

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by

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The Gilbert Spottiswood Churchill Fellowship to study the teaching of voice and text for classical theatre – UK, USA.

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Signed

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INTRODUCTION

The fellowship enabled me to travel to the UK and the US in order to observe the teaching of voice and text for classical theatre, thereby enriching my own practice as an actor but more importantly informing my growth as a director of the great and enduring texts of the Western canon.

I extend my appreciation to the Churchill Trust and to the memory of Gilbert Spottiswood whose endowment facilitated my travel. I met Gilbert many years ago when I was a young actor and am thrilled to be the recipient of his generosity to Australian theatre through the Trust.

My contacts in the UK and the US were extremely welcoming and hospitable and I am grateful for their kindness and generosity to me while I was with them. Theatre is an ephemeral and fleeting experience and it is often the spirit of the production or the teaching which is most memorable. This was certainly the case with all of my encounters. I will take the spirit and energy of their teaching with me for the rest of my career.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The fellowship travel was undertaken between October 30th and December 22nd 2006. The aim of the fellowship was to visit and observe various teaching programs for Classical Theatre: in particular, the Master's Degree in Classical Acting at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London and Cicely Berry, Head of Voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford upon Avon, Warwickshire, UK. In the US, my contacts were Kristin Linklater, Head of Voice in Theatre Arts at Columbia University, New York City and Brian McEleney, Head of Acting at the Trinity Rep Consortium, Providence, Rhode Island.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Observing the incorporation of improvisational techniques in the teaching of Masters Degree students at Central School of Speech and Drama London.
- Travelling to Stratford upon Avon to meet and talk with Cicely Berry, Head of Voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company along with observing the RSC's work in repertoire.
- Observing masterclasses of a forthcoming student production of Rameau's "Dardanus" given by the world renowned conductor John Elliot Gardiner at the Royal Academy of Music, London.
- Attending voice and text classes given by Kristen Linklater at Columbia University, New York.
- Observing the conservatory model employed by the ensemble theatre company, Trinity Repertory, and its attached drama school in Providence, Rhode Island.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Australian theatre lacks the rich and layered voice and text work which is central to performing the great dramatic plays of the Western Canon. Our theatre companies tend to employ Voice consultants on a casual production by production basis whereas daily exposure to imaginative and rigorous teaching would benefit actors, directors and ultimately, productions.
- Similarly, training institutions tend to steer their students towards television and film careers nowadays, forgetting that an understanding and mastery of language skills is essential to the fully realized performance of any text, contemporary or classical.
- Most students I encountered in training institutions had age, experience and a graduate degree behind them which accounted for the maturity and focus of the class work. I'm convinced this system would produce much more grounded performers.

IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION

- The exposure I've had to the best teachers of voice and text in the world will of course enrich my own acting and directing. I'm extremely keen to work with students at drama schools as a director and a teacher of voice and text.
- I also feel that actors and directors need constant exposure to these techniques throughout their careers and intend organizing a group of performers to explore and perform staged public readings of classical text.

Fellowship Programme

2nd - 11th November

Central School of Speech and Drama, Swiss Cottage, London

Master's Degree in Classical Acting

- **Voice and Text – Martin Wylde**
- **Movement**

12th - 21st November

Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford Upon Avon, UK

- **Cicely Berry, Head of Voice, RSC**
- **The Winter's Tale RSC**
- **The Taming of the Shrew Propellor Theatre Company**

22nd - 27th November

Royal Academy of Music, London

- **Masterclasses**

1st – 10th December

Columbia University, New York

Theatre Arts School

- **Voice and Text - Kristen Linklater**

13th – 21st December

Trinity Rep Consortium

Providence, Rhode Island, US

- **Voice and Text- Brian McEleney / Stephen Berenson**
- **Movement- Stephen**
- **3rd year production of Macbeth**

