

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by – Atul Joshi – 2000 Churchill Fellow

The GILBERT SPOTTISWOOD CHURCHILL
FELLOWSHIP to study

*Best international practises in the development of
New writing for the stage.*

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INTRODUCTION

For 4 months in 2000, I went on a tour of a number of international theatrical centres with the aid of a Churchill Fellowship. The common thread through this trip was to discover the ways in which a selected list of companies developed, produced and made such a success of new writing for the stage. All had terrific track records in this area, and were chosen because of this, and earning healthy royalties from these successes (including returns from Australian productions of plays such as *Closer* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*). I wanted to see what they were doing to create such success and derive a set of best practises that could at the very least be benchmarked against similar practises in Australia. This report details the trip, the people I met and the discoveries I made. It then derives some implications for the Australian theatre industry and makes some recommendations on how information about these best practises can be disseminated and applied in Australia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 25 April to 22 July 2000 I had the once in a lifetime opportunity to travel the western theatre world, with the aid of a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia Fellowship. Over these 4 months or so, I travelled to the United Kingdom to visit the Royal National Theatre Studio, the Royal Court Theatre, the Soho Theatre, the Bush Theatre, the Hampstead Theatre, Writernet, all in London, the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the Druid Theatre Company in Galway. I then travelled to the United States to visit the Lincoln Center Theatre, the Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights' Horizons and the Vineyard Theatre, all in New York, and the Seattle Repertory Theatre and A Contemporary Theatre, in Seattle. The purpose of all these visits was to study the ways in which these companies developed, produced, marketed and made such a success of new writing for the stage and to derive best practises against which Australian work in these areas could be measured. These companies were chosen because all of them had terrific track records in this area, and were earning healthy royalties from these successes (including returns from Australian productions of plays such as *Closer* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*), and I wanted to see what they were doing to create such success.

It seemed to me that the key factors of this "success", which we can term "best practise", for these companies are: -

- A dedicated policy from the top down to invest resources to develop new writing and seeing this as an integral part of the company's mission (for some of these companies it was their sole mission).
- Dedicated literary departments who took the care (and time!) to read every script that comes through their door and who take a pro-active approach to sourcing new writing and writers by going out into the community.
- Establishment of long-term, professional associations with writers in which time is taken to maintain and nurture this relationship
- Respecting the right to "fail" and respecting the right not to produce any tangible public outcomes from these processes ie. An emphasis on process
- A symbiotic, two-way relationship with the commercial sector
- A recognition and appreciation by writers, and their agents, of the investment made by companies in their work and corresponding flexibility in sharing personal rewards with the companies.

These best practises have serious implications for the Australian theatre industry. While many of our major companies and writing development organisations will recognise and endorse these practises, and while current mechanisms of communication between these companies will be utilised to disseminate this information, the current models of funding, based on tangible, short-term outcomes and structural/economic efficiencies, go against these practises. It seems to me essential that if the Australian arts industry is to create a National theatrical culture that encourages and rewards new writing and risk, creates a critical mass of writing and thus sets the scene for repeated success, nationally and internationally, the theatre sector must make these best practises known to the funding bodies and government.

