Melbourne Workers Theatre (MWT) has produced high quality theatre for twenty years. This is an outstanding achievement in a period marked by government attacks on the trade union movement, migrants, refugees, indigenous people and the poor. MWT continues to give marginalised people a platform to tell their stories in an increasingly conservative culture. Speaking with a dissident, recalcitrant voice, MWT refuses to concede ground to the big end of town, and in an era when the very category of ‘class’ is ridiculed as an archaic relic of the last century, MWT remains committed to working-class people.

As we shall see, there is nothing archaic or backward-looking about the company. Far from promoting an overly earnest, humourless form of ‘agitprop’ theatre, MWT continues to explore new theatrical forms, actively engage with the most vulnerable members of our society, and find new ways to respond to political change. That it has done so with humour, wit and intelligence is a testament to the quality of its productions, and the people who have made these productions come alive on stage.

Class Act recounts the MWT story through a series of interviews with some of its major artists, and a number of essays that analyse and reflect on the company’s work. In simple terms, this book is an anthology of writing about the company, as opposed to an academic history or vacuous celebration of achievement. The interviews seek to provide an insight into the backgrounds, motivations and working methods of some of the key personalities associated with MWT over the years. The informal, conversational tone of the
interviews provide an accessible insight into the inner workings of the company. The interviews are not meant to provide a comprehensive history of MWT, nor represent all the important players in the MWT story.

Hundreds of people have worked with MWT over the last two decades, and it was not possible to include all their voices. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the enormous contribution all the writers, directors, performers, technicians and administrators have made to the company at the outset.

MWT has thrived on frank and forthright debate, as any past or present member of its Committee of Management will agree. In fact, an energetic and sometimes passionate exchange of ideas is a common feature of MWT meetings (this was certainly the case during my tenure with the company’s committee of management and its artistic advisory committee). MWT is a company that thinks, and keenly analyses the strengths and shortcomings of its work – this practice has played an important role in keeping its work fresh, vital and responsive to changing political and artistic conditions.

In keeping with this spirit, Class Act also includes a series of essays that analyse specific productions in detail. These papers, by senior scholars in the field of theatre studies such as Professors Maria Shevtsova and Alan Filewod among others, and key members of MWT such as Patricia Cornelius and Irine Vela, demonstrate the extent to which critical analysis and self-reflexivity have been integral to the MWT ethos. Taken together the interviews
and essays present the MWT story from a multiplicity of viewpoints, which are often at odds with each other. Nonetheless, a compelling pattern emerges from this clash of disparate voices, methodologies and memories.

Tough, confrontational, and critical, MWT has documented a particularly turbulent period in the history of the city of Melbourne. So while this book primarily celebrates a significant milestone in the company’s history, it also provides an account of the political issues, struggles and conflicts that occurred locally and globally from the perspective of people not represented in the archival record, and often ignored by historians. So, before outlining the specific themes of this book it is worth spending a few paragraphs on MWT’s social and political context; for in order to understand the significance of the company’s work, it is important to know something about the political tenor of the last two decades both at home and abroad. What motivated MWT’s founders to form a political theatre company in 1987? Why did they forge an alliance with the trade union movement?

They say if you remember the sixties you weren’t there. In the popular imagination, the era is closely associated with a generation that collectively inhaled vast quantities of intoxicating substances notorious for their adverse effect on the brain in general, and the memory in particular. Like all generalisations there is probably an element of truth to this characterisation of that much-mythologised decade; but it masks a more complex social and political reality.

The recent past is just as complex, and similarly prone to gross oversimplification. Nonetheless, I’m going to resort to simplification for the sake of clarity. If dope, pop music, flower power, and civil rights are emblematic of the sixties, money stands as the supreme symbol of the eighties and nineties. More than big hair, bad television, the America’s Cup, Kylie Minogue, and Crocodile Dundee, we will remember Australia in the eighties for a radical economic revolution, the effects of which are still reverberating some twenty years later. Let’s call this revolution the ‘monetarist revolution’. Following the lead of free-market advocates like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the Australian Labor government deregulated the dollar in 1983 and became cheerleaders for economic globalisation; the following years saw governments on both sides of politics implement policies that supported monetarism, or neo-liberal orthodoxy. Thus, financial deregulation, privatisation and industrial relations reform primarily aimed at reducing the power of trade unions became policy priorities for the next decade.

This, in turn, produced a generation obsessed with accumulating vast amounts of capital. Entrepreneurs such as Alan Bond, Christopher Skase and John Elliot were feted as heroes. Greed was good, as Gordon Gekko, the
protagonist of Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* triumphantly announced in 1987. Greed, and free-market economics may have been good for some, but they unleashed a veritable tsunami of suffering and misery for vast numbers of people all over the world.

