

---

## Writing about rehearsal: some preliminary observations

And let him observe  
That this is not magic but  
Work, my friends.  
(Bertolt Brecht, *The Curtains*)

A good place to begin to think about rehearsal is via the word itself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'rehearsal' comes from the Old French word 're-herse,' which is a term used in agriculture. It refers to the practice of preparing the soil before planting seeds, and the implement used, the 'herse,' is a frame with metal spikes that pierce the soil when dragged along the ground. The English word, both noun and verb, is 'harrow' but as is often the case in English, the original French word has also been retained with another meaning. A 'herse' is the wooden or metal frame with prickets set up in the sanctuary of a church, upon which the faithful may place lighted candles that each represent a prayer or an appeal to God. In the Anglican church, this practice was particularly connected with the funeral rite, hence the slippage from 'herse' to 'hearse,' from the frame carrying the prayers of the faithful that was placed over the coffin to the vehicle carrying the coffin to the grave. Interestingly, in modern French, the word 'herse' designates the agricultural implement, the liturgical candelabra and also a batten from which stage lights are hung in the theatre. The theatrical connection does not,

however, extend to rehearsal, for which the modern French word is *répétition*. Victor Turner demonstrated on numerous occasions that tracing the etymology of key words revealed them to be 'crystallised secretions of once living human experience' or, what he called 'a "laminated" semantic system' (Turner 1982, 17) in that meanings are layered onto one another, some superseded but nevertheless still present. The semantic system indicated by the etymology of the word 'rehearsal' provides an extremely rich context for consideration of the theatrical practice: nurturing the soil, providing the organic conditions for new growth and providing illumination are obviously relevant connotations, and the sense of some appeal to the supernatural or sending a message into the unknown is also part of the mix. Modern rehearsal practice, thus, seems to draw on a complex set of meanings and connotations embedded in the word and it becomes clear why, over the past couple of centuries, this is the word that has come to the fore amongst English speaking theatre practitioners rather than words like 'repetition' or 'trial,' used in earlier times (Stern 2000, 23–4) and still the norm in other European languages.<sup>1</sup>

This book is an attempt to describe a single rehearsal process, the six weeks of intensive work involved in the making of *Toy Symphony*, a new play by Michael Gow, directed by Neil Armfield and brought to the stage for the first time in December 2007 by Company B at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney. I was a participant-observer of the whole rehearsal process, made welcome by the director and the actors, by the company staff in the offices and the production crew in the theatre, even though no one had much of an idea what kind of book I would be writing. In keeping with contemporary ethnographic practice, I make no attempt to disguise my own presence as narrator in this account for so much of it depends on my responses to the fragments of performance that were created, discarded, adjusted and refined day by day over the weeks of painstaking, repetitive work. Like the director, I was the unconditional spectator, as Ariane Mnouchkine once put it (Mnouchkine 1973), always attentive to the performers and ready to respond, but I was also observing the director and trying to keep track of what was done and what was said throughout the process. In this introductory chapter, the story of the process is preceded by some comments concerning the task of rehearsal observation and the lessons learned from ethnography and micro-sociology that have inflected what I see as a central element in the academic study of performance; the chapter also includes a short account of the prior creative work of the three main protagonists in the work process: Neil Armfield, the director, Michael Gow, the writer and Richard Roxburgh, the actor who played the huge role of the central character and was never off the stage. The fourth protagonist is the

Belvoir Street Theatre itself, with its idiosyncratic corner stage and its historic role in the formation of a theatre culture in Sydney. It, too, is briefly described here.

It is a somewhat surprising fact that, notwithstanding a century or so of scholarly concern with theatrical performance, relatively little has been written about the rehearsal practices from which these performances emerge. In part this can be explained by the historical emphasis in the discipline of theatre studies as it sought in its early years to find a place in the contested field of the humanities (see Vince 1989, Fischer Lichte 1999, Carlson 2001, Jackson 2004). The well-documented difficulties involved in talking about performance in bygone periods are greatly compounded when the question turns to rehearsal for, if public performance is ephemeral and leaves little trace, the private work processes that precede it are even more deeply buried in the past. As Tiffany Stern has shown, however, even in relation to the distant past, the inability to find material has been due perhaps more to a lack of scholarly enterprise than genuine absence of information. According to her, 'much more data than has been assumed survives about rehearsal from 1576 to 1780. Sources are diverse and scattered, however, and there is no single logical place to look for material concerning theatrical practice' (Stern 2000, 18).

Once the focus shifts from historical to contemporary performance, there is no shortage of material evidence for scholars who seek it, but the reluctance to engage seriously with rehearsal practice has continued. Paul Atkinson, author of an ethnographic study of the Welsh National Opera, is criticising scholars in cultural studies as well as theatre and performance departments, when he speaks of 'collective failure' in relation to the dearth of studies examining 'the social worlds of cultural production as collective work in socially organised settings' (Atkinson 2004, 94). In this one phrase, Atkinson foreshadows a whole intellectual programme and it resonates with my own evolving concern with rehearsal practice.<sup>2</sup>

In setting out to describe the creative process involved in the making of Michael Gow's *Toy Symphony* by Company B Belvoir in 2007, I am drawing on many years of experimentation and reflection on how best to approach the 'hidden world' of rehearsal, to use Susan Letzler Cole's telling phrase (Cole 1992), and the methodologies and conceptual frameworks that can best assist in dealing with the complex aesthetic and social issues involved. In the early days of this research, the focus of my interest was the production emerging from the rehearsal process. Concern with the semiotics of performance meant that what I noticed most was the way dominant signifiers came to be

I HAVE NOT

selected, the discussions that surrounded this selection process and the traces of things tried and discarded that were left in the performance. Already at this early stage, however, I was struck by the wide range of practices and people involved in the creative work, the collaborative nature of what went on, the way an element that later proved to be essential might have been originally introduced almost by accident, and the way a good director drew on the creativity of everyone in the room. As a result, I became more and more uneasy with the authorial role being attributed to the director in relation to performance, which seemed as misleading and reductive as claiming the same for the playwright. The issue of creative agency remains a central concern and, in attempting to describe how a group of artists with very different skills, working in a range of different media, come together for an intensive period and produce a single work of art, I hope to make possible a more nuanced understanding of the real artistry involved in what it is that the director does and what the playwright contributes to the process, as well as providing a deeper appreciation of the profoundly collaborative nature of theatrical creation.

The notion of creative and authorial agency, issues related to power relations between participants, and appreciation of the social and professional networks that underpin the groupings found in any rehearsal room were brought into clearer focus once I began to apply to rehearsal analytical concepts and methods derived from my reading of ethnography. I have written elsewhere about the insights that led me to place engagement with rehearsal process at the centre of the study of performance (McAuley 1998, 2006(a), 2008), and as I observed more and more rehearsals it became clear that the critical apparatus provided by theatre studies (historiography, semiotics, text and performance analysis) was insufficient when attempting to deal with the complex interpersonal relations, work practices and the collective creative process involved in rehearsal. My theatre studies colleagues, like the theatre artists I observed, engaged in the practice of rehearsal but did not write about it or theorise their experiences.

