



The middle years: Death Defying Theatre transformed

Ian Maxwell

Department of Performance Studies
University of Sydney

In July 2006, in a noisy room at Performance Space I met with Fiona Winning and John Baylis to reflect upon their times at the helm of, when Fiona joined the company, Death Defying Theatre, and what became, during John's Artistic Directorship, Urban Theatre Projects. This essay is based upon that conversation.

In the broadest terms, the period 1991-2001 saw the company develop from a ensemble-based model, where artistic and management direction was guided by a loose collective of present and past workers, based in a small office in the Pavilion behind Bondi Beach, struggling to sustain cohesion and artistic focus, to an artistic-director driven company based in the heart of Sydney's western suburbs, developing technically and logistically challenging, site-based performances in, with and about local 'communities'. This transformation entailed nothing less than inventing a new model for making performance work, drawing upon both the legacy of 'community theatre' and—herein lies perhaps the most remarkable (and most frequently remarked upon) aspect of this experiment—upon what might be broadly (and unsatisfactorily) labelled as the 'avant-garde', or perhaps 'post-modern' traditions developed in inner city venues including the Performance Space.

"Experiment" is no exaggeration. Decisions to relocate the company, initially to Auburn, and then further away into relative isolation from the cultural centres of the City and Eastern Suburbs, to commit to developing work with local communities, in response to those communities' needs (rather than responding to commissions from various authorities and levels of government), to develop that work in unconventional locations (this driven as much by necessity—the absence of performing arts infrastructure in the western suburbs—as by design), and to adopt and adapt innovative dramaturgical models, meant that the company—its artistic leadership, its workers, its collaborators and its various audiences—never settled into a comfortable, established practice. Rather, the company through this period constantly pushed boundaries. The experimentation was not reckless, although in looking back over their respective tenures, both Winning and Baylis freely admit to certain naïveties. Neither, however, in recollecting their experiences, talks of 'risk-taking'; instead, both talk of responsibility and accountability, to audiences, and to the constituencies with whom they developed the work.

The move

In his contribution to this volume, Paul Brown recounts the eleventh-hour decisions, taken in late 1990 on the basis of a hastily put together report, to save DDT from being wound up. The key recommendations were, first, to relocate the company to the Western Suburbs, and second, to reform the company's administrative and artistic structures. This involved shifting from a (rather tired) ensemble model to that of an artistic directorship.

Where, in the early years of the company's existence, a certain critical mass of workers carried "a kind of overflow" from year to year, by 1990, the turnover of ensemble members was placing a strain on the administration and management, creating problems for the maintenance of a repertoire of material, skills and knowledge. Each ensemble

would spend a while getting something up; they'd travel, tour around, then they couldn't do it again, or they'd have to rehearse people into it and nobody had ownership of the product; there was this self-driven collective [but] nobody actually cared enough about the work unless they were making it, so where does the artistic vision come from? It was just lost every time.

Brown approached Winning, with whom he had been working in the Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board. Winning had been working with Queensland community-based companies Street Arts and the Popular Theatre Troupe. They spoke of developments in Queensland politics and arts practice. "I was asked to come and do a six-month contract with them at the beginning, and when that ended, it then"—Winning chuckles at her choice of words— "descended into a full-time job."

Over the last years of the 1980s, she recalls,

[DDT] was almost like—this sounds more cynical than I mean it to—a place where young actors could get a one year contract and work on their craft, but they weren't necessarily able to [pursue an artistic vision].

This was not a problem exclusive to DDT, says Baylis:

TYP [Theatre for Young People] companies were moving through the same phase—Toe Truck and the like had just deteriorated to gigs for actors, with much less focus on any artistic vision or leadership.

At stake, according to Baylis, was artistic leadership in an increasingly complex social context:

[t]he question of responding to a community, and an ideology in which the artist takes the lead, in a situation in which the community does not even identify itself, let alone demand an artwork... if you don't set up a model of artistic leadership—however you do it, it can be a collective—it will lose vitality.

