TRANSITING THROUGH THE CULTURES OF SUBURBIA
HOW THEATREWORKS DISCOVERED THE COMMUNITY OF AN AUDIENCE.

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Abstract

"From Burwood to the Bay": A theatre company's transition through the cultures of suburbia.

In its first iteration as an ensemble of actors, writers and directors dedicated to "celebrating and disturbing" Melbourne audiences, *TheatreWorks* changed its base of operations from a tiny office at Burwood State College (in 1981) to the Canterbury Gardens Centre (1983) and finally to a Parish Hall in St. Kilda (in 1985), where in a rare feat of longevity, the company continues to support the production of innovative, original, work. This paper examines that transition from the outer suburbs to an inner urban demographic as a search for new audiences across different cultural sub-groups: middle class, upper middle class and the mix of younger, poorer but artistically literate interest groups to be found converging on St. Kilda in the 1980s. In a wider context, *TheatreWorks* was one of a number of small, professional companies that deployed themselves in a broad strategic formation across Victoria at that time. *West* went west, *TheatreWorks* east, the *Murray River Performing Group* north, *The Mill* south, and *Crosswinds* ended up somewhere in the middle. Additionally, there was *Anthill*, *La Mama*, *Melbourne Worker's Theatre* and *The Church* – all contributing to a vibrant theatre tradition since described by Geoffrey Milne and others as the 'Next Wave' movement. In addition to transitioning through these suburbs as a company, *TheatreWorks* also developed forms of site-specific practice which saw the staging of plays on trams, and riverboats, in pubs, houses and gardens. These 'location plays' with their energetic manipulation of diegetic and found spaces, drew in new audiences for theatre. The *Tram* and *Boat Shows* literally moved their audiences from their outer suburban starting points to the city and back. Other plays such as *Living Rooms* (produced in a former colonial mansion) explored the demographic changes in St. Kilda by ushering its audience through different historical moments in the same building. Thus, not only did the company itself 'move' in response to a changing aesthetic and cultural agenda, so too, did the audiences within each show.

TheatreWorks and the Community Theatre Movement

On the 23rd of February 1981, an ensemble of recent graduates from the Victorian College of the Arts, Drama School (Caz Howard, Peter Sommerfeld, Susie Fraser, Hannie Rayson and Peter Finlay) incorporated themselves as the 'Eastern Suburbs Community Theatre Company Limited' but the group was more colloquially known as 'TheatreWorks' and was re-incorporated as such (on 21st Februrary1986) after consolidating its move to the Acland Street Parish Hall in St. Kilda. Right from the beginning, the company was

committed to exploring how a group of professional actors/theatre workers can best serve the people of the Eastern Suburbs by providing an *accessible* form of *entertainment*, educational and leisure activity, through the services of a community theatre (emphasis added).[1]

A few years later these aims had evolved to include

creating work which is pertinent to contemporary Australian lives, and which reflects the energies of urban life, building a symbolic vocabulary which will serve and sustain people in their search for meaning and identity. We aim to make our work both celebratory and disturbing. 'Celebratory' in that a sense of wonder and curiosity is embraced and reflected in all aspects of our work. 'Disturbing' in that we do not see our role as passively reflecting the status quo, but as intervening against certain spurious images disseminated in the mass culture, thereby opening up new channels of perception. We also seek to explore new actor- audience relationships and thereby to maximise the possibilities of the audience/participants both *identifying with the work, and evaluating* the broader issues at stake. (emphasis added). [2]

The 'disturb' clause hints at an already uncertain relationship to the suburbs surrounding Burwood State College where the company had its first office. Equally important is the open-ended nature of TheatreWorks' embrace of this new audience – who would also be the chief source material for the narratives of ordinary life to follow: stories and characters that could authentically exist inside a tram, a shopping centre, a riverboat, pub, family home or boarding house, all of which became sites of TheatreWorks productions. Accessibility, complicity, mobility and connectivity would become key elements in the company's performative style, especially as TheatreWorks pursued the exploration of its self-described 'location theatre' plays, works which would now be more commonly known as 'site-specific theatre'[3].

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[1] TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) Artistic Policy Documents, 1981.
[2] TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland). Artistic Policy Documents, 1984.
[3] See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). Also Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London:

In a text-centric critical discourse not a great deal has been written about these plays given that the script was a relatively minor part of a process that encouraged improvisation and a good deal of physical business. Consequently, the public record has tended to overlook both the subtle management of social spaces, and the robust interplay of fiction and reality that is going on in these works.[4] I would argue that it requires a new critical approach to assess site-specific performance, and new criteria with which to interrogate its spatial manipulation. Such a tool kit would allow an appreciation of elements such as the engagement of multiple senses (olfactory space), the relation of text to location, exploration of actor-audience relationships and co-ordination and stage management of the fiction/reality interface.

Certainly nothing has been written about Melbourne's outbreak of site-specific theatre in the 1980s as a coherent body of work: the 'location theatre' sub-movement, as it were, within the larger 'Community Theatre' umbrella – which in itself was an integral part of the 'Next Wave' or 'Third Wave' of Australian theatre as described by Geoffrey Milne and others.[5] Increasingly, a rich archive of audio visual material is being produced and uncovered to counter the ephemerality of live performance – something with which to apply a new critique of these productions. TheatreWorks for one, has left a useful record of its location plays in the University of Queensland's Fryer Library, including film, video and audio recordings of plays and workshops as well as photographs, manuscripts, company documents and other published and unpublished materials.

