

AUSTRALIA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS PRESENTS THE

# 8TH AUSTRALIAN PERFORMING ARTS MARKET

25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE ADELAIDE BANK FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND THE ADELAIDE FRINGE



## EDITED TRANSCRIPT

### Keynote Address: **Barrie Kosky**

*Monday 25 February 2008*

*Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide*

**Barrie Kosky:** Thank you, and it's thrilling to be back here. I have lots of things to talk about and I should just warn you, for those who know, who have heard me speak before, it's just a freewheeling rhapsody. For those that have heard me before they know that I wait for a signal, usually from someone who is running the organisation, to tell me to stop. So, I will be occasionally looking down to Ian, til he gives me that sign to wrap up.

It was a thrill to come back yesterday. I must say I had my shock number one at the Adelaide Airport because there were no stairs coming down from the plane. And this was a shock not because – it's great that you've got a fabulous airport – but I always used to love that what I called the Sophia Loren moment was when you arrived in Adelaide and you came down and you stood at the staircase with hat and sunglasses and 'hello Adelaide'.

And it's gone. I came through the corridor and there was no.. I was preparing myself for the Sophia Loren moment and it never happened so, I don't know, maybe during the course of my speech I will give you the Sophia Loren moment, if you're lucky.

But I do want to apologise also. I'm not an alcoholic and I don't have a drinking disorder. The first thing I did yesterday was I ran to Henley Beach to jump into the water and I didn't put enough slip, slop slap on my body to protect myself from the Berlin winter, and I do look like a suckling pig today and I apologise for that but it then gave me a very nice sunburn memory which I'll get onto in a moment, to do with some Russians and some sunburn.

I was thinking today and I was thinking in the few weeks before I came here, in Berlin, thinking what angle shall I talk about today, what shall I talk about? I'm so sick of talking about the problems with Australian culture and I don't live here anymore so I really can't talk about them. And it's such a mixed audience: there are people from Australia; there are people from overseas. There are artists; there are producers; there are presenters, and I thought you know, I'm just going to tell some stories. And you can just work out what it all means after it.

[Laughter]

I'm not going to preach and I'm not going to make generalisations and I thought I'd just tell you a few stories about being an Australian Jewish puffer in Berlin and it's easy, with some serious elements thrown in.

As I said I got off the plane and because I really haven't been back for.. I came for two days for Robyn's festival and in fact I think the Minister for the Arts left Robyn out of his list. She's here.

Thank you. I'd just like to welcome Robyn!

[Applause and cheering]

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I was a little bit concerned that she was left out of that list so I'm putting her back in there. And I was here for two days for Robyn's second festival and so I really haven't spent much time back here and coming back is always.., coming back to somewhere, coming back to a place, coming back to a place that you had such an extraordinary time in: I had an amazing time here for three years doing the Adelaide festival in '96. You're full of such contradictory emotions and memories and I love that. I love being confronted with the past in such a visceral sort of firstly geographical way and then what memory does.

And to me Adelaide in '96 was a very special time not just because I think we presented an extraordinary Festival, and all the people that worked on the Festival, but for what I remember about the Festival. And it was so interesting.

I told you I'd tell you a story about sunburn and Russians but I was looking at my pink red body last night and I was just thinking one of my fond memories of Adelaide and the Adelaide Festival, and still one of my great, great stories, is the Maly Theatre of St Petersburg who we brought out. I think there were about 60 or 70 of them, who arrived, so excited because they'd never been to the southern hemisphere and Australia and the sun, and they'd just come from St Petersburg where it was minus 20 degrees and the first thing the entire company did was to go down to Henley Beach and got so sunburnt that it was – the terrible thing was not that they got sunburnt but that they were doing a show which was set on a blanket of snow, dealing with a Siberian winter in Russia.

And there was a terrible sort of moment of panic and Lev Doden going, 'Ooooh, make up!,' and whatever and we said, 'Could we change the lighting? What are we going to do?' and I said, 'Just do it. Let them go.'

And there was a fabulous moment - I think we're the only place in the world where the Maly Theatre of St Petersburg have come on, twenty guys came on and the snow, completely pink and red from the Australian sun.

And this sort of element of the messy, unpredictable chaotic nature of theatre is one the themes that I'm spinning and weaving today because I think we have to be.. you know, I'm not here to tell you about the importance of the arts. I'm not here to tell you about what the problems with the arts are. I'd like to remind you maybe of a few things that are very important.

