

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Liz Jones 1999 Churchill Fellow

Liz Jones received the Gilbert Spottiswood Fellowship
for the study of an aspect of theatre.

This study examines the place and nature of theatre in a number of
major cities in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

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Executive Summary

La Mama Theatre was established in 1967 to nurture new Australian theatre and has played an important role in the development of the Australian dramatic voice. It has been committed to a diversity of artistic approach, to innovation and to exploring minority as well as general concerns. A vital space and prolific production house, La Mama has given initial exposure to a large number of playwrights, directors, actors, technicians as well as poets, musicians, performance artists and experimental film makers.

I have been the Artistic Director of La Mama since late 1976, having worked at that theatre as both actor and front of house since 1973. Before this I taught in the Victorian education system and worked as a Volunteer Graduate in Bugor, Indonesia.

In 1996 I received a Doctorate of Laws honoris causam from the A.N.U. More recently in 2002 I was placed on the Honour Roll of Victorian Women.

In 1998 I was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to examine the place of theatre and its cultural relevance in a number of countries other than Australia. This was provoked by a concern at the continual marginalisation of theatre in Australia (by funding organisations, the media, educational institutions and society in general).

The most valuable experiences gained by me are clearly reflected in the body of the presentation: the State Funding of Infrastructure with Lottery Money in the United Kingdom; the importance of civic pride and funding support in Glasgow and Berlin; the diversity of models for international festivals; the complexity and weight of traditions on young playwrights.

I came back to Australia, Melbourne and La Mama Carlton with much pride in the knowledge that theatre is a difficult, demanding and expensive art form, and that it battles for status in a complex technological world, it maintains its relevance against the odds, largely because of the determination and passion of the creative artists involved.

Wherever I travelled, it was confirmed that state funding is vital to theatre's ability to survive, but also clear that the funding of art and artists produces a healthier outcome than pouring money into the upgrading of existing infrastructure.

Liz Jones' Churchill Diary

1999

- 7th June** **LONDON**
- 11th June** *Plenty* with Cate Blanchett
(at Albery Theatre)
Produced by the famous Almeida Theatre Company
- 12th June** *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Lift Festival: South Africa)
(at Tricycle Theatre)
- 13th June** Lunch at Hilary Westlake's with Deborah Levy, David Gale
(from *Lumiere and Son*), Trevor Stewart (amongst country's
leading writers, directors and performers.)
- Bedsit*, a piece of naturalistic Irish theatre.
(at Battersea Arts Centre)
- 14th June** Visit Southbank: Haywood Gallery, National Theatre, National
Film Theatre, Bookshops
- Gulio Cesare* (LIFT Festival: Italy)
(at Queen Elizabeth Hall)
- 15th June** *Shoot* (Spanish play in Trans)
(at Jermyn Street Theatre)
- 16th June** *Tower* (by Deborah Warner – LIFT)
(installation in Telecom Tower)
- LIFT Forum: Prof. Alan Reade in discussion with creator of
Gulio Cesare, Romeo Castellucci
(on HMAS President on River Thames)
- Icarus Falling* installation / performance
By Primitive Science
(at OXO Theatre)
- 17th June** Lunch with community theatre maker Rose Sharp.
- LIFT Forum: discussion with Wesley Enoch and cast of *Ubu*
(on HMS President)
- The Weir*
By Conor McPherson (a Royal Court production)
(at Duke of York's Theatre)
Evening Standard Award Winner
Very Irish in form and content

