions of contemporary society, or vernacular voices and narratives. Australian accents were to be heard in public performances before the nineteen-seventies, but these always had the odium of a 'party turn'. This was so with Roy Rene who made his career (and his art) from a sophisticated parody of 'Australian-ness', made-up as a traditional Jewish clown into the bargain, as it was with Chips Rafferty. Rafferty played Australian characters in numerous films, but rarely ventured beyond a token, self-conscious representation of national types.

Depictions of Australia-ness were too often received as exotic or quaint. Play writing at this time was limited by the lack of a viable performance tradition depicting local values. The Campbell Howard Campbell collection at University of New England and the Hanger Collection at the University of Queensland catalogue the limited and intermittent nature of play writing in Australia at the time. (Australian Drama 1920-1955: 1986 passim; Parsons 1996: 497) While nationalist theatres were established in Ireland and the United States of America; in Australia the refusal of modernism meant that progressive writing, which may have coalesced into a school of Australian vernacular drama, remained largely unseen in marginal theatre clubs or entirely unperformed. The emergence of any significant body of performed vernacular theatre literature with representations of Australian characters, which could interrogate Australian-ness in an international context, was yet to come. Modernism was suppressed in the theatre in Australia because the new nation remained
locked in a neo-colonial framework. Humphrey McQueen (1979), Richard Haese (1981), Geoffrey Dutton (1986) and John F. Williams (1995) have discussed aspects of the mechanisms of this opposition to modernity in Australia. Anne-Marie Willis in her book, *Illusions of Identity: The Art of Nation*, cites Nick Mansfield’s contention that “Australia is a member of a community of neo-colonial nations, that is, it is one of the ‘European colonies of settlement that developed an unfulfilled attachment to the lands they settled, and inadequate peace with the peoples they displaced and an incomplete break with the cultures that gave rise to them’.” (Mansfield cited in Willis 1993: 31) Mansfield has even queried the use of the national name: Australia. Willis records that he argued that it had “functioned in literary culture as a refusal of modernism.” (Willis 1993: 550) Supporting Mansfield, Willis goes as far as suggesting that “the use of the signifier ‘Australia’ as a means of authentification reveals a condition of inauthenticity, forever in pursuit of the authentic.” (Willis 1993: 55) This substitution of a nation for the incisive expressions of a modern art and a grasp of the contemporary world can be observed in the narratives of the dramatic literature in Australia of the twentieth century up to 1965.

There were, in the early decades of the century, a small number of individuals who had a working knowledge of the contemporary international theatre and saw the need to found an Australian theatre. But there were also strong fears of the international character of aesthetic modernism. Humphrey McQueen has commented on the situation in the visual arts at this time, writing that “support for Modernism in the nineteen-twenties was confined to a tiny minority.” Beyond this, McQueen’s account of painting and the visual arts suggested the virtual suppression of modernism in those cultural traditions which were seen to ‘civilise’ the country. Theatre was one of the arts in which modernism was discouraged to the point of suppression, at this time. Generally, there was considerable mistrust of aesthetic modernism in Australia. McQueen (1979: 7) has quoted the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, L. Bernard Hall’s condemnation of modernism as, “slatternly and mannerless, devoid of breeding or tradition.” Hall feared that modernism represented a decline, and that “a major cause of this decline was the democratic structure of modern society.” A conservative elite were reluctant to give up authority, in art as in society, to “the great mass of uneducated taste and amateur control,” in Hall’s words. 4 This conservatism prefigured the opposition to the democratisation in arts practice with the community arts policies of the nineteen-seventies, and the debates over ‘excellence’ in the nineteen-eighties.
It was key individuals, working with amateur theatre groups in this period that pursued modern theatre in Australia and provided the only opportunities for Australian plays to be seen. Some of the amateur groups were concerned to present modern plays, and in some cases, works from the European avant-gardes. (Brisbane 1991: 215; 1995: 38-45) The amateurs claimed then, with considerable justification, to be the custodians of the theatre tradition. Doris Fitton founded the Independent Theatre in Sydney in 1930, influenced by her earlier work with Gregan McMahon. Fitton named her project after the innovative Independent Theatre Club, in London, which had introduced Ibsen and Shaw to the English stage in the last decade of the nineteenth century. (Brebach & Noad 1995: 292-3) Over a long period from the nineteen-thirties to the nineteen-seventies the Independent Theatre occupied a vital role introducing a diverse repertoire of frequently contemporary and occasionally provocative plays to Australian audiences. The Independent charted the difficult course from amateur or semi-professional to a short lived but unsuccessful period as a professional ensemble in the nineteen-sixties. It allowed important opportunities for training actors, directors and playwrights in Australia. Radical and avant-garde theatre projects sometimes occurred in problematic and even paradoxical relationship to essentially conservative organisations, such as the Independent Theatre where Peter O’Shaughnessy directed a successful production of Waiting for Godot, which was then toured extensively by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust.

The Little Theatre, founded in Melbourne by Brett Randall in 1931, opened its theatre in South Yarra three years later with Georg Kaiser’s expressionist play From Morn to Midnight. (Dawes & Thorn 1995: 543) The Little Theatre bridged amateur and semi-professional status until 1962 when they changed its name to St Martin’s Theatre. It then became fully professional, if financially troubled. Randall, and later Irene Mitchell, were responsible for productions that introduced new plays from overseas, and they occasionally presented local plays. (Brisbane 1991: 215)

From the early nineteen-thirties the socialist Workers’ Art Theatre and theatres of the New Theatre League were active in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and later Newcastle. The New Theatre was notable for presenting the work of local women playwrights including Prichard, Oriel Gray, and Mona Brand. These essentially amateur theatres provided a major opportunity for actors and directors to gain experience. They were also served by some gifted designers who were influenced by contemporary
international ideas, Russian constructivism and expressionism. The New Theatres were consistently productive over many decades and their output embraced numerous examples of non-naturalistic documentary styles and agit-prop theatre. Some work was influenced by the European avant-gardes, and other projects were in the style of popular forms based around such things as musical theatre and vaudeville traditions. Despite orthodox communism’s preference for social realism, the New Theatres were remarkably diverse in the work they presented in Australia. Over time this was to encompass a wide repertoire, including inter-disciplinary theatre experiments.

Carrie Tennant had started the Community Theatre in Sydney in 1928. She was encouraged by William Moore in this enterprise committed to presenting Australian plays. (Murphy & Anthony 1995: 581) Then she started the Play Society in 1931, which performed Australian plays in the basement of St Peter’s Church Hall and later the Aeolian Hall in Darlinghurst where they also published playscripts. The basement of St Peter’s Hall was the initial locale for Bryants’ Playhouse. This influential amateur group was, at first, an offshoot of Beryl Bryant’s teaching. They later moved to the Phillip Street Theatre where they remained a significant venue for modern theatre in Sydney until the mid-nineteen-forties. It was here that Patrick White’s first work for the theatre was staged in 1935. (Brisbane 1991: 215)

Between 1931 and 1935 the visual artist Alan Harkness and Kester Baruch established an experimental theatre called Ab-Intra, in Adelaide. This was a visionary undertaking, and their purpose was to explore ideas from European avant-garde theatre. Harkness had trained as a painter and this led them to place emphasis on compositional aspects of lighting, pattern, and colour as well as movement, mime, and visual communications. (Afford 1988: passim) Efforts such as these were made against the tide of general conservatism, and foundered on the inability of projects to sustain the artists who were working on them.7

Modern dance was marginalised in Australia and held in opposition to a conservative notion of dance presented commercially and by the Australian Ballet. Of all the performing arts, it was with modern dance that there was some general acceptance of a modern tradition. Modern dance was early recognised as a separate strand of the dance tradition in Australia, as it was internationally. Gertrud Bodenweiser started to teach ‘Modern Expressive Dance’ in Sydney in 1939. She established her own dance company in 1950, and on her death in 1959, her foremost students Keith Bain and Margaret Chappel, took over the influential
Bodenweiser studio. *Masque* November/December 1967: 37) Radical methods within dance were widely accepted and crossed over into the other performing arts, especially in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.

The forces opposing modernity in Australia were powerful. This can be seen in the move by Robert G. Menzies, in the nineteen-thirties, to establish an Australian Royal Academy of Art. "Experiment is necessary in establishing an Academy," Menzies proposed in 1937, "but certain principles must apply to this business of art as to any other business which affects the artistic sense of the community," he continued. "Great art speaks a language which every intelligent person can understand," Menzies claimed. "The people who call themselves modernists talk a different language," he concluded. (Haese 1981: 40) Conservatism of this order applied across the arts and precluded the development of a system of funding which could support new theatre work that did not have the certainty of commercial return.

The limitation of arts patronage was a significant factor in restricting the development of work reflecting then current international theatre practices. Haese noted that, in contrast to Menzies, the publisher Ure Smith, was "prepared to support the idea of an Academy as long as that cultural unity which it was designed to encourage did not inhibit openness or an enriching difference in art." (Haese 1981: 41) The issue then - as it was to be later - concerned whether government support of the arts would tend to restrain or enhance plurality of expression. Opponents reacted to the proposed formation of an Academy by forming the Contemporary Art Society in 1938. (Haese 1981: 43)

The creation of the Playwrights' Advisory Board in 1938, contrasted strongly with the plan for a Royal Academy. Although a centralised organisation, the Board did not have the colonial hierarchy of regal patronage. Nor did the Advisory Board have the Anglo-centricism of the British Drama League, which, on the surface, shared some of the functions of the Board by distributing scripts and handling the right to many plays from the United Kingdom. The Playwrights' Advisory Board collected and distributed scripts of Australian plays and negotiated their performing rights; but they went beyond this and offered feedback to authors, occasionally published local plays and generally advocated the interests of Australian plays and playwrights up to the early nineteen-sixties.9
Australia was not deemed ready for a National theatre by the British theatre director, Tyrone Guthrie, who reported to the Australian government in 1949. Instead, Guthrie suggested, the country would benefit from visits of first-class productions from the authentic colonial theatrical centre, and talented Australians should train in London. Australia's continuing neo-colonial status was thus assured. (Andrews & Brisbane 1995: 256) Guthrie's view was not generally accepted. A Labour government had commissioned the report but the conservative coalition government won the next election and on coming to office set aside the report's recommendations in favour of other, grander initiatives.

The slow growth of pluralism in the performing arts in Australia, contended with a tendency towards monolithic conservative organisations dominating Australian cultural life. The establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT) in 1954 suggested an imperial construction of arts initiatives on a national level. It was an umbrella that was to nurture performing art ventures in Australia for three decades until just beyond the period of this study. The national ballet, opera and puppetry companies, the state orchestras and most state theatre companies were among the developments made possible under the AETT. The establishment of the Arts Councils in each state in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties also broadened the opportunities for theatre, and led to more productions of modern repertoire among amateur groups, even occasionally to examples of radical and experimental theatre. The Arts Councils serviced the amateur theatres with professional tutors and directors and generally supported and tried to enhance the offerings of this sector. As Gay Hawkins has reminded us, the Arts Councils had "essentially socialist" origins. (Hawkins 1993: passim) It is also true that they trod the line between the aesthetic values of their professional staff, and assumptions about the more conservative tastes of their local branches. This dichotomy is thematic throughout much of the discussion of theatre activity in this period, up to the early nineteen-seventies.

Critical indifference and economic marginalisation constrained attempts to diversify the offerings on the Australian stage beyond very limited conservative fare. Without reliable national funding for the theatre in Australia, there were ongoing attempts to negotiate the authority of the stage tradition in terms of professional status. The decade 1955-1964 saw a number of vernacular 'hits', most notably Summer of the Seventeenth Doll and The Shifting Heart both of which also won approval in London. There were also popular and critical successes in Australia, including The Slaughter on St Teresa's Day. These
naturalistic plays were identified by Rees (1973) and Fitzpatrick (1979) as marking a professionalisation of the presentation of Australian plays. And while it has been proposed these plays were the foundation of a school of naturalist drama in Australia, they were isolated successes. They did not amount to a critical mass sufficient to continue between individual events with the force of momentum which a fully-fledged tradition might achieve. This decade lacked the social volatility and did not have the professional audacity that were to mark the artistic environment of the following decade.

Radio presented modern material without the fetters experienced by the stage. Radio allowed a relative economy in production in comparison to the stage. Especially on the ABC there was a weekly demand for material that freed producers to explore a broad repertoire. Radio is an essentially imaginative medium, well suited to the flights of modern (and postmodern) inventiveness. “It’s all in the mind, you know,” as Spike Milligan would have his Goon Show characters remind us. So too, with the writing of Barbara Vernon and Colin Free, among others. (Rees 1995: 478-480) Radio, over time, fulfilled a similar function to commercially produced magazines, designs and advertising, which Willis recognised were alternative conduits for the arrival of modern visual ideas into Australia. If the modern material was recognised at all, at the time, it was thought to be culturally insignificant ephemera. Such material by-passed the ‘official’ disfavour shown to modern art, and so society at large developed a familiarity with the modes and preoccupations of modernity. Julian Croft has commented that the novel in Australia began to acquire modern characteristics without ‘self-consciousness’ because “until well into the 1960s the term ‘modernism’ was not widely used in Australia to describe them.” (Croft 1988: 410) Similarly, in the theatre there were a similar set of things happening.

A conclusion: opposition to the opposition

Modern plays were seen on the periphery of the Australian theatre before the period of this study. Several distinct strands of international modernism influenced theatre practice in Australia. Plays of the European avant-gardes, and plays that were directly influenced by them, had been frowned upon in Australia. Such unorthodox theatre reflected a modernism that defined itself aesthetically, and in Australia this met with antagonism similar to the hostility shown towards modern art in this period. (Croft 1988: passim) Plays of the European avant-gardes and the nationalist vernacular theatres of Ireland and the United
States were occasionally performed in Australia in earlier decades of the twentieth century. They were largely insulated within small amateur theatre ‘clubs’, and ignored critically. These were significant antecedents for the modern Australian theatre that was to follow, but as isolated performances they did not represent a sustained and ongoing body of modern theatre.

The commercial theatre in Australia contained modern theatrical material that was not generally recognised as ‘modern’, especially productions of American musicals. They were identified within a known cultural ‘package’, which bore the authority of the Broadway production tradition for these, otherwise, new works. In the public mind, American musicals were not tainted by any odious notion of modern art; their newness reflected, instead, the scintillations of technological advancement and the novelty of a ‘new act’.

The modernism of social realism was, effectively, segregated in the little theatres of the left; although, again through a commercial agency, in this case the cinema, the quest to depict and make commentary upon daily life and history became increasingly familiar cinematic norms in the decades leading up to 1965. The characteristics that were most strongly associated with radical and avant-garde theatre practice were actively opposed by conservative forces within Australia. Democratic opposition to class and to aristocratic and feudal hierarchies have been suggested by Raymond Williams as characteristic of modernism. He has also pointed to a widespread opposition to war and advocacy of sexual emancipation as concerns special to modernity. In comparison, he has written that, the avant-garde can be identified by a rhetoric “rejecting even the immediate past” and “presenting the bourgeois world as at once domineering and grotesque.” He notes that the theatres that have grown from the historical avant-gardes can be characterised by “rejection of language” and a preference for communication through physical movement styles. This work is presented such that “the fixed forms of representation can be perpetually broken, not by establishing new forms but by showing their persistent pressures and tyranny,” Williams suggests. (Williams 1988: 319) In Australia the habitual and almost reflex rejection of new cultural expression culminated in the notorious rejection of Patrick White’s writing for the stage in the early nineteen-sixties. The public debate over the treatment of White’s plays was to be something of a landmark, if not a watershed.
Struggles to re-place the colonial centre (1960-1970)

By the nineteen-sixties some individual theatre artists began to address their understanding of the concerns of the then contemporary international theatre in Australia. They struggled to achieve idealised goals because these individuals had a sense of questing against entrenched interests. Their work was met with hostility and fear. There was pathos in their isolation and their work for the theatre was a ‘failure’ in its own time, even if this apparent lack of success was critically reversed in later decades.

Through its avant-garde attacks this work de-centred Australian theatre from its neo-colonial focus on London and a narrow notion of the English language stage tradition. The disputes that followed were marked by a widely felt bitterness that indicated how fundamental these concerns were to Australian culture, at the time. Patrick White shifted his personal centre from London to Greece. Dorothy Hewett was a revolutionary playwright, who left the Communist Party of Australia and the formularistic constraints of social realism, but maintained a personal cultural focus on the city of Moscow.

In this period there was a growing minority audience who recognised the importance of cosmopolitan modern theatre in Australia and began to seek out these values in local theatre. The radical playwrights did not, yet, find many ‘informed’ people working in the theatre in Australia to stage their works sympathetically.

To go to London to see... the future, or the past

Many theatre artists in this period found the environment overseas more attractive than life in Australia, and they moved overseas. Successful Australian writers who were lured overseas in the nineteen-sixties often remained as expatriates. Among such artists we find Ray Lawler, Barrie Humphries, Alan Seymour, Alan Hopgood, Richard Benyon and Ray Matthew. Alan Seymour had bravely confronted the issue of the sacrosanct digger character in The One Day of the Year. He was then swallowed up by ‘success’ in London.
Occasionally there was a ‘heroic’ figure who returned to Australia and continued to speak with an Australian voice. The playwright Peter Kenna was to confront the Anglophile, Protestant and heterosexual norms of Australian society and depicted Irish, Roman Catholic and homosexual characters and issues, when he returned and joined in the new theatre activities of the nineteen-seventies.

On the other hand, being an expatriate was not the issue, some artists who stayed in Australia were still extremely Anglo-centric in the values they espoused. The training and experience they had acquired overseas made them, in their own eyes, the custodians and transmitters of an English tradition. Robin Lovejoy with the Trust Players and later the Old Tote, Peter Summerton at the Independent Theatre, and the designer Tom Brown, were all focused on London. The designer Loudon Sainthill while focused on London theatres, may have seen his contribution in terms of European traditions, especially the Ballet Russe with its avant-garde associations.

In London this generation found a culture that was of-the-moment, and, in several senses, they found ‘the future’ - their future direction, but more significantly some impression of where the thrust of cultural innovation was taking contemporary theatre and other forms. The time-warp that Australia’s geographic isolation imposed could only be transcended then by travelling out of the country to the cultural centre: London.

There were individuals who fought for the establishment of a modern theatre in Australia, and many were women. They were especially active in the ‘little theatres’ of the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties: Kathleen Robinson, Lorna Forbes, Carrie Tennant, May Hollinworth, Beryl Bryant, Doris Fitton, Irene Mitchell and also later Doreen Warburton. Other women’s names could be added to this list, and men accompanied or followed the efforts of these women: Sydney Turnbull, Frank Thring and Peter O’Shaughnessy also had an eye to modern theatre contents and means.

Other innovators within the Australian theatre remained quarantined within the socialist theatres, as we shall note in the next chapter. These included the women writing extraordinary plays for the New Theatre, Oriel Gray, Betty Roland and Mona Brand, who made real innovations that were generally ignored, even within their own theatre groups. Later chapters will describe how these different forms of isolation (suppressed heroic
gestures, expatriation, and quarantine) were overridden by the advent of a sympathetic and progressive social environment including actors’ companies and theatre workshop groups that shared these writers’ radical goals.

**Modern plays looking East: Patrick White**

The rejection of the plays of Patrick White in the early nineteen-sixties placed a public focus on the issue of the suppression of modernism in Australia. Patrick White was writing novels within the heartland of modern fiction. He also wrote for the theatre as an autonomous artist who was determining his own vision within the aesthetics of the modern tradition.

Although it was written in 1947, White had to wait until 1961 before his first major stage work, *The Ham Funeral*, was produced. This production occurred amid an acrimonious storm over the play’s rejection from the program of the Adelaide Festival for 1962. The Drama Committee of the Festival had “strongly supported the play, as a modern work of power and imagination.” (Rees 1978: 334) However the Governors of the Festival, who were prominent Adelaide businessmen, were not convinced. They commissioned a separate report from a one-time manager of variety acts for the Tivoli circuit, Glen McBride, who advised them that the play had little box office appeal, and “was not up to much.” (Marr 1991: 390) At the last moment they added McBride to the Drama Committee, and he provided a minority recommendation against the play. McBride wrote that it was an “abstract type of play, too confusing to the public.” He suggested that, “every effort should be made to avoid the ‘kitchen sink’ type of play and aim for a play of merit with strong appeal to the many thousands seeking entertainment that they can understand and appreciate.” McBride’s damning report concluded, “This play is unappetising fare.” (Rees 1978: 334) It was the words of an Englishman, however, which finally killed-off any hope of the Festival Governors accepting the Australian play. Neil Hutchison, newly appointed to head the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, wrote that the play was “a piece of work which quite fails to reconcile poetry with social realism. I think it would be very tedious in production.” Hutchison ventured his view that “there is no character development and the dialogue is insufferably mannered. As for the abortion in the dustbin... Really, words fail me!” (Marr 1991: 390)
As White’s biographer, David Marr, has suggested, *The Ham Funeral* became “a rallying point for those who were unhappy with the boring, official culture of Australia in the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties, hated the philistine power of the Establishment.” Despite this protracted row, Adelaide was to have the premiere of *The Ham Funeral*, and John Tasker’s production of the play opened, ahead of the Festival, at the Adelaide University Guild Hall on 15 November 1961. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust reversed its opposition to *The Ham Funeral*, and supported a later Sydney season at the Palace Theatre in July 1962. It was again directed by John Tasker. This time it had a fully professional cast which boasted Zoe Caldwell. The journalist-critic H. G. Kippax was the voice, perhaps above all others, at this time, to support White’s daring. He wrote in the fortnightly, *Nation*, “I believe the professional performance of *The Ham Funeral* [...] is an epoch making event.” (Nation, Sydney, 28.7.62: 51 as quoted by Marr 1991: 395)

Kippax wrote that Patrick White “is exceptional” in that “he assumes that the Australian plays that he is writing belong to the Western European dramatic tradition and that he can command whatever suits his purpose from its range of styles, techniques and conventions.” Kippax had grasped that White’s work was imbedded in the essentially international nature of the modern tradition. “He refuses to be hobbled by the Australian convention that the educationally or intellectually underprivileged have to be presented as inarticulate in the name of verisimilitude,” Kippax wrote. (Kippax 1964: 242)

Patrick White had studied modern European languages at Cambridge, and leaving the university in early adulthood made London his home. During the Second World War White met his lifelong partner, Emanuel (Manoly) Lacaris, and his personal focus moved east to Alexandria and Athens. In David Marr’s words, “Almost everything White wrote after that time bears traces of the history, ancient and modern, of the Lacaris family. Fragments of Byzantine genealogies, the sufferings of Smyrna, the squalor and magnificence of the Orthodox faith, the persistence of civilisation in exile - all became part of White’s experience.” (Marr 1991: 218-9) Later, White returned to Australia to farm and to write of his country. In the nineteen-sixties White’s mother was ensconced in London, but it was significant that London was not the cultural centre towards which Patrick White looked; instead his metropolitan centre had moved east to Greece. The centre of his world was not Britain, but the Greece of his lover, and the Greece of the classics.
Patrick White’s response to the painful dispute over the exclusion of *The Ham Funeral* from the Adelaide Festival was to write *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, subtitled, *A Charade of Suburbia*. With candour, White wrote to his cousin in England, that the play was “about the effect a bitch in season has on a certain suburban street. It has allowed me to blow off a lot of what I have been feeling about Australia.” (Marr 1991: 391) To Geoffrey Dutton in Adelaide, White wrote, “This one is purely Australian, and at the same time has burst right out of the prescribed four walls of Australian social realism. If I don’t get this one on, and twist the tails of all the Adelaide aldermen, Elizabethan hack producers, and old maids dabbling in the Sydney theatre, I shall just about bust.” (Marr 1991: 391) The young John Tasker again directed the play for the Adelaide University Guild Theatre, where it opened on 14 September 1962.

White’s next play, *Night on a Bald Mountain*, appeared soon afterwards in March 1964. A face-saving production at the Adelaide Festival was possible, but a similar stand-off with the Festival Board put an end to that. It was again the Adelaide University Guild that presented *Night on a Bald Mountain*, which was also directed by John Tasker. (Marr 1991: 425-430; Rees 1978: 338-340)1 There were some attempts to interest overseas companies in White’s plays but nothing came of these, and for nearly a decade White turned away from writing for the theatre.

If the theatre environment had not changed entirely in the next decade, this is where White’s play writing would have stopped. His ‘heroic’ quest and relative ‘failure’ would have been complete. But modern theatre was validated by theatre experiments and new nationalism that rejected the hideboundness of the old guard, overly concerned about how things were done on the London stage. In 1976 Sydney saw a revival by the Old Tote of Patrick White’s play the *Season at Sarsaparilla*, by the enfant terrible director, Jim Sharman. The production was given a daring design by Brian Thompson. Together this enormously creative artistic team built a relationship with the playwright. White started to again consider writing for the theatre. Axel Kruse has drawn attention to the essential similarity between the visual sophistication of their production of *Season at Sarsaparilla* and the theatricality and the high camp of Sharman and Thompson’s rock musical production, *The Rocky Horror Show*. (Kruse 1986: 310) Sharman directed White’s new play, *Big Toys*, for the Old Tote, at the Parade Theatre in July 1977. (Kruse 1986: 305) This was White’s first new play since the mid-nineteen-sixties. The Old Tote Theatre
planned to revive *A Cheery Soul*, but the company failed before this production was presented. Sharman and many of the actors from this proposed production then planned to stage the play as part of the Paris Theatre Company season. However, this company also folded before the production of *A Cheery Soul*. In the end, the initial season of the nascent Sydney Theatre Company presented Sharman’s production of *A Cheery Soul*, for which Brian Thompson designed the sets.

Axel Kruse has written of the press and academic response to White’s later plays as regarding them as “more or less simple failures in which his characteristic flaws have become more obvious.” (Kruse 1987: 305) Kruse questioned this narrowly parochial view, and argued that White’s work should be viewed in an international context. Kruse suggested that this “kind of reaction is an indication of a continuing critical failure to confront the fact that White is one of the more extraordinary and freakish writers of the tradition of modernism that includes Picasso and Salvador Dali as well as writers such as Lawrence, Joyce and Beckett.” (Kruse 1987: 305)

Kruse has explored the issue of White’s homosexuality as it affects his theatre, noting that critics have often avoided this domain. Sharman and Thompson employed non-naturalistic scenography for *Big Toys*. Kruse has pointed out that this turned the play “into a literary charade,” a kind of game of words and theatre. Kruse also pointed out that the “sophistication” of this staging “added an element of high camp visual wit, and in that way it contributed to the puzzles about homosexual wit and ritual which are another main feature of *Big Toys* and White’s two later plays.” (Kruse 1986: 310)

In the nineteen-seventies with a gradual acceptance of a plurality of voices in the Australian theatre, there was a change in the critical attitude to White’s work. This was not universal however, and ironically it was his early champion, Harry Kippax who became his most notable detractor at the very time that White’s work was getting performances in his home city. White’s theatre, like much that was new and challenging at that time, had gone too far for Kippax, and White was rebuked from the pages of Sydney’s leading newspaper. (Waites 1989: 5) The theatre that Harry Kippax had fought as a journalist-critic to see established in Australia, was flourishing by the end of the nineteen-seventies. Kippax saw disorder everywhere. He was testy about feminist theatres, explorations of gender and sexuality, marginal voices, and structural weakness. In his
view, the new professional theatre in Australia was in danger of being taken-over by the
lowbrow, and losing its aspirations to an authoritative voice. There were radical social
changes in Sydney through the nineteen-seventies, that were brought about by the Wran
Labour State government which shifted the alignment of power in New South Wales.
What had been an exclusive club for a corrupt conservative elite; became an inclusive - if
corrupt - socialist state, with innovative programs and a bent for cultural ornament. New
cultural institutions, entertainment facilities, museums, galleries and theatres were part of
this legacy. Among the social and political changes of the time came more liberal laws
decriminalising homosexuality. Sydney was set to become a city renowned for its liberal
social environment. The Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, initially a protest against police
oppression of homosexual men, changed through the nineteen-seventies and
nineteen-eighties to a huge celebration of gay and lesbian subcultures.

The social climate had been changing in South Australia also, and White’s work was now
accepted by the state company in Adelaide. Jim Sharman ran the Adelaide Festival and
then the state theatre company in the early nineteen-eighties, and instigated two premieres
of new plays by White: *Signal Driver*, directed by Neil Armfield in 1982 and *Netherwood*
which he directed in 1983. In 1987 Armfield directed the premiere of White’s final play,
*Shepherd on the Rocks* for the State Theatre Company of South Australia. White’s
ostracism from the Australian theatre was at an end. The modern culture he reflected in
his writing had become culturally dominant in Australia, and the theatre of this time
reflected that change. The characteristics that had alienated White from a previous
generation in Australia, now endeared him to those at the cutting-edge of theatre in the
nineteen-eighties.

A radical stage poet: Dorothy Hewett

Playwright and poet Dorothy Hewett was keenly conscious of pushing the boundaries of
writing for the stage. “In Australia the writer that I love most is Patrick White, both as a
novelist and a playwright. Because I have learnt an enormous amount from White as a
playwright,” Hewett has said. “Because I think he was trying to do some of the things in
the theatre that I have tried to do, long before I was trying to do them, and in a period
when people were very unsympathetic to that style of writing.” (Bathelmess/Hewett
interview 1981)
Hewett’s membership of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) has been widely discussed. Like many other members, Hewett left the CPA after the suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the revelations about Stalin at the twentieth Party Conference. Free from the strictures of Party activities, at thirty-six years old, Hewett returned to the University of Western Australia to finish her degree. She then enrolled in a postgraduate program, and worked as a tutor at the university. “Instead of writing my MA thesis on Vance Palmer, I wrote a version of *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home,*” Hewett wrote in *Meanjin.* “I sent the script to the Tote where it gathered dust with about two hundred other unread Australian plays, until it was discovered by an American, Jean Wilhelm, a lecturer in drama at the University of NSW, who was looking for a vehicle for her first professional Australian production,” Hewett wrote. “Harry Kippax, SMH critic, left after the play saying: ‘Old, old, old, call me a taxi’, and the Old Tote management were not amused. However Kippax gave me the best review I’ve ever had from him, suggesting amateur companies should pick it up. He was right, and they have.” (Hewett 1984: 28; Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981)

Hewett is a strong example of the complex interplay of political radicalism and aesthetic radicalism. Free to go beyond social realist writing, Hewett employed a broad theatrical spectrum in her subsequent writing. She has acknowledged the importance to her work of the director Aarne Neeme, who she explained “came from NSW University student drama, Emerald Hill and the Nimrod Street Theatre to set up a small professional company to work with students at WA University.” She continued in *Meanjin,* “At the Australian Student Drama Festival, hosted by Perth, Aarne directed a moved reading of Act One of *The Chapel Perilous* (which was as far as I’d got before getting stuck) in front of a hard-headed audience, including the Melbourne avant-garde.” Hewett recalled that, “They started talking about Brechtian influence, which was true. But the greatest influence was architectural space.” (Hewett 1984: 29)

Hewett’s writing for the stage has Elizabethan proportions, pace and cosmology inspired by the open stage that she had seen daily from her office window as a tutor in English, and upon which she had acted in Philip Parsons’ Shakespeare productions at The New Fortune Theatre. Her theatre had the quick fire of Elizabethan language and stage action, and was addressed to a modern audience used to the pace of cinematic editing and able to accept novel structures. Images and language from movies, popular songs, folk ballads, and
Shakespeare and his contemporaries were models for Hewett’s stage. She quoted, emulated and parodied them, sometimes in a welter of linguistic display that was dazzlingly rich, and generally defied the taste of those who determined the artistic programs of most of Australia’s theatres. The next play of Hewett’s, *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, was tried out at PACT, in Sydney, in the late nineteen-sixties. In Hewett’s words it, “used every experimental technique I’d discovered, plus a few more I’d invented.” (Hewett 1984: 29) She came to national notice with *Chapel Perilous*, workshopped in 1971, and first staged in 1974. “George Whaley’s gothic, cluttered production of *The Chapel Perilous* for the Old Tote at the Opera House was a disaster,” Hewett recorded. “Only Patrick White defended the script.” (Hewett 1984: 30)

An established poet, Dorothy Hewett said in 1981 that, she “decided a few years ago to concentrate on theatre.” In some ways larger than life herself, the poet suggested that she “believe[d] with Shelley that poets are the legislators of the universe.” Hewett laughed at her own provocation, and added: “But nobody in Australia much seems to know about it.” (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981) Hewett had clearly separated herself from the ideological strictures of the CPA, but she identified her strategies as a writer with radical political strategies. Her iconoclastic writing echoed the polemical tone of political struggle. As a radical playwright Hewett expressed an aesthetic which was also extreme. She said, “The struggle is always to push it as far as you can possibly go - while still keeping in your mind that you’ve got to communicate. That’s the kind of balance that you keep in your head.” (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981) To Jim Davidson she has said that, “You must always be ahead in some way - either in thought or in style, always trying to do something new. And this is very difficult for people to catch up with.” Hewett went on, “But truth is not something very palatable to people.” Therefore, she realised “it will be very difficult to be popular...And I’ve accepted that. It sounds a bit hoity-toity, and all the rest of it.” (Davidson 1979: 364-365)

Any danger of elitism in Hewett’s exploratory theatre work was moderated, however, by her concern for her audience. “You must not make it too difficult to understand or you will have destroyed what you set out to do,” Hewett said to Bathelmess. (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981) The rich layering of her writing includes many popular forms, in part to ensure that there are plenty of pegs upon which audience members can hang the hats of their enjoyment and understanding. Music has such a central
place in several of her plays that they have at times been categorised as musicals. “They are not musicals, they are plays with music,” Hewett has said. (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981) And she has stressed that Australian audiences love to have music in performances. “I think Australian audiences are terribly susceptible to the power of music, and if you want to get them on side there is nothing better than to have song.” (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981)

The opposite danger might be to become a writer with a “formula and use it over and over”, which Hewett rejected: “I don’t think anybody who was serious would want to do that.” (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981) Each of her works is a new departure, exploring new ideas, structures and theatrical territory. This balance between vernacular accessibility - derived from the orthodoxy of social realism of the mid-century; and structural and stylistic innovation, was something Hewett shared with the contemporary modern poets of the nineteen-sixties. “The whole new movement in Australian poetry which came about sixty-seven, sixty-eight around Sydney has been enormously important to me,” Hewett has explained. (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981)

As a modern poet, she has been concerned with shaping material, and above all else, with putting together structure. “This is why I was so keen on Communism. It structured the world for me. I firmly believe that most people become writers because they want to organise the world,” she said to Jim Davidson. “The world is too fragmented for them; they want to get it together in some way and make sense of it. But if your sense of the meaning of the world and your sense of structure is not very strong - and mine certainly isn’t,” she said in the Meanjin article in 1981, “then what happens is that you’re continually caught in the moment and trying to make some sort of existential sense of it.” (Davidson 1979: 361)

Her own struggle to shape material into a play may have tempted Hewett to play down her achievements in creating novel structures for performance. Because she employed a breadth of styles, with the proletarian forms along-side elite art forms, she defied categorisation in the nineteen-seventies. Her work has irritated conservative critics by displaying a dazzling variety of theatrical styles in coherent but unusual play structures that were often epic in scale. We find romanticism, burlesque, acid satire, the sentimental ballad, vernacular rhetoric, and crude social realism dovetailed in her writing. This array
of styles and voices became the essence of her theatre. The spaces between pastoral frontier and urban decay in Australian society were occupied by her characters, and tested in the stories of her plays. This has not always been easy for critics or theatre managements to appreciate.

Hewett’s work pioneered the expression of overtly post-colonial perspectives. These aspects of her writing for the stage were rejected out-of-hand by theatre managements. She also depicted modern Australia as a *melange*. Her work celebrated the often clashing components of an emerging nation. Her plays have shown the transference of cultural material into Australia - American cinema, trash consumerism, Celtic traditional - and expressing this disjunction has been a constant motif in her stage world. Pointing to this process of cultural importation was self-conscious, and broke a taboo within Australian culture. Repeatedly, however, in Hewett’s plays there has been explicit depiction of cultural material from outside Australia and the collision of this material with the vernacular environment of the drama. “There must always be a dialogue between yourself and your country in which you *must* find yourself at loggerheads.” (Davidson 1979: 364)

The post-colonial centre of Hewett’s world was not Western Europe, and certainly not Britain, the Imperial centre. It was, ironically, Moscow. Her links with the CPA placed Russia in juxtaposition to her intense identification with Australia. Speaking to Jim Davidson of the poetry of Osip Mandel’shtam, Hewett reminisced about travelling in Russia, speaking of Moscow in terms which someone else of her generation might have spoken of London as a place to compare to their home. But this was Moscow, the poignant city of Chekhov and Gorky: “I was there a month, in Moscow. Yet for so long I saw it as a kind of exile’s home - it was the place you went to because you didn’t fit in Australia.” She told Davidson, “I understand Mandel’shtam’s strong feeling for that countryside and that country, and I empathise with it: I feel much the same way towards Australia - very much a part of this country and very much not a part of it. The feeling is the same, although perhaps not so violent as his was because I didn’t have to be sent to gaol, suffer in concentration camps and all the rest of it.” (Davidson 1979: 364)

This playwright has been a maker of worlds. Hewett created a powerful language-based theatre, unfettered by any narrow notions of proper style. She is a modern poet of the theatre, calling fully upon the iconoclastic prerogative of modern poetry. Dorothy Hewett
has been a masterly performance-maker.³

The productions Hewett was getting of her plays saw male directors ‘fixing up’ and ‘improving’ her wayward writing in their productions. Helen van der Poorten asked in 1976, "is it not time that we saw a director recognising the sure dramatic sense with which she has set some of her images?" Her commentary was an understatement of an anger she and Hewett felt at the time. (van der Poorten 1976: 36) Hewett’s frustration at not having directors equal to the challenges of her writing for performance, is echoed after successive productions of her plays over the decade of the nineteen-seventies. It was despite a role-call of directors who worked on her plays that included: Aarne Neeme, Alexander Hay, George Whaley, Graeme Blundell and Jim Sharman. Hewett told Denise Bathelmess in 1981, that “the major obstacle is to find a director who is sympathetic and understands your point of view; which is much more difficult than you might imagine.” (Bathelmess/Hewett interview 1981)

In Western Australia, Englishman Stephen Barry assumed the leadership of the state theatre company and commissioned Hewett to write a play to celebrate the state’s sesquicentennial. He directed The Man from Mukinupin in Perth, in the face of an established hostility in the city towards the local playwright. The play was later directed by Rodney Fisher for the Sydney Theatre Company. Fisher was also to direct the premiere of Fields of Heaven, for the National Theatre Company, in 1982, and the subsequent Sydney Theatre Company production. Hewett’s concern to find a director who had sufficient empathy with her work appeared to be answered in Rodney Fisher.

Despite these productions in Perth and Sydney, few theatre companies had mounted productions of Hewett’s work in the nineteen-seventies, and the following decade did not see a widespread acceptance of her work in the mainstream theatres, nor in progressive theatres. Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, for example, did not ever stage a work by Hewett.

Dorothy Hewett called the playwright “the voice of the tribe.” Speaking to Bathelmess she described her view of play writing in terms that are congruent with the avant-garde. “To push the understanding and sensitivity, and the imagination of people a lot further than they are at the moment,” she has suggested. Hewett’s anti-colonial political radicalism was apparent throughout all her work, which was imbued with a focused
iconoclasm. She described her aim: "to express the life of your own country and the attitudes, and to criticise them when you think they are reactionary or backward or wrong." (Bathelmess/ Hewett interview 1981) Such radicalism left Hewett's plays generally rejected by conservative theatres in Australia, and although she has been critically accepted as an important playwright she has carried her marginal status with her.

A conclusion: individual struggles

There were samples of modernity in the theatre in Australia during the post-war decades because of the enthusiastic efforts of individuals, but these attempts to establish a theatre with a more clearly contemporary set of concerns were undermined both by the vested interests of a powerful elite and the circumstances of the times. Like others before them, the work of White and later Hewett had failed to catalyse an on-going modern Australian theatre. Their richly constructed plays were rejected initially by the theatrical and the critical establishments, who responded with fear and hostility. Their contributions were ignored. However, unlike the unregistered efforts of earlier generations the theatre culture around White and Hewett was maturing and their works was later highly valued. Never-the-less, many theatre companies and major directors remained openly hostile to their work. Far from being seduced by White or Hewett's powerful originality their work was consistently described as seriously flawed, and rejected by the state companies. But both White and Hewett had developed particularly strong theatrical means to address their own notions of Australian-ness and to depicted Australia.
Modern ensembles: incipient nationalism (1959-1966)

Where individual theatre artists had failed to establish contemporary theatre practices in Australia, ensemble theatre groups in the nineteen-sixties were able to begin to achieve this goal. The ensemble groups laid the ground for the new theatre that in the following years the actors’ theatres (concerned with anti-imperialism and nationalism) and the theatre laboratories (concerned with experiment and change) were able to synthesise.

International avant-garde theatre practice became directly influential in Australia in the nineteen-sixties on an unprecedented scale through the emerging ensemble groups. By focusing on the performer and the performance they laid the foundation for a new set of Australian theatre idioms. Although their advances in a repertoire seem only modestly adventurous from our perspective today, they were markedly more cosmopolitan than the general thrust of other programs being offered to Australian audiences. They also introduced the pedagogy of the workshop as a learning-place, and the notion of the workshop as a means towards the creation of performances. This was a methodology absent from the spirit and general practice of the state companies and the commercial and amateur theatres. The workshop method was to provide no less than the means to create new types of local performances.

Modern groups for modern times

Modernism came to be increasingly accepted in Australian cultural life in the decade of the nineteen-sixties. Modern theatre forms and modern theatrical concepts were the essence of the work at the Ensemble Theatre, the Emerald Hill Theatre and the Melbourne Youth Theatre. These groups introduced aspects of modern theatre repertoire and practice by valuing the development of actors and introducing programs of actor training, approaching theatres in a democratic fashion, and extending the rehearsal process through ‘workshop’ methods such as improvisation and group devising.
These ensembles did not focus upon the expression of Australian nationalism nor the intense and sustained activity of the theatre laboratory, which were to develop a little later. Expressions of nationalism were not entirely absent from these companies' work but it was not their central or driving concern, as it was to be with the Australian Performing Group and Nimrod. The ensembles introduced the workshop process, but did not extend it, as the laboratory theatres did, into a concentrated investigation which sometimes was justified in its own right, with or without productions as an outcome. These two elements, nationalism and laboratory investigation were yet to converge, as they did in the Carlton theatres and elsewhere by at the end of the nineteen-sixties.

While not actively pursuing a radical political theatre to effect social change these ensembles were not politically neutral. Especially at the Emerald Hill, where many members had moved across from the Melbourne New Theatre, its output was infused with a potential for political radicalism, which was to later manifest in the further movement of a number of these individuals to the AFG.

The formation of the Emerald Hill Theatre in the early nineteen-sixties can be compared with the foundation of Louis Asanas enterprising Pioneer Players in Melbourne in the nineteen-twenties. Both ventures took international models for a national drama, and had gifted and informed leaders; both were confronted by similar critical indifference and foundered in similar economic marginality. Separated by forty years, these examples of the constraints on modern work mark out the extent of this suppression. In Sydney, the Ensemble Theatre dealt with marginality in a different way, embracing an amateur identification, while modelling its means of working on the American off-Broadway theatres. The Melbourne Youth Theatre was set up with a learning/teaching premise. It its own way it pioneered audience education and development in Australia. Its amateur, student and youth basis was a considerable limitation in its claiming authority and leadership in its choice of repertoire, production style and means of working. Its contribution was not widely acknowledged.

**Training for A Modern Theatre: the Ensemble Theatre (from 1960)**

The Ensemble Theatre in Sydney represented the introduction of innovations from contemporary American theatre: the down-played veracity of method acting and the
commitment of the off-Broadway theatres, where marginal economies were a fact-of-life, and work was tried-out for its own sake. As it had in New York, in Sydney this approach developed both performers and audiences for new work.

The intimate theatre-in-the-round that Hayes Gordon and his followers built in a former boat shed by the water at Careening Cove in 1960, was the first theatre of its kind in Australia. The group had its beginnings in theatre workshop classes Gordon had started in North Sydney in 1959. Gordon was an acclaimed teacher, with a flare for the axiomatic. He was committed, as the name they gave the theatre proclaimed, to an ensemble style, and the Stanislavsky-based training espoused by his teacher, Lee Strasberg.

With charismatic flare, Gordon articulated the principles underlying their work: “Actors must train,” and “work honestly,” there should be “no star system,” but actors should “build the other fellow.” A man of the commercial stage, Gordon wrote that, “theatre exists for audiences.” With his home-spun style, Gordon easily embraced both the pragmatic and the idealistic in his craft. For example, he suggested “alternately presenting one popular play to support one experimental or off-beat play.” (Gordon 1964: 303ff)

Gordon generated enormous enthusiasm for the new approach that the Ensemble put into action. The early repertory of the Ensemble Theatre included many modern American plays, appropriate to a naturalistic acting style and their intimate theatre. The Ensemble Theatre had a significant influence on the training of actors in Australia.²

Neither the actors working with him, nor his students when given roles in Ensemble productions, were paid. Box office takings were put back into improving the theatre. The potential nightmare of trying to make a tiny one-hundred and sixty-four seat theatre pay wages, was avoided. Although Gordon had come to Australia in 1952 to star in Kiss Me Kate, and had remained a popular actor in the commercial theatre, at the Ensemble it was the focus on training which was most important.

When Federal funding for the arts was introduced in 1968 the Ensemble did not receive sufficient support to lift it as a company out of its amateur status. It was granted only project funding from the Federal and state governments, and there was considerable disappointment within the Ensemble at its rejection as Sydney’s ‘second company’ after the
Old Tote. Throughout the nineteen-sixties the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney continued to have a lively program of contemporary plays in productions that were more adventurous and dynamic than the Old Tote. Hayes Gordon rationalised their exclusion, saying, "We have to be a bit jealous or suspicious of sources of support, lest we end in the position of whose bread we eat, his song we sing. It is absolutely imperative that we have a free voice." (Allen 1968: 25) In retrospect, Gordon appears to have failed to understand or accept the changes that were taking place in national arts policy at this time. He continued to proselytise the ensemble principle with enthusiasm, supported by his keen following, but from this point his theatre was to become increasingly marginal.

The Ensemble remained an amateur or semi-professional theatre throughout the study period. It rallied and sought to gain recognition as the state company for New South Wales after the demise of the Old Tote Company in 1979, but this was not the outcome. It received increased funding to re-build its theatre, and from this time was able to maintain a professional status. Although eclipsed by a later wave of creative endeavour, its innovations remain a major contribution to the Australian stage, especially the focus placed on the actor and the training of the actor, and the ideal of the ensemble of actors as a working method.

An international perspective: Emerald Hill Theatre (1962-1965)

In 1959 Wal Cherry formed the Melbourne Theatre Workshop and Actor’s Studio to train actors and consolidate an ensemble theatre company.³ Some of the key actors in this group had come from the increasingly moribund Melbourne New Theatre. With students from the Studio and with George Whaley as the main actor, Cherry presented Beckett’s *All That Fall* and O’Casey’s *Shadow of A Gunman* at the National Theatre, Eastern Hill, in 1960. (Stanley 1979: 19) Calling the venture, Theatre 60, it was an attempt to set up a theatre club to provide the kind of challenging theatre Melbourne lacked at the time. (Worby 1981: 25) Later in 1960 they presented Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*, at the Russell Street Theatre - then newly refurbished by the Victorian Council for Adult Education. This was not a success, and was replaced quickly by a return season of *All That Fall*, with the director-performer Peter O’Shaughnessy’s production of Beckett’s, *Krapp’s Last Tape* on the same bill. This production had already had a Melbourne season in 1960 at the Arts Theatre, then in Richmond.
George Whaley had been Cherry’s principal collaborator in these ventures, as he was in 1962 in establishing the innovative Emerald Hill Theatre, in South Melbourne. The group spent most of 1961 in workshops and rehearsals and setting up the venue in a former church in Dorcas Street. The design of the theatre had a deep thrust stage, surrounded by three banks of tiered seating. There was a substantial rear stage area at one end of the building that could be used as a proscenium and indeed, featured a revolving stage. The design was credited to Robin Boyd, Jane Norris and Wal Cherry, and it was an outstanding intimate studio theatre, seating one hundred and thirty-five people. (Worby 1981: 26)

The theatre opened in March 1962 with Bill Hannan’s musical play *Not with Yours Truly*, which had music by Ivan Hutchinson. Directed by Wal Cherry, the cast included Studio students, and the production had been in rehearsal for many months. It was not a critical or a box office success. Guthrie Worby has commented that although Emerald Hill “did not propagate a house political ideology, it did have an ethic and an aesthetic.” Worby also suggested that Emerald Hill’s work could be described as a “campaign […] in favour of thinking,” and he noted their “concern with middle-class pretensions and conservatism, discrimination and the alienation of the individual, exploitation, and a variety of manifestations of power-mongering by those whom society calls great.” (Worby 1981: 27)

Emerald Hill trained people and enhanced their theatrical skills through their engagement with theatrical modernism and innovation. More than this however, from Emerald Hill’s rarefied environment in which a small band of people were committed to heightened artistic aspirations and theatre with a social conscience, individuals emerged to disseminate a new commitment to ensemble working methods and to working on material that had ‘integrity’. John Derum, Aarne Neeme and Michael Boddy went to work in Sydney at NIDA, with the Performance Syndicate and at Nimrod, amongst other ventures. Dawn Klingberg was one of the actors who moved to the APG and David Kendall to La Mama and Melbourne University and the Victorian College of the Arts. These artists shared a particular daring which Emerald Hill had manifest throughout its efforts to extend the stage tradition.

The next generation of studio theatres in Melbourne, including La Mama, and later the Pram Factory, were going to pick up this mission and to concentrate on modern work, to encourage new play writing, and to develop an Australian performing vocabulary. Cross fertilisation between Emerald Hill and the Sydney theatres occurred through Boddy, Neeme, and others. Most of the work at Emerald Hill fell short of the audacity of the
avant-garde, but it set in place a tradition for projects that were to follow and continue to introduce modern theatre into the nineteen-seventies. Emerald Hill was oppositional and committed at once to international modern theatre practice and to articulating a local performance idiom.

Wal Cherry had a mission to broaden the styles of performance available in Australia, and to inform that quest with an international perspective. Worby has discussed these international influences, suggesting that his antecedents were "the Berliner Ensemble, Stanislavsky's earlier experiments, Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire and Joan Littlewood's Stratford East Workshop." (Worby 1979: 23) The group was keen to eschew amateur status and embrace professionalism at all costs. It was a huge burden, however, on an organisation with a small auditorium like the Emerald Hill, and the company operated within a state of ongoing financial crisis. Their initial intention, to present Australian material, was thwarted by their financial marginality. Local plays seemed not to draw audiences. They resorted for the most part to a repertoire of progressive contemporary work for their educated, middle-class audience.4

By conventional measures Emerald Hill was not a 'success'. This was despite the obvious fact that it had an outstandingly talented group of people working together. The 'consolation prize' - as for many alternative groups - was their successful 'alumni', actors and directors and writers who went on to 'success' at La Mama and the AGP and elsewhere. Yet audiences were unreliable and, without the support of government subsidy, the company were left constantly uncertain about repertoire and financially obliged to chase what must have seemed like fickle public taste. Emerald Hill sacrificed its artistic freedom - tamed its repertoire and perhaps even its artist integrity - for a financial rationale which did not in the end pay-off. This was a far-cry from the sense of abandon about to be let loose in Carlton where writers and actors had things to say whether anybody wanted to listen or not. Let the audiences come at their own risk or let them stay away, there was a bravado about to become manifest that was substantially the avant-garde challenge to middle-class taste. The artists in Carlton were to licence themselves to speak as they pleased and they did not pander to any supposed audience preferences. At La Mama after all, twelve could be a 'crowd' in such a tiny venue. At Emerald Hill twelve or twenty or even forty were audiences that spelled financial inviability. Emerald Hill, by giving priority to professional status, could not afford the radical licence of the avant-garde process.
In 1966 Wal Cherry took up the post of foundation Professor of Drama at Flinders University in South Australia. The fate of Emerald Hill was left in the balance, as George Whaley was deeply committed to roles for the MTC. Although new people were coming into the company, the Emerald Hill season for 1966 did not materialise. Worby summarised a tally, in which he noted that Emerald Hill had notched up twenty-nine major productions, of which eleven were Australian premieres, and five Melbourne premieres. (Worby 1981: 23) Like the Ensemble, the Emerald Hill Theatre was not supported as a company in the inaugural round of Federal arts subsidy in 1968, for the Emerald Hill this blow was fatal. (Adams 1969a: 38)

The Opposition: Melbourne Youth Theatre (1966-1969)

Not usually linked to the Ensemble and the Emerald Hill Theatres, the Melbourne Youth Theatre, nonetheless, had several likenesses to them. They all respected the ensemble ideal, even if in the strictest sense they were all part-time or partial ensembles. None of these theatres sustained full-time, consistent, collaboration over a substantial period to synthesise new approaches to work, as Stanislavsky had done. Nevertheless, the Melbourne Youth Theatre had a closely-knit group of like-minded people, including John and Lois Ellis, Elijah Moshinsky, John Wood, and others. The approach they took to work involved learning/teaching strategies including workshop processes.

John Ellis had taught at Melbourne Teachers’ College before going to Europe in the mid-nineteen-sixties. On his return in 1966, he set up the theatre courses at Monash Teachers’ College - later to be called Rusden. With Lois Ellis as associate director, he also established the Melbourne Youth Theatre based in the College. They first presented Brecht’s play, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, directed by John Ellis and designed by the twenty-one year old Elijah Moshinsky. John Wood was a young actor in this large-scale production. (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview) At this time the Melbourne Theatre Company had not presented any of the works of Bertold Brecht, but they were prompted to follow with George Ogilvie’s much lauded production of the same play at the Russell Street Theatre in 1968. Meanwhile, John Ellis directed a production of Brecht’s Mother Courage for the Melbourne Youth Theatre, which again, Elijah Moshinsky designed.  

Lois Ellis had been among the first students to graduate from the National Institute of
Dramatic Art (NIDA). She directed several productions for Melbourne Youth Theatre, and became an important female role-model - ahead of a wave of women directors and women’s theatre, yet to come. For Melbourne Youth Theatre she directed *The House of Bernada Alba*, and *Romeo and Juliet* with Wendy Hughes playing Juliet. She also directed *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, with John Wood designing and playing in the production. Melbourne Youth Theatre had a particular importance as a training ground for young talent, at a time when the only other avenue in Australia was NIDA. John Ellis recalled that after John Wood had done several productions with Melbourne Youth Theatre, Lois, “more or less bullied him into going to NIDA.” (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990) Melbourne Youth Theatre also gave early opportunities to actors like Max Gillies and Robert Meldrum.

The production of *Marat/Sade* by Melbourne Youth Theatre in 1969 at the Alexander Theatre at Monash University, was a genuine indication of a transfer of theatrical radicalism from Europe to this venue on the most politically radical campus of the time in Australia. John Ellis and Lois Ellis had seen Brook’s production of *Marat/Sade* in London, and had sought to do a production of the play for some time, but were thwarted because John Sumner at the Melbourne Theatre Company would not relinquish the rights - although he showed no sign of staging the play. Melbourne Youth Theatre did the early Tom Stoppard plays, *The Real Inspector Hound*, and another Stoppard play to which the Melbourne Theatre Company held the rights for a considerable time, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. This was run in 1970 in tandem with *Hamlet*. These were the last, and perhaps the most successful productions of the Melbourne Youth Theatre.

The Melbourne Youth Theatre - despite its amateur status, and its “youth theatre” label - was the opposition in Melbourne to Sumner’s Melbourne Theatre Company, at a time when the Emerald Hill had ceased to function, and St Martin’s was blandly pottering along. Although the Melbourne Youth Theatre was something short of an avant-garde company in most regards, it did break new ground for Melbourne in terms of repertoire.

**A conclusion: heading towards the sustained expression of a national drama**

The idea of an Australian national drama was manifesting itself in the newly formed state theatre companies but these were intermittent attempts. It was in the ensemble companies that the new methodologies were being actively developed, and these were to provide the
means to articulate and sustain a national theatre. The international models of actor training and workshop method were to become firmly established in the ensemble groups, and promoted Australia-wide through their efforts. The ensembles were avant-garde ventures, recognised at the time for being in advance of the mainstream, and sustaining that mainstream with new working principles.

The national theatre did not emerge from these ensemble groups, but it is reasonable to regard the ensembles as necessary to the growth in Australia of theatrical techniques and dramaturgical concerns, and as having been the foundation for the sustained national drama which was about the flourish in the venues and actors' companies that were established towards the end of the nineteen-sixties. These emergent groups were to place revolutionary theatre practices in the foreground of their activities, in contrast to the modest political radicalism of the ensembles.

For the first time in Australia the ensembles had a sense of shared and common concerns with the processes and methodologies of their international peers. The ensemble theatres represented a new concern with 'the actor'. They highlighted the training of actors and out of this came a heightened awareness of the creative potential of the actor, which over time, beyond these groups, was to grow into the more potent and autonomous notion of 'the performer'. These theatres were, in a sense, an interim step in the direction of the larrikin-venues, and the laboratory theatres that followed immediately after them and, in a sense, 'overtook' them in political and artistic radicalism.

The institutions of the theatre and theatres themselves were going to change and significantly increase and diversify as a result of new organisations to support the arts and increased arts funding from government. These 'ensemble' groups, however, did not fare well in the level of support they attracted from government in the transitional period at the end of the nineteen-sixties.
National spaces for modern Australian theatre (1965-1969)

In the latter part of the nineteen-sixties there was a deepening response by Australian theatre to international trends. There was a general increase in modernism throughout Australian society and a loosening of the colonial link with Britain in favour of a stronger alliance with the United States of America. The inhibiting effect of Australia's geographic isolation was substantially reduced by the advent of fast global transport and communications media at this time.

Concurrent with this new growing global perspective was a drive to create an Australian drama within a growing national culture. Modern theatre became an increasing part of the repertoire at this time, and modern methods of work were beginning to be embraced by the theatre in Australia. International influences such as the work of Artaud and Brook became apparent. Modern dance, by this time, was widely taught and practised in Australia. It had a clearly international base and tradition of training which had set the trend for the performing arts in Australia by first crossing the disciplinary boundaries and succeeding in operating independently of the established conservative theatres.

The establishment of La Mama in Melbourne and Jane Street in Sydney, are frequently acknowledged turning-points in Australian theatre practice. They represent a period where the very idea of indigenous theatre itself carried a degree of defiant avant-gardism.

‘American-isation’, ‘Australian-isation’ and the war

The period itself was charged with a radical political and aesthetic potential. Australia entered the Vietnam war in 1965. Modern American poetry became more readily available and this was having an enormous impact on poetry written by young Australians. In the visual arts in Australia, Christopher Heathcote has recently emphasised the degree to which modernism was becoming accepted in this decade. The landmark exhibition, *Two Decades of American Art*, was held at the old National Gallery of Victoria in 1967. ‘The term avant-
garde, which had not previously been used outside contemporary art circles, was invoked by every reviewer and started to enter the vocabulary of the wider cultural scene;" Heathcote has noted. (Heathcote 1995: 196) A cultural conduit for modernism from America was evident in poetry and painting, as well as theatre, at this time.

In 1968 the effect of the Vietcong’s Tet offensive was to shift American public opinion against the war and force politicians to seek to limit the risk of further large numbers of American casualties in this Asian war. The strategy was euphemistically called the ‘Vietnam-ization’ of the war. The Australian Liberal Prime Minister, John Gorton, promised that no extra Australian troops will be sent to Vietnam. American military personnel on ‘rest and recreation’ leave poured into Australia, especially Sydney. After ten years of imported American television Australians were familiar with the progress-and-consumption-orientated modern culture of the United States of America, and there were responses of both admiration and aversion.

The American-isation of Australia was difficult to distinguish from the modern-isation of Australia, and significantly, despite the threat to Australian independence and uniqueness experienced with the overwhelming flood of things American, this ‘flood’ included the tools with which to articulate a newly focused nationalism in Australia. Models of American writing, visual art, American popular music, the American cinema and the American theatre, all suggested ways forward for progressive work in Australia. Radical student politics and the liberation struggles of the New Left, came to Australia via the United States of America.

One of the cultural strengths of American art was its courage to depict the great diversity of the peoples of America. This now began to have a significant impact in Australia. New registrations of the national voices were heard in Australian performances. A nascent nationalism depended on the political acumen to reject the ‘assimilationist’ ethos that had been dominant in Australia. The growing culture of youth, students and the unifying effects of the anti-war movements strengthened and emboldened this generation to embrace a level of anarchy - in the strictly technical sense: individual responsibility for individual needs - and radical nonconformist lifestyles. The theatre to emerge had a politics which was generally nationalist and revelled in the exploration of national types, was generally liberal, and explored sexual themes and themes of violence as means by which social freedom can be gauged. Among younger people there was a particular attraction for material that would
test the viability of the status quo in the theatre.

**A space for experimental theatre in Sydney: PACT (1964 -)**

By the end of the nineteen-sixties, before the Nimrod had taken over the thrust of presenting local writing in Sydney, PACT was important as an accessible outlet for Australian stage writing. This experimental performance space was set up in the old Corn Exchange building in Sussex Street, Sydney, on an initiative of an ABC television producer, Robert Allnutt, in 1964. Producers Authors Composers and Talent (PACT) was a co-operative, and its importance as a self proclaimed experimental theatre should not be obscured by its later concentration on youth theatre. It was established "as a response to the needs of theatre and film professionals at a time when few opportunities existed for development and performance of Australian works." (Mannix nd: np) For its first ten years PACT specialised in untried Australian plays, and environmental events and productions. In the latter part of the nineteen-sixties its weekly folk music spot became enormously popular, and many well-known musicians appeared there.

The building was made available to them for a peppercorn rental by the Sydney City Council and PACT started a Directors' Workshop which initiated the workshopping of new Australian plays. Clem Gorman was among those involved. As well as new plays, PACT presented innovations in environmental events, something overlooked in Anne Marsh’s recent book on this subject. Young people and especially university students were attracted to PACT by the regular musical performances, and by the late nineteen-sixties this audience had prompted “the adoption of a style of theatrical performance more attuned to their tastes.” In the fervour for contemporary means of expression, “the stage and naturalistic sets were abandoned and replaced by the creation of special performance environments, (in spaces not originally intended to be theatres).” (Mannix nd: np Parentheses in the original)

Environmental theatre projects were an important area of innovation at PACT. In January 1970 Willy Young [William Yang] wrote in the *Bulletin* that, “in Australia environmental theatre as a theatre form has been neglected to the extent of being almost non-existent.” Lindsay Bourke created works at PACT that combined music and visual art. Young recorded that Bourke described his compositions as “‘free improvisations’, and on this level
they are incredible pieces of sensuous expression.” With considerable approval, Young
commented that “they are beyond criticism, because there is no artistic pretension.” (Young
1970: 41) In 1970 Terry McGee workshopped a production of Peer Gynt at PACT. This
production had the audience moving through various parts of the Corn Exchange building.
(Cramphorne 1970a: 47)

An international repertoire was presented at PACT, and this influenced local directors,
actors and playwrights. For example, they staged productions in 1969 of Sam Shepard’s
plays Melodrama Play, Chicago and Icarus’s Mother. These were supported by the special
projects fund of the Australian Council for the Arts. As Rex Cramphorn commented, “we
must hope that this establishes some sort of precedent that will encourage the group in its
current burst of activity: whatever the level of results achieved, it remains the only theatrical
location in Sydney with a consistent interest in new or experimental work.” (Cramphorne
1969c: 44)

Alexander Buzo’s first plays were among those given an airing at PACT. Both his plays,
Norm and Armed and Rooted, were given readings. PACT also “nurtured the talents”, as
Denis O’Brien reported in 1969, “of an elusive Sydney University undergraduate called
Grahame Bond, whose revue Balloon Doubloon distinguished him as an original comedy
writer.” (O’Brien 1969b: 37) In 1969 PACT gave Bond and Peter Weir $600 to stage the
review at the Cell Block theatre. Quite a roll-call can be listed of PACT activities that later
paid-off in the mainstream, including early readings in Sydney of Dorothy Hewett’s work.

In the late nineteen-sixties PACT mounted occasional workshops or performances in the
suburbs of Sydney, and in the country, even interstate. Sometimes they had several
concurrent projects, at their city base and elsewhere. One such season of a new Australian
play in the suburbs led the Bulletin’s critic Sandra Hall to write later in 1969, that “Sydney’s
experimental PACT theatre group is far out in one sense; Bankstown [...] is far out in quite
another.” (Hall 1969: 41) This neatly summarised both demographically and aesthetically
the relationship of margin to mainstream. The layout of this Bulletin article is informative.
It constitutes a box in the bottom right-hand corner, to fill what would otherwise be the
third full page of a feature article by an American journalist on off-Broadway theatre and
“the institutionalisation of the avant-garde.” The editors of the Bulletin have positioned the
PACT review to counterpoint the New York model. Hall’s piece about PACT goes on: “In
the past months, the group has just about covered the modern theatrical spectrum - four-letter words, onstage nudity and a scene where a baby is baked in an oven." Hall then identifies an expectation of the conservative preferences of the suburb. "But Bankstown will be seeing PACT at its most subdued. The Boutique, [...] employs no ‘sixties-style shock tactics." (Hall 1969: 41) The reader is presented with the New York paradigm, in which the rest of the world orbits the big apple. In Sydney then, the suburban satellites circle the city centre. "While the Bankstown Methodist Hall audience is watching The Boutique, the audiences inured to PACT’s usual experimental style will be seeing The Burning of Joan, a new play by Australian playwright John Aitken, at their usual headquarters, the Sussex Street warehouse-turned-theatre," Hall wrote. (Hall 1969: 41)

From the critical record it would seem that the acting at PACT was not always of a high standard - although there are notes that a number of later well known actors took part in their productions. Even if this is the case, when PACT was compared with La Mama by Denis O’Brien in an article in 1969, he stated that these two workshops were the only places in Australia “of any consequence for the working of theatrical experiments.” (O’Brien 1969b: 37)²

**A search for Australian plays: Jane Street Theatre (1966 -1977)**

Jane Street Theatre was set up as a try-out venue for Australian writing for the stage. Robert Quentin, Tom Brown and Robin Lovejoy believed that there were insufficient ‘good’ Australian plays because there was nowhere to test them, refine them and render them into works of the first class. This was similar to the sentiment that Hugh Hunt had expressed at the end of his stint running the AETT in 1960. (Hunt 1960: *passim*) The Old Tote was far less daring than even the Melbourne Theatre Company in tackling productions of locally written plays. They felt the Tote was struggling to establish itself in Sydney, ‘based out of town’ in the old totalisator building on the campus of the new University of New South Wales. So they were reluctant to risk staging Australian material for their subscription season. The Jane Street Theatre was set up in 1966 to present new Australian plays. The building was a small disused church in Randwick, near the campus. The National Institute for Dramatic Art (NIDA) and the Old Tote Theatre had been set up by the New South Wales University Drama Foundation, which was linked with the Drama Department within the University. They received funding for the Jane Street season from the Calouste
Gulbenkian Foundation. The theatre and the Australian play productions were going to augment the teaching program at NIDA, and any successes could be ‘picked up’ by the Tote program. This was a low-risk approach to new theatre.

The season was framed to evoke the sanctuary of the ‘experimental’ theatre category, without necessarily engaging in the processes of experiment. H. G. Kippax in the SMH quoted the brochure for the Jane Street season with apparent approval: “We must have another theatre, no matter how modest, in which new Australian plays can be produced, simply but professionally, without the pressures which demand that every play must be a major success” (Kippax 1966a: pu) A national theatre could only be broached by these conservative custodians of the colonial theatre when it was hedged by the provisional context of a Jane Street season.

Robin Lovejoy oversaw the initial season, and commented that they had “set out to focus on the workshop” needs of Australian writing. He made it clear that this was envisaged as an exercise to develop writers. “To limit the focus of our experiment, giving the authors a fair go,” he said later in 1968. But the “reaction went far beyond that,” he added, “the audiences were clearly excited about the plays for their own sake,” Lovejoy recalled with enthusiasm. (Allen 1968a: 6)³ The 1966 season at Jane Street included Robin Lovejoy's productions of I’ve Come About the Assassination by Tony Morphett and A Refined Look at Existence by Rodney Milgate. Milgate was a visual artist, and his play was a montage of theatrical ideas, song and poetry based on the localisation of a Greek myth. It was the most challenging work in the season, and the one that Lovejoy chose to take for a further production with the Old Tote. Non-naturalistic devises that explored Australian language and themes in this play were forerunners of the writing for the Australian theatre to come.

Beyond the first season of Australian plays at Jane Street, an annual Jane Street season of Australian work was established. In 1968 Terror Australis was directed by Jim Sharman at Jane Street, and broke new ground in the creation of stage work in Australia. Devised by the director and cast through improvisation, it had a script written by Richard Walsh and Dean Letcher - who were then renowned for their satiric writing in Oz Magazine - with Rick Billinghurst and Clem Gorman. (Allen 1968c: 11) This production was a review of national history, and this and the means used to create the work prefigured the community theatre of the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties. “What Sharman is doing is a new
departure in many ways,” an article in Masque commented. “It puts experimental theatre on a new footing in this country, soundly backed by the establishment (in this case the Old Tote Theatre) and gathering together a group of people which is itself a little astounding.” (Allen 1968c: 11 Parenthesis in the original.)

“In an attempt to confront the audience in a new way, Sharman has devised a new form of rehearsal and presentation for the show. It is very much a team product,” Allen wrote. (Allen 1968c: 11) Terror Australis was Sharman and his team’s response to a violent decade. “There is no physical violence on stage, but the effect at times is that of high-pitched hysteria created through mime, lighting, and sound. Violence is counterpointed with lyricism, in an attempt to grasp the audience and then stimulate them along new directions about their lives and habits.” (Allen 1968c: 11) This performance was an attempt to identify Australia’s past as violent, racist and problematic, in contradistinction to the mythology of pastoral tranquility and growth, so cherished then in much conservative Australian history. As a production Terror Australis “toy[ed] with normal audience relationships in an attempt to stimulate involvement,” Allen recorded at the time. (Allen 1968c: 11)

‘Suburban ugliness’ was the architect Robin Boyd’s term, and since Patrick White’s Season At Sarsaparilla, a similar theme had been a preoccupation of modern Australian drama. This was in evidence in the Jane Street season in 1969, when Tony Morphett’s The Rise and Fall of Boronia Avenue and Alexander Buzo’s Rooted were in the season of plays. More than the problems of the built environment, there were the unresolved cultural questions central to modern Australian culture: questions of place and moral direction. Buzo attempted to create an impression of abject subservience towards a powerful figure, in a way similar to Ionesco’s technique of creating an overwhelming off-stage presence. The new suburban mythology was being proposed to confronted the dominant mythology of rural nostalgia, with its denial of difference and its support for middle-class self-satisfaction in the face of national shame at the systematic dispossession of the Aboriginal people.

The group which was to become the Performance Syndicate worked as the Jane Street Company in 1970, and with the director Rex Cramphorn they created the experimental, Ten Thousand Miles Away. John Bell then directed the group in The Legend of King O’Malley. The initial O’Malley season looked to be the ‘success’ for which John Clark and Robin
Lovejoy had been searching at Jane Street. Such national acknowledgement would have justified the Jane Street activities in the eyes of the NSW University Drama Foundation, but the national tour organised by the AETT was not well received in other cities. The Jane Street project, the Performance Syndicate and ‘experimentation’ were left under something of a cloud. The other play scheduled for the 1970 Jane Street season was Stockade, commissioned from Kenneth Cook. It was plagued with difficulties which arose from a rigidly conventional playwright meeting a wildly unconventional performance group. The production did not survive to a public season at Jane Street, and this caused a controversy which the NIDA organisers met with a disgruntled public silence. The difficulties lay in the heart of the Jane Street project which had been set up as an ‘experimental theatre’, but was organised along very formal lines. Authors were commissioned to write plays for Jane Street; however, in the hands of Cramphorn and the members of the Performance Syndicate, these were scripts that were treated for development. This was effectively what was occurring in 1970, when scripts by David Malouf and Michael Boddy with Robert Ellis were treated as starting points by one of the most dynamic and extraordinary groups of actors and theatre artists Australia had seen.

The lasting significance of The Legend of King O’Malley, its abiding success, was that it led directly to the creation of two remarkable theatre ventures: the Performance Syndicate and the Nimrod Street Theatre. Mutually necessary at this point and through the first years of their lives, these ventures were significantly different in the way the Syndicate sought to be unconventionally democratic and yet became a vehicle for its star director, Rex Cramphorn; and Nimrod was frolicsome and good-naturedly democratic, but resolved into an increasingly bourgeois identity. Nimrod’s outrageous birth as a contemporary larrikin theatre had been embraced by its young, educated middle-class audience much as they had moved back from post-war suburbia into the inner city. This generation’s initial defiance of convention by ‘slumming-it’ in the terrace houses of the working-class had rapidly ‘gentrified’ as their incomes increased and their renovations progressed. Nimrod Theatre’s audience tamed politically, and so did the politics of their theatre.

The landmark Sydney production of David Williamson’s play, Don’s Party, was presented at Jane Street in 1972, directed by John Clark. It became an outright commercial success and NIDA offered it to the entrepreneur Harry Miller, who toured it nationally. This was a significant milestone in the acceptance of the viability of Australian play writing, as it
brought together the bravura performances manifesting in Sydney with the political acuteness of the APG. Harry Kippax, who had somewhat cooled his enthusiasm for Australian plays, was carried along with the acclaim for this show, writing his much quoted comment, “OK - I surrender: we do have an Australian drama, and it’s doing very nicely, thank you. [...] On the strength of Don’s Party [...] I have no doubt that Mr Williamson is the best playwright working in Australia, and one of the best in the world.” (Kippax 1972: pu) Under the title, “An ecstatic new comedy finds an audience,” Katharine Brisbane - the clear voiced advocate of Australian theatre - celebrated this production in her Australian column. She wrote that “John has turned a good play into a good marketable play,” and explained that “from being a rather wild formless participatory play full of four-letter words it has become a disciplined comedy of character for an orthodox theatre.” (Brisbane 1972: 8) Significantly, here Brisbane was casting Jane Street not in the role of experimental studio, but as a conduit to mainstages around the country. This may have been at variance with the stated policy of Jane Street, but it was in reality close to the thrust of the direction given to the project by NIDA.⁶

**A place to experiment: La Mama, Carlton (1967-)**

In 1967 Betty Burstall established La Mama in Faraday Street, Carlton. Taking its name from Ellen Stewart’s famous New York coffeehouse theatre, Burstall acknowledged that she had modelled La Mama on the New York theatres where the audiences were small, the playing space limited, the plays short and the admission as low as possible. “My policy,” she wrote in 1970, “is to present new Australian plays, sketches, inter-media experiments, improvisations, happenings.” Burstall had made a home for innovation. “La Mama has also put on regular readings of new poetry, programs of new music and screenings of new films,” the 1970 report continued. (Cummins et al 1970: 5) *Three Old Friends*, by Jack Hibberd, was the first play performed at La Mama, in 1967, with David Kendall, Bruce Knappett and Graeme Blundell in the cast. Hibberd has described it as director-less, and suggested that it possibly inaugurated “the actor-writer coalition and tradition which was to become such a feature of the theatre at La Mama, and around the corner later, at the Pram Factory”. (McGillick 1988: 12)⁷

From its beginning La Mama allowed writers to work closely with actors, and gave the opportunity for actors to explore their inclinations to communicate with their audience. The
intuitions of actors may have been something long mistrusted by theatre managements, but La Mama did not fear the indulgence of testing these impulses. The writers working in the orbit of these activities were able to take and give shape to the rich material of these emerging performers. Sunday acting workshops at La Mama began in 1968, and became so popular that fifty and more people would attend them, with the activities spilling out into the car park. Geoffrey Milne has recollected that they conducted “workshops on body and voice and anything that could be extracted from the most recent pages of TDR,” the influential Tulane Drama Review. He recalled that, “people like Brian Davies, would be standing there with TDR in one hand, directing people to do these things - these experimental things - with the other hand.” Invoking the immediacy of the scene, Milne said, “Literally reading...It came in the post yesterday”. Milne has recalled that through the pages of the TDR, one of most resonant ideas at the time was Richard Schechner’s axioms of the environmental theatre. Milne has suggested that, this “really took hold of everybody’s imagination,” and became “one of the key notions” of the emerging La Mama Group. (Guthrie/Milne interview 1989)

Brian Davies had a seminal role in running the workshops that led to the La Mama Group. He had a particularly international perspective, and had been involved in the Melbourne University Film Society, as Milne recollected. Davies directed premieres of Hibberd’s plays, *Who* and *Escape*, at La Mama, as well as influential productions of Brecht’s *Exception and the Rule* and *Elephant Calf* in 1969. Milne believed that Davies’ contribution was important. “He actually knew something about Brecht. He really did. He was the guy who ordered TDR. He was the subscriber. So TDR landed at 32 Carlton Street, before it reached number 30, which is where Blundell lived,” said Mine. (Guthrie/Milne interview 1989; Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*) A split grew between Davies and the La Mama Group. As Jack Hibberd has recorded it: “the ‘Monash Maoists’ - Bill Garner, John Romeril, Jon Hawkes, Lindsay and Margot Smith - joined the group, and more or less politicised it. Friction existed between Brian Davies and Lindsay Smith”. Davies left the group at the end of 1969. (McGillick 1988: 14)

The La Mama Group, which was to became the APG, was the most strikingly innovative group to have emerged in the Australian theatre. Fired by a passion for the renovation of the national culture, this group was dominated by a number of male personalities. Among them there was Irish-Australian back-foot eloquence and Calvinist evangelical passion.
Blundell has said that they saw themselves as “this really tough-minded indigenous group of extraordinary tough Australian performers with what we saw as a unique style, a physical style”. (Bovell 1988: 11) There was a machismo evident, at this time, in the male culture of the group.