And one of the things that I think is very important is that we forget, both artists and producers, that we're not ever dealing with something that is fixed here. We're not dealing with something that it – and I'm talking about the notion of performance – we're not dealing with something that can be constrained within a box or a circle. We're dealing with a living, breathing organism which has so much to do with time and place and individual natures of experience and that we have to always be very careful about the sort of broadbrush stroke, the generalisation. The idea that any artistic enterprise can be fixed in a period of time is nonsense of course.

And so this changing, unfinished, messy element of the arts is very important. And to me to come back to Adelaide it just reminded me also of the beauty of the small. I think if there's one thing that's going to become apparent to all of us in this century is the need to connect with the small, the exquisite, the moment, to not be consumed by the large picture all the time.

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And my favourite thing, my memory of the Festival and we had, you know, The Whirling Dervishes were one of the most extraordinary experiences to bring to Adelaide, forty of the dancers from Konya whirling outside in a 30 degree evening was breathtaking, although of course we had big problems because the floor was too slippery and the dress rehearsal was a lot of slipping dervishes. And this was fabulous. The breadth of the work was amazing.

But what I remember, my favourite thing, which I don't think many people went to, was something that we set up with Buzz here who was my assistant, very early on in the Festival, to do this morning sunrise and sunset chanting. And we decided we wanted, even if only three or four people experienced it, just begin each day, and the sunrise and the sunset, with a chant from a different community in Adelaide, in South Australia.

And so we chose 21 different singers and they had to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and there were some loudspeakers around and whatever.

But some people enjoyed it and the fact that this sort of thing went on, that the city was greeted, the sun was greeted, the arrival of the sun and the exiting of sun every day by a song, a chant, was something that was exquisite, something that didn't have to do with box office, and it didn't have to do with whether people thought something was 'Faaaabulous' and 'Have you seen that show and that show?' It wasn't to do with that. The fact that it existed was more important to me than anything else. And I was reminded when I walked down the Torrens today on the banks how beautiful that was.

But before I get myself enveloped in nostalgia let me get onto some stories otherwise we'll be here for hours.

Story # 1 - and all the stories have a point but bear with me:

This was what I call the right show at the right time in the right place with the right people story because we sometimes forget that this element of chance is so important in the arts. This element of being with the right people at the right time in the right show at the right place. Because it takes one of those ingredients not to be balanced and then it's a different experience.

And I know a lot of artists like myself, we strive for those shows. These are Utopian shows. We sometimes get there. But these are the experiences that we strive for and we go through all the shit to get to these experiences.

But this experience of these elements, and you can't predict the, you can start off saying, 'Oh, we've all the right elements in place. It's going to be fantastic.' And then it's a disaster. I've had shows like that. Or you can say, 'Oh, I really, really wish that we could have this thing and that,' and it never happens.

When I moved to Vienna to run the Schauspielhaus I had to think, 'What show am I going to do for my first show in Vienna? I'm coming to Vienna. If I fuck up the first show it's curtains. It's back to Australia. It's going to be a nightmare. And I'm going to really embarrass myself. What am I going to do?'

And there were a few ideas and I thought, I don't know what to do, and I was sitting in a café in Vienna and I thought I wanted to do something Greek and I wanted to do something else, and I thought, which one? And I just thought, 'Choose the quintessential play about a foreigner and do Medea.'

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And from that moment the elements clicked into place and we decided that we would do Medea and I then brought Melita Jurisic out from Australia who is Croatian Australian, to play Medea. And I've never had a production before where it just went chink, chink, chink, chink, chink, chink, chink.

And before I knew it I'd found a fantastic Turkish singer in Vienna. I'd found a fantastic Romanian Jewish girl in Vienna. I'd found a Persian actor. I'd found a Nigerian actor. And before I knew it we'd assembled this extraordinary group of actors. And I thought to myself, 'Well, a week ago I didn't know that this would be the show. I didn't know that this was what we'd be doing.'

And this element of chance, of luck is so important in what we do and we must never forget it. And this show was always with me because I thought to myself, 'Oh, now I just need something I can really irritate the Austrians with. Hmm, okay, I'm doing Medea in Vienna. She's the outsider. She's coming into albeit an abstracted Viennese context. The children? What can I do? The children get killed. I'm in Vienna. I know! Vienna Boys Choir.'