PROGRAMME

UNITED KINGDOM

Date	Location	Company/Activity	Contact
25 April	London	CAST Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Diana Franklin & Yolande Bird
26 April	London	National Theatre & National Theatre Studio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Eddie Keogh, Technical Manager Tour of Studio and The National Theatre Complex Observe rehearsals for <i>Pera Palas</i>, new Turkish play
27 April	London	National Theatre & National Theatre Studio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Roger Chapman, Head of Touring, NT Meeting with Sue Higginson, Head of NT Studio Meeting with Jack Bradley, Literary Manager, NT
28 April	London	Royal Shakespeare Co. Writernet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Simon Reade, Literary Manager, RSC Meeting with Jonathan Meth, Director of Writernet
29/30 April & 1 May	London – long weekend	Attend various theatre performances	
2 May	London	Hampstead Theatre & International Creative Management (Agents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Ben Jancovich, Literary Manager, Hampstead Theatre & Alan Radcliffe & Michael McCoy, ICM
3 May	London	Soho Theatre & Royal Court Theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul Sirett, Literary Manager, Soho Theatre Graham Whybrow, Literary Manager, Royal Court
4 May	London	Attend Performances	
5 May	London	Rod Hall Agency, Casarotto Ramsay Agency, Bush Theatre, Michael Billington, <i>Pera Palas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings with Theatrical Agents Meeting with Tim Fountain, Literary Manager Meeting with Michael Billington, Theatre Critic for <i>The Guardian</i>, attend performance of <i>Pera Palas</i>
6 May	London	CAST Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second meeting with Diana Franklin
7 May – Sunday	To Leeds	Travel	
8 May	Leeds	West Yorkshire Playhouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tour of Theatre Meeting with Maggie Saxon, Managing Director Kay Magson, Associate Producer, Kate Sanderson, Marketing Director
9 May	Leeds	West Yorkshire Playhouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Jude Kelly, Artistic Director
10 May	Return to London	Travel	
11 May	London	Rest Day	
12 May	London	Meetings with Theatrical Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sara Stroud @ Judy Daish and Associates
13 – 25 May	Europe	Holiday Break	
26 May	London	Meeting with Theatrical Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Agency, Alan Brodie @ Alan Brodie & Assoc., Nikki Stoddart @ PDF
27 May	London		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend Theatre Performances
28 May	London to Dublin	Travel	
29 May	Dublin		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up Irish Meetings
30 May	Dublin	The Abbey Theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Richard Wakely, MD at Abbey Theatre
31 May	Dublin to Galway	Travel	
1 June	Galway	Galway International Festival & Druid Theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Rose Parkinson at Galway Festival Meet with Ciaran Walsh at Druid Theatre
2 June	Galway to Dublin	Travel	
3 June – 18 June	USA/Latin America	Holiday Break	

USA

Date	Location	Company/Activity	Contact
19 June	New York		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Linda Key, State Theatre SA's New York Agent
20 June	New York	Lincoln Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Jon Nakagawa, Director Lincoln Center New Works Program
21 June	New York	Lincoln Center Theatre Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Anne Cattaneo, Director of XX
22 June	New York	Vineyard Theatre Co.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Jodi Schoenbrun, General Manager
23 June	New York	Attend Theatre Performance	
24 & 25 June, weekend	New York	Attend Theatre performances	
26 June	New York	Manhattan Theatre Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend new work play reading
27 June	New York		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend Theatre Performance
28 June	New York	Playwrights Horizons, Theatrical Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Tim Sandford @ Playwrights' Horizons Meet with Sarah Jane Leigh @ International Creative Mgmt
29 June	New York	Manhattan Theatre Club, Theatrical Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Christian Parker, Literary Manager, MTC Meet with Joyce Ketay of Joyce Ketay and Assoc.
30 June	New York	Theatrical Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Ron Gwiazda of Rosenstone/ Wender Meet with Mark Subias, William Morris Agency
1 & 2 July, weekend	New York	Attend Theatre Performances	
3 July	New York	Attend Theatre Performances	
4 - 18 July	USA/Canada	Holiday Break	
19 July	Seattle	Seattle Repertory Theatre Co.	Meet with Ben Moore, Managing Director
20 July	Seattle	A Contemporary Theatre	Meet with Jim Loader, Managing Director
21 July	Seattle	Seattle Repertory Theatre Co.	Meet with Ben Moore, Managing Director and Sharon Ott, Artistic Director
22 July	Return journey to Adelaide	Travel	

RESEARCH FINDINGS

My endeavour to distil best international practises in the development and production of New writing for the stage was prompted by the fact that the Australian theatre industry does not demonstrate the same successful track record in the development and staging of new writing, as do our industry's counterparts in other international centres. Despite the commitment of a number of our companies to produce new Australian work, this new work very often only sees a limited life (with the exception of the new work of a very small handful of our stage writers) – the most common experience being a play receiving its premiere production then never being seen again. I thought it was too glib an answer to attribute this just to our small population (both of audiences and potential writers) and differences in the economic contexts between our industries. As a theatre producer, I felt that there was more our companies could be doing to achieve success for themselves and their writers, and more that our policy makers and funders could be doing to support this.

I wanted to obtain different perspectives on this subject and hence I visited a range of organizations from large Government funded national organizations to small struggling companies to regionally based organisations to those reliant totally on private sector support. Each organization selected was chosen for the fact that: -

- a) the organization had a strong commitment and track record of developing and staging new writing (where the organization was a producing theatre company) or because
- b) the organization had a strong representation of writers (where the organization was a theatrical agent or writer's representative group eg *Writernet*) or they were
- c) individuals who had a store of information about this process (eg. State Theatre's various international agents).

