

9th Australian Performing Arts Market

TRANSCRIPT **Keynote Address: Cate Blanchett** Monday 22 February, 2010

Good afternoon.

There are two assumptions underpinning this speech which I cannot spend the time justifying. They are; that experience (regardless of how it feels at the time) is a beneficial thing, and; that experience is by its unique and personal nature essentially unquantifiable and mysterious. If those assumptions don't hold for you, then apologies and maybe now's a good time to catch up on your emails. I'll be about 20 minutes.

The following quote I think expresses the unique, unquantifiable and beneficial power of experience way more succinctly and lucidly than I ever could.

" ... Our experience, for all that we are the subject of it, is a mystery to us. We have no notion, amid the events and feelings and words and pictures that crowd in upon us, of the advent of our most secret understandings, the moments that will one day mean most to us, which image glimpsed, or word spoken, will occasion in us that sweet shock in which the complex spider-web of life will suddenly glow and tremble in the chamber of our consciousness.

" 'We do not know today,' Emerson tells us in a memorable passage, 'whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have discovered afterwards that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us. All our days are so uncomfortable while they pass, that 'tis wonderful where or when we ever got anything of this thing which we call wisdom, poetry, virtue. We never got it on any dated calendar day. Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere, like those Hermes won of the moon, that Osiris might be born'."

That is taken from David Malouf's Little Book "On Experience." In which he quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson who in turn quotes Egyptian mythology. Nothing is new and yet somehow everything is unique.

My guess is a key note address should try and set the key. Act as a tuning fork - give us all a note. Get us singing from the same hymn book as they bellow in marketing sweat lodges – ew there's an ugly picture ...

I think what I want to say is very simple. I will call this key note address: Making Experience Possible.

That is our job. That is why we are here today. If I can be reductive, the beautiful ... essay I suppose you'd call it ... of David Malouf's which I just quoted, tells ways the experience of life can be transformed into a work of art. And how that work of art can in turn become a life-changing experience for its lucky audience. That is the virtuous circle of human culture, of which this noble gathering clearly seeks to be part.

One of Andrew Upton and my first decisions as Artistic Directors was to try and program at some distance from our own personal aesthetics. There were several reasons for this; on a practical level we felt the company was too big and diverse to be the organ of one particular vision. More pertinently though, as a principle – if I may - we wanted to put our audience in the way of experience. We did not want to tell them what theatre was, but leave them wondering what it might be next.

This programming policy is harder than it sounds and sadly we will only go a tiny, weeny way towards achieving it. Inevitably many of the projects under consideration are only a nose, a whisker apart in terms of quality and value ... but the judgement must come down and the closer the call you have to make the more you have to rely on your instincts. Instincts and aesthetics blur at such proximity. Life, for all that it is fabulous, is a bugger of imprecision – just ask the Quantum mechanicals. Quality in the arts, it seems to me, is finally only assessable in terms of risk and laziness. Lack of risk leaves you turd-polishing and laziness is ... well, why would you bother, really?

When I was approached to speak to you all today, a couple of months ago now, I immediately felt it was important because APAM it seems to me is all about touring. The underlying principle of touring is in accord with our underlying principle; to put people in the way of experience. Touring is an important tool for making experience possible. Experience for the audience, experience for the artists and experience for the participating company as a whole. International touring even more so. The stakes are higher, the safety nets are further from view, more is up for grabs. When things are up for grabs, an experience is just around the corner.

Do I have to say this? It seems pretty self-evident to me that for an audience to see a version of King Lear, from Bogota say, is – provided it is not a lazy production – more likely to have perspectives on the play that will shift their perception of it. Such a production has by its' cultural distance and specificity more likelihood of creating what Julianna Engberg, who heads up ACCA – The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art -

calls “Radical misunderstanding”. “Moments of arresting, conflicted thoughts” that cause us to rethink preconceptions, making us more open to the experience.