Rehearsal as we know it today in the west, is substantially an invention of the twentieth century, and it is inextricably bound up with the emergence and development of the role of director. In earlier periods, the task of preparation for performance was essentially one of organising the stage traffic and ensuring that any special effects worked. The actors' work of preparation was done privately, in their own time, and they were given the text only of their own parts, indicated by cue words, so the actor would not necessarily know even which character was the interlocutor in the exchange in question (Stern 2000). Well into the

nineteenth century, the custom was to have only one full rehearsal of the whole play with all the actors present, and sometimes there was no rehearsal at all. When Edmund Kean was invited to play Shylock at the Croydon Theatre, he notified the stage manager that he would not require any rehearsal even though he knew nothing about the planned production and had not worked with the company before (Marshall, 1957, 12). Furthermore, in those rehearsals that were held, 'leading actors never troubled to read any of their speeches . . . , contenting themselves with merely giving the cues.' Norman Marshall reports that, when Macready tried to change this at Drury Lane, the actors threatened to go on strike (13).

These anecdotes provide a measure of what the advent of the director has meant for the theatre.<sup>3</sup> A stage production is now acknowledged to be a complex work of art and it is through the rehearsal process that this work of art is brought into being, which is why the observation of rehearsal is such a fascinating and compelling area of research. Rehearsal is the time when the multiple material elements that will constitute a unique work of art are progressively brought together and when the process of reaction between them is set in train. Rehearsal as we now know it is a process of discovery and, in the words of American actor Peter Moloney, 'the things that are to be discovered are not known by anyone before the work of rehearsal begins – not by the playwright, not by the director, not by the actors' (Cole 2001, 162). The role of the director in the process is absolutely crucial even when, perhaps especially when, the work is emerging from a genuinely collaborative effort by artists working in different media. While a director-auteur like Richard Foreman or Tadeusz Kantor<sup>4</sup> has the complex task of orchestrating a wide range of elements to meet the demands of his own vision, the work of the director in a creative process such as that described by Moloney is even more complex in that it involves stimulating and unleashing the creativity of others as well as moulding the results into an intellectually dense, artistically compelling work.

Ethnography has provided methodological guidance and concepts that 'are good to think with' (to use Lévi-Strauss's often quoted phrase), and the ethnographic turn has brought with it a significant shift from concern with the individual work of art to the social and cultural context within which that work is being created. As the above quotation from Paul Atkinson suggests, it becomes necessary to consider the institutional framework, the 'socially organised settings' that both constrain and make possible the production of the artwork as well as the work itself. *Toy Symphony* was part of a season and, for a sizable proportion of the audience who were Belvoir subscribers, it was received in the

context of all the other productions that made up that season's programme; the season's productions are embedded in and emerge from the company set up, are seen to be the work of Company B and not just the particular artists, some of whom might well be producing work for other companies in the same season (actors and designers in Sydney are essentially freelance, hired only for the given production); Company B Belvoir is part of a wider theatre community and this in turn is part of the urban culture of Sydney. Within the theatre community, Company B has a certain reputation, represents certain values and work practices, and employment there confers a certain kind of cachet on the individual practitioner. For spectators too, and in particular for the loyal subscribers who come back year after year for the whole season, Company B Belvoir is associated with a certain kind of theatre and certain social values. Any production is thus embedded in a series of institutional and cultural contexts, all of which have a part to play in relation to the work process involved in that particular production, all of which need to be considered alongside and around the narrative recounting details of aesthetic choices made, interpretations discussed, stories told and imaginary worlds constructed. James Clifford has described the task of the ethnographic observer and analyst as

a continuous tacking between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of events; on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts. (Clifford 1988, 34)

In the words of Clifford Geertz, reflecting in his Jerusalem-Harvard lectures on the experiences of a lifetime's work as an anthropologist, the task is one that 'involves bringing figure and ground, the passing occasion and the long story, into coincident view' (Geertz 1995, 31). Many hours spent in rehearsal rooms showed that my colleagues and I had been engaging in participant-observation, even though we had not been using that term, but our reading of ethnography revealed the extent to which the analytical practices we had been inventing were already a form of ethnographic study. This reading also provided a broader context within which to consider some ongoing methodological and ethical issues, such as the vexed question of the relation between insider and outsider.

Rehearsals are traditionally private, a time when artists work intensively together, when actors go further and deeper into their own and their characters' emotions and need to feel safe to experiment with what they are finding. The demarcation between insider and outsider is

very strong in the theatre, and never more so than when it is a matter of rehearsals, for many directors fear the disruptive impact an outsider can have on the chemistry that is occurring in the room. This is why, for example, when Susan Letzler Cole was observing rehearsals for the Wooster Group's production *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony*, she was asked to leave on one occasion when relations became fraught between members of the group, even though the tension had nothing to do with her (Cole 1992, 114–15). Many directors refuse to admit observers and others will do so only on condition that that person takes on a role in the rehearsal, such as assistant to one of the functionaries in the process (director, dramaturg, stage manager) and thereby becomes a pseudo-insider. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that most of the accounts of rehearsal that have been published have been written by insiders concerning their own work: directors, actors, playwrights (for example, Stafford Clark 1989, Hall 1983, Sher 1985 and 2005, Cox 1992, Wesker 1997) and even dramaturgs (Bly 1996 and 2001).

While these accounts are invaluable and, indeed, they are rapidly becoming canonical texts as scholarly interest in rehearsal develops, it is my view that accounts by outsiders also have a valuable contribution to make. In pursuing this intuition against the received wisdom of theatre practitioners, who are more often than not extremely reluctant to admit an observer to their rehearsal room, I found in the debates that had occurred in ethnography a decade earlier the most nuanced discussion of an issue which is, of course, utterly central to that discipline. James Clifford, writing in 1986 about the shifting power relations between anthropologists and their informants in the post-colonial world, makes two very important points about insider accounts: 'Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered *and restricted* in unique ways' [my emphasis] (Clifford 1986, 9). Accounts such as those mentioned above describe the process from the perspective of the writer's role in it and, although they definitely have 'depths of understanding' unavailable to an outsider, this understanding does not necessarily extend very far beyond the writer's own role. The insider, engaged in an act of artistic creation, will see differently from an outside observer, and find different things important or noteworthy. Insiders are also well placed to talk informally with the other participants throughout the process and, thus, tend to elicit more valuable insights than are normally forthcoming in structured interviews after the event. On the other hand, an outsider may see things that familiarity has rendered unremarkable to the insider and may usefully broaden

the perspective by paying more attention to the experience and contribution of other participants.