Because all the Viennese press had been 'Oh, it's so interesting. How did you come to the idea of using two singers from the Vienna Boys Choir?' and I just said, 'Well, I just.. it came to my head. Two children need to be killed – Vienna Boys Choir. You know?'

So, this was one of the great audition experiences of my life, let me tell you. I've got to say that. We just had to have one child after another to see whether they could scream properly as Melita strangled them during the audition and it was great fun.

There's a point to all this. This was very interesting. For me it was completely natural to arrive in Vienna and go, 'Where are the non-Viennese actors?' This was my first question. Where are the people that fall between the cracks? Where are the people that don't work in the major theatres and where are the foreigners?

And what was fascinating – I got confronted with one of my first huge experiences of working in Europe which was a great thing to do – about how far ahead Australia in a lot of these ideas. I think a lot of the discussions that are happening in Europe we sort of did twenty or thirty years ago. I'm not saying Australia is a Utopia in this sort of thing but a lot of it is old hat to us, thank goodness.

And what I saw, suddenly confronted in Vienna, in an extraordinary brutal way, was people saying to me, 'So why have you done Medea with a group of non-Austrian actors?' and I'd go, 'Well, why wouldn't you? The play is about an outsider and it's one of the quintessential plays about the outsider, and to me that's the first thing you would do. It has to be a clash of all those cultures.' 'Oh, right, okay.'

And then my second clash was with the press because I don't believe in things of multicultural theatre, or 'multiculti' as they say in Austria. And I said to this journalist, 'What's this 'multiculti'? It sounds like a kids' show.' And they said, 'Well, you know, you've got, you've got...' and I said, 'You've got what?' and they said, 'Well, well, well, actors that are...' 'What, not white?' and there was this sort of, 'Yes, well, yes. And the show was on in five languages and.. and.. and.. it.. it.. it.. it was an organic process for the actors.'

But the impression that the Viennese media had with the show was not that it was a production of Medea or that it was a new production Medea, that it has a label to it and that label became 'the Australian director Barrie Kosky's multiculti production of Medea.'

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And, of course, you suddenly realise, 'Oh, bang! There goes the first fence. There goes the first fence because this means the first stamp on the thing. This means that then – of course I don't think most audiences think of that at all. They think of the experience they're having – but there goes the first stamp. And I thought, Danger, Danger, Danger, Danger.

But what was natural to me, and I suppose the point of the story – what was natural to me to cast interesting people from different cultures in a show was completely unnatural to most of the people in the theatre world in that particular city.

And I found that fascinating. I just realised that this idea of context, of place, and what side of the telescope you're looking through is such an important discussion of how we view work, and it's never really talked about. And to me Medea, which was eight years ago really confronted me with that.

I should say the Vienna Boys Choir died spectacularly as they were singing Johan Strauss and it was a fantastic experience and wonderful.

But the position happened a few weeks ago in Berlin when I went to see a production of the Komische Opera where I work frequently in Berlin, and it was a Handel production, and I was spectacularly outraged at one moment in the second act. And it was a very provocative new production of a Handel opera and the singers were not just singing but they were talking their text, and whatever and it had – surprise, surprise – it was a Handel opera, called Theseus and Medea, the story of Medea and I thought, 'Well, that's interesting because eight years ago I was doing it in Vienna.'

And suddenly I'm watching these very talented Scandinavian and German singers tell the story of Medea and on stage came 20 extras behind one of the singers and they were dressed in scarves and head dresses and carrying bags and I thought, 'Here we go, that old cliché again.' And I thought I don't recognise any of those extras, because normally I know the guys and girls and thought, 'What the...?'

I leaned forward to someone and I said, 'They're not extras.' And they said, 'No, no, no, no, no. They're real Turkish people.' And I said, 'Oh, 'real' Turkish people?' and I said, 'Huh?'

And then I watched and they came on and there was this counter tenor going on, a bit of coloratura here, la la la la la, and orchestra playing beautifully here, and behind them they all started having a kind of dinner party, like mum and dad and the kids are running around. And that happened for three minutes and then off they went. And they came on four and a half hours later, because it was long, for a curtain call and they all stood there.

And I was going 'Whoah', and I said - afterwards everyone in the foyer was going, 'That was beautiful' – 'but but but but? What was that about?' and they said, 'Oh, the director wanted a real Turkish family on stage. He didn't want them portrayed by actors or extras.'