Let’s pursue our illusory Bogotan Shakespeare Company further. This 40 week whistle-stop tour of Australia will also put their participating artists in the way of experience. They will experience new ways of working, different audience attention, interest, focus. Different laughs, sighs, applause. They will experience different theatre technologies, different priorities. Let’s get granular here with one Bogotan, who... Edgar? The fellow playing Edgar, say. He’s in the foyer after the show and some shifty patron sidles up to him and amid awkward hand gestures and averted eyes asks him if he has any cocaine ...

Not another one ... Bloody stereotyping. Cheap joke. Bad stereotypist speech maker. Naughty, naughty.

BUT. No. Seriously. Our Bogotan Edgar has experienced what I am sure many of us have experienced, the Australian equivalent being, you are cornered about the cricket score or how well we have done at the Olympics you know, per capita. Or how lucky we are with the weather or how surprised they are at the accent. You learn, on tour, how bland and mediated, how organised the outside world’s view is of your country and it makes you more determined to get cracking and shift that perception. It steels your resolve and leads your pencil. Touring is, in pretty much every respect, confronting. Stereotypes and bogeymen exist only in the shadows of ignorance and it is one of our jobs to hunt around in those shadows with our theatre lights and see what beguiling demons we can uncover.

Speaking of lights ... Obviously STC is not only a touring company, we have a home base, a loyal audience and a big city to be a part of. Running a venue is also informed by our desire to Make Experience possible and so has lead us to become ardent advocates of the notion of an Arts Precinct, an area in the city characterised by a predominance of artistic activity, a place where an audience can be made by accident, or in non-traditional ways. A place where passers-by can be put in the way of an experience. One of the first things we wanted to do to our home base, the wharf, was to green the building. Back in the 1980’s, the STC was one of the first adaptive re-users of the docks around Sydney harbour. The building was a flagship for a change in the way we all used the city. We thought it was appropriate then that it became a new flagship for a Green Arts Precinct. It seems we will by the end of this year - and with great philanthropic and government support – be able to say we have greened our operations, our theatre. That will involve the installation of about 1900 Pluto solar panels on the roof. For those of you who know the building, that’s a lot of roof ... These panels, combined with other energy use reduction programs, will reduce our power use from the grid by about 70 percent. This solar array has been made possible in unique partnership with the

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University of NSW and the Shi's Family Foundation. We will also harvest our rainwater rather ingeniously to cover 100 percent of our (non potable) water needs. This initiative was able to be triggered by the Federal government's Green Precincts Fund and we hope to spearhead the strip from Barangaroo to the Opera House as the first Green Arts precinct in the world, where audiences will be able to place their local cultural experience in a wider context, specifically Climate Change; and see how such changes can be made without sacrificing their cultural engagement (and let's face it, their fun).

We are first and foremost the SYDNEY theatre Company and our commitment to the precinct and the city keeps the bulk of our activities at home. Something we try to do every year to maintain our connection to the world then, is invite an international director into the company. This offers many opportunities to the company, the artists and the audience. For all concerned it is on a daily practical basis a meeting of minds, bringing different perspectives from different cultures. The best of these will be challenging. Challenging for the production team in terms of the process employed and the rigour brought to bear. Challenging for the Artists who work on these projects in terms of those things of course, but also in terms of approach and the regular conversations that can and do ensue around not just the project at hand but the whole endeavour of making work. Anything that stretches our practitioners and allows more passionate commitment to their work is a worthwhile venture.

For the audiences too, we believe this direct engagement with the international community brings - in some instances an extra frisson - but in all cases a new approach to the work and an ever-broadening horizon contextualizing that work. To that end at the STC we are building co-production connections with venues, festivals and producing companies in Austria, Germany, France, the UK and the US. We have Asia in our sights - who doesn't? And are beginning to find ways to make work with practitioners from that very exciting region.

