

**A Chance Gathering of Strays:
the Australian theatre family**

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Epigraph:

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Everything was in confusion in the Oblonsky’s house. The wife had discovered that the husband was carrying on an intrigue with a French girl, who had been a governess in their family, and she had announced to her husband that she could not go on living in the same house with him. This position of affairs had now lasted three days, and not only the husband and wife themselves, but all the members of their family and household, were painfully conscious of it. Every person in the house felt that there was no sense in their living together, and that the stray people brought together by chance in any inn had more in common with one another than they, the members of the family and household of the Oblonskys. The wife did not leave her own room, the husband had not been at home for three days. The children ran wild all over the house; the English governess quarreled with the housekeeper, and wrote to a friend asking her to look out for a new situation for her; the man-cook had walked off the day before just at dinner time; the kitchen-maid, and the coachman had given warning.”

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Prologue:

There are always a couple of days over the course of the rehearsal of a play, when I feel more like a member of the Oblonsky household than a trained, experienced professional in charge of my craft. Sometimes actors do have relationships with each other over the course of the play/show (often known as a 'showmance') and it may complicate an unusually close working environment. Sometimes people do leave and cast members are replaced for a whole range of reasons. I have experienced rehearsals where the depth of chaos has been liberating and creatively fecund and other times when, without any direct discussion, actors 'pull together' to fill in possible gaps left by direction or writing. A professional cast *is* 'a chance gathering of strays' in that we rarely or never choose with whom we will embark on the rehearsal and production of a play. Even so, there is a metaphor which persists, that binds us.

Jokes abound on the collective noun for a group of actors. A 'dole queue' of actors, a 'conceit' of actors, a 'whinge' and a 'sullen' to name a few. These descriptions certainly reveal the way others (employers, general public, critics) may view actors. When I began to observe the language actors employ in our regular and general discussions with each other, one metaphor kept surfacing consistently: 'family'. The metaphor of family or parts thereof used to describe a cast experience, appears in every conceivable form — from union material to company brochures, newspaper editorials and blogs to TV and radio interviews — actors and directors use familial terms to describe their working relationships. It is used both consciously and unconsciously but, although widespread, not all actors use it.

At the time of writing, there are some changes taking place in Australian theatre that may already render this 'family' metaphor of another time — or not. Neil

Armfield will direct his final season at Belvoir St Theatre this year (2010). It is possible that the language of family and home, which has long been a part of the Belvoir St Theatre identity, will be replaced with the language of a new artistic director and vision. That is, unless the metaphor originates from somewhere deeper than the season brochure. At the Sydney Theatre Company, Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett have replaced the “STC Actors Company” (created by former Artistic Director Robyn Nevin during her tenure) with “The Residents” — the inference being The Wharf at the Sydney Theatre Company, is a kind of metaphorical ‘home’ for this group of young actors — all are under thirty. The Griffin Theatre Company also makes reference to ‘family’ in their request for capital support to give “Australian playwrights a better home”.¹ Whilst Neil may have unashamedly extended the metaphor of family so far as to include the subscribers at Belvoir St², nonetheless he drew on something that is fundamental to the making of theatre.

My work as professional actor for the last twenty years has been in text-based mainstream theatre for the most part, in Sydney. I have performed with the Bell Shakespeare Company, the Ensemble Theatre, the Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir St Theatre and the Griffin Theatre Company, the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Western Australian State Theatre Company and a number of theatre companies that no longer exist. The questions about the significance of the notion of family in the theatre are my own; why ‘family’ and not something else? How does it inform the social structure created by it? I am looking for what connects and disconnects actors at this moment, in Australia at this time. My focus is on but not limited to, theatre companies in Sydney. Because actors will always go where the work is, there will be references to theatre companies in other capital cities of Australia and other countries.

Although the chaos of the Oblonsky household is a familiar description of some productions and casts, on closer observation of these very particular working

¹ Nick Marchant, <http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/support-us/capital-appeal/> [accessed 10.7.10]

² Neil Armfield, “Belvoir St Season Brochure.” Sydney: Company B, 2010:6 “Neil’s Message” in reference to the specifics of the Belvoir theatre space itself writes “It means somehow that every show has a cast of over three hundred participants, all breathing the same air ...” and signs off with the a very familial “Love Neil x “

relationships a culture emerges. In consideration of the question: “why the metaphor of ‘family’?” actors reveal how the *culture* of the theatre informs the kind of work it makes. There is a type of work one expects to make when rehearsing at Belvoir which is different from the type at the Sydney Theatre Company or the Griffin for that matter. Yes, there is a culture created by the companies but within that there is a micro-culture of family created by each cast, as a unit. This fact is important if it is true that the theatre is a reflection of a wider culture at a particular time. It is not just which plays are being scheduled in a particular season, not just the subject matter or even their interpretation but the process of the making of the work and the relationships forged as a result, which reveals us to ourselves. That the character of a theatre company, possibly a nation may be reflected in the processes of a rehearsal room at any given time may appear to be a broad, even grand proposal, but as we actors busy ourselves at the outset of every rehearsal, to justify and give breath, flesh and spirit to characters who begin life as black dots on a page ... there will be blood. It connects us.

Introduction:

Revealing Family

This research is an examination of the ways in which theatre practitioners understand the notion of 'family' in the theatre. The language used by professional actors to describe their working relationships in the rehearsal environment is something more than collegial. In order to understand what the language and metaphor reveals about the nature of being a professional theatre artist in Sydney, Australia at this time, it is essential to examine the family dynamic created by it. The metaphor is not meant to suggest or imply in any way that it is a surrogate or in place of one's own blood family, even though there are moments where they merge which are significant. The practitioners interviewed work primarily in text-based, mainstream theatres in Sydney. I have also included interviews with directors from different 'generations' as a possible counter point of view to those expressed by the actors. The theatres where these actors and directors work are Belvoir St Theatre, including Company B, the Sydney Theatre Company, the Ensemble, the Griffin Theatre Company and the Bell Shakespeare Company. I also include some examples of professional actors working for my own small company Theatre 20/20 as part of the Theatre Hydra³ season in 1999 at the Old Fitzroy Hotel.

Central to this research is the series of interviews conducted with these practitioners. In order to show clear examples of the contexts in which the family metaphor is used the subjects engaged in open and frank discussion about the

³ Theatre Hydra was a company made up of 5 independent (professionals, unpaid) theatre companies: Theatre 20/20, O'Punksky's, Porkchop Theatre, Brink and the Tamarama Rock Surfers. The companies performed at the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Sydney for two full seasons 1998/99, then a third in 2000 at the Seymour Centre.

rigours of the work and demands created by it. In allowing the language of the practitioners themselves to surface, the outcome was twofold: the interviewee could fashion their responses weighted to whatever aspects they deemed personally relevant and simultaneously reveal their own descriptive language around the subject. What emerge are agendas which reflect the artists' concerns at the time of the interview. This was essential in order to form a picture of whether language and metaphor were common between practitioners or particular to the interviewee concerned.

To parallel these experiences, I also offer three very particular experiences of my own from my professional life as an actor, which relate to the notion of "family" in the theatre. Each chapter of this thesis will begin with a narrative vignette, which describes an event that will exemplify and expand a "moment" of family. The interviews with my professional colleagues on the subject of family will offer alternative or supportive narratives. In doing so, the interviews present multiple perspectives by practitioners on what some of the contributing factors are in the creation of professional theatre culture in Sydney, Australia at this time. What is the substance of the language of our theatre culture? What is involved in the process of coming together and moving away and coming together again? The first chapter recounts the death of a mentor, in this case the late actor and playwright Nick Enright. The interviews that follow in that chapter reflect how the community of artists responded to the death of one member so deeply connected: firstly as an actor himself, then as a director, writer and teacher. The second chapter begins with a debilitating rehearsal dysfunction and goes on to interviews with practitioners who discuss the broader effects of conflict, beyond the rehearsal room. There is a tension where management absorbs the language and culture created by performers without engaging in any of the emotional risks and cost that give organic rise to it in the rehearsal room. Chapter three is an investigation of the Indigenous theatre family. From the perspective of black performers, the family metaphor in some instances may be found in actual familial relations. The task of navigating both the white European theatre culture alongside the preservation and extension of Indigenous culture is something the interviewees all felt strongly about. Chapter four is focused on directors' views. It

includes an interview with Neil Armfield, for whom the metaphor of family has always been a theatrical touchstone. This interview took place on the day before the new Artistic Director of Company B was to be announced. The timing of Neil's contribution to this study although not planned (it took two years to secure a date for the interview) brings unexpected new dimensions to this discussion. It supports my findings and understanding of family, in the theatre context, as a dynamic. After engaging with many casts of actors at Belvoir St over the last 30 years, Neil acknowledges family in this context broadly. The conclusion opens up what is common among the views of the practitioners and offers an analysis of what this 'family' has inherited. The fluidity of casts coming together and moving on — then coming together again in a new form is the nature of this organism. It is the emotional commitment with the expectation of impermanence that sets a theatre family apart from actual blood family where the depth of connection is assumed to be life-long.

Australian playwright Michael Gurr illustrates both the language in use and the dynamic itself: "Working in the theatre is like having a series of invented families. They only last for a short while, but they're very intense and intimate and there's something very attractive about that."⁴ He acknowledges that there are enticing aspects of this impermanence or continuous change. That there is refreshment in the constant regrouping is true, up to a point. Significant working difficulties between people in a cast last only as long as the run of the show, then a new job starting from scratch gives us all a clean slate. However most actors (in the theatre) tend to cross paths again and again in the new form of another play, especially over a number of years. So whilst the sensation of going from cast to cast may be one of change, professional actors in Sydney reach the stage where one begins to build a working history with colleagues made up of a myriad of different scripts, directors, casts, roles and indeed forms (for example: a radio play, script workshop or film). What the experiences may have in common is that each form will demand a different kind of high emotional engagement. I earn my living from giving over to this intensity, from 10am until 6pm, six days a week and then for eight shows a week during performance.

⁴ Michael Gurr interviewed by Paul Heinrichs, "The Premier and the Playwright." *The Age*, 27 August 2006.

Finding Ease

At about five years old I began swimming training at the Don Talbot Swimming Pool and a few years later tap dancing classes. Both activities were suggested to my mother by our family doctor, in an attempt to allay my chronic childhood asthma. I loved the tap dancing. Swimming was a repetitive struggle to breathe. At various times my mother encouraged me to try other sports: netball, hockey, volleyball. I hated all of it. I was literally 'dumb' at it and I still could not breathe. I was not only clumsy (on any field) but I could not anticipate the moves in sport in the same unconscious way I found I could inhabit the story and musicality of tap. In hindsight, there was a level of thinking and (breathing) already done. A sense of rhythm, proximity and phrasing were implicit and I do not know how it got there. My body forgot it could not breathe. Ease: "absence of difficulty or effort";⁵ "freedom from constraint or embarrassment".⁶ Those elements were already there. Perhaps a return to ease in one form or another is what compels both performer and spectator in the theatre. As an actor I aspire to embody the required intensity and ease simultaneously. I search for a physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual largesse. Certainly the *repetitions* of rehearsal (and on another level again in performance) are the opportunities for an actor to inhabit a new kind of ease. A kind which was previously alien, alternative ways of thinking, moving, being and engaging with another human, *as* another human. Of course you are always yourself, but this state of becoming is brought about by affecting your own natural rhythms of breath, of movement, of speech, of thought, of experience and occasionally of time. This ease and this intensity must co-exist, it is the embodiment of this paradox which gives a character a stage life.

Being an Actor

In the middle of my world and on the periphery of everyone else's perhaps: a participant who observes. In the throes of rehearsal one is in constant activity — at the same time on the look out for applicable behaviours from life. Behaviours of my own and other people's, details, which if chosen with care and economy, will accumulate to serve the story of the play. I have to keep learning things,

⁵ Concise Oxford Dictionary, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 450

⁶ WebsterDictionary <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/ease>. [accessed 31.05.2010]

seemingly unrelated skills, as a matter of course. This includes relentless amounts of text, some of it breathtaking, a privilege to utter, but there are also equal amounts of utter rubbish. Other lessons have included: how to walk with a white cane (blinded by contact lenses); acquiring bits of other languages including French, Arabic, Greek, Turkish, some Cambodian and Dari. The application of principles of Feldenkrais movement; Alexander technique; a system of political enquiry in Australia (SIEV X) and how to julienne four carrots, in the space of my own spoken paragraph with the physical rhythms and finesse of an excellent cook whose first language is Dari. All of these skills are completely unrelated and all have been necessary to perform at one time or another. Which skill may be required show by show cannot be predicted — the one certainty is that whatever it is, one requires more than a passing knowledge in order to perform it night after night, believably. It is necessary to inhabit in order to embody and in order to embody it is essential to observe.

To observe human beings in their circumstances very specifically as constructed by the circumstances set out in a play is a fundamental part of the process. I have spent days observing people in the giant pokies room at Penrith Panthers Club, searching for what is common amongst the poker machine players and what is particular. The need or allure of a poker machine is alien to me personally. I played a little to get the feel of pushing those bright buttons. The rhythm of coin in the slot, noise, buttons, digital flashes and more noise. It seems for almost no effort, the machine goes ballistic with lights and sounds — if not for the fact that there is nothing in the tray, the machine makes so much fuss you would think you *had* won. I want to understand.

It is a fantastically engaging way of cultivating meaning, of practising empathy. It is the one curiosity in my life that never seems to wane. If anything, this curiosity intensifies as I mature. Just when I think I know exactly what I am looking for in a role, something elusive will surface, which, after twenty years of professional practice, ignites a passionate and urgent (only four weeks rehearsal) exploration. The search invigorates me: It is a sign of life. The frayed end of the thread, that is: what I am in search of may be an emotional state, a piece of theatrical logic or a

physical dexterity I am required to inhabit so as to give a precise life to the words, the script. As an actor, I am a fulltime student of understanding.

This process, this search, involves primary sources. One must observe the soul that one is looking to inhabit. It may mean hours in a shopping mall or making cold calls to meet with a nun who works in the prison system or meeting the cousin of a friend who works as a diplomat. Clifford Geertz describes the ethnographer who is faced with another culture as confronting:

a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. And this is true at the most down-to-earth-jungle field work levels of his activity: interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, tracing property line, censusing households ... writing in his journal.⁷

This rings true for the preparation of a role. The process is like a kind of applied ethnography. A character is suggested by the writer, then the information is interpreted by an actor — informed by the specifics of being. The creation of a character requires close, objective, unobtrusive access to your subject. Frequently actors use journals to document and build a character. Observations and references including language or accent notes, photographs, family trees (from the play text and/or a primary source) literature, drawings and music.

It is the process of rehearsal that occupies me. A performance is something I end up with as a result of the process of discovery. Performing to an audience is not incidental; any professional artistic practice must extend to the final exposure to an audience otherwise the full process, in this context, is incomplete. I cannot project an outcome in any way. Just what the performance will *be* is always a mystery. Performance for an actor is perhaps like publishing for a writer. There is another level of discovery enabled by the sharing with an audience. The exchange with an audience can be profound. Having an audience pushes me into a deeper consciousness of the character — their darkness, my light and then it is

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* by Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books, 1973: 10.

gone! Like the notion of the film *Groundhog Day*;⁸ each performance ends with a mental list of aspects or moments requiring more attention or that are still unsolved. Each night over the season is an opportunity to bring a particular world, in its entirety to life. Moment by moment, the aim is always to unleash the sublime. Easy. It *must* be easy or it cannot be sublime. During some performances, one is literally carried by the good will of an audience determined to engage. At other times with the same performers, the same text, the same space it can be like wading through mud with weights on. It is extraordinary how different the experience of two performances of the same show can be. That is: can *feel*. There is always a final variable and that is the relationship with the audience on any given night.

A need to be noticed, that is, an inclination towards exhibitionism has very little if anything, to do with why I act. To embody (act) is the primary way I make sense of my world. In other words, the *process* of performing is how I understand myself. Being unemployed or unnoticed does not make me any less this way. I find meditation, action, comfort, presence, connection, meaning and ease in the processes of performance. Paul Moore outlines the statistics regarding the *lack* of employment for skilled professionals in his thesis *Longing to Belong*.⁹ The numbers are dire and proven. His research reveals clearly and scientifically the lack of work prospects, especially in the theatre, encountered by trained professionals in Australia. In the face of these statistics, applications for acting training institutions continue to grow. Of course if I were forced to, I could experience meaning (in the broader sense) in another way but acting and all aspects of theatre are natural, efficient and remain compelling to me twenty years into this profession. Neil Armfield's answer to his own question "Why do we put on shows?"¹⁰ describes an essential place where transformation is the nature of things. The creation of a world (in rehearsal) that we might actually want to inhabit, whilst surrendering to the inevitability for performers to perform: "I think it's because we're driven to it: there's nothing else we can do... outside the delicious focus of the rehearsal room everything is incomplete,

⁸ *Groundhog Day*, director Harold Ramis, released in 1993.

⁹ Paul Moore, "Longing to Belong: Trained Actors' Attempts to Enter the Profession." PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2004.

¹⁰ Neil Armfield, "Belvoir St Season Brochure." Sydney: Company B, 2006: 7.

unsatisfactory, inconclusive; but in there, our play is meaningful and rich and occasionally beautiful ... And it gives us something to do with our rage, our frustration. And of course our joy." A place for us to be.

Simplistic equations with exhibitionism are much further from the truth for most actors than the general public might imagine. As a child I kept creating 'theatre' for myself no matter where I was or how I was treated because of it. In his book *The Actor and the Target* director Declan Donnellan suggests that this need is in fact true for all of us. The introduction is entitled "I am therefore I act". In it he suggests that to act in any capacity is a statement of presence. As much as breath is. He extends the idea from simply actors to everyone, from our very first breath: "A baby is born not only with an expectation of 'mother' and 'language', but also with an anticipation of 'acting'; the child is genetically prepared to copy behaviours that it will witness". Donnellan continues:

If every auditorium were razed to the ground, theatre would still survive, because the hunger in each of us to act and be acted to, is genetic. This intense hunger even crosses the threshold of sleep. For we direct, perform and witness performances every night – theatre cannot die before the last dream is dreamt.¹¹

The subconscious is the starting point for preparation of any role, bringing your attention to what is already there. When a new cast comes together its members bring their own internal versions of the story (narrative) of the play, informed by their own particular set of experiences. In some form or another the search for the 'truth' of this story begins. Sometimes, depending on the experiences of individuals, the process towards this 'truth' is a painful one — ease can be defiant or difficult to navigate, at other times the process of creating is utterly joyful. The variables which may dictate a process are infinite; people get sick, marriages break up, babies are born, addictions nursed, injuries happen and more. The 'character' of a cast as a group begins to emerge, as they interact and absorb the realities, as well as get to know each other. The intensity of discovery and revelation builds over the rehearsal weeks and hopefully the cycle will be at a peak by opening night. Then a new cycle will begin over the course of the performance to do with nuance, integration of the audience and refinement.

¹¹ Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*. London: Nick Hern, 2002: 1.

Outside the cycle of creating, I experience an 'in-between' feeling. This internal space is very different from the security of being in the middle of a hefty run of a show. Paradoxically, due to the utterly consuming nature of the work, breaks from it are also essential. Other pursuits go on hold when one is working so getting back to life can be a relief, particularly after a tour. I have on occasion chosen to remain unemployed as an actor because I felt I had nothing in particular to bring to a role. On the face of it this may seem perverse but the effort required to manufacture a connection with material without that first spark can be debilitating or at worst destructive. The aim is to be ready with energy to burn for the right project. Over time the need to perform will build again. When the inevitable phases of unemployment are extended however, along with all the usual difficulties and stresses that arise with no income — like poverty and existential crises — there is another dimension experienced by professional actors, a psychological and emotional separation from your 'tribe'.

Tribe

As I write this, my Oxford Dictionary flattens a pile of bills, which will not be met until my next job. It could be six months away — in which case other arrangements for work and the payment of bills will need to be made. When work comes those arrangements will again need to be undone. Eventually this rhythm of doing and undoing finds its own equilibrium and one begins to experience a way to manage the inconstancy. Or not. The vicissitudes of life as an actor in this country at this time are massive, sometimes frightening and above all constant. To absorb or live with these shifts cannot be taught or understood fully by anyone who lives with the right of continuous work, wages or salary.

This fact never goes away. Learning a way to live, a way to survive with dignity and connectedness during times of financial and emotional suspension came from my mentors in the theatre. Everything about the world of an actor is other. In this country at this time to be a working actor is seemingly of little or no social consequence at all. There will never be a box to tick as 'artist'. As for government agencies, there is no recognition of the fact that our work as actors is 'seasonal', where in France for example, working in the theatre is perceived as a legitimate profession and artists are subsidised accordingly. Having specific government

protocols in place recognizes the seasonal nature of the work. Performers and artists with a proven history of employment are spared regular returns to dole queues or being forced to apply for what will inevitably be temporary work. The lengths actors will go to in order to secure paid work in their field is well known and sometimes exploited. Sydney has around ten theatre venues where the performers are paid for their work, these theatres are perceived as 'professional' venues but they do not always pay the professional artists who work there. At the time of writing these theatres are: Belvoir St. Downstairs, Griffin Theatre 'Griffin Independent', Seymour Centre Downstairs, The Darlinghurst Theatre and the Old Fitzroy.

