

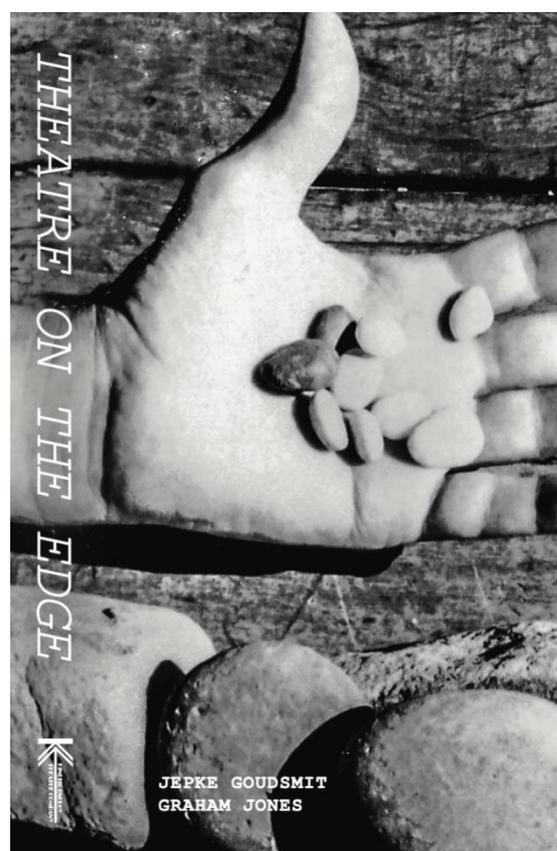
*Theatre on the Edge:***Knowledge Passes On, Sumptuously****A review of *Theatre on the Edge* by Jepke Goudsmit and Graham Jones**

By Todd Barty

A student of theatre in Australia is likely to have heard of several of the form's major international innovators from the later part of the twentieth century, and the twenty-first, thus far. Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook are ubiquitous reference points both in actor training and avant-grade aesthetics. Eugenio Barba, Tadashi Suzuki, Ariane Mnoushkine, Robert Wilson, and Julian Beck and Judith Malina (The Living Theatre) are others whose names are synonymous with acting methodology and stylistic experimentation.

But to whom do they look in Australia? In Queensland, where I am based, Frank (Ozfrank) Theatre and Zen Zen Zo have pushed the boundaries of physical and postdramatic theatre, and further afield, Legs on The Wall, Bangarra, Chunky Move and the now-closed Sydney Front have made significant contributions in these areas. For pioneers of laboratory-style theatre work in Australia, however, a scholar of theatre or prospective avant-gardist must certainly take note of the Sydney-based Kinetic Energy Theatre Company, and its co-artistic directors, Graham Jones and Jepke Goudsmit.

Inspired to share the discoveries of a bold and



significant creative journey, Goudsmit and Jones have recently released a generous volume titled *Theatre on the Edge*. This stunning hardcover publication richly documents their work, including scripts, discussions of process and research, and an abundance of stunning photography that captures a unique aesthetic developed over the last fifty years, focussing

particularly on their exciting period of praxis at The Edge Theatre.

Before examining Kinetic Energy's works during this exciting period, it is important to trace the aesthetic lineage of the two lead creatives, Goudsmit and Jones. Before founding the company as Kinetic Energy Dance Company in 1975, Graham Jones had an impressive career at the vanguard of contemporary dance, in Australia and internationally. Jones's early work as a dancer and choreographer was with The Contemporary Dance Company of Australia under the direction of Ronne Arnold, an American practitioner who himself had learnt from modern dance icon Nadia Chikovsky at the Philadelphia Dance Academy before embarking on a successful career in musical theatre that saw him relocate to the Antipodes. Arnold's own career was a diverse one, encompassing jazz as well as an interest in the dance of First Nations Australians; he was later to work with Bangarra. Curious to learn, Jones went on to study the Martha Graham technique at London's contemporary dance hub The Place and to work with Ballet Rambert, which had recently shifted its focus from classical to contemporary dance and boasted such alumni as Audrey Hepburn. Here, he not only danced but became one of the company's emerging choreographers, creating three original pieces for the company. Following this, Jones moved to New York to study at the Merce Cunningham studio, with modern dance luminaries Murry Louis and Joyce Tristler. Upon his return to the