- 18th June** *De La Guarda* (Argentinian Coy.) Visual physical theatre
(at Roundhouse)
- 19th June** **BERLIN**
- Feature of Blown Youth* (by Australian Raimondo Cortese and Ranters Theatre Company - Theater der Welt
(at Theater am HalleschenUfer).
- 20th June** *Ratsoi* (Theater der Welt – Italian)
(at Hebbel Theater)
- 21st June** Visit to Berliner Ensemble
Murx by Christopher Matahler – brilliant!
(at Volksbunne)
- 22nd June** *5 Angry Men* (Theater der Welt – Australian)
(at Potsdamplatz)
- Gayikler Lanetler* (Theater der Welt – Turkish)
(at Schaubühne Theater)
- 23rd June** *Bamboo Bridge Installation* (Theater der Welt – Australian)
by Simon Barley
- King Lear* (Theater der Welt - Singapore)
By Ong Keng Sen
(at Schillertheater)
- 24th June** Lunch with Australian-Berliner Carrie Hempal, physical
performer
Theatre walk with Carrie Hempal (52 theatres in Berlin)
to Hamberger Bahnhof Gallerie (Ansel Keifer, and Joseph Beuys)
- Saragosa – 66 de zile* (Theater der Welt – Bulgaria)
(at Hebbel Theater)
- 25th June** **PARIS**
- 26th June** *The Mountain Giant* (by Pirandello – Italian with French
subtitle)
(at Theatre l’Odeon)
- 28th June** Visited Goethe Institute Paris
Meeting with Claudia Amthor, Senior Consultant
- 29th June** Theatre Boeuff Ou Nord
(Peter Brook’s theatre space – saw youth dance piece)
- 30th June** **LONDON**
- 1st July** *Shockhead Peter*
(at Lyric Hammersmith)

- 2nd July** **DUBLIN**
- Making History* (by Brian Friel)
(at Peacock Theatre)
- 3rd July** *Dancing at Lughnasa* (by Brian Friel)
(at Abbey Theatre)
- 4th July** *Women on the Verge of HRT* (by Marie Jones)
- 5th July** *Stones in their Pockets* (by Marie Jones)
(at St. Andrew Theatre)
- 6th July** Visit to Irish Writers' Centre
interviewed Collette Connor (Irish playwright)
- LONDON**
- 11th July** *Digging for Ladies* (with Suzanne Steele)
(at Regent's Park)
- 13th July** **NEW YORK**
- 14th July** Dinner with artistic director of Common Basis Theatre
Company, and member of the Actors' Studio, Marcia Haufrecht.
- 15th July** Meeting with Lynn Hayes, president of Womens International
Playwright's Organisation and artistic director of WOW Lesbian
Theatre Company
- Meeting with Beverley Pretty,
General Manager of La MaMa Etc, 4th Street, N.Y.
- Meeting with Stella Pulo – only Australian member of the
Actors' Studio
- Side Man* (Steppenwolfe Theatre Company)
- 16th July** *Visit MOMA*
Uncle Vanya (Irish Gate – Abbey Theatre,
Brian Friel's adaptation)
(at Lincoln Center)
- 17th July** *Death of a Salesman* (Arthur Miller)
(at Eugene O'Neill Theatre)
- SQUONK*
(at PS 122 Theatre Space)
- Jon Lucien (Jazz legend from Cuba)
(at Birdland)
- 18th July** **MELBOURNE**

2001

- 25th June** **LONDON**
- 26th June** National Portrait Gallery
Bill Viola (film/performance installation)
Fire Angels for the Millennium
- 27th June** *Nowhere to Go* (German Film)
(at CIA)
- 28th June** *Sotoba Kamachi* (BITE Festival at Barbican)
- 30th June** Lunch with Jess Kingsford – young Australian director working
with Howard Barker
- Bronco Does a Dekki* (by Grid Iron Theatre of Edinburgh)
Outdoor youth performance in Coram's Fields
- Ophelia: The Secret Love Life Of*
(written and directed by Steve Berkoff)
(at Kings Head)
- 5th July** *Cardboard Citizen*
Meeting with Adrian Jackson of Boal Techniques, a theatre
company which works extensively with the homeless.
- Genesi* (by Romeo Castelluci) (LIFT Festival Italy)
(at Sadlers Wells)
- 6th July** Tate Modern: *Rothko*
Arte Povera Retrospective
- One for the Road* (by Harold Pinter)
(at New Ambassador – performed by Pinter himself)
- 7th July** *The Noise of Time* (BITE Festival)
Theatre de Complicite and Emerson String Quartet
(at Barbican)
- PARIS**
- 11th July** South American Installation at Museum of Modern Art.
- 12th July** Pompidou Centre – Major collection of late 20th Century
paintings and installations
- 14-15th July** **BILBAO**
- Museo Guggenheim
Museo Basque
Museo Bellas Artes

CUMBRIA / ENGLAND

17th July Visit to Welfare State Theatre complex at "Lantern House" in Ulveston.
Meetings with Elaine Strand (administrator) and Sue Gill (artistic director)

