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I have quite distinct memories of my first encounters with people I identified as Jews. In the 1970’s, when I was in my teens, I made friends with a group of Jewish girls, and was invited to their homes, most of which were in the Melbourne (Australia) suburb of Caulfield, which had one of the highest proportions of Jewish inhabitants in the city. I was growing up opposite a golf-course in an increasingly affluent, beachside, bleached-blonde outer suburb whose micro-culture epitomised entrenched Anglo-Australian values: good manners, regular hours, discreet display of wealth, restrained emotion, mid-week tennis, weekends on the beach. Entree to the homes of these Jewish families provided my fairly romantic and uncritical eye with a glimpse of another world…

"My friends had parents with exotic accents, raised voices, strongly held and volubly expressed opinions accompanied by a symphony of gesticulation, grin and grimace. Some of the mothers had very big hair, and very big jewellery but, when they rolled their sleeves up in their big kitchens, some of them had numbers tattooed on their arms, hinting at a history the consciousness of which was only then beginning to seep into my mind."

I recall an embarrassed fascination at what seemed the exposed nerves, the unabashed sentimentality, the directness of address, the 'expressiveness', of these 'foreigners' who were the parents of my friends; characteristics which stood in such stark contrast to my own world in which 'restraint' in all its forms was so valorised. As an inheritor of what was still an extremely Anglophile culture, I associated these characteristics with a sort of hysteria, or a primitiveness; with a lack of 'culture'. Yet these people were clearly 'cultured' in all sorts of ways which accorded to normative definitions - their homes were filled with the signs and symbols of 'culture' - books, music, debate.

Their children, my friends, clearly experienced a similar sort of ambivalence to the 'otherness' of their parents. We would entertain each other by imitating their accents, their mangled syntax, and their gestures, often quite cruelly. For my friends, it was clearly a way of distancing themselves, not from their Jewishness per se, but from this 'old Jewishness', this 'Yiddishkeit', an anachronism in the new country. It was even funnier, apparently, when I, a non-Jew, could imitate them. It placed the 'old Jewishness' another step away. We could not tell whether these 'old Jews' behaved like this because they could not help it, or because they refused to adapt their behaviours to their new context.

This testimony examines questions of the construction of 'Jewishness' in a performance context from the perspective of the performance maker and the performer. I will be reflecting on my own experience in both those functions as an ensemble member of Gilgul Theatre. Through this testimony, I hope to frame concerns regarding representations of cultural identity as performance problems being processed by practitioners engaged in the production of performed narratives and performed bodies out of culture-specific material. Central to these considerations is the fact that the Gilgul ensemble of performers was composed of both Jews and non-Jews, each embarking on the project from points of differing experiences of, degrees of distance from, and levels of conversance with Jewish culture. An analysis of the performance-making process raises questions of the nature of the decisions we took, and the transformations we underwent in order to construct a performed 'Jewishness', in the body of the work, and in the bodies of the characters we constructed.

Between 1991 and 1993, Gilgul Theatre, under the direction of Barrie Kosky, created 'The Exile Trilogy', three works (The Dybbuk, 1991. Es Brent, 1992. Levad, 1993) investigating Jewish experience and history through a series of postmodern treatments of works from the canon of the Yiddish theatre. The word gilgul derives from the Hebrew word meaning revolution, rolling or metamorphosis, but is used in mystical writings to refer to the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation. This notion is expressed in the structure of each of the three works, whereby a number of narratives are played out, interwoven around a spinal narrative and threaded through with a theme of memory and forgetting. The dislocated souls of performers from the pre-war, European Yiddish theatre find themselves on a road, travelling somewhere between the fact of death, and the extinction of consciousness, and are compelled
to recreate fragments of their life-histories, and performances they have given. Rather than attempting to reinterpret the source texts or present biographical fragments with any semblance of authenticity, the works attempted to represent the memories of these moments - reshaped, fragmented, blurred, warped by the impact of history on the rememberers.

