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AUSTRALIAN THEATRE-FOR-SCHOOLS: NEGOTIATING PROBLEMS OF DISTANCE¹

1. Introduction

Take a glance at any world map, and you will soon see that Australia is a vast country. It extends from Perth in the far west to Melbourne in the extreme east. In doing so it matches the distance from Ingolstadt to Cairo and from London to Moscow. The tyranny of geographical distances between people, towns and cities has influenced the past, continually informs the present and will have a large bearing on the future of *Theatre-for-Schools*² in Australia. I wish to show that the physical vastness of the country has a formative influence on the political, cultural and creative make up of *Theatre-for-Schools*. There are other kinds of 'distances' that extend beyond the geographical ones. These distances are historical, physical, artistic, political, cultural, communicational, financial and aspirational. They are all influenced to a lesser or greater degree by the geographical size of the country. I shall examine these with particular reference to *Theatre-for-Schools* in Australia. But first, I wish to begin by surveying some of the main theatre companies who occupy the physical and creative spaces in Australian schools.

2. Surveying the Ground

For reasons that will become clearer later, the majority of Australian companies prefer the title *Theatre-for-Schools* to *Theatre-in-Education*. The label is used to describe a host of theatre provision for young people. You will soon see that the boundaries between labels and approaches are very blurred. However, these labels are more of a problem for academics wishing to categorise activity, than for the practitioners themselves. I shall briefly outline seven kinds of companies which together provide *Theatre-for-Schools* in Australia. So what theatre provisions do we have for young people?

2.1 *Schools-Theatre*

First we have established schools theatre groups who create work solely for young people. Examples are: *Toetruck Theatre* in Sydney, *Arena Theatre* in Melbourne, *Magpie and Patch Theatres* in Adelaide, *Acting Out* in Western Australia, *Brolgas* in Brisbane, *Jigsaw* in Canberra, and *Salamanca* in Tasmania, plus *Freewheels TIE* in Newcastle, New South Wales.

2.1.1 Touring Companies

All of these groups tour extensively throughout their own region or state. They are funded by the Arts Council or regional authorities who are keen to have theatre companies touring their schools or community centres.

In the recent past, the brief has been for companies to cover the whole of their state so that all tax-payers receive equal privileges and are not disadvantaged by their geographical isolation.

For example, the *Brolga Theatre Company* of Queensland was given a train by Queensland Railways so they could cover most of the state. Thus, one of the principle costs of travelling was met by the State Railways.

2.1.2 In-House Productions

A number of *Schools-Theatre* touring companies supplement their income by performing in city or regional theatres. They are employed as the 'youth arm' of State Theatre Companies. Examples are: *Magpie* (South Australia State Production), *Brolgas* (Royal Queensland Theatre Company), and *Acting Out* (State Theatre Company of Western Australia). Company members enjoy access to the elaborate technology (e.g. for special lighting effects) available to city-based theatre companies.

The material for both touring and In-House productions tends to be an even mix of social/didactic, social/aesthetic experiences. In respect of content, companies have to be

¹This paper was held at the *DEUTSCH-BRITISCHES THEATERTREFFEN* in Ingolstadt on November 24th 1991.

²*Theatre-for-Schools* is the Australian variant of the British term *Theatre-in-Education*. See page 3f.

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moderately educational in order to justify their funding and presence in schools. There is a growing trend away from group devised, improvised material towards the adaptation of dramatic literature (through scripting).

A common feature of scripts used by *Schools-Theatre* companies is a clearly defined focus on aspects of social justice. The content centres on notions of protecting the weak and fragile, the uneducated, infirm, aged, handicapped, the natural world and human relationships.

2.2 Children's Theatre

Next we have *Children's Theatre*. This label further blurs the boundaries among and between *Schools-Theatre* companies. However, in contrast to other groups, they offer no pretence about providing an educative experience for students. They are commercial companies whose main concern is getting 'bottoms on seats' during school holidays and Christmas time. *Ren* is one example of a *Children's Theatre* Company. It is based in Sydney at Bondi Pavilion. It operates both during and between term times and its main function is to keep children entertained.