Another direct and tangible benefit from working one on one with international directors is the possibility of members of the creative team and cast building ongoing productive relationships with their director. The other AD has a show in rehearsals right now at The National Theatre in London, his third collaboration with the British director Howard Davies since they worked together on The Cherry Orchard at STC in 2006. Another working relationship that comes to mind is that of The Sound designer Paul Charlier and Michael Blakemore that also came out of working at The STC and has taken Paul to The National and Broadway. A further STC example which works in a slightly different dynamic is the Director Benedict Andrews - an Adelaide boy - who forged a relationship with the German writer Marius Von Mayenburg and through that got an entrée into working at the Schaubuhne in Berlin where he now does regular productions. This room is, I imagine, filled with many such fruitful connections and

bridges to Experience. My guess is no-one would deny the lasting impact and rewards such connections offer us as artists.

Can we quantify them? Justify them economically and with statistics and graphs? Maybe, but what would be achieved? The fact is Australia has been enriched, challenged, and changed by taking a stronger and more complex place on the world stage than just selling ourselves as a great beach resort populated by smiling outdoorsy larrikins. I know this from my own experience, I know this from having worked recently with Benedict, I know this from seeing the growth in my husband's work. As Julianna Enberg argues so eloquently in the article I quoted earlier: we can justify ourselves with economic indicators and KPI's and graphs and acquittals but it just makes us look like any other industry and we are not.

The Arts operate at the very core of human identity and existence. They operate at the cutting edge of the science that is now trying to unravel the puzzle of consciousness and identity. Emerson's wonderful hymn to the mystery of experience, as quoted at the top of the speech is not a piece of whimsy it touches on the enduring source of cultural power in human life. How did we come to know? To understand? To grow? When did the pieces fall into place? Not on some graph. The graph is proof. Proof comes afterwards. Proof is important to science because scientists start with speculation and conjecture to arrive at reality. Our job is to change reality and challenge it, not prove it and explain it.

This little detour probably hasn't much to do with APAM but it is important in this room because around the country certainly and the world generally there has been a growing pressure on the arts to justify themselves. To prove their case and make their graphs and pie-charts. We have done it and we know the ripple effect of funding the arts leads to better dollar multiplier than many other expenditures, we know that cities with strong Arts opportunities are more vibrant and attract more business and tourism, we know most of the arts community work for lower wages and longer hours and this is only tenable because they are proud of their work. I want to make another point here, which I don't hear made often enough actually - the Arts are a great employer. At the STC we have a staff of - I'm going to do sort of rounded off figures - about 130 people at any given time. The division is the interesting thing here. 30 of them might be artists working on specific shows, actors, designers, directors. 10? Maybe 10 of the full time staff would be considered artists in our permanent employ that means about 90 - more than double the number of "Artists" - are employed to help create and realise the work of the company. We are a big company yes, but my guess is the ratios are similar all round the world. It's not just artists who work in the arts, it's an entire highly skilled, highly committed and passionate community. Anyway ... what else do we know and have studied and measured? We know countries with strong cultural identities

demonstrate greater social cohesion. And on and on. Basically, all sorts of studies have been done and KPI's measured and indeed, graphed.

But there is more, we do more than all that we must remember. The arts do more than just that; we process experience and make experience available and understandable, we change people's lives at the risk of our own. We change countries, governments, history. After gravity, Culture is the thing that holds humanity in place in an otherwise constantly shifting and let's face it tiny outcrop in the middle of an infinity of nowhere. What I'm saying that no-one would deny and yet no-one seems prepared to value; we give people the chance to make sense of the experience of their brief lives and the tools to communicate that unique sense to another person or people. I want to quote David Malouf again.

"This insistence on the importance of experience itself is a feature of these witnessing books and these witnessing lives. An insistence that history is not a concept, or a force, but the brief, limited, unimportant lives of ordinary men and women involved in the business of getting from one day to the next. Just this, repeated a million times over."

