The Body in Time: A Physical Approach to Historical Storytelling

By Todd Barty

In contemporary Australian Theatre, creators are making increasing use of postdramatic vocabularies, specifically exploring the way they may be deployed to address the challenging and emotive processes of truth telling and cultural memory as we continue to explore Australian history. Often, this encompasses the use of actor-driven approaches familiar to physical theatre to provoke thought and dialogue by encouraging an active audience. In order to critically engage with these works, it is helpful to reflect on the history of the physical and postdramatic modes, before moving to an exploration of their emergence in Australian performance.

In my professional practice as an arts educator, I have found that Postdramatic Theatre, a style that seeks to "defy traditional principles of narration, action and characterisation" (Hamilton 153), may be found across the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority's 2019 Senior Syllabus for Drama. It encompasses various forms of storytelling theatre covered in Unit One, the hybrid styles Magical Realism and Australian Gothic in Unit Two, contemporary political theatre and Theatre of the Absurd in Unit Three,

and Contemporary Theatre, as covered in Unit Four. Critically, it must be noted that Postdramatic Theatre, a term coined by the German scholar Hans-Theiss Lehmann, emerged in a Post-Brechtian environment not "as a theatre that has nothing to do with Brecht, but as a theatre which knows it is affected by . . . Brecht's work, but can no longer accept Brecht's answers" (Lehman trans. Jurs-Munby 27).

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It is important to note, however, that while several theatre practitioners associated with Postdramatic Theatre have taken physical and visual storytelling further, the Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Irwin Piscator introduced the concept of Gestus, defined by Drama Queensland as:

> A combination of a gesture and a social meaning in a movement, stance or vocal display which is continuous or repeated throughout the moment. It is used to convey the didactic ideas significant at that moment, as well as denoting a character's status, social attitude and relationships with others. The actor's choices need to be socially recognisable to the audience; drawing on habits, manners and customs which are a demonstration rather than realistically shown. (Drama Queensland np)

Brecht's deployment of this convention in his politically didactic Theatre aligns with the goals of contemporary director Ariane Mnouchkine, whose company Théâtre du Soleil also engages in political comment, that her actors' bodies become "forms, figures, and signs - or easily readable visual images" (Miller 38). While the final products may draw on various stylistic conventions (this hybridity being characteristic of Postdramatic Theatre), training and rehearsals at Théâtre du Soleil employ the use of masks, particularly those of the Commedia dell'Arte, to achieve this aim in vitally physical performances. The masks do not always appear in the resulting production, but sometimes do. Mnouchkine's prioritisation of 'readability' is echoed in the observations of theatre-maker and anthropologist Richards Shechner, who noted that his company, The Performance Group, benefitted from broader physicality when presenting Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children for a (partially) non-English-speaking audience in India (44). The universal quality of movement and imagery demonstrated here, I would contend, has the potential to transcend not only language barriers, but differences in age, culture and background.

Polish director Jerzy Grotowski is listed by Lehrman as part of the postdramatic movement (24), and his body-centred approaches often cause him to be associated with physical theatre, although he would have laughed at the term

(Capra). Grotowski described his style as the 'Poor Theatre', in reaction to the 'rich theatre' that relied heavily upon technical and design elements. At a time when other Postdramatic practitioners were experimenting with technologies, such as the integration of film, Grotwski labelled such efforts as "nonsense" (Grotowski 19). He felt that the goal of the 'rich theatre' was to emulate film, something that theatre could never and should not attempt to do. His intention, realised with an ensemble of actors, was to discover the unique properties of live theatre, and to do this he instituted a method of training designed to unlock the expressive potential of the body. Discussing his research, Grotowski explains that:

> We found that it was consummately theatrical for an actor to transform from type to type, character to character, silhouette to silhouette—while the audience watched—in a poor manner, using only his own body and his craft . . . By his controlled use of gesture the actor transforms the floor into a sea, a table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner etc. (21)

While Australia has produced a few notable companies engaged in Postdramatic Theatre, such as The Sydney Front, and some specifically dedicated to Physical Theatre, such as Kinetic Energy Theatre Company and Brisbane's own Zen Zen Zo and Frank Theatre, John McCallum observes that Postdramatic Theatre in Australia is hybridised with more traditional modes of expression (485), and plays by Angela Betzien and Tom Wright exemplify this tendency.