However, the general oversight has allowed certain historical blind spots to emerge, an example of which can be found in Laura Levin's recent description of *Nights In This City* (a bus show by the British theatre group Forced Entertainment in 1995) as "the *celebrated prototype* for urban site-specific work" (emphasis added).[6] This production used two tour guides to take audiences on a bus trip around Sheffield which included certain staged events along the way. Yet more than a decade earlier, in 1982, Rod Quantock's 'celebrated' *Bus, Son of Tram* carried passengers on busses to improvised performances at sites around Melbourne by two 'tour guides', one (Quantock) carrying a chicken on a pole

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Routledge, 2001). And Fiona Wilkie, *Out of Place: the Negotiation of Space in Site-Specific Performance* (University of Surrey, 2004). PhD thesis.

[4] There are of course, several worthy exceptions, including Geoffrey Milne's *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited: Australian Theatre since the 1950s*. Australian Playwrights. Ed. Kelly, Veronica. Vol. 10. (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004). Also *Community Theatre in Australia*. In Richard Fotheringham, ed., (North Ryde NSW: Methuen, 1987), and John O'Toole's *The Process of Drama: Negotiating Art and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992) which has a section on *The Tram Show*: 'Renegotiating Expectations in Adult Theatre' 173-182.

[5] Ibid. 5-6. See especially the graph of the three distinct 'waves' of theatre activity on 5.

[6] Laura Levin , 'Can the City Speak? Site Specific Art After Poststructuralism', in D.J. Hopkins, Shelly Orr and Kim Solga, ed., *Performance and the City*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 241.

as a rallying point for his fellow travelers, the other (Jeff Brookes), holding a stuffed koala. The point being (and part of the motive for this article) is that we neglect our own history at the risk of it being overlooked.

TheatreWorks was the third example of a Community Theatre company to emerge from the Victorian College of the Arts. The formula of "theatre by the people, for the people, of the people"[7] had been pioneered by WEST in the western suburbs of Melbourne and the Murray River Performing Group after they headed north to Albury-Wadonga (both emerging from the VCA in1979). Earlier, The Mill Theatre had gone south-west to Geelong and later Crosswinds would occupy the centre (of Victoria) by basing itself in Wangaratta/Benalla.

Politically and demographically this movement can now be read as part of a strategic plan to capitalize on the momentum building behind a wider democratization of the arts across Victoria that followed in the wake of the Cain (State) and Hawke (Federal) Labour governments[8]. Peter Oysten who had instigated the do-it-yourself and keep -it-local ethos at the VCA Drama School, had come back from directing a regional company in the UK towards the end of the Australian 'Second' or 'New Wave' in 1975. [9] In this cultural/political climate Oysten's agenda was unashamedly nationalist.

It's important to find the Australian voice because this is who we are. Otherwise it's schizophrenic because we are a very naïve people – open and susceptible… So my attitude in starting the School of Drama at the VCA was that we would speak *our* words and I asked Sue Spunner to teach a subject called Australian History. I found a great number of students didn't know enough about the subject. And if you don't have a sense of where you come from and why you're here then how can you be responsible for expressing the dreams in theatrical terms? [10]

As Geoffrey Milne points out

The Second Wave was when we Australianised the Australian theatre. And got the situation up to the stage where Australia became the dominant content. It was largely a mono-cultural, nationalist project. There was a fertile national imaginary that encouraged the development of an Australian culture across the board.[11]

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[7] Geoffrey Milne, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD.
[8] Indeed in the very person of Victoria's new Arts Minister, Race Mathews, there was a sense of a certain continuity with and restoration of Whitlamesque patronage for cultural activities across the board.
[9] The Duke's Playhouse in Lancaster.
[10] Peter Oysten, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD.
[11] Geoffrey Milne, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

So if the Pram Factory and Nimrod had been about finding the Australian voice, the Community Theatre Movement was perhaps about getting lost in the multiplicity of voices that followed.

As Richard Fotheringham notes in his introduction to *Community Theatre In Australia,* and as TheatreWorks soon discovered, there can be many different kinds of community, based not only on socio economic indicators, but also on criteria such as age, gender, institutional, or work situations.[12] Consequently, inside this apparently amorphous suburban demographic, into which TheatreWorks had chosen to launch itself, there were in fact any number of different communities and the cultures associated with them. All of which begs the question: what constitutes a community? As Fotheringham himself concedes, the term is difficult to define.[13] One can talk about sharing something in common (a suburb, a workplace, ethnicity, the local football team etc.) but I would argue that a more critical ingredient in the formation of 'community' is 'identity' – something internal and subjective rather than being externally or objectively driven. And if we are to talk about the idea of a 'community of the audience' this self-referencing involves more than just groups of spectators seeing themselves across a thrust stage, something which Gay McAuley discusses in a recent article about Sydney theatre spaces.[14] With regards to *The Tram Show* for example, the audience becomes aware of itself not only as fellow passengers sharing a journey and facing each other across an aisle, but as a separate cohort within the larger random reality of the streetscape going past outside which sometimes enters back into the frame of the play in the form of regular commuters expecting a normal ride.

