Reclaiming the middle ground: the case of the Malthouse Theatre

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Australia’s theatre scene remains small and scattered across a wide terrain, mirroring the size and distribution of its population. A shift in any of the major features of this landscape has the potential to change the local and national ecology of performance and, by extension, the shape and scope of Australia’s presence on the international stage. Such has certainly been the case with Melbourne’s Malthouse Theatre. This paper assesses the new and renewed aspirations of this company as an occupier of ‘the middle ground’, and as a potential recuperator of that sometimes pejorative term. I suggest that the challenges it faces are paradigmatic of larger forces operating on a range of cultural institutions in contemporary Australia in the face of shrinking government subsidy, and of persistent cultural anxiety about the quality of Australian work in relation to international benchmarks, and the nature and sustainability of an ‘authentic Australian voice’ in performance in a post-colonial, globalised era.

A narrow middle ground

The Malthouse Theatre is Melbourne’s ‘second tier’ subsidised theatre company. So-called "Second tier" companies in Australia occupy a middle-ground which renders them both more responsive, and more vulnerable, to changes in the cultural ecology. Their survival requires them to present an alternative to the benchmarks of scale and excellence (problematically relativist criteria, but useful in this context) provided by the flagship state theatre companies, and to the more fluid and anarchic creative energy of the ‘fringe’. This position can constitute a ‘not-space’, where creative agendas can effectively be conditioned by what they are not, rather than what they are. Given the competition for a limited audience pool who, in the past, have been seen as voting with their feet for one or the other, this can sometimes be a recipe for mediocrity, and an uncomfortably narrow space to occupy. There can be an unproductive collusion between the obligations attendant upon receipt of federal and state subsidy to produce work of ‘excellence’ and ‘national significance’, and those of generating work of lesser creative and economic risk than independent companies. The appellation, ‘second tier’, can also be read to imply not just a diminution of scale, but also of worth or quality, and presents a picture of theatrical activity as arranged along a vertical axis.

The challenge for this company has been to recuperate and extend a definition of this ‘middle ground’ from that of a fixed and narrow space crushed between two static monoliths, to one of a wider and more dynamic space, stretching between increasingly permeable borders, which artists can traverse driven by more complex and creative forces than upward aspiration and economic necessity, and across which creative alliances can be forged and brokered. I contend that the new vision for this theatre has, at least in part, succeeded in shifting the axis from vertical toward the horizontal, and begun to mount a productive challenge to hegemonic structures which characterise the
quality, reach and value of theatre as a descending scale. The net effect of the fairly radical shift in policy for the company has been a simultaneous expansion and re-engineering of this space to work as a fulcrum, generating centripetal forces that draw energy in from the perimeters toward the centre.

Background - Playbox and the Narrow Space

The predecessor to the Malthouse, the Playbox Theatre, was established in 1976 with the primary brief of the production of new Australian writing for the stage. In 1990 it moved into a converted brewery on the outer perimeter of a developing ‘arts precinct’ on the city’s edge but, by the late 1990s, was in increasingly dire straits. Audiences had declined to a point where the company was barely sustainable, and its resources were overstretched by its dual obligations to develop untried work for production in two large theatre spaces, and its custodial and maintenance responsibilities for the venue. Increasingly conservative programming meant that they seldom attracted the increasingly sophisticated audience for contemporary performance, and the obligation to produce new scripts with limited resources frequently resulted in unripe and mediocre work. Unable to generate enough work to keep their two auditoria full, the company found itself able to exert little quality control over what was staged by tenant companies. Increasingly, occupation of this uncomfortable middle space between roles as producer and landlord, with insufficient resources to do either well, became untenable. In 2004, freelance theatre director, Michael Kantor was appointed as the new Artistic Director of the company and Stephen Armstrong joined him as Executive Producer.