The Importance of Voice and Text in Contemporary Theatre

- Heightened text and its vocal and linguistic requirements are often neglected and poorly served to the detriment of theatre productions of the classic repertoire. Technology also, in the form of film and television, has tended to influence our stage work so that performance sometimes becomes naturalistic and inward looking rather than expressive and communicative in a large and public space.
- The requirements of theatre performance are quite different from film and television performance and necessitate a reaching out and meeting a live audience. In order to do this effectively, performers need to embrace the tools of their trade- words -and to have a thorough and complete understanding of how language works. Coupled with a free and vibrant vocal technique and a strong, vigorous physicality, the work becomes richer, deeper, and consequently, more significant.
- The great classical works of theatre afford the best opportunities for performers to develop and hone these skills. Not only do these require specific dexterity but they also encompass ideas and passions which are grand in scope and which are at the core of our humanity. Applying these skills to contemporary texts enriches them to the same extent.
- Audiences nowadays are in danger of losing the ability to listen effectively. I believe this is directly related to the diminishing verbal skills of performers. If theatre is to survive and thrive, it must be through the reinvigoration and diligent use of the spoken word on stage.
- Although the teachers I observed in the UK and the US were very different in style and approach, there was a philosophical belief in the primacy of the spoken word and a commitment to its development which underpinned their courses.
- Interpretive work is ephemeral and intangible and often it is the **spirit** of the teaching, and the connection of students with the language of great literature via good teaching which is a joy to watch and absorb. Most of the teaching I observed was inspirational in this regard.

Central School of Speech and Drama, Swiss Cottage, London.UK.

Central offers an MA in Classical Acting – a year long course which immerses students primarily in the works of William Shakespeare but also in other early modern and renaissance texts and Greek tragedy. The course aims to give actors a thorough grounding in conventional Voice and Movement requirements for such texts as well as an experience of improvisational techniques which stimulate flexibility and spontaneity in the performance of structured language.

I spent time observing the text classes of Martin Wylde, the convenor of the course and a strong advocate for the techniques of Keith Johnstone, one of the inspirational acting teachers associated with the Royal Court Theatre in its formative years.

Central has enviable new facilities, endowed in the past five years from Lottery money which in the UK is given regularly to Arts organizations. Would that Australia had a similar scheme!! A new building added to the older, Victorian mansion, houses three fully equipped theatre spaces of varying size and capacity as well many rehearsal and teaching rooms on three levels. Also included in the building were large production workshops and studios for prop making/sound and electrics.

There are about 14 students in the Master's course of varying maturity, experience and nationality. The heightened text component has two parts-the first is designed to develop the students' technical understanding of Elizabethan/Jacobean verse through the exploration of structure, narrative, theme, thought length, figures of speech, rhythm, image and historical perspective. The second part engages the students in improvisational techniques such as status transaction games to raise awareness of listening, and to encourage the students to find authentic responses moment by moment and to understand that in all human interaction every movement, inflection and utterance is a signifier of status which is a subliminal clue to audience reception.

While this sort of work is exciting to watch and valuable in building confidence and freedom in performers, sometimes the richness of a complex text is obscured by the anarchy of such an exercise. However, I was observing the students at the beginning of their course while they are still in the throes of acquiring many different skills so the end of the academic year-next July-would undoubtedly show a more complete integration. The interest for me lies in the application of such ideas and I would certainly incorporate some of the principles into text work as an expansion of freedom and flexibility.

Royal Shakespeare Company Stratford Upon Avon UK

Cicely Berry is at the forefront of voice and text teaching in the UK, and has been an important and acclaimed associate of the Royal Shakespeare Company for many years. She is also the author of two seminal books 'Voice and the Actor' and 'The Actor and the Text,' so I felt privileged to spend time with her in Stratford. Her work has influenced several generations of actors in the UK and abroad and she regularly travels to companies in the US and South America to share her extensive experience and knowledge with seasoned and emerging artists. She is a staunch advocate for heightened text and believes that understanding the form and discipline required to access this language and practise it well, opens the door for audience and performer alike to a satisfying encounter not only with the classics but with contemporary theatre writing as well. Theatre is primarily a verbal art form so keeping language alive and robust is

very much part of her philosophy. Her teaching is centred on making voice and speech remarkable to the listener; investing energy into structured language so that the content is readily available; taking pleasure in the imagery and music such language affords and connecting a rich inner experience with bold, imaginative expression so that these great works are still relevant to contemporary audiences.

