

Haunted by irrelevance?

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Abstract

In *Richard the Third*, the king is haunted in his dreams by the ghosts of those he has murdered. As an experienced theatre director working in actor training, my deliberations are haunted by the ghosts of ideas and concepts that I may have ‘murdered’ on my way to building relevant program design that will appeal to actors and their parents, to the arts industry at large and to the marketing department. Spectres appear, such as Ghost 1: Is it more relevant to actors’ employment prospects to focus on acting for screen?; Ghost 2: What is the relevance of skills training in an arts environment where theatre companies appear to have impoverished resources, limited textual experience, no ‘calling’ and prefer to cast television actors in order to protect ‘bums on seats’?; or Ghost 3: Is Australian actor training relevant when so many yearn for post-graduate study overseas? In preparing rehearsals for *The Northern Lass*, a play by Richard Brome written in 1629, and haunted by such questions, what relevance can I claim for directing this classic play in Ballarat, Australia? I intend to examine and celebrate the surprising aesthetic, textual, psychological and comic relevance of making such a choice.

Keywords

Actor Training; Curriculum Design; Fear; Empathy; *The Northern Lass*; Richard Brome

What I have is mine own, and I will be merry with it directly.
(*The Northern Lass*, Richard Brome, 3.2, 538)

This catchphrase becomes the mantra of Sir Paul Squelch, a character in Richard Brome’s play *The Northern Lass* whenever he perceives a threatening situation. I would like to have this attitude to curriculum design, which can be a threatening process. This play from 1629 is a silly comedy that explores love, marriage, jealousy and debt. In late September 2019 I am staging the first full production of this work since 1738. I imagine some people might think this an irrelevant choice of repertoire for contemporary actor training, especially in a regional city such as Ballarat, Australia. Students who were cast in the play asked me what was going on, what it would be like? (July 29, 2019, Camp

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Street, Ballarat). They appeared vaguely threatened by its unknown nature. Unknown, the play is a ghost in my imagination as yet, one that only the process of staging can reveal. In another classical work full of threats, *Richard the Third*, the king is haunted in his dreams by the ghosts of those he has murdered. The ghosts of enemies and rivals build fears created by doubt and anger. The ghost of Buckingham, for example, exhorts Richard thus:

*Dream on, dream on, of bloody deeds and death:
Fainting, despair; despairing, yield thy breath!
(Richard the Third, William Shakespeare, 5.3, 172-173)*

I have both fainted and despaired when working on course design, so I will adopt the conceit of being haunted by enemies in order to examine the threats and possibilities inherent in trying to design artistic training that is ‘relevant’. Immediately one can ask, relevant to what? To the history of the art form? To the age and demeanour of students? To the needs of industry? To the internal leaders in the University sector, and then their overseers? Here is a conundrum. Whose should be the leading voice in this process? Colleagues in other training institutions, be clear: you are not enemies! However, we all swim in a common sea looking to fill up; in a marketing sense, all institutions are compared equally by young people surfing the net, despite institutional variations and contradictions. Glossy brochures and marketing speech operate in an unequal political and monetised terrain and those working away from the ‘Big Smoke’ can feel this pressure keenly. And a survey of the latest *Stage Whispers* training edition (July-August 2019) shows an array of seductive language: candidates are asked to ‘amplify your potential’ (Australian Institute of Music, 41), be ‘passion-driven actors’ (Perform Australia, 49), ‘find your voice’ (Griffith University Queensland Conservatorium, 49) and ‘make your vision come to life’ (National Institute of Dramatic Art, 51). Indeed, passion is frequently mentioned whenever the word ‘career’ appears. Meanwhile, anyone wandering around London’s West End, as I recently have, might believe that the most relevant training to offer a professional performer is a set of generic mainstream skills. Yet, as Alison Hodge has shown, twentieth century theatre directors developed drama school training in the West partly in order to reject these values. She states that

Ultimately, many twentieth century practitioners have eschewed the notion of a comprehensive system in favour of identifying first principles within the context in which their training operates. These principles are made manifest through specific actor training techniques and amplify distinctive ethical positions, but do not in themselves constitute a ‘system’.
(2000:8)

