

America and the Australian Performing Group

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The development of a distinctively Australian theater is commonly traced to two companies that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Australian Performing Group (APG) in Melbourne and the Nimrod in Sydney. The work of both companies is remembered for its determined populism, physicality, and transgressive vulgarity. While these qualities were not necessarily new to Australian theater, the Nimrod and the APG allied them to a theatrical nationalism that won acceptance at the time and has influenced interpretations of their work since then. Populism, physicality, and vulgarity became the hallmarks of what was read at the time and has continued to be read as a characteristically Australian performance style. Both companies were also crucial in attempting to reverse a cultural cringe that led Australian theater companies to be suspicious of local products and to imitate or import the foreign. The Nimrod and the APG developed a cluster of influential writers whose subjects and style were drawn from Australia and who won acceptance for indigenous theater.

These are important achievements that have long been celebrated in Australia. Less readily acknowledged have been the foreign influences on these companies. This study of the Australian Performing Group traces the effects of developments in the United States in shaping some of the company's work, especially in its early stages. In attempting to find a theater style suited to their abilities and aspirations and distinct from other theater in Melbourne at the time, the young theater-makers who became the APG first turned to avant-garde modes which were communicated to them via an American journal, the *Tulane Drama Review*. In doing so, they repeated a trend in youth and popular culture at the time of looking to the United States for style and content. Later, though more avant-garde work persisted, as the nationalist project took hold, their gaze turned more inward and backward, particularly to popular forms and styles from within Australia.

The genesis of the APG occurred at the University of Melbourne in 1968 with the performance of some short plays by Jack Hibberd under the title, *Brainrot*. The cast became the core of a group that undertook acting workshops and began performing at La Mama, a small, experimental space modeled on a New York original. The group was called the La Mama Company until 1970 when it became the Australian Performing Group and shifted to larger premises, the Pram Factory. The company is often referred to by the name of the building. In 1981, the APG folded when it lost its premises.

Long before the advent of the Nimrod and the APG the United States had begun influencing Australia via popular culture. For example, in the silent film era, "The United States produced 85% of the silent films shown in the world and Australia imported more than any other country" (Waterhouse 177). As a result of continued importation of American films and music as well as local imitations of them, visiting American service personnel during the Second World War found the "forms of cinema and dancing [they favored] were already firmly entrenched in Australia" (Waterhouse 189).

Popular music played on the radio and the increasingly ubiquitous medium of television continued the trend. For instance, "One survey in the late 1950s showed that Australian material comprised only 5 out of 131 half hour shows; another in the early 1960s that of 136 evening programmes telecast nationally in the USA, only 12 were not being shown in Australia" (Walter 70). Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett plausibly assert that via these and other avenues the American influence on Australia had proceeded so far that when President Johnson visited Australia in 1966 he "was virtually a *de facto* leader" (34).

Ironically, the slogans and style of those involved in demonstrations against the President's visit also bore the stamp of American influence. Various forms of resistance to Australia's involvement in Vietnam, to racial and gender inequality, and to capitalism in general have been gathered under the rubric, "counter culture." The movement was characterized by anti-authoritarianism, collectivism, sexual liberation, and alternative drug use. The emotional and "spiritual" were valorized above the rational. There was a search for transnational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal unity in the face of the alleged schismatic and alienating effects of capitalism. Largely a youth movement, like other aspects of Australian youth culture it took its cues from the United States to determine the style, rhetoric, and practice of its resistance.

For instance, the "freedom rides" of the American Civil Rights movement inspired the bus tour of rural New South Wales organized by Student Action for Aborigines. In opposition to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and the conscription that was part of it, there emerged on Australian campuses organizations with American prototypes such as Students for Democratic Society. Sometimes there was a deliberate coincidence between American and Australian demonstrations: "Bob Gould [an activist of the time] remembers demonstrations in 1965 being rescheduled to fall a few days after those planned in the United States to enhance their publicity"

(Eden 61) since large American demonstrations would be covered almost immediately on Australian television news.