The commercial sector has not been represented in this research due to the difficulties in accessing this information, which is more often than not kept in commercial confidence by producers. This is not seen as a serious drawback, however, as the development of new writing, and quite often the first production of a new work, remains in the domain of the government subsidised companies or the not-for-profit sector, across the western theatrical world. In addition these companies were able to provide information on their relationship with the commercial sector. Another major perspective that has not been canvassed is that of the funding agencies. It was felt that best practise could be best gleaned from producing companies, rather than policy makers who are one step removed from the writing and producing front line.

In my meetings with the various people from different sectors, detailed in the programme section above, I asked each person a similar set of questions and asked them to answer from the perspective of the operations of their organization in respect to new writing (ie. Scripts which have not been previously produced, most often by writers who are not "established"). These questions were very general, meant to provoke conversation and debate and information and included: -

- Could you please describe what your company does to bring a new work to the stage?
- Could you please describe how you go about finding new works/writers with the potential to be staged?
- What happens to the more successful of these works after they have had their first production?
- How do you fund the new writing activities of your organization?
- How do you contract with writers to maximise returns for your organization and for the writer?
- What is the situation for new writers in your city, what opportunities exist for them?

The answers to these questions produced a common set of responses in all the companies I visited despite their different contexts and sizes and funding sources. From these responses I was able to distil a common set of principles which I have term “best practises”. The fact that these were common across the board, and the fact that these activities and outlooks were producing successful outcomes for these companies, allows me to give them this term them this status. These are given as headings below followed by a brief discussion on each point.

1. A dedicated policy from the top down

Each of the companies had a commitment from the Board, the Artistic Director and the Senior Executive down to invest resources to develop new writing. What is important also is that in tough economic times, this commitment remained – the policy to invest in new writing was not viewed as a luxury that could be cut or shelved. Each of these stakeholders saw this as an integral part of their company’s mission (for some of these companies, such as the Royal Court, it was their sole mission). The philosophy behind this is both economic and artistic. Economically, this is akin to the research and development processes of commercial industries. The stream of dollars invested in this artistic “R&D” is justified by, for example, the success of one or two works per year, which then provides the organization with an ongoing income stream and justifies the initial investment. Artistically, this “R&D” is the new blood which constantly reinvigorates the company’s artistic life and which provides interest and debate for its audiences.

2. Dedicated & Proactive Staff

Each of the companies had dedicated literary departments, usually consisting of a Literary Manager, and a combination of Literary Assistants, dramaturges (script editors) and script readers. For some of the smaller companies, it was usually an Associate Artistic Director or Director in Residence who took on this role. Even a company focused on the existing classical repertoire, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, had a Literary Manager. These people took the care (and time!) to read every script that comes through their door. For a company like the National Theatre, this means reading the 1000 + scripts that they receive each year. This is both seen as: -

- a) A duty or public service, ie. Acknowledge the role played by a government-funded company in servicing its constituencies, as well as providing aspiring writers with some feedback and the confidence that their work receives some attention.
- b) A desire not to overlook a talented writer or a script with promise. Martin McDonagh’s work, now performed world – wide, and earning a healthy income stream for both the Druid Theatre in Galway and the Royal Court, come to the attention of these theatres firstly as an unsolicited script.

The staff also take a pro-active approach to sourcing new writing and writers by going out into the community, and this is a valuable lesson for areas of regional Australia, or indeed within certain sub communities of our larger cities, where there may not yet exist a critical mass or pool of writers. Graham Whybrow, Literary Manager of the Royal Court, described his experience of going out to “scout” talent in various sub communities in London, for example by putting up posters and handing out leaflets saying something like “Want to write a Play? Come to XX on XXX” or attending comedy nights at local pubs. The play *East is East* came to his attention this way, as a yellowed, scrappy screenplay text sent to him after meeting the writer at a community night. This work was subsequently staged and then went on to become a major feature film.

This “outreach” work is not just limited to sourcing scripts, it also involves going outside of the theatre’s walls to present talks, run workshops and generally represent theatre in the community. London’s Soho Theatre ventures out into workplaces, such as Marks and Spencer, and runs playwriting workshops at lunchtime. These plays then receive

productions at the workplace. This promotes not only writing but also the actual idea of attending the theatre!

