



Curtain Up! From Book to Stage

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Abstract: This paper features four recent adaptations for the stage of award winning Australian books for young people. Varied aspects of Australian cultural life include Aboriginal Dreamtime creatures and rural farm life; migration and the challenges of an unknown culture and language; outback station life and the Stolen Generation woven together in the format of a requiem mass; the fable of a young boy growing up in an isolated coastal community, his relationship with his mother and marine environmental protection. Both story and setting are significant for the original author and the artistic director. The importance of trust and the role of puppetry are essential for all productions.

Key words: Australia, children, literature, theatre, puppetry.

Prologue

Welcome to today's performance featuring four adaptations for the stage of Australian books for young people.

Scene 1 depicts Sydney's EARTH adaptation of *The Nargun and the Stars* by HC Andersen Award winner Patricia Wrightson, directed by Scott Wright and Wesley Enoch and commissioned for the 2009 Sydney Festival and Perth International Arts Festival.

Scene 2 introduces 2008 HC Andersen Award nominee and 2010 IBBY Honour List illustrator, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* as portrayed by Spare Parts Puppet Theatre of Fremantle, Western Australia and directed by Philip Mitchell.

Scene 3 features another Spare Parts Puppet Theatre production *Blueback* by acclaimed West Australian writer, Tim Winton, also directed by Philip Mitchell.

Scene 4 explores the stage collaboration between Matt Ottley, Danny Parker and 70 students in the complex and multi-layered *Requiem for a Beast*, the 2008 winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year.

Scene 1: Dreaming Creatures

The auditorium lights go out. Curtains are slowly pulled back. The darkened stage is illuminated. A story begins to unfold. It is the journey of city lad, Simon, grieving after the death of his parents. He comes to *Wongadilla*, a sheep farm to stay with elderly relatives. Simon meets the ancient dreaming creatures of the landscape and confronts Nargun, an ancient stone dreaming creature that has invaded from another



part of the country. Through his adventures, Simon finds a place where he belongs and peace in his heart.

ERTH's adaptation of *The Nargun and the Stars* by Patricia Wrightson brings this classic to a new generation. Patricia was indeed a pioneer, and exercised protocol before that was understood by the white community. She would not write about things unless they were documented by both white and indigenous culture. Her message is that children need to know and love the land and the only way to do that is by knowing its inhabitants.

Artistic Director Scott Wright's primary school days were in the heyday of Australian writers such as Patricia Wrightson, Ivan Southall and Colin Thiele. His step-mother, a teacher, read Patricia Wrightson's books to him during camping trips. Having lost his own mother, Scott strongly identified with Simon. Fantasy was real for Scott and knowing about the Nargun meant that many other creatures were possible, especially when they were camping in the bush. When walking through the bush Scott had a certain wariness, as if his peripheral vision was on the look out for the real thing. Scott has since met people, who as children, left apples in the stream for the Potkorooks and they were either eaten or gone the next day. Scott felt as if he were stamped and branded, such were the impressions made by the Dreamtime creatures in Patricia's books. The Nargun resurfaced when Scott was a teenager, attending secret drama classes, when his parents thought he was working at the local supermarket. Others in the class were making weird creatures and he recalled the Nargun, remembering how much he had loved the book. At that time he did not have any connections with indigenous communities, but he was always asking questions and seeking people who knew more.

Scott's fascination with the Nargun at a young age led to the key moment, when having his own theatre company and making the shows he wanted, in the mid 90s Scott turned a story that meant so much to him into a show. He wrote to Patricia and sought her permission.

Scott found it hard to get anyone – indigenous people and funding bodies alike to talk about the concept. I asked Scott about protocol and making connection with the communities he replied: "There is no one way. Meeting the communities was quite a cathartic moment – it just meant going there, with no help from anyone, and by myself. I couldn't write – I just went looking for them – and it took a long time". As a white



fella it took Scott a lot of sensitive consultation to get there. Vast distances needed to be travelled and the fracturing of traditional Aboriginal society complicated consultation with the appropriate elders. Difficulties also arose because of traditional ownership of men and women's business. The lair of the Nargun is a sacred women's site used for initiation and learning ceremonies, and Aboriginal children were taught not to go there because the Nargun would get them. Indigenous communities are now confident that Scott will be respectful of their folklore and so he is trusted.