THE BODY OF THE WORK

I will focus here primarily on the process by which *The Dybbuk* was created as it was in this period that the template for the other works in the trilogy was set, as each of these works took a text from the canon of the Yiddish theatre repertoire as a core narrative thread. *The Dybbuk* was based on Solomon Anski’s canonical text, *Es Brent*, on Elie Wiesel’s play *The Trial of God,* and *Levad* on *Mirele Efros* by Jacob Gordin. Through a relatively formal process of dramaturgical research, these texts were interwoven or conflated with texts quoted or derived from sacred and mystical writings, songs from the Yiddish folk tradition and the Yiddish theatre, historical and anecdotal material, quotation and extrapolation of photographic and filmed documentation and, in the case of *Levad* in particular, oral histories gathered from actors born into or trained in the Yiddish theatre tradition. What is at issue here, however, is another level of dramaturgy - a semi-conscious, often serendipitous dramaturgy which impacted on the construction of the pieces, and on the construction of the characters who inhabited them.

ISSUES OF SHAPE AND SIZE

A process of reflection throughout these periods of text-gathering threw up ideas which created fundamental formal and structural parameters for the making of the work, all centring around an acknowledgment of the distance at which we stood from these sources. In dealing with the experience of pre-war European Jewry - even were we to presume that this experience could be conceived of as a single, stable and verifiable entity - and with the ways in which it represented itself through theatre texts, we were dealing with the fragments of a shattered vessel - a collection of shards and fragments; testimonies, images and imagining - the detritus left after the destruction of centuries of European Jewish culture in one fell swoop. Expressed as a performance problem, the acknowledgment that, as artists at a great distance experientially, geographically and historically from the subject of our art-making, our source

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materials were limited to these fragments immediately suggested fragmentation as a fundamental structural idea.

MEMORY THEATRE

It also pointed to the futility of any attempt at a project of 'authentic' recreation. Grotowski, speaking of his production of Shakuntala, stated that his intention was "to create a performance which gave an image of Oriental theatre - not an authentic one, but as Europeans imagined it". ³ Given the unbridgeable distance at which we stood from the sources, and the layers of mediation with which time and history had reshaped and edited the material, we had no option but present a Yiddish Theatre "as we imagined it". The decision to locate the performance in a space/time locus which subverted chronology - a structure akin to that of a memory of history than to the sequence of events which constitute it - created the metastructure for all three parts of the trilogy, allowing us to range freely across historical fact, subjective memory, conjecture and imagining, with no responsibility to adhere to a linear narrative logic.

These notions of distance and fragmentation impacted also upon the process of constructing characters to inhabit this world between worlds. The skeletal structures proved relatively easy to construct in the form of biographies cobbled together from histo/biographical accounts which positioned the characters at points across the short span of the history of the Yiddish theatre, and which correlated with the particular styles of theatre we were beginning to juxtapose. The double strand of narrative, however, demanded the creation of multiple bodies for most of the actors. Within one narrative strand we were playing the fictional/historical figures of performers from the Yiddish theatre; within another, we were playing the characters in the plays they are performing. Distinct bodies needed to be developed for all of these roles. Nonetheless, all were Jews, and an implicit consensus regarding the particular set of signifiers to express these 'Jewishnesses' was slowly arrived at.

The works contained little expository material, relying heavily on quotation and allusion to signal scenic frame and narrative, so the process of characterisation was strongly rooted in narratives expressed through action and image - translating as performance problems for the actor into the development of an elaborated physical and vocal vocabulary. Kosky was not, at

this point in his career, particularly interested, or literate in, ‘actors problems’ or conventional
processes for the devising of character-driven performance narratives, so little space was
dedicated in the rehearsal process for ‘character development’. Early drafts were partially
derived from quite formal dramaturgical research. Particular physicalities and compositions
were extrapolated from still photographs of original Yiddish theatre productions, and of
Constructivist productions of the era - silhouettes and compositions, frozen gestures and
grimaces which provided leaping-off points for movement styles once animated. Some of the
earliest work on the piece was musical, learning and staging a number of songs from the
repertoire of the popular Yiddish theatre, in the original Yiddish. Aside from the extension of
the use of vocal range which the movement from speech to song demands, and the
concomitant impulse to extend the physical movement accompanying it, the specific musicality
of the language was disembedded. The articulation of both Yiddish and Hebrew demand
greater physical effort than the pronunciation of English, shifting from gutturals produced deep
in the throat, plosive consonants, and unelided vowel sounds with sudden ‘rests’ between
them. The contortions of our vocal equipment around the unfamiliar sounds pushed out into
the whole body, beginning to reshape actions, and bleed into the delivery of the spoken text.