Establishing such principles is essential in representing artistic work that is living within an ancient art form. As an experienced theatre director working in actor training, my deliberations are haunted by the ghosts of ideas and concepts that I may have ‘murdered’ on my way to building relevant program design that will appeal to various stakeholders, such as actors and their parents, the arts industry at large and the marketing department. For example, the teaching team has spent hours designing teaching modules for actors that provide them with a strong amount of knowledge and

contact hours. Lately, due to the pressures of time and budget, disciplines such as clowning, mask and animal studies (the core of an atelier approach to the development of psychophysical acting skills) are preserved in a skeleton format of four classes per discipline area over a twelve-week term. Although the ‘missing’ hours are filled with other skills, to me, these could be the ghosts of effective training, perhaps as a leading historical actor such as Jean-Louis Barrault would have designed it. Famous for appearing in the original production of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, in his memoirs, he remembers:

My impression is that, when I chose the theatre, I decided to attend the School of Life. First I had become conscious of the Individual, the ‘Self’. Then I had discovered the Others, both as nourishment and as obstacle. Then I found the place where everyone meets to raise a quantity of questions: a theatre. (1974:72)

Australian actor training curriculum design may look good on paper. It may appear relevant, using buzz words like ‘contemporary’ in the brochures, that word so fraught to our cousins teaching in the visual arts. But the voice of fear suggests that this model of training is a spectre if it fails to advance the practices and deeper values of our collaborative art form. It is a ghost of a practice if it does not enable the actor to engage in their psychophysical discipline with strength, power and knowledge. Designing for relevance may have murdered its spirit?

The ghosts of market forces

The curriculum designer haunted by ghosts tends to be working in an external policy vacuum. For example, the Gillard Government commissioned the Lomax-Smith Review into higher education base funding and the final recommendations, released in October 2011, were not adopted in full (VOCEDplus). This impressive document of 202 pages represents essential statistics that were vital for the establishment of the future funding of university courses across Australia. There were twenty-four recommendations, and only 13 were accepted in full or part. Interestingly the report suggested that particular disciplines should be separately funded, due to the complexity and high standards of their practices and qualifications. For example:

The study, together with additional data from other reports and submitted information, convinced The Panel that there are areas of underfunding in the current base funding model. This report identifies three groups of disciplines of concern:

- *accounting, administration, economics and commerce;*
- *medicine, dentistry, agriculture, veterinary science, and visual and performing arts;*
- *law and humanities.*

The Panel's view is that the evidence supports the conclusion that the first two groups are underfunded and require additional funding, while the third group needs careful consideration for additional support. (2011:x)

The final report makes for sober reading and may have caused the hearts of actor-trainers to momentarily lift, yet these particular recommendations were rejected by the then-Labor government, and the subsequent damage created within a demand-driven system of university funding is evident in the profile of changed and merged courses across Australia.

There are other spectres when selecting courses for training. Ghost 1: Is it more relevant to actors' employment prospects to focus on acting for screen? It is inevitable that a focus on screen will become only more relevant over time. Even Barrault had this to say on the matter:

I was to put forward a report in which I made this point: the Society of Comedie Francaise Actors would not recover its balance except by gathering together, into a single activity, all the branches of the dramatic art: theatre, cinema, radio, television. I still believe this, especially with the development of cassettes and the prospect of recording on videograms. (1974: 118-9)

In my experience, despite the excitement inherent in approaches to acting with technology, trainers need to fight to retain the actor's presence in cultural products, in a climate where the pleasures of virtual reality could unseat them. Then there is Ghost 2: What is the relevance of skills training in an arts environment where theatre companies appear to have impoverished resources, limited textual experience, no 'calling' and prefer to cast television actors onstage in order to protect 'bums on seats'? This reality is linked to the first. It is coloured by somewhat inevitable cultural changes in funding and fashion, generational changes, thrift and poor memory of other models. I remember an anecdote from discussion with a casting agent for a major theatre company. They were struggling to cast a young actor for two classic plays because they could not find anyone who could, in their words, 'hold the stage'. This seems unrealistic given the amount and depth of talent pouring through drama schools, but of course the missing ingredient for these young actors was potentially a successful on-screen following. Finally, Ghost 3: Is Australian actor training relevant when so many yearn for post-graduate study overseas? In a global environment, this kind of cross-over may be seen as inevitable and healthy. The dream of overseas training holds within it the yearning for depth and serious attention to discipline, whatever the vast cost involved. It is a sad truism for the Australian actor that it may be perceived as more relevant to attain an overseas qualification.