An earlier example of a Community Theatre model can be seen in The Mill Theatre Company, set up as an offshoot of Deakin University in Geelong in 1979. Its founding artistic director, James McCaughey, explains that

Part of my ideological framework was that theatre was dead. It had to go into the streets and work places. If theatre is just going to be a ghetto thing, then I don't want to spend my life doing it. The mission was to explore what was the role and function of a professional theatre company in Geelong. And it sure as hell wasn't to run a repertory company. Theatre was an activity integral to all human life. I felt we had to look for ways (to enact plays) in different locations and societal frameworks, in which we could create the events with people. Or help them create the events.[15]

The Cultures of Suburbia

[12] Ibid. 20.
[13] Ibid. 20.
[14] Gay McAuley, 'The Sydney Trinity: Performance Space and the Creation of a 'Matrix of Sensibility', *Australasian Drama Studies* 58 (April 2011) 83.
[15] James McCaughey, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

The term 'suburban' implies something '*less* than urban', lower in the hierarchy, bland, away from the centre of things, of minor significance, often co-joined to the idea of 'wasteland'. However, what TheatreWorks encountered was something that Donald Horne had identified almost a generation earlier. The quote from *The Lucky Country* that TheatreWorks' included on the opening page of its first pitch document to the funding bodies was Horne's assertion that

The profusion of life doesn't wither because people live in small brick houses with red tile roofs. It is the almost universal failure of Australian writers to realize this that causes them either to caricature Australian life, or to ignore it… Almost all Australian writers, whatever their politics, are reactionaries whose attitude to the massive diversities of suburban life is to ignore it or to condemn it rather than discover what it is." [16]

And this, I would argue, is essentially what the TheatreWorks' project set out to do: to discover who their audiences were, and to reflect that discovery back to them in order create a culture of live performance in the suburbs and the regions where there had been none, a process that was intentionally strategic. As Peter Oysten recalls, he "had a map on the wall of my office with the various population densities, giving us an insight into where new companies could go…you must start from a sense of place."[17]

Strategic mobility was also inherent in the TheatreWorks' business plan because, in its first five years of operations (until the move St. Kilda in 1985), the company did not have a proper performance space of its own. Not surprisingly, in these peripatetic years, a certain restlessness characterized both the company and its activities. Plays from 1980 to 1986, all had a tour-able potential, designed to be produced in any available hall or class room, internal or external space. Initially, therefore, the elements of mobility and accessibility to be found in the early plays were the outcome of a certain corporate homelessness. The search for new performance spaces was leading TheatreWorks increasingly out into the open, to the streets, parks and public spaces (including public transport) that a long tradition of street theatre had already occupied, arguably tracing a genealogy back to the practices of medieval theatre with its miracle and mystery plays staged in public squares and mounted on the backs of wagons.

The agenda was two-fold: to situate the work in the eastern suburbs and to reflect that community back to itself. TheatreWorks also sought to do this in ways where the decision making was shared equally across the ensemble. This intention to reach into the suburban heartland and to do so in a non-hierarchical way (as an 'artistic directorate'), further blurs

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[16] Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*. (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964) 18. As quoted in TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) Artistic Policy Documents. 1981.

[17] Peter Oysten, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

the demarcation between producers and observers, and prepares the way for any prospective audience to enter into the process as participants, something more than the passive voyeurs of a proscenium-arch theatre, seated alone and in the dark, peering through an invisible fourth wall.

TheatreWorks suburban audiences were not passive, never alone, and rarely in the dark. Nor was there any fourth wall to peer through since the audience for the site-specific plays had been taken through it to be effectively placed 'up' on stage with the actors. In the often confined spaces of these plays, other senses beyond those of sight and hearing could also be engaged including smell, taste and touch. Here audiences got to *feel* the actors – literally, they could fall into your lap, reeling from some dramatic moment, or ask you to dance (at Samantha Hart-Byrne's divorce party): the roar of the grease paint, the smell of the crowd.

All these factors, community outreach, corporate homelessness, performative mobility, new actor/audience relationships, the visceral component, all coalesced to create a form of site-specific production that was playful, inventive and popular, something unique to Melbourne at the time. What they also lead to was the formation of the community of the audience *within* the play.

Transitions

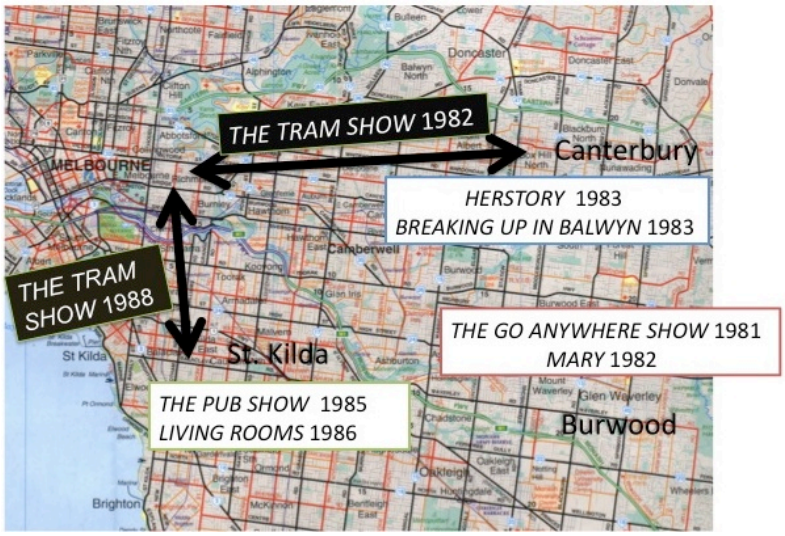

Figure 1. Occupying Suburban Space
Indicative TheatreWorks' productions 1981-1988

Figure 1 shows seven TheatreWorks plays that were sited in the three different municipalities (and effectively very different communities) in which the company positioned itself as it moved steadily west from Burwood towards the inner city.