As early as December 1970, the Carlton News (later known as the Melbourne Times) ran a page of items celebrating the longevity and considerable achievements of La Mama. The actor Peter Cummins wrote (using the idiom of the day) that “the theatrical environment of La Mama takes the sweat out of acting.” The informality of the space he argued, destroyed “the strange but universal conception held by theatre people that the audience is a monster to be feared. It is impossible to maintain this myth with the close physical contact the La Mama actor has [...] not only in performance, but more importantly in those moments before and after the performance.” (Cummins et al 1970: 5)

A loose network of individuals were brought together, writers, actors, musicians, film-makers, and composers, and La Mama provided the venue for the performances which resulted from such collaborations. Betty Burstall and Liz Jones, between them, ran La Mama from 1967 until the point of writing. They always had a nurturing role, and a personal, non-authoritarian manner. La Mama sustained an emphasis on original work and this produced an unequalled contribution to the performing arts traditions in Australia. In their book on La Mama, Burstall and Jones list 525 events over the first twenty years at La Mama. Among these they list 367 world premiere theatre performances. There was a consistency of artistic policy cultivated throughout this entire period. La Mama has been a venue for local writing, and for the cross-over potential of playwrights and poets, working with musicians and multi-media artists. Only a handful of plays which were not Australian were performed at La Mama during this time, but all of them were in some sense at the cutting edge of international avant-garde theatre.

There was a greater pluralism present at La Mama than is sometimes recorded. “Betty Burstall’s original intention,” as Andrew Bovell has observed, was that it would be a “space that fostered the ‘experimental’.” She “also saw it as a writers’ theatre.” Bovell suggested that the APG “wanted La Mama to be an actors’ theatre” and had dismissed Burstall’s concept as, “culturally imported.” Andrew Bovell made a re-evaluation in 1988 of the “myth of the golden days of La Mama,” commenting that “the creators of this oral
history were for the most part men, who drank at the Stewart’s Hotel and characterised themselves as ‘larrikins’ who rejected in no uncertain terms the theatre establishment in Melbourne,” Bovell wrote. (Bovell 1988: 10-11) These were the group who had formed the APG. This is the view which they have propagated of themselves, which has come to dominate both the local oral mythology and the critical and historical writing on La Mama and the APG. This history, Bovell pointed out, tended to exclude the wide and ongoing diversity of work at La Mama, and to be exclusively a male view of the germination of a “populist, indigenous” theatre.

An indication of the seminal role of this venue is demonstrated by a number of groups which presented their first work at La Mama, as well as the APG, these include Claremont, Skelta, Playbox, Anthill, and Chamber Made Opera. La Mama provided the soil for the germination of the early writings of a number of widely recognised playwrights: Hibberd, Oakley, Bakaitis, Romeril, Williamson, Nowra, Motherwell, Keene and Barry Dickins. In some senses even more importantly for this study, there are a number of playwrights and performance makers for whom La Mama has been the sole, or the major venue for their work: Bren, Hemensley, Clayden, Richards, McKimm, Clayton, Hartman, Jones, Pulvers, Henderson, Simmonds, Kirwan, Kahans, Paterson, Cathcart, Uren, Black and Cornelius. This work was the seedbed, and provided the experimentation and the culture of investigation of performance which has been La Mama. Unrewarded in the wider sphere, this has been the success of La Mama.

Physically, La Mama is a small flexible studio. Its architectural idiosyncrasies - its compact size, the stairs, the sink, the doors - limit it to a considerable degree, but any attempt to put a performance on there, is an attempt to address that space, of necessity. It may be that La Mama is essentially an opportunity to address space. Perhaps then any assumption that it is not a designer’s venue, is almost the mirror opposite of the reality which has kept La Mama an important place: the opportunity it provides to explore the spatial potentialities of performance/audience. (Milne 1989: 6) There have been events, happenings, readings, visual art, music, inter-media and environmental installations and performances at La Mama, which have shared a concern with the use of space, and design. A body of work has been developed at La Mama which represents an understanding of space and performance, within the participants and a wider diaspora of associated people.
It is wrong to view La Mama - or avant-garde theatre generally - as merely a place where writers learn to write for a wider audience. It is this, and it is more. The role of directors, actors, designers, theatre musicians and composers, and most importantly, audiences are also cultivated. Perhaps the major function of avant-garde theatre practice is the cultivation of new audiences. La Mama has done this consistently, and to great effect. These are not new audiences for old theatre. Radical and avant-garde theatre created new audiences for new theatre. These audiences become aware of potentialities within performance hitherto not available, and they increasingly demanded from mainstream venues the new forms they had experienced on the margins. In the later nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies we can see this happening with the APG and the nationalist drama transferring to the state theatre companies. However, this function of supply and demand did not always prevail, and into the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties the arbiters of taste - critics, entrepreneurs, artistic directors and boards of directors - still often sought to quash modern trends.

The musician and performance-maker Syd Clayton was a stalwart of La Mama for many years. He produced work that was full of wit and eccentricity, with many direct references to the historical avant-gardes which were his benchmark. Syd Clayton's performance art can be compared to the work of John Cage. It explored similar parameters and had a similar humour, but did not have the same intellectual rigour. It was personal, and local, but informed by international practice. Poet and performance-maker Kris Hemensley wrote at the time of Syd Clayton's work at La Mama: "His music was a living theatre which dramatised all too clearly the fumbling at drama by the majority of La Mama playwrights. Sid [sic] made music. The others cut and chiselled 'workable' plays. Sid [sic] created an extra dimension. Perhaps ritual was the basis of his music. Maybe it was humour. Or silence. Whatever his basis the effect was magic." (Hemensley 1969: 35)

Clayton's work should be evaluated in the context of the international avant-gardes which were his acknowledged inspiration. "Let us discuss Klee or Picasso or Charles Olson or Jean-Luc Godard or Ray Liechtenstein or Saul Steinberg or the value of philosophy or the war in Vietnam", wrote Hemensley. "For this is the music of Sid Clayton. His art. His poetry. His theatre. His life." (Hemensley 1969: 36) Michael Wansborough also stressed the importance of Clayton's place in any overview of work at La Mama. In an interview for this study Wansborough added, with a laugh which savoured the incongruity, "I think he
was a postman...” (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990)

La Mama continued to be a major venue for innovative and provocative work. It was remarkable for the way it remained steadfastly un-starry eyed. Even the sign which appeared out the front for many years had a hand-me-down lack of pretense. The poverty of the venue was in direct contrast to the wealth of the activities it housed. With the potential rewards from shared box office so limited, it remained a venue in which people worked for love and interest, with passion, and without any expectation of fame or fortune.

A conclusion: places to experiment allowed a national drama to grow

The freedom to experiment and to present all sorts of unconventional performances to receptive audiences at PACT and La Mama stimulated the development of a specifically Australian performance idiom with a range of national attributes including Australian accents represented. Most notable was the way actors and writers began to use the larrikin figure to depict, not rural down-and-outs but middle-class Australian characters. PACT and La Mama were actively engaged in actor-centred and writer-centred working processes. Jane Street Theatre exemplified a different method of working to these open-access workshop spaces, as it was centrally planned and coordinated by the NIDA management who commissioned writers and appointed directors to work on their scripts. There were exceptional projects at Jane Street which employed workshop methodology and sought to extend the nature of theatre. The most outstanding body of work to come out of Jane Street were the projects worked on by Rex Cramphorn and the Performance Syndicate from 1970. In a later chapter it will be argued that this seminal work gained its artistic integrity and its widely felt influence by thoroughly embracing the model of the theatre laboratory.
Ecstatic alternatives: modern ‘tribes’ (1968-1972)

In the nineteen-sixties the advent of the counter culture converged with the growth in nationalism and for young people this was a powerful validation of aspects of contemporary life in Australian that had been kept in check in previous decades. The international liberation struggles were strong prompts to radical new appraisals of life in Australia. It was, however, in the apparently less ideologically charged areas of ‘lifestyle’ and ‘individual action’ that the greatest radical shifts in Australian society and self-perception occurred.

The generation born after the Second World War - the baby-boomers - embraced the bohemian life of the artist and student on an unprecedented scale. For many in that generation, life and art were seen as one, and bourgeois social norms were rejected with scorn. This was a generation who embraced rock and roll music and unorthodox behaviour and individualism; they incorporated the use of illegal drugs into their lives as never before; and believed that their dreams were the blue-prints of actions, in a rhetorical manner equivalent to the gestures of the historical avant-gardes, and the political theorists of anarchy.

There was a common oppositional stance throughout the international youth culture which was galvanised by resistance to the Vietnam war. This profoundly influenced rock and roll music and alternative theatre, amongst the performing arts. Modern practices including performance art, happenings, celebratory events, and community involvement in the arts, were taken up enthusiastically in Australia. The workshop process and the notion of laboratory experiment had permeated radical and avant-garde theatre in Australia by the late nineteen-sixties.

The status of avant-garde practice was ambivalent at this time, it was not simply opposed to popular and accessible forms, such as say, the social realist traditions of representation. Far from being hermetic or the exclusive province of an elite, avant-garde strategies
During the post-war decades had come to completely permeate popular culture. There were a complex diversity of coteries with which the individual may identify, or not, within a pluralist society: the verge had been reached of postmodern culture.

**Alternative theatre and alternative society**

International modernism manifest itself in the social disjunctions of oppositional youth culture, drugs, rock music, and the counter culture, and growing student radical action against racism and the war in Vietnam. As in America and Europe, Australia had an increase in political theatre, and theatre concerned to experiment with form and working methodology. The strategies of subversion and disruption practised by the European historical avant-gardes earlier in the twentieth century were amongst the models for the alternative theatres in the nineteen-sixties. Their stance was opposed to the social and political norms of the day, and their means were coercive and at times openly aggressive.

Federal government arts funding was initiated in 1968, and it was a major factor in freeing creative endeavours from commercial constraints. As a consequence artists were freed to pursue aesthetically and ideologically determined goals which included demands for modern practices in the performing arts. New work opened up in areas which had previously been ignored or even suppressed by powerful conservative tendencies.

Projects became responsive to international trends in arts practice and cultural action, and artists became involved in the accompanying debates. By the end of the nineteen-sixties, throughout the Western world, youth culture and the counter culture were fulfilling for a generation of young people the aspiration of the historical avant-gardes: to live art. For the bohemian artist of the avant-gardes, life and art were in close proximity. The alternative subculture became emblematic of the baby-boomer generation in Australia, and in the western world generally. The counter culture embraced an all-encompassing ethos in which life became art.

The counter culture arrived in Australia aided by the global dispersal of the electronic media and easy world travel. It had an impact which was heightened because of the long sustained efforts of conservative interests to inhibit reformation, change and revolution in Australia. The decades-long suppression of modernism which had applied across the board in
Australia was suddenly overtaken by a generation with more money, education, and leisure, than could be effectively contained. Public outrage at the aesthetic non-conformism and evident energy of youth culture, at the time, was an indication of a continuing presence of this sort of conservatism.

The technological implications of holding back from modernism could no longer be countenanced in Australia—especially by the interests which stood to make vast profits from television, recorded music and the consumer paraphernalia of youth culture. The conservative forces in Australia no longer stood united against modern trends. Young people were an important mass market who were no longer to be denied their day—especially if they were going to be allowed to spend freely.

**A iconoclastic family: Tribe (1969-1972)**

Doug Anders [Anderson] brought his company, Tribe, from Brisbane to work at La Mama in the late nineteen-sixties, and with them he gained a considerable reputation for creating remarkable theatre events. Tribe did a lot of work based on mime, and presented a physicalised theatre, unlike anything else seen in Melbourne before. They created group-devised work and worked on plays written for the group by members of the company, including Allan Robertson, Frank Starr, and Bob Daly. Anders also directed plays at La Mama written by outside writers, such as Barry McKimm and Kris Hemensley. The Tribe production of van Itallie’s *The Serpent* achieved considerable notoriety in late 1969, when it was performed at the National Gallery of Victoria. (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*) Although their work was regarded as very confronting at times, Tribe received funding from the Australian Council for the Arts for its projects, in this increasingly liberal period.

Anders was a charismatic figure. Tribe explored a theatre concerned with an inner journey—sometimes mystical, and sometimes aggressively topical. Michael Wansborough recalls, that they “smoked lots of dope, and did workshops on all sorts of really esoteric things. They came up with theatre that was strange and interesting. It was good. But it was strange. Just what we needed in Melbourne”, he said. (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990)1 Anders and others from Tribe participated in programs of improvisations at La Mama, and in other productions there.
Tribe was a major innovative influence on many people working in the theatre in Melbourne at the time. Actors from Tribe were later associated with the APG, for example, Bolza, Mokotow, Porter, Alan Robertson, Cornell, Clifton, and others; and Anders and others lived in the ‘Tower’, the residential section of the Pram Factory building. In these times of considerable liberality and outright anti-institutionalisation, people came and went between groups without questions of loyalty always being evoked. It was the La Mama Group - around the time it became the APG - which emerged as a more structured and politically disciplined group than Tribe. This was because of the influence of the members of the Monash Labour Club - “arguably the most politically radical organisation in Australia at the time” - who joined the Group. (Milne 1989: 7) Tribe, by contrast, was an expression of an alternative society. In this context, LSD, more significantly than any other drug, was an important aspect of the life experiences of a number of members of the group and their lifestyle at the time, and it informed their work. Many of the members of Tribe lived in a house in Toorak; although, perhaps significantly, Doug Anders lived elsewhere.

The political aspect of Tribe’s work was in the radicalism of their approach to theatre as an expression of a non-conformist life-style. “It was a bit like an acid trip, and people were taking a lot of acid and that kind of connection was happening, as well,” Richard Murphet commented. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989) Tribe’s performances were wildly confronting, in some senses revolutionary in their intent, with defecation on stage, sexual content and themes explored in their work that were well outside what was conventionally acceptable. Their work was compared with the ritual-like performances of the New York theatres at this time. Richard Murphet, who returned in 1970 from studies in North America, contrasted the work of Tribe with key practitioners he had seen overseas. Tribe’s work, he commented, “was far more larrikin than Schechner’s work. It had an area of scatological, iconoclastic, turning-up-the-nose at things”. For all the strength of Tribe’s work, Murphet considered, there was not the “serious sort of research/experimentation that was going on in those Grotowski-model theatres”. In Murphet’s assessment the difference between Tribe and the APG was that Tribe “was a group of people who lived and worked together, largely. And their work came out of their life together, and their life together was part of their work,” he stressed. “It was also a group unlike the APG in theory - although it happened a bit with the APG - it was a group that was very dominated by the figure at
the helm," he commented. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989) Murphet suggested that the relationship Anders had with Tribe was, "quite guru-like, really; and similar to the powerful director-figures of the Grotowski/Schechner/Chaikin mould. He had a very strong vision of theatre, and yet he wasn’t domineering. But the way in which the people were drawn to the group was because of the draw of his personality - and certainly there were members of the group who were in love with him, you know". (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

Doug Anders was a man of much integrity and a marvellous calmness. His quiet strength and insight were sought out by those who knew him. Tribe was not alone in having a guru leader - it was the accepted international model for avant-garde theatre work at the time. A model which matches the pattern in Australia, with Rex Cramphorne and the Performance Syndicate, and other groups in the early nineteen-seventies. As Murphet recollected at that time there was an idea of “going on a journey into areas of the unknown - and you needed a leader. Much like you needed a person to help you through your acid trip. You needed a leader to take you on the journey, and it needed a person of a lot of power to do it, really”. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

Shifting the thresholds of acceptability: The Human Body & The Australian Free Theatre Troupe and Hair (1968-9)

The Human Body was the name given to a para-theatrical project initiated by three notable innovators in Australian cultural life: Brian O’Connell (Clem) Gorman, Judy (Juno) Gemes, and John (Johnny) Allen. Gemes was a NIDA graduate and had travelled overseas. She started Ten Cunningham Street, “an environmental discotheque meant to give opportunity, space and money for anyone with an event of any kind to stage, build or develop.” (Allen 1969: 29) She was to be involved with the Yellow House and subsequent creative endeavours. Allen then edited the theatre magazine, Masque, and was to be instrumental in setting up the Aquarius Festivals. Gorman was a radical playwright and proponent of experimental theatre, running the Australian Free Theatre Troupe. The work of the Human Body was created during 1968 and 1969, mostly within the flux of PACT Theatre’s activities in Sussex Street, Sydney.

To participate in an event called Vietnam Environment, the Human Body made a visit to Brisbane in 1969. Half a floor of the Trades Hall Building in Brisbane had been made over
to a multi-media "centre for young people", it was called Foco - "Cuban for guerrilla encampment," Allen noted. Here the Human Body worked with Tribe and other participants for one week to create an environmental event, using all the available spaces in the building. "Tribe performed a series of Vietnam sketches," Allen wrote. "A boy in a clear plastic cylinder of ox blood wiped the blood across the plastic view which people had of his prison before breaking out to spread ox blood among the crowd." Then, he recorded, "audience members were extracted, put through an interrogation box, and either offered a lucky dip or pushed onto the fire escape. The pop band played an abstract sound poem based on the siren of an ambulance, and the Tribe improvised an interpretive dance under strobe lights. Chants of 'stop the war', 'leave Vietnam', were passed around and picked up." (Allen 1969: 30) Gorman felt that they needed more preparation time for such an event. Allen himself, felt that "the enormity of Vietnam had been too much to cope with." (Allen 1969: 29) It was a learning process, which left them "eager to work," on their return to Sydney. (Allen 1969: 30)

With the Australian Free Theatre Troupe Gorman next created, Ceremonies, "an attempt to extract the elements of ritual from out everyday life and mould these into a form which could be shared." (Allen 1969: 30) Gorman wrote a manifesto which was notable for the congruency it had with Artaud, and the historical avant-gardes. This suggested more than simply Gorman's knowledge of these earlier texts, of which he was no doubt aware; but he was also a true voice of his time. To his knowledge of his antecedents we should add a recognition of his sensibility to his own time. His words were revelatory, ecstatic and illuminated the two decades to follow. Significantly these ideas, as expressed by Gorman, were de-politicised to the point of being potentially reactionary. He wrote, for example, of a process of "un-training", that was a process of opening up to levels of heightened suggestibility and personal vulnerability. The celebration of love, hate, cruelty, violence and peace "with equal indifference," which Gorman was advocating, suggested a wider focus of modern theatre performances on stage, cinema and television in the late nineteen-sixties. Issues of the viewing of violence, and the place of 'cruelty' in the reception of art has remained a great moral fulcrum around which modernism turns this century. This transgressive potential Gorman placed beyond the confining situation of the stage. The stage had its tradition of licence and liberality, but Gorman advocated that there was no stage. By arguing - as many were in the nineteen-sixties - that life and art were one, there was no safe forum for the dangerous passions of the drama. The liberated province which
the stage traditionally provided was ruptured, and these obsessions let loose into society at large, with revolutionary potential.

In December 1968, Ceremonies “caused some comment from critics and the newspapers, collected a few strange paragraphs because of its first exploration here of theatrical nudity, but failed to draw the reaction of offense which we had partly expected,” Allen wrote in Masque. (Allen 1969a: 30) The critic Katharine Brisbane in the Australian, questioned if it was theatre. “The evening culminated in the amorphous group stripping and covering each other with coloured paints and dancing in an increasing frenzy which finally led to the men in the unreal flashing light of the stroboscope tossing aside their last tiny piece of covering.” Brisbane added, “It all seemed remarkably vernal and inoffensive.” (Brisbane 1991: 309) Nudity, she and Allen both point out, had arrived on the modern Australian stage.

Commercial theatre was not usually the site for radically innovative theatre, or outrageous provocation, but the counter culture became marketable very early; in fact the counter culture was inflated by - if not the outright creation of - the public relations machinery surrounding the popular music industry. The rock musical Hair was a commercial success in 1969 for the entrepreneur Harry M. Miller, and his backers enjoyed a considerable return from their investment in this radical project. The director Jim Sharman’s production transformed this minor and quite inward-looking off-off-Broadway show into a hit. It ran at the Metro Theatre for over a year before a season in Melbourne. Hair apparently challenged what could be offered to local audiences and considerably widened what was allowed. Denis O’Brien wrote in the Bulletin, “Hair represents the sum of avant-garde theatre ... nakedness, four-letter words, improvisations, cacophony, heady incomprehensibility - the lot.” O’Brien was concerned in this article to put the principle that experiment was necessary to renovate tradition in the theatre. “Keeping theatre from moribundity by keeping it relevant for successive generations”, he wrote, “now depends more than ever on the workshop experiment which has nothing to do with calculating commercialism. In Australia,” he went on, “where theatre is sustained by theatre from abroad, the workshop is a vital necessity if our theatre is ever to have any hairs on its chest.” (O’Brien 1969b: 37) Notwithstanding O’Brien’s pun, this was strong advocacy from the pages of the Bulletin for a radical national theatre tradition. In fact it was just such hairy-chested, male dominated theatre that was emerging from the La Mama Group.
Hair was a celebration that was cast largely from singers and non-actors. Sharman's direction, in conjunction with the designer Brian Thompson, was highly original and went well beyond any formula of either the commercial theatre or the 'honest' theatre of the ensemble workshops. In Hair performances were brash and indicative rather than motivated, they were amplified and distorted electronically, and full of parody and even travesty of both the form and contents of the work. But as a focus for youth culture, Hair seemed, at the time, to empower the young. In the way of the principles of anarchy, this work claimed to hand to young people the responsibility for themselves and their society. The show questioned sexual repression and racism and war, and it advocated personal freedoms and responsibilities.

The stage was stripped to reveal its stage equipment and was surrounded with towering industrial scaffolding holding an armoury of lighting and stage effects which were employed so that each major number of the show had a stunning new set of effects to accompany it. The deliberately modern stage was "bare, save for the magnet of focus of a great nuclear disarmament arrow whose circle marked off what was to prove a new variant on the ancient Greek dancing-floor." (Ryan 1970: 15) Monumental construction, text on the set and in the action, and the traditional drapes removed, reflected Thompson's enthusiasm for 'Brechtian' staging. Beyond this though, there was a vitality of youth culture that had been let loose on the stage, and was responding to the pressing political issues of the time, engaged in a search for ritual forms to articulate its current concerns. This production was a success which Sharman and Thompson were to follow in other cities around the world. Hair introduced methods of the avant-garde to the usually staid precinct of the commercial stage in Australia.


A group of artists set up an experiment in Sydney's cosmopolitan Kings Cross, inspired by the idea of Van Gogh's ideal communal colony. The Yellow House lasted for two years, and was a work-space, gallery, performance space, living-place, and show-case, for Martin Sharp, George Gittoes, Albie Thoms, Peter Kingston, Juno Gemes, Julia Sale, Bruce Goold, and others. It drew painters, film makers, and performance artists into a cross-disciplinary environment which dared to be both playful and profound.
Experimental film maker Albie Thorns established the Ginger Meggs Memorial School of Arts there, and there were “mixed-media performances and film screenings. A weekly film-makers cinema showed the work of Yellow House artists. Those attracted included Bruce Petty and Peter Weir.” (Barrowclough 1990: 44) Roger Foley, known in those days as Ellis D. Fogg, created environmental light shows and on one occasion a light capsule at the Yellow House. (Barrowclough 1990: 44) The influence of the historical avant-gardes was apparent at the Yellow House, as well as their fascination with Oriental representation. This was reminiscent of Van Gogh and the neo-impressionist’s preoccupation with woodblock prints. Brett Whiteley’s Bonsai Room was a playfully presented environmental work which he created with Martin Sharp. It included a trompe l’œil doorway through which was painted a huge version of one of the Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji by Hokusai, popularly as The Wave. (Barrowclough 1990: 44) Parodic citation of this type is a fundamental strategy of postmodern art, and this demonstrates that the artists at the Yellow House were setting the trends in contemporary art making in Australia.

Artists at the Yellow House were influenced by international models and events. They, in their turn, had a pervasive influence on local art and performance. Barrowclough noted that there were plays performed at the Yellow House by Dada and Expressionist authors and by Jean Cocteau, as well as “the experimental theatre of the Yellow House artists themselves.” (Barrowclough 1990: 44) George Gittoes created a puppet theatre at the Yellow House in which Sufi allegories from classic Persian literature were a feature. “The ‘puppets’ who appeared each evening often took their characters out of the streets of the Cross,” Barrowclough wrote, “Amid the bizarre carnival of drug dealers, prostitutes and American R&R servicemen, Pierrot, [Harlequin] and Columbine were arrested regularly and charged with ‘obstructing the free flow of traffic’.” (Barrowclough 1990: 41) The Yellow House was a port of call for visiting artists and ‘travellers’ such as “the strange, exotic English raconteur David Litvanoff.” (Barrowclough 1990: 41) And the site of both the carefully contrived and the spontaneous performances of its participants, including, Bruce Goold and the performance artist Bliss. (Barrowclough 1990: 44)

Albie Thoms initiated the Theatre of Cruelty project mounted by Sydney University Dramatic Society in 1965 with further events through 1966. (Mundie 1997: 23 ff) Thoms has suggested that they staged Sydney’s first happening - an apparent air accident with the bloodied bodies of the injured carried through an unsuspecting dinner party - as part of this
series of events. (Allen 1968: 23; Thoms 1969: 15) Thoms wrote a substantial article for *Masque* in 1969, titled, 'The grandchildren of Pa Ubu’. In it he gave a detailed account of the “genealogy of happenings” from the historical avant-gardes to the then contemporary scene in America and Europe. Jarry, Artaud, Tzara, as well as Kaprow, Oldenberg and Cage were situated by Thoms’ article as antecedents to his own current preoccupations in Australia. (Thoms 1969: *passim*) Thoms set up an underground film co-operative, UBU Films. His first feature length film in 1969 was *Marinetti*. (Allen 1969: 8) Ubu Films also specialised in light shows. Barrowclough has suggested that “it can be argued that the later arrival of Australian film began at the Yellow House.” (Barrowclough 1990: 44)

Thoms and Sharp formed their anarchic, latter-day version of the Bauhaus at a specific time and place: in the liberated days of the early nineteen-seventies, in the bohemian centre of Sydney, Kings Cross. “The House and the School attracted a significant amount of attention,” Anne Marsh wrote, “due to Sharp’s illustrious connections with artists and the pop art scene through his involvement with *Oz*.” The magazine had been the testing ground for debates over censorship. As Marsh noted, Martin Sharp was even “gaoled in 1964 for his obscene drawings; [and] criticism against the magazine continued into the nineteen-seventies.” (Marsh 1993: 26)

By 1971 internal dissension within the group propelled Sharp, Thoms and Gittoes to leave. “Under the guidance of Sebastian Jorgensen, who changed the focus to a live-in commune,” Marsh has written, “artists worked and attempted to integrate themselves into the local environment through children’s theatre, acrobatic displays and similar activities.” (Marsh 1993: 27) The work done at the Yellow House, during its brief but intensely productive existence, was to widely influence film, visual arts and theatre practices in Australia.

**An alternative company: The White Company** (1972 to 1976)

The White Company was started at Sydney University in 1972, at a time charged with a sense of revolutionary opportunity. There was a lot of political and creative activity on campus at this time. Frederick May was the head of the Italian Department and inspired considerable explorations of commedia dell’arte and Italian renaissance performing arts, as well as being a provocative figure in contemporary theatre. One of the most outstanding people to work with the White Company was Philippa Cullen. She was still an
undergraduate when she began to teach modern dance on campus, and to create extraordinary cross-media dance events. Working in Australia with the composers David Ahern and Don Banks, as well in Europe with Cathy Berberian, Luciano Berio and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Cullen was at the forefront of international contemporary music and performance. (Wallace 1989: passim; Alexander 1989: passim)

The White Company received a boost when they were asked to travel around and help promote the Aquarius Festival at Nimbin. There were a number of key participants, including Peter [White] Carolan and Ronaldo [pseudonym] Cameron. (Rosenzveig 1992) Peter Carolan has said that the White Company’s philosophy was to “try to get away from this idea of [...] the actors being separate from the audience.” The White Company, Carolan suggested, was “quite anarchic.” He commented that the way they approached performing “left quite a lot of space for unusual things to happen.” Adding, with a smile, “Which we used to like, in those days.” (Rosenzveig 1992)

A strategy of the alternative theatres was to try to find something less superficial and contrived than the formal theatres. The spontaneous celebrations of youth and student culture were more fertile places to work for these young performers. “We just used to go where there were people who just wouldn’t normally be exposed to theatre,” Carolan commented. The White Company had the charm of the unexpected, like latter day troubadours. “Like most of the theatre that we did could be anywhere. Literally, we carried our instruments on our back. We could always find costumes. And we would do it in whatever circumstances we found ourselves,” Carolan said. (Rosenzveig 1992)

There was a certain pride at this time in doing both the unexpected and the downright impossible. The White Company, Carolan recalled “were the only people who have ever agreed to drive to Coober Pedy just for one show. So when they had us back the second year,” he added, “they gave us a plane and we did Maree, and all those little outback towns.” On one occasion night fell before their plane reached the town to which they were travelling. With growing anxiety, the pilot finally found the town in the darkness and flew low over the houses. Everybody in town then drove their cars out to the airstrip to light it with their headlights so that the plane could land. (Rosenzveig 1992) Such was the stuff of legends for a generation who were, consciously or unconsciously, writing their own legendary adventures.
Ronaldo Cameron had a grandfather who formed an acrobatics troupe in the depression years of the nineteen-thirties. Cameron had learnt dance from childhood and commenced working with Philippa Cullen at the University of Sydney. He created performances at the University Settlement, in Redfern, and worked with the White Company in 1973 at the Nimbin Festival and in 1976 at Sydney University they performed *City of Food*. (Rosenzveig 1992) Cameron worked with Margaret Barr’s Dance Drama Group in Sydney. He was in sympathy with the social consciousness of this dedicated socialist. Cameron began at this time working with artists across disciplines, learning other dance traditions and performing across cultures. Like many of his contemporaries, Cameron had the opportunity to travel overseas. He studied modern dance in the United States, and traditional dance in India.

**The apotheosis of the modern: The Aquarius Festival**

The first Aquarius Festival was highly politicised by its placement in the National Capital, and by some of the performances, especially from the Australian Performing Group. It was held on the campus of the Australian National University in 1971. It had a rich program of theatre within a very structured program of events organised by the Australian Union of Students (AUS). (Small 1971: 44) However protests about the war in Vietnam and other social issues were at boiling point and with university students from all over Australia resident on a campus in the heart of Canberra, daily protests and clashes with the police occurred. (Guthrie/Salzer interview 1990) Later, students asked if the imposed structure of this festival was ideal. “People don’t want to be culture consumers, they want to get together and do their own thing, and the hell with organisation,” one participant was quoted as saying. (Small 1971: 45)

So it was that for the next Aquarius Festival in 1973, AUS adopted a more anarchic approach: The organisers travelled the country inviting people to come and to make it their own festival at Nimbin. John Allen and Graeme Dunstan had the task of bringing together people for ten days in May 1973 for the Aquarius Festival at Nimbin in Northern NSW. Ten to fifteen thousand people attended this event in a quiet rural valley, once subtropical rainforest. Allen has described it as a “vision for the future, a temporary and ecstatic community for the duration of the festival.” (Doogue interview 1993)
The 1973 Aquarius Festival at Nimbin was far more than a pop music festival: it became a statement of belief in an alternative society. It was the highpoint of youth culture in Australia in this period, and represented the utopian ideal within modernism at its most focussed in Australia. At Nimbin, life and art met, as they have rarely done, despite the recurrence of this ideal.

The entire festival was imbued with a sense of ceremony and theatre. From the performances of the White Company, and the relatively formal concerts of rock and roll bands to impromptu events - unrehearsed happenings and rituals - this was a seminal occasion for many who attended. Allen has commented that for some “the festival has never stopped,” It was a “turning point in people’s lives,” he said. “We are all artists, and the true art is life,” Allen added. (Doogue interview 1993) The Nimbin Festival “was not reactive” - as the earlier University campus-based festivals had been, Graeme Dunstan has commented. He has argued that there was a constructive attitude to the alternative society. (Walker interviews 1993) This positivism was still ironically loaded with reactive aspects, as architect Colin James recalled, “It’s not true to suggest that we had an ideology even though the counter culture and Roszak and those sorts of writers would suggest there was some sort of ideology. It’s not really true. Basically it was to not follow the dominant paradigm,” James said. (Colin James in Walker interviews 1993) There was a common revolutionary contention with middle-class norms. If this festival had turned away from political protest action, yet here was actual commune-ism. Here, participants came face to face with the notion that politically, as well as artistically, they could take responsibility themselves and through their own actions create new solutions.

The Festival was a celebration of popular music, sexual freedom, and the use of marijuana and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Because of the illegal nature of these drugs it was hard to properly assess the influence of marijuana, and the Swiss chemist, Albert Hoffman’s mind-altering drug, LSD. Their prevalence in youth culture generally should not be underestimated, nor the influence of Timothy Leary expressed in the psychedelic rock music of Hendrix, Pink Floyd and the Beatles. There was little use of alcohol, it has been noted, but the composer Ian Farr once described to me being handed a bottle of Southern Comfort by the poet Judith Wright, late at night around a campfire at the festival, as a ‘life-changing’ moment.
A conclusion: ghetto or garden

In his writing on the Third Theatre, Eugenio Barba advocated the necessity of the ghetto, the safe-haven in a hostile world in which culture can be cultivated. He characterised the companies of the Third Theatre, like his own Odin Teatret, as “excluded people” and “misfits” who had shown, he suggested, “the courage to leave the mainland” and, in his key phrase, have built “a floating island”, in other words a province which separates them from the obligation to follow “the mainland’s culture.” (Barba 1986:205) In this description of Barba’s, we can recognise the alternative theatres in Australia at this time.

Whether this separate frame of reference was a magic garden or a ghetto was a matter of perspective, and at times it was both: an enchanting liberated space and a confining limited domain. The ecstatic theatres, like the alternative society, were crying out against materialism from the privilege of a society of incomparable affluence. They expressed profound mistrust of technology and the electronic media while, at the same time enjoying every access and advantage that these provided. The almost unhinged paradoxes within the ‘alternative society’ and its cultural institutions - especially rock and roll and alternative theatre - were an expression of a pinnacle of modernism, at which point the proposition of ‘progress’ itself became a kind of absurdity (to use Chesterton’s phrase, if not Esslin’s). Beyond this point Western cultural history became global cultural history and, coincidentally, the modern proposition of ‘newness’ slipped into the postmodern proposition of ‘reframing’. The ‘alternative culture’ was the ultimate Quixotic expression of a totalising Utopian ideal in modern Western thought. It was extreme and anti-logical, its political foundations were in anarchy, but its head was in the clouds. The clouds were, at this date of course, psychedelic and induced by marijuana and lysergic acid. For the theatre companies of this period, notions of a ‘separate space’ or an ‘alternative reality’ were profoundly dangerous because they were completely marginalising, and marked out those holding such views as unconcerned with the main-game. These attempts at self-liberation and self-actualisation became too frequently a pretext for groups and their members to be dismissed by the conservative arbiters of taste, who increasingly became the Federal and State funding bodies. These were not always liberating alternatives but at time these individuals and groups pushed their activities to the point of self-annihilation.

There had been a strong tradition of socialist theatre in Australia within the New Theatre movement. The arrival of the politics of the New Left through the radical campus politics of Monash University stimulated a politicisation of the theatre experiments at La Mama in Carlton, especially with individuals associated with the Melbourne Teachers’ College and the Melbourne University. The outcome of this was Australia’s most dynamic political theatre: the Australian Performing Group, the APG (1970 - 1981).

Revolutionary actions within the APG irrevocably changed the nature of theatre in Australia from colonial patterns to a new set of values which were profoundly democratic and anti-imperialistic.

When the APG moved to their new theatre in Drummond Street, Carlton, they named the theatre the Pram Factory, after one of the building’s previous uses. A perambulator was a suitable image for a theatre which delivered the new theatre and paraded it around town, sometimes quite literally in Vietnam moratorium marches and other social action and public demonstrations. The APG was to carry a diversity of offspring, including a number of deeply committed investigations of the potential of theatre to produce social change and to reflect radical views of society. Notably there were the work of Nightshift, which styled itself as an underground theatre, the theatre experiments of Stasis, and the emergence of community theatre and the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group.

Training actors for the revolution: The New Theatre

The New Theatre in Melbourne and the New Theatre in Sydney fulfilled important roles in training young performers before training institutions were established in Australia. Established directors and actors would often choose to work at the New Theatre because of the repertoire and the stylistic freedoms it offered. Although earlier bound by an adherence to social realism, by the late nineteen-sixties this had relaxed and there were
many aesthetically radical productions, especially in Sydney. The New Theatre’s National Policy as amended at the 21st National Conference of the New Theatre in 1968 reads, in part: “New Theatre is a theatre based on the principles of humanism and the realistic tradition in art.” Social realism remained the style favoured in the policy, but the document continued with a broadly worded provision to include the theatre innovations of the day. The policy now advocated “drama which, what ever its form, is centred on the ideals and aspirations of the people for a better, fuller and freer life.” (New Theatre’s National Policy, no author, 1968.)

The Sydney New Theatre contributed several theatrical landmarks during the nineteen-sixties at their theatre in St Peter’s Lane. The popular documentary musicals *On Stage Vietnam* in 1967 and *Going Going Gone* in 1968 were collaborative works, which used music, drama and the vaudeville tradition to present the politics of the day. They anticipated similar works at Jane Street Theatre, the APG and Nimrod Theatre. Ken Harper has stressed that the New provided a model for the nationalistic bombast of the new Australian theatre in the early days of Nimrod and the APG. Especially he noted that *On Stage Vietnam*, with a script by Mona Brand and Pat Barnett, used “a range of styles and synthetic media [...] stylistic collage, historical quote, burlesque and collaborative working methods [which were to be] used by Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis in the development of *The Legend of King O’Malley* three years later.” (Harper 1984a: 69)

John Tasker’s production of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude van Itallie in June 1968, in Rex Cramphorn’s view, realised something of Artaud’s proposition that theatre must re-engage with life. (Cramphorne 1968; pu) This triple-bill also confronted the issue of censorship in Australia, and became a rallying point for greater liberalism. With the latter part banned by the New South Wales Chief Secretary (note the retention of a colonial title), ‘Friends of America Hurrah’ organised a one-night performance of this savagely anti-American work in the Teachers’ Federation Hall in Sussex Street, Sydney. Three thousand people attended the protest, spilling out into the street. At the end of the performance the police failed to arrest the actors who disappeared into the crowd. (SMH 27 July 1968, Herlinger 1995: 404) This production and others challenged the repressive laws of the day, and led eventually to a degree of liberalisation of the State and Federal legislation concerning ‘indecent language’ and sexual content in performances. Van Itallie’s play *The Serpent*, was also staged at the New in July 1969, but Cramphorn saw this as an
“unconvincing carbon copy” of the Open Theatre. He noted with regret that it lacked “the conviction of a trained ensemble who have helped create the material they present from their own experience, their own minds and bodies.” (Cramphorne 1969e: 45) This is an interesting prefigurement of Cramphorn’s own work to come with the Performance Syndicate. One of the last performances given by the New Theatre at the St Peter’s Lane venue was an inter-arts program conceived by Kai Tai Chan in February 1973, titled *Dance Exploration*. The theatre moved then to its premises in King Street, Newtown.

In the nineteen-sixties Oriel Gray, Mona Brand and Betty Rolland were simultaneously ‘successful playwrights’ at the New Theatre and marginalised as ‘women playwrights’. In an ironic twist to the way they were patronised as women, in a recent interview with David Marr, they have suggested that they felt themselves able to explore more radical forms and devices *because* they were women. This was a freedom not enjoyed by their male contemporaries, who, they suggested to Marr, were taken ‘more seriously’ and had placed on them more strict expectations to adhere to a social realist line. (Marr/Brand, Gray & Rolland interview 1995) An outcome of this was that the innovations in style and form made by these women, laid the ground for the development of a stylistically diverse local vernacular theatre. Brand, Gray and Rolland’s writing for theatre opened the way for a naturalism which had a quirky inclination to novel theatrical devices and unconventional play structures.

The Melbourne New Theatre shared the use of the Drummond Street building with the APG when they were first setting up the Pram Factory theatre.¹ The Melbourne New Theatre was effectively eclipsed by the more radical, dynamic and popular socialist theatre upstairs. It survived to do some community theatre and at least two productions - *Sandinista* and *Sun on Our Backs* - in the mid-nineteen-eighties that were reminiscent of its hey day. (O’Brien 1995: 402)

The move changed a closed laboratory theatre working out of La Mama into a large collective with a complex and pluralist agenda at the Pram Factory. The theatre laboratory at La Mama was animated by people who had read TDR and people who had enthusiasm for avant-garde theatre, such as Sue Neville who had worked in Poland with Grotowski in the nineteen-sixties. The prospect of experimental theatre also animated the core group who were to form the APG. Kerry Dwyer commented, “I’d always wanted to have a small
ensemble. But the small experimental theatre they may have intended was overtaken by the popularity of the impulse towards a modern national theatrical expression. Kerry Dwyer recollected that “it became really clear that it wasn’t ever going to be like that, because it generated so much energy and we had all these people coming in from different areas. We prided ourselves on being a pluralist group,” Dwyer told Wawrzyńczak. (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987: 3)

The APG: new politics, new theatre, new aesthetics

The Australian Performing Group (APG) was a political theatre. This is the appropriate framework to view the impressive and diverse body of work which was produced by the Group, mostly in their theatre, the Pram Factory, during the years 1970 to 1981. More than one hundred individuals were members of the co-operative during this period. In the keen debates within the collective, aesthetic considerations were often weighed less heavily than political action. It was the contending factions in debates on a socialist agenda, rather than debates on the art of theatre, which drove the company and its work. This is not to suggest that members of the APG were aesthetically ill-informed or lacking judgment. Their various radical stances were linked to aesthetic values, and reflected considerable knowledge of the tradition.

The APG was an enormously prolific, sprawling and, at times, self-contradictory venture. The work at the Pram Factory had this “wonderful earthy energy,” as Alison Richards has said. “It was unashamedly colloquial, vulgar, broad, over the top,” she continued. (Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) As well as these strong qualities, which have been widely held to characterise the group, there were also other qualities at the APG. The pluralism at the Pram Factory Robin Laurie has suggested came from three important strands of performances: there was American and European experimental theatre; there was political street theatre which, Laurie noted, “went on to become the community theatre”; and there was the popular Australian play. (Wawrzyńczak/Laurie interview 1987) These areas were not exclusive, and individuals were possibly involved in more than one project and so could be active in different aspects of the group’s work. Laurie remarked that, “Because we had done a lot of street theatre and were interested in popular forms, the physical had always been very much a part of all areas of work.” She said, “We were against the idea that an actor was an interpreter of somebody else’s words. We didn’t want
to say anything we didn’t believe in.” (Wawrzyńczak/Laurie interview 1987: 9) If the work of the APG was sometimes rough, and even deliberately unpolished, and if sometimes it was downright badly acted, yet the APG also nurtured some of the most outstanding acting talents to emerge in the Australian theatre. There was also work of enormous competence and even, occasionally, masterly polish done at the Pram Factory. Essential to this range and diversity of work was a sense of freedom which the APG enjoyed which was, in part, a product of the times, but was also reinforced by several specific circumstances of the Group.

As a political theatre - and distinct from the experimental theatres premised on aesthetic propositions at this time - the APG had, in a sense, an *artistic licence* to make its product by whatever means it chose. It was no longer constrained, as other socialist theatres had been by an obligation to produce social realist work. The Group included individuals with a first-hand knowledge of contemporary performance practices internationally, and collectively they benefited from knowledge of these trends without becoming bound to these aesthetic goals or the means of achieving them. This freedom was essential to achieving the high level of originality and daring that was evident in the work the APG. There was another licence ironically granted by the conservative Melbourne press, who refused to review ‘out of town’ theatre activity, which included the Carlton theatres. Their choice not to review the APG’s work provided a freedom from hostile press criticism which was liberating for the APG. As Kerry Dwyer told Jan Wawrzyńczak, “our style was to take a text and not bother to analyse it much and then put on it a few songs, a few jokes, a couple of signs, acrobatics. We could give something a real theatrical flair and panache and people would have a fabulous time in the theatre and go home happy.” (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987: 9)

The APG was anarchic and sometimes deliberately out of control, in the way that the counter culture gave individuals - gave that generation - a licence to be wild, to ‘do your own thing,’ while waiting for the revolution. Robin Laurie recalled that their aim was, “to blow people’s minds, and make the revolution come after the very next production, and create a genuinely popular Australian culture.” She continued, “Romeril always talked about it being part of a cultural liberation struggle, a process a lot of countries have had to go through to reject the culture of the colonising nation.” (Wawrzyńczak/Laurie interview 1987: 4)
This New Left analysis placed a deliberate strategy of de-colonising at the disposal of these performance makers. “We thought that theatre was dominated by a certain cultural class, it expressed the interests and concerns of that class, and not anybody else,” Laurie said. “We were determined to take theatre out of the theatre and take it to the streets, to the parks, to the schools, to the workplaces. We believed that there was no separation between your work and your life, that everything was political,” Laurie explained. (Wawrzyńczak/Laurie interview 1987: 4) Clearly this strategic thinking was in line with, and preceded, the policies for the democratisation of art which emerged with the Australian Council for the Arts initiative in community arts. Kerry Dwyer has said, “We were all concerned about using theatre as a way to make a better world, that theatre had the potential to change things for the better in a political sense.” (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987) The notion of community theatre was first employed in Australia with APG projects.

To make art accessible for a general audience of non-theatre-goers the APG employed popular theatre forms. Kerry Dwyer suggested to Wawrzyńczak that the influences included vaudeville and “ideas of popular theatre that were being explored in England, Europe and America.” She also said that agit prop was “the big thing.” Dwyer commented that the APG had used some of Grotowski’s exercises in actor training. (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987) The Pram Factory opened in December 1970 with, Marvellous Melbourne, a production which foregrounded post-colonial concerns and revisited the vaudeville era. Hibberd and Romeril contributed scripted material which was worked on by the cast. The play was reworked for a second season in March 1971. A critique of American capitalism was the focus of John Romeril’s play Chicago Chicago in a new production in June that year, directed by Max Gillies. They staged the hilarious political satire, The Feet of Daniel Mannix by Barry Oakley, in October 1971. It was about the involvement of the Roman Catholic archbishop in a secret anti-Communist organisation, the League of Rights, which had played a key role in the Labour Party spilt that had kept the conservative Liberal Party in office for over twenty years. Directed by Graeme Blundell, the play showcased the comic brilliance of Bruce Spence as the Archbishop and Max Gillies in the role of Greensleeves, an elphin muse to the notorious archbishop, who bore a startling resemblance to B.A. Santamaria. There was a strongly anarchic tone to many activities of the APG. Gary Waddell has said, “We weren’t armchair socialists, we actually were doing it, we’d get out and involve ourselves.” Waddell told Jan Wawrzyńczak, “We had the insanity, we could possibly do anything and we did, like dragging the corpse of Capitalism and putting it out
There was a daring exploration of the national narratives undertaken by the APG. Notions of national identity were interrogated through investigations of colonial character types, and the colonial origins of character types. The construction of sexual types in Australian dramatic literature, and the theatrical representation of gender were investigated at the APG. In early plays for the APG by Williamson, Oakley, Romeril, and Hibberd, for example, a type of male Australian character is represented, who - although middle-class - displayed a deliberate coarseness, and intentionally stepped down from the gentry values of an Anglophile middle-class. This was not a step down into the gutter, as it were, but a step into the stereotype of the wild colonial boy: the larrikin. (Fitzpatrick 1988: 522)2 The diverse work which manifest these investigations profoundly influenced Australian self-perception, as we can see with the widespread recognition of the larrikin persona. The APG was also remarkably articulate in their own analysis and reflection on their work.

Hibberd wrote of the Pram Factory as “the cradle of dingo theatre,” where “it has been said, only half facetiously, that the APG introduced heterosexuality into the Australian theatre.” (Hibberd 1980: 38) It is Hibberd himself, of course, who elsewhere made this facetious assertion, whilst decrying effete imported theatre and the tinsel decorated, homosexual dominated, theatre of Sydney. The ongoing inter-colonial rivalries between Melbourne and Sydney were present in Hibberd’s claim to the more virile of the strains in a post-colonial tradition.

**Women’s Liberation and women’s theatre**

Women’s theatre activities in Australia began at the APG with Betty Can Jump, presented just after Christmas in 1972. This landmark production was put on “in conjunction with the Carlton Branch of Women’s Liberation,” as a Melbourne Times article stated. “There had been a growing feeling,” the article suggested, “among the women in the APG that their position to date had not been equal, and their full contribution was not being enlisted.” (Melbourne Times 19/1/72: 5) Robin Laurie recalled “The Women’s Liberation Movement too, asserted that the present must be lived in all aspects of our lives. ‘The Personal is Political’ raised the question of the relation of the public to the private spheres,” Laurie said in 1987 at a Community Theatre Conference. “Consciousness Raising groups stressed every
woman’s need for space for her feelings and ideas to grow and be recognised.” (Laurie 1987: np) The processes initiated in this workshop and production were to become the commonplaces of community theatre during the next two decades. “The twin sources of the play,” the article continues, “are the personal exploration methods leading to theatrical images (developed in workshop and carried over into rehearsals) and a rich fund of documents unearthed and presented to the group by a team of researchers (rather than writers as such).” [Parenthesis in the original] The article states, that “this personal exploration through workshops was directed to examining role playing and conditioning in women, and to externalise what was uncovered into theatrical images, in preparation for a full production on those themes.” Implicitly contrasting this process with a more conventional one involving a playwright, the article pursues Dwyer’s point that this process involved the participant’s “experience as a contribution from the very earliest stages.” This was a matter of power and ownership: “Theatre should spring directly from its environment, from its society, rather than be imposed on it,” the article stated. This “ethos of the APG,” as the article called it, was to become the rationale of the greater part of the alternative and community theatre work done in the period of this study. (Melbourne Times 19/1/72: 5) Dwyer, as much as anyone, articulated the paradox of the alignment of art-for-art’s-sake workshops and the radical politics which was relocating power in post-colonial Australia.

The nature of workshop/rehearsal and research/devising as processes to create a theatrical performance were modelled here. The implications were significant both in the politics of performance making, and in the stylistic aspects of the results. Women’s theatre in Australia had, at its inception, qualities of reflection, and a concern with detail, which remained amongst its strengths throughout the period of this study. “This documentary material consists of official records, diaries, journals, newspapers, magazines, letters and plays, poetry, prose and songs from different periods of our history,” the Melbourne Times article enumerates. (19/1/72: 5) The actor-devised documentary play may have its acknowledged origins in such projects as Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop production, Oh What a Lovely War!; but locally, and much less well recognised, Betty Can Jump was an important antecedent to twenty years of group-devised, documentary theatre work in Australia.

Matters of process were the issue in dispute, as so often at the APG. “The group’s workshops in the past have been related to developing acting skills, and were seldom concerned with the searching for personal exploration that might form the actual material
for performance.” Here the article reflected Dwyer’s argument at the time, we might suppose. “The role of the writer in APG projects had been to produce an a priori text based on a personal ‘vision’ or experience, and the feasibility and group contribution extended only so far as experimenting with the final theatrical form for performance.” (Melbourne Times 19/1/72: 5 Italics added.) This was the crux of another conflict within the APG, between writers and actors, and in this project the additional issue of gender brought it to a fine focus. More recently, Dwyer has said that the APG, at that period, created shows in which they had “a writer come in and shape what the actors had come up with and there’d be half men and half women in the cast, and they’d come back with script after script with nothing for the women. They could not see women, they could not hear women. So we had to do it ourselves.” She commented that “Betty Can Jump was the first Women’s Lib piece, and we rehearsed it in secret and on the dress rehearsal we allowed the men to come in and they hated it. But it was a huge hit.” (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987) Women from the Pram Factory founded the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group (MWTG) in 1974, as will be discussed more fully in the second part of this thesis.

At this crucial juncture in the emergence of modern Australia, in the fervent anticipation of the election of a new government which promised ‘change’, the APG produced one of the key texts to dissect post-colonial Australian experience, Jack Hibberd’s modern classic A Stretch of the Imagination. Peter Cummins first played the role of the craggy isolate Monk O’Neill in this monodrama at the Pram Factory in March 1972. This was an artistic high-point for the APG and for theatre in Australia. But the APG was first and foremost a political theatre and the most telling productions were not always the most artistically refined. Sonia’s Knee and Thigh Show, was a political revue presented in April 1972. The title poked fun at Sonia McMahon’s choice of garment when she accompanied her husband, William McMahon, then the Liberal Prime Minister, to the White House while on a trip to America. More than Vietnamese, Americans or Australians losing their lives in the Vietnam war, the local press and, we were led to believe, the American press, were scandalised by the sight of Sonia McMahon’s legs.

A new government: nationalist and reformist

The election of the Labour government of Gough Whitlam in 1972 offered a renewed vision for Australia. With an optimistic, national agenda of socialist reform, Whitlam represented
the positive potential of being Australian. He promised to return Australia to the position of the social laboratory; unself-consciously picking up the never-completed nationalist agenda of Federation. Domestic attention to ‘the quality of life’ and greater international independence represented a shift away from the colonial cringe and subservience to either Britain or the United States of America. When it was elected, the response to the Labour government’s policy developments within the arts was a quite unparalleled flourishing of vernacular expression. Australia had come of age as a nation, and Australian narratives were now able to be articulated as never before in literature, theatre and cinema. There was an ironic problem in this victory of the left for the APG. The APG was a left-wing theatre, and had gained much of its momentum from the dynamics of protest. Within hours of taking office the new Australian government had recognised the People’s Republic of China, withdrawn from the war in Vietnam and given amnesty to thousands of young men who had illegally avoided conscription. While celebrating these victories, the theatre had also lost the passionate issues of the day. New government programs supported the new types of accessible theatre that the APG had been pioneering; however, ‘success’ and ‘programs of support’ were not always wholly comfortable forms of recognition for an essentially rebellious group.

Art and working life

The APG had started to do shows in work places with the help of trade unions as early as 1969. Initially these were agit-prop style shows by John Romeril, such as Mr Big, the Big Big Pig. Later they created more theatrically complex community theatre shows. The musician and circus performer Mick Conway recalled, “We did a whole lot of factory shows organised by trade unions around Melbourne, and then we did a tour of Sydney too. We were the first multilingual show - when we went into factories we did it in Italian, English and Greek - any one part of it could basically be understood by anyone,” he said. “A lot of us were using circus skills. Just about all the factories we did, they’d never seen anything like it, they were shocked that we did it in three languages.” There were ground breaking performances. Conway said, “The most extraordinary concert I ever did in a factory was in Redfern. A lot of these people never went out, some of the women wouldn’t be allowed out. The atmosphere was electric - they just went berserk.” (Wawrzyńczak/Conway interview 1987)
In the APG collective workers controlled the production of the company. They espoused a non-hierarchical structure. It was held together by "a common belief in that method of working and by the scar tissue attending wounds arising from a long history of internal theatrical and ideological warfare," as the account published in the PAYBA put it. This has a familiar wit. "The process is intense and exhausting; a necessary parsimony exists towards the excesses of individualism and may be inhibiting to those who best work alone. It would be fair to say that, at times, the flush of militant collectivism is inimical to individualistic creativity on which the Group has long depended for its artistic and administrative thrust." (PAYBA 1977: 328)

At its largest there were fifty members to the collective. They had monthly meetings, and an elected executive. But the lifestyle was very intense. Members were expected to work on each other's shows, and some even contributed outside earnings above a certain level to the common funds. It was a single person's world. As Robin Laurie commented, "This meant that people with relationships outside the group were under incredible stress, and the women with children must have been truly amazing!" (Laurie 1987: nd) In a way Laurie identified one of the ways the Group worked, when she said, "The collective was an alternative grouping to the nuclear family." However, there was a general conviction that "there would be no Big Daddy." (Laurie 1987: np)

It was unfortunately true, that like many other arts organisations at the time, "a major contribution to the activities of the Group comes from the financial sacrifice involved in working at the Pram Factory, where salaries are far below the average Australian wage." (PAYBA 1977: 328) The actor Bruce Spence, said, "We had a love-hate relationship with promoting ourselves and our shows. The process was much more important than the product. Once a play was on, we got bored with it." (Wawrzyńczak/Spence interview 1987: 9) This was evident in many of the experimental theatres of the nineteen-seventies, and came close to fulfilling the axiom, *art for art's sake*.

**Between 'experiment' and 'political action'**

A key dichotomy within the APG was the divide between those who wanted to make experimental theatre - for its own sake - and those who wanted to create social actions that would effect political outcomes. Graeme Blundell was renowned in the group for his ability
to wield substantive arguments from abroad to win the day within the APG’s domestic politics. Blundell had met Erika Munk in New York in 1971. He reported their discussions about collective structures and the future of progressive theatre groups, in the *APG Internal Bulletin*. Munk had edited *TDR*, but had been replaced by Michael Kirby. She then edited the journal, *Performance*. Lines had been drawn in this part of American theatre criticism, and Blundell’s commentary in the *APG Internal Bulletin* identified strongly with the people “actually involved in creating the theatre and defining its areas” who were writing for *Performance*. (GJB 1972: 1) Munk rejected the anthropological model developed by Richard Schechner in *TDR*. “GREENWICH VILLAGE IS NOT A VILLAGE IN NEW GUINEA,” Munk is quoted as having written. The members of the APG collective, easily substituted ‘Carlton’ for ‘Greenwich Village’ in this global comparison. Munk wrote, “Americans neither can nor should re-create rituals of pre-literate societies.” She argued, “because the purpose of ritual is to ratify a society’s network of myth and social structure, and we want to question that network.” (GJB 1972: 2 Typography as in the original APG document.) The lines of this dispute were laid out in New York, over the fate of avant-garde theatre in America. Munk took up her position opposite Michael Kirby, Richard Schechner and others; and in Australia, similar positions were hotly debated inside the APG.

There were similar debates in Australia, outside the APG in companies like the Performance Syndicate, Claremont, the Film Maker’s Co-operatives in both Melbourne and Sydney, and numerous other radical cultural organisations, on the place of ritual and the role of political action in theatre and film. Monk was quoted as having written: “A group which insists that its members maintain a post-revolutionary level of personal relations and a completely non-authoritarian structure of responsibility will usually end up concentrating more and more on means, not ends, on the processes of training and decision-making rather than the production of work for audiences.” (GJB 1972: 3 Underlining in the original APG document.) This was a cautionary attitude. “Now we must learn and move on from these mistakes,” Munk wrote, advocating also that theatre “must develop self-criticism, a way to judge the effect of its work so that it doesn’t grow narcissistic.” (GJB 1972: 3)

In a document which we can assume was distributed with an *APG Internal Bulletin*, titled ‘Notes from Charles Kemp,’ we find a discussion of contemporary theatre, rejecting naturalism outright. (Kemp nd: 1) Kemp cited Michael Kirby, who suggested a division of
avant-garde theatre into two classes: antagonistic and hermetic. The historical avant-gardes are the clear model of the antagonistic avant-garde - épater la bourgeoisie. The situation of the avant-garde today is somewhat different however, in Kirby’s words, “we have a more detailed model of the antagonistic avant-garde. It includes an audience with particular anti-bourgeois or non-bourgeois tastes that senses the bourgeoisie would be offended if they were present.” (Kirby 1987: 98)

The hermetic avant-garde is exemplified by the Symbolists whose “aesthetics demonstrate a turning inward, away from the bourgeois world [...] There was no confrontation of the bourgeoisie, no satire, no attack on anyone else’s values or standards. The bourgeois world simply did not exist.” (Kirby 1987: 99-100) Jerzy Grotowski’s work was hermetic, in Kirby’s view; although his “actor-training, his neo-Expressionist acting style, and his altering of the traditional audience-performance relationship has strong influence, however, on the antagonistic avant-garde of the nineteen-sixties.” (Kirby 1987: 105) These have some value as categories, but Kirby is defining actions by the reaction to them. It is the avant-garde ‘gesture’ - including the intention to outstrip the norm - disrupt, fracture, confront - which is at the heart of both the antagonisation and the exclusion which are essential for the two categories Kirby has used. “Nostalgia is the opposite of the avant-garde attitude.” (Kirby 1987: 101) If the avant-garde was apparently divided in the nineteen-seventies between contending models, these were all in pursuit of ‘rigour’ and against ‘nostalgia’.

In 1976 Robin Laurie, Jon Hawkes and Lindzee Smith from the APG, went overseas and saw work by Chaikin and Schechner, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Living Theatre. The APG actors took heart when they found similarities in both standards and approach between their work and that of their North American contemporaries. Robin Laurie later commented that, “their work wasn’t any better than ours, and that was great because they were written up in TDR and we weren’t, it gave their work a sort of authority.” (Wawrzyńczak/Laurie interview 1987)

The APG produced work with an increasingly wide range of style and objective. There was the highly skilled and artistically disciplined work of Bob Thorneycroft and Joe Bolza, whose mime shows were technically grounded in European mime. The first presented at the Pram Factory in March 1973, was called, simply, The Bob and Joe Show. Their work
was amongst the most technically disciplined within the APG. In the rough-house style which had endeared the APG to those who sought a new national drama, there was *Waltzing Matilda - A National Pantomime with Tomato Sauce*. The title itself proclaimed an alignment with popular local values. The play, written by Tim Robertson with John Romeril and the Group, had a transparently post-colonial premise. It was presented at the Pram Factory from November 1973. At the beginning of 1974, in the Back Theatre the rock musical, *Africa* by Steve J. Spears, was in production directed by Lindzee Smith. The emerging Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group (MWTG) brought together a week-long Women’s Festival called *Out of the Frying Pan*, and presented the play, *Love Show*, in May at the Pram Factory.

In August 1974 the APG presented *The Floating World*, by John Romeril. It was a major work with almost surrealist power, and in staging the old soldier’s return to modern Japan on a cruise ship, made a new assertion of Australia’s problematic relationship with Asia. It was directed by Lindzee Smith, and designed by Peter Corrigan.

James McCaughey was an academic at Melbourne University when he mounted his production of the *Orestes Trilogy* at the Pram Factory in 1974. The Greek Theatre Project was one of the most searching investigation into performance in Australia at this time.

*The Hills Family Show* was a group-devised show which had it first season at the Pram Factory in 1975 and toured all around Australia for over a year. It was both highly successful and exemplary, in may ways, of what the APG could achieve. It was devised around the idea of a travelling vaudeville troupe, as may once have travelled around rural Australia. Its family members going to seed, and at times hilariously crazy. It used popular theatre forms, and it was popular theatre. It delved into the national memory, and produced a nostalgic, slightly grotesque, but loving revision of the national personae. This work fulfilled many of the ideals of popular theatre espoused by the APG. It was a collaborative creation, calling on popular theatre forms, and widely toured. Whilst not itself conceived as a community theatre venture, *The Hills Family Show* provided a benchmark and a methodology for the emerging practice of community theatre throughout Australia.

The dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 traumatised much in the cultural life of Australia that had arisen and been embraced by the new nationalist vision. If there had been
an ironic diminution in the keen-ness of the political edge in the APG’s work when a radical government came to office; then there was even more complex and desperate response to its undemocratic removal from office. This was compounded for many by the election result which followed the vice-regal removal of the government’s mandate. This result saw the Australian electorate retreat from a path of renovation into a familiar subservience toward civil authority in the person of Malcolm Fraser, the dour new Liberal Prime Minister. One of the actions of the conservative government was to ‘devolve’ the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council.

The crisis for the APG was very real, and for many within the collective the very breadth of their work now made a unified political response impossible. By 1976 the pluralism within the collective was verging on unwieldiness, and there was seen to be a lack of focus. Even as the very successful *Hill Family Show* and the *Soapbox Circus* were being presented, it was argued that the collective was too big. (Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) A reminder of the political nature of the work of the APG was *The Timor Show*, in the Melbourne City Square in early 1976. But this was hardly an APG production, although collective members performed in it. *The Timor Show* protested the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and had a trilingual narrative. The APG presented productions with idiosyncratic local titles, such as the offerings from 1977: *Phar Lap - It’s Cingalese for Lightning, Y’know* by Steven Mastere, and *Back to Bourke Street, a Cavalcade of Australian Popular Songs 1900 -1950*. These represented the company’s stylistic mainstay. Charles Kemp presented Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, in the Back Theatre in 1977 and the following year Kerry Dwyer directed for that space the powerful Fassbinder play, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*. These indicate the continued concern within the APG for the European avant-garde.

**An underground theatre: Nightshift** (between 1976 and 1979)

The director Lindzee Smith was active within the APG collective with the group Nightshift. Smith had worked in New York, and brought from there to the APG both the name, *Nightshift*, and the work which preoccupied him. In 1976 Lindzee Smith directed Peter Handke’s *My Foot My Tutor*, with Bob Thorneycroft and Joe Bolza. Also in the same period Alison Richards and Jackie Kerin presented Handke’s *Self-Accusation*; whilst Thorneycroft and Bolza, presented Beckett’s *Act Without Words*. Both of these casts
worked without director, and the double-bill was toured extensively. By contrast, at this
time Hibberd’s populist musical play *A Toast to Melba*, was presented at the 1976 Adelaide
Festival, and in Melbourne at the National Theatre.

Nightshift were consciously living beyond normal social order and endurance: they
eschewed middle-class values, inhabiting instead a dangerous underworld, concerned with
subcultural criminality, drug use and social marginality. The realm they occupied,
nonetheless, demanded of each member of Nightshift, a rigour and integrity all their own.
Kerry Dwyer told Wawrzyńczak, “They were the death seekers. The tension in the group
was somehow maintained between Circus Oz and Nightshift. They were mutually exclusive
but they had mutual respect for each other,” she said. (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview
1987: 11) There was a romance of negativity associated with Nightshift; however, as
Alison Richards commented, Smith and Nightshift “kept the place honest.”
(Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) Lindzee Smith directed Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s
play, *Pre-Paradise, Sorry Now*, at the Pram Factory in June 1978. It was staged with
*Political Transmission*, by Tim Burns and Lindzee Smith. Nightshift performed both at the
Pram Factory and other venues. Nightshift presented original work, as well as American and
English work, and the group included Carol Porter, Phil Motherwell, Shuv’us, Gary
Waddell and Richard Murphet, amongst others at this time. Probably the most significant
piece they worked on was Phil Motherwell’s play, *Dreamers of the Absolute*, which Smith
directed in September 1978.

Smith’s production of *The Mother*, “was hugely inventive and exciting - world class stuff;”
Alison Richards has commented. (Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) Gary Waddell said,
“I think people really respected us.” But he also commented that they were “the bad boys,
romantics, less structured than anybody else.” He added that “although there were a lot of
holes in what we were doing, there was magic in certain moments of it.” In many way the
group was isolated and inward-looking. Waddell recalled that “your best support was
always from your friends.” He said of his involvement with Nightshift: “It was pretty heavy
stuff.” He described the texts they chose to work on as, “the underground stuff,” adding
that “there was a lot of humour there; we didn’t exclude anybody.” (Wawrzyńczak/Waddell
interview 1987) Richard Murphet commented that what Nightshift “wanted to do, was to
subvert all the norms.” He said that they rejected the “carefully worked out” and
“correct” ideas, seen as “discoveries of the late sixties, and cemented by the early seventies,
we wanted to fuck them... Throw them out, turn them over.” Murphet explained, “Lindzee’s theory really was that you worked flat-out on everything that you did.” He went on, “And you worked all night, and you rehearsed all day. We did a lot of plays by Heathcote Williams, his AC/DC, a lot of Fassbinder’s plays, Phil Motherwell’s plays, Kroetz’s plays, Joe Orton, all that kind of hard edged [work],” he said. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

Contrary to the trend towards improvised and group-devised material in that period, the work of Nightshift was described by Murphet as giving “far more attention to the script.” He said it was “trying to find what was the electric quality of the script - it was to do with electricity. It was to do with a hard-edged, urban guerrilla theatre.” (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)³

In 1979 Nightshift presented three plays by Phil Motherwell at the Pram Factory: The Fitzroy Yank, The Laughing Bantam, and The Surgeon’s Arms. They were directed by Wilfred Last and Judy [Jai] McHenry, and shared a season with two plays by Barry Dickins: Rotten Teeth and The Horror of the Suburban Nature Strip. In 1979 Lindzee Smith returned, for a time, to New York. Richard Murphet worked on Kroetz’s Men’s Business at Squat Theatre in New York, with Carol Porter and Lindzee Smith. Murphet said that over all, Nightshift had been “a really strong influence” on his work. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

A theatre laboratory: Stasis (1976-1977)

Stasis was an essentially avant-garde group which formed within the APG. It was initiated by Roz de Winter, Sue Ingleton and Robert Meldrum as a voice workshop; but they went beyond this and tested the boundaries of performance itself in a sustained workshop process. The first showing by this group in April 1976, was titled: Stasis. In preparing this piece they were assisted by a former member of Tribe, Yvonne Marini. Later, in August that year, they presented, The Sylvia Plath Show, and from that point on they adopted Stasis as the name for the group. The vocal workshop had expanded by then into a profound exploration of the performer, in which they were joined by Jenny Kemp. In November 1976 they presented The Young Peer Gynt.
Stasis was interested in the politics of the individual, not so much the socio-economic order, which was the focus for the rest of the collective. There were those within the APG who rejected the basis of Stasis work, which was “process orientated,” and not overtly political. Stasis was “moving into new territory,” as Kemp recalled. This deep emotional exploration was “a bit fragile,” she said. It certainly did not have the characteristic pugnacity of much else in the APG collective. Challenged to justify “private” work, and the need for long periods of exploratory workshop, the members of Stasis were under pressure from the group. “Maybe at times we were a bit precious,” Kemp said. But she added the comment that they were “very vulnerable.” (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991)

Jenny Kemp continued to work with Stasis. In July 1977 they mounted a production of *Anthony and Cleopatra* in the Back Theatre at the Pram Factory. “We worked from scripts then and we made a lot of mistakes, but we probably found out things,” Kemp told Katharine Sturak. At the time they “were trying to work organically,” she explained that they “were all actor/directors.” (Sturak 1983: 2) This level of exploration of the means of making work, as much as exploring the work itself, was characteristic of the workshop process, and had significant outcomes on the broader theatre enterprise.

The difficulties of the exploratory working process in the nineteen-seventies, was an issue Kemp identified. “I don’t want to do [that] now, but I did it then,” she said, distancing herself from her position at that time. “Now I’m becoming a bit more of a dictator,” Kemp said to Sturak. “On one extreme there is the director as the dictator and the actors are puppets and the other extreme is the director not directing at all and the actors are pouring forth. I’ve been looking for that balance between things,” Kemp explained. (Sturak 1983: 2) After Stasis, Kemp worked with Roz de Winter developing a show based on Grimm’s Fairy Tales. The work done in the Stasis workshops established principles and methods which continued to be pursued by those individual participants well beyond the life of Stasis within the APG.

**Crisis within and without the collective: ‘survival’ versus ‘political action’**

This period at the APG was dominated by John Timlin, the Administrator. He was “trying to keep it on the commercial rails,” Alison Richards has suggested. (Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) Increasingly though, this trend took the focus away from the political and
artistic radicalism which was the heart of the APG, and saw the Group increasingly staging ‘successful’ English plays such as those by David Hare, for example. Although these may have been ‘radical’ plays, there was no difference in what the APG were now doing to the cultural dependency of the Melbourne Theatre Company, for example. It politically neutered any radical value - especially over issues of class and culture - these works had in their British context. For the APG to be a repertory theatre was inconsistent with its political nature.

Soapbox Circus were a remarkable mix of a jug band and rough-and-ready political satire, that represented a re-affirmation of the central political role of the APG in 1976. Mick Conway’s popular Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band had a following from alternative music venues such as the F. T. Much Ballroom, where they had begun to interact with circus and cabaret performances. Soapbox Circus took this much further into an integrated cabaret-circus style with a deliberately anarchic manner gauged to appeal to young audiences especially on university campuses where they toured nationally. With Conway as the lead singer and circus master, *A Smack in the Dacks*, written and directed by Richard Murphet and Carol Porter, was an exuberant demonstration of the APG’s continuing potential for effective political action. They toured as a roadshow for nearly two years.

At the beginning of 1978 Soapbox Circus joined with New Ensemble Circus, who were originally from Adelaide, to form Circus Oz. (Wagner 1980: 10) The political content declined while the newly independent Circus Oz developed its circus skills over the next few years to achieve widely recognised excellence. This was enhanced by a number of exchanges between Australian artists and visiting artists from the People’s Republic of China.

Other figures came to the fore at the APG, including the director Peter King who had demonstrated a preoccupation with theatre experiments from the beginning of his career. His early production of Shakespeare’s *Troylus and Cressida* at the Pram Factory was presented with a group he called Old Scream Theatre. It had a mix of professionals and students, and it set out to research performance conventions in the laboratory theatre tradition.

After more than a decade of outstandingly innovative work, by 1980 a crisis faced the APG
The solution they settled upon was an unusual one. They chose to resign and install a new “ensemble” group to “keep the name of the APG going,” in Richard Murphet’s words. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989) “By 1978 or 1979 the group had polarised,” commented Kerry Dwyer. Between the circus groups and Nightshift, she said, “there were a large number of people in the middle floating around, and that was how the group finished off.” She suggested to Jan Wawrzyńczak that the Wimmin’s Circus, which had developed with support from the APG in this period, “should have inherited the Pram Factory instead of this artificial ensemble that people tried to create.” Commenting that this was the end of an era, Dwyer said, “Someone said that experimental theatres should only have a five year life span, and we lasted for ten or eleven.” She told Wawrzyńczak, “I don’t think you can sustain it without losing the heart of it. We were becoming increasingly bureaucratized. It had grown in such an organic way that it either needed to continue to grow organically and acknowledge that life force or else just finish it. But we didn’t do it that way, we did it the patriarchal way, we chose our heirs.” (Wawrzyńczak/Dwyer interview 1987: 11-12)

The Ensemble were appointed, and began work on an interesting program, including some entirely new plays and some that were recent successes interstate. But they “folded under the pressure,” as Murphet put it. “Some of the stuff that they started to do was really interesting. Unfortunately it didn’t have a chance to find its own place because it was within the context of the APG,” he said. The work they did failed, “not failed artistically, but failed to get an audience,” Murphet said. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

The final season at the APG was the Directors’ Season in 1981. Outside directors were invited to work on plays of their own choice. The season included Witkiewicz’ rarely performed modern play, The Two Headed Calf, translated and directed by Roger Pulvers; and Artaud at Rodez, by Charles Marowitz, with John F. Howard in the title role and directed by Peter Friedrich. The last play at the APG was The Bedbug Celebration, by John Blay, based on the Mayakovsky play from the height of the revolutionary Russian avant-garde. It was directed by Richard Murphet.

The APG has provided one of the most clear and successful examples of a utopian model of radicalism in the Australian theatre. It was a seminal model, and its ‘alumni’ as David Watt has called them - along with those of the Popular Theatre Troupe - “were important
in establishing many of the community theatre companies which began to appear towards the end of the nineteen-seventies.” (Watt 1993: 7)

A conclusion: the big picture as it emerged...

The reforms of the nationalist Labour Government of Gough Whitlam addressed an urgent sense of a need for change in Australia’s social make up. In the theatre, this was articulated by vernacular drama, and new forms of work in which a variety of voices emerged reflecting a diversity of social and ethnic groups. Across Australia the chains of a post-colonial malaise were loosened, if not entirely thrown off in a cultural revolution. For some, this was inspired by an (incomplete) idea of the cultural revolution occurring in China; but quite unlike China, the cultural liberation which occurred in Australia had a genuinely democratic and egalitarian thrust, premised on ‘the quality of life’ of average Australians. The beginnings of the democratisation of art - through federal government policy - rejected the anachronistic hierarchies of art practised from colonial times that had been concerned with whether work was good enough to be accepted in London. Practitioners had now learned of the concerns of wider international art practices and with this knowledge were able to focus more clearly and comfortably on local subjects and local means of working.