18th July **GLASGOW / SCOTLAND**

Tron Theatre
Met with Donna McVey (administrator)

19th July Citizen's Theatre
Met with Lyn Puller (administrator)

Theatre 7: 84
Met with Rhona Matherson (general manager)

Tramway Theatre and Gallery Space

Glasgow School of Art

School of Music and Drama

21st July **AVIGNON FESTIVAL / FRANCE**

Death of Danton (by Georg Büchner)
(Ecole St. Joseph) directed by Thomas Oestermeier

22nd July *Je Suis Sang*
Jan Fabre – Belgium
(Lycee St. Joseph)

LONDON

24th July National Portrait Gallery
Wapping Power Station Arthouse
Exhibition of Keith Haring

25th July Old Tate
Turner and Cruikshank

28th July **MELBOURNE**

Liz Jones' Churchill Report

Introduction

I completed my Churchill Fellowship over three years, 1999-2001. This was as a result of the illness of first my mother and then my husband. However, in many ways it was a blessing as it allowed me the time to reflect on my experiences and to regroup and reprioritise my return trip.

I realise now in 2003 that I am incredibly late with this report. I do humbly apologise for this inexcusable delay. I can only plead overwork. I do appreciate your tolerance and will say that with two years to reflect on my overall experience I believe my report benefits from the wisdom of hindsight.

On my first foray in 1999 I saw as much theatre as I possibly could in the time available. I saw 28 productions in 38 days. In that time I also went to a number of forums in LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) and Theater der Welt Theatre of the World Festival in Berlin.

On my return trip in 2001 I restricted the amount of time I spent actually attending productions (with the exception of the Avignon Festival) and spent much valuable time networking with other artistic directors and administrators. This was particularly enlightening in regard to funding issues in Great Britain where lottery money has been available for bricks and mortar without any concomitant rise in funding for art, artists, management or even maintenance. I feel in many ways Arts Victoria moved down this road particularly in the Kennett era and is now having to appraise the consequences.

Issue 1. State Funding of Infrastructure: Lottery Money

Case Study 1 – The Welfare State

For 20 years working out of buses all over the country, finally coming to settle in the rickety old 'Lantern House' in Cumbria. This is now the most stunning architect designed fully renovated space. While a joy to behold the administrator of the venue expressed a concern that the programme had become *venue driven*. Food for thought.

Case Study 2 – Tron Theatre, Glasgow

In a wonderful old Victorian building in the heart of this elegant Victorian city. Again extensive Lottery funding. Again the administrator expressed grave reservations about this. There is now a lot of modern glass around which is extremely expensive to clean and the popular and beautiful bar-theatre space has been changed and is no longer the heart of the Tron. Audience, having fallen off inevitably during the renovations, were not flocking back. Some are simply not happy with the "renovations".

Case Study 3 – Citizen Theatre, Glasgow

Probably the most exciting space to me in my entire study. Set in the Goebbles – an area that was old Victorian terrace slums now "upgraded" into a vast estate of high rise flats. A little bastion of integrity, the Citizen Theatre seems to me to have held fast to the ideals of Grotowski's "poor" theatre, extending this to the aesthetics of grunge. Not for nothing did the famous play *Trainspotting* premiere in their tiny (La Mama size) 50 seat space. They

have resisted the temptation of using Lottery money to upgrade their theatres – rather they have spent any money available on user-friendly rehearsal and workshop spaces.

Managing two “poor theatre” spaces as I do, both in Heritage listed buildings, I learned much of value here. *When there is little to steal and much to share why be a thief?*

Issue 2. City Pride (and funding)

The arts seemed to me to be flourishing at the grass roots level in two cities: Berlin and Glasgow. In both of these cities one senses a number of things: that the community takes real pride in their theatre communities and that theatre is seen as extremely relevant; in both cities there are many theatres of varying sizes rather than one or two flagship companies. Both cities have in many ways reinvented themselves. Berlin post “the wall” and Glasgow after the closing of its shipyard. Although hard to generalise, it appeared that much of the content of productions related to current issues.

