



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Published on *Up Close* (<http://www.upclose.unimelb.edu.au>)

Episode 24: Simon Phillips: Theater is No Drama

Theater is No Drama

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities, and cultural offerings of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web at upclose.unimelb.edu.au That!|s upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au

SIAN PRIOR

Hello and welcome to Up Close, coming to you from Melbourne University, Australia. I!|m Sian Prior. Now when was the last time you went to the theater and why did you go? Was it to experience the excitement of living, breathing actors performing a classic dramatic text right before your eyes? Or, were you perhaps in search of something new, something challenging or shocking or deeply moving, that you couldn!|t find on your television, or cinema or computer screen? Or do you prefer, staying at home, in front of your computer screen and finding your entertainment on You Tube? Well, today on Melbourne University Up Close we!|re going to take a look at contemporary theater, both in Australia and internationally. Is theater surviving or thriving in the digital age? Is it adapting to consumers growing appetite for interactivity, for spectacle, and at the same time, for intimacy? Or, is it going to be left behind in the race for cashed up cultural audiences in the 21st century? Well, who better to answer these questions than Simon Philips, the artistic director of one of Australia!|s most successful main stage theater companies. Simon has been at the helm of the Melbourne theater Company since the year 2000. The MTC is a company that originally formed here at the University of Melbourne, Australia, back in 1953, and it is still officially a department of Melbourne University. Even though the company functions autonomously, the University continues to support the company as a vital contributor to the cultural life of Melbourne. Simon Philips has won numerous awards for his directing work in Australia, and he has also worked internationally directing theater, opera and musical theater productions in the UK and Europe. Simon, welcome to Melbourne University Up Close.

SIMON PHILLIPS

Thanks Sian.

SIAN PRIOR

As we mentioned, the Melbourne theater Company is one of the healthiest in Australia, if you're looking at box office records. A couple of years ago, I think, the MTC had the highest ticket sales of any theater company in the country. But, let's take a step back even further: are Australians enthusiastic theatergoers, in the 21st century? Are ticket sales in general going up or down?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I find that quite a difficult question to answer because the way tickets are sold and the number of productions and then number of productions that are sold will always affect that. But I have found in recent times, that audience attendance is essentially on the increase for us. I think that there is a very strong sense that there is a high competition for what they call that "entertainment dollar". There is much more variety. If you go back to Shakespeare, theater did everything. It was the newspaper, it was current thought, it was philosophical ideas, it was getting people together in a social setting and if you compare that simple idea of the Globe with what is happening now, there is just a multitude of possibilities. And theater itself is diversifying so enormously. I think in an exciting way, there are people who are not interested in text based theater, who are working very strongly in visual based areas, people who are exploring the digital possibilities of what you can do with live digital work and there are companies, essentially, committed to the idea that the word beautifully arranged can be a marvelous thing.

SIAN PRIOR

Globalization has presumably affected the arts and entertainment industry presumably as much as every other industry in recent decades. Would you say there has been a speeding up of the international flow of ideas and trends in the performing arts in recent times in the same way that there has with science and technology?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yes I think that that is undeniable. But the notion of ideas being in the atmosphere is an interesting one in any area. I think we went through a phase of being extremely conscious of original ideas and the pinching and plagiarizing of original ideas and that was very important. Writers stole stories from everyone else, nationally and internationally, in fact, and cribbed them and re-told them. That was kind of. There'd be three or four versions of a given story, and people accepted that as a given, I think that particularly now, with the technological age, the idea of magpie-ing ideas has less stigma about it. It is almost inevitability that there are only so many ideas going around and they will be absorbed and used in different ways.

SIAN PRIOR

So is there no such thing as originality anymore?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I think there are original takes on un-original ideas. Particularly, I have noticed in technology and the theater, those ideas are disseminating very quickly. There is

some very interesting work being done with live camera, action on stage. I'll see it in London, I'll see it in New York, I'll see it in Australia. And I feel like it is globalization that is allowing that is allowing those ideas to develop at a particularly speedy rate that they are.

SIAN PRIOR

And it is the incredible pace of technological change, too.

SIMON PHILLIPS

It's extraordinary what you can achieve relatively simply now that you couldn't 10 years, five years ago. It is racing forward and we can do it. My own view is that in the theater we have to be careful. Because we rarely do it as well as other mediums do it, that technological thing.