United Kingdom, Jones continued to work on stage and in film and television. With this experience, Jones returned to Australia to found Kinetic Energy. Between 1975 and 1984, he created a range of new works with the company and developed relationships with collaborators from other disciplines, particularly music and design. The company was resident at The Seymour Centre before establishing Sydney's first warehouse studio in Liverpool Street, akin to the NY style loft venues. Under his direction the company mounted performance programs, tours, workshop and educational programs, and he experimented with site-specific performance as a direct way to bring modern and contemporary dance to the people.

Jepke Goudsmit's path to the company is no less extraordinary. While studying to be an actor at the Theatre Academy in Amsterdam, Goudsmit took classes in contemporary dance. Gravitating towards alternative theatre, she secured a position to study in Poland at the Teatr Laboratorium, directed by Jerzy Grotowski, one of the most significant theatrical innovators of the second half of the twentieth century. Grotowski had gained international recognition for his experiments in 'Poor Theatre,' peeling back technical and design elements to rediscover theatre's unique essence: the expressive power of the actor. During this phase, Grotowski also experimented with the actor-audience relationship via unconventional configuring of performance spaces. He investigated this central

**It is difficult to imagine that there is an Australian theatre company with a more impressive coalescence of lineages from the avant-garde of twentieth century performance.**

relationship further in his paratheatrical phase, encouraging audience participation in communal experiences with actors leading the process. As well as fundamental actor training with Grotowski, Goudsmit participated in this aesthetic journey. Following this, she became a core member of The International Theatre Research Group KISS, under the artistic direction of Jean-Pierre Voos. Voos was inspired by Grotowski, Peter Brook and other innovators of the era in his image-rich recreations of classics such as *The Oresteia*, a production which was to become a through-line in the company's journey, in which Goudsmit portrayed Electra. She also taught and directed for the company, becoming a leading authority on the company's training exercises. It was during a 1983 tour of KISS to Australia that Goudsmit met Jones and joined him as co-artistic director of Kinetic Energy. It is difficult to imagine that there is an Australian theatre company with a more impressive coalescence of lineages from the avant-garde of twentieth century performance.

The first of the plays, *Eccentrics*, is a playful exploration of otherness. The work arose from an examination of diversity and difference, with the creators surveying both their own family histories and the social landscape of the Sydney around them. The play focuses on Ruby and Frankie, two

characters whose different abilities and cultures place them on the fringes of society. Through a series of poignant, sometimes humorous, poetic vignettes, their lives are intertwined to reflect a humanity that is shared between both of them, and the audience. One reviewer—reviews are included in the documentation for each play—suggests a Beckettian quality to *Eccentrics*. While the sense of ritual and strangeness are certainly there, the show also exudes a warmth and hopefulness—even joy—in the resilience of the characters and the interludes of popular music and choreographic whimsy that draw them together and entice the audience into their peculiar, but not unpleasant, world.

The theatrical diptych *Who Dies?* and *Who Lives?* explores cultural attitudes and practices surrounding death, dying or close encounters therewith. The narrative starting point of *Who Dies?*, a contemporary retelling of Plato's allegory of the cave, is the reality of a hospice and the lives of four patients nearing the end of their lives: Jinny, Mrs Foster, Angela and Mrs Page. Their routines, struggles and conversations are relatable and grounded, but death is not simply something that is going to happen to them; it is instead an embodied presence with whom, day to day, they are developing a relationship—a concept that will resonate with anyone who has journeyed with a

