

By Dr. Julian Meyrick

*Follow truth not too close at heel lest it kick thy teeth in.* It's a quote from the poet George Herbert, my favourite, a reminder to theatre artists you can do the right thing and still end up with a show that tanks. Theatre, a public art form, is tough, messy and relentless. You shouldn't be too thin-skinned about reactions to your work, not if you want to stay sane.

I am the director of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, which has a week to run at the Arts Centre as part of MTC's 2009 season. Recently, I've been thinking about the reviews the show received, its reception with audiences, the development of the actors. Here I want to talk about the first. In particular I want to discuss the reviews in the *Age* ("Marred Performance of Brilliantly Sinister Pinter" 27/6/09) and the *Australian* ("Pinter Transposed into Strine" 29/6/09) – two newspapers of record. Compared to the floggings I've received from both Cameron Woodhead and Alison Croggon in the past, these reviews aren't too bad. There's positive comment, a few insights. At another time, for another project, I would be content to score my three stars in the Interesting-if-Flawed-Category-of-Contemporary-Theatre-Making. Why then did I fall into despair on reading them? Why did that despair not lift, as it usually does, after a few days? Why do the reviews still leave a bitter, ugly taste? Surely my response is unreasonable. But it isn't. These are *failed* reviews, if truthful in a narrow way. That is, I'm sure both critics said what they felt and put it down much as they felt it. But in shaping their responses, everything about *The Birthday Party* that is different, new, challenging and important has been swept aside. The result is an evasiveness which, if you didn't know the show, might not be perceptible. Even if you *did* know the show you might be tempted to gloss over it as allowable, though strange. But if you cared about it, had felt Pinter's cold, undeniable fingers close round your heart then this weird slipperiness is something that needs explaining.

I cannot unpack my thoughts on the show without discussing Australian theatre more broadly. Although it is a generalisation, it is one that captures something about the art form at the moment to say *there is a hole where its heart should be*. This is exemplified by Cameron's and Alison's reviews. They are incomplete, in an emotional and spiritual sense, and this speaks to a larger disconnection in the culture. In order to make my argument – and to be fair to these two reviewers, which is important – I must first sketch my approach as a director, then that of the critics, finally the salient features of *The Birthday Party*.

To be a director committed to simplicity and *sachlichkeit* (literally 'sobriety') in an age of bling and high technique is to be out of step with the temper of the times. It is to go *under* when the disposition is to go *over*, to want to clarify and reduce, when others are adding to the spectacle, ramping up the emotions, indulging in *more* of everything, whatever that happens to be. The lack of purity of intent in contemporary Australian theatre always shocks me. There is a desperation I find deeply disturbing. And the assumption of a certain kind of deafness. If you're not shouting, then you're not being heard. Such is my default position as an artist, and having assumed it I have no right to complain when this is misunderstood, misrepresented or calumnified. Though, of course, it wears you down.

Cameron and Alison are, in their different ways, part of this fanfaronade, sometimes its supporters. It's not fair to count them in the same breath, really. Cameron is a literary critic, if he's anything, not a theatre person. His reviews show a startling aberrance in assessing live performance, a confusion regarding his own feelings and the feelings of his audience. Good critics *use* their emotions as a means of framing (though not necessarily agreeing with) the public response to a show. Cameron is not typically aware of this duty. For him it's about what he likes and what he doesn't, and his reviews are often fractured, lacking an integrated and organising core. They are reactions rather than responses. Alison, by contrast, is one of the most intelligent people writing on theatre today. She's got background in the art form in a way Cameron hasn't, and does not hold herself aloof from the realities of producing and advocating stage work. But in one way she resembles her colleague: partisanship is the essence of her craft. It is possible to say ahead of time what Alison will think of any show because her view of theatre is schematic, adversarial and assured. The result is opinions which label themselves as such, yet lack range in feeling and taste. This has always been a problem for Australian critics of quality, who are bottled-up in a theatre scene not big enough even to be called a pond. It was said of the late Harry Kippax he spent so long looking for a new Australian theatre he didn't recognise it when it arrived. A certain kind of diminishing power comes with being a critic – a

petty power directors also court, so I recognise it – that is corrosive of disinterested thinking and the wider view.