Baylis here touches on the issue that was to worry at the company over the next decade—the problem of just what the word *community* means in a massive post-colonial, multicultural conurbation at the turn of the twenty-first century. For Winning, the complexities were not immediately apparent. Her aim, in 1991, was to establish a "model of community participation and relevance" in which the company would be "embedded in a local geographical community with all the complexities that surround that". Winning calls this "the participation model": artists, rather than presenting a completed work to a community, would collaborate with the community to make, and to perform, a work. If the conceptual complexities surrounding the idea of 'community' were not yet apparent, the logistical complexities hidden in the deceptively straightforward phrase "the participation model" became apparent from the outset.

Community and Place

It is one thing to intend to work in and with these things called 'communities' in this place 'the Western Suburbs'. Both are slippery concepts, and Winning admits to a "naivety" as she set about negotiating DDT's relation to each.

I was an outsider looking at everything like a tourist, listening to the politics of Sydney... this division [between cosmopolitan east and 'underclass' West] that seemed so potent... Western Sydney seemed to be on a political agenda: it seemed like the place to be in terms of working with diverse communities, of there not being any other theatre companies in Western Sydney at that time—apart from Q Theatre—and the amazing diversity of cultural practices whether they be folkloric or urban beatish, or whatever; there was just so much going on.

There was a political will, through the Ministry for the Arts, to develop cultural resources in the western suburbs. Winning had connections through working for the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council. She recalls

driving around Western Sydney meeting with [the few] multicultural arts officers... to tell me what was already happening in Western Sydney. I visited people and went to different sites and met with different communities... [local Arab-Australian artist and collaborator] Alissar Chidiac was involved in the early research, talking to Arab

communities. Michael Gough from the Ministry for the Arts came with me to a series of meetings with local government: he became the suit and political support, so these local government people would actually feel that we weren't just this little team of young people, predominantly women.

Initially the advances to councils met with scepticism. It was hard to reach decision-makers—general managers and the like. Most often, they would make contact with relatively isolated community arts officers. However, an approach to the Auburn City Council paid off.

Auburn was just right. It was one of those absolutely straightaway matches. It felt right. And —part of this feels shameful in retrospect—it felt right partly because it wasn't too far out... we got some criticism that we hadn't really moved to Western Sydney and all that kind of stuff, but it felt right because there were Arab and Turkish communities who were interested in having dialogues with us. Secondly, we got to the General Manager pretty quickly; and third, they wanted us and they gave us a space—an office space. And fourthly I thought that it was going to be easier to convince people in and around the company: we were at Auburn and not [further away in] Blacktown or Casula.

The company was given space in the Lady Mayoress's office. "It was beautiful", says Winning, "in all its 1950s splendour, its blue embossed satin couches. Fabulous." DDT was given half of the room; behind a makeshift screen the other half of the room was used to storing the Council's "precious furniture, gilt mirrors and stuff", although before long, this space was colonised for meetings and DDT's own storage.

The company set to work creating, in 1991, *Café Hakawati*, exploring the 'Arab community's' experiences during the first Gulf War. It immediately created problems:

[the Council] was a very old-fashioned culture, and the staff was very Anglo. There were some good people there—I don't mean to say that it was a desperately racist place—but it was just an old-fashioned culture. A wife [of one of the council staff] used to ring me and give me a really hard time. She was incensed that we were in the Lady Mayoress's room working with Arabs...

While Auburn Council certainly had representatives from a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, Winning explains, "that didn't mean anything when they were real estate agents: they were there as real estate agents". The Council did not know what it was getting into; in all likelihood, Winning reflects, they were anticipating a relatively 'safe' grip, working in schools. Instead, *Café Hakawati*, staged in a church hall, attracted massive publicity, from the Council's perspective, "for all the wrong reasons". "I would never have done anything different" reflects Winning, "but it was not strategic in terms of our relationship with the Council. It was the beginning of the end."

The intention was to make a work that came from "a different position, that wasn't being heard". For Winning, the work was politically motivated. Her artistic aspiration was as simple as "trying to make a good work that spoke to both Arab communities and to non-Arab communities and offered challenges, new perspectives and different ways of thinking to both." The work needed to be operating on a whole range of levels, and at the same time give itself over to an Arab voice which at that time—not dissimilar to now —was demonised on every level. "Participants kept saying that they wanted to make something that actually 'humanised'—all those words—that made it clear that we are not all the same . . . members of the community had a very strong sense of wanting to step up".