And I said, 'But this is ridiculous, because they don't sing. They've got no character names, and they're there as cultural wallpaper. If you want to use the Turkish family, fabulous, but set up a half an hour monologue or prologue at the beginning to tell their stories or whatever. But you can't simply present four hours of Handel with a group of white people singing in the front and a Turkish family in headscarves having a dinner party behind for three minutes, and say that's a serious analysis of what?'

Well, you can understand how that monologue went down in the foyer of the opera.

[Laughter]

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25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

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And it wasn't the fact that no-one was having the discussion with me, the fact that no-one thought about it. And I'm sitting there going, 'What planet are you on? What are you doing?' And very nice people there, and people that I work with, they were going to me, 'I don't understand the problem Barrie.' And I said, 'Well, the problem is you don't understand the problem!'

And then what was fascinating, not one single review, one review mentioned it but no-one said this was a problem, and I know it's an opera house and opera houses tend to have different philosophies behind their work but this shocked me, absolutely shocked me.

And then I started to realise we assume always that where we come from, or our ideas are the ideas of everyone else, particularly in the theatre world. We tend to think oh, we think that so therefore everyone thinks that and I actually had a little moment of pride about Australia then because I thought, that would never happen here because in the rehearsal room everyone would be saying 'Ah! Moment? Er, what are we doing here?'

And it was a very interesting, yet again, interesting experience to have to be confronted with that sort of thing.

I'm not going to get into a long discussion about racial casting and whether that's what it all means. And I don't believe in those things anyway because basically there are no rules and I don't want every single production that I see in the world to be a sort of Benetton ad. I don't want everyone to assume that the only way to present work is if you've got one representative of every particular culture that you know, or that you're going out of your way deliberately to cast people for political correctness. I'm not saying that at all. That just becomes a sort of racial bouillabaisse then on stage. And meaningless too.

On the other hand, I do quite rightly think that it's important that if you are in a city for example like Berlin with the largest population of Turks anywhere outside Turkey, in Europe then it's very important that these people are represented on stage a little bit more than just window dressing.

And to me I realised how important it is in what we do is to do, to talk about work case by case, production by production, director by director, performance by performance. It's so important I think not to have a large sort of breath of 'This is what it means.' But to actually look at who's doing it. Why are they doing it? And it is right for that particular work? No rules, no regulations: genre busting.

I'm sick to death of people saying it's this, this is what the work's about, it's one of those sort of productions, this is what this means. I don't think that's how artists really think when they're creating work. Well, if it's good work I think you basically do what you feel is right.

So this performance by performance, show by show, I think is very important.

Story # 2 – the worst show at the worst place in the worst theatre with the worst people.

I believe and have believed this for years and I think a lot of you agree with but we have to always keep saying this is that we have as artists the absolute rights to fail spectacularly. We do. Now, sometimes this involves losing lots of money but that's just part of a, you know, the wonderful whirlwind of creativity.

[Laughter and applause]

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25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

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It's very different of course in Europe because a lot of these places, particularly that I work at now, are so fantastically funded that it doesn't matter but I know in a lot of countries, where it's England or America or Australia for example, it does matter a lot. But this idea that everything is a masterpiece, that everything is extraordinary is also very problematic, that we also have to be very, very careful about because as we know from thousands of years of whether it's performance artists or composers or writers or whatever, that not everything you do can be fantastic. Maybe you'll have to do five problematic things to reach that wonderful moment where you've worked things out.

And there's so much stress and competition and pressure for everting to be 'five stars Margaret', - that's for the Australians, but I don't think she has her film show any more does she? She does. Sorry, overseas people you won't understand that reference at all. Ask someone at the barbecue. So it's very important that we have this absolute right.

Now, I don't believe anyone sets out in a production to go, let's fail spectacularly with this, but I talked about how chance makes you come together to have a wonderful thing. Well, I had also in Vienna, a few years ago, the experience of doing the worst show of my life and it was actually all my fault because I got seduced by the idea of working at the Vienna Staatsoper and by the intendant who said please come and do a new production of Wagner's Lohengrin here. I went, 'Oh, okay. Staatsoper, yep. why not?' and of course my stomach told me when he said, 'We want you to do Wagner's Lohengrin,' my stomach tied itself in knots inside, but instead, of course, I went, 'Great, great, yeah, yeah, yeah. Great.'