Despite these difficulties, actors support one another to manage these dips and highs, and shifts that occur. It may seem irrational to consider oneself an actor through periods of not actually performing. Paul Moore refers to this mentality as a type of misplaced faith in the cycle of work.¹² Why wouldn't one just find other employment? Behave like an intelligent grown up, and make a contribution ... it makes no sense to suffer. For an artist there is another kind of logic at work. In her interview actor Kerry Walker describes the life thus: "You face constant rejection, [you will get] one job in ten. You have to be psychologically capable to cope with this rejection. People who choose this way of life have to be tough and secure. That's why there is such a huge attrition rate [...] it can be a soul destroying profession."¹³ I will return to this point of attrition made by Kerry Walker in chapter two. Somehow, most 'jobbing' actors in Australia find ways among themselves to manage. This understanding that actors have creates a profound connection among them. As a result, we feed each other, help each other out financially where possible, with the full knowledge that the tables can turn for anyone at any moment. We live outside what are considered 'sensible' bounds. This is not an aspect of the life that any actor lives with any relish. These swings between employment and unemployment are always difficult.

Jacky Bratton makes the point that offering this type of sustenance is, in part, recognition of each other as more than work associates: "Family history is

¹² Paul Moore, "Longing to Belong: Trained Actors' Attempts to Enter the Profession." PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2004.

¹³ Kerry Walker, unpublished interview with the author, 4.12.09

important in an anthropocentric understanding of self, and the theatre is an extreme example of a professional group for whom family, very broadly understood, is a central structure of feeling and practical support.”¹⁴ Bratton is referring to actors in the United Kingdom and her timeframe is historical, but there are nonetheless measures in place here and now as the very same needs arise. One example of actors’ response to the need for practical support is *The Actors Benevolent Fund*. This committee, which began in London in 1882, was set up for “distressed and decayed actors” by Henry Irving. Nowadays, in Australia, it is a special branch within the union (MEAA).¹⁵ The fund gives small amounts of financial support to actors who are experiencing difficulty. Actor Deborah Kennedy is currently a committee member: “It acknowledges that no matter how tough times get — you’re still an actor. Most of the cases are to do with older/sick actors who need financial assistance. The fund raises money to help its own profession ... frightening [unexpected or well known] people come up on the agenda. Hardship is sudden.”¹⁶ Both the difficulty and inbuilt support are part of the fabric of actors’ culture. Colleagues helping each other in this way is of course not new or exclusive to this profession; what is specific here is the recognition from within the profession that there will be times one is not (for all intent and purpose) *in it*, but the connection remains.

Defining Family

From the participants who engaged with this research, there surfaced an expected diversity of responses. Every human being on the planet has experienced a version of family, each one unique. Regardless of what that experience was, the assumption when using ‘family’ to describe a group of people is generally positive or ideal. It is a given that most people have experienced at least some of the positives and negatives not to mention extremes of dysfunction within families. We need them all. In his article “Sibling Interaction: A Neglected Aspect in Family Life Research”, Donald P Irish defines

¹⁴ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 196.

¹⁵ Media Entertainment Arts Alliance/Equity: the actors union.

¹⁶ Deborah Kennedy, unpublished interview with the author, 10.5.10.

family as "A unity of interactive personalities."¹⁷ This definition reflects a simplicity which is useful in clarifying the notion of a theatre 'Family' in this context. More importantly, it is *inclusive*. Hopefully a cast does become a 'unity' because if nothing else a cast must interact, but even as a dis-unity a cast must still maintain the required interaction necessary in order to perform.

Family in general is whoever or whatever people decide it is. Individuals' criteria are their own and not limited to who is directly connected by traditional measures of name or blood. Irene Levin and Jan Trost acknowledge that it defies a universal description:

As family scholars we know that there is no unity whatsoever in our definitions of family ... individuals can conceptualize family in their own way. Even if it is preferable as scholars, as lay-persons we do not need to agree on what is family generally or what is our own family. From outside we can never *decide* what is family for a certain person.¹⁸

Since most theatre practitioners in the current professional pool in Australia continue to employ the family metaphor freely and regularly with regard to what would otherwise be considered work colleagues, does a common understanding of this term exist? If so, what is it about these circumstances that are special, unusual? If not, then what occurs in this gap of understanding? To uncover some of the connective tissue between the myriad of experiences of family in the Australian theatre context is to reveal much about how intrinsic these relationships are to the creation of the work. The commonalities that emerge show more than a shared passion for the theatre, but a view of the world and their place in it. Our language and metaphor about anything exposes our conceptual systems, whether we are conscious of it or not: "Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like",¹⁹ as Lakoff and Johnson remind us. It follows that a 'firm' of accountants for example, do not *think* of themselves in the same way as a cast of actors do: you

¹⁷ Donald P. Irish, "Sibling Interaction: A Neglected Aspect in Family Life Research." *Social Forces* 42, no. 3 (1964): 279

¹⁸ Irene Levin and Jan Trost, "Understanding the Concept of Family." *Family Relations* 41, no. 3 (1992): 350.

¹⁹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980: 3.

would not hear a member of a firm say something like: “Once they’ve played your child, you tend to think of them as your children” as actors’ actor Peter Carroll has said in passing. In the theatre world, the family metaphor is fundamental, useful, appropriate and spectacularly problematic.

My own agency in this research oscillates between that of ‘insider’²⁰ and observer. Even during casual discussions with my colleagues on this subject, most are curious as to how other actors view the term family in this context: “What did other actors say?” A common understanding among actors does emerge in the chapters to come but that does not necessarily extend in the same way to theatre company managements and administrations who, in some cases, have adopted/appropriated the metaphor as well. In some cases, dysfunction surfaces and at times emotional distress, where stakes and losses were substantial, outside the world of the play but within the theatre family created by it.

All the interviewees are mid-career and beyond, mainstream theatre professionals. In all cases the honesty is compelling and generous, for which I am deeply grateful to each participant. The interviews took place in either my home or in that of the subjects or a suitable café. This detail becomes significant as it demonstrates that only when an actor is employed is there a regular place to carry out your work. The dressing room at the theatre becomes your work-space. Meetings and note sessions can take place there, as can interviews (with permission). When an actor is not working, these events must take place at home or frequently the space is loaned. In one case I borrowed a room at my agent’s office. Neil Armfield was eventually interviewed in the boardroom at the Belvoir office because it was more convenient for me to get there, but the first thing he suggested when we were deciding on an appropriate venue was to “come to my house tomorrow ... ?” It is revealing in terms of the place from where Neil likes to lead, and his consciousness of me first as actor perhaps less as researcher.

²⁰ See Susan Letzler Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Accidental Culture

Because the theatre is an oral tradition there exists a culture among performers of storytelling. Not only to or for the audience but to and for each other. This culture has one life in the form of a prepared version for public access — the production itself including publicity — and another, which exists in the rehearsal room and backstage, among the actors themselves. Although it may be viewed from the outside as anecdotal, it is the only way in which a cultural memory is created and history transferred among theatrical ‘generations’ of performers. It, incidentally, creates a type of social structure of its own. Actors do impersonations of each other, tell stories and anecdotes about other actors in other shows, which also places the teller (for the listener) within the theatrical field.

The passing on of these stories in the context of rehearsal and backstage accumulates over time to create deeper connections between the teller and the recipient. As the recipient becomes aware of his or her *place* in a wider context, for some, a sense of being connected to this history is engendered; there is a sense of place. This is the case in the creation of any culture; a culture of theatre is no different. Bratton views it as an essential aspect of the culture of the theatre:

The stories that these theatre people tell around their own biographies are not an assertion of their own particular importance in the world, so much as an attempt to construct a group identity, in which their individuality is seated. Thus the recounting of anecdotes, which are the building blocks of theatrical memoir and biography, may be understood not simply as the vehicle of more or less dubious or provable facts, but as a process of identity formation that extends beyond individuals to the group or community to which they belong.²¹

Bratton is talking explicitly about memoir and biography, however the point she makes can be extended to include the theatre stories and anecdotes which bounce off dressing room walls once the door is closed. If we are our stories then our metaphor makes us.

²¹ Bratton, 2003: 102

In their paper *A Practice of Faith: Actors and Rehearsal* Paul Moore and Kate Rossmanith create a fictional and hapless unemployed actor called “Peter Andrews.”²² “Peter” describes repeated unsuccessful attempts to work as a failure to belong. Rossmanith and Moore create a sense of needing some kind of permission of entry for the poor Peter who cannot get a break. Rather than acknowledging what was common between “himself” and potential colleagues he remains on his constructed outer. It is mysterious to me that I never felt the need to be granted any kind of ‘entrée’ — except perhaps what was provided by the audition process of acting school. All the same, I can clearly remember the moment I became aware that maybe I did belong to something. I was backstage at the Sydney Opera House just having come off stage after the final curtain of a show. It was a wonderful cast, a successful season, and the run felt like it was ending way too soon. I was a young actor, moping a little in the dressing room, missing the nightly routine already. Suddenly there grew a sense of foreboding — imminent unemployment; of the family so carefully constructed during rehearsal about to be dismantled with the set. What was on the other side — an abyss or the next job? A senior cast member enquired “why the glums?” — I said it just felt over too soon, we would never be together as a group again and now it was done. Whilst being hugged in consolation, I remember a whisper: “Welcome to the family...”

²² Paul Moore and Kate Rossmanith. "A Practice of Faith: Actors and Rehearsal (a Tragedy in One Act)." *Being There: Proceedings of the 2006 Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies*, <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/2509>, [accessed 31.05.2010].

Chapter One: What makes Theatre Family?

There are very specific circumstances and requirements of the work to do with being an actor that give rise to an acknowledged intensity between performers. Exploring the emotional lives of characters in rehearsal creates exchanges of trust, which are physical, emotional and psychological. There are other contributing factors including the rigours of touring, another is the fact of returning to work with the same artists on different projects in different companies — a sense of ‘return’ after a bond has been made on a previous show.

I had never given these bonds much thought as an actor, until the death of the Australian actor, writer, teacher and mentor Nick Enright. His place in Australian theatre history is well documented, and indeed special, but his death in 2003 was so deeply felt by so many in all areas of our profession that a question surged up in my mind: Where does this feeling, this familial intensity come from? I remember standing in the crowded NIDA foyer amidst a throng of artists who had converged for Nick’s memorial service. It was like the gathering of a tribe. People flew to Sydney from all over the country. Ordinarily performers and other theatre workers have a tendency to be dispersed at any given time — it is not always possible to attend such gatherings. Nick’s memorial service was held in the NIDA theatre. Inside there was a magnificent outpouring of respect and love. There were fine performances of songs he had written, very beautiful eulogies by friends and a hymn: “To be a Pilgrim”,²³ which Nick had chosen himself. When I read the words to the hymn, his aspiration struck me as great, high. Robyn Nevin and Neil Armfield gave eulogies: and both independently chose to read Sonia’s final speech from *Uncle Vanya*:

²³ John Bunyan, Hymn. 1684.

*Uncle Vanya*²⁴

Act IV

VANYA: My child, I feel such a weight on my heart ... if only you knew ... such a weight on my heart ...

SONIA: So what do we do? We've got to keep living! [pause] We shall survive, Uncle Vanya. We'll go through an endless procession of days and long nights; we'll patiently endure the blows that fate delivers; we'll work tirelessly for others both now and in our old age, and when our time comes we shall die as people die, and over there, on the other side of the curtain, we'll say that we have suffered, that we have cried, that we have felt grief, and God will take pity on us; and you and I, uncle, my darling uncle, we shall glimpse a life which is full of light and beauty and grace, and we will be glad, and we'll look back at the troubles of our life with tenderness and a smile – and we will find peace. I believe that, uncle, I believe that fervently, deeply.

[She kneels in front of him and puts her head in his hands]

We will find peace!

[Telegin plays the guitar quietly]

We will find peace! We'll hear the angels, we'll see heaven lit up with diamonds, we'll see all the evils of this earth, all our suffering, drowned in a wave of mercy that will wash the entire world, and our life will become quiet and gentle, and sweet as a mother's love. I believe that, I believe that ... [she wipes his tears with her handkerchief].

Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you're crying ... you haven't known any joy in your life, but just wait, Uncle Vanya, just wait ... we will find peace.

[She embraces him]

We will find peace!

[The WATCHMAN taps. TELEGIN plays quietly. MARIA VASSILYEVNA makes notes in the margin of her pamphlet. MARINA knits a stocking.]

We will find peace!

CURTAIN

²⁴ *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov, unpublished performance translation/adaptation text by Neil Armfield and Oleg Bytchenkov. 1992.

Story One: Uncle Nick's Vanya

I was walking up Oxford St Paddington, around midday late 2002. There was a figure about two blocks up who looked like a stooped over version of Nick. Nick who always walks quickly and purposefully, small rapid steps, always punctual, always polite. The man in the distance looked like him, but there was nothing polite about this man's struggle up the pavement. The fact that Nick had announced 'The Cancer' a few weeks back, dawned on me as I approached this man, who was indeed Nick Enright. By the time I was about a metre away, he saw me and straightened up smiled and waved. No sign of the earlier struggle as he casually leaned to the bus stop pole for support. He was on his way to the doctor. I remember we chatted about Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (of all things). How he didn't *really* feel as though he knew what it was about, never really *understood* the play. He had a better grasp of *Vanya* he thought. As we talked and he began to lean harder on the pole, I realized that 'this cancer thing' was well on its way through his body. My bus arrived.

On the way home to Bondi, I thought about the letters and notes he sent me over the years, roles he had written for me, productions and theatre companies he had encouraged me to make, dinners he had made and bought for me, I could not imagine his un-presence. I always felt with Nick he had an inflated sense of my talent and intelligence. Rather than admit the truth, I would simply continue with his encouragement, try to raise myself to meet it, often surprising no one more than myself. How do you acknowledge that? The championing. Without anticipating the leaving.

In 1999 we had performed Chekhov's *Three Sisters* together for my young, rough theatre company. He had heard I was mounting the production in the Hydra season at the Old Fitzroy Hotel; he phoned to ask if he could be considered for the role of Kuleghin. Considered? There did exist a phenomenon I called the 'Nick-Factor'. It seemed that every time I worked on a show he had anything to do with, the experience was enriching, and we did share a deep love for the work of Anton Chekhov. We performed opposite each other on that production; he as Kuleghin, me as Masha. Still on the bus trundling down Bondi road, I thought about what anyone, me for example, might want to be doing during the approach

of death? There would be comfort in action, I guessed. It seemed obvious therefore to arrange for Nick to explore the play *Uncle Vanya* without the pressure of performance. We would just read the thing, translation after adaptation, and let our bodies and brains absorb the play's treasures over time. It was presumptuous of me, I imagined he might like to be doing something like that.

By now the severity of Nick's illness was fairly common knowledge within our circles of work. Anthony Weigh (actor/writer) and I discussed over the phone how we might cast something like this. There was nothing on offer to any performers who participated but to read the play. There are so many and varied adaptations and translations of all of Chekhov's plays but in this instance, we weren't searching for anything in particular, it was just an opportunity to see if anything was illuminated by reading a few of them. Even with a workshop there exists the potential for some kind of performance — perhaps a small audience at the end. In this very special instance the criteria was completely different. Appropriateness for the roles of course but also people with whom Nick might enjoy to spend the time, because in a way, that's what we were doing, spending very precious time. The cast list was as follows:

Astrov – Geoff Morrell

Serebryakov – Peter Corbett

Yelyena – Nadine Garner and Emily Russell

Sonya - me

Marya – Kerry Walker

Uncle Vanya – Nick Enright

Teleghin – Russell Cheek

Marina - Maggie Dence

and a newcomer Anthony Sisean as Yefim, who was about to audition for NIDA.

Anthony Weigh was observer. Each time we met over the course of some months, people brought their assigned contribution (food or wine) to my home on a Sunday evening. I would make a meal. I would be shirking the truth if I do not admit to experiencing the role of Sonia at this time. Moments of

consciousness as I placed meals on the table, as I chided one for being late for dinner (it didn't really matter...), always at the ready in case Nick needed something during the reading or the meal. It felt indulgent and rare, like the piece was playing me out instead of the other way around. It was not my intention and I couldn't control it, but nor could I ignore these moments of crossed consciousness as they occurred. Safe to say that physically, I will never be emotionally trapped on a farm in Russia with my uncle — we were at my place in Bondi, just a bunch of bonded actors reading a play. But on those Sunday evenings, at around 6pm, the cast would begin to arrive, we'd gather in the kitchen, we would dish-out the main course, followed by a read of the first half of the play, talk, eat, drink wine, eat dessert, drink coffee, then the second half of the play, talk some more and somehow, alleviate the impending reality by being with it. Translation after translation. Here was a ritual and ceremony, which gathered form and meaning with each repetition. On another level, I was repeating what I had already been given by Nick — many meals as a context for fleshing out ideas, gossip, argument and encouragement.

There is ease, simplicity and matter of factness in the way Peter Brook explains the void out of which his 'Holy Theatre' grows. It is a need as obvious as hunger and so in whatever form it takes — we do it. Brook is talking about Hamburg in 1946 — “In a tiny attic fifty people crammed together while in the inches of remaining space a handful of the best actors resolutely continued to practise their art...”²⁵ There is no equivocation on the fact that the way *through* is practice:

There was nothing to discuss nothing to analyse — In Germany that winter, as in London a few years before, the theatre was responding to a hunger. Was it a hunger for the invisible, a hunger for a reality deeper than the fullest form of everyday life — or was it a hunger for the missing things of life, a hunger in fact for buffers against reality?²⁶

Aren't there churches for that kind of thing?

The first time we came together, Maggie Dence sat next to Kerry Walker, two stalwarts of Australian film, theatre and television. They began to work the room

²⁵ Peter Brook. *The Empty Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968: 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

like some Tivoli double act: as we sat down to table for the first meal, Maggie flicked out her napkin and quipped “I don’t know about any of you, but I’m here for the food”. Kerry Walker flashed back dry as a bone and with her inimitable delivery: “There’s food?!” There must have been sixty years between them in experience but this was the first time they had worked on anything together. Their job, it seemed, was to keep Nick laughing. By the end of that first reading it was clear that something ‘Holy’ in the Brook sense had occurred. There was that silence at the end, which is unmistakable. In *The Empty Space* Peter Brook describes such silences as the alternative to rapturous applause, “recognition of our common intention”.²⁷ I knew we would just keep doing this for as long as it helped.

I have to admit to hoping there was even a small chance this focus and energy might keep Nick alive a little longer. I can recall clearly his arrival one particular Sunday night: during the week; Anthony and I had secured copies of the adaptation made by Neil Armfield and Oleg Bytchenkov. It was an exceptional version (made for The Sydney Theatre Company in 1992). I opened the door to Anthony and Nick — who was leaning forward, holding up the doorway. He was in too much physical pain to stand upright — but cheerful. I began to make all sorts of contingency plans in my head as I helped him in. Simple pain management like a warm bath or a soft bed. Finally, whatever Nick decided he wanted would be the order of the evening. Although we had gathered, it might not happen tonight and that would, of course, be fine. We went on as usual. After the reading it was like the pain had been exorcised somehow, even temporarily, because Nick walked out the door upright, unaided.

He sent Kerry Walker an email: “Talk about Doctor Theatre. I was feeling wretched when I arrived last night, but reading the play in such company and in that excellent version perked me up no end. And I think Geoff is amazingly good in the role. Let’s hope it happens.” This version of the play we repeated for a number of readings until finally Nick asked if we were going to keep reading these readings or “mount the thing”. Everyone looked at each other but no one

²⁷ Brook, 1968: 52.

was brave enough to say the obvious. No real discussions were had then and there, but everyone agreed to go away and think about it. Everyone did.

We had about three initial production meetings. Nick and I had a photo session as Sonia and Vanya, after which we had what turned out to be our final meal together at an Indian restaurant in Newtown. Some commitments of cash and a possible pre-production team were agreed. About three weeks later Nick died in May 2003.

The day before he died at Prince of Wales Hospital, Anthony Weigh and I were sitting with him in his room; it seemed now was the time to say something, but I could not get my mouth to open. There weren't words and this was it. Anthony told him we would go forward with the production, even though I knew then and there I couldn't. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him, how grateful I was how much I would miss him, but all my energy went into not falling into a pathetic heap. I had no words. He made a joke about having bought up all the good fabric so whoever played Vanya would be stuck with crap costumes anyway. When we left the room we knew that was the last time. I walked around the corner and let go into a snotty mess; Ant waited whilst I pulled myself together then we drifted down the hospital corridor and straight into (actor/director) Rhys McConnochie. Rhys looked straight into my eyes and knew there was nothing to be said or done.

It wasn't until Nick's memorial when both Neil Armfield and Robyn Nevin ended their eulogies with Sonia's last speech, that it dawned on me, I had been making goodbyes, translation after adaptation. I had made promises of peace and rest and love every time we read the play. In hindsight, nothing could be more obvious. The simplicity of getting on with what it is that we do, allowed a small group of us to offer presence.

This creation of a de facto family grew out of the need to ritualise the approach of the death of an elder. None of the Chekhovian overtones of familial dysfunction were intended, but of course they were all there including the idea of the Sunday dinner. At the same time the familiarity of the quotidian and the sense that we were engaging in something very ancient created this ritual. Peter

Brook notes again in *The Empty Space*, “This theatre is Holy because its purpose is Holy; it has a clearly defined place in community and it responds to a need the church can no longer fill.”²⁸ There is no question that theatre in this sense, gives form to what is truthful, unbearable, intolerable, inevitable.