What is at issue here, after all, is not a performed culture within a stable structure and
highly elaborated physical vocabulary such as Peking Opera, Noh Theatre or Kathakali, but a
more nebulous constellation of received perceptions of a temperament, a history, a language,
a set of rituals. The vocabulary we all had in common came out of the ‘stage Jews’ we had all
been exposed to. A plethora of models already constructed through performance spring
immediately to mind - Shylock, Fagin, Woody Allen and the gallery of monstrous Jewish
mothers which appear in his films.

Simultaneously, another less conscious dramaturgy is at work. Some of the
actors are Jewish, some are not. Those who are perform ‘Jewishness’ for those who are not.
In the gaps between formal work sessions on scenes, in breaks and lapses, we ‘muck around’
- playing Jews we have known, telling stories and jokes. Our evolving private rehearsal
language becomes increasingly peppered with Yiddish and Hebrew words and phrases. As we
work on the making of scenes - on the what, rather than the how - those who are Jewish, or
can ‘act Jewish’ are teaching the non-Jews our repertoire of party tricks. We wave our hands
about, we raise our voices, we push our inflections to the extremes of our vocal ranges, we
mangle the syntax, and this repertoire is absorbed by the non-jews through mimicry, and into
the aesthetic of the performance by a sort of osmosis. Nonetheless, although our 'Jewish-literacy' gives us some level of cultural authority, once it is applied to the text of The Dybbuk, or to the brief moments dealing with the personal narratives of the performer-characters, we, too are dealing with an 'imagined Jewishness'. We are tunneling through layers of history, extrapolating from material which was itself extrapolated - the Vilna Troupe's 1920 production of The Dybbuk, the play itself set sometime in the previous century, and therefore itself expressing an imagined/reconstructed Jewish culture. The constructivist nostalgia of the original Vilna production was already a gesture towards acknowledging the distance at which that company stood from the culture depicted in the play.

MAKING JEWISH BODIES

Through this elision of documentary and anecdotal sources, the physical and gestural vocabularies of the characters established themselves quite early, and quite easily, but are more difficult to define and analyse in this context since since movement qualities and gestures are unstable signifiers once withdrawn from their context. The confluence of the above mentioned sources, expressing a theatrical culture as much as Jewish one, created a commonality of proportion (or distortion) - agreed levels of 'expressiveness', agreed parameters regarding 'size' and 'volume'. At the same time, different 'Jewishnesses' were evolving within the constructs of the individual characters.

Tom Wright, playing the intense young actor/scholar, ultimately evolved a body which is Jewish in a more metaphorical sense than the other characters - a body mostly hunched under, or huddled over a book. While many 'stage Jews' seems to have a hunchedness in common, and images from anti-Semitic propaganda almost always present a Jewish spine as crooked as the Jewish nose4, this posture in our Dybbuk evolves out of his entrance with an open book over his head, as if enormously burdened by it - a reference to the Jew as part of The People of the Book, but also pointing, perhaps, to a habitus of marginalisation, oppression, confinement within literal and metaphorical yeshivas and ghettos.

Michael and Elisa allude to another Jewishness - these representatives of the 'low art' streams of Jewish theatre - out of schund and cabaret traditions, enter out of the darkness along the double row of remembrance candles which divide the audience from the acting space, their feet beating out the rhythm of train wheels - a distinct allusion to the train

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journeys which took their passengers to Auschwitz. Paradoxically, they are the clowns, the 
 idiot savants, whose 'Jewishness' is a grotesque parody of the 'stage jews' described above.

In contrast, I evolved the character of Eva Askenfeld - loosely based on 
grande dames of the Yiddish theatre such as Hannah Rovina, who represented another sort of 
Jewishness - a Jewishness of temperament, expressed through a more conventional and 
detailed construction of character - cantankerous, expressive, elaborately gestured, extending 
out into and claiming the space around her, her accent marked. Long trained in 'acting 
Jewish', I was attempting to reconstruct for the audience the intensity of response which I had 
experienced in my encounters with these qualities I identified as 'Jewish', revelling in the 
escape from 'the culture of restraint', and her obstinate refusal to accommodate changes in 
her cultural or professional context.