Political theatre had generated aesthetic innovations that overtured colonial patterns in Australian culture. The APG was the most decisive agent in this change. Stimulated by a climate which welcomed initiatives in the performing arts, and supported them with government funding, the seeds of several major diversifications in theatre practice in Australia were established at this time, including: theatre-in-education, or TIE, community theatre, regional theatre, youth theatre, women’s theatre, gay and lesbian theatre, Aboriginal theatre, puppet theatre, and dance theatre.
Theatre laboratories: modern mean of production (1970 - 1979)

The Performance Syndicate, Claremont, Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe, the Theatre Research Group and, within the APG, Stasis were active experimental theatre groups in Australia in the nineteen-seventies. They were influenced by the international experimental theatre model and worked for extended periods to explore performance in a studio or workshop group. The subject of their investigation was 'the performance' itself and the concept of 'the performer'. In an apparent contradiction, the directors of these groups or theatre projects tended to have a dominant role in overseeing these investigations.

There was a wider influence of theatre laboratories on Australian theatre than has been generally recognised. These groups considerably enhanced the skills-base of Australian performers and through their dramaturgy and their inter-cultural concerns they raised the standards of production in Australian theatre.

At times these groups with their director-leaders were concerned to test the discoveries they had made about performance in works of the classical theatre. This re-investment in traditional material also became a new source of theatrical investigation as classic texts and traditional performance disciplines yielded insights into the approaches to performance which had created them in the first place. These laboratory theatres had a tendency to look to other traditions as sources of inspiration, ideas and inter-cultural productions. The diverse traditions considered in this way included the n_ and kabuki theatres, kathkali, Balinese dance, English pantomime, European clowning, commedia dell' arte, French classical theatre, contemporary theatre, and theatre of the European historical avant-gardes.

These experimental theatre groups were concerned to develop skills in a traditional sense, and beyond this they were concerned to investigate the transformational power of the act of performing. Considering the scientific metaphor, there is irony in the quasi-mystical concerns of the laboratory theatres. This ambivalence had been there in the work of their
precursors: Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Artaud and Grotowski. Among the key questions tested and re-tested in the experimental theatres were those that concerned the ritualistic nature of theatre and the magico-religious traditions of transformation, states of possession, representation and time.

A culture of experiment

‘Experimental theatre’ and ‘theatre laboratory’ were metaphors of scientific enquiry that had their origins with the revolutionary theatrical innovations of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold’s theatre laboratories early in the century. The later investigations of performance by Jerzy Grotowski and his Laboratory and Peter Brook’s re-investigation of the ideas of Antonin Artaud and his employment of the workshop method with the Royal Shakespeare Company and later his own umbrella for inter-cultural explorations, the Centre for International Theatrical Creations, continued this tradition into the period of this study. Brook’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company visited Australian cities in 1973. Grotowski visited Australia in 1973 to speak publicly and prepare for the visit of his company the following year when they performed *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* in the Chapter Hall at St Mary’s Cathedral, in Sydney.¹

Experimental theatre was in focus internationally in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. In describing the American experimental theatre of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies Arthur Sainer (1975) wrote both of ‘political radicalism’ and of ‘aesthetic radicalism’ in a way which blurred a division between these terms. This was characteristic of the time when the political was becoming less ideologically loaded and more personally driven, and politics, *per se*, was becoming fashionable. Eugenio Barba wrote in the nineteen-seventies of “the third theatre” - a term that deliberately echoed the radical nomenclature, ‘the third world’: the otherwise poor and colonised or formerly colonised countries of the globe. Barba described a movement that was internationally active within the youth and counter cultures, and in the global artistic environment. The Performance Syndicate, Claremont, Mushroom and the Theatre Research Group were all groups which could be identified with Barba’s third theatre. Barba wrote that the theatres of the third theatre were “like islands without contact between themselves, young people in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Japan [who] gather to form theatre groups, determined to survive.” (Barba 1986: 193)
With the reformist Whitlam government there emerged an environment in Australia that encouraged artistic experimentation. Experimentation allowed new syntheses to occur. New contexts for theatre which were created as a result of government funding initiatives that supported new theatres and new types of performance, for new audiences. A diversity of theatre forms and voices within the theatre were now becoming strongly apparent in Australia. An important role was being played by the institutions of tertiary education which were increasingly supporting initiatives in the performing arts across the country. By 1975 in Australia a national drama had been established and passed into the accepted theatre mainstream. Modern theatre practices, following overseas models, were becoming accepted and increasingly a part of local performances.

“A glimpse of total theatre”: The Performance Syndicate (1970-1975)

Excited by Grotowski’s record of his theatre training in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, the instigators of the Performance Syndicate, Rex Cramphorn, Nicos Lathouris, David Cameron and Robert Millikin set up a workshop in 1969 to work in a similar way. Meeting in one of the NIDA rehearsal rooms, their daily training included yoga and exercises they based on Grotowski’s record of his Theatre Laboratory. (Guthrie/Lathouris interview 1990) Later others joined them, including William Yang, Terry O’Brien and Gillian Jones, and the Performance Syndicate was born.

Rex Cramphorn was invited to direct a production of Cyril Tourneur’s classic, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* at the Theatre Royal in Hobart in 1970. Members of the group worked on this production with local amateur actors. Barbara Manning reviewed the production in the *Bulletin*: “A brilliant revolutionary, completely absorbing piece of theatre,” she wrote. Commenting on the design: “Visually it’s staggering. The actors work inside a huge, greyish-white skull, like a shell, that fills the stage.” (Manning 1970: 46) Manning wrote that, “Rex Cramphorne is a disciple of Jerzy Grotowski.” She suggested that, “*Towards a Poor Theatre* has provided Rex Cramphorn with a handbook, a tenuous link with his Polish contemporaries. From this book, exploring as he goes, and working with a group of Sydney actors as dedicated as he is, he has evolved a set of exercises aimed to develop complete physical and mental readiness and awareness.” She continued, “The cast of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* work each morning on the Grotowski exercises, and the result is obvious. There’s
a clean decisiveness about the whole production that stimulates awareness in the audience, too, a sharp awareness that satisfies every sense." (Manning 1970: 46)

The audacity of the process begun in Hobart was continued in Sydney. John Clarke saw this production and invited them to work at NIDA for a postgraduation year when they would also form the basis for the Jane Street acting company. (Bray/Nicholson interview 1989) Returning to Sydney they began working on *Ten Thousand Miles Away*, which was based on material prepared by David Malouf that was developed by William Yang. Their work on *Ten Thousand Miles Away* was highly physical, and saw the script so entirely altered in the workshopping process that the original attribution to Malouf was first shared with Yang, the young Queensland writer working within the group, and later attributed to Yang alone. In the *Bulletin* Brian Hoad wrote that, “already in performance the words are beginning to crack and slide; detach themselves; transforming into whines or whispers, shrieks or hisses.” Hoad continued, “Covering themselves up as they sometimes do in opera as five or six or seven voices take them up and sing (or chant, or speak) in harmony or counterpoint or dissonance, capable of intensifying meaning in the very process of discarding meaning.” (Hoad 1970b: 41 Parenthesis in the original.) Not accidentally perhaps, the arts editor of the *Bulletin* chose to place this critique of Rex Cramphorn’s production immediately following a two-page article on director Jerzy Grotowski and his Laboratory Theatre.

Their collaboration on *Ten Thousand Miles Away* was the first of the Performance Syndicate’s investigative productions. Brian Hoad described it as “avant-garde.” He argued, “it is, after all, in a season of experimental theatre; it is a theatre going forward, and if you feel you do not like the idea of the way it is heading, then it may be thought of in terms of theatre going backwards, backward out of theatre into ritual, out of ritual into dance.” (Hoad 1970b: 42) Derek Nicholson recalled how closely the group worked with Cramphorn on this project. “It was the intensity of that group of actors’ work on *Ten Thousand Miles Away* that really made *O’Malley* work. I don’t think that was acknowledged at the time,” he commented. The next play at Jane Street was *The Legend of King O’Malley*, by Michael Boddy and Robert (Bob) Ellis. It was directed by John Bell and had substantially the same group of actors with Cramphorn himself in the cast and John Paramor in the title role. The writers provided, “the first act and the outline of the play, and then it was developed in rehearsals,” Nicholson said. (Bray/Nicholson interview 1989)
This project shifted the focus of NIDA’s interest in the development of an Australian dramatic literature from a preoccupation with ‘play writing’ to a concern with ‘playing’ Australian material. Almost accidentally, John Clark had allowed this group to work together. This remarkably talented and creative group of performers should be compared with the powerful presence and influence of the actors at La Mama and the APG.

In *O'Malley*, Katharine Brisbane recognised the timely arrival of a hitherto rarely heard national voice. “For me it has a particular pleasure because it synthesises so many of the elements which make up the Australian taste which for so long have been begging to be dramatised.” (Brisbane 1970a: pu) The voice, of course is more than the Australian accent - the ‘strine’ which had become in the nineteen-sixties a kind of jokey acknowledgment of our inability to speak ‘properly’. The ‘voice’ is really the tell-tale sign of the national persona. For Brisbane the play gave “us the first genuine larrikin-hero in our drama that I can put my finger on since colonial theatre.” (Brisbane 1970a: pu)

The theatre laboratory investigations had ‘liberated’ new variants of Australian English in a public forum. Brisbane suggested, “what the co-authors of *The Legend of King O'Malley* have done - with their director, John Bell, for this is a thorough group creation - is in barely literate terms given us a man who is twice life size through the ratbag language of the theatre.” (Brisbane 1970a: pu) This ratbag voice was rapidly to become the agent of the *New Australian Plays*. The term ‘New Australian Plays’ - all with capitals - had an ironic echo because it recalled the expression used to officially describe and objectify post-war migrants to Australia: *the New Australians*. The term and concept of ‘the immigrant’ remained unpopular in Australia to the end of the twentieth century. And up to the nineteen-seventies the official Federal government policy was ‘assimilation’. *Difference* was to be denied. This has been particularly painful to non-English speaking emigrants as it has to indigenous Australians.

In 1970 *The Legend of King O'Malley* was a quite unprecedented success in Sydney. Initially at Jane Street, John Bell’s production then transferred to the Parade Theatre and was toured interstate by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. In October of that year - just after its tour - Bob Ellis suggested a post-colonial framework with which he evaluated the period and its theatre activity in Australia. He drew a comparison between the
approach of *O'Malley*, and an Afro-American performance he had seen in Harlem. "It was about Harlem itself - the squalid families, the dreadful choices, the strange euphoria and the dreaming, dreaming, dreaming which is the emotional dusk in which the people roam," Ellis wrote. (Ellis 1979: 43) The very ‘suburban ugliness’ which had so alienated many in Patrick White’s modern plays was now being argued as the necessary matter of a national drama. Bob Ellis introduced an overseas comparison which, like so many of the key and transforming models of the period, was from a marginal site, and was oppositional, communal, and aesthetically subversive.

Ellis was using post-colonial comparisons. "We are *not* a European nation," he commented, "we are a barbaric working-class, provincial, ignorant nation of understimulated slobs." (Ellis 1970: 43) The shocking truth - so hard for Australians to see - has been to recognise that we were once, not British, but a colony. Our common origin was never the mother country, it was *the experience of the dislocation of colonisation*. Whether the poor of England, or the dispossessed of Ireland and Scotland, the native Aboriginal people of the continent, or that diversity of displaced peoples represented in the population of the first fleet in 1788 and ever after, the commonality is a disjunction which occurred because of the foreign incursion into the continent.

The overt political satire of the play was audacious. The Commonwealth Parliament was presented as a vaudeville show. (Brisbane 1970a: pu) It may have had partial antecedents in the local comedy tradition associated with the Phillip Street Theatre revues or university revues, or in the work of the New theatres; however, it was new in the daring of the proposition that this was a play for the “legitimate” stage. The dynamic interaction of the playwrights, director and actors, and the evident vitality of the performances were recognised as landmarks.

The success of the production created considerable pressure for the production to tour nationally. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust organised what proved to be a very long and not particularly easy tour for the show. Cramphorn suggested that, “*O'Malley*'s original charm was in slightness and spontaneity” in the intimate venue in which it was created. (Cramphorne 1971a: 42) On tour the response was more hostile, as Cramphorn reported, “what has been ‘rough’ became ‘clumsy’, what had been enthusiastic became ‘messy’ and what had been ‘satirical’ became ‘tasteless’.” He added, “the epithet ‘student’
had haunted us throughout the tour, although we had all worked professionally for long enough before ‘O’Malley’ to feel that it was a trifle inaccurate.” (Cramphorne 1971a: 44)

The difficulty with *O’Malley* revealed some of the limitations in the reception of radical work in Australia, where there was no appropriate frame of reference. In October 1970, Denis O’Brien wrote an article in the *Bulletin* entitled, ‘If only *O’Malley* had been a good honest failure’. “Until *The Legend of King O’Malley* burst into view, Sydney’s Jane Street Theatre seemed to be programmed for failure - stiff-upper-lip failure, but failure nevertheless,” he wrote. “Of the 15 plays staged there - or, under its auspices, at the Old Tote - *O’Malley* is the only bell-ringer in four years of gallant experiment. Thus, unaccustomed as it is to success, the place wasn’t programmed to handle a runaway hit, and *O’Malley*, an unusual play in any circumstances, has had peculiar problems on its way from Jane Street to main street,” O’Brien wrote. “Michael Boddy has collected a sadly significant quote,” O’Brien noted, “‘Why couldn’t you,’ he was asked, ‘have written a good honest failure like everybody else?’” (O’Brien 1970b: 44)

The workshop of the script titled *Stockade*, by Kenneth Cook, failed to come to a public performance and was withdrawn by the author who felt that no respect was given to his text. The Performance Syndicate collaborated on another piece, this time one that sought to challenge the parameters of musical theatre. Its author was a member of the group, William Yang, who had been developing this work in Brisbane with the composer Ralph Tyrrell. *Childhead’s Doll* was directed by Rex Cramphorne for a season in 1971 at Jane Street Theatre. The Performance Syndicate worked with Rex Cramphorn and achieved stunning results with productions of a number of classics. Especially memorable were William Yang’s adaptation of Sophocles’ *Orestes*, at the Arts Factory, Paddington, in 1971, and Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, the same year.

The following year, 1972, saw the Performance Syndicate’s greatest achievement with a highly physical but elegantly simple production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. It was initially funded as a schools production for the Old Tote, and later it had a season at the Chapter Hall at St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney, and toured nationally. At the beginning of each performance the actors marked-out a circle in chalk which became the playing space for this production. At its centre they placed a large piece of driftwood that became in turn the ship, the staff, the crutch, the *axis Mundi* of the play’s cosmos. Brian Hoad in the
Bulletin suggested that this production was the crowning achievement of Australian theatre in 1972. (Hoad 1972c: 52) “Here is movement more significant than the Australian Ballet has yet been able to achieve. Here is the sort of music drama which should be the central objective of the Australia Opera,” he wrote at a time national funding for these institutions was newly secured. Hoad identified the confronting mechanism of the avant-garde in this work: “Here is a glimpse of total theatre as art. It is unique in Australia, and it will infuriate many who go and see it.” He suggested this belonged to an ‘avant-garde tradition’ at the core of the Western art of the twentieth century. “There is not academic reverence here for the hallowed text - huge chunks have been cut away or are mumbled or chanted or otherwise made inaudible. But there is enormous reverence and understanding for the spirit of the play, and for the mystical power of theatre,” Hoad recorded at the time. (Hoad 1972c: 53)

Reflecting the concerns of experimental theatre internationally, this physical dance-drama sought to create an authentic modern ritual which celebrated the presence of the transcendant amid the mundane. The Performance Syndicate also developed at this time the first version of their adaptation of the classic fairytale, The Marsh King’s Daughter. It demonstrated similar preoccupations with ritual and celebration, conveying its narrative with a sparse physical approach to acting.

Their training in the manner of Grotowski’s theatre exercises, and their fascination with Indian dance-drama techniques, led this outstandingly gifted group of actors to develop with Cramphorn almost uncanny powers of performance. Especially Nicos Lathouris, David Cameron, Terry O’Brien, and Gillian Jones had physical skills and a sense of ensemble which enthralled their audience.

The ambiguity of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ could not have been more pointed than when, during 1973, the Performance Syndicate became the resident company at St Martin’s Theatre in Melbourne. With a new director, Christopher Muir, St Martin’s was making a last ditch attempt to find a way of quickly developing a new and younger audience. The Performance Syndicate presented the Marsh King’s Daughter, to some critical effect, but were then pressured into opening other work, less suited to the group, with entirely too little time to rehearse. The Melbourne experience was generally not a happy one. They returned to Sydney and with newly recruited forces, once again presented The Marsh
King’s Daughter, this time at the Nimrod Street Theatre. If they had ‘failed’ in Melbourne, their reputation among a cognoscenti was, nonetheless, by then established. Katharine Brisbane remained enthusiastic and wrote in October 1973, “The Performance Syndicate is a laboratory theatre and as such is to do with the development of our theatre profession, not with the development of audiences.” She went on, “It is by far the most advanced developmental programme we have in Australia now because it is the only one wholly concerned with the source of the theatre and not with the end product; and with the dramatic impulse as an expression of life.” (Brisbane 1973: pu)

In the quest for a national drama, the laboratory theatre had a different role to play, Brisbane suggested, than attracting an alternative audience. Its role was to invest the broader theatre practice with the findings of its investigations, she suggested. “What I mean is that it can give the theatre profession a place in which to contemplate the forces with which they daily carelessly deal,” Brisbane wrote, “to help them understand better the complexity of simplicity in the interpretation of the human cycle of life.” (Brisbane 1973: pu)

In 1974 they received a special projects grant and developed a complex production of the Sanskrit classic Shakuntala, for the Adelaide Festival. The group was under great strain and divisions became irreconcilable while in Adelaide and Nicos Lathouris left the group. On returning to Sydney and to Jane Street, the remaining actors worked with Cramphorn on Alan Simpson’s play about insanity, Muriel. The following year at Jane Street, Cramphorn directed Michael Cove’s play Mariner, based on Coleridge. In 1975 Cramphorn directed simple and powerful productions of the French classics Berenice by Racine and Scapi by Molière. With the actors of the Performance Syndicate, these productions, performed back to back, made elegant use of the Recording Hall in the Sydney Opera House. Part of the Old Tote schools program, the power and authority of these performances, especially that of David Cameron, outshone most other theatre to be seen in Australia at the time.3

“A sort of theatrical delicatessen’s shop”: Claremont Theatre Centre (1971-1976)

Like other experimental theatres of the time, the Claremont Theatre Centre was set up with several contradictory intentions among its participants, some of whom wanted a theatre laboratory, and some of whom wanted a stepping-stone for their careers in the theatre. In
1971 I took over a space above Tamani Bistro in South Yarra, that offered theatre classes, poetry and off-Broadway plays. It brought together a group of interested people with whom I then established a theatre in a factory space near-by in Claremont Street, South Yarra. We called it, rather grandly, the Claremont Theatre Centre, after the London model, because we had an intention to have a wide mixture of things on offer. My own interest was to have at the core of this activity an experimental theatre, and I drew up a manifesto in which Artaud, Grotowski and Brook figured prominently as our perceived antecedents.

The first year of Claremont’s activities was based around multifarious monthly programs which included: formal productions and public readings of modern plays, productions and readings of Australian plays, children’s theatre, regular public seminars, art exhibitions, performances of modern dance, folk dance, folk music, jazz, classical music, and rock and roll and experimental theatre. Claremont was, Leonard Glickfield reported in the National Times, “a sort of theatrical delicatessen’s shop specialising in chamber plays and the avant-garde, but offering everything from children’s plays and method-aligned acting lessons to poetry readings, play writing workshops and folk music recitals.” (Italics in the original) Glickfield also commented that “since the closing of the Emerald Hill Theatre, Melbourne has sorely needed a home for overseas avant-garde drama.” (Glickfield 1972: 53) It was one of the intentions of those involved to provide such fare in Melbourne. Claremont’s first production was the bitter-sweet modern play Fando and Liz by the exiled Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal. It was directed by Leila Blake who brought a rare insight into the post-war ennui of Arrabal’s language and theatrical imagination.

During the second year of Claremont’s operations a younger group who were interested in experimental theatre took over. They were committed to training and exploration, and included artists with training in modern dance, musicians and painters. From the beginning of 1973 this company began to work ‘behind closed doors’, while running a theatre school and weekly children’s theatre to pay the bills. There were long-running workshop projects which explored the performance skills of commedia dell’arte, and the function of tragedy - with a production of my translation of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. After closed laboratory exploration for nine or ten months a public season of Oedipus Rex was given. Kim Gyngell and Alison Richards played Oedipus and Jocasta, and Adam Salzer assisted in the production. The production was “presented starkly with highly stylised movements on the part of the principal actors,” Paul Salzman wrote, “the actors’ voices blending in a
counterpoint to background percussion and voices the rhythms of the play become incessant.” (Salzman 1972: np) This strand of work was influenced by Grotowski’s training techniques which I had first read about and later encountered in workshops with Sue Neville, who had trained with Grotowski in the mid-nineteen-sixties.

Claremont also had workshop projects which did not have end products. Immediately after Oedipus Rex, I hoped to develop an anarchic comic explosion based on Jarry’s Ubu Roi, and to run them on alternative nights. But these preparations did not come to fruition. There were public performances which resulted from developmental workshops, such as The Boat (1974). Sometimes a conventional play was staged to give form to some of the ideas currently being developed, such as N. F. Simpson’s Was He Anyone? (1974). European avant-garde theatre such as Eugene Ionesco’s The Bald Prima Donna was presented with a conscious intention to introduce works of modernism into the current Australian repertoire. The promotional material read: The Bald Prima Donna: 1950. Leonard Glickfield wrote, “the audience follows the characters through a ritual which challenges literal, secure and limited habits of thought. Mindbending or expanding, you might say.” (Glickfield 1974: pu) There was an investigation of the symbolist play, The Blue Bird, by Maurice Maeterlinck in 1974. However, this did not reach a public season.

Some of the work produced by Claremont was group-devised; other material was written from within the company. I wrote many of the works for Claremont, and became increasingly interested in Asian theatre forms. Waves - Three Pieces for Theatre were theatrical miniatures that owed something to my then understanding, or misunderstanding of n_. They were given seasons in Melbourne and Canberra in early 1975, and at the Paddington Village Church hall in Sydney. Kevon Kemp wrote in the National Times under the headline: “Claremont Barnstorms its ideas on theatre,” and explained that Claremont was hoping “to get to know Australia” through this extensive touring. Pursuing this idea Claremont performed at the Orange Festival, toured the Central West of New South Wales, and had a season in Brisbane. Kemp commented that Claremont “has been developing expertise in song, mime, dance, music, and acting different in intent and content than most other contemporary theatre.” (Kemp 1975: pu) The rationale of exploration which prompted Claremont to travel for a year in 1975 - the need to “get to know Australia” - led the company effectively to operate as a community theatre. The initial funds for Claremont to tour had been raised by presenting an interactive children’s show for the Melbourne
Moomba Festival, and we had some funding from the Australia 75 Festival to perform in Canberra. A grant from the newly constituted Community Arts Board allowed Claremont to tour Central Western New South Wales. The company then travelled to Queensland and returned to NSW.

Claremont was committed to experimental theatre and conducted a deeply probing investigation of ritual in performance, and the integration and manipulation of music, lyric and image. Members of this group were living and working in a shifting set of communal households and workplaces for much of this time. There was sometimes internal dissension within this group, but there was also a sense that this was a safe-haven, a family-like group within which there was a high level of acceptance and support. In early 1976 the company presented Picasso’s *The Four Little Girls*, in the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory. Stephen Killick and David Maplestone, two painters from Adelaide worked on the production making original settings and costumes. Claremont again took part in the Moomba Festival in 1976, and planned a further extensive tour that year. The Theatre Board of the Australia Council did not fund this program, however, and faced with considerable burnout the company ceased to operate.

Eugenio Barba suggested that there were two possible means of survival for marginal theatre companies, which he described in a way very appropriate to Australia. Either these groups must enter the “circle of established theatre,” Barba suggested, or they could succeed “through continuous work to individualise their own area, seeking what for them is essential and trying to force others to respect this diversity.” (Barba 1986: 193) The first of these options was what was to happen to the Nimrod Theatre. The second - to work to “individualise” a company’s work until others “respect” them - was the course attempted by Claremont. If Claremont failed because it did not receive recognition, this could be because persistence faltered, or because the climate was not sufficiently supportive. Several individuals and groups from within this company have gone on to pursue, in various ways, essentially the same mission.


In 1973 Michael Wansborough became frustrated in his hope to establish an ensemble company for the Children’s Arena Theatre in South Yarra where he was the Artistic
Director. (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990) He left, and with Nano Nagle set up the Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe. It was to be one of longest surviving alternative theatres in Australia. Its name suggested that it was truly a banner of the counter culture.

Wansborough said that, Mushroom “didn’t really see itself as a community theatre company, or a children’s theatre company, or any other kind of theatre company, but just as a theatre company.” They were committed to working together to explore theatre for its own sake. “We were an ensemble, and the thing that I understand about ensemble is that the work is based on an on-going program of training and research,” Wansborough said. The workshops were “not necessarily geared towards the productions that are being done,” he said. “The productions come out of that work, and the discoveries that are made,” Wansborough explained. (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990)

The freedom to workshop - to explore the nature of theatre, and develop skills - was not, however, what the company was funded to do. Wansborough contrasted the ideal of workshop method, and the reality of having a program of touring to schools as Mushroom was funded to do. “Every so often an ensemble decides to make a report to the public. And the way it is done is through a production,” Wansborough commented. “That’s the ideal situation,” he said, adding, “The Mushroom Troupe never had such an ideal situation, because we had to do an incredible number of performances in order to justify our existence. But we always managed to do some workshop each day, and we used to keep at least one day a week free just for workshop. “(Guthrie/ Wansborough interview 1990)

Eventually there was support for Mushroom in the context of the growing community arts movement in Australia. The Theatre Board had rejected their applications initially. But with support from Ros Bower an application to the Community Arts Committee - the forerunner of the Community Arts Board - was successful, contingent on their assistance being matched by the Theatre Board. There was a considerable dispute at a meeting of the Australia Council. The Theatre Board was not sympathetic towards alternative theatre, and said “They’re amateurs!” But eventually a compromise was reached, and the Theatre Board co-funded Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe with the Community Arts Committee. (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990) In 1975 Mushroom received annual funding for the first time, and became the first such company to be put on annual funding by the Australia Council. “I think it was about forty percent of our running costs, and we thought that it was
superb,” Michael Wansborough said. “Co-funding continued for about two years,” he added, “and then we went over to [funding from] the Theatre Board.” (Guthrie/Wansborough interview 1990)

Perhaps Mushroom’s greatest achievement was not its productions, but the influence it had on those who had worked for it and on their on-going work over time. It can be argued that Mushroom, and other companies like it, provided a fertile ground for a significant number of emerging talents. Their methodology of “training and active research,” in Michael Wansborough’s phrase, carried forward into the later work of many of these individuals. (Guthrie/ Wansborough interview 1990) The specialist skills of company members were frequently the basis of teaching within the group. A key idea which was developed by the Magic Mushroom Troupe under Michael Wansborough was character based improvisation and the development of character clowns. These obsessive characters were used later independently by a number of company members, including Gillian Farelly, Tim Tyler and Terry Danzig. Richard Tulloch was briefly the Director of Mushroom when Michael Wansborough was on an overseas study tour in 1975. Wansborough came back from overseas with a perspective from London and Amsterdam. “I realised that what was going on in Melbourne was really quite interesting in the context of theatre generally,” he recalled. (Guthrie/ Wansborough interview 1990)

Alison Richards, who had worked with Claremont, Mushroom and the APG, became the Artistic Director of company, which she simply called the Mushroom Troupe. The work they completed had an exemplary community orientation, yet the company’s funding was cut off in 1984.

“Beautifully made…but no one who could act”: Bozart (1974-1975)

The laboratory groups threw open the question, ‘What is a theatre?’ Another group intent on investigating performance was Bozart, most of the key members of which group were ex-students of the NSW University Architecture Faculty. Bozart lasted about two years in 1974 and 1975. It put on a number of productions, the most important of which were the first two plays of Tim Gooding. “He worked on them for a long time - a year,” said ex-Bozart participant, Mark Stiles, who has since become a respected documentary film maker (Kampuchea After Pol Pot, 1983). “Then, really, there wasn’t much other material
for us to do,” Stiles said. There was “a core of two or three highly creative individuals - particularly Tim Gooding,” he added, but otherwise it was “about twenty designers and nobody who could act.” (Guthrie/Stiles interview 1987)

The problematic relationship of this group, and others like it, to the official funding bodies is suggested in Stiles’ self deprecating recollections. “The Australia Council knew we weren’t the Willoughby Musical Society. But then,” he said, “they knew we weren’t a proper theatre either.” Stiles explained, “I mean there was really only the Old Tote and Nimrod and us...and the Willoughby Musical Society.” What happened to Bozart was similar to other groups with token funding at this time. “The Australia Council gave us about $200, and put us on a list which was distributed to all aspiring writers - so we were deluged with scripts - awful, impossible stuff which arrived at our pathetic address-for-that-week. And we had to get through it, and then send it all back. If we could find the money.” (Guthrie/Stiles interview 1987)

Bozart did some original work. It also did an early production of Sam Shepard’s Horse Dreamer at the Paddington Village Church hall, with Joanna Pigott - who was completing the Nimrod Theatre School, as it then was - and later pursued a career in rock and roll. “We didn’t have a theatre, a base. That was a great disadvantage. Look at Griffin - the way they have survived - continued for seven years - certainly with more support, and with actors! But a venue is important,” said Stiles in 1987. (Guthrie/Stiles interview 1987)

Bozart had some considerable talent in Mark Stiles, and NIDA trained Lee Whitmore, Tim Gooding, and the director Adam Salzer who worked with them in 1975. In the long term, this resulted in a working relationship between Gooding and Salzer which - through a workshop at the 1976 Australian National Playwrights’ Conference - resulted in Salzer directing Gooding’s play Rockola as the inaugural Hoopla/Playbox Theatre production in Melbourne. Wherrett directed a separate production of the play for Nimrod in Sydney. Gooding’s output as a playwright was never happily received by the local critics and theatre companies. A parallel with Shepard was not out of place. He has ended up in rock and roll - writing and performing in the band XLCapris. Mark Stiles wryly commented on the make up of the group, when he said, “Bozart was mostly ex-architecture students - so we had beautifully made sets, and well designed costumes, and wonderful programs - but no one who could act. There were some exceptions, and certain people had an input in that area.”
If, as Stiles suggested, Bozart was "a failure," it failed in exactly the manner of the avant-garde; making a gesture beyond the conventions of the day, and then, as Stiles said, "it ran out of energy." (Guthrie/Stiles interview 1987)

"Questions to do with the work of the actor": Theatre Research Group (1975-1980)

In 1975 Igor Persan brought together a group of people interested in Grotowski’s work to conduct their own theatre research. Initially this group of five or six worked in the Church Buildings, in Middle Park (the space where the previous year both Mushroom and Claremont had been based). They called themselves the Theatre Research Group, and included John F. Howard, Arpad Milhaly and Graham Henderson. Later they were based near Armidale, NSW, where they lived “on little farmlets” and met together “in the local hall every day” to develop their explorations of a personally challenging and physically based theatre. In Howard’s view, this group “was developing ideas similar to the Polish Laboratory Theatre. Those sort of ideas that Grotowski was looking at with his collaborators, but it was a group with its own idiosyncrasies, and its own personalities, and it was in Australia,” Howard stressed. “It was in an entirely different situation.” (Stanley/Howard interview 1990)

Between 1975 and 1980 the group worked on and off at its base in New England. The breaks in their work were to allow the participants to go and earn money, so that they could “re-group and work for another six or eight months,” said Howard. The Theatre Research Group was not principally a performance group, but “a workshop group looking at questions to do with the work of the actor,” as John F. Howard explained. Members of the group conducted workshops for students at New England University, and “at the local community centre for people who were interested in the kind of work we were doing,” Howard said. Members of these community classes participated in the first performance the group gave in Armidale. It was a production of T. S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral, staged in Armidale Cathedral, with a cast of about thirty people.

The core group then included Nikki Heywood, Pierre Clough and Helen Zerkla, who devised a work called Requiem, which was performed at various locations around Armidale, as well as in Melbourne. They did a production of Ted Hughes’ adaptation of Seneca’s Oedipus. The group used improvisation to find appropriate performance values when they
worked on established texts. Their central concern, however, was the exploratory process itself. They saw their work as essentially personal, and it developed “like a map,” in John F. Howard’s words. There was, for example, “working on a thing we called the impossible exercise. Which was something we were unable to do, but which we worked towards,” he said. “In some cases we achieved it - eventually achieved it. And so we would work then towards another [goal],” John F. Howard recalled. (Stanley/Howard interview 1990)

The key was not personal achievement, but a collective concern with overcoming limitations. Reminiscent of Gurdjieff’s methods, the focus was on the group providing an environment in which even the impossible became possible. “For the individual actor it was developing like a personal mythology,” Howard said. “Like an imaginary landscape, and imaginary characters and personas and animals and within those worlds developing our stories, as it were, our individual stories,” he said. “Quite often drawing inspiration also from novels, and plays, and stuff that we were writing our selves. But essentially we would bring the questions to the rehearsal space,” Howard explained. (Stanley/Howard interview 1990)

John F. Howard also developed some work independently during this period. In Sydney he worked in a group called Exit, in the late nineteen-seventies. With them he directed and performed in two short plays by Samuel Beckett, Not I and Theatre 2. He also directed a performance of Mickey’s Blood by Franz Xavier Kroetz; and prepared and performed a solo piece called Eight Years. This was adapted from court statements in the trial of an eighteen-year-old alcoholic, on trial for having raped an old woman. “I asked him if I could use that material for a theatre performance,” Howard said. “I told him what my business was. And he said, ‘Yeah, that’s ok. As long as you don’t use my name, because I’m going to change it anyway when I get out of goal.’ He got eight years, that was his sentence, and that was the what I called the piece.” (Stanley/Howard interview 1990)

Only in its early stages did the Theatre Research Group receive any funding, and most of the work of the group was unfunded. John F. Howard worked consistently in a fringe territory in Australian theatre; for example, with Arpad Milhaly he worked as the little recognised Australian Performance Ensemble. He often chose to do quite confronting and difficult work. John F. Howard worked with a wide circle of people, who were characterised, in one way or another, by marginality: Anders, Persan, Lindzee Smith, Nicos
Lathouris, Margaret Cameron, Daniel Keene, and Rex Cramphorn. The Theatre Research Group did a production of Genet’s *The Maids*. In their final year, 1980, they prepared a workshop which ran for thirty days and thirty nights. “It was a live-in workshop in the country, with about thirty people,” Howard recalled. “And that finished off five year’s work with Theatre Research Group, and we all went our separate ways then.” (Stanley/Howard interview 1990) In 1981 John F. Howard came to Melbourne and played Artaud in one of the final shows at the Pram Factory, *Artaud at Rodez*. Directed by Peter Frederick, this production also had in its cast Arpad Mihaly, Daniel Keene, Rhonda Wilson, and Patricia Cornelius, with whom Howard later worked in Melbourne. He has also worked in film.

Terry MacArthur and other former members of the Theatre Research Group, including Nikki Heywood, formed the Operating Theatre in 1980. Working out of Armidale, Lismore and Bellingen they toured a production of Seneca’s *Oedipus*, performing outdoors in forest environments. At Bellingen in 1983, this group presented *The Operation*, by Terry MacArthur. They were concerned with exploring a physical theatre, with expansive and highly developed movement skills, very simple settings and use of the found environment. In 1986 they performed Terry MacArthur’s *The Bearded Lady’s Daughters*, in Sydney, at St John’s Hall, Paddington.

A conclusion: magic gardens or theatre laboratories?

The Performance Syndicate, Claremont and Mushroom were marginal companies and personal concerns sometimes dominated their activities, but they also represented a strategically significant set of innovations in the production of theatre in Australia. Even their shortcomings and outright failures attest to their fulfilling the model of the historical avant-gardes: cruelty, dada and surrealism. They were modern theatres, in the terms Raymond Williams has described, they were: democratic, concerned to liberate women and minorities, anti-racist and anti-militarist. But they were not overtly ‘political’. They were ‘against the establishment’, and this manifested itself in expressions of sexual freedom, communal living and drug usage, as well as in their theatre. The Performance Syndicate and Claremont were concerned with inter-cultural transactions with Asian theatre forms. Eugenio Barba’s notion of the *third theatre* has considerable congruence with these companies in the nineteen-seventies. “If in spite of everything one succeeds in surviving,” Barba wrote, “then paradoxically one’s ‘asociality’ becomes something social.”
1986: 206) Barba delineated a paradox by which margin can turn into a key cultural focus. It is evident with these theatres that their ‘asociality’ had not been absorbed into a cultural tradition as had some of the *enfants terribles* of the historical avant-gardes in an earlier period.

The laboratory groups were different from the groups I have placed together as ecstatic theatres because, on balance, the laboratory theatres emphasised training and some systematic process of exploration and had significant influences - often not recognised at the time - but through extensive networks they shifted the ground upon which Australian theatre was to be made.

The persona of the larrikin was a striking feature of the contribution especially of the APG to Australian theatre, and by the end of the nineteen-seventies this figure had moved beyond Carlton and been embraced Australia-wide. The success at Jane Street of David Williamson’s play Don’s Party in 1972 was recognised, at the time, as the synthesis of the theatrical innovations of Melbourne and Sydney.

Modern theatre was fully realised in Australia in the work of theatres such as Nimrod in Sydney, the Popular Theatre Troupe in Brisbane and Troupe in Adelaide. Throughout the decade of the nineteen-seventies these theatres confronted and shifted the colonial constraints on Australian drama and performance practice and established more than an Australian idiom: they created a body of work which exemplified an Australian performance language.

By the end of the nineteen-seventies, such theatre was already becoming the mainstream. The work done at the Nimrod Theatre was the high-water mark of this movement towards a modern nationalist theatre in Australia. It employed an iconoclastic attitude to its work and allowed a new cocksure national style to emerge. Yet it was rapidly to move beyond this radicalism to become a staid repertory theatre. The strongly rebellious impulse that had charged its first productions became enshrined in ‘the Nimrod style’ and ‘the Nimrod attitude’, while never again amounting to an attack on the status quo. Instead, Nimrod became the national leader, and the new ‘conservatoire’ of the Australian Theatre (with capitals).

Modern Australian theatre: larrikinism and aesthetic innovation

The Nimrod Theatre shared a genesis with the Performance Syndicate in the production of The Legend of King O’Malley. I would argue that this common origin - noted for its witty confrontations of the status quo - embodied the establishment of modern theatre in
Australia. This source of irreverent and youthful larrikinism and aesthetic innovation was the formative element in Nimrod’s development of a theatrical style and a means of working which came to be a significant component of Australian theatre. The lineage of Nimrod’s legacy can be seen in Richard Wherrett going on to head the Sydney Theatre Company; in John Bell going on to the company committed to Shakespeare that carries his name; and in Belvoir Street Theatre continuing, through the guidance of Chris Westwood and Neil Armfield, the democratic spirit of Nimrod.

The beginnings of the Popular Theatre Troupe were in a single anti-colonialist and anti-racist project directed by English director Albert Hunt in Brisbane in 1975. It was given the ironic title: *The White Man’s Burden*. Apart from the more or less simultaneous emergence of Aboriginal theatre (described in the next chapter) little theatre created in Australia until *The White Man’s Burden* had directly addressed the issue of systemic racism.

Troupe in Adelaide was shaped by writer and director David Allen’s perception of life in Australia in juxtaposition to his experience of theatre in Africa and his training in England. Troupe’s later aesthetic radicalism was moderated by Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter’s interest in theatre experiment, which ultimately propelled the group in this direction (as a later chapter will explain).

In discussing the phenomenon of the alternative theatres created across the world by young people during the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies, Eugenio Barba identified the problem of being a subculture and advocated that these groups become “group cultures”. In effect a “cultural microcosm” armed with the competencies of the large society: to adapt and modify the surroundings, to exchange and organise “individual and collective activities,” and to “transmit the collective ‘wisdom’” and “technical knowledge.” (Barba 1987: 207-8) Sustaining any such cultural autonomy was difficult for the alternative theatres in Australia in the nineteen-seventies. As a goal it may even have been illusory, and misleading. Before such groups could achieve any form of cultural authority, they were faced with the need to survive long enough or to grow in size or importance to become more than a ghetto. Nimrod Theatre was one of the few cases where this happened unambiguously. This theatre transformed itself from a marginal alternative theatre to the most culturally authoritative theatre in the nation.
Katharine Brisbane once described the larrikin beginnings of the APG and Nimrod under the heading: ‘Preserving the Disreputable’. (Brisbane 1971a: 30) The disreputability of the ‘New Australian Plays’ was a reality in 1971. Their subsequent rapid and enthusiastic acceptance into the mainstream occurred despite the initial gestures at Nimrod and the APG that had distanced their work from the mainstream of the day. In her outstanding advocacy of Australian theatre, Brisbane often brought an awareness of the colonial origins inherent in the new work. “The music hall-vaudeville tradition is very strong in Australia,” she wrote. “A working-class culture right from the convict days, its classic traditions have always been imposed from the outside from a nostalgic but untutored yearning for the best in the older cultures.” (Brisbane 1971a: 32)

Initially the ‘New Australian Plays’ were offensive from a conservative perspective because they paid no allegiance to the middle-class aspirations and the British manner of the Old Tote, the Melbourne Theatre Company and commercial productions. This new work in Melbourne and Sydney had both the cheek to be down to earth in its embrace of vernacular language and culture, and then to assert its own legitimacy in place of the imported hybrid performance strain. Katharine Brisbane championed the new theatre, at this time, writing an article in the *Australian* entitled, ‘Not Wrong - Just Different’. “There are plenty of things wrong with this country and we take masochistic delight in inviting distinguished foreigners and expatriate countrymen to expound on them,” she wrote. “We have always felt the outsiders know because our standards have come from outside. For so long have we conformed, first to British and then to American standards, that it is from their distance that we call ourselves wrong,” she wrote. “But there is much left, thank heavens, in Australia that is neither British nor American,” Brisbane continued. “Let us call it - not wrong but different.” Brisbane clearly proposed a post-colonial perspective. “What has been stifling the Australian theatre is exactly this desire to conform to foreign standards,” she concluded. (Brisbane 1971b: pu)

With popular acceptance of the APG’s work their playwrights, who were working in the vernacular, were commissioned to provide plays for the state theatre companies. Some of these commissions did not see the mainstages, but with the inclusion of David Williamson and Alex Buzo’s work in the repertoire of the Melbourne Theatre Company and other state companies, the general critical reception of vernacular drama changed quickly to voluble and rapturous approval.
Katharine Brisbane was able to write in her *Australian* column in 1972, "The battle for recognition of our writers is pretty well won, now," and, she suggested, "now it is time to pay attention to the actors." She recognised that the habitual emulation of English acting styles and English accents was out of date, and that the end had come to the spurious tradition of *standard English* on the Australian stage. "Some of these actors have done well for themselves in the repertory system, revue and so on; all of them can do whatever accent you require. But they tend to fit awkwardly into the system." Brisbane had recognised that it was *that awkwardness* that was "going to make them indispensable and by progression to make them stars - the kind who will take what our writers have to say around the world and make them understood," she wrote. "They will discard the ideal of serving the play and the director and become the essential partner of the writer in making something unpredictable and surprising and our own," Brisbane stated. (Brisbane 1972a) She was an advocate for the anarchic breed of new actors working at the APG, La Mama and Nimrod.


With the lease of an old stable in Kings Cross, John Bell and Ken Horler established Nimrod Street Theatre in 1970. After writing *O’Malley*, Michael Boddy and Robert Ellis began work on a new play for this venture. Katharine Brisbane observed, they "turned their energies to expand their ideas about a vaudeville style of theatre. This became the Nimrod Street Theatre and a spearhead for the modern movement.” (Brisbane 1977: 60) Horler and Bell had been contemporaries at Sydney University in the nineteen-sixties, where they had been associated with Sydney University Dramatic Society.

Whatever drove the people associated with the early years of Nimrod, in the stables in Nimrod Street, Kings Cross, it was not money. The tiny theatre was uneconomic as a venue for anything but shows with one or two actors and minimal production costs. Its tiny size, of course, also kept production costs down, and gave the space a wonderfully intimate cabaret feel, even if the seating, in this unusually shaped corner building, was permanently set up in an inflexible traverse stage. Such a stage is notoriously hard to play, on top of which, there was pillar - until some renovations in 1990 removed it - to one side of the stage. Necessary to hold up the roof, this pole also held up the action on stage. Yet despite any limitations this space had, in its different managements, it brought an uninterrupted wealth of innovative theatre to Sydney over the decades to follow.
The Nimrod Street Theatre, while at Kings Cross during the years 1970 to 1974, presented work done for its own sake. The venue was not economic. The imperatives were, therefore, entirely artistic. Daring, and not economics, was to be the measure of success at Nimrod Street. To defy the limitations and to present even epic ideas on this awkwardly shaped traverse stage, no bigger than many domestic living rooms. There was a freedom to try and to fail. A domestic intimacy allowed the audience to feel they were a part of the experiment.

The first work put on there in late 1970 was *Biggles*, by Robert Ellis and Michael Boddy. John Bell directed with the writers bringing along the script as the rehearsals progressed. In some ways, the play was an extended revue sketch. Its satirical ideas were sustained because, in the character of Biggles and his pukka British cronies, the audience found the perfect set of comic metaphors for their colonial experience. Another adaptation of *Biggles* had been popular as a radio serial on the ABC’s *Children’s* hour. A generation of Australian children had enjoyed these often racist and quite vacuous adventures. At Nimrod this generation had grown to middle-class self awareness, and their laughter linked nostalgia with guilt, for the guileless pandering to Empire that was fundamental to the plots of W. E. Johns’ boys’ adventure stories. This was laughter that changed people’s lives, for a specific generation who were prompted to acknowledge the preposterousness of their recent colonial habits of thought and allegiance.

Members of the Performance Syndicate worked at Nimrod with John Bell to stage a version of *Macbeth*, inspired by magic and ritual. “There is plenty of nastiness and much madness in the air,” Brian Hoad wrote of this production. “The confusion and collapse of intention and identities, right and wrong, is everywhere as the small cast doubles and trebles roles,” the critic continued. Yet the strengths of the group shone through these shortcoming in the critic’s view. “That something as interesting and imaginative as this was produced because of the apparent drawbacks must rate close to a minor theatrical miracle.” (Hoad 1971c: 49) Nicos Lathouris played Macbeth, the other members of the cast played multiple roles. It may not have been a critical success, but this production was audacious in its dramaturgy and performance style. It sought to link the classic with the horror of recent mass murderers: Charles Manson, and the “Moors Murderers” Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. Brian Hoad had liked *Biggles*, “But how on earth can the explosive rush of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* be confined within such a cosy situation? How do you key-down a satanic orgy
to the dimensions of a hearth rug?” It may just be that this all-too-close domesticated evil, which Hoad is trying to dismiss, was more effective than he was prepared or able to say at the time. “The private lives of Bell’s Macbeths is a simpering sterile affair,” Hoad wrote. “Immature and vacuous, they are wide open to any perversion that comes their way; their lust for power and their subsequent blood letting take upon themselves something of perverted sexuality.” He then makes the association suggested in the dramaturgy. “No doubt the carryings-on of Manson or Brady or Hindley were equally hollow, equally unconvincing to man or devil.” (Hoad 1971c: 49) The theatre of cruelty had found a new home.

The vigour of the first productions at Nimrod Street suggested something of the sense of freedom - even of abandon and furious optimism in Australia in the period leading up to the election of the nationalist Whitlam government. Their choice of Jack Hibberd’s *Customs and Excise* to accompany *The Roy Murphy Show* by Sydney-based Alexander Buzo, had a boisterous sense of irreverence for the colonial past. Also in 1971, their drag-show parody of Shakespeare, *Hamlet on Ice*, showed Nimrod’s capacity for outrageousness and nationalistic celebration. John Bell’s original production of Ron Blair’s musical, *Flash Jim Vaux*, in the same year, was based on the larger-than-life historical figure of James Hardy Vaux whose *New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of Flash Language* (McLachan 1964) is an early nineteenth century documentation of the witty argot of London criminals transported to New South Wales.

In Blair’s play the hero, Vaux, gives a powerfully direct account of the orgy on the day of the disembarkation of the First Fleet, when convicts and soldiers were issued a quantity of rum and let loose on what must have been that age’s nearest equivalent to some unknown region of deep space. Vaux’s recollection summed up his view of the colony, to which he had been transported three times, he rants and abuses the place itself: “This country based on cunt and rum!” Blair’s words were chosen as a provocation at the time. Censorship was still a contentious issue, and the previous year actors had been arrested for uttering ‘four letter words’. In this context Blair’s note to producers of his play, to gloss-over the line and hope that the audience might think the line spoken was, “Cut and run”, was a little timid. This was how they had approached this line at Nimrod, the note suggested. This does suggest some lack of resolution to break-the-mould within Nimrod, at this early stage.
An iconoclastic impulse can be clearly seen in the early work of Nimrod Street Theatre in their original theatre in Kings Cross. In 1972 they presented *The Duke of Edinburgh Assassinated! or the Vindication of Henry Parkes* by Dick Hall and Robert Ellis, a play that foregrounded Australian political history; and the Performance Syndicate worked on Helmut Bakaitis’s gothic play, *Shadows of Blood*, which was directed by Rex Cramphorn; *Rooted*, by Alexander Buzo; and *On Yer Marx!*, two short plays by John Wood, *Housey* and *Bigotry VC*, directed by Aarne Neeme. There were politically radical and socially confrontational aspects to these plays.

The only time Nimrod joined forces with the APG was in 1973 when the APG hosted the Melbourne season of a successful Nimrod production of *Hamlet*. John Bell and Richard Wherrett co-directed this work which boasted a striking staging dominated by huge mirrors. It is of course an old theatre superstition not to have mirrors on stage - let alone a set made of mirrors. Bell played Hamlet to considerable critical acclaim.

In 1974 Nimrod Theatre moved from the stables building in Kings Cross, to a newly created theatre in Surry Hills; built in the shell of the one time Cerebos salt and tomato sauce factory. Nimrod were the outright owners of the new theatre which they had bought from the Commonwealth Bank finance company for a token payment. In time, they also created a tiny Downstairs space for more risky and small-scale works. The address of the new Nimrod was always then given as Goodlet Street, and the access was across a large wasteland of inner city demolition that was awaiting redevelopment.

For a time in 1974 and 1975 the Nimrod management still ran the Nimrod Street space, then called the Old Nimrod Theatre. It was hired out to various groups, including director Mark Gould who staged a work by Sam Shepard there in 1975. Gould formed a group called Technical Smile, which had participants in common with the Performance Syndicate. Technical Smile also later did another play by Shepard elsewhere, and a production of Marlow’s *Dr Faustus* in 1976. The stables building was bought by Anne Brooksbank and Robert Ellis, renamed the Stables, and hired to a variety of users for several years, before it became the home for the Griffin Theatre.

In 1973 John Bell gave a lecture at Sydney University under the title: *Alternative Theatre*. He spoke of his own Nimrod Theatre and work at La Mama, the Pram Factory and the
work of the Performance Syndicate, all as *alternative* to the *established* theatres, by which he then meant the state theatre companies and the commercial theatres.

When the Nimrod Theatre moved from their little loft in Kings Cross to the new theatre in Surry Hills there was a qualitative difference in their work. In 1974 they not only moved from a very small theatre to a larger one; they also moved in an aesthetic and sociological sense, away from the dangerous margin with its ensuing bravado, to apparently safer ground. However, this seeming safety was to be a burden. The economic imperatives of the new theatre building did not allow the freedoms of the old Stables building with its tiny audience that could never be anything but a tilt in the direction of full-salaried professional operation. The new theatre was big enough to be professional in every sense, even if the margins of economic viability were always tight. No longer was it possible to afford the outrageousness of the early plays that were written during rehearsal and were brash and spontaneous as much in their creative process as their performance style. In the last half of the nineteen-seventies Nimrod eclipsed the state company in NSW, the Old Tote, and became the most outstanding theatre company in Sydney, and probably in Australia. Nimrod’s work became stylistically authoritative, and gained an acute cultural relevance to the young educated middle-class who were now their audience.

In 1976 Bell’s address was published by the University and his changed view was added in a postscript to the lecture, dated 1975. The easy dualism between *alternative theatre* and *establishment theatre* in his original paper was gone, and this is understandable as his theatre, Nimrod, had move from an alternative status to an establishment status in this period. Nimrod had become more generously funded, and was becoming the most dynamic and widely respected theatre in the country. The position in his paper - which had a certain tone of ‘crying poor’, was no longer appropriate. Perhaps, also, any euphoria of the *age if Aquarius* had turned sour by 1975 in Australia. “I now regard Alternative Theatre as one of the manifestations of an Alternative Society and one which is therefore likely to be politically radical, deliberately anti-commercial, deliberately unprofessional and impermanent;” Bell wrote in 1975, “aimed not at entertaining or even communicating with an anonymous floating public so much as having a particular statement to a certain select and sympathetic audience.” (Bell 1976: 19) Bell was at pains to distance himself and his theatre from the problem of marginality that he has originally ignored in his paper.
Nimrod, in a sense, became trapped by its own ‘commercialism’, and its fixation on ‘success’. This reached near-farce in the late nineteen-seventies, when Nimrod’s Administrator Paul Iles came up with the idea of calling the theatre, ‘The National Nimrod’. If this piece of one-up-manship had been a purely tongue-in-cheek gesture, it may have been congruent with the anti-colonial sentiments of the early Nimrod. But this had been more than an eccentrically defiant gesture. It was an attempt to proclaim Nimrod’s precedence in a hierarchy of Australian theatre. This was a profoundly backward step away from the egalitarian and democratic sentiments that had been first demonstrated in Nimrod’s work and their positioning of their work in relationship to other theatre and society at large. Such posturing did not serve Nimrod’s real preeminence.

By the nineteen-eighties, Nimrod Theatre, which had spearheaded the nationalist theatre a decade earlier, had lost its radical character and failed to manage the economic limitations of its venue. At one stage the company chose to perform occasionally in larger venues, especially the Seymour Centre. Initially this succeeded in generating vital income, but in the long term money was lost on such ventures. Meanwhile, the company’s repertoire slipped towards a more conservative mix of works. Eventually they were forced to sell the theatre building, and to work out of the Seymour Centre, finally adopting a policy of presenting the classics. This ironic slide from brash nationalism into colonial conservatism was the death-knell of the company in 1987.

Radical theatre in Adelaide: Troupe

As a young left wing teacher in Britain, David Allen said he had little patience with theatre as a bourgeois form. When he went to work in East Africa, he realised the radical potential of theatre, first as an educational force for social change, then as a form in its own right. In Uganda, Allen became involved with a “vernacular African group, who put on what were basically improvised plays.” Then with the playwright Robert Serumaga, who had been educated in Britain and Ireland before he returned to Uganda, David Allen set up Theatre Limited. Allen directed the company in plays by Serumaga, Fugard and others. Realising this was what he wanted to do, Allen returned to Britain for training. He completed the postgraduate training program in directing at Manchester University, run by Hugh Hunt. Allen then applied for a job in South Australia, and with this heightened post-colonial perspective, he came to teach drama in Adelaide in 1971. (Bray/Allen interview 1989)
colonial link among the three continents is clear: centred on European England, Africa and Australia are the sites of remote outposts.

David Allen and Keith Gallasch had started working with a student group within the Salisbury College of Advanced Education in outer suburban Adelaide. Troupe Theatre was the means by which they could bring their work into the heart of the city, when they settled into the old taxi garage next to the Communist, People’s Bookshop. (Worby 1979:10) Troupe set up as a cooperative ensemble company. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) Calling their venue the Red Shed, Troupe sustained a full program of plays that were “politically, if not theatrically, avant-garde,” as David Allen told Errol Bray. (Bray/Allen interview 1989; Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) Allen initially directed most of the work. Some early group devising gave way to Allen’s writing. A modern commentary to accompany the text of Henry V was David Allen’s first work for Troupe. His key work based on the writings of D. H. Lawrence, soon followed: If Ever I Get Back Here Again I’ll Stay, later called, Upside Down at the Bottom of the World. Its success made Allen’s reputation as a writer in Australia, and it made the company known around Australia. (Bray/Allen interview 1989) The emblematic post-colonial motif was striking in both titles to the play, and in its contents.

David Allen wrote super-realist documentary dramas, many of them reviewing Australian history with a radically skewed post-colonialist perspective. Adelaide’s founders, Gouger and Light were portrayed, for example, in another early play, Don’t Listen to Gouger. This also critically reflected the contemporary stand-off between the state Premier, Dunstan and the state Police Commissioner, Salisbury. David Allen’s hyper-realism is a stylistic quality common in post-colonial writing generally. Allen himself called it super-naturalism. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) A good deal of the strength and effectiveness of David Allen’s writing for the stage came from his situation within Troupe, where he knew the characteristics of the venue, the Red Shed, and he knew the actors he was writing for in the company. Allen himself said, “the style that came out of Troupe and the Red Shed was different. It tended to be shorter, jumping from scene to scene, [with a] minimum use of sets.” (Bray/Allen interview 1989) Stylistically and politically the Pram Factory influenced Troupe. Allen told Bray, “We were very much influenced by their attitudes and style and their nationalism.” He also pointed to the impact of the later work of the Popular Theatre Troupe, “in a way that’s why we called ourselves Troupe,” Allen said. “Because
their style was very theatrical and vaudevillian and that was another input." (Bray/Allen interview 1989) In turn, Troupe was to have a widely felt influence; for example, Des James, an early member of Troupe, later became the Director of Riverina Trucking Company.

With Troupe, Allen and Gallasch also chose to present works by Jack Hibberd and Alma De Groen. Their work is concerned with displacement, although the specific mechanisms used by these playwrights were different. In 1976 and 1978 with Gallasch in the role of Monk O’Neill, Troupe presented *A Stretch of the Imagination* by Hibberd. In 1977 they gave seasons of three plays by Alma De Groen: *The Joss Adams Show, Perfectly Alright* and *Chidley*. Other writers, including Doreen Clarke, wrote broadly naturalistic work produced by the company: *Roses in Due Season* in 1978 and *Bleedin’ Butterflies* in 1980.

Allen’s play *Dickinson* was presented in 1978 in the Space at the Festival Centre. Directed by David Young, it included Flinders University students in its cast. By 1979 Troupe had sufficient funding to attempt to employ a full-time core of actors. (Worby 1979:10; Bray/Allen interview 1989) Around this time Troupe became affiliated with Flinders University Drama Discipline. Allen’s plays *Behold the Gay Marsupial* and *Gone With Hardy* both in 1977 and *Pike’s Madness* in 1979 were among the last of his work presented by Troupe. He was, however, to collaborate with Doreen Clarke to write *Coppin and Company*, for Troupe to present at the Red Shed. David Young directed his play *Meat* at the Space in 1980, anticipating further collaborations when Allen accepted work with the State Theatre Company of South Australia.

With additional funding by 1979, Troupe became very active in training, one of the hallmarks of the alternative theatre companies of the nineteen-seventies. Undiminished by its growing success the company continued to be a political theatre of the left, with a collective organisation. Its audience were students, “young people who never went to theatre, but went to cinema” - people who were politically active, rather than theatre goers. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) Troupe had a trio of Artistic Directors: David Allen, Keith Gallasch and Henry Salter. Allen identified the reactive strategy which in part drove Troupe, saying that they were “trying to out-do the State Theatre Company. We used the term ‘the alternative theatre company’ in South Australia,” he told Bray. (Bray/Allen interview 1989)
They had acclaimed Keith Gallasch as a leading actor in the company, but he was to emerge as a major director and playwright. In April 1977 he wrote with Alan Barrie, a late night show, *S.A. - an exercise in madness*. Troupe’s work had been politically radical, but otherwise theatrically conventional to this point, but now things began to change. With this work Keith Gallasch began his ongoing exploration of avant-garde theatre. In 1978 his play *Gents* was presented at the Red Shed. David Allen commented, “Keith was much more interested in the visual avant-garde than I was...and so he did a couple of plays he devised himself. One was a kind of science fiction fantasy. Which was really about concepts of male and female, and that was very successful. It had a lot of visuals. In that Red Shed it was amazing what you could do, in the way of slides, and what ever.” (Bray/Allen interview 1989) *Gents* was also taken to La Mama, in Melbourne.

There was an avant-garde impulse developing within Troupe. “We saw avant-garde and political together,” Gallasch told Bray. Gallasch and those around him were increasingly interested in a different sort of theatre. “Virginia and I had seen Phil Motherwell’s *The Dreamers of the Absolute* done in Melbourne by Nightshift - the radical, or the avant-garde wing of the APG.” Gallasch said. “The APG and their larrikin tradition of the Australian theatre was alternative, but not avant-garde. Whereas Nightshift was calculatedly avant-garde - singsong delivery, very strong visual imagery. So we immediately came back to Adelaide, and within a couple of months mounted *Dreamers of the Absolute*. Peter Handke’s *Kasper* followed this.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

Baxter had suggested to Gallasch that he should work with non-theatre people as collaborators. Gallasch created a work called *Suburban Mysteries*, which used the thriller genre, and was to be pivotal for them. “We got Phil Colson, a local composer, and Ian de Grooche, the photographer in,” Gallasch listed his co-workers. “A rock musician, and the interior designer, Michael Geisler, to do the set. And it was a very successful show. But all these people brought their strengths with them, you know. And very idiosyncratic views, and I realised then that Virginia was onto something.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

Virginia Baxter commented on working in the theatre with these non-theatre trained artists. “They didn’t have the kind of expectations, or preconceptions about what you could do in
the theatre, so they came up with quite - probably on the surface - quite outrageous demands. And yet, in fulfilling them [...] all the stumbling blocks that those kind of things throw up, create really quite interesting theatre.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

Troupe moved to Unley Town Hall in 1980. Gallasch recalled, “I think by 1981 everyone was happy to be political, but I think there were a number who resisted too much adventurousness in the work - who wanted what we saw as a cozy character based plays...as we were pushing to be more experimental. Rather than just be politically alternative we wanted to play much more with form, and generate more works.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) Ultimately this was not to be at Troupe.

Gallasch and Baxter had reached a point with innovative theatre where they “wanted to concentrate on that. As opposed to doing a bit of it, and doing a bit of the others,” as Virginia Baxter put it. “We didn’t want to pick up the latest Doreen Clarke play and do that,” Gallasch added. He was proposing then, that Troupe had “to become unique.” He recalled proposing then that “the company has been doing the same kind of thing for years and we’ve got to change.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

Gallasch’s proposed new direction for Troupe, to operate more as an experimental theatre, made much sense in 1981, because the State Company of South Australia was already mounting productions of Troupe’s most successful writers Allen and Clarke, in its season that year.1 Troupe’s claim to an innovative edge was under considerable challenge. However, there was an ironic twist. The company then comprised many young actors determined to establish careers. It was really the dwindling number of old hands who were primarily interested in the political dimension of the company’s work, or the aesthetic innovations of avant-garde theatre. “The younger students out of Flinders tended to be more conservative,” Gallasch recalled, “by and large the impulse was toward more conventional work. But there were some of us pushing to be more adventurous. So there was a great shared area. But there was just enough there to create a schism. Especially when the issue of power was there,” Gallasch said. “In the end David Young and Henry Salter left. David Allen left. That left me, I was the only oldie left in the company, and some people thought I carried too much power with me. So when I felt that, I left,” he said. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)
A conclusion: national types for a new type of nation...

The larrikin figure was not unknown in the years beyond his colonial heyday and before his latter day reincarnation as a national type and embodiment of contemporary Australia. Roy Rene and George Wallace were Australia’s most popular comedy stars in vaudeville and both embodied many of the features of the larrikin, in their stage and film work. What blocked their popular acts embodying the nation was the lack of a modern context in which to view this ‘old’ type newly. At the time, these characters were bound to be ‘no-hopers’ and ‘undesirables’.

When the middle-class audience at Nimrod (and thenceforth other contemporary theatres in Australia) identified themselves with the rat-baggery of the larrikin characters presented to them on that stage, Australia had come of age, and had shed the ‘colonial cringe’, in A. A. Phillip’s resonant phrase. The depictions at Nimrod and elsewhere may have been an overcompensation, but to laugh at the idea of our collective disadvantage, and even to celebrate larrikinism was a liberating transition from the self-loathing which Barry Humphries had traded-upon a decade earlier. Middle-class Australia was given permission to laugh at itself and to love itself in these characters. However, there was a cost to be counted.

In 1983 Australia elected a Labour government led by Bob Hawke. The nation now had a Prime Minister who was widely regarded as a larrikin. He was capable of eloquence as well as pointed invective. He was renowned for his smart dressing, drinking and womanising. But, especially when he first took office, there was a freedom and informality to his manner, and Hawke appeared to be the embodiment of Australian-ness. The fundamental conservatism of this government was to emerge. Its corporatisation of the nation undermined Labour’s socialist principles in the pursuit of a new agenda of consensus, which was sadly reminiscent of the dominant notion of ‘assimilation’ of earlier decades. A parallel to the new corporate nation was the way the corporate management class themselves Australian-ised and embraced the larrikin persona. Modern Australia was a business, run by men dressed in imported suits, speaking with a flourish of Australian colloquialisms to display a newly confident bonhomie. When Alan Bond’s yacht won the America’s Cup it was to the theme-song, I Come From a Land Down Under. The song remained at the top of the charts in America for many weeks and earned record amounts of foreign exchange
income for Australia, and for the band, Men at Work. Members of the band had been in the circle of people working at Claremont: the new nationalism first articulated in the avant-garde, now became a (dubious) ‘national’ anthem. This was modern Australia.
Part two:
Reverses in marginality...
Going beyond the established centre...

It became ‘in’ to be out in the margins beyond the cultural edifices of the city centres and the established theatrical institutions. The beginning of the nineteen-eighties saw a reversal in the recognised marginality of place, ethnicity and language, sexuality and gender identity, and the beginnings of a change in the marginality of indigenous Australians with the instigation of an Aboriginal theatre.

This thesis argues that modernism was manifest in Australia by this time. In the Australian theatre modern work was enthusiastically nourished by local conditions and stimulated by international trends. This part of the thesis will demonstrate that within this context there was an emergent national dramatic expression which reflected a diversity of forms and voices, and a new set of intentions and attitudes among the makers of theatre in Australia. Regional and otherwise marginal theatres - on the periphery either for their geographic isolation or cultural specificity or linguistic difference - were dynamic intercessions promoting the growing breadth of theatre culture in Australia.

Community theatres were not ipso facto experimental theatres or avant-garde theatres, however, amid this diversity of new theatre there were new opportunities for innovation and the avant-garde.

Spreading national culture: theatre communities

Australian cities have been built on strong colonial models with the inner-city centres boasting the established cultural institutions, usually in architecturally significant structures. This period saw a trend to subvert the dominance of the central theatrical institutions. Most significantly Aboriginal theatre began to emerge in Australia, theatres were established in regional cities and marginal places, communities themselves became the focus for innovative theatre-making usually outside formal theatre buildings, often indeed, out of doors.
The nationalist Labour government in Australia from 1972 to 1975 had promoted policies that encouraged innovations in the theatre, including a program to encourage community arts as a means to change Australian society from its colonial mould. The community arts program of the Australia Council was attacked by the incoming Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser in 1976, and they made a public gesture of ‘devolving’ the Community Arts Board. Despite this, many of the community arts initiatives survived. Although chastened, the period saw the growth of regional theatres, theatre-in-education and later theatre for young people. The so-called alternative theatres continued to struggle to make places for themselves within the changing government policies.

A notion of alternative theatre derived from the counter culture, increasingly made way for a more diverse set of categories in Australia, in part derived from funding policies. In addition to community theatre and theatre-in-education, which had been well established in the nineteen-seventies, more clearly defined examples of women’s theatres, Aboriginal theatres, youth theatres, and regional theatres were developed. National funding policies included guidelines to support innovative projects and theatre for and by people of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Pluralism increased despite the conservatism of the early nineteen-eighties. Radical ideas whether political, social or artistic, were factored into the capitalist economies of Western countries. Environmental concerns and cultural development, for example, stood with industrial development and social order, as elements to be negotiated in the resolution of political action. In Australia the arts lobby grew more astute and politically powerful at this time. The arts now had a broader social base than the gentry-dominated institutions that held the authority before the democratising changes of the early nineteen-seventies came into effect.

In the first half of the nineteen-eighties the growth of community theatre reached its peak in Australia. It provided niche opportunities that were sometimes occupied by artists with an interest in avant-garde theatre. This was not always the case, as much of the work done in regional theatres, community and young people’s theatres was inherently conservative. On the other hand, outside the inner suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney there was sometimes perceived to be a freedom to innovate, and this stimulated original work on the margins. Companies with an interest in developing avant-garde work chose to work
in-the-field at times, and were funded as community theatres. For some groups, the way funding policies pushed work into specific areas was compromising, but for others this was quite painless. Funding policies identified audiences, in effect. Companies, directors, actors and performance makers all needed audiences to survive and to have a theatre practice, apart from their need for financial support, as such.

There was a considerable increase in the diversity of theatre practised in Australia. Overall a great deal of the diversity present in the Australian theatre came directly from the theatre styles, working methods, and training of personnel in so called marginal theatres. Often innovation came from revisiting old traditions and popular forms like circus and puppetry, cabaret and music theatre, and this will be examined in sole detail in later chapters of this thesis. The innovations were also prompted by the contexts in which these groups performed to new audiences of young people, workers, institutionalised people in hospitals, homes and jails. They travelled and performed in unconventional and sometimes remote places, and overall these groups were developing new ways of allowing these audiences ‘into’ their performances.

**Indigenous marginality: Aboriginal theatre**

The expression of any broadly identified Australian nationalism is inextricably involved with the questions of the relationship of Australia’s indigenous people to the incoming waves of conquerors, convicts and migrants. Finding expression for these narratives was essential for a viable national idiom and a genuinely national culture to develop.

The original culture in Australia, the Aboriginal culture, had been systematically suppressed and marginalised throughout the two centuries of European colonial and neo-colonial occupation. Unacknowledged as a precursor or a foundation for Australian culture and society, these complex societies, with their intimate relationship with the land, were regarded as invisible by the usurping society of the white Europeans.

Slowly however, Australian narratives of place came to revise the heroic colonial view of *exploration* depicted in the Australian theatre. Work began to emerge which considered the continent’s indigenous people and recognised the *invasion* of the Europeans. This was an unpalatable truth for white Australians generally, but an increasingly educated and
cosmopolitan elite saw this as a foundational truth of any conception of Australian nationality. This elite resided in the youth subculture, and the bohemian artistic and student subcultures that were permeated by international political and social concerns. There was a tendency for non-Aboriginal people to speak on behalf of Australia’s indigenous people. A number of works by non-Aborigines were essentially sympathetic, including Bill Reed’s *Truganinni* which was about the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines; John Romeril’s *Bastardy* and Jack Hibberd’s *Captain Midnight VC* both at the APG in 1972; and the Popular Theatre Troupe and English director Albert Hunt’s *The Whiteman’s Burden* in 1975. These works also represent a new articulation by white Australians of their relationship with the dispossessed indigenous population.

In 1967 a Referendum was held proposing to change the Commonwealth Constitution to include Aborigines in the census and effectively to give them the rights of other citizens of Australia. This was supported by both the Liberal government and the Labour opposition. In an unprecedented affirmation the proposal was carried by a substantial majority of the voting population. The apartheid-like divisions between Aborigines and the emigrant population began to come to an end: the notion of Aboriginal ‘protection’ and the confinement of indigenous people to ‘missions’ and ‘reserves’ and the denial of social services to Aborigines were ended. Aborigines gained (in theory, and increasingly in fact) the right to own property, to move beyond the reserves and to bring up their children without fear of the iniquitous practice of the removal of children into ‘protection’.

The liberation struggles of Africa and the third world provided persuasive models and raised the expectations for personal and community rights and freedoms throughout the world. The Black Power movement in the United States of America was a strong influence on a generation of Aboriginal activists in Australia which included the poet and playwright Kevin Gilbert and the actor and playwright Bob Maza. (Morton-Evans 1984)

At the New Theatre in Melbourne in 1970, Dot [Dorothy] Thompson directed Jack Charles in Athol Fugard’s play, *The Blood Knot*. (Knappett 1971) With Bob Maza they then set up an Aboriginal theatre company, Nindethana, which staged Kevin Gilbert’s *The Cherry Pickers*, which has been acknowledged as “the first play written by an Aboriginal dramatist.” (Shoemaker 1995: 134) They also produced the revue, *Jack Charles is Up and Fighting*, in 1972, with Anglo-Australian Dot Thompson directing Jack Charles, Oleg
Lewinski who is of Lithuanian decent and Bob Maza in the cast. The sketches and songs
in this program were contributed by Bill Reed, Jack Houston and Bob Maza. It played to
largely white audiences at the Pram Factory, the Guild Theatre at Melbourne University and
toured to the ANU in Canberra. Jack Charles is Up and Fighting aimed to tell “the whites
about the blacks,” it was reported. (National Times 8 March 1972:pu)

In late 1972 Nindethana joined with the APG to present Katharine Susannah Pritchard’s
play, Brumby Innes, which had won the 1927 Triad play competition but had not at the
time been given its promised production. The play had been enormously daring for its day
and had therefore had to wait until more ‘liberated’ times to receive its premiere. Beginning
with a depiction of an Aboriginal corroboree, Brumby Innes confronts its audience with a
frank portrait of the sexual violence of its white protagonist towards Aboriginal women and
the white city woman who stumbles into his world.

The National Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre, in Redfern, was a major initiative
towards Aboriginal cultural autonomy in 1974. Paul Coe of the Aboriginal Legal Service
and Jenny Sheehan, a student from the Ensemble Theatre, had sought funding in 1972 for
drama workshops they had started in Redfern. Gerry Bostock recalled that the funding was
given only if a ‘professional’ tutor could be found and so Bob Maza was brought from
Melbourne to conduct these workshops. Bostock has also emphasised that the core “people
involved in the black theatre were also involved in the medical service, […] the legal service
[,] the housing projects and community activity.” (Bostock 1984: 69) These initiatives were
part of a growing political radicalism within Aboriginal society which was influenced by the
international political climate.

Kevin Gilbert was instrumental in setting up the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in
January 1972. 1 (Gilbert 1985: 36-7) The powerful metaphoric presence of the ‘Embassy’
asserted the status of the Aboriginal people as a separate nation, a First Nation of the
original inhabitants, and it became a major turning point in the growing consciousness of
the plight of the Aborigines in the broader Australian and international communities.
Bostock has argued that the Embassy was “part of black theatre”, also suggesting that these
performative actions were integral to the social environment which produced the formal
Aboriginal theatre of the time. “We acted out in the general public what our general feelings
are, as we performed on the lawns of Government House,” Bostock explained to fellow
Aboriginal writers in 1983. "We performed as black theatre groups, as street groups, in the marches. Black theatre would get involved with all the political demonstrations," he said. (Bostock 1985: 70) The apparent disparity between the conventional forms of dramatic narrative usually adopted by Aboriginal playwrights and their political radicalism in the early nineteen-seventies, is in part offset by recognising the heightened political environment of the time which radicalised even pedestrian forms. More specifically there was a diffuse engagement with white audiences beyond formal theatrical events: in street marches and the considerable ‘meta-theatricality’ of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, itself. Significantly, after some considerable time, the Tent Embassy was forcibly removed by the Commonwealth Police.

In a spectacular international gesture the Australian Labour opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, visited China in 1971, in defiance of the almost total political isolation then surrounding of the People’s Republic of China. Early the next year the American President Richard Nixon also went to China. The Chinese invited an Australian Aboriginal delegation to visit and members of the National Black Theatre were included in this group in 1972. By the end of that year the Labour party had swept into office in Australia and initiated systematic and substantive revisions of the social policies affecting Australian Aboriginal people including a trebling of the funding for Aboriginal programs in the Federal budget. (Bostock 1985: 71)

In Melbourne Nindethana had addressed a predominantly white audience with the material in the revue Jack Charles in Up and Fighting. In Sydney, Basically Black was a revue with similar contents reflecting the oppression and racism faced by Aborigines, but significantly it was more directed at the radicalisation of its urban Aboriginal audience. If Nindethana had, with government assistance, crossed a threshold to become “entirely black”, the National Black Theatre teetered on the same threshold for much of its existence. Basically Black was directed by Ernest MacIntyre also in 1975. As an emigrant from Sri Lanka, MacIntyre was highly aware of the issues of colonialism, racism and the clash of cultures. The internal debate about the involvement of non-Aborigines within the Black Theatre simmered away. The division over this was parallel to larger political questions of Aboriginal politics at the time which, in their extreme expressions, can be summed up as ‘separatism’ or ‘assimilation’.