2.3 Youth Theatre

Another configuration of *Theatre-for-Schools* is *Youth Theatre*. There are three broad models of youth theatre. The first model involves young people attending the State Theatre and participating in theatre workshops. If, for instance, they wish to experience clowning for six weeks, then a professional person will be hired to teach these particular skills.

At the end of the course the young people will create a mini performance and show off their newly acquired skills to friends. These courses are open to all young people in the larger cities. Opportunities such as these provide amateur, out of school, professional training followed by an unpressured performance.

In the second model, often labelled the *St. Martin's Model* (after the theatre of that name), hundreds of young people are enrolled at the theatre venue. They are then auditioned for parts in a full scale production, such as *Romeo and Juliet*. Those successful in the auditions will take part in the professional production. They will be directed by theatre professionals who are flown from other parts of Australia at the expense of the Australia Council.

Young people do not get paid, but receive their rewards through exposure to the professional theatre. Some of this work may be taken to local city schools as part of an ongoing provision for young people.

The third model consists of professional companies who devise theatre to perform for youth in schools and community settings. Examples are *Corrugated Iron* based in the Northern Territory and *Backstares* in South Australia. Each tours in remoter areas of their state. The line between *Youth Theatre* and *Theatre-for-Schools* becomes more blurred.

2.4 Educational Theatre

Educational Theatre is another aspect of theatre for young people. It is distinctive in that school theatre is used as part of their overall educational intentions, rather than being the focus of it. *Threadbare* is one example of an *Educational Theatre Company* and is located in Western Australia. Their aim is to create environmental educational theatre experience for children. They are one of the very few companies who still employ direct audience participation.

Threadbare is aptly named because the work relies heavily on threadbare budgets (although they receive funding from ecological groups). They are more concerned with the creation of specific learning environments than examining environmental issues. For instance, they recently recreated an ancient agricultural settlement in the rear part of the Western Australian Museum. Here they used theatre to show groups of 35-45 children at a time how to grind corn, draw water from the well, and understand that the soil needs rain to be productive, and so on. The other meaning of the group's name *Threadbare* comes from their imaginative use of fabrics in creating special environments.

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2.5 Community Theatre Companies

Examples for our *Community Theatre* groups are: *Mainstream Theatre*, South Australia; *Death Defying Theatre* in Sydney; *Woolly Jumpers Theatre Company* in Victoria and *Zeal Theatre* in Newcastle (New South Wales). These companies will devise work for touring specific worksites (such as, factories, construction sites, and open air works) as part of the *Australian Art and Working Life* projects. There is no difficulty in including schools as one of their work site tours.

2.6 Main House Theatre Companies

Then we have *Main House Theatre* Companies. The best examples being the Sydney and Melbourne State Theatre Companies. They have programmes which focus on the notion of *Explorations* (a title used by both companies). Here, they will hire a company of four or five actors plus a director with the task of devising an exploration, say of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (or any other play from the current drama examination syllabus). This small company will present a one hour presentation of selected scenes from a play. This will be done in the main theatre during the day and young people will be brought into the city to see it. This is not theatre going into schools, nor is it students coming to the theatre to watch a full length main house production. It is a specially commissioned in house miniature schools production. A typical programme would be where the young audience listen to introductory remarks by the director, followed by a presentation of the selected play scenes.

After the performance, selected actors discuss their interpretations of the roles/performance. Finally, there is a structured question and answer session where school groups will ask prepared questions centred on say, the direction or set design.

Funding bodies have placed pressures on these companies to provide greater opportunities for young people to experience theatre. There are two possible reasons for this pressure: One is that theatre companies of this size have to justify their massive subsidies; the other is that theatre companies should be encouraging audience building for the future. The youth of today are the audience of tomorrow. So both companies have brought in the *Explorations* model. This year the student audience are allowed to suggest, or enquire about, alternative styles for the scene/characters. These are then improvised spontaneously by the actors.