Brome and *The Northern Lass*

Brome's *The Northern Lass* disappeared from the stage from 1738 until 2008, when the play was presented as a Shakespeare's Globe *Read Not Dead* rehearsed reading. There has been no fully-staged production for 281 years. Haunted by my questions, I

struggle to articulate the relevance of directing this classic play in Ballarat with third year actors, a play that no-one understands. I want to celebrate the surprising aesthetic, textual, psychological and comic relevance of making such a choice. The plays of Caroline playwright Richard Brome were largely forgotten in contemporary times before the website *Richard Brome Online (RBO)* was created in 2010. My practice of premiering the plays in Ballarat has taken place since 2007, providing a range of new insights into the production of these texts and new grounds for a reconsideration of the reputation of the dramatist. If we perceive Shakespeare as an ‘upstairs’ playwright, my conclusion is that Richard Brome can be seen to occupy a ‘downstairs’ position in the dramatic register. Noting a characteristic social investigation in these plays, I see that Brome uses what I have identified in positive terms as a ‘downstairs dramaturgy.’ Brome’s downstairs dramaturgy can be characterised by a number of key theatrical tropes, including: an interest in presenting the wealthy and the not-so-wealthy in proximity and engagement with one another; examples of open, playful, extemporised action; a detailed psychological portrayal of servants who often provide plot development and revelation; a tendency to portray the inner freedom and sexual character of women with relish and detail; and, especially, in a sophisticated manipulation of metatheatrical devices, through which role-play and re-enactment abound, inviting both characters and audiences to move downstairs with the common people, shed their inhibitions and see the frame of the world and the theatre anew.

The evidence for Brome’s use of these forms is presented throughout my completed PhD study based on performative examples taken from the productions of three plays, *The City Wit* (directed in 2007), *The Antipodes* (directed in 2008) and *A Jovial Crew* (directed in 2013). This project has exposed a characteristic looseness in Brome’s writing and story-telling, including, for example, a remarkable fluidity in the application of song to the drama of *The Northern Lass* that looks like early music theatre. Julie Sanders suggests that

Critics such as R. W. Ingram long ago recognized the ‘semi-operatic’ quality of Brome’s play ...but the embeddedness of song in the plotlines and effects of this play, particularly but not solely in the Constance or ‘fake’ Constance scenes, suggests as well a more integrated understanding of musical and song-based culture on the part of Brome that went beyond pure theatrical effect or innovation. (Critical Introduction, Accessed 05.08.19)

Irrelevant? No, irreverent

What are the relevant training purposes and the meanings behind reviving a nearly forgotten classic play in an Australian regional setting? This question would tend not to be posed in the UK, where revivals are regular and normalised, and where a broad range of English and European classic works form the basis of an extensive repertoire. Far away in Ballarat, theatre artists and audiences more familiar with Shakespeare or more sympathetic to contemporary playwrights have sometimes requested an examination of this topic. There are some encouraging signposts for the appropriateness of a Brome revival. Firstly, that Brome’s dramaturgy is democratised,

as Helen Hirschfield has suggested ‘one dedicated, above all, to the exposure and analysis of human humours, grievances, crimes and sins’ (Hoenselaars 2013: 240). Brome’s plays, as staged in Ballarat to date, have proven to be entertaining in good measure, with genuine comic strengths that have been celebrated by cross-generational audiences. Brome is deliciously irreverent towards authority. Brome’s writing was valued for this by Gerald Freeman, the director of the only contemporary Shakespeare’s Globe revival of Brome’s *The Antipodes*:

Brome created a world of antic humour and anarchic suspension of expectations that makes for a screwball comedy. The viewer is left wondering: who are the doctors and who the patients? ... His imagination, energy and theatrical suspense are unflagging. (Kastan and Proudfoot: 2000: viii)