Writing at the start of the 1970s, Ray Aitchison observed that, "In the streets, the catch-cries of Australian students, drop-outs, hippies and demonstrators, their living habits and apparel, and often their causes and thoughts are aped from their peers in America" (190). A witness to an early La Mama performance describes many in the audience reading New York's *Village Voice* (Adams 75). A similar faction in the APG has been described as "the hip, born-again Americans" (Robertson 45).

According to Alison Richards, "The Pram Factory ...rose out of a primordial soup of the student culture of the 60s: US West Coast radicalism, Greenwich Village counterculture and incipient feminism" (33). The young Melbourne theater workers involved in the Pram Factory were inspired by an American journal, the *Tulane Drama Review*. Its standing is suggested by David Williamson who, in 1972, observed that "the actors of the APG were becoming increasingly committed to the philosophies of the burgeoning US and European experimental drama groups, as propagated via the hallowed *Tulane Drama Review*" (104).

Tim Robertson was an actor, writer, and director with the Pram Factory. In 1995, years after the company had folded, he suggested "a guernsey in the *Tulane Drama Review*." (45) as a suitable reward for Jack Hibberd's patience during the rehearsal of one of his plays. Robertson's full stops emphasize the journal's importance. Geoffrey Milne, a founding member of the APG, mentions the formative influence of the *Tulane Drama Review* (19), as does Dennis Carroll (37). Graeme Blundell's description of the early acting workshops he co-led in the formative stages of the company is instructive: "We tossed around dramatic ideas on confrontation and environment from Chaikin, Grotowski, Schechner, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and Jerry Lewis. We developed our own versions of their exercises. We got into psychotherapy, group gropes and encounter training" (8). Readily apparent is the emphasis on personal and group psychology in the style of avant-garde theater championed at the time by the *Tulane Drama Review*. That only one of the gurus nominated by Blundell, Grotowski, is from outside the United States illustrates the strength of the American influence.

In line with the avant-garde, the early inclinations of the company that became the APG were away from overt politics and issues and towards psychological and aesthetic aspects of theater itself. The program for the debut season of Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola* at La Mama in July 1969 suggests the predominance of the avant-garde style. It lists among previous productions at La Mama such "events" as *The Car Park Event*, *The Birth of Space*, *An Open Event*, *The Journey, Happening*, and *The Audience's Audience*. As its name suggests, the final event examined audience participation:

It involved a discussion between the actors and a special "audience" who, in fact, consisted of actors also.

The real audience was told that they need not bother participating because they had been provided with a special audience of actors who would do this for them. All the cast was instructed to "ruthlessly put down" any attempt to participate on the part of the real audience. This instruction was not carried out successfully; the real audience joined in a discussion which quickly left the short scripted sketch and reached far into the night. (Whitelaw 8)

Ideas from the avant-garde, communicated to the company via the *Tulane Drama Review* among other publications, are also evident in a 1972 revue, *A Night in Rio and Other Bummers*, which demonstrated contempt for the conventional decorums of the stage and suggested liberation of the body through play that is typical of the avant-garde. Of this production, *The Truth* headlined, "Stage Nudes Send Up the Prudes" (16 Dec. 1972, 5). At various times, there were performances of Samuel Beckett pieces or theater inspired by Beckett. Other writers from the avant-garde represented in APG work, particularly by *Nightshift*, include Handke and Arrabal.

The coincidence of two parallel events, one in New York and the other in Melbourne, suggest that in keeping an eye on the United States the APG found a model for some self-promotion. The New York event was a symposium entitled "Theater or Therapy." The participants included the directors of the Living Theater and Robert Brustein, then Dean of Drama at Yale. Not long before, in the *New York Review*, Brustein had accused the Living Theater and its ilk of "mindlessness, and romantic revolutionary rhetoric" (Brustein 31). The Living Theater organized the symposium as a benefit for itself and an opportunity for the accused to confront their accuser publicly.