Boy, I've gone off on a path there ... Anyway I think to myself I can cut it later, it's all grist to the mill. What – apart from the meaning of life - do we have to offer? What as Australians do I think we have to offer overseas? That's a probably more relevant question to APAM.

APAM? I've got to say just on that whole economic rationalism pie-chart and graph thing. Australian Performing Arts Market? My blood ran cold. I got a stomach ache when I heard what APAM actually stood for. The only worse name I thought they could come up with was Australian Performing Arts Audition And Anxiety And Alienation Gathering of Honchos APAAAAAAGH. I don't know about you but since the 90's the word Market just fills me with horror. Images of desperation, greed, need, voracious consumerism, the triumph of the soulless mass-producible monster product. Suits and Strippers, men on quad bikes. Bankers, crisis ... lurching idiot behaviour. People selling their artistic souls for a pittance to other people who don't have money just a series of carefully concealed debts made to look like money.

Walking my children to the local Primary, I wondered would it be better served if it was called APAF? - the Australian Performing Arts Fete. APAF? Any takers? No? Just think, if that catches on the Australia Council could be reconceived as a Federal Lamington Drive. Actually ...? I'm seeing a big increase in funding dollars there. There's an idea for 2020.2.

Enough. There is a point in here somewhere and I should try to get to it.

The way you walk into a room is often the determiner for how you will be perceived from then on. First impressions count and indeed I believe – call me shallow – first impressions often reveal an essential truth. Australia weighed into the global cultural conversation with a fart cushion and a prawn and we’ve been living it down ever since. We probably had a few under our belt as well, so our judgement was skewed but the problem was no-one else had had a drop when we burst in. Maybe it was a time zone thing. Either way the uncouth and the disrespectful, the slightly clownish and awkward. These things have stuck. Interestingly “Chuck another prawn on the Barbie” actually does capture a quality inherent in our work whether we like it or not. Let me explain ... The prawn is quite an exotic thing, ugly but delicious (think Oedipus Rex or Phedre) and the Barbie is a casual, practical no fuss way to get the job done. Do you see my point? I think the Hedda Gabler we took to BAM in 2006 was probably on some deep culturally true level not unlike throwing another shrimp on the Barbie. You’ve got your classic in one hand and your no fuss practicality on the other. In fact, thinking on it now, I wish we had been bolder with the production and not taken our best crockery with us to serve it up because we might have really ruffled some feathers. Which surely is the point. “Hedda’s having a Barbie and then she’s going to top herself. BYO.”

The great thing for me as an actor going to BAM with Hedda Gabler was the chance to perform in such an informal formal space with an audience who enjoyed the proscenium arch. We have so many of those little, found-space theatres in Australia – which are beautiful and intimate don’t get me wrong - but they do elicit a different kind of performance. It was great for us all to be in such space. And eight hundred people seems so much more than three hundred. Unsurprisingly.

The most unsettling thing about doing Hedda in Brooklyn was the really text-bound state of the critics and some of the audience. The expectation that there was a right way to do the play and that the play, or the production should act as a vessel for a kind of literary appreciation. There’s nothing worse for drama than considering it literature ... In fact, it was that experience that stimulated us to program Streetcar and ask Liv Ullmann to direct it. We returned to that same audience with that production. Because of the prior exposure to our work they were sort of ready for our irreverence. This could have gone both ways of course but luckily – and not wanting to blow our own trumpet too much – it was reviewed by Ben Brantley in the New York Times with the line “it was like hearing the lines for the first time.” That in a nutshell encapsulates what a cultural outsider can bring to those on the inside. Fresh perspectives. We asked Liv to direct that particular play because we felt her aesthetic would really help to blow the campy out of it and the stuffy literary-ness. Whether we achieved that or not is not for me to say but it definitely felt like we had engaged with America head on and that was emboldening and ... well tiring honestly. I’m exhausted. Touring ...? Really? Why do we bother?

