

A Critic's Reflection

Leonard Radic

From an interview with Helen Rickards, December 2009

Leonard Radic was chief theatre critic for Melbourne newspaper *The Age* from 1974 to 1994, and its deputy theatre critic for the previous 5 years, writing over 2000 reviews for the paper in the quarter century that coincided with most of Handspan's lifetime.

He was in a unique position to overview Melbourne, and Australia's, performing arts industry, seeing and considering work from both the mainstream and the fringe. Leonard has written two books: *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre Since the 1960s* (Penguin Australia, 1991) and *Contemporary Australian Drama* (Brandl & Scheslinger, 2006).

In 2009 Leonard Radic recalled Handspan's work and its place in the cultural landscape of its time.

In my book, *State of Play*, I discussed the 1960s/70s revolution, not in traditional repertory theatre or big commercial theatres, but in improbable places – warehouses, sweatshops and stables – initiated very largely in Sydney and Melbourne at Nimrod and The Pram Factory (APG).

It was a movement inspired by the need to create an Australian theatre in a true sense of the word: that was written by Australians about Australian issues, and that used Australian actors who were not afraid to use Australian accents as distinct from the 'Pommy' style of the imported musicals, thrillers and comedies seen in Australian theatres. This 'revolution' was led by a younger generation, largely university educated and not afraid to be themselves, who were making a distinct break. Above all, the concern was to create original and genuinely Australian work and it owed little to the international body.

Essentially, the impetus in the creation of original Australian theatre – in that early stage

it was mostly non-indigenous although some works by Aboriginal artists were staged - was in the direction of a localised theatre. In this context, a whole string of new theatre companies sprang up primarily in Melbourne and Sydney but some in Adelaide and Perth. The leaders of the movement, the so-called 'new wave', were demonstrably APG and Nimrod and the three significant companies in the second line group were, in Melbourne, Chambermade Opera, Australian Nouveau Theatre (which became known as Anthill) and Handspan.

What made these companies special were their high production values, their imagination above all, and their original approach to theatre. They were creating something new, they were not drawing on previous modes of theatre. They experimented with a variety of forms. They were sometimes verbal but mostly imagistic and Handspan was particularly so – an example of imagist theatre and imaginative theatrical effects.

Handspan employed mime and puppetry occasionally using text-based or verbal elements but it was above all its imagination that engaged its audiences. Also, the company varied its work from production to production, it wasn't just slavishly derivative or imitative, it was constantly trying to do something new and different that they hadn't been done before but using the same visual elements. These visual elements became much stronger as the company developed and, as I remember, it changed its name at some point to a visual theatre company and puppetry and mime had less attention given to them.

Handspan's best work was its early work, where these elements of mime and puppetry were at their peak and where exponents like Peter Wilson guaranteed to enthral the audience. Later, there was the work of Nigel Triffitt, an associate rather than a member. His *Secrets*, created by the company was one of its finest works and later *The Fall of Singapore*, commissioned by the Melbourne Spoleto Festival, was created with Handspan members.

There started to become a dividing line between Handspan's early work and the more deliberately imagist work, and that of the latter years with its more verbal component.

As an example, *The Haunted* started off as a play about Derrimut. Then, Peter Oyston took the company to Central Australia and they spent a fortnight with a tribe there absorbing all that they could, so that the work, when eventually it surfaced here was much stronger in the narrative elements and had clearly more input from the Aboriginal community than it would have had if it been devised here. But, in the course of it, it also changed – it was less of a work about Derrimut and much more about the colonial invasion and the plight of the early aboriginals in the hands of the early settlers. The company has started to move into the area of political/social commentary.

In the field of community theatre, for the Castlemaine Festival, a work they did, *Waves of