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Early in 1975 Robert Merritt's play, *The Cake Man* opened at the National Black Theatre, directed by Bob Maza. (Merritt 1978: 4) It also had later productions at the Bondi Pavilion Theatre in 1977, directed by non-Aborigine George Ogilvie, with the outstanding Aboriginal actor and teacher Brian Syron in the lead role. The play was broadcast on ABC TV in that year. Robert Merritt, himself, directed a production which toured to the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado in 1982. The National Black Theatre production of Gerry Bostock's play *Here Comes the Nigger* in 1976 was directed by Jack Charles. Like *The Cake Man*, this was a moving, but essentially naturalistic play. These works, and others of the period, while apparently conforming to the dramatic conventions of the English language stage, at a subtle level subverted this European tradition. Again and again the performances are described as having a relaxed and down-played authenticity which recognised the players' and the audience's complicity in the making of theatre. However simple this common breach of the naturalistic convention, it is the bridge to traditional Aboriginal narrative forms. These qualities in Aboriginal writing generally, as Robert Ariss has noted, have been criticised by journalists and some academics as, "rambling, conversational and sometimes confusing", but beyond this he argues they represent a consistent struggle by Aboriginal writers to render an "accountable" Aboriginal voice. This is clearly the case with writing for the Aboriginal theatre. Ariss has quoted Marcia Langton's insistence that "any discourse about Aborigines must also be written for Aborigines, that is, accountable." (Ariss 1988: 137 citing Langton 1981: 11) Whether deeply imbedded in traditional life or alienated in urban living, the arbiters of what is 'Aboriginality' are to be Aboriginal people. Taking control of that identification - of who was to be accepted as one of them - was one of the few remaining prerogatives left to Aborigines in Australia. The negotiation of this identification has remained a central issue in the articulation of Aboriginal culture.

The seeds of the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association Inc (NAISDA) and their showcase, the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre, were established in 1972. Carole Johnson came to Australia with the Eleo Pomare Dance Company and, as Bostock recorded, she became "involved in black theatre and started teaching dance." The Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre has made a strong contribution to the performing arts especially in Sydney, through its annual season at Belvoir Street Theatre. Graduates have set up a number of independent Aboriginal dance organisations. Johnson and graduate Stephen Page established Bangarra Dance Theatre in
1989. It has become a major landmark as an innovative and independent Aboriginal dance company. It represented a cosmopolitan expression of Aboriginal ideas through the language of modern dance informed by traditional Aboriginal dance forms. The work has been widely acclaimed and yet it is challenging to both black and white audiences. Within the growing pluralism of postmodern society the integrity of the indigenous culture of Australian Aborigines threw up a number of problematic negotiations between culturally loaded concepts: ‘success’ or ‘selling-out’, ‘teaching’ or ‘preaching’, and ‘separatism’ or ‘the ghetto’.

Jack Davis’ writing for the stage developed throughout the nineteen-eighties in Western Australia. It is the clearest example of the subtle subversion of European forms to articulate an Aboriginal voice. This was achieved through the long-standing collaboration of a white dramaturg and director, Andrew Ross, with the Aboriginal playwright. The 1988 Melbourne performances of Davis’ *The First Born* trilogy by Marli Byol (Swan River) Company achieved both mainstream backing and national recognition. They were supported by the establishment institutions: the Aboriginal Arts Board, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the Melbourne Theatre Company. (Olb 1989: 4) Davis and Ross had begun working together on *Kullark* in 1979, then *The Dreamers* in 1982 and *No Sugar* in 1985. In their joint productions, these plays became increasingly complex with ‘environmental’ staging that had the audience move from site to site to follow the action. Jack Davis became a strong presence in Australia as a contemporary playwright and an Aboriginal artist. However his plays were not integrated into the repertoires of mainstage theatres, and they remained marginalised: but around their marginality, in a sense, the centre shifted. This was culturally central work that made demands on casting and style which the state theatre companies were not equipped to meet, and probably did not feel it appropriate to include in their annual programs. The Melbourne Theatre Company embrace of the 1988 performances of *The First Born* trilogy, was therefore especially significant, as it exemplified the mainstream including Aboriginal work in the repertoire. In so doing the mainstream was led by the margin.

Mudrooroo Nyoongar created a project titled: *The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of ‘The Commission’ by Heiner Müller*. It was developed through the late nineteen-eighties and given a workshop in 1991 at the Centre for Performance Studies at the University of
Sydney, directed by Brian Syron. There was then a reading given at Belvoir Street Theatre. Mudrooroo also worked with the translator and dramaturg Gerhard Fischer to develop a radical review of the Müller text, *Der Auftrag* or *The Commission*, subtitled, *Memory of a Revolution*. It treats the displacement of the idea of the French revolution to the African slave population in Haiti. This colonial model was taken by Mudrooroo, who created what he titled a Koori text. (Fischer 1993: *passim*; Müller project: 1991)

Brian Syron, Vivian Walker and Justine Saunders were among those involved in the establishment of the first National Black Playwright’s Conference in Canberra in 1987. A second conference was held at Macquarie University in 1989, and an Aboriginal National Theatre Trust was created to promote the needs of a theatre of Australia’s indigenous people. Funding was given reluctantly by the Australia Council, and withdrawn entirely after the second conference. (Syron 1993: 165)

**Democratisation of art: community theatre**

Don Mamouney strongly argued, at the inaugural Community Theatre Conference, that *community theatre* was not a form nor a style of theatre, rather he suggested, placing theatre in the community was a strategy for theatre practice. This was the strategy of community art over all: to democratise the practice of art and to acknowledge a broader base to valid art activity than was represented in the traditional marketplace. The framework of traditional institutions which constituted the ‘marketplace’ had been dominated by imported cultural products, implying that Australia retained a colonial relationship to authentic artistic expression. Between 1918 and 1972 prestigious settings for ‘high art’ products were favoured over popular expressions by the arts establishment in Australia.

In the United States of America the debate between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ had been a place where significant national debates on American identity took place. The ‘low art’ images of Hollywood cinema, for example, had been legitimised as subjects for art work and had come to have a place in the transactions of the art market. For this reason they could not be denied a place among ‘art market’ commodities. Debates over the ambiguous relationship of high art and low art, and elite forms and popular forms, occurred in Australia and in a similar way through these debates there was an articulation of a national discourse. The United States of America and Australia were at odds with Britain and Europe where
these issues within modernism hinged around transcending questions of class and overcoming rigid patterns of aristocratic patronage. In Australia, the American pattern which focused on the hierarchy of the market, and the European pattern which focused on ‘received’ notions of taste, mingled and clashed. There was a diffuse projection which posed European high art against American populism.

Community art in Australia - the *democratisation of art* - had an unambiguous intention to go beyond the colonial expression of art in this country. It placed the means of expression at the immediate disposal of Australian artists whether they had the approval of British arbiters of taste or the local establishment with its Anglophile preferences. Any discussion of high art and low art is not all that relevant to Australia, therefore, when the post-colonial model is more decisive in describing Australian circumstances. The debates have been carried on over the issues of ‘access’ to art and ‘equity’ of access to art making and consumption, and in the conservative calls for ‘excellence’.

In the broadening expression of a national theatre idiom a shift occurred which saw the peripherally placed regional theatres become culturally central locations. More than this, in the new regional theatres considerable innovation and synthesis of new theatre values took place. The regional theatres at first ‘imported’ the ‘new theatre’ from the alternative theatres in the capital cities, and later to some extent, innovated in a similar fashion. The Hunter Valley Theatre Company in Newcastle modelled itself on Nimrod, and the same repertoire was also strongly in evidence at Wagga Wagga with the Riverina Trucking Company, and later in North Queensland with the New Moon Theatre Company. In time these theatres responded to both the needs and opportunities of their new situations and produced original theatrical values appropriate for regional theatre. The Riverina Trucking Company developed musical theatre and cabaret tradition, and the Hunter Valley Theatre Company created some impressive new documentary works especially after they grew closer to the Freewheels theatre-in-education company. New Moon’s interactions with Dance North, some time later, were also notable.

The Riverina Trucking Company (later called the Riverina Theatre Company) was established in 1976 within the facilities of the then Riverina College of Advanced Education. Its first Artistic Director was Terry O’Connell, who presented a program in the first two years which included the work of the new Australian playwrights,
theatre-in-education and actor devised material, an original rock musical, cabaret and Shakespeare. This programming was similar to the contents of a number of other regional theatre companies and may not seem to bear out O'Connell's reputation as an exponent of avant-garde theatre, however, the Riverina Trucking Company was the first company to take this direction.

A regional theatre company based in Newcastle, NSW, the Hunter Valley Theatre Company (HVTC) also commenced in 1976, with Terence Clarke as its first Artistic Director. From the beginning the HVTC received support from both the University of Newcastle, which had a new Drama Department, and the Newcastle Teachers' College, then a separate institution. The early HVTC programming was closely modelled on the Nimrod Theatre where Clarke had worked. *Hamlet on Ice*, which had been successful with Nimrod, was HVTC's first production, for example. Interestingly this play was also part of the Riverina Trucking Company's program in 1978. Initially the HVTC program was more dependant on mainstream repertoire than that of Riverina Trucking Company. Although in Wagga Wagga popular American musicals and rock musicals figured prominently in the company's activities in productions which involved students and the wider community.

**Sustained experimentation: the Mill Community Theatre**

On the wave of policies favouring regional theatre the Mill Community Theatre in Geelong was established by Deakin University in the late nineteen-seventies. The foundation Dean of Humanities, the philosopher Max Charlesworth was a power behind the enterprise, believing that the university should have a creative presence in its community. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) James McCaughey was appointed the foundation lecturer in Drama Studies at Deakin, and he established an off-campus teaching facility in an old flour mill in Geelong. McCaughey was the Artistic Director of the Mill Community Theatre from 1978 until 1984. During this period he split his time between his fulltime academic responsibilities and his work with the company.

The Mill theatre itself was a "stunning space," as Lisa Scott-Murphy has described it, with "polished floors, white walls and skylighting." (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990) James McCaughey likened the space to the Pram Factory, where his production of the *Oresteia* had been staged in the mid-nineteen-seventies in a way that had pushed the
potentialities of the Pram Factory considerably, with different settings for each of the plays in the trilogy. McCaughey recalled another strikingly effective use of space which had inspired him: Lindzee Smith’s production of Brecht’s *The Mother*, for which the Pram Factory auditorium had been stripped-back and empty. This was the way he wanted the Mill to function. Like the Pram Factory, the Mill had two spaces, and from McCaughey’s point of view, it had “potentialities far beyond the use as a classroom.” Exploring that space became the essence of the work done by the Mill Theatre Company. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)

The question of whether or not the work of the Mill was avant-garde, should be judged by McCaughey’s consistent description of their work as ‘experiment’, which is born out in the record of the work itself. “The whole course of my time with the company could have been described as learning how to use that theatre,” he said. “That theatre was just standing there trying to teach you, and it was a question of using the space, trying to let the space work.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) This was not the type of thing the director of a repertory theatre would say. Nor was it the pedagogue only speaking, this “learning” and “teaching” was the essential methodology of the experimental theatre. Pushed by funding policies and a growing articulation of ‘community theatre’ in Australia as an active political force, McCaughey later distanced his work from the process of experimentation. However, his lucid explanation of the company’s methods and intentions gives the lie to his denial. It becomes a kind of transparent paralipsis. This is a clear example of the kind of pressure under which funding policies, inadvertently, placed theatre workers.

The company’s premise was the question: what does this “group of theatre professionals” do in Geelong? McCaughey explained, “There was a commitment to creating theatre out of the experience of the locality - of the audience.” The regional city was to hear its own stories. “Initially we took a very particular line about that, we felt that Geelong was a city that under-valued itself, which it clearly is. Also, Geelong has got a very remarkable history.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) The company devised plays with writers, composers and choreographers which gave theatrical flesh to this idea. They made a series of four plays based on Geelong’s history. Then, McCaughey commented, “I stopped, because I didn’t want to get stuck with that label.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) Again and again with the history of the Mill there was a valuing of originality over ‘success’; and aesthetics over expedience - the hallmarks of the avant-garde. The Mill was
conceived and conducted as a series of systematic experiments - with a substantial level of intellectual and artistic rigour.

The Mill produced several far-reaching innovations in format, including the open-house, *Mill Nights* and a mastery of the processes of group devising. *Bringing theatre to the people* has a slightly missionary connotation, which was not entirely absent from the community theatre movement in Australia generally. McCaughey was an intellectual, and he had an evangelical manner that led to a number of reforms and innovations in methodology and style. McCaughey was “concerned that the actors’ skills should improve,” and this was characteristic of the experimental theatres and distinguished the Mill from many community theatre companies. Too often community companies, McCaughey commented, “want to eat people up and spit them out.” The Mill, by contrast, had a weekly voice and movement classes. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) These were the preoccupations of an experimental theatre.

This was the period when many practitioners in Sydney spoke of *new form*, to define their work, and to separate it from the vernacular theatre. McCaughey was distancing himself from the vernacular stage - originating with the APG - which was also dominating community theatres at the time. “I became more and more concerned with a tendency,” McCaughey said, “to depend slightly self-consciously on rough-stuff, language, and over-worship of [...] rough theatre.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) These were times of major contradictions within Australian society at large. The high tide of counter cultural euphoria, social democratic renovation and general optimism had ebbed away in Australia. The role of art was then more than usually ambiguous: especially in radical theatre practice, whether to continue to support the larrikin impulse, which had ironically become something of the official cultural persona.

James McCaughey’s 1982 *Meanjin* article was something of a raising of the flag for his company, but it was also provocatively titled: *Australian Theatre: Beyond Experimentalism*, which suggested both a claim to maturity, and a turning away from the scientific metaphor. The article was one of the few real attempts, at the time, to stake out a theoretical position in this critical terrain. “Experiment in the theatre is spasmodic,” McCaughey began. “It is only occasionally that significant numbers wish to think anew about human nature or behaviour. Since theatre explores human action, and experimental
theatre challenges notions of that action and how it is to be represented, experiment is only tolerated, let alone sought, at particular periods of history.” (McCaughey 1982: 552)

This opening paragraph of his article uses something like the conventional art historical view of the avant-garde dominant at the time. Interestingly it established the notion of a coterie audience for the avant-garde. Such a coterie following for avant-garde theatre was not necessarily as limited or as hard to find as he perhaps implies. The ‘minority’ taste had recently - and quite spectacularly - become the ‘majority’ taste in the case of the vernacular Australian plays. This conspicuous ‘success’ did not mean that there were not other experiments going on. In the nineteen-seventies experimental theatre had been an adventure, and it became a taste many young people enjoyed, and this continued into the next decade.

The idea was prevalent that coterie audiences were elitist and therefore un-Australian. However, rock and roll music was a form which had a strong tendency to be oppositional in a similar manner to the historical avant-gardes, and it was the music listened to by the young at this time. Exposure to rock and roll was one factor which educated an audience in the reception of subversive and disruptive art: an anti-aesthetics. In rock and roll the rude gesture - the contempt for bourgeois values and the tone of often outright abuse - were similar to the strategies of the historical avant-gardes. Exposure to this music created an audience which was very open to the oppositional stance of avant-garde theatre performance. This was dominantly a young audience.

“We could no longer be said to be living in an experimental period,” McCaughey wrote provocatively. “Most of the groups spawned in the late sixties and early seventies have passed away or are no longer productive,” he added. (McCaughey 1982: 552-3) McCaughey’s cry that the experimental theatre is dead, was overstated. For that generation, however, something of the brashly audacious elements of avant-garde theatre had passed into the mainstream with the vernacular drama; while other elements, especially those associated with the counter culture, had become much less active. To this extent experimentation was no longer the manner of the day, in life or in theatre. In life-style, drug use, sexuality there were new boundaries which had been set by the experimentation of the previous decade. The heroism of the experimental was no longer the fashion in life or art.

People who had been working in experimental theatre were now often “just totally
exhausted,” as McCaughey described his own state. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) There was a burden imposed by the contradictions between rhetoric and action made necessary by practitioners pursuing artistic goals within the guidelines of government policy. On the basis of funding, this was the period of the highest levels of support for alternative theatre, and the maintenance of a diversity of theatre performances around the country. Yet the rhetoric of practitioners and arts policy makers alike at this time, would not make us think this was the case.

For McCaughey, and others at this time, the marginality of community theatre in Australia was re-construed as a laboratory for a structured investigation of the nature of performance. The entirety of the work of the Mill Community Theatre can be evaluated as a discussion of the place of performance in society. In that focus on the performative and its placement rests the avant-garde nature of this theatre’s work.

When he visited New York in 1982, McCaughey rejected the ‘experimentalism’ of New York and the theatres of the established avant-garde centre. He wrote that he found the experimental theatres there “turned in on themselves, asserting their own identity, playing rather private rituals.” This was “like an activity carried on by consenting adults in private,” he wrote, and his choice of words reminded the reader of then new legislation which legalised homosexual acts. McCaughey rejected the New York experimental model because it had become indulgent and because it was now an established institution. The marginal experiment of place, which the Mill represented, was validated by McCaughey’s challenge. He was addressing lofty goals in Geelong, Australia: a national theatre highest among them. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) He was suggesting that Geelong had become the cultural centre, and for this work New York was marginal.

McCaughey was also writing to the policy makers who provided the funding for his company. Placing their work as the national centre in an international comparison, he was sacrificing ‘experimental’ status and the ‘right to fail’. This has a similar resonance to Bell’s rejection of Nimrod’s ‘alternative’ status in 1976. The danger in both cases was that for this rhetorical advantage both companies had now denied their ‘special case’ status. By rejecting “experimental theatre as a way of life,” they were now exposed to economic rationalist imperatives. Their claim to have ‘arrived’ and ‘succeeded’ was, ironically, their downfall.
The Mill had been consistently carried on in an avant-garde framework, in that it breached the demarcations between the arts, and it breached the demarcation between art and life. This reintegration of art and life was worked through at the Mill throughout its entire output. The direction of McCaughey’s work at the Mill had a momentum and logic to it. He saw his work moving from a nineteen-seventies preoccupation with physical work “at all costs,” to work which had a foundation in “technique,” but this development was not a loss of ‘edge’ and it remained consistent with the laboratory process. Dance and dance teachers worked with the company to provide a basis for their physical theatre, especially through contact-release work. Bridging performance styles and moving between “physically heightened” performance and back into “very natural” work was part of the sustained investigations of the group. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)8

Throughout 1982 the company did only devised work, and the production of Dolphin Play was a landmark for them.9 It received substantial funding support and had a good reception, but Dolphin Play was a difficult project to work on and in many ways it exhausted the company. McCaughey commented that Dolphin Play was probably “our most experimental event.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) The essence of the Mill Company’s work may be summed up in Scott-Murphy’s comment that the challenge of this production was “trying to find out how you organise the performance language.” (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990) Looking back, “the contact-release work looked quite uncannily like the movement of dolphins,” McCaughey said. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)

Process became the sticking point, as so often in alternative and community theatre projects. “It was under the guise of a democratic collaboration, but it never worked that way,” Scott-Murphy commented. “If James had felt more comfortable about his role as a leader - which I think a director really is - it might have been a bit easier,” she said. (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990) McCaughey said that, “The company really was at the same time a collective, and it had a leader.” He contended, “I don’t think those two things are mutually exclusive. In fact, I would argue that they are probably mutually necessary.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) Being clear is always easier in hindsight with such difficult conflicts of methodology and human personality. “It was pretty painful,” he commented. “Although the play is remembered very fondly,” he added, “it is not remembered very fondly by those who did it.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) Lisa Scott-Murphy recalled the production in just such a way: “I felt more or less burnt out after
Dolphin Play.” She suggested at that time there was a carry-over of ‘positivism’ from the nineteen-seventies which was unrealistic. “We all said, ‘yes, yes, yes,’ to everything,” she said. “It produced some good work, but now I’m much more concerned about the structure of things,” Scott-Murphy said. She now preferred a conventional organisation for theatre projects which gave a clear delineation of tasks, and avoided individuals having to approach projects as ‘heroic quests’, something which had characterised the alternative theatre of the previous decade.

James McCaughey went to the Playbox Theatre, Melbourne, in 1984. However, the relative rigidity of a repertory company like the Playbox Theatre contrasted with the process-centred style of the Mill, and McCaughey found this a problematic transition. “I found it very, very difficult, in more formal circumstances, I just don’t think - for me creativity just does not switch on and off like that.” The economics of Playbox and the philosophy of the company were at odds with the process McCaughey had enjoyed. “I must admit that Playbox did find some funds where I could do a bit of preliminary rehearsal, but it’s not the same thing as that organic process whereby the play is growing slowly.”

The Mill was widely regarded as an exciting and innovative theatre, and its new Artistic Director, Richard Murphet, argued its value as an avant-garde theatre. However, this more openly challenging set of policies eroded the standing of the company in the eyes of the funding authorities and funding was eventually withdrawn. The strategy Richard Murphet used at the Mill, he explained, was to get together a troupe of “red-hot improvisers,” that could go out anywhere in the community - “to gun clubs, to golf clubs, and social groups all over the Western District and all over Geelong.” As he recalled, “we would just go to them and say, ‘what would you like a play on?’” Murphet describes the effect of this working method in terms of empowerment of the audience. “There is a feeling that suddenly the audience can have power over figures that the audience feels that they can never [normally] have power over. Suddenly they can place Ronald Reagan in a milkbar in Colac, and they can watch him falling in love.”

Improvisation had not been presented as the entire substance of any major company’s work in Australia at that time. It was an audacious proposition. “We did that over three years, and that became [...] our theatre work,” Murphet said. “And the most galling thing was,
that one of the reasons why the Theatre Board cut off our funding,” he said, “was that, for them, this was not theatre. It was preparation for theatre.” They were unable to accept the argument which he made to them that: “This is not preparation for theatre. This was not a rehearsal technique - so that we will finally end up doing a script for a play. This is our theatre.” Murphet argued that this was “a new contract between the audience and actor.” But his idea of a new theatre was not admissible to the Australia Council. Murphet recalled that, “I wrote articles on it and I went and talked to them about it, but they could never accept it. And finally that undermined their faith in the company.” (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)

Conventionally, improvisatory theatre may seem shallow, because of its lack of preparation. However, Murphet made strong arguments why this was not so. “A character in an improvisation never has a 500-page biography” Murphet admitted. “A character begins when the audience sees the scene begin, and ends when the audience sees the scene end, and [...] can die and disappear at any moment. And that threat of death, as Herbert Blau says, is the thing that really keeps the audience alive.” Referring to Blau, Murphet placed the argument for improvisation on a different level. He argued that this was the ontology of the theatre. “In theatre, an actor dies. Can die at any moment? Will die at the end of the evening. And that is the real frisson that is there for theatre, and that never is there for cinema,” Murphet said. (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989) This was the limitation of the policy of peer assessment in which a panel of theatre people judge who are to receive the funds among the many applicants. The unconventional, obscure and the outright bizarre had small hope of receiving favour. At this time regional theatres across the country were losing their funding. The rationales given for the withdrawal of funding or its conditional continuation determined the nature of the theatre offered in Australia.

In this period, the Mill company came up with effective community theatre performances, each original and with an edge of the extraordinary. This work came close to perfectly fulfilling the democratisation of art and the post-colonial reclaiming of the means of expression which was the rationale of community arts. “Instead of feeling that art is only about kings and queens or great lovers, or whatever,” Murphet suggested their approach made it “something that is part of their life - risen to that level, and made magical, and put up on stage.” (Guthrie/Murphet interview 1989)
The next alternative: The Church

Suburban Hawthorn is not a regional city. Nor is it the inner city theatre precinct - in Melbourne, Fitzroy to South Yarra - yet it was there in 1983 that John and Lois Ellis set up a dynamic alternative venue in the old Augustine Church.\textsuperscript{11} The Church, as they called the venue, picked up their mission at Rusden: to put ‘interesting’ work and ‘ideas’ together, to educate audiences and to take theatre to all Australia. “I was trying to do some work myself, and give opportunities for a lot of work which would explode against each other,” John Ellis explained. (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990) The first play staged there, which he directed, was \textit{Dance in the Ashes}, by Sandy McCutcheon. The Mill’s production of \textit{Dolphin Play} followed. Then Lois Ellis directed \textit{Emu}, a play by long-time collaborator, John Wood. John Ellis reminisced that when he asked friends within the funding bodies how to proceed with his idea of starting The Church, he was told in confidence, “don’t tell the funding bodies that you are going to start a theatre company. Because they want that like they want a hole in the head. If they smell that that is what you want to do you’d be lucky to get anything. So put up a couple of projects.” Ellis followed this advice. However, its limitations are self-evident. Establishing a theatre company through the back door, he called it. “Really the problem about the back door [is] you get so caught up in the politics, in the diplomacy [that] you lose sight of the progress of what you’re on about personally.” (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990)\textsuperscript{12}

The horizons of the Church Theatre’s program grew. In 1989 Jenny Kemp directed her acclaimed production, \textit{Call of the Wild}, which was toured by Performing Lines, formerly the AETT Australian Content Department. This aspect of the Trust’s work had been strengthened under the leadership of Adam Salzer, who had advocated a touring system for the alternative companies throughout Australia since working in that area in the nineteen-seventies. Whistling in the Theatre presented the initial season of their modern parable, \textit{Ship of Fools}, which was then toured nationally by Performing Lines.\textsuperscript{13}

There was a significant range and artistic strength to the program of the Church which became even more adventurous over time. This was not a company with a fixed aesthetic policy, instead it was a theatre which gave opportunities to a number of key figures and companies to develop. The range of these creative activities was the strength of the Church, however, it was not seen that way by the funding bodies. “They said, ‘it’s a hybrid’, and,
"it shifts and changes," John Ellis said. "They weren't sure what it was. They couldn't put it in a pigeon hole," he recalled. (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990)

Gradually new appointments to the Theatre Board and its peer panels at the Australia Council had swung the balance of sympathy towards the marginal companies in the early nineteen-eighties. This amounted to an unprecedented challenge to the supremacy of the state theatre companies. This threat to the share of the budget the major players received made them, in effect, close ranks to stem the flow of funds to regional, community and experimental companies. Despite the increased diversity of views represented on the broadly based peer group panels and the Theatre Board itself, the sympathetic support of the margins was to be a transitory aberration, and there were no permanent changes to the funding patterns. What followed was the reorganisation of the Australia Council in response to the McLeay Report, which resulted the abandonment of the Theatre Board and its panels, and the formation of a super-Board to cover all the performing arts. The Australia Council was restructured to further centralise power at the top. Although there were new advisory panels, these could be seen, in the context, as a dispersal of power. Over all this led to greater centralisation of key decision making at the Australia Council. (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990; Parsons 1987: passim)

By the end of the nineteen-eighties marginal companies were being progressively squeezed out by the funding bodies. Because there was little or no growth in the modest funding base which the Australia Council received from government, either major companies had to be cut back or minor companies had to be cut out entirely. State funding could in a sense 'hedge' against the pressures from Canberra, but usually followed the Federal funding lead. In 1989 the Victorian State Ministry of the Arts, responding to a general crisis in the state economy, cut their funding to the Church.14

A community-based avant-garde: Sidetrack Theatre

With their early work based on formally scripted plays, Sidetrack Theatre was held up as the exemplar of community theatre in Australia. The arts bureaucracy, the Federal Minister, and the press all championed it at various times. It has also survived longer than many companies, although later it significantly changed the nature of its work. Unlike most other community theatre companies, Sidetrack Theatre has been the province of a single Artistic
Director for all but a short period. Don Mamouney’s artistic vision came to propel the work of the company more and more. Sidetrack was always a political theatre. Sidetrack went from a functionary role providing an experiential dimension for teaching English as a second language and ‘conventional’ TIE and a period committed to art in working life projects; to become, later in the nineteen-eighties, an influential avant-garde theatre. Their interactions with other avant-garde theatre practitioners were important, and Sidetrack’s work pushed the boundaries of form and the means and content of performance.

Don Mamouney had trained and worked in community theatre in England during the nineteen-seventies. He returned to Australia and established the Sidetrack Theatre Company with the writer Graham Pitts in 1979. Initially Sidetrack was loosely affiliated with the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney. One of Sidetrack’s first shows was Mesh, written by Graham Pitts and directed by Don Mamouney in 1980. This dealt with industrial safety issues and was directed at the many migrant groups represented in the workforce. Art and working life was a key to this phase of Sidetrack’s work. At the same time they had TIE shows which they were touring to primary and secondary schools. Lost in Arrgghhh! - The Writing Show, a show for primary schools, was an early example. Drink the Mercury, about devastating industrial pollution in Minamata in Japan, was a standard of the TIE repertoire by the British Belgrade TIE team. It was co-directed by Don Mamouney and Malcolm Keith for Sidetrack.

Mamouney was the sole Director of the company by 1983, when they presented Busted, a play by P.P. [Pat] Cranney about young people and the police. This was an example of working closely with the local Education Department. The play resulted from a residency Sidetrack had at Glebe High School, and it suggested the company’s comfortable identification with the cosmopolitan nature of inner Western Sydney suburbia. With Down Under the Thumb, which was a group-devised show directed by Mamouney in 1983, Sidetrack were beginning to have a recognised style which was clearly their own, and would achieve considerable recognition during the mid-nineteen-eighties. They took Down Under the Thumb to the Come Out Festival in Adelaide, in 1983. It dealt with multiculturalism. This issue, in all its contradictions, came to be the clear focus of Sidetrack’s work in this period. In fact, a recognition of the presence of cultural differences in the audiences they were addressing was a consistent premise to Sidetrack’s work in all periods.
Sidetrack presented an exemplary art and working life project in 1983. *Loco* was developed at Chullora Locomotive Workshops where material from extensive interviews with the railway staff was used to create the play, which was then presented back to audiences of railway workers. It was supported by the Theatre, Community Arts, and Literature Boards of the Australia Council, and by trade unions covering the workers at Chullora, the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwright’s Union and Australian Rail Union. The writer-in-residence was P.P. Cranney, who worked with the unionists and the company to create the play. *Loco* was taken to the Adelaide Festival in 1984, where it was performed, not in a conventional theatre, but in the railway workshops in Adelaide. (Caper 23: 11)

Art in working life projects targeted working people who, it was argued, had frequently been denied access to the arts. This policy and these projects became the target of political attacks in Parliament and in the press. The *Bulletin*’s Brian Hoad took up this campaign in his criticism of Sidetrack’s *Day to Day*, which looked at the life-style and work-life of office employees. It was devised by the company in 1984 and directed by Mamouney, with a season at the Sailors’ Home Theatre, in the Rocks and an extensive tour. Hoad wrote of this production as a “flag-bearer” for the “sinister forces of community artists.” This attack on the play was used to score a political point against the Labour Minister for the Arts, Barry Cohen, whom Hoad claimed, had endorsed Sidetrack’s work. “It is dim-witted, simple-minded, and gormless. It is a revealing reflection of the tastes of Cohen. It is a macabre, bizarre and finally disturbingly realistic picture of the shape of things to come in Australian theatre.” (Hoad 1984: 52) This was political theatre, and Hoad’s problem was both with its politics and its aesthetics.

Sidetrack continued to produce work which was politically provocative. Their productions usually had considerable physicality and energy, songs and live music. Here was the rough theatre of the APG, with the influences of Brecht and social realism. Perhaps the most vigorous and polished of the productions in this period was *Adios Cha Cha*, which Don Mamouney directed in 1986. With a strong cast, who had worked together for some time, they created a fierce, funny, angry play on oppression in Central America. A number of the cast and the musicians were refugees from that oppression, and this could not fail to be a moving piece of theatre. It was received in Sydney and at the Adelaide Festival with considerable enthusiasm. There was great pressure from the actors in the company to continue in this direction artistically, and to develop this collaborative style of work towards
a fully democratic collective. However, this was not necessarily the view of the Board, and it was ultimately different to the artistic objectives which Mamouney was pursuing. He resigned in 1986 and took up the post of Artistic Director of Fortune Capital Theatre, in Canberra.

Don Mamouney did only a few productions with Fortune Capital Theatre before bringing his remarkable collectively devised piece, *Manichino*, to the Wharf Studio. This ensemble company - like Sidetrack - was made up of individual performers from different ethnic groups. Mamouney had asked for, and been given, the luxury of a substantial closed workshop period in which to hone skills and develop his ensemble. This was the work which Mamouney was now interested in following, which Sidetrack - both actors and Board - had been reluctant to accommodate. (Guthrie/Mamouney interview 1991)

*Manichino* was a powerfully staged, expressive piece of theatre, in which a narrative of Calabrian migration to Australia was embedded. But it was not told as a social realist document. Its theatre values owed much to the later work of Tadeusz Kantor. *Manichino* had a repetitive and even an obsessive movement design accompanied by a powerful amplified musical accompaniment that made the stage action appear to be propelled by the music as if the actor were puppets. Although in some ways incomplete, this was exciting theatre. Mamouney said later of the Sydney season, that they had “put it on in the wrong venue.” (Guthrie/Mamouney interview 1991) The Wharf Studio was not as appropriate as the Performance Space may have been, and did not have its own audience interested in avant-garde theatre. This Sydney season lost money, and the Board of Fortune Capital Theatre sacked Mamouney and the administrator, Cheryl Jones.

Meanwhile Dallas Lewis and then Jo Caust had taken the helm at Sidetrack. In this period they tried to follow through with the thrust of the productions of this radical political theatre and to develop the internal politics of the company. The most successful piece at this time was the art and working life play, *Welcome to the Madhouse*, directed by Dallas Lewis. It looked at the world within hospitals from the perspective of the nursing staff. There was, however, continuing dissension in the acting company, and this resulted in protracted episodes of industrial arbitration.

In 1988 Don Mamouney was engaged as a freelance director to do a single production with
the company, the result was *Whispers in the Heart*. In the bicentennial year, this was a production about the invasion of Australia, the genocide of the indigenous people, and the cultural tyranny which took place. Mamouney in his later work was not afraid to challenge his audiences; he did not patronise them - young people, migrants, working people in suburban Australia. The confronting contents were expressed in a technically ambitious production with amplified and electronically modified voices and an urgently repetitive sound score, delivered by the type of sound system used in a gig rock concert. The production had an enthralling movement design by Mémé Thorn, with relentlessly repetitive patterns of movement advancing into the arena - the new land. Although intended for school assembly halls, this production went beyond the conventions of TIE.

Mamouney and the cast of *Whispers in the Heart* mounted a second independent season the following year at the Performance Space. In time, Mamouney applied for his old job, and was once again appointed Director of Sidetrack Theatre.

Don Mamouney’s directorial work at Sidetrack and in Canberra was crossing into the postmodern. Mamouney set about developing an ensemble of performers when he returned to Sidetrack. For a time Sidetrack explored genre works, for the sake of training actors. “These shows were also toured to schools,” Mamouney said. “I would rather do less touring. And only to local schools. Say, the fifty local schools. That’s all I ever wanted to do, take work to the local community.” Increasingly he has become concerned with extending actors and enhancing their performance abilities. The company regularly worked with Mémé Thorn, a dancer trained in Suzuki technique. Mamouney says that, “Suzuki’s work is very sound training for actors. You need something with it, but it’s a very good base for a company to work with.” (Guthrie/Mamouney interview 1991) Sidetrack has continued to strengthen its claim to avant-garde status with immensely concentrated and challenging performance pieces. In 1989 the company initiated *Contemporary Performance Week*, a program of workshops, forums and contemporary performances. It has run annually to the time of writing, and become an influential showcase and training program, to the point that it has been a significant contribution to theatre practice in Sydney. Sidetrack Theatre has since became: Sidetrack Performance Group.
Outside theatre: Death Defying Theatre

Death Defying Theatre (DDT) was a political theatre, functioning outside normal theatre venues, and usually performing outdoors. They were established in 1981 as a co-operative with Kim Spinks, Paul Brown and Christine Sammers. Tim Fitzpatrick had a commedia dell'arte group at University of New South Wales, which later became Cartwheel and was based at the Seymour Centre at Sydney University. It too was one of the ingredients which came together to form Death Defying Theatre. In the decade from 1981 they specialised in outdoor theatre and toured schools, festivals and workplaces.

The first shows created by Death Defying Theatre included *Dr Floyd's Fly By Night Medicine Show*, and in 1982 *Discipline and Punishment* for which Michel Foucault's work was an important source. The company operated as a collective and the group devised work, with company members doing the research. In 1983 they created a show titled *Living Newspaper*, identifying strongly with the agit prop tradition.

Increasingly, Death Defying Theatre worked in the models implied in the community arts funding programs. They were an important group to benefit from the art and working life program set up by the Australia Council and trade unions to jointly fund cultural activities in accessible and relevant contexts for working people. Death Defying Theatre's *Riff Raffle*, was an art and working life project, which they devised and performed in 1983, with support from the NSW Trades and Labour Council. *Coal Town*, in 1985 was also an art and working life project developed by the company within the mining community at Collinsville in North Queensland, supported by the trade unions; this show was then toured to other mining communities. (Brown 1987: 447ff) While they were residing in Collinsville, Death Defying Theatre performed within the community and developed workshops for local groups. (Spinks 1987: 155) There was some resistance from Peko Wallsend, one of the corporate owners of the mines, to allowing *Coal Town* to be performed on company property in a company town. (Brown 1987: passim)

Kim Spinks has written that Death Defying Theatre was, “influenced by community arts groups like Pipi Storm.” She wrote that they sought to “to define our work in relationship to where we work rather than to an 'art market'.” Spinks commented, “In our definition community theatre involves altering the means of production in theatre.” (Spinks 1987:
The strategic significance of working in the street, or in work places, or in sites other than traditional theatres was of great significance, and Death Defying Theatre was instrumental in moderating what constituted theatre practice in Australia in this period. The acceptance of this community theatre, was not only that it democratised arts practice, but that it shifted the means and methods of theatre practice.

Death Defying Theatre created several powerful art and working life projects. Women and Work Show in 1988, and Behind the Seams, the following year, put work-place experience as the central focus, and gender issues in the foreground. For the latter show, which concerned the experiences of migrant women, they worked with the writers Sue Castrique and Sonja Sedmak. This political theatre was looking for a socially useful function, and increasingly they found this working with writers. Later with Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter they developed The Death Defying Life Show, during a residency at Fairfield Hospital in Sydney. In 1991 Death Defying Theatre moved to Auburn and to a new role as cultural development workers or community facilitators, and in 1995 they based themselves at Casula Powerhouse, in the South-West of Sydney.

Theatre in the wild: TREE and Homage

A further twist to the issue of the placement of the theatrical event can be seen in a loosely linked series of outdoor multi-arts events organised on the extreme fringe of suburban Sydney in the early nineteen-eighties. The artists George Gittoes and Gabrielle Dalton created events at Wattamolla Beach in the Royal National Park just south of Sydney. Initially funded to make a film about the Park to mark its centenary, Gittoes created an environmental happening, which he then filmed. Calling themselves TREE - Theatre Researching Environments Everywhere - this became an annual event for some years, with up to one hundred and thirty participants, and several thousand spectators. These events grew to involve the local community at Bundeena, which abuts the park, and a wider audience drawn by the expansive scale and novelty of this celebration. Wattamolla Beach offered a natural amphitheatre with rocks, cliffs, a lagoon and the sea.

A key creative participant in these events was Ronaldo Cameron, who danced and devised work for his group, Theatre Unlimited. With both dancers and non-dancers Cameron created movement sculptures, and explored the choreographic potential of human bodies.
in this environment. His work used simple theatre elements such as long pieces of fabric, and natural materials for costumes. Music was created by a group called WATT whose members were Ian Fredericks and Martin Wesley-Smith. Gittoes had an interest in puppetry, and giant puppets were an important element of the event. Other unusual elements were an underwater light show created by some local CSIRO scientists, and pyrotechnics by Torch Brothers. (Rosenzveig 1992; Marsh 1983: 152; Short 1981: 14) In the early eighties, these TREE events carried titles which indicated the thematic arrangement of ideas placed together: *Echoes and Stars* (1981), and *Unfound Land* (1983). As Wattamolla Beach had difficulties with access, and was environmentally fragile, these events were never rehearsed. (PAYBA 1982: 122),

There were also a number of site-specific works at Terrigal on the New South Wales Central Coast. These too were large scale occasions for community involvement and celebration set in a natural environment. Terrigal had the facilities of a beach resort and was not as environmentally fragile as Wottamolla in the Royal National Park. *Homage to the Elements*, in 1988, was a multi-arts event that was initiated by Nina Angelo, the local Community Arts Officer. *Homage* was, for several years, organised annually. It was directed by various people, including the visual artist Virginia Heydon, and the dancer and choreographer Victoria Monk. Those who contributed to these events included Ronaldo Cameron, who designed movement for community participants, and Torch Brothers with fireworks which emphasised but did not overwhelm the natural sea-side environment at Terrigal.

A conclusion: community as a margin, margins as a centre

By the end of the nineteen-seventies the attraction of the experimental theatre model was waning among young people. Nonetheless, by increment, if not by a single revolutionary shift, the margins were taking over the centre. Marginal theatre enterprises were important prompts and indicators of the artistic move towards a diversified national drama. Many of those initially attracted to experimental theatre had then found opportunities to work on community theatre projects, and either consciously or accidentally gravitated towards community theatre. In one sense this depleted the energy active in the experimental theatres, on the other hand this meant that there were many active theatre workers, committed to the principles and practices of theatre experimentation, working in the community theatres.
This contrasted with the situation later in the nineteen-eighties when a new generation of graduates from universities and colleges came on the scene. They put into practice the training they had been receiving, including their experience of workshop processes and experimental theatre as it had been transmitted by their teachers. But they were also under pressure to be successful and employed! This was unlike the prevailing mood in the earlier decade, when - with an almost cavalier approach - people had felt free to make experimental theatre without too much anxiety about employment and 'success'.

Community theatre provided many new opportunities for making performances and some of these were taken up by practitioners of experimental theatre. It also gave an opportunity for a generation of artists in the Australian theatre to gain a wide experience of performing in many different circumstances. If these opportunities were in the margins, away from the city centres and the regular theatre-going public, that was not entirely a disadvantage for exploratory investigation. In time, the 'lessons' learned in the margins were to return to the centre.
Margins of language

Australians were beginning to see themselves differently as representations of Australians on the stage became more diverse. The characters in Australian drama became less narrowly a part of one culture. The many languages spoken in Australia began to be represented on stage and challenged the absolute authority of English in Australia. Aboriginal people were seen and their languages heard in Australian theatres.

There was the beginning of a trend towards intercultural performances, influences and interchanges between the English tradition and the non-English language theatres in Australia in the nineteen-eighties. The motive factor here was to be the recognition and integration of non-English language theatres in Australia. Such theatres had existed in non-Aboriginal Australian society as early as the nineteenth century, but it was as a product of policies of multiculturalism and with the acceptance of ethnic diversity within Australia that such theatres began to influence each other and the mainstages. This allowed new scope for international modernism in both repertoire and approach in Australian theatre and provided a new site for theatrical experiment and for the deliberately avant-garde. Playwrights and other theatre workers from non-English speaking backgrounds were especially important in exploring modern theatre forms as they were less restrained by the English language stage tradition and they made considerable contributions in the development of an avant-garde theatre in Australia. This was not generally considered significant by the journalist-critics and most academic critics or by the bureaucrats in the funding bodies.

Language plays: Australian theatre not in English

The Anglo-centricism of Australia remained despite the efforts of individual artists such as Rudi Krausmann and José Fariñas, and the organisation of such bilingual projects as FILEF and Doppio Teatro. However, they began to shift awareness and, importantly, to open possibilities for new work. The experimental group Teatro dell’IRAA, Anthill and Thalia
have placed highly original theatrical offerings before Australian audiences.

Rudi Krausmann was identified by Jan Bruck as both an immigrant writer and an avant-garde writer. Bruck described Krausmann’s work as “language play” or sprechstücke, and likened it to the writing of the Austrian playwright Peter Handke, who “created a new literary form in which language analysis is the dominant medium through which human relations and behaviour are analysed.” Bruck commented that in Austrian literature “the problem of language and communication has been a continuing theme since the beginning of the century.” (Bruck 1986: 20)

In Krausmann’s plays “instead of being introduced to an imaginary ‘world’ with its own dynamics, conflicts and solutions and a dramatic spectacle, the audience is confronted with autonomous sentences and word games which demand complete concentration, almost as if one listened to a philosophical lecture.” Krausmann’s first play was Everyman, which had a season in the Downstairs Theatre at Nimrod in 1977. Another play of his, The Perfection - a comedy of progress, was performed at the David Reid Gallery in 1981. And The Word - a comedy of words, was given a production at University of NSW, Department of Drama, in 1982, directed by Ian Watson. (Bruck 1986: 21) There were only limited opportunities for these experiments in the mainstream theatres. Despite policies which supported ‘minority’ voices, the ‘alternative’ to assimilation still appeared to be ‘tokenism’ only. However, Krausmann’s plays were being staged even if Bruck and he regretted that in Australia there were no laboratory theatres annexed to richly subsidised state companies, as in much of Europe.

Spanish born José Fariñas started his interest in theatre before he came to live in Australia in 1974. In 1981 he founded La Troupé Theatre in Sydney. Much of the work he directed with La Troupé had a multimedia component which was created with the photographer, sound designer and cinematographer Guillermo Kellner. They worked with the flamenco group Laberinto to create a program they titled Lorca - Illustrations from an Unmarked Grave. This piece emphasised the essentially political nature of Lorca’s life and writing until he was brutalised and murdered as much for his homosexuality as his left-wing politics. It was presented at the Tom Mann Theatre in 1983. A frankly radical politics has informed all Fariñas’ theatrical work. In 1984 Fariñas was assistant director to Don Mamouney at Sidetrack Theatre.
Farīnas explored the problematic conjunction between the introduced cultures and the indigenous Australian culture employing a text by Franz Kafka and a locally written play and two of the leading Aboriginal actors in the country. “The Kafka story symbolised for me two hundred years of white repression in this country,” Farinas said. (Krausmann 1987:8) Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy* had Aboriginal actor Athol Compton and Egyptian-born Silvio Offria in its cast; while another respected Aboriginal actor, Justine Saunders, performed the monodrama, *Dispatches from Another World*, by Virginia Jane Rose. Together titled *Prisons and Dreams*, these plays went on at the Off Broadway Theatre, in Ultimo in 1985. In this group there was an openness to the issues of Aboriginal politics and a facility to deal with finding an appropriate form in which to speak about these issues. This openness stemmed from the core dissociation from the English language stage tradition which freed La Troupé to explore forms and ideas more widely than was happening in mainstream theatres at that time.

In 1985 *La Rosa de Papel (The Paper Rose)*, a modern classic by Ramon del Valle Inclan, was a collective production by La Troupé at the Tom Mann Theatre. The following year Farīnas created a multimedia program, *Storm of the People, Poems of Love and War*, based on poetry by Miguel Hernandez.¹ In 1988, with collaborators from many different backgrounds, Farīnas directed a play by Patrick Mohr called, *Soundjata: An African Story*, at the Performance Space, Sydney. Mohr was born in Geneva and had graduated from the École Jacques Lecoq and worked with Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. He had travelled in Asia and Africa and this play was a result of this journey.

Although most of his theatre was presented in Spanish, Farīnas rejected the temptation that it should provide Spanish theatre so that the Spanish-speaking community in Sydney could “nourish itself on nostalgia.” He commented that this audience “expects to see plays which it has seen twenty or more years ago. When you show modern, up to date theatre, which is actually done in their home country now, they feel lost,” Farinas told Krausmann. (Krausmann 1986:8) José Farīnas fought against this inclination to sentimentalism, and his work defiantly crossed over boundaries by using collaborators from different language groups and communities and by employing multimedia elements. The demarcations of languages were blurred in his work and the stage disciplines merged to allow significant innovations.
In a new country it was possible to create new theatre as the Federazione Italiani Lavoratori Emigrati e Famiglie (Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and their Families, or FILEF) proved with their broadly supported community performances starting in 1984. The Sydney suburb of Leichhardt has been settled by a high proportion of Italian post-war migrants. Its main street, Norton Street, is known for its Italian food and Italian coffee. In 1984 the organisers of *Nuovo Paese* (*New Country*) harnessed a substantial reserve of goodwill in this local community - amongst the shopkeepers and local businesses, the schools, and Leichhardt Council - to mount a production on an epic scale. *Nuovo Paese* was a bilingual production created by this community about the experiences of Italian migrants and their children. Displacement from an original cultural centre was the major focus of this play. The first part of *Nuovo Paese* took place outside. 'Pioneer Park' in Norton Street was transformed by a carnivalesque departure scene, to the Calabria of 1948. Then the cast and the audience 'migrated', buying their passport tickets, they moved across the street beyond the park to see the second part in the high school hall. The third part was set outside in the school yard. It was a spirited presentation of the concerns of first and second generation Australians, using rock and roll and a circus-like format.

FILEF is a political organisation. With the success of *Nuovo Paese*, the renown of FILEF beyond the Italian community, was made. But strictly speaking FILEF was not a community theatre, as such. FILEF is an international labour organisation, and its Cultural Committee in Australia initiated the FILEF Theatre Group. Recognising this difference is significant because it allows us to place the emphasis squarely on the political priorities and away from 'the local search for identity' - which is the way this work has generally been critiqued. *Nuovo Paese* documents the place of migration in Italian and Australian history. Beyond this, the work deposits the 'ownership' of these narratives in the community where these experiences have taken place. This is a significant shift away from the widely supposed strategy to 'celebrate' identity. These articulations empower the community. In the wider deconstruction of the colonial Anglophone hierarchy, this work attacks the conservative cultural supposition that Australian history and experience start in Britain. Robin Laurie noted that her "connections with FILEF" went back to the Pram Factory in the mid-nineteen-seventies and to performances by Circus Oz at the Festa dell'UNITA in Melbourne. (Laurie & Sedmak 1987: 1) The link was international political radicalism, and the outcome was a clear example of a gesture of political liberation. In *Nuovo Paese* there was a convergence of the political radicalism of the New Left in Australia, as represented
by the former APG actors Robin Laurie and Rose Costelloe, and the radical left Italian traditions, as represented by FILEF. It was evident that this convergence occurred in an essentially modern milieu, and was opposed by conservative interests, nostalgic for colonial values.

Categorising FILEF Theatre Group’s work as *ethnic arts* or *community theatre* needs to be guarded against, as this does not acknowledge that such work existed within a wider and more longstanding tradition of political theatre. Perhaps that is where we now must evaluate all of what we have called ‘community theatre’, as David Watt has suggested. (Watt 1991b) Indeed the very reaction of conservative politicians, such as the National Party’s Michael Cobb who railed in Parliament against FILEF’s work, may be an indication that intrinsically this work was socially innovative and politically effective. (Mitchell 1987c: 16)

FILEF Theatre Group operated with a collective structure. It was a political theatre that at times employed the strategies of the avant-garde. Prior to *Nuovo Paese*, in 1984, the visual artist Dennis del Favero created a ‘fotocommedia’ installation, *Quegli Ultimi Momenti (Those Final Moments)*, at the Australian Centre for Photography in Paddington. He and the designer Eamon D’Arcy worked with the FILEF Theatre Group collective to create, what Tony Mitchell called, “this important installation.” He recorded that it “captured the experience of an Italian family who, having lived through Fascism, and the Resistance, migrated to Australia.” (Mitchell 1987c: 16) “The installation featured a suburban lounge room, painted white and turned upside down,” Mitchell wrote. “This illustrated the nightmare the mother experienced moving to Australia, he commented, adding a note that, "this topsy-turvy image reflected not only the disorientation accompanying such a move, but also that the move was made to a country 'upside down at the bottom of the world'."

*Quegli Ultimi Momenti* included a “powerful series of framed documentary photographs, and projected slides as well as an audio tape of music, natural sounds and voice.” (Mitchell 1987c: 16) It won the Australian Design Institute Award in 1985. (McGillick 1987a: 22)

Dennis del Favero collaborated with FILEF Theatre Group in 1987 to create an installation for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Linea di Fuoco (Line of Fire)*. Paul McGillick wrote of this sophisticated mixture of enactment and documentary device, which “highlights the fact that we are all simultaneously participants and voyeurs.” Evidence of the lives of Laura and David was seen by the audience in a way that was distinctly compromising. They
watched each other. In turn, they were spied on by the state. “On the outside of the room, which both houses and is the installation, is a fragmentary photographic record of Laura and David’s story: both visitors to Australia, running away from the past,” McGillick wrote. “Inside we discover the detritus of the watchers, their surveillance equipment - evidence of how the outside photographic record came to be,” he explains. “From being voyeurs looking on, we are now inducted into the story ourselves - invited, as it were, from the stalls and onto the stage.” (McGillick 1987a: 22)

Doppio Teatro is an Adelaide-based bilingual theatre the very name of which speaks of the dualism of the two languages and the two worlds occupied by migrant culture in Australia. Doppio Teatro was established by Teresa Crea and Christopher Bell in 1983. (Mitchell 1987c: 14) Graduates of Flinders University, their first show was Cabaret dell’ Emigrante. This piece was group-devised for the Italian community clubs. In it the cast ‘travelled to Australia’ through the audience with their suitcases in hands. In 1986, their second show was, Un Pugno di Terra (A Fistful of Earth), which they performed in Adelaide, and took to the Melbourne Spoleto Festival. “There is always a duality at the core of our existence: two cultures and value systems continually confronting and interacting with each other,” wrote Crea. (Bent et al 1992: 1) With productions such as Ricordi, The Olive Tree and Water From the Well, Doppio earned and enhanced a national reputation. At a deep level this multiple duality of language and values mirrors the dividing and re-dividing of narratives in a pluralist nationalism.

An Italian experimental theatre in Australia: Teatro dell’ IRAA

The Institute of Anthropological Research on the Actor (IRAA) was founded by Renato Cuocolo in Rome in 1978. This Italian avant-garde theatre company toured widely, performing and “studying theatrical traditions all over the world.” (Dolgopolov 1991: 164) They visited Australia in 1985, and later returned to become resident in Melbourne. In 1985 they performed Atacama, about their experiences with the indigenous people of South America, which they toured to Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide. Interested to make contact with Aboriginal people in Australia, they found this surprisingly hard to do at this first visit. (Sturak 1986: 6) In 1988, assisted by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, they returned to fulfil something of their earlier intention to get to know the culture of Aboriginal Australia.
Renato Cuocolo has explained their work in these terms: “Our work has been developed through meetings with other cultures and by studying the work that has been done on the body in these cultures. This work is not strictly within ‘theatre’ nor outside it.” (Patton & Sorenson 1988: 2) Bruce Chatwin wrote: “There are only two types of theatre in the world; that which reveals truth, and that which reveals the existence of secrets.” He added, “The first is stable, well-funded and safe. The other is nomadic, poor and unpredictable.” IRAA belonged to the latter group, preoccupied with “travel, search and movement,” Chatwin wrote. (Chipperfield 1990: pu)

Australian performers took the place of the Italian members who came to Australia with Cuocolo, but Teatro dell’ IRAA continued to tour internationally from their base in Melbourne. Far From Where - which had been in the company’s repertoire for nearly a decade - was restaged with an Australian cast in April 1990 at the Universal Theatre, Melbourne. (Chipperfield 1990: pu) Chatwin had written of the original piece in terms of its presentation of “the cynicism, disbelief and moral vacuum that poisons the modern world.” (Chipperfield 1990: pu)

IRAA’s work was centrally placed in the tradition of theatre experiment. It revisited the notion of ritual and explored the anthropology of performance. They conducted long-term workshop-based investigations of the psycho-physical aspects of performance and the actor. Cuocolo said, in an interview in 1988, that “theatre has a lot of possibilities since it is a marginal activity. Due to its marginality, it enjoys a great degree of freedom. We can use theatre as a ‘way’ and we can say that to study theatre is to study oneself.” (Patton & Sorenson 1988: 2) ‘The Way of the Theatre’ was a text by Renato Cuocolo on his training and theatre practice. The Taoist implications of this title suggest a link between his work and another major aspect of the Grotowski/Barba tradition: a concern with the metaphysical aspects of theatre.

A cultural mélange: the Australian Nouveau Theatre (ANT)

Jean-Pierre Mignon decided to move to Australia in 1978, and tried to find work in Sydney. Eventually he did a production of Tim Goings’s play The Astounding Mr Optimismus, with Bruce Keller in the cast. (McLeod 1985: 79) This show then had a season at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, and Mignon sought to do more projects in this
theatre. In the meantime he and Keller put on *Samuel Beckett: 3 Short Plays*, at La Mama, in Melbourne, and together decided to start their own company. With its title, Australian Nouveau Theatre (ANT), they were signalling not just a linguistic *mélange* - but, by implication, a cultural *mélange*. ANT’s first work, *Samuel Beckett: 3 Short Plays*, comprised, *Embers, Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Not I*, and it was toured extensively. Local playwright David Porter’s play, *The Door*, was their next project, again at La Mama. And another local script, *A Banquet of Vipers*, by Alicia Tierney followed. Mignon had found the script, which had been submitted to the APG, whilst seeking a suitable play to do at the Pram Factory. They had rejected the proposal, but later accepted it as an ANT production at the Pram Factory. Nicholas Tsoutas became affiliated with ANT, and directed Peter Handke’s plays at the Salamanca Centre, in Hobart in October 1980.

*Artaud and Cruelty*, directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon, and presented at La Mama in February 1981, was perhaps the work which set the work of ANT apart. It comprised, significantly, a production of Antonin Artaud’s play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, and Richard Murphet’s play, *Quick Death to Infinity*. Also toured to Hobart, this double bill became the first show at ANT’s new theatre, Anthill. Later that year they also presented a French language production of Artaud’s play, *Pour en Finir Avec le Judgement De Dieu*.

Innovation and experimentation were stressed in the rhetoric from Anthill, in press statements and in their newsletter, *Antnews*. Anthill’s main objective was to “stimulate and encourage audiences through the presentation of innovative theatre of excellence.” (*Antnews*, August 1985: np) Perhaps this was wording reflecting the arts funding agencies’ guidelines, but it also fairly describes the thrust of the company’s work.

There was, in the circumstances, an ambivalence in what Mignon said about their work. “As far as I’m concerned when I’m doing theatre, I’m getting a text and trying to make it as alive as possible. I’m pushing the boundaries - certainly of what’s happening around here in Melbourne, at present.” Mignon was hesitant to call their work avant-garde. He argued that “it might look different” in Australia, but that there was a notion of originality he associated with the avant-garde that their work did not match. But he did say Anthill stressed putting a vitality in their work, and that this was “taking risks.” (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990) Only by 1983 did the company gain general recognition in the press and
community for its achievements. This helped secure reasonable levels of arts funding for the following year. Finally everyone could be paid and it was possible, for a period of time, to run a core ensemble of actors. They were cast in Anthill’s productions and trained together in voice and movement classes. The productions which signalled this acceptance of Mignon’s directorial work, and Anthill’s place in the Australian theatre, were fittingly productions of Molière’s classics in English, starting in 1983 with Tartuffe. In this year also Mignon mounted an audacious “expressionist” production of the Australian classic, Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, by Ray Lawler.

With subsequent productions of Molière in the two years following, their reputation was made. Don Juan, in 1984, was directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon for Anthill in association with the State Theatre Company of South Australia, for the Adelaide Festival. The 1985 the production he did of The Misanthrope, was staged in Melbourne both at Anthill Theatre, and a disused orphanage in South Melbourne. Later in the year there was a season at the Wharf Theatre in association with the Sydney Theatre Company.

Anthill presented the world premieres of a significant number of plays, amongst them another play by Richard Murphet, Slow Love, in 1983; and Catastrophe Practice No 2: Landfall by Nicholas Mosley, in 1984, which was directed by Richard Murphet. In addition there were: Exiles (1981) by Alec Miller, Illuminated Ducks (1982) by Hazel Barry and directed by Elena Eramin, Schadenfreude (1982) written and directed by Paul Adkin, The White Door, written and directed by Stefan Mrowinski, and Vic 300 (1985) a group-devised work in collaboration with Helen Garner. A number of works were written and directed by artists at Anthill, including Puppy Love with Bruce Keller, written and directed by David Paul Jobling, Boy/Girls Talk (1986), directed by Lisa Dombroski, and Good Night, Sweet Dreams (1986) written and directed by Jenny Kemp. Roderick Poole’s Dream of an Unknown Drinker, was directed by Suzanne Chaundy.5

To the end of 1989 Anthill had presented nineteen world premieres and twelve Australian premieres to Melbourne audiences.6 “We’ve been introducing authors to Australia, “said Mignon. “Raymond Cousse, people like that. It seems to be important as well that we make the link with other cultures. I believe the tradition of the European culture is an important thing which should also be shared here.” (Stanley/ Mignon interview 1990) A number of significant modern European plays by Sartre, Kafka, Bulgakov and Genet, which had
already been performed elsewhere in Australia, were given provocative productions at Anthill. Anthill also has hosted several productions touring from Europe including Narrkastl Theatre (Fool’s Box) from Vienna in 1986 who presented *Kill Hamlet* by the Bosnian actor/playwright Zijan A. Skolović. This confronting investigation of the complicity of actor and audience was directed by Joseph Hartmann.

At the same time Anthill was striving to establish itself as a mainstream theatre, and away from a perception that they did only ‘obscure’ European work. In 1986 Jean-Pierre Mignon directed an atmospheric production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in a ruined factory in South Melbourne, with Robert Menzies as Macbeth. “Now the plays we chose are plays I want to do - are plays which have themes which are universal in temper. Plays which talk to people now in an essential way,” he commented to Howard Stanley, who had been one of the core ensemble actors at Anthill during this period. (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

“This company works with texts,” Mignon pointed out, noting that the great majority of their output has been scripted. Anthill did very little group-devised work and preferred to work on the texts of formally scripted plays. “And each text I felt was demanding a different process,” Mignon said. “Even plays by the same author demanded a different process. We worked differently with *Wolf’s Banquet* than I did with *Kid’s Stuff*”, he said, mentioning two of the three plays they presented by the French writer Raymond Cousse. “And I worked differently with *Tartuffe* than I did with *The Imaginary Invalid*,” he commented, mentioning two Molière productions of the four he had worked on in Australia by 1990. “It’s also that each group of people demand a different process. It’s something which happens early on in rehearsals, when you can sense what will take,” Mignon explained of the inclusive manner of their rehearsal process. (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

Anthill was not an overtly political theatre which embraced causes or issues. Jean-Pierre Mignon explained, “we are not doing a naturalistic play about AIDS, for example. We’d rather do a play about the imaginary invalid, which is, in a metaphorical way, [treating] a lot of area which could be specifically addressed.” He said, “we are talking to the human soul. And theatre, in a sense is just life, and we go with it.” (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

Mignon directed three major stage works of Anton Chekhov in 1987: *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Three Sisters*. All were presented at Anthill Theatre in South Melbourne, and performed by the same ensemble of actors.
Overall Jean-Pierre Mignon was far from a conservative, nonetheless he was proposing an elite audience. “We don’t want to do theatre for consumers,” he said. “We don’t want to sell packages. I think it’s very dangerous to have to cater to consumers, you can end up being completely lost. You can end up compromising form, because your audience numbers can never be lower than the year before.” (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990) Mignon was a man of the theatre. His theatre was clearly influenced by the modern French tradition where there is a close proximity of the classics and the avant-garde, and this was also evident with Anthill’s output.

The funding bodies put a lot of pressure on the Australian Nouveau Theatre (Anthill) to conform to the normal corporate structures, and to appoint a Board of Directors. This was transparently a rationalisation for the funding cuts precipitated by the Victorian Government. Mignon said, “Our intention was to operate as a group of artisans.” He added, “decisions were taken from common sense point of view of consensus, rather than voting.” However voting was what the funding bodies asked for, and Anthill changed its way of operating. “They don’t want the artists in power, they want bureaucrats, and technocrats, and accountants,” Mignon said. (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

Anthill was not allowed to grow beyond its modest size into a third theatre company in Melbourne, which was a city of about three million people. Looking back in 1990, after the traumatic cut in their funds in 1989, Jean-Pierre Mignon was cautious to describe the company’s work as neither experimental nor innovative. He said, these are “categories people gave us from the outside. They told us we were an innovative company. They told us we were an experimental company,” Mignon said. (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990) Anthill was criticised for its innovativeness - arguably its greatest strength - and so it moved towards a more conservative program, and was then damned for losing its way. In an atmosphere where funding was to be ‘rationalised’, funding guidelines were used to provide reasons for summary rejection.

**Modern European theatre: Thalia**

Established slightly later in Sydney than Anthill’s formation in Melbourne, Thalia Theatre Company could also be characterised as European theatre in Australia. Its life too was short and the support given by the funding bodies was fickle and limited. It was the meeting of
the young actor and playwright Michael Gow with Bogdan Koca that generated the group. Koca had trained and worked as an actor in Poland, which he left with the loosening of political restraints around 1980. He spent a couple of years in Austria working as an actor, and then came to Australia. Koca worked on Ljubisa Ristić’s *1984 AD* for the AETT at the 1984 Adelaide Festival.

With Koca as its Artistic Director, Thalia received some small initial subsidy. The first project they mounted was Mrozek’s play, *The Emigrants*, which was performed in Sydney and at the Adelaide Festival Fringe in 1984. Michael Gow recalled that the play is “a standard in the repertoire in most Middle and Eastern European theatres, and the production was fairly straightforward. Although by our standards unusual, in that Bogdan does not like direct lighting, and he does not like colour on stage, so it was all very dark, with black and white lighting - black and white shadows and lighting. But it wasn’t what I would call avant-garde.” (Bray/Gow interview 1989) The directorial approach which Koca was to develop was more like that of a painter to their work, than the conventional stage director. Koca has said, “I think that any creation, even in theatre is a very individual thing, a very personal thing.” (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

Michael Gow’s play *The Astronaut’s Wife* was the next project staged by Thalia in Sydney. It was directed by Bogdan Koca. “It was problematical to begin with,” Gow recalled. “The play was written as a kind of short, sharp, mad, physical comedy; and it became a very weighty, kind of, a space age *Waiting for Godot,*” he said in an interview in 1989. “It was very different to what I’d written, and it was kind of like an interesting lesson.” (Bray/Gow interview 1989) From Bogdan Koca’s perspective, *The Astronaut’s Wife* was a convenient text upon which to hang a production idea he had been developing.

Koca had named the new company *Thalia*, after a company of this name in Hamburg, Germany, which he regarded as an outstanding avant-garde theatre. They were renowned for hosting European productions by Robert Wilson, whom Koca described as “one of the most innovative directors in the world, if not number one.” Asked if his own work was innovative, Koca was careful to say, “When I am making art I am not thinking about changing the forms or setting up new expressions or something. No, I am trying to say something to people, which is very personal and very mine. And I use different tools and different forms depending on the subject, or on my mood, or the mood of my actors.”
Bogdan Koca has asked a vital question, which applies to many projects of the period: “Who is the author of the theatre production: the writer, or the director, or a group of actors?” Koca made clear his own unambiguous response to this. “I think that the author/creator of the theatre event is the director and actors involved in it, it is a group creation under the direction of the director.” Not primarily interested in staging plays, Koca was concerned with making theatre pieces, often based on literary sources, and developed with the actors he was gathering around him. Preludes to Joyce’s Artist was devised by Koca in this way. It did not have a script. Koca’s main focus was on an innovative form. It was “thirteen points written on one page,” Koca said. “But I don’t have a script,” Koca explained, “because it’s not a play, it’s a project, a theatre project, practical theatre project, and it exists only when you sit in the audience [and] watch actors acting. That’s the beauty of theatre.” (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

Thalia’s work “appealed to a lot of young people,” in Michael Gow’s view. “People who were interested in things that weren’t the mainstream, that weren’t subscriber theatre or the flag ship theatre companies. But stuff that was more like what they were used to in the visual arts, or in video, or super-eight film, or pop clip, or something. Rather than what is considered legitimate theatre,” he said. (Bray/Gow interview 1989)

Different projects were approached in different ways by Koca, working with Thalia. “There is no method - that’s my method,” he said. Not concerned with actor training, however, Koca suggested that he was developing with his actors a creative and intellectual environment in which the performance was created. “I’m not doing warm ups. I am not doing sort of exercises for concentration. We are drinking beer. We are talking. It is rather intellectual,” Koca told Bray. (Bray/Koca interview 1989) This was not the theatre workshop training process of Grotowski or the experimental theatre of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.

Their rehearsal period for projects has varied considerably in length. The relatively well funded productions of Hamlet and The Marriage, which they prepared for the 1986 Adelaide Festival, were rehearsed for eleven weeks. On the other hand, there was an adaptation from Dostoevsky, titled Karamazov, which ran for three hours but was devised
and rehearsed in only four weeks. Koca said, “I realised if I had more [time] - it wouldn’t be so good.” (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

Thalia presented a number of productions of modern European works which broke new ground in Australia, including *The Ambassador* by Mrozek; an adaptation of the key surrealist work, *The Poet Assassinated* by Apollinaire; and *Break of Noon* by Claudel. However, perhaps their most widely seen production was *The Marriage* (łub) written in the mid-twentieth century by the modern Polish playwright Witold Gombrowicz. It is a play with many facets, which parodies and re-employs models of classical theatre. In the manner of Polish modernism it shows a love of the bizarre, and prefigures the multiple layering of postmodern work with an abundance of hype and travesty. The play - written in 1946, but unstaged until 1963 - has been recognised as a classic of modern European theatre. It deprives its audience of equilibrium. *The Marriage* is like a nightmare of war, in which madness, tyranny and greed are the norm, and cruelty reaches a state of sadistic tedium. Koca created a disciplined and fluent rendering of the complexity of *The Marriage*, with an outstanding cast headed by Michael Gow. The production was coupled with performances of *Hamlet*, one of its classical antecedents, on alternate nights. The burlesque and the classic it mocked were displayed to reveal the coercive dependence they have on each other: each revealing and redefining the meaning of the other.

Koca has said, “I prefer the situation where a show that I’m putting on provokes people, or even makes them angry, or makes them think, or even [makes them] opposed to my concept; than to go home and [switch on] the television set and watch soaps.” Positioned firmly within the modern tradition, Koca sees art-making and performance making as inherently innovative. “I think the world is changing all the time, and if you want to go ahead, or if you want to go to dinner with the world with the changes, you have to change as well, yourself,” he told Bray. (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

Bogdan Koca is an auteur. He has said of his work, “I am totally in control of it. It’s my project I am doing this from beginning to the end.” Koca said he believed that any “great achievement in art had a very strong seal of some one person’s individuality, personality.” He preferred not to work with a designer, or composer, or playwright, but to create all aspects of the production himself. (Bray/Koca interview 1989)
Bogdan Koca’s attitude towards the audience is significant. “I am doing this show - all my shows - for the most intelligent person sitting in the audience,” Koca has said. “We can do something which is mediocre, or something which is for the most stupid person in the audience. But I don’t think that is very challenging or very proper.” Koca added, “I have found Australian audiences extremely sophisticated, and extremely honest compared to European audiences,” he said. In Europe although theatre is part of life, he explained, this has limitations too, because the “audience is trained by centuries to receive theatre in a certain way.” (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

Thalia presented a deliberately contentious work, Apparitions, at Expo 88 in Brisbane. “I considered it very controversial - it was a play about bureaucracy in Australia, particularly in art,” Koca said. “The organisers of Expo were quite aware that it may be too provocative, too aggressive - I mean, it’s meant to be - but I didn’t realise that someone might be scared, and the organisers were. But the reaction of the audience was absolutely extraordinary. I was really shocked by the reaction of the average audience. You know, they gave standing ovations.” (Bray/Koca interview 1989)

The group adopted a formal corporate structure in 1989, with a board of directors. Gow had left the group, but there were about ten artist members, who regularly worked with Koca. At this time he wished to work with this group and set up a permanent repertory company. The group were looking for a home base, and at one stage believed that this might be the Crossroads Theatre in Kings Cross. Koca said, at this time, that he was interested in setting up an international centre for theatrical art, theatrical research and education in Sydney under the umbrella of Thalia Theatre Company. (Bray/Koca interview 1989) Koca identified with Australia as a place of both new and ancient potentialities. “Ironically we are living in one of the most spiritual, and one of the most ancient and beautiful lands, and [yet] our art, our creation is less spiritual then anything else in the world.” Koca said, “You don’t have to copy [the world], you have to express your relation towards it. Aborigines did [that].” Koca spoke about the opportunity in Australia “to create something which has not got a model at all.” There was a turning point for him. “My dream was to create theatre done the way it would operate in Europe,” he said. “What for?” he asked. In Australian he found a chance “to create something which will be totally different.” Koca said, “What is beautiful about Australian theatre is that it is open for change. I mean it has to be made up.” Koca had considered remaining in Austria or Germany, “but I had
to sing the same song that they sing. You know, here I don’t have to sing any songs. I have
to make up the score,” Koca said. (Bray/Koca interview 1989)14

A conclusion: towards an intercultural theatre practice

Waves of theatre workers from South America, Eastern Europe and other countries migrated to Australia during the nineteen-eighties.15 By the end of this decade there was also a more general recognition of non-English language theatres and also the theatres of Asia in Australia. There was considerable fascination with the work of Tadashi Suzuki, for example; and the influence of Chinese circus training on Australian performers was becoming widespread.

Practitioners from Eastern Europe, East and South East Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and South America were working in marginal Australian theatres. They were not, however, given significant places in the mainstream of Australian theatre. These individuals and the groups they formed were given only token funding support. Despite this marginalisation their voices were culturally and aesthetically important; if they remained muted, they were a presence which could no longer be denied: Australia was depicted in its linguistic diversity and this rupture of the assimilationist ethos was not to be reversed.

Non-English language theatre workers and theatre groups had a particularly active role in extending modern theatre repertoire and methods in Australia. They increased the opportunities for avant-garde theatre in this country, and made a place for on-going intercultural investigations of performance.

There was a wealth of experience brought to Australia by of actors and directors trained in non-English language theatre traditions at this time. Because there was little willingness by the funding bodies to recognise their potentially new contribution, they were side-lined. The funded companies saw no reason to open their doors to these individuals or the different ideas and training they represented. They were not assimilated, but formed their own groups or joined the marginal theatres, and paradoxically their exclusion heightened their perceived difference and amplified the effects of their intercession in the theatre practices of the day. These irregular, strange and linguistically isolated theatre activities were an insistent prompt to change the theatre discourse in Australia.
Gendered marginality: women’s theatre

Feminism has been a pervasive influence within modernism in the twentieth century. In the late nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies feminist women formed loose associations and women’s organisations to achieve a revolutionary shift in the political and social agenda in Australia, as in the Western world at large. The genesis and impact of feminism have always been highly ambivalent, despite the formative nature of its influences and its ubiquity. Feminism has been a force for innovation and renewal, which has confronted the status quo and incited violent reactions against its proposed initiatives. There has been an ironic, but recurrent, conservative view that feminism was a backward-looking brake on the progress of the twentieth century. Especially in the mid-twentieth-century the anti-feminist acronym, ‘wowser’, became a popular synonym for ‘old-fashioned killjoy’, for example.

International Women’s Year in 1975 was a watershed in Australia for the women’s movement and, through the infrastructure initiated during that year, for Australian society as a whole. These modernising reforms were imbedded in the matrix of social renovations of the Whitlam government. The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group was funded as a part of the International Women’s Year, and in its turn seeded many other women’s theatre projects, a number of which are discussed here.

Feminist action: ‘women’s theatre’ and the female perspective

An increasing number of theatre groups and projects that were dedicated to feminism, and several had dominantly or entirely female participants. From within the revolutionary impulse which impelled the APG came landmark women’s productions and the influential Women’s Theatre Group (1974-77) which contributed to a series of women’s circus projects and had an impact of the formation in Canberra-based Fools’ Gallery Theatre Company (1979-1983). Also inspired by the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group, the Women and Theatre project at Sydney’s Nimrod Theatre ran throughout 1980 and into
1981. Following this initiative in Sydney, the director Ros Horin, set up Playworks to serve women playwrights with readings and workshop productions. In Adelaide there were women's theatre projects which took the Melbourne Women's Theatre Group as their model in the late nineteen-seventies. Later Troupe Theatre gravitated towards women's theatre projects and a feminist rationale, and Red Shed Theatre had strongly feminist sympathies. From 1984 the touring company Vitalstatistix had a mission to inform their audiences about women's issues. In Melbourne the Home Cooking Theatre Company created theatre for and about women from 1981, and Flash Rat developed projects from 1984, including several on lesbian themes.1

It is notable within the spread of women's theatre that there was a network through which feminist ideas were disseminated, and with them the methodology of 'women's theatre' was spread as a means of feminist political action. Individual women artists frequently moved through a similar network of women's organisations and on into the community theatre organisations of the nineteen-eighties. Ollie Black, for example, worked with Desperate Measures in Perth and then joined the Wimmins [sic] Circus in Melbourne. When they disbanded, she helped set up the Lolly's Women's Warehouse in Sydney, before establishing Vitalstatistix in Port Adelaide. Similar patterns of activity can be mapped out for other key figures in the dispersal of 'women's theatre' into the wider array of theatre activity especially the community theatres of the period.2

During the nineteen-seventies Australian women writers and thinkers were at the forefront of the women's movement initiating the international debates. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* was published in 1970, and five years later Anne Summers' influential feminist critique of women in Australia, *Damned Whores and God's Police: the Colonization of Women in Australia*, was published.