SIAN PRIOR

Why?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Well, I probably should qualify that. I think that if a work sets out entirely to be using digital technology and the expertise is there to work that entirely, I think it can be wonderful. But I think, mastering the disjunction between the live being on stage and the technological element on stage, is always an interesting one and it kind of comes back to that central issue that you were touching on before, which is what do people go to the theater for? Because film can do most of that magic. That kind of magic, better. So you want the theater to have that kind of interesting interaction between the live and the technological.

SIAN PRIOR

But, Simon, these days you don't need to be in a theater to have that experience. You can go on line, someone is doing something on web cam, live at that very moment, who knows where in the world. Why bother going to the theater?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yeah. It is really interesting. I saw a production in London recently of Martin Crimp's attempt on her life that was done in the national and it was really beautifully produced. There was a lot -

SIAN PRIOR

Martin Crimp, the UK playwright?

SIMON PHILLIPS

The UK playwright. And it was very, very beautifully produced. A lot of live camera action on stage, and Katie Mitchell was doing a lot of experiments in these areas. And one of the exciting things about it, is that you'd see the actor, with for example, a small prop, and you could see that, and then on the screen, you could see what that looked like and the image was exquisite and perfectly realised and you could look at it on stage and see how naff the way it was being made was. And that was kind of fascinating. But for me, I noticed at the beginning of this piece, the line of

actors stood up and did the text, they each individually and very interestingly and beautifully delivered a section of Martin Crimp's quite abstract and non-narrative text. And it was actually, really if you want to know, the most compelling part of the evening. And I felt that the technological stuff was beautiful and fascinating, but your interest in it lasted only a certain amount of time. That is just my experience.

SIAN PRIOR

What about interactivity, which has been a huge feature of the new digital technology? Is that leading audiences to expect that they're going to be involved in a theater production in some way?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Oh, wow. This is a very good question and interesting one because my experience usually is interactivity is something people are much more interested in doing privately than publicly. The embarrassment factor of interactivity publicly is actually something that many people don't want to do. There are varieties of that experience. And I have just done two productions recently where there was quite a lot of audience interaction. One was this production of the 25th Putnam County Annual Spelling Bee, American musical theater. But part of the notion of that is that four people from the audience volunteer to be part of the action every night. Well, I think that added an excitement to the event, that is at the heart of why theater should be exciting and perhaps sometimes isn't exciting! V which is unpredictability. Which is something, really fresh in the air, and I had a little section at the beginning of the second half of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, the musical, which is something I have worked on in Sydney, and it is entirely an audience participation piece and I have noticed that there are certain members of the audience who love being part of that, but more importantly, there rest of the audience love watching them being part of that. So I think it is quite a naff part of the show. People really like it. It really raises peoples' spirits.

SIAN PRIOR

Waiting to see if someone is going to slip on a banana skin.

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yeah. That's right. What's going to happen? Interaction, I think we really talking about, you being able to change the course of the event.

SIAN PRIOR

Yes. Change the story. Decide the end of the story.

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yes. I think there is potential in that. Unexplored potential, which you have introduced to the world in this interview, Sian.

SIAN PRIOR

[laughs] Simon, it has been said that audience tastes have sort of been diverging along a spectrum. That these days we really love large scale spectacles with special effects and stunning visuals; you know, Walking with Dinosaurs, or perhaps Priscilla

Queen of the Desert. But that on the other hand, we also enjoy very small scale, intimate theater experiences, shows where perhaps there is an audience of one, with one performer. Is that the case do you think?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I think so. And wonderfully. I never liked the idea that the large scale musical was using up every available dollar that people had to spend on culture. I thought that was a shame. Well, I've seen Phantom of the Opera this year. That is my culture done. But I love the idea that it can co-exist with something very intimate and very intense. I love the idea that all those things are existing. That they are still allowed to exist. Nothing has killed off anything else. And that you can have those very, very different experiences.

SIAN PRIOR

I'm Sian Prior and you're listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where today we are talking about the past, present and future of the performing arts with Simon Philips, the artistic director of the Melbourne theater Company. Simon, let's talk a bit about opera because you've directed a lot of opera in your career, does this art form have a future other than as a museum of past classics?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Opera audiences are to be castigated, I think, because they are so resistant, essentially, to new work. And, I think it is just astonishing that in opera, that really, works that were written in the 1950s, 40s, 30s, even 20s are still considered modern and difficult works, within the opera spectrum. So, in the theater, those works would be considered classics to be dusted off, and in the opera, they kind of extraordinary minority tastes in the opera. I'm sure if you were talking to a person who really works in the opera they would have a positive view of this and say No. No. You know, it's all coming. And I think when new works are done in the opera; I think there is a small, incredibly enthusiastic audience for them. But I think it is an uphill battle in the opera. And the repertoire of existing classics which people easily and relaxedly adore, is also tiny when compared to the theater. So I think that one of the things that opera is perhaps struggling to get the right balance of is repetition, comfortable familiarity versus exploring new territory. I think that is why there has been such an extraordinary development of the kind of the director's opera. Because the works themselves, there is only a handful of works, so what do you do to make them new, the directors get more and more extreme and bazaar and left of centre in their interpretation of them. Which has a slightly perverse effect because, in some ways the very reason that people are attracted to the familiar gets blasted apart by the unfamiliarity of what is being done with them.