And if a Community Theatre company is essentially about reflecting a local demographic back to itself, then this progression in search of audiences and stories, is reflected in the quite different content and style of the various productions that came out of the three main

stopping points of Burwood, Canterbury and St. Kilda. These range from the *Go Anywhere Show* and *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* to *Mary* (all set in the outer east), *Herstory* and *Breaking Up In Balwyn* (in the more up market middle east) and finally, *The Pub Show* and *Living Rooms* in a much grungier but culturally literate inner-urban community.

Almost from the start there was a certain ambiguity about the outer eastern location in which TheatreWorks had chosen to situate itself. As founding member Hannie Rayson says

The suburban experience was something I was running a million miles from. That's why I'd come to live in Fitzroy, Collingwood, Carlton. I was never going back to the suburbs. But there I was. It wasn't like WEST [community theatre company]. That was something we felt keenly. They were attached to a community that they passionately wanted to represent and we didn't want to represent these [eastern suburbs] values at all. So there was a sense of slight wrong-footedness from the start.[18]

Other founding members had similar reservations. In Susie Fraser's words: "We felt a bit weird going out into the Eastern Suburbs. It was a long way away."[19] Mary Sitarenos also remembers, "when we went out there it was a bit of a desert."[20] And Peter Finlay confesses that he "used to call it Kafka country."[21]

Nevertheless, true to its community agenda, TheatreWorks set out to embody what they found in that 'desert' allowing us to read these seven early plays as reflecting the very different set of cultures thus embraced – all serving to highlight Horne's insight that the "profusion of life" can indeed flourish beneath those amorphous "red brick tiles."

Communities of the Homeless – *The Go Anywhere Show* (1981)

TheatreWorks first response as a company was to produce what Susie Fraser called their "calling card":[22] *The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show,* a play that set out to highlight ('disturb') the hidden unemployment making life difficult for many people in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs in early 1981 – a contributing factor to the demise of the Fraser Liberal Government two years later.

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[18] Hannie Rayson Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD
[19] Susie Fraser, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD
[20] Mary Sitarenos, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD
[21] Peter Finlay, Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD
[22] Susie Fraser Personal Interview, TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

The Go Anywhere Show enacted an early form of localized site-specific theatre which occupied public spaces and borrowed freely from the agit-prop, street theatre of the late 1960s/early 1970s. Director Robin Laurie (herself a key New Wave player at the Pram Factory), and most of the TheatreWorks' ensemble had been directly or indirectly involved in such activities. As the title implies, *The Go Anywhere Show* was designed to be produced in virtually any location (public or private) that was capable of containing, or attracting an audience. The narrative itself was semi-improvised around a number of set scenes, which were intercut with a liberal application of physical comedy ('*lazzis*' in *commedia dell'arte* terms). Sometimes the show would be booked by a school or community centre, at other times it might be produced *alfresco* in a camping ground or shopping centre – as a form of theatrical busking.

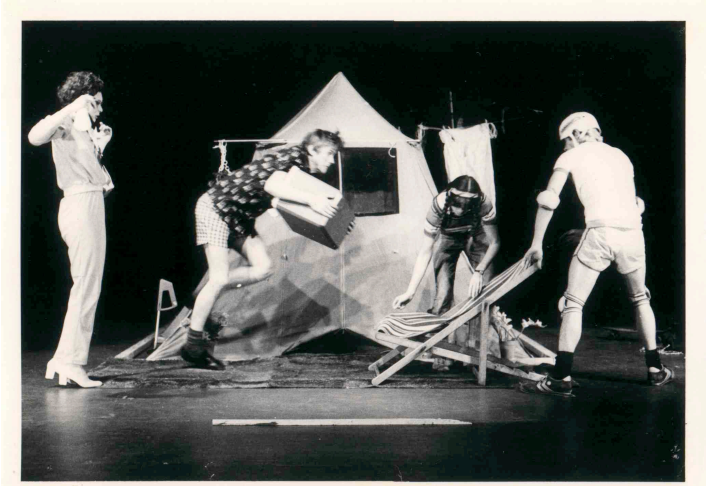

Figure 2. *The Go Anywhere Show* (group devised) 1981
The 'Setting up the Tent' Lazzo
L-R: Caz Howard, Peter Finlay, Hannie Rayson, Tony Kishawi

The performance space of the play was 'produced' in a Lefebvrian sense by the erection of the tent.[23] What unfolded around this family 'home' was a narrative in which we meet the Dickens family: Dick (father), Dolly (mother), Darryl (son), Daphne (daughter) and Desdemona (auntie). The conceit behind the play depicted the Dickens as a homeless, down-on-their-luck family, perpetually wandering the eastern suburbs looking for a permanent address (much like TheatreWorks itself). However, in order to keep up appearances, the Dickens pretended that they were merely on a sort of "permanent holiday"; when in fact they were actually unemployed and utterly impoverished.[24]

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[23] Henri Lefebvre, *La Production De L'espace*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell,
1991). See especially 13 where he links the production of space to physical theory.
[24] *The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show* (Group Devised) TheatreWorks' Archive (Fryer Library, University of Queensland) MS.

