

**The Winston Churchill Memorial
Trust of Australia**

**Report by
Deborah Pollard- 2000 Churchill
Fellow**

**Project
To observe large scale visual
theatre groups in the Netherlands
and France.**

**Address
6 Lochner St, Hobart, Tasmania
7000**

Introduction

My time in Europe was enriching, educative and inspiring. In the madness that is the summer arts festivals of Europe I found my search for one inspiring company lead me to another. My research in the end took me beyond the borders of France and the Netherlands to include Belgium and Germany. In addition there was also a quick boarder hop to Spain to catch company *Semola* at the Barcelona Festival.

While there was no rehearsals to watch as initially planned in the Churchill Fellowship proposal, I was able to dedicate my time to watching the multitude of theatre and contemporary arts activity that occurred over the summer season. To have access to such a broad spectrum of foreign work enabled me as an artist, the inspiration and time to access how it is I and fellow Australian artists make work. It highlighted the unique differences of Australian artists and the difficulties we come up against within an Australian economic and cultural climate.

In a festival environment the cultural climate can be more conducive to talking with artists about their work as the festivals provide forums for debate and discussion. As well as face to face conversations with artists I found festival forums, despite the sometimes difficult language barriers, to be very beneficial for my own artistic reflections.

In addition to the performing arts companies I was able to see some excellent visual arts, particularly in the field of new media and multi media which has a direct impact on my own arts practice as well as the broader organisations I have associations with such as the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for this opportunity as well as the many European artists I encountered. Their work will continue to inspire me for decades to come.

Special thanks to Giselle Mignon, Arjen Anker and Company *Vis a Vis* and to the most memorable works by *Ballet C de la B* and *Groupe Merci*.

Executive Summary

Deborah Pollard, 6 Lochner St West Hobart, Tas 7000 tel:03 62345529

Director, performer, writer

Fellowship: To observe large scale ensemble theatre in the Netherlands and France.

Fellowship Highlights

- Terschelling Festival, a diverse outdoor theatre festival based on a small island in the Netherlands, where the audience bicycle from one event to the next. Here I saw the work of Vis a Vis and met with company member Arjen Anker and associate Kate Wilkinson.
- Amsterdam, watching the production *All the Indians* by company *Ballet C de la B*, the most inspiring work I saw during my fellowship.
- Avignon International Festival and contemporary visual art exhibition '*La Beautè*' featuring the work of Jeff Koons, Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor and others
- Meeting Giselle Mignon of the Marseille company *Nini Dogskin* and being invited to act as a creative 'outside eye ' for the rehearsal of their new cabaret work in Corsica.
- Aurillac Festival in central France where I observed a multitude of large scale outdoor theatre works. Most notable being *Groupe Merci* and *Groupe Lackaal Duckric*.
- Rotterdam, viewing the work of Tony Oursler at Rotterdam contemporary art gallery.
- Berlin, visiting the multitude of new theatres and galleries that have sprung up in East Berlin.

Major Lessons learned and dissemination of ideas within Australia.

The most valuable insight gained from this fellowship is the realisation that theatre and visual art within Australia is of an international standard. Within Australia we have a unique vision and our artists should be confident that their work is not second rate in light of European models. Talking to various artists in Europe highlighted the different circumstances in which they create work. The major differences being the ability to tour work throughout Europe allowing greater time to develop their performance and reach a larger audience base. Europe also has a denser population base to draw upon.

The advantages of an Australian environment is a fresh approach to art making that is free from the restraints and expectations of generations of tradition. Whilst European funding structures appear to be able to give larger amounts of money to artists, the reality is only a select few artists receive funding and many artists struggle to maintain a practice. This may be said to be true of Australia as well, however, it appears that Australian policies on multicultural arts funding, indigenous arts funding and emerging artists funding are reaching a broader scope of artists.

I will endeavour to disseminate this information in two ways in the future. As a fund member of the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council I am in a position to inform my colleges of the restraints placed on Australian artists and what initiatives can be taken to make the funding dollar better assist in the development of Australian arts practice.

As an arts practitioner, the fellowship was invaluable as it highlighted for me what I am currently doing with my process and theatrical structures. It enabled me to analyse how I can take my work further thus influencing my immediate arts community and contributing to the development of contemporary performance and visual arts practice within Australia.

The Program

June 14-27: Oerol Festival Terschelling

Saw a multitude of outdoor theatre works. This festival concentrates on a variety of styles but there is a focus on visual/physical based work.

I met with company members of the Dutch Company *Vis a Vis*. Arjen Anker and associate Kate Wilkinson.

June 27-28: Amsterdam

Saw *Ballet C de la B*, a Belgium contemporary performance group. This company are currently hailed as one of the great innovators of European theatre. The new production *All the Indians* was an amazing feat of design, and performance. It was highly reflective of the tensions of the lower classes in Belgium as well as current racial tensions within Europe.

