

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Paul Jackson

2007 Churchill Fellow

THE GILBERT SPOTTISWOOD FELLOWSHIP to study lighting design techniques and practices for contemporary opera, theatre and dance in Berlin.

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Signed Paul F. Jackson

Dated March 20, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

The fellowship enabled me to travel to Berlin and reside there for 2½ months . During that time I was able to observe the technical rehearsal and production periods at three of Germany's (and Europe's) leading companies: Schaubuehne Am Lehninger Platz, Komische Oper and Deutsches Theater. Whilst these three companies were at the core of my itinerary, I was also fortunate enough to travel to London to see the Francis Bacon retrospective at Tate Britain and the Rothko retrospective at Tate Modern. My residence in Berlin also included much time spent at the Berlin Philharmonie, the Berlin Konzerthaus, the Gemäldegalerie and Neue Nationalgalerie. When I arrived in Berlin, the Festival of Lights – a celebration of civic art lighting - was well underway. The time of my Fellowship was one of rich, diverse and intense cultural and aesthetic experiences. Very few opportunities exist for mid-career theatre-makers, especially designers, to seek out experiences that allow reflection, growth and development beyond the demands of daily work. This Fellowship was invaluable.

Talking to lighting designers, set designers and directors, and watching them pursue their collaborations through to Opening Night, I was able to reflect upon my own practice as a lighting designer and artist in Australia as well as consider and compare aesthetic, structural and social differences. This report is a summary of those reflections and considerations.

I would like to thank The Churchill Trust for making such a study possible, and I am especially grateful for the enlightened generosity of Gilbert Spottiswood: to receive a Gilbert Spottiswood Fellowship is a great honour in the Arts in Australia.

My sincere thanks to Barrie Kosky, who helped to arrange so much of my programme, and whose generosity and interest made my time in Berlin so productive. I would like to thank Benedict Andrews for his support and assistance in making contact with Schaubuehne, and his general encouragement. I am grateful for the time and attention shown to me by the many people, in various roles, whom I encountered in the companies I visited.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The fellowship travel was undertaken between October 17, 2008 and January 1, 2009.

I resided in Berlin for this time and attended the technical production periods of *Anatol* at Schaubuehne Am Lehniner Platz, *La Traviata* at Komische Oper and *Ein Traumspiel* at Deutsches Theatre (performing at Berghain). I was also able to attend many concerts, galleries and performances, which, whilst not formally part of my programme, were an integral part of my experience and education.

The aim of the fellowship was to observe the techniques and practices of stage lighting design in Berlin with a focus on contemporary performance. Such a study, it was intended, would provide a useful perspectives from which to consider the state and nature of stage lighting design in Australia.

Highlights:

- Observing Director Barrie Kosky in the lighting rehearsals of *Ein Traumspiel*.
- Discussing the nature of collaboration between set designers and lighting designers with Mark Van Denesse at Schaubuehne.
- Watching lighting designer Franck Evin light *La Traviata* at Komische Oper
- Discussing post-war German theatre with Barrie Kosky.
- Appreciating the seriousness and centrality of theatre as an art form in Germany, and in Berlin especially.
- Appreciating the profound self-respect of German theatre artists.

Insights, lessons and recommendations:

- Time and reflection, not technology and staffing, are the keys to good design.
- Whilst time in the theatre is expensive, it is not necessarily cheaper to rely on technology driven solutions.
- Believing that your art form and practice are central to the project of society and civilization will fundamentally alter how you create and collaborate.
- Australian stage lighting practices could benefit from having a less sharp division between technical staff and design staff.

Implementation and Dissemination:

- At the time of writing I have committed to mentoring/supervising a minimum of 3 design students and 2 junior designers on professional projects in 2009.
- I will continue to teach casually at a range of educational institutions.
- I will continue to work as a lighting designer with a range of Australian companies such as Malthouse Theatre, Victorian Opera, Sydney Theatre Company.....

