The Sydney Morning Herald
JULY 17-18, 2010

SPECTRUM

Upstaged

Why theatres spurn Australian plays

Christos Tsiolkas: what grandma taught me

Sting: I don't need to be loved by everyone

Wendy Sharpe: Avalon to Venice via the Archibald

COVER

Culture

Between the lines

Australian plays are too white, too middle class … and there are too few of them. JOYCE MORGAN looks at the debate raging over the health of our theatre.

A playwright sits alone, pen in hand, in a cavernous room. Another is deep in discussion with the creative team around a long table. A third unwinds with a couple of actors near a steaming tea urn.

All morning, playwrights from around Australia have been watching actors breathe life into their words. They have heard how the lines they have penned over months – and perhaps read aloud only to themselves – sound when delivered by those trained to do so.

By mid-afternoon, some of the six playwrights have already embarked on rewriting, putting the red pen through some parts, perhaps even killing off a cherished character, or adding a new plot twist. They will return the next day to repeat the process in the chilly CarriageWorks performance space in Newtown.

For two weeks, the former railway workshop was the engine-room of new Australian playwriting for the National Script Workshop.

The annual workshop is a chance for playwrights to work intensively with actors, directors and dramaturgs to develop their craft. It is an opportunity all too rare in Australia, as Melbourne-based Declan Greene – at 25, the youngest playwright taking part – well knows.

"Often, as an emerging writer, readings will just be a bunch of your friends around a table in your loungeroom. Even though that can be great, at the end you're not sure whether the fault is with your writing or with delivery or whatever," says Greene, whose work *Moth* will be produced at the Opera House Studio later this month.

The workshop, conducted by the national script development agency PlayWriting Australia this month, is the first since the controversial decision in May by the Premier's Literary Awards not to give a playwriting prize this year. The move, which dismayed many in the theatre world, has ignited debate about the quality of Australian playwriting and the health of our theatre. And it comes as PlayWriting Australia has just received a survey of theatre companies about their attitudes to new work (see box at right). It found that a key reason companies did not program Australian work was that they did not consider the quality high enough.

It is not hard to see why so many theatre companies adopt the "shopping trolley" approach, picking up the latest hit from London or New York. These plays arrive with a track record of success, glowing overseas reviews and the benefit of workshops, dramaturgy, trial runs. It is a systemic problem, says PlayWriting Australia's artistic director, Chris Mead.

"It's just cheaper and easier to pick up a play overseas," he says. But new plays don't arrive fully formed. "That's part of what we do – try to get the skills and quality up there so companies can pick up this work and get it into production," Mead says. "Everyone is looking for that perfect play, and that's always a reason not to do a [new] play. But the crucial thing is artists' development, allowing playwrights to increase their skills over time and over a number of theatres."

How best to do that is occupying theatre practitioners at a time when resources are tight and a generational shift is under way. The Australian playwrights who were shaped by the 1960s are beginning to vacate the stage. In the wings, a new generation of theatre-makers is experimenting with form and creating work in a different way. It is work that at times raises questions about what constitutes theatre today.

In the past five years, the ways of making theatre have transformed, says Lyn Wallis, director of the theatre board of the Australia Council for the Arts.

"I think the whole of our industry is going through this collapse of boundaries between art form and practice and the way things are made," she says. "The straight commission – with a writer going away into a dark room, writing the play and coming back, maybe working with a dramaturg, then having a relationship with a company and then with the audience – there's less of that. There are still companies that are commissioning work like that, but it tends to be a mix of ways of getting new work onto the stage. Now you are seeing groups of people getting together in a room and there might be writers among them. They may be working with text, but the making of it is entirely different from from the traditional commissioning model."

Adelaide's Border Project (*Highway Rock 'n' Roll Disaster*), Sydney's Version 1.0 (*A Certain Maritime Incident*) and Geelong's Back to Back (*Food Court* and *Small Metal Objects*) – all productions that have been seen in Sydney – have been among those making work in innovative, often group-devised ways.