As an actor, teacher and writer Nick Enright was of deep significance to the theatre community of which he was a part. The interviews that follow are with actors with whom Nick worked and considered part of his wider family. Their views on theatre families differ in the degree to which that family is an apt metaphor but interestingly, regardless of these differences, the common factor is how the language of family still serves to clarify their views. It is acknowledged that the intensity of the rehearsal relationships need to decrease over one’s time as a professional, but the language of family remains and in one case extends into in-laws. In his very first observation, Glenn Hazeldine reveals the origin of the initial intensity.

Interview with actor Glenn Hazeldine

“The requirement is to feel safe in order to do the work”. He describes the metaphor of family in the theatre as potent. “It’s not like working in a bank. It’s emotionally raw”. By his own retrospective reckoning, his first difficult lesson as a professional after graduating from NIDA was that the family only exists while you’re a part of it, whilst the show is on, but that this is never spoken. His first professional engagement after leaving NIDA was in the Sydney Theatre Company production of *Dead White Males*²⁹ by David Williamson. In his assessment, the notion of family that developed during the tour “created a trusting” which eventually caused some distress at the end of the season. Although he was invited by one of the senior female members of the cast to “think of me as your mother” the intensity of the relationship existed “only within the context of the job”. He says he is more recently aware of “an agenda of this surrogate family”: “It’s a rite of passage in becoming a professional, this deep-seated need to belong”. He considers it personal emotional growth to be able to engage in a *less*

²⁸ Brook, 1968: 67.

²⁹ *Dead White Males* by David Williamson, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Wayne Harrison, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, 1995. The show was a major box office success, and toured nationally.

familial way with each rehearsal process. If not, over time, “How can I maintain these relationships? It’s impossible because they become more and more with every job. There is a pressure ...”

At the same time for Glenn, Nick Enright was at the very heart of his “theatre family”, his father figure. Glenn rented a room in Nick’s Chalder Street house “Budgerywoi” in Newtown, when he graduated from NIDA. He lived there for the following five years. Glenn was the first “eye and ear” over the plays as Nick wrote during that time. Since Nick’s death, Glenn says regarding anything of weight in his life, his first question is always “What would Nick think?” At the same time he is clear about the moment when the relationship changed forever: “I stood up to him for the first time ... then I had to leave”. Perhaps he released his mentor, but the sense of emotional intimacy never went. In Glenn’s opinion the overriding theme of all of Nick’s plays is family trying to come to terms with dysfunction: “In many of the plays it involves some miraculous energy to bring people back together.”

Glenn describes the grief after Nick’s death as much stronger than when his own father died. He says that for a year or so, he avoided people who were close to Nick and couldn’t accept the death: “I finally read a hardcover edition of *Cloudstreet* he had given me. For some reason I’d never noticed what Nick wrote in the sleeve of the book. The inscription was like a message from the dead, like an antidote to the grief. It dispelled any fear I had that I may have lost Nick’s regard.”

Glenn describes Nick’s legacy as having “changed the way this generation work[s] together”. He brought our attention to each other as artists, who will be capable of greater things if we take care of each other as human beings. Nick’s influence on many, many professional actors as a result of his contact with training institutions has been immense.

Vanessa Downing also acknowledges Nick as teacher whilst working with him at the South Australian State Theatre Company. She makes a clear separation between her own family and the theatre family. One is not an extension of the

other but here again, the language around it persists. She also recognizes the different intensity in rehearsal as compared to other work she does as a lawyer.

Interview with actor Vanessa Downing

“With Nick [Enright] I was more a part of his family — in spite of theatre. It began as a teacher relationship. He was associate director of the South Australian Theatre Company. He was great at solving acting problems, finding clarity”. Although Vanessa views the raw notion of family in the theatre differently from Glenn, her concession is that it may be more like “in-laws” (and so the metaphor extends): “I view it more as a social life, I don’t identify it as family. It’s separate from my own family but there is a crossover — like in-laws! I’ve become involved with people by association. We get to know each other’s parents. You meet them when they come to plays then at social gatherings. I know a lot of people’s parents. I make a point of meeting people’s parents; it reveals the person more. It’s a revelation of personality so parents are a big indicator of your own or in spite of. The “family” meets the family. If you’ve ever worked with Neil Armfield — you will have met [his parents] Len and Nita. I met Colin Friel’s mum [during the production of *Macbeth*³⁰] but you know when the play is over you’ll never see them again. There are also ‘family’ who you don’t want to work with — you don’t want to be negative about their work. [It is] subjective by nature. You turn a blind eye to performance shortcomings.”

Sometime after our initial interview, Vanessa relates by email to me that Nita Armfield had since passed away: “I was really upset that no one told me and I missed her funeral which I would definitely have attended. I found out the morning of the funeral and couldn’t find out where it was because all our friends had already left to attend it. So I suppose that’s an example of the “family” having slipped up!!”

Theatre family extends into actual family as a matter of course. Cast members’ families will usually come to a performance and it is not unusual for them to be introduced to the cast backstage or in dressing rooms. It is considered a

³⁰ *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, Sydney Theatre Company, directed Ian Judge, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, 1999.

backstage courtesy (if possible) to greet family members if they come backstage. If a show is on tour, depending on where it goes — it is possible to meet everyone's (actual) family. As Vanessa notes: "Touring is a big influence [on a relationship]. On *Influence*³¹ four of the cast had offspring — they [the children] were all backstage playing. That tour was over a long period of time from March until August — you're living in another city — you do things you wouldn't do at home. Glenn Hazeldine took the children out." This is an excellent example of how the families sometimes extend and then, for a period of time, integrate. Touring brings with it another kind of intensity, brought about by not only working together everyday, but sharing meals and downtime, coupled with the separation from one's own regular life outside the theatre.

"At a day job [non acting work] you tend to keep people at a distance. There is no real commitment; the theatre is more intense. When you come back to old relationships [in theatre] when you re-meet it's a bit of a starting point. History. I love working with Hugo [Weaving] it's always the best working experience. We've worked together three times now but we're not close." Vanessa is referring to the history that may be created show by show over years but not carried over into our actual lives. The relationship exists deeply over the course of the project and is then gone. These are the intense families to which Michael Gurr refers in the introduction.

Vanessa brings up another variable which is essential over the run of a play especially when it includes a long tour: "Relationships can be made or broken by the stage manager — because your dressing room partner becomes important." It is almost impossible to work as an actor and keep your colleagues at a distance as Vanessa noted above. As also stated by Glenn, some kind of connection is a requirement of the work. It is not impossible to perform without it but it does make the 'ease' much more difficult to come by. Dressing rooms are intimate spaces where costumes are changed, make-up applied and preparations to go on stage are made. These personal preparations may be anything ranging from silent meditations to repetitive loud vocal exercises. Stage-managers give much

³¹ *Influence* by David Williamson, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Bruce Myles, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, 2005.

consideration to these placements; the right one may lead to life-long friendships, whilst the wrong one has the potential to undo a show. Sometimes a tour will involve moving combinations of people around to ensure difficulties do not arise over long periods of touring. The constant becomes the show.

At the end of this long loop is the return home. For some actors, a tour also means sub-letting your home, frequently to another actor. Actors network and will often source accommodation for each other; 'someone' is always on tour or working with a theatre company interstate. Should a tour and an interstate job come up in the same year, an actor could be away from home for around eight months of that year. Personal effects may have been packed away for long periods; mail redirected and business is waiting to be dealt with on return. Sub-letting also means that should a few days become available, returning home is no longer an option. Even if an actor decides not to do touring work (it may be extremely difficult with children of school age for example), the expectation of moving around for work periods is a given for an actor, from company to company, or city to city. Where the idea of 'settling down' comes for most people at a certain time with most occupations, as an actor for hire at any level, the nexus of family and home are broken and reformed continuously. After the intensity of the tour there is a period of adjustment. That is true of any show, as Vanessa observes: "There is a certain amount of attrition after a show is over — it doesn't continue by circumstance. It's a sad thing. Some [connections] continue, some don't." Even if the show has been an exhausting or difficult experience, on arrival home there is always a sense of having left something. This may be alleviated by... the next play.

Interview with actor Robert Alexander

Robert's opinion on the intensity of process is interesting in terms of years in the business. Where Glenn identifies this feeling lessening as he develops toward becoming a more seasoned professional Robert, twenty years his senior, agrees but identifies a sadness at the end of a good show even so: "When I did *As You Like It*³² Kerry [Walker] played Audrey, I remember standing on the stage as they

³² *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, Jane St. Theatre, directed by Aubrey Mellor, 1978.

were tearing it [the set] down feeling distressed. The product is made by joint collaboration. We had Aubrey [Mellor] at the helm — maybe it's because it is a play about love, maybe it wouldn't be the same with *Macbeth*. It depends on the part as well. A beautiful successful experience when it clicks. I also don't find it as painful to leave now — it's just the way of the world. I have to say though, it was sad to say goodbye to *Hamlet*.”³³ So even though Robert describes the end of a season as “the way of the world” there will always be particular shows where the emotional cost is felt more deeply. The intensity may vary but attrition of some kind is usually present at the end of a run. Dan Spielman puts it another way to James Waites when discussing the difficulties experienced when performing in ongoing, back to back, seasons of plays: “No time to grieve.”³⁴ I am not suggesting a profound painful loss, but a sadness nonetheless as those relationships go back to the ether.

Robert: “There is a ‘family’ for every single play or company. The STC Company is different from the Bell Shakespeare touring company. On tour, people literally look after each other. It doesn't depend on the play, but take *Away*;³⁵ we'd go out as a family — Steven Vidler ‘my son’, Michelle Fawdon ‘my wife’. In the second production we had a new mum (Anna Volska) and *we* didn't. People seem to apply their own family situation to it.”

The creation of cast families in a touring situation is by no means an expectation — but it occurs frequently as a result of the ongoing job requirements as also noted by Vanessa Downing. There may be long road trips for example, up to ten hours in some cases. A kind of intimacy forms after a sheer matter of time. This time spent may begin to inform the depth of the stage relationship: “There is a certain degree of intimacy of discussion that includes stage managers and dressers — it's not a job. In *Hamlet* the kind of friendship between Leon Ford and me informed the relationship between Hamlet and Polonius [their respective characters]. There was an amusement between us, an understanding, banter — a true affection. Is the converse true? I wouldn't let it [be]. The duty is

³³ *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, Bell Shakespeare, directed by John Bell, 2003.

³⁴ James Waites, *Platform Papers: Whatever Happened to the STC Actors Company*. Sydney: Currency House, 2010: 30.

³⁵ *Away* by Michael Gow, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Richard Wherrett, Drama Theatre, Opera House, 1987.

to the audience and playwright. The last duty is to yourself as an actor. You owe your fellow actors. It's special when it happens. Affection is more usual — that's why I do it. When we were on tour I lost my favorite aunt. The comfort from the cast was beautiful. We all do it for each other. I do love making that family." It is very easy for Robert to give example after example of experiences he would call "family" in theatre: "In *Three Sisters*³⁶ I had a heart scare and was driven by Nick Eadie [lead actor in that show] to the hospital. The show was cancelled. I was in the ward for 3 weeks and everyone in the cast visited."

Robert performed in three plays that Nick Enright directed at the South Australian State Theatre Company: "If you were an actor, you were family. Acting is how my association with Nick started. I carry in my make up kit a card Nick wrote for me after *Hamlet*. The last one. With Nick, there were greater things on the way. He always wanted to write about his father. Sketches were done ... He [Nick] had a greater courage and spontaneous kindness." Suddenly Robert asks the date ... "It's his birthday on the 22nd [of this month]".

I ask Robert what, if any, was Nick's legacy? Robert answers simply. "Love. I don't think there is a person who knew Nick who didn't experience his love. The sense of family existed with Nick. His plays are about family. Family. Every time he wrote it was about family in different circumstances, searching for connection and roots." Robert refers back to *Away*:

"In the opening of Act 2 in *Away* Harry tells the other father about his dying son, the effect on the audience is extraordinary. They collectively hold their breath. There you are. You are a family. The 'family' extends to the audience doesn't it? If the actors and the text are connected then the success of the production depends on it. I think the self-absorbed actor can make it less potent." From the point of view of the actor performing, each night, the audience is an essential element of the creation of this communion. Whatever the pervading sensibility is of a particular house, [the audience] co-creates the experience of the performance for that particular night. Without exception. Over the course of a performance an actor 'gets to know' each house, which is a technical requirement in that, in order

³⁶ *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Richard Wherrett, Drama Theatre, Opera House, 1990.

to time (with any delicacy) the delivery of text an actor needs to be able to sense the building and falling of responses from an audience in the moment that it is happening. Actors will frequently listen to an audience's responses to certain moments in the wings of the stage before they make their first entrance (or listen intently over the dressing room speakers). This is to take the temperature of the house. The actors are listening and sometimes watching for what the audience collectively find amusing, how they are responding to certain aspects of the world of this piece so far. Each night is a new house, so some tiny decisions which were well served in the previous night's performance may not be appropriate for another. The differences may be as subtle as an intake of breath at a particular moment. In this way the audience becomes a part of the organism simply by turning up on a given night.

Research begun in 1986 by Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux supports this unseen exchange between actor and audience: "Recordings made inside the auditorium during performances enabled us to explore the way the audience modulates the performance. This occurs in a three fold manner involving rhythm, tone, and the dramatic intensity of the scene."³⁷ This is in no way to suggest that an actor's performance will be 'led' by an audience response, but this research acknowledges the nightly exchange that occurs:

The sound archives reveal the absolute uniqueness of each performance – an essential phenomenon that is not perceived unless one attends multiple performances of the same show. As pointed out by McAuley (247) actors are aware of this but their experience is rarely talked about.³⁸

The significant discovery in this context however is the suggestion by Mervant-Roux that her research saw: "the formation, for each performance, of an ephemeral community ..."³⁹

This ephemeral community is made up of audience and company and lasts the length of a performance. The journey of the relationship is the life of the play and

³⁷ Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux, "The Great Resonator: What Historical Anthropology and an Ethnographic Approach to the Auditorium Can Tell Us About Audiences." *About Performance* 10, July (2010): 226.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

the farewell to this never-to-be-replicated community is ritualized by the exchange of applause. Frequently in Europe, the tradition is for the cast to clap back to the audience in recognition of this exchange. It may seem odd to an outsider, but actors will *always* have applause at a funeral or memorial. It is a way to acknowledge and say goodbye.

Robert reiterates the idea that within the culture of acting there are particular ways of saying final good-byes to each other. These memorials always involve celebration and performance as a way of honouring the life of a fellow practitioner. The events are usually held in theatres and performers come together: “Go to an actor’s funeral! They are extraordinary experiences. Thousands spilling out of doors; spontaneous applause ... It’s a large family, a perfect demonstration of the love. Richard Wherrett’s⁴⁰ funeral was reviewed as a great night at the theatre!”

Robert gives me a full script for Richard’s funeral. It is a thirty-seven page document written by actor/writer/director Tony Sheldon. Every actor who had ever worked with Richard was cast by name, to read a chronological anecdotal journey through the life of Richard (as Richard). The setting of the play was Richard in heaven directing his life punctuated by scenes and songs from 16 productions, with the actors who performed in them at the time. It is also a wealth of Australian theatre history from about 1960-1990. It was held at the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House:

Drew Forsyth impersonated Richard Wherrett in heaven, organizing a production:

ACT I⁴¹

Ethereal music. Drew Forsyth as Richard is discovered writing in his diary.

DREW: Sunday, April 7th. Another heavenly day. It’s always a heavenly day. Every day is perfect. Nothing but happiness. Happiness, happiness, happiness. Of course I’d be even happier if heaven didn’t quite so much look like the stage of the [Opera House] Drama Theatre. Imagine being

⁴⁰ Richard Wherrett (1940-2001) was the first Artistic Director of the Sydney Theatre Company

⁴¹ Unpublished script for the memorial of Richard Wherrett.

an angel with no wing space and nowhere to fly. That's my idea of hell. But otherwise, everything turned out rather well. I directed my own funeral, which did turn away business. I even got a standing ovation as I left the church. And, since I arrived up here — It's been an endless round of meetings. I bumped into Sir Robert Helpmann: He's looking more like Tyler Coppin everyday! He thinks we should do a project together, so we're going ahead with that arena version of *Hair*. It seems silly to waste all that pre production and we won't have to pay Harry [M. Miller, producer] his percentage! Gordon Chater is finally ready to play Falstaff for me. Johnny Hargreaves thinks it will be camp to do *You Can't Take It With You* — because it turns out we can!

And God wants me to direct *Gypsy* — apparently his favourite musical. Geraldine Turner will be furious — but Ethel Merman's his girlfriend and she hasn't worked in 35 years."

Although this particular case is the celebration and remembrance of a particular theatre director, actors are practised at the creation of ritual and their response to this death as a group, is organized, practical and irreverent. It demonstrates well the process by which this tribe absorbs, makes sense of and inhabits the unsayable. The bonds have been rehearsed and performed and so they embed ... somewhere. Events such as funerals and crises confirm this notion for what it is: another type of family. That is also what I was observing in the NIDA theatre foyer the day of Nick's funeral.

Chapter Two: It's Personal - Functioning Dysfunction

It works when it's working. The underside of a sense of family, that is the stresses, the difficulties and the disjunctures are bound to find the surface as a natural part of this dynamic. There are those who imagine that the best work in rehearsal comes only from conflict; that conflict is actually part of the cost of making good work. Every actor knows from experience that this is only occasionally true. When an idea is truly good it will stand up to rigour and becomes suddenly obvious to all. A rehearsal room without working respect between the cast stops being creative and starts to become dysfunctional. Even if that happens; then the expectation of any professional company is to put personal difficulty aside and keep rehearsing and performing. There is no particular protocol for when a working relationship becomes irreconcilable; actors just keep to their work. Finding the truth of a scene can be challenging and elusive. The theatre is not a place for the faint-hearted; you have to work with everything you have or not at all. The family metaphor stays apt, perhaps even more so under strain. It is extremely rare for an actor leave a company; everyone does their utmost to maintain a version of unity no matter how tenuous, until the end of the run.

Story Two: "Happiness is having a large close-knit family. In another city!"⁴²

It is 1999, St Stevens Church hall Newtown. Rehearsal for Chekhov's *Three Sisters* to be performed at The Old Fitzroy as part of the Theatre Hydra season is underway. We've just had the mid-morning break and most of the large cast is hanging around with coffee cups chatting quietly. We move on to Act III. The scene is between Masha (me) and Vershinin (Sean O'Shea). Present are the director, stage manager, a few lingering cast members. This rehearsal process in

⁴² George Burns, American comedian, www.quotationsbook.com/author/1165/. 28.6.10

particular was a very collaborative one. We worked together or with whoever was available on solving most scenes. When out of the blue:

Nick Enright: (actor playing Kuleghin) Do you think they've [Masha and Vershinin] had sex before this scene?

In the text this point is not stated although it is inferred that the couple are together. Chekhov does not say exactly what they are doing. I find it interesting to observe what position a company may imply on this issue when they perform the play. In the search to create a performance that is specific rather than generalized, the two actors concerned and the director may want to clarify and isolate the merits of both possibilities and then decide which would service this version of the production. Sean's position was firmly in the positive, whilst mine was more ambivalent. We both believed our readings of the text were supported by it. Although these are probably not the exact words spoken at the time, we agreed in hindsight that there was a lot of swearing. I suggest the nub of the rub here:

Sean O'Shea: Well of course they have.

(pause)

Camilla Ah Kin: ... it's not anywhere in the text and I kind of like the idea that they haven't ... so there's no sense of release about either of them ...

S : What do you mean they haven't had sex by *now*? They were out rooting about three scenes ago. [laughter from observers]

C : If any of these characters were capable of acting with an instinct as basic as that, they'd all be free... there'd be no play.

S: Have you read the play?

C: (*Quiet fury*) What the fuck do you suppose "Moscow, Moscow, Moscow" is *about* Sean? It's a hell of a town I suppose.

S: It's implicit Camilla

C: What *is* it that's implicit Sean? The fact that it's an *abstract* is implicit...

S: Well you can't 'play' an abstract ...

C: Exactly. We haven't had sex.

S: Fuck you.

C: Fuck you.

One by one other cast members, including Nick, decide this is a good time to have a cigarette, or go to the loo, or better, grab a coffee in the kitchen where you can still see and hear at a distance. This argument had not been building; in the moment it is not about anything else except a reading of the text. In the same moment we realized that we were coming to this play and these characters from completely different places. The argument became so fraught it seemed the director did not know what to do. Clearly it was something she felt she could not penetrate. She stayed in the room but didn't speak, probably just to make sure we didn't kill each other. In the end even the stage manager left. We were on our own.

Looking back, I'm sure old Nick was being deliberately incendiary but it was the exact moment for this question in the discovery of the play. After a further twenty minutes or so of argument — I took myself out of the room where in the words of Anna Volska “the giving had stopped”.⁴³ I skulked around the corner to a nearby park and walked. What would happen if we couldn't resolve this? My position in this instance was informed by the fact that I was also a co-producer of the show. I had co-conceived not only the production but also the season of plays in which it would appear. I had cast the play and chosen this particular adaptation with the director. I was personally responsible for a group of professionals working as professionals but not being paid. I felt a great weight for the donation of their time and expertise. The long view was to be able to survive as a company long enough to attract funding (I now find the notion of arts funding in Australia being something that could be “attracted” painfully naïve!). For me there was a lot at stake. Of course none of these things is at stake in this moment — but they all are.