LANGUAGE AND ACCENT

Perhaps the most stable signifier of 'Jewishness' in The Dybbuk, the use of 
accents, eventually settled across a spectrum, also siting the characters in their particular 
cultural/historical context.

'Authentic' Polish/Yiddish accents were an option. Unlike the other signifiers, authentic sources 
were locatable. The question never arose. Authentic accents, on characters who were 
becoming increasingly archetypal and metaphorical as the work found it's proportions and 
parameters, seemed too disciplined a structure to impose, and at odds with the 'roughness' we 
were rapidly claiming as it's aesthetic. In fact, as a group, we were unlikely to have been able 
to construct a set of 'authentic' accents, so the roughness of the vocal expression set up 
another text, pointing again towards the distance between the performers and their subjects. 
At this point, these decisions are becoming "as much aesthetic as ideological"5, and the range 
of accents produced use the tonality, musicality and rhythm, in varying degrees, of the accents 
we have been playing with, though we play fast and loose with the pronunciation of the vowels 
and consonants. I suspect that this spectrum of 'foreignness' in the pronunciation of the text 
allowed an easier 'slide' into the use of languages which were, indeed, 'foreign' - the sung 
texts, the Yiddish in which the songs were sung, and the Hebrew in which the possession was 
enacted. It gave a plasticity to the language and demanded a plasticity in the reception of the 
spoken and sung text from the audience.

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5 Partrice Pavis. Introduction to Theatre of Gesture and Image. Jaques Lecoq. in Pavis.P (Ed) The 
A decision was made from the outset to sing the songs in the original Yiddish and, while some frustration was expressed by audience members who were discomforted by their inability to understand the words, I would tend to feel uneasy on nights when I knew there to be Yiddish speakers in the audience. My concern was that the ability to ascribe a literal/concrete meaning to the lyrics made the song an inflexible expressive tool by reducing the number of possible meanings one might attribute to it, guided by signs in the mise en scene, the performers response to the song, or any number of other signs present in the space. In a sense, the singing in Yiddish was our gesture towards historical authenticity, and the songs themselves authentic historical artifacts - testament to the thick, volatile musicality of the heard language.

The use of Yiddish in the sung texts, and the occasional expression could, in retrospect, have been expected to provoke strong responses. Yiddish is a mongrel tongue, based largely in an Old German, but written and pronounced differently, and infiltrated by other languages. For the non-Jew, it is confusing language to listen to, since it keeps exposing it's Germanic roots and threatening to be comprehensible, only to withdraw into thickets of Hebrew, Polish or Russian -derived words. Perhaps they thought we knew what we were singing about. In fact, only one of us spoke Yiddish - the rest of us only had a rough idea of what we were singing. It could have meant anything!

"...if the Yiddish lyrics lose almost all of their lustre in the printed translation, the sound of the language.......has a taste and a texture that carry the meaning beyond words"661

A JEWISH SPACE
The selection of a derelict mechanics workshop as a performance venue for the first two works in the Exile Trilogy was significant for a number of reasons, not least of which that it was lent to the company rent-free by the owner of the property. It was a stated aim of the company from its inception to work in non-traditional performance spaces. This aim has some historical cultural resonance, relating partly to the image of the Wandering Jew, and to a history of European Jewish theatre replete with stories of performance created in adverse circumstances, housed in any form of building which could contain performer and audience,
and forced by geography and demographics to tour constantly from one Jewish community to another. "We quite like the idea of the wandering troupe. I don't want to institutionalise it....... It's a conscious decision because in a way we link ourselves to the whole concept of the wandering Jew". 7ii

The performance space itself had a resonance which supported and informed the atmosphere of the works, one which we attempted to impose on theatre spaces in which later works were performed8 - an industrial ambience, a long, narrow and cavernous space, a high, vaulted ceiling, the disintegrating remains of old shelving structures, the dark tunnel beyond the performing space from which the characters emerged - all suggesting images from Jewish history - the old wooden circus building in which the Vilna Troupe staged their first performances, the emptied ghettos of East European cities after they were cleared, the emptied gas chambers of the concentration camps after liberation, a remote and deserted Polish railway station - "...very much a displaced space."9ii