Together, in their various drama forms, and operations, these companies are labelled *Theatre-for-Schools*. Having surveyed the ground, let us take a look at some of the distances which provide a focus for this paper.

2. Historical Distances Between *TIE* and *Theatre-for-Schools*.

I will begin by outlining the historical distance between the earlier *TIE* and contemporary *Theatre-for-Schools* in Australia. As mentioned earlier, most companies see themselves as *Theatre-for-Schools* than *Theatre-in-Education*.

The *TIE* model of the 1970s and early 1980s usually consisted of teams of teacher-actors whose task was to deliver a specific educational message to schools' audiences. The work was usually devised by the team, often with a writer, researcher and an in-house playwright. Gradually through the 1980s, *Theatre-for-Schools* companies have moved away from the English model. The teacher-actors have either left altogether or gone back to the blackboard. What we have left are *Theatre-for-Schools* companies who have either gradually abandoned the *E* for *Education*, part of *TIE*, or indeed have never known it.

There is a widely held view that *Theatre-in-Education* was fine for the 1970s and 1980s. Whether there is a place for theatre companies to focus on the resolution of human affairs and clear cut decisions is a contentious issue. It is held that teenage audiences in particular can see clearly through simplistic resolutions to human conflict.

And yet, the few remaining *TIE* companies would state that teenagers need to be helped in seeing clear cut alternatives in this complex and often chaotic postmodern world. There is also a groundswell feeling that we should be highlighting the problematic, taken-for-granted aspects of living, not pandering to the provision of simple outcomes. Are there such things as clear cut decisions or simple cause and effect in human affairs?

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Some advocates of school theatre claim that the earlier *TIE* groups did little to empower audiences with their one way flow of power and information from actors to audience. Despite claims of participation, much it seems (at least in Australia) was wrapped in singular moralistic messages given by the real participants, that is, the *TIE* team themselves. It seems there was little room for honest decision making by the audience, or opportunities to question the source of the message. There was a desire on the part of companies to get away from the moral-of-the-story approach towards the real challenge of producing a piece of quality theatre.

Schools Theatre companies claim to get closer to young people in their lives. By using conventions such as reversing gender roles, it is hoped that the audience may see other viewpoints than their own. However, there is always the danger of limiting the content of performances to the experiences of the audience.

Many would agree that *Theatre-for-Schools* needs to address a broad range of human affairs that extend beyond those specific to any one age group, e.g. questions of ageing which belong to the community as a whole.

Young people may make immediate connections with their own lives and/or sit back and be entertained. Members of the school audience often write to the actors stating how the performance has managed to mirror their own experiences. Although *Theatre-for-Schools* companies question the need for the production to carry a message, they nevertheless are gratified by the many issues that the audience manage to identify within their plays.

There are clear financial reasons for displacing *TIE* with *Theatre-for-Schools*. Not only are Arts Ministeries struggling for government money, but so are those Education Ministeries who have been responsible for funding *TIE* teams in the past. Many have been forced to cut their funding over the years. As Education Ministeries have pulled out of *TIE*, the *Education* part of the *TIE* has been progressively eroded.

There are many singular reasons why many contemporary groups have distanced themselves from the past *TIE* concept. A useful way of understanding the move away from *TIE* is to recent the journey of one theatre group: *Barnstorm Theatre Ballarat*, Victoria.

One history: *Barnstorm Ballarat*

When the company was formed its approach to theatre for young people was based firmly on the British model of the 1970s. Productions encouraged a high degree of audience participation and content was focussed on aspects of the school curriculum.

The work was always group devised and time consuming. Some group devised programmes did not reach a completed production stage due to the breakdown in the group creation process. There was also a lack of definable direction in structuring the content. In 1983, despite these problems *Barnstorm* was given funding by the Commonwealth Government to deliver a range of entertainment to the local community.