A second reason to activate a Brome revival may be the opportunity to engage with the question of fidelity to the text. In the words of Goodman, ‘How do we define the relationship between texts and contexts?’ (1993: 239). Much has been written in the press regarding the rightness of retaining all aspects of a script in a revival. Australian director Simon Stone was taken to task by local journalists for his apparent disrespect of the source material in his adaptations of *The Wild Duck* (Malthouse Theatre 2012) and *The Cherry Orchard* (Melbourne Theatre Company 2013) and the estate of Arthur Miller demanded the return of materials cut from his version of *Death of a Salesman* by Belvoir Theatre in 2012. Yet if the text is unknown to its audience, who is to know what indignities that text may have suffered in performance? Is it relevant? Does it need to be? In my 2008 interpretation of *The Antipodes*, the text was trimmed, something that Brome complained about even in his own time, and showing that perhaps this ongoing struggle between writers, directors and performers has a trans-historical dimension (Haaker 1966: xi). This process, it seems to me, is perhaps parallel to producing a new dramatic work. In my commissioned article for *Richard Brome Online*, (taking my cue from Max Stafford-Clark writing to Farquar in *Letters to George*), I have taken the liberty of writing imaginary letters to the deceased playwright, just as I would if he really were an emerging writer. There are so many things to discuss with him that only a practice-led investigation can begin to answer. Richard Brome’s work therefore is almost new to the stage, given his ‘forgottenness’ and therefore I argue that it demands a degree of ‘fidelity’ to his text and stagecraft so that we may meet, examine and enjoy the work of this engaging and clear-eyed social commentator.

But a final reason for my interest has been to test the so-called ‘unperformability’ of the work, so labelled by Stephen Jeffreys in his introduction to the 1991 version of *A Jovial Crew* that he adapted by removing 45% of the Brome text (1992: unnumbered page). I argue that not only is Brome eminently and gloriously ‘performable’, but that until recently his dramaturgical talents have not been adequately explored or appreciated. It is possible for Australian artists to perceive the Caroline period of theatrical history to be indistinct and less well known than the Elizabethan and Jacobean repertoire, due to the paucity of physical examples available for research purposes in the local environment. It appears that, apart from a student performance of *The Antipodes* at the

Studio Theatre, University of Tasmania in 1992, no play by Richard Brome had been previously produced in Australia until a performance of Brome's *The City Wit* mounted with undergraduate actors at the Arts Academy (AusStage, Accessed 08.09.19). What I am describing as his downstairs dramaturgy provides 'cross-sectional' thinking about masters and servants that has its echoes in two novels successfully brought to the Australian stage. *The Playmaker* by Thomas Kenneally, adapted as *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker, is a re-imagining of the first colony as it mounts George Farquar's comedy *The Recruiting Officer*, an event that provides a context for the intermingling of 'upstairs' officers with 'downstairs' convicts. More devastatingly, the stage adaptation by Andrew Bovell of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* for Sydney Theatre Company gives voice and language to the shadowy figures of our indigenous people and shows the hollowness of the apparent superiority of the colonising forces. Binary positions have a particular meaning in Australian culture and politics: Peter Eckersall has characterised Australian performance studies as a unique mix, in his persuasive description of a culturally off-centre focus here: he states

Wavering between various political-aesthetic possibilities for art, and then countering them in the cultural "marketplace" is likely a feature of the social role of art in advanced economies everywhere. However, this state of affairs is enlivened in Australia by the composite of postmodern, post-colonial, centre-periphery discourses and tensions that permeate our cultural history. (2011: 119)

Ballarat or bust

Because of his focus on status, Brome's plays, emphasising the abuttal and conflict between the classes, would have been understood in gold-rush crazy Ballarat:

She opened at Ballarat on 16 February in a series of sketches; greeted by packed houses she invited miners to shower nuggets at her feet as she danced. The Ballarat Times attacked her notoriety; Lola retaliated by publicly horsewhipping the editor Henry Seekamp at the United States Hotel. (Australian Dictionary of Biography, Accessed 02.09.19)

Lola Montez's 1856 whipping of the Ballarat newspaper editor is known to many of its citizens and approved for its cross-class and cross-gender power: in quoting a popular ballad on this subject Claire Wright notes that:

Imperial anxieties about the state of social flux in the colonies in general, and about the presumptuous, defiant behaviour of women in particular, are summed up in the satirical analogy between women whipping men and the military whipping the miners. (2013: 450)

Ballarat is a town of then and now, one that always harks back to its past to illuminate the present, and as such, a place where the remounting of historical drama should be able to find acceptance. This is a place where the descendants of the law enforcers (nicknamed 'trappers') and the rebels (the miners), those who were involved in the