Vitally important, however, is Clifford's point about the published accounts being restricted in different ways. When a person is located within a community or group, that person is subject to the power relations of the group, and may be reluctant to hurt people's feelings or offend the powerful who have influence over future job opportunities. The outsider's account is of course also subject to constraints, albeit slightly different ones, and it may be true that, as Georges Banu claims, anyone who has observed a rehearsal process becomes a quasi-insider:

It must be acknowledged that any account by an outsider will, to a greater or lesser extent, be a betrayal of the reality because the observer becomes emotionally involved with the experience he is recounting and will refuse, not so much to reveal it, as to describe it as fully as he could; it is as though he feels it would be indecent to open to scrutiny a practice located in the no man's land between public and private. (Banu 2005, 41)

It is not clear if Banu is speaking of his own experience here or generalising from other cases, but the point is a serious one. On numerous occasions during the rehearsals for *Toy Symphony*, Neil Armfield or one of the actors would tell me that what had just been said should not be included in the book and I have of course respected their wishes. There is a good deal of story telling in the rehearsal room, often involving other productions and other artists, sometimes quite indiscreet but, as Marion Potts pointed out in her masters thesis, written after she had spent several years working alongside some of the most experienced directors in Sydney, this kind of story telling is in fact an essential part of the way craft knowledge and theory are articulated and passed on (Potts 1995). Jim Sharman put the point even more pithily in the first Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture when he said 'theatre practitioners are like a lost tribe with only an oral tradition handed down erratically from person to person, usually as gossip' (Sharman 1996). Writing about rehearsal, thus, requires navigation of a fine line between betraying confidences by telling too much and failing to engage with the reality of the practice by telling too little.

While there are definite advantages that flow from becoming a quasi-insider by taking on a role within the process, my own experience has been that the task of observing and note taking is so demanding that it is not possible to undertake any further responsibilities and nevertheless pay the requisite attention to all the aspects of the

developing work process. A day spent observing in the rehearsal room has to be followed by several hours of writing up what anthropologists call the 'scratch notes' taken during the day (Sanjek 1990, 92-121). Graduate students of anthropology preparing to go into the field are warned that failure to write up scratch notes within a period of forty-eight hours or so will render them useless. I can attest to the validity of this advice: coming back to notes taken a few days earlier if I had missed writing them up, I would find that they triggered little in the way of additional memories, so it became a simple matter of transcribing factual details, whereas writing up on the same day always triggered more memories, more details and the beginnings of theoretical speculations. The task is, thus, demanding and absorbing and would definitely be put at risk if one had also to take responsibility for part of the creative process.

The experience of ethnography is that the participant/observer in the field has to be both vitally enmeshed in the daily experiences of the people being studied and, at the same time, sufficiently distanced to make observations, write notes about what is occurring and find time to write these up in more detail. As Margaret Mead put it, the task is to 'maintain a balance between empathic involvement and disciplined detachment' (Mead in Naroll & Cohen 1973, 247). My realisation that it took many months of analysis and reflection before one rehearsal experience could be written up echoes the normal practice of ethnographers, who return home after a period in the field in order to engage in the next phase of the work: reflecting on the experience and transforming the mass of field notes into another form of discourse. The different timeframes involved in theatrical creation and academic reflection come strongly into play here: while the artists involved in the production of *Toy Symphony* have moved on to other productions, other equally intense creative experiences in the three years since the show ended, I am still living with it, still mulling over it, trying to find appropriate ways to write about it.

Undoubtedly, the single most valuable concept ethnographic practice has contributed to the study of rehearsal and performance analysis is Clifford Geertz's idea of 'thick description' (1973, 3-30) and its concomitant insistence on both the detailed minutiae that make up the 'passing occasion' and the larger structures of the 'long story' of which it is a part. Applying the idea to rehearsal means broadening the focus from concentrating on the materiality of the performance signifiers being created to greater awareness of the social and professional networks relating the participants in the rehearsal room to each other, and attempting to establish the nature of the social field within

which the work is occurring. In order to discover the logic of the practice, one must be alert to all the details of rehearsal room talk, the terminology and the concepts used. Nothing can be taken for granted because the meaning attributed to a certain term may not be the same for practitioners coming from different backgrounds, and even for those with the same background, the meaning and use of key terms seems to change over time. The result is that virtually nothing can be bracketed out as irrelevant, whether it is jokes, gossip, story telling, a sudden silence or even (as happened on one occasion) an animated discussion of where to procure the best feta and avocado muffins. In rehearsal analysis as in ethnographic description, the larger picture comes into view through the accumulation of minutiae, and this is why the task requires full time presence by the observer and why it cannot be done adequately by someone dropping in at intervals to view work in progress. *Ha!* *THIS HERE IS WHY!*

In attempting to make sense of the relationships, exchanges and practices observed during the weeks of the rehearsal and the run of the show, I have found some very illuminating insights into the theory of interaction ritual, as developed by Erving Goffman and, particularly, by Randall Collins in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004). While the word 'ritual' is normally taken to refer to ceremonial practices, Collins explains that this common usage refers to what he calls 'formal rituals' and distinguishes from 'natural rituals.' The latter are far more widespread in social life and the necessary ingredients are the bodily co-presence of two or more people, boundaries to outsiders so that participants know who is included, who is excluded, a focus of attention on a common object or activity that is mutually enhanced by the focus of the other participants and a shared common mood. These four factors produce what Collins calls 'emotional energy' or, following Durkheim, 'collective effervescence.' The period of rehearsals can be seen as a classic interaction ritual chain, exemplifying the process that Collins describes 'in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions' (2004, 47), a process that in turn generates feelings of solidarity, group membership and social worth amongst the participants and functions to endow with particular value the objects and places that are at the heart of the activity. There are many features of the *Toy Symphony* rehearsals that might be considered somewhat peripheral to the task of producing the show, but seen in the light of interaction ritual theory, are utterly germane to the social process of which the production is a part, as will be discussed further in my final chapter.

Observation of rehearsal practice raises the question of when and

where the creative process begins and perhaps also where it ends. In the case of *Toy Symphony*, as will be seen, there was the writer's process that had been going on for years with greater or lesser intensity, and this continued after the rehearsals and the run of the show with the preparation of the script for publication. The creative process for the other participants was also already well under way before the first day of rehearsals proper. A great deal of thought, discussion and planning had preceded that moment, including a reading of the whole text by the cast in the company's boardroom and reading of specific scenes during the audition process. The main role of the play was cast before the season was announced, photographs of Richard Roxburgh in the role of the child Roland were taken for the season brochure (see figure 1) so an image of the play was already imprinted in the minds of subscribers and the other artists. Michael Gow had written several drafts of his script and discussed these with Neil Armfield, making changes in response to problems raised. Ralph Myers had designed the set but he was still thinking about it, and when he met Neil, fortuitously while both were on holiday in Sicily a few weeks before rehearsals began, he decided on some radical changes. This indicates that the creative process is not confined to a particular place and time but can be bubbling along in a subliminal way even when the artist is doing something else, including being on holiday.