The primacy of the playwright was a given in an era of the narrative-driven, text-based "well-made play". But in the 1990s, the emergence of director-driven theatre – epitomised in Australia by Barrie Kosky's productions – generated much debate about the role of the playwright. More recently, the growth in technology, shrinking attention spans and the ascendancy of visual culture have all impacted on our stages, in what is seen and how it is realised.

Sam Strong, who took over in May as artistic director of Griffin Theatre, which produces only Australian work, says a willingness to experiment characterises a younger generation of theatre-makers. Nonetheless, the writer remains central.

"Younger writers especially are not just interrogating content and form, but they're interrogating process. They're much more open to modes of working. Writers are working in a more collaborative way. This is starting earlier in the creative process than it historically did. There's an evolution in the way of making work, but writers are still the foundation and most important part of the process."

Strong, 33, was part of the groundbreaking work *Red Sky Morning*, developed two years ago with the playwright Tom Holloway (*Love Me Tender*), which used three overlapping monologues to unfold its tale. It was an attempt to make theatre for a generation used to receiving a lot of information quickly – theatre for the iPod generation.

"Theatre that is based on two people just talking to each other on stage in the one room hasn't really caught up with the way we take in information in the modern world," Strong says. "We can watch *Sunrise* and we can see a scroll bar going along the bottom and we can read a headline and we can check out the weather forecast."

Strong welcomes the debate ignited by of the Premier's decision, but believes arguments over whether or not Australian plays are up to scratch misses the point.

"Staging and developing new playwriting is an extraordinarily difficult, time-consuming and resource-heavy activity," he says. "The number of works making their way onto the main stage is a symptom of that difficulty and the difficulty of that process rather than a statement about the quality of the work that is out there."

Neil Armfield, outgoing artistic director of Company B Belvoir, believes he is leaving at a time when Australian playwriting shows great energy. He has long championed new theatre, having programmed, directed and developed such landmark works as *Cloudstreet* and *Keating! The Musical*. As he planned his final Belvoir season, he considered programming an all-Australian year. The plan didn't go ahead ("too self-regarding"), but not because he couldn't find enough Australian plays worth staging.

"I think we're actually in a rather good time, an extremely promising time. It may be that the names that have dominated the theatre have retired or pulled back a bit – Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra and obviously [David] Williamson," says Armfield.

"There's another generation com-

> *"Shows often have just one production in Australia. They have this short life and they've gone – it's like a dream.*
>
> Lally Katz (pictured), playwright

Who'd be a playwright?

PURSUING a career as a playwright in Australia is not an easy option. A commission for a new full-length work is $12,500 – for up to two years' work. Very few of the estimated 125 working playwrights in Australia command more than the $12,500 minimum, says Angela Keefe, of the Australian Writers Guild, the professional body for performance writers.

"You'd have to be pretty flash," says Keefe, the guild's organising and industrial manager. "Theatre writers make the least of any performance writers in Australia."

In contrast, television scriptwriters receive about $9000 for a 30-minute episode.

Yet getting a commission is no guarantee that the play will ever be produced. Most are not. Hard figures are not available, but PlayWriting Australia's Chris Mead estimates that only about 10 per cent of commissioned works reach the stage. **JM**

Act one, scene one … Tommy Murphy in rehearsals for *Gwen in Purgatory* at Belvoir St Theatre; Declan Greene at the national script workshop.
Photos: Quentin Jones, Ben Rushton, Simon Schluter

ing through, but I think that generation is very interesting."

Armfield has no doubts there is an audience hungry for new Australian theatre. Indeed, the most popular play in Belvoir's season last year was Brendan Cowell's *Ruben Guthrie*, about a hard-partying young man's battle with excess.

"Certainly, the shift to the perspective of Gen Y is very much the world of *Ruben Guthrie*," he says. "You might expect that audience would prefer to have their head stuck in a mobile phone or an iPad, but actually that audience, it seems to me, is finding the theatre a refreshing alternative."