⁴³ Anna Volska, unpublished interview with the author. 20.4.10

I felt my view of the play (this world) was being patronized and misunderstood by one of my most trusted and closest working associates. I on the other hand clutched my truth so tightly that I strangled it.

How would it be possible to bring these opposing views into something workable, which is: performable? It was about week two of rehearsal, so we still had the rest of rehearsal (another four weeks in this instance) and a whole season to do. The intense atmosphere of a rehearsal room, by its nature, does not offer much opportunity to “cool down” or decompress in the ways that more traditional workplaces may offer. The opening night deadline is rarely shifted. From that point on for both of us, everything we did in rehearsal was a fact-finding mission. Occasionally we would approach each other with new evidence to help the other come to terms with the ‘obvious’ understanding of the play. We aggravated each other to the point of being unable to speak to each other outside the text. Given that most of the text between Vershinin and Masha is love-making in one form or another (...at least I think we agreed on that), I had to compartmentalize in that he (my friend and colleague) had to become only the words that Vershinin was saying. We went on to perform the production, both playing our own truths every night, which were nothing to do with the truth of the other. Through the text alone we played passionate scenes feeling somewhere deep down that this fundamental disagreement must be affecting the coherence of the production, although we never discussed the difficulties we had with anyone, least of all appreciative audience members. It seems from their responses that no cracks showed. It appeared that our differences did not interfere with the play in the performance. More to the point, there was never a question of *not* going on. A complicity of some description will be found even if it is not an agreement.

Dealing with this type of dysfunction in the theatre is entirely different from a film set. Where a number of times in one day one may manifest the necessary emotions, when the take is achieved the scene is over. It is never (or rarely) revisited. In the theatre, night after night for weeks, the only contact we had was intimate, through the text, whilst remaining disconnected from each other off stage. On one level of course it is not desirable or creative, and on another it was

necessary in order to perform our commitment. Any performance is contingent on an actor's (in this case mine) ability to work/play as though nothing is at stake — even when very much always is.

The history of my relationship with Sean up to this point is relevant in that it is long. We treated each other with the familiarity of siblings rather than the mutual respect of colleagues. We met doing our first acting classes together 15 years before. We were then accepted into WAAPA in the same year. We spent three years at acting school and collected our first paypackets together from the WA State Theatre Company for a production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Soon after we worked together again with Bell Shakespeare. To make matters altogether worse my mother made an insightful observation at the time: “You two always fight when you work together...”. Sensing my incredulity (in the pause, over the phone) she proceeded to rattle off a list of previous locking of horns between Sean and me over the years. I had forgotten every single time. To be frank, it feels like family to me, the underlying trust stretched to its limit. Rightly or wrongly — we reached a point where we had discarded any notion of being polite or filtering our responses. The fact that we were friends was a given and now we had a play to do, we had a common truth to create. To attack the work with the same rigour (for which we respect each other still) I viewed as part of the creative process. This instance was different because for the first time, by the end of the performance run, we came dangerously close to losing the friendship. Neither of us knew whether we could reclaim our friendship after that. It took some time and we have. It is over ten years ago now and we have both acknowledged what we learned from that difficulty. Should the prospect of working together come about again, everything would be very different.

Part of the maturation process of an artist must be balancing the emotional distance from work that one must, at *the same time*, be intensely emotionally involved with. Identifying this emotional nook comes with practice; both Robert and Glenn make reference to this awareness as a maturing state of the artist. Performers must be able to not simply feel, but express, the intimacy required regardless of the actual circumstances. That is when a character lives and breathes for him/herself over the course of the play. It has nothing to do with me

the actor. This requires skill at being not just an actor but at being a human being. And so it is that in a professional life as an actor, the requirement seems to be to make very specific, personal emotional applications, at the same time as making none at all. The emotional lines here are very, very fine between ‘this is just a job’ and the stakes being explored in the scene — sometimes life and death. It goes back to feeling “safe in order to do the work” (Glenn Hazeldine). Whilst it is hoped that a sense of ‘family’ in the rehearsal room may bring with it the required mutual trust, the sense of ‘family’ may also bring the opposite of what it is trying to achieve. The other side of family: the darker side, the sibling rivalry, the feuding and breaking away.

Remember, nowadays almost every civilized person, even the most healthy, nowhere feels more irritation than when he is at home with his own family, because the difference between past and present is felt most of all within the family.⁴⁴

Chekhov acknowledges in a letter to Meyerhold that ‘home’, meaning the family, is for most people (every civilized person, even the most healthy) the greatest source of tension and disharmony. In his book *Born to Rebel* Frank J. Sulloway goes even further; he suggests birth order as the original source of fundamental differences between siblings and “as the great forge of individual tendencies toward revolution and counterrevolution, the family is one of the foremost engines of historical change.”⁴⁵ This is an argument for the potential in the ‘family’ environment to be in equal parts creative and/or destructive; either way the dynamic between siblings may be a hot bed.

On a much bigger scale, the life and times of the Nimrod as a company and the evolution of the venue into Belvoir St. Theatre, demonstrates the essential nature of revolution and evolution, which reflects (painfully) a natural dynamic of a theatre family. There is often more at stake than the job itself and typically, everyone involved has given heart and soul to be there. In his description of the final Nimrod joint meeting, which sees the termination of Ken Horler’s position

⁴⁴ Anton Chekhov quoted in J Benedetti (ed. and trans.), *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*. London: Methuen Drama, 1991: 56

⁴⁵ Frank Sulloway, *Born To Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997: xviii.

from the artistic directorate of Nimrod in 1979, Julian Meyrick is unequivocal about the *nature* of the shift. It is personal:

There is no question of not being personal here. Personal feelings are the essence of the situation. It reaches a culmination in Ken Horler's attack on Iles for betraying the trust that he and his wife showed him, [...]Lilian then reminds Bell (though appallingly the staff try to shout her down) that years ago she posed as Anna Volska's sister when they were buying their Surry Hills home ... A personal bond symbolizing the commitment of the company in general was broken.⁴⁶

What is significant in this context is less the particular personalities involved than the lengths a tribe of theatre-makers go to support each other in work that may not be supporting them, in this case young Nimrod. Above is a description, which illustrates both the intensity and closeness of those relationships at that time. To pose as 'sisters' for the purpose of a bank loan (which for jobbing actors are notoriously difficult to secure) gives a sense of risk and support overflowing into life. It fuels the sense betrayal at the moment of separation. In theory, to keep a professional distance from the work is essential, making those divisions and compartmentalizing the personal. That is where a sturdy administration can come into its own.

The stakes are still as high as ever they were and actual resources for professionals as thin as they were in the 1970s. It is interesting to me now, that during the time of my own work with Theatre Hydra in the early days of The Old Fitzroy Hotel,⁴⁷ Ken and Lilian Horler were supporters. They made cheque donations to our company and attended every production. I was always touched by their support and it has only been the result of this research that I became aware of what they may have viewed as our associated history. I wondered how they could bear to sit on the bad seating with no air-conditioning and the occasional rat downstairs at the Old Fitzroy Hotel. But they had already done it, they wanted us to succeed; another family by association.

⁴⁶ Julian Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2002: 144-145.

⁴⁷ The Old Fitzroy Hotel is a small Sydney theatre space in the basement of a pub.

When Nimrod later made the transition into Belvoir St, Kerry Walker was among the actors who were working there. Her view on the family metaphor has a few different streams. She identifies strongly as an actor with a sense of family.

Interview with actor Kerry Walker

Kerry has witnessed the transition in Australian theatre from places created for actors to make work, into complex arts bureaucracies, but actors will keep returning to the original simplicity again and again despite the corporatization of their work, because in essence, if one is drawn to the theatre at all, one is drawn to that — the coming together.

Another structure of which Kerry was a part and longtime board member was the creation of Company B after Nimrod at Belvoir St:

“I have a strong sense of family with actors I’ve worked with time and time again. The feeling is I tend not to lose touch with people I do keep up the contact. It’s highly likely I will work again with these actors, I do keep up the connection. I put in the effort. Even if I didn’t — there is still a sense of connection. I’m still in touch with people from productions in 1972. The nature of the business forms close relationships quickly. Every night you have to grapple with the play. One of the things that bonds you are bad crits! Also a difficult cast member. You collectively work out strategies with dysfunctional members. As a company of actors you are a family, you’re living in each other’s pockets. Especially on tour ... you’re stuck with them — the acting family for maybe three months.”

Kerry’s opinion reconfirms the established concept of the requirement of some kind of bond to sustain the work. However weathering negative critiques is another variable she lists along with the old ‘mad-uncle’. Every family has one and sometimes so does a cast.

I ask if Kerry experienced a sense of family from the generation of actors before hers: “A generation in the theatre can be five years! I was the first generation that felt I didn’t have to go overseas. John Bell, Ron Haddrick, all went overseas; that is, London. I went to NIDA in 1972. Whitlam had just got in. It was exciting to be here. Australian nationalism increased. I didn’t get a sense of family from

the generation above. It was radically different. I went straight to Nimrod.” The inference Kerry makes is that by the time she graduated from NIDA there were actually theatres to work at in Sydney that were considered legitimate professionally: those eventually created by the Horlers, John Bell, Richard Wherrett *et al* on their return to Australia. This particular ‘theatre family’ also spawned two more major institutions in Bell Shakespeare and the STC. The importance of the tiny ‘Stables’ as a starting point cannot be overstated. Prior to this time performers felt they needed to go to London to pursue opportunity. After Nimrod, Kerry was cast as a member of an ensemble company in Adelaide, which also included Jon Wood, Geoffrey Rush and Melita Jurisic.

Lighthouse was the ensemble company Jim Sharman created for the South Australian State Theatre Company of which Kerry was also a member. I first learnt of the details of its existence and history in our breaks in our dressing room during the run of a show. The stories of this time flowed and even then, I was conscious of a kind of theatrical oral history being passed on. The fact that it was just the two of us in the dressing room, night after night, imbued the place of the telling with an intimacy as well; they were theatre anecdotes, of course, but it made me aware of place, of what came before: “Jim created an ensemble of thirteen actors, at the end of the first year two actors left. It went for two years because after that we would have started repeating ourselves so that’s all Jim wanted. Performing shows in rep for twelve months was very physically demanding. I felt a sense of achievement by the end, but Jim was right not to go on. The audience wants variety.⁴⁸ Generally it was a happy group. If there was tension it was so minor. My memory of it is as harmonious. People were chronically tired and that can surface.”

Even though *Lighthouse* days are remembered as harmonious, Kerry is of the opinion that when disharmony occurs to the point of dysfunction that it hold the play to ransom: “After thirty five years there is only a list of about ten actors I’d never work with again. It’s when their work and mine are affected by their neuroses. Destructive behaviour, where the work couldn’t happen, but it’s

⁴⁸This point was observed more recently in research by James Waites with regard to the STC Actors Company: James Waites, *Platform Papers: Whatever Happened to the STC Actors Company*. Sydney: Currency House, 2010: 49

mostly the opposite, thousands of actors I've worked with are great. Jealousy in this business is a stupid, stupid emotion. Everyone has their own uniqueness to bring to a role." Contrary to popular belief, even though competition for work is high, most artists don't consider themselves in competition against one another. There is a knowledge of the director's process and respect paid to their decision. Where casting is concerned we are all apples and oranges. For the most part career actors are aware of a cycle of work and, as stated in the introduction, find ways toward absorbing these shifts, with varying degrees of success.

Kerry asserts as quoted above: "Nobody understands an actor better than another actor. No one can teach you how to survive the life because you face constant rejection [you get] one job in ten. You have to be psychologically capable to cope with this rejection. People who choose this way of life have to be tough and secure. That's why there is a huge attrition rate. After around seven years it can be the most soul-destroying profession. I've recently been buying DVDs, Australian films, all these names and faces from 20 – 30 years ago. They were so good ... what happened? My year at NIDA had sixteen now three of us are doing it."⁴⁹ The attrition rate is about the same for my own acting school year a generation later, but there are many more private institutions offering three year full-time acting courses. There are fewer paying theatre companies active in Sydney now than when I graduated in 1989.

"The industry only functions because employers are able to draw on an enormous pool of actors who are unemployed. Actors' risk enables others in bureaucracy." The point that Kerry makes here is manifest in the current Independent theatre scene. At the moment in Sydney, the Griffin Theatre Company, Belvoir St ("Downstairs" performers are excluded from the famous parity pay of Upstairs – which is also coming to a close) The Seymour Centre (Downstairs), The Darlinghurst Theatre and The Old Fitzroy Theatre all present seasons of plays where professional actors work unpaid whilst theatre company staff are paid; there is nothing so much as a wage for any of the artists. This has become known as the 'Independent Theatre Scene'. Kerry makes an important wider point which is; should the independent theatre scene disappear, the host

⁴⁹ Kerry Walker, the quote used partially in the introduction is repeated in its full context here.

company's venues would be what is known in the theatre as 'dark' because at present these venues are unable to attract enough funding of any kind, to pay actors. In fact so far down the list of priorities are professional actors that in the case of two of these theatre companies, their buildings will be (and have been) fully renovated and professional actors are still unpaid. And so in Sydney, frequently, professional actors continue to create a professional and vibrant landscape of theatre in which they remain unwaged. It must be noted however that Company B have announced in a recent media release⁵⁰ their intention to pay all artists who work in the Downstairs theatre from 2011. The Resident Director will be Simon Stone. At this point it is still unclear what this will mean for the Independent companies who present work there now. The question of actors' wages is usually closely linked with the question of subsidy.

Without any government subsidy, John Bell went on after Nimrod to found the Bell Shakespeare Company in 1990. The financial backing to start the company was provided by a private benefactor. The continuance of this private support for twenty years has ensured the survival of the company over which time it was slowly able to find its form and make a significant contribution to Australian theatre.

Interview with actor Christopher Stollery

Christopher is a graduate of NIDA who was accepted straight from school in the early 1980s. From 1993 he was a continuous member of the Bell Shakespeare Company and later Artistic Associate with the company until 2007. After Chris had been working solidly with BSC for just over ten years, he wanted to assess how the company was functioning artistically and review his part in it. This kind of 'tenure' in Sydney theatre is rare, even though each play would have been on a contract-by-contract basis. The continuity of productions gives the appearance of some kind of commitment from the company, even though the work is still freelance in every way.

"In 2004 I drafted a letter to John [Bell] just before rehearsals before *Hamlet* [rehearsals] started. I had joined the company in 1993: by 2003, 10 years later,

⁵⁰ Belvoir St Media Release: "Artistic Developments at Company B Belvoir" 5.7.10

the compass went full circle — hey, where are we now? Nothing was any different. There had been no innovation. So I wrote John the first letter.”

The first letter from Christopher Stollery to John Bell which came from his ten year working relationship with the company, is an attempt to consolidate and quantify advances made and not made by the work of the company over that time. He examines in detail the ‘present’ rehearsal process. He acknowledges the rapport, the shorthand and the development of an ‘in-house style’. Chris then goes on to identify and isolate problems inherent and recurring in the process such as how time and money spent on ‘workshop weeks’ before rehearsal could be more focused for better outcomes. Suggestions included restructuring the rehearsal process, language work and training including text work in rehearsal. Another heading was “Some Possible Practices for Fielding Contribution”:

“Current protocol assumes an actors possessiveness about their character ‘I know what’s best for my role and you look after yours’. It is considered rude to presume to offer advice and breach thespian sovereignty. This ‘stove-piping’ attitude has always seemed a little strange to me. Seldom is an actor playing a role that they wrote and very rarely in Shakespeare! Just because I am cast in a role does not mean I am the only person capable of having ideas for the character — I could look at any actor in the room and say ‘But for the grace of John Bell, there goes Antipholus’. My experience is that the most fruitful discussions often take place in hallways and tea rooms, usually prefaced by ‘I know this is none of my business but ...’ As if they were about to give advice about my love life rather than the play we are all working on. Yet some of my favorite moments have come from, or been precipitated by, unsolicited suggestions. For example the baby-kissing idea in *Julius Caesar* came from a conversation with Pip Madgwick in the foyer one night. I’m not quite sure what to call this practice but I would love to see some arrangement whereby these impolite and presumptuous suggestions can be further encouraged so that ideas swapping can be conducted openly and deliberately.”

Chris goes on to reveal the issues of company actors’ dissatisfaction — which actors in general are notoriously reluctant to express for fear of losing a place

(and job) or sully a working relationship for the future. He writes sensitively and with great care about outcomes whilst remaining mindful of the dollars spent in search of new form. He takes time to give a clear-sighted view and detailed analysis of some specific examples of rehearsal problems, to which he then offers a series of informed possible alternatives. The problems he attempts to address are specific to those experienced by him and other actors in the Bell Shakespeare rehearsal room, at that time. The letter is over nineteen pages long, and passionately felt and expressed:

“It would be absurd for a member of the ACO working on a piece of Mozart to not know what a crotchet or a minor scale were; to be deaf to the difference between melody and harmony. Equally bewildering is an actor’s not knowing where the verb is (let alone a gerund), how to scan a line, or being unable to distinguish a parenthetical phrase from the main thought. We are dealing with language’s equivalent of Mozart yet remain somewhat cavalier in our attitude to how language works — even though language and words are our very stock in trade. We should surely devote at least as much time to this type of education and training as we do to learning Meyerhold or chorus work.”

He then shifts his concerns from the rehearsal room to the ensemble and Associate Artists. He feels the role of AA’s is unclear: “are we expected to take the charter seriously or is it just an honorary title?” He continues:

“I recommend that a regular forum be organized for Associate Artists in which we could offer our artistic feedback and address any other company concerns. Frequent meetings of AA’s would give the title some efficacy and be a step towards articulating and *supporting the company’s artist objectives*”

I ask how John Bell responded:

“John was genuinely enthusiastic about it. At this time the company spirit had begun to grow but there was schism regarding everyone’s function, particularly that of the Associate Artists. It was meant to create a profile of repeat performers — so we weren’t a faceless ensemble. After 8 years with the company I had no profile. My agent at the time said I shouldn’t be off the radar this long, but I was doing Shakespeare constantly. I loved it. Then John came back with the idea of

‘Associate Artist’, we didn’t actually *do* anything — there was never any further publicity. Other people had other ‘families’; Belvoir, STC — BSC was my home, my family.”

So, for some actors, there is a possibility of a sense of continuity with BSC. A period of consistent employment and opportunities for roles and challenges that only Shakespeare can provide but, like any company creating its own form as it grows, the ranks are also finding their own places in the hierarchy:

“During *Hamlet* in 2003 John was a father figure for lots of guys in the company. In Canberra during the *Julius Caesar* season, Sean O’Shea and John Adam and me (like 3 brothers) were discussing how do you get along with John [Bell]. They called me the ‘Golden Boy’ — there was jealousy, but it comes back to bite me ... Like ‘Joseph and the Dreamcoat’”.

In 2007, after performing with the company in over twenty productions, regularly since 1993, Chris received no contact for eighteen months from the company. Chris was not cast in any of the plays after that time. There was no explanation or discussion from the company.

Chris wrote John another letter. This time one page. He asked for it to be read in his absence from the Artistic Associates meeting: “The flattering title of Artistic Associate is not only tokenistic and meaningless, it is patronizing and manipulative — a bauble to tempt us to fill the numbers at sponsors events ... I am appalled and heartbroken — not just personally but on behalf of all other actors who dedicated themselves to dozens of productions and thousands of miles on the basis of the cant about company ensemble and family ... for all the anti-Howard hot air that circulates around here, ‘Work Choices’ affords more protection for an employee than anything the BSC has ever offered to even its most loyal actors.”

Chris was very open, frank and clear about how there may have been a more satisfying end to the relationship: “Perhaps my sense of grievance would not nearly be as strong if John had had a conversation with me. We have to accept being cut adrift; it drives actors to bond when working together again. Working on a show is a pseudo family, even a bad show. I took over from another actor on

a show last year. We became a unit. There is something about performing every night that bonds you. Being part of a football team is comparable, but not the same.”

In my introduction I refer to the fact that there are many other versions of ‘family’ bonds that people experience, what is of interest here is what is particular to the ‘theatre family’. The ‘something’ about performing that bonds actors in this context is a reference to the risk, the emotional commitment and the exchange demanded by the creative process. This is the intensity to which most practitioners refer in my research. All interviewees agree that the demands are very specific in the professional rehearsal environment and all remark that it is not comparable to other jobs.

“Why this metaphor?” Chris asks. “The nature of what we do tends to replicate a family structure. It isn’t like having a ‘boss’, you’re being guided in your expression of who you are — that’s a parental concern. A cast are nearly always like siblings.”

This may particularly be the case with Shakespeare — all of the narratives are built out of the structure of the drama of the family, be it royal or otherwise. It is always an element of the exploration. One cannot help but bring one’s own family experience to that and that must include sibling place. I am not suggesting that an actor is tied only to his/her own experience of that — but it must be a consideration among others in the playing of a role. The politics of the ‘bastard’ son as opposed to the heir in *King Lear*, for example, are what will create the substance of the range of motivations the actors will consider in creating the roles.