The group redefined their processes of group creation and found themselves part of a larger national movement against collective writing/improvising. They realised they had credible writers in their own region and so decided to employ these on a full time basis for performances in schools. The writer became a very important part of the group. *Barnstorm* performed a number of projects which were simply plays with a young audience in mind. These were successful with the wider community and was indicative of the way to go in the future.

Within their notion of *Theatre-for-Schools*, *Barnstorm* dispelled a number of myths: For instance, they abandoned the earlier golden 60 minute rule that theatre productions would go no longer than an hour. They presented a full length play in schools with a conventional interval and it ran 110 mins. The company also wanted to explore darker areas of human experience.

Characters were made more multidimensional so that it was possible to explore areas such as violence in the streets, drug abuse and parental separation. The company were not in the business of creating (artificial) happy endings.

An example of their contemporary approach is the production of *Foreigners from Home*: It's a play about an Australian family during the economically difficult years of the Great Depression (1930-1936). They see the family's story as most relevant to all undergoing the present economic recession in Australia.

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This production aimed to show young people that the hope, optimism and courage of the 1930s is still applicable even in the blackest of times. It's depiction of the past serves to remind the community that history can repeat itself and, despite advances in technology, essential human qualities still remain.

3. More Distances

3.1 Distance between Actors and Audience in Schools

The historical move from *TIE* to *Theatre-for-Schools* has not been an easy one and has created its own distances: Possibly one of the problems for teachers, and ultimately the theatre company, has been a lack of liaison between performers and schools. This has been particularly evident during post production gatherings with the audience. Here the actors come out of role and invite the audience to ask questions.

Questions have often taken the form of: "What do you do in real life? Do you have any difficulty in making the sets? What was that about?" The actors have then completed their visit by thanking the audience and departing. Teachers are responsible for hiring theatre groups have been critical of companies giving inadequate responses to their young audiences and/or not meeting their educational purposes.

Teachers have been the ones who have requested post production discussions. By implication, there is a growing view that a performance may not stand in its own right, and that verbal elaboration should be an integral part of the work - a characteristic of earlier *TIE* groups.

How important is the post-performance discussion? Does this detract from drama as an art form in its own right? What of the aesthetic value of the work? How much integrity is sacrificed when work is bent more on satisfying educational curricula than pursuing dramatic art?

It is interesting to note that a number of Australian companies (*Jigsaw* in Canberra and *Magpie* in Adelaide) have recently advertised for a Schools Liaison Officer to act as prime communicator between actors and audience after performances. To what extent a liaison person will enable actors to get on with their perceived tasks of enactment remains to be seen.

3.2 Tyranny of Physical Distances

In the country the size of Australia, the towns to which *Schools Theatre* companies tour are often extremely isolated. Even in our smallest state, Tasmania, a school may only be 140 kilometres from the company's base. However, due to the terrain often being mountainous, touring a group of small towns can be a nightmare. It is also horrendously expensive this tyranny of distance by providing appropriate funding.

For some schools, the nearest theatre may be four to five hundred kilometres away, and catering for these is difficult. The material used by theatre for schools is becoming more urbanised as the big audiences, the ones that make it pay, are based in our larger cities. Thus, it is becoming less feasible to make material for specific regional audiences. It is also a fact of life that city based companies are going to create city based plays.

So, although State Arts Councils like the one in South Australia promote theatre companies to visit remote parts of the country, they will no longer commission work for specific rural or outback audiences. That is, they will only take what groups already have on offer.

An allied problem is that regionally-based theatre companies are finding it more difficult to meet the costs of hiring actors from nearby capital cities. Transport and accommodation are expensive. A consequence is that regional groups have less choice in selecting 'new blood' for their companies. It costs almost double to employ actors from the city than those from ones own region.

3.3 Attempts at Closing Cultural Distances

There are cultural distances which some would argue are larger than physical ones. Once more, rhetoric has it that all young people should be given equal access to *Theatre-for-Schools* in the settings of their own community.