Ethnographers speak of the bounded nature of events and, as Tim Asch has put it: 'Observers and subjects may differ greatly in their perceptions of when an event or interaction begins and ends and whom it includes' (Asch in Rollwagen 1988, 3). This is certainly the case with rehearsals. It came as something of a surprise to Kylie Mascord, the stage manager, when I said that I wanted to attend the production meetings, held every Wednesday morning during the five weeks of rehearsal, and the 'bump in' when technical and production crew installed the set on the Belvoir stage. She had thought that my interest would be exclusively with what the actors were doing. As late as the preview performances, costume designer Tess Schofield was still finding delightful elements to add to the costume of some of the characters, which demonstrates the temporally extended nature of her creative process. And of course, there is a limit to where the observer can be in a diffuse process involving numerous artists, groups, and different types of artistic expression. Should I ask to go with the director and the playwright to lunch on the days when the latter was in Sydney, would this be an intrusion, would my presence prevent vital exchanges of views about the text? Should I have lunch in the kitchen with the group of actors who brought their own sandwiches or take the opportunity to get my own thoughts in



**Figure 1.** Richard Roxburgh in publicity photograph for *Toy Symphony*  
Photo: Alex Craig

order somewhere else? And if I did go to the kitchen, what would I be doing? It would clearly be inappropriate to take notes even though, of course, the social bonding occurring at that time was a crucial part of the process but would it not be even more unacceptable to make notes

about lunchtime discussions at some later time? Georgina Born, writing an ethnographic study of the Institute for Contemporary Music in Paris, found herself in a similar bind:

As one intellectual informant and friend said, 'I never know when we are talking if we are simply talking, or whether you're going back home to write it up as notes;' to which I could only reply, 'both.' This touches on the inherently reflexive nature of the ethnographic encounter – a reality that makes it no less problematic for intellectual informants or ethnographer. (Born 1995, 8–9)

There is much to be learned from contemporary ethnographic practice when dealing with the practicalities and the ethics of rehearsal observation as well as in the subsequent phase of written analysis.

---

### Neil Armfield and Company B

---

Neil Armfield is probably best known outside of Australia as a director of opera (his biographical note on the Opera Australia website lists eight foreign opera companies for whom he has directed: the Royal Opera Covent Garden, the Welsh National Opera, English National Opera, Zurich Opera, Houston Grand Opera, the Bregenz Festival, Canadian Opera and the Lyric Opera Chicago) but within Australia he is even better known for his theatrical productions. The 1999 tour to London, Dublin and Zurich of his acclaimed production of *Cloudstreet*, based on the novel by Tim Winton, and the success of his Broadway production of *Exit the King* in 2009, adapted by Armfield and Geoffrey Rush from Ionesco's play, have provided overseas audiences with some indication of why, in his home country, he is widely considered to be the finest theatre director of his generation. While he has directed for all the major theatre companies in Australia, it is as artistic director of Company B Belvoir for the last 16 years that he has created the works that best represent his mature style, and he has so successfully imprinted his particular artistic vision and management ethos on the company that it is difficult to remember it had a considerable life before he took over the directorship in 1994.

Neil Armfield was born in 1955, the youngest in a family of three boys living in the Sydney suburb of Concord, and he studied arts at Sydney University. He began directing plays for the Sydney University

Dramatic Society, where his talent was spotted by Paul Iles, general manager of the Nimrod Theatre, and Richard Wherrett, one of the three artistic co-directors of that theatre. In 1979, after Richard Wherrett left Nimrod in order to become the director of the newly formed Sydney Theatre Company, Armfield was invited to join John Bell and Ken Horler as artistic co-director of Nimrod, in Wherrett's place. He stayed for two years with Nimrod, then took up the position of associate director at the Lighthouse Theatre Company in Adelaide under the mentorship of Jim Sharman. It was at Lighthouse that he directed a legendary production of *Twelfth Night* in 1983 as well as plays by Patrick White, until then considered virtually unstageable but revealed by the Lighthouse directors to be among the most powerful Australian plays yet written. He returned to Sydney in 1985, at the time of the crisis that saw Nimrod moving out of the Belvoir Street theatre, the building being put up for sale to developers, and a heroic effort spearheaded by Sue Hill and Chris Westwood to raise the money from within the theatre community to purchase the building and keep it safe for theatre.<sup>5</sup>

Hundreds of arts, entertainment and media professionals contributed funds to form a syndicate, Company A, to purchase the building. Under a unique scheme, Company A owns the building but leases it to Company B, which has responsibility for managing the theatre and producing the annual season of shows in both the Upstairs theatre (capacity 320) and the tiny Downstairs (capacity around 80). The scheme protects the theatre itself from the risks that are inherent in the business of theatre making and ensures that, even if Company B should fold, the theatre itself will still be there. In fact, over the twenty-five years of its existence, Company B has been enormously successful both in establishing a substantial audience of enthusiastic subscribers and in attracting corporate donors to supplement the always inadequate government subsidies.

The company's annual report proudly lists the core values and principles that underpin their work:

Belief in the primacy of the artistic process; clarity and playfulness in storytelling; a sense of the community within the theatrical environment; responsiveness to current social and political issues; equality, ethical standards and shared ownership of artistic and company achievements; development of our performers, artists and staff. (Company B *Annual Report*, 2006, 3)

These principles are not just high sounding ideals but have been implemented in such things as the parity of pay policy, which the company

maintained until 2010, causing the former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, to refer to it affectionately as 'the last commune in Australia'.<sup>6</sup> The published principles reflect the nature of the company's relationship to both the theatre community and the wider community within which the theatre is located. They also convey Armfield's conviction that theatre, however playful or wild it might be, has something vitally important to contribute to society, perhaps more so than ever in the face of social, political and environmental problems that seem to get more and more intractable year by year. As he asked in his annual message to subscribers in the 2007 season brochure: 'How do we confront the overwhelming problems of our world without buckling under the weight of despair and anxiety?' And then answered his own question: 'by listening and teaching, by raising the standards of education, by advancing informed debate, by encouraging the telling of our stories in books, on our screens and on our stages. And that is what we're trying, in our own way, to do. That's our job: to tell the stories, to sing the songs of our land, our world, our past' (Armfield 2007, 6-7).

The annual subscription season consists of six or seven productions, two or three of which are directed by Neil Armfield. There is a pattern to the programming that juxtaposes new and classic Australian plays, classics from the international repertoire, especially Shakespeare, and contemporary works from abroad. The performance history supplied by the company (figure 2) indicates their method of categorising the works and it shows that by far the largest category is new Australian plays. As part of this, there has been a significant attempt to produce work with strong Indigenous content as well as providing mentorship and opportunities for Indigenous artists. Indeed, when Neil Armfield was awarded the Order of Australia in 2007 for 'services to the arts,' the citation read in part: 'for promotion of innovative Australian productions including Australian Indigenous drama'. For people in Sydney, Company B Belvoir represents high quality text-based theatre that still maintains something of the larrikin edge that is part of the Nimrod legacy. As Neil put it when describing the 'sing-along' performance which ended the phenomenal run of *Keating!*, 'Times like these are as good as it gets – and really what the ongoing experiment of Company B is all about: creating a live experience that is unforgettable, unique and specifically a fusion of the creative energy in that space on that night' (Armfield 2009, 4).