However, *Café Hakawati* also revealed, from the outset, the problematic nature of 'community':

there were many communities within the Arab community and that ways of talking and working with people were completely rhizomatic. We worked with an organization called Bannin which was like a community from Tripoli [in Lebanon], many of whom had moved to Auburn, and it was like transplanting whole sets of families and communities and networks. During the rehearsals it was important to place ourselves within that group... but that also meant placing ourselves in the heart of Tripoli, and there are people from different parts of the Middle East who were outside of and perhaps even felt alienated from that particular group... my big lesson was that [this process] is rhizomatic: talking to someone who leads you to someone who introduces you to someone... you have to have the energy to follow that trajectory.

The works that followed the initial foray into situated, 'real' communities reflected an increasingly nuanced understanding of the idea of community itself. *Blood Orange* (1992), written by Noelle Janacewska, was a self-consciously poetic work, the impetus for which Winning remembers as having come from the Fairfield Womens' Health Centre:

we didn't make it ethno-specific: we just advertised and through a range of different networks a bunch of young women came and did some workshops. They were not cohered as any kind of community; they came as individuals who wanted to do some stuff, who wanted to talk about themselves, who wanted to have fun.

Winning admits that, in general, things were not unfolding as she had anticipated.

My naïve—completely naïve—politic at the time was that the company would be run by non-English Speaking Background artists, some of whom were developed by the company, some of whom were attracted to the company because of the work that it did.

Eye of the Law (1994) recognised communities of affiliation— specifically that set of practices and ideas clustered around 'hip hop' (graffiti, break-dancing, rapping)—rather than those of ethnicity. This was developed in 1995's *Hip Hopera*, tapping into the complex ways in which young people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, across the vast breadth of the western suburbs, were turning to mediatised resources of transnational cultural flows, rather than monocultural traditions. In doing so, the company found itself transgressing generic boundaries, experimenting with dramatic and non-dramatic forms, and expanding the kinds of places in which performances take place.

Winning recalls the tension that at the time pervaded the community arts sector: the question of bad art versus good art. Bluntly, this debate pitted those for whom a desired social outcome outweighed artistic significance against those who believed that work had to be *good*. Winning understood her own fundamental responsibility being to make good work:

that drove me as artist—how do I get better as an artist? How do the artists that we're working with get better as artists... I was doing workshops with Playworks trying to develop my skills, and in the process, of course, building a network of artists that were not involved in any specific kind of practice, but I got to be friends with Clare Grant and John Baylis.

By 1995, Winning was ready to move on. When the Board's selection for a replacement artistic coordinator withdrew at the last minute, an interim measure was put in place: Harley Stumm was appointed company manager, a position that had been left vacant in anticipation of the new appointment. Winning stayed on with Gail Kelly and Monica Barone as a member of an Artistic Directorate. Together, they and Stumm put together a program, with Kelly, Winning and Barone each taking responsibility for particular projects.

This experimental set-up transformed the way the company was managed, how the work was produced, and the relationship between artistic and management/producing, anticipating the kind of producer-driven model now, in 2006, being debated for the entire small-to-medium theatre sector. In practice, rehearsal room and company office drew apart: there was neither, Stumm recalls, a consistent company vision and interests (artistic and financial) represented in the rehearsal room, nor a permanent practitioner perspective in the office.

After 18 productive, but stressful months, it became clear that this arrangement "really was a very short-term measure—it wasn't a new model" at all. The Board advertised, seeking proposals for an artist or artists wishing to work with the company in a fulltime capacity. Applicants were invited to describe this capacity. John Baylis pitched to be artistic coordinator, and was, in 1997, appointed to that position.

Community Cultural Development meets the Avant Garde

Reflecting on his observations of UTP's work from 1997 to 2000, Keith Gallasch wrote

[a] lot of community arts practice became embedded within the community services offered by government, local government, and so on. So a lot of community arts happened through salaried officers in migrant resource centres, youth centres, in local councils. And it's delivered like a government service. There's a way of doing it and you do it (2000: 33).