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Some *Theatre-for-Schools* groups try to meet the needs of diverse cultural groups. For example, last year the *Spare Parts Theatre Company* of Fremantle, Western Australia devised a show written by an aboriginal writer Jack Davis. It was part mime, dance, acting and was called *Dreamtime*. *Polyglot*, used another Jack Davies play which consisted of storytelling, mime, dance, and so on. It had a predominantly aboriginal cast. It succeeded in providing a new learning experience for actors and audiences alike.

One company has shone above others in addressing multicultural issues; namely *Sidetrack Theatre Company*. It was begun in the late 1970s and became a professional company in the 1980s. It is a multilingual company that addresses workers in their own language, including English. In their performances, they usually have a multilingual family consisting of a Lebanese speaker, a Vietnamese speaker, an English speaker, an Italian speaker, and so on.

The company have been criticised for not being more cultural specific. An earlier production entitled *Down Under the Thumbs* (1982-1983) was criticised because it failed to focus on any one particular set of migrants, for instance an Italian or Greek family. Instead they preferred to set their plays in mythical South American countries.

However, the company argue that targetting one migrant group is likely to alienate another, on both cultural and religious grounds. *Sidetrack* visit schools who may have either predominantly moslem or catholic populations.

How can we ever cater for all ethnic groups? In Australia we have many kinds of indigenous people, and we have first, second, third and some fourth generation migrants from all parts of the world. If you cater for only the dominant groups, you alienate minorities and are labelled 'culturally imperialistic'.

Sidetrack emphasise the varied ethnic backgrounds, with a view to minimising some of the distance between cultural and religious groups in attempting to be universal without being monolingual.

3.4 Distance Between Actors of Varying Mental and Physical Abilities and the Audience

There is distance that may exist between abled and disabled actors and their audience: There is a growing belief among both actors and directors of *Theatre-for-Schools* companies that persons with various mental and physical disabilities should be actively engaged in drama performance in school/community settings. That is, those actors with disabilities should have the same access to performance as their more abled colleagues.

Actors with disabilities attempt to challenge the perceptions of their audience, aiming to break stereotypical views of physically and/or mental disability. Their message affirms an equal place with able bodied people in a pluralistic society.

A problem is that the work itself is still impeded by technical problems. Wheelchairs for instance can impede the mobility, design and style of a performance. One example of a company determined to integrate actors with disabilities into their ensemble is *Undercurrent Theatre* of Victoria. It recently presented a show entitled *52 Wheelchairs - Everyone's Workin'*. Through the interaction of able bodied actors and actors with disability, friendships, healthy attitudes and abilities were explored in relation to a broad notion of 'disability'. Similar work has been done by the *Workers, Revolutionaries and Rogues Theatre Company*, who presented a performance aimed at a cast possessing a variety of disabilities.

Much thinking has to be done in the creation of work to ensure that the audience are assisted to see beyond the disabilities of the actors to see the universal qualities that we as humans share.

3.5 Distance Between Age, Equity and Experience

Beyond matters of disability, there are other equity issues associated with distance... *Theatre-for-Schools* groups are likely to spend many days away from their home base as they make long distance tours of their state. This is a particular disadvantage for older members of the ensemble and those with pressing family commitments. When older actors leave a company then the wisdom of earlier generations of *Theatre-for-Schools* actors is often lost.

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Added to this there is financial equity which can act to disadvantage older actors. Members of democratic *Theatre-for-Schools* groups receive the same salary. In effect this means that there are no incremental incentives for older actors to stay on beyond a specific period with a company. What might have been a reasonable salary at the start of a career (and this is contentious) simply is unsustainable later, as actors start their own families, have the desire to buy a home of their own, or simply wish to stay in one place. There are implications here for the very existence of companies: Without stability, or the interaction between older and younger actors, it is most difficult to create and sustain a consistent company image. Lost too are the mature rôle identities that older actors may provide young audiences.