At this point in the interview Chris has a series of his own questions:

“What is the culture of a company? The BSC family? The identity of the company should be built around its members. The *administration* became the ‘host’. The company.” The tension arises from the fact that in this case, the management plays out the *idea* of something more democratic — appropriating the language of family and ensemble and in some cases commitment, born out of the substance that actually does bond performers as they work.

“As actors are we habituated into the dysfunction like no other industry?” Chris asks. “What are the guidelines? Because you’re dealing with people’s lives. Other (commercial) producers don’t pretend they’re a ‘company’ and con supporters into believing there is a continuity. Maybe it’s my naïveté — I was as much a freelancer as anyone else. I think it’s something to do with promise. To presume a role beyond my station — I was pretty quickly put back in my place.”

Is Chris’s loyalty to the company naïve? An experienced professional actor entertaining any expectation other than the current contract? We all know how it works, but the rhetoric in our industry is everywhere and otherwise. Whilst I acknowledge that once upon a time performing troupes were often *actually* family, the family metaphor has grown out of the acknowledged sense of tribe that actors do in fact experience as a result of the creative process. In the rehearsal room we thrive on emotional risk and we trust each other implicitly with that. (In any acting training course, without exception, the very first exercises are physical trust building exercises.) If that implicit agreement is not present then there is not the complicity to go onstage as a company. That complicity between performers comes from weeks on the rehearsal floor together — making an agreement with your fellow actors moment by moment, thought by thought, action by action. When a show is in production the cast necessarily continues those relationships as they intensify with (necessarily) less and less input from management or the administration. The same bonds have not formed between the company of actors and the administration but, as in the case of Christopher, the language and metaphor is assumed by management in question (in this case, Bell Shakespeare).

These intentions crossed and met with the same metaphor may be deeply problematic for actors. I say actors in this case but it would be and is the same for any individual who is forced by the freelance nature of their work to have his or her rights diminished. As previously mentioned, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain how the metaphors in our everyday employment reflect our concept of the world. To become conscious of how we use them and what they imply for us is to empower ourselves with new choices:

The idea that metaphors can create realities goes against most traditional views of metaphor. The reason is that metaphor has traditionally been viewed as a matter of mere language, rather than primarily as a means of structuring our conceptual system and the kinds of everyday activities we perform. It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don't change reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions.⁵¹

Actors creating in rehearsal need to work with the intensity of a so-called family in which case the perceptions of this metaphor are appropriate. In this case perhaps it is an appealing use of 'mere language' for the company. The two parties are employing the same metaphor to different ends. Perhaps for the company, it is to attend the language of the actors or a means of giving patrons a perceived "access" to the company to which they may financially subscribe. For the actors however it reflects the necessary intensity of the rehearsal room.

Interview with actor Marco Chiappi

Marco is a graduate of the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. For the last 15 years, Marco has been working in Australia for companies mostly in Melbourne but also South Australia, Tasmania, The Bell Shakespeare Company and The Keene/Taylor Project. He has directed, acted and adapted texts for the theatre group The Hoist in Melbourne, of which he was a founding member. He was cast as an original member of the STC Actors Company, but for family reasons, he left the company and went to Italy to oversee the family business.

During the interview, Marco states the opinion strongly that theatre is not family to him, but "the community of common effort which constantly attracts, utility. A functioning community of interest. Familial relationships exist beyond utility. 'Family' becomes an attractive metaphor for practitioners because it describes a web of relationships that are sustained beyond economic imperative." He offers a countervailing opinion: "Maybe it's a Marxist view — the idea family (in the

⁵¹George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980: 145-6.

theatre) has a utilitarian function — pragmatism. Marx was critical of the way that family relationships have been exploited within capitalism and family was in itself a social unit formed in economic imperative.”

The point he makes is a good one. When actual family ties exist within a business, no matter what — beyond utility — there is an expectation that family members will contribute regardless of perceived conditions or rates of pay but with the added incentive (and expectation) of a continued share in profits or future enterprise. Marco notes: “The thrust of my observation is that for practitioners there is a vocational commitment. This commitment endures beyond notions of economic sustainability or utility. A social grouping that readily comes to mind that shares this characteristic is of course ‘the family’, in that its cohesion and *raison d’être* seems to exist outside a conception of economic utility (ignoring the Marxist critique, and why not! As actors we can be fuzzy thinkers but real whizzes when it comes to cozies!).”⁵² In this case, the theory is that the family metaphor is a convenience, perhaps an example of the “fuzzy-thinking” of actors, or is it more? Marco aligns the family metaphor with what he terms an “ancient economic ordering” which belongs to the theatre: “When I was working with *The Hoist*, I think I said in some press somewhere that I had had enough of other people’s families, that I wanted to start my own, but it was a convenient metaphor. It was used as a way to earth the argument. Theatre is labour intensive — economically perilous — and ‘family’ is a convenient economic unit. There is a myth of communitarianism ... as the economy goes in one direction in terms of labour practices, theatre is arrested in more ancient economic ordering. Mutual responsibility.” He wonders what the metaphors are for other guilds: “[w]hat metaphors did they employ to represent the craft concerns they shared beyond the necessity to protect trade secrets and economic position. That is: what were the metaphors (if indeed there were any) they used to represent the ‘poetic’ of their undertaking? The enterprise of acting is outside the economy — family is something that is translatable across many fields.”

⁵² There were clarifications of the original interview conducted by email as both researcher and subject were now living in different countries. Here Marco has expressed himself in writing and is being flippant but it reveals an actor’s preference for pragmatism rather than theory.

The enterprise of acting is certainly outside the current rational economy: at the moment in theatre in Sydney a significant part of the landscape belongs to unpaid working professionals. When another theatre company folds or loses funding, the screw turns just a little tighter for actors who earn their living in this medium. It is impossible to replace a theatre company once it has gone in that, when a particular company dies it will never reform with the same aspirations or participants again. New entities will form and they do in the form of Independent theatre but without a *place* these companies will never mature. And so a certain group of artists at a certain time making work become small miracles. The specific nature of any theatre company as I have established, is made up of its actors primarily — they create the product, they *are* the output. No matter how well a company is administered, the board members or playwrights for that matter do not perform the show night after night.

Marco makes the observation: “[f]ilm is the artform of capitalism. There are no family metaphors there. Anything counter will always invoke family. It’s [family] a convenient metaphor which fights against utility.” This is frequently true although there are some film casts on record using the family metaphor, it is usually a ‘special’ event like a Mike Leigh experience where the actors go through the character creation process over a period of time before the shoot, a practice which is borrowed from theatre. Neil Armfield suggests in his interview that a theatre cast is together from the beginning of the creative process until the end (including night after night in performance) in contrast to film actors who, are only present for their scenes of the film. So the language in reference to the theatre is also a reflection of the process.

Marco makes clear his preference for the term community: “[a]lthough there are webs of relationships I prefer community as opposed to family. Because of the infantile nature of acting — you only work because of someone else’s choice. The arbitrary aspect is softened by the metaphor of family because the nature of hierarchy in family is also arbitrary.”

One would hope that the formation of a theatre ensemble fights against this ‘arbitrariness’. A theatre ensemble suggests something ongoing for an actor so as

well as the artistic benefits, a by-product may also be that the stress of impending unemployment is allayed and therefore a deeper focus on the work at hand is possible. A production of *Ivanov* (by Anton Chekhov) by the Katona Jozef Theatre (Budapest, Hungary) was part of the Sydney Festival 2009. On the evening I attended this sold out season, the production was very well received by the audience. On the way out of the theatre, I overheard one person comment that “you’d never see that [excellence] from a group of Australian actors”. The director, Tamás Ascher, has since been invited back to Australia to work on a prestigious production of *Uncle Vanya* at the Sydney Theatre Company.⁵³ An aspect contributing to the success of the production from the Katona Jozef Theatre seems to have been overlooked by that audience member; which is the group of people who actually performed it and the nature of the ensemble that created it and the amount of time, decades given to that endeavour alone.

In his annual review roundup article in the *New York Times* (2005), “Theatre: The Ensembles; Theatrical Collectives and European Unions” American theatre critic Charles Isherwood makes mention of all of the European theatre companies visiting Broadway that year. He identifies the most striking impression which emerged for him was that in this case, the attention to ensemble-based theatre may improve the work being made by American companies: “Am I suggesting that foreigners are better actors? Obviously not, what is significant though, is that the actors involved in all the productions I’ve mentioned [Théâtre du Soleil, Shakespeare’s Globe, Alan Ayckbourn’s Stephen Joseph Theatre, Druid Theatre] shared some history”. He continues:

True theatrical collectives — companies of actors and artists who repeatedly work together to hone their craft, establishing a cohesive aesthetic — remain a vital part of the European theatrical landscape. By contrast, the phenomenon is virtually non-existent in the upper realms of New York theater, where the demands of the marketplace reign supreme and even the finest casts are assembled for a single production.

What we lose out on is what I found so transfixing in the productions mentioned: the singular ability of a unified company of actors to

⁵³ Sydney Theatre Company, 2010

conjure a world that compels us with its truth, whatever the style or tone of the material.⁵⁴

Isherwood identifies the problem as most obvious when companies come to perform the work of Chekhov: “His work tends to get massacred when it’s approached with the usual classic revival recipe: Assemble the needed name stars with holes in their television or film schedules, hire a hot director and hope for the best.”

It is an argument for the preservation or creation in some form of working theatre ensembles. Although Isherwood refers specifically to the American (New York, Broadway) community, the same argument may be applied to the current Australian scene. Whilst the recent Platform Paper by James Waites, *Whatever Happened To The STC Actors Company*, examines the difficulties experienced by this Sydney ensemble, the research may also be read as an argument for the work that an ongoing ensemble can produce:

Every actor interviewed for this essay described their time in the AC as one of the most, if not the most, exciting experiences of their careers. Some have found themselves together again, in new rehearsal rooms back in the sausage-factory system of theatre-making. Others working with them in these productions have been taken aback by the shorthand, the trust and shared understanding that the AC members enjoy.⁵⁵

Another Australian ensemble mentioned in the same essay is the Keene/Taylor Theatre Project (Melbourne 1997-2002). Both Ariette Taylor and Marco were members of the company. Some days after my original interview with Marco, we lunch with Ariette Taylor and discuss the comings and goings of the STC Actors Company. He comments in passing that “[i]n a company like that, Brandon [Burke] and I are going to be the *middle* children.” Later, I ask why he would use the metaphor in that context, given his responses in our previous interview. He replies: “[i]t’s potent but not significant, a metaphorical convenience. I prefer community of interest.”

⁵⁴ Charles Isherwood, “Theatre: The Ensembles; Theatrical Collectives and European Unions.” *The New York Times*, 25 December 2005: 2.

⁵⁵ Waites, 2010: 66.

So why does the metaphor persist, even for those who disavow it? George Lakoff describes a conceptual metaphor as “a convenient way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another often unconsciously.”⁵⁶ Does the unconscious use, or indeed conscious rejection of a particular metaphor dilute its significance? Language is actors’ currency, we deal in words, when we are assigned them we unpack them like attic suitcases for aspects to inhabit, it does contribute to the complexity and complex operation of our ‘conceptual systems’. This family metaphor wholly represents all aspects of our working lives. It encompasses these relationships in every respect; the difficulties and the realities, the community and disunity, including the emotional nuances, the shifts and rifts, from which the work is made. “Family” seems to endure as language from a European ensemble of twenty years to a tiny Independent (unpaid) Theatre Company in Sydney – what is common among them are the actors, coming together then fragmenting then reforming again.

⁵⁶ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002: 4.

Chapter Three: Community –The Indigenous Family

One of the enduring lessons I had absorbed from acting school was that the rehearsal room is sacred. It is a place where from day one of rehearsal until production week only those directly related to the making of the production may come and go. No one unrelated is allowed in the room — even if they are relations. It is simply not allowed. The rehearsal room is a private and insular space. The teachers at WAAPA who instilled this law in us were obviously students of George Bernard Shaw: “Remember that no strangers should be present at rehearsal ... rehearsals are absolutely and sacredly confidential ... No direction should ever be given to an actor in the presence of a stranger ...”⁵⁷ There are good reasons for this privacy that are to do with more than just maintaining an atmosphere in the room; these kinds of structures adhered to engender more freedom for the actor to play and create and fail without any sense of ‘performing’ for anyone. There are also safety and security issues given the nature of back stage and rehearsal spaces. The walls may be lined with seemingly unrelated furniture, tools and or clothing — no one but the stage-manager is to say what should be moved or touched, lest an irreplaceable item is misplaced or damaged.

Story Three: Who’s Your Auntie?

By the first day of rehearsal for *No Sugar*⁵⁸ with the WA State Theatre Company in 1990, I had been working non-stop professionally for a full year — I thought I had a pretty good idea of what to expect. The stage manager had already called to ensure details like directions to Fremantle or where to park the car for a day

⁵⁷ G B Shaw, *The Art of Rehearsal*. 1928. quoted in Susan Letzler Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*. New York: Routledge, 1992: 2.

⁵⁸ *No Sugar* by Jack Davis, WA State Theatre Company, directed by Neil Armfield, Perth Playhouse, 1990.

without getting a ticket. A script had been mailed and a full cast list. There was generally someone I knew in the cast or crew and the administration people would introduce themselves on the day. There is a sort of protocol. I was completely unprepared for what I encountered this time.

The season was a co-production between Belvoir St. and the WA State Theatre Company. *No Sugar* would play in repertory at the Playhouse in Perth with its companion piece *In Our Town* after which *No Sugar* would do a national tour via Adelaide and Tasmania (Burnie, Launceston and Hobart), culminating in a season at Belvoir St. in Sydney. There were a few firsts: it was to be my first tour, first play with an Indigenous company, first 'Neil show' and first professional appearance back in my hometown of Sydney after four years in Perth.

On this first day, I stood in the doorway of a huge rehearsal room in Fremantle peering in. The room was jam-packed with people. Children of all ages, from tiny babies to teenagers, teenagers with babies or pregnant, their mums, dads, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts all talking, laughing, holding babies drinking cups of tea and eating biscuits. I scanned the room ... I had no idea who any of them were. Finally, I spotted an actor I knew.

Eventually Neil Armfield brought the group together and it became clear that these people were 'Jack's mob' and relations of 'Jack's mob'. Some of them had been in previous productions of *No Sugar*, but for all of these people there was a sense of ownership of this story. *No Sugar* was their story.

I imagined that it was probably a morning-tea-social-thing and by the next day we would get down to serious work (I'd been to drama school) but that was not the case. For as long as anyone felt like it, as we worked over the next few weeks rehearsing two plays, relations moved in and out of the space whenever they liked. It was quickly evident where the boring bits were... the kids either played louder or people just left. For most of the rehearsal time we had a critical audience.

Before *No Sugar* I had known one aboriginal person, my friend Gary Cooper who was in my year at acting school. He never ever talked about his aboriginality but then again I never asked. I received my first real insight into our country's

Indigenous history from Lynette Narkle over three months of rehearsal and the performance tour of *No Sugar*. Jack Davis was Lynette's uncle; she was also in the cast. Lynette taught me about different countries, that my friend Gary was in fact a Wongi and not Noongar (like Jack's clan). It was all dressing room and backstage talk, incidental and anecdotal but I began to see the great gasping gap in my knowledge of the Indigenous history of this country.

One weekend during rehearsal, we went as a clan/cast by bus to the Moore River Settlement where much of the play is set. There must have been at least twenty-five of us, plus extras. We spent a full day walking around and talking. Some old buildings were still standing, and the place where the pine forest used to be. We cooked damper and had a barbecue. There, Lynette and Auntie Dot showed me exact places where children were buried, educated and abused. Being in this place landed the importance of this play to me in a way that no amount of rehearsal ever could. When we got to Port Arthur in Tasmania, through Lynette, I began to have an insight into the black history of the place. It consisted mostly of walking around places with her commentary. That was the first time I learned about the massacre of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania. We did have an opportunity to learn about ancient culture at school, but the choice was Greek or Roman.

Gail Mabo was the other actress in the company closest to my age, but a year younger. She had come to the company from Sydney having been a member of The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Company. At such a young age she was both extremely accomplished and humble. Gail already had two children. In two years time the legal battle that her father had begun against the government of Queensland eight years earlier, would make history, but for now we were on tour in Adelaide. One particular night, we were making our way home together after a show around midnight. I suggested we just start walking and flag a taxi on the way. Gail appeared reticent which I presumed was to do with expense; she had the kids to think about. We walked along the road out of town, the available taxis just kept sailing past, one after another. It was frustrating and after about half an hour, I became a little nervous the further away from town we got. Finally Gail said "It's me". She disappeared into the

doorway of a shop and waited whilst I hailed. The very first taxi pulled over. I got into that cab feeling naïve, deeply ashamed and embarrassed. There was a shift in my world that night.

It was obvious very early on in rehearsal that a couple of the lead cast were nursing serious 'Br'er Rabbits' (habit /substance addictions), which for the most part, the company tolerated as far as they possibly could. As a director, Neil showed understanding at every obstacle; he was accommodating and always conscious of the bigger picture. At one point in rehearsal Jack Charles⁵⁹ disappeared for a few days. His character was in almost every scene so it made the rescheduling almost impossible. No one could get in contact with him or had any idea whether he had gone for good or just a bit (this was before the onslaught of mobile phones — not that it would have made any difference). Jack was a Koori over from Melbourne to play the role. The other blackfellas in the cast were furious. He was accused of all kinds of disrespect. Neil worked on. When Jack made it back some days later there was an angry confrontation. I remember Jack, contrite but defiant, declaring to the assembled cast: "I was catatonic, CAT-A-TONIC — DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT IS?????" If I thought I did before, I knew now I had no clue. I was standing up the back of the room, within earshot of Jack Davis muttering "histrionics". The politics of this room were so incredibly layered, complex and generational. Jack Charles did complete the tour. He was hilarious and touching in the role in spite of the fact that his life was chaos outside the show. Looking back it seemed like Neil knew then that the task of the play would eventually unify and give voice, maybe a whisper to the unsayable and unmanageable.

And then there was Auntie Dot. She was Jack's sister. Auntie Dot was around seventy. I was never sure exactly who qualified and who did not in my limited terms, to call Auntie Dot, Auntie Dot. I cannot recall being told to or not to, you just did. She was utterly dependable on stage and was always involved in the fun backstage, she had a cackle of a laugh. Her presence was calm and stable but she

⁵⁹ The fabric of the life of Jack Charles is revealed in the documentary *Bastardy* directed by Amiel Courtin-Wilson, film released 2008. Over the seven years of filming the film reveals Jack's life as actor, cat-burglar, drug-addict, homeless and 'in the nick'.

could 'have a go' when necessary – as evidenced by her bolshy outburst on stage as 'Gran' in the play.

By the time we reached Adelaide it was clear one of the leading cast could not continue with the show (not Jack, another performer). The actor was overly late to technical rehearsals (one in every new town on tour) and performances and frequently 'high' when he arrived to perform. There were thefts. The situation became untenable. Talk of his being asked to leave was rife through the blackfellas in the cast, but there was no decision to be made or action taken until Neil had consulted Auntie Dot first. This respect for elders was simply paid by everyone, although she never once demanded or asked for anything. It was decided that Kelton Pell, who had a small role and had been playing didge in the show would replace the actor for the rest of the Adelaide season and Tasmania. The next show Kelton went on with every word down, not a move out of place. The story was already in his body. He had been in a previous production of the show some years before but not in this role. Another of the Davis clan, John Moore, was flown in from WA to join the Sydney season at Belvoir St. Again, I observed without much rehearsal or fuss, this story was already in the bodies of the people who owned it. There was ease in the telling, they carried it in them.

Finally we arrived in Sydney for the last leg of the tour. I was passing through the Belvoir foyer as Neil and Deb Murphy, the business manager at the time, were trying to sort out an accommodation problem. Some arrangements had gone awry and Auntie Dot had nowhere to stay for the first few days. I suggested she could stay at my place. 'My place' was actually with my parents — kids having moved out, there were empty beds. I did consider that Auntie Dot would be the first Indigenous person to come to my parent's house, let alone stay there. I wondered how many white middle class families Auntie Dot had stayed with before now. Auntie Dot came home with me that night and we arrived back in the suburbs late after a show. Frank and Nola (my parents) had the bed made and were waiting up to meet us. "Mum, Dad ... this is Auntie Dot" I said by way of introduction. I can still see my parents smiling at the doorway then leading us down the hall into the loungeroom. It was significant to have Auntie Dot at my place — she had shown me so many places of hers. Under no other

circumstances would this have occurred, but it was a lucky privilege for me that it did. Somehow my parents knew it was an honour to have this elder under their roof, even though no one said anything. Perhaps whatever my parents may have lacked in political awareness they could make up for in Lebanese/Chinese-Irish hospitality. The meeting of these worlds seemed the right ending for this journey of *No Sugar*. This Indigenous story had another opening, another beginning in my family. Here was 'show-family' crossing hearths with actual family. It was completely foreign to introduce anyone — much less an Indigenous elder — to my parents as 'auntie' whom they had never met. The significance lay in the politics of the play being extended beyond the theatre in which it was performed and into my own family home.