Although Peter Finlay provided the characters and Hannie Rayson some of the dialogue,[25] much of the humour of the piece turned on the gap between appearances and reality: that middle class attempt to stay calm and carry on while ignoring the dire reality of their situation.

Communities of Commuters – *Storming Mont Albert by Tram* (1982 - 1994)

Figure 3. *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* (Paul Davies) 1982
The penultimate 'bomb scare' scene
Extreme Left and Right: Peter Sommerfeld, Mary Sitarenos

The story of an 'ordinary tram journey', but based on a real incident witnessed by its author, the original *Tram Show* was staged on a Number 42 tram as it proceeded along its normal route from the Mont Albert terminus to the city and back (interval was held at the Australia Hotel in Collins Street). Of all TheatreWorks' location plays this was by any measure the most successful staging of the site-specific idea, particularly in the integration of text and space.

The story unfolds around various characters as they enter and exit the tram in the guise of ordinary passengers (including an over zealous ticket inspector working 'undercover'). These people form the sort of temporary and often curiously intimate micro relationships that occur between strangers on any public vehicle. As they meet and spark off each other, their various backstories and anxieties unfold in front of an audience cast at first in the role of *de facto* voyeurs, much like anybody overhearing a conversation in public. While the journey proceeds the audience become drawn into the web of events more as accomplices with the actors in a set narrative that has been let loose within the random reality of the city going past outside. Here the audience also become aware of themselves as the object of someone else's gaze, but from a position of narrative privilege – in on the joke as it were.

[25] Peter Finlay, Personal Interview, (Brisbane: TheatreWorks' Archive: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

Finally, after an attempted hijacking by a homeless alcoholic, the 'police' arrive, completely mis-read the situation, and proceed to arrest the wrong people. [26] Like Rod Quantock's bus show the piece revolved around the guiding/uniting spirit of the tram's conductress, Alice Katranski, as she struggled to cope on her first night on the job. [27] Like hospital waiting rooms and airport terminals, trams are social melting pots, one of the few places people from different strata of society can find themselves thrown together. Into this dramatic container TheatreWorks poured a forensic cross section of the different sub-communities it was uncovering in the eastern suburbs and with whom it was engaging in a premeditated act of celebration and disturbance. As well as the 'connie', the ticket inspector, and the homeless alcoholic, the dramatis personae include a slightly threatening punk, a single mother, a visiting Sydney filmmaker, and an upper middle class housewife who's never been on public transport before but reluctantly comes on board looking for the first class section.

The Tram Show became TheatreWorks' signature site-specific play and was reproduced half a dozen times on tram routes in both Melbourne and Adelaide over the succeeding decade. It ran to more than 300 performances and travelled a cumulative distance that would have taken it half way around the world! Figure 3 shows a moment in the play when the police character (back, centre) thinks he has just uncovered a bomb on board the tram (set in a more innocent time when the idea of explosive devices on public transport could still be regarded as a joke – witness the audience reactions).

What made the *Tram Show* so appealing, was not only the sense of inclusion (in that the 'community of the audience' was framed by their shared status as fellow passengers with the actors), but also that the play achieved a certain 'authenticity' by manipulating the commonly understood protocols of public transport behavior and playing them up for comic effect. The narrative perfectly matched the location – arguably the *key* performance indicator of any site-specific play. Nor was it merely a three dimensional experience happening all around the audience (and sometimes above or below them), it was such a

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[26] Paul Davies, *Storming St. Kilda By Tram* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1982) 65. Quite often real police officers would also arrive having received reports of an 'incident' occurring on the tram. On entering however, and expecting trouble, they would instead be greeted by a bemused expectation from the audience that they were also part of the show. And perhaps a sense of shared guilt among the audience that they were partially responsible, another audience/community building element.

[27] It's worth noting that both these examples of 'really moving drama' were on in Melbourne at the same time (February 1982). And in a unique collision of real and invented spaces, Quantock timed one of his performances to block *the tram Show's* progress along Victoria Parade by parking his bus across the rails. What followed as the characters from both 'events' interacted with each other, created a kind of improvised meta performance as reported by Susan Spunner in the *National Times*: "Theatre on the Number 42" *The National Times* (April 11 to 17 1982). Such a bizarre interface of colliding social and narrative spaces could arguably only ever have occurred in Melbourne at that time – at the height of the site-specific craze in the early 1980s.

close engagement between performers and spectators that a certain olfactory space could also be engaged: the stench of 'derro' as he fell asleep on your shoulder, or took his socks off. Or the smell of tomato sauce from his meat pie that he mistakes for his own blood. Here you could also literally *feel* the actors as they bumped into you, or as the Connie appealed to you for sympathy, reeling from the dramatic shock of her sacking. The audience became aware of itself as an audience not just because in a tram they sit facing each other (more proximate even than McAuley's thrust stage scenario), but because they were the subject of another gaze: a random spectatorship looking back into the play from the street going past outside and into which the *Tram* narrative ebbed and flowed as various characters came and went.[28]