3.6 Distance Between Financial Survival and Insolvency

A further important distance for *Theatre-for-Schools* companies is that between financial solvency and insolvency. In terms of putting distance between your theatre company and insolvency, what should a company do to survive these hard economic times? Should they expand or contract their operations? *Theatre-for-Schools* companies are not simply purveyors of art, they are by their very positions precarious business ventures.

One group who believe in expansion is *Barnstorm Theatre*. They hold the view that they must expand in order to survive financially. If they are to earn money and get increased funding, their operations must grow and they must travel beyond their own region. The more performances they can give, the more funding they are likely to receive for the following year.

In contrast to the expansion of *Barnstorm*, the *Magpie Theatre Company* of South Australia originally began with a company of eight actors in 1983. They used to travel South Australia in two large trucks. The company had a large repertoire of productions and an abundant supply of sound and lighting equipment. Now in 1991, they have half the number of actors, a director, and a very small van with a roof rack.

Magpie believes that it has to reduce its operations in order to survive the depressed economic market. However, should they make further cuts, then the company would cease to operate as a viable theatre company. At present, they are unable to perform for small communities due to insufficient revenue. They also have only the one show in their repertoire.

So - if you wish to survive, do you expand or reduce operations? If you expand you will likely increase overheads, but may attract more bookings and increase your reputation. Contract operations and you will decrease overheads, but risk the possibility of having less work and a diminished reputation. What do you sacrifice to survive - artistic integrity, larger operations, ambition?

3.7 Artistic and Political Distances

A final, but no less important distance is that between the artistic and political functions of a company. Theatre for Young People is an endangered species as its members have to continually fight for its survival. Artists are having to spend greater amounts of time lobbying funding bodies to maintain their funding. As a consequence, artists are torn between the time spent on political activity and that on creating theatre art. Energy spent on political activity can exceed that used for creating and maintaining projects. In the latter half of 1990, *Theatre-for-Schools* companies were heavily involved in political rallies, attempting to make their views known about proposed cuts by State and Federal funding bodies. For smaller companies of four or five members, it became increasingly difficult to meet booking commitments while also trying to attend political rallies, some of which were held hundreds of kilometres away from their own regional centre.

In CONCLUSION, the distances alluded to in this paper are interrelated: the geographical size of Australia, issues of actor and audience equity, combined with the expense of travel, accommodation, and touring on limited budgets, are beginning to influence greatly the direction of *Theatre-for-Schools* companies. There is a displacement of equity as more companies are having to move their operations away from the remoter country areas to the towns and cities.

Distance conspires to undermine the valuable artistic work of companies attempting to bring together the culturally diverse peoples of Australia through quality *Theatre-for-Schools*.

4. Going Down the Track

The writing of this paper has raised issues without any attempt to solve them. Solutions are not easily obtained. What is clear is that actors/companies have a shared aim of providing quality theatre for young people. There is a feeling that their audiences are often misunderstood and totally undervalued. They claim that adults often treat the young in a condescending manner. There is a fair consensus that *Theatre-for-Schools* should at least have the same quality of sophistication as that presented to adults.

Success for *Schools Theatre* is likely to be determined by a change in perceptions about theatre per se and the many issues that it evokes. Issues that might ordinarily have been someone else's problem come to be owned by the audience. From the audience's point of view, success comes when they leave the performance hating, loving or being angered by the characters in the play.

Many companies have come to realise that they have an incredible responsibility to do their job well. If they do not, the young will avoid the theatre and its messages. Similarly, if young people experience inferior theatre, they are unlikely to return and appreciate the visions it may offer.

Despite the economic malaise in Australia, *Theatre-for-Schools* companies are, on the whole, resilient. They are confident in being able to provide theatre for the schools of the nineties and beyond. However, in the short term, cuts in educational funding will almost certainly continue to impact on those young people and artists, all of whom are disadvantaged by the tyranny of distance.

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