

The Winston Churchill
Memorial Trust of Australia

2005 Churchill Fellowship Report
by Raimondo Cortese

To participate in dramaturgical workshops conducted by internationally recognized theatre companies specialising in creating dialogue through actor improvisation – Germany, France, Portugal, UK, USA.

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Signed: Raimondo Cortese

Dated: 9/8/06

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INTRODUCTION

The Churchill Fellowship enabled me to travel to several countries – Germany, Portugal, France, UK, and the USA – in order to see first hand a multitude of techniques and methodologies used to develop theatrical writing.

The experience and insights gained from the Churchill Fellowship was invaluable to me as a writer and teacher of dramaturgy and I wish to use this opportunity to thank the Churchill Trust for providing me this unique and privileged opportunity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Churchill Fellowship created the unique circumstances that allowed me to gain a clear and precise appreciation of the various methodologies, challenges and contradictions that define approaches to making theatre, both from a playwrighting and teaching perspective. My fellowship began on the 3rd of June and finished on the 30th July 2006. During this time I was able to visit a number of theatre and performing arts institutions in Europe and the USA, including The Hebbel/Hau in Berlin, the Teatro Nacional S. Joao in Porto, the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, Wales, Atlantic Theatre and PS122 in New York, as well as working with a translator in Paris to translate my plays into French.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Working with renowned theatre director and dramaturge Ricardo Pais at the Teatro Nacional S. Joao.
- Working With James Tyson and Des Barry on a new script over a five-day workshop at The Chapter Arts Centre.
- Visiting the Hebbel Theatre and seeing how it operates.
- Hearing John Guare give a talk on what he believes a director's job should be.
- Witnessing the workings of Performance Space 122 under the artistic direction of Vallejo Gantner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Working on new scripts requires ample time and resources. There are no short cuts.
- Every artist has a unique approach and there is no one methodology for editing or dramaturging new scripts.

- A relaxed environment needs to be created so that participants feel free to discuss and criticise the work at hand.
- Working on new plays requires a clear understanding of the way spoken language works on the floor with actors.
- The meaning and significance of dialogue depends on the action being played in any given scene or situation, not on a literal understanding of what the dialogue means or signifies on the page.

IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION

- The knowledge and skills gained from the Fellowship will directly impact on my own writing and also on the way I teach dramaturgy and dialogue writing at tertiary institutions such as the VCA and VUT.
- My findings will be disseminated during teaching classes with students, at forums on dialogue writing, presentations and lectures, and in articles and essays written for publication.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME 2006

1 - 3rd-10th June – Berlin.

Hebbel Theater/HAU 1, 2 & 3.

2 – 14th – 18th June – Porto

Teatro Nacional S. Joao

3 – 18th – 25th June – Paris

Working on a French Translation

4 – 25th June – 8th July – Cardiff/London

Chapter Arts Centre

5 – 8th – 27th July

Lecture by John Guare

Performance Space 122

Atlantic Theatre Co.

Germany - Hebbel Theater/HAU 1, 2 & 3

The focus of my first leg was the Hebbel Theatre, recently renamed the HAU 1,2,3. This theatre, along with the Volksbühne, has been the centre of experimental performance, including dance, in Berlin since the 1970's. In the last decades it has focused on bringing to Berlin the work of many of the world's most established theatre and dance practitioners, such as Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, Jo Fabian, Theatre de Complicite, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Anatolij Wassiljew, Eimuntas Nekrosius, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Deschamps & Deschamps, The Wooster Group, Raimund Hoghe, Richard Foreman and Reza Abdoh. In the late nineties The Hebbel began to decline in influence among the new generation of Berlin's theatre directors and choreographers and writers. In 2003, Matthias Lilienthal became the Artistic Director and invigorated the program by emphasizing the work of emerging artists. The theatre now offers a diverse array of theatre and dance practitioners, primarily German, but also including lesser-known international artists (thanks to the Football World Cup, there was a predominance of Brazilian dance groups).

The Hebbel/HAU spends considerable resources on developing shows, usually over an eight to ten week interval, beginning with the conceptual framework that is workshopped on the floor with performers. The Hebbel/HAU no longer develops the work of playwrights as such, but works with writers, directors, actors, performers, dancers, multi-discipline artists in collaboration on various projects. Lilienthal uses his skills as a dramaturge (most famously in his collaborations with the theatre director Christophe Mathaler), to encourage and offer critical evaluation and feedback at various stages during the creation of a new work.