The 'women's theatres' gave way progressively in the nineteen-eighties to theatres which manifest a female perspective. If the 'women's theatres' had been loud and didactic, the new work by women in the theatre tended to be imbued with new narrative modes and representational styles which had been created in response to feminist critiques. This was theatre which was profoundly different to existing theatrical norms: it tended to deny dramatic climaxes derived from conflict, it posed differing notions of chronology, it often avoided the dualities of male/female and self/other, and instead created work which built
upon sympathetic identification with the figures, characters and images it presented. In
general the work to emerge at the end of this period, which is further discussed in part three
of this thesis, was to be often created around 'found' experiences and interior journeys
rather than an external spectacle. Work in this mode was created by several women who
had worked at the Mill Theatre, Meredith Rogers and Barbara Ciszewska, who with
Suzanne Spunner formed Home Cooking Theatre Company. The playwright Sarah Cathcart
also worked at the Mill, and should be considered here; as too, should the later work of
Lois Ellis and Kerry Eccles who formed Radclyffe in 1986. Jenny Kemp's important work
and the sustained investigations of Valerie Kirwan at La Mama, which are discussed later
in this part of the thesis, are inherently feminist in their origins but do not seek to educate
or promote feminism. The thrust of much of the work of the Melbourne Women's Theatre
Group was unashamedly agit-prop and celebrative. Ros de Winter and Alison Richards,
were among a number of women who were deeply involved in Melbourne Women's
Theatre Group projects, and also had great commitment to investigating an aesthetics of
feminism. At times they had to defend this type of laboratory activity against criticism from
their colleagues more concerned with immediate political goals. The dichotomy between
political and aesthetic concerns was more apparent than real, many artists slipped between
these ambiguous poles.

**Pioneering modern theatre: Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group**

The strong responses to the 1972 production of *Betty Can Jump* were discussed in the first
part of this thesis. For women within the APG collective, such as Kerry Dwyer, Christine
Mearing and Robin Laurie the issue of theatre by and for women took on the highest
significance at this time. The Women’s Theatre Group was brought together and operated
as a project within the APG from 1974. While many of its participants were members of the
APG collective there was a continuing effort to involve other women interested in making
feminist theatre. Peta Tait has argued that the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group, as it
was to be called later, was original, and that “they were engaged in a revolutionary struggle
for an entirely new political system.” She noted that their work “initially set out to satirise
stereotyped images of women, [and that] they went on to develop a diversity of
representation which was not found elsewhere at the time.” These were key innovations.
"By developing original women’s theatre,” Tait has suggested, “they placed theatre at the
forefront of the movement for social change in the mid-nineteen-seventies.” (Tait 1993: 4)
The feminist motivation of the Group was political and it led them to deconstruct the theatrical language of the day and to make new theatrical relationships in which the re-positioned representations of women could be seen and read.

In changing the relationship with their audience and the ‘ownership’ of this theatre for and by women, the production of *Betty Can Jump* and then the Women’s Theatre Group shifted the patterns of patronage and provided new answers to the question: To whom was the performance addressed? Any tacit acceptance of male reception of the performance as the norm was rejected outright by the Group. Likewise, any hypothetical critical ‘standard’ derived from a notion of British theatre was totally disregarded by the Women’s Theatre Group. In this, they were like the rest of the APG, but the Women’s Theatre Group were armed by feminism. Their agenda was to change the role of women in society, and in their own working theatre-environment. Within the APG, Robin Laurie has recorded that female members of the collective felt that they were not well served by the men writing plays and the usually male directors working with them. “We were frustrated with the size, scope and nature of the roles available and the subject matter of the plays,” Laurie said at the National Community Theatre Conference in 1987. (Laurie 1987: np) The Women’s Theatre Group could perhaps have settled for more women playwrights and directors (to match their relatively high proportion among the APG actors); they may have agitated for a more sympathetic approach to feminist ‘issues’ from their male colleagues; but this was not the way they advanced. The Women’s Theatre Group synthesised a substantially new approach to making theatre.

The alternative culture of the nineteen-seventies was rife with new cultural hybrids and opportunities for artistic cross-overs, and in this environment the Women’s Theatre Group appropriated and deconstructed theatrical traditions to further their strategic struggle to change the positioning of women in the structure of society. The Group were consciously using theatrical means to achieve this political end, and felt themselves free to treat theatrical traditions without much reverence. In their projects the Group modified and mixed theatrical conventions as they saw fit, in a search for effective ways to make theatrical images to represent their feminist ideas. They appropriated musical performance styles and elements of physical theatre, and they developed many areas of comedy, including the revolutionary twist to a male archetype: the female clown. (Although there were historical precedents, female clowns and high comedy personas began to be developed at
this time on an unprecedented scale.) The outcome of this playing fast-and-loose with conventions was not a new theatre style: women’s theatre. Instead it harnessed a number of portmanteau-forms such as cabaret, comedy revue and later circus, so that these complex and often eclectic, but many-layered formats were at the disposal of political ideas. To privilege political ideas to this extent gave significant aesthetic license, as artistic means were selected as they were ‘needed’ rather than according to their own artistic conventions. In the Women’s Theatre Group and its immediate successors, a wide variety of theatrical traditions were blended and used in new ways along with original ideas, and all of this was trialed as an experimental process. In this, they functioned as avant-garde projects.

The profound outcomes of this were to deconstruct the theatrical transaction and form new relationships between the theatrical event and its audience. This type of innovation was happening simultaneously outside these women’s theatre groups. Others were also creating hybrids and cross-overs, for example, the Performance Syndicate’s production of *The Legend of King O’Malley* was musical, revue and history, and the T. F. Much Ballrooms were a mixture of rock and roll bands, vaudeville and circus acts. But the contribution of the Women’s Theatre Group was especially far-reaching because it coalesced as a cogent entity: women’s theatre. As feminism spread at this time, so too women’s theatre was spread as a medium to raise consciousness about women’s issues. The aesthetic innovations of ‘women’s theatre’ were carried across the nation and, over time, affected all facets of theatre practice in this country.

At the time, however, the Women’s Theatre Group ‘confronted’ resistance to their initiatives within the collective of the APG, as well as from the general critical conservatism of the day. The confrontation itself pushed them to operate increasingly independently of the male-dominated collective and ultimately to separate from it. In the public arena they continued to negotiate between the impulse to improve women’s lives by teaching men about women, and the separatist option. In doing this, they produced much satiric material, pioneered group researched and devised drama, and initiated some of Australia’s first inter-cultural and multi-lingual theatre projects.

Feminist theatre ideas developed in workshops run by the women from the APG were ‘packaged’ into formats that could gain exposure, but which could also be included in the existing APG program. It was called, ‘women’s theatre’, and they became the Women’s
Theatre Group. This began in early 1974 with late night shows in the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory: Women's Weekly Vol 1 and Women's Weekly Vol 2, the titles parodying the most popular magazine marketed to women at that time. Both had a revue format, although group-devised comedy dominated the first show and the second had two formal plays followed by instrumental music and song. The Group was very productive at this time. Between April and June 1974 they performed Women's Street Theatre, which satirised the exploitation of women through ‘beauty quests’, and in The Love Show [also called Women's Weekly 3] they investigated women’s consumption of romances.

With these projects the Women’s Theatre Group pioneered the processes of documentary theatre in Australia. Ros de Winter directed a production based on interviews with young women charged with ‘being in moral danger’, which they called Documentary Theatre. The transcripts of interviews selected for performance encompassed experiences of young women who had suffered sexual abuse and others who had been abandoned by their families. The performance was critical of conventional laws and public attitudes that punished these young women - as Tait argued, the ‘victims’- and placed them in institutions for their deviation from social norms. This show suggested that, because these young women were sexually active but not confined in the institution of marriage, they were institutionally confined by a conservative society. Significantly this piece was presented in the main auditorium at the Pram Factory, the Front Theatre, as part of the Out of the Frying Pan - Women's Festival (22 May - 1 June 1974). The Group then presented a street theatre piece in support of women in the Fairlea Women’s Prison. A further show, Women and Children First, was given a season in the less prestigious Back Theatre at the end of the year. This play looked further at the issues of the social expectations of women: in this case that women should be mothers. (Tait 1993: 20-26, 86; Guthrie/Richards interview 1990)

For International Women’s Year the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group organised an extended celebration in Melbourne’s Exhibition Gardens. Sister’s Delight Festival was held over several days around International Women’s Day in March 1975. (Tait 1993: 27-8) A number of shows were taken to workplaces that year, opening up the idea of art in working life in Australia. These included A Woman’s Place Is, which was also known as Women and Work. Mounted with assistance from the Amalgamated Metal Workers’ Union, it was developed in response to a strike by women factory workers. Later in the year this
play had another season and toured widely. This piece was extended street theatre with an agit-prop format that entertained and educated its work-place audiences about the limitations placed by society on women and the injustices of inequitable working conditions. (Tait 1993: 28-9; 86)

The social and political marginalisation of women ran parallel to the ostracism of minority groups, including the mentally ill. Where these categories crossed was a site for a substantial political examination in *The Women and Madness Show*, also called *Add a Grated Laugh or Two*. It was a major project, presented in the Front Theatre at the Pram Factory in May-June 1975. Key women in the Group worked on this play. Most of the Women’s Theatre Group’s performances were group-devised, but they also performed some conventional scripts, and several works were written for them.4

A euphoric state of self-recognition and self-affirmation for women in the women’s movement was reflected in the work of the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group at this time. As with the utopian aspects of the counter culture, this heightened state within feminism was always, perhaps, in some peril. If the euphoria should fall away, all that was left to individuals and to groups was disillusionment and bitter recriminations.

The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group received funding independent of the APG in 1976, and the Group decided to become separate. This parting was not without pain for many of those involved who had loyalties to both the APG collective and the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group. Robin Laurie said they separated from the Pram Factory “over the issue of whether the emphasis was to be on the process or product, skills or personal growth.” She commented in 1987, that this was “a debate which continued within the Pram and all the groups I’ve been in since.” Laurie recognised the community theatres had followed the dynamic of the APG in agonising over “time for in-service training balanced against the necessity to make a buck.” (Laurie 1987: np)

The first project after the split was a group-devised show, *Wonder Woman’s Revenge*, directed by Alison Richards. It was performed in the Carlton Salvation Army Hall. The politics of the group-process for this production threatened to take over from the feminist intentions of the show. Richards had been engaged to direct *Wonder Woman’s Revenge*. However, she was attacked by some members of the Group who did not want a director
at all. Richards was not alone in having to confront the issue of balancing the authority of
the director and the creative autonomy of actors. The Melbourne Women’s Theatre
Group’s next production in 1976 was an original play by Ella Filar, directed by Sylvie
Leber, *The Smoke*. It was performed at the Drama Resource Centre, in Bouverie Street,
Carlton. (Tait 1993: passim)

By 1977 the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group had its own venue, the Women’s Space
in Faraday Street, but it also had less funding. They suffered further splits, especially as a
number of key people returned to focus their energy on projects within the APG. At the
Women’s Space, they performed two group-devised works in 1977: *The Power Show*, and
*Edges*, directed by Finola Moorhead. (Tait 1993: passim) The perception of the place of
women in alternative theatres changed Australia during the period of this study.

Members of the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group took with them the innovations
developed in the Group and spread them widely. Evelyn Krape and Sue Ingleton, for
example, were to take unambiguously feminist theatre to broadly-based audiences with
popular one-person shows. The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group stimulated the
emergence of women directors, women’s companies, and assured individual women artists
in comedy, music and circus. Several groups perpetuated something of the style and method
of the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group, especially Vitalstatistix, with their over-the-top
popular treatment of important women’s issues. The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Groups
can be seen to have established a practice of creating highly original theatre, which was
allowed by their disregard for masculine theatre and critical institutions. This widespread
iconoclasm within feminist theatre practice made fertile ground for avant-garde theatre
practitioners to emerge in the immediately following period. The work of Jenny Kemp,
Virginia Baxter and Sarah Cathcart are examples of such emerging radical practice.

The circus groups which grew from the APG circus workshops and the Wimmins [sic]
Circus created a re-vision of the musculature of the female body through circus training.
Through this they also presented the female body in a newly constructed critical framework,
not prone to the male gaze but in a complex and ambiguous gender relationship,
both/neither female or male, both/neither submitting or dominant.
Laboratory experiment: Fools' Gallery Theatre  (1979 -1983)

In Canberra at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties, Carol Woodrow's company, Fools' Gallery Theatre, was exploring an essentially feminist theatrical domain. They were a theatre workshop group - including both men and women - that had grown from membership of the Canberra Youth Theatre. When the group was striving to become a fully-fledged theatre, Woodrow resigned the Artistic Direction of Jigsaw and Canberra Youth Theatre. Their first major show, *Standard Operating Procedures*, was provocative in the way it expressed their outrage at the systematic oppression of women, rape and the practice of female circumcision. It had a season at the Performance Space in Sydney during the 1981 Sydney Festival and had an influential tour interstate also.

Fools' Gallery Theatre worked together from 1979 until about 1983. They enjoyed the umbrella of Reid House Theatre Workshop Inc. in Canberra. The group had its origin in Woodrow's workshop investigations of the actor which linked their work to the theatre laboratories, but the direction of their group-devised work had a distinctly feminist rationale. Their productions included *Sleeping Beauty*, later titled *It Bleeds, It Sleeps*, and *Original Sin*. They built a small workshop space and performance venue, the Back Theatre, at Reid House in Canberra. There they presented the Canberra season of *The Dragon of Ares* in 1983, which explored the theme of war. The company created this work from the texts plays by Euripides. A season was also presented at the Performance Space as part of the Sydney Festival. (Healey 1981: 10)

A broad survey of feminism in Sydney: The Women and Theatre Project  (1980-1)

Jude Kuring had been active in the APG and the Melbourne Women's Theatre, and with Chris Westwood in Sydney she helped set up the Women and Theatre Project. This was hosted by the Nimrod Theatre in 1980 and remained active throughout 1981. It was funded through a Limited Life Program grant from the Theatre Board of the Australia Council. (Westwood 1982: 39) Westwood became the coordinator of the project. Their aim was to establish a "professional feminist theatre in Sydney." Westwood commented in an article in ADS that in “discussions with members and staff of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council it was also made evident that we had to play down ‘feminism’ and play up ‘equal opportunity’ or ‘women’.” Because of this, Westwood believed, the project lost “much of
the theoretical direction.” As she wrote, “it seemed hard for people in the industry, which includes the funding bodies, to grasp that ‘feminism’ was to Jude and I what ‘naturalism’ might have been to George Bernard Shaw.” (Westwood 1982: 41) This was another instance where the processes of arts funding stifled a radical artistic initiative.

The project was opened to all the women who wanted to participate. This appealed to the funding authority - who feared that the project would become a feminist enclave - but caused problems for the direction of the project as more than one hundred and forty women took part. They were very diverse, and there was no coherent position possible on the ideology which had brought them together: feminism. While pluralism had some advantages, Westwood felt that it resulted in “middle-of-the-road” work becoming too great a part in the program. Certainly, she pointed out, this made the “misgivings of the Theatre Board and others about our ‘doing politics not art’ seem entirely without foundation.” (Westwood 1982: 42)

Despite the apparent placation of the funding authorities, the press took a generally negative position towards the project from the start. Harry Kippax in the SMH, for example wrote of Hilary Beaton’s Sitting on a Fortune, “If you hate men, you will probably love it.” (Kippax 1981) Brian Hoad in the Bulletin also had great difficulty accepting the place of women’s work, calling the Theatre Board’s grant to the project “one of its more bizarre gestures for some time.” (Hoad 1981: 32; critics cited Westwood 1982; see also Waites 1989: 4-5) Much of the criticism was marked by an irrationality and outright misogyny which was so apparent that, perhaps more than any other issue in the period, this twelve-month project exposed to widespread questioning the threadbare nature of critical writing on theatre in the press in Australia.

At the outset of the Women and Theatre project, Nimrod Theatre had never employed a woman director. Westwood commented that this was probably typical of theatres across Australia at the time. Australian women playwrights had also figured poorly at Nimrod, where only four plays by a woman had been performed. This was typical of what had happened across Australia in the new wave of local play writing. Encouraging women playwrights was one of the project’s objectives, and the participants who wrote work which was treated in the project included: Hilary Beaton, Cathy Downes, Berwyn Lewis, Gillian Jones, Alison Lyssa. There were several group-devised projects. The largest was called
Project “A” in the grant application. It dealt with music and comedy, and resulted in the production, *Desert Flambe*, which Westwood described as “zany, new, convention-flouting comedy.” (Westwood 1982: 40, 46)

The other part of the application was Project “B” - *Unlimited Lives*, an attempt to create a mass celebration of female identity, in much the same way sporting events or military events could be seen to reflect masculine identity, they thought. The inspirations for this “all-female mass theatrical spectacle,” included Busby Berkeley routines and the opening ceremony of the Moscow Olympic, Westwood recorded. She wrote also that they “had been excited by and challenged to build on the work of Wimmin’s Circus and Fools [sic] Gallery Theatre.” (Westwood 1982: 54) Westwood wrote that “their final work-in-progress presentation was held on the basket ball court at Bondi Pavilion one balmy night in October,” and that it showed the “enormous potential for a breakthrough in theatre,” in Westwood’s view, although she conceded some critical comparison with performance/events in Europe “found it wanting.” (Westwood 1982: 47)

There were many small projects set up to find outlets for the numerous participants and to give public expression to the broad areas covered by the workshop programs, readings and skill development aspects of the Women and Theatre project. Much of the project looked to international traditions and a significant amount crossed conventional art form boundaries. The outcomes of the Women and Theatre project at Nimrod were significant, but diffused, especially when compared to the decisive intervention that the Melbourne Women’s Theatre had represented six years earlier. Nonetheless the industry and the art of theatre had come to include women, and the aesthetics of theatre had been shifted by feminism. Playworks was a follow-up to the Women and Theatre project in Sydney. It was established by Ros Horin in 1985 to workshop and present readings of women playwrights’ work.

**Home Cooking Theatre Company**

The germ of the Home Cooking Theatre Company was the 1981 production of *I Am Whom You Infer*, at La Mama. Based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson, this performance was devised and designed by its performer, Meredith Rogers, and director Barbara Ciszewska. Both of these women had worked at the Mill Theatre Company. The project toured and
became the Home Cooking Theatre Company.

Even the obliqueness of the quoted line / title of Emily Dickinson’s poem, “I am whom you infer,” suggests the audacious new area of exploration upon which they were entering. By foregrounding representation and the act of acting and by self-referentially concentrating on the artist as image-maker, and the acts of art-making, this theatre had new and important things to say. In 1982 they did *Not Still Lives*, by Suzanne Spunner, with Meredith Rogers and Andrea Lemon, playing the “prominent Australian artists Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor who are accredited as the major forces in introducing modernism to Australia in the 1920s and 30s.” (Harmer 1989: pu) *Not Still Lives* was first performed at the Iceberg Gallery, off Little Bourke Street, in Melbourne, and then as part of the Women and Arts Festival, downstairs at Nimrod, in Sydney, then later in Adelaide.12

The most successful production by Home Cooking Theatre Company, was *Running up a Dress: A Dialectic of Sewing*, by Suzanne Spunner, with Meredith Rogers, and Carmelina Di Guglielmo, directed Barbara Ciszewska. This play was toured extensively between 1986 and 1988. Brian Hoad wrote in the *Bulletin*, “as the title suggests it is a piece of didactic feminism which” - and here he quotes the words of the company themselves - “juxtaposes realistic and abstract elements, and explores the work processes of sewing and their metaphorical resonances with the induction of the girl-child into the realm of womanhood and the feminine’. In fact it’s nowhere near as ghastly as it sounds,” Hoad concludes, with a backhanded compliment. He goes on to comment that the writing was light and witty, but that the performance “looks back without anger to happy days with mum around the good old Singer treadle. But like the title, it does go on. With a total running time of 90 minutes, and a second half which mostly repeats the first, it simply cannot sustain interest,” he wrote. This critic was not able to accept that repetition and even tedium were among the values deliberately employed in this work, and so he deemed them errors.

Barry Oakley wrote a review in the National Times which was more sympathetic to the themes of the play, but still he had difficulty with the structure. “There’s a conceptual rather than a dramatic centre - theatre of demonstration rather than development. ‘Playschool’ for adults, too much of the Singer, not enough of the song’,” Oakley quipped, but his wit belied his inability to see difference, to see a theatre uninflected by conflict. Although conventionally drama based on conflict has been seen to be the heart of theatre in the West,
this is not universally so of world theatre. Japanese no theatre, for example, can be described as essentially revelatory and not dramatic. Visual art theory and history informed the work of Home Cooking Theatre Company. At the heart of performance art can be found explorations of the theories of concealment and revelation, framing and the manipulation of view-point, which are integral to an understanding of Home Cooking’s work.

**Feminist radicalism in Adelaide**

Increasingly, Troupe in Adelaide, became a feminist theatre, as the collective members changed during the early nineteen-eighties. Julie Holledge, who had an extensive background in women’s theatre in the United Kingdom, became the director of Troupe in 1984. The company was already ‘on notice’ that its funds would be cut by the Australia Council the following year. (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990) Troupe had started out, in David Allen words, “as a very male, old-fashioned, socialist, writer-orientated theatre,” and had now transformed into a woman’s theatre. (Bray/Allen interview 1989) Holledge saw her work - and by extension the work of those she has trained - as concerned with creating large, popular theatre works with a political message. She was “less concerned with form for form’s sake,” as she told me in 1990. (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990) She shared her guidance of the company with dramaturg Barry Pluce and designer Mary Moore. By this stage, however, the company was in difficulties because their move to Unley had been a move to a “very middle class suburb,” which was too close to the city to make any virtue of regionalism. Holledge steered the collective away from some of the straight scripted plays they had been doing.

There was something of a breakthrough with *Kelly Dance*, a production Holledge created with Flinders students and the playwright John Romeril in association with Troupe. This work was based on a popular social form: the bush dance. While leaving intact the audience’s participation in an evening of dancing, *Troupe* insinuated the material of the play into the event. This became a model for Troupe’s work up to the end of 1985 when Holledge left the company. Holledge made no claim that her work with Troupe constituted an “intellectual investigation of theatre as form.” (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990) And yet, by harnessing the structure of a popular event for other theatrical purposes, it did constitute an investigation of form. In this period in Australia, the community theatre.
movement was broadly concerned with these shifts in intention: popular forms were appropriated for political ends. Subverting popular forms and consciously manipulating the intentions of performances was a domain which was rich with innovation in this period. The strategy of using popular forms in this robust way or even in a perverse way was certainly not the Grotowski-model of avant-garde theatre as a laboratory, which was prevalent in the nineteen-seventies. Nevertheless, this appropriation of forms challenged the parameters of theatre practice in Australia at a profound level.16

Women pushing the boundaries: Flash Rat & Radclyffe

The later nineteen-eighties saw a strategic move away from the large collective women’s groups and the tenuously funded women’s venues that had dominated the previous decade, to smaller and more deliberately focused groups of two or three like-minded women. Vitalstatistix comprised three key members, and Lois Ellis and Kerry Eccles set up the outrageously titled, Flash Rat, as a production company in Melbourne in 1986. Although apparently a ‘commercial’ structure, the production house format was chosen by Ellis and Eccles as an effective management arrangement to focus on their feminist objectives, without unwieldy financial overheads or the time consuming inter-personal dynamic of the collectives. Their approach, far from being overbearingly hierarchical, had a business-like efficiency but was not taken too seriously, as can be seen in their witty promotion of the enterprise as a “tight company of loose women.” (Tait 1994: 75)

Their aim with Flash Rat was to allow “women theatre workers to have opportunities to take responsibility in the process of making theatre. Not just the servicing roles,” in Lois Ellis’s words. Flash Rat was funded by the Australia Council, and also in its last year by the Victorian Ministry. Ellis and Eccles set up a small company, but were not themselves paid at all. Because, as Ellis recalled, “Kerry kept her full time job, and I kept my freelance directing, that’s OK for a while but you realize you can’t do it.” As happens so often in marginal arts practice, and especially with women, they ended up supporting their own activity, out of their own pocket. They staged original shows, including, Pennies Before the Holidays, a new script which came out of Playworks. Ellis stressed that her philosophy was: “do not put on a play which has not been through a process.” The notion of workshopping and trying out plays with audiences before opening a full season, has become a widely held principle. Not to do this Ellis believed was “not good for the artists, it’s not
good for the playwright, it’s not good for the audience usually. So it was our philosophy that we always had plays that had come through some sort of workshop process. That tended to be a very good decision.” (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990)

Ellis stressed that the production values in Flash Rat were high. Over three years they employed over sixty people, on a show-by-show basis. In the end they “ran out of suitable material, and ceased operation,” Ellis said. (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990) They mounted a production titled, Radclyffe...the Well of Loneliness (1988). The play was devised by Adele Saleem and Sara Hardy and was about the novelist Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, whose novel, The Well of Loneliness, which dealt with a lesbian affair, was banned and destroyed in Britain in the nineteen-twenties. The play had an episodic structure and reflected “Radclyffe’s own relationship of 30 years with the aristocratic Una Troubridge.” (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990; Hobart Mercury: du) It had two seasons in Melbourne and toured widely. In Hobart it was on with Sarah Cathcart’s The Serpent’s Fall, in the Backspace in January 1988. It also toured to Vancouver, in Canada.

As a director Lois Ellis’s career from the nineteen-sixties to the nineteen-nineties influenced many emerging actors and directors. She did not generally work naturalistically, and this, she commented, upset critics. For example she did a production of A Stretch of the Imagination with Stephen Kearney, which outraged reviewers who called it a “travesty.” Abstracted ideas and images and a local setting for Beckett’s Happy Days also distressed press reviewers. “I think those things really get up people’s noses, and I think that’s important,” Ellis commented. Her independent directorial work at this time was concentrated on plays with only one and two actors, and this was the general trend, especially in theatre by and for women. (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990)

A conclusion: feminism shifted the focus in theatre

The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group and the feminist theatre groups which were to immediately follow them, changed the critical nature of theatre in Australia, and they had an on-going influence though the community theatres of the following decade. Feminist values, processes and aesthetics subverted and, in time, shifted the direction of the mainstream.
There was a wide influence of feminist thought in Australian theatre, and individual feminists changed it profoundly. However, as Sarah Miller has pointed out, those indicators of the avant-garde such as “obsessiveness, ‘living on the edge’, a valorizing of machismo” are problematic for radical female theatre work. And this reminds us that there are traps in “defining women only in relation to masculine norms.” (Miller 1988: 7) The dominant international figures of the period included male and female guru/directors, Grotowski, Suzuki and Wilson and also Bausch, LaCompt and Mnouchkine, for example. Feminism was oppositional and employed strategies of subversion and disruption very like those of the historical avant-gardes.

The work of key Australian women stretched the boundaries of acceptable work in specifically female values of perception and expression. This provocative work included the performance making and directorial work of Barbara Ciszewska, Ewa Czajor, Lindy Davies, Margaret Davis, Kerry Dwyer, Lois Ellis, Ros Horin, Noelle Janaczewska, Lyndal Jones, Jenny Kemp, Andrea Lemon, Alison Richards, Meredith Rogers, Helen Sky, Helen Star and Carol Woodrow.

Women performance makers broke the boundaries of the disciplines between theatre and the visual arts, craft, art history, non-dramatic narratives, poetry, site-specific work, installation, film and other media.
State controlled alternatives

The other side of the issue of the reversal of margin and centre was the perspective of the state theatre companies: from the centre. There were some genuine attempts to imbue the work of large state companies with the processes of investigation and training which have normally characterised marginal avant-garde companies; however, there were also cases of cynical appropriation by mainstream companies of experimental effects as stylistic devices and the avant-garde’s experimental prerogative: ‘the right to fail’.

Success and failure of state companies’ experiments

In their establishment phase most state theatre companies made gestures towards a modern European theatre repertoire. The Union Theatre Repertory Company (later the Melbourne Theatre Company or MTC) opened in 1953 with John Sumner’s production of *Colombe* by Jean Anouilh. It was then a recent London success and a conspicuously modern play from the French stage, but such audacity of programming was not later to be regularly seen at the MTC. In its inaugural flourish in Sydney in 1963, the Old Tote Theatre Company presented Eugene Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna*, and this suggested a concern with an avant-garde aesthetic that was not generally followed through in their later programming. John Tasker chose Max Frisch’s *Andorra* in 1965, to launch the South Australian Theatre Company. These were acknowledgments of the placement of Australian theatre enterprises in their contemporary international context. After these gestures, however, the company programs did not pursue modern work, let alone the avant-garde. These explorations were either ignored, or given over to ‘experimental laboratories’ within the state companies.

The place of experimental theatre within state theatre companies has been a matter of some contention since they were established. What was the role of the state companies? Were they to be the repositories of the theatrical canon? Or were they to pursue commercial success? State companies in Australia have argued their right and even their obligation to do ‘R & D’ in the manner of the experimental spaces attached to theatres like the National
Theatre of Great Britain. Others have contested this, suggesting that the state companies have put up ‘experimental’ projects only to meet the funding guidelines of the Australia Council. Like other theatres, state companies have generated their programs and artistic directions in response to government funding policies.

Until two years after the ‘experimental’ Jane Street season of local plays the Old Tote subscription seasons had still not included an Australian play. However, in 1968 - which was the fifth year of the company’s operation - there was a ‘special season’ of six Australian plays presented by the Old Tote. It was effectively quarantined from the regular subscription season of the Old Tote Theatre, and funded by money - in effect, the money remaining - from the Gulbenkian Foundation’s grant that had supported the earlier Jane Street season. The 1968 season included a new production of Rodney Milgate’s play, A Refined Look at Existence, which had been seen at Jane Street, as well as Milgate’s new play called, At Least You Get Something Out of That. These two pieces were directed by Robin Lovejoy, who was the director of the Old Tote. A Refined Look at Existence was a significant milestone. Lovejoy said of the Jane Street production, “To me the play came to life amazingly under those circumstances.” But he found the second “more commercial” treatment was not as personally rewarding as the first. “There was a quite inexpressible [...] quality about the Jane St. production which involved the audience in a most extraordinary, and for me, a most elating way. It was the most exciting thing I’d ever done in the theatre,” he told John Allen. “To feel this audience response, this was the peak of anything I’d ever done,” Lovejoy said. (Allen 1968a: 7) The 1968 Australian play season was not commercially successful or successful in introducing Australian plays to the general repertoire.¹

The Union Theatre Repertory Company, The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the Old Tote had a similar approach to developing local repertoire by commissioning plays from established authors. There were few successes produced by this strategy. Even the success of Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, for example, did not come from a commission to an outside writer, as Ray Lawler was an actor and director within the Union Theatre Repertory Company. A decade later in 1967, Bill Reed’s play, Burke’s Company, was an artistic success and developed the company creatively. Directed by George Ogilvie, the production introduced advanced mime and physical performance to the mainstream Australian stage.
George Ogilvie had been an actor with the Union Theatre Repertory Company, then he had gone to France to study with Jacques Lecoq. He toured Europe in a comedy duo with Julian Chagrin, until he was persuaded by John Sumner to return to Australia as the Associate Director of the newly re-named Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC). Ogilvie cared about the actors he worked with, and he was deeply respected and liked by them. He introduced workshops to train actors within the MTC and many Melbourne actors were given instruction in mime by Ogilvie.

In 1969 Ogilvie proposed a project for the MTC that was to be developed through the workshop process and it opened up new ground for the company. Influenced by writing by and about Native American people, the young writer Rodney Fisher had suggested to Ogilvie a theatre work which took the viewpoint of Australia’s Aborigines. They shared the direction of the piece and, with a group of keen actors, developed *A Long View*, which grappled with the depiction of the dispossession of the indigenous population. Fisher has commented that the MTC took up this project because the company’s Director, John Sumner, felt them to be “under pressure from the burgeoning *new Australian theatre*.” Believing that he must remain ahead of this trend, Sumner set aside a luxurious three months for Ogilvie, Fisher and the actors to train and to devise *A Long View*. (Guthrie/Fisher interview 1990)

*A Long View* was largely group-devised, Geoffrey Milne has commented, but Rodney Fisher was credited as the playwright. (Guthrie/Milne interview 1989) It was an audacious attempt, for the time, to speak of the terrible truth of the appropriation of Australia from its indigenous inhabitants. Despite the passage of the 1967 referendum acknowledging Aborigines, there was little broader articulation in Australian society of the issues of justice for Aborigines. The weakness of this play was in the indirectness of its statement on the treatment of indigenous Australians because of its dependance on an analogy with American Native people. There was no direct involvement of Australian Aborigines in the project. Fisher’s text spoke in generalities of the ‘dwellers’ and the ‘invaders,’ and so it lost much of the immediate power and significance of the tragedy that had befallen Australia’s Aboriginal people. The play caused a stir, however, and Fisher recalled that he was abused by some audience members on opening night. More than its social conscience, the piece was quite abstract and this disturbed people. “At that time it was unacceptable,” Fisher commented, “that you couldn’t be understood.” He added that “it was all right to be boring.
Or it was all right if people could say, ‘Oh, well, it wasn’t as funny as I thought it would be’. But nobody expected things to horrify them in a mainstream theatre company. I don’t think anything had ever horrified anybody at the Melbourne Theatre Company before,” Fisher said of *A Long View*. (Guthrie/Fisher interview 1990. Italics indicate the emphasis in the taped interview.)

Philip Adams, an early and significant advocate of Australian plays, reviewed *A Long View* in the *Bulletin*. “I was ready to roast John Sumner in this review, (a) for his general reluctance to perform new Australian plays and (b) for the tentative way this particular experiment had been promoted,” Adams wrote in 1969. “Given virtually no publicity *A Long View* was excluded from the formal season structure and staged as a sort of optional extra,” Adams complained, adding that this was “tantamount to warning the Melbourne Theatre Company audience to stay away in droves. Which is exactly what it is doing.” The crunch comes, however, when Adams adds, “I must reluctantly concede that Sumner was right to be reticent. I'd rather a noble failure than a slick success any day, but the *A Long View*, in my view, contains too many errors of judgment to justify a full-scale presentation.” (Adams 1969c: pu) The lasting significance of *A Long View* was that it began Rodney Fisher’s collaboration with George Ogilvie.

The reformist Labour Premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, appointed George Ogilvie to overhaul the South Australia Theatre Company, and backed his radical proposal to adopt an ensemble format and the working methodology of the marginal experimental laboratory theatres. It was a bold gesture which saw the means of art-making of the margins introduced to the central institutions of theatre in South Australia: the state company, the Adelaide Festival and the Adelaide Festival Centre. George Ogilvie became the Artistic Director of the reconstructed company, and with him came two colleagues from the Melbourne Theatre Company: Rodney Fisher, who became the Associate Director, and Helmut Bakaitis, who took charge of youth activities. It was described as “the most ambitious re-training program ever attempted in the professional theatre in Australia,” in the words of the Chair of the Board of the company, at the time. (Ward 1992: 49, 52-3) There was a closed workshop program, free from productions for several months in the first year, in which the actors trained with the three resident directors and also Rex Cramphorn.

Ogilvie assembled a company that included some of the finest actors in Australia. It was
warmly received in Adelaide, at first. They presented two seasons in rolling repertory. This is a format that is notoriously demanding on the technical resources of any company, because it requires frequent changes of stage setting. On top of this, before the opening of the new Playhouse at the Adelaide Festival Centre, they were forced to work in different theatres around the city. This was especially difficult for technicians and actors, and there were growing rumblings of discontent. Stand-offs grew between different factions. Theatre technicians were frustrated by the difficulties in planning caused by uncertainties about when the new theatre would open. The Board pressured Ogilvie over organisational niceties, and the Premier’s office oversaw the project like a protective and demanding parent. Against these pressures the triumvirate of the artistic directors stood firmly together, but the critical reception of company’s work began to wane. (Ward 1992; passim)

The point in the history of Australian theatre when David Williamson’s plays moved from the margin to the mainstage of the state theatre companies, occurred in Adelaide in 1972 with Rodney Fisher’s production of *Jugglers Three*. Williamson’s works had developed a growing reputation with seasons at the ‘radical’ APG, the ‘experimental’ Jane Street and the ‘alternative’ Nimrod Theatre, but Fisher’ production of this play was a landmark.

When the Playhouse opened in 1974, the first production was *The Bride of Gospel Place* by Louis Esson, directed by Rodney Fisher. Ward records that it “received a mixed, even cool reaction.” (Ward 1992: 59) Apart from this ‘rediscovery’ of Esson’s writing and a late-night cabaret that Fisher devised for Margaret Roadknight, there was little to distinguish their choice of plays from the subscriber seasons of other state theatre companies around Australia. The initial impulse to train actors and use the workshop before settling on a choice of plays and working methods, did not alone produce a sustained difference in the plays eventually selected. It was a major contribution, however, to raising standards of acting Australia-wide.

The South Australian Theatre Company developed a more extensive program of theatre for young people than any other before in Australia. With the energetic leadership of Helmut Bakaitis, they made significant innovations; with the company creating and commissioning challenging new works for young audiences. They toured these productions extensively. However, as outside pressures constrained the South Australian Theatre Company’s activities, their theatrical explorations were increasingly focused within the youth theatre
work, especially the workshop program. Much of the flowering, Australia-wide, of youth theatre in the following decade can be traced back to the success of this work in South Australia. The national show-case for youth arts, the Come Out Youth Arts Festival, was established in Adelaide in 1975. Ogilvie remained in Adelaide until 1976 in a complex atmosphere where bureaucracy and politics contended with him for authority in the South Australian Theatre Company. His reputation for innovation in direction was perhaps secondary to the emphasis he placed on ensemble and his faith in the creativity of actors, to whom he gave more fulfilling opportunities than his contemporaries in Australian state companies. He was unique as a teacher-director in the professional theatre in Australia. His attitude ran counter to the prevailing one, which regarded actors largely as production-fodder, and took little care to enhance their skills and expand their opportunities.

Nearly a decade later, in 1981 Jim Sharman directed an adaptation made by Louis Nowra of Frank Wedekind’s *Lulu Plays* for the South Australian Theatre Company. With this version of the searingly sexual avant-garde drama of the early twentieth century, Sharman began the significant body of work with a radical orientation, which he was to do in Adelaide over the early nineteen-eighties. He was appointed the Director of the Adelaide Festival the following year, and commissioned a new play from Patrick White. Finally with *Signal Driver*, which was directed by Neil Armfield, White’s estrangement from the Adelaide Festival was at an end.

Jim Sharman was appointed the Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company in 1982, and he changed its name to Lighthouse. Sharman sought an ensemble basis for their work, and developed an audacious program. The two seasons presented by the Lighthouse company, if not always a success at the box office, were a conscious attempt to set a new agenda for Australian theatre. “We are not going to compromise it by chasing box office hits,” Sharman wrote at the time. “We are pursuing a theatricality similar to that of the Elizabethan theatre,” Sharman explained. (Cited Ward 1993: 107) In his first year leading the state company, Jim Sharman directed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children*, and Louis Nowra’s *The Royal Show*. This was an evocative celebration of a favourite Australian institution, the ubiquitous agricultural show - a colonial inheritance that Australians have made especially their own. Neil Armfield
directed Nowra’s play, *Spellbound*, in this season; and Nowra, himself, directed *The Prince of Homburg* by Heinrich von Kleist. It ran in tandem with *Silver Lining*, by Bill Harding, which was set in post-revolutionary Russia and considered the fate of the characters from Chekhov’s play, *The Three Sisters*. (Ward 1993: 106-7)

There was a consciously post-colonial perspective to the work of Lighthouse. It was Australian, and it took the traditions further into a complex pluralist nationalism. It went beyond either the easy nationalism of the larrikin voices, or the stultified reverence for all things British which had dogged Adelaide theatre at times. There emerged, in Jim Sharman’s program for Lighthouse, a set of postmodern Australian preoccupations and identities that reflected values of the classical theatre. Patrick White wrote *Netherwood* for the company, and Sharman directed it in 1983. (Kruse 1986: 311) In that second year of the Lighthouse company, Armfield directed *Twelfth Night*, and Sewell’s play *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, while Sharman directed Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* and Nowra’s *Sunrise*. Louis Nowra himself directed Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Bill Harding’s play, *Restaurant*, was directed by Jim Sharman. (Ward 1993: 108)

Following the contentious years with Sharman at the helm, and an interregnum with Nick Enright and Kevin Palmer, the Board of the state company chose Keith Gallasch, who had been a founder of Troupe, to become Artistic Director. It was a radical choice of a local leader for the South Australian company. Gallasch changed the company’s name to the State Theatre Company. With Neil Armfield as an Associate Director and later Peter King, Gallasch was there in 1984 and 1985. He said, he was “interested in the idea of a state theatre company working collaboratively with good artists from all over Australia.” His aim was “to create new work,” he said, “in the tradition that went right back to the origins of the State Theatre Company and its constitution, going back to Rodney Fisher and George Ogilvie.” Gallasch described his first year at the company as a “watching brief”, in which, with his modest experience as a director, he invited many exciting people in to work with the company. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) His choice of outside directors was far more adventurous than the norm in state theatre company programs. Jean-Pierre Mignon was invited by Gallasch to direct Moliere’s *Don Juan*; and Ros Horin to direct *Vocations* by Alma De Groen. Aubrey Mellor directed Ibsen’s *The Lady for the Sea*, and Neil Armfield directed *Romeo and Juliet* with a design by Stephen Curtis. Peter King directed Louis Esson’s early twentieth century Australian play, *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe*. All of this
was solid and moderately challenging work, and should have kept the Board and the Adelaide politicians happy; however box office was not good, and there was beginning to be some disquiet.

In the second year of Gallasch’s Artistic Directorship there were successes. One was The Conquest of Carmen Miranda devised and performed by Robyn Archer. It was directed by Neil Armfield. The successful revival of Patrick White’s play, The Season at Sarsaparilla, also strengthened Gallasch’s hold. David Holman’s play, No Worries, was directed by Chris Johnson for the Magpie TIE company to some acclaim. Gallasch himself directed Barry Dickins’ outrageously self-loathing depiction of Australian characters and mores, Beautiland. Critics in Adelaide were scathing. Even if Barry Humphries had made an art of this for nearly twenty years by then, they were affronted to see such an abusive gesture in the context of the state theatre company. In a small, marginal venue, arguably no offence would be taken, but Adelaide had little stomach for this play in the context of its flagship company’s contribution to a youth arts festival.

Peter King’s production of Richard III was an experiment that many believed failed, despite having a daring conceptual base and a set by Peter Corrigan. Local critics in Adelaide hated King’s experimental Shakespeare, and subscribers stayed away. At this point the bravado evident in Gallasch’s programming collapsed. Jenny Kemp’s production of Big and Little by Botho Strauss, was widely admired, but audiences declined alarmingly, and the company was in crisis. Peter Ward appreciated the overall quality of everything in this production, except the script. Leading European postmodernism was not his taste, and he recorded smugly that, “the audience, always the best critics, left in droves.” (Ward 1992: 122) Australian critics have made a habit of hiding their own conservatism behind the supposed attitude of the public. Gallasch had found real difficulty in balancing his artistic vision with the pragmatic demands of a large state organisation and local expectations.

From early in his term as the inaugural Artistic Director of the Sydney Theatre Company, Richard Wherrett had stressed the need for a second theatre to serve a similar role to the Downstairs Theatre at Nimrod. Wherrett had been a Co-Artistic Director of Nimrod before this appointment and he clearly wanted to have access to some of the dynamic options which a small try-out space like Nimrod’s first venue in King’s Cross and then the Downstairs Theatre had offered. “We should have a second venue, an informal theatre,
which would perform the function of the warehouse in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s setup in England,” Wherrett said at the time. (Strachan 1979: 9) “I don’t mind making the Drama Theatre very popularly orientated if I have a second venue, and the Wharf has always been intended to be the risk-taking venue. It’s where we can do our new work,” he said. (Sykes 1984: 39)

Wherrett employed a rhetoric that stressed the need for this state theatre company to have the prerogatives of the avant-garde. “Other companies can’t do our experimenting for us,” Wherrett is reported to have said at the time of the opening of the Wharf Theatre. “We must have the right to fail.” (SMH 14/12/1984: pu) This appropriation of the role of avant-garde theatres by the state companies must be questioned. Was this anything more than rhetoric to justify applications to the Australia Council under the guidelines for ‘innovation’? “Every company needs somewhere where you can do the more extending, difficult, innovative, esoteric kind of works.” Wherrett argued. “Not just as plays, but in terms of acting styles and design concepts as well,” he said. (Radic 1979: pu)

Richard Wherrett directed a triple-bill at the Wharf in 1987, titled No(h) Exit.10 The process of deconstruction suggested by the orthography of the title was not carried through into the substance of the performances of the plays by Sartre and Mishima. Instead there was posturing in borrowed robes (not Japanese at that!) and grimacing with heavy makeup, which presented a sham-orient, like Gilbert and Sullivan in the east, but it lacked the jolly numbers of The Mikado. This was a travesty of the avant-garde. It was clear that either Wherrett was self-deluded over his aptitude for experimental theatre or, it was a cynical manipulation of the funding guidelines. In either case it was unfortunate because it deprived genuinely experimental theatre work of funding,

Superficially the ingredients may have resembled some form of postmodern assemblage; they lacked, however, intellectual and critical rigour in citing and placing these disparate elements from east and west. This program had a fine cast who moved from cliché to cliché via moments of cleverly designed, lit and choreographed awkwardness. Philip Glass’s music from the then recently released movie, Mishima, was there apparently for no better reason than this was a film about the life and work of the famous Japanese author of the plays. Glass’s music was a western artist’s response to this complex and passionate figure from recent Japanese culture, but the dramaturgy of No(h) Exit did not reach such heights. The
way the music was added to the production was fundamentally gratuitous and opportunistic. In von Schlöndorff's film, the music had a critical function underpinning depictions of the obsessional passion of the playwright and his texts. In the Sydney production the music was able to make no such contribution to any exploration of the texts of *Hanjo* and *The Lady Aoi*.

The widely acknowledged 'failure' of this production was not the result of the Sydney Theatre Company *taking risks* in terms of style, form or content. The plays in this program were not workshopped, or investigated in a laboratory situation, or composed from any aesthetic investigation by the director or cast or dramaturg. They were a superficial emulation of the effects of postmodern theatre work internationally: a pale imitation of productions by Wilson or LeCompt. The Sydney Theatre Company's rhetoric about its experimental activities was a cover for its bid for a second house to cater to smaller audiences, defined by subcultural taste.

In 1988 the *Six Years Old Company* was the child of the Australian Bicentennial Authority and the Sydney Theatre Company. It was set up as an in-house alternative to the mainstage company. As such, it was a manifestation of the Sydney Theatre Company's rhetoric about their need for experimentation. Baz Luhrmann was appointed Artistic Director, and he then appointed ex-Anthill Administrator, Gabrielle Baker, with Katerina Ivak as Dramaturg. There were seventeen working on the project in all: an ensemble of eight actors, as well as three designers, a playwright, a production manager, a stage manager and an assistant stage manager. They had a brief to present a season that "might attract more of the young to the theatre," Angela Bennie reported. (Bennie 1988: pu) This group operated with relative independence under the auspices of the Sydney Theatre Company. They performed three works. The first was *Hair-Cut*, set at the opening of a new retrofitted hairdressing salon. It was a look back to the landmark rock musical of twenty years before, *Hair*. However, as Angela Bennie wrote, "*Hair-Cut* plays it safe." There was "no youthful anger here to kick them off into the unknown. No challenge to the old. And certainly not a whiff of revolution," Bennie reported. (Bennie 1988: pu) This is another case of either self-delusion or the manipulation of the opportunities for funding experimental theatre.

Nobody doubted the talent and vitality of Baz Luhrmann and the group of performers, or
the abilities of those running the company. The difficulty was whether a group with the artificial genesis of Six Years Old could apply themselves to exploratory work. Their second offering answered this question. It was a stage version of *Strictly Ballroom*. This had been a piece devised by Luhrmann and fellow students in the acting course at NIDA. It had been taken by them to the International Festival of Drama Academies in Czechoslovakia, where it had won a number of awards, including one for Luhrmann for best production. Luhrmann later made a successful film of *Strictly Ballroom*.

Katerina Ivak directed the final piece for Six Years Old Company, *Angels*, by Tobsha Learner. The critical response demonstrated a level of moral support from the Sydney critics, even if some of it was begrudgingly given. “In this third production of the young experimental Six Years Old, we have their most crafted work yet,” wrote Paul LePetit in the *Sunday Telegraph*. “And yet it is still a long way from being satisfying,” he cautioned. (LePetit 1988: pu) In axiomatic manner, Frank Gauntlet wrote, “the experiment ‘worked’ because the experiment existed.” But he then expressed his doubts. “That its many eager and talented participants have been enriched by their experience gives hope that we can share in that enrichment for many years to come. For the audience, however, the experience of *Angels* is a mixed pleasure.” (Gauntlet 1988: pu)

Suzanne Chaundy commented that they were under pressure as a “very high profile project with only six months to prove their worth.” She wrote that, “They have been given little time to evolve quietly in a more organic fashion.” (Chaundy 1988: 8) Chaundy suggested that there was a central flaw to the project: a company of talented young people had been arbitrarily brought together to fulfil someone else’s idea of what an avant-garde company should be doing. She came close to saying that any failure was not going to be the company’s, but the failure of those who set it up.

**A conclusion: alternative to what?**

When he was running the Melbourne Theatre Company’s experimental theatre project based at Grant Street theatre in 1976, Simon Hopkinson said to me that he would not call it *alternative theatre*. He said that his whole department would then become like the tail of a horse, and if the horse changed direction, then the tail must inevitably follow in opposition to it. This would seem to be a paradox inherent in avant-garde status, when it is defined by
its oppositional position. Ironically though, being *an alternative without being in opposition*, can simply mean that you become a 'second house': the lesser operation of a larger theatre company, presented to justify certain funding parameters, but ultimately a gesture without much substance.

Where state theatre companies developed such in-house alternatives, there is reason to suggest that they have used funding ear-marked for innovation, without significantly pursuing this goal, and in so doing displaced legitimate investigative projects. In the worst case, this has wasted these funds, contributed nothing to the tradition and undermined the credibility of all ventures conducted in the name of innovation.
Marginal centres: the embodiment of modern theatre

The quest for individual vision in the midst of the growing diversity of new theatre in Australia was also an aspect of the reversal in marginality. This individual work opened new ground, and set new trends for the mainstream theatres. Critics were often hostile and asked if these individuals were not ‘going off the rails’? It is the contention of this thesis that this work was shifting the cultural centre, or ‘de-centring’ Australian dramatic narratives and forms of expression away from the colonial models toward specifically local modern expressions.

An apotheosis of modernism: de-centring ‘Australian-ness’

The individualistic work of Jack Hibberd and Lindzee Smith, which has been discussed earlier, along with Roger Pulvers, Michael Mullins and Nicholas Tsoutas can all be viewed as striving for new theatre values. Their very different work has in common their various iconoclastic stances in relationship to the status quo, and the projects they created represented the apotheosis of modernism in Australia. These directors and writer-directors were responding to their contemporary international theatre practices and especially the avant-garde.

Pulvers, Mullins and Tsoutas were not able to sustain long careers creating new theatre in Australia. They flourished in the early nineteen-eighties, at a crucial time when modernism became accepted, and concurrently postmodernism was becoming manifest in avant-garde theatre in Australian. They each negotiated the realisation of modern theatre that carried a commitment to some notion of ‘progress’, whether through revolution or some other mechanism. Each of them was concerned with the inter-cultural dimension of making theatre in Australia through this period.
Roger Pulvers was protean in his efforts to single-handedly reframe theatre in a more cosmopolitan way in his chosen home country. However, Pulvers was alienated from the thrust towards a nationalist theatre in Australia, and ultimately left to achieve recognition in Japan where the inter-cultural substance of his writing was more highly valued. Michael Mullins was an exponent of experimental theatre and was concerned with the structure and placement of performance in the human environment. Mullins was a rebel, who advocated more opportunities for new work. He was instrumental in establishing the Performance Space in Sydney. Nicholas Tsoutas created a political theatre which was aesthetically rich and used the laboratory method as a central means of creating performances. As a Greek-Australian, Tsoutas had a non-English speaking background and looked to the other non-English language theatre traditions to synthesise his own theatre. His rhetoric and his theatre works reflected his commitment to revolution as a means of social change. The Performance Space may have been identified as an ‘alternative’ venue when it was first being set up (1980-1983) but this changed as it later styled itself a “National Centre for Research and Development of Contemporary Arts in Australia”. (The Performance Space policy 1988)

An international perspective: Roger Pulvers

Roger Pulvers was one of the most idiosyncratic playwrights in Australia during this period, and an enthusiastic exponents of theatrical innovation. Born in the United States of America, Pulvers came to live in Australia after living for some years in Japan and Eastern Europe. This background placed Pulvers’ contribution to an Australian theatre on a unique footing. Having left the land of his birth as a protest against the war in Vietnam, Pulvers was in many ways a maverick. The titles of his plays were calculated to provoke discomfort, and they were anything but bowing to commercialism: *Yamashita, Bones, Cedoona, Witold Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires*, and *Bertold Brecht Leaves Los Angeles*. The last two titles self-consciously positioned the playwright - or his alter ego - in the centre of his own stage. These were plays about playing, for which the playwright had largely devised his own rules.

With his forthright and confident manner, Pulvers was feared in local theatre circles as an intellectual. A common assumption about Pulvers was that his plays were weird because he didn’t know how theatre really worked. This was dangerously presumptuous. He was acknowledged as a formidable linguist, who was fluent in Polish, Russian and Japanese; and
translated for the stage from these languages, as well as from Norwegian and Swedish. He was a language teacher, broadcaster and writer, beside his career in the theatre as playwright and director. But beyond this was a man steeped in the traditions of the performing arts. Pulvers had worked his way through university as a professional musician, and he was an expert stage magician. His own charm was a little reminiscent of his great idol, Al Jolson, one of the twentieth century’s consummately skilful popular entertainers.

Pulvers’ early play, *Yamashita*, is a complex and finely written short play. With its closely controlled text, it reflects the form of the no play. Pulvers was a student and friend of Hisao Kanze, one of the most celebrated practitioners of no this century. *Yamashita* is singular as an Australian play that is set in Hawaii, with characters who are Hawaiian, American and the ghost of the Japanese General whose name gives the play its title. Yamashita was the military leader behind the early land-based victories of the Japanese in the Second World War. He was the strategist who pinned Australia down and nearly conquered it. The Australian-ness of the play is implicit only. Although on the surface *Yamashita* takes something of the form of a courtroom drama, it is neither trial nor apology. In the manner of a no performance this play evokes a response, not through dramatic action, but through exposition. *Yamashita* was given a workshop at the 1977 Australian National Playwrights’ Conference, directed by Richard Wherrett. It had a later production at La Mama, Melbourne, and elsewhere.

The Polish theatre tradition has also strongly influenced Pulvers’ theatre, with its love of the bizarre and its ritual intensity derived from the Catholic church. Among the first of Pulvers’ plays to be professionally staged was *Witold Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires*. The play confounded theatre norms. In it the audience find there has been a war, but the action has occurred elsewhere. The play resounds with inferred events, and what is presented is inconsequential, at times flippant, or gross, or arbitrary. These were not flaws in a well-made naturalistic play, these were the rules Pulvers had created for his theatre.

Ron Blair’s production of Pulvers anti-nuclear play, *Cedoona*, was presented by the South Australian Theatre Company in Adelaide. The title was a rendering, in a deliberately Americanised form, of the name of the site of an American military communications base in the Australian desert. The facility, at Ceduna in South Australia, was widely believed to be part of the American global surveillance and early warning system. Pulvers politics was
troubling: he was an American, a foreigner, an outsider within the new Australia play writing. Rejection in Australia of the colonisers - Britain and America - left Pulvers, who had himself relinquished his American citizenship, strangely ill-matched to the mood of the time.\(^2\)

Pulvers' translation of the extraordinary Polish avant-garde play of 1921, *The Two Headed Calf* by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz had been given an amateur production in Alice Springs in 1973, directed by Algis Butavicius. Pulvers' own production of the work was included in the final "Directors' Program" at The Pram Factory in 1981. It was a landmark as the first professional production in Australia of this significant work of European modernism set in this country.

In 1980 the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) purchased the rights to a Pulvers story, *Coma Berenices*, and commissioned him to script it as a radio play. It was produced by David Chandler with a cast of well known actors and a score by Vincent Plush. The ABC intended to enter the production in the *Prix Italia*. Yet before it was broadcast, and without telling the playwright, the Head of ABC Radio Drama and Features, Richard Connolly, withdrew the play. The central character of *Coma Berenices* is a sixteen year old boy, played by Tony Sheldon in the ABC production. It is not a naturalistic play. The boy is an obsessive, in a marginalised world - at odds with his parents, and preoccupied with "birth, death and masturbation [and] his equally obsessive involvement with astronomy," as Barry Hill wrote in *The Age*. (Hill, 1981) When Pulvers heard indirectly of the ban on his play he tried to negotiate with Connolly, who wrote to him that "certain sectors of the Australian public might find it offensive." (Roberts 1981) Pulvers' tenacious response to his play being banned was little short of a campaign in the nation's press arguing against the censoring of his play.\(^3\)

Pulvers' term as Associate Director at the Playbox had come to an end, and the rejection by the ABC came to Pulvers as a considerable blow. He saw few other opportunities to work in Australian theatre. When he was offered work as the first assistant director to Nagisa Oshima on the film *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, Pulvers took the opportunity. He was publicly critical of Australian theatre and some of its self-imposed limitations. This was seen as un-Australian by the humorist and playwright Barry Dickins. Pulvers had made the rhetorical point that, had Australia been invaded by the Japanese in the mid-twentieth
century instead of only by the British at the end of the eighteenth century, we may have had a more rich cultural life. Dickins - in his persona as the little Aussie battler, the digger - was not amused. There was an acrimonious debate in the press. Pulvers left Australia in 1984 for Japan. Dickins continued to publish angry letters to the editor. Pulvers wrote his autobiography in Japanese for his Japanese publishers.

Living sculpture: Michael Mullins

While each is differently framed - politically and artistically - the internationalism in Roger Pulvers' theatre has a number of thing in common with the theatre of Michael (Mike) Mullins. Both have made strong comments on the relationship between Australia and the United States of America, and both have had active links with Polish theatre.

Michael Mullins' work was aesthetic and formal, yet in his own view it was also political: his living sculptures and conceptual events were conceived to subvert powerful conservative traditions in Australian society. Mullins' pseudo-mythical figures attacked institution such as the digger and the little Aussie battler. They also made a savage commentary on the Americanisation of Australian society and the fabric of Australian culture.

Mullins had organised Jerzy Grotowski's journeys to Australia in 1973 and 1974, and he was strongly influenced by the methods of the Polish Theatre Laboratory. Mullins worked in 1976 with members of the Theatre Research Group, who were also influenced by Grotowski, on a production called Shadowline. The foundation of this production was Büchner's proto-modernist play, Woyzeck. There are elements in Mullins work that are reminiscent of Büchner (1813-1837), the revolutionary disillusioned with revolution. They each created theatre that challenged given notions of class, and economic and moral precepts. Both were dissidents, in their different historical periods, angry with a world they saw as manipulated by powerful unseen hands. Büchner was his model in Mullins' early work when he created theatre which was consciously structured as a series of settings or tableaux. In Mullins' work, as it was in Büchner, parody and travesty combined with tragedy in formal investigations of theatre and the world we live in.

The theatre laboratory methodology was the other dominant influence on Mullins' theatre
practice. For the Theatre Workshop at Sydney University, he conducted a year of intensive workshops during 1977. These and other sustained workshop programs run by Mullins fed into his exploration of theatre as living sculpture, and a production called, *Montage*, at the Pilgrim Theatre in Pitt Street, Sydney in 1978. There was also a second version of the earlier work, *Shadowline II*, again based on the living sculpture idea, with ‘tableaux’ which were thematically linked. At the end of that year Mullins took a related work, *Ocker Cartoon*, to Poland and performed it in student clubs. (Mullins 1979)

Michael Mullins struggled to establish his own theatre practice and to provide opportunities for others to work in a similar vein. His frustration at some of the knock-backs he received, led him to speak out, and he was regarded as an angry voice of protest. Although Mullins received a Director’s Development grant from the Australia Council in 1979, he was later unsuccessful with an application for a Limited Life grant from the Theatre Board. Such support would have allowed Mullins to work systematically with a group for a year. He was outraged that they “gave the money to a Shakespeare-in-workshop project instead - colonial theatre,” he said in an interview with Barry Oakley. “I was so angry and depressed I put on my three piece suit, topped it off with a brown paper bag over my head and walked around Paddington,” he explained. (Oakley 1982: pu) He was outraged and his response took the form of a guerrilla attack on normal social activity.

Mullins’ career as a performance artist was headlines in 1981, when he was arrested in Sydney for appearing at an Australia Day celebration dressed as an Australian soldier but wrapped entirely in bandages. This enigmatic public persona Mullins called, No-one. It was the basis of many solo performance which he gave over the next few years. He created a theatre piece for Downstairs at the Nimrod Theatre in July 1982, in which he explored the neo-colonial relationship between Australia and America. It was titled *Kitsch or Australiana*... and Mullins’ press release referred to a recent unsettling political story in Australia: “No-one works for Nugan Hand Bank,” it stated. Frank Nugan had been the head of a Sydney-based Merchant bank until he disappeared in suspicious circumstances. There were suggestions of an association between him and an American intelligence operation to laundered money from illicit drugs, but despite some investigative reporting, these matters were largely left unexplored in the Australian media. Mullins’ work was politically timely, but the critic Jill Sykes was dismissive of this “parade of Australia’s sacred objects and Aunt Sallies.” Sykes thought, “It was all rather juvenile - a sideshow rather than a piece of
theatre.” The mixture of slide-show and voice-over, ironic use of music and popular imagery, Sykes found slight, even if it was “underlining Australia’s complacency in the face of foreign domination, particularly American.” (Sykes 1982: pu)

Over several years, Mullins created an unfolding series of solo characters: No-one, The Lone Anzac, Agent Orange and Doomsday Bubble Man. He staged carefully contrived appearances at chosen sites of social and political significance for white Australia: the War Memorial and Parliament House in Canberra, an official appearance at the Court of Petty Sessions in Sydney, as well as Martin Place and the Royal Botanical Gardens. The Lone Anzac was seen at the Royal Easter Show, where school children taunted, graziers stood back bemused at his troubling presence, and others warmly patted the figure on the back and said, “Yeah, right mate, that makes a lot of sense.” (Portus 1989) He camped on Bondi Beach, and appeared at an Australian Football League Grand Final in Melbourne, standing silently under the scoreboard.

The theatre of these events was in the responses people made to these provocative presences. Figures created by Mullins wordlessly carried a series of changing flags - at first an Australian flag, and later a flag with the Stars and Stripes supplanting the Union Jack in the corner, then and later still, a light blue flag with the stars of the southern cross and the Federation alone. “I became quite seduced by this, as an artist. To be out there, in amongst the mainstream of life. There’s quite an exciting edge,” he said in an ABC interview. “I suppose it’s in many ways like, in the extreme example of it - when the Lone Anzac confronted Prince Charles in the Botanical Gardens and actually diverted his path - in this moment there was an edge probably not unlike stunt people. It is a real adrenaline thing. You are testing, you are really testing. I mean, even just walking around town with a brown paper bag on your head, you’re testing. In a way I suppose it’s a form of terrorism.” (Mullins 1989)

Michael Mullins work with the Theatre Workshop at Sydney University and with Derek Nicholson led to them setting up the Performance Space, in Cleveland Street, Strawberry Hills. In fact, Mullins lived in the building and was its founder Co-ordinator, as well as caretaker. He reworked his production of New Blood with the help of designer Silvia Jansons, and put it on in the space in 1980. The Performance Space opened officially in 1983 with Mullins’ Long, Long Time Ago.
At Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo, Mullins lived for three weeks in a cage as a Homo sapiens exhibit. "I see the human animal as a caged animal, we carry a cage within ourselves," Mullins said in an interview whilst in the cage at Taronga Zoo in 1984. (Portus 1989) He linked this work with the issue of nuclear weapons, and a sign on the cage warned the visitors that the animal inside the cage was "the most dangerous animal in the world." Mullins took the opportunity to invite the Chairman of the Australia Council and senior Council staff into the cage to a lunch, and whilst offering champagne, complained that the "Australia Council maintains a colonial culture" in Australia. (O'Brien 1984) Mullins was to amplify similar ideas in his response to the McLeay Committee enquiry into arts patronage in Australia in 1986. He identified Australia as still dominated by "foreign formulae," and stated that "it is impossible to achieve excellence of significant invention, innovation and originality when government and cultural agencies locate excellence, not in authentic indigenous invention, but in artificial, superficial, quick, easy and always fabulously glossy achievements that are based on the practice of re-invention, re-creation, and reproduction of content, style and form that has originated from other individuals and other cultures." (Parsons 1987: 96)

Mullins commented strongly on the way both avant-garde arts practice and its audience were treated with condescension. "This attitude that the Australian people aren't interested in the avant-garde, that's bullshit!" he said. "I've been out there amongst Australian people in a fairly extreme outfit, a fairly extreme statement, and the Australian people have got very valid things to say about that. Very valid reactions, to things like that." (Portus 1989) Mullins suggested that the style of arts patronage in Australia, at the time, was condescending. At the 1985 Orange Festival of the Arts which was under the direction of Eamon D'Arcy, Mullins created an event titled: _The Invasion of No-one_. The week long event included the participation of one hundred and thirty children from three local schools, who had been sworn to secrecy by Mullins, as they prepared clone-like replications of his uniformed character: No-one. In a soldier's uniform, bandaged head and hands, this was the living-dead version of the unknown soldier. The Returned Services League were not impressed. A form of panic overran Orange as their children prepared in secret for this parodic ritual, aimed more at stopping war than celebrating our warrior dead.

The Australian National Playwrights' Conference in 1985 saw a workshop production of _Illusion_, a text that Peter Carey and Michael Mullins had devised. The Adelaide Festival
provided a substantial amount of funding for a production of *Illusion* for 1986; however, it was far from successful, despite a cast with much experience in experimental theatre. The premise of the show was to turn Mullins’ by then familiar gallery of public characters into a rock musical, with No-one, a Glowing Man, Yellow Cake, a CIA man who was disguised as Groucho Marx, and Big Business reptiles. But no amount of Suzuki stomping, or circus skills or rock and roll could save this show. Mullins’ career now took a different turn, as he took charge of the performing arts component of Expo 88 in Brisbane. Here Mullins was dealing with a reported $4 million budget, massive public spectacle, and a local and an international avant-garde showcase. This sideshow of delights now took over for Mullins where confrontation and provocation had previously been dominant strategies.

**Work in extremity: Nicholas Tsoutas and the All Out Ensemble**

The internationalism of Pulvers and Mullins has another parallel in the concerns of Nicholas (Nick) Tsoutas, especially his preoccupation with Polish theatre. His vision also tended to de-centre the orientation of Australian theatre towards Eastern Europe.

Nicholas Tsoutas had emerged from the Flinders University drama course at the end of the nineteen-seventies and formed the All Out Ensemble. In the work of this group Tsoutas voiced his commitment to political radicalism of the left, and applied his knowledge of the critical issues informing art practice at the time. All Out Ensemble was funded by the Australia Council and spanned the years 1980 to 1987. To some, the body of work created by Nicholas Tsoutas with the All Out Ensemble appeared to be abusive and incoherent, for others it was an exciting new realm of performance event. Tsoutas was a visual artist and his theatre was heavily influenced by visual art theory and practice. All Out Ensemble had few trained theatre people, and the group included painters, photographers and writers.

Nicholas Tsoutas work with the All Out Ensemble in the early nineteen-eighties challenged convention in the manner of the avant-garde. Tsoutas’ utterances were charged with a hubris reminiscent of the historical avant-gardes, while being also characteristic of the larrkin Australian. The eighties may have produced a particular protesting rhetoric - often outright abusive: the *insolence of the Punk generation*. If bourgeois society - the press and arts bureaucrats - found Tsoutas confronting, there was more, his rhetoric also had the stridency of a left-wing ideologue.
Their first devised piece, *Basketweaving for Amateurs*, was not first performed in a theatre but at Roundspace Gallery in Adelaide, and then later at Bouverie Street Theatre in Melbourne, in April 1981. It was about the Australian modernist painter, Margaret Preston. Tsoutas recalled, “the more we researched into her life we discovered here was this warped brain living in conventional, conservative surroundings.” (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

The production has a text by Christopher Barnett. Tsoutas commented that, Christopher Barnett “fragmented - in a discursive manner - fragmented the line, and the structure,” to create the text for this performance. For Tsoutas, Barnett’s work was almost heroic in its determination to abstract contents - whilst maintaining a strictly Marxist rationale. Tsoutas explained that Barnett’s text for *Basket Weaving for Amateurs*, “included musical structures - rock and roll, jazz structures. To the point that - to the ordinary reader - his stuff is nonsense,” Tsoutas said. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

Tsoutas commented on the frame of reference used by different audiences in reading this performance: Theatre goers did not understand it, but the visual art audiences did. The practices of performance art were known to the visual arts audience, and that provided a reading strategy which was appropriate to the work of All Out Ensemble. Tsoutas' concerns were like those of the visual arts practitioner, for whom object and critical discourse can become one, without too much concern for the paying customer. In this performance he said, “There was no real centre: it was de-centred. It was exploring a criticality within itself, at the same time as you were watching a piece of performance or the object,” said Tsoutas, “you were also observing critique.” (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

As well as the work they devised and performed, key modern plays were a feature of Tsoutas and the All Out Ensemble’s output. They worked in Adelaide on a double-bill of plays by Franca Rame and Dario Fo: *Strage di Stato*, which consisted of *Ulrike Meinhof Sex Female Communist*, and *Tomorrow’s News*. In Hobart in October 1980, under the banner of the Australian Nouveau Theatre (ANT), Tsoutas directed a program of Peter Handke’s plays titled: *Sprechstücke*, which comprised *Offending the Audience* and *Self Accusation*. In addition to these key contemporary works, Tsoutas directed Witkiewicz’s avant-garde play from 1923, *The Madman and the Nun*, at the Anthill Theatre, in South Melbourne. A little later in 1981 they staged another double-bill, this time at the Red Shed in Adelaide, followed by a season at Anthill Theatre. It consisted of *Can’t Help Dreaming*
by Adelaide poet Jenny Boult, and Waking Up by Fo & Rame.  

Situation Normal...Cut Up was the next production devised by All Out Ensemble. It was about police corruption and involvement with drugs, and was staged in Adelaide at the Experimental Art Foundation. “We performed it in a pit with the audience above us looking down,” said Tsoutas. “The script consisted of police commission reports which were cut-up in Burroughsesque style - we literally cut them all up, wrote other bits, and cut them up too, threw it all in a hat, and picked out the script. Everyday it was cut up again, and the process was repeated - there was all this chopped up language but it was amazing how its meaning was retained.” (Sturak 1985: 4)

Their next work was Selling Ourselves for Dinner, devised for the 1982 Adelaide Festival, and it moved further towards performance art by using for its performing space, an entire city block, including an underground car park. As Tsoutas told Sturak: “The audience had to walk long distances from one area to another.” The situational nature of the performance challenged the orthodoxy of theatre-bound performance. “Restrictions were broken, parameters were widened, and people were allowed to permeate at their own free will.” (Sturak 1985: 4) This production explored a notion of simultaneous action in which the “linear and logical developments of character and story-line within a narrative construction are eliminated. Rather than all the performers relating to the same little crisis, they are each executing separate, independent, alien actions.” (Sturak 1985: 4) This type of de-centred spatial and textual approach invites responses from its audience. As Tsoutas has been quoted as saying on this, “when the audience realises that there are all these simultaneous happenings, they are suddenly all over the place, rushing to catch everything, like a rock concert.” (Sturak 1985: 4)

After Tsoutas had been appointed the Artistic Co-ordinator of the Performance Space in Sydney, in 1983, the All Out Ensemble performed a number of works there, including a trilogy which comprised: Permutations into Darkness, Age of Innocents in April 1985, and Asleep at the Wheel in July 1985.

Tsoutas differentiated between his work and a dominant Anglophile tradition in Australian theatre. “I consider myself an Australian artist, right? But looking at my work,” Tsoutas said, “those images are not quite the sensibility that usually emanates from this country. But
they are a sensibility of most oppressed people.” Significantly, Tsoutas positioned himself in such a way that he implied a minority status. He was not so much emphasising his own marginality within Australia, but he was suggesting the marginality of Australia itself in a post-colonial framework. The “oppressed” are universal, the Australian mainstream was insignificant on a global scale. It was only in the nineteen-eighties that a position such as this could be articulated in Australia. Tsoutas commented that, “I’ve had a number of Greek non-theatrical people come and see the shows, and they have understood very quickly, that the work is anti-capitalist, is anti-religion, is anti-fascist.” This was a shift, Tsoutas indicated, in the cultural centring of Australia in this period. “They’ve understood,” Tsoutas stated. They were his benchmark for the work. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

A Greek-Australian, Tsoutas’ political radicalism had its background in the traumatisation of Greece at the conclusion of World War Two. At Yalta it had been determined that Greece would be a part of Western Europe, however, Greece was liberated by the Greek communist partisans. Their brief triumph was snatched from them by their erstwhile Allies, who turned on them. Greeks were gunned down in the streets of Athens by Allied forces. Another attempt at Socialism via the ballot box saw the army snatch control of Greece in 1967. Nicholas Tsoutas viewed international events of 1968 as another failed revolution. *Asleep at the Wheel*, which was originally entitled, *1968 - Asleep at the Wheel*, was an outcome of Tsoutas’ belief that there had been a lack of revolutionary rigour in 1968, and an outright lack of ability to seize the moment. “As revolutionary situations developed the people involved couldn’t simply carry out a cold, clinical hidden method of warfare,” he told Sturak. (Sturak 1985: 4)

Tsoutas has described the world in terms of “a nightmare.” This was not an empty expression for him, or a failure of vision. It was a view of the times, based on his ideological position and expressed in his aesthetics which were couched in the key modern trope of a failure of society and culture. He spoke of “this nightmare, the hell that we all live,” and embraced the theatre traditions of twentieth century Poland. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989) Wracked with war and suffering, Poland became emblematic for Tsoutas. He said, “their artists are going to see things not in the comfort of the Western art-makers, but they are going to see something about the human condition that comes through genocide, sacrifice, humanity on the brink of disaster and total eclipse.” (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)
In All Out Ensemble's production of *The Age of the Innocents*, Tsoutas had chosen to confront the audience as they entered the theatre with a person in evening dress with his hand out to shake the hand of the audience member, but with a mirror for his face. In holding his particular *mirror up to nature*, Tsoutas spoke of an "ugliness", in the interview he gave. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989) He was not concerned in this with the petty psychology of naturalism. Tsoutas was confronting the audience with the denial of difference within the Australian population. The "ugliness" he saw in the mirror was not the character flaws dwelt upon in a play by David Williamson, nor was it the local shallowness and derivativeness described in Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness*; it was the deadening burden of integration and assimilation which for decades had silenced voices which might have described the diverse Australian cultures.

There was a sense of outrage for the *punk generation*, just too young to have participated in the euphoria of the counter culture's tilt, Quixote-like, at Utopia. Youth of the later nineteen-seventies and the nineteen-eighties were plunged suddenly into the recession mentality of the time, knowing the freedoms of the flower generation which were so recent, but themselves restrained by the grim and anxious preoccupations of the following decade. Inevitably there was an anger in the generation who came to adulthood at this time. Tsoutas can be compared to the historical avant-gardes, which he cited when he said, "what I wanted to do - you know Mayakovsky said, it was *a slap in the face to public taste* - to me, I think it was probably more a punch in the face." (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989) He had an ambivalent relationship to his supposed audience. He wished to empower the audience to construct a reading of his work for itself. At the same time, he was contemptuous of the audience's shortcomings in fulfilling this active role. There are in the generic model of the avant-garde quite simply two 'audiences,' and Tsoutas's differing attitudes can be seen to apply to them. A slap for the befuddled bourgeoisie, and empowerment for the *cognoscenti*.

