

Why must the show go on?

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I've been in the theatre business now for over forty years and I've seen a lot of changes in that time.

The industry has grown and has become far more professional and accountable. Its Boards of Directors today are a lot more than figureheads. Forty years ago the Board of Directors of an Arts company consisted of a group of worthy individuals whose names looked good on a letterhead – you had to have at least one judge and a couple of prominent socialites – a title or two helped a lot.

Nowadays recruiting a Board is a delicate and serious business. You need people who are leaders in their own fields, dedicated networkers with good political and corporate connections. They have to be prepared to make substantial financial contributions to the Company, spend a lot of time at sub-committee meetings, rehearsals and performances, be on tap to offer pro bono advice, be held responsible in the case of economic downturn and to do all this for nothing.

It's no wonder that recruiting Directors is such a competitive and time-consuming business, especially when you're trying to achieve an appropriate gender-balance on the Board.

And it remains a fact that the sterling work and dedication of the Boards of arts organizations goes largely unrecognised. They only get their names in the paper when things go wrong.

Another area of intense competition is the recruiting of top quality management in areas of administration, marketing, fundraising and finance. In terms of remuneration, theatre can't begin to compete with the corporate sector, so here again we are dependent on the passion and commitment of individuals who are convinced of the necessity of a thriving arts community for the benefit of society as a whole.

Competition in live theatre has increased drastically over the last decade or so. When I began my theatrical career the only serious competition was the cinema. TV was still something of a novelty.

Since then the competition from big-budget movies, TV, video and DVD, home cinema, pop concerts, the club scene and video-games has got the theatre clamouring for attention. And even within the live entertainment industry, competition for the disposable dollar is intense. People complain about ticket prices for live drama being too expensive – but they'll happily dish out two or three times as much to see *Dusty*, *The Lion King* or a rock concert. As always, it's a matter of priorities.

A lot of people here in Sydney who care about the arts are regular subscribers to The Opera, The Ballet, Musica Viva or the ACO, The Sydney Symphony, Sydney Dance Company and maybe The Art Gallery. That doesn't leave much room for theatre; so they're going to subscribe to one or two of the following – the STC, Belvoir, The Ensemble or Glen St.

If they have a night free they'll hopefully come to Bell Shakespeare as well. Being a touring company, we have virtually no subscriber base and depend almost entirely on single ticket sales.

How times have changed....

When I began my acting career in 1963 it was with the Old Tote Company whose home was a tin shed on the campus of the Uni of NSW. It held just 100 people and was Sydney's first (and only) full-time professional theatre company. The only competition of any sort came from the occasional J.C. Williamson musical.

As things improved, the Tote moved to a three-hundred seat theatre called the Parade where the current NIDA building stands on Anzac Parade, Kensington. I worked for the Old Tote as an actor and director in the early seventies, and this will show you how much the economics of theatre have changed:

In those days we could regularly put on shows with casts of up to twenty in a 300 seat venue. Government subsidy was minimal and there was no corporate sponsorship. Ticket prices were modest and yet we could still make a profit – partly because actors' salaries were also very modest.

Now in a theatre with twice the number of seats, much increased government subsidy, healthy corporate sponsorship, and much higher ticket prices, you're struggling to break even with a cast of six or seven actors.

Where has the money gone? Certainly not on actors' salaries, which are as modest as ever.

The costs are in infrastructure, material costs, staff requirements, marketing and publicity, all things that have crept up on us incrementally.

My first experience in running a theatre company came in 1970 with the foundation of the Nimrod Theatre now known as The Stables.

A few old mates from Sydney Uni days – Ken Horler (lawyer), Richard Wherrett (director), Ron Blair (playwright) and myself decided to turn this derelict garage in the backstreets of Kings Cross into a performance space. We had no money but passed the hat around (mostly to Ken's lawyer friends) and raised enough to open up shop. With the help of our wives and other volunteers over the next few months we managed to clean the place up and build seating plus a bar in the foyer. Ken's wife Lillian (a tax lawyer, later a magistrate) took on the role of manager; and my wife, Anna, acted and helped make the costumes.

Our programme was basically new Australian plays with an irreverent, mildly political flavour. We applied for funding and the Australia Council offered us \$30,000 for the following year if we could make it through the first twelve months on our own, which we did.

After three years we had expanded sufficiently to leave Kings Cross and build a new theatre in Surry Hills which we ran for the next ten years. It's now known as the Belvoir St Theatre.

None of us had any training in business, management or finance. We learned on the job and made up the rest as we went along. We received strong support from the Whitlam government (and from Gough and Margaret personally), but these were the days before corporate sponsorship became a player. Most of our success depended on a strong box-office and we thrived when a show was popular. We transferred a number of shows to commercial theatres (*The Club*, *The Removalists*, *Travelling North* and *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* among them). *The Removalists* went on to the Royal Court in London and *Benjamin Franklin* to London and New York.