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

October 17, 2008 – January 1, 2009
Berlin, Germany

- **Schaubuehne Am Lehniner Platz**

Anatol

by Arthur Schnitzler

Direction (Regie)	Luk Perceval
Stage Design (Bühne)	Katrin Brack
Costume (Kostüme)	Ilse Vandebussche
Dramaturgie	Maja Zade
Lighting Design (Licht)	Mark Van Denesse

- **Komische Oper**

La Traviata

by Giuseppe Verdi

Musical Direction	Carl St. Clair
Direction (Regie)	Hans Neuenfels
Stage Design (Bühne)	Christof Hetzer
Costume (Kostüme)	Elina Schnizler
Dramaturgie	Bettina Auer
Lighting Design (Licht)	Franck Evin

- **Deutsches Theater (at Berghain)**

Ein Traumspiel

by August Strindberg

Direction (Regie)	Barrie Kosky
Stage Design (Bühne)	Esther Bialas
Costume (Kostüme)	Klaus Bruns



Anatol at Schaubuehne

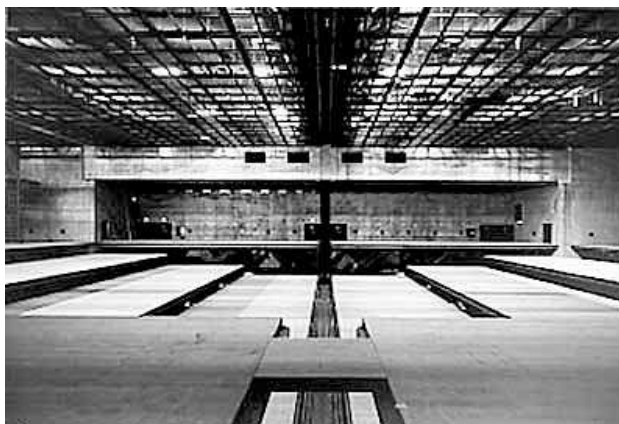
SCHAUBUEHNE AM LEHNINER PLATZ

Schaubuehne Am Lehniner Platz is a multi-venue production house in Wilmersdorf. In terms of conception and aesthetic, it is the company most like my Melbourne base, Malthouse Theatre, where I am an Artist-in- Residence. Schaubuehne differs in scale: the technical, staffing and financial resources available to Schaubuehne mean it is in a very different league. This, of course, does not mean that the end product is necessarily better...

Schaubuehne, like most German companies, plays in repertory, often changing shows nightly. Technical infrastructure and staffing levels reflect this need for regular turn-over. Many of the lighting 'looks' and techniques associated with the German theatre 'style' stem from this need to turn shows over quickly: use of large HMI lamps for front wash, big, clean simple looks with less cuing, less use of tightly focussed lamps and 'specials'. The aesthetic that emerges from these techniques is, however, also a result of a desire for theatre design to be more 'architectural'. German theatre favours design that delivers univocal, large, tectonic metaphors. German lighting techniques follow this lead.

I attended the technical production period for *Anatol*, a German language classic by Schnitzler. Lighting designer Mark Van Denesse was welcoming and helpful. What was immediately noticeable was that the technical production/rehearsal period – *endprobe* – was twice as long as it would be in Melbourne, and staffing levels through this time were higher, with people waiting to immediately make any adjustments as required. In Melbourne, time in the theatre without an audience is kept to a bare minimum and staffing drops sharply after initial installation. Berlin operates in a very different economic framework. In Australia, I have worked in such a process with directors used to the German model, and it results in a work that is less 'overworked'. Longer periods of technical rehearsal results in work that is more integrated across the whole performance and all design elements. It generally means less equipment is used and shows end up with a cleaner 'aesthetic' as time is available to repeatedly edit. Time is available to work beyond the first impulse.

Whilst the economic imperatives in Australia are different, my experience at Schaubuehne confirmed for me that more 'organic' and incremental technical rehearsal periods deliver exponentially better design results. It also confirmed for me that the more time the lighting designer has with the full cast working on stage, the better. The European model of plotting lights over the rehearsal period after a leaner initial plotting session leads to better results.



Schaubuehne Am Lehniner Platz

KOMISCHE OPER



La Traviata

Komische Oper is one of a number of professional opera companies in Berlin. It performs in repertory and its lighting infrastructure reflects this. Again, the show's design was defined by a single, strong tectonic idea. A bare stage with a grid track above on which metal panels slid on and off stage, defining and re-defining small spaces.