New Vision

The installation of the new team signals a changing of the guard from the generation responsible for the ‘New Wave’ of the 60s and 70s who continue to dominate the Australian theatre scene. Both had their beginnings in resolutely alternative theatre practice and companies, but brought a market and media-savvy to the introduction of an apparently radical realignment of the vision and scope of the theatre’s activities. Within 6 months the new team had effected, amongst others, the following major changes:

- Change of name from Playbox Theatre to Malthouse Theatre
- Change of programming policy from the production of new Australian scripts to new Australian performance
- Change from annual season to three ‘seasonal’ seasons, with concomitant change to subscription ticket marketing
- Curatorial approach to everything produced in the complex
- Refurbishment of the larger Merlyn Theatre
- Opening of the Tower Theatre
- Refurbishment of the bar and cafe
- Requirement to submit project proposals rather than unsolicited scripts
- Significant increase in the number of productions mounted
- Significant increase in collaborations, remounts, co-productions and partnerships with interstate theatre companies

The immediate change of name from the Playbox Theatre to the Malthouse Theatre signalled a clear and determined change of agenda. The most facile deconstruction of the previous name would indicate that putting plays in boxes is hardly an attractive metaphor for contemporary performance. Kantor metaphorises the new name, contending that it ‘refers to a melting point with the aim of intoxication ... a confluence of elements: malt, water, barley --- or sound, text and image, about collaborative forces coming together to create something which is seductive, which is ultimately transformative (like alcohol) and which allows for a multi-disciplinary approach ... a theatre of the senses’ (in Marshall, 2005).
The new name also connotes a site, rather than a sort, of theatre, and significant changes on and around the site have reinforced the new vision of the company. A decade of development in the area has filled the gaps, and the precinct now houses most of the major cultural institutions of the city, as well as many new ‘Paris-style’ apartment blocks. This increase in population density alone has increased the traffic through the area which, with the refurbishment of the bar and café, has begun to reinvest the site with a centripetal force, drawing in artists, arts and culture workers and students from surrounding institutions.

The company has embarked on a period of expansion, marked architecturally by the opening of new performance space within the building. The small Tower Theatre has operated to materialise the building itself as a middle ground in which all levels of theatre production can meet. Kantor and Armstrong speak passionately of their determination to provide a trajectory for emerging artists, whereby they might begin in the Tower, through the Beckett Theatre, en route to mounting works of scale in the Merlyn Theatre. In this way, the options provided by the company again expand the ‘space between’ - virtually replicating, in miniature, conditions from a fringe to a commercial scale of production with the attendant creative and logistical demands. The repertoire in the Tower Theatre has focussed on presenting artists who have succeeded on the Fringe and the company has taken a restauranteur’s approach to programming - scheduling work that is fresh and ‘in season’. While it may appear that this embodies the thankless task of developing artists and artistic product so it or they can be pushed further up the food chain, the model also operates to facilitate movement across the ‘space-between’ in both directions, allowing artists to move between these three actual and symbolic spaces - with all they represent about scale, appropriate space and desired audience relationship.

It has also effected a productive, but demanding, elision of the roles of producer and landlord. From the outset, the new management announced that they would no longer ‘rent out rooms’, but would ‘curate’ any events under its roof. While the company has more than doubled the number of works produced, it cannot create enough product to fill its auditoria all year. A more rigorous policy of quality control has, ironically, resulted in more border crossings with the accommodation of homeless flagship companies such as the State Theatre Company, the State Orchestra and events from Melbourne International Arts Festival.

A reshaping of subscription patterns, from annual subscription, to three seasons per year, coupled with the increase in the number and range of works produced, demonstrates their belief that, in order to rebuild and extend their audience base they could not afford to think of them as a single homogenous entity. The increase in the number and range of their audience extends the boundaries of this middle ground into neighbouring territories.