But when a show didn't pull the crowds we suffered badly; and since we were under-capitalised from the start, and had no cash reserves, it was a constant uphill battle. We produced over 100 Australian plays during my time at the Nimrod; but producing new plays by unknown authors is always high-risk and in 1985 I left the Nimrod, wrung-out, exhausted, and swearing I'd never run another theatre company.

But in 1990 I was approached by a former Director of the Nimrod, Tony Gilbert, who said he had a little money put aside and wanted to promote the production of Shakespeare in Australia.

Shakespeare had in fact saved our bacon a number of times at the Nimrod. Whenever our future was looking grim we'd programme a Shakespeare and pack the place out. Given the comparatively rough informal atmosphere of the Nimrod, a style of Shakespeare emerged that was spontaneous, unaffected and unashamedly Australian.

These were the qualities I hoped to transfer to the Bell Shakespeare Company. The money Tony Gilbert put up wasn't enough to launch a company but it was enough to enable me to approach the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and solicit their support. They gave me an office, a telephone and a mailing list and helped arrange a series of lunches where, once again, I passed the hat around. A Board of Directors was hastily assembled and corporate support was pursued as well as private donations. We received no government support (apart from a few project grants) for the first five years of our operation. By the close of 1990 we'd raised close on \$3/4 million. It wasn't quite enough for our purposes but we decided we couldn't wait any longer, so launched our first season in 1991. As a result, like the Nimrod, we have always been undercapitalised and have spent the last sixteen years trying to catch up. We now have an annual turnover in excess of \$8 million of which only 8% comes from core government funding. Our box office returns a respectable 55% on average; the rest we have to make up from corporate support and private donations. We have set up a Foundation to build those very necessary cash reserves. But we are still vulnerable. Put on a well-known play like *Romeo And Juliet* or *Hamlet* and you're half way there. But last year, to celebrate our fifteenth anniversary, we programmed three lesser known Shakespeare plays, confident that we had now built a loyal audience who would enjoy seeing rarely-performed works. Our calculations were wrong and the box-office suffered accordingly. Like the Opera and the Ballet, we found, to our disappointment, that audiences are afraid of the unfamiliar but will pack out *Madam Butterfly* or *Swan Lake* year after year.

As I mentioned earlier, we are also fairly unique in having virtually no subscription base because we are a touring company with no home of our own. We depend almost entirely on single ticket sales. So our programming for the next season or two has to be a safer mix (in so far as theatre is ever safe) until we can catch up, yet again.

Enough of the business side of the agenda for the moment – Let's look at the other, the artistic side of running a theatre company.

Many people are unsure what a play-director actually does, so let me tell you:

The Director is the person responsible for the overall production. He or she has to first of all come up with a concept – What does the play mean, why does it matter, how do we communicate that to an audience? How should it look? Who should play the various roles? What sort of music and lighting are called for? What other areas of expertise – acrobatics, choreography, martial arts etc.

In all those areas should you play it safe or take risks? Will a radical design concept stimulate an audience or send them away in droves? Should you go for the obvious casting or cast against type and surprise your audience with a brand new interpretation, an unlikely choice of actor? What will be the impact on Box Office?

How much should you strive for star names and how much should you honour your obligation to the next generation by giving new-comers a chance? In this area I tend to be a bit of a softie and love pushing new talent to the fore.

I try to give myself twelve months to prepare a production; to do the necessary research, work with my designer and conduct auditions. Once I've cast the roles I call the actors in to collaborate on the costumes. The actor has to feel that the finished costume is totally in harmony with his or her concept of the character. The only catch is the actor saying "But I don't know who I am until I start rehearsing with the other actors." So one has to leave as much room as possible for late decisions and people changing their minds, while keeping happy the costume makers who are working to tight deadlines.

When the set, costume, props, sound and lighting equipment area finalised, I submit the whole lot to the Production Manager for costing.

My most recent experience of this was with *Romeo And Juliet*. My Production Manager looked approvingly at the designs and said: "lovely... Go away and cut \$140,000."

So you spend the next few months scaling down and paring back to the bone. That's all pre-production.. Then comes the intense five-week rehearsal period to get it all together and put the show on.

One of my priorities is to create a team spirit: to make everybody feel included; to make everybody feel they own the show; to create an emotionally safe environment so that people can take risks and reveal their innermost, private selves without embarrassment.