When in the last days of rehearsing *The Birthday Party* it became clear it would broadly work, I felt we were putting forward not merely “a nice, solid show” (as one of the actors put it), but a new alliance of forces. You can get the impression from Cameron and Alison’s reviews that staging Pinter plays with Indigenous actors is an interesting but not remarkable event, the sort of thing which happens from time-to-time in a culture open to the profit of cross-cultural casting. That’s weird. As I know, and they know, it’s the first time it has *ever been done*, so if the core of Pinter’s play is, in Cameron’s words “the vexed relationship between language and memory and identity” then this could have done with a little unpacking. Alison’s response is even more truncated “[the] cross-racial production gives the play a complex indigenous subtext that nevertheless resists obvious interpretation”. Does it now? In *The Birthday Party*, two men, Goldberg and McCann, turn up at a seedy boarding house looking for a third man, Stanley, who is hiding from them. In this production, everyone is Aboriginal except for Goldberg. So the action goes: a white man hunts down a black man, charms his landlady, seduces his girlfriend, then terrorizes, tortures and takes him away to a malign fate. When Stanley appears at the end of the play, ready to go, he’s physically OK but can no longer talk. It seems hilarious now but when I was rehearsing, I thought the meaning of all this would be *too obvious*. I hadn’t factored in Australia’s completely aphasic attitude to race.

Both Cameron and Alison had a problem with one of the lead performances, Isaac Drandic’s portrayal of Stanley. For Cameron it was a deal-breaker: “leaden and inert, Drandic seems incapable of talking like a real person, with stolid inflections that retain the impression of an actor reciting lines in the earliest phases of rehearsal”. He goes on to say – and this is an absolutely crucial give-away – “that by the end of the play we feel sorrier for Goldberg and McCann than we do for Stanley”. Alison doesn’t single Isaac out in the *Australian*, but she does in her blog, *Theatre Notes*, where she calls him “emotionally blank”, his lack of affect “neutralis[ing] many of the exchanges in the play, as Stanley is always a passive victim”. If you read more of the blog, you will see that not everyone felt that way. But it’s a devastating judgement which, if true, blunts the edge of Pinter’s play. Under such circumstances Alison would be right to claim that the comedy had overwhelmed the menace, reducing the drama.

Watching Isaac’s performance grow these past weeks I realise what a difficult job I asked him to do. He’s a capable, passionate actor with considerable stage presence, but the role of Stanley is tricky, ever-changing in tone and intent. Cameron’s review was a blow, too. When a reviewer expresses themselves in a lurid and personal way, and Cameron sometimes does, the result is a kink in the performance trajectory that needs to be battled through. There’s an element of truth in most criticism, however vitriolic, and you have to pick it out, action it, and grow stronger for having done so.

But comparing Isaac with the many young actors I have worked with over the years, I have also come to feel these critical judgements of his performance are harsh, unreasonable and perverse. Worse, they operate in such a way as to block traffic, fuddling the intended meaning of the show. His performance is used as an excuse not to look at the unsettling racial associations the action throws up. As a young, black, working-class man – and this description would apply both to Isaac and Stanley – empathy is withheld from him in an unnatural way. Isaac’s portrayal of Stanley didn’t lack feeling. He received countless letters and messages after Cameron’s review telling him so. If anything, *feeling was all there was* as he struggled, in the early stages of the run, to find the appropriate technique for his demanding role. I can’t prove it, but the evidence points in the other direction: to a critical absence where a critical response should be: to a marked unwillingness to connect with the victim of the play.