At around about the same time that my parents decided to get married and settle with a mortgage in the suburbs, Noel Tovey was a young Indigenous man who had already been in prison, and was living on the streets of Kings Cross in Sydney. Since he began his career, the changes that have been instituted which enable black artists in this country have been considerable. But they are still not enough. This is obvious from the complexities of kin and generational issues that are revealed in the following interviews.

Interview with actor Noel Tovey

Noel has lived and worked in London, New York, Melbourne and Sydney. His career in the arts spans fifty three years and over the last fifteen years he has settled and worked in Sydney.

His life and career as a dancer, actor, writer, and director was told in his one-man show and autobiography *Little Black Bastard*. It played to sell-out seasons at the Darlinghurst Theatre in Sydney before transferring to Belvoir St in 2004, then two seasons in Melbourne. The piece has also been produced as a radio play and published. In 2007 Noel went to Queensland to direct a group of Indigenous performing arts students who performed a new version of the show with him. A survivor of the stolen generation, he remains an activist for Indigenous rights and is now an elder.

On the day of the interview I notice Noel is wearing two wristbands. One is red and another red, yellow and black. The bands have written on them “sister brother deadly vibe.” When I ask what they are for he tells me the red one is in support of an AIDS effort and the other he has worn since his last lunch with actor Justine Saunders. She had passed away about five months earlier: “I haven’t taken them off.”

“Is it family? Yes. I think of everyone as part of a bigger family. This year I went back to London and I made contact with people I knew from the sixties, but only the theatre people. It’s the *language* — with the others I have nothing in common. That intimacy forms a life-long bond. Almost like a child — a creation — that makes a bond.

Of course you can also fall out with people. There’s a lot of rivalry, like sibling rivalry. In dance, the only common language was the vocabulary of dance. It’s part of the addiction to theatre. When one starts out you feel like you’re in a family in rehearsal and it’s like growing up — the longer you continue in the family the more responsibility you get. As a director you become head of the family. In the first rehearsal I create the space for my babies to create. By the final dress rehearsal I hand the production back to the family like cutting the umbilical cord. Directors may fail a production if they don’t have the ability to cut the cord.”

Noel is not consciously choosing his words to service a point for this interview. I get the impression that had I posed a question without mention of family, he would describe his life in the theatre in the same way. The metaphors are firm and deep and clear without equivocation. Noel’s perspective in this case is not simply an Indigenous one; he speaks from a generational point of view as well. Noel has spent equal time in the British theatrical system in the fifties and sixties (including the Sadler’s Wells Ballet both as a dancer and choreographer), as in Australia, so he compares two worlds and two timeframes: the culture of professional theatre in London at that time, and the theatre culture he has been a part of in Australia over the past fifteen years. The one common thread is politics woven constantly through his art: “[w]hen I went to work at Sadler’s Wells —

those companies [of performers] are together for years. I became aware of the English class system". A quick google of "Noel+Tovey+Images" brings up a photograph of Noel marching in the frontline alongside other activists against the Vietnam War in Trafalgar Square London in 1968. Alongside him are Vanessa Redgrave, Tariq Ali and a "young man on crutches" who is suggested to be Stephen Hawking.⁶⁰ It was a system he clearly managed to navigate nonetheless, to find "his people and his politics" even in a foreign country.

I ask if it is it the same with an Indigenous cast? "Any Indigenous cast from day one creates a community. There is a recognition of being a relative. Seeing people and thinking 'I may be related to them'. It comes from the destruction of the invasion." Noel's discussion from the Indigenous perspective reveals the very complicated interconnected family/country/skin system that has been shattered over generations and geography, since the white invasion. The only records to consult are the memories of elders. The white colonials, having projected their own patriarchal family structure onto this culture, have created margins between kin and kin. I imagine porcelain utterly smashed and trying to replace delicate loose shards of information. Any information that joins even two pieces back together becomes precious.

Acknowledgement of this separation is often the starting point in unifying an Indigenous cast. It represents a fundamental difference between a predominately white cast and Indigenous as Noel has experienced: "With an Indigenous cast — it should be the same [as with a white cast] but you have to consider lots of cultural things within an Indigenous family collectively. There is never as much security to begin with. Lots of bravado but actually they're terrified. They want to achieve in a white world. There are no traditions of Indigenous theatre [text based drama]. Drama schools didn't turn out Indigenous actors. Lots of them that I work with are untrained. They don't go to the theatre. Take *[A] Midsummer Nights Dream* for example.⁶¹ 'Uncle Noel ... I have to have an abortion ...' — I covered for her. With me they expect more, they [the actors]

⁶⁰ Photograph by Lewis Morley in the National Gallery of Australia.

⁶¹ Performed by a complete cast of Indigenous performers. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, Festival of the Dreaming, directed by Noel Tovey, Wharf 1, Sydney Theatre Company, 1997.

truly have a belief I will deliver them into the world of a good production. There is a strong sense of family.”

To illustrate one area of difference Noel relates a story about directing a “mixed” rehearsal room of black and white actors. In order to discipline an Indigenous actor, Noel had all the white actors leave the room so the shame of the Indigenous actors poor rehearsal showings was only among the blackfellas in the cast: “I use my position of respect to discipline.” Clearly there are instances where he sees the positions of both director and elder merging in the service of not only the play but the cast themselves.

His view on the Indigenous notion of community is double edged. It is a place to return to the fold, find comfort, perhaps reassess. At the same time it is the scene of many crimes as he sees and has experienced it. The place where many are held back by their history: “Indigenous casts have a shared history of abuse and everyone knows.” He feels as a director that he must take all the cultural responsibility for the effects of the abuses as they may manifest in the rehearsal room. The notion of “wiping one’s feet at the rehearsal room door” (leaving personal issues outside) does not apply here. The whole process has an aspect of healing. Noel goes further: “[t]he one thing that keeps Aboriginal people together destroys them. Community. They run back to community. I consider myself Indigenous but it works against me. I am a victim of Aboriginal politics. That said I have set up a scholarship fund.” No matter how complex the nature of family and community in this sense has become, it appears that Noel makes his own way through in spite of it. The scholarship fund has been set up regardless of political complexities. Family is assumed without question. It is a given. There is always a place; the existence of family in any sense cannot be erased. Neil Armfield will make a very similar assessment in his interview regarding the strange permanence which underpins what appear to be ephemeral working bonds.

Noel makes a final point in regard to the acknowledgement of elders within Indigenous arts and the wider community: “One thing that has never been lost is the importance of allowing reverence for elders. Respect. There is a natural

respect for elders among Aboriginal actors.” This is certainly evidenced in the following interviews with two of the newer generation of Indigenous actors as well.

Interview with actor Kyas Sheriff

“The next wave of Indigenous practitioners is finding teams to create it. Getting theatre makers together. A black alliance. It’s catch 22 really because you want to represent your community and to kick ass in the mainstream too.”

After scoring in the top percentile in HSC Drama, Kyas was accepted at the University of New England (Armidale). “My cousin [then] told me to go to Koomba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company in Brisbane. I did and I volunteered also at La Boite and then I did the Young Playwrights Conference.”

The pathway to a professional career in the theatre for this Indigenous girl during the mid-nineties is worlds away from the experiences of even one generation ago. Structurally there is more in place for one thing but the familial fundamentals still connect with Noel’s description of the deeper issues and stresses experienced by this theatre family. Kyas identifies the difficulty of navigating the subtleties within the Indigenous family in the rehearsal room: “The relationships you form in show mode is like family. Only *that* show family can understand the pain! How you have to be ... fearless to make good work. If the unit is good — knowing other actors will catch you. There is a lot of ‘dealing with’ in a show. Continuous critiquing. Some I know I’ll never perform with again. You’ve felt ostracized. As an Indigenous actor, there are a bunch of female actors I’ll never work with again. Your ‘family’ comes into the workspace ... not in the white way. If someone has died we all mourn with you and then you can leave [the show]. In one show I did, we all came from different countries [in the Indigenous sense]. Once we had six funerals and then the intensity of continuous negotiations of cultural appropriateness can be [a minefield].”

The necessity of negotiations regarding cultural appropriateness seems to far outweigh any unwieldy terrain that one may have to traverse over the course of the consultation. As Kyas points out, it is not simply a matter of showing respect, although that too is of great importance; the wellbeing of the storytellers may

also be at risk if consultations are not addressed: “There is such a difference between mobs — Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria — for example I have to get clearance from the people of the land before I perform it in another state. It’s all relevant to what happened in that region. They come from different stories. But if I play an Italian I don’t need permission to do it! When you do blackfella stories shit comes with it. When you’ve had consultation you’re safe with the telling of it. On *Holy Day*⁶² we had no [Indigenous] consultant. There was a seventeen year old [Indigenous] non-actor who was cast in one of the roles and they ended up self-harming because they couldn’t separate the telling of the horrendous story. We needed a consultant even though the story had clearance.”

There is no way of predicting how *any* actor may internalise a role they may be working on at any given time, but suffice to say where there may be questions about the legitimacy of formal training for an art form, these cases speak loudly for the practice of learning to prepare for a role and, most importantly in this case, Indigenous consultation. In a working environment that has been already identified as particularly intense, the rehearsal room (and therefore the piece) must also absorb the realities of present life for the storytellers. Nowadays it is more common for space and allowances to be made. With the Indigenous stories that are making their way through to performance now, the subjects are still very close to the histories they bravely reveal. These circumstances are delicate in every case so even though community rules and clearances may appear to be limiting at first, they also perform a serious function providing structure and protocol around these issues. That said, the support system in Aboriginal culture involving ‘aunties’, ‘uncles’ and ‘elders’ extends itself into the rehearsal room:

“Indigenous practitioners ... we’re there for each other. The unspoken support of ‘auntie’ or of ‘uncle’ are in the work space. If something is bad you can go and have a cup of tea with an elder.” So with the respect that Noel describes as owing to an elder, comes the responsibility. There is an expectation from the younger members of the community or cast in this case that the elder, if needed, will make themselves available to a younger member in any kind of need regardless

⁶² *Holy Day* by Andrew Bovell, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Ariette Taylor, Wharf 1, Sydney Theatre Company, 2003.

of blood relationship. 'Auntie' or 'Uncle' in this sense could be anyone who is deemed an 'elder'.

Even with this internal support system however Kyas also describes situations where culture may be “played” by some cast members but not tolerated by others: “Some play what I call the ‘cultural card’ — they don’t have to follow theatre rules because it’s not appropriate ... For example an actor didn’t have to take notes [from the director] claiming an ‘oral tradition’. If the English language was second or third maybe, but the other actors pulled them up. There’s a knowledge when you go into a theatre space that you will all work this hard. It disappoints me [when Indigenous actors play the cultural card][...] There is a tall poppy syndrome that is an Uptown Koori. Community rules can be very limiting. There can be issues in a script blackfellas know to support things like death, rape, abortion, suicide — it’s always so recent. Grieving time is needed and someone may still be in it. There are check ins. Working with non-Indigenous people they will talk one on one, with Indigenous people it comes up in the group. Some [Indigenous] actors are sometimes still grieving through their own stories during a play because they [the events] are still so close. They are happening right now. You feel the weight and the pain.”

Kyas works with a great awareness of the wider political implications of working as an Indigenous artist. There is a growing consciousness of the immediacy for the performers of the Indigenous stories by the wider theatre community, and an acknowledgement that there will be extra challenges for Indigenous cast members. For example, if the play is about an Aboriginal death in custody, then we can assume that, for the Aboriginal members of the cast, there will probably be family links with deaths being portrayed. In order to sustain each other familial bonds, along with community protocols within an Indigenous cast, are attempts to build emotionally safe working environments. It is an acknowledgement of the at times, high cost of this necessary work.

These high costs take many forms for an Indigenous performer. Ursula Yovich explains how family, sorry-business and the playing of a role itself can contribute

to maintaining a sense of emotional stability whilst working, especially where the rehearsal room is a place of permission and safety.

Interview with actor Ursula Yovich

Ursula came to Sydney via a short stint at acting school in Perth. Neil Armfield cast her in the Belvoir St production of Beatrix Christian's play *The Governor's Family*⁶³ in 1997. Since then she has worked in theatre, film and television as well as being a regular with the Indigenous band The Black Arm Band. I ask her if there are references to 'family' in the theatre for her:

"In reference to the theatre — yeah for sure — I mean I use it a lot too. Like Belvoir is one — I say they are like family, for me. And the Black Arm Band. So I have specific ones and then there are people who I have worked with that I consider family. It's funny that — it's all of the stuff I did much earlier on in my career. When you are young and everything is so new and exciting, so those people kind-of stick with you. You know the Page brothers, David and Stephen, they're family. I mean I call them Uncle David and Uncle Stephen so they are like family to me — great friends but their nieces, they are my sisters. Luke Carroll is another one, Kyas — even though I don't see them often, like if I was living at home I would see my family every day [but] it doesn't feel like I've been disconnected when I finally see them — it's like 'Hey, I just saw you yesterday'. They're like definitely family."

For Ursula the sense of family is ongoing, once the initial connection has been made. In most cases those relationships continue after the show has closed. The title of 'uncle' or 'auntie' in an Indigenous context has nothing to do with age, but more how the person presents or is perceived.

"Who were my aunties? Isn't that hilarious, I have always been called 'Mama Urse', even when I was doing *The Sunshine Club*,⁶⁴ 99-2000, I was always called 'Mama Urse' by some of the girls in the cast because I was always cooking and they would come around and have a feed and we would all hang out together and

⁶³ *The Governor's Family* by Beatrix Christian, Company B, directed by Neil Armfield, Belvoir St. Theatre, 1997.

⁶⁴ *The Sunshine Club* by Enoch Wesley and John Rogers, Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Wesley Enoch, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, 2000.

I was a little bit more responsible. We were all the same age but I was just a little bit more responsible. Luke Carroll is only a year younger than me and he calls me Auntie.”

If there is an elder in the cast then the hierarchy is firmly in place and respect is paid. There is an essential acknowledgement by younger members that the elder’s place is simply earned by years on this earth (she takes her own naming as “Auntie” as ironic). For example, Ursula understood how to pay respect to the actor Kevin Smith in the same way she would her own father: “Yeah, but that kind of does happen in some shows that you — especially when I work with black actors, aboriginal actors — you do fall into a pecking order kind of thing I guess. I don’t mean it in a bad way — but say *The Dreamers*,⁶⁵ you had Uncle Kevin Smith and so he was — you would just consider him as the eldest/the elder, and if he had a problem with something and he had the shits, no one said anything because it was like — No he had the right, you let him go we’ll just, and you allow ... It’s like when my father has a problem with anything he would tell me, so with Uncle Kevin Smith I would allow him to tell me because he was much older. If someone my age was to tell me I would probably get quite defensive and I know I have a number of times.”

Ursula relates clear cultural differences between Indigenous casts and others, which are to do with how personal issues are dealt with by both other cast members and company management. For an Indigenous cast it is a given that family obligations will come first. In an all white cast the opposite is frequently true. In my early training we were taught that a commitment to a play must come before anything personal. One expects to miss weddings, christenings and funerals during the season of a show. Twenty years ago a family obligation was not a legitimate request for a night off performing. Actors tend to have their own weddings and funerals studiously avoiding performance times so their friends can actually be present. It may be because of the awareness brought to these circumstances by our Indigenous colleagues that it has been less rigid over the last few years.

⁶⁵ *The Dreamers* by Jack Davis, Company B, directed by Wesley Enoch, Belvoir St. Theatre, 2002.

Ursula reflects: “I think generally speaking working with white casts, it’s far more on a professional level and there is still the love there but it is not, it doesn’t always feel — and I really am speaking in general terms because there have been shows that I’ve worked on where I have relationships with people still and I consider them my brother or sister, but just in general ... it just seems far more professional: we can have fun but the job comes first, with a black cast it is family first, job comes after.

I wouldn’t dare bring Djarla [her daughter] to [rehearsals of] a production where it’s all white cast members, and a white director, but I always bring her in, say if I am working with Wesley [Enoch], I’ll bring her in — she *doesn’t stay* but I just feel as if she has to meet the family, so I bring her in and that’s — I feel comfortable with that. There’s been a few directors, Rose Myers, who has always said ‘Bring her in, she’s cool, she’s fine’. Well Neil [Armfield] is the only one I would feel comfortable bringing Djarla in to see, if he was directing something. And I don’t know if that is because he has already worked with a lot of blackfellas before I’ve even been on the scene.”

Director Wesley Enoch has addressed his preference for having as open a rehearsal space as possible:

People coming in and out, having kids in the rehearsal room, having dogs in the rehearsal room, having friends and family visit – There’s points where you go, it does expose the actors sometimes, especially [...] when you’re doing runs; those sensitive times you go ‘ok let’s just ask everyone if it’s alright do to that kind of stuff’ but I’m full-on into it. In fact, if kids are part of the rehearsal room, right from the very first day on, I find it fine for those kids to be there during those sensitive moments. It’s just if they come in and out, that it’s a problem. They’re part of the process.⁶⁶

This is definitely a shift (sometimes a shock) away from what has been the accepted expectation of rehearsal until relatively recently. From Wesley’s point of view having an open room amounts to more than say a bit of extra audience. He refers to everyone in the room (even the dog!) as “part of the process”. Neil Armfield has also absorbed aspects of this approach with his Indigenous work over the last twenty years at Belvoir.

⁶⁶ Laura Ginters, Interview with Wesley Enoch 22.11.2005

Ursula's experience working with Belvoir St in this sense is a familial one. The suggestion is that this attention to individuals is present throughout the company but it comes from Neil down through the ranks. In doing so, the company gains deep loyalty and dedication from the actor in return: "I guess because there is no real black and white. I don't think you can separate — because we're up here and we are trying to represent people and I think if you try and separate yourself from that and to just treat it as a job it doesn't work. I think Belvoir understands that, I think they really get it. It's this family, it's all about, I remember I told [...] I'd been having a bit of a [health] scare and I was just talking to the stage-manager because I needed the time to go and have all these tests and stuff and come back. This was when we were doing *Snugglepote and Cuddlepie*⁶⁷ and she was really concerned and she had a chat with Neil, and then Neil pulled me aside, 'If you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know, money whatever.' And family does that so — but I don't think I'd ever come across that in any other theatre company. So Belvoir is very much about — and I think that's why they are so successful too. It's looking out for each other. Because when you look after somebody they are going to give you back more. Like I will try to do my absolute best. And the same with Wesley, he is just always there — same thing. Yes, you just try and do your best. And it's not always great too, there's been a couple of people I have worked with that I absolutely adore but they get on my nerves and it's just like a real family — it really does sometimes feel like it's real."

For Ursula, the substance of these relationships is created in the rehearsal room. The expectations of work created there are not 'play-acting' if you are going to present something true to the subject portrayed: "I think because we are always dealing with human emotions, we are always dealing with real things. People that go — we're getting up there and just play-acting but you have to go to these places in order to show what it is that we do. I think it is because we are always dealing with emotion; well that is what I believe anyway. Say for instance

⁶⁷ *The Adventures of Snugglepote & Cuddlepie and Little Ragged Blossom*, by Alan John and John Clarke with Doug MacLeod, Company B with Windmill Performing Arts, directed by Neil Armfield, Theatre Royal, MLC Centre, 2007.

Capricornia,⁶⁸ that was a very difficult play to get through. Yeah ... I played Tocky ... I don't know, I guess I ... maybe my experiences are a little bit different. There are painful things but I know that I put a lot of what I have been through, or my mob have been through, into stories that are not necessarily about that."

Ursula played the role of Dorothy in the recent stage production of *The Wizard of Oz*⁶⁹ by Windmill Theatre Company. Her approach to the role of Dorothy in the context of this production began from the position of a broken family as a starting point for the character of this young Indigenous Dorothy. Her own family is the first point of application: "Well, I [as the character] had no uncle, single auntie, we lived in a caravan park, auntie's young, has three boyfriends, it's the real broken down family. Which I just related to straight away, and I think a lot of people do, because a lot of people have really broken up families. I guess [that is] what "[t]here's somewhere over the rainbow" was about, seeing the film with Judy Garland, it's about running away and finding something big, or somewhere where she fits in, whatever, but for me I felt that song, *my* Dorothy was all about ... when one day, one of these days, maybe not for me, but maybe for my children or my children's children there will be a time when we will be truly free and that's how I interpreted the song. To me that was very much about where I'd come from and the black struggle because I cannot escape this, so I have to put it into this story. The general public aren't going to see that, but that's what I put into her "Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby", you know that's like the aboriginal consciousness of I want to go past this, the present situation and what's happened. You know will there be a time when we can go beyond this, where everyone is absolutely equal and if I wanted to be a big super rock-star, is my colour going to hinder me. So, yeah, I do that with all of my roles because I don't know if I could approach them in another way. But at the same time, it is hard when you do those shows because it is very raw, it is still so present, whereas something like "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" for me to love it, care about it, I have to put that in."

⁶⁸ *Capricornia* by Louis Nowra based on the novel by Xavier Herbert, Company B., directed by Wesley Enoch, York Theatre, The Seymour Centre, 2006.

⁶⁹ *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, Windmill Performing Arts, directed by Rosemary Myers, 2009.