This was manifestly evident in the text work in "The Winter's Tale" and "The Taming of the Shrew". Both productions had large ethnically diverse ensembles ranging in experience from the newly graduated to the veteran, and were part of an ambitious year long project to stage all of Shakespeare's plays. The all male Propellor Company performed "The Taming of the Shrew at The Other Space.

"The Winter's Tale" was given a promenade production in the Swan Theatre for which the ground floor seats were removed and the action staged in and around the audience. Such an approach requires huge technical skill from the performers; not only must the story telling be clear but as the focus is constantly shifting from one area to another, each new scene must find a way of building on the one before with dynamic purpose. This was accomplished most proficiently by the company. The drama operates within a 16 year time frame and it was cleverly set in post war Britain so that the transfer to a hippy like Bohemia after that time made sense of the rustic elements of the play.

There was a wonderful sense of knockabout physical comedy in "The Taming of the Shrew" with performers playing musical instruments and using the thrust stage rather wildly, incorporating much audience participation and very similar to the working theatres of Shakespeare's time I imagine. Again, none of the spoken text was diminished or lost by the pace and frenetic energy of the actors and the piece was alive and accessible.

The vitality and rhythm of both productions, the clarity of thought and feeling expressed at the moment of delivery, and the command of the spoken word made these four hundred year old plays spring to life with few props and little scenery in an exhilarating and illuminating way. There is no doubt that when a company of actors is truly connected to the language and able to master it effectively, that the experience of theatre going is what it should and can be- transcendent!

Royal Academy of Music, London

Cecily Berry had a commitment in the US towards the end of my time in the UK so I searched, and found several master classes to observe at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Being exposed to another art form is extremely interesting in that the objective is the same, to interpret and illuminate a work of art for an audience, and similar sorts of problems are being tackled, albeit within a different discipline. The most valuable of these experiences for me was the rehearsal of Rameau's "Dardanus" with John Eliot Gardiner putting the orchestral and singing students through their paces. The same energy and commitment to the connection between reason and feeling was required; a concentration on articulation of sound, colour, imagery and phrasing to realise the deepest and most complete meaning for the piece. He coaxed all of these essential ingredients from the singers and the orchestral players alike, with rigour, humour and an absolute attention to detail which was exhilarating to watch.

Theatre Arts Division, Columbia University, New York

Two of the most worthwhile books I've utilized as an actor and a director are *Freeing the Natural Voice* and *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*, both by Kristin Linklater, Head of Voice in the Theatre Arts Division, Columbia University NY. The time I spent observing Ms Linklater with students was invaluable since it is often the spirit of the person which informs as much as their publications and this was absolutely the case in these classes. Her primary focus is on the connection between mind and body so that the voice is able to reveal the true self. This is especially necessary for strong and intelligent performance of Shakespeare texts.

The classes were held in one of the towers of the Riverside Church high up above Manhattan and the students were always led through an extensive and rigorous physical and vocal warm up before embarking on the set text for the day. There was an emphasis on relaxation/breathing and vocal awareness which aimed to stimulate and free physical, sensory and emotional energies in preparation for the interpretative work to follow. Ms Linklater is an engaging and lively teacher who connects authentically to her students, expecting their focus and commitment and always urging them through humour and her own example to work diligently and to strive for excellence. There is a degree of openness in the classes which extends to feedback from the students about their own and others' work and which serves to sharpen their own analytical observations and response.

While it's impossible to list an inventory of all classes, or even to satisfactorily report my observations, I was particularly struck by her work with one student on a passage of *Alcestis* and will try to reconstruct that work in order to illustrate the profound affect her teaching had on the student and on the observer.