Community practice, Gallasch suggested, was characterised by "clichés and unquestioned conventional practices". Reviewing Alicia Talbot's work (*Cement Garage*) in 1999 Gallasch and Virginia Baxter wrote "[i]n the tradition of companies like Urban Theatre Projects... [this production] use[s] contemporary performance models to invigorate a community theatre model" (1999-2000: 28). Talbot, Gallasch enthuses, "bravely takes performance principles rather than tired theatrical conventions" to the project (ibid). She is "emphatic that she is not using the contemporary community theatre model" (1999: 25). Instead,

The Cement Garage is, like Urban Theatre Projects, another example in the west of the continuing involvement of members of Sydney's performance community working innovatively within the broader community (1999: 25).

On this account, a community theatre scene, devoid of innovation, inspiration and energy was saved, some time around 1997 ("over the last 3 years" wrote Gallasch in 2000) by the heroic efforts of 'contemporary performance' to share with the suburban underclass the fruits of their wisdom and sophistication.

Is this a fair interpretation of the efforts of a number of people, some of whom were members of the 'contemporary performance community', and many others who were not, to develop models of practice appropriate to rapidly changing social realities?

Almost certainly not. The impetus for developing new models—and specifically the constantly evolving model developed through the 1990s by DDT/UTP came from within the community and cultural development sector itself: there is, as performance academic (and UTP collaborator) Paul Dwyer has argued, no case that there was ever a singular, one-size-fits-all public service 'community theatre model' (see bibliography, below). As I have suggested, above, the 'problem' with the community sector, insofar as Death Defying Theatre was concerned, had been identified—and addressed successfully—in the late 1980s. Gallasch's hypothesis effectively overlooks the contributions of Winning (and her collaborators) over a period of half a decade: from the Brown report, through the recruitment of Fiona Winning to the staging of *Café Hakawati*, *Hip Hopera* and the preparations for *TrackWork*, it is hard to sustain the assertion that a flagging community theatre model was saved from mediocrity and failure by the sudden transfusion, circa 1997, of the fresh new blood of the avant-garde.

Baylis offers an alternative narrative—one that suggests certain problems at the heart of this synthesis of contemporary performance practice and community theatre. After several years of making self-consciously 'post-modern' work with feted contemporary performance group The Sydney Front since the mid 1980s, Baylis was drawn to the idea of making performance outside of arthouses: "that was one of the reasons why I didn't want to proceed with The Sydney Front..."

It just got too easy and irresponsible in a way. We could do anything that we wanted. There was a converted following, and it felt silly. I'm being overly harsh about it; there are other things that I really valued about it, but there was no accountability in it... so I quite liked the idea of being in a context where you had to actually justify what you were doing. You couldn't appeal to an authority like high theory. That appealed to me as a challenge, still keeping the same aesthetic strategy...

Baylis had worked with the founders of DDT—Kim Spinks, Christine Sammers and Paul Brown—in the late 1970s, on Rex Cramphorn's projects in the Seymour Centre Downstairs Theatre. Following the end of The Sydney Front in 1993, Baylis had been working with the Australia Council as a program officer. "I'd heard about *Hip Hopera*", he explains:

I'd seen a number of works in my capacity with the Australia Council, but *Hip Hopera* in particular I'd thought interesting... on the basis of the idea of *Hip Hopera* I thought, can you imagine the type of work you could do with this?... I was artistically driven, I had no community experience.

Baylis brought ideas about making and structuring a work with the kinds of dramaturgical innovations developed by The Sydney Front. The focus was to become, increasingly, about creating environments for audiences to be in, so that part of the meaning of the work was created by that environment. And these environments were to be public spaces, rather than being created, *ex nihilo*, in a black box theatre.

The Politics of Representation

The first project on which Baylis worked for DDT was 1997's *TrackWork*—a show conceived (Baylis is at pains to point out) by Monica Barone and Winning: "I inherited it, so it was quite accidental..." he concedes. Winning also points to the contribution of company manager Stumm, not just to *TrackWork*, but to earlier shows including *Hip Hopera* and *Going Home*.