This pro-active approach is not limited to new writers. The Artistic staff of these companies work with established writers to stretch their abilities and challenge them into new directions. An example again is the Royal Court, who worked with Conor McPherson, a successful writer of monologues up to that point, to steer him towards writing a work for an ensemble of actors. The result was *The Weir*, a play that is still running in London's West End and has enjoyed phenomenal worldwide success.

3. Long-term, professional associations

These companies all exhibit the establishment of long-term, professional associations with writers in which time is taken to maintain, nurture and develop this relationship. Successful long-term associations include those of Patrick Marber (writer of *Dealer's Choice* and *Closer*) with the National Theatre Studio and Martin McDonagh (writer of *Beauty Queen of Leenane*) with the Druid Theatre, Galway. These associations extend beyond that of focusing on a playscript. For the Hampstead Theatre in London, it means making the writer a "focal point for participation", involving him or her with all of the theatre's activities. For the Soho Theatre in the same city it is finding writers with potential then involving them in all aspects of the company as a writer in residence, or as an "attachment", running workshops, providing opportunities for the writer to try out ideas with directors and designers, making sure they participate in all other activities of the company, providing them with space and room and resources for their writing.

The National Theatre Studio provides a unique environment for the creative artist to "jam" their ideas. It provides writers it has established relationships with residencies at the Studio. These range from a room and a desk for a period of time to write down their ideas, to providing the writer with a group of actors to develop the ideas into a script, to access to the intellectual and physical resources of the National Theatre itself.

4. The right to fail

Respecting the right to "fail" and the right not to produce tangible outcomes (public readings or productions) is perhaps the most important thing that is offered to an artist by many of these companies. It is closely associated to the practise of forming long-term relationships based on belief and trust. This is aimed at giving the writers the freedom to produce their best work.

The level of freedom from such pressures offered to writers differs from company to company. Almost all the companies seemed to agree that public workshops or readings of works in progress must be presented with the aim of solving problems, or to gauge an invited audiences reactions to a piece when the piece is moving towards production, rather than seen as outcomes for the writer to work towards. In addition, most deadlines are seen as flexible, rather than imposed strictures.

5. A symbiotic, two-way relationship with the commercial sector

The companies work in an environment where commercial theatrical interests are also active and this is the one significant difference I can see between the Australian theatre industry, where commercial interests have dwindled, and these companies. Although a healthy level of competition exists between the not-for-profit and commercial sectors, both are advantaged in the area of new writing by each other's existence. In terms of new writing, the not-for-profit sector acts as the try-out arena for new work for commercial producers, who then buy the work once its proven its success in this arena. Commercial risk is therefore mitigated. For the not-for-profits, returns are available from the commercial arena in terms of the sale of

rights to their production, of product itself (sets and costumes) as well as a royalty stream for licensing rights to the production, in addition to the more intangible benefits of having their name taken to a new market place. Commercial returns are also available before the production of a new work, when a producer invests in the premiere production in return for certain future rights. This enlarged or open market place for new writing facilitates and creates resources to allow the best development and production of new work.

6. Sharing rewards

A recognition and appreciation by writers, and their agents, of the investment made by companies in their work and corresponding flexibility in sharing of rewards with the companies and producers is one practise that is a strong feature of the research and of which there are only few examples in Australia. The cost of producing a new work is high, both in terms of development resources and in the probable lower income achievable (as opposed to an extant, popular work). The “best practise” companies work in an environment that allows them better opportunities for participation in future returns than companies are able to in Australia as the following table of examples demonstrates.

	<i>“Best practise”</i>	<i>Australian Practise – as recommended by the Australian Writers’ Guild</i>
<i>Writers’ Royalties</i>	Range from 7.5% up to 10%	Standard, non-negotiable minimum of 10%
<i>Participation in returns from sale to TV/Film</i>	Yes	No
<i>Participation in income from future productions or TV/Film sales</i>	Negotiated % of writers’ earnings for the work above a certain level	Not recommended, apart from 1% original producers’ royalty for a period of 3 years
<i>Ability to buy options/rights to other territories, including English language world rights, to create returns on initial investment</i>	Yes	Not recommended

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

A set of best practises has been described which are common to many of the companies visited and which have produced tangible artistic and economic success for the companies concerned, as well as for the writers. Although each of the companies visited all exhibited these practises, the level to which each practise was adopted differed from company to company depending upon their resources and environment. While acknowledging this and while some of these practises are known and practised in part by the Australian industry, it is worthwhile to view them as a set of best practises against which our industry can benchmark itself.