Eureka Stockade in the nineteenth century, struggle right now over the best location for the remnants of the Stockade flag, as it has bounced between preservation by the Art Gallery, where it is seen as an artistic icon, and its long-term loan to the Eureka Centre as a symbol of democracy (*The Courier*: 2012). I suggest it is no mere accident that I have adopted Brome on Ballarat's behalf, but something of an offer to the populace, as the city also houses the first Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, which opened its doors only four months before *A Jovial Crew* hit the stage in 2013. Don Weingust's self-reflection on original practices acknowledges the distance:

One of the games of history is trying to recognise the various lenses through which one views one's own period: which affect one's perspective in obvious discernable ways and which alter the view in ways one may be unable, or unwilling to recognise. (2006: 191)

The Northern Lass is to be set in 2019 at the Melbourne Cup, a place of broad demographics, giving us a rich repertoire of cultural tropes to draw upon. The Northern English accent of our Northern lass, that was included in the text phonetically by Brome, has been replaced by a North Queensland accent, broad Australian nasality and contemporary slang. There are already challenges ahead, given that we have real women playing the female characters instead of seventeenth century boys. This causes some of the more sexist moments to go darker, something the actors are now relishing. Their fears of the unknown are vanishing as they engage in the process of sailing in, as one suggested, 'The Brome boat'. She says 'we may hit an iceberg but now we travel together' (August 2019).

Whether haunted by competitors, despairing of the market or ghosted by the loss of ideal conditions for drama school training, I remain inspired by actors and their practices. I ask actors at entry auditions why they think actors are important for the world, and they give me an array of beautiful answers. I propose that actor training is relevant to the world because it deals with a human art form and I believe only if it engages with the work of the soul can it remain relevant. By the work of the soul, I mean the daily engagement with artistic methods that refine perception, heightening physical and emotional awareness in the actor, and equipping them for the generous act of giving embodiment to stories in public. If this seems highly elevated as a purpose, consider the opinion of Eugenio Barba that

The dialogue between the visible and the invisible is precisely that which the actor experiences as inner life, and in some cases even as meditation. And it is what the spectator experiences as interpretation. (Zarilli 2002:104)

The most relevant training looks after the well-being of the actor. In a recent discussion with UK director Mike Alfreds, who is about to start a new ensemble to continue his work, at the age of 85, he emphasised that actor training needs to focus on the body, the feeling, and the thought. Like some of us, he was concerned about the impact of social media on the mental health of actors (Personal discussion with the author, London 2019). Actors are important. In concluding a consideration of relevant training models, I think it important to quote Mike from his seminal work, *Different Every Night*:

In fact, actors are the reason for theatre. We go to the theatre because of them. Actors are more than the executors of other people's ideas. More vitally, and in their own right, they manifest the extraordinary human phenomenon of acting: the ability to embody and imagine oneself another person. I believe that at the deepest level of our theatregoing experience, we long to witness this special evidence of our humanity in action. Theatre at its purest is a manifestation of empathy. (Alfreds 2007:12)

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Associate Professor Kim Durban trained as a teacher in South Australia, then as a director at the Victorian College of the Arts. Over the last 33 years she has built a strong reputation as a director of both new plays and classic texts for theatres across Australia including Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Playbox Theatre, La Mama and Red Stitch Theatre. In 2001, Kim was appointed Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts, where her productions have included *Margaret of Anjou*, *Machinal*, *Ant + Cleo*, *The Tempest*, *A Little Touch of Chaos*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Murder on the Ballarat Train*, *The Hatpin* and *Kiss Me, Kate*. She is currently the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Acting for Stage and Screen and Bachelor of Contemporary Performance Practice undergraduate degrees. Kim is the winner of a 2015 *Vice Chancellor's Citation for Teaching Excellence*, the 2012 *EJ Barker Fellowship*, a 2010 *ALTC Citation* and joint winner of the 1990 *Ewa Czajor Memorial Award*. She has a current entry in the *Who's Who of Australian Women*. Her PhD on Caroline playwright Richard Brome, completed at La Trobe University, included Australian premieres of *The City Wit*, *The Antipodes* and *A Jovial Crew* and she has also premiered in Australia Brome's *Covent Garden Weeded* (re-named for Australian audiences *Garden City Weeded*) and *The Northern Lass*.