And the moment I said it I realised, no, no, no, this is not good. This was like two years before the production and let me tell you so it was my entire fault. And to this day still, the worst experience I've had in the theatre, anywhere. It's unfortunate that I can't have a glass of wine in my hands and a few hours to tell you the whole story but it really was very interesting because I suddenly found myself in Vienna which of course is an extraordinary city that I don't like, but is an extraordinary city.

And when you're suddenly in Vienna you realise that - I kept on saying to all my Viennese friends there, 'It's amazing. Whenever I'm in Vienna I just think in the space of twenty years, from 1890 to sort of 1910, you had in Vienna, you had Theodore Herzl writing the beginning of the official idea of Zionism and the Jewish state. You have Gustav Mahler writing his symphonies. You had Freud writing and working and you had Adolf Hitler as a young boy, a young student, all within that space of twenty years.'

To me, when I spent my seven years in Vienna, all I could see was Herzl on that street corner, young Hitler being told that he wasn't a painter anymore, and I blame the professors at the Australian Arts Academy for that because if they'd let him stay and paint....

[Laughter]

But anyway, so I saw Hitler on that corner, and you see Freud and I'm thinking God, all these guys, this was like an incredible laboratory for the 20<sup>th</sup> century here and to me it was absolutely what Vienna's about. But basically to the Austrians it's of no interest really. They don't want to deal with that.

So I was suddenly finding myself being asked to direct Staatsoper where Gustav Mahler had to give up being a Jew, had to baptise himself as a Catholic to work there because Jews weren't allowed to work at the Opera House. I didn't have to baptise to work there now, but working there at this Staatsoper which was this huge monumental conservative tourist destination, really, on a Wagner opera that I didn't like with a cast from hell.

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25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

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And this included a tenor who basically said to me – you know, it was classic opera land – said to me after a minute of me saying, ‘Ah, very nice to meet you. I thought I’d talk about the production.’ ‘I have no interest in the production. Tell me where I stand for my first appearance.’ And I said, ‘You’re not standing, you’re sitting for your first appearance.’ And there was a snarl from the tenor.

It was wonderful, being told, with the tenor walking on stage with no costume, being told the costume had changed because the tenor’s agent and wife didn’t like it. The conductor refusing to conduct a rehearsal the first time he saw the set because he didn’t like the colour. And I’m thinking ‘What am I doing here? I’m in the Vienna Staatsoper in front of the Vienna Philharmonic and this Russian American conductor, who I won’t name, is standing there saying he refuses to conduct because the set’s the wrong colour and he can’t conduct in front of that colour.’

And I just thought, ‘What am I doing here? This is an absolutely nightmare!’ The nightmare got worse because then I was told by the dramaturge – I wrote a little article in the program, you know, and the production wasn’t good, let me say that, it was a problematic production but it was made more problematic by the people. I wrote a little essay in the program saying how I think, with Lohengrin because it’s seen as being such a nationalistic element, it’s one of Hitler’s favourite operas, it’s where Wagner first heard it, being done in Vienna. And I said you have to really take away that – and I used the expression ‘German tra-la-la’ from the opera.

And I talked about how, in some ways, you also have to accept that Wagner was a horrible man and a racist and an anti-Semite and a genius, and I think you have to accept that. You can’t suddenly say, ‘Oh, well, it’s got nothing to do with it. He’s a genius. The music is fabulous.’ No, he was one of the great arseholes of all time. And a deeply offensive problematic man who happened to write music of genius.

I find this interesting but you can’t simply say that it’s got nothing to do with it and I wrote an article last year with Daniel Barrymore who said that music cannot be racist, and that Wagner’s music is not anti-Semitic: I think that’s nonsense. I disagree with him entirely but in this particular case, in Vienna, it was such a mild production for me. In fact I even got bored by my own work there, and I was just thinking, ‘What am I doing?’

[Laughter]

Don’t like the set, only had three weeks to rehearse, I’ve had six chorus rehearsals, I’m not talking to half the cast, the conductor hates me, I hate him, what the hell am I doing here?

The dramaturge said to me, ‘I’ve just read your article which we’ve just translated,’ because although I speak German I can’t write German beautifully enough for the program of the Vienna Staatsoper. He said, ‘You know you’re going to get into very big trouble with this article and this production.’