John O'Toole describes the "Brechtian ambush" that occurred just before interval where

the 'tram inspector' revealed that he was a fringe theatre worker (true), and only working on a tram because he was 'resting' (fiction but likely). He then hung out of the tram shouting humorous insults at the Melbourne Theatre Company and its real patrons until the tram had passed the building…This gentle metaxis of real and dramatic contexts was layered further by a Brechtian ambush of the whole convention, bringing the *medium* into the metaxis. Maintaining his 'officious tram inspector' persona, this actor simultaneously overlaid it with the real role of the TheatreWorks stage manager explaining the interval procedure for the audience, including prearranged drinks at a city hotel bar.[29]

O'Toole accounts for this synchronicity of text and location as "a further layering of metaxis" which he defines as a "tension caused by the gap between the real and the fiction, and a recognition of that gap."[30]

For all these reasons, but especially in its marriage of space and narrative, and the extension of the theatre experience that results (for actor and spect-actor alike), *The Tram Show* became the benchmark site-specific piece against which others were measured (and sometimes found wanting). In many ways, the self described 'location plays' produced by TheatreWorks in the wake of the *Tram* were all various attempts to re-concoct the original magic formula. In all cases some kind of mobility was inherent: either the stage moved or the audience did (for example through the rooms of an old mansion in *Living Rooms*). In most examples there would also be an element of playful complicity in which the audience

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[28] This precision required the script to conform to a strict chronology (much like a television script with its strict segment lengths). The length of scenes between character entrances and exits was based on timetables supplied by the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board which proved more theoretical than practical. Consequently, as traffic flows became worse the length of the play expanded and often required improvisation between stops in order to keep the momentum of the story going. Clearly, the narrative itself could not progress until the vehicle itself did.

[29] John O'Toole, *The Process of Drama: Negotiating Art and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992)
180-181.

[30] Ibid. 166

became aware of itself as a distinct cohort within the event: the 'community of the audience' within the play.

Communities of Ethnicity and Age – *Mary* (1982)

Figure 4. *Mary* (Hannie Rayson) 1982
Joy Dunstan (Gail), Mary Sitarenos (Mary)
Girlfriends across the suburban divide

A year later, but still in Burwood, Hannie Rayson's second play, *Mary* deals with the Anglo-Celtic lower middle class as it finds itself sharing suburban space with an emerging migrant group, specifically the post-war, southern European 'New Australians' (Greeks and Italians mostly). [31] This ethnic community had started their upwardly mobile journey from the cafes of the inner city and the manufacturing industries of the western suburbs and now saw their second and third generations set off in search of a better life in Melbourne's vast eastern spread. In *Mary* there is also a clash of generational communities as the younger members of the different ethnic groupings shared a sub-culture related to the interests of their own age. Another feminist inspired 'TheatreWork', *Mary* was as much a play about what the daughters have in common as what the mothers don't.

Rayson says that when she began the process of writing *Mary* she was very conscious of the fact that

[31] Hannie Rayson's first play *Please Return to Sender* was written and performed in 1980 while the TheatreWorks founding members were in their final year at the VCA. This play marked their inauguration as an ensemble within the VCA.

I was a fifth generation Australian attempting to write a play about the experiences of Greek women living in Melbourne. I was concerned on one level that the Greek community itself might regard my intentions with a degree of suspicion but also whether I could in fact truthfully tap into a cultural milieu so different from my own. With regard to the Greek community, my fears were dispelled rapidly…"[32]

Len Radic found the play " a study of the tensions and conflicts between new and old Australians," and compared it to Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart.*[33] Laurie Landray, in his review, quotes the Greek mother chastising her daughter Mary: "You're talking like an Australian – you got no respect" to which, Landray reported "the audience of Australians and Greeks, and Greek Australians breaks up with laughter."[34] In this moment Rayson manages to unite these disparate communities, Australia's new 'multicultural' paradigm, within the community of *Mary's* audience.

Communities of Class -- *Breaking Up In Balwyn* (1983)

Figure 5. *Breaking Up In Balwyn* (Paul Davies 1983)
Enter the Greek 'frenchmaid' (Mary Sitarenos)

By 1983 TheatreWorks had left its office in the outer east and moved closer to the city, to inner eastern Canterbury. Subtitled "a toast to money marriage and divorce," *Breaking Up In Balwyn* was a very different response by the company to the new, affluent and politically conservative community in which they now found themselves.

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[32] Hannie Rayson, Personal Interview (Brisbane: TheatreWorks' Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD
[33] Leonard Radic, 'On Opposite Sides of the Fence', *The Age* (16 December 1982).
[34] Laurie Landray, 'Showcase for *Mary*' *The Herald* (9 December 1982).

Designed to make theatre as soap opera, *Breaking Up In Balwyn* was written as a sequel to the *Tram Show*, and even recycled some of the same characters. In this case the public vehicle was the appropriately named, 'Yarra Princess' and the party/play was staged on board as the boat as it made its way from Melbourne's CBD up the Yarra River to the suburb of Toorak, home to some of the city's wealthiest people. The play took the form of a kind of inverted wedding ceremony, a divorce party in which Samantha Hart-Byrne 'celebrated' her separation from her shonky stock-broker husband, Michael.