The student was having difficulty accessing the emotion of the text while still remaining clear and open so that she could be easily understood by an audience. KL's approach to the problem was practical and creative. She asked questions of the student –What do you need to communicate? What do you want your partner to understand? What I'm not hearing from you is the shift from the external story to your feeling about it. Whisper it so you're making text/thought/ feeling connect to each other. Experiment with pitch so that other areas of your voice begin to come into play.

She talked about resistance, all the time working on the student's spine and neck, massaging her, getting her to model sounds and combinations of rhythms and nonsense so that she might be released from whatever was inhibiting her. She probed these areas with the student- gently but insistently-what are you protecting yourself from? Tears? Fear of being wrong? Fear of being too expressive? Eventually the student acknowledged her reluctance to step away from her natural reserve and KL asked- What might happen if you dissolve your reserve? You might be seen as petulant? Impulsive? Extreme/ Passionate? Manic?

Eventually, and recording it here seems simplistic, the student, through the combination of physical freedom and release, found another voice, a stronger, richer, more dynamic way of expressing the text she was grappling with, and the breakthrough was palpable. She got to a freer stage of her development which allowed her to let the words act on her rather than the reverse.

It seems remarkable to me that someone who has been teaching for forty years or more, is highly esteemed in her field, has written and taught all over the world, still has the same enthusiasm and energy for working with young undergraduates as she has with seasoned

professionals, and her dedication to language and its deliverance in the theatre is an inspiration to anyone lucky enough to observe her in action.

Brown/Trinity Repertory Consortium, Providence, Rhode Island USA

The time I spent with the Brown/Trinity Rep Consortium was illuminating in the very best sense of the word. Providence is a prosperous University town of about 175,000, situated three hours north of NY. I mention the number of inhabitants because incredibly, the city sustains a professional theatre company with a drama school attached, and has done so for the past 30 years. The attachment to Brown University helps of course but nevertheless, the city has provided generous gifts in the realm of disused public buildings for theatre spaces and rehearsal rooms and the facilities are well equipped and expansive.

Brian McEleney is the Head of the Drama School component of the consortium and also a member of the professional company. Staff members are particularly proud of the fact that they still maintain their professional lives as actors and directors and are also able to give their students real and valuable experiences with Trinity Repertory Company. Indeed the students are required to fulfil many duties at the theatre as part of their course and these duties range from ushering and backstage work to understudy and small parts in season productions. The staff was particularly welcoming and open and filled my days with interesting and diverse classes to observe which ranged through the three years of student activity.

The course unites conservatory training and the practical association with a professional theatre company with academic studies connected to Brown University, enabling the students to graduate from an esteemed university and equipped at the end of the three years to embrace (hopefully) a career as an actor, director or teacher. An important physical separation from the main campus allows the students to focus completely on the necessary disciplines and long hours of a performing curriculum without the distractions of customary student life, and another notable, and to my mind, essential component of any drama course, was the insistence on an undergraduate degree before admission into the school. I was struck by the maturity and total commitment of the students to the ideal of what theatre should be in a community. They were strong vocally and physically, open, articulate and industrious, and vitally interested in all aspects of their own and their colleagues' work.

I observed text, acting and movement classes across the three year levels of the course. Texts included Shakespeare, the Greeks, Moliere, Racine and Contemporary American Realism. Heightened text requires a great stretch for American students who are probably more comfortable in the language of realism since Method Acting informs the backbone of their stage tradition. There is, however, a rigorous and concerted effort by the acting staff to stimulate love of language and an application from the students that is admirable. This was borne out by a student directed Macbeth which I attended while in Providence. In the third year of the directing course, fledgling directors are given the opportunity to create a strong piece of theatre which will launch their careers in the real world-(again, hopefully!!)The director is given valuable resources- a professional designer; sound and lighting experts and a theatre space which any actor or director would aspire to. The production, which modernized the story and centred the action round a drug cartel, was bold, lively, and the language strong and clear. It was a patent example of the aims and success of the Brown/Trinity Rep Consortium -"to explore and enhance the live, communal experience that is at the heart of theatre."