16,000 children and adults have seen *The Nargun and the Stars*. "For children to see our work based on indigenous spirit creatures means they will look at the bush with completely different eyes – and be like me as a child" concluded Scott. He acknowledges Patricia Wrightson, Aunty Rachel a Monaro woman, and Aunty Caroline a Boon Wurrung woman and their work with EARTH in advising on the development of the stage version of *The Nargun and the Stars*.

Scene 2 – Multiculturalism

Leaving the Dreamtime creatures of Australia we now turn to the worldwide experience of leaving the homeland arriving in a new place, with unknown terrain, customs and language.

Shaun Tan worked on *The Arrival* about 12 miles from where his father Bing, a Chinese Malaysian arrived on the boat at Fremantle many years previously. The themes of freedom, migration, survival, love and acceptance are woven into the experience as the hero Aki farewells his loved ones, journeys across the sea to a new land, where he meets extraordinary inhabitants and learns how to survive in a new culture and sustained by hope, is eventually reunited with his wife and daughter. Shaun "had already realized the need for simple and easily understood scenes in these drawings, especially as the book contains no actual speech or writing, and any dialogue or reactions become physical gestures".

Artistic Director of Spare Parts Puppet Theatre since 2001, Philip Mitchell had wanted to work with Shaun Tan for some time. Philip "wanted to create works of universal appeal that challenged adults and children with a shared experience in one space. I like the philosophy that emotional intelligence builds a strong culture and I look for a work that reflects this." For Shaun *The Arrival* seemed "like a story that would



adapt well to stage, particularly as the book itself incorporated images of real people and imaginary landscapes, objects and creatures that could easily be translated as puppets”.

Such was the trust between the two that Shaun had very little involvement with the production and he encouraged Spare Parts Puppet Theatre (SPPT) to continue in its own direction. When adapting the book Philip “had to create our own story and we explored relationships, especially the relationship between the migrant Aki and the landlady” resulting in a 50 minute script. With subsequent productions the relationships between the animals and the relationship of the animals being in harmony with their humans deepened as SPPT wanted to take this concept further. SPPT developed the strong symbolism in the book eg the Origami bird – the first frame of the book, is symbolic of both flight and freedom. The company wanted to have a set that unfolded from 2D to 3D. According to Philip “We wanted to create a drama, and not just present it as a book on stage. We wanted to use all aspects of production as a storytelling device. This is a continuing challenge in all that we do – the specialness of theatre and its immediacy is different from the book”.

Philip Mitchell stressed the importance of all elements of the production being in balance, contributing to the telling of the story and to the process from the beginning. The pie chart shows the 5 equal sections: Lighting, Text-Narrative, Sound-music, Design and Puppetry. For example, all the instruments in *The Arrival* are part of the multicultural theme, with each character having a different instrument – pan flutes indicated the landlady. Her story was told by projected images on the washing line.

The Arrival was awarded the Best Production for 2006 at the Perth Theatre Trust/Actors Equity Guild Award and is one of SPPT most distinguished productions. It also performed in Ohio and was chosen to open the World Puppetry Festival at Charleville Mezieres in September, 2009.

Scene 3 – Marine Life and Death

This time the curtain opens on the “coastal verandah” that area between the land and the sea. The story is of 10 year old Abel Jackson whose family had lived at Long Boat Bay for over 100 years. Abel formed a deep and abiding relationship with a blue



groper, Blueback. He went inland to board at a hostel and attend secondary school, but even as an adult Abel never topped thinking of his home, the sea and the blue groper.

In one of noted WA author Tim Winton's rare interviews he says "I feel very specifically that I benefited from growing up where I did, where so much revolved around the sea – in a way, it was a gift and I owe it something. If the sea is ultimately where we come from, and it seems we did, then it's our source, our ancestral life and we are obliged to nourish it."

In an interview SPPT Artistic Director, Philip Mitchell commented on how lucky he is to be surrounded by such talented people with *Blueback* being one of the most performed children's work in Australia. It is an adaptation which Philip has now directed many times "every time I hear the words, I hear new things in it...Wow! This is so good!"