Case Study 1 – Glasgow

In my time in Glasgow I could see no theatre at all as everyone was in rehearsal for, or on their way to, the Edinburgh Festival. However this did free up the administrative staff to spend time with me and meant I could fully explore the theatre space. The Citizen Theatre, in the heart of the Goebbles, was the most exciting space for me in my entire Churchill travels. Grunge theatre at its best but also the most diverse. A 50 seat space, a 250 seat space, and a 500 seat space. The administrator Lyn Puller assured me that the decision as to what play to put in what theatre was largely artistic. They receive very strong city council funding. Glaswegians have immense civic pride, which results in positive support for local creativity.

Case Study 2 – Berlin

There are 52 theatres in Berlin, a city the size of Melbourne, and all receive some public funding. I talked to Australian-Berliner Cari Hampil who is a physical theatre artist. Most theatres pay an agreed amount to all artists and produce the work as well. Cooperative door deals à la La Mama Melbourne and New York are rare. The level of funding is amazingly supportive from both the state and the city.

The Berliner Ensemble receives \$3 million + per annum and many other theatres receive generous funding too. The grass roots is flourishing. In Berlin you feel art spilling onto the streets. It is here that I saw the single most exciting piece of theatre on my trip. MURX by Christopher Mathaler, 2 hours of humour, whimsy, incisive comment of the most subtle kind, human frailty, suffering and stupidity. The music was riveting: children’s songs, patriotic “Deutschland” songs and one profound moment of Jewish klezmer. A large cast of 45 in the magnificent Volksbaume Theatre. Highly stimulating, accessible and affordable.

Case Study 3 – Bilbao

Another example of a post-industrial resurrection of a city once dedicated to building ships. Gehry’s new Guggenheim museum is magnificent and again has the sense of art spilling onto the streets. Beautiful painted sculptured bulls everywhere, again an inspiring sense of civic pride and very real support for local Basque culture, but also an appetite for new thinking from artists across the globe.

Issue 3. A Diversity of Festivals

Case Study 1. Avignon Festival

Even more than Adelaide, Avignon is transformed by its annual festival in July. It is a small walled city. The city becomes the festival. Street theatre on every corner. Fringe theatre in every available space. The crème de la crème of European Theatre in one of the many open air amphitheatres at 10.00pm each night. 10.00pm because that is when it gets dark. The streets throb till 3-4am. No one rises before noon. I see two marvellous pieces:

Death of Danton from the famous Shubüner in Berlin directed by the young artistic director Thomas Oestermeir.

Je Suis Sang from Belgium*, directed by the revolutionary theatre maker Jan Fabre.

* Belgium is another example of a small nation where both government and civic funding have created a flourishing theatre culture.

Avignon also has a huge fringe festival all desperately competing for audiences – very like the fringe in Adelaide, Melbourne and Edinburgh.

Case Study 2. Festival der Welt, Berlin

Curated by Maria Magdalena Schwegerman, this is a very different festival. Theatre from all over the world including Bulgaria, Italy, Singapore, Turkey and three pieces from Melbourne. We felt very proud for our country – indeed our city – so well represented. It also led to lots of after-partying, which also meant positive meetings with lots of other artists.

Schwegerman put together a truly exploratory, experimental season. I really admire her courage and risk taking.

I also admired the Berlin audience's ability to take on the culturally alien and give it their all. Raimondo Cortese's demanding *Features of Blown Youth* in English received three curtain calls.

One of the exciting policies at the Festival de Welt was one of no intervals – not even in the Turkish epic *Gayikler Lanetler* which ran 3 ½ hours! The intensity was never broken.

Case Study 3: London – the LIFT Festival (London International Festival of Theatre)

The LIFT festival was funded by and is still curated by Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal who declare they program work that "deliberately prods at the boundaries of what theatre can be". Again a far less prestigious affair than our festivals. So much less "corporate sponsorship" driven. Work from all over the world.

For me, the most exciting aspect of this festival was the daily forums on the H.M.S. President moored on the Thames. Here I attended the daily "conversation" between artists: Romeo Castellucci with Prof. Alan Read and our own Wesley Enoch with South African Handspring Puppeteers.

The President was a marvellous festival club (managed by an Australian by the way!).