Franck Evin is head of lighting and lights all original work for Komische Oper. His design for *La Traviata* was effective, clear, concise. This is a significantly different professional structure than that in operation in Australia, where lighting designers are freelance or artists-in-residence with lighting departments and technicians part of a separate production hierarchy. The German model – similar to the old Hollywood studio system for cinematographers - means that designers are generally very experienced technicians and that sharp divisions between design and technical thinking do not exist. Both systems have advantages and disadvantages. The German system allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness, but lighting heads do not necessarily have design or artistic training. It also presumes the sort of large, well resourced companies that are the core of German performing arts. The Australian/American/British model means that designers come from a design training background but are not necessarily as technically literate as they might be. However this latter system makes more sense with smaller companies, not working in rep and with lower turnover. Also, it allows for greater diversity in design and works against the emergence of 'house styles' (in the negative sense).

What can be taken from the German model is the need for lighting designer and stage electrician education to stress that both occupations are interdependent: the goal of both is the best stage design outcome possible. Design requires technical competency and innovation, and technical competency is irrelevant without design.



Komische Oper

DEUTSCHES THEATER



Ein Traumspiel

Ein Traumspiel was intended to open the newly refurbished Deutsches Theater. Construction delays meant that the show was staged in Berghain, a Soviet era industrial venue in eastern Berlin that is used primarily for dance parties. The stage design aimed to have as low a profile as possible – the monolithic architecture of the building was to be the key design feature. Lighting was intended to accentuate and compliment this modernist, industrial aesthetic.

As is so often the case in Barrie Kosky's work, darkness and shadow were as important, if not more important, as illumination and light. Unlike the designs for *Anatol* and *La Traviata*, light was kept local and specific, with many more cues, and with lighting changes foregrounded as a means of altering mood, underscoring emotion and signalling shifts in time. This approach to lighting which is less tectonic, more emotive, was difficult to grasp for the technical team. Kosky was working with new staff, and his desires were in some ways counter-intuitive for the German crew. Kosky directed lighting with clarity, sureness and resolve and the end result was a tonalist, tungsten based aesthetic that fully exploited the metaphoric possibilities of Berghain's architecture.

What was interesting was to note that the received lighting aesthetic that I had begun to identify as a type of 'German lighting aesthetic' – non incandescent sources, big white looks with little cuing - did not work here, and the lighting team was slow to read where Kosky was heading and what this very particular space required. Kosky later noted that German audiences have taken some time to understand how he works with light. For him light is a medium that can express emotional nuance and tone and provide a visual correlative to musical scoring. Light can be metaphor, can have a poetics. This is alien to what I came to think of as the German stage's approach to lighting, which is primarily formalist and architectural.

I was forced to reflect on the ways in which I have also developed a personal aesthetic that needs to be challenged by working with people and places outside the normal run of my career, beyond the parameters of my usual aesthetic. It is all too easy, especially in mid-career, to develop a single approach to the task of designing with light, and to let the success of previous designs pre-determine future results. Designers are employed on the basis of the 'look' they have developed, but that 'look' must always be provisional, must always be in evolution, under challenge and review, lest it become either cliché or a fixed mindset, a blinkering to new possibilities.

Art and theatre, seeking always to find new ways to understand and articulate human experience, must continue to challenge their own knowledge, techniques and strategies – lighting design, as an integral part of this, must struggle likewise.

OTHER NOTABLE EXPERIENCES

The value of the Fellowship, the extent of its effect on me as an artist and designer, lay not only in the encounter with those companies and projects which were in my official itinerary. The broader experiences of art, architecture, music, performance and culture which it allowed me were an integral part of my learning, reflection and consideration.

- **Bacon Retrospective, Tate Britain and Rothko Retrospective, Tate Modern. London.**

To be able to attend both the Rothko and Bacon retrospectives was extremely exciting. Rothko was always attuned to questions of light within his work as well as the question of light in exhibition spaces. At Tate Modern there is a permanent Rothko room that is dimly lit and takes seriously the artist's notion of his panels as objects for spiritual contemplation.



- **Gemäldegalerie and Neue Nationalgalerie. Berlin.**

Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie floats at the Kulturforum. One of the best expositions of the glass pavilion ideal of modern architecture, an ideal underpinned by a fascination with 'light' and 'lightness', it was filled with the outsized, chrome, vividly coloured sculptures of Jeff Koons when I visited.