Visited contemporary art gallery spaces *Metro Video* and *Melweg*.

June 29- July 11: Belgium including Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels

Saw work at the *Zomer Van Antwerpen Festival*, which included large public art works and contemporary circus.

Met with members of an Australian/Belgium company called *Branch Nebula* and watched their work *Mad Red*. Company members are Mirabell Wouters and Lee Wilson.

Visited Contemporary Youth and emerging artists space '*Victoria*' in Ghent.

Met with Gie Bagette, an agent for outdoor and large scale performance work.

July 13- 20: Attended the Barcelona Festival

Saw Performance works by *Semola Theatre*, a renowned physical theatre company.

Their latest work *Bailamos* was a rich mix of visual arts, dance and performance.

Also saw work by company *Klowns de luxe* and visited the various contemporary and modern art galleries and Antonio Gaudie architecture in Barcelona.

July 26- 30: Attended Avignon International Theatre Festival.

Saw many works, particularly from East Block countries where there is a focus at the moment.

Also attended "*La Beautie*" a comprehensive contemporary visual art exhibition that was truly inspiring. It had gathered and commissioned the work of many great international artists including Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor, Jan Fabre and many others.

Met with Giselle Mignon from *Company Nini Dogskin*, who invited me to come with them to Marseille and Corsica to help in the direction of a new work.

August 2-12: Corsica with Nini Dogskin Troupe.

I participated in a rehearsal process for the *Nini Dogskin's* latest Cabaret/performance work. They are completely mad and I enjoyed myself incredibly and hopefully helped their work!!!

August 15- 21: Paris

Tried in vain to recontact *Groupe Zur* but touring commitments had taken them to Poland.

In Paris I saw all the major gallery spaces ie *Pompodou* and *Louvre*.

Attended the performance of a contemporary Belgium company called *Cirque Calcinculo* at the *Parc La Villette*. It was a wonderful contemporary physical theatre work using an amazing large scale set that informed the structure of the concept, ie danger and points of balance. Met with Phillip de Coen after the performance for brief discussion about their funding and rehearsal process.

August 24-28: Attended the Aurillac Festival, Festival de la Rue.

This Festival focuses on outdoor large scale works, The notion of street theatre is very different in France to Australia. These works were not busking acts but fully fledged funded productions . The most memorable were *Lackaal Duckric* and *Groupe Merci*. Both groups were site specific works and concentrated on an innovative way to involve an audience. The audiences at Aurillac Festival were enormous.

August 30- September 10: Rotterdam and Amsterdam

Met with Andreas Broeckmann from the gallery collective *V2*. These artists focus on new media art.

Attended major contemporary art galleries in Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

Sept 11 -22: Hamburg and Berlin

Visited Hamburg as it is famous for its contemporary art galleries.

Berlin , visited gallery spaces and newly established theatre spaces in the ruins and mass development of East Berlin.

During my stay I saw two productions which were both by Polish artists. The work coming from the East Europe is very unique in its form and concept.

What I learned from my fellowship.

The objective of my fellowship was to observe the practice of European theatre artists with a view to reflecting on my own working methodologies and those of my fellow Australian practitioners.

I was interested in how and why they create work and how art is funded in Europe. Finally I wanted to observe the differences between European and Australian performance and reflect on the factors and context that create those differences.

During my time in Europe I saw many different performances. The standard of the work was as varied as the types of work I saw. I observed in many performances the same mistakes or shortcomings I see in works in Australia, my own work included. This perhaps was the most valuable observation as it casts aside the inferiority complex we often feel in Australia about our artistic work. So often our Australian Artists throw themselves towards Europe in search of an artistic guru that will provide the answers for a better artistic practice.

It was refreshing to realise that work made within Australia is of a comparable standard and that cultural and geographic factors are what create differences in the way we make work and the types of work we create. Neither one should be viewed as better or worse, they are just different.

Performances within Europe are made with a view to touring. The geographical nature of Europe makes it affordable to tour, particularly when there is a strong networks of summer festivals to tour too. The dense population of Europe makes it possible to stage a number of Festivals.

Within Australia we have only a handful of major performing arts festivals, with the most famous being the *Adelaide International Arts Festival*. The *Adelaide Festival* is well attended, however the opportunity of holding a number of festivals of this nature is impractical due to the vastly spread population base of Australia and the expense of touring work throughout the large landmass of Australia. This and the length given to a process are perhaps the major differences.

In Europe the winter months are dedicated to creating and rehearsing work for the summer festival circuit. Companies like *Vis a Vis* and *Ballet C de la B* can spend up to six months creating a work and then they are able to enjoy a further 3 months of touring. If the international circuit, ie Asia and Australia also buy the work the touring options are extended even further.