In the adaptation there was no input from the author, who as a Board member of SPPT, was no stranger to the form of puppetry so this permission was based on trust. Philip is a strong believer in establishing relationships with the original authors of works adapted. The script, by Peta Murray "is a beautiful piece of writing and the poetry and the cycle of seasons that are threaded through the book". The death of Abel's mother Dora "is very beautifully dealt with – very rarely is there a dry eye in the house". The performance moves people in many different ways and at different moments. Philip thinks it is important for all productions to have a moment "when that lump in the throat comes... *Blueback* allows young people to see death in a positive way and the watery image is very helpful – it reveals the difference between knowledge and wisdom and this is a beautiful thing about the sea... It is about the balance of things and about sustainable fishing."

Peta Murray's script won the 2000 Awgie Award for the Best Play for Young People. Lee Buddle creates full scores for all productions and the tune for *Blueback* is based on a Guatemalan mourning song that mothers sing when they lose a child. "I like the sadness and the positivity of it all. The music contributes to the telling and becomes part of the storytelling" commented Philip who continues to live his dream within a budget.

Scene 4 – The Stolen Generation and Adolescent Journey



We move to a very different landscape, the vast, wide brown land of northern inland Australia. Far from the deep blue sea is a multi-layered experience that weaves together outback station life, memories of the Stolen Generation, the myth of Minos and a Requiem Mass to portray a young man's coming-of-age for which the talented Matt Ottley, created the text, illustrations and music.

For Matt, it was a very affirmative experience. As a young sensitive 17 year old stockman, he had carried the guilt of not being able to speak out against the many racial slurs and injustices he witnessed. There was a lot of media controversy when *Requiem for a Beast* won the 2008 Children's Book Council of Australia's Picture Book of the Year and Matt was pilloried in the press, despite being championed by the CBCA.

Matt Ottley was Writer-in-Residence at Hale School where the theatre group is based. Working with Danny Parker, Director of Drama at the school was to prove invaluable. They had never before chosen a title that was as ambitious as *Requiem for a Beast* proved to be. It involved a cast of 70 young people aged from 14 to 18 years who belonged to the Redfoot Youth Theatre group which draws its young people from surrounding suburbs.

The cast were involved in the creation/design of the masks and the bull, and as the process moved from workshop to rehearsal mode, the ownership and involvement felt by the cast, resulted in a production that was exciting, stimulating and challenging. The whole process took 5 months. First came the adaptation of the text, difficult as there are three voices in the book – the omniscient narrator, the protagonist and the Aboriginal elder. The text had to be made workable for 70 people. Possibilities emerged such as the age of the boy-man character with shifts from childhood to young adulthood and this was spread through the play via different actors. Up to 20 different people took the voice of the omniscient narrator.

The music was rearranged to work on stage instead of as an accompaniment to the book. This gave Matt a totally different understanding of the Requiem as a musical from which traditionally has been very rigid moving in a regular procession of moods. The Requiem Mass is about the grieving process, whereas what was on stage was a totally different mix. The grieving process itself is neither neat, nor prescriptive. By



mixing the form it moved from anger to sadness to resolution, back to sadness, then anger – it was all over the place.

The decision to use puppets was practical. Danny has a policy of not rejecting anyone, so when he announced the choice of *Requiem* 70 volunteered. The major problem was how to present the Bull – backdrop or lighting? He decided to use puppetry which was held by 7 different people, who came together to form the Beast, so it worked at a metaphorical level as well. It was decided to make the puppets very minimal, based on the principle that the less prescriptive the puppet, the more powerful it becomes and the audience invests it with their own imagination.

Seeing 70 young people in community retelling a deeply personal part of Matt's life story and because he could see the cast really "got it" had a big impact on him. At last he felt purged of the guilt he had carried for so long. These young people rose to the challenge and the whole experience helped them think deeply about issues of the Stolen Generation that had never before occurred to them. The baton had now been passed to the young people.

Epilogue

Scott Mitchell continues creating shows for children with EARTH. It is hard to sell such a big production as *Nargun* and vital to keep costs down.

Spare Parts Puppet Theatre creates work for a repertoire, unlike *Nargun* and *Requiem*, and so is constantly creating works that will be well used. Philip Mitchell is looking forward to further collaboration with Shaun Tan for a performance based on the award winning book *Tales from Outer Suburbia* in 2011, while their 2010 touring programme includes both *The Arrival* and *Blueback*.

Matt Ottley and Danny Parker are collaborating again and with the poet Catherine Bateson, are working on a musical production and contemporary version of the traditional tale Rapunzel.

And so the curtain can now be drawn.

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