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What else do Australians bring to the global cultural conversation? I think a kind of secularity which is liberating and exciting. We are a country that has never had big issues between the church and the state and so we don't seem so hide bound by ideologies and dogma. There is a down side to this secularity I think it's rare for our work to reach deep into that yearning that religion embodies and grapples with. In our first week as Artistic Directors Andrew and I had lunch with Fergus Linehan, the then Artistic Director of the Sydney Festival and we asked him what he felt was most distinctive about Sydney audiences and he said "Open mindedness" he explained that he had found the Sydney audiences adventurous, relatively non-judgemental and engaging. We too have found this and I think at some level that is related to the inherent secularity of our society. There seems to be sophistication without ennui, and a genuine pleasure in difference. That pleasure is hampered only by a dreadful paranoid fear of the pretentious. The fear of the pretentious itself would be fine except when it spills over into a pre-emptive strike mentality on anything that someone might hint at as being pretentious. I say it's fine, but it's a problem really because one of the definers of an artist is someone whose ambitions are bigger than their abilities. Artists are pretentious, let's face it.

It's a useful exercise I think to ask what it is we offer on tour because knowing what you offer goes a long way to revealing who you are.

Fourteen years ago to the day I got on a plane to Adelaide. I was coming here to make a short film called *Parklands*, one of my first jobs in front of a camera and one of the first jobs I had to leave home for. I was very excited by the idea of travelling for my work, I felt then that one of the key aspects of work in the Arts was the opportunity to travel and keep moving. To be exposed to other methods of working, different types of work, new experiences and get that priceless opportunity to be a free-floating anonymous agent in another place. Away, far from the constraints of home and all the expectations and limitations that Security brings. I remember boarding the flight here, sensing quite distinctly it was a watershed in my career and as I look back on it fourteen years later, my life. But at the time as I say, much of it was based around the opportunity to work somewhere else. I had some evenings free to see Festival events as well, it was kind of perfect: I was working, I was exposed to new things, I was free. I was fourteen years younger ...

Since that job I have got on a few more planes and travelled even further than Adelaide with my work. I can say for definite - I was right then about the indelible impact that exposure makes on us as artists. Exposure on an international stage particularly, yes of course it is exciting and rewarding and seems some kind of endorsement of what we have done, but more than that, much more than that, it changes the way we think and

feel about our work, about the Arts, about society. The result is we bring back enormous riches for the imagination, aspiration and expansion of everyone back home.

Measuring, quantifying and valuing those riches is virtually impossible in a market type way. I've only come up with one unit of measurement. Change.

If something is really worth doing it will change your life. Change by its nature is unexpected. Doing that interstate job 14 years ago I met the other Co-Artistic Director of the STC. The work we do, like life, is held together with threads so fine as to be undetectable. In the end it seems the only thing you can do is go where it takes you and the way to make the best of that randomness is to set yourself up to be taken somewhere further than your own back yard.

That seems to me to be a vital part of APAM or whatever it's called.

Another important outcome of international touring for Australia is to rebalance the achievements of the country in the eyes of the world. Many individual artists are noted overseas but there is not really an understanding of Australia as a regular producer of great art. The more we tour as distinctive Australian companies, collectives, ensembles or groups the more we can make the world aware of our collective cultural power, because of course it is only a rich diverse and healthy culture that can throw up individuals of note in the first place. There was quite a lot else I wanted to say, particularly about scale and scope. About smaller companies and the bigger companies and finding ways to work together and not let the scale differences kill us all but I am aware that I have banged on plenty for now ...

I hope I have struck a note – not too flat. I'm not a person of facts and figures, nor am I a great theoretician. The only thing I imagine that qualifies me to give this speech really is that, as an actor I have benefited immensely from an international career. It has exposed me to countless methods, approaches, rationales, and visions. I feel I know quite well a particular current in the huge cultural ocean that binds and separates us. I know for sure that it's encounters like this where you can build important bridges and maintain and grow little connections that ... Make Experience Possible ... have a great couple of days.