Figure 2. Company B Belvoir performance history 1985–2007

Year	Shakespeare	Classic	Classic Australian	New Australian	New International
1985			<i>Signal Driver</i> Patrick White	Ha Ha Ha Performing Humans	
1986				ABC Holman; <i>A Smile a Song and a Lump of Wood</i> Kelso/Ackroyd; <i>Pearls Before Swine</i> Watkins/Harriot; <i>State of Shock</i> Strachan	<i>Savannah Bay Duras</i> <i>Kids Stuff</i> Cousse
1987				Cho Cho San Daniel Keene; <i>Magpie's Nest</i> Grattian; <i>Europe</i> Michael Gow	<i>Lie of the Mind</i> Shepard; Shakers O'Connell; <i>Gertrude Stein and a Companion</i> Margolyes; <i>On Parliament Hill</i> Greig
1988		<i>Les Enfants du Paradis</i> Prevert Lerner Ghosts Ibsen <i>Drums of Thunder</i> Brecht		<i>Capricornia</i> Herbert/ Keir; Hate Sewell	
1989		<i>Diary of a Madman</i> Gogol/Holman <i>A Doll's House</i> Ibsen		<i>Greek Tragedy</i> Leigh	<i>Conquest of the South</i> Pole Karge; <i>The Wolfs Banquet</i> Cousse

1990	<i>The Tempest</i>		No Sugar Davis	<i>Call of the Wild</i> Kemp; <i>Words of One Syllable</i> Barrett; <i>Café Fledermaus</i> Archer	
1991		<i>The Master Builder</i> Ibsen		<i>Royal Commission into the Australian Economy</i> Clarke; Buzz Coleman/ Coppin; <i>Headbutt</i> Abbot; <i>Diving for Pearls</i> Thomson	<i>Love and Magic in Mamma's Kitchen</i> Wertmuller
1992		<i>Diary of a Madman</i> Gogol <i>Frogs</i> Aristophanes		Cosi Nowra; <i>Popular Mechanicals 2</i>	<i>The Cockroach Opera</i> Riantiaro
1993				<i>Afterstocks</i> Brown; <i>The Exile Trilogy</i> Gulgul/ Kosky; <i>Radiance</i> Nowra	<i>Scenes from an Execution</i> Barker
1994	<i>Hamlet</i>			<i>All of Me</i> Legs on the Wall; <i>Dead Heart</i> Parsons; <i>Blue Murder</i> Christian	<i>Picasso at the Lapin Agile</i> Martin
1995	<i>The Tempest</i>	<i>Splendids</i> Genet	<i>The Blind Giant is Dancing</i> Sewell	Emma Pitts	
1996		<i>The Alchemist</i> Jonson <i>View from the Bridge</i> Miller	<i>Night on Bald Mountain</i> White	<i>Up the Road</i> Hardinge	Wasp Martin

Figure 2. (continued)

Year	Shakespeare	Classic	Classic Australian	New Australian	New International
1997		<i>The Seagull</i> Chekhov <i>Lulu</i> GWPabst <i>The Birthday Party</i> Pinter		<i>Black Mary</i> Jansen; <i>The Governor's Family</i> Christian	
1998		<i>Caucasian Chalk Circle</i> Brecht <i>Trouble in Tahiti</i> Bernstein		<i>Cloudstreet</i> Enright/ Monjo; <i>Under the Influence</i> Legs on the Wall; <i>Welcome to Broome</i> Mellick; <i>Love Burns</i> Nowra/Koehne	<i>Judas Kiss</i> Hare
1999	<i>As You Like It</i>		<i>The Small Poppies</i> Holman	<i>Burnt Piano</i> Fleming; <i>Box the Pony</i> Purcell/Rankin; <i>My Vicious Angel</i> Evans	<i>Little Cherry Orchard</i> Alexej Slapovskij
2000	<i>Twelfth Night</i>	<i>Suddenly Last Summer</i> Williams <i>Figaro</i> Beaumarchais	<i>The Ham Funeral</i> White	<i>Stolen</i> Harrison	<i>The Unexpected Man</i> Reza
2001		<i>Ubu Jarry</i>	<i>A Cheery Soul</i> White	<i>Emma's Nose</i> Livingstone; <i>Aliwa</i> Winmar; <i>Roulette</i> Cortese; <i>Cloudstreet</i> Enright/Monjo	<i>The Laramie Project</i> Tectonic

2002		<i>Buried Child</i> Shepard <i>Waiting for Godot</i> Beckett	<i>The Dreamers</i> Davis <i>The Aunt's Story</i> White	<i>Svetlana in Slingbacks</i> Levkowitz	<i>The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman</i> <i>He Loved in the Former Soviet Union</i> Greig; <i>My Zinc Bed</i> Hare
2003	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Threepenny Opera</i> Brecht	<i>William Yang</i> Retrospective	<i>Conversations with the Dead</i> Frankland; <i>Run Rabbit Run</i> Valentine	<i>The Underpants</i> Martin; <i>The Lieutenant of Inishmore</i> McDonagh
2004	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>What the Butler Saw</i> Orton		<i>In Our Name</i> Jamieson; <i>Life Times Three</i> (Page 8 Nowra/Page; <i>Little Black Bastard</i> Tovey; <i>Gulpitil Gulpitil/Cribb</i> ); <i>The Spook</i> Reeves	<i>Our Lady of Sligo</i> Barry
2005		<i>The Chairs</i> Ionesco <i>Black Medea</i> Euripides adapt. Enoch		<i>The Sapphires</i> Briggs; <i>Ray's Tempest</i> Rodgers	<i>Stuff Happens</i> Hare
2006		<i>Peribanez de Vega</i>	<i>Capricornia</i> Herbert/Nowra	<i>It Just Stopped</i> Sewell; <i>Keating!</i> Bennetto	
2007		<i>Exit the King</i> Ionesco <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> Albee		<i>Snugglepot and Cuddlepie</i> Clarke/ MacLeod/John; <i>The Gates of Egypt</i> Sewell; <i>Parramatta Girls</i> Valentine; <i>Toy Symphony</i> Gow	<i>Paul</i> Brenton

## Michael Gow and *Toy Symphony*

Michael Gow is the same age as Neil Armfield, born in 1955, and educated, like him, at a state high school and then, in the mid-1970s, in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney. At university, they were rivals, as Neil recalls, acting and directing plays for the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS). It was extremely unusual for amateur or student theatre to be reviewed by national newspaper critics, but this is what happened for some of these SUDS productions, notably Barry Keefe's *Gimme Shelter*, directed by Neil Armfield, in which Michael Gow gave what Armfield still remembers as 'an amazing performance'. This was a particularly vibrant period in Australian culture when the New Wave was, in the words of Geoffrey Milne, 'Australianising the Australian theatre' (Milne 2004, 6) and a new Labor government had been elected after more than two decades of stultifying conservative rule.

Unlike Armfield, Michael Gow was an only child. He was brought up in Como, in the Sutherland Shire, part of Sydney's vast and sprawling southern suburbs, and he returns in his plays frequently to the experience of growing up in suburbia, the dysfunctional families, the mindless cruelty inflicted on homosexual teenagers, the pretensions and the snobbery, but his dark vision is balanced by the recurring theme of the redemptive power of art. His first play, *The Kid* (1983) won considerable success, but it was *Away* (1986) that really seemed to strike a chord with Australian audiences, actors and directors. Reprinted nearly every year since it was first published, and sometimes more than once, performed in every state capital and regional centre, read by generations of high school students as part of the literature syllabus, it is the most frequently revived Australian play. For Neil Armfield, who has directed three productions of it, including the 1987 production for the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne, it is 'the great Australian play of the last quarter of the twentieth century'.