Each new show is taken through several stages of development. To begin with, artists must present an interesting concept that is chosen from a wide field. Projects that are selected are provided with a developmental budget, together with a space, and, if necessary, costumes, lighting and other technical assistance. The artists usually have around two to three weeks to develop their idea on the floor. The result is then watched as a presentation, or read if it entails a script, or seen over a period of time as an open workshop. The result is then evaluated as to whether it deserves continued assistance. If the work is taken forward, it is given enough funds to resource a second workshop

period, during which time the work on the floor with the performers is developed to a more sophisticated level, with the inclusion of higher production values if required. This work is then assessed and, if found worthy, given further funds to develop the work and take it to a presentation outcome in front of an audience.

Apart from critical evaluation, Lilienthal and the associated artists at the Hebbel/HAU do not directly involve themselves in the development of the new work. There is no direct workshopping or hands on, dramaturgical or conceptual methodology that is imparted to the incoming theatre workers it collaborates with. The theatre sees itself as a curator of new work and a provider of resources for prospective artists. The creative process is left up to the various practitioners the Hebbel's artistic team decides to provide to collaborate with. As a model for creating new theatre writing it is interesting for the simple reason that it does not (unlike the majority of theatre institutions in Australia, such as the Malthouse or MTC) stage in-house productions. There are a variety of styles and forms explored in the shows produced and each is given ample time and the necessary resources to help ensure the written work has been properly developed on the floor. However, the lack of an over-arching, in-depth performance methodology means that the work presented does not support a long-term, ensemble approach to creating written texts. The various companies presented by the Hebbel/HAU are affected by the vicarious existence associated with being an artistic entity and rarely exhibit the same personnel from one show to the next. While personnel turnover can add excitement and fresh energy to a production, it can also mean that the quality and development of the writing, direction, and acting is not taken further than the life of any one particular show.

Portugal – Teatro Nacional S. Joao

During my stay in Porto I was extremely fortunate in being invited to work with one of Europe's most eminent theatre directors, Ricardo Pais, the Artistic Director of the Teatro Nacional S. Joao. Ricardo was exiled to London during the Salazar dictatorship and returned to Portugal after the Revolution of the Carnations in 1974, after which he worked with numerous theatre companies throughout Europe. His position as AD at the Teatro Nacional was taken up in 2003.

The workshop involved seven students, young writers in their twenties and thirties, who are attached to the theatre via a playwrighting project initiated and produced by the Teatro Nacional in an attempt to foster and nurture the work of younger writers. Due to the stagnation afflicting Portugal's economy, it is extremely difficult at times for Portuguese writers to earn a living from their work unless they are produced abroad. Very few are.

During the workshops Ricardo Pais set up a series of actor-based improvisations that enabled the writers to explore their dialogue from the point of view of an actor. This process helped the writers focus on dramatic action to tell their stories and, in so doing, understand what was necessary or not in their writing. The dialogue was edited and re-edited continuously to make the lines more concise and focused, less cluttered and overstated. The emphasis was on seeing the language less as a literary phenomenon and more as something fluid, that exist as spoken text and, most importantly, does something specific to the person the dialogue is actually addressing.

The exercises Ricardo used were very clear and easy to comprehend. The simplicity and focus of the workshop allowed the writers to see for themselves the problems in their writing. The workshop was democratic; a conscious attempt was made to create a critical environment where everyone felt comfortable in initiating discussion and feedback with each other's work. There was never an attempt to challenge or alter the formal nature of the projects, but rather Ricardo concentrated on trying to make the dialogue more efficient. It was a process that asked questions of the writer; what were they actually trying to achieve and why? Ricardo constantly reminded the writers that they were writing for actors, not readers, and that their language, if devoid of inherent dramatic action, would become tedious. The dramatic tensions Ricardo exposed allowed the dialogue to be clearly understood as something experiential. During the exercises the hidden content of the writing would reveal itself. Ricardo always trusted the writers to work out and explore their dialogue over the length of time necessary to make this process organic and self-evident. He tried to instil confidence in the writers and encouraged them to trust their own instincts. He regularly insisted that writers of dialogue need to practise, like any artist or athlete, in order to develop their writing. 'There was no

substitute for hard work,' he would remind us, and poured cold water on the notion of inspiration.

On balance, I found the workshops to be incredibly instructive and elucidating. Ricardo Pais found practical solutions and was consistently able to remain calm and focused on the job and always allowed the writers enough room to explore their dialogue in a way that was unrestrained in content and form and open to criticism.

Working on a French Translation

While in Paris I had an opportunity to work with Severine Magois to translate some plays of mine into French, as well as to meet various French producers and directors in the hope they might be interested in both producing my plays in French and also to tour Ranters Theatre's productions in France.

Very few French producers and directors speak or read English, so in order for them to read my plays it was essential that they were first translated. There are also very few opportunities to tour theatrical productions in their original language. Most of the overseas productions tend to tour in regional arts festivals and theatres.

