

Theatre

December 02, 2020

The end of any year is always a reflective time but this year in particular, with its lack of live theatre, I am looking back on the experiences that shaped me as a lover of theatre.

I will never forget that moment 60 years ago when the magic happened. We were studying *Julius Caesar* for the Leaving Certificate and we had a chance to see a live production, meaning a night trip to Newtown from Parramatta. I was in awe as Ron Hadwick and Neva Carr Glynn brought the story to life and was enthralled by the staging of the battle scenes. "That moment" came when the line "I am the son of Marcus Cato, ho!" was uttered and an arrow seemed to come from the back of the theatre to kill him. We actually saw the arrow in his breast. Later, I found a way of getting back to the Elizabethan Theatre to watch the show again and to find out how they used theatre-magic and illusion to create that scene. From then on I was hooked.



There was the year when I was training and saving scraps of money to see what little theatre there was, then another year in Goulburn and playing my first role as a munchkin in the

Liedertafel Society production of *The Wizard of Oz*. I studied drama with Oliver Fiala at Bathurst Teachers College where I performed and tried my hand at directing for the first time. Then there were the school productions of *Oklahoma!* at Monaro High and *Bye Bye Birdie* at Cabramatta.

In 1974, *Green Pastures*, the production I helmed at Randwick Boys with the support of students at Randwick Girls, won the Schools Drama Award. Later, when we also produced *Oh, What A Lovely War!* I learnt how creating a stage production was an enormous joint effort. At the same time, I found New Theatre and discovered theatre could also be political.

I did a lot of great shows at the New but had to stop when I became an organiser with Federation. I did manage one more production, which meant working with Maurie Mulheron on the show he wrote about Pete Seeger, *One Word ... WE!* I had met Maurie when he joined my production of *Reedy River* in 1978.

All of this is to say how much of a shock it has been this year since everything closed down. I have seen most shows at Belvoir, having subscribed since it opened. I remember those early shows at The Stables when we discovered original Australian style and irreverent approaches to Shakespeare, all produced on a tiny stage with the audience within an arm's length. I was able to stage-manage a couple of productions in that space.

I have been a subscriber to the Sydney Theatre Company from its first show at the Opera House, have subscribed to the Sydney Dance Company since its early days and I'm a life member of New Theatre.

But, at last, there is some light ahead. There are four productions about to open in Sydney. They will all run at a loss with much-reduced seating. New Theatre is opening with *Neighbourhood Watch* by Lally Katz. I saw a great production of this at Belvoir and highly recommend it. It is a sad and funny story of strange friends — a

young woman and elderly neighbour — whose lives collide while putting out their garbage bins and they connect as they share their strange backgrounds.

Griffin Theatre is presenting a new play by Mark Rogers, *Superheroes*. It is about two young women, one in Thirroul and the other in Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their relationship is small but their lives collide with big political issues.

Belvoir has the excellent Anita Heigh as Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. I remember seeing it with Pamela Rabe (I think) and it is a beautiful time in the theatre.

And Sydney Theatre Company is presenting a new Australian show called *Wonnangatta* by Angus Cerini. It stars Wayne Blair and Hugo Weaving. Cerini's last play was *The Bleeding Tree*, an extraordinary and confronting journey.

The shows are booked out as each theatre has had to limit the capacity in order to comply with COVID-safe rules. This will mean my first trip to Sydney since the lockdown started. It will also mean my first chance to actually see my doctor and physio and the opportunity to catch up with friends.

I could spend time on how theatre workers and those in all the arts have been treated so badly by the Federal Government. The LNP stands condemned. But in the meantime, I will enjoy the little I am offered.

Frank Barnes is retired and COVIDvulnerable