Companies like Pina Baushe, who was brought to Australia for the Cultural Olympics has shows in repertoire for years and years.

Within Australia the scenario is very different. Smaller professional companies like Salamanca Theatre in Hobart would average a six to eight week rehearsal process and our performances would tour for a maximum of 11 weeks around the state to various schools. In this sense the school based companies are able to develop their work more than our general public companies who are constantly struggling to make box office. The work at Salamanca is held in repertoire but they often only have one season.

The most innovative work coming out of Australia is often coming from companies on project funding. The short falls of project funding are no sense of company development and artists often working for small wages. A project funded theatre work, on average, would only have a six to eight week rehearsal process and more than likely the work would only play a short season in their home town.

In Europe they also seem to be able to present large ensembles. In Australia this is rare and work is often restricted to small casts due to funding restraints.

Although I envy the time allowed to European artists to develop a performance, I am now aware that it is not necessarily a complete short coming in Australian work. The work here has a roughness and newness which was lost in some of the performances I saw in Europe. Ideas of conventional structures of theatre are held rigidly where as in Australia there is a lot of risk taking and little reverence given to theatrical traditional. In a contemporary arts practice this is a vital component .

This of course is not true for all the performances I saw in Europe. Ballet C de la b and Groupe Merci were highly innovative companies. The long development process is evident in the sophistication of the integration of the concept within the performance. The conclusion I draw from this observation is it depends on the nature of the work as to how much development time should be given. It is, however, important to have this option and this is a rarity within Australian art making practice due to limited funds.

Conclusions

As an arts practitioner and a member of a national arts funding body I feel the Winston Churchill Fellowship was timely. I am currently viewing Australian art making from a personal and national perspective.

On a personal level the reflections of my time in Europe will directly impact upon my work, my co- collaborators and the audiences who see my work. The fellowship has helped me to analyse potential problems within my work and with new projects on the horizon I can directly address these issues.

The two main points of focus I wish to address are:

- the placement and movement of the audience within installation performance works.
- the relationship of the subject matter to the form of the performance.

I am actively involved in arts forums and already feel that my time in Europe has allowed me to impart information to fellow artists who inturn can reflect on their own methodologies. I recently attended a forum held at the Performance Space in Sydney. The topic for discussion was “the design and the body in Space”. This topic although broad is very much in keeping with the objectives of the fellowship. Having had time to reflect on how design is used in Australia and Europe I felt my contribution to this forum was valuable. Listening to other arts practitioners talk at this forum I could see that they were asking the same questions that I had been asking within my research in Europe.

My position on the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council requires me to be involved in making policy decisions for arts funding within Australia as well as allocating funds to the various artists in Australia who apply for funding.

It is vital to have a notion of how artists are operating within this country and the various factors that have a direct impact on the way they work. My fellowship enabled me to

realise the Australian artist in an Australian context. I feel I am now in a position to inform the policy makers of directions that would best suit the needs of Australian artists.

Recommendations

To improve conditions for artists to create and further develop work, we must firstly understand what those conditions are:

- Arts within Australia are made from a small pool of funding
- Performing arts have a small audience base to draw upon.
- Being a young nation Australia does not have the same relationship or long lived association with the arts.
- Touring around Australia and to overseas destinations is very expensive.

These elements are known within Australia but in recent times the onus has been placed on the artists and companies to address and fix these dilemmas. They are asked to devise marketing strategies that will increase profit margins, secure them overseas touring opportunities and source corporate funding.

I am not entirely convinced that artists can do this, nor can art be expected to operate within a business for profit structure. The solution perhaps lies at a bigger policy level that reflects a government's understanding of the value of artistic practice to a well balanced nation.

Australian arts money has been sometimes misdirected into endless market research and marketing campaigns designed to increase audience numbers and awareness of the arts. Within the countries I visited in Europe there was a more wholistic approach to the arts that included education and government incentives. We do not have the same history that has fostered appreciation for the arts as European nations have had, so we therefore need to introduce arts as a valuable commodity into our education system and our government policies. This can only happen if a government is willing to endorse this value judgement with incentives for education and industry to support the arts.

To ask artists to become an industry and operate as a business is a denial of its' cultural value. As art makers in positions of policy making we must now try and educate the government about the value of arts beyond events that just earn international notoriety, ie, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. If this basic understanding can be nurtured than the artists inturn will stop viewing themselves as second rate to their overseas counterparts.

I believe the art we make in Australia is innovative and unique in an international context. I felt a similar sense when I was able to watch the work of new artists from the 'East Block'. With the wall down and incentives offered to nurture and develop artists from the East, Western Europe now stands in awe of the abilities and innovations of a once cut off and supposedly 'inferior group of nations.'