And here we get to heart of it: our culture’s bizarre, unreadable and depressing attitude to Aboriginality, including – the bit I know about – its representation on stage. Again I say you might get the impression from the reviews that cross-racial casting of canonical English plays went on all the time, instead of the reality, that it almost never happens. One contributor to the *Theatre Notes* blog suggested it might be a marketing strategy. But the implications are professionally and culturally profound. There are few more difficult playwrights than Pinter. If you can act Pinter, you can act anything. An indigenous cast nailing *The Birthday Party* is an indication that a new era in cross-cultural casting has arrived. It’s a shift from *why* (why cast Aboriginal actors) to *why not* (why not cast Aboriginal actors). If they can do the part, they can be in the play, regardless of colour or creed.

There's a social justice issue here, then, but that is not the only implication of the casting. The Indigenous actors in *The Birthday Party* aren't just ones who *can* do the roles; they are the *right* ones for them. It's about energy, not just representation. It's about renewal not only professional inclusion. In every way, these actors bring another dimension to a theatrical scene – and a repertoire – ever on the brink of turning inward. They bring something new. The work of today's theatre artists is good, but, let's be honest we're a socially homogeneous bunch: middle-class, tertiary-educated, white middle-Australians. Even those who fall outside this profile get sucked into its values. The danger is theatre becomes a college club, socially exclusive, experientially arid. For all our talk about diversity, for all the diversity that exists in Australia as a whole, it doesn't kick through to our theatre. More importantly, it doesn't kick through to our theatrical imaginations. We remain trapped in a limited reality we don't recognise as limited, in need of an alternate sensibility to open us up not only to different kinds of cultural portrayal but to other kinds of creative freedom.

The cast of *The Birthday Party* were the hardest working, most thoughtful, considerate and humorous bunch of actors I've worked with in a while. It was hard facing them after the reviews and having to explain why their achievement had been minimized, elided or traduced. They knew what they had done. And for me the most shameful thing was: *they were not surprised*.

To finish up, in *Theatre Notes* Alison says she was "very disappointed" with this production of *The Birthday Party*. : "There was all the architecture for something splendid, but nobody had switched on the lights." She's right. But the connection was hers to make. The production, which is full of problems, I'm sure, is also full of invitations. As a white director, as an Anglo-Australian, I can't stage a play about the experience of Indigenous people. I don't have the knowledge, the insight or the right. But I've got eyes and ears, and I can read. Everything to do with the official approach to Aboriginality in this country stinks. Pinter's play, which I do know because it's an object from my own cultural background, is about truth, violence, humour, deference and power. By bringing the two together I am trying to communicate something about how race operates in the fragmented, demented, tortured, amnesiac consciousness of contemporary Australia. Pinter says covertly what is difficult to point to directly: that the bad thinking surrounding Indigenous identity in Australian society today warps our whole way of life.

So, Alison I am very disappointed with you, you in particular. There is an issue for me of whether it's worth continuing as part of a culture that has revealed itself for what it is: closed-off, self-alienated, lost. *The Birthday Party* is a good show, I hope. Good *enough*. More importantly it is an attempt to action a truth, and move forward through that actioning. I don't know what Australian theatre is supposed to be if it does not encompass this as a primary dynamic. Just a cycle of mild aesthetic experiment and self-promoting, un-attached commentary, I guess. An expensive reality avoidance strategy.

At a future point – and it may not be far away – Australian theatre will hit the wall. In line with other sectors of the economy, the finances of the performing arts are getting more complicated, as costs continue to rise and profits prove harder to generate. At this moment, the question of what lies at the heart of Australian theatre may not be so esoteric. The industry will need to expand its sense of self, to become more genuinely diverse, yet preserve what it thinks is of on-going importance. It's a big call, but I think the critical responses to *The Birthday Party* suggest this moment, too, will be bungled. There is a rigidity, even a sterility to our current ideas of theatre that results in a weary confusion between the peripheral and the valuable, the look of something and its meaning, the faux-innovative and the genuinely new.

*The Birthday Party* is something genuinely new. I offer it up as such, in all its glory, for all its flaws. It breaks my heart that the invitation was, in and through these reviews, declined.