Cowell's play began small, in Belvoir's tiny downstairs theatre, before it moved up to the main stage. Increasingly, this is a feature of Australian theatre and reflects overseas practice, where the "out-of-town tryout" offers a means to fine-tune work before a Broadway or West End season. For years, Australian theatre suffered from "world premierism". Undercooked but overhyped work was staged once, flopped or got a tepid reception, then vanished forever. It became a vicious circle.

Belvoir is looking to appoint for the first time a full-time literary manager who will work on new scripts with playwrights. At a forum this week, Belvoir's incoming artistic director, Ralph Myers, flagged his interest in programming Australian plays and classics.

The playwright Lally Katz believes Australian theatre would be stronger if more plays got the chance of a second season. "Shows often have just one production in Australia," says the American-born Katz. "They might not be a perfect show, so that ends up being the end of it. Especially if something just has a short season. The end of the season is only just when it's becoming what it can be. They have this short life and they've gone – it's like a dream."

The trend to take small initial productions and develop them for a main-stage transfer – as well as the increase in co-productions – has been driven in part by economic necessity. Nonetheless, it has allowed playwrights to develop their work. One of the most successful plays to emerge in Australia in recent years, Tommy Murphy's *Holding the Man*, is a case in point. It was first staged in 2006 at Griffin before seasons at the Opera House and Belvoir; in April it transferred to London. Even in London, Murphy was reworking it.

"Every time it's been remounted I've made changes," Murphy says. "It is so important for our writing culture for plays to have a life beyond. We can start something at the Old Fitz with the ambition that it ends up at the Opera House, not just that one-off attempt."

Murphy, 30, is at the forefront of a young generation of playwrights whose work is finding a place on the international stage. He has spent time in Britain at the Royal Court and the National Theatre's Studio and was impressed by the resources put into the development of new work.

"We don't have all those structures, but at the same time we do have access to the stage and we do have an attitude of getting things up. We tend not to get trapped in development and readings and we tend to just get the plays on. And I think that's quite a good culture here."

Murphy, who has won the NSW Premier's Literary Award twice and also the Philip Parsons Young Playwrights Award, says the awards have allowed him to do what few others his age can – make a living as a playwright. His new play, *Gwen in Purgatory*, which opens at Belvoir St later this month, is one of this year's most anticipated new Australian works.

The play, in which an African Christian missionary finds himself in Australian suburbia, puts centre stage a non-Anglo actor (Pacharo Mzembe). It is an unusual move. For despite Australia's cultural mix, white Anglo faces are still the staple of Australia's stages. Murphy would like to see that mix reflected on stage. "I think we all acknowledge there could be more of it," he says. "As a group we probably don't reflect the diversity of this country … there is room for more voices from more corners."

***Gwen in Purgatory* opens at Belvoir St Theatre on July 31.**

Attitudes

PLAYWRIGHTING Australia surveyed 67 theatre companies around the country, including 33 from NSW, about their attitude to Australian plays. The survey, completed in April, found that:

❏ Half the companies that rejected work said the quality of new Australian plays was not high enough to program. Other key reasons were that the work did not fit the season or that they could not afford to program the new play.

❏ There was a lack of Australian plays about non-white, non-middle class people and insufficient support for playwrights from diverse backgrounds. Of 268 Australian plays staged by the companies in 2009, 11 were by indigenous writers and 19 by authors from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

❏ 60 per cent of the companies believed not enough Australian plays were being staged.

❏ More than 70 per cent believed development opportunities for Australian plays were insufficient.

❏ The main reason new plays were produced was that the companies had commissioned or developed them. Other reasons cited were that the writing was high quality and the writer was well-known or had a good track record.

❏ In April, 58 of the companies surveyed were developing 219 new Australian plays. But many will never be produced. One respondent noted: "The culture of the large companies having the right not to stage a commission is a problem because there is always a point when you get the first draft that you have a crisis of faith."

JM