Attendant upon this came a radical revision of the company’s central policy - the shift from a literary text-derived brief in favour of a broader notion of new Australian performance. This is a brave move, given that subsidised Australian companies are required to articulate very clearly what they do, where they sit in the landscape and, given the increasing pressures for efficiency and centralisation in order to avoid ‘replication’, to make claims to be the only organisation doing it. Aside from works it commissions and produces itself, the company has replaced the mode of access for untried ‘product’. Unsolicited scripts are no longer accepted, this text- driven model replaced by an artist-driven submissions process in which ‘proposals for performance’ are solicited, stating that they ‘embrace the diversity of cultures that constitute Australian theatre’ and ‘acknowledge the important role of the writer’ but ‘also recognise the many ways in which a work of theatre might be made’ (Malthouse Theatre, 2006). The repertoire has expanded accordingly to include physical theatre, dance, puppetry, concert and cabaret. The effect of this territorial bid has been to extend the repertoire across an additional axis in the acceptance, and brokering, of
relationships between artists and performance works across almost all genres of performance being made in Australia, creating a microcosm of the local contemporary performance landscape.

**Challenges and casualties**

The assumption which developed in some quarters that the company was distancing itself from text-based performance is belied by the fact that 22 of the 30 works produced by the company to August 2006 have been text-based. There have, however, been casualties. The company no longer provides dramaturgical assistance for unsolicited scripts, except for the projects in which it has invested, and the long-standing relationship with Currency Press, who had published all scripts produced by the company as programmes, has also been shifted to a more ad-hoc arrangement. Given the acknowledged difficulties of resourcing all stages of script development - from concept to performance, the policy of soliciting proposals would seem to be an eminently sensible one. While the gesture speaks to the new agenda being artist, rather than text-driven, it can also operate as a risk-management strategy at both the economic and the creative level in that it presumes that a project proposal is likely to be further down the development track, conceptually and practically, than would be a raw play script. The approach presumes multiple options in the performance-making process, contradicting the assumption that the writer necessarily leads the process, and recasting her/him as the creator of a pre-text for a theatrical event. Here, the assertion is that, even in text-based or driven work, operations brought to bear on that text by the artistic team will determine its ultimate meaning, and its success or failure. It also mounts a long-overdue challenge to the notion that ‘the Australian story’ or ‘the Australian voice’ (an abstract or metaphorical usage of the terms) necessarily resides in ‘the Australian script’ (a literal and literary object).

In the current moment, however, larger political shifts are serving to problematise this opening of the borders. A revival of protectionist impulses within the broader cultural industry has been generated by negotiations toward a Free Trade agreement with the US. Although the direct effects were most likely to be felt in more readily transportable popular cultural product, fears have been generated that we will be swamped with American product, meaning fewer jobs for Australian artists, producing a general impoverishment of cultural product and a ‘uniformity of culture’ (Fensham 2001). It can hardly be co-incidental that, at the height of the negotiations, the government directed extra funding to the national arts funding body for an initiative called ‘Australian Stories' designed to ‘support the creation and presentation of new artistic works that reflect distinctly Australian stories’ (Australian Government, 2005).

The company’s response to this set of concerns was partly evident in its first two productions, A Journal of the Plague Year and The Ham Funeral. Both texts are by Australian writers - Tom Wright and Patrick White, but both were set in London and do not deal in any explicit way with the subject of Australia. Complicating the issue further were the distinct influences of a European contemporary performance aesthetic in these and subsequent works. The previous administration had consciously brokered relationships and collaborations with Asia, a well-intentioned and strategic move in terms of developing cultural exchange with our nearest neighbours or, as Jacqueline Lo puts it, privileging ‘geography over history’ (Kelly, 1998:53). Kantor and Armstrong, however, currently eschew such convenient orthodoxies, claiming that the Australian theatre tradition has grown out of the Anglo/European theatre tradition, and pointing to the problematic project of negotiating the shifting time/space locus between European history and Asian geography, not to mention the ethics of the appropriation of Asian theatre forms for Western consumption. Their simple response is, whatever it’s subject, theme, language, form or perspective, if the work is made by Australian artists, it is an expression of ‘the Australian voice’. The public articulation of this belief, and the work which has emerged from the Malthouse since the beginning of last year, mounts an interesting challenge to the uncritical promotion of dated utopianist fantasies of nationalism and inter-, rather than multi-culturalism.
Nor has every work produced by the company displayed the same hallmarks. Indeed, one of the stand-out productions of 2005 was Das Shoku Hora by post-bhutto Japanese-Australian performer, Yumi Umiumare. The form and content of this performance, in the context of the clear post-modern bent of the new repertoire, substantiates Kelly’s claim that ‘recent Australian work is not afraid of fragmentary self-division or incompleteness, but uses them as strategy and subject for exploration’ (Kelly, 1998:8).