As DDT moved into more and more complex relationships with councils, public authorities and local neighbourhoods, the logistics, negotiations and management matters for which Stumm took responsibility became, Baylis acknowledges, "part of the creative function" of the company. As revealed in Eugene van Erven's documentary film about the project, *TrackWork* was a logistic nightmare involving discrete performances solicited from community groups and youth theatres from around the inner western suburbs: a work that juxtaposed disparate and unconnected performances, presented to a traveling audience of train-borne flaneurs. The show was an outstanding success; Baylis's presence as Artistic Director and the work's departure point at inner-city Redfern Station brought DDT's work to the attention of a relatively new audience: the art theatre crowd.

Almost immediately, Baylis was confronted by the 'community' problem. In 1998, he assisted Vietnamese-Australian artist Tony Le Nguyen to direct *Chay Vong Vong*:

I had no idea of this split within the [Vietnamese] community. The old community was dominated by the ex-military South Vietnamese who ran it like a military operation. One cast member was a North Vietnamese refugee who was not trusted by some in the local community: they trusted nobody from the north. He was actually kidnapped and interrogated when he first arrived; it was like a state within a state. This was the older, the mid-70s refugee. So I was walking Tony around, getting a feel for it all, [and even] he didn't know the politics of it.

Baylis also speaks of another non-anglo artist "being castigated because she allowed herself to play a white anglo in a film." For Baylis, the —again he uses the word: 'naïve'—impulse to 'work with communities' hit Realpolitik hurdles.

[The work] wasn't being driven by community, it was being driven by university-educated arts workers from the community who acted in ways as gate-keepers and who would try and stand between you and the community, and not want you to go round them, preferring you to go through them, negotiate through them. I realised that post-modern theory had been displaced by post-colonial theory, and that I'd better go and do some reading.

"After that first year," Baylis recalls, "I never wanted to do an ethno-specific show". Instead, the renamed Urban Theatre Projects ("I wanted something *bland*, that could have been a local government department or something, a bland corporate logo") set about developing shows that thematised the problematic issues of representation, place and community.

1998's *Speed Street* explored the theme of shared place as the grounds for understanding contemporary, urban communities. Baylis's intention was to use locations that were "living, breathing public spaces, not just where performers wanted to work." This was not controlled, or necessarily controllable, space; it was real space, or, rather, real places, where people were going about their daily lives, and where there was always the possibility of chance events occurring.

In the case of *Speed Street*, the location was an actual street in Liverpool. John's account evinces a deep ambivalence at the heart of his Artistic Directorship:

[w]e put a lot of effort into socialising with the people on the street. But it was such a transitory area; not many people identified with the place, because it was just the cheapest place to live; you'd have Sudanese refugees who were desperately saving money to get out of there, it had that quality to it.

This is literally u-topia, or *ou-topos*: a place experienced as a lack of place. Few people who lived in Speed St were that interested in the project; the majority of the performers were brought in from elsewhere.

Baylis admits that the model—involving a local community in the process of animating their own place—failed.

That was where I started to take a back seat. The collaborating artists had not much interest [either]; they came from a more CCD background, and were more interested in telling stories about the local people.

The deflation that Baylis experienced returns him to the theme of the artistic grounds for the practice:

That was also the show where I decided that I didn't want to work with community artists anymore... there's a censorious attitude, even when you're in a room away from the community, just throwing around ideas, you can't come up with a whacky idea and just let it sit there and wait for the good idea that is three ideas beyond it. Straight away it's cut off: "No! You can't do that... it's disrespectful, no... no..." The only creative process that I knew was that you start with dumb ideas and you keep working until they become good ideas.

1999's *<subtopia>* revelled in the idea that people invent communities for themselves, suggesting that whatever your ethnicity, you could choose your community affinity through a subculture: you could float free of, and perhaps transcend, your origins.

For this "heresy" (as he describes it), Baylis copped a critical bucketing in the pages of Arts West. Staged in and around the shopping precinct of central Bankstown, *<subtopia>* was inspired by Eugene van Erven's account of the 'exposure tours' performed by the Philipino Educational Theatre Association (PETA), involving taking a group of spectators into the place of a particular, often oppressed or minoritarian community, and exposing that social reality.

"That appealed to me" says Baylis, before going on to use (again), the word 'naive' to describe the outcome:

in retrospect I realise that [the 'exposure tour' model] assumes that the audience are visitors... the audience changed a little bit, because it did attract an inner city crowd, but it also attracted a local audience for each show, so what almost became more interesting was that mix: the inner city types and the locals.