During the period there had been a debate amongst some practitioners of experimental theatre - particularly that which was called *theatre research* - about the appropriate attitude to take to the audience. Some thought that the audience would be a small, and thus a privileged group, invited to observe a *hermetic process*. They were averse to the audience assuming the powerful position of *the paying customer*, who would wish to be *pleased* by the entertainment. A different view was that theatre was an *exchange between audience and players*, and that it was essentially an opportunity to investigate - more or less.
systematically - what worked in this relationship, why it worked, and how.

Nicholas Tsoutas candidly revealed a lack of resolution in his work between his subscription to the first of these understandings, which regarded the performance as an exploration which the audience might observe, and his directorial concern with confounding expectations and deliberate manipulation of the audience.

But I usually don’t [think about the audience] - I lie, I usually do. I think, if you have to deal with the performer, you have to deal with the audience as well. But I like to think, if all things were equal, I'd like not to think about the audience. And in a sense what I like to think is that the audience that comes to this sort of theatre [does so] because they want to engage in a particular way. There’s a danger of preaching to the converted here. There’s also a danger of the thrill-seeker and all that shit. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989. Emphasis indicated from recorded interview)

The contradiction which was apparent in these statements, was present in Tsoutas’ work also. It defied a neat resolution, and was indicative of a broader dissonance - but not absolute contradiction - between ideological radicalism and aesthetic radicalism. Tsoutas subscribed to both. In the above statements can be found Grotowski’s high tone of asceticism, and yet Tsoutas created productions of lavish experiential detail. Tsoutas and his fellow artists saw themselves creating an artwork, analogous to a painting, and demanded for themselves and their work some of the parameters available for a work of visual art. These included a notion that the critical issues of the work will be a part of the performance, as well as implied in the context - as with an exhibition. That the receiver of the works will acknowledge this curatorial context in making a reading of the work; and that many different readings by different audience members (and each audience member) are possible. He knew his cognoscenti audience and addressed them quite specifically in the work.

The power relationship of the performance and its audience is a key critical issue. Tsoutas has said that he does not understand “the theatrical as being like a subservient act of exchange, where I do this sort of thing for a price.” Using these terms, he has sought to reject the performance as a kind of prostitution yet he has also asserted its dominant nature. Yet he has described his work, with its openness to different ‘readings’, as an empowerment.
of the audience. "You beg them to take that power and do something with it," Tsoutas said. "And if it means [the audience] stopping the work, that's the tantalising thing," he added, and continued, "The language of the audience is always - it doesn't matter who they are - is always so submissive. They love being fucked up the arse. You know, they love it. And in a sense this is the heritage of bourgeois system." (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

It is reasonable to question this 'gift' to the audience. Is it a gesture giving the audience power, which is then suddenly and cruelly reversed and they are metaphorically abused for their invariably submissive nature? Then the theatre act was not "a subservient act of exchange" but a dominating action done to an audience. The choice of violent images tempts consideration of Erich Fromm's discussion of the cruelty of the sadist, in whose unpredictability of behaviour there is an alternation from the show of kindness to cruelty. Fromm suggested, "the core of sadism, common to all its manifestations, is the passion to have absolute and unrestricted control over a living being, whether animal, child, man, or woman." (Fromm 1973: 288) Tsoutas cited Jerzy Grotowski as his model, "The work is brutal on the body, and I understand that the Grotowski tradition is that the body is so committed that it transcends everything, it transcends pain." Speaking of his own work, The Age of the Innocents, Tsoutas reflected:

The only thing we did for the first three or four week was - I had the performers walking in the rehearsal space at imperceivable slow motion. So slow it becomes cathartic. This is all day! That was all! And doing this exercise that I wanted: no movement at all. People had to stand for an hour at a time, with no movement. So that they become a still life, their own mask. And the feed back on that was total catharsis! People went into gold nightmares, and things like that! But the slow motion one was eight hours of slow motion, no breaks. " (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

Tsoutas and his working process were not alone in raising questions about the role of director in the quasi-religious zeal of experimental theatre - particularly that influenced by Grotowski's writing on the holy theatre. In the early seventies the Performance Syndicate, the APG and Claremont were companies which sought to reconcile an ideal of disciplined training and visionary purpose with a democratic process. Perhaps an impossible task, and one which at times was deeply divisive. Grotowski acknowledged Artaud's importance and
indicated the points where the writings of this “poet of the possibilities of the theatre” anticipated his own work. “Anarchy and chaos,” Grotowski wrote, citing Artaud, “should be linked to a sense of order, which he conceived in the mind, and not as a physical technique.” And Grotowski quotes an image from Artaud which, he suggests, is “the very foundation of the actor’s art of extreme and ultimate action. ‘Actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signalling to us from their stakes.’” (Grotowski 1968: 93)

The Polish-American critic Jan Kott has suggested the theatrical explorations of Grotowski’s company were self-realised, insulated and ritualistic, in a similar manner to the psychology of cult adherence. (Kott 1984: 157ff) There are questions of the negotiation of power between directors and performers. How valid is a prevalent notion of the absolute reason of the director triumphing over the un-focused emotionalism of the actors? This rationality may veil the tyranny of the director’s role. Tsoutas does not subscribe to a domineering role for the director. Nonetheless, the possibility of tyranny of the guru-director must be considered. On the opening night of The Age of Innocents, Tsoutas has recalled, one of the main performers broke his hand: The All Out Ensemble prided themselves on the rigour of their approach. “The guy holding the gun up and running full speed for the first twenty minutes,” Tsoutas said, “caught his finger and snapped his wrist. I was sitting in the front row and he winced. But then he went back and did the same thing at full pace with a broken wrist all through the show - shwew shwew shwew - he didn’t stop the pace of the work at all,” recalled Tsoutas with evident pride. (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989)

The All Out Ensemble pursued a violent regime to achieve their performance material. Grotowski spoke of a ‘secular holiness’. It was premised on the same moral tightrope as the religious paradox of sacred transgression, in which the taboo ironically gives the potentiality of a rupture which allows access to the divine. Interestingly the language used applies almost equally to anarchy, sex and religious mysticism. “If the actor, by setting himself a challenge publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self penetration.” (Grotowski 1968: 34)

The model of experimental work constructed here was transcendent. It was revelatory. Its violence promised fulfilment. Questioning the role of the director, was one of the issues of
the time, and many struggled trying to redefine this role. Whilst some groups in the period willingly gave guru status to their leaders, other groups followed a more complex patterns. Tsoutas was a collaborator with his company of artists. There was a tension between Tsoutas’ central placement of performers, and his denial of the conventional training and criteria for selection of performers. In this contradiction may lie the hubris of the avant-garde: to reject the tradition and its disciplines and to substitute disciplines of its own. But these new disciplines were so extreme that we should consider if their severity was not a means to place such work beyond any possible reproach that the avant-garde is formless, easy or self-indulgent.

Nicholas Tsoutas was appointed the curator of Performance Art at the 1985 Perspecta at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; and the curator of Soundworks Festival at the 1986 Sydney Biennale. With Sarah Miller he was to edit the theoretical theatre journal, Spectator Burns; and in 1989 he was appointed Director of the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane.10

A place for new form productions: The Performance Space, Sydney

The struggle for the acceptance of their individual vision that was the common core of both Mullins’ and Tsoutas efforts, and this was embodied in the Performance Space, in Sydney. It promised to be a new venue for their own innovative works, and it gave the same opportunity to others like them in the face of Sydney’s chronic lack of theatres.11 In the terms used by Michael Mullins in the early nineteen-eighties, it was a venue for ‘new form’ work. From somewhat ad hoc beginnings the Performance Space expanded its horizons by including the visual arts. John Baylis and Christopher Allen worked with Mullins at this early period, and gradually the space became a more formal venture. The Arts Unit, which was an important aspect of avant-garde art in Sydney in the early nineteen-eighties, had a major input into the Performance Space. The “long struggle” Michael Mullins had to set up the Performance Space and to persuade the funding authorities that it was a viable proposition, had a positive outcome in 1983 when it officially opened. (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)

The Performance Space was an important venue that showcased work which spanned the transition between modern theatre and postmodern theatre in Australia. In 1985 Allan Vizents, who had set up the multi-arts, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), was
appointed Artistic Co-ordinator. He was primarily a visual artist. “So that meant that there
was a real shift in the operations,” Miller commented. (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)
Vizents unfortunately died quite soon after taking up the job, but the Board carried out the
artistic program he had designed. There was a stronger engagement with contemporary
theoretical issues and a broader engagement with the visual arts at the Performance Space.

The organisation continued to grow, with close to a doubling of its listed activities in 1986
across performing arts events, gallery exhibitions, seminars and interdisciplinary events. The
theatre was a much sought-after venue in Sydney. The AETT placed a number of artistically
daring touring productions at the Performance Space, through its Australian Contents
Department (which later became independent and was called Performing Lines).

The next appointment to the Artistic Co-ordinator’s role was the interdisciplinary artist,
Noelle Janaczewska, in 1986. She continued to strengthen the notion of the Performance
Space being a national centre for contemporary arts practice. Janaczewska was concerned
with the importance of theory. “Providing the kind of structures,” Miller suggested, “so that
these new work didn’t just disappear out of history, and we weren’t always in the position
of reinventing the wheel. Which, of course, has been the thing which has dogged the
development of avant-garde, experimental, innovative, new form theatre in this country,”
she said. (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990) Whilst Barbara Allen was the Administrative
Co-ordinator a number of initiatives were set up, including the first conference, the Politics
of the Body, which was associated with Perspecta ‘87.12 (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)
The Open Dance Week, was another initiative of this period. These developments were
strong contributions to the local culture of performance making.13

Sarah Miller was herself to become the Artistic Co-ordinator of the Performance Space in
1989. She has suggested that by this time, visitors coming from overseas to see
contemporary performance in Australia were aware of the Performance Space.
(Guthrie/Miller interview 1990) The Performance Space increasingly worked in
co-operation with other national organisations, especially PICA, with whom a cross-cultural
exchange program was set up with Asian artists.

The Performance Space was not set up as a community-orientated space. Yet, positioned
in the inner city near Redfern - which is characterised by its high-profile Aboriginal
community - there was a recurrent question: ‘Is it not an elitist institution?’ Miller
suggested that in the late nineteen-eighties there were “multiple minority groups,” and she proposed that “it could equally be argued that, in different ways, the artists that we service at the Performance Space are very much a minority group of their own.” (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)

The Performance Space continued to be troubled by some uncertainty about the security of its tenancy in the building; and its funding-base was not sufficient for it to comfortably resource its users. Nonetheless, strong contemporary performance groups emerged from the Performance Space in the mid-nineteen-eighties, including Sydney Front, Open City, and Legs on the Wall. Lyndal Jones had an influential residency at the Performance Space, and cross-over groups like Mind/Body/Split, were a significant feature of the program. Tess de Quincey conducted workshops and gave performances of Body Weather butoh, and outside companies used the space, including the Melbourne-based, Time and Tide Theatre, with Lindzee Smith and Rhonda Wilson. They performed two plays by Daniel Keene in 1986: *The Hour Before My Brother Dies* and *Angels Tomorrow*. The Performance Space hosted ground-breaking installations and events that explored the interface of technology and art.  

A conclusion: late capitalism and postmodernism

Mullins and Tsoutas and those who followed them at the Performance Space in Sydney, struggled ‘heroically’, and this venue was secured and it appeared to prosper. But experimental groups were still only ever funded on a project-by-project basis in Australia. This mitigated against those retaining an aspiration to conduct long-term theatre laboratory research. The ‘dissident voices’ of the avant-garde were not encouraged. The avant-garde was implicitly regarded as a passing-phase - like adolescence - and funded as such. There was little acceptance of the argument that, even to get ‘value for money’, groups had to be supported to do long and sustained periods of systematic research. That only after this ‘investment’ could there be any benefits for the project and the theatre at large.

By the mid-nineteen-eighties there was not the range of support for avant-garde theatre to be found in Australia that had been available with policies embracing diversity at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. Even in the nineteen-seventies there had been more opportunities in an environment where a lack of policies had allowed - possibly accidentally
considerable support for non-conventional theatre in Australia. The political climate was not encouraging for “the generation of younger artists coming through,” Miller said in 1989. “We are not seeing the emergence of young new companies who are doing work. And I think that is a problem to do with economics,” Miller commented.15 (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990) There were increasing levels of inequity in Australian society, and this had a big impact on the production of marginal art. The confidence of artists and radicals of all kinds - who had set out to change the world in the previous decade - was shaken. This led to some confusion, but also to new strategies which reflected the emerging relationships of radical impulses and a complex modern world.

Even in this context the cumulative effect of the theatre created by Pulvers, Mullins and Tsoutas challenged the general rift of mainstream theatre in Australia and contributed to the gradual deflection of the established theatre institutions away from their colonial patterns.
Part three:
Bodies of postmodernism...
Bodies in Space: visual theatre

In the third part of this thesis we look at theatre within the context of postmodern pluralism. In postmodernism any notion of the future as a unified cultural expression or national expression, which had been conveyed within modernism, had become unviable. Postmodern society was complex and defused into a number of clusters of cultural practices: the ‘bodies of postmodernism’ of the title of this part of the thesis.

In avant-garde theatre in Australia by this time there was a general engagement with international practices and critical concerns, and a concentration on the human body, especially stimulated through post-structuralist and feminist discourses (concerned with gender, representation and the reception of meaning by an audience - comparable to the making of meaning by the reader). Humour and hype and camp were key components of postmodern theatre, as they had been of the marginally placed alternative theatres of the nineteen-seventies.

Nigel Triffitt, Valerie Kirwan and Jenny Kemp as well as the Handspan Theatre were survivors in the struggle to gain support and to continue to work. Their work reflected the broad concerns of postmodernity.

Postscript: postmodernity

Experiment and workshop became less self-consciously employed within postmodernism, although their ‘lessons’ were frequently acknowledged. In the Australian theatre, as was the case internationally, there was a shift away from unitary notions of ‘progression’ - including such conventions as, social realism, naturalism, nationalist theatre - towards multiple subcultures. Any grand idea of a sweeping revision of theatre was quietly abandoned. The preoccupation within modernism of inventing new theatre forms, was replaced by a strategy of selecting from existing forms with the possibility of employing them in complex and mutating patterns. A number of other key strategies were employed
in postmodern theatre, including approaches to art-making based on visual arts theory and practice. Critical theory was often a prompt for the creation of theatre work and even, at times, the substance of such work. The question of the 'right' to make art - to be an author, an artist - had been a central idea in modernism and, although problematic, it remained central to postmodernism.

There continued to be little in the way of sustained financial support for avant-garde theatre in Australia, but if fickle policies did not encourage, they also did not altogether halt the creation of such theatre in the mid-nineteen-eighties. The state companies sometimes adopted a notion of postmodernism as if it were a production style. This resulted in productions in which an over-importance was given to stage setting, at the expense of other values: this became a theatre dominated by the designer.

Modernism carried within it the strategy of confrontation and the imperative of progress; while postmodernism offered plurality of practice and diffusion as a way ‘forward’, rather than a united progression of any sort. Modernism had adopted strategies of ‘testing’ artistic authenticity through the confrontational means adopted initially by the historical avant-gardes: authentic modern art was original and pointed - usually abusively - to the derivativeness of everything which preceded it. Inevitable these attacks on the old became performative gestures, rather then each and every one mounting a systematic attack on the old guard. The ‘rude gesture’ of the avant-garde became a ‘signature’ of authenticity. The gesture was supposed to be brutal, abandoned and carried out with a rigour which smashed the existing institutions of art. It was deeply ironic then, that increasingly this strategy was deployed only as an aesthetic effect, an ornament. The artifice of this led to the paradoxes we can observe in postmodern work of authenticity without originality, drama of inaction, and the ironic spectacle of ambiguity, parody and travesty most directly addressing their subjects.

As the thrust for community art and the creation of regional theatre companies in Australia waned, small groups and individuals, especially in the main cities, deliberately pursued theatre work which was characterised as postmodern or avant-garde performance. The historical avant-gardes were consciously adopted as models by several significant postmodern performance groups in Australia, at this time. Non-English language theatre was increasingly recognised in its own right and made inroads into the mainstream.
Pluralism in theatre generated hybrid forms in the early nineteen-eighties, and these began with music-dance events, theatre-music crossovers, multilingual performances and inter-cultural productions. While long periods of investigation into the actor's work were now more rare, there were investigations of the skills-based 'physical theatre' and experiments with non-linguistic performances. The notion of *performance* came increasingly to dominate practice and discourse. This term avoided the institutional associations of the word, 'theatre'. Its use was broadly congruent with Schechner's usage. (Schechner 1988)

With the approach of the bicentennial of European colonisation in 1988, there was a self-conscious nationalism promoted in Australia. It focused on synthesising a new identity, rather than the essentially image-breaking process which characterised the earlier decade. Iconoclasm had made way for icon building.

Key exponents of visual theatre are discussed in this chapter. Nigel Triffitt's career moved from youthful outrage to commercial success. Valerie Kirwan on the other hand, was a modernist artist *par excellence*, and retained a degree of isolation from mainstream theatre which allowed her to explore freely her own theatrical vocabulary which through others had an influence on the reception of theatre imagery in mainstream Australian theatre. Jenny Kemp was an original mind in Australian theatre through the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and significantly she became progressively more accepted as a director in the mainstream.

A nonconformist: Nigel Triffitt (from 1970)

The director Nigel Triffitt established his career in the early nineteen-seventies with the notoriety of two productions in Sydney: *Ruby* and *The Beard*. Brian Hoad in the *Bulletin* described *Ruby* as a "theatrical experiment" in April 1971. The audience were met, blindfolded and transported to the site of the performance. There, Hoad recorded, "in the basement of a seedy terrace house Ruby awaits her visitors - a gentlewoman of indeterminate age fallen on hard times and effusively glad to see 12 or so old friends." (Hoad 1971a) Later in 1971 Triffitt directed Michael McClure's play, *The Beard*, at the Yellow House. A transgressive modern parable of beauty and the beast in which the sadism of the youthful villain Billy the Kid and the complicity of the cinema goddess, Jean Harlow, lock them together beyond death for eternity. Their enactment of cunnilingus is the savagely
presented metaphor at the centre of this play. In all its apparent vulgarity, it paradoxically reflects on both the nature of abuse and of divinity itself. (See Hoad 1971b)

Irene Mitchell invited Nigel Triffitt to Melbourne in 1972 to direct at St Martin’s Theatre in South Yarra. With his initial production of *Home* by David Story, the St Martin’s management may have wanted to emulate the success at the Royal Court in London of Lindsay Anderson’s production of this play. Triffitt’s production was strangely contrived however, with a pastel coloured stage setting which had cleaner lines and more colour than the performances of his cast. It was not regarded as a critical success. Triffitt’s work at St Martin’s did nothing to arrest St Martin’s terminal decline. Youth did not infused age with a revitalising serum; although this was the role expected of Triffitt who - in the historical avant-garde model of Jean Cocteau - was seen as an enfant terrible. The following year Triffitt spent as the Director of Student Theatre at Monash University. On this highly politicised campus Triffitt did a production of Jean-Louis Barrault’s *Rabelais* which was celebratory in the style of *Hair*, and had the then requisite nude scene.¹

From the radical student culture at Monash, Triffitt assembled the Yellow Brick Roadshow in 1974. Adam Salzer, Andrew Ross and others worked with these actors, initially doing work for children. Triffitt then developed a stylish contemporary roadshow format. They toured widely with productions including one based on texts of Italian Futurist manifestoes. Triffitt described the Yellow Brick Roadshow as “touring around outraging people. Playing anywhere that wasn’t a theatre. Playing in pubs, and we went to Darwin and played in the wreckage of cycloned houses. We played on farms - and a cow interrupted one of our performances once. All over Australia for two and a half years” (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984) Yellow Brick Roadshow had ambitions to go overseas, and eventually did so, but without adequate funding. This was clearly a very difficult exercise, with considerable cost to individual members of the company. Their final travels in North Africa, which Triffitt described as a “binge through Morocco,” had frankly nightmarish connotations. Triffitt, in his autobiographical manner, later used this experience in the ironically titled work of 1984: *The Gift of Vagrancy*. (Beeby 1984: 12)²

A master at creating theatrical imagery, for the next decade Nigel Triffitt was the director, designer and deviser of his own projects. He used puppets and sometimes actors with found-music and texts which he compiled himself to create inventive multimedia theatrical...
spectacles. The Melbourne critic Leonard Radic could not dismiss Nigel Triffitt, and wrote, "The field of imagistic or performance theatre is a lively one [and] the outstanding figure in this area is Nigel Triffitt who has won a national and international reputation for a succession of brilliantly imaginative shows." (Radic 1991: 215) In many ways Triffitt's work was clearly framed in the traditions of theatrical experiments of the historical avant-gardes. His individualistic gestures were as much designed to provoke as to please. Nigel Triffitt sustained a robust engagement with the media for more than twenty years, which in its own right was an extraordinary performance in the creation of a public persona. This led to an amount of 'labelling' of Triffitt, and Carol Moyse in the Melbourne Herald was to write that, "he's been called 'the brat of the theatre', 'the king of counter culture' and 'enfant terrible'." (Melbourne Herald 2/7/84)

Triffitt had written and directed a number of TIE shows, but his production of Momma's Little Horror Show in 1976 for the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre was the major turning-point that gave him a mainstage success throughout Australia and overseas.³ In their history of puppetry in Australia Vella and Rickards wrote that this show "completely overturned the public's - and the industry's - existing preconceptions about puppet theatre and its possibilities." They commented that, "Momma's Little Horror Show was an enigma - but a well-produced enigma. Australian puppetry had never been in this position before. No one had ever taken a puppet show seriously enough to engage in discussion about what it meant." (Vella & Rickards 1989: 66) The debate over this Seymour Centre season in December 1978, resembled the responses provoked by the audacity of the gestures of the historical avant-gardes. "I have seldom seen a house so divided as on the opening night of Momma's Little Horror Show at the Everest Theatre," wrote Norman Kessell in the Sunday Telegraph. "After-show opinions on the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre production varied from brilliant to boring with every possible permutation between," he added. (Kessell 1978)⁴ A critic in Le Monde was to review this work favourably on their European tour, and suggest prospective members of the audience should "leave your logic and Cartesian ideas at the door." (Cited Vella & Rickards 1989: 66)

Triffitt welcomed his success. He said he had "worked entirely in the alternate theatre for eight or nine years, but I really got very sick of earning no money and banging my head against a brick wall and being arrested for what I wanted to do." (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984) Triffitt effectively transferred many of the strategies and assumptions of the
experimental theatre to his emerging independent, and essentially commercial career.

Triffitt has suggested in an interview with Suzanne Hayes that he has “an expanded view of puppetry.” He explained, “a puppet is any inanimate object that can be made animate by a manipulator.” He developed this idea of artistic control even further. “The trick is also to think about everything on that stage as puppet, to think about the set as a puppet, and to think about the lights as puppets, and then to think about the puppeteers as puppets, and then think about the audience as puppets,” Triffitt said. “All that you have to do here is to remove the bad connotations of the word ‘manipulate’, ” he said. The audience, Triffitt has suggested “pay to be manipulated, for the common good, as opposed to [doing it] in a bad way, or doing it in a way which is merely self-indulgent. You are manipulating them to try to get somewhere. To send them out changed in some way at the end. I do that unashamedly,” Triffitt told Hayes. (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984)

Triffitt created Secrets for Handspan Theatre in Melbourne in 1982. It was a personal response to his recent failure with the Rock and Roll project in Europe, the break up of a relationship and the shattering personal revelation that he had been adopted as a baby. In Secrets “he had tried to stage an attitude of mind,” as Vella and Rickards wrote. “‘If you want a story’, he said, ‘go and read a book. I am interested in staging passing emotional responses to situations.’” (Vella & Rickards 1989: 69) Secrets toured the international festival circuit from 1983 to 1986, including the Spoleto Festival, Italy. It won a number of awards.

“There are a number of intrinsically interesting things about puppets” Nigel Triffitt said, “They don’t talk back - which is wonderful in a rehearsal process - and people are fascinated by them. All over the world you can deal with the deepest emotional things in a way that, say, only ballet or grand, grand opera can - but you can do that with puppets.” (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984) Triffitt’s 1983 production of Samson and Delilah for the Victoria State Opera was calculated to provoke a complacent audience in a number of ways, including nudity on stage. When the opera company approached him, Triffitt says, he “knew nothing about” opera. In an interview with Hayes, Triffitt adopted a mock-naivety. “When I first did Momma, I’d never worked with puppets before, and thought they were a fairly stupid art form - but accepted the job. When the [Australian] Dance Theatre asked me to do Wildstars and I also thought that modern dance was a fairly
uninteresting art form, but I decided I’d have a bash at it,” he said. This stance was close to the bravado of artists within the historical avant-gardes. “I love going into art forms that I don’t know the rules of,” Triffitt said, “because what you do is break the rules that shouldn’t be there.” He went on, “because you don’t know that they’re there. And they’re unnecessary,” he claimed, adding, “And you learn the rules that are necessary.” (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984)

Triffitt received considerable attention from the press, in many ways he and his art were inclined to provoke responses, and even minor scandals. The tone of the reportage had love-hate duality, typical of the titillation-disapproval response to provocative gestures. Triffitt often used a playfully self-referential manner in speaking to journalists. “God knows what people expect of me, but it’s only a play. Don’t expect the hand of God to have come into the Studio and placed his finger in the centre of the stage. It’s only Nige, who lives up the road and plays with cassettes.” The Gift of Vagrancy, opened in July 1984 at the Studio at Victorian Arts Centre. Based on found-conversations and “nineteen-sixties schmaltz,” Triffitt commented to journalist Roslyn Beeby, “the schmaltz and the crap are fine, but self indulgence is out.” Beeby further quotes him as saying, “I’m very tough on my own shows because I do this multiple role: design, devise, direct. I get the praise and the glory - but my oath, do I get the custard pies in the face if it backfires.” (Beeby 1984: pu) The Gift of Vagrancy was not a success. Triffitt later described it as “an honourable defeat. I tried to go too far and it didn’t work and that was humiliating.” (Fiona Gillies nd)

For the 1987 Melbourne’s Spoleto Festival Nigel Triffitt created The Fall of Singapore, using actors and puppets, oral history recordings, and surreal audiovisual means. Triffitt evoked for a modern audience a nostalgic theatrical document relating this formative episode in Australian history, when the Japanese captured many Australian prisoners of war after overrunning the defences of Singapore in the Second World War. The playwright Barry Oakley reported in the Age in 1987 that, “The Fall of Singapore is a triumph for Nigel Triffitt and his team [...] It says something mythic and memorable, and it says it above, beyond and below language.” It was presented at the Spoleto Festival, in the Melbourne Town Hall, which was divided in half to accommodate audience and performance on the floor of the hall. Oakley likened Triffitt’s work to Artaud: “A theatre that was elemental, ritualistic, magical and non-verbal; a theatre bloody and inhuman, like dreams, that would show us the lights and shadows of our inner selves,” Oakley wrote.
“Nigel Triffitt has created such a theatre: a controlled yet overpowering nightmare in which Singapore falls to the Japanese, and Australian prisoners of war suffer the purgation that, like Gallipoli before it, has helped shape our national consciousness.” (Oakley 1987: 30)

The source of Triffitt’s material was a radio series broadcast on the ABC. This carefully constructed oral history, which Tim Bowden and Hank Nelson created from hundreds of hours of oral reminiscences, sampled the pride and anger of the individuals caught in the horror of internment in Changi Jail. It also gave a legitimate space to their nostalgia. The ABC radio program was underpinned by considered historical scruples, so that while it let us (literally) hear the voices of those involved in this deeply moving episode in history, the emotional values were underscored by the historical context and structure of the programs. In its own right these programs were quite masterly documentary making, full of strongly expressed opinions but themselves, reasoned and humane. Triffitt’s production, The Fall of Singapore on the other hand, had the appeal of nostalgia. Its strategies of shock and exoticism guided Triffitt as he cut up the sound track of the radio broadcasts and assembled his own, very powerful material, satisfying a public need for sentimental acknowledgements of nationhood and self-justification. In seeking tokens to communicate quickly and strongly Triffitt lapsed into both the trite and the stereotypic. Oriental images were presented as tritely Asian, evil and menacing. The very strength and efficacy of some of Triffitt’s images was their xenophobic immediacy.

Earlier Triffitt had lapsed into stereotypical use of oriental images, for example the use of fans and the coloured samurai in Secrets, which were the threatening exotic figures in Triffitt’s nightmare. In his Fall of Singapore we can see the potential difficulty of this exploration of his own obsessions neither guided by aesthetics, nor morals, nor social principals. He has more in common with Barry Humphries than may at first appear: both are visual artists, both are audacious, and both outrageously self-promoting. I have asked earlier, if Humphries’ greatest work is not his own complex public persona as Humphries: if it is not the person off-stage that is not the greatest of his creations? (Introduction Note 4) Triffitt is not a solo-performer on stage, but in other ways that is exactly what he is doing: He is an auteur. He designs and directs - expresses a preference for working with puppets (as they don’t answer back). He works in isolation, filled with unfathomable loathing and resentment - not for the middle-class to which he has never comfortably belonged or apparently wanted to belong - but for the art institutions, to which he has,
equally, never been admitted. Like Humphries, in the grim embrace of his loathing, Triffitt has grown increasingly conservative.

Earlier in the decade Triffitt had spoken of the challenge of his own work, in these terms: “The artist is confronting and confronted by his or her public - on a very direct narrow line. I think there is nothing else but that. But it’s a very scary road to travel,” he said. (Hayes/Triffitt interview 1984) Triffitt has been quoted in the press as saying, “I’m trying to find a new theatre language because most of the old theatre language is quite pointless. Why would you have actors on stage saying words when we have radio and television and films?” (Stone 1990: nd)

Renovating the puppetry tradition: Handspan

Nigel Triffitt’s production of Secrets for Handspan Theatre, was an image-based adult work, that opened at the Australian International Puppet Festival in Adelaide in 1983, and toured widely in Australia and internationally. The term applied to Triffitt’s production of Secrets, was “visual theatre.” This became the identifying tag for Handspan’s work henceforth. (Vella & Rickards 1989: 72; 69) Handspan Theatre is a puppet theatre renowned for its innovative work for adult audiences. It origins may have been in the collective set up to tour TIE programs to schools in 1977, but its focus rapidly shifted. The group has been concerned to explore extended puppetry techniques and the theatrical values of puppetry in a succession of bravura productions that presented puppet theatre as a site for the exploration of questions of representation. Handspan had an expanded notion of what a puppet is, and this has been a hallmark of their work: to use objects in the manner of puppets. They aimed, in the words of Ken Evans, “to be the animators of the inanimate.” (Burstow 1988) Their work dominantly used black theatre techniques, not with ultraviolet light, but with carefully directed white light, and puppeteers concealed in black, or revealed in light with the puppet/objects.

Another substantial success for Handspan was Cho Cho San. It was a retelling of Madam Butterfly, in which the faithless American, Commander Perry, takes on a menacing contemporary relevance. The adaptation by Daniel Keene, was based on John L. Long’s original novel. The production used a mixture of actors and puppets, and had music by Boris Conley and Dalmazio Babare. It was directed in 1984 by Geoffrey Hooke. Cho Cho
San stands as a piece of music theatre in its own right. Michelle Spooner designed bunraku influenced puppets for this production. (Vella & Rickards 1989: 90) Peter James Wilson, who manipulated the Butterfly puppet had studied this form in Japan in 1979. (Broinowski 1992: 144) Ken Evans commented that this production reversed the convention of black theatre: “everything was white - white on white.” He said, “We made the rules and then broke them.” (Burstow 1988) The production, like a number of important Handspan works, used a large stage, and a complex interweaving of theatrical presentational devices. It was first performed at the Universal Theatre, in Melbourne, with a one hundred foot long white cyclorama.

Despite the success of Cho Cho San, the Australia Council Theatre Board decided to entirely cut funding to Handspan at this point in the mid-nineteen-eighties. They were forced to struggle on without assistance for some time. In this period Michelle Spooner and Peter James Wilson started to work on a piece which contrasted with the large scale of Cho Cho San. They called it, Smalls. It was made up of short pieces, on a miniature scale, for relatively conventional puppets which they devised to be manipulated somewhat like solo bunraku puppets. While developing this project both Spooner and Wilson did an intensive course with Phillipe Genty at the International Puppetry Institute at Charleville-Mezieres. It was directed at “the actor, the animator and the animated object,” and gave then an opportunity try out their work at an International Puppetry Festival, where it was “received with great enthusiasm. It was apparent that Smalls emanates a style particular to Michelle and Peter’s cultural background which the international audience found unique and exciting.” (Sturak 1986: 8) Smalls was a considerable success when presented at the Adelaide Festival in 1986, and in subsequent seasons in Australia. Funding was again given to the company.

At the height of its success, the Melbourne-based, Handspan Theatre took on a more conventional structure. In 1986 Trina Parker became its Artistic Director, and the collective was replaced with a Board. 7

Ken Evans commented on the advantages of this type of visual theatre, suggesting that it gave the audience “more to play with.” He explained, “If you give them straight text or dialogue, they have only to react off that. But if you give them images that can be more than one thing, coming out of darkness or smoke, you give them time to work out what they
think they are looking at, and by the time they see what they are looking at, it is totally different, it has changed. You are giving them more head space within a performance,” he said. (Burstow 1988)

At the heart of a puppet theatre is to be found, in a sense ironically, the human body and the representation of the human body. Handspan persisted in asserting a perspective informed by international critical concerns, feminism and an emerging sophistication in the transaction of inter-cultural material.

An original vision: Valerie Kirwan

Valerie Kirwan worked in an idiosyncratic and sustained way to establish a new theatre language to amplify her poetry in fully realised theatrical creations. Her periods of intense experimental collaboration balanced periods working in isolation as a writer. She appeared always to find her work self-sustaining and - unlike Triffitt - there was little of the showman in Kirwan’s approach; little evidence that she was calculating the impact of her work on her public image or how it might affect the reception of later work within an ongoing career.

Valerie Kirwan performed in Syd Clayton’s Hands Down Gourds at La Mama, in 1971, and she has acknowledged the influence which the chance element in Clayton’s work had on her own performance making. (Stanley/Kirwan interview 1990) A poet and novelist, she directed and performed in her first play, Marmalamur, which was rehearsed for many months and seen at La Mama in 1974. Kirwan’s early work was abstract, and composed through extended periods of developmental rehearsals, in which she collaborated closely with her actors, non-actors and musicians to make the work. Many of the design ideas in her plays were determined by found objects and environments. The most consistent of these collaborations was with Douglas Kirwan, who was editor, set and poster designer and assisted in the direction of her plays. (Stanley/Kirwan interview 1990) She worked closely with her cast in 1975 to developed her second play, Hamjamb and the Gigolo. It was also staged at La Mama, and so too was the work that she staged the following year which was based on Samuel Beckett’s text, Cascando. She developed it with several key collaborators including Howard Stanley.8 Kirwan herself performed in these pieces, and the pattern of Kirwan as writer-director-actor was set. La Mama figured importantly as the venue for her work, and she was the writer-in-residence there in 1979 and in 1988 they commissioned a
work for La Mama’s twenty-first anniversary.

Her work was intensely individualistic, but apparently not ego-centred. Kirwan used a nom de plume as a performer, calling herself Benny the Dip, to remove the focus from herself. Kirwan described her theatre as “a little bit dangerous. Not ‘dangerous’... ‘adventurous’,” she corrected herself, modestly. Her work was regarded by her peers as highly original. James McCaughey acknowledged the influence on his work of Kirwan’s plays, which he described as “highly expressive, highly imagistic theatre.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) Similarly, Jenny Kemp and Howard Stanley himself have acknowledged her influence on their work. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1990; Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

Kirwan described her scripts as being “like a map,” and her plays as being, “a bit like a musical score with words.” Although primarily a writer, she was concerned with making performances. “A script may be one word on a page,” she said, emphasising the chance nature of collaborating with other performers, she added, “or a sentence, or a paragraph.” Kirwan revelled in the mutation of ideas in rehearsal, shaping new performance values influenced by “elements of chance.” (Stanley/Kirwan interview 1990)

Kirwan’s later work was performed at the Organ Factory, at the Universal Theatre 2, as well as La Mama, in Melbourne. Her play, *The Arts of Lobster Whistling* was based on her novel. The reverse process occurred when her theatrical characters and ideas re-emerged in stories and novels. In 1978 her *Stingray Play* was a more cinematically conceived work, which she described as “black and white.” Generally these later works were less abstract, with discernible narrative situations. (Stanley/Kirwan interview 1990)

After writing novels for a few years, Valerie Kirwan returned to writing for theatre with *I Swallowed a Diamond An Hour Ago And I Think There’s A Storm Brewing*, in 1988. She developed this with the assistance of a grant from the Australia Council, and presented a second version in 1990. From the press response to this work she selected a quotation which she used to promote her next play: “an inane and futile exercise.” (Chaundy 1991: 3) Her devil-may-care attitude to the critical response resonated with the bravado of the avant-garde, and indicated the sense of freedom she maintained by remaining outside the market for ‘well-made plays’.9
Jenny Kemp has commented on seeing Valerie Kirwan’s work at La Mama, saying that, “it was fantastic to be able to sit there and genuinely identify with it. I don’t know if it’s simply because she’s a woman, but there was something about what she was trying to do that you don’t get very often.” (Horton 1986: 2)

**An experimental artist: Jenny Kemp**

Jenny Kemp’s individual vision grew from extensive laboratory training and periods of experimentation, into an increasingly conventional director’s role. Daughter of the painter Roger Kemp, Jenny Kemp was briefly at NIDA in 1967. There she was a contemporary of the extraordinary students who formed the Performance Syndicate. Later in London, she was involved in the alternative theatre scene in theatre clubs and touring children’s theatre, and working with an American experimental group called Liquid Theatre. Kemp remarked to Howard Stanley that, this group was “breaking down” traditional theatrical forms, and she said, “I found that pretty interesting.” She recalled, they were “experimenting with the whole form of theatre - the audience were active and involved.” With forty people in the cast, a band, and a “huge dance after [the show] every night,” this was an exciting time. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991) Kemp travelled further in Europe, before she returned to Australia. For a time, she worked solely as a visual artist.

In 1975 Jenny Kemp completed a training program for voice and movement with Rowena Balos. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991 & Sturak 1983: 2) It provided, for Kemp, what she has acknowledged as, “a really solid foundation for my whole career as a director.” This training for the actor concerned the relationship of voice, emotion, body, breath and imagination. Kemp has said that because of this work she has become a director with a close rapport with actors. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991) “This process is one layer and now fundamental to my vision of theatre but it isn’t where my vision lies,” Kemp told Sturak.

This work led directly to Kemp’s work with Stasis, the theatre laboratory within the APG, discussed in an earlier chapter. After Stasis, she continued to explore “what the essence of theatre is.” Kemp recalled, “I worked on process a lot. I spent a lot of time in halls doing workshops with people, concentrating on the actor in the space.” Kemp entered into a sustained period of theatre research work with Robert Meldrum. “We virtually spent six
months in a hall one year," Kemp said. "We improvised, we analysed," she recollected. They had both trained with Balos. "It was like stripping everything right back to see what's there," as she described it. "We were really fascinated by the fundamentals with a person walking into an empty space. The presence of the actor," Kemp said. Their extended period of experimentation and exploration of process produced several performances, including, *The Point Isn't To Tell You*, *Sheila Alone*, and *Jealousy or The Affair*. Kemp directed and wrote these projects, which Robert Meldrum and Marilyn O'Donnell performed. It was the beginning of Kemp working on her own material. "We developed one piece of work, we had a small grant for, that was like looking at life through a microscope," Kemp said. "It interested me to follow that through. It worked for a while, but we pushed it so far we destroyed it - we wanted to push everything to extremes." (Sturak 1983: 2)

Exploratory workshops of this sort were the central methodology of avant-garde work in this period. The group dynamics of theatre workshops could be very intense and the personal cost was often high. There was frequently a sense of frustration or outright failure associated with such activities. They were foundational to Kemp’s later work, but this was a stage she went beyond. She said, "I don't want to concentrate on process anymore. It doesn't interest me to go in there and explore and explore and explore anymore. It was like a learning period and I feed on that a whole lot now." (Sturak 1983: 2)

Jenny Kemp moved from laboratory projects to gain an increasing stature as a freelance director. She worked on productions with students at Rusden and VCA, including *Cenci* by Artaud and *Andromache* by Racine. Kemp suggested that there were different ways that people may be "used to listening, to watching, to seeing things." That there were female perceptions which effected the "forms, structures and contents" of women's work. Kemp had a direct concern with the individual's perception and reception of a work. This validation of a subjective base was influenced by ideas from within the women's movement, and it was influenced by visual arts concerns. When Kemp directed Strindberg's *Dream Play* at the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory, Valerie Kirwan said that, as a woman, she was more interested in the female vision that came from Kemp's production, than she was in Strindberg. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991; Meldrum 1989: 33; Horton 1986: 2) Some quality in Kemp's work had been affirmed by Kirwan. "I hope," Kemp told Horton, "that what, and the way, women have to say things becomes more and more recognisable."
Jenny Kemp's 1983 production of *The White Hotel*, adapted by her from the novel of D. M. Thomas, was something of a *tour de force*. Presented at Grant Street Theatre, it made her reputation as a director. It had a powerful mixture of eroticism and the horrors of Nazi extermination of Jews in Eastern Europe in the Second World War. Her production of Botho Strauss's *Big and Little* for the State Theatre Company of South Australia in 1983 was a critical success, but the audiences stayed away. (Horton 1986: 2) In fact, Adelaide critic Peter Ward pointed out, they were the all-time smallest houses at the Festival Centre Playhouse for that company. (Ward 1993: 121-2) Perversely, this may be a kind of achievement, but it was a disaster for the - by then - beleaguered Artistic Director of the company, Keith Gallasch.

As a writer-director, Jenny Kemp was to create her own oeuvre through the nineteen-eighties. Douglas Horton commented, "In Jenny Kemp's production the world of the imagined, the remembered, and the dreamt figures as highly as the real, the here and now." (Horton 1986: 1) At Anthill, Kemp created *Good Night, Sweet Dreams*, with music by Elizabeth Drake. For over a year Kemp and her partner, Richard Murphet, recorded their dreams. They had a young baby, so writing, Kemp recalled, "became a really good form to work with." (Stanley/Kemp interview 1990) "In the play I'm presenting a split," she told Horton. "In our society dream life is seen to be quite different from day life, unlike some primitive societies where dream and waking life are much closer." Her comment on this production may be a metaphor for her work generally. She aimed "to help bridge the two worlds." In *Good Night, Sweet Dreams*, there was "a naturalistic setting in which the dreams and day scenes will both take place." (Horton 1986: 1) Kemp wanted "to see the two worlds together. It's an experiment," she said. "I believe there is something to be gained by tuning into dream life," she explained. She had a preoccupation with simultaneity in performance, and the metaphorical significance of seeing *the one* and *the other*.

The gradual development of a feminine aesthetic, and a feminist theatre practice are relevant to Jenny Kemp's work. Kemp suggested to Sturak that she was interested in the way Marguerite Duras "works in a way that isn't linear narrative - it's to do with layering and rhythms." In Australia, as internationally, women's writing and women's theatre were becoming differentiated. "I know, particularly with women's work, that sometimes it gets too bound up in minutiae and details, too about the moment without the overall form," Kemp said. "And sometimes I feel male orientated work - yang orientation - is too bound
up with a beginning, middle and end, the overall form without the information, without the
depth. I don’t want either,” she told Sturak, “I want both ends to meet.” (Sturak 1983: 2)

In the later nineteen-eighties Kemp developed a play script with the working title, Blood
Dreaming. This was presented in 1989 as Call of the Wild. Unlike the other work she had
then been directing, this was not autobiographical. It arose from a workshop conducted by
the American playwright Maria Irene Fornes, at the Playbox in Melbourne. The exercise
was to “tap the right side of the brain - writing from a place you can’t control. Everything
that came out really surprised me,” Kemp recalled. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1990)

The play ‘occupied’ a found painting, a surreal landscape of the Belgian painter Paul
Delvaux. Pamela Payne wrote of Call of the Wild, when later it toured to Sydney’s Belvoir
Theatre, observing that the “playwright-director Jenny Kemp defies most expectations of
dramatic production.” (Payne 1989: 16) Payne also wrote, “Call of the Wild has neither
plot, narrative nor identifiable characters. Performance style is in a hectic flux: familiar and
naturalistic one moment, exaggerated or distorted the next. Text, music and image are set
in irrational juxtaposition,” Payne wrote. (Payne 1990a)

This is not a drama of conflict between characters. It has a far more complex set of values,
intended to seduce and enthral its audience. “Vocal tones often subvert the meaning of the
language - a pornographic fantasy is conveyed in a dull monotone,” Payne explains.
“Spoken words are further subverted by contrary phrases and sentences projected on the
wall - a woman, for example, describes the prim, confining architecture of her bedroom
while the audience reads abandoned erotic text.” (Payne 1989: 16)

Jenny Kemp has observed “very extreme responses” to her work: “People really angry, and
people really loving it,” she commented. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991) Kemp has
embraced this and gone beyond the concerns of the avant-garde theatre of the
nineteen-seventies - the modern theatre’s preoccupation with process and rejection of
bourgeois conventions. She has developed a stage language which allows a simultaneity of
voices, a textual polyglot operating between formal disciplines - voice, scenography, the
physical dynamics of the actors’ bodies and visualised text. In this postmodern realm of a
general plurality we are impelled to find the other within shifts in time, shifts in view-point,
displacement of word and image, intercultural transactions and ambiguities of gender.
A conclusion: representations of the body

The term 'visual theatre' was used at the time. Nicholas Tsoutas strongly rejected the label for himself and his work, saying pugnaciously, "I can shit visual images at the rate television shits them out. And visual theatre is not really terribly exciting." For Tsoutas what was of interest was "something beyond simply making a good picture." (Guthrie/Tsoutas interview 1989) Nigel Triffitt, Handspan Theatre, Valerie Kirwan and Jenny Kemp all traversed this terrain in different ways. In a sense, they did make pictures, but beyond this they found new ways to represent things, ideas and the body.

All of these artists were committed to making exploration of theatre form, but not at the level of a unifying revision, nor at the level of changing the contents of the theatrical event: but in the slippage between form and content, and in the microcosm of detail and texture. Feminism was a major influence on Valerie Kirwan and Jenny Kemp and within the work of Handspan Theatre.

There was an acceptance of some 'alternative' theatre practice. This allowed seemingly eccentric approaches to making theatre to become an increasing part of the theatrical culture of Australia. Nigel Triffitt became a big success, and the gaps in his approach - inter-cultural insensitivity and grandiloquence - grew larger as his projects were mounted on a larger and larger scale. In all his work, however, Triffitt was a master of the gesture. Triffitt’s work did not attempt to negotiate the inter-cultural transactions of the material he was using. On the other hand, Kirwan remained idealistic and self-motivated and in a sense self-sufficient, but generally unrecognised. She inspired and showed others what could be done with limited means in the Australian theatre. Jenny Kemp became increasingly accepted for her radicalism and her integrity. She did not sell out. In a sense her credentials for artistic purity became ‘marketable’ in Australian theatre.

None of these individual artists took a unitary social norm as a foundation of their work, instead they were engaged in profound negotiation of meaning and investigations of the means to make that meaning in the theatre in Australia. Their quite different bodies of theatrical work were marked by reverses in their marginal status: they were, generally, the ‘successful’ alternatives to mainstream theatre.
Bodies in suspense: art performed

A number of fertile interactions between the visual arts and the performing arts occurred at this time that manifest, not only in visual theatre, but in a new conceptual apparatus to investigate theatre and its related fields. There were new sites for theatre work as an outcome, and new types of events challenging the boundaries of 'the theatrical'. Conceptual art overlapped theatre, and there were conceptual frameworks given to theatre events, pushing some theatre work of the time towards the concerns of the visual arts.

Theatre and art-making

There had been a wealth of antecedents in Australia during the previous two decades where art-making and performance had intersected. The self-styled Annandale Imitation Realists in the early nineteen-sixties had embraced notions of assemblage and installation, as well as an anarchic attitude to the artistic norms of the day. (Heathcote 1995: 174)1 The Yellow House in Kings Cross, Central Street Gallery in Sydney, and the Tin Sheds at Sydney University had been venues in the nineteen-seventies where networks of artists had interacted in a counter culture milieu, which had encouraged the synthesis of new performance art and multimedia events.

Evidence of the increasingly widespread linkage between visual art and theatre has been given in discussions of the work of Michael Mullins, Nicholas Tsoutas and Jenny Kemp. Mike Parr referred to Artaud in writing about his art which ventured into theatrical framing of materials, ideas and events. The painter and film maker, Tim Burns, created work in association with Lindzee Smith and Nightshift. Elizabeth Paterson enclosed herself in a portable installation like a puppet theatre in which she framed herself. The artist Ian Burn worked with trade unions to place art-making in the context of the industrial system and to place art works in the daily life of workers. Terry Smith and Ian Burn were part of the international Art & Language group in New York, and brought those concerns with them to Australia. Lyndal Jones and Derek Kreckler had dual roles as visual artists and
performing artists, and each worked both within galleries and produced work in the theatre.

Antonin Artaud was the critical precursor of Stelarc's body suspensions and experiments with perception and human endurance. From his earliest work, Stelarc explored technology and perception. His *Event from micro to macro and the between* at the Hamilton Gallery in 1969, used dancers and helmets designed by the artist which gave the wearer "fragmented" wrap-around vision.² (Marsh 1993: 25) Stelarc developed a series of suspension events in which his body was supported only by hooks inserted through his skin. These events took place in galleries and outdoors in Australian, Japan and the United States of America. Stelarc further explored notions of the technological extension to the human body, and developed events which monitored his own bodily functions. Stelarc created events that tested human endurance by smashing his body through barriers of glass and brick. (De Groen 1984: 87) He pursued a preoccupation with the potential, through technology, to supersede the human body: the obsolete body, as he called it. "Once the body has attained planetary escape velocity," Stelarc has said, speaking figuratively, "it will be launched into new evolutionary trajectories." (Waterlow 1991: 42) He began to develop his increasingly technically refined *Third Hand* in 1975. It represented, as Waterlow has commented, "a convergence between hi-tech science, robotic nerve-end appendages and Stelarc's desire to break out of the obsolete body." Waterlow then quoted Stelarc, saying, "if the body can be redesigned in a modular fashion to facilitate the replacement of malfunctioning parts, then technologically there would be no reason for death." Stelarc concluded, "death does not authenticate existence." Stelarc has often worked in Australia, but has lived in Japan since 1970.

When the Claremont Company went on tour in 1975, Howard Stanley remained in Melbourne and taught improvisation for the Council of Adult Education. He met a painter also teaching there, David Maplestone, and through him became involved in a series of gallery shows. "I wanted to find out about seeing," Stanley commented. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990) Stanley and Stephen Killick put on an exhibition in Ken Even's Eyeball Gallery in Kew. They lived in this small gallery for a time, and created events around the gallery, in collaboration with David Maplestone - called Horse - and Carol Rough. "People in the neighbourhood were complaining because there was a very narrow street, and there were a lot of kids, and so Horse sat in a canvas chair in the middle of the street, and read comics." Stanley recalled with some relish, people in cars "would come flying down the
road, and (screech), and (mumbled abuse) get out and abuse him. And he’d just look at
them, and go back to reading his comics.” Whether this is art-with-a-conscience, or a good
lark, or a performance concept, Stanley recalled that it “brought the newspaper, and the
cops, and they got STOP signs because of that.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)³

Through Graeme Hare, Howard Stanley came into contact with Art & Language: “a
Maoist-inspired radical group working in London and New York.” (Heathcote 1995: 213)
Terry Smith, the art theorist and photographer, and others associated with Preston College
of Advanced Education were associated with this group. Howard Stanley recalled, “That
really excited me, because it was something that I knew absolutely nothing about, so I
started to read.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)³ The interaction between the erstwhile
discrete disciplines was very stimulating to those involved. “It was so exciting. That
particular period was like: We could be heroes. We could do whatever we wanted to do,
and it would be fine,” Stanley recalled. “And it was wonderful, because we did whatever
we wanted to do, and it was OK,” he said. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)³ In this period,
working outside conventional theatres, Stanley remained an actor in his own eyes. “I didn’t
think of myself as an artist because I - I mean, I thought of myself as being engaged in art
pursuits, but it was always as a performer.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

This was a liberating status to have - and it contrasts with the traditional actor’s
subservience to the playwright’s text. Stanley’s most provocative enquiries into the
construction of performance came as part of a gallery event called, The Cheque Change
Event. It was based in Paraphernalia Gallery on Collins Street, Melbourne. Stanley was
installed in the window of the gallery, and a poster proposed a contract in which he would
do anything to, with, or for anybody as long as the art buyer - the patron - paid for the
service with a cheque that bounced. The dishonoured cheque needed to be then returned
to the account holder. Stanley recalled that he tried to bank $2,735,000 in dishonoured
cheques during the two weeks of the event. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

At least one cheque was inadvertently processed by a teller, endowing a penurious artist
friend for a short time with an improbably enormous unapproved overdraft, and the teller
with a frightening shortfall at the end of their day’s work. Two police and bank officials
descended on the gallery, and took away documents relating to the transaction. No further
action was taken, however. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)
The most elaborate proposal was paid for by a dishonoured cheque for $35 by Murray Turner, who commissioned Howard Stanley to complete two performances. The simpler one proposed that Stanley attend a live performance by Quintin Crisp at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne, and engage the audience around him in a discussion of the show, and ask Crisp one question. Turner, meanwhile, secretly recorded all of this. This was done, although it was rather upstaged - in the event - when a particularly inebriated and vocal Barry Dickins interrupted Crisp’s show to demand of the audience, what they were doing, watching something like this imported show? When, didn’t they know, they could be watching a good Australian play by Barry Dickins down the road - and keeping Australian plays, playwrights and players in work? At a loss, Crisp invited Dickins onto the stage with him, in so doing overlooking the presence of the orchestra pit between the auditorium and the stage in the Princess Theatre. When Dickins was rescued from the orchestra pit and removed from the theatre, Stanley asked his question of Crisp: “Are you often lost for words?” When Crisp assured them he was never lost for words, the audience laughed. This was not, perhaps, the most comfortable laugh for Crisp. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

This became the trial run for Turner’s second proposal, in which Howard Stanley was commissioned to play the part of Max Martin, a promising young comic whose career had been tragically cut short by a motor accident. The character and situation devised by Turner, had Max severely impaired. His sight and motor functions were terribly limited, and he had severe brain damage, Turner stipulated. Max had also lost his wife and children - and he would never be able to make people laugh again. If this is not black enough, Turner - who played Max’s cousin and minder - wrote to Barry Humphries, explaining that Max, who had returned to live in Benalla after the accident, wanted more than anything, to see Humphries perform, and asked would it be possible for Max to meet Humphries at his hotel before the show, after they arrived from Benalla on the train? (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

This became more than a prank. At one level it was a serious investigation of the sado-masochistic relationship Humphries has with his audience. How could you devise a more powerful presences than Humphries, and his gallery of characters - including that ultimate dominatrix, Edna Everage?

Murray Turner and his fictitious cousin from Benalla, the crippled and mentally damaged
former comic, arrived on the day at the imposing Windsor Hotel in Melbourne. Humphries met them. Turner all the while, assuring his poor infantile, cousin that, “Barry is here, but he can’t stay very long.” Max was clearly enraptured with Barry, but addressed all his anxious questions to his cousin, whom he called, “mother.” In the circumstances Humphries was charm itself, and invited them to have refreshments in the hotel restaurant as his guests. Humphries, however, told them he must leave and he hoped that they would enjoy the show that night. (Guthrie/Stanley interviews 1990 & 1994)

This then became a hoax on the famous hoaxer. Unbeknown to Humphries, or the theatre management, programs were distributed that night to the audience of A Night with Dame Edna, stating that Max Martin would be in the audience and participating in Humphries show. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990) The presence in the audience of this character was regularly made known to all, by his rapturous outbursts of appreciation, “Barry! Barry!” And his pleading, “Where’s Barry”? And the response from Turner, “Shhh, Barry’s on stage performing.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990) Breaking every rule of the actors’ code, they were using their knowledge of performance to undermine and systematically upstage every moment at which Humphries might have felt that he had won his audience. Barry Humphries took no advantage of the pitiful subject in the audience, and played his usual bullying and cajoling actions on the more ‘able’ members of the audience. Max ate an ice-cream at interval. His dark suit was covered in it. With a dead flower in his lapel, and a balloon he brought with him, this could have been Carl Valentine.

The evening might be seen as a kind of duel between two performers, vying for an audience. Humphries had the full power of his production to back him up. Stanley had the great appeal of subversion working on his side. By whatever standards, it was an outrageous night’s entertainment. Who was the audience to this duel? Murray Turner and Graeme Hare in the theatre that night, and posterity, perhaps?

At this time Stanley said he was “basically discovering the world of ideas,” and through this contact with the world of visual art, “falling in love, in a sense, with the world of ideas,” he said. The strategies for making art that he learned, he applied to his theatre work. “So, it was, ‘It would be a good idea to...’ ‘Wouldn’t it be a good idea to...’ And then going from there, back into Cabaret,” he recalled. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)
In 1976 *Cabarats* performed at John Pinder’s restaurant, the Flying Trapeze. *Cabarats* was a group made up of ex-Claremont performers, including the musicians Rodney Freeman-Smith, and Glenda Lum, with Janet Heywood, and Howard Stanley. “The amazing thing about all those people,” Stanley said, was that “they were all animals. Just in terms of when they were on stage. I mean, there was always a structure, but it was always out of control. And so you were riding every minute.” In this way, he said, “the shows themselves were very much like a piece of music. But we were together for that time because we shared the same thing, which was to do something that had never really been done before. And the process was to discover what that was, and also to be entertaining in some way.”

(Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

The *Cabarats* shows had surreal art-piece costumes created by David Maplestone, and an event-like rationale which broke new ground. Defying the tiny venue, these were dazzling spectacles. For the audience these were daring encounters with the uncertainty of a theatrical happening. Howard Stanley summed up their approach, saying they worked on “the notion of doing things - which could be incredibly bent, some of the stuff - for its own sake.” He believed they were consciously exploring what it is to be “doing stuff to a so called naive audience. This curious entity that I think really at some level or another, is really fairly sophisticated,” he said. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990 Emphasis as recorded.)

The members of *Cabarats* set out to present to their audience some of their artistic concerns, and above all they wished to “confront the audience,” in the manner of the performance artist. When interviewed, Howard Stanley said that he considered this “was pretty rare in cabaret at that time.” Rod Quantok and others were just starting out, and as Stanley indicated, most performers at this time had come through things like university reviews, and not the theatre. “They were very much sketch-orientated” and they depended on “having put-downs for an audience,” he said. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

Stanley commented, “Cabaret interested me, because it was a lot more instant, and it didn’t have the same sorts of boundaries and rules as theatre.” He said, “it was a very conscious decision to say: I don’t want to work in plays, I’d much rather work in this popularist medium of cabaret, and attempt to do theatrical things in that context.” The strategy he used was a little like a painter. He asked: “what would I really like to see?” He then set out to make a performance to realise that. (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990) At this time, beside
the element of outrage, was an experience of something which at times approached the ecstatic. “The whole tone of that period was - you could do anything, and there was very little disappointment.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990) The attitude towards the audience was - if not aggressive - at least not compromising. “Well, you’d better really like it. And if you don’t like it, you’re really fucked.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

La Mama celebrated its tenth birthday in 1977, and Stanley did two pieces, The Mongrel Dog Show, in September, for ten dogs and ten actors. And he also did The Bongo Van Performance[s] - singing an advertising jingle, “Clap Hands Here Comes the Brokoff Baker” all over Melbourne, at appointed times, as he did his delivery rounds. The poster for this event was a photograph by Graeme Hare.

In 1977, Howard Stanley created a rock band called - with calculated cynicism - The Product. He said he wanted to “explore the theatre in rock,” and that, he was “pretty sure it was conservative, because it’s so taste oriented.” But he was aware that it was “an excellent medium to talk to a different audience.” He wrote lyrics and then worked with a composer and musicians - presenting himself as the lead vocalist - an inability to sing playing no part in the values at stake here. “I only wanted to have a band for six months...to see what it was like,” he said. “And almost to the day that’s what it lasted.” They made a recording, and did some tumultuous and some catastrophic gigs. “The rumours were out that there was this band - and rumours in rock and roll are just the most fantastic thing - you don’t need posters you need rumours.” (Guthrie/Stanley interview 1990)

In 1980 Howard Stanley arranged three evenings at La Mama, entitled Base Acts. He invited various people to devise contributions. His own base act, on the first night has been recalled by Liz Jones, “Howard Stanley sat defecating for forty minutes,” she recorded. “He came in immaculate, in a suit. The audience sat and watched Howard on a commode [...] and then he picked up the shit and wrote HOPE with it on the wall behind him.” (Jones et al 1988: 13) Other performances on that weekend were given by Roger Pulvers, and the group Stanley had given the name, Los Trios Ringbarkus.

In the mid-nineteen-eighties, Howard Stanley developed some funny but menacing solo performance work with the character, Howard Slowly. It was mostly seen at Le Joke, John Pinder’s upstairs venue at the Last Laugh, and at a season downstairs at Belvoir Street
during the Sydney Festival in 1986. This was in a program called, Two Boys and Two Girls, which had four short one-person shows by Gerry Connolly, Sue Ingleton, Angela Moore and Stanley. Later that year Howard Stanley took this material to the Adelaide Festival fringe, where the Adelaide Advertiser critic, Peter Goers wrote of “this very confronting show,” complaining that, “in attempting to expose the myth of the Australian male, Stanley fakes masturbation for much of his allotted hour on stage.” (Goers 1986: pu) This was an exaggeration. There was a very funny - and possibly confronting, interaction with the audience in this show, when he asked the men in the audience to put up their hands if they did not masturbate. In any case, “I do this for a living, I don’t know about you,” he concluded. The publicity for this show stated, “There are a lot of things men never talk about. Howard Slowly often embarrasses men.” (Company B and the Sydney Committee, 1986) Howard Stanley’s performance work and his comedy were marking out the boundaries of the sayable.

Howard Stanley did several projects with Geoffrey (Geoff) Hooke, who created a number of daring productions during the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties. After graduation from Rusden he was “given a portfolio to do experimental theatre,” as he explained. (Slamet 1979: pu) Hooke received an Australia Council grant of $5000 to do a production of Ubu - The King at the Universal, in Melbourne, in 1979. “Jarry’s anarchism appeals to me because he finds that the only solution for himself is just to laugh at what’s around you or the whole thing is too depressing,” Hooke said at the time. It was a highly energetic production with Howard Stanley in the cast. “It’s pretty savage laughter...it’s basically laughing at the world, laughing at theatre conventions, laughing at audience expectations,” Hooke said. “I want people to go away feeling satisfied and asking questions like, ‘Gee, that was a violent play, why did I laugh so much?’ Or I just saw 17 people being tortured to death...why did I kill myself laughing?” (Slamet 1979:pu)

Zoo Productions was the name under which Hooke’s work appeared. Asked about this, he said, “my work has a lot of different animals in it. I like to put together bizarre and exotic cocktails of people - musicians, magicians, comics, cabaret artists, visual designers, virtuoso musicians and buskers.” (Litson 1988: 8) Geoff Hooke directed the successful production of Cho Cho San, by Daniel Keene, with Handspan in 1984, and the subsequent production mounted by Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 1987, which toured Victoria and had a season at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney. Also in 1987 he directed a modern Chinese play, The
Impostor, by Sha Yexin, in an adaptation by John Romeril at Playbox, in Melbourne. Alison Broinowski has pointed out that this production made concessions to its audience in the form of a narrator. (Broinowski 1992: 140) It was a conscious policy of Playbox at this time to address Asian theatre. Again for Playbox in 1988, Hooke directed the one-person play, Steal Away Home, by Phil Motherwell, at the Studio in the Victorian Arts Centre.

“Theatre for me,” Geoff Hooke has been quoted as saying, “is very childlike, simple and beautiful.” (Litson 1988: 8) This sensibility was open to misunderstanding, it was not a confession of gormlessness, but a way of positioning himself aesthetically. “Theatre can create visual environments that can only be appreciated live,” Hooke said. “It can create an intimacy between performer and audience, a sense of being there at that moment. Most of my work now embraces those elements and is strongly non-naturalistic.” (Litson 1988: 8)

Derek Krekler began to create performance work in Adelaide at the South Australian School of Art. His Wet Dream, in 1979, was first filmed, and this film then became an element in a gallery event. The suggestive title of the work belied the straight-faced humour of the film, in which - dressed in a business suit - Krekler walked into the sea and, with Chaplinesque poise, fell into the water. In the gallery event Krekler - dressed in his suit - climbed into a bed before his audience, completely covering himself, he left his audience to view slides of the event at the beach and listen to a saxophonist. After listening to ‘Beautiful Dreamer’ and ‘Wake Unto Me’, Krekler emerged from the bed. He was dripping wet. (Marsh 1993: 91-3)

The following year Krekler participated in the Performance Week organised by the Experimental Art Foundation as part of the Adelaide Festival. With Jack Cheslyn he performed Another 60 Watt Nirvana, in which Cheslyn sat wearing a gas mask on his face in a room lit only by a globe which Krekler swung before him until eventually it smashed on the mask leaving the room in darkness. Another work titled Our Glass performed with Alison Davey had the two participants lying parallel on the floor facing opposite directions each with a pile of salt at their head and a low hanging light bulb at their feet, where they remained for eight hours - with an hour off for lunch. (March et al 1980: 44) Derek Krekler worked with Nicholas Tsoutas and the All Out Ensemble, and later, in Sydney, with Sarah Miller as Told By An Idiot.
The interdisciplinary artist Lyndal Jones trained in Decroux mime and Feldenkrais technique, as well as practising as a visual artist. She created two major series of performance works during the period: \textit{At home} over five years during the late nineteen-seventies, and a ten-year series through the nineteen-eighties: \textit{Prediction Pieces}. These works were seen in theatres and art galleries in Melbourne, Sydney, Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, London and Edinburgh. (Murphet 1989: 27n)

\textit{At home - coming and going} was performed in and around the car park at La Mama in 1977. In it a number of performers carried out mundane activities while, from within the theatre, an argument could be overhead. In the car-park Jones herself constructed a ‘house’ of wood and fabric and lay down in it. Eventually the arguing figures from inside the theatre came out and one drove away. As Anne Marsh noted, the structure is fragmentary and - however evocative - within the bounds of the modernist art happening. (Marsh 1993: 189)

In 1979 at Melbourne University Jones performed a solo work, \textit{At home - ladies a plate}. Without parody this work had a sly feminist rationale. As Jones arranged and rearranged seventy plates on the gallery floor, slides showed the aftermath of a party and a voice tape reminisced about a garden party. Her uses of gesture and repetition, Marsh has suggested, prompt a Brechtian distancing, and provoked audiences to question what it is they are seeing. (Marsh 1993:190) Adrian Martin has placed her work - with it use of montage and formal explorations - as heroically modernist; indeed he has likened her work to the work of the American film-maker Yvonne Rainer. Both artists have their origins in movement disciplines and both produce works which register strongly evocative qualities through the assemblage of surfaces and textures. When he wrote, Martin recognised postmodernism as a shallow stylistic effect. He rejected it as an appropriate epithet for Lyndal Jones’s work. His defining assumptions about postmodernism - that it is characterised by “world-weary indifference” or “misty-eyed ‘poetic’ lyricism” - are not assumptions shared in this thesis. (Martin 1988: 36) Jones’s work was deeply felt and deeply committed, but it was not driven by an unquestioned single project of either revolution or renovation: in fact these were the troubled issues which her work frequently questioned. Her work characterised the emerging postmodern theatre in Australia. Her performances were candidly personal - she invariably placed herself amid the actors - but this self-reflexive quality did not mask the investigations of form and the juxtaposition of elements in the making of meaning which were the substance of her work. With her work Jones engaged the audience with image and

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texture, but it was work which also distanced them with repetition and formal manipulations which foregrounded the performative nature of the event. Montage and personal narrative were elements of modernism, and in postmodernism they were refined so that they remained persuasive domains.

Jones long had a fascination with the idea of scientific investigation, and with the value of the anticipatory power of the scientific method. *Prediction Pieces* are an outcome of this preoccupation. They also “reflected the prevailing fear at the time that there might be no future, that the event of a nuclear holocaust was a foregone conclusion,” Marsh quoted Cramer as writing to introduce *Lyndal Jones: the prediction pieces 1981-1991*. (Marsh 1993: 191; Cramer 1991: 8) Jones wrote in a program note that her intention was to investigate “processes through which we arrange our future(s) within our minds, and, hence, our ability to plan, to intervene.” She continued, “It is an examination of the foundations upon which we can organise and create change,” Jones wrote. (Patton 1989: np; Marsh 1993: 192) She was investigating both the implications of scientific progress and wider social implications, including the place of political revolution.

*Prediction Piece 6: Pipe Dreaming - a performance about optimism*, was performed in 1989 at the University of Adelaide Union Hall for the Come Out Festival, and later in the Studio at the Victorian Arts Centre, in Melbourne. In this work Lyndal Jones produced the most complex and overtly theatrical of the series, collaborating with Nanette Hassall and Danceworks, and with the visual artist Lindy Lee, and the composer Richard Vella. As in her other works, Jones performed in this piece herself, this time with David Latham, Richard Murphet and Judith Stratford. It was presented on a broad stage in front of a large wall upon which slides projected messages, in an arrangement, in some ways reminiscent of the ‘Democracy Wall’ in Beijing, but essentially more personal to Jones. In a witty montage of signs, signals and slogans, the texts on the slides recalled the Cultural Revolution in China, the *I Ching*, Chairman Mao, and familiar narratives of romance. Yet, in this disparate material Jones’s apparently personal voice could be said to have represented her generation. Some of the slides read: “as the sun/sinks slowly/on the West.../the East is red/(the centre cannot hold)/what do you see/FIRE/is this a sign/?I see no end to this/I see no end to it/...an endless vista.../forewarned is forearmed/a loaded gun will always fire/get ready/take aim/the writing is on the wall.” (Marsh 1993: 200; Capitalisation as in the original. Oblique slashes indicate line breaks in original.)
On a stage within the stage, surrounded by piles of books, two men and a woman enacted the parts of revolutionaries concerned with writing rousing speeches. They quoted Guy Debord’s anarchist ‘Instructions for taking up arms’, and in a later sequence quoted from Chekhov’s play, *The Seagull*. (Marsh 1993: 198; McCaughey 1989: 34) Jones was fascinated by Chekhov, she told Richard Murphet. (Murphet 1989: 28) In Chekhov’s apparently ambivalent attitude towards the revolution can be found a clue to Jones’s position, and that of her generation of artists and intellectuals in Australia. The crucial juxtaposition of the personal and the global political dimension was a poignant and confronting aspect of this work. The bitter failure of the pro-democracy student actions in Beijing followed within days of the performances in Melbourne. The ‘optimism’ of the piece was out of place, some critics wrote. Lyndal Jones herself appeared, in front of the wall, blindfolded, in this work. There was an implied presence of a firing squad. The text on the wall read: “I want to touch you/you are up against the wall/FIRE/it could all end in tears/we will need to take steps/three steps forward (and two steps back)/you will need to step forward/there COULD be a happy ending/your back is to the wall.” (Marsh 1993: 200 Capitalisation as in the original. Oblique slashes indicate line breaks in original.)

Simon Patton felt that Jones “invoked the image of China” as no more than an exotic locale. He wrote that the piece was “distressing” in the way the visual artist Lindy Lee was “used in the performance as the ‘token Chinese’.” (Patton 1989: np) Marsh wrote at the time, of the work as “overly optimistic.” (Marsh 1993: 244n) Later, however, Marsh wrote, “Change and revolution were personalised in the messages projected on the wall, the political became the personal.” In this neat inversion of the feminist axiom, Marsh suggested the experience of a generation, for whom the failure of revolution in 1968 had resulted in two decades of internalisation. In this work by Lyndal Jones, “stories of revolutions snatched from historical texts were replaced by the personal memories of revolution as told by Chinese immigrants in Australia,” March recorded. Any sense that Australia was far away from the action of global political reality was to be rejected. Marsh commented, “the cultural opposition was undone as the other entered the space of the performance: no longer exoticized, the images of Lindy Lee’s paintings presented by the artist herself replaced the central space of the actor-revolutionaries.” (Marsh 1993: 202) In a sense then, the local experience was the global reality.
A conclusion: artifice and the real article

The apparent failure of revolution as a means of total social renovation meant an end to the utopianism reflected in the theatre and the means of theatre making of the previous decade. The postmodern world at the end of the century nevertheless posed a selection of strategic devices from which avant-garde theatre could be made: cross-disciplinary modulations testing the boundaries of the theatrical, inter-cultural citation and explorations of sexuality and gender testing the ambiguities of self and other. Feminism and post-structuralism provided much of the underpinning critical thinking beneath such work. The ‘permission’ to develop conceptual work came directly from the interdisciplinary work based in the visual arts. It brought with it something of the practices of art-making of the fields crossed: film, music, poetry, gastronomy, installations, the new electronic arts, were among those introduced into the performance arena.

In the plurality of postmodernism a higher priority was given to subcultural concerns, and less credibility to the ‘big questions’. In fact, the big questions seemed only meaningful when asked at a personal scale: What about nuclear destruction? What about the destruction of the global environment? Political radicalism did not disappear, but it was differently and more often personally framed. The questioning of modernism continued, if anything it intensified. There were new conceptual frameworks structured by the arts. Postmodern theatre presented to the audience as surfaces. The surfaces may be cool or warmly seductive, but they did not present as the solid masses of classical or modern drama. The new theatre of postmodernism can usefully be looked at - as can the modern and classical theatres - as an assault on the ‘sayable’.
Bodies in motion: urban theatres

By the mid-nineteen-eighties there were considerably fewer funding opportunities for non-mainstream theatre in Australia, nevertheless a few determined individuals and groups continued to emerge and to produced avant-garde theatre. Some of this work was modelled on the historical avant-gardes. Strategies for making new theatre within postmodernism included the appropriation of popular forms, especially in Australia groups employed circus and produced a range of hybrid forms.

As modern dance had been a vanguard for the introduction of modernism into the performing arts generally, so modern dance was also to be a primary site for postmodern innovations: 'beyond modernism' and even 'beyond dance'. Dance-theatre, mime and 'physical theatre' focused on the presentation of images, on a plurality of voices and viewpoints, on the human body and on the blending of media.

The new work of the nineteen-eighties could be identified as urban theatre that asserted the end of the cultural dominance of a rural idol in Australia. It reflected, instead, the demographic reality of Australia as one of the most urbanised societies on Earth, and one of the most culturally diverse. This acceptance of the polygeneric nature of Australian society was both represented within the emerging work and, significantly, allowed the creation of such work.

Postmodern place: dancing and circuses

Modern dance had an important role linking performing arts practices in Australia with overseas models in a systematic way. Modern dance training exposed dancers to new methods of working, including interdisciplinary strategies for making a performance and intercultural approaches. This was an explicitly modern tradition, acknowledging its genesis in the historical avant-gardes, and following successive exponents of modern practices. Teachers of modern dance and modern dance companies had an especially influential role
in Australia crossing over disciplines, introducing and legitimising notions of the modern and in time the postmodern and introducing international themes. The role of Kai Tai Chan and, a decade later, that of Meryl Tankard

One Extra Dance Company was established by Kai Tai Chan in the mid-nineteen-seventies but only received funding to become fully professional in 1981. There was a marked increase in the sophistication of their work, as well as an increase in the outright proficiency of fully-trained dancers. Under the leadership of Kai Tai Chan this dance drama group had gained an increasing reputation and a respect for their artistic audacity. Their work began to explore themes of subcultural identity: inner city youth culture, homosexuality and Asian identity in Australia. The playwright Louis Nowra created a work with Kai Tai Chan. The Cheated, in 1982, was based on a montage of newspaper cuttings. Kai Tai Chan created pioneering Australian-Asian work. Whilst the One Extra company was based at the Performance Space in 1984, they presented, Ah Q Goes West. It was a work which directly addressed the ambiguous polarities of East and West in Australia. Later Kai Tai Chan produced works such as Six Chapters in a Floating Life (1988), People Like Us (1991), and Dancing Demons (1991), which took further the dialogues between tradition and modernity, East and West.