The Gemäldegalerie is one of the great European galleries. As a lighting designer, I spent a great deal of time thinking through Rembrandt's representations of light.

- **Jewish Museum, Berlin.**

Libeskind's Jewish Museum is one of the great works of contemporary world architecture. I have been referring to this space in my teaching for some time. To finally visit it was very significant for me. It is moving, affecting, loving, deeply engaged, complex, contradictory..... The Holocaust Tower, which is a dark void enlightened only by a small slit far above is one of the simplest and most profound experiences of light and metaphor that I have ever had.



Holocaust Tower

- **Festival of Lights. Berlin.**

Whilst the idea of civic art lighting is nowadays very popular, it is extremely difficult, and expensive, to make effective. Lighting allows the artist to engage visually with sensitive sites whilst protecting the often fragile building itself. Too often, however, this ends up as simply splashing coloured light onto old buildings. Unfortunately this was the net effect in Berlin. Washing the Brandenburg Gate with green and magenta light offers little in terms of conceptual or technical innovation or depth. A Neoclassical city such as Berlin profits little from mere effect lighting. I suspect however, that the Festival of Lights will develop, and I imagine that light as intervention will help provide a certain 'lightness' in response to the heavier aspects of Berlin architecture.... Much more appealing, and effective, is the red neon sign outside the Pergamon Museum (which houses one of the great Egyptian collections of Europe) that reads "All art was contemporary once."

- **Berlin Philharmonie, Konzerthaus, Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche.**

Exposure to the wealth and majesty of classical music culture in Berlin was a true highlight of the Fellowship. Berlin offers a diversity and depth of performance and appreciation that is at first a little overwhelming. I have begun to design with live music (Australian Art Orchestra) and attending concerts in venues as diverse as the Philharmonie, the Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche and the Konzerthaus has provided me with the beginnings of a visual and spatial response to orchestral performance.

CONCLUSIONS

- Time and reflection, not technology and staffing, are the keys to good design.
- Longer technical rehearsal periods that incorporate the entire company, result in more integrated design outcomes.
- Australian stage lighting design can sometimes suffer from too sharp a division between designers and technical staff. Whilst these divisions were useful in the past to establish lighting design as a separate discipline, it now can sometimes result in diminished possibilities for the Australian stage.
- The German stage is fortunate to have much greater financial resources available. However, more importantly, these resources reflect the fact that theatre and the performing arts are seen as central to society in a way that is not the case in Australia. Performing artists – performers, designers, directors, technicians – see themselves as an integral part of society’s idea of itself. Their work, then, arises from, and is informed by, a deep sense of seriousness and self-respect. Part of the development of Australian lighting design culture and practice must be the larger project of stitching the performing arts deeper into the fabric of Australian society.
- German theatre artists discuss what they do differently from their Australian counterparts. There is no sense that they feel that their work is peripheral, they do not in any sense feel a need to ‘apologize for’ or ‘justify’ being artists. Believing that your art form and practice are central to the project of society and civilization will fundamentally alter how you create and collaborate.
- Lighting designers, like all artists, need to struggle against their own success, especially mid-career. They must constantly challenge their own knowledge and practice in order to continue to serve the theatre – the theatre understood as human experience seeking to understand and articulate itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Where possible, project budgets and schedules should prioritize time in technical rehearsals over staffing, technology and scale of design.
- The technical rehearsal period needs to emphasize and prioritize time spent in rehearsals with the full company integrating all performance elements. Time spent working with the whole company is the most important element in the technical rehearsal period.
- Education for lighting professionals needs to give weight to both technical and design elements equally and must prioritize the outcome. Dialogue between technicians and designers needs to be improved both in professional and educational environments.
- All possible opportunities for advocating the Arts as a critical and integral part of a thinking, intelligent society must be exploited.
- Flowing from this, young Australian designers need to be have their sense of their own value as artists reinforced. The performing arts are not simply an entertainment, they are a critical part of the way society thinks, reflects, feels and experiences
- More personal and artistic development opportunities for designers and theatre artists in mid-career will lead to a flow on of better quality work, greater mentoring and improved Arts education.