Wright and, most significantly, Betzien, have contributed to a corpus of work recognised critically as Australian Gothic playwriting. In the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Senior Drama Syllabus, Australian Gothic is collected under the umbrella of another postcolonial style, Magical Realism (QCAA 30). Wendy B. Faris explains that "magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" and the "combination . . . together with . . . different cultural traditions, means that magical realism reflects . . . the hybrid nature of much post-colonial society" (1). Australian Gothic transplants the European tradition of "tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images", "life-threatening pursuits", and "imagined and realistic threats" (Botting 2) and where landscapes, "desolate, alienating and full of menace", the "castle" and other "medieval edifices" all denote "the spatial and temporal separation of the past" (3) and its haunting return in the present, to a colonial Australian setting. Gerry Turcotte argues that "the generic qualities of the Gothic mode . . . [articulate] the colonial experience inasmuch as each emerges out of a condition of deracination

and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space" (1). In more recent times, Linda Hassall has noted the gothic features of the colonial experience: "The 'grotesque carnival' of convict settlement, the abject deprivation and violence associated with colonisation and subsequent entrenched Indigenous genocide and disadvantage are signifiers of our cultural heritage" (3). Carleton notes "a current Gothic 'boom' in Australian playwriting" ("Northern Turn" 56). He finds continuity between Turcotte's description of colonial gothic and Linda Hassall's definition of the postcolonial mode to identify an ongoing tradition of gothic theatre mapped to the nation's traumas (Carleton, "Australian Gothic Drama").

Several Magical Realist and Australian Gothic plays, by design, adhere to Grotwski's insistence that the actor is the chief agent of theatrical storytelling and, with limited means, is capable of fluidly creating and transitioning between time, space and role—conventions of Magical Realism and Australian Gothic recognised by QCAA (31). The attraction of body-centred approaches to exploring bodies "no longer physically present" (Parker-Starbuck and Mock 10) is understandable in this style, "arguably to recapture and make sense of these bodies, to negotiate between absence and presence" (Parker-Starbuck and Mock 10). The importance of the 'presence' of the actor over the representation of character extends to the 'chorusisation' of dialogue (Lehmann), with characters emerging as necessary, not trivially, from the storytelling - explicitly connected to the construction of meaning, as a priority over traditional theatre's focus on the development of characters and relationships. The symbolism and abstraction, created using posture, positioning, pace and energy, activates the audience to interpretive and critical engagement when dealing with historical subject matter, rather than a purely emotional response that may result in a sense of guilt or revulsion that precipitates disengagement.

Devices familiar to postdramatic and physical or visual theatre are echoed in Tom Wright's restaging of the Joan Lindsay classic *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2017), originally directed by Matthew Lutton for Malthouse Theatre, which is rich in symbolism of colonial and patriarchal oppression. The play begins with the modern students sharing the famous story, and their words precipitate their transformation into the characters and the horrifying re-enactment of the disappearance and its aftermath. The most prolific playwright inferring these conventions, however, is Angela Betzien, who has chosen to write in a gothic mode in several of her plays, including *Hoods* (2007), and *Children of the Black Skirt* (2005); the latter is identified by both Stephen Carleton and John McCallum as a key work in the Australian Gothic corpus. In both of these plays, which were originally directed by Leticia Caceres, Betzien has written intentionally for spartan, actor-driven productions. Hoods follows two mysterious youths with uncanny