Into these spaces were introduced

The narratives were told by means of the actors' bodies - history was enacted as physical forces and conflicts working on and through them. Secondary, corporeal, texts emerged as the effort of execution told on the bodies of the actors in signs of exertion - weariness, breathlessness, sweat, strain in the voice. Images of stoic endurance in the narrative frame of the theatre pieces knit into the impact of the real history and effect of performance time on the body of the actor. The outcome was a theatrical style which relied on extraordinary virtuosity as the actors switched between physical task, characterisation, narration, song, and dance: and between English, Yiddish and Hebrew.

This must have been the position of an audience - the opacity of the language, or any other of the cultural signifiers, reminding them precisely where they stood in relation to the culture. If an audience member felt a degree of alienation because they did not understand the Yiddish lyrics of a song, or the Hebrew words of a prayer, or the rituals

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8 The third part of the trilogy, Levad, was performed in the Beckett Theatre at The Malthouse in Melbourne, and Es Brent and Levad were performed in the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney when the trilogy was presented there. Both of these are conventional theatre spaces in which a 'found space' aesthetic needed to be reproduced.
9 Ibid
depicted or referenced, it pointed to their distance from the culture. The words would have been understood by a Yiddish or Hebrew speaker, the melody recognised by one who had heard it in an original context, or had it passed on from one who had - that is, by those who belonged to, or could 'read' the culture. The real religious significance of the Hebrew prayer would have been understood by one who belonged to that religion. Any one beyond the Pale of that culture or that religion would rightly be reminded by their encounter with this opacity that they are, in fact, an alien in that territory. An anxious response was clearly anticipated by the management of the Belvoir St. Theatre, who hosted the tour of The Exile Trilogy to Sydney in 1993, and whose advance publicity for the works proclaimed "This is not ghetto theatre!"

READING JEWISHNESS - AUDIENCE RESPONSES

Some of the critical and audience responses to The Exile Trilogy revealed a palpable anxiety in response to the use of Yiddish and Hebrew, and of iconography and aspects of ritual borrowed directly from Jewish culture. These problems are particularly distinct in relation to The Dybbuk, which is sited deep within the culture of the shtetl, the pre-war European Yiddish Theatre, and a peculiarly Jewish netherworld, all relatively detached from non-Jewish culture, but pertain in some measure or other to all seven works created by the company across the seven-year span of its creative life. These manifest anxieties regarding the ability to 'read' the symbology of the works seemed not to be confined to the non-Jewish audience, revealing the distance from their 'roots' felt by some Jews in the audience unfamiliar with the aspects of Jewish culture referred to in the work, and possibly feeling obliquely chastised by the work for an ignorance of their own culture. It is also true to say that the 'Jewishness' represented was not a generic one, but very much grounded in the Polish/Ashkenazi Jewish experience. The work was described as confirming anti-Semitic prejudice by Peter Morrison, critic for the Sydney edition of The Australian Jewish News, who objected to use of the grotesque and the arcane in the embodiment of Jewish characters and Jewish narratives.

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10 This proved an issue in the reception of the work in Sydney, for example, and in contrast to the reception in Melbourne. It is probably true to say that the Jewish community in Melbourne has a larger proportion of Polish and Russian immigrants, and a larger proportion of post-World War 2 immigrants than the Sydney community, which has been longer established. Indeed, the fact that there were 13 Jews on the First Fleet of convicts brought from Britain to colonise what was then defined as terra nullius became one of the driving concepts behind Gilgul’s production The Wilderness Room in 1994.
I simply could not understand many of Kosky’s references; and those I spoke to included well-informed Jews........the non-play is heavily loaded with mysticism, Cabbalism, and just plain old Yiddishe superstition; which reminds me that the piece was strongly advertised as not being Ghetto Theatre. If Ghetto Theatre means theatre that can largely be appreciated by Jews, I have my doubts. If most Jews who see it don’t know what much of it is about, non-Jews must be completely bemused.11

The irony was, of course, that the source of their anxiety was precisely the source of their fascination. Gilgul was ‘ghetto theatre’. We were performing this patchwork Jewishness inside a culture in which issues of multiculturalism, of the integrity of cultural traditions, and of the degree to which traditions need to merge with, and articulate themselves in terms of the dominant culture were and are very much alive. The anxiety betrayed by the publicity machine at Belvoir St. contradicts precisely the attraction of the work - the glamour of tragedy, it’s exoticness, it’s status as persecuted remnant, it’s paradoxes.