Michael Gow is not a prolific playwright: *Away* was followed by *On Top of the World* (1986), *Europe* (1987), *1841* (a play commissioned for the Australian Bicentennial in 1988), *All Stops Out* (1989), *Furious* (1994), *Sweet Phoebe* (1994), *Live Acts on Stage* (1996) and then nothing apart from an adaptation, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* (2004) until *Toy Symphony* in 2007. During this time, however, he was constantly involved in theatre as a director, but no longer as an actor. He has also written for television, and his mini series, *Edens Lost* (based on the novel by Sumner Locke Elliott and directed by Neil Armfield) won him the

Australian Film Institute award in 1989 for Best Mini Series Screenplay. He makes no secret of the fact that writing does not come easily to him. He told Richard Crooke, in an interview published online in *Time Out*, 'I never write for pleasure. I hate it. In a masochist way. I enjoy the sense of achievement, but I have to push myself all the time' (Gow 2010(a)). This tallies with comments made during the rehearsals for *Toy Symphony*, when he said that he was happy to make amendments to what had been written but it was evident that he approached any requirement for new writing with considerable reluctance.

He was appointed artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company in 1999 and has run the company with conspicuous success. His decision to decline the offer to continue in the position after the expiry of his contract in August 2010 was perhaps affected in some way by the extraordinary success of the Company B production of *Toy Symphony* in 2007. The production won no fewer than seven Sydney Theatre Awards and four Helpmann Awards in 2007–08, and the critical reviews were overwhelmingly positive.<sup>7</sup> In the press release posted on the Australian Stage website on 4 April 2010 when his resignation from the directorship had been announced, Gow spoke of a 'growing need to get back to myself as a writer' (Gow 2010 b). If this is the case, then the intermeshing of fact and fiction that is such a feature of his work will be continuing, and the redemption hinted at for Roland Henning, the central character in *Toy Symphony*, may become a reality for Michael Gow, experiencing like Roland a prolonged inability to write.

A significant part of Michael Gow's skill as a playwright is to write in such a way as to leave space for the actor and the director. Richard Roxburgh commented on numerous occasions about the power of Michael's writing for the actor in this play. He found the broken syntax and fragmented sentences extremely difficult to learn but he delighted in the scope offered by them and by such things as what he called 'the Gowian full stops'. A good example of the latter occurs in the second scene, when Roland Henning says to the copyright lawyer: 'There you are. There. You are.' (p. 9), and I frequently marvelled at the way Richard was able to load those few bland words with layers of self justification and apprehension as, guided by the punctuation, he shifted the focus from Roland convincing the lawyer to Roland realising his own predicament. Richard Roxburgh told an interviewer before the play opened, 'there are a few scenes in this play that are really Michael Gow at his absolute incisive, gobsmacking best. There are some scenes that are just so fantastically raw, there's such pleasure in the playing of it. It's a great thing for an actor to get those rewards along the way' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 2007, 14).

## Richard Roxburgh

Richard Roxburgh was born in 1962 and brought up in the New South Wales country town of Albury, the youngest of six children. He studied economics at the Australian National University but had already been deeply involved with theatre while still at school when he played Willie Loman in a school production of *Death of a Salesman*. He trained at the National Institute for Dramatic Art (NIDA), Australia's most prestigious theatre school, graduating in 1986, and has since worked in film, television and on the stage in Australia as well as contributing some notable supporting performances to international blockbuster movies such as *Mission Impossible II*, *Van Helsing* and *Moulin Rouge*. He said in an interview 'when I came out of drama school, it was all about theatre. It was what I invested all my love in and the thing that I really cared about. I did quite a lot of work with various companies. But finally, it was Belvoir Street that settled as my creative home' (Talking Heads, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2007).

He has worked with Neil Armfield on a number of occasions. It was Neil who directed his graduation play at NIDA (Louis Nowra's *Golden Age*), as well as his extraordinary *Hamlet* in 1994, and his Trigorin in *The Seagull* in 1997 for Company B. For the Sydney Theatre Company, his work includes Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Patrick Marber's *Closer*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In addition to his acting, Richard Roxburgh has created some significant work as a director, both for theatre and film. He directed a highly regarded production of *Twelfth Night* for Company B in 2000 as well as *Ray's Tempest*, a play by Steve Rodgers that was based on an idea by Roxburgh and formed part of Company B's 2005 season. He collaborated with Justin Monjo on the stage adaptation of Tim Winton's novel *That Eye The Sky* and then directed it for his own company, Burning House, as part of the Sydney Festival in 1994. When he directs a work, whether for film or theatre, it tends to be something he has worked on for several years, collaborating with a writer to produce the script he will then direct. This was also the case for the film adaptation of *Romulus My Father*, clearly another labour of love, with a script written by Nick Drake in a seven-year collaboration with Roxburgh. The film, directed by Roxburgh, won several Australian Film Institute awards in 2007, including best feature film.

## Belvoir Street Theatre

The Belvoir Street building was originally a factory, and was in a derelict condition when the Nimrod company transformed it into a theatre in 1974, retaining the key features of the idiosyncratic performance space they had created in the tiny mews building they had earlier occupied and that their success had forced them to quit. The theatre building itself and the particular features of the performance space it houses have played a vital role in the success of Company B and of the Nimrod Theatre before it.

There is an asymmetrical, five-sided, open thrust stage, set into the corner of the room, surrounded by three irregularly placed, steeply raked banks of seating that fan out at an angle of 58°, thus ensuring

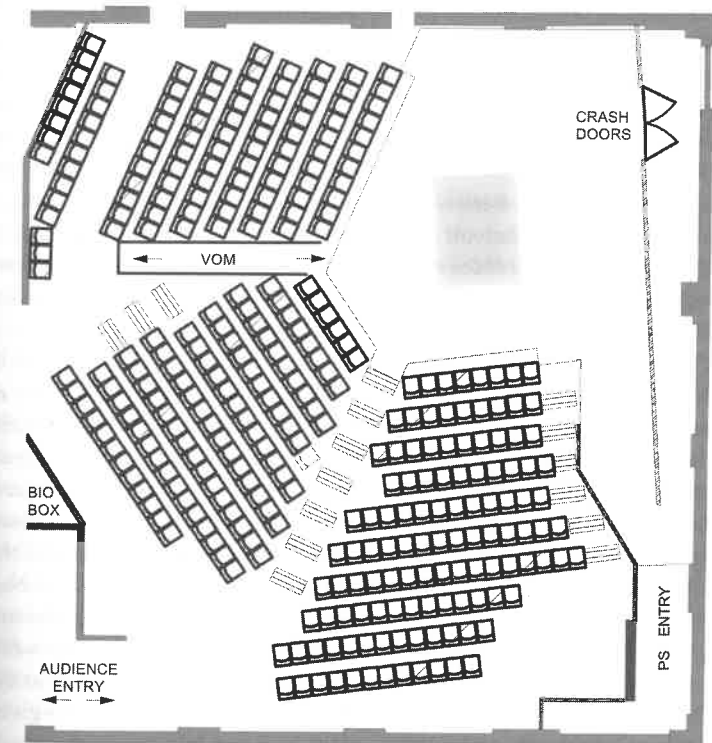


Figure 3. Floor Plan of Belvoir Street Theatre with set for *Toy Symphony*  
Graphic: Russell Emerson