Severine Magois translated some of my Roulette plays. Occasionally she found it challenging to discover a French equivalent, not so much for the words themselves, but importantly for the dramatic intention of the line and making it correspond closely to what the words are saying dramatically, as opposed to being literal. The style and content of my dialogue was quite unusual in French, which tends to be more formal and classically structured. It was a fascinating and rewarding experience, but without cross-cultural subsidies (allowing the translator to get paid for their work up front), the business side of translating plays into French is very much a long-term process.

UK – Chapter Arts Centre

The Chapter Arts Centre, a renovated school abandoned in the 1960's and centred in Cardiff, has a very proactive programme. Artistic director James Tyson aims to engage the local community by developing and staging local productions and offering

infrastructural support, as well as presenting a diverse and vigorous theatre and dance programme from around the world.

Over a five day period I participated in a play development workshop conducted by James Tyson. We worked on a new play entitled *Three Cities* by the playwright and novelist Des Barry. Both James and Des have a long history of creating works that connect with an acting process. Des wrote the first draft in isolation. It is a three-hander dealing with incest, abandonment, migration; a dense and provocative play written with amazing clarity, ear for spoken language and sheer virtuosity. The play was initially read by the three actors around a table, with James, Des and myself also present. The reading was followed by a lengthy discussion and, after a short break, was re-read. This process tried to avoid any conscious interpretation of the dialogue, to avoid external or superficial decisions being imposed upon the play. James Tyson's aim was to find a more unconscious, lateral entry into what the play was actually about so as to avoid the pitfalls of making literal decisions about the content of the work. In other words, he was keen to 'hear' the actual play, not an interpretation of it. He was extremely patient and tried to ensure that the participants engaged with the dramatic content, rather than hook onto the literal meaning of the words. The discussion was rigorous, direct, generous, though critical, and very specific to the issues and problems that emerged on a line-by-line basis. Des Barry was very relaxed and open to criticism. He constantly tried to find solutions to the problems in the play, rather than solicit praise. James and Des made copious notes during these initial discussions, after which James and the actors had a break. Des spent the next hour re-writing the script on the spot, using a method of 'speaking out' the dialogue from the point of view of a character. After the break, we re-read the new draft, though on this occasion James and Des interrupted the read and directed discussion towards any problems that arose as we progressed. The group often suggested changes and when Des felt satisfied that these changes worked, or were worth looking at on the floor, we wrote them into the script by hand. This process too up the remainder of the day, with very rigorous, honest and open debate around the viability of the alterations being suggested.

Over the next four days, the play was explored on the floor with James and the actors, while Des and I watched from the sidelines. The script was first divided into units

of action. James did not request that the actors learn their lines. Rather, they improvised the content of their lines in order to discover an emotional connection to the actors/characters they were working with. A separate improvisation was conducted for each unit of action. The lines were then worked in, as written, and the actors were asked to explore the section anew. The content of the play was meticulously explored. Questions were constantly asked, and nothing was taken for granted. James was adamant that the actors not rely on habit or convention to find solutions, but to go to the heart of what any given line was about. When weaknesses in the dialogue became evident, Des would make notes and re-write overnight and return the next day with a fresh draft. Des often made radical changes. His work process was fast and took advantage of the time we had available.

On the final day the actors were able to offer a very convincing performance of the entire play. While the work was not regarded by anyone as finished, it was clear that the intensive discussion and workshop period had transformed the script from one that had potential, to one that was powerful and dynamic and almost ready for the stage. The process conducted by James had immense integrity, focus, passion, and honesty. It was an incredibly practical and insightful method of bringing a work of dialogue to fruition. At all times, James and Des ensured there was an atmosphere where the desire to constructively improve the work at hand was always paramount.

What a Playwright Seeks in a Director

During my stay in New York, I was invited by some directing students at Atlantic Theatre to hear a lecture by the renowned playwright John Guare. He was asked to talk about what he looked for when choosing a director to work on one of his plays.

It was an incredibly insightful experience to hear someone with John Guare's knowledge and skill to talk about his work and life in the theatre over the last few decades. He often stated that the director's job is simply to be useful; to make sure everything works. A director should never say to an actor 'I don't know.' Rather, the director should investigate the right question with his/her actors to enable them to overcome the problem. He sees theatre role as illuminating something in a way we have

never experienced before. He chooses directors on the basis of how well they can tell the story of the play he has written, i.e. what happens in it? He is less interested in directors that want to make loose interpretations of his material. He talked at length about the kinds of productions values he likes to see in his plays, and whether or not an actor has the right technical ability.