SIAN PRIOR

How much of that is to do with the sheer economics of opera, I mean, basically with an opera you need an entire orchestra and a large caste of highly trained singers wearing expensive costumes singing in front of very expensive props -

SIMON PHILLIPS

It is a very tough form. It assumes huge resources and to support it, essentially a government needs to believe that it is something that should still be happening. That it is a form that still needs supporting within our culture. And of course the chances getting opera perfect are more remote than any other art form, but when you do it is more sublime than any other art form. If you crack an opera, if you really get it, there is something completely beautiful about it.

SIAN PRIOR

Why is it harder than any other performing arts?

SIMON PHILLIPS

There are just so many things that have to come together. For one thing, the performers need an uncommon talent in a person. To have the voice can be as rare as five people in the world in some cases. So -

SIAN PRIOR

And then to have to be able to act.

SIMON PHILLIPS

To do all those other things as well. It is a really big ask. But I do think that is improving in opera. I think singers are expecting to be asked to do both. So, I think that is difficult and getting the conductor to be in simpatico with the physical production, to be musically sensitive and all those things to come together in one. And for the economic reasons that you're talking about, it is constrained. You wish you could rehearse for much longer. I always run out of time with the chorus because I want the chorus scenes to be very detailed and I always find that is my big stress doing opera because you get them for four rehearsals or something, to get it all done. It is very difficult.

SIAN PRIOR

Simon, Australia has been a great exporter of theatrical talent, and musical talent, and in recent years we have seen a lot of Australian actors and directors becoming stars in the American film and television industry. People like Judy Davis, Geoffrey Rush, who I know you have directed, Eric Bana, Cate Blanchet, I mean, these are globally known names. And many of these people got their start on Australian theater stages. Why are we such a wonderful exporter of talent?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Prolific exporter of talent.

SIAN PRIOR

Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yeah. Damn Nuisance. !øFDCome back! All is forgiven!!| !|ve thought about this and I think it is because on this side of the world, we are necessarily, because of our geography and our inferiority complex we are necessarily very open and outward looking and we are also less convention constrained. I don't think the rulebook is in

place; the traditions, the expectations are as strongly in place as they are in European countries that have been doing these things for many centuries. And so I think there are great advantages to that !V having worked everywhere, I still say that !!d rather work in the Antipodes than any other place because we are easier going, we are freer thinkers, we are not so intensely constrained by how things have always been done and must always be done. And I love that and I think that works on an inventive level. And, I also think that it works on an imaginative level for those actors. I do think that their lateral thought is inbuilt into the Australian persona. A sense of daring is kind of inbuilt into the culture. And a kind of mischief inbuilt into the culture too. And, I think that is incredibly valuable and excites the world, that kind of quality.

SIAN PRIOR

What about our playwrights? I mean people know about our actors like Cate Blanchet and Geoffrey Rush, are there Australian playwrights who are known and respected outside of these shores?

SIMON PHILLIPS

There are many working, I think. There is no possibility of almost any playwright becoming a household name in the same way as those film stars are. But you know, Joanna Murray-Smith who has virtually written a play for me every year, my season, it feels like Murray-Smith theater Company -

SIAN PRIOR

She is a Melbourne playwright.

SIMON PHILLIPS

She is a Melbourne playwright; you have to say that for our international audiences.

SIAN PRIOR

Yes.

SIMON PHILLIPS

But world domination is well within her sights. Annette Benning is going to star in her play in New York. And Honour, her other play is going to be done in both New York and London.

SIAN PRIOR

Daniel Keane is another Australian - Melbourne playwright who I believe is very popular in Europe.

SIMON PHILLIPS

It is almost one of those things, where even Australia doesn't know that we are exporting this jewel of a playwright. This wonderful, really original voice and he is infiltrating into those places that we don't tend to hear about as much. I think the work is travelling. There is no doubt about that.