a kind of immediacy of access for spectators which in turn creates a particular kind of energy. As Neil Armfield has said many times, the corner stage is central to his aesthetic, and he goes even further: 'The interplay of space, light and sound is unique. It's why our company exists' (Armfield 2009, 6). This performance space affects spectators as much as practitioners and I have argued elsewhere that, for a number of historical reasons, it is at the heart of a whole way of conceptualising and experiencing theatre that is peculiar to Sydney (McAuley 2011). The shape of the stage, the dimensions of the overall space and the relationship between stage and auditorium mean that spectators are very close to the actors, they witness the performance in a direct, unmediated way, and actors get quick and undiluted feedback from the audience. Looking down at the stage is a very different experience from looking into a box set from a seat in the stalls, and the fact that the floor of the stage is always visible means that actors' moves are perceived in relation to the floor as much as to elements of the set. Another material feature of the theatre that is crucial to the performance experience is the placement of the entrance/exit points: there are two access points to the Belvoir stage, one from the wings on the audience right or prompt side of the stage<sup>8</sup> and the other via a vomitory that leads under the raked blocks of audience seating between the central and left hand (or OP) blocks of seats (see figure 3). While other access points can be introduced if the set includes false walls, as here with the crash doors, a significant feature of the dynamism of the Belvoir space comes from the vomitory because it means that the lines of force running between entrance points necessarily engage the audience space rather than leaving the spectators outside looking in, as with a traditional picture frame stage.

When the Belvoir Street Theatre was extensively refurbished in 2005–06, the performance space was left virtually unchanged. State of the art equipment, more comfortable seating and better backstage facilities have greatly improved the experience for both spectators and practitioners but what was essential in the old building has been retained: the size of the auditorium that allows immediacy of access between actor and spectator, the sightlines, the off-centre corner stage and the vomitory that together create a special kind of energy. To quote Neil Armfield once more: 'the audience connects with the actors at Belvoir Street unlike any other theatre. It means somehow that every show has a cast of over 300 participants, all breathing the same air, living in the same moment of story' (Armfield 2009, 6). The description I have given here focuses on the material reality of the building because it plays such an important role in determining relationships between performers and audience and because these in turn affect the emotional intensity

of the performance experience for both parties. It should, however, also be pointed out that, for reasons that depend in part on these material features, in part on a complex of historical factors and in part on the work of Neil Armfield as artistic director over a period of sixteen years, the Belvoir Theatre and Company B have come to occupy a very particular place within the theatre culture of Sydney. The Sydney Theatre Company, with its prestigious theatres around the harbour foreshore and its status as the official company for the state of New South Wales, may attract a larger share of public funding and more glamorous sponsorships, but for theatre practitioners and spectators alike there is the sense that, as one of the actors put it, 'Belvoir is art house theatre and its productions have heart and are culturally richer than those of the STC.' Furthermore, the Belvoir Theatre occupies the building that Nimrod created and it is thus seen to be in a direct line of descent from the artists who first began to create an authentically Australian theatre during the so-called New Wave in the 1960s (see Milne 2004). All of these factors have some bearing on the creative process that I observed and will be discussed further in the final chapter of this study.

---

## The project

---

The plan for me to observe one of Neil Armfield's productions and write a book about the experience had been discussed over a number of years but was continually deferred due to problems that arose: Neil's serious illness in 2005, a late decision to rehearse Stephen Sewell's *It Just Stopped* in Melbourne rather than Sydney, the need for the timing to coincide with my own availability. When finally, in 2007, several years after the plan was first adumbrated, everything fell into place, it was with a new Australian play and a group of actors I did not know. Michael Gow had studied French in the department in which I taught but I did not know him as an undergraduate nor did I see the SUDS productions on which he and Neil Armfield collaborated. I had, however, spent a fascinating week in 1991 watching him at work on his production of Racine's *Phaedra* and I had, of course, seen a great many of Neil Armfield's productions over the years.

Neil arranged for me to get copies of all the draft versions of the *Toy Symphony* script (the so-called Rehearsal Draft 1 with which the rehearsal process began, was in fact the fourth draft). I attended rehearsals every day for five weeks in the renovated warehouse that now houses the

Company B offices, wardrobe store and rehearsal rooms beginning on Tuesday 2 October and I also attended the weekly production meetings, held for an hour on Wednesday mornings. On 5 November I spent several hours in the theatre while the production crew were bumping in and the actors had a day off, and I then watched all the technical rehearsals, the two dress rehearsals on 9 and 10 November, and the preview performances on 10, 11 and 13 November. I was there for the party and shared some of the exhilaration of opening night on 14 November and I attended performances on numerous occasions throughout the run, sometimes sitting backstage to watch the work process from that perspective, once in the bio box with Kylie Mascord, the stage manager, as she 'called' the show, and several times in the auditorium, trying to see the production from many of the different viewing positions provided by the three banks of seats in the Belvoir Street Theatre. I attended all the sessions during the preview week when Neil delivered his 'notes' to the cast and I was given the handwritten sheets of notes posted in the actors' dressing room after performances he attended during the run when there was no formal meeting with the actors. Most of the interviews that I had arranged with the actors occurred during the run, and on some occasions I went out to supper with them after the show or was given a lift or drove one of the actors home after a performance. From the party on the final night of the run (22 December 2007) until March 2010 when I began my most intensive period of writing about the process, I did not see or speak to any of the participants. An experience that occupied most of my waking thoughts for nearly three intensive months was suddenly over, and the leap from pseudo-intimacy to complete absence provides an instructive insight into aspects of the actors' working life that are rarely discussed.

The description of the extent of my involvement and of the access I was given is an indication of the basis on which this account of the work process has been constructed. The production was special for many reasons, notably in that it was the first full length work for the stage Michael Gow had written for ten years, an enormously long period of silence from a playwright who had been able to capture the country's *Zeitgeist* so powerfully in 1986. It also marked the return to the theatre of one of Australia's most accomplished actors, Richard Roxburgh, after seven years working in film and television, much of it out of the country. It is a particularly galling fact of theatre life that actors, whose artistry is the driving force of the creative and the performance process, should be paid so poorly in the theatre compared to the remuneration they can receive for work in film and television where the creative process is handled at its most profound levels by others, long after the actors have

done their bit and moved on to other things. The answer Richard gave when asked why he had stayed away from the theatre for so long raises major issues about the actor's experience, which are discussed in Part Two where I reflect on the intermeshing of real life and fiction that is so much part of an actor's work in the theatre.