Everybody should feel empowered. So to those actors playing the smallest roles I say "Show us some exercise or skill we can use in rehearsal, either as a warm-up or part of the show..." When debate gets heated I pass around the Director's Hat. Everybody is entitled to wear it and express an opinion. Every suggestion should be listened to, nobody, can be shouted down, while wearing the Director's Hat.

Say you have to devise a battle scene (a frequent challenge in Shakespeare): I have two options – I can either call in a fight director to devise it and teach it to the cast or I can approach it more organically. I can split the cast into groups of three or four and say "Each show me six ways of falling off a horse. Each show me a six ways of killing someone with an axe.." etc etc. When they've all had time to work out their routines we have a show and tell. Everyone gets a go and we video tape the lot so nothing gets forgotten. Then the fight director and myself will watch the videos. We choose the best dozen or so routines and work out a sequence, with the creators of each routine teaching it to the rest of the cast.

What this achieves is a feeling of spontaneity, lots of different ideas and the actors feeling empowered. Even those whose routines aren't used are happy that they've had the chance to show their stuff and the cast as a whole are proud of the sequence they've had a hand in creating rather than simply learning something by rote.

The Director has to play the benign autocrat. He can't appear indecisive because that makes for insecurity in the cast. He mustn't appear flustered or impatient and he mustn't play favourites.

One of his hardest jobs is to pace the rehearsal process, keeping everybody working towards the same goal of being fully prepared by opening night. He has to learn who to push and when to let things coast along and breathe a bit – It's a bit like baking bread.

He mustn't over-direct, but leave the actors some room for spontaneity and ownership of the role and he must be both a diplomat and a psychologist, learning how to read the signs. Sometimes aggression, defensiveness and even laziness are a cover for insecurity and what the actor needs is encouragement rather than reprimand.

The Director has to be mindful of every individual actor (his needs and his private process) and yet maintain an overview of the whole show.

Some directors get emotionally needy or impatient, but this makes the cast distrust them.

Some directors actually encourage friction and disharmony in the room because they feed off the tension and feel that it creates drama. I find the reverse, and regard all negative energy as destructive. I feel that I'm not doing this for the fame or the money, so why be miserable as well? In my experience it's only a happy and supportive team that makes the effort worthwhile.

Rehearsal room dramas may provide a quick fix but the long-term results, over a six-month tour, can be poisonous.

But a director can't be too soft either. For the sake of the play he has to keep raising the stakes, encouraging full emotional commitment, pushing the actors to take greater risks, acting like a drill-sergeant when necessary to keep the show crisp and tight, having the courage to knock back inappropriate ideas.

And once the show has opened, that's not the end of it. The director has to keep an eye on the play when it's on the road, dropping in once or twice a week to make sure it's still on track, that morale is high and that not too many little "improvements" have crept in.

As well as being an actor and director, I am also the Artistic Director of The Bell Shakespeare Company – So what does that entail?

All of the above, plus determining the policy and repertoire of the company – What plays to do and why, who should direct them and what is expected aesthetically. I am also expected to be frontman or spokesman for the company on occasion, not so much in the business sense (I leave that to my excellent management team – my General Manager, her deputy, and other heads of department: finance, education, sponsorship, fundraising, marketing etc), but in constantly defining the vision and mission-statement and selling it to sponsors, donors and the media.

I also regard it as my duty to seek out and encourage new talent – actors, directors, designers, composers etc. I like working with young people. They keep me young and keep surprising me with their freshness and different outlook on life.

It's part of my job as Artistic Director to keep an overview of all that's happening with our vast Education programme, to make sure that all our touring shows are keeping up to scratch and to collaborate with all the various departments in the organisation to make sure we're all singing the same tune.

I have a number of Associate Artists, both actors and directors, in the Company, whose careers I wish to foster and whose input I welcome in the creative process.

As an actor/director myself I believe that it is good for the Artistic Director to maintain a public profile and lead from the front occasionally, as do Robyn Nevin, Graeme Murphy and Richard Tognetti in their various organisations.

So how successful is it, this juggling act, this wearing of two hats as artist and business-person?

Well, for a start it's nothing new. It is, in fact, a time-honoured practice. William Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright. He acted in all his own plays as well as directing them. He also had shares in the Globe Theatre and proved to be a shrewd business-man and an aggressive litigant. He was highly successful in attracting patronage – first from a series of wealthy noblemen, then the Lord Chamberlain and finally from the King himself. Sponsorship doesn't get much better than that.

His near contemporary, Molière, was another artist who ran his own company and that tradition has continued to the present day, reaching its zenith in the 19th Century with great actor-managers like Irving, Kemble and Kean.

Today many theatre companies, dance companies, orchestras and pop groups are headed, or at least fronted, by a practicing artist.