I said, ‘Oh come on.’ And he said, ‘No, no, no. You don’t understand. This is Wagner. You’ve said he’s an – and I used the expression ‘antisemitisch arschloch in the program. And they said, ‘Well, you’ve said to this Viennese audience that he’s an anti-Semitic arsehole, then you’ve also said that you’re not going to give them any nationalistic thing in the production, and you’ve also said there’s no swan.’

And those of you who know Lohengrin it’s that, of course, everyone waits *for* the swan with Lohengrin appearing, and I had said to my designer, my costume designer, the first meeting: ‘No swan’.

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25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

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And so, he said, 'You've done all that. They're going to crucify you on the opening night.' And I said, 'No, no, no. It'll be fine.' He said, 'No, no, no, you don't understand. They're going to really go for you.' And I said, 'Oh yes, that'll be fine.' And he said, 'No, no, no, because they're the most anti-Semitic audience in the world.' And I said, 'Don't be silly. It's Vienna. It's like they're not anti-Semitic and it's not because I'm a Jew and I've said those things in the press.' And he said..[threw up his hands]

And I've got to say I've been booed lots of times and I have never in my life, on my opening night, experienced what I can only understand as – it wasn't booing. It was something more than that, waves of not just hatred but waves of something. To this day I can't even begin to describe what it was, coming at me from this audience, with me just doing one of my little smiles.

And a friend of mine sitting back in the theatre and old Viennese ladies banging his hands telling friends of mine to stop applauding. And I thought to myself it's like there's no sex on stage, there's no blood, there's no bodily fluid – you know how I love a bit of bodily fluid on stage – there's nothing. It's this beautiful semi-abstract production which I don't like. What's the problem?

Well, there was a problem because this Viennese audience thought I had desecrated their great temple and two things: I think it's very important that artists desecrate temples, but to me, going back to what I was saying before, and I had a semi-nervous breakdown after the production, fled Vienna and I became very, very grand about the whole thing. I said, 'Freud did it, and Mahler had to do it.'

[Laughter]

But one of my favourite quotes from Samuel Beckett, in a beautiful way, is that Samuel Beckett said 'Fail again, fail better.' And to me that's such a wonderful line for in the theatre because we all see this Utopia and if it doesn't happen you just have to go, 'Uh, it didn't happen.' But the idea of 'Fail again and fail better' is just – I think we ought to create t-shirts for it, because we're all striving for something which I'll get onto in a moment.

Ian, don't give me a sign yet. I'm on a roll.

Story #3

This story I call 'It's delightful, it's delicious, it's delovely,' and this is a story about music because I'm very suspicious if theatre doesn't have music. And I was confronted very interestingly in Vienna, not so much in Berlin, but in Vienna, my years at the Schauspielhaus, with this extraordinary dialogue that went on between people in the foyer and between lots of journalists and me about, 'Oh' you use so much music in your theatre productions.' And I'm going, 'Yes, well, I'm not the first and I won't be the last, and well, der.'

And it's amazing this idea that somehow – and I think it's changing. I think in the last few decades whether it's through dance theatre or whether it's through different sorts of music theatre, but this idea that somehow the music is separate from theatre is historically so grotesquely inaccurate on one hand and problematic on the other.

And I kept saying to people, 'But it was only 200 years or so of Western European theatre that decided music had no place in the theatre,' and we suddenly went from the epic, where we suddenly went from scenes that combined great storytelling or mythology or whatever, into the drawing room of Chekov and Ibsen and Strindberg.

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25 - 29 FEBRUARY 2008 ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

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Now, I think they're three great writers but something terrible happened in European theatre at that stage. And I said, 'I'm sorry but ooh! Wake up! If you go outside Europe, helloo! You'll probably find that most theatrical practice still use music live, and use dance also.' And I said, 'Hello, Greek theatre. Hello, Shakespeare?' at least seven songs in every Shakespeare play.

And I thought to myself, 'This is grotesque. Suddenly music has become something which is an add-on to a theatre experience, not actually the root of it.'

We've all sat in theatre productions where people have just spoken text and you think, 'Okay, dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.' And you know that moment that's about three hours into it and people have just been going 'blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah,' and the someone plays a musical instrument, or a violin starts up or a piano, or someone sings. And you feel the audience go, 'Ah, we can breathe.'