Although it enjoyed a healthy box office, built largely on the profile and success of the earlier *Tram Show, The Boat Show* was less successful with the critics, its lightweight *commedia* style unleavened by the potential and tension of random interventions. And although the *Boat Show* employed the same site-specific tactic of a moving stage into which characters entered and exited as it went along, in this case there was less opportunity for the outside gaze to happen given the darkened, mostly empty river bank going past outside. It is also probable that audiences found their assignment as a boatload of Samantha's 'very dearest and best friends' less comfortable, particularly as it involved participating a subtle put-down of the whole idea of marriage. In this respect the 'disturb' element of TheatreWorks agenda became more dominant than the 'celebrate' clause, the result being that here the community of the audience became a more fraught proposition, the identity element lacking.

Structurally (and with a nod to Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola*), *Breaking Up In Balwyn* attempted to subvert the wedding reception formula by reconstituting its familiar outline but turning all this on its head with the presentation of (inappropriate) gifts, a grand entrance by the new divorcee, cutting a special cake, an anti-bridal waltz etc. The play almost caused a split in the company as Susie Fraser for one, felt that *Breaking Up In Balwyn* was trite and lacked any real point, she even wondered where TheatreWorks was going as a company.[35] Certainly, the audience felt less comfortable being guests at a divorce party than they did being passengers on a tram where the protocols and rituals of public transport behaviour were more familiar and accepted – even if some of the *Tram* characters were notionally more threatening.

One result of these internal divisions was that two years later TheatreWorks abandoned the outer and middle eastern suburban experiment and moved to its final destination in St. Kilda where, much like Nimrod before it, the company found its natural home in the city's red light district. But before that move there was one more show reflecting life in middle-eastern Camberwell.

Communities of Age and Gender– *Herstory* (1983)

[35] TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) Minutes of Company Meetings. 1983.

Figure 6. *Herstory* 1983 (group devised)
Susie Fraser, Caz Howard

Soon after the company moved to the Canterbury Gardens Centre (in 1983), the community it chose to tease out and reflect was both generational and gender specific. *Women of Three Generations* was a large scale project which examined the history and experiences of women in the Camberwell City area over the previous century. The process involved script and performance workshops, oral histories, lectures, discussions, and the presentation of films by, for, and about women.

Applying the classic modus operandi of a Community Theatre production, *Women of Three Generations* was designed as the seed project for a later play, *Herstory,* which used these oral histories and dramatic explorations to knit together a piece of documentary theatre, using performance, slides and music to reflect the journeys of many different women over the preceding century. The project coordinator, or 'animateur' was Susie Fraser. The concept of the 'animateur' as it evolved through the VCA training process, described a person who was part dramaturg, part researcher, part producer/coordinator and workshop leader; in short the person who brings a particular project 'to life' ('animates') and who nurtures it through its various developmental processes. It was possible at the time at the VCA Drama School, under Peter Oysten's direction, to follow this career path through the College as an alternative to becoming an actor, writer or director in the more traditional sense.

As Fraser later commented in relation to the *Herstory/Women of Three Generations* project

There was a lot of stuff in the press at the time about our generation being the first feminist one and everything I read about the 1890s and 1920s [showed that those periods] had been important times for women and so it seemed arrogant to say we were the first…We went to the Baptist home for the elderly, got some fantastic women in their 80s and girls from Fintona [high school]. It was partly blue ribbon, (former Premier) Dick Hamer's daughter took part in it. Also a girl from prison who had had a baby adopted out. Quite big stories, and it did feel it was part of that consciousness raising. Some women found it very

formative in making them think about being a woman. But we always wanted to gather it together as a thread… "[36]

Communities of Culture – *The Pub Show* (1985)

Figure 7. *The Pub Show* 1985 (Peter Sommerfeld)
Smoke and Mirrors: "Eat The Rich" play the Gerswhin Room live
Stage L-R: Boris Connelly, Jeremy Stanford, Paul Davies

It's hard to imagine a more different style of show to *Herstory* than Peter Sommerfeld's *Pub Show* – ostensibly the story of the rise and fall of a local rock band as it implodes on stage during a session in St. Kilda's iconic Esplanade Hotel. Here the audience were invested with the role of rock fans and brought within the fourth wall of the performance as the action unfolded not only up on stage but throughout the venue (including under the tables) as various actors filled ancillary roles of bouncer, gaffer, drug pusher, police officer, pregnant deluded fan etc.

And here the community being reflected was an educated, young, inner urban, culturally literate one. The audience were thereby invested with the role of typical hotel patrons who might be found attending any number of St. Kilda's many live band venues. *The Pub Show* was a continuation of the site-specific tradition that had started with TheatreWorks Tent, Tram and Boat Shows.

The narrative involved a parody of the rise and rise of a semi-talented rock band called appropriately enough, given TheatreWorks' recent fraught relationship with Canterbury, 'Eat the Rich'. The strategy was to stage a kind of rock musical in a typical pub band venue, but to salt in the individual stories of the band members as it all comes out between the songs.

Communities of History and Place– *Living Rooms* 1986

[36] Susie Fraser Personal Interview (Brisbane: TheatreWorks' Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 2010. CD

Figure 8. ‘Linden’ circa 1900

The final production in TheatreWorks journey westwards through Melbourne is *Living Rooms* (Paul Davies 1986). And here the communities are both chronological and socio-economic.