The dissemination of this information can be achieved easily as various national networks, that can be utilised to spread this information amongst the theatre industry and writers, already exist. These include: -

- The Confederation of Australian State Theatres, encompassing Melbourne Theatre Co, Queensland Theatre Co, State Theatre Co. of South Australia and Sydney Theatre Co. The heads of these four companies meet on a regular basis for an information sharing colloquium where such information can be disseminated.
- The Australian National Playwrights' Centre in Sydney is already networked to all professional theatre companies in Australia, and its publication *Dialogue*, as well as its annual conference, are both good vehicles to disseminate this information.
- The Australian Writers' Guild, which represents writers as a professional body, also publishes a regular newsletter that can be utilised. In addition, representatives of the AWG regularly meet with CAST to share information and discuss issues and these meetings can also be utilised. This would be a valuable forum to seek change in some of the contractual terms for new writing to make the development of such work, less economically prohibitive for the companies.

As already flagged at the beginning, it could be argued that these best practises are conducted within an environment that is different to the Australian environment – different populations (both size and breadth) and better funding environments – hence they cannot produce the same level of success in Australia. I contend that both arguments are spurious.

In terms of the population, both Sydney and Melbourne now match any major world city in the size and breadth of the current and potential audiences for new writing. For the smaller capitals and regional centres, the facts are that the industry in smaller regional centres in Galway, Dublin, Leeds, Seattle etc are using these practises and producing new writing that is taking the world by storm.

In terms of funding, it is true that the funding levels in Australia differ to that in the UK - they are perceived to be lower in Australia. But then in the USA, government funding is minimal and most of the companies have to raise their own funds, and new writing development and production still proceeds at the highest levels. The companies actually find the promotion of new writing gives them a leverage in this area – seeking funds to promote local or national creativity is seen as a plus (as it is also in the UK) in approaching private sector funds. So the potential exists for Australian companies to source private funds to support this activity.

I believe the main difference, and the main hindrance to the adoption of these best practises lies in the expectations of the funding bodies and the private sector, and this to me is the most pressing need highlighted by the research.

In our funding world, which is now based on performance outcomes and contracted agreements for the funding dollar, it is a matter of expanding our funders' expectations and horizons, from: -

- a) Expectations based on economic rationalism of short term outcomes, short term attendance and “subsidy per seat” figures, subsidy versus generated income ratios, to
- b) A longer-term horizon encompassing a strong research and development focus, as well as the expected production focus.

The Funders must recognise the rights for the companies to employ more resources for new writing development, to take risk and fail when taking risk, in the expectation of longer term artistic and economic gains. Such gains will not happen within one year, or even necessarily within a 3-year time frame (the standard funding timeframe now entrenched across many funding programs). We are looking at 5 – 10 years at least. The potential outcomes will benefit both the writing community in Australia, the companies and Australia’s profile as a country promoting its own unique creativity.

This education of government is just as much the task of the writers as it is of the companies. A strong lobbying process needs to be in place. It is noted that apart from the funding agencies themselves, and their workers, there is no lobbying program or lobbyist for the theatre industry. This fact is reflected in the sub-optimal outcomes, at least in this area of new writing development, for the theatre sector in the recent recommendations resulting from the Nugent Inquiry into the Major Performing Arts Sector. The Australian Writers’ Guild can play a major role in this regard.

To access funds from the private sector to support new writing development initiatives, support cannot just be pitched for the tried and true and the known. Much of the private sector has an R & D focus, the theatre industry has too and this needs to be made known, recognised, linked and supported. The theatre industry itself should attempt to communicate this better to the private sector. Companies can align themselves in these activities with the corporations who see a match between their R & D and those of the artists, and who see a benefit to promoting Australian creativity across all endeavours, industrial, scientific and artistic. The Australian Business Foundation for the Arts is the perfect vehicle to educate the private sector in this regard.

Personally, the research findings have reaffirmed the new directions the company I manage is heading in. There are still gaps in what we do at State Theatre Co. of SA, but we have already demonstrated that lack of funding does not mean such practises cannot be put in place. We have found private sector funds to support us in endeavours, such as a new writing laboratory, and created self funding workshops for young writers and established a sponsored young writer’s competition. What remains to be done is the better engagement of our community to put many of the other practises into place, the dissemination of the above information and the concerted lobbying of political decision makers.

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