And it's happened a lot in shows like that and I'm always amazed at this idea that somehow music became separated. We can talk for hours about why and whatever but it's something very important for me because I was reading an article about... Oliver Sachs has got a new book out about music and he made this fantastic thing where he said that - I didn't know this - that music is the only experience that humans have that uses every part of their brain, that when you hear music you are using your entire brain, the left side, the right side and all the different lobes, are vibrating and working together. It doesn't happen in speech and it only happens in music.

And I think to me this fundamental connection with music is the expression of the soul. Text is something different. And I did a production in Vienna of Papaya, this Monteverdi opera, and we combined it with Cole Porter songs and it was a great success, a great cast, and we took it to Edinburgh last year and we're hopefully bringing it to Sydney at some time in the future. But what was interesting about this was that for me it was completely natural to take the Monteverdi score and go, 'Mmm, something's missing. I know, Cole Porter!'

[Laughter]

And to me this was a natural thing to do and it was very interesting. And the reason why I'm telling you this story is that this show then, in the last three cities it's been to had such different reactions. I should just briefly tell you - seven actors, non opera singers and we re-scored it for three cellos and a piano and there was klezmer music in it and tango and Cole Porter songs, and the actors were all - they could sing but I said to them, 'Shout the text and scream the text and mess it up here, and use the text in a different way.'

And it was a fantastic new thing that happened quite organically. I didn't sit down going, 'Oh, a genre busting production of Papaya. What shall I do?'

Because all the journalists said to me, 'You know, Cole Porter, Monteverdi? It's like so weird.' And I said, No, it's completely natural. Why wasn't it thought about before?' And what was interesting about this production was that the reaction in different cities was entirely different. In Vienna they criticised it because there were too many musical people in. 'Oh, it's too musical, they're singing in it like musicals.' In Berlin they said, 'Oh, it's interesting because it's like Viennese hotchpotch,' and in Edinburgh they said, 'It's about the Weimar Republic.'

So, I was just thinking 'Wow, this is also another example to me of context and place and time and also the past. Because we all in the theatre, when we do works, we're all necrophiliacs. But I've got a new

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idea: instead of sleeping with the past we have to eat it. Don't fuck it, eat it. Consume it, be nourished by it and let it out.

So I can't tell you my two anecdotes. That's a pity. No, I can't because there are other people to talk about. I'll set up a booth outside.

So, if you want to hear the two stories I can't tell now – one's a Pina Bausch story and one's about a Berlin production – no, I'll tell them at the barbecue.

But to wrap up this Talmudic tale, I do think we've got to always remember that theatre is alchemy. It's about ingredients and elements being mixed together to create something. It's full of paradoxes. It's not about agendas and it's not about trends and it's not about crisis.

Audiences don't care. They just want to experience something. Artists I don't think actually care because if you're working well you're in a rehearsal room and you're only concerned with the work you're doing there. So I think we've got to be very careful that the audiences don't really care about that and the artists don't care about that, so why, so much of the time we spend talking about these elements. It's very important.

And I think what's also important is that this complex dialogue is not about seeking perfection. It's about seeking revelation and that the theatrical experience, or the performing arts experience, is actually in the end a wonderful, wonderful, magical alchemical thing.

Because you've got a paradox. You're sitting in a large audience with a group of people who you don't know, experiencing something together, simultaneously together but the experience you're having is a lonely, individual experience which reveals more about you than about the work, ultimately, because in fact what is being revealed to you is not whether the show is fabulous or whether you like or not like it, but more about you. And your opinions and your expressions and your responses to the work are actually your reflection of the world, not just the work.

And I think that we've got to forget - and I don't want to end it with a sort of optimistic, although one can't help being optimistic in this wonderful post-Howard Australian culture -

[Laughter & Applause]

I say that theatre has got to be revelation and I think it has got to be a return also to the idea I said before about the smallness, but also about the idea of wonder. I think to experience the theatre, I think to experience in theatre we should all be a little like Howard Carter looking through that little hole into the blackness when they thought they had discovered Tutankhamen's tomb and they put the black thing in and Lord Carnarvon said to Howard Carter, 'What do you see?' and they lit a match and then suddenly in the flickering flames was this lapis lazuli and gold and all this sort of stuff there, spread out for thousands of years, and it was all flickering under the light, and he said, 'What do you see?' And he said, 'I see wonderful things.'

And to me, every time I go into the theatre, that's all I want to see. I want to see wonderful things.

Thank you very much. Have a good time. Bye.

[Applause]