Meryl Tankard had trained with the Australian Ballet, but turned her back on the life of a classical ballerina when she left Australia to work as a dancer in Pina Bausch Tanztheatre in Wuppertal, Germany. Tankard decided to return to Australia after this company’s tour to the Adelaide Festival in 1982. Living in Sydney, Tankard found it difficult to find a new place for herself in the performing arts in Australia. In 1986 she created a comic piece about world travel, called Travelling Light. It toured to London and Edinburgh, and it was seen as part of the Spoleto Festival in Melbourne, but she could not get a season in Sydney. "Promoters don’t like to take risks," she told an interviewer. "It isn’t really a risk because we did so well in London. But they think that because you’re Australian you can’t be that good." (da Silva 1987: 12) The Age critic in Melbourne thought that anything subtitled a "dance theatre cabaret" should not be a part of the Festival proper. "Travelling Light belongs on the fringe," wrote Neil Jillet, with a ringing slap. (Jillet 1987: 14)

With the integrity of her work, and its success with audiences, her reputation grew in Australia. In 1988 her solo show, Two Feet, opened the Australian section of the
performing arts program for Expo 88. This work was later performed in Tokyo and Canberra. In 1988 Tankard took over the Canberra-based dance company which Don Asker had called Human Veins. It became the Meryl Tankard Company. Canberra in several senses provided a haven for this wandering creative individual. As well as funding for a small company and residency in the Canberra Theatre Centre, there were opportunities to create events for specific exhibitions at the National Gallery. However, the national capital had a limited population, and so Canberra was more of a quiet backwater than a buzzing metropolis. Meryl Tankard was later to accept the leadership of the Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide, and this company also took on her name in 1992.

Pierre Thibaudeau and Elizabeth Bourke had studied mime with Etienne Decroux. Their teaching consolidated understanding and practices of mime and physical theatre in Australia. Firstly they set up the Sydney Corporeal Mime School in 1979, and this became the Entr’acte Theatre Limited, with Thibaudeau and Burke as its directors, in 1982. In 1983 Entr’acte presented the remarkable Bauhaus inspired production, Refractions, at the Performance Space in Sydney, where they were a resident company. It was devised by the performers, who included Pierre Thibaudeau and Elizabeth Burke. In 1985 Concerto and Blue for Heaven, were also presented at the Performance Space.

Christopher Allen was Entr’acte’s administrator in 1983, when they received a significant increase in funding. From the following year they commenced a program of touring in Australia, and by 1985 they had completed their first overseas tour to the London Mime Festival. In 1986 Entr’acte travelled to Indonesia for the first time, and in 1987 they had a residency at Institut Seni Indonesia in Yogyakarta. In 1988 they toured the UK and Europe and in 1990 they participated in the Toga Festival in Japan.

Entr’acte Theatre continued its close association with the Performance Space, staging some of its most original work there in this period: On Archaeology, by Nicholas Tsoutas and Ostraka, created by the company under the direction of Pierre Thibaudeau. Both works were presented together in 1986. Ostraka was later subtitled an act remembered ... a memory re-enacted, and it had several subsequent seasons. John Baylis was the dramaturg, and he called on a text from Marguerite Yourcenar to evoke the story of Clytemnestra. The work explored the problematic uncertainty at the core of drama: that the violent act being represented and the representation itself are always fragmentary and illusive. They took this
production to Indonesia.

On returning Entr'acte created *The Last Circus*, under the direction of Pierre Thibaudeau, again with the dramaturg, John Baylis. Music for this production was by Blair Greenberg. With Bruce Keller among a very gifted cast, *The Last Circus* was a richly worked production based on a crazy mixture of food and thought: A shabby circus troupe face the issue of survival and at the same time bake bread as a sustenance for body and mind.

Jean-Pierre Voos brought his Netherlands-based experimental theatre group, Kiss, to Australia the early nineteen-eighties. The English actor and director Richard Lawton came with them and stayed in Australia. "When I was living in Europe I was a foreigner," he has said. "I'd been dispossessed for seven years, but I came here, and found that everyone here is actually dispossessed. I feel at home! Everyone here doesn't really belong here," Lawton said. (Collier 1985: pu) He initiated a series of works-in-progress and performances in Sydney that were together titled, *Broken Tales*. From his own perspective he commented that this was a continuation of work he had been doing in Britain. (Lawton et al 1985: np) Working between performing disciplines with fragmented narratives, this was like the heartland of the experimental theatre of the nineteen-seventies, but it was imbued with a stylishness that was entirely of the nineteen-eighties.

Lawton ran a workshop for actors, musicians and dancers that developed "a small, pilot, movement-theatre piece to fifty invited friends at a warehouse in Glebe." This group, augmented by Henk Johannes' band, met again eight months later to present two nights of *Broken Tales II* at Blackwattle Studios. (Lawson et al 1984: np) They created work that explored the mythology of anxiety-prone urban youth. *Broken Tales III* was presented at the Bondi Pavilion Theatre in August-September 1984. *Broken Tales III* was restaged and renamed *Ha Ha Ha Performing Humans*, in which form it was the youthful and celebratory opening production for the new Belvoir Street Theatre on 7 March 1985. This was the building that had once been the Nimrod Theatre and was now back from the jaws of oblivion. The *Bulletin* critic, Brian Hoad, wrote, "Since the Australia Council started taking an interest in the fringe, boosting its funding this year [...] The Belvoir Street Theatre is a timely happening. With all the new money and new enthusiasm being poured into the fringe, there is going to be an increasing need for a central showcase in which to display the results of the more successful experiments." (Hoad 1985: 117)
"Broken Tales is always a risk," became something of a byword for this project. The director’s notes for the Belvoir Street Theatre season used the same words: "Ha Ha Ha Performing Humans is a risk." (Lawton et al 1984 & 1985) This suggests the manner of the historical avant-gardes, and perhaps it is a statement of position, and a claim to avant-garde status. Lawton staged another show at the Performance Space later in 1985. It was entitled Broken Tales No. 4 (Escape). (Lawton et al 1984) Lawton told the Sydney Morning Herald that "Broken Tales No. 4 has as its metaphors two issues preoccupying the imagination of the Western world: Armageddon (nuclear warfare), and the plague (AIDS)." (Collier 1985: pu) In the program the six characters were described as archetypes - “guilty” and “historically accused,” they were, “fighting for their lives, and it’s almost too late,” it stated, “they change or they die.” (Lawson et al 1985) The production used the large Performance Space floor area to great advantage - with the audience steeply raked at the end of the hall. Mark St Leon and Mark Shelton contributed to the design of a setting that featured water, fabric and light. This production also had a sound environment which was quite unlike anything in previous Broken Tales productions. The acting ensemble was increased in size, and their was a generally more experienced cast. This most sophisticated of the Broken Tales series, was “mounted in four and a half weeks on a budget of $16,000.” (Lawton et al 1985)

Whistling In The Theatre (WITT) started as a small collective in Melbourne in 1985. Even the name they gave themselves, Whistling In The Theatre, indicated an iconoclastic breach of the traditional superstition: that you must never whistle in the theatre. This was a group who aimed to upend the norms. They worked together intermittently at first, but created a steady output of projects. Most of the members were graduates of the Victorian College of the Arts. Most of the work created by Whistling In The Theatre has been based on their adaptations of works of literature. They said, they were “committed to the exploration of story telling in the theatre.” One of their early works, Country of the Blind, was based on a story by H. G. Wells that they put in a contemporary setting. (Freund 18987: 8) The Sword and the Stone, based on the novel of T. H. White, was another early work, this time for children. Whistling In The Theatre did an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Their Woman in the Attic, blended the narratives of Emily Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea, to investigate a problematic romance through this dual perspective. Some critics found this difficult to accept. (Thompson 1987: pu)
There was, however, a problem possibly inherent in this working methodology. A member of the collective, Peter Freund, discussed the choices of English literary classics which dominated their work, calling them “arbitrary-random choices based on interest in a particular theme or story, with political, philosophical, and more abstract issues considered but not being of prime importance,” he wrote. There was “not one Australian piece (perhaps a reflection of our schooling),” Freund wrote in 1987, and he added, “we have always been aware of this, but have chosen to set it aside.” (Freund 1987: 8 Parenthesis in the original)

For a collective of actors they were not so interested in exploring acting per se, as they were in the problems of making performances. In an interview for this thesis with Howard Stanley, members of the group commented that they were sustained, not by an ideology they hold in common, but by curiosity. In Bob Pavlich’s words, “It is an experiment for us. It is more motivated by curiosity, rather than conviction.” Their investigation is more to do with finding “solutions,” they explained. “How you make theatre out of this material?” This has sometimes been an intellectual process, to find the forms and the theatrical means to tell the story. Their emphasis has been more about giving the individual members a chance to make work, rather than investigating acting. They had a “continuing interest in the ideas and the means rather than the ends,” as Pavlich put it. (Stanley/WITT interview 1991)

This non-hierarchical collective sustained a common vein of work through a working methodology, rather than an ideology or vision. A manifestation of this has been a tendency in their work to have multiple entry points into a narrative, several perspectives. This has had “an interesting by-product,” Polly Croke commented, “our audience senses this openness in the work.” Peter Freund adds, “and they try and complete it.” Bob Pavlich says, “It is the way we do it - rather than what we do.” They are concerned with exploring ways of making performances “rather than big questions,” Pavlich explained, “Like, what is theatre?” (Stanley/WITT interview 1991)

Without a theatre, this group was free from any burdensome overheads or responsibility to maintain an output. Whistling in the Theatre found its strength in its explorations of form and ensemble work and in its sense of fun. The key to these may be found in their children’s theatre. From the beginning, with Sword and the Stone, they have been aware of the value of this work, which demanded considerable directness. Their work was not sanitised, as
much TIE work tended to be. But, as Polly Croke said, “it was more of a wild anarchic circus.” Their children’s theatre informed their adult theatre, proving new ways of telling stories, and new modes of working together to make performances.

Circus is traditionally the realm of spectacle. In the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies circus was harnessed by street theatre groups who had a political message to deliver. The potential of circus as a vehicle for ideas, as well as intensely theatrical imagery began to develop its own Australian idiom. The street theatre of the Lord Mayor’s Jesters at the Sydney Festivals of the late nineteen-seventies reflected some of the outcomes of the theatrical investigations occurring within the Seymour Student Theatre on the campus of Sydney University, at the time. Chrome and the Sydney-based group, Legs on the Wall, bent the definitions of comedy, circus and theatre and in so doing, indicated something of the changing parameters of performance.

Legs on the Wall was to begin in 1987 with a production called, *Legs on the Wall - Comedy Circus*. With many circus skills, Brian Keogh was the key figure in the group, and Gail Kelly directed most of their early work, which toured to NSW and the ACT. In 1988 they worked at Expo 88 in Brisbane, performing a work titled, *Quacks in the Ceiling*. They also devised a show titled, *Big Trouble*. Their broad traditional clown and circus style was then put at the disposal of the writer, Keith Gallasch, who created with them complex theatrical works with multiple textual elements: *Off the Wall* (1989) and *Hurt* (1992). In these performances the texts were often word-less-ly enacted, played out and played with.

Playwright and performer Tony Strachan started the street theatre group, Chrome, in the late nineteen-seventies. Teamed with various other artists including, Mémé Thorn and Paul Livingstone, Strachan continued intermittently over the following decade, and established a slyly witty set of interactive routines which found a place in the international arts festival circuit. This shark-finned team specialised in doing the apparently undo-able, with precision movement, and whimsical interaction with their audiences. (Romeril 1994: 531 ff)

Another circus-like group, who toured festival and mixed music, mime and film were Etcetera. Large scale stage magic created by Russell Garbutt was one of their hallmarks. The group - men and women - often dressed identically in grey suits, and parodied office workers with a mixture of menace and servility. They always had a closely controlled sense
of ensemble movement. Their performances were very physical, sometimes poignant or threatening, but they also often created moments of unexpected whimsy. Etcetera’s stage show *For Example*, in 1988 was a theatrical *tour de force* that used stage illusion, black-theatre and film with virtuosity.

The Even Orchestra were a group of four performers, Bruce Currie, John Hughes, Paul Livingston and Polly Watkins. They were described as “multi-media oddballs,” who together “dazzled with their originality and wit - as well as their masterful manipulation of film with live performance.” James Waites commented, “It’s all pretty crazy stuff, funny, determinedly ‘home-made’ in its look, and verging on the surreal. Their greatest achievement?” he asked in mock interrogation of the subject. “Probably turning the experience of living in inner-city Sydney - to be precise, Darlinghurst - into an art form.” (Waites & Busby 1988: 15) This group toured to several international festivals, after an appearance at Adelaide Festival in 1986.

When still a student at Melbourne University in the late nineteen-eighties, Roderick Poole formed a performance group with Fred Court and Ray Richards who had worked in the UK with D Dart. In 1989 they performed, *Red Tape*, at LaTrobe University. Later they made a larger processional performance work which they described as a living sculpture. In it, twelve people moved around the city continuously for twelve hours using very stylised movement. Each of them was beset by a puppet-like figure of a black demon, about a quarter life size, above their head and shoulders, or on their backs. This was titled, *Inner Simulacra.* (Corbett 1989: 6)

Primary Sources’ most widely seen work was titled, *Sisyphus.* It used the various professional backgrounds and talents of the group, as Poole told Corbett. These included the engineering and construction skills needed to make the four metre high steel wheel which was dragged around the city streets by twelve performers dressed as office workers. (Corbett 1989: 6) *Sisyphus* was seen at the Melbourne Spoleto Festival in 1989, and subsequently at the Sydney Festival in 1990. The participants had highly resolved critical understanding of their work. Rachel Fensham has written with insight on the postmodern city, citing De Certeau’s *Walking the Cities*, and Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies*; besides recalling in a witty manner her experience as a performer in *Q*, a project in 1991. *Q* was another twelve hour, twelve person sojourn through Melbourne dressed in conservative
business clothes, with movement governed by several set rules around the idea of people in a queue. (Fensham 1991a: *passim*)

Asked if their work was confronting, Roderick Pool has answered, “The work is confronting in terms of the ideas we present, but we don’t launch an onslaught at the people watching us,” he told Chris Corbett. “There’s also an element of fun to our performances,” he said. “Generally people seem to be pleasantly perplexed, which is nice.” (Corbett 1989:7)

The Melbourne-based playwright and director Peter King combined an almost bookish attention to text and tradition with a fascination for innovative movement-based theatre. King had a veneration of the classics and he explored the communicative possibilities of human bodies in theatre spaces.6

In collaboration with the designer, Peter Corrigan, King worked in 1988 on a production of *A Moment’s Hesitation*, by Jeffrey Faraday, at La Mama, Carlton. Later that year King directed *Operas Minutes* from 1928, by Darius Milhaud, comprising *L’Enlèvement d’Europe*, *L’Abandon d’Ariane*, and *La Délivrance de Thésée*. With designer Michael Anderson, King’s production brought favourable comment from Paul Carter in the *Age Monthly Review* editorial. “King has developed a coherent gestural language, a complex (but carefully explained) language of hand, arm and head movements corresponding to the basic emotions the drama expressed,” Carter wrote of these short works given at the Blue Mountains Festival in October 1988. “King’s production was not only historically scrupulous and well-informed: it was a witty and devastating critique of contemporary performance.” (Carter 1989: 2 Parenthesis in the original.)

In 1988 Peter King started an ongoing series of environment specific works collectively called, *Going Through Stages*. King has himself described these ‘cross-discipline’ collaborations” in Antithesis 4.2. The first piece was, *Year of Playing Dead*, which was designed by Peter Corrigan, and performed at the Organ Factory, Clifton Hill.7 “We are making new work and new audiences,” King has commented. (King 1991: 90) Performed in theatres and non-theatres, *Going Through Stages* constituted an investigation of performance, *per se*. They aimed to “make audiences aware of and sympathetic to aesthetic, spatial, political, and psychological discourses rarely encountered or explored in mainstream theatre practice,” according to King. (King 1991: 90)
In a series of performance events in found-spaces, Peter King continued to work with the designer Peter Corrigan and the acoustic designer Suenore Woon, and a number of established performance artists, and actors. *The Usurper of the Plains*, their next work, it was performed in 1989 at the Fringe Network Studio. King has written, that “in opposition to other, more traditional, ‘hierarchical’ theatres that privilege text, declamation, and properties above all other elements in their work,” instead “bodies, sound, movement, light, colour, shapes, space, and speed” in this series of works are “to be equally expressive,” in a performance-making process in which “creation, development and performance simultaneously occur.” He explained, “We do not rehearse an extant text but rather make a theatre intimately dependant on spatial, temporal, physical, and emotional relationships and ruptures as they occur, grow, and decompose in our long and exhaustive (often exhausting) performance-making period.” (King 1991: 89)

Not only the product, but the means of its creation are different from the mainstream. “Our work is orchestrated and choreographed - using the sound, spatial, movement, and analytical skills of the group - almost solely in performance-making sessions,” King wrote. (King 1991: 89) He asserted *Going Through Stages*, aimed to “insist on the expressive and aesthetic rights and powers of subcultures (women, gays, ethnic groups, some artists) and to privilege and represent their concerns and actions.” (King 1991: 90) King suggested that these events avoided the costs of running a theatre structure, and ensured that “the emphasis, in terms of product and cost, [was] on artistic creation not the creation of an administration.” (King 1991: 90)

Also uninterested in working in mainstream conventional theatre, the members of Sydney Front created performances for a *cognoscente audience*, who followed their work, and appreciated the distance between Sydney Front and mainstream theatre. Their work was developed, in the most part, for the Performance Space, in Sydney. They each had respectable credentials as theoreticians and performers. John Baylis worked within the Sydney University Centre for Performance study. Nigel Kellaway, after training in music and composition, took up dance and worked with One Extra Company, for whom he did his first directorial work, *The House of Awa*, at the Performance Space. He then went to Japan and trained with Tadashi Suzuki in the mid-nineteen-eighties. Baylis and Kellaway worked on Mike Mullins’ production, *Illusions* for the 1986 Adelaide Festival. Whilst doing this, they decided to start the new venture. (Olb 1989: 17) The Sydney Front started work
in 1986.

The immediate connections of those involved illustrates the growth in the network of individuals working in avant-garde theatre in Australia by the late nineteen-eighties. At its inception Sydney Front was very close to Entr’acte - with Pierre Thibaudeau and Elizabeth Bourke in the cast of *Waltz*, and Andrea Aloise, who trained with Entr’acte, was a member of Sydney Front throughout its history. John Baylis was a dramaturg on several Entr’acte projects, and Nigel Kellaway gave guest performances with them. Christopher Ryan, from Adelaide, had worked on Broken Tales when he came to Sydney in the mid-nineteen-eighties. Clare Grant, originally from New Zealand, had worked with Kiss, in Holland, and One Extra and Sidetrack in Sydney before joining Sydney Front.

Sydney Front’s work was group-devised, and cited a rich diversity of appropriated texts; it was energetically physical, and became increasingly provocative, with often sexually explicit ideas. It also was sometimes very funny as it shared its unashamedly in-jokes with its audience. Sydney Front sought to confront those who came to see its work. For their first production, *Waltz*, in 1987, they wrote a press release which was quoted at length in the *SMH* at the time: “*Waltz* is a frenzied meditation on theatrical obsession,” it stated. “*Waltz* is a bound performer dragged naked to the footlights. *Waltz* is a phalanx of funereal evening dresses. *Waltz* is nine performers losing all composure in their harrowing struggle with nine legendary theatrical heroines.” It went on, “*Waltz* is an evening of neurotic aspiration, epic posturing and operatic derangement. *Waltz* contains scenes of serious bruising. *Waltz* is the pornography of performance.” The *SMH* commented, “admirably, they want to challenge the increasing timidity of Sydney theatre.” *(SMH 17/3/87: 20)* If this indicates a susceptibility to the advent of Sydney Front within the local press, this welcome was not universal.

Paul McGillick rejected the Sydney Front’s work, out of hand. “The company’s name suggests a dated combativeness as well as a misplaced focus,” he wrote. A number of things concerned McGillick about *Waltz*. “Firstly, it is determined to be obscure,” he wrote. “A second thing was the repetition of ideas from earlier shows.” These were two recurrent complaints by conservative critics. “It is an expose of the shallowness of mainstream performance,” McGillick commented, going on to suggest, however, that their criticism alone was not enough - they must come up with an “alternative” in its place. “I think we can
expect our self-proclaimed innovators to say something of their own. Waltz does not do this. It contents itself with in-jokes and programmatic posturing.” (McGillick 1987b: 7) It seems almost perverse to have accused Sydney Front of lacking answers, given that the substance of their performances presented a multi-layered wealth of material, in strong and original structures.

Asked about McGillick’s criticism later, John Baylis replied, “We were offering something in its place - right before his eyes - but he wanted it packaged in the same way as the things we were rejecting.” In Baylis’ view, Sydney Front were “offering a performance logic of pleasure.” Baylis added, “a pleasure transaction between performer and spectator seems to me the essence of live performance.” (Olb 1989: 18) Later that year Sydney Front created John Laws/Sade: A Confession, also at the Performance Space. This time in NTA, McGillick reviewed the work - at length - whilst confessing, “my problem is how to respond to a show like this.” And he commented, “watching the Front is actually like experiencing a nightmare - and that is a descriptive statement and not a value judgment. Figures agonise over simple movements. There is repetition, and surreal tearing away of surface convention and a liberation of the barbarian child beneath.” (McGillick 1987b: 7) In McGillick’s view, Sydney Front was “like a ghost of conceptual art which continues to stalk the world it once inhabited, delivering lectures on what art ought and ought not to be.” But McGillick could have found the same said of himself. “Beware hubris!” McGillick chided Sydney Front. (McGillick 1987b: 7)

Sydney Front’s work was strikingly self-revelatory, and it contained material on and about theatre processes and theatre products: exhibitionism, narcissism, vulnerability, trickery, desire, complicity, bluff, voyeurism, sanctimoniousness, were all playfully, and powerfully deployed in the work of Sydney Front. The production of John Laws/Sade explored the disembodied authorial voice, and public confessions - hence the counter balance of Sade and Laws. John Laws had been a conservative radio talk-back show host for many years in Sydney. Laws has a large following, and was reputed to be the most highly paid media personality in Australia. Parts of John Laws/Sade and Waltz were together presented as Pornography of Performance at the 1988 Adelaide Festival, and then at the Performance Space, Sydney.

Sydney Front explored the idea of privilege. In Pornography of Performance the audience
were invited, at the beginning of the performance, to reach in and feel the anonymous naked bodies of actors inside large cylinders - marking the extremity of the actors' availability to audience. Nigel Kellaway said Pornography of Performance was about “the actor’s ego and libido - as well as the spectator’s, and about voyeurism. In the beginning,” he said, “I think audiences believed the voyeurism was encapsulated in the fact that we invited them to grope our naked bodies. By twenty minutes into the piece they [the audience] begin to realize that the essence of voyeurism is just purely the act of watching.” Kellaway suggested that, “an actor whether naked or fully dressed on stage is in a state of heightened exhibitionism.” (Olb 1989: 18) The pleasure is a compact between audience and performer. But finally the knowledge that you are included in the privileged audience - not excluded, not repulsed, or confused - is the greatest source pleasure. In Adelaide Peter Goers applauded the work. “The Pornography of Performance leaves its audience elated by the sheer power of the theatre and, by way of the theatre, life itself.” (Goers 1988: 40)

Nigel Kellaway told Suzanne Olb, “We’re more interested in what an audience sees than what an actor experiences.” To which John Baylis added, “And the difference between them.” They rejected naturalism’s dependence on an actor’s internal emotional fabrications. Sydney Front identified the territory between the audience’s reading of their performance and the performer’s experience of performing as a site of their exploration.

Like other Sydney Front work, Photocopies of God, in 1989, was presented at the Performance Space, in Sydney. It was a composition which explored the paradox of the singular nature of religious experience and yet the multiplicity of religious forms propagated. Where might the new, and where might god, be found deep in the age of the mechanical reproduction?

The problem of authenticity in art, and in spirituality are the substance and driving idea of Photocopies of God. In the midst of a rich fabric of formal stage movement, quotations of ritual, remembered and forgotten text, mumbled and declaimed, there is a moment of great rapport with the audience, and each member of the cast relaxes from their sometimes frenetic activities on the high walkway entirely surrounding the audience, they simply sit and tell a story from their lives. One shows old snap shots, one an old home movie, another shares sweets and childhood memories with members of the audience who group around. Then, as if reacting to a signal from outside, the actors get up and quickly change places,
and each begins again warmly telling their story, only this time it is the story which was also
told by the previous actor in this place. It is all a lie. We have been accosted by these
fictions. It is amusing and strangely disturbing. The audience is invited to retaliate, and they
do, pounding the actors with tomatoes. Crucifying the performers: the artist as charlatan,
and the vengeance of a righteous populace. (Guthrie 1989: 2)

Putting themselves in the very foreground of their own theatre works were Virginia Baxter
and Keith Gallasch, who had together created a body of avant-garde theatre going back to
productions with Troupe in Adelaide. Especially in *Suburban Mysteries* and *Gents* can be
seen the beginnings of the formal and strategic experiments that were the basis of their work
to emerge as Open City. Virginia Baxter also created several solo performances, notably
*Passengers in Overcoats* by Gillian Jones, on which Baxter worked with Peggy Wallach
from the All Out Ensemble directing. They put the play on at the Experimental Arts
Foundation, and Baxter recalled, that “working with Peggy was a real eye opener for me
because she worked very physically.” Baxter commented, that “working with her was very
freeing for me. She worked a lot on voice as well. The connection between body and
voice,” Baxter said. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

There were also other collaborations with artists, often from non-theatrical disciplines.
Keith Gallasch worked with Virginia Baxter writing a text for *Just Walk*, which they put
on at the Red Shed in 1983. The director, Gail Kelly, and the visual artist, Lani Weedon
also collaborated with Baxter on this project. *Just Walk* became a watershed for Baxter and
Gallasch, because in it they resolved a style of direct address to the audience that was to
characterise their work from then on. With great charm and a quiet intimacy they spoke to
their audience as if to friends. Later they commented that the intimacy demanded by the
venue itself at the Red Shed, had carried through into their later work. Baxter said, “We like
the audience. We never have them in total darkness. We always have them close up.”
Gallasch commented that, “Quite a bit of the work in Troupe was based on the politics of
everyday life.” There had also been “a strong influence of feminism, sexual politics as an
everyday thing,” which suggested a methodology which stayed with Baxter and Gallasch.
(Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

In 1985 Virginia Baxter created a further collaborative solo piece, *What Time Is This
House*. It was directed and co-written by Keith Gallasch, and they worked again with the
visual artist Lani Weedon, and this time also with the photographer Linda Marie Walker and
the composer Greg Hooper. *What Time Is This House* was adapted for radio and
Broadcast by the ABC. At this time Baxter and Gallasch realised that they were creating
a type of work that interested them, and that it was developing from project to project.
They moved from Adelaide to Sydney. Gallasch commented that they were influenced by
theory, for instance the English sociologist John Berger, and theories of space, inside and
outside, the poetics of space.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989; Berger 1973;
Bachelard 1994)

In 1987 Baxter and Gallasch presented their work as Open City, when they performed their
most complex work to that date, *Tokyo/Now/Thriller*, at the Performance Space, Sydney.
This duo show was made up of anecdotes about travel in Japan told in a comfortable lounge
setting by a couple with sharp eyes for detail and sharp tongues which exposed their fraught
- if understated - relationship. To this was added a suggestion of a murder thriller involving
the male short story writer and the female photographer. The play was transparently about
their own experience of going to Japan in 1982, and it became an essay on “the problematic
relationship of the heterosexual couple,” in Gallasch’s words. The production had witty
music composed for it by Robert Lloyd that was played live by the composer and Natasha
Moszenin. Michael Geissler, who was “an interior designer, as opposed to a theatre
designer,” as Gallasch pointed out, designed their spacious setting of lounge, desk and
lamp. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) There was a version for radio produced by
the ABC in which the tenuous thriller theme was dropped from the script. It had the new
title, *Australia-Japan: A Love Story*. In the early nineteen-nineties the play re-emerged for
stage, retaining its strongest element the humorous and insightful dialogue of two
Australians in a strangely unfamiliar city. It was now called *Tokyo Two*.

Using very personal family material from Keith Gallasch’s childhood in the nineteen-fifties,
Gallasch and Baxter explored the power of the photography in contemporary life. The
figure of his mother became a kind of “hero-villain” in *Photo Play*. It played with time and
narration. Baxter and Gallasch described the work as very personal postmodern work,
based closely on the maker’s own life and experience. They pointed out that because it is
based on autobiographical material, it is accessible and not abstracted, “there is less
deduction to do for the audience,” Gallasch said. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)
*Photo Play* was performed at the Performance Space, in Sydney in 1988. They received

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financial support from Literature Board to develop the script.

Open City’s work showed an ongoing concern with the way memory works. Photography was used several times in their work, especially the evocative ‘snapshot’ with its immediately personal associations. They were interested to examine the way we speak of images and “the distortions that happen” as we describe what we are seeing in our personal photographs. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)9 Girl With A Stone in Her Shoe, at the Performance Space Gallery, Sydney, in 1989, was written and performed by Virginia Baxter, Keith Gallasch and Georgia Keighery. Keighery was then ten years old. With Girl With a Stone in Her Shoe, “the idea was to present the ideas of a child saying very serious things to an adult audience,” Baxter recalled. “It was great to work with a child - that opened us up enormously, we had to be very brave,” she said. Through improvisation they created a fiction called The Girl With a Stone in Her Shoe - A History. The structure of the piece was that of the five courses of a meal. “She starts with desert, being a child, and works back,” Gallasch said. One character was a resident historian, played by Gallasch, who provided his young friend with “a history of manners, of farting, nose-blowing, the fork...” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) The play had a preliminary tryout at the Interventions Conference, at the Performance Space in December 1988. It was directed by Gail Kelly. The success of this show prompted Baxter and Gallasch to use the gallery format for their next show in the Performance Space, All That Flows, which was about the male body. It was presented in a format which played on the “idea of exhibition-cum-performance.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)10

In Open City’s work Baxter and Gallasch created a complex ambiguity about the relationship of their work and their personal lives. Their work so often recounts their own experiences, which they developed through improvisation and their own writing, they invited this teasing uncertainty. As Gallasch said, “They ask, ‘Is that you? Or isn’t it’? And I say, well this bit’s me, and this is how I might behave. So we play ourselves, and logical extensions of ourselves. We play projections of ourselves. So we’re more like characters in plays. Some people find the narrative shaping of it difficult. Because we don’t rely on a story.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) The effect they achieve is a theatrical hyper-realism. There is an implication that their lives and the performance we are seeing are not separate at all. This is subtly disquieting. Where is the line between real and pretend?
It is a dubious commonplace that practitioners of avant-garde theatre do not care if people understand work or not. Baxter and Gallasch were clearly concerned to engage their audience. When asked directly about this, they commented that like other avant-garde artists they are concerned not to have their audience reject their work. Gallasch commented, that someone like Lyndal Jones “gets very worried if people don’t respond to the work.” Virginia Baxter pointed to the line that an avant-garde company needs to walk. “You want to continue to challenge the audience. You don’t want to give them what they’ve asked for. But, by the same token, you are trying to speak to people.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

In the interview with Bray, Gallasch told him, “I think we don’t see it as a fixed product. We are into the politics of everyday life, improvisation-based work, collaboration, they are the key areas, along with this very developed notion of working with an audience.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

“The avant-garde is always about ideas,” said Gallasch, affirming his understanding that avant-garde theatre was not a stylistic category. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) Baxter and Gallasch reject the idea that what they are doing is research and development for state theatres, or that the role of the avant-garde is to “ginger along” the mainstream. Instead Gallasch identified avant-garde theatre as a domain in its own right - especially then we consider the international Festival touring circuit. “It doesn’t influence the mainstream companies,” he suggested, “it is essentially a separate entity.” (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

Negotiating the independence of the avant-garde, whilst also asserting that it has its own vital importance, is one of the difficult tasks, artists working in this area, in various ways, are asked to do again and again. Gallasch’s point, that avant-garde theatre has its own market and freedom, is true to a point. But ultimately there are a set of interdependencies within the theatre culture. This is the medium within which the avant-garde feeds and is fed upon.

Few avant-garde theatre artists have achieved recognition in Australia, as had happened internationally with Robert Wilson, Tadashi Suzuki, Ariane Mnouchkine and Pina Bausch. By the end of the eighties in Australia, however, this was beginning to change, and Nigel
Triffitt, Jenny Kemp, Sydney Front and Open City, began to gain support. By linking with the international festival circuits and other avenues of international theatrical practice Australian artists were emerging by the late nineteen-eighties as 'accepted' dissidents.
Conclusion
The conclusion

Avant-garde theatre in the period between the mid-nineteen-sixties and the mid-nineteen-eighties was the forum in which innovations were tested that progressively changed the nature of theatre in Australia. International modernism, first seen in alternative theatres, took hold in Australian theatre generally. The political radicalism of the New Left, youth culture and the counter culture were the agents of this modernisation, which, along with a reassertion of Australian nationalism and the expression of a local vernacular drama, overturned the conservative neo-colonial norms of theatre practice in Australia. The theatre laboratory method, and a notion of theatrical experimentation were major means of change. The national policies of community art brought about a democratisation of the theatre institution that asserted a non-colonial ownership of theatre newly vested in communities or subcultures within Australian society.

Gestures towards modern theatre...

The historical avant-gardes were the models for the innovations which occurred in radical, experimental and avant-garde theatres in Australia between 1965 and 1985. Experimentation with theatre form became a prevalent activity in Australian theatre. A notion of performance loosened the theatrical tradition, which in Australia had been bound to the hierarchy of a dramatic canon derived from the stages of London and Broadway. In its place a nationalist vision of a theatre emerged and rapidly became established as the dominant mode, while simultaneously new subcultural expressions grew to have their own theatrical voices on Australia. Within a growing complexity of postmodern pluralism, artists were emerging who achieved recognition for the integrity and originality of their work, and not for the closeness of its resemblance to a London or New York model.

Since the commencement of government funding for theatre companies in the nineteen-fifties there has been the opportunity for programming theatre offerings with freedom from commercial considerations. At their commencement the state theatre companies indicated
a commitment to aesthetically driven choices in repertoire by first presenting modern European plays. These initial choices of repertoire were a signal that modernity was the new benchmark by which the artistic leaders of these companies first believed their work should be judged. Yet in all cases this early commitment to modern theatre was not followed up in the subsequent planning of the state theatre companies’ programs. The predominantly conservative views in Australia of Australian theatre critics and the membership of the boards of state theatre companies strongly counselled the new artistic directors away from ‘radical’ choices. Modern theatre was an aspect of aesthetic modernism upon which conservative Australia had firmly turned its back.

The foundations of the so-called national drama were laid down in the ‘ensemble’ groups, especially Emerald Hill and the Ensemble theatre, and in the socialist New Theatre movement. These groups were concerned with international practices that suggested to them new methods of working. The newly available strategies which were broached in the ‘ensemble’ companies’ work but not always fully engaged, included new systems of actor training, the process of the theatre workshop, experimental theatre and the use of improvisation with actors researching and devising material according to broadly sociological investigation of themes. These methods were to come to have an important role in Australian theatre practice when they were more fully realised at La Mama, the APG, Nimrod, the Popular Theatre Troupe and Troupe in Adelaide.

Speaking to John Allen in 1968, Robin Lovejoy described what he saw as the weakness in the Australian theatre in terms of an incomplete hierarchy. “The ideal circumstance would be one in which there were many small workshop theatres which took plays on bravely, went out on a limb. And then more theatres at Old Tote level which took the next stage of development or polish in the play and presented that. And finally, a paternal theatre which was embracing and developing the quarter of an inch of cream made up from the bottle which came out of the other two theatres,” Lovejoy suggested. (Allen 1968a: 7) The spectre of a National Theatre has died hard in Australia. Lovejoy’s hierarchy might be fairly representative of conservative views of the time. Little theatres at the bottom, with state theatre companies polishing their products and talents while operating ‘commercially,’ and overlain by the ultimate refinement of Australian theatre: a National Theatre. The states vied to be host to such a national institution. And some companies simply assumed that mantel in name (National Theatre Company, in Perth, and Nimrod National Theatre) or in the
conduct of their activities (as Sumner’s Melbourne Theatre Company might have done, or more recently the Sydney Theatre Company under Wayne Harrison).

The great distances to the rest of the world had always caused delays in the arrival of cultural innovations in Australia; however, this time-warp progressively ceased to be a dominating factor during the nineteen-seventies, with satellite communications and accessible rapid air transport. Radical youth and student culture disseminated radical theatre in Australia, as it had in other parts of the world, during the nineteen-sixties and into the nineteen-seventies. Something of the fervour for social renovation, which had died down in Europe after 1968, was still building in Australia towards the major social revisions to come with the election of a nationalist government in 1972. There was a new focus in the Australian ethos that was evident throughout society, including the media and the theatre. It rejected colonial structures and implied a new nationalism, although many of those actively and passionately espousing this at the time were reluctant to use that name.

During this time political theatres experimented with new forms and strategies of making performances. Although politically driven this innovative work, within the APG and elsewhere, was aesthetically informed. Theatre was produced in new contexts with new relationships to its audience, for example theatre restaurants and street theatre, which blurred the distinctions of popular entertainment and art-theatre, and allowed a synthesis of work which articulated Australian identity.

Internationally, the counter culture gave rise to alternative theatre practices, and this had a considerable impact in Australia where experimental theatre and the avant-garde became focal models for new theatre projects. The model of the oppositional avant-garde in international and local alternative theatres was built on a foundation of knowledge of their antecedents in the historical European avant-gardes. There was in Australian non-mainstream theatre, as with the counter culture generally, a close proximity between life and art. Political anarchy was manifesting itself in this generation with its co-operatives and the collectives, which were self-generated social and industrial structures. Above all in its motive and its essence the alternative theatre was oppositional. John Allen wrote that, “an experimental theatre movement is taking place in Australia,” adding that, “some unity of feeling has arisen about the shortcomings of theatre of the past. There is yet, happily, no agreement on the next stage of the theatre’s development.” (Allen 1969: 29)
The postwar baby-boom generation focused society on the aspirations of youth. They took to the streets to take up the promises held out in the common social vision in those years of affluence. They demanded peace and freedom immediately, to complement the relative wealth and leisure they enjoyed. This was not the reading of the social contract which the conservative powers had intended, and it caught the Western world by surprise. This instantaneous social volatility peaked in the conflicts in Paris in 1968, where it had at once flared and failed to take the political power from the established institutions. With its inherent anarchic nature as a movement it had failed to create institutional structures of its own to challenge those already in place. In the adaptive manner of capitalism the existing institutions rapidly appropriated many aspects of the demands made by the young.

Jan Kott has identified two ostensibly political pronouncements which were emblematic of the time: “Sois réaliste. Faites L’impossible,” and “L’imagination au pouvoir!” (Kott 1984: 148) These self-conscious paradoxes were written on the walls of the Sorbonne and the Odeon Theatre by student protesters in 1968. In these slogans Kott found a linguistic and psychological closure, a turning away from the broad cultural traditions towards a subculture. This he likened to the self-constraints evident in cult practices. Discussing Grotowski, the key model of the experimental theatre of the period, Kott’s view was apocalyptic. There was, however, an outright utopian reading of the actions and words of 1968. The graffitied cries resounded with a surreal poetry similar to many of the lyrics of the contemporary anthems of self-affirmation sung by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. This was a millennial view of social patterns ending - perhaps violently - but there was stated and implied renewal. From within the counter culture there was a utopian faith in the future, and this was common to the streets of Paris and the campus of Monash University in 1968.

A re-assertion of Australian nationalism converged in this period with the revolutionary intentions of young people. In rejecting Australia’s neo-colonial ‘British-ness’, young middle-class Australians found in the larrikin persona a viable ‘new’ identity for themselves. The easygoing anti-authoritarian stance of the larrikin was increasingly attractive to the educated middle-class. They enjoyed a new affluence and easily put aside the reticence which had once kept the middle-class at a remove from the down-at-heel larrikin. In the streetwise manner of the larrikin persona there was a potential revolutionary nationalist.
The new nationalist drama emerged from the alternative theatres, and with its ‘rough’ new acting style it conveyed an irreverent vitality that made these new plays hot commercial properties and the core of the state theatre repertoires. The closed *cognoscente* audience rapidly switched to a wider following broadly appreciative of the new popular nationalism. Audiences of the state theatre companies enjoyed the oppositional rude gestures in the direction of the colonial theatre, often unaware that this had been learned in the avant-garde theatres.

When the *way out* was...*in*

In the common parlance of the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies what was pleasing, new and challenged the norm, was ‘way out’. *Way out* indicated more than fashionableness, it was a shorthand for those things which aligned with a radical alternative set of social values: the counter culture. The counter culture was a manifestation of modern society that was driven by similar social and political tendencies that had produced the historical avant-gardes earlier in the century. Challenging the *status quo*, the new theatre practices adopted the iconoclasm of the avant-garde.

The corollary of being ‘way out’ was, ironically, ‘to be in’. *To be in* was to be one of the ‘in crowd’, one of the *cognoscenti*. To be in, was also ‘to be in fashion’. When *the way out* was *in*, during this period, the extreme elements in radical art practice and social action formed coteries of adherents in the convention of *avant-garde* art.

The APG was not alone in its utopianism or its *modus operandi*. Companies such as the Performance Syndicate, Claremont, Mushroom, the White Company and Technical Smile, struggled with the same set of key issues argued in the APG monthly collective meetings: the search for structures which were non-hierarchical, the debate between ‘process’ and ‘product’, the place of the director in an egalitarian structure, and the role of women in the group. These issues also continued to be the dominant issues within the internal processes of the community theatres of the late nineteen-seventies and the nineteen-eighties. Robin Laurie reminded us of this when she described the APG as “a group founded by actors and writers totally opposed to the ‘traditional’ power of the director and aimed at creating a genuinely popular Australian theatre.” (Laurie 1987: np)
The international models for this activity were to be found in the counter culture and the surge in international avant-garde theatre in the nineteen-sixties. The reassertion of feminism in the Western world in the nineteen-sixties was also profoundly important. There was a utopian idealism - still redolent with the values of the historical avant-gardes - and animated by the actions of youth in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, which Robin Laurie referred to, speaking at the National Community Theatre Conference in 1987: “We could do ANYTHING! The Living Theatre were our heroines and heroes. Life, Art and Politics were inescapably intertwined.” She continued, “It was assumed your politics were communicated not only through what you said, but in what you did and how you did it. We wanted to live the future now!” she recalled. (Laurie 1987: np Orthography as in the original transcript.)

It was an aspect of the radicalism of this period that the worker was to be respected and the traditional power structure was to be overturned. Avant-garde theatre groups placed a priority on the importance of actors as creative artists. Robin Laurie recalled the sentiments of the APG that the “revolution must liberate the imagination - ‘Be Realistic - Demand the Impossible’. There was stress on the subjective feelings, on the performer as source of material, as an artist in their own right, not ‘just’ an interpreter of the text.” Privileging the actor redressed the historically short-lived imbalance in Western theatre this century. In the late nineteen-sixties - coinciding with news of the Cultural Revolution in China - redress was sought for the actor in the West. “We were impressed by the Chinese idea of breaking down the distinction between intellectual and manual labour - let the Administrator clean the dunnies!” Laurie recalled. “Anyone could be an artist. All jobs could be done by anyone who wanted to.” Challenging the hierarchy of the art market was a strategy of the historical avant-gardes. Subverting the hierarchy of the patriarchy was a broader social goal of the women’s movement, which was taken up by the community theatre movement. “We wanted genuine participation, everyone to be equal, we rejected notions of ‘skill’ and ‘talent’ that capitalism used to divide people, to create hierarchies, to make some people feel superior or to assume more power than others.” (Laurie 1987: np) In a strategy derived from feminist discourse, community theatre generally sought to validate marginal status and in so doing to deny the traditional masculine criteria of success which were excellence, domination and ownership. The thrust of this movement was to throw-over these values in favour of living in the present and being in touch with the individual, their senses and with the community.
A dramatic political shift occurred in Australia with the sacking of the Whitlam Labour government in 1975. There was a widespread sense of loss which overwhelmed the optimism of this brief period of radical innovation in Australia. A general sense of disillusionment took over the arts in Australia in the latter years of the nineteen-seventies. Nonetheless, there was an increasing diversity of cultural expression as the seeds sown during the previous decade grew despite a climate of general conservative reaction. The so-called alternative theatres came and went at an individual level; however, the thrust to create such enterprises continued despite some blustering from a new Liberal Federal government. The Community Arts Board of the Australia Council was devolved - but later reinstated. Their work was generally more controlled by funding parameters and policies.

In the late nineteen-seventies comedy venues sprang up in Australia and reflected a strong anti-establishment sentiment, with Dada-like work increasingly popular. Theatre-in-education, theatre for young people and regional theatres allowed new opportunities of diversity and experimentation. The inter-disciplinary nature of modern dance and the progressive impulse from new technologies stimulated a flux of innovation on the parameters of the performing arts. Festivals became more numerous and significant throughout Australia. With government support, festivals increasingly provided a means to patch together fluctuating opportunities for avant-garde theatre groups.

The co-founder of Nimrod Theatre, John Bell, had been invited to give the Kathleen Robinson Lecturer at Sydney University in 1973, where he had linked the work of alternative theatres in Australia with contemporary avant-garde theatre activities in Europe, Britain and America. Bell had advocated a vital role in Australia for the alternative theatre as the “real alternative to the Established Theatre.” He had also argued for more generous financial support for such work, to encourage new and experimental theatre. “Alternative Theatre needs to be brave, to defy the box-office and the critics and to employ the best actors and directors available,” Bell said in 1973. (Bell 1976: 17) By the time his lecture was published by the University in 1976, Nimrod Theatre had gained preeminence among Australian theatres, and Bell’s original identification with ‘alternative theatre’ was no longer in his theatre’s interests. He added a postscript in which he suggest that if he were to “lecture on the same subject today” he would no longer define Alternative Theatre as a “branch of the ‘established’ theatre balancing the policy of its neighbours.” Bell now argued, instead, that “theatres such as Nimrod cannot be called ‘alternative’ simply because
we produce some of the plays you'd be unlikely to see at the Old Tote.” he argued that they were “doing the same job as the Tote - producing a professional repertory of entertainment for a paying audience.” (Bell 1976: 19) Why should Bell have represented Nimrod as a mere alternative to the Old Tote? This state company was, arguably, by then artistically moribund, and was to cease operations by the end of the nineteen-seventies. Bell’s comments point to a shift in identification at Nimrod: from the avant-garde to the second tier of the mainstream.

The fleeting avant-garde status of vernacular texts was gone. Jack Hibberd commented, ten years after the establishment of the APG, that there was a “general acceptance of local plays and the Australian dialect. It is now no longer experimental or radical to present Australian works.” It seemed to Hibberd, that “these early endeavours” had been assimilated into the “theatrical status quo.” (Hibberd 1979: 475-6) More than the wild anarchy and rapture had gone; once established, there was little disruptive potential in these vernacular voices, no longer any ability to rupture the conventional social commerce. The decade had been both rewarding and hard on Hibberd. There was growing difficulty in his position as an innovative artist, who had not commodified his work, as arguably, David Williamson had done, for example. Hibberd found himself in a rapidly contracting creative environment.

Support for the arts in Australia was constrained by a lack of tradition, and by limited opportunities available in a country with a small population. This was all the more so for avant-garde theatre which could be ‘difficult’, aggressive and unconventional. Australia had little capacity in the nineteen-seventies for a category of avant-garde artists, who could survive and even gain public acclaim and notoriety, whilst they retained their status as iconoclasts. The idea persisted in Australia, from days dominated by commercial theatre, that a star was someone who made a name for themselves overseas. Hibberd was hilariously sarcastic and without mercy in identifying his enemy. “We need more antipodean actors, dingo performers, not elocutionary puffballs,” Hibberd urged. “We need interpretive dingo directors, not cravat-necked Londoners.” There were only two ways for the avant-garde to go in Australia: into the mainstream as soon as possible; or the way of the larrikin: shrouding doubt in pugilistic “feats of self-assertion and self-fabrication.” (Hibberd 1979: 478)

One of the results of a critical romanticisation of the larrikin beginnings of the APG was
that it suggested a kind of wilful ignorance or denial of history and tradition by the members of the APG and their contemporaries. They were not, however, ignorant of history or tradition, although they may have denied the colonial models. These were highly educated and informed individuals, some number of whom had travelled widely and knew at first hand what was going on internationally.

John Bell had suggested that alternative theatre was an aspect of alternative society. ‘Experimental theatres’ or ‘alternative theatres’ such as the Performance Syndicate, the White Company, Claremont, Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe, and the Theatre Research Group, may have exemplified the totality of cultural displacement implied in Bell’s comments. However, members of these companies might or might not have seen themselves as “manifestations of an Alternative Society,” in the terms of Bell’s postscript. (Bell 1976: 19) Their marginality was not because they were part of an alternative society or counter culture, but because they had undertaken aesthetic and strategic directions which were at odds with the prevailing conventional theatre and also different to the ‘new Australian plays’. The social forces of the early nineteen-seventies that were suggested in the term ‘counter culture’ made these projects feasible, and this culture also provided occasion for such radical, experimental and avant-garde activity. This however, fell short of being the cause of this work.

The women’s movement had a widespread impact in Australian society at large and in the theatre, especially the avant-garde theatre. Women had a high level of involvement in marginal theatre activities: theatre with young people, dance-theatre and theatre-in-education, for example employed many women in leading positions. Gradually the barriers became easier to cross for women to progress upwards to more influential roles and laterally into their chosen fields. This was a slow process, which Colleen Chesterman in her study, Playing with Time: Women writing for performance (1995), has shown continued well beyond the mid-nineteen-eighties. Significantly, however, women’s theatre practice tended, in this period, to focus on non-conventional dramatic forms. In discussing the role women have taken in avant-garde theatre in Australia Miller and Janaczewska have commented that they “partook of a range of movements which sought to challenge the dominant paradigms and to open out the possibilities for heterogeneity and alternative political communities.” (Miller & Janaczewska 1990: 5) Monodramas were a prevalent form that reflected a preference in women’s writing for the personal perspective. There was
also a tendency toward undramatised narratives, that is, stories in which conflict was not essential. Theatre created by women was inclined to place an emphasis on spatial, visual and contextual values and these, over time, came to enter the mainstream. Miller and Janaczewska have commented that women in avant-garde theatre in Australia “partook of a range of movements which sought to challenge the dominant paradigms and to open out the possibilities for heterogeneity and alternative political communities.” (Miller & Janaczewska 1990: 5)

In her book on Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group Peta Tate wrote that, in the nineteen-seventies “it was women working in the arts, the union movement and social welfare who constructed theory from practice, developing cohesive frameworks often from the discourse taking place at women’s gatherings and conferences.” (Tate 1993: 3) There was a fear of theory and a reluctance to use theory among people working in the theatre. Speaking about women in community theatre, Robin Laurie advised her feminist colleagues, that “we must not be afraid of theory. We need to be articulate, we need to be powerful.” (Laurie 1987: np) Women in the theatre disclaimed theory as a tool of their professional activities for the greater part of the period of this study. This is generally true of women and men across the alternative theatres throughout the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. The denial of theory can be identified as a general weakness of the inward-looking stance of social action in the nineteen-seventies.

There were a few exceptions in this period, when theatre organisations and individuals spoke about their theoretical positions. At the Performance Space in Sydney in the early nineteen-eighties, the rhetoric was about new form. This term embraced a rediscovery of the intention within the historical avant-gardes to avoid or to destroy narrative. It was, perhaps, a restatement of formalism. Later, also at the Performance Space, Mullins’ successors, Tsoutas and Miller, jointly edited the short-lived theoretical journal, Spectator Burns.

The personal is political has implications beyond women’s art practice. It is an axiom with a bearing on alternative art practices generally. The political nature of the personal dimension can answer the occasional attacks of ideologues who criticise personal work as art for art’s sake, suggesting that it therefore lacks political credibility. Jenny Kemp created highly personal theatre, and she has claimed that it has an underlying political dimension.
Kemp commented that, she is “concerned to critique the society.” Kemp explained this to Stanley in terms of redressing what she saw as “imbalances” in the wider social arena. She gave this example of her attitude: “Some inner resources seem to be ignored as potent resources. And I actually think that it is quite political that they are not encouraged.” She identified these exclusions as mechanisms of social control that “disempower the individual.” Kemp was concerned that this would “nurture fascism.” Her response was politically forthright. “In that way I feel anarchic: to empower the individual to think for themselves,” Kemp said. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991)

The Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group and other feminist groups, as well as the APG, the Performance Syndicate and Claremont had crises over the role of the director. These disputes were in part human discord, and in part ideologically constructed. Beyond this however, such conflicts were endemic in chronically under-resourced groups, where to continue at all - often with no money - meant these companies were forced to ‘exploit’ the enthusiasm, skills and talents of their members. Eventually individuals became emotionally too aggrieved to support the group activities any longer, and discord broke out, often aimed at the director. The limited funding available to such groups was a crucial factor in causing or worsening these break-downs and the abuse of individual artists.

In the early nineteen-eighties there was a paradoxical social environment in which strong conservative forces - reflected in the governments of the day - accommodated progressive and radical activities which had been associated with the counter culture. Radical and avant-garde theatre were supported in Australia, but there was a trend to turn such theatre into a commodity. Examples of this transition include alternative comedy, festival fringe activities, some rock and roll, performance art, art events, and advertising’s use of avant-garde performance.

At this time in Australia avant-garde practice was not exclusive to any type of theatre or context where performances might be found. The growing diversity of theatre activity provided more opportunities for avant-garde work, although the occurrence was essentially unplanned and often quite opportunistic. People were pushed by the funding policies to go into new places and to use new means of making performances; and for some, this was a prompt to investigate the nature and means of theatre itself.
The great expansion and development of theatre available in Australia at this time was the result of government funding programs, especially the Community Arts program which manifest projects in marginal contexts. Federal, State and local government programs began to coordinate their funding policies more deliberately, and the support for radical, experimental and avant-garde theatre achieved its broadest financial base. New and original types of theatre were brought to new theatre audiences, not always as a conscious result of a policy, but as a consequence of the policy thrust to generally broaden the base of arts production and consumption in Australia.

There was, however, little significant financial assistance to these sorts of theatre activities from private sector sponsors. Several alternative commercial entrepreneurs - most notably John Pinder - made some new opportunities for diversity of theatre on offer in Australia. Unlike the experience in America, where arts facilities were often privately endowed and available to avant-garde arts projects; in Australia there was little private philanthropy. In Australia - as it was in America - theatres were often associated with universities. It was these publicly funded institutions in Australia, which provided occasional opportunities for unconventional theatrical endeavours.

Within the tertiary education systems there were a variety of environments which allowed the development of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Besides the provision of government support for theatre the part played by the colleges and university was the single most significant factor allowing the development of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Universities and colleges contributed materially and in-kind to the development of theatre in Australia generally. On their campuses new theatrical ideas were nurtured, allowed to gestate and from there they were disseminated. Avant-garde theatre was often made possible because of access to the resources within institutions of tertiary education, and such work was often informally allied to the surrounding campus culture. The advent of quality professional training for performers had a significant impact on the development of a comprehensive basis for the stage tradition in Australia. Although there was a stand-off between the formal training institutions and the alternative theatres, which also offered training in workshops and classes as off-shoots of marginal theatre activities, each provoked the other to establish further workshop-based training.

There have been few opportunities, however, offered in the Australian theatre to sustain
commitment to developing work over a long period so that interesting work can be allowed
to mature. Several elements were not aiding the development of an avant-garde theatre in
the Australian context. There was not a strong enough tradition of try-out venues, and try-
out opportunities, so that plays and production concepts could be tested before they were
put before a critical audience. There was also little in the way of any understanding or
acceptance that promising new work needed to be supported for years, if necessary, to
allow it to be strengthened and refined, and to emerge with the kind of quality which these
processes had allowed international examples of the avant-garde to achieve.

There was no sense of confidence about the support available for avant-garde theatre in
Australia. Even the Australia Council programs designed to support innovation, such as
Limited Life Grants and Pilot Project Grants, were administered in a way which did not
encourage risk-taking or genuinely unconventional work. The title, Limited Life Grant,
suggested the extreme constraint placed on such support under this funding program.

Artists wanting to explore avant-garde theatre were forced to find niches within funding
programs such as the Community Arts or later the Community Cultural Development
programs. This funding was usually offered on a project-by-project basis. A significant
number of regional companies with annual funding and marginal companies with reasonable
levels of support had agendas which included theatrical experiments or developmental
workshops, but these were often not presented to the funding authorities in these terms.¹

No policy was effective in supporting avant-garde theatre in Australian theatre in the period
of this study. This was a failure of the policies themselves and of the peer assessment
committees of the Australia Council, where too often the representative artists supported
the organisations in which they worked and other similar organisations nationally. These
committees allowed the mainstream companies to dominate calls on the ‘innovation’ criteria
for funding on all but rare occasions.

Not another death of the avant-garde!

Paul McGillick lamented the lack of exploratory avant-garde theatre in the nineteen-
eighties, speaking at a forum during the Griffin Theatre’s D week in November 1989. He
pointed out, that nobody in Australia took the time to painstakingly develop disciplined
ensemble work, as Grotowski had done, and that the groups that had used this type of
process in Australia in the nineteen-seventies were no longer to be found. Mark Gould responded to these comments by pointing out that funding was largely based on projects, and did not support this sort of work, which required months or even years of intensive group exploration without necessarily any outcome.

Chris Westwood answered McGillick's regret, that avant-garde theatre in Australia had died with the nineteen-seventies, with a firm assertion that theatre by and about women, and Aborigines, gay theatre and theatre within the community had become dynamic sources of innovations. These were, she said, the avant-garde theatres of the nineteen-eighties. A Grotowski-like process of long-running laboratory activities resulting in near-sacred performances was not necessarily the only appropriate model for innovative work and it was no longer the dominant model. Issues of gender, ethnicity and marginal identity were more than the contents of the theatre of the nineteen-eighties. By voicing marginal positions, the actual nature of theatre practice changed in this period. Language changed, dramaturgy and scenography changed and, most profoundly, the relationship of the performance to its audience changed. By placing performances outside conventional theatres - in work places, parks, pubs, schools, the street - the nature of the theatre experience changed for Australian audiences irreversibly.

Jan Bruck has suggested, provocatively, that "Australian playwrights have not produced much in terms of avant-garde experiments or radical theatre, as political pragmatism and cultural conservatism have discouraged the use of criticism and aesthetic shock." Bruck regretted that Australian "audiences are correspondingly less inclined to be entertained by the bizarre or activist happenings of the European and American avant-garde." (Bruck 1986: 20) However, Bruck's Eurocentric evaluation demonstrates that the tone of disapproval associated with the colonial cringe is not exclusive to the Anglophile cynic.

On the other hand, there was a recognition, in this period, that the Australian audience was both specific and multi-faceted, and that generalities of imported English and American drama did little to represent this. A convergence had occurred of the nationalism of the Whitlam years and the modernist means to convey Australia's pluralism. Nationalism meant the validation of many voices which were hitherto unacceptable on the stage, and in the media. Initially the vernacular voices and manners of the white Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Australian working-class and middle-class were put on stage; but subsequently gay theatre,
non-English language theatre, and theatre for or about groups which were marginalised or
disabled became prevalent in this sphere of alternative theatre. In turn, the mainstages of
the state theatre companies and commercial managements took up and adopted parts of this
new work and some of it quickly became an accepted part of the established theatre
repertoire. The modern national vernacular rapidly became an orthodoxy, and dissenting
voices took up new avant-garde positions.

Gay Hawkins has commented that, support of the avant-garde or experimental work within
the Australia Council was “hardly central or secure.” She has disinterred a report prepared
by Kevin Morgan which stated that, “The avant-garde does not necessarily belong with
audiences encountering the arts for the first time, and it will be self defeating and
paternalistic to think of factory workers, for example, as guinea pigs to be exposed to a
theatre experience which may be challenging to the conventional expectations of even the
habitual theatregoer.” Morgan went on, “quality work in traditional forms has in the short
term been a rewarding introduction to the arts.” Then he added a disclaimer, “this is not to
prejudge the capacity of any audience to enjoy and assimilate innovative work.” (Morgan
1977:8 cited Hawkins 1993:40) By the early nineteen-eighties, Hawkins recorded, the
Community Arts Board (CAB), “openly rejected projects which were committed only to
aesthetic innovation.” (Hawkins 1993:62)

A little later, Pilot Projects funded by the CAB were an important avenue, however,
through which radical work still received CAB support. Hawkins quoted Andrea Hull’s
report on CAB Pilot Projects, written in 1981 when Hull was Director of Policy and
Planning: “Proposals must be related to a known community context and, whilst
experimental, should relate to a new application of the arts or a new artistic experience for
the people, rather than experimentation for art’s sake” (Hull, cited Hawkins 1993:62) Hull
used the paradigmatic axiom of the historical avant-gardes - *art for art’s sake* - to invalidate
such work as acceptable community arts practice.

In all this, there is a dialogue to be read between the rhetoric from Australia Council, and
the demand for support from the field. Guidelines and policy utterances were made in
response to a flood of applications, which carried their own rhetoric. Hawkins’ analysis of
the policy rhetoric does not acknowledge these other voices in the dialogue. The policy
utterances represented attempts to turn the flow of funds toward specific desired outcomes.
They ran counter to the pull of demand. The policy utterances did not represent the actual outcomes of funding decisions; almost the contrary, at times, was true.

The CAB was funding some avant-garde work which may have subverted the intentions of the funding body and this prompted further policy formulation to 'rectify' this trend. The policies so articulated did not necessarily override the multitude of criteria the peer group committees needed to consider in making grants. Aesthetic considerations, equitable state distribution, track record, demographics, peer regard, are among the factors which we can assume were influential, along with policy guidelines, and reports developed by Australia Council staff or consultants. Not specific policy statements, but the work funded during that period, should be considered as the primary evidence of the effects of Australia Council grants. A significant level of radical, experimental and avant-garde theatre was supported under the rubric of community art. Policy developments tending away from this, such as those cited by Hawkins and quoted above, are a kind of inverse proof of this trend.

What might be the border between modern and postmodern has been much discussed. The dependency which postmodernism has on the pre-existence of the modern is problematic. This is exacerbated in the Australian experience because, in sense, modernism and postmodernism emerged concurrently in the period of this study. Because of the resistance to modernism in Australia earlier in the century, the international manifestations of modernity were still becoming newly established when postmodernism arrived in the theatre. This is markedly apparent in the work of Nicholas Tsoutas, Michael Mullins and Lyndal Jones, for example. By the mid-nineteen-eighties new work emerged within a progressively more complex continuum of performance forms and genres. The value of differentiation between categories can become a misleading activity here, because projects rested between and among categories.

If postmodern theatre in the United States of America and Europe has been characterised by surface qualities, pastiche and complex strategies of assemblage, as well a bravado that refused to differentiate between street-wise irony and traditional wisdom; these were similar qualities to those in evidence in the modern avant-garde theatre of the nineteen-seventies in Australia. If, too, as Auslander has summarised, there is a generalised view “that postmodern culture seems unlikely to provide much foothold for political art practices as traditionally conceived,” this was the kind of view frequently taken of the formal theatre
experiments in Australia in the nineteen-seventies. (Auslander 1992: 21) However, this thesis has contested any simplified assumption that political radicalism was absent from alternative theatre in the nineteen-seventies. So too, it is strongly evident that the major proponents of postmodern performance in Australia in the early nineteen-eighties - including Jenny Kemp, Virginia Baxter and Keith Gallasch, Don Mamouney, John Baylis and Nigel Kellaway - were not apolitical, nor were they cynically turning away from political issues to the postmodern pleasures of surface and form. Indeed the surfaces and forms employed in their work were harnessed to both overtly political and implicitly political intentions.

The avant-garde introduced the emergent national drama and the accompanying presentation of community theatre that articulated specifically nationalistic material. The "rejection of history" in the case of Australian postmodernism has been dominantly a rejection of the colonial history, both among the consciously political theatres and the groups devoted to formal experimentation. Rather than a depoliticising process this had been expressly political. Auslander has noted that, as a term, ‘postmodernity’ has generally been used to describe both a period and a style. The greatest value in the Australian context is the term’s usefulness to describe the period at the climax of the twentieth century when ‘progress’ became problematic. Distinct from any inclination to a millennial summing-up of the period, such as Fredric Jameson’s “gloomy view of a society that has surrendered its sense of history to the cynical embrace of commodity capitalism.” Auslander cites Hal Foster’s view that within postmodernism there is “reaction” and “resistance”. For Auslander, resistance to the powerful forces of commodification within postmodernity suggests a potential for the reassertion of political contents into postmodern American theatre. (Auslander 1992: 31) In Australia, Auslander’s insights are congruent with a theatre where postmodern work did not generally abandon its political purposes in an attitude of cynicism, but used the heightened self-consciousness offered by postmodernity to interlink comment and commentary of the inner workings of the performance and the external world, the societal and, often, the global environment.

The motif of the journey - key to the alternative culture of the nineteen-seventies - was still a figure for postmodern theatre practice. Jenny Kemp spoke in these terms to Stanley, but the heroic journey has been repositioned. “The travelling is being done in the audience’s mind, it’s not being presented, or laid out on the stage so much,” Kemp said. This has
become an internal, female world. “On stage is a provocation. On stage is an enigma, or a knot, or a catalyst,” she proposed. “My work functions in that catalytic way, causing the audience to start working,” she emphasised. “The audience starts feeling all these possibilities of thinking associatively, and of being receptive to fantasy, to imagination and dream, and linking those with the intellect, so that they are working with each other,” Kemp explained of her stage works. (Stanley/Kemp interview 1991) Women had a growing importance in the margins in Australia at this time, and made some impact as directors on the mainstages.

By the nineteen-eighties a proposition of the avant-garde as a future-in-the-present no longer held good: in postmodernity progress toward the future was problematic, and the future itself was no longer an irresistible lure. Andreas Huyssen noted that “since Saint Simon, the avant-gardes of Europe have been characterized by a precarious balance of art and politics”, and he suggested that after the flourish of the historical avant-gardes politics and art “went their separate ways.” (Huyssen 1988: 6) In Australia between 1965 and 1985 the opposite occurred. In a climate charged with a strong national political current the international cultural concerns which arrived in Australia - youth culture, counter culture, popular anarchy - were politically more formative than, perhaps, elsewhere, because they were able to rapidly coalesced with the local forces for social changes.

Jean Baudrillard has identified May 1968 in Paris as “the first shock-wave” of the crisis upon which postmodernity may be premised: in which the struggle to synthesise original creations (productions) is reduced to mere repetitions (reproductions). (Baudrillard 1990b: 122) But the huge anti-war marches in Australia beginning in 1968 gave the impression that change was possible and was about to occur; and the nationalist Labour government of the early nineteen-seventies put in place public institutions which irreversibly altered the type of society that Australia was to be into the future. Postmodernity had to mark-time in Australia, at least until the malaise following the 1975 sacking of the Whitlam government. Radical political views were not then silenced but intensified and made more strident with the step backwards which the election of a conservative government was seen to represent. The populist cultural devices and the mediated nature of postmodern theatre (and other arts) in the nineteen-eighties, was galvanised in Australia by the nationalism implicit and explicit in that time and place: it was not reduced to “radicalism marketable as sentimental or ironic fashions,” as Birringer had noted in the United States of America and Europe.
In 1940 Walter Benjamin had already questioned the "concept of progress" and reflected on the paradox that while Judaism prohibited Jews "investigating the future" and "the Torah and prayers instruct them in remembrance," it had a contradictory effect because this focus insisted that "every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter." (Benjamin 1969: 264) The manipulation of time in modernism and postmodernism is fraught with irony and potential. Jürgen Habermas has noted that modernity is focused on defining itself and not relying on other past periods to define it. He also commented on Benjamin's linkage of a millennial Judaic tradition with the 'futurism' of modernity, suggesting that Benjamin proposed "a drastic reversal of the horizon of expectation and space of experience [...] the present responsible for the 'sins' of the past through remembering." This he comments is served by barbarianism as well as by civility. (Habermas 1990: 7-14)

The theme of cruelty in theatre, so characteristic of the period, has a longer presence than at first appears to be the case. The genesis is often seen to rest at the foundation of the historic avant-gardes with Jarry and Wedekind at the turn of the century and in the nineteen-thirties with Artaud; and it also had romantic antecedents with Mary Shelley and Byron and their fabrication of Gothic tales. But before them, as Jean-François Lyotard has noted, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant had described an aesthetics of the sublime, comparable with a Judaic prohibition on representations of the divine intensifying the 'contemplation of the infinite.' Burke suggested that "the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening," Lyotard records. 'Terrors' caused by "privations" are the nature of this hapless state: "privations of others, a terror of solitude; privation of language, a terror of silence." The role of art proposed by Burke was to "suspend" the threat of such privations, and return us to a realm of satisfactory levels of stimulation (agitation). Burke called this pleasure of relief, "delight". But more pointedly he suggested that to fulfill this function art needed to "search for intense effects, and must give up the imitation of models that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations." Lyotard commented that "shock is, par excellence, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing, suspended privation." (Lyotard 1989: 204-5) So the crisis the heart of modernism and postmodernism has been anticipated in Burke's eighteenth century reflections.
The 'crisis of language' in modernism and the crisis of 'Is there anything further to say?' in postmodernism have their antecedents in this stream of Western philosophical discourse. The way the Australian experience of 'silence' and the 'unsayable' have informed theatre in the period has been discussed. A crisis over authority characterises international modernism's split between political right and left. This can be compared to the crisis identifiable as a key Australian preoccupation since white settlement: the battler supporting civil authority whilst simultaneously (or not) maintaining a larrikin rebelliousness.

The director's role was frequently challenged in the collective companies of the nineteen-seventies, and it was still in question in the processes of several of the most radical theatres, such as the Mill and Sidetrack, during the nineteen-eighties; although there was some evidence of the reassertion of the dominant place of the director in the work of the nineteen-eighties. The success of directors like Triffitt and even Jenny Kemp and the dancer-choreographer Meryl Tankard indicate the acceptance of a leading role, and even a visionary role for the director. However, smaller artistic collectives remained the outstanding examples of contemporary work at the end of the period: Whistling In The Theatre, Sydney Front and Open City.

Concluding summary

The continuing output of La Mama was a testimony to the need for simple low-cost venues to try-out theatrical ideas. Numerous enormous theatres were built in Australia to celebrate the bicentennial in 1988, none of them with anything like the significance of La Mama. In dance and in outdoor theatre there were ongoing innovations into the nineteen-eighties in Australia; and circus was rehabilitated as a performance medium in this period to become a leading theatrical form with impacts across the theatre. Significantly circus was first rediscovered by political theatres, especially the APG; and has retained to some degree its politically radical orientation.  

Avant-garde theatre developed rapidly in Australia between 1965 and 1985 because of the convergence of three factors; first, the diminution of the conservative constraint placed on modernism in Australia; secondly, international agitation for radical social and political change within youth and student cultures and the counter culture; and thirdly, a restatement of Australian nationalism. International influences had a formative impact on the dynamic
emergence of avant-garde theatre in Australia. Some of the diverse work that resulted also influenced later theatre practice.

The virtual suppression of modern theatre in Australia had been an aspect of the neo-colonial status from which the country emerged during the study period. The initial appearance of vernacular theatre in the mid-nineteen-fifties had been heralded because of its acceptance in London. It was towards the colonial centre that the mainstream theatres established in that period had turned for their authority. Before 1965 the neo-colonial cultural environment in Australia had encouraged an old-fashioned set of theatre practices, which the academic community had been slow to moderate. Press reportage was poorly informed and it discouraged new ideas. Commercial theatre managements had been principally concerned with touring successes from London and Broadway, and had little interest in innovation.

The London stage had lost its authority by the mid-nineteen-sixties in Australia, because the volume of postwar migration had produced a society in which the principle of assimilation into an Anglophile culture could no longer function. Australia was a society with manifest differences, a society where ironically, displacement was not only a cause of division, but it had become, conversely, a common denominator bringing communities together. This pluralist context was the ground for the development of avant-garde theatre in the decades that are the focus of this study.

Because of the constraints which had been placed on the introduction of modern theatre into Australia, when it arrived, in the period of this study, there was a backlog of ideas and cultural material. Modernity and postmodernity arrived in Australia concurrently in this period. The disjunction between modernism's progressive premise and postmodernism's apparently non-forward looking and sometimes cynical attitude, fell into a different cultural context in Australia than it did in Europe or America. There was an outright optimism growing in Australian society. Several 'new' values that came to dominate postmodern art in fact were well-worked themes, even commonplaces belonging to an earlier generation in Australia: survival despite isolation and cultural sterility, the subverted embrace of surface pleasures, camp, self-parody and self-pity.
Notes
Notes

Introduction

1. Those radical cultural statements of the new in the period around the First World War, including Futurism, Constructivism, Vorticism, Cubism and Dada, can be designated as the historical avant-gardes, or the European avant-gardes. They attacked the art institutions of the day - including modernity - yet, ironically, they are now seen as emblematic of modern art.

2. The term “third world” had been first used in 1952 by the economist Alfred Sauvy.

3. In his Second Manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty Artaud proposed a hypothetical production based on the ruthless European conquest of Mexico: “From the historical point of view, The Conquest of Mexico raises the question of colonisation. It revives Europe’s deep-rooted self-conceit in a burning, inexorable bloody manner, allowing us to debunk its own concept of its supremacy.” (Artaud 1977: 85) Artaud was ahead of his contemporaries in the nineteen-thirties in understanding the central place of this issue. His vision has been taken up in aspects of modern/postmodern Australian theatre, such as Nicholas Tsoutas’ work, as it has in recent work in Central and South America.

4. Bürger contended that the historical avant-garde movements made apparent, for the first time, the institution of art: the nature of the sociological phenomenon, including the forces that drove art within bourgeois society. This decisive event, Bürger puts forward as a turning point in the history of Western art, and a benchmark by which the efficacy of other movements and other bodies of work may be gauged. The historical avant-gardes allow an assessment of the political engagement of art, in the knowledge, he suggested, that “the institution of art neutralises the political content.” (Bürger 1984: 90)
Bürger observed in Hegel’s aesthetic theories, “the shift in the form-content dialectic in favour of form, a development that characterises the further development of art.” (Bürger 1984: 93) He identified a key transition at the beginning of the century from aestheticism to the avant-garde, which came about because of a rejection by the avant-garde of the “autonomy of art” and an attempt “to lead art back into social praxis.” (Sculle-Sasse 1984: xiv)

5. A paradoxical similarity exists between the way an avant-garde coterie audience is ‘cultivated’ and the cultivation of a fashionable chic. Both reject middle-class taste, and propose an identification with a new ‘cool’ image. However it is the followers of the avant-garde who enjoy the outright attack upon the bourgeoisie; whereas the followers of fashion are fulfilled by owning what has already been packaged for consumption. One is an aesthetic pleasure and a pleasure in identifying with the rude gesture. The other is a pleasure of ownership.

6. The Old Tote’s 1978 production of Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, is a case in point. The satire is based on issues of class, gender, fidelity and the relationship of private to public responsibility. All this had relevance in Australia at that time but it was treated as banal banter and covered up with unfunny horse-play.

7. Behind his multiple public personas as Edna Everage, Sandy Stone, and the others, Humphries constructed for himself an identity that was hardly less fanciful. He poses as a flamboyantly dressed art connoisseur and a mannered arbiter of taste, who looks down critically on the middle-class, the values which he now, in so many ways, represents. We can wonder if this is not the final and most perverse of Humphries’ hoaxes on the self-loathing but proper middle-class suburban Australia of his youth. ‘Look at me, Mum. I’m an English toff now!’ comes very close to the utterance of a wild colonial boy in his hand-me-down tweed jacket.

8. Williamson’s play *The Removalists* was premiered at La Mama in 1971 and went on to win the George Devine Award in London. If this was a neo-colonial accolade, Williamson did not follow other successful Australian playwrights of the previous decade and become an expatriate. He was commissioned to write plays by the state theatre companies and with the minor success of the film based on his stage play *Stork* and the much more significant success of the film of *The Removalists*, Williamson’s
career diversified into film. His success was such that the APG collective voted him out, as he either did not attend enough collective meetings, or he had ‘sold out’.

9. The new nation, Australia, was proud of its social innovations. These included giving women the vote and setting up a social security system including the old age pension; the acceptance of trade unions to protect the interests of workers and the creation of an industrial arbitration system.

10. In the medieval period the Bible was translated into the ‘common’ language of the day, that is, the most generally accessible language, Latin. This was known as the *vulgate*, and it was seen to open a wider access to the Christian texts.

11. In an introductory essay to the *Macquarie Dictionary*, J. R. L. Bernard suggests that “there is a spectrum of Australian English” which he notes ranges through a scale of formality he terms: “Broad-General-Cultivated-Modified”. Language is used to place the individual in a social context. Interestingly Bernard comments that, “Australians may adjust their choices either casually, as temporary circumstances dictate, or habitually, as more permanent changes in situation seem to require. Most Australians have the ability to upgrade at will some distance in the spectrum in the direction of Cultivated when it seems appropriate under certain social pressures, and to drift unconsciously back again when relaxed” (Bernard 1981: 19). There are “cultivated” voices in both expression and delivery; and “common” voices which are vulgar in both the classical and conversational senses. These two voices once reflected the voice of the occupying authority and the voice of the alienated colonials. (influenced pervasively by the subjugated indigens). Beyond Bernard’s view there has been an expansion in the complexity represented in Australian usage. In contemporary society Australians use a range of ‘voices’ where they feel them to be socially and culturally applicable.