A question I had pondered before rehearsals began concerned the fact that there would be three people in the room with considerable directorial experience: Michael Gow, while ostensibly the writer, is an experienced and accomplished director whose work in the theatre in recent years has been overwhelmingly as director, and Richard Roxburgh, playing the huge central role, is also a director, usually for works he has also co-written, adapted from literary works over a long period of development. Before the process began, I did wonder how the fact of having three highly skilled directors in the room would work in practice and whether it might create a degree of tension. When I spoke of this late in the run of the play to another of the actors, Monica Maughan, she was immediately dismissive of any such possibility. She said 'Oh no, they are all professionals and they know what their role is in this process. They all respect the protocol that every suggestion has to go to the director.' This is certainly true, and the three roles were scrupulously respected: every suggested cut or addition to the text was discussed with Michael by Neil in their regular phone calls and emails, Neil's authority as director was never challenged, and there was no question of either of the others taking it upon themselves to say anything that might have been construed as a 'note' for another participant. It was not uncommon for Neil to defer to Richard on the playing of a given moment, as happened for example on Day 21 when they were rehearsing the final scene. Richard said 'let me experiment, I will find it' and Neil said simply 'I know' and turned his attention to the other actor in that scene. Notwithstanding this acknowledgement of each other's strengths and what Monica referred to as the 'protocols', I think there is evidence that, as the work developed over the weeks of the rehearsals and also over the weeks of the run, there were some significant differences between these three key players as to directions into which to take the material. This fascinating question will also be explored further in Part Two.

The quotation from Brecht that serves as epigraph to this chapter, and indeed to the book as a whole, encapsulates with admirable concision the central premise of my study. In choosing to write an extended description of a single rehearsal process rather than extrapolating from the many productions I have observed, my purpose is to give an account of the day-to-day work, the hard graft involved in repeating a given

fragment over and over again, trying to find the optimum arrangement of all the variables, the incremental advances in knowledge and understanding, the hesitations, anxieties and compromises as well as the thrill of discovery, the tensions that arise as well as the emotional warmth of the relations between the participants. As indicated earlier in this introduction, I am also vitally interested in the complex nature of collective creativity. It seemed to me that an account of rehearsal process involving references to a range of productions could mislead the reader by showing only the high points of discovery without the repetitive work process that precedes the moment of discovery, but I acknowledge the possibility that focusing on the day-to-day work of a single production may overwhelm the reader with a plethora of what seem to be minute details.

The great anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard once said that for the ethnographer 'the decisive battle is not fought in the field but in the study afterwards' (in Sanjek 1990), and his comment draws attention to the sheer difficulty of what is being attempted. As Evans-Pritchard knew all too well, any period in the field produces an enormous amount of material that has to be ordered and analysed before a useful account can be produced, and in the case of rehearsal, the danger is always present that the written account will render boring what was in fact an exhilarating experience. The two-part structure of this book is a response to the need to achieve an appropriate balance between detailed description of the daily work practices and commentary on the larger social and cultural processes within which they are located and to which they contribute. Part One is, thus, a relatively straightforward narrative account of the process, largely chronological but with some activities singled out for particular attention, while Part Two consists of a number of more reflective essays. My aim has been to provide a compelling story of the day-to-day work of the rehearsal process, maintaining where possible the sense of not knowing ahead of time things that were not in fact known at the time by the participants, and deferring until Part Two attempts to draw out from the material any more general observations. Part Two consists of four essays. The first deals with the way the rehearsal space was haunted by figures brought into it through the story telling that accompanied the work process, the second with the different directions in which author, director and actor wanted to take the material, the third examines in greater depth Neil Armfield's directorial process, and the last one attempts to locate the whole production experience within the larger social and cultural context of which it is a part. The two sections of the book are interdependent and there are a number of references in the narrative section to matters that will be dealt with in more depth in

later chapters. In order to permit the narrative a degree of autonomy, however, these references to the later commentary are used sparingly.

A final warning concerns the potential confusion for the reader confronted with a narrative involving twenty characters, the artists, technicians and craftspeople who created Company B's *Toy Symphony*, all of whom are referred to by name on numerous occasions here, and an embedded narrative constituted by Michael Gow's play which itself involves another twenty-four characters, most of them named. It is evident that this constitutes a bewildering number of names and I have tried to provide a brief indication of role or function every time I have used a name that has not been mentioned for a few pages. The Company List (reproduced on p. 33–4) formed part of the folder of essential materials handed to every participant on the first day of rehearsals and readers may need to refer back to it, as to the *dramatis personae* listed at the beginning of a play text, if my signposting proves inadequate.

#### Notes

- 1 The German *Probe*, the Italian *prova* and the Spanish *ensayo* all derive from words meaning to try; the French *répétition* and the Russian *repetitsia* foreground the idea of repetition.
- 2 Notwithstanding these comments, the study of rehearsal is slowly beginning to emerge as a sub-discipline in theatre and performance studies, witness the work of Josette Féral and the Working Group on Creative Processes she convenes for the International Federation of Theatre Research, the interest in theatre practices expressed by French exponents of genetic criticism (see Léger and Grésillon 2005; Kinderman and Jones 2009) and the special issues of theatre journals dedicated to rehearsal documentation and analysis in recent years (see for example Féral (ed.) 2008, and McAuley (ed.) 2006(b). Diana Taylor's theorisation of the shift from written to embodied culture via the interrelated notions of archive and repertoire represents another point of connection between bodies of research generated by performance practices (Taylor 2003). Her perception that the consequences of this shift might entail the traditional disciplines extending their boundaries to 'include practices previously outside their purview' (17) is clearly relevant to the emergence of rehearsal as the locus of scholarly interest.
- 3 There is an extensive literature concerning the pioneering work of directors such as Antoine, Stanislavsky, Gordon Craig, Copeau and Reinhard, who transformed the European theatre in the early years of the twentieth century and paved the way for what would be known as 'director's theatre' a couple of generations later. Norman Marshall (1957) was one of the first to draw attention to the way the whole production process was being transformed by the input of this new artist. On the later generation of directors see also

- Whitton 1987; Bradby and Williams 1988; Delgado and Heritage (eds) 1996; Mitter and Shevtsova (eds) 2005; Delgado and Rebellato (eds) 2010.
- 4 On Richard Foreman, see for example Foreman (with Jordan) 1992; Gerald Rabkin 1999. On Tadeusz Kantor, see Michal Kobialka 1993; Denis Bablet 1980.
  - 5 See Julian Meyrick 2008.
  - 6 In a speech given from the stage of the theatre after a performance of *Keating!*, the satirical musical by Casey Bennetto celebrating Keating's prime ministership (1991–96), directed by Neil Armfield for Company B in 2006.
  - 7 Sydney Theatre Awards have been conferred annually since 2005 by a group of Sydney-based theatre reviewers 'to recognise the strength and diversity of theatre in Sydney' ([www.sydneytheatreawards.com](http://www.sydneytheatreawards.com)). Awards for *Toy Symphony* in 2007 were: Best Mainstage Production; Best Direction (Neil Armfield); Best New Australian Work (Michael Gow); Best Actor in a Lead Role (Richard Roxburgh); Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Russell Dykstra); Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Monica Maughan); Best Lighting Design (Damien Cooper). The Helpmann Awards were established in 2001 by the Australian Entertainment Industry Association to recognise excellence in all the live performing arts. Awards for *Toy Symphony* in 2008 were: Best New Australian Work; Best Direction of a Play (Neil Armfield); Best Male Actor in a Play (Richard Roxburgh); Best Male Actor in a Supporting Role (Russell Dykstra).
  - 8 Belvoir actors and production crew use the familiar English terminology, PS (prompt side) and OP (opposite prompt), to refer to the audience right and left respectively even though their stage is five sided and the lines of force between access points are triangulated by the vomitory.

---

## PART ONE *The Toy Symphony* rehearsals