With *<subtopia>* Baylis was deliberately applying the theoretical premise of the Sydney Front's work:

we were trying to resist what was then being theorised as the dictates of the politics around the male gaze. We were trying to subvert the gaze of the audience, and how do you do that? You try to put the audience in a slightly dangerous position so that they can't relax into a nice voyeuristic space, because at any moment, they might be exposed, too...

The critical difference was, of course, that while the members of the Sydney Front were experienced, trained performers, many of the contributors to *<subtopia>* were not.

[We were] working with community members, who don't necessarily have the same strategy: that's not their reason for being there... they came there for their own reasons. In the end, I was becoming more of a facilitator. I would create situations, but then what they do is their own concern, I didn't try to build a master theoretical construct, let alone a narrative construct.

The tension between the disparate motivations for participation in such projects had already been apparent to Baylis during *TrackWork*. He is still uncomfortable about the work:

there is an ethical question there about manipulating people; they don't know the context they were performing in. I don't know whether that is just an ethical question that every artists deals with: [that of] exploitative relationships.

At the same time, Baylis admits that by the time he got to the end of his time at UTP he felt that “this is what all art will be in the future: mixing the untrained and the trained, high aesthetic and street stuff.”

However, Baylis recognises that this was not work that he wanted to do:

I also knew that I was not the right person. I’m too outside, too much of the backseat driver. To really do the job well, you’ve got to be prepared to really live it, to get everyone’s trust by going right in. I always wanted to keep my distance and move the pieces around from that distance.

Baylis’ legacy to UTP—albeit one, as I hope I have suggested, for which the groundwork was put in place throughout the 1990s by his predecessors—was a model for making work at the interstices of the trained and the untrained, of ‘high’ and popular cultures, of community as origin and aspiration, of places real and imaginary, in all their dystopian confusion and churlishness.

Coda

Baylis’s artistic directorship saw some of the most adventurous, enthralling and inventive performance work ever produced in Sydney—and quite likely Australia. The company’s profile and reputation soared nationally and internationally. The vigour (and rigour) with which Baylis and his team developed relationships with various collaborators changed not just the profile and standing of cultural practices across Sydney, but the way in which such practices work. In the process, Baylis and his collaborators set in motion, in their wake, careers, aspirations and imitations.

Baylis’ account stands in measured counterpoint to Gallasch’s somewhat triumphalist narrative. As we talk, Baylis is aware that his perspective “foregrounds the self-critical; the disinterested reader would be forgiven for taking it to be the account of an interesting failure.” He does not back away from his “retrospective, over-nice scruples” and “grumbling dissatisfactions”, however, but points out that, ultimately, artists’ creations are not exclusively their own. “The shows we made,” he concludes,

meant a lot to those who participated in or saw them. I don’t walk away from what I did; I see it as a valuable, ‘successful’, even, contribution to the evolution of performance.

References

Dwyer, Paul “From *Speed Street* to High Street: By Train, Tram or Bus” Unpublished paper, Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Drama Studies (ADSA), University of Newcastle, July 2000.

Gallasch, Keith “John Baylis and the Performing Community” *RealTime* 36 April-May 2000: 33

— “Streetwise Dramaturgs” *RealTime* 33 October-November 1999: 265

— and Virginia Baxter “Lost in the in-between” *RealTime* 34 December 99-Jan 2000: 28

1 Fiona and John responded to drafts of this essay; I appreciate their candour and generosity. I have avoided larding the text with other than the minimum of scholarly apparatus—footnotes and the like. The context will, in each case, make it clear whose voice is being quoted.

2 Originally, both Winning and Baylis were appointed to the position of Artistic Coordinator; over time the title changed to Artistic Director.

3 *Toe Truck* was, between 1976 and 1993, best known for developing plays based upon issues about and stories for school-aged audiences..

4 Playworks, established in 1985, is a script development organisation offering dramaturgical consultation to playwrights, performance writers, teams of artists and theatre companies. At the time of writing, the future of the organisation is unclear.

5 Founding members, in 1986, of The Sydney Front.

6 My thanks to Harley Stumm for these insights