12. The questionnaire contained these questions: AVANT-GARDE THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA – A SURVEY
1. Respondent’s name.
2. Contact address.
3. Contact phone number(s).
4. Name of the company/group/individual.
5. Address.
6. Dates of work - indicate years.
7. Place(s) where work presented.
8. Key people involved.
9. What priority did/do you give to innovation/experimentation in your work?
10. Have you described your work as experimental/innovative/avant-garde?
11. What is your artistic policy? Is it written, discussed or implicit?
12. What sources of income/funding
Modernism suppressed in the theatre in Australia (before 1965)

1. There are, of course, several ways in which the term 'modern period' is used historically. The way the term is used in this thesis generally refers to the later part of the nineteenth century through to the later part of the twentieth (Hugo to Brecht). However, in the context of the political and historical discussion of the concept of the nation state, which is here heavily indebted to Benedict Anderson, we are looking at a more broadly defined period from the late seventeenth century.

2. Adelaide Literary Theatre developed from Treharne's teaching at the Elder Conservatorium, and the group was first known as Treharne's Class, according to Rose Wilson (1995: 613-4). In 1910 the group presented a local play, The Wasters, by Arthur H. Adams. Wilson records that they later presented the same playwright's Pierrot in Australia and Doctor Death.

3. Gregan McMahon established the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company in 1911. It offered modern English drama of the day (Shaw, Granville-Barker), European
naturalism (Chekhov, Ibsen) and progressive European plays in translation (Hauptmann, Pirandello). (Brisbane 1991: 159; Hutchinson 1984: 51; Brisbane 1995: 40) In 1920, under the aegis of J. C. Williamsons in Sydney, McMahon set up the semi-professional Sydney Repertory Theatre Society, which presented a similarly modern repertoire.

4. McQueen notes that the long entrenched director of the National Gallery of Victoria, L. Bernard Hall, first wrote this piece berating modernity in 1918, and again delivered it, word-for-word, as a speech in 1931. Thus, McQueen shows Hall to be a man of fixed ideas and remarkable economy of words!

5. Here can be found the idea, prevalent in Australia into the second half of the century, that the amateur theatres are the custodians of the theatre tradition. This idea which was substantially accurate until the advent of government funding in 1968.

6. In 1963 Brett Randall died and his son, Peter, with George Fairfax and Irene Mitchell took over control of St Martin’s Theatre. (Brisbane 1991:293)

7. Later, in the late nineteen-fifties, Kester Baruch was a teacher for the Worker’s Educational Association in Newcastle where he encouraged the young John Tasker. (Brisbane 1995: 577)

8. Margaret Lasica has recently begun to record the work of the pioneers of modern dance in Australia. She has identified a number of dancers who came to Australia in the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties who had trained in modern dance in Europe, and established teaching and performing practices in Australia. (Dempster 1989: 47n)

9. The Playwrights’ Advisory Board was dependent on the efforts of its honorary board members, especially the playwright, critic and theatre historian Leslie Rees. The most notable amongst its activities may have been the drama prizes which it employed to elicit plays from authors.

10. The Trust - as it was always widely known - was a repository of considerable establishment patronage of the arts, although in reality the greater part of its funding was always from the Federal government. It was almost as if the establishment acted as a cultural filter by their presence on the board of the AETT.
Despite the presence on its board of many of the most wealthy and powerful knights and company directors in Australia, the AETT did not ever achieve major levels of support for the arts from the private or corporate sectors. When compared to the American example of beneficence towards the arts by corporations, wealthy individuals and philanthropic trusts, the failure of the AETT was conspicuous.

Struggles to re-place the colonial centre (1960-1970)

1. White recommended to the Guild, and later the Trust, that John Tasker should be asked to direct his plays. Tasker's reputation was substantially built on these productions. Tasker had trained in London, and lived in Europe, and was a gifted director with a knowledge of contemporary theatre. For the Melbourne production of *The Cheery Soul*, John Sumner could not be persuaded to give Tasker an opportunity. White's benign patronage of Tasker ended unfortunately, however, in an escalating series of disagreements. Tasker sought more and more control over the shaping of the plays in production, seeking rewrites and revisions from White.

John Tasker was appointed the foundation Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company in 1965. His second production there was Reg Livermore's musical, *West of the Black Stump*. (Ward 1992: 23) However, Tasker had a turbulent relationship with those who held power in Adelaide, and after a couple of years he "fell out with the board and was sacked." (Marr 1991: 431) Peter Ward has asked, if Tasker's downfall was not aggravated by prejudice against his "openly homosexual" way of life? (Ward 1993: 31)

2. The Women and Theatre project at Nimrod at the end of the nineteen-seventies received some of H.C. Kippax's most infuriated condemnation. Kippax retired as chief critic of the Sydney Morning Herald in 1989. (Waites 1989: 5)

3. Her next play, *Bon-bon and Roses for Dolly*, was first seen in Western Australia in 1972. There, Ray Omodei directed a production at the Perth Playhouse; and later in Sydney it was staged at Jane Street. She wrote a rock musical, *Catspaw*, in 1974, which was directed by Aarne Neeme, at the New Fortune Theatre, in Perth. In 1976 her next play, *Golden Oldies*, was workshopped at the Australian National Playwrights'
Conference. It was then taken up as part of the opening season of Hoopla Productions - which was later to become the Playbox Theatre - who in Melbourne presented Graeme Blundell’s production of *Golden Oldies* at the Grant Street Theatre, in Melbourne. Alexander Hay directed Sydney seasons of *Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly* at Jane Street, and *Tatty Hollow Story* at the Stables.

**Modern ensembles: incipient nationalism (1959-1966)**

1. A letter from Nettie Palmer to Wal Cherry, commiserating on the demise of Theatre 60 - the initial ensemble venture he set up after he left the UTRC - may indicate the degree to which Cherry was picking up the mission of the Pioneer Players. “It was painfully reminiscent of the experiences of the Pioneer Players in the twenties,” she wrote, adding sardonically, “we used to wonder how the audiences knew enough about the plays to stay away.” (Worby 1978: 33)

2. Numerous actors worked at the Ensemble early in their professional lives, including Jon Ewing, Bruce Kerr, Brian Young, Lorraine Bayly, Don Reid and Reg Livermore.

3. Wal Cherry had began his involvement with the Union Theatre Repertory Company when still an undergraduate at Melbourne University in the early nineteen-fifties. For a brief period from 1956, he was the Artistic Director of that company. During this time he initiated a daring program, which caused controversy, especially for his choice of modern American plays, such as those of Tennessee Williams. (Stanley 1979: 19; Wilson 1961: 20)

4. The Emerald Hill Theatre, South Melbourne (1962-6) presented works in 1962 by John Osborne, Arthur Miller, Brendan Behan and Thornton Wilder. An Australian play, *When The Grave Digger Comes* by Robert Almos (Robert Schoenfeld), was the first play they presented in 1963. The production received assistance from the AETT, but was not a marked success. (Rees 1978: 357-8) Also in May that year there was another production by Wal Cherry of a play by Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Ike Delavale Remembers* was a late night revue presented by the vaudeville artist Delavale with Myrtle Roberts. (Stanley 1979: 20) How ever, it was George Whaley’s productions of Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, and Max Frisch’s *The Fire Raisers*, that
were regarded as high points of the company’s work to that time in 1963. Another Australian play, John Hepworth’s *The Last of the Rainbow*, Worby tells us was regarded by American producer Robert Margulies, “as a worthy successor to Behan’s *The Hostage* in its roisterous, irreverent, knockabout humour and poignancy.” (Worby 1981: 29) Stanley described the play’s “wild assortment of eccentrics gathered to drink, fornicate, rollick around and play nursery games,” but he confessed that he “thought it a nasty little play.” (Stanley 1979: 20)

Productions of *Antigone* by Sophocles and *Antigone* by Anouilh, which were run concurrently, were Emerald Hill’s major outputs in 1964. The Greek classic was directed by Cherry and the contemporary French play was directed by Whaley. In the following year, 1965, Cherry directed Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, with Whaley as Oedipus.

The production of *The Killer*, by Eugene Ionesco, which Wal Cherry directed in June 1964 was especially significant in introducing this contemporary French avant-garde repertoire to Australian audiences. In the same year Cherry directed John Arden’s play, *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance*, and Whaley presented a lunchtime season at the Curzon Cinema, in the city with a return season of *The Zoo Story*, and Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*.

Cherry’s production of *Macbeth*, was counter-balanced in 1965 by the surreal comic nonsense of John Antrobus’ play, *You’ll Come to Love Your Sperm Test*. George Whaley directed this sure-fire comedy, and although some people thought it was selling out the seriousness of this theatre-with-a-conscience. The timeliness of its irreverent humour may be measured by the fact that the daily papers would not run advertisements for the play, and refused to review it. Finally, Emerald Hill was able to advertise: *You’ll Come to Love Your Whale Test directed by George Spermley*. This anecdote, which still circulates as a longstanding howler, attests to the tensions over the priggish, conservatism of the time.

Later that year, in the same vein, Whaley directed Spike Milligan’s *The Bed Sitting Room*. 1965 finished with the watershed production *Brecht on Brecht*, a compilation of
writings by Bertold Brecht, directed by Wal Cherry. This toured to the Adelaide Festival in 1966, and gained much national acclaim. (Stanley 1979: 40; Worby 1981:31)

The last year of the company, 1966, saw two plays by Lewis John Calino directed by Cherry; and two plays by Murray Schisagal, directed Jon Ewing who had moved from the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney. Emerald Hill presented Peter Pinne and Don Battye’s musical A Bunch of Ratbags, which was based on the book by William Dick, and co-directed by Cherry and Ewing.

The final offering from this company was a revue titled, A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Front. Staged at the end of 1966, the title suggested Australia’s involvement in the war in Vietnam, and various authors contributed material, including Michael Boddy, David Williamson and Phillip Adams. (Stanley 1979:40)

5. Moshinsky was to direct two productions for Melbourne Youth Theatre: a production of Chekhov’s The Three Sisters, and Hamlet. Of the Hamlet, John Ellis recalled that, “a lot of the staid critics around the town described [it] as visual gimmickry - but two years later he was directing at Covent Garden.” (Stanley/John Ellis interview 1990) The Melbourne Theatre Company was again to follow with Ogilvie directing a memorable production of The Three Sisters in 1969.

National spaces for modern Australian theatre (1965-1969)

1. In 1968 the new building of the National Gallery of Victoria opened in St Kilda Road with the controversial exhibition of Australian colour-field painting. A manifestation of abstract expressionism in Australia. “Contemporary art fractured [in Australia] following the crisis brought on by The Field,” Heathcote has contended. (Heathcote 1995: 211) Clement Greenberg made an extensive and influential visit to Australia in 1968, when he delivered the inaugural Power Memorial Lecture. His visit had a big impact on the local art scene. But he had no time for the Australian colour-field work and advised local artists to emulate Boyd, Nolan, Pugh, Williams, and Ray Cooke, “Artists found themselves confronting the prejudices that had dogged the reception of contemporary art for decades: once again a taste-maker from overseas
preferred works of art that conformed to the foreign preconceptions about the exoticness of the Australian continent and culture.” (Heathcote 1995: 191)

2. PACT had been limited in their use of the Corn Exchange by the dilapidated state of the building and difficulties in licensing it as a theatre. They faced a crisis in the nineteen-seventies when the role was overtaken by Nimrod Theatre and other groups. The rationale for PACT was reviewed, and the theatre became: PACT Youth and Experimental Theatre. Under the guidance of Jack Mannix, it continued in somewhat narrower vein as a youth theatre. In 1988 the company aims included an intention “to discover or invent new, simple and economic performance techniques for dramatic events.” (Heckenberg 1988:27) Ironically the Corn Exchange in Sussex Street had always been considered temporary. PACT stayed there for over twenty years, under the threat of its demolition or redevelopment. PACT moved late in 1988 to their new premises in Sydney Street, Erskineville. There they had an effective new performing space, and PACT emerged with something of a new lease of life. Highlights in the new Sydney Street Theatre Space included work by Victoria Monk, Lech Mackiewicz, and a program titled, *Theatre of Cruelty*, directed by Max Lyandvert.


There was a full production of *Rooted* given at Jane Street, in 1969. The *Bulletin* carried a photograph of the young NIDA graduate Garry MacDonald playing Bentley, the luckless anti-hero of the play. (Cramphorne 1969b: 48) Later famed for his bald TV persona, Norman Gunstan, MacDonald then had hair on his head! The Jane Street season was followed by productions of *Rooted* at Nimrod in Sydney in 1971, and Claremont in Melbourne in 1972.

4. The cast of *Terror Australis* was Helen Morse, Garry McDonald, and Peter Rowley who were NIDA-trained, and British-trained Jennifer West. Gorman,
Billinghurst and the production assistant, Judy Gemes were associated with experimental theatre.

5. Other plays performed in 1971 at Jane Street included, *King Edward* by William Leonard Marshall and *Truth* by David Young. In 1972 Thomas Keneally’s *An Awful Rose*, was presented, directed by Alexander Hay.

6. At Jane Street, Willy Young and Ralph Tyrell worked together again in 1973, to present a musical called *Coopers and Borges*, which was directed by John Milson, with a cast of third year NIDA students. Alma de Groen’s early play, *The After-Life of Arthur Craven*, was presented at Jane Street in 1973. So too was *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* by Dorothy Hewett, directed by Alexander Hay; and George Hutchinson’s first play *My Shadow and Me* was directed by Dennis Gill and Adam Salzer, then directing students at NIDA. In 1975 The Performance Group presented William Yang’s play *Interplay*, at Jane Street Theatre. The Jane Street season in 1976 comprised *Le Chateau* by Helmut Bakaitis, and *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted* by Peter Kenna. *The Ripper Show (and how they wrote it)* by Frank Barlow, was directed by Stanley Walsh, in 1977. *Don’t Piddle Against the Wind, Mate* by South Australian playwright Kenneth Ross, directed by John Tasker, was also presented at Jane Street in the same year. In 1978 there was a policy change at Jane Street and the season was no longer devoted to Australian plays.

7. Graeme Blundell, Bruce Knappett and David Kendall continued their close association with Hibberd. Along with Brian Davies, they directed productions of his early plays, either at La Mama, or in 1969 at Melbourne University, in what became known as the *Brain-Rot* season. Blundell was also working as an actor at that time with the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC). He had just appeared in George Ogilvie’s production of Bill Reed’s play *Bourke’s Company*, which could be viewed as the token local play for the Melbourne Theatre Company. At La Mama, Blundell then directed the original production of Hibberd’s play, *Dimboola*.

8. Companies which had their beginnings at La Mama included, the APG, which was born there; Tribe was a resident for a crucial period; Claremont was launched there in 1971; and later, Skelta; and in its establishment, Playbox Theatre - originally Hoopla Theatre Foundation - used various venues when setting out, including La Mama; as did Anthill; and Chamber Made Opera were first seen at La Mama. (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*)
9. The writers listed in Jones *et al* 1988, with the number of their premieres at La Mama in parenthesis: Hibberd (9), Oakley (3), Bakaitis (2), Romeril (7), Williamson (6), Nowra (2), Motherwell (4), Keene (4), and Barry Dickins (11). (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*)

10. Jones *et al* does not differentiate between forms - new music, inter-media events, play writing are treated with an appropriate parity. The authors of the premieres they list are: Frank Bren (5), Kris Hemensley (8), James Clayden (16), Max Richards (9), Barry McKimm (8), Syd Clayton (14), Rivka Hartman (3), Lloyd Jones (23), Roger Pulvers (5), Graham Henderson (2), Graham Simmonds (5), Valerie Kirwan (7), Daniel Kahans (8), Elizabeth Paterson (4), Sarah Cathcart (1), Tanya Uren (2), Nancy Black (1), and Patricia Cornelius (2). (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*)

11. Designers of note who have worked at La Mama have included Peter Corrigan, Trina Parker and Peter King. Doug Kirwan has designed most of Valerie Kirwan’s production. (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*) Geoffrey Milne has commented on Trina Parker’s outstanding design for Sarah Cathcart’s *Serpent’s Fall*. (Milne 1989: 6)


**Ecstatic alternatives: modern ‘tribes’** (1968-1972)

1. Tribe performed the following shows at La Mama: *Saturday*, and *Mushrooms*, by Barry McKimm in February and December 1969; *Programme A*, and *Programme B* in July 1969; *The Hieronymus Bosch Hour* by Kris Hemensley in August 1970; *Pieces*, by the company, in February 1971; *The Gooseberry Moth*, by Frank Starr, and *A Last Look at Sadness* by Alan Robertson - both company members - in August 1971; *Our Dick*, by Bob Daly - also a member of Tribe - in 1972. All these were directed by
Anders. The group also did *Punch and Judy* in September 1972. (Jones *et al* 1988, *passim*)

2. John Allen quotes at length from Clem Gorman’s ‘manifesto’, which was created around the time as the Australian Free Theatre event, *Ceremonies*:

Theatre is celebratory. [...] Anything and everything can be celebrated [if] the thing being celebrated is known to all those participating, a part of their common stock of myths.

Celebration need not be limited to its present narrow meaning, in our culture, of a ‘happy get-together’. A sacrifice is also a celebration, as is a fight to the death with knives.

The opposites are already united: art and life.

Theatre of celebration is the theatre of ecstasy.

Ecstasy is the daily normal experience of the fully developed and fully alive man. There is nothing esoteric or unattainable about ecstasy, no ‘problem’. It is simply a matter of letting down the barriers. Training for the theatre of celebration is untraining.

The celebrant reaches into the community’s resources and stockpiles of gestures, signs, symbols, icons, sounds, fantasies that are characteristic of that community.

The theatre of celebration is not something that some people ‘go to’; it is a natural part of ordinary life. Each local community expects to support its local group of celebrants, and travelling groups.

The celebrant does not characterise, he is only himself. There is no catharsis, only total involvement.

A celebration is a collective communication, a re-affirmation of collective purpose and myths, through allowing for reshaping of these myths. [...] The ideal audience for a celebration is one that does not select, because it has not learnt to, or has unlearnt to. For this reason, in our culture young people will be the main congregation for celebrations for some time.

Theatre celebrates love, hate, cruelty, violence, peace, feelings, existence, fear, passion, with equal indifference. Its vibrations are a caress, not a prelude to some message. Everyone of us already knows all the messages.

Theatre of celebration is imagist, non sequential. [...] (Allen 1969a: 30)
3. Johnny Allen, Clem Gorman and Alex Buzo were also involved in running the Arts Factory in Surry Hills, Sydney, which was a significant space for emerging work which sought to challenge conventions in the late nineteen-sixties.

4. Frederick May first translated Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* into English; and was a wit and a lively commentator on contemporary culture. He inspired Winsome Evans to start the early music group, the Renaissance Players, at this time.

5. Philippa Cullen travelled extensively in Europe, Africa and Asia, returning with eager news of international developments. With help from two artists at the Sydney University Fine Arts Workshop, she commenced experimental movement work using an instrument called a Theremin, which generated sounds from movement. Cullen gave performances at Central Street Gallery, Inhibodress Gallery, Watters Gallery, The Cell Block Theatre and elsewhere in Sydney, and in England, Germany and Holland. She worked with artists from all disciplines and national backgrounds. In 1975 Philippa Cullen gave performances, and set up events and installations at the Festival of Creative Arts and Sciences in Canberra (Australia 75), and at the Mildura Sculpture Biennale, before leaving for India, where she died in the middle of that year. (Wallace 1989: *passim*; Alexander 1989: *passim*)


1. John Timlin was the lessee of the building throughout the entire period it was used as a theatre. (Duigan 1973: 30) The notion that the APG - the home of equality and worker management - did not even have the lease to its own building, suggests a power structure behind the once-famous Drummond Street facade, which is not always acknowledged.

2. This was a blatant pretext for avoiding the obligations of a journal of record to review the radical new theatres in Carlton, South Yarra and other inner city suburbs. It is especially ironic, given that the UTRC had only moved from the Melbourne University campus to the city in the mid-nineteen-sixties.
3. In a later, typically jocular, account Jack Hibberd saluted Kerry Dwyer’s victory on the day, and took some pride in Melbourne’s achievements ahead of those made by women’s theatre in Sydney. “Feminism under the leadership of Kerry Dwyer,” he wrote, “became a serious and volatile issue in late 1969 - almost a dozen years before it became a fashion in Sydney theatre.” (McGillick 1988: 14-5)

4. Former members of the APG have permeated the entire performing arts spectrum in the succeeding two decades, to name on a few, Greg Packhaver alias H.G. Nelson, Jan Cornell, Mick and Jim Conway, Sue Ingleton, Graeme Blundell, Robert Meldrum, Max Gillies, and others, have become popular performers.


1. The Theatre Laboratory only performed in Sydney and Grotowski insisted audiences should be restricted in size. They then also conducted para-theatrical workshops in the country. These were experiential journeys, concerned with the personal growth of the participants. Many participants regarded these workshops as profound and life-changing experiences. The direction of this work was away from the theatre, through ritual and ceremony into the sort of event which may be associated with encounter groups. Many of those who participated in the Theatre Laboratory’s workshops in Australia went on to work in the theatre; they included playwright Julie Janson, director Adam Salzer, the actor John F. Howard and critic James Waites.

2. Several key members changed the names they were known by or the spelling of their names: Rex Cramphorne dropped the final ‘e’ from his name at the end of the nineteen-seventies. (When his published criticism is quoted however, the original spelling is employed.) William Yang was then known as Willy Young; and Nicos Lathouris was then known as Nick Lathouris.

3. Rex Cramphorn worked at the Playboy in Melbourne between 1981 and 1985. During the period he was the Artistic Director, the Playboy was a company without a home venue, and these somewhat stateless times were not conducive to the deeply considered investigative work for which Cramphorn was renowned. The years at the Playbox saw Cramphorn work in a solid repertory format with some success; but they
fell short of the revelation which his earlier work had been. On leaving the Playbox, Rex Cramphorn worked again with a core group of performers, in a format they titled *United Artists*, in a reference to independent Hollywood of an earlier era. He studied film making, and presented an interesting production of *Measure for Measure* (one of four he did) which employed simultaneous projected performances. Cramphorn was also then associated with the Centre for Performance Studies as Sydney University, for whom he directed a number of projects.

4. I was the initial Artistic Director of the Claremont Theatre. Foundation co-operative members included Bruce Kerr, Anne Pendlebury, Jeff Booth, and Kevin Howard. There was conflict over leadership and Bruce Kerr became the Director for a time. An interesting reflection on John Sumner’s proprietorial hold on theatre in Melbourne, is to note that most of the leading actors working at Claremont in the first year (including all of the above) were given work in the following year’s season at the Melbourne Theatre Company.

5. Leila Blake was an actor, writer and director with a wide technical understanding of the stage and an imaginative power which was much under-valued in Australia. She was a Holocaust- survivor, LAMDA graduate and friend and contemporary of Harold Pinter, the premiere of whose *A Night Out* she directed. She gave the Australian premiere of Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*, and set up the Wayside Chapel Theatre. Leila Blake was an outstanding teacher. She created and toured a number of successful one-person shows. In 1970 she set up her own production umbrella, Studio Australia, and staged Leonard Melfi’s short off-Broadway plays with Kevin Howard at Media 156, above Tamani Bistro in South Yarra. She was deeply involved in setting up Claremont, but declined to become a member of the co-operative, and was for a time the ‘artistic advisor.’

6. This group of later co-operative members included Glenda Lum - who had trained with Margaret Lasica, and taught and choreographed for the Modern Dance Ensemble; Kim Gyngel; Adam Salzer; Alison Richards; Russel Howell; Andrew Foster; Michael Eckersall; Greg Ham; Margaret Coutes (Maggi Nimmo); Alan Hartman; Christine Warne; John Mester; Oleg Levinski; and Karen Corbett.

7. The production of *Oedipus Rex* was conceived as a musical and visual score with richly patterned rhythmic vocal and percussion. The performers developed musical
skills throughout the extensive workshop playing complex additive rhythmic patterns with found-objects and conventional musical instruments. Of the key players, Alison Richards was classically trained as a violinist and Kim Gyngell had a sound musical training and, like Oleg Levinski, was a rock and roll musician. The audience was ‘inducted’ into a dark space to view this masked, and physically abstract event. It had painterly lighting and a complex musical form. The austerity of the event was oppressive. This was intended to explore public grieving. An exploration of the interior but public space offered by the theatre to untie the knots of urban life through the experience of tragedy.

8. Sue Neville had worked in Poland with Jerzy Grotowski in the mid-nineteen-sixties. She taught at the Melbourne Teachers’ College and gave workshops at La Mama. In 1971 she gave a series of workshops for the actors in Harold Baigent’s Victorian Shakespeare Company. This organisation has been generally ignored, but in addition to Baigent - a graduate of Yale Drama School - being a considerable authority on Shakespeare’s theatre, his occasional productions through this period were a valuable informal training ground from which many Melbourne actors benefited.

9. This was the wrong year, in fact Ionesco wrote *The Bald Prima Donna* in 1949, but the intention to work through this repertoire was clear enough.

10. Magic Mushroom Mime Troupe was incorporated as a Trust in 1976, with Nano Nagle and Michael Wansborough as its joint executive directors. When their activities grew, the company also employed an office manager to arrange touring. Their artistic policy was developed largely collectively by discussion with the company members. The company’s work was group-devised with director Michael Wansborough.

11. The Mushroom Troupe was an important stepping stone in the careers of a number of its actors and directors. Ros Horin went on to become a widely respected director. She had worked with the APG before studying at NIDA and gaining a drama teaching qualification at the Drama Centre, London. Horin worked with Mushroom for eighteen months, bringing with her this specialist knowledge. Amanda Muggleton and Lisa Scott-Murphy both had training in mime which enriched the company’s skills base. Mushroom also brought in teachers and experts from outside. For example, David Lander, who had worked with Keith Johnson in the UK, was invited to work with the company on improvisation techniques. Damian Jameson, after a substantial period
working with Mushroom as a performer, worked as the Director of the Riverina Trucking Company - following on from its initial Director, Terry O'Connell. Jameson was then Director of Gambit, in Tasmania; and has also worked with the Salemanca Company in Hobart. (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990)

12. Gillian Farelly performed with a character she created within Michael Wansborough; Tim Tyler's clown character, Mr PP, performed widely through festivals in Australia and overseas; Terry Danzig's character Star has been extensively toured by Arts Councils. His character, Charles Panache, is a broken down magician, which Danzig has performed at Melbourne Comedy venues.

13. Igor Persan [pseudonym] had come to Australia from France in the late nineteen-sixties. He taught French literature at Monash and ran the French language theatre in Melbourne associated with Alliance Française. This group worked at the Claremont Theatre Centre in 1973, and Persan taught a series of mime classes at Claremont over that year. In 1974 Igor Persan travelled from Australia to Poland to meet with the peripatetic Grotowski, only to find him out of the country. The returning path to cultural centre was not smooth - whether the centre was London or Cracow.

14. John F. Howard was enrolled in the acting course at NIDA when he saw several performances of Apocalypsis cum Figuris in Sydney. In effect, forbidden by NIDA to attend the Grotowski workshops, Howard chose to leave NIDA, and to do a ten-day long workshop with Stanisław Scierski concerned with the physical training of the actor. Stephen Champion was another participant in this workshop. (Stanley/Howard interview 1990) After this Howard worked in Sydney with Doug Anders, the White Company and in 1975 he joined the Theatre Research Group.

15. In the mid-nineteen-eighties James Cook University gave the former director of the internationally renowned avant-garde theatre Kiss, Jean-Pierre Voos, the opportunity to head their theatre course. In Townsville he established Capricorn Line with ex-Kiss actors Richard and Yaffa Moore, and later he set up Tropic Line Theatre Company within the University. He continued to work in Townsville beyond his employment as an academic within the University into the mid-nineteen-nineties.

1. As well as their conventional plays, in 1981 the State Theatre Company of South Australia staged a musical written by David Allen and directed by dancer, choreographer Ariette Taylor, with music by Glenn Henrich and lyrics by Nick Enright. Called *Buckley's*, it was about youth unemployment. With a remarkable cast including Tom Considine and Justine Saunders, it was designed by Ken Wilby. This piece pushed the boundaries of the State Company, if not of theatre *per se*. (Bray/Allen interview 1989; Ward 1992:98)

Going beyond the established centre...

1. Kevin Gilbert's play *The Cherry Pickers* had been written in the late nineteen-sixties when he was in jail. By 1972 Gilbert had been released, but he was still on parole and therefore unable to leave New South Wales. There was widespread outrage among Aborigines at the McMahon government's offer of limited 'land rights'- whereby Aboriginal people would effectively be leasing their tribal lands. Gilbert arranged for three young Wirajuri men [Tony Coorie, Kevin Wyman and Billy Craigie] to set up the Aboriginal tent embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra, but he could not go into the Australian Capital Territory, himself.


3. Eleo Pomare and Elizabeth Dalman had both studied with Kurt Jooss, from whom they broke away to form their own school and dance company in Europe in the nineteen-sixties. Later, Dalman returned to Adelaide where she established the Australian Dance Theatre in 1965, and Pomare started his own company in the United State of America. (Ward 1969b: 53-4)

4. The Riverina Teacher's College and the Agricultural College in Wagga Wagga joined to become the Riverina College of Advanced Education - which later joined Charles Sturt University. Drama was offered there within the context of a liberal arts degree. There was a TIE company, Theatre of Youth and Education in the Riverina (TYER), which was directed by Gordon Beattie.

6. Piloted in 1978, the formation of the Mill faced an early crisis when the government funding bodies appeared to lose their initial enthusiasm. James McCaughey attributed this to a fear that there would be innumerable community theatres seeded by tertiary institutions at this time. This may have been a reaction to Peter Oysten’s initiatives in the drama course at the Victorian College of the Arts, where it was proposed that each year graduates should go out into the wider community and set up theatres. The Mill was independent of these VCA groups, one of which went to Albury-Wodonga about the same time and established the Murray River Performing Group. This apparent anxiety on the part of the government’s funding bodies passed, and the Mill received support. The Mill was “funded for the reason we were almost not funded,” McCaughey commented, “creating theatre in places it hadn’t existed before.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) This meant creating theatre in regional Australia. In fact, at first McCaughey thought that the company would only be based at the mill building, and would be essentially a touring operation. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) “The way we described the rationale, the function of the Mill Theatre Company was to explore the role of a group of theatre professionals in the Geelong city.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)

7. The innovations in form or format included *Mill Nights*, which became very popular in Geelong. Every Thursday the company would open up the theatre, “and everyone would come for an evening, from the town - like two hundred people - kids, grandparents, families, and we would run an evening of theatrical events.” Lisa Scott-Murphy described the *Mill Night* format, saying that it was “mostly to do with workshops; or we’d run warm up for everybody and then say, ‘Well, tonight we’re interested in Shakespearian entrances and exits.’ Or somebody else would do it on massage; or somebody would do story telling,” she said, “They were very popular.” (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990) McCaughey told Stanley that *Mill Night* was,
one of our main flagships - one of the most creative things that, I think, we did.” And then he pointed out that it was “actually something we did by accident” as it was “initially planned to be for [...] three months, and lasted for eight years.” The importance placed by McCaughey on this dynamic interaction with the local audience was significant. He recalled that, “some of my more memorable theatre experiences were created live, they were created in the two hours that we were there, but they were created with the people who were there.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)

The bulk of the Mill’s output was group-devised, while other performances were devised with a writer, and a number of emerging writers had residencies at the Mill. Several actors in the company developed skills in devising which they later used to write their own material, for example, Sarah Cathcart. The company also did scripted plays. For example in 1979, they had done a successful productions of Brecht’s play, in their version titled simply, Chalk Circle. In this year they also staged Ubu, the King, the classic of the historical avant-garde. Throughout all this McCaughey said, “that the commitment to that policy of creating plays out of the experience of the area, was itself only part of a wider policy of seeing how performance could matter to people.” He said, “I felt then, and I would go on now, feeling that part of that is just to do terribly exciting performance. That certainly was true. When I look back on it that was true: when we were good, we got people.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990 Emphasis added.)

Working with Robert Draffin, McCaughey increasingly emphasised the self-devising skills of the actors in his company from 1982. Much of the Deakin syllabus was based on “students creating their own work,” and this informed the company’s way of working. “There was a lot of emphasis on solo work, as well as duet and group work,” McCaughey said. “One of the pieces I remember with greatest fondness at the Mill,” he said, “was a duet made by Robert Draffin and Neil Greenaway.” Created at a Mill Night, this piece was performed in the streets, prisons, and all sorts of community venues. It was “actually made out of two solos they had created and we had combined them into a duet - which was highly abstract - the work was entirely abstract,” McCaughey said. “Draffin’s was about balance - because he’s a big hefty man [...] and Neil’s was about creating line - because he has a very long body - against all the lines of the theatre.” He summed up, saying that, “Later on I started really looking at how you"
could create play - the language of performance - out of the particular language of the particular actors,” McCaughey said. (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990)

8. Asked to consider what had influenced him, McCaughey replied, contemporary music and the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) with the composer Keith Humble in Melbourne in the nineteen-sixties, and modern dance. The significance of modern dance was suggested in the *Meanjin* article, too. “Recent developments in dance - the introduction of radically simplified language, ordinary gestures, everyday actions, and the use of outdoor environments - offer another way forward,” McCaughey wrote. (McCaughey 1982: 554)

9. *Dolphin Play* was a very big production for the company to tackle, with a three month rehearsal period supported by $18,000 research funding from the university. The company included Angela Chaplin, Tom Considine, Matthew Farger, Lisa Scott-Murphy and William Henderson. As well as working with Hassell and Ginsberg they trained in a series of specialist classes given by Libby Dempster, Jane Mullet and others. (Guthrie/Scott-Murphy interview 1990) There was a season of three weeks at the Mill, and then a similar season at the Church. It “was the only play we ever brought to Melbourne,” McCaughey said. “Because everything else was absolutely site-specific. And really this one was a bit site specific too, it belonged to the Mill, but we did manage to put it into the Church. It actually changed when it was in the Church, but not necessarily for the worse.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) “We had come across this remarkable story,” McCaughey recalled, “of some research assistants freeing two dolphins in Honolulu [that had] been captured for experimental purposes.” McCaughey had met someone who had first-hand knowledge of this incident, and the company set out to tell their story. “Geelong is a ocean city,” he said, and this play was “a completely different way of relating to Geelong’s experience.” (Stanley/McCaughey interview 1990) With the help of Rinske Ginsberg the company built up its skills in trapeze work. Weeks of training showed them “how to work on these wonderful swivel trapezes so we could get that vertical dimension of a fish diving” (Stanley/ McCaughey interview 1990)

10. The Mill was significant in establishing a number of careers including the directors: Barbara CISzewska, Angela Chaplin, Robert Draffin, Caz Anderson, Meredith Roger, Karren Pateman, Graeme Gavin, and Lisa Scott-Murphy. Similarly, several
writers and writer/performers had their beginnings at the Mill, including: William Henderson, Ernie Grey, Sarah Cathcart and Hannie Rayson.

11. John and Lois Ellis were initially the joint Artistic Directors of the theatre, which was legally the Australian Contemporary Theatre Company.

12. The 1984 program at the Church included, *The Tempest*, and two plays by Jack Hibberd, directed by John Ellis, *Captain Midnight*, and *Odyssey of a Prostitute*, the latter done with the Melbourne Writer's Theatre. The Church Theatre was the other major venue for new work in Melbourne in the late nineteen-eighties. *Border Country*, by Anne Marie Mykyta, was directed there by Lois Ellis in 1985. *Pathfinder*, Darryl Emmerson's musical play about the poet John Shaw Neilson, was the success of 1986. The year in which *This Is The Way The World Ends*, by Graham Sheil, was directed by John Ellis; and *Illuminations*, by Peter Murphy, performed by Arpad Milhaly, were also presented at The Church.

The highlight of 1987 was the production of Joanna Murray-Smith’s, *Angry Young Penguins*. It established this young playwright and the director, Ewa Czajor, who had worked with Fool’s Gallery, and whose life was to be tragically cut short the following year. Amongst other things, there was also a children’s play, *The Crimson Parrot*, which had an interesting cast with Faruk Avid, Nick Carrafa, Kylie Belling and Val [Valentina] Levkowicz, and puppets made by Ian Cuming. In an interdisciplinary piece, the musician Sarah Hopkins worked with environmental sound artist, Alan Lamb, and the dancers Beth Shelton and Ian Ferguson to create *Sky Song* in 1988. The dancers were associated with DanceWorks. The textile artist Tim Newth, and lighting designer Elena Eremin also worked on this production which was toured by the Australian Content Department of the AETT. Also this year Robert Draffin directed *Volpone* with Rhys McConnochie in the title role. And the début by Douglas Horton’s work based on Henry James’ novel, *The Heiress*, was staged by Chamber Made Opera. Andrew Charker, a “Twenty-six year old veteran of Sydney street theatre and mime,” created *Gesualdo*, which was also presented at the Church that year. (Romney 1988:pu)

13. The Church did a production of *Essington Lewis: I Am Work*, which John Ellis directed. The musical *Pastrana*, with music and lyrics by Allan McFadden, and book and lyrics by Peter Northwood, was directed by John Ellis and also presented at the
Church. So too was Beverly Blankenship’s production of the German play, *Deathraft*, by Harald Mueller.

14. This bleak episode in art funding in Victoria also saw the removal of funding to Australian Nouveau Theatre (Anthill).

15. Ronaldo Cameron travelled overseas early in the nineteen-eighties, going to India, Turkey, Egypt, Europe, and Greece. (Rosenzveig 1992) He created a dance with a significant political element with *Whale Dance* in the heart of Sydney. With a huge piece of fabric - literally the size of a whale - attached at one end high up on a balcony of the Sydney Town Hall, Cameron, enveloped in the other end of the fabric below, danced poignantly to remind those in the city of the plight of these endangered giants of the sea. (Rosenzveig 1992) A champion of community art, Cameron said, “I believe that everyone has the ability to be an artist. Not only that, but I believe they have the right to do it. I think it is part of our right as humans to have connection and involvement with art. To me it is not just a luxury.” (Rosenzveig 1992) Cameron worked at the Aboriginal and Islander Dance School, in Sydney. He joined Kala Bharti Indian dance group in Sydney, and danced the part of Rawana in a Kathakali style performance of the Ramayana in 1980. He was one of twelve artists who established Blackwattle Studios in a disused factory/warehouse space in Glebe, in the early eighties. This co-operative space had no funding support, but was an important rehearsal and class space, and occasional venue. Gittoes has said of Cameron, “He had worked across a wide range [with] friends in community art and theatre.” They represented, Gittoes suggested, “an underworld of the theatrical life which isn’t documented.” (Rosenzveig 1992)

For Hiroshima Day 1988 Ronaldo Cameron created a performance in the underground pedestrian tunnel which traverses Sydney’s Central Station. (Rosenzveig 1992) This reverberant space had been a favourite place for buskers in Sydney, however on this occasion the police tried to remove these ‘potential terrorists’. As long, however, as the ghoulishly clad group kept moving - at no matter how agonisingly slow a pace - the police could not arrest them for disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic. Cameron returned to dance with the Margaret Barr Dance Drama Group in 1988 in *Pueblo de Maiz*. He performed as a Christ figure in a moving passion created by Margaret Barr, the octogenarian, Marxist humanist choreographer. The South American setting commented
on the lives of people in the third world. During these performances Cameron sensed the first signs of the motor neurone disease which was to prematurely end his life. (Rosenzveig 1992; Barrowclough 1992: 21)

Margins of Language

1. Fariñas directed actor Michelle Millner in *Isabel desterrada en Isabel*, by Jaun Radrigan, in 1987. This was presented with the Calypso Sisters - Jackie and Michelle Millner and Liz France - in *On the Road Again*, at the Tom Mann Theatre. Again in 1987 and at the Tom Mann Theatre Fariñas directed Lorca's modern classic, *La Casa de Bernada Alba*. *(The House of Bernada Alba).*

2. *Nuovo Paese*, in 1984, was FILEF Theatre Group's first stage production. It was scripted by Pat Cranny and Sonja Sedmak, and directed by Robin Laurie. The four subsequent major works they presented were scripted by Sedmak. *Otto Marzo (Eighth of March)*, presented in 1985, was also directed by Robin Laurie. Concerned with the women's movement - the play's title referred to the occasion in 1908 when migrant women factory workers locked in a Boston Factory while protesting their conditions, were killed in a fire. *Lasciateci in Pace (Leave us in Peace)* in 1986, was created for International Year of Peace. It was directed by Richard Collins. *L'Albero delle Rose (The tree of Roses)* in 1987, told the stories of three generations of women from Italy, and their Australian born daughters, and the issues surrounding their lives. *Storie in Cantiere (Stories in Construction)* in 1988, was about Italian workers in the building industry, and their families. Research for the play showed the contribution of this community in building modern Australia. "Their work is not recognised, there is little opportunity for them to contribute to the social, political and cultural life in Australia. This is a play about racism." (Andic 1990: 6) In 1988 the theatre group rejected Australian Bicentennial Authority funding, indicating the difficulty it had in a country where "the culture of the invader is still predominant." (Andic 1990: 6)

3. The long time members of Teatro dell' IRAA at this point were Raffaella Rossellini, Massimo Raneiri and Simona Mosetti.
4. Jean-Pierre Mignon began his involvement in theatre in France when he was fifteen years old, with free drama lessons offered in the local *maison de la culture*. His teacher was Marc Renaudin, who offered training based in the French classics and the twentieth century actor training work derived from Jacques Copeau and Charles Dullin. Mignon, as a young adult pursued this training in Paris, and in time joined his teacher’s touring company. With them he did his first directing, making “fresh and daring” productions of Molière. (McLeod 1985: 78; Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

5. At Anthill in 1987 there were readings of *Guide to Better Living* by Pam Leversha, directed by Andrea Lemon; *The Thief The Drought* by Tom Petsinis, directed by Russell Walsh; and *An Ordinary Dream About a Journey North*, by Andrew Bovell, directed by Peter Freund.


7. Modern plays presented by Anthill but not Australian premieres included: Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Condemned of Alton* in 1982 which was directed by William Gluth; *The Trial* by Franz Kafka adapted for screen by Orson Welles and further adapted for stage by Richard Murphet who also directed the production in 1985; *Molière* by Mikhail Bulgakov was directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon in 1988; and *The Maids* by Jean Genet was directed by Suzanne Chaundy in 1989.
8. One of the only group-devised works created by Anthill was *Vic150*, commissioned to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the colony and later State of Victoria in 1986. Helen Garner worked on it with the company as a writer for a short time. In Mignon's view the show "was a complete disaster." He concluded, "basically we like working from texts better, I think." (Stanley/Mignon interview 1990)

9. When Anthill's funding for 1990 was substantially cut by the Victorian Government, Hocking and Wood took up the *Imaginary Invalid* season and produced it, they provided the Universal Theatre, and took the show to the Adelaide Festival. With this, and some project funding - worth $120,000 - and the MTC producing Anthill's production of *Waiting for Godot* - the company was able to stay together for 1990 and do the season it had planned. This was their swan-song however.

10. "Bogdan and I had the idea of forming a company," Gow recalled. "I met Bogdan at just the low point when I was thinking, 'Oh, this isn't for me. It's boring, and it's the same thing repeated over and over again.' And then suddenly someone was saying, 'I'd like to try this, and I think like this, and these are the things I like, and these are the plays I admire, and the writers I admire.' And they were often what I admire," Gow said. (Bray/Gow interview 1989)

11. Michael Gow had met Gosia Dobrowolska when they both worked on Philip Keir's workshop production of *The Bacchae* at the Seymour Student Theatre in 1983. She had then recently arrived in Australia, having trained and worked in Poland. Gow recalled that he was interested in Dobrowolska's work "because of the way she performed and rehearsed and thought about things." He said this "was very different to what I was used to in Australia." (Bray/Gow interview 1989) Through her, Michael Gow met Bogdan Koca.

12. Ljubisa Ristić's production of *The Liberation of Skopje* with the Zagreb Theatre Company was brought to Australia by the Cladan Cultural Exchange Institute, and performed in the gothic environment of the old Darlinghurst Goal during the Sydney Festival in 1981. The production, in Serbo-Croatian, German and Romany, had an intensity and ebullience which appealed to Australian audiences. He was invited to return to work on a production with a local cast, portentously titled, *1984 AD*. This ensemble experiment - commissioned by the Australian Content Department of the AETT (Performing Lines) - was not altogether successful, as it lacked the cohesion and
stylish dynamics which had marked *Skopje*. The cast brought together for *1984 AD* had no opportunity to form the kind of complex working relationships which enrich the work of many experimental companies working on group-devised material, although they had considerable experience and undoubted abilities. The cast included the Polish actors Bogan Koca and Gosia Dobrawolska, as well as Kris McQuade, Cathie Downes, Tony Strachan, Viki Luke, Tyler Coppin and Tanya Uren. The amalgam of Orwell, Aeschylus and Ibsen, did not take on a coherent form in performance, leaving the heroes Xerxes, Peer Gynt and Winston Smith, and the talented participants unable to crystallise anything much about the human condition, however saturated the production was in promising material. Ristić left Australia to work on a production of *Ubu Roi* to open the Nancy Festival in June 1984. (Hely 1984:pu)

13. Bogdan Koca’s productions of *The Marriage* and *Hamlet* were also given a Sydney season in the Broadwalk Studio of the Opera House in 1986. The productions shared a cast of Philip Quast, Michael Gow, Patrick Dickson, Wenanty Nosul, as well as Robin Ramsay and Kris McQuade.

14. The level of subsidy for Thalia diminished toward the end of the nineteen-eighties. In the nineteen-nineties Bogdan Koca worked extensively at the tiny Lighthouse Theatre in Kings Cross. In 1994 he took up a two-year contract to teach at University of Western Sydney, Nepean, and continued to direct and write plays at the Lighthouse Theatre.

15. Stefan Mrowinski, Andrzei Siedlecki, both noted Polish directors, as well as Bogdan Koca and Lech Mackiewicz, came to live in Australia, but it was hard for any of them to find a place in the theatre in Australia. In a similar category, Dasha Blahova had studied both acting and puppetry at the Prague Academy of Dramatic Art. The linkage of puppetry with the other disciplines of the theatre was quite conventional in Eastern European training, but appeared aberrant to the Anglophone repertory training tradition and the second-hand St Denis of NIDA. Maria Magdalena Slabacu from Rumania has a similar emphasis to her training in Bucharest; and mention might also be made of similar training with Jinda Rosendorf, Wojciech Pisarek, Karel and Eva Rehorek of the Puppet Museum and Paperbag Theatre. Alex Menglet - an extraordinary actor, trained in Russia - worked extensively with Anthill, in Melbourne.
The Polish director Lech Mackiewicz was becoming recognised toward the end of the nineteen-eighties. With NIDA graduates Justin Monjo and Jaime Robertson, he set up a co-operative company, Auto Da Fé in 1987. They aimed to present in Sydney, "little-known European plays." (Evans 1992: pu) In 1989 they also presented Saroyan's short play, *Hello Out There*, which was significant for the production's use of a found environment at the old brick factory buildings in the Sydney Park, at St Peters. Working with designer Jerzy Szafjanski and lighting designer Jan Wawrzyńczak, Mackiewicz did a production of Mrozek's *The Immigrants*, and works based on Beckett and Kafka in Sydney. Lech Mackiewicz received some support from the funding agencies, but few opportunities to direct with established companies. He was later invited by Tadashi Suzuki to direct the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) at the Toga Festival and the Festival of Mito in Japan. It is interesting to note that Mackiewicz developed the material for the SCOT project with the Powerhouse Youth Theatre in suburban Sydney.

**Gendered marginality: women's theatre**

1. Among 'women's venues' can be listed: The Bakery - a collectively run performance space in Adelaide for cabaret and "original women's theatre", (Forth 1980: 32) and Lolly’s Women’s Warehouse, a venue in Leichhardt. (Tait 1994: 115) Among the 'women’s theatres' there was the Perth-based Desperate Measures in the late nineteen-seventies, and in Sydney the Women Action Theatre (1976-1982) and Just Wisteria (1981-4). The circus groups included: the Real Mighty Bonza Wacko Women’s Circus (1979) which merged to form Wimmins Circus (1980-82).

2. Further examples might be Alison Richards (Canberra 1970-72) ANU and Australian Theatre Workshops, (Melbourne) Claremont training workshops (1973), actor Mushroom and director Claremont children’s theatre show (1974), NIDA (1975), directing four Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group shows (1975), APG member, overseas study, briefly associate director St Martin’s Youth Theatre, artistic director Mushroom, freelance director and actor with a number of feminist theatre works among credits.

4. Alison Richards directed three short plays written by local women in November 1975 at the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory. Together titled *Women Times Three*, the plays were a mime piece, *Curtain Raiser* by Finola Moorhead; a black comedy, *String Trio* by Jane Bradhurst; and naturalistic lesbian 'coming out', *Shift* by Di King. (Tait 1993: 87; Guthrie/Richards interview 1990) While it was still a part of the APG in 1976, the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group devised two travelling shows: *The Travelling Medicine Show*, directed by Margot Nash, and *She'll Be Right, Mate*, directed by Alison Richards. (Guthrie/Richards interview 1990; Tait 1993: 28-30)

5. I had been rehearsing Picasso’s *The Four Little Girls* at the beginning of that year in the same venue. It was to prove to be the final major Claremont show, as the cooperative broke-down over the issue of working methods and the role of the director; on top of which further limitations to funding exacerbated the perceived injustices within the group. I cite this otherwise slight coincidence only to demonstrate that impassioned arguments about the validity of the role of the director were occurring in many of the ‘alternative theatres’ at this time. Similar debates were occurring within the APG and the Performance Syndicate.

6. The Vitalstatistix Theatre Company, based in Port Adelaide, was founded in 1984 by Ollie Black, Margaret Fisher, and Roxxy Bent. It has a strong record of documentary style plays written by company members, often treating with considerable humour important issues affecting women’s lives. For example in 1985 they toured *Weighing It Up* and *Dieters’ Dilemma*, both concerned with diet and women’s body image. The following year they presented Roxxy Bent’s play *Stitch In Time*, described as a feminist thriller, at the Wet Pac Theatre, in the Living Arts Centre, in Adelaide. They presented another play by Bent, *Waiting for Annette*, in October 1987, this time at the Red Shed. In the same year they toured a play about sexual harassment, *A Touchy Subject*, by Ollie Black, Margaret Fisher, and Darrelyn Gunzburg. (Bent *et al* 1992: 193) Vitalstatistix have also explored cabaret as an appropriate form for women’s theatre, exemplified by *The Fabulous Apron Fashion Parade*. In 1989, Teresa Crea and Margaret Fisher wrote *Home Sweet Home*, a play about domestic violence, which was
presented in Adelaide and interstate. (Bent et al 1992: 194) Vitalstatistix Theatre Company is perhaps the most securely funded and long lived women’s theatre in Australia.

7. In her 1982 article, Westwood gave a full list of the close to 150 participants in the Women and Theatre Project. They included old hands at women’s theatre, such as Kerry Dwyer, Rose Costelloe, Jan Cornall, Jude Kuring, Fay Mokotow, and Ros Horin - all ex-APG members; and also Alison Lyssa - who worked with Carol Woodrow in Canberra, and Gillian Jones - who had been a key figure in the Performance Syndicate. (Westwood 1982: passim)

8. Project “B” - Unlimited Lives, included as participants Rose Costelloe, Jan Cornall, Kerry Dwyer, Joan Grounds, Susan Lambert, Alison Lyssa, and Kay Self.

9. Other devised pieces included, Strangers - a mime and movement piece devised and performed by Dasha Blahova and Jenny Hope; an interdisciplinary piece, Untitled - devised, composed and choreographed by Vineta Lagzdina and Jane McLennan; and a non-naturalistic play, Vertigo - written and performed by Kate Jason Smith, Helen Pankhurst, Lindy Hatherly, Sara Hardy and Kay Self, with help from Jan Dungey, from the London based, Cunning Stunts.

10. In 1981 Suzanne Spunner noted the on-going momentum of women’s theatre in Melbourne after the Melbourne Women’s Theatre Group, and her article in TA indicated a growing attention to the analysis of sexuality and gender in feminist theatre. Doody: The Stripper’s Progress, A Parade to No Man’s Land, at the Universal Theatre, was an autobiographical stage show around the career as a stripper, which described and analysed the attitudes and intentions of the dance: the strip tease. The dances were choreographed by leading modern dance and movement exponents in Australia: Jacqui Carroll, Margaret Lascica and Bob Thorneycroft. Sue Ingleton was pregnant when she created From Here to Maternity, the show in which audiences first met her brilliant comic invention: Bill Rowlings - the pregnant man. This simple role reversal was the device which allowed Ingleton to “deliver her feminist salvoes as carefully aimed custard pies.” (Spunner 1981: 57) Both these shows, Spunner noted, commented upon the performer’s “acutely vulnerable sexual states.” Spunner wrote, “In their own way, both performances were courageous statements which transgressed theatrical conventions and social taboos.” (Spunner 1981: 56)
11. Other women’s theatre projects have included, *Icy Tea*, a “community-based women’s theatre project” in Brisbane which originated within *Street Arts*, in 1982, and became an independent group in 1986. (Tait 1993: 81) *Syntheatrix*, from Queensland, had begun in 1983 as the Brisbane Women’s Performance Workshop Collective.

12. In 1985 for Home Cooking Theatre Company, Andrea Lemon created *Looking In...Looking Out*. It was performed at Warr Park House, Brunswick.

13. In 1989 Home Cooking Theatre Company presented a play about Edna Walling the landscape gardener, and conservationist in the Fitzroy Gardens. *Edna for the Garden*, was written by Suzanne Spunner, and directed and designed by Meredith Rogers, with Sara Hardy, Ernie Gray, Monica Main, and Carmelina Di Guglielmo in the cast.

14. There had been women’s theatre projects in Adelaide prior to this, including very big shows with perhaps two hundred women involved. These were mounted by Anne Dunn. There was one such show at the end of the nineteen-eighties about Aboriginal and white woman, called, *Is This Seat Taken?* These shows were not based on the English women’s theatre model, and were basically amateur projects. (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990) In 1985 Dunn devised *Women’s Own Work*, a similar large-scale event with a hundred women in Darwin, in the Northern Territory. (James 1995: 410) And later, beyond the life of Troupe, their old venue was the place where the Red Shed Company was set up in 1986. The actors in this collective were mainly women, and they characterised their output as broadly feminist. Graduates from Flinders, in the main, they were influenced through Julie Holledge by English women’s theatre. (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990)

15. Julie Holledge came to Australia in 1981 to teach at Flinders. In Britain in the nineteen-seventies she had had involvement in the alternative women’s theatre and she brought with her these political concerns and this working methodology.

16. Virginia Baxter and Julie Holledge and others set up the Association of Women Theatre Workers in Adelaide in 1984. They ran workshops for performers and for women writers. These were influenced by English models, and it may be said that this activity was effective in increasing the number of women writers and performance makers with work being staged in South Australia. (Guthrie/Holledge interview 1990)

18. Lois Ellis and Sara Hardy took the name, *Radclyffe*, as the name of their small production company in 1989. Comprising five women, their first production was *Vita - a Fantasy* by Sara Hardy, directed by Lois Ellis. The production of *Vita* was supported by the Reichstein Foundation, a private philanthropic organisation. Ellis was optimistic that Radclyffe Theatre Productions would become well known. She was conscious that theatre treating lesbian themes had a market in Australia, and the company was directing work at this cognoscenti audience. (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990)

19. She directed Jan Friedl in a one person opera, *Seduction of the General*, for the Victorian State Opera. This was funded by the Music Board, the Performing Arts Board, and the Myer Foundation. (Stanley/Lois Ellis interview 1990) She directed the Franca Rame and Dario Fo comic monologues, *Female Parts* in 1982.

**State controlled alternatives**

1. The other plays in the Old Tote 1968 season of Australian plays were unstaged contemporary plays: *Childermas* by Tom Keneally, which was directed by John Clark, and *This Old Man Come Rolling Home*, an early play in a social realist style by Dorothy Hewett, which was chosen and directed by Jean Wilhelm. There was also a curious double-bill presented with Douglas Stewart’s *Fire on the Snow*, directed by Tom Brown, coupled with *Norm and Ahmed*, by Alex Buzo and directed by Jim Sharman. (Allen 1968: 33)

2. Rodney Fisher had earlier been selected by Robert Quintin to participate in a “short-lived playwrights’ studio” at NIDA, doing “the play writing course at night and the acting course by day.” He had then returned to Melbourne, and approached Ogilvie who invited him to work on this project. (Guthrie/Fisher interview 1990)

3. There were seventeen actors in this production, they included, Frederick Parslow, Anne Pendlebury, Sean Scully, Shaun Gurton, and Jennifer Clare.
4. Ogilvie and Fisher next worked for the MTC on Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, with a similar group of actors at the Russell Street. The production was set up to stretch the actors’ abilities, by having two groups playing ‘characters’ and ‘actors,’ and requiring them to swap around on alternate nights. It was notionally co-directed by Ogilvie and Fisher - but as Ogilvie himself played the part of the Director in the show - it was, in effect, Fisher’s début production. It is still remembered by those who saw it for its theatrical audacity, and by members of its cast for the tensions within the company. Fisher went overseas and it was thought at the time that he would never be heard of again, but that was not to be. In 1972 he was asked to return to become Associate to George Ogilvie, who had become the Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company. For Fisher this commenced a trajectory of success as a stage director leading him, by the end of the eighties, to a place of preeminence as a director in Australia.

5. Ogilvie’s first season at the SATC included high-comedy ingredients, with plays by Antrobus and Feydeau that utilised his training in *commedia dell’arte*. Fisher’s contributions were to direct Trevor Griffith’s *Occupations* - about Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and a compilation of words by Brecht and music by Weill, with the singer Margaret Roadknight. Rex Cramphorn directed *Measure for Measure*. (Ward 1992: 56)

6. Rodney Fisher also directed O’Neill’s *Long Days Journey Into Night* and James Saunders’ *Hans Kohlaas* in that season. George Ogilvie directed Whitehead’s *Alpha Beta, Comedy of Errors* and Travers’ *Rookery Nook*. Fisher worked with Margaret Roadknight on *Adelaide Anthology*, which was presented as a late night cabaret.

7. The Come Out Youth Arts Festival was established by Chris Westwood, then Education Officer at the Adelaide Festival Centre, Jim Giles, from the South Australian Education Department and Helmut Bakaitis. It runs biennially on years that alternate with the Adelaide Festival. (Lonie 1984: 167)

8. Titled *Lulu*, Nowra’s adaptation rendered these idiosyncratic prototypes to the German Expressionist dramas, as a well-made play. In the leading role Judy Davis gave a dazzlingly candid performance as the sex-spirit on the opening night, but this initial
frankness was hard to sustain throughout the Adelaide and a subsequent Sydney seasons.

9. The 1985 season also saw productions of Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, directed by Terry O’Connell; and *Muse of Fire*, by Nigel Krauth, directed by Keith Gallasch. After some problems when a new play that had been commissioned was dropped from the program, *On the Razzle*, by Tom Stoppard, was substituted, directed by Peter King. Betty Roland's Australian classic, *The Touch of Silk*, long ignored by Australian companies, was presented, directed by Keith Gallasch and designed by Peter Corrigan. Emulating a successful London revival they also presented *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, directed by Peter King and designed by Ken Wilby and Mark Thompson.

10. There is here a discernible agenda of nostalgia. Richard Wherrett had worked on productions of radical German plays at Sydney’s Nimrod Theatre early in his directorial career: Peter Handke’s plays *Kasper* in 1973 and *Ride Across Lake Constance* in 1975.

11. The Australian Bicentennial Authority’s Arts Australia program provided $150,000 which was augmented by the Sydney Theatre Company with facilities and support for the project.

### Marginal centres: the embodiment of modern theatre

1. I directed the first production of *Witold Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires*, in May 1978 in the April-May Theatre Program at Barbarfald’s Building in Watt Street, Newcastle. This Newcastle season, with Julie Hudspeth, Howard Stanley, Bill Doblo and Joanna Pigott, was funded by the Theatre Board of the Australia Council. With the latter cast member replaced by Glenda Lum, the production then had a season in Canberra.

2. Roger Pulvers was appointed as Associate Director to Carrillo Gantner at the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 1979, and he quickly established himself as a directorial presence in the Australian theatre. He had earlier directed his own play, *Yamashita*, in Canberra in 1979. At Playbox Pulvers also became , in effect, a writer-in-residence and translated and directed *Miss Julie* and *Dance of Death*. These productions reinstated some of the obsessive, expressionist values of Strindberg’s theatre. Pulvers’ play, *Bertold Brecht Leaves Los Angeles*, with music by Felix Werder,
was given a production by Malcolm Robertson which the playwright felt to be amongst the most effective and successful productions of his works to that time. His satiric puppet play *General MacArthur in Australia* which had been written for Richard Bradshaw, was presented by the Marionette Theatre of Australia at the Playbox Theatre Downstairs. Pulvers directed his own plays *News Unlimited* and *Covenant of the Rainbow* on a double-bill at La Mama. Also in 1981, for a Playbox tour to the Adelaide Festival, Pulvers directed a double-bill of Sam Shepherd’s plays: *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. (Clarke 1982) Pulvers was to direct *Buried Child* again, in 1986 in Tokyo, with a Japanese cast.

3. Richard Connolly changed the ground of his opposition from obscenity, to a criticism of the play in terms of it being “either a great work of art or colossally pretentious” which failed “not because of the offensiveness of some passages, but because of the sheer mass of piled up details […] in the circumstances its offensiveness to many listeners doesn’t enhance its broadcastability.” (Hill 1981) Connolly had shifted his objection from *indecency*, to a charge of *self indulgence*.

4. Michael (Mike) Mullins was born at The Rock, NSW, in 1952. He worked in a bank, and was a trainee director with the Old Tote in the early nineteen-seventies. He organised Jerzy Grotowski’s tour for the Australian Council for the Arts in 1974, before spending some time in the United States and Europe, especially Poland. In 1975 he directed *The Maids*, at La Mama, in Melbourne.

5. There were developmental workshops run by Mullins at this time, as well as presentations in Sydney, Wagga Wagga and Armidale, NSW.


7. The following year Mullins set up the program of public performances at Darling Harbour, in Sydney. Funded by the Darling Harbour developer, Stage 1B was a program of street theatre, circus and strolling entertainers. It was reported to have a $1.5 million budget. (The Eastern Herald 5/1/89: pu) After this, Mullins left Australia to manage festival events from a base in London, and John (Johnny) Allen took over running the Darling Harbour spectacles.
8. Tsoutas did no other directorial work at Anthill, but he was listed on the board of ANT at least until 1985.

9. Nicholas Tsoutas was influenced by the Polish artist-director Tadeusz Kantor, whose production, *The Dead Class*, he had seen at the 1978 Adelaide Festival. Kantor’s idiosyncratic performance making style may be apparent as an influence in Tsoutas’s work. In fact, Tsoutas went to Poland in 1978 to meet Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, but found both artists out of the country during his visit. The wealth of cultural tradition in the theatre in Poland - particularly the work of Jozef Szajna - was nonetheless to impress Tsoutas profoundly.


11. There were a number of resident companies at the Performance Space, including, Entr’acte, All Out Ensemble and One Extra Dance Theatre. There were also a number of other organisations who were closely associated with the Performance Space, and these included, Dance Network and Russell Dumas’ Dance Exchange. Grotequi Monkey Choir were a relatively informal group of people, who played music and created some wildly unconventional performances at the Performance Space, Sydney in 1983 and 1984. This group used original music, large puppets and crazy humour to create almost celebratory - if punk - events. Andrew Lindsay and Nicoletta Boris were key members of Red Weather, a group which performed early in the life of the Performance Space. *Keep the Dream Running*, was described as an absurd allegory, and was directed by Carol Woodrow. The company specialised in a theatre of grotesque, peopled with buffoon characters. They later worked on a bizarre adaptation which they titled *The Fourpenny Opera*, which they put on at the Gap, the cabaret space set up by Ralph Kerle at the Sydney Trade Union Club. Told By An Idiot was a performance group with Derek Kreckler and Sarah Miller. They did “fairly small pieces,” Miller said, “we weren’t the kind of group that was going to sustain a season of theatre, or anything like that. We did short, quick pieces; and so that, kind of, performance night format was what suited us best,” she said. Later this group toured work to galleries and festivals in the UK. (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)

12. Other conferences were to include, *Int(er)ventions: Feminism and Performance*, in 1988, and *The Politics of Exile*, in 1989; significantly, the theme of the conference in 1990 was: *Revaluations: avant-garde practice in an age of economic rationalism.*
13. The dance work of Richard Allen and Karen Perlman was introduced to Sydney audiences at the Performance Space, with Charles Stories, in 1989. There was considerable critical interrogation of dance and movement theatre going on within the Performance Space over several years; and an independent dance network, Dance Base, worked out of the centre.

14. By the late nineteen-eighties, events which focused on technology and art at the Performance Space included in 1988, Virtual Object; a performance art by Barbara Campbell; and a series of installations by Joan Grounds; and an interactive radar, audio and video installations by Anna Gibbs, Sally Pryor, and Jill Scott in 1989. There was also a collaborative video project, One Block from Heaven in 1988, which included a video by Tim Burns; and later a retrospective of Derek Krekler's work, Conceptual Theatres 1978 -1990.

15. The annual Open Performance Week at the Performance Space was established on the model of the Open Dance Week initiative, to give greater access to experimental work, and to provide a forum in which young artists might see each other's works and exchange ideas. (Guthrie/Miller interview 1990)

Bodies in Space: visual theatre

1. Several people worked with students at Monash at Triffitt's invitation. Andrew Ross did a production of Bill Reed's play Trugannini, which was a precursor to the significant work Ross was to do in Western Australia directing plays not only about, but by Aborigines, especially Jack Davis and Jimmy Chai. I did a production of John Webster's The White Devil with a youthful invective appropriate to the play's Jacobean spirit and an eclectic mix of ideas taken from Kabuki and blues singing.

2. In April 1976 Le Roadshow Cafe at the Seymour Centre, in Sydney, was the final gig for the Yellow Brick Roadshow. The company was by then Jacqui Stolz - an original member, Andrew Hansen, and Bill Doblo - formerly with Tribe. (PAYBA 1976: 167)
3. Triffitt created *Momma's Little Horror Show* when he was invited by Peter Wilson to develop ideas which the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre had started to work on in 1975 for International Women’s Year.

4. Nigel Triffitt devised a ballet for the innovative Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide. Titled, *Wildstars*, it also toured to the Edinburgh Festival. Triffitt then spent some time in the early nineteen-eighties in Europe touring the new version of *Momma’s Little Horror Show*. This time it was produced by the Australian Puppet Theatre. (Vella & Rickards 1989: 66) Triffitt also worked in Holland on a show called, *The Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, which flopped unceremoniously. The Dutch backers lost a lot of money. “For six weeks Triffitt sat in a hotel room in Amsterdam and brooded,” Peter Weiniger reported in an interview in which Triffitt told him that he, “really felt like doing violence to a lot of my acquaintances.” But - the interviewer assured us - “instead, he listened to the BBC World Service on the radio, and recorded hours of music and voices which he cut up into a tape that was aggressive and sharp.” This was to be the basis for Triffitt’s next stage work, *Secrets*. (Weiniger 1982)

5. In the mid-nineteen-eighties Triffitt also did *High Fliers*, for the Australian Dance Theatre, in Adelaide, and with the singer and writer, Robyn Archer, he did *The Three Legends of Kra*, for the seasons at the Adelaide Festival and in Brisbane.

6. The original members of the Handspan collective were: Ken Evans, Andrew Hansen, Helen Rickards, Maeve Vella, Peter James Wilson and Christine Woodock.

7. Ariette Taylor directed a highly inventive production of Picasso’s play, *Four Little Girls*, with Handspan in 1988. This production may be the high-point of Handspan’s work, as the imaginative demands of this text were measured against the considerable resources of Ken Evans who designed the production. Ariette Taylor extended work she had done elsewhere with young people, by casting four children who performed with the puppets, animated fabrics, objects and puppeteers to make this a dazzling rendition of childhood. *Four Little Girls* was taken to Sydney and performed on the thrust stage of the Seymour Centre’s York Theatre - at some cost to the visual construction of the production.
8. *Hamjamb and the Gigolo*’s cast included Howard Stanley, John F. Howard, Adrian Montana, John Coombes, and Valerie Kirwan herself. *Cascando* was also performed at La Mama with Howard Stanley, Danny Robinson, Neil Greenaway, Rachel Fensham, and again Valerie Kirwan herself in its cast.

9. A further play of Valerie Kirwan’s, *In the Cold Cold Morning Light*, was performed by Anthill in 1991.

**Bodies in suspense: art performed**

1. The Annandale Imitation Realists were the Sydney-based painters Mike Brown, Ross Crothall and Colin Lanceley. They first exhibited in Melbourne at Museum of Modern Australian Art in 1962, and later gave themselves the ironic label ‘Subterranean Realists’. (Heathcote 1995: 174ff)

2. Stelarc, was born Stelios Aradiou in Cyprus in 1946. His performance work began when he was a student at Caulfield Institute of Technology in Melbourne, and even his early involved suspensions and technologically produced extensions of human faculties. (De Groen 1984: 80)

3. Killick, Rough and Maplestone had come to Melbourne from Adelaide where they had studied. The playwright Steve Spears, the arts administrator and entrepreneur David Heally and the visual artist Graeme Hare were also part of this group.

**Bodies in motion: urban theatres**

1. Pierre Thibaudeau and Elizabeth Burke had already devised and performed *The Shape of Time* (1980) at the Performance Space; the following years saw their, *À la Carte* (1981), *The Trial* (1982) and *When the Bough Breaks* (1982).

2. So, too, did Jean-Pierre Voos and Jepke Gouldsmit.

3. The key members of the band, which was then called *Ha Ha Ha*, were Henk Johannes and Robin Copp, with Yantra De Vilder, Peter Haddock and Carl Avey.
Glenda Lum worked with them - principally now a singer and song writer. Glenda Lum had trained as a dancer and choreographer, and worked as an actor with Claremont, the APG, and during this period she worked on Mike Mullins’ *Illusion*. Chris Ryan, who had then recently come to Sydney from Adelaide where he had studied mime, worked on this series. Anna Hruby and Laura Williams worked on the earlier pieces.

4. Several new performers worked on *Broken Tales 4* - Lyn Pierse and Tanya Gerstle, Martin Sacks, Richard Weinstein, and Andrew Charka. Chris Ryan and Glenda Lum remained, as did the band.

5. Whistling in the Theatre’s *Ship of Fools* (1988) was a highly regarded production, the script of which was jointly devised by the director, Robert Draffin, collective members and the playwright, Andrew Bovell. It toured to Sydney, where critics and the theatre management had some trouble with the notion of unemployment being spoken of in a metaphoric way. In was ostensibly a medieval story. The topic of unemployment had been thoroughly researched and workshopped, but finally subsumed into the work, which provided no resolution. This was confronting for the management of Belvoir Street Theatre, who thought that this was not politically sound. There was pressure to give the production a ‘better ending’. Whistling in the Theatre also produced a successful production of *A Thousand and One Nights*, based on the Arabic classic. This work was also directed by Robert Draffin and toured by Performing Lines.

6. King had been chair of the APG collective, and in 1981 his play, *Mansfield Stark*, was presented by John Timlin’s Almost Managing Company with the APG, at La Mama, Carlton, and the Zoo Studio, Fitzroy. At this time he received a director’s development grant from the Australia Council which allowed him to work with Jim Sharman and travel to Bali. (Price 1982: pu) “The important thing for a new director is to do the classics and to do them well,” he is quoted as having said to Jenna Price. (Price 1982: pu) He directed *The Old Wives Tale* of 1595, by George Peele in 1983. Peter King was the Associate Director of the State Theatre Company of South Australia while Keith Gallasch was running the company.

7. *Year of Playing Dead*, had as its performers, Karen Davitt, Nick Elias, Anna McCrossin, Ingrid Ohlsson, Yoni Prior, and Campbell Thomson.
8. *The Usurper of the Plains*, had as its performers, Faruk Avdi, Colin Batrouney, Nancy Black, David Bonney, Nick Elias, Ingrid Ohlsson, and David Roberts. The designer was Michael Anderson; and the composer was Sam Mallet.

9. Baxter and Gallasch’s work has investigated the suggestion that the artist is an historian. In 1986, *Talking Pictures*, written and performed by Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter for ABC Radio’s *Surface Tension*, it was a verbal exploration of photographs and way we speak about them. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989)

10. In 1989 Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter developed a script with the political street theatre company, Death Defying Theatre. It was a departure from the street circus format in which Death Defying Theatre had specialised. Gallasch gave them a rehearsal script which he and Baxter then worked on with the actors. Although working without a director, this process suggested the role of writer/director for Gallasch and Baxter. This project was funded by the state Health Department. (Bray/Gallasch & Baxter interview 1989) With *Legs on the Wall* Gallasch created the exuberant, *Off the Wall* (1990), and later the remarkable, word-less Gothic performance piece, *Hurt* (1991). Both were staged at the Performance Space, Sydney.

The conclusion

1. The quantity and access to public funding for avant-garde theatre was at a peak in the first half of the nineteen-eighties and declined to the end of the decade. There was an even more marked decline in the years since, despite initiatives such as the creation of the ironically titled, ‘hybrid arts’ funding category. Community, regional and otherwise marginal theatres have generally been fewer in number and funded less generously.

2. McGillick’s contribution to Parsons 1995 is of the same stamp. Paul McGillick, who had been the director of the International Society for Contemporary Art (ISCA) in Sydney in the nineteen-seventies, now took up an increasingly conservative set of positions on new theatre in Australia.

3. A representative example of the postmodern phenomenon may be People Next Door. An interesting ‘hybrid’ company this Canberra-based duo created work of
different sorts in a number of categories: they toured schools with TIE, they toured the Philippines and worked with the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) and they created avant-garde theatre works. In 1990 they adapted Mary Shelley's text to create a piece called *Frankenstein's Shadow*, which was directed by Richard Murphet, and had music by the Original Otto Orchestra. (Trail 1991: passim) They were part community theatre, part regional theatre, part conceptual art project and part intercultural experiment: for People Next Door the categories no longer held.

4. Dance continued to be a focus for innovation in Australian performing arts as shown by the vitality of the Green Mill Dance Project and the acceptance of Meryl Tankard. Interestingly, the strong interest in opera in Australia generated a number of innovative groups and individuals reacting to this field. Richard Vella was the founder and Artistic Director of the Calculated Risks Opera Company. *Tales of Love* was their first production, and *Volcano and Vision*, with music by Rainer Linz and text by Paul Greene, was their second production which was staged at the Performance Space in Sydney. Directed by Nigel Kellaway, this work was presented with a small instrumental ensemble, and three vocalists, including Annette Tesoriero. The composer Con Koukias is the creator of opera performances in acoustically rich disused industrial sites, wharves and warehouses: the architectural equivalents for our times of the castles and the cathedrals of the past. He is also the co-founder and artistic director of IHOS Opera.

Barrie Kosky was a *wunderkind* from Melbourne University, and started by directing strikingly original opera productions when still an undergraduate. He set up his own company, *Treason of Images* - named after the Magritte painting - in 1985, when he was eighteen. Starting with one of the foundational works of western music theatre: *Orfeo*, by Monteverdi, in 1986, Kosky followed this with a radical versions of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. At the 1988 Spoleto Festival in Melbourne, he directed Berg's *Lulu*; and for this festival the following year, he directed Michael Tippett's *The Knot Garden*. Barrie Kosky was to found the Gilgul Theatre, for which he directed daring productions of Jewish classics, *The Dybbuk* (1991), and later the remaining plays in the *Exile Trilogy*: *Es Brent* (1992), and *Levad* (1993). (Shmith 1993: passim) These were seen on the mainstages of the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne, and Belvoir St Theatre, in Sydney.
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Abbreviations used

AETT  Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust
APG  Australian Performing Group
MTC  Melbourne Theatre Company
MWTG  Melbourne Women's Theatre Group
nd  no date
np  no pagination
NSW  New South Wales
PAYBA  *Performing Arts Year Book of Australia* volumes 1 - 6, Sydney: Showcase Publications, 1977 - 1982, various editors. [From 1976 to 1979 PAYBA was published the following year. For example PAYBA 1976, was published in 1977. There was no volume titled, PAYBA 1980. PAYBA 1981 and 1982 list activities of the previous years, 1980 and 1981, respectively. In this study PAYBA are refered to by title, not presumed publication date.]
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