By 1987, the year Patricia Cornelius, Steve Payne and Michael White formed MWT, Melbourne was feeling the effects of the monetarist revolution. While the Premier of Victoria, John Cain, was a Keynesian who believed in government spending on infrastructure, Victoria was not insulated from the global economy, and the impact of the federal Labor government's neo-liberal policies, which demanded radical reform in the area of work practices in order to supposedly increase productivity and profitability. John Cain, who was not known as a great supporter of trade unions, found himself between a rock and a hard place. Cain believed that 'some of the unions regard a Labor government as there to be milked – they wanted everything they could get from it while it lasted.' Several major industrial relations disputes characterised this period in the State's history. For example, the Dollar Sweets dispute in 1985, the Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF) deregistration in 1986, the wage claims of the public sector unions, and the Royal Australian Nursing Federation (RANF) dispute in the same year.

Alan Filewod and David Watt's contribution to this volume provides a detailed account of MWT's origins and aims. What is evident from their analysis, and from the interviews I conducted with the founders of the company, is that the early work of MWT was committed to exploring the implications of being a trade unionist during the late 1980s, and telling the stories of workers from a 'workerite' perspective.

While remaining committed to class politics and the trade union movement, MWT expanded its original brief over time and engaged with other political issues such as sexism and gender inequality in the workplace, race relations, and indigenous issues. In fact, a cursory survey of the shows produced by the company reveal the political fault lines of Australia, and reflect the political debates, confrontations and contradictions that have shaped the nation.

This is perhaps most apparent in the company's work during the 1990s. More than any other theatre company, or, for that matter, any group of artists working in adjacent mediums such as film and literature, MWT told the story of the Jeff Kennett era in Victorian politics with courage and conviction. Productions like the award-winning; *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* presented a gritty, compelling vision of the implications of Kennett's brand of free-market liberalism for ordinary working people. *Class Act* includes three essays which deal with this landmark production, including
an elegant account of its gestation by Julian Meyrick, the play's director. *Tower of Light*, another play inspired by the Kennett ethos, exposed the human cost of the gambling industry in general, and the hypocrisy behind the valorisation of the Melbourne casino in particular.

There is little doubt that race is the major political issue in Australia at present. MWT has been at the forefront of making people aware of this major fissure in Australian culture. The company has dealt with the question of race in relation to indigenous people, migrants and refugees. MWT was one of the first professional theatre companies in this country to actively support indigenous artists and tell indigenous stories. Most recently, Andrea James' acclaimed play *Yanagai! Yanagai!* dealt with the Yorta Yorta people's land claim, and found its way onto the VCE reading list for both drama and legal studies.

The company was also one of the first to acknowledge the existence of non-Anglo migrants in Australia, and adopt a colour-blind casting policy, thereby opening up opportunities for actors from non-Anglo backgrounds to be seen and heard on the professional stage. In 2002, MWT staged *The Waiting Room* as a co-production with the Sydney company Platform 27. This was arguably the first Australian performance to deal with the plight of asylum-seekers and refugees. This charting of Australia's political history is a major achievement in itself, but MWT's contribution to Australian culture in general and Australian theatre culture in particular goes way beyond its role as a chronicler of our political history.

As the interviews in this book attest, MWT, more than any other similar-sized theatre company in Australia, functions as an incubator for nascent theatrical talent. Many of today's major writers, actors and directors got their start with MWT. Moreover, MWT actively seeks out emerging artists from marginalised backgrounds in order to nurture their talent, and provide them with the means to tell their stories.

Artistic innovation is another striking feature of the body of work produced by MWT over the last twenty years. From its inception, the company has consciously sought to tell its stories through a variety of theatrical forms. From the gritty realism of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* (1998) through to the theatre-meets-hip-hop aesthetic of *Diatribe* (2004), and the installation/processional theatre of *We Built this City* (2006), MWT has explored almost every theatrical form from naturalism to physical theatre and beyond. Music has been another notable feature of the company's work, and Irine Vela's contribution to the company as a composer, performer and writer is represented in this volume in an essay, which recounts the history of MWT through song lyrics.
Its constant search for new talent and willingness to experiment with innovative theatre forms has made MWT one of Australia's most important theatre companies. Moreover, its steadfast refusal to bow before conservative political and economic orthodoxy makes it a crucial player in the cultural life of Australia. MWT is truly a 'Class Act,' and I eagerly look forward to the company's next twenty years.

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