Are there tensions? Of course there are. The ideal Business person is expected to be pragmatic, predictable, steady, and strategic. Many artists on the other hand thrive on chaos, risk, flexibility and emotional impulses. They can be at their most thrilling when they are erratic and unpredictable.

But a lot of corporate people today are a little more open-minded than they used to be in this regard, and are looking at the values of flexibility, risk taking, and thinking outside the square.

A few years ago my wife and I were invited to Duntroon to give a Shakespeare recital for the young officers of ADFA.

Before the recital we had lunch in the mess with the commandant and I asked him why he'd invited us. He said: "tomorrow's soldiers are a new breed. They're going to be sent to all sorts of trouble spots. They can't just jump out of a plane and start shooting at people; they're going to have to immediately assess the situation and empathise with the locals, and exercise diplomacy. They can learn a lot from actors, and especially from Shakespeare. No one has better understood what makes people tick."

The artists' chief tool is imagination and, as Einstein pointed out, imagination is the basis of all science. Artists teach us to see life not just as it is, but what it could be. They teach us about innovation, creative speculation, self-knowledge, wit, cleverness and resilience.

The stifling of the imagination results in drudgery, dullness and lack of inspiration, inertia.

As individuals, art has the power to transform us as individuals, to expand our horizons and give us deeper insights into the human condition. It can teach us to empathise, to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes and see things from their point-of-view.

I regard it as an enormous privilege that I have been able to spend the best part of the last sixteen years working day-by-day in the company of William Shakespeare; to share something of his vision of the world, his joy, his despair, his indignation and healthy scepticism. If it weren't for him I don't know that I would have devoted my life to the theatre. But through his work I have been able to conduct a fascinating and never-ending examination of life, of people and of myself. His plays empower actors and give them an unrivalled range of self-expression in tackling roles of such magnitude, such passion, such truthful insight. Through Shakespeare's characters, actors can reveal their innermost selves. Shakespeare challenges directors to bring his stories to light with clarity, with emotional precision and simplicity.

All of us in the theatre industry regard ourselves as fortunate that we are able to exercise whatever talent we have in order to make a living in a profession that gives us such variety, excitement and satisfaction.

It has its downside too, of course. The unemployment rate for actors in Australia runs constantly at above 90%. Unless you're a movie or TV star, remuneration is pretty paltry and the insecurity monumental. The disappointments and knockbacks are many.

To balance the creative thrill, the actor or director has to live with anxiety. You agonise over a role or production for months. You can't sleep at night and at times you feel physically sick with anxiety. You give it all you've got but the exposure can be cruel. The critics can give it the thumbs down, the show is a box-office flop and you're pounding the pavements again looking for a job.

Even when a show's a success, it has a limited shelf-life. You look back on all the blood, sweat and tears that went into making it and then it's all over – nothing more than a memory, a programme and a bunch of reviews.

And on blue days you ask yourself why you do it.

A year or two ago I was at the Art Gallery Of NSW and there was a room set aside for a couple of Buddhist monks creating a mandala.

A small crowd hovered around the edges of this activity, marvelling at the intricate beauty of the pattern the monks were creating by sifting coloured sand through their fingers. The mandala was some three metres square and after many days of intense concentration the monks had created something as glowing and exquisite as a Persian carpet.

When it was finished, they sat and looked at it for while, then tipped the whole lot into the sea.

It was a lesson about the transience of life; that it's creative endeavour that matters, not trying to hold on to something.

We do our work in the belief that a vibrant and articulate theatre helps create a more interesting and aware community.

At Bell Shakespeare we spend our life on the road. Our productions tour to all capital cities and major regional centres as well as nearly forty smaller regional venues such as Taree, Nunawading, Whyalla, Kalgoorlie, Karratha and Launceston. Our education teams work the year round in schools in every state and territory playing to over 60,000 students including those in outback communities. When we can't drive there we fly there, and if we can't fly there we broadcast live via satellite – fully interactive programmes.

The response from audiences, young and old, makes it all worthwhile, as does the emergence of exciting and dedicated new talent.

For our young actors it's a life of considerable adventure. Just last week our education team in Western Australia had to get from Newman to Port Hedland for three school performances. The aircraft hired by the local sponsor was too small to carry the actors and their equipment. So they hired a four-wheel drive with roof racks and set out on the five-hour drive across the desert. Halfway there they got a flat tyre, but still managed to make it to Port Hedland in time for the shows. These are four kids fresh out of drama school, so you can see it as baptism by fire, and something good for their memoirs.

I'm glad to have had the opportunity to talk to you and tell you something about what we crazy theatre-folk do and why we do it. It's important for us to make people like you aware of what we're doing because it's your support, your endorsement that is needed to keep the show on the road.

Thank you for your attention..

John Bell

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