CULTURAL CONTEXT - WOGS AND JEWS

The ‘stage Jew’ in the late twentieth century shares certain characteristics of the stigmatised migrant ‘other’ - the signs of ‘primitivity’ and resistance to assimilation, alongside signs of high culture - the traditions of European civilization. While the Gilgul audience is fragmented by the varying degrees of conversance with Jewish culture, it is united in sitting itself as an audience for the ‘avant garde’, for ‘art theatre’, with all the associated aspirations and anxieties of that middle-class audience regarding leadership of that intellectual culture.

AKTORKEIT

These anxieties are shared and acknowledged by the ensemble. We are all playing actors, yet none of the company members of Gilgul has what could be described as a formal training in theatre, or a consistent experience of ‘the profession’ - as performers, performance makers, directors, or any of the other less clearly defined functions which we fulfill in the work of the company. This is something we occasionally declare with the bravado of the illegitimate child declaring marriage an outmoded institution. Barrie Kosky’s public status as a maverick and occasionally recalcitrant outsider, defiantly transgressive and challenging

of the dominant theatre culture, is another factor which increasingly informs the reading of our work. (He often describes his public opinion-givings as "doing his loud Jew act")

Inside the ghetto we happily construct for ourselves, in Gilgul rehearsals, we entertain each other with performances of artistic temperament, with the rhetoric of acting methodologies we consider anachronistic, with references to age-old theatrical superstitions and rituals, with wilful anti-intellectualism. I have already acknowledged the distance at which we stand from the ostensible subjects of our work - the actors from the Yiddish Theatre - but our positions, even prior to Gilgul, on the fringes on the mainstream theatre culture also mean that the old acting methods we parody are also inauthentic, 'imagined', parodied, albeit with affection. "I don't believe you!", Barrie shouts. "My character wouldn't do that", someone shouts back, and we all cackle at the anachronistic directors and actors we are not. Nonetheless, we derive enormous pleasure from the license we give ourselves to revel in histrionic behaviour which borders on the infantile. This play, these characters, expose our deep ambivalence regarding our originating culture and our legitimacy as performers, for the imagined culture of the 'profession' and of the 'old actor'.

**CONCLUSION**

Historically as actors, and as Jews, both our subjects and ourselves were sited in moments of radical cultural transition, and of deep cultural anxiety. The Gilgul ensemble emerged at a time when Australia's taste-makers and audiences were ready to accept challenges to the ways in which these complex identities have been represented, and Gilgul's theatre thus played a part in redefining a more sophisticated sense of Australian culture and nationhood. It is hard to speculate to what degree this greater openness derived from a sincere re-evaluation of the most positive aspects of the cultural diversity of the Australian population, or to what degree it might have been driven by a zeitgeist fascination for 'other' cultures...........born out of a certain ennui, a reaction to aridity and the subsequent search for new sources of energy, vitality and sensuality".

In the wider frame, Gilgul was articulating and playing with a series of discontinuities within cultures in moments of transition, translated as solutions to performance problems into a

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**Footnote:**

highly constructed aesthetic - both in its expression of Jewishness (Yiddishkeit), and its theatricality (Aktorkeit), which overlap in their refusal of closure.

This refusal to translate was not post-modern cleverness born out of an attachment to theory, but an acknowledgement of accidental dramaturgies of constructing from fragments, of distance from sources, of the impossibility of authenticity, of the irresistibility of subjectivity.

In fact, we had a running joke about this. Following the initial critical response to the work we would corner Tom, our resident boffin, nightly in the dressing room and chorus “Could you explain post-modernism again?".

ii Kosky, B. (November 1991) Interview in Entertainment Guide The Age Melbourne

iii BK interview. The Age. 19 November, 1991