I am unsure how they make ends meet in LIFT as Castellucci's *Guilio Cesare* played in the Queen Elizabeth Hall to 50% capacity. Castellucci scandalised the administration by insisting we all move down the front into the best seats (no matter what we paid!). *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, the South African Handspring production at Tricycle Theatre had 55 in a theatre with 150 capacity. Another thing that interested me is that there seemed to be no exclusion of late comers at any of the venues I attended.

Some stimulating thoughts from Romeo Castellucci:

"at the root of my work is a respect for the power of the image, the primary ingredient of theatre".

Of the ensemble he has assembled (a number who are disabled) he says *"it could be regarded as exploitative but the real crime is to exclude people from the theatre who remain outside the norm"*

He eschews trained actors favouring those with physical presence. He works frequently with children and animals. "Children and animals are not complicated but they help to complicate the shows". Castellucci explains "They provide an element of truth in a system of fiction".

Issue 4. The Pressure of Past Traditions and Present Excellence

London, New York, Dublin and Old Europe

Both London and New York have extremely high profile and extensive theatre scenes – Broadway, Off-Broadway, the West End, Mayfair... Audiences come from all over the world to taste this fare. I have friends in Melbourne who *never* attend theatre here but religiously go to see the latest must-see in either city. Brian Dennehy with *Death of a Salesman* in New York, Cate Blanchett with *Plenty* in London.

My interest is how this translates to the "fringe" in both these cities. The results (with of course some wonderful exceptions) were disappointing, particularly in New York where I have made three forays. It seems that the very high quality of the Off-Broadway productions to the maintaining of very traditional works – and the Actors Studio's emphasis on the same has led a rather conservative approach. In neither London nor New York was I able to find any substantive examples of the multi disciplining forms that I feel we have in Melbourne. Experimentation seemed to be in dance or the visual theatre arts, rather than theatre.

Looking further afield, to the heart of so much great theatre, Dublin, I found an even more troubling scenario. There the major playwrights of the day Brian Friel, Marie Jones and Jimmy Murphy, and the ever present Samuel Beckett, inhabited all available theatre space and try as I did I found no real "fringe". I asked my friend, playwright Collette Connor whom I visited at the Irish Writer's Centre and she confessed her concern at the lack of any small alternate theatre spaces. Recently I heard a young Norwegian playwright complain that no-one in Norway was interested in anyone other than Ibsen.

In conclusion I recently attended a lecture by Raimondo Cortese – a prolific and talented Melbourne playwright and recent recipient of the Elizabeth Murdoch Travelling Fellowship. He talked much about theatre in Europe, particularly Eastern Europe.

He felt despite the high profile of theatre in Europe, despite the fact that public funding was so much higher there than we have, that young artists were very weighed down by tradition and past heroes; by elitist notions that the new can never live up to the old. He felt that as a young artist he was deeply privileged to be working on the cutting edge of Australian

theatre, unfettered by such containing standards and expectations. I was very excited and felt affirmed about my theatre's role by this very positive reflection and it, along with my Churchill experiences, made me feel that theatre in Australia, and especially here in Melbourne, was more than holding its own in shaping this timeless medium as a vibrant, creative voice for these times.

Conclusions?

What have I learned from my Churchill experience? I began this journey feeling at best, despondent about theatre's future in our ever increasing technological world, but find that theatre is surviving remarkably well.

Theatre is an incredibly expensive art form even at the grassroots level and cannot survive without some outside support either public (as in Europe) or private (as in the States). The most exciting new theatre comes from the work of ensembles – and such ensembles require quite extensive assured funding.

One of the ironies is that cutting edge political theatre exists very much with the support of an educated cultural elite – and battles to reach the oppressed and the dispossessed. In this, ticket prices are incredibly important – especially when it comes to the active participation of our own impoverished theatre community members. Accessibility is all important. I cannot stress enough how vital I feel it is that practising artists are offered an affordable solution to attending all performances and festivals.

In all of this I must feel proud of La Mama with its open door policies, its low ticket prices, and thankfully its reliable state funding. I am also very grateful that Actors Equity in this country respect the right of their members to work cooperatively for door shares in places like La Mama.

I cannot sign off before I acknowledge the generous support of the foundation, and the tremendous contribution my Fellowship has made to my awareness of the struggle theatre faces in other places and how proud I am of the way our artists, young and old, show such passion and resilience in pursuing their art.