On April 23 1972, a year after Brustein had published an account of the New York meeting, the APG convened a seminar in Melbourne entitled "One Hundred Years of Indigenous Theater." There, too, the set-up was confrontational. The event was conceived as a forum in which the new theater-makers from the APG could publicly attack a figure from the establishment, in this case, John Sumner, the Artistic Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company. The differing emphases of the events provide an insight into the distance between the APG and the American influences that had inspired some of its early development. While the New York symposium exploited more purely conceptual schisms concerning what theater might or should be, the Melbourne event was based on more pragmatic and ostensibly political concerns about local content. The variation suggests the ascendancy of nationalism in the company's thinking. Presumably, John Sumner was invited as the object of attack because he was held to represent an outmoded Europhilia, an unhealthy foreign influence of which the APG was free.

Opposition to "cultural imperialism" is also evident when the United States was the subject of plays performed by the APG. As well as inspiring early avant-garde experiments by the APG and its precursor, the La Mama Company, the United States was the subject of several



A performance of Jack Hibberd's "Who" at Australia's La Mama, 1969

Photograph by Lloyd Carrick.

productions throughout the APG's career. John Romeril's *Chicago Chicago* (1971) was described in a program note as an exploration of "the range and variety of American madness." *The Dragon Lady's Revenge* (1973) was a script from the San Francisco Mime Troupe looking at imperialism in Asia. *The Golden Holden* (1976), another Romeril script, concerned capitalism, imperialism/foreign ownership in Australia and the history of General Motors Holden. The subject of *The Dudders* (1977) was Australian-American relations during the Second World War particularly the antagonism between servicemen from the two countries. Company publicity described it as dealing with "the headiness of cultural clash, the power of American money and the competition between men of both nations" (production file, Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*, 1977). *Mickey's Moomba* (1979) exploited Mickey Mouse's having been made King of Moomba, a Melbourne cultural festival, two years previously. Not surprisingly, Mickey was portrayed as "an agent of US imperialism" (program).

The contrast between the titles of the New York and Melbourne seminars and the anti-imperialist element in the shows concerning the United States suggest the nationalism that was to overshadow more standard avant-

garde concerns in the APG at the time and continues to overshadow them in popular perceptions of the company. An APG statement put out by the company in early 1973 for "One Hundred Years of Indigenous Theater" describes the main thrust of the APG's experimentation as being "towards the development of a truly *indigenous* theater, strongly rooted in the community and dealing with the myths and realities of life in Australia; a theater built from the fabric—past, present and future—of Australian society itself" (Williams and Morgan 69). In the following year, John Romeril, a key writer in the company, allied the nationalist enterprise to identity building: "Less than 200 years ago Australia was invented by Britain. If someone could invent the country then there seems some chance that we could invent it all over again. Now. And this time for ourselves" (7). In attempting to rediscover and reinvent Australia on its stages, the APG turned to popular theater forms such as the musical and the music hall, it re-examined famous historical figures, and presented a range of readily identifiable Australian stereotypes. Its characteristic style was irreverent and rumbustious celebration.

In first looking overseas to find models for a theater more closely allied to their distinctive interests and con-

cerns, the young people of the APG were continuing a trend that was characteristic of an older generation of Australian theater-makers. But while the "establishment" reflected Australia's colonial past in looking to Britain, the new generation's looking to the United States was symptomatic of international youth and popular culture. Eventually, as nationalism took hold and became ascendant, the quest to rediscover and re-invent an Australian identity led predominant elements in the APG to look more closely at indigenous models for style and content.

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Easter Images in Tasmania

PETER HUNT

An old gray horse fretting under the firs,
 Beyond, a row of poplars, faintly gold,
 Espaliered apples rosy on the wires,
 And down the hill, a stretch of wrinkled water
 Blue-misted, half-shrouding two black swans;
 A chill of ague-damp; but Pinot Noir
 And Chardonnay mellowing on the vines.

Peter Hunt has published poems widely in Australia and abroad. He lives in Tasmania. This is his first appearance in Antipodes.