By 1986, when this house based, site-specific play was produced, St. Kilda was going through it’s third major demographic transformation. It had started life in the previous century as an aristocratic seaside retreat for Melbourne’s newly wealthy ‘squattocracy’. Here the fortunes made in the wool and gold industries spawned a series of spectacular mansions of which ‘Linden’ at 27 Acland Street was an outstanding example. Figure 8 shows members of the Michaelis family who had built Linden in the 1880s, at the height of the ‘Marvelous Melbourne’ period.

By the 1960s St. Kilda had declined to a much less salubrious red light district which saw many of its grand old buildings subdivided into boarding houses. However, by the 1980s it was going through a period of re-gentrification, as a new inner-urban professional class moved in. St. Kilda’s night life and cosmopolitanism, as well as its proximity to the bay, and their offices in the city, were now all win-win situations.

The idea of *Living Rooms* was to embody these three demographic transitions by staging scenes from the different eras in three separate rooms. Thus, the very different communities occupying St. Kilda in the previous 100 years were reconstituted in the same place. Here the community of the audience was divided into three sub-groups who each rotated through the house as the scenes set in different historical periods were replayed simultaneously. All groups consequently witnessed the whole play but in different running orders, and each room required a different mode of witnessing: from fellow participants (Gallery), to voyeurs (Flatette), to invisible ghostly presences (Drawing Room). A final scene drew the all audience groups together for a denouement in Linden’s spacious hallway, where the house itself gets to have a final say.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Figure 9. *Living Rooms* (1986)
The Drawing Room Scene 1900: Kevin Cotter, Cliff Ellen

In the Drawing Room, set in 1900, the audience find themselves present at a farewell party for a young artillery officer heading off to the Boer War. Here the audience are arranged around the room as passive witnesses – present but curiously absent at the same time, not directly referred to by the characters. But *there* nevertheless, situated in amongst the fine crystal glasses and Rupert Bunny landscapes on the wall, ghosts effectively, within the story.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Figure 10. *Living Rooms* (1986)
The Flatette Scene 1972: Cliff Ellen, Paul Davies

In the Flatette scene, set in 1972 (St.Kilda's down-market era), a conscientious objector on the run from the Federal Police, anxiously awaits the election of the Whitlam labour

government and his consequent decriminalization as Australia's participation in the Vietnam War comes to an end. Here the audience look on, hidden behind a light scrim, observing the action as if they are detectives scrutinising an interrogation, or medical students observing an operation, effectively distanced from the action in a very deliberate way.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Figure 11 *Living Rooms* (1986)
The Gallery Scene 1988: Peter Sommerfeld, Caz Howard (front row)

In the gallery scene, set in the near future (the bi-centennial year of 1988), a newly arrived yuppie couple emerge out of the audience as their private argument becomes more audible. They've arrived in Linden expecting to find an exhibition of 'living rooms' but find their particular room "isn't working."[37] Because of course, they *are* the play in this room. Here much like the *Tram* and *Boat* shows, the actors effectively invade the audience and pretend to co-exist with them – on the same playing field as it were.

As *Living Rooms* proceeds with each scene repeated three times, and the action bleeding from one story to another, the rooms themselves become unstable containers of space and time. In addition, two actors move between the rooms turning up as different characters in different time periods. Sitting in one room the audience can hear shouting and other noises going on all around them and if they've already been in those rooms may have some idea of what is going on. In this way they become aware of their participation in the play as a kind of 'meta event'. In terms of staging, this was one of the most sophisticated site-specific plays that TheatreWorks undertook. And the company repeated the formula three years later in the same building with *Full House No Vacancies* (Paul Davies, 1989).

Conclusion

[37] Paul Davies, *Living Rooms,* TheatreWorks' Archive (Brisbane: Fryer Library, University of Queensland) 1986. MS. 81.

Figure 12 Finally on the Map
TheatreWorks Artistic Directorate 1988
L-R: Paul Davies, Shirley Sydenham, Caz Howard, Wolfgang Wittwer

By the end of the 1980s, TheatreWorks, through its very presence in St. Kilda as an agent of cultural production, had become part of the change it was talking about, effectively part of the gentrification of the community it had chosen to stay with. Indeed, in a rare feat of longevity for any artistic enterprise, TheatreWorks continues to support the production of new work (much of it local), from its final destination in the Christ Church, Parish Hall. By 1988 the company was officially on the map, an indelible part of the demographic evolution it had set out to describe, celebrate and disturb. On its journey from Burwood to Port Phillip Bay it had revealed something of the complex web of life that failed to wither under Donald Horne's red tiled roofs. Partly as a result of this, TheatreWorks also became a key player in Melbourne's site-specific revolution throughout the 1980s, which lived on in the numerous productions in found spaces that took place the following decade. Julian Meyrick counts no less than 47 such works in the various Fringe Festivals from 1988 to 1995, and an additional 'extensive number' of shows in found spaces outside the Festival context.[38] Much of the enduring success of this form of theatre, which grows out of a certain community outreach ethos, resides in its ability to give audiences a sense of coming together in an act of self-identification (as an audience), which in turn allows, I would argue, for a heightened and more complex engagement with the drama they're witnessing.

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[38] Julian Meyrick, 'Filthy Spaces: the Investment of Non-theatre Venues in Melbourne 1990-95', in Peta Tait, ed. *Body/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 170-171.