John Guare was clearly speaking from the point of view of an established playwright on Broadway. Many of his stories and points of discussion related to being a successful writer in a highly commercial arena. While listening, I was acutely aware that it is extremely difficult for playwrights living outside New York (or London for that matter) to realise their work in the same way, and that Australian playwrights tend to have different focus. This is not to suggest that the issues John Guare addressed were not significant to overseas playwrights, but rather that the central concerns of any theatre maker tend to be inherently localised.

Directing Workshop

Over the course of three days I was able to witness directing workshops conducted by students at Atlantic Theatre. Each student staged segments or scenes of plays, including excerpts from Arthur Miller, John Guare, John Patrick Stanley, Mamet and others. The students tried to serve the intentions of the playwright at all times. Their aim was to present a scene or excerpt that clarified the real content of the dialogue, without making wild interpretations. Much emphasis was placed on where an actor stood in relation to the others, to ensure the stage picture was uncluttered, and to make sure the actor spoke clearly. Each actor was provided with a clear action, phrased specifically in terms of what they were doing to the other character in the scene. In addition, each actor was required to have a clear objective for the scene, such as 'I want to get them to give me a break,' in other words, something that could be articulated in a way that could be played on the other actor. It meant that the renditions of the scenes were generally clear and precise, but the depth to which the scenes were realised depended largely on how instinctive the directors were at understanding the 'real' content of the play. The dialogue was often treated in a literal way, and so the actions and objectives chosen did not always

take the actors deeply into the material. The methodology used by the directors often made the actors overly conscious of what they were doing. This sometimes meant that a wall seemed to divide the actors. However, it was beneficial to observe actors attempt to engage with the action, rather than generate their lines from isolation. The process genuinely tried to engage the emotional content of the dialogue, to discover what was driving it, and to present it in a way that was devoid of excess.

Performance Space 122

I spent a week observing the workings of Performance Space 122, under the artistic tutelage of Vallejo Gantner. Since the middle of 2005, Vallejo has overseen a remarkable transformation of one of New York's most exciting, dynamic and experimental performance venues. The venue develops a wide variety of contemporary theatre, moving away from its reputation as an anything goes, performing arts hub. New work is constantly in various stages of development, often in collaboration with overseas artists. PS122, like the Hebbel/HAU, does not have an overall methodology or process for developing work, but provides resources, spaces, funds, technical support and administration to give theatre makers the opportunity to realise their goals. Usually actors, directors and writers work over an initial development period of two or three weeks. The focus tends to be on groups of artists that work collaboratively, rather than actors and directors who stage existing plays. The aim of each development is to present the outcome at the venue, though the amount of time each work is developed depends on the individual context. While the works presented at PS122 tend to be group devised, though this is not to say that individuals are not assigned specific roles, i.e. a writer, director, and performers. There appears to be a tremendous energy and goodwill amongst the various artists currently creating new work there, with a clear and genuine attempt to address questions that go to the heart of why we need live theatre.

PS122 now has a valuable and growing reputation for presenting exciting, new alternative work. There are two spaces at the venue; one with approximately two hundred seats, the other with around eighty-five. To assist in financing its operations the venue

has to raise funds from private philanthropists, as well as local and federal government arts agencies.

Conclusions

Each artist brings a unique personal and cultural perspective to the way in which they generate theatrical writing and it was not my intention to criticise or judge the approaches and methodologies I witnessed. I wished to simply describe these approaches to creating dialogue, with actors or otherwise, in a way that respects the artistic intention of the personnel involved, so that their various practises stand in dialogue and in contrast with each other. Working on new scripts requires ample time and resources and there is no short cut to doing the job properly. It also seems essential that a relaxed environment needs to be created so that artists can feel free to discuss and criticise, as they need to. It was also extremely clear that working on plays is not a literary exercise and one needs to have a profound knowledge of what it is an actor does with spoken language in order to work dramaturgically or when devising or editing dialogue. The essential content of the dialogue only becomes apparent when actors engage with it through dramatic action.

Recommendations

- I believe theatre companies in Australia need to provide more resources to workshop scripts on the floor. This would dramatically improve the quality of the plays being staged.
- Greater lead-time in Australia is required for plays to be written, developed and then staged.
- Writers in Australia should be encouraged to write not only in isolation, but also alongside actors and directors. However, this requires increased resources from both theatre companies and funding agencies.

- Dramaturgy is not a literary editing process and requires an in-depth understanding of what is meant by ‘dramatic action’ and what an actor might do with any given line of dialogue.
- The knowledge I have gained from the Fellowship, and from working alongside actors, will directly impact on the plays I write.
- As a teacher of dramaturgy and dialogue writing at tertiary institutions, such as the VCA and VUT, I will implement the knowledge and skills I have gained through my work with students while working on scripts and on the floor with performers.
- I intend to discuss my findings at forums on dialogue writing, presentations and lectures, and in articles and essays that I write in the future for publication in journals and newspapers.