Highlights of Performances

I made a concerted effort to see as much live performance as I could – theatre, musicals, concerts, opera – since the practice of such diverse art forms still encompasses the skills I was observing in drama institutions, but brought to fruition at the highest level possible. The performers, whatever their chosen art form, exemplified mastery of these skills: clarity of thought, deep investment in the word or note, communication of complex ideas, an exhilaration in connecting with an audience and a commitment to the art they were generating.

Highlights included:

UK

- A production of “Faustus” at the Hampstead Theatre Club, which transported the Faustian tale to the contemporary art world and incorporated physical theatre with spoken text.
- “The Taming of the Shrew” – an all male version of Shakespeare’s play performed with great gusto and inventiveness by the Propellor Theatre Company at Stratford upon Avon.
- “The Waves” - adapted from the novel by Virginia Woolf and directed imaginatively by Katie Mitchell with a cast of 8 performing, filming, lighting and providing all effects. At the Cottesloe Theatre.
- “Caroline, or Change” by Tony Kushner at the National Theatre. A highly acclaimed musical which had transferred from Broadway and dealt with the growing civil rights movement of the sixties.
- A masterclass of Rameau’s “Dardanus” given by renowned conductor John Elliot Gardiner with orchestral and singing students at the Royal Academy of Music.

USA

- “Spring Awakening” - a new musical version of the 19thc classic by Frank Wedekind which showcased many extraordinarily talented young performers and a savage score.
- “The Vertical Hour” – the Broadway debut production of a new play by British playwright David Hare starring Julieanne Moore and Bill Nighy which deals with the moral dilemma of the Iraq war.
- “The Voyage Inheritance” - a strong and utterly believable production of Harley Granville Barker’s 19thc classic – performed in the tiny Atlantic Theatre Off Broadway. Most of the performers were veteran actors of the old school-ie able to deal with heightened text, long verbose passages and robust argument.

- Julie Taymor's production of "The Magic Flute" at The Met complete with the imaginative designs and staging which are an essential part of her style. Watching the way she places figures in space and rhythmically manoeuvres objects and characters is an object lesson for a director.
- "Macbeth" - a student production at Trinity Rep Providence, Rhode Island, which combined youthful exuberance with clear text work and excellent production values.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We live in a culture that is increasingly influenced by the visual, and as a consequence of this, our ability to concentrate fully on the oral/aural aspects of language for any length of time has been severely eroded over the past few decades. This does not bode well for theatre. It is primarily a verbal art form and ideas of great scope and emotion have been expressed through this art form from Classical Greek drama to the present. Society needs to reflect upon itself in many different ways and theatre is a vital and important way of achieving this. In these days of reality programming for television which often expresses only the banal and superficial, it's imperative to keep great texts alive for their insights into humanity and the richness and variety of expression which brings these aspects of our shared fellowship to life. There is no better or more satisfying way of achieving this than an immersion in Shakespeare and ancient Greek drama as well as Jacobean and Restoration texts, Moliere, Shaw, Miller and even our own Australian writer of social comment, David Williamson. Tackling such texts requires a love of language, a thorough understanding of the structure of language and a constant, diligent practice and exposure to great works of dramatic literature. The Churchill Fellowship has allowed me not only to visit and observe some of the very best teachers of text in the world, but has inspired me to continue that work with as many actors and directors as possible.

Recommendations

- Actors currently employed by major theatre companies require ongoing practice in heightened text. As well as employing permanent voice consultants, the established custom of dance companies, which invite established dancers to attend daily technique classes, wherever they might be in the world, is worth emulating since it ensures an ongoing revision and expansion of skills.
- Actors and directors need a deep and thorough understanding of the nature of language so that their comprehension and ability to perform literary texts is not compromised. Grammar is an important component of language learning and it is unfortunately neglected in our schools nowadays. A reinstatement of the principles of grammar into school curricular would certainly enhance interpretation.
- Exposure to great texts which is lively and imaginative and restores the word to the centre of that universe is essential to preservation of the classic repertoire.
- Students should be accepted at drama schools only after they have completed an undergraduate degree. Their subsequent work is more mature and grounded and enriched by life experience.