SIAN PRIOR

!!m Sian Prior and my guest today in Melbourne University Up Close is Simon

Phillips, the artistic director of the Melbourne theater Company. Simon, what do you think should be the role of theater? Give us the big picture point of view, from your point of view. Why have theater?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I think theater can do so many things for different people at different times. But essentially what it is there to do, as Shakespeare said, is hold a mirror up to nature. And by doing that, whatever form it may take, whether it is in a very much more entertaining or it is in a very much more penetrative and deep tragic form, the reason it was invented was to engage people in hopefully a gripping narrative which at the same time, helps them, possibly, to reflect on, and live, and even solve problems within their own life. So, it just put an idea up in front of people that hopefully had some connection back to them. And you can never predict what that connection is going to be. I do believe in telling a damn good story. I really think people love that. And within it they will get something.

SIAN PRIOR

theater as catharsis?

SIMON PHILLIPS

Absolutely. It is there to enrich the inner life of the person. And it can do that by just putting a big happy glow through the person, you know, the anti-cancer function of theater, or it can do that by allowing them to see their own dilemmas or problems in a way they might never have seen them before.

SIAN PRIOR

Simon, if theater is as you say, above all about telling damn good stories, with wonderful words, making people think about their lives, reflect on things, what does it say about physical theater, which is very much not about words?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I think the best physical theater does seem to come out of that boundary-less idea that you can leap into something and you can make it work. I also think it is probably true to say that the easiest works to transport internationally are non-language based works. That the companies we celebrate as being the real kind of frontier breaking companies here, Circus Oz, the dance companies, one of the reasons that happens is because there is no language barrier. So, they can go anywhere. And make that work. It is harder, obviously, with a text-based work.

SIAN PRIOR

No translation required. No cultural differences to be explained.

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yeah, yeah. And you get it vividly and excitedly right off the block!K

SIAN PRIOR

You mentioned the exporting of our dance companies, and one of our companies that the rest of the world is particularly interested in is Bangarra Dance theater which

is an indigenous, aboriginal and Torres Strait islander dance company. And I know that internationally, there has been a huge amount of interest in indigenous art, visual arts, painting in Australia. Is there a similar level of interest in performance arts coming out of the indigenous community?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I think so. I think what makes this easy is there is no absolutely no sense of !øFDcoal to Newcastle about it!|.

SIAN PRIOR

It!|s original.

SIMON PHILLIPS

It!|s entirely original to our nation, that!|s right. And I think that makes it really easy for people to go !øFDwow, this is something I couldn!|t get anywhere except from that culture.!

SIAN PRIOR

Well, finally Simon, are you optimistic about the future of theater in Australia, do you think it will continue to attract audiences, to be relevant, to answer that need, to tell stories?

SIMON PHILLIPS

I!|m pretty optimistic about it because I think that I am now old enough to feel that the notion that the theater is gradually being starved in one way or another or falling off, dying off, has been around my entire life.

SIAN PRIOR

Chicken Little saying the sky is falling in.

SIMON PHILLIPS

Yeah. Yeah. People saying !øFDit is the end of theater as we know it.!

 And in the nigh-on 30 years that I!|ve been working professionally that has yet to happen. And in fact, in many ways it seems to be more buoyant than it might have been a decade ago or whatever. It will always go in cycles and things will happen. I may eat my words. It obviously behooves me to believe that the theater will continue to thrive because it is my livelihood and my passion and all that, so, I like to be optimistic about it. But I really do just genuinely see no reason why there will not be a proportion of the population, it may not be as big as a proportion as 100 years ago, who will choose this art form as a way to enrich their lives, but I think there will be a big enough proportion of the population who still want to keep it keeping on.

SIAN PRIOR

Well, Simon, I sincerely hope you are right and thank you for being with us today.

SIMON PHILLIPS

My pleasure.

SIAN PRIOR

I'm Sian Prior and my guest today on Melbourne University Up Close has been Simon Philips, artistic director of the Melbourne theater Company, one of Australia's most successful main stage theater companies and a department of the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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We also invite you to leave your comments or feedback on this or any episode of Up Close. Simply click on the add new comment link at the bottom of the episode page. This program was produced by Kelvin Param, Eric Van Bommel, and myself, Sian Prior. Audio recording is by Craig McArthur and the theme music is performed by Sergio Ercole. Melbourne University Up Close is created by Eric Van Bommel and Kelvin Param. Until next time, thanks for joining us. Goodbye.

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