Ursula echoes the point made earlier by Kyas about the rawness, the immediacy of events being portrayed by Indigenous casts telling their own stories. How emotionally harrowing the telling can be when there is so little distance still from the events. “With *Bran Nue Dae*⁷⁰ there’s a wonderful prison scene where they are locked up and the prison just disappears — and I’m probably giving away too much now I just — because a lot of my cousins have died in prison, a lot have died through suicide, a lot of young men, so to watch something, or to be involved in something like that does get really, really, hard. Sometimes you have to take a moment and come back.”

There is no easy or polite way for any of us to understand — with any depth— suicide, rape or separation, to “take a moment and come back” seems as practical a response as any. In many cases like this, the grieving process is generational and profound, even with a musical form such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Bran Nue Dae*, when an actor is applying a version (and there are many) of the Stanislavski process, the demands are deep and family remains a conscious or unconscious first point of reference. There is a lot at stake in any rehearsal in the preparation for the emotional journeys of these roles. Recognition of this fact also recalls Glenn Hazeldine’s claim in chapter one: “the requirement is to feel safe in order to do the work”. The safer in this sense any actor feels, the higher the emotional wire can be.

There are of course times when two familial cultures may have opposing demands. Once committed to the run of a show in performance, especially in subsidised theatre where there are no understudies, any actor is under pressure to stay (not the least of which pressures may be financial) until the end of the performance run. If you leave a company, you forgo the small wage you may have waited six months to get. Should an actor leave for any reason it is, by default, a decision to “re-unemploy” yourself. Ursula describes her conflict of interest: “Yeah, I suppose because sorry business is such an important thing in Aboriginal culture it’s something you just *cannot* miss. I got into a lot of trouble when I was working on *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* and my Uncle had passed away and I just said ‘I can’t’ [go home]. And there’s no understanding that work just

⁷⁰ *Bran Nue Dae*, directed by Rachel Perkins, film released 2009.

doesn't come first, family comes first: you have to come home and you have to pay your respects, and you have to say goodbye". In the end she decided to stay with the show.

When Indigenous actors become a part of a European story form perhaps the most tension surfaces when trying to maintain culture. In this instance for Ursula, it meant leaving a show and flying from Sydney to Darwin — the geography is also now a major consideration. The dilemma is she wants to preserve both her place in the production and her family/cultural obligations.

Noel Tovey pointed out in his interview that it is usual practice for Indigenous casts to find out who each other's actual family are, where people are from — to place each other in their broader kinship web. Ursula describes an experience of finding that the actor David Gulpilil who was playing her father on the set of *Australia*⁷¹ in a cultural sense actually *was* her father: "it just happened, because I was chatting with [David] Gulpilil and he was asking where my mum was from and I told him, it is an important thing too with blackfellas, I don't know if you heard it when you were working on *No Sugar*, it's always the first question when you meet a blackfella is 'where your mob from?' Gulpilil's from Elcho and my mum's from Maningrida. You've got all the skin names and stuff, he played my father in the film, but in real life he is also my father. That's a skin, he's, I think, my mother's 'right skin', like he could be her husband if he wanted to. Because I don't call her brothers 'father' I call them uncle, she's my mother but I call her sisters 'mother' as well. So you have all of that as well. I think that's why with aboriginal mob its all uncle, auntie, sis — because, I think that's where it all came from was the kinship system. But Gulpilil is actually my father. I think all the Indigenous nations have some form of kinship system but yeah mine's, like my ... it's about following them ... Like in Western culture you follow your father, it's like you've got your father's name but in our culture you are following your mother's line. So you have uncles and aunties but your — all of my mother's brothers are my uncles and who they marry are my aunties, and their children are my cousins. All of my mother's sisters are my mothers, and their husbands

⁷¹ *Australia* directed by Baz Luhrmann, film released 2008.

are my fathers, and their children are my brothers and sisters. So, we do have cousins and all of that but we have a lot more brothers and sisters.”

The web is intricate but there is a necessity to unravel it. I ask Ursula if this depth of questioning will always come up in a cast situation: “Not the kinship but where you’re from which then goes to ‘I’m from here, or there’. I guess ‘cause family is so important and you need to know who you are related to. You don’t want to be kissing up with a brother! But yeah, I always get it.” With such a complex kinship system — it would seem the possibility of “kissin’ up with your brother” is never far off; another very practical reason for the regular family checks concerning who is related to who and from where. Once she has clarity on that, Ursula is then serious about the intensity of commitment to those relationships — whatever they are, once rehearsal begins:

“I don’t think you’d be a good actor if you couldn’t do that — oh my god. If you couldn’t go there, I don’t think you’d be a good actor. And it mucks some people up and some people act on those emotions, but it’s probably safer if you didn’t I suppose because, ... what is that thing where they say that if you laugh even if you’re sad, if you just keep laughin’ and laughin’ you convince yourself you are quite happy. So I guess it’s like that *[laughing]* isn’t it?”

Ursula suggests that if an actor just keeps performing a relationship over rehearsal then night after night when performing — the feelings may begin to feel actual in the doing. “It’s a group of people getting together and you spend such a long time — it does get really intense [...] You’re with the same people over and over again. There is going to be a lot of lovin’, and there’s going to be a lot of heartache, a lot of fights, and I think we really search for that kind-of stuff as humans, we search for belonging and we want to be a part of something. And I think theatre gives us permission.” The ‘permission’ Ursula refers to is for that intensity to exist in the construct of rehearsal – so that real feeling can actually surface and then service the scene. The point that Ursula makes here is a part of any actor’s engagement with the work, Indigenous or non-Indigenous. The permission is also to explore what the outer edges, extremes or possibilities of

human relationship may be. Those are the risks, the demands of the emotional high wire for any actor.

Chapter Four: Director's Perspectives

In this chapter, I present three diverse examples of the perspectives of directors on the notion of family in theatre. The first is a published viewpoint from French director Ariane Mnouchkine, the second is Australian director Marion Potts and the last interview is with Neil Armfield — given the day before the new artistic director was announced at Belvoir St. These particular directors represent different positions on the notion of family, not just personally and artistically, but generationally and culturally, so their contributions cover a broad spectrum. For each representation, the language of family is a part of the atmosphere in which they make work, whether they position themselves as a part of it or not. A notion of 'family' for the 'Elder' directors is common to both. For a younger, although experienced mid-career director, it is not.

One of the most important acknowledged theatre companies in practice at the moment is the *Théâtre du Soleil*, based in Paris. The company began producing work in 1964. Since the company's inception its artistic director has been Ariane Mnouchkine. This particular collective is unique in many important aspects. The structure of the company is built on the fact that there is very little 'specialization' of skills. All of the actors contribute as stagehands or to sound and lighting or to the chopping of vegetables for the provision of meals. At the same time, the company reflects the political context of any work they are making or performing and take responsibility for their position on it. The collective have responsibilities beyond the play and importantly, attention is paid to "the company's shared language, the metaphorical vocabulary [...] it assumes an amplified sense of ethical and political responsibilities to the group as a web of dynamic interrelations, an organic 'culture' requiring continuous

individual and collective renegotiation and reinvention”.⁷² Once a paid member of the collective (there are also volunteers), no one is ever asked to leave. Artists make their own decision as to the ‘right time’ to break with the company. Although the Soleil functions as a co-operative, the position of the director is clear and after years of denial, Mnouchkine claims her perception of her role has shifted. From the interview “One Must Try Not To Lie”⁷³ Mnouchkine is asked how she views her role in the company:

F: One senses an intense emotional relationship between you and the whole company. Do you feel you have a maternal role?

M: That’s something I denied fiercely a few years ago. Unfortunately I now think I can no longer deny it, but I think — I hope — it’s not exclusively that. It also depends on the others. With some people it fluctuates, at times it can also go the other way around: some people are sufficiently mature to take me under their wings when I’m not going so well. That also happens! Some of them even some of the younger ones, sense those moments when perhaps it’s up to them to look after me a bit. It’s very complicated. In any case one can say, that a group is always maternal to some degree. What would it be if I were a man? It would be paternal ...

It is interesting that it took some time for Mnouchkine to own this metaphor. With it comes a responsibility beyond the work on both sides, from both director and company of actors. In some ways it is a surrender to the fact that it is happening anyway; that is the only way that theatre can be properly made. It is true that the suggestion of her role being maternal implies an infinite relationship and given that there is no official termination of contract, it is a very different commitment between artist and company from any other. The artists in a truer sense *are* the company. Although worlds away from the kind of theatre made at the Comédie Française both companies uphold the French notion that theatre artists may be employed fulltime and are deserving in every way of all of the rights (and responsibilities) that go with that which include wages and subsidy to maintain skills. Equally, Mnouchkine also acknowledges the end point:

M: There is perhaps one question I would like you to ask: a question people ask me each time: ‘Why do people leave the Soleil?’ Here is my

⁷² David Williams, *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre Du Soleil Sourcebook*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz and David Williams. London: Routledge, 1999: 118.

⁷³ Williams, 1999: 124.

response: 'I am very sorry when they leave'. It's a great pity, but people leave for a thousand reasons I've spoken of: when one no longer gets anything out of it: either one thinks one no longer has a place, or one simply wants to go elsewhere, or one wants to found a company... or we no longer love each other. I must admit this, once and for all: what surprises me is that love can become extinguished. I never believe it but it's true.⁷⁴

Mnouchkine affirms the idea clearly here, that for her, love in whatever sense it is implied, is a requirement for the making of the work. This point reveals the kind of love that Mnouchkine refers to: it is full of hard work and rough roads. That attention is paid to individual and collective renegotiation at all, which includes the performers in this way, is still a revolutionary idea and the company is unique in this way. This is not to suggest that art in this form is a completely democratic endeavour, but this is an ongoing recognition of the collective itself and a passage of respect for the serious input of company members.

Interview with director Marion Potts

"Nothing like banging on about family to make you feel like an orphan ... but that's what family is often about — exclusion."

There is something about this observation that rings deeply true as well. Marion has been a freelance theatre director in Sydney for some 15 years and before that, trained at NIDA as a director. She is currently Artistic Director of Development with the Bell Shakespeare Company, and she has just been appointed Artistic Director of Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne from 2011.

Marion finds the term 'family' in relation to the theatre "mawkish" and "clichéd ... it's often used without rigour so it comes with assumptions which are simplistic. It's exclusive by its nature and often used to create a feeling in rehearsal — trying to grab at a mood rather than evolve. An imposition." She says "[s]iblings are people you show allegiance to no matter what." She is uncomfortable with the idea that colleagues should therefore equal siblings: "It's difficult — that's a lot of people to love!" (Glenn Hazeldine uses the same phrase in his interview.) She senses that in the contemporary theatre-making scene in Australia: "If you don't buy into it [family] you're somehow lacking in empathy." She expresses

⁷⁴ Williams, 1999: 125.

deep suspicion of mythologising these relationships: “It’s easy; a wishful description of the dynamic”. Her response acknowledges the truthful limitations for her, of the actor/director relationship and in her case the metaphor does not accurately describe those relationships.

Marion describes the dynamic of her first few professional shows as very intense (which also corresponds to the way in which Glenn Hazledine describes these early experiences) but finally, she believes, the use of the family metaphor “[i]s dishonest — there’s a kind of promise implicit in the rhetoric.” This may be the same ‘promise’ that Christopher Stollery refers to in his musing and his sense of betrayal at its failure to be realized finally. So, in this context what Marion offers is also true, but the expectation of company actor and director are totally at odds in this case. She wonders if stage managers (known for their practicality) use the term ‘family’: “It’s sentimental and nostalgic — marketing material.”

In describing the Bell Shakespeare Company she does use the term “[t]he family business” and suggests that: “[a] culture of company evolves from that. There is more commitment to maintaining relationships with Associate Artists [for example] who feed into the programming.” The metaphor remains even though Marion states she is much more comfortable with the term community: “the arts community.” Some practitioners state a preference the word community — when asked — but the metaphor embedded in their description is still family. Perhaps a sense of community is the aspiration (less demanding than family) but it does not address the closer dynamic from within a cast performing together night after night. Family invokes the warts and all kind, the kind where passionate disagreement must co-exist with the harmonious in order for the outcome to have authenticity. Unless actors as a cast are complicit, whether they aware of it or not, there is no show to perform. The “arts community” is something bigger than the unit of a cast. When Mervant-Roux and Peter Brook make reference to community in this context, it infers the coming together of a group of people which even includes the audience on a given night of a performance. Noel Tovey views community from an Indigenous perspective as not just a web of connections but also something which may hold Indigenous people back. The web may be sticky and impede development when it does not

go through the necessary process of fragmentation to which Brook refers. Neil Armfield sees his relationship with a cast as a unit he is both part of and at the same time observing. Community for Neil is also a reference to something broader. For some the notion of community binds closer and for others such as Marion in this case, 'community' may permit an emotional distance (which may be more comfortable) that family does not.

Marion was curator of the National Playwrights Conference at the time of Nick Enright's death: "He was scheduled to come down as an actor." She recalls receiving a flood of emails from many people, but the most memorable she said, was Hilary Bell who wrote "He had high aspirations for us all." When family isn't about exclusion — when it becomes about there being "a lot of people to love" in its positive sense, it is undoubtedly, a great, high aspiration. It *is* difficult, but a difficulty that Nick Enright deemed worthy of navigation. Robert Alexander makes the observation that (for him) Nick Enright's legacy was love. He is remembered for this very aspiration.

Interview with director Neil Armfield

The subjects of theatre and families have been hallmarks of Neil Armfield's language regarding his work over the last twenty-five years. When I arrive at Belvoir St, Neil offers to make me a cup of tea. At the same time one of the junior artistic members arrives, Neil also offers to make him a cup of tea. Neil notes how few teacups there are on the shelf. The other company member says they may have been left upstairs in the rehearsal room. Neil is concerned because some of them belonged to his mum, Nita. The scenario speaks volumes about how Neil maintains a sense of family in this environment.

I regard this interview as central to the substance of this research, not only because of the high regard in which Neil's contribution to Australian theatre is held but also because of his ability to draw on his influences both far and close to home which he is then able to articulate with such depth and clarity. To that end I have intentionally maintained as much verbatim in Neil's responses as possible. By doing so I hope to enable the metaphor which is naturally embedded in his

language about the work, to surface. I began by asking whether the language of 'family' serves or resonated with him:

"Yes, in that I've always known that in my position as a third child and it's not a big spectrum but, it was the experience of watching, well preconscious days really, of watching my brothers before me [giggles] wandering behaviourally and finding a path that was perhaps defined by seeing where they'd gone before me. It's quite difficult to explain that but it's ... I suppose I've always sought people's favour. I've always liked being liked. I have a very strong impulse to please and so ... I think that's ... my relationship with audiences is based on that. That I really like pleasing people! The perspective of a watcher within the family but outside it as well. And the particular experience of family of my eldest brother getting sick and dying and my mum who had been given six months to live and then living for another thirty eight years. My cousin suddenly, having the same arc of mortality as my brother all within a few years from when I was thirteen until sixteen — strongly affected both my sense of the attraction to theatre as an escape but also as a reality that I could control in some way. Where potentially the chaos of life could be made to obey, not exactly obey one's will, but obey a playwright's will. But at the same time what I've always loved is the, is that feeling that, that way of starting every project where you don't really have a clue where it's going to end up. If you listen well enough to everyone who's there, the way in which the end result can go to really powerfully imaginative and wonderful places. Everyone is participating in that process because it's being willed but it's not being willed. I ride along with everyone else in finding the surprise of what the piece is really.

As that third child ...

Yes.

So what about the family metaphor?

It has been something that has very much been applied to Company B and I can certainly sympathize with those that find it a mawkish marketing tool but I also think there is — because families can be very troubling places and very dysfunctional places as well, of course, but I do think that it's recognizing that the

act of creating theatre is a kind of a human enterprise which is quite unlike other forms of work and other art forms as well. That as a director you are needing to parent but you're parenting in a way that isn't about control. Although it is about control as well — to be a director you have to be happy to take control, it has to be a basic impulse, but at the same time you have to be able to surrender. It's constantly juggling that contradiction, keeping both sides of that contradiction quite alive. They can't cancel each other out because you need to be able to, you're the only person with a true perspective outside the piece, but you're also inside it. I guess every actor can have that eye inside as well as outside, it's true, but I think that actors really depend on that sense of guidance of when something is working and when it's not, when it's genuine and honest support and it's not, and when it hasn't got the energy of blind fear underneath where you say what you think you're expected to say or what someone is hoping you'll say. You've got to question all of those defences.

How are we different from a firm of accountants, who don't have the same language around their work?

I suppose because you're together in a room, creating some shared moment of revealing the rituals of behaviour, exploring what happens between people and what might happen between people. In order for that to be interesting, there needs to be just complete trust within the space. It's also everyone is working within the same timeline — you all more or less start together and open it together unlike other film performances where everyone's timeline is different. With theatre everyone's timeline is shared, even if you have days off.

What about the exchange of anecdote in that arena? People sharing stuff that's actual and not constructed by the playwright —

Yeah, that's right, I think it's quite a bizarre thing for a group of people, some of whom will know each other and some of whom won't, to gather together — the bell goes and you start opening up, start finding this show. One way of people finding a socialization or an ease of connection particularly early in the process to encourage people to anecdotally find a framework for the story that we're working on. There will always be some people that lead this more than others,

that gradually people find things from their own life and share the things from their own life that somehow hook them into this group experience of the story. I think that's a very important way of people making a personal connection but also, throwing out something that others can attach to, both through their own recognition and their understanding of who that person is. I think at the same time it's been quite important to me anyway that there is no real science to this. There's certainly no formula to it. It's not a technique, it's a way of, the simplest human social terms of just finding a way of everyone being there, being imaginatively involved with each other. It's always trying to keep a perspective that what we're doing, to be pleasurable to us is going to be pleasurable to an audience. Often it's through jokes perhaps not always, people will gradually release their defences. It's just about finding ways for the barriers and the defences between people to be – without ever being acknowledged consciously but those things are broken down or released a bit. It's keeping in mind also that you're just putting in a show. It's not something that should be a cause of distress and anxiety, even though you want it to be as good as you possibly can. It's another one of those contradictions you do have huge ambition for it, but at the same time you need to be able to step lightly away from it and say funny doesn't matter.

And yet it's such a paradox because it ["funny"] is the most important thing in the world, and there is a level at which that has to be true in order for the work to get where it needs to go...

Yeah, but you can work with actors who are gripping on to their hopes and their fears their frustrations so tightly that — it's just not reasonable, not rational and so the ability to just float above that and to let it be will be so much more productive.

Revisiting No Sugar – did you go into that show with a sense of what the difficulties might be? You were so young and there was so much politics under the surface.

I think I did have a sense of what the difficulties might be. That was 1990 and before that I'd done Tony Strachan's play *State of Shock*⁷⁵ in about '85. Ernie Dingo and Lyn Narkle. And I worked with Uncle Bob Maza in *Clouds*⁷⁶ which was the first thing I did in the Upstairs Theatre. They were all pretty happy experiences. *State of Shock*, Bob Maza was a complete dream [...] I'd talked to Auntie Dot about being in that because I'd seen her in the first *No Sugar* that Andrew Ross did and so we had a little bit of contact with each other, and she was extremely trusting of me. Uncle Jack Davis took me aside and said this mob can be really badly behaved. You just must do what you think you must do. And Auntie Dot was "you tell 'em". There was also particularly from Auntie Dot, such kindness that was this amazing grandmother. I think what she liked was my sense of detail and that I was both loose but very precise about how I thought things ought to be, and that worked really. As a young director in that situation, I didn't feel any different, we don't feel any different now to how we did then really.

I think I was somehow more shifted later when I did *Aliwa*⁷⁷ with Ningali and Kylie Belling and Deb Mailman. Unlike *No Sugar*, we started with a script that felt much more unformed and unrealized really. And Dallas [Winmar] was there and we really just practically worked our way through it and looked at every scene and discussed where the scenes might — if there was something missing in the story, would it be a good opportunity to have a scene at whatever the show was a country show in North Western WA [agricultural show]. That's really when I realized it was by complete surrender, that sense of how do you will something forward, to just surrender to what the energies are of the room. Which I kind of had been doing instinctively one way or another but that's where it became very conscious. Ningali and Kylie both had kids who were around the rehearsal and came in and out. So much of the focus of the day was cooking lunch for everyone so food was ... which probably was with *No Sugar* as well, food was terribly important in the process of the day. That was really the, I thought with *No Sugar*

⁷⁵ *State of Shock* by Tony Strachan, Company B, directed by Neil Armfield, Belvoir St. Theatre, 1986.

⁷⁶ *Clouds* by Michael Frayn, Nimrod Theatre Company, directed by Neil Armfield, Nimrod Upstairs (now Belvoir St.), 1980.

⁷⁷ *Aliwa* by Dallas Winmar, Company B, directed by Neil Armfield, Belvoir St. Theatre, 2001.

it was the script and the story was very like a piece of poetry really that just had to be fleshed out the dramaturgy was secure. Whereas with *Aliwa* we were finding that as we went through. It was such a leap into the unknown. Deeply satisfying because of where it landed, I thought.