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storytelling power who take the audience on several doomed car trips before entering the main narrative in which a junkyard transforms into a suburban car park where two lonely children and an infant wait for their missing mother. The characters and situations are evoked using only the detritus found in the wrecked car, the hoods on the characters' sweaters, and physical and vocal change. The twitching, grotesque nocturnal denizens of the carpark and figures from the children's world are the products of accents, pitch and tone, posture and levels. In *Children of the Black Skirt*, a similarly minimalist set endows the space as an abandoned orphanage and the actors, with fragmentary costumes and props and, again relying on movement and voice, transition through various characters from Australia's past to tell difficult chapters from our history, through the eyes of the lost child, who Peter Pierce argues is "a symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties in the white settler communities of this country" (xi). With its dreamlike structure and haunted orphanage and cast of lost children who disclose repressed narratives from Australia's past, *Children of the Black Skirt* reflects "Gothic's preoccupation with history's 'haunting' of the present" (Carleton, "Northern Turn" 52).

The question remains, however, of the efficacy and appropriateness of theatre to deal with serious and sensitive political, social and cultural questions, particularly in the classroom. Marvin Carlson contends that:

> drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory. (qtd. in Carleton 11).

The physical approach enriches this recirculation while creating space for interpretation and discussion, functioning as a distancing or defamiliarisation effect in the style of Epic Theatre. At the 2023 Drama Queensland State Conference: Odyssey, Wesley Enoch gave a comprehensive insight into his process in directing Tom Wright's *Black Diggers* (2014), a play that is not gothic but certainly postdramatic,

for Queensland Theatre. He noted that the deployment of Brechtian distancing or defamiliarisation not only impacted the way the audience experienced the play, it also protected the First Nations actors who, in many cases, are required to depict discrimination and trauma that forms part of their own lived experience, adding another layer to the argument for a stylised approach. Scholar Andrew Huston, writing on the work of the company DV8, observes that, "In physical theatre, the experience of action is the means by which the spectator's psychic state is affected" (1). I argue that this occurs as the audience is not, as in realism, encouraged to see the stage as a 'real' location, rather, it is treated as a liminal space (Scheckner), one of transition and transformation. As Victor Turner says, "[b]oth ritual and theatre crucially involve liminal events and processes and have an important aspect of social metacommentary" (8).

Wesley Enoch references this in his manipulation of phenomenology, that is the philosophy of human experience and its abstractions (Armstrong), in guiding the audience to make meaning through his *mise-en-scène*. Jean-Pierre Voos, renowned artistic director of the International Theatre Research Group KISS, emphasises the potential of imagery in his physical theatre work:

> Imagery expands, deepens or parallels the action of the play [...] These illuminating images can have still further attributes - they can be haunting; capable of being retained in the mind, at whatever level, so that they may well-up later and again provoke some 'work' on the part of the spectator. (147)

The interest of Australian Theatre makers in this style of work shows no sign of abating. In *The Shot* by Angela Betzien (2019), commissioned by Queensland Theatre for their educational offering The Scene Project, the playwright extends her reach beyond Australia, navigating an international legacy of conflict, inequality and exploitation through the turbulent dreams of a renowned photojournalist. This work of Global Gothic, a term that acknowledges that "contemporary Gothic… would appear to have much to do with the social, cultural and economic impacts of globalisation" (Byron 371), was minimally staged by Queensland Theatre under the direction of Travis Dowling, with a small cast evoking multiple roles and settings using fragmentary costuming and physicality. As filmed performance options studied for the external examination sat by Senior Drama students, QCAA selected *Children of the Black Skirt* in 2020 and 2021, and *Black Diggers* in 2023 and 2024 - further encouraging the study of the intersect between aesthetics and politics at secondary school level. Most recently, in the lead-up to the historic referendum on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, *Children of the Black Skirt* received a new production by

Brisbane's Lost Child Ensemble in association with The Curators Theatre, characterised by "director Helen Strube's lean into its non-naturalism" and the "mesmeric stylised movement of physical theatre" (Walker, 2003), and another iteration of Wright's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was directed by Lachlan Driscoll for The Observatory Theatre. While the referendum yielded disappointing results, the continued emergence and development of this stylistic tendency underscores the vital role theatre, and the arts, have in our national conversation, prompting consideration of how reimagining an artform might assist audiences to reimagine the surrounding society.

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