terminally ill or elderly loved one. Death is usually a process of stepping away from life. In a meta-theatrical conceit, the character of Death takes on the various roles with whom the four patients interact. From here, the realities of the patients transition fluidly into the world of dreams, memory, transcendence—the beyond. Death leads the characters through the abstract space in sequences of music, dance and childhood games, creating a flow of poetic images. *Who Lives?* parallels the first play with the story of a world-weary man contemplating death at his own hand, who is challenged to go on living by his soul, again a metaphysical concept that is embodied, this time in female form. The play draws inspiration from an ancient Egyptian tale and is transposed to a contemporary Australian setting, following the plight of a man who has not met the standards of the patriarchal society around him; it is a story of transformation and renewal. *Who Lives?* continues the performative language of the first play, where the surface of reality gives way to something deeper within the human experience that goes beyond representation and can only be hinted at through a broader, more inventive vocabulary of the body and voice.

The next diptych, *Undiscovered Land: Voyage 1 and Voyage 2*, takes history, viewed from just before the turn of the millennium, as its subject. Unsurprisingly, this makes it the most confronting of the works, although Jones and Goudsmit place any political critique on the way that humans treat each other to further their own

ends, rather than taking any simplistic partisan positions. The first play follows Richard, and the second, Heather, two Sydneysiders in the 1990s who are each at a point of crisis. The play uses regression therapy as a narrative device to send them back not only to their own youths but into other time periods. Richard finds himself as a nobleman in twelfth-century Europe leading into the Crusades, and a young woman with an oppressive father in early twentieth-century America. Heather discovers herself as a woman in sixteenth-century Spain facing the cruelty of The Inquisition and an actor working under Moliere at the Comedie Francais in seventeenth-century France, determined to assert her creativity. The plays expose the shocking propensity of humanity to mobilise identity and division, whether along the lines of race, religion or sex, to claim or reinforce power. The pain they inflict, the violence they justify, against others and themselves, out of fear, greed or desperation, is laid bare. In a way that is both postdramatic and post-Brechtian, however, Goudsmit and Jones deploy a stylistic palette that encompasses non-linearity, repetition, dance, vaudeville and Commedia Dell'Arte to allow the audience space for critical engagement and curiosity.

The final play, *Go, Walk!*, is the shortest and most poetic of the works, and deeply personal to Jones and Goudsmit at the times of creation. The work weaves together western experience with an understanding of Chinese philosophy concerning natural cycles, especially birthing. Of particular

interest is the inventive use of Chinese calligraphy to inform not only the stage imagery, but the movement of the play. *Go, Walk!* is, in fact, a revisiting of one of the company's earlier works, *Dong Xi*, reimagining the original through more seasoned eyes that encompassed the lived experience of parenthood. This makes it an even more fitting entry as Goudsmit and Jones's daughters, Jola-Inanna and Saha-Mayousha, who were both part of the couple's journey at The Edge, provided support and encouragement for the creation of the publication, co-editing/designing and co-producing, respectively.

The challenge for Goudsmit and Jones, creators of celebratory work that transcends narrative and discipline, and reworks the traditional relationship between actor and audience, is how to capture these experiences in print. One of Goudsmit's aforementioned mentors, Jean-Pierre Voos, talked of reclaiming theatre from the 'hegemony of literature'—from plays that could be just as well read at home, because the performed product was more or less a representation of the text that the reader could imagine for themselves without venturing to the theatre. The work of Kinetic Energy more than rises to this challenge—a vibrant, image-driven theatre where text is just one element interwoven with music, and movement, not without linearity but never confined by it. The approach to documenting the work is novel and fulsome; the scripts are preceded by detailed insights into the creators' vision and floor plans that set the scene.

They are augmented with vivid descriptions of the choreography that is so central to each piece and, essentially, a plethora of visually arresting performance photography by Corrie Ancone, Anthea Boesenberg, Denise Davis, Saha Jones, Régis Lansac and Jos Schrijer-Zouff that helps to evoke what those visitors to The Edge must have felt during this period of theatre history. *Theatre on the Edge* is not merely a compendium of scripts, but a sumptuous art object—beautifully formatted and illustrated, a logical coda to the company's ground-breaking work.