I think you can be too precious about the mysteries of what goes on in a room. It can be great. I remember going to Indonesia 1980 earlier that year, I went to visit Rendra from the Bengkel Theatre Company. He'd been in prison and he'd spent a lot of his life in prison under Soeharto. We had done a reading of the play *Struggle of the Naga Tribe* and Nimrod went on later to do a production of it.⁷⁸ This play had been hugely important in Indonesia and the theatre company had been closed down, they had performances in Jakarta which were closed after two days, the company travelled to Surabaya, the other end of the island. People in the audience knew the songs from the show because they had travelled through the communities across the island the length of Java. A couple of the actors showed me where they rehearsed in Rendra's backyard and described that all of the local community used to come and climb on the fences and up the trees early in the morning. Everyone from around was there participating in the story as it got found. That's why it belonged to the community so powerfully. That was 10 years before I ventured into *No Sugar* and I think that was a very powerful discovery.

Do you think we make families as we work? It seems to me, that no matter how consciously we try to apply other language — we always end up there ...

Yeah, for sure. When we redeveloped the [Belvoir St.] theatre, it's why I pushed so hard for there just to be a single dressing room so that everyone was together in the same space. Which was one of the great problems on Broadway⁷⁹ was that everyone goes off into their own dressing room. The more important you are to the selling of the show, the closer you are to the stage. It entrenches the sense of hierarchy that's quite bizarre. I kept on saying look, when there were problems

⁷⁸ *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe* by W. S. Rendra, Nimrod Theatre Company, directed by Chris Johnson, 1982.

⁷⁹ *Exit The King* by Eugene Ionesco, Belvoir St / Malthouse co-production, directed by Neil Armfield, 2007. Opened on Broadway in 2009 with a predominantly US cast except for Geoffrey Rush.

within the company, all you have to do is gather together in Susan's [Sarandon] dressing room — Susan had a big dressing room with a common room or a big kind of lounge area attached to her dressing room, and talk it out. In the way that you do naturally at Belvoir because you come off stage and if you're angry about something you say it. Or if it happens three shows in a row and you want to say it, you say it.

Because you kind of can't hide it even if all you're doing is taking your costume off...

You know I guess it's no surprise that, something like *Cloudstreet*⁸⁰ becomes the iconic production for me, of my time here. I would say *No Sugar* was very much connected to the development of an aesthetic, or the development of an approach that ended up in *Cloudstreet*. It's so obviously about family, kind of almost nothing else, well not nothing else, but it's about the nation conceived as family as well.

I want to know if you feel you'll be without family when you leave Belvoir?

I don't know yet. I resisted becoming an artistic director. I went through this really shocking experience early after starting at Nimrod. Having been engaged in the slaughter of Ken Horler, with John [Bell] and Paul Iles and Graham Murray. Paul Iles left after being general manager after Ken left.

How do you mean slaughter...

After Richard Wherrett left 'cause it was Richard John and Ken — it was a very unstable ... well, it was stable but it was unhappy. The triumvirate. Richard got the Sydney Theatre Company job, John had wanted it but Richard got it. So John and Ken were left, they then invited me and Kim Carpenter to become co-artistic directors with them. So it became four people. Kind of encouraged by John but it was of my own viewing as well. [Neil makes reference to the fact that there were artistic differences between Ken Horler and the company which perhaps no one had the courage to address] ... but instead ... there was this move within the staff that was encouraged by me and John particularly and Paul the general manager

⁸⁰ *Cloudstreet*, adapted from Tim Winton's novel by by Nick Enright and Justin Monjo, Company B./Black Swan, directed by Neil Armfield, Berth 9, Darling Harbour, 1998.

for people to give 'testimony' against Ken. It was awful, and so they did it and they sort of asked him to leave. It could have happened in a very different way. In particular the feminist energies within the company, Chris Westwood and Sue Hill were harnessed. Then they were perceived as a threat to John Bell's artistic directorship, and I was seen as part of that group as well. — And so Sue and Westie were both removed from the company, Aubrey [Mellor] came to work here, it just became a very weird place to work.

I was offered the directorship of the South Australian Theatre Company, in 1981 the end of my first year of working professionally. I was flattered and kind of accepted it, but I was very nervous of it, I hadn't actually signed a contract, I was delaying because I was nervous about what it might do to me. Finally I, well Paul Iles who was now General Manager in South Australia sensed my delaying and he announced it to the press before I'd signed and that freaked me out and made me immediately decide it was completely the wrong job for me. So I pulled out and it was just an unholy mess. It made me *really* wary about that. And then Jim Sharman took on the company, and he invited me down there as a guest director and then associate director. So I kind of then came in, and Jim was like — Jim was an only child — well he's not an only child but he thought he was — he grew up as one, and so he's leading the company and I came in as the "younger brother" who develops a relationship with Geoffrey [Rush] and Kerry [Walker] and Jon Wood all under Jim's nose, really, because I was more like, I was the kid. Again it's that third child thing of see what other people are doing, do it better and differently and make people happy whilst you're doing it — to some extent.

And so I was very wary of taking on this 'Boss' position. I much preferred working from a different political structure altogether. Then we set up Company B. What was created didn't work at all really. Which was an artistic directorate that was itinerant artists who came in and gather together yearly. Met every six weeks or every month but — they were elected yearly. It was me and Robyn Archer and Bill Shanahan, Kerry [Walker] a whole group of people that came and went, Lindy Davies. But the company was really being led by the general manager [Chris Westwood and Sue Hill]. Then it was Robyn Kershaw; that was when you came into the company.

It became clear that there was a way of being an Artistic Director without fucking it up. Not that they're power trips, but that I could find a way of holding the position and trying to remain as open both to my needs which are huge because I need a huge amount of support from the people I'm working with. For people to give me as much as I give them — more! ... than what I give them, I suspect. The political economy of the company really suited that intention. I tried to set up a company that I could both lead but it be very analogous to the experience of the rehearsal room. That everyone is sharing in the ideals of where the company is heading.

Which was the objective before ...

Yeah, but it wasn't resulting in good theatre all the time. Nothing's ever always great but the distance between when it was good and when it was bad was vast before, and it's been narrowed. So, to return to your question,

It's not like you'll walk out the door never to be seen again – no one will recognize you when you knock on the door...!

It could happen! But I'm aware that when I go to Houston and work with the opera company there — everyone comments on the atmosphere in the rehearsal room being unlike any other opera rehearsals they've been in. Same thing happened here with *Peter Grimes*. And *Billy Budd*. It's not particularly calculated, just trying to work as honestly as you can and be as open about things that you don't know. Try and create a situation that's friendly and trusting but uncompromising in its desire to be, to do, something good. I suppose what I try and do, is whatever rehearsal room I go into, I try and create that experience for the time of the play.

What I guess I will miss is the way the entire staff here are connected to that atmosphere within the company, but really I think that is much more governed by the general manager still in this company. I think I have a connection and love many of the people working within the administration. I do spend a lot of my time away as well. They get on with it. And they don't know me, some of them.

I don't know if you read in the brochure where I talked about the designers have made such a huge contribution to this company, particularly Ralph Myers and Robert Cousins and Dale Ferguson, Tess Schofield. There's a group that have been really people of great equanimity as human beings. What you set up with those designers is very brotherly really from my point of view. Robert [Cousins] has created this thing, which he calls 'Salon' it's Tuesday nights at his local pub [...]. There's just a bunch of people who go there and talk. Not to talk about theatre necessarily but we often do. It's just a really nice way of belonging to the theatre community of the city. I imagine I would still go along there on Tuesday nights and have a drink. But it's a weird thing, the gap between the intensity of that relationship whilst you're working on something and then how easily it can apparently disappear after that project stops.

There's certainly a period of melancholy (sadness, ennui, attrition?) that actors talk about, I was surprised to find – it's one of those things professional actors keep hidden but it happens more often than not ...

When it's so easily dissolvable, there's a fear it's a false notion of family. The notion of family is something that is permanent and you can't escape from it really. Whereas — I think something remains which can be stronger and then its reconnected again when you reconnect, with those people again professionally or it remains in sometimes long periods when you're not connecting again, but you can't deny the pleasure of what that time was and what that achievement was as well. Those things kind of last forever in a way. Almost every show that I've done stays as alive as the last one or the next one. Do you find that?

I do, when I started to write this I was surprised at how accessible all those experiences were. Like the night I introduced mum and dad to Auntie Dot when she stayed at our place. Those things are not small. They're not necessarily aspects of the work but they serve to really anchor this stuff somewhere.

Absolutely, and I think there's a particular colonial story which is being shaken up by these work experiences, where there's a much, the Anglo Saxon experience is much more there's your home life and there's your professional life whereas the aboriginal experience, there's much more flow in it."

This is a great acknowledgement by Neil of the Indigenous approach, the flow between one's own life and the life of the piece. That the two aspects are not mutually exclusive but a part of each other. Ursula makes particular mention of the quality of a Belvoir working experience, which she attributes specifically to Neil and his attention to that. Neil was receptive to that idea as a young director, and it has grown in practice to become a trademark of Belvoir St. Theatre under his leadership. So 'family' in this sense, to refer back to my introduction, is not a thing, or a description or even an aspiration but a dynamic. Neil's word is 'flow'. The family has its own life which is organic, rough, irreverent and vulnerable. In chapter two I quoted Chekhov who suggested that for him, blood families are places of irritation because it is where the differences between past and present are most felt. When a theatre family exists in the making of a play, it is always in the present for the life of the play and they are seemingly "ephemeral" bonds.⁸¹

⁸¹ Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux, 2010: 203

Conclusion: A Temporary Unity

As Leo Tolstoy describes the Oblonsky household in the opening moment of Anna Karenina there is a sense of witnessing this family/household poised for disaster. It is amusing to observe – husband, wife, French governess, cook and housekeeper all contributing to each other’s pain, detached and yet together creating the snapshot of “The Oblonskys”. This research is a step inside the “household”. The language of the householders themselves uncovers the dynamic beneath the chaos. The agendas that have surfaced as a matter of course range from theatre culture to work practices to the politics of company structure and community. In each case the metaphor of ‘family’ was the gateway.

What Remains

There is one consistent thread that begins in the first interview, runs right through dysfunction, the Indigenous perspective and the perceptions of directors. It is the acknowledgment of the required ‘intensity’ to do the work of the rehearsal room. This intensity is a deep focus on the relationships being created in the service of the play. In terms of the depth and truth that professional actors endeavour to bring to their work as artists it is not a great leap to name this intensity ‘love’. It lasts for the commitment of the show, and as some interviewees have identified, there is sometimes a small period, of varying intensities of sadness or adjustment after the run of a performance. A professional cast of actors does not walk into a rehearsal room and immediately fall in love with each other (!) but they are working to define emotional landscapes truthfully and precisely prescribed by the text. This quality of love encompasses all the inherent problems and nuances that come with it. There are expectations regarding a sense of emotional safety for each actor, which enables them to take greater risks in the process of discovery.

Understanding the measures and dynamic of this intensity or kind of love comes with practice. It is interesting to note that over the course of the interviews presented it was suggested that this intensity is felt greatly in the early years, less so in the middle years of job to job, and it is the artists of maturity who come back to the idea, weathered by a deeper and broader perception of the intensity. Robert Alexander recalls his sadness after the close of the *Hamlet* tour; Noel Tovey affirmed: “Is it family? Yes. [...] that intimacy forms a life long bond”. Mnouchkine says she denied fiercely a maternal role but now no longer can. Neil Armfield addresses this family dynamic when he says “When it’s so easily dissolvable, there’s a fear it’s a false notion of family. The notion of family is something that is permanent and you can’t escape from it really. Whereas I think something remains which can be stronger and then it’s reconnected again when you reconnect with these people again professionally or it remains in sometimes long periods [...] Those things kind of last forever in a way.” He draws out here the other common thread, which is the notion of coming back together when actors re-form a new unit. The history is in place. Whether the previous experience was good or indeed difficult there is that sense of safety or trust and familiarity as a starting point for the work.

Coming and Going

In his interview Neil Armfield, discussed his work with Geoffrey Rush. He doesn’t want to isolate *that* working relationship from the others — even though he recognizes it as very particular in its longevity alone. By extension, another relationship with the audience has been formed who maintain a collection of these collaborations (in the case of Geoffrey and Neil) in their memories. This familial relationship comes and goes, punctuated by other projects. Both Geoffrey and Neil have international careers in other media. Geoffrey having been pursued by an international film career and Neil in opera; all the while, there is a place where they call ‘home’ and that has been Belvoir St.

The 2007 Belvoir brochure shows Geoffrey on the front cover sitting on a throne in underwear and crown, with a hand written note saying “Welcome Home” with the Company B logo circled underneath. It was not only the return of the company after the renovations and more than a return for Geoffrey to this

theatre after an absence for some years but also a return for audiences to this collaboration. There is reference in the season brochure to Neil and Geoffrey renewing vows.⁸² The point I want to make here is: even this exceptional theatre relationship appears to be a constant moving away and coming together again. Made evident only by its longevity, those examples are particularly rare in Australian theatre. When they return to work together again it has a sense of the inevitable about it then, when the show is over, the possibility becomes a mystery again. The artistic relationship remains elusive — even to the participants (at the mercy of international schedules). Along with the continued success of these collaborations comes another aspect that audiences also fall in love with — familiarity. This working relationship reflects well Peter Brook's observation:

There is a reality which I can't deny, and that is that in any large conglomeration of human beings — in a city, let's say — people aspire to unity. But they are incapable of living that unity. Fragmentation is the natural process of agglomeration. And there is something of vast importance in attaining a temporary sense of unity. Perhaps this is the most fundamental and ancient meaning that the theatre can have.⁸³

The intensity of these working relationships does exist within the framework of the play. It is expected. The experience of performing extremities in relationships plays does impact, in that they (the feelings) *land* somewhere and something remains. It is the making of theatre that bonds us uniquely and divides us again inevitably, in order for new organisms to form and bond us again, and again. It creates our theatre culture and our wider community — these temporary unities to which Brook refers. That is to say that the notion of a theatre family is not actual family. Not at all, but the *dynamic* is the same which is why the metaphor around it seems to survive whether we are we use it intentionally or not. Show by show the theatre gives the appearance of being temporary or ephemeral and on the surface indeed it is, but underneath, for the actors who stay with it, bonds have been made through the — mostly unseen — journey to complicity.

⁸² Belvoir St season brochure, 2007: 17

⁸³ Melinda Camber Porter, *Through Parisian Eyes: Reflections on Contemporary French Arts and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986: 70.

The Family Inheritance

Any exploration of notions of family, metaphorical or actual, also inevitably brings up the question of legacy and inheritance. What is being passed on and to whom? How is cultural capital being managed by theatrical generations who exist side by side? At a moment when Australian theatre's greatest proponent of the metaphor is about to move out of his theatrical home, this is a significant time to consider such things. Julian Meyrick makes clear what the consequences are if these questions are continuously ignored:

A series of disconnections has arisen within Australian theatre whose chief fault-line is generational [...] But theatre cultures are more than collections of material assets. There are ideas, ways of working, attitudes and values which also need handing on, albeit in a transformed way, from older practitioners to younger ones. When this doesn't happen — or happens less often and meaningfully than it should — the result is stunted growth: a theatre culture that repeats itself, rather than growing richer, because it doesn't know how to manage its inheritance.⁸⁴

The interviews in this research seem to suggest otherwise — the notion of theatre culture — ideas, ways of working, attitudes *are* being passed down from theatre generation to theatre generation, in dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms and on tour. The younger generations of performers are hungry to make a contribution and transform what they know. In Sydney, the disconnect occurs where there has been a poverty of professional venues, opportunities and committed ongoing support (that is: wages) for the artists in order to make that contribution in any meaningful and lasting way. Even now, a very poor understanding of the wider potential economy and society that professional theatre and arts bring to any quarter in any city remains a major obstacle to maturing generations of artistic excellence in Sydney. But the artists keep working and so we have the “Independent Theatre” scenes in Sydney and Melbourne, often loaded up with “cred” but no one gets paid.

It is fundamental to acknowledge that ‘generations’ of theatre performers exist by not only valuing their contribution – but by also paying them properly for

⁸⁴ Julian Meyrick, *Platform Paper: Trapped by the Past: Why Our Theatre Is Facing Paralysis*. Sydney: Currency House, 2005: 6.

their work. In the 2002 Rex Cramphorn Lecture, Nick Enright was already concerned about this:

I believe we are losing sight of the value and dignity of the actor in society and the importance of continuity, tradition and experience in this most ancient and essential artform.⁸⁵

Recognition of the stories and difficulties and commitments that connect us as a community is crucial, it appears to be built in to the very nature of what we do. Nick Enright had already begun to notice some decay. The fact that the real cost of this artform is born by the artists is nothing new, what is striking is that when Nick says “I believe *we* are losing sight of the dignity of the actor”; his audience that day were the performers, theatre makers, producers, directors and writers. Have we begun to accept this contraction of our value — ourselves? It is of concern when one considers now the amount of unpaid Independent Theatre which makes up the theatre landscape in Sydney. That said, one of the resounding themes, in all of the interviews that make up this document is the seriousness and depth applied by actors to their work, with or without a paypacket.

The notion of family as a metaphor in the theatre is everything that a blood connection implies: the difficulties and divisions; reconnections and fragmentations; generational shifts and cultural issues. The creation of theatre requires an ancient structure, no matter how advanced or challenging its form may evolve to be. Family remains the ancient point of reference in its innumerable manifestations. Perhaps the family metaphor in Australian theatre will transform; if it does, we will be working in another way. Our cultural priorities as a nation will have shifted, which our stories and their telling will reflect but an experience of unity is what remains. Any experience of unity no matter how ephemeral, is what enables us to re-create community in another context. Family is our beginning experience of this ancient recreation.

⁸⁵ Nick Enright, "Collaboration and Community: The Seventh Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture" *Australasian Drama Studies*. no. 42 (2003): 19.

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Appendix 1: Interview Information and Ethics Protocols:

Interview subjects and dates:

- Robert Alexander 1.2.10
- Neil Armfield 23.11.09
- Marco Chiappi 8.12.09
- Vanessa Downing 25.1.10
- Glenn Hazeldine 18.11.09
- Deborah Kennedy 10.5.10
- John O'Hare 11.3.10
- Marion Potts 10.2.10
- Kyas Sherriff 15.5.10
- Christopher Stollery 31.5.10
- Noel Tovey 3.4.10
- Anna Volska 20.4.10
- Kerry Walker 4.12.09
- Ursula Yovich 13.1.10

- **Sample Participant Information Statement:**



The University of Sydney

Dr Laura Ginters
Department of Performance Studies
laura.ginters@usyd.edu.au

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

Title: Notions of Family in Australian Theatre, from the Holy Family to the Osbournes.

(1) What is the study about?

The metaphor of the family among actors and theatre practitioners is familiar and potent to those who embrace it and to those who reject it. An examination of the language which informs the rehearsal environment in the case of performers (specifically actors) and the administration face of theatre companies they work for. How does this metaphor inform practise and creation?

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Camilla Ah Kin, part-time Master of Arts (Research) student under the supervision of Dr Laura Ginters at the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney.

(3) What does the study involve?

A series of interviews to be held with actors and directors of varying ages and experience who are working currently in theatre in Australia.

(4) How much time will the study take?

It is anticipated that interviews will take approximately 1 - 2 hours and these interviews will be conducted at times of mutual convenience with practising actors and directors and others who may emerge as of interest to the study. The interviews may be recorded, and take place at a time and location convenient to participants. Such as a café or another open public area.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and—if you do participate—you can withdraw at any time without prejudicing your relationship with the University of Sydney or penalty. Should you withdraw after or during the interview, any data collected will be deleted.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

All aspects of the study will fully acknowledge your contributions. You will be fully identified and credited for any contributions that you make to the generation of data on the work of the company. Should you wish to remain anonymous, contributions will be attributed to gender, age and years of experience (eg: M,34, 8 years experience) only.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

The aim of this study is to examine this particular aspect of theatre rehearsal practice and the continuation of professional theatre culture in Australia.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes

(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information, Camilla Ah Kin will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please contact Camilla Ah Kin (0412 154558) or Dr Laura Ginters, Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney: 9351 6849 (laura.ginters@usyd.edu.au).

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Deputy Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 86278176 (Telephone); (02) 86278177 (Facsimile) or human.ethics@usyd.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep

• **Sample Participant Consent From:**



The University of Sydney

Dr Laura Ginters
School of Letters, Art and Media
Ph: [61 2] 02 9351 6849
Fax: [61 2] 02 9351 5676
Woolley Bldg
A20 Manning Road, NSW Australia 2006

Department of Performance Studies

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: Notions of family in the theatre

I,, give consent to my
participation in the research project
Name (please print)

TITLE: Notions of family in the theatre, from the Holy Family to the Osbournes.

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher.
3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time and any data recorded will be deleted. My relationship with the researcher now or in the future will not be affected.
4. I understand that my involvement in this project will require me to participate in a series of interviews to be conducted for the purpose of collecting oral history data for documentation and analysis. I understand that these interviews will be recorded and I give my permission for this to occur. I realize that transcripts of these interviews or excerpts from them will be published in the final research project document and that I will be identified and acknowledged for my contributions to this document or remain anonymous as I advise.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

- **Sample Interview Questions**

Notions of Family in the theatre, from the Holy Family to The Osbournes

Interview Questions:

- How do you understand the term “Family” in a theatrical context?
- Can you describe how relationships with colleagues form and deepen through rehearsal and performance?
- Do you consider that you have or have had a “theatre family”? If so, where and when?
- What happens when the show is over – or it breaks away?
- Why do you think this metaphor persists?
- Is there an economy associated with this idea of “family” in the professional sphere?