From an artistic perspective, previous collaborations with Asian artists attempted to work the middle-ground, producing performances which hybridised vastly different performance languages. While they proposed interesting integrations of cultural forms and had the attraction of the exotic, they had varying degrees of success. In the far more European-influenced productions mounted by the Malthouse, the integration is more seamless but points to a set of dilemmas particular to the Australian contemporary context, to the 'middle ground', and to the work of this company. The ambitions of the company to participate in a global dialogue, and to cast off the post-colonial cultural cringe, are evident in the form and scale of their works for larger spaces in particular. Multiple and unexplained references to contemporary and past European performance modes, and history, testify to their confidence that an Australian audience is sufficiently sophisticated to be able to read these. In this, the company ventures a response to what has been referred to by some very vocal critics as ‘our obsession with being world class’. In ambition, intellectual and cultural reach, the productions measure up.

Perhaps unfortunately for the Malthouse, the local benchmarks for ‘art theatre' tend to be set externally, through incursions from international companies during international arts festivals. These productions, whose classification as ‘world class' is defined by their inclusion in the festival, have frequently been produced under less straitened conditions than those produced locally, and have generally (by the time they reach Australia) been polished on the international festival circuit. Local work, by contrast, often shows the effects of industrial exigencies on the most ambitious works in a comparative lack of detail and finish.

To make a very simple comparison - the 2005 Melbourne International festival program featured both the Malthouse stage adaption of Homer's Odyssey and Theatre du Soleil’s Le Dernier Caravenserai - both narratives of odyssey but working in different directions between the pretext and the text. While it is unfair to both to attempt a comprehensive comparison between such different companies, it is of note that Mnouchkine’s work was created over a period of years, while the Malthouse work was rehearsed in seven weeks.

It is also true that, in adopting a European performance currency, the company may be spoiling its chances of taking Melbourne to Europe in that it runs the risk of offering coal to Newcastle. The cultural exchange market is mostly interested in buying what it cannot produce itself - ’Notre specialites du maison'.

What is not yet possible to judge is the long-term effect that the initiatives of this company will have on the cultural ecology, particularly of Melbourne. And, to the extent that the new management heralds the beginning of a fourth wave of artistic leadership in significant ‘middle-ground' cultural institutions in Australia, the degree to which they might catalyse a sustained renewal of creative forces across a wider terrain. What is evident is that, while its aims and vision are difficult to argue with, their achievement relies on a delicate balancing act, on the tightrope walkers being able to hold their nerve and momentum and to revive the company in a way which does not rely entirely on the charismatic individuals currently directing its path. They have inherited a substantial position in the Australian theatrical map and extended the boundaries of that territory. Sustainability, however, is always an issue. Pickings are scarce in the middle ground, given the scale of their ambitions. Works so far produced by the
company show varying degrees of success in ‘cutting their coat to suit their cloth’ and their ability to reach benchmarks determined internally or externally will continue to be strongly conditioned by their ability to husband creative and material resources within very narrow margins.

Notes

1 This paper is based on a presentation made by the author at the International Federation of Theatre Research World Congress, University of Helsinki, Finland on Tuesday 8th August, 2006.

2 In his survey of Australian theatre in the second half of the 20th century (Milne, 2004), Geoffrey Milne identifies three waves of theatrical energy and innovation as rising through this period. I propose that the shift into positions of power and influence in the mainstream in the period from 2000 onwards of the generation responsible for presenting alternatives to the mainstream during the 1980’s and 1990’s effectively constitutes a ‘fourth wave’.

References


Geoffrey Milne (2004). Theatre Australia (Un)limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s (Rodopi: Amsterdam & New York)