The plays are accompanied and much enriched by contextual information about the history of the company and creators and illuminating reflections and writings from Goudsmit. Her recollections of her time with Grotowski and Voos (KISS) provide a link between the work of Kinetic Energy and significant international movements in laboratory theatre work, from one who experienced and contributed to them firsthand. It is interesting to note that several KISS members (some from here originally), including Voos himself, settled in Australia after the company disbanded; the significance of this for Australian theatre is a subject for another article. Writing about The Edge itself, Goudsmit highlights the importance of space and stability for the development of artists and ensembles, a need acutely felt by many in the theatre industry, particularly those with research aims. These end materials of the book synthesise the journeys of Goudsmit and Jones

with the six plays that precede. The physical and thematic dexterity of contemporary dance, the intensity and economy of Grotowski and the striking Imagist Theatre of Voos clearly influence the Kinetic Energy style, where movement and imagery provide the abstract line of universality onto which beads of human experience are threaded. In the late 1990s, when Hans-Theis Lehman first coined the term ‘postdramatic’ to describe a theatre of decentralised text, non-linearity, and reworking of traditional development of character and tension, Kinetic Energy had brought the global influences about whom he was talking to Australia—all of this was accomplished at The Edge in Sydney.

Kinetic Energy did, however, continue in their prolific theatre praxis, after this period, creating a series of plays with social justice themes, which will appear in the next publication. So, a student of theatre in Australia, interested in the nexus of theatre and anthropology, how theatre can activate an audience into an examination of society, history and culture, should order *Theatre on the Edge* post-haste. Like me, you will read it back and forth, absorbing the insights Goudsmit and Jones are generously passing to the next generation.

**Theatre on the Edge is available to order from [Kinetic Energy Press](#).**

---

Image: From [Theatre on the Edge](#)

## Works Consulted

- Burnett, Jeffrey (ed.) Theatre Research Book KISS, Boekmakerij/Uitgeverij Luyten, 1982.
- Goudsmit, Jepke and Jones, Graham. *Kinetic Energy Press: Passing a Cultural and Political Legacy on to New Generations*. Green Left, April 2021, Issue 1301, [www.greenleft.org.au/2021/1303/culture/kinetic-energy-press-passing-cultural-and-political-legacy-new-generations](http://www.greenleft.org.au/2021/1303/culture/kinetic-energy-press-passing-cultural-and-political-legacy-new-generations)
- Goudsmit, Jepke and Jones, Graham. *Theatre on the Edge*. Kinetic Energy Press, 2025
- Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Methuen, 1981
- Guthrie, Adrian John, *When the Way Out Was In: Avant-Garde Theatre in Australia, 1965-1985*. University of Wollongong, 1996, [scispace.com/pdf/when-the-way-out-was-in-avant-garde-theatre-in-australia-2b94eirwu8.pdf](http://scispace.com/pdf/when-the-way-out-was-in-avant-garde-theatre-in-australia-2b94eirwu8.pdf).
- Lehman, Hans-Theis, Trans. Jurs-Munby, Karen. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Routledge, 2006
- Merce Cunningham Trust. [www.mercecunningham.org](http://www.mercecunningham.org).
- McCallum, John. *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century*. Currency Press, 2009.
- My Dinner with Andre*. Dir. Louis Malle. New Yorker Films, 1981.
- Rambert. [rambert.org.uk](http://rambert.org.uk).
- Trove: Ronnie Arnold, contributed by The National Library of Australia, [trove.nla.gov.au/people/601856#error=login\\_required&state=706bab2e-7f50-415f-93f9-183e58a4460b&iss=https%3A%2F%2Flogin.nla.gov.au%2Fnew%2Frealms%2Ftroveservices](http://trove.nla.gov.au/people/601856#error=login_required&state=706bab2e-7f50-415f-93f9-183e58a4460b&iss=https%3A%2F%2Flogin.nla.gov.au%2Fnew%2Frealms%2Ftroveservices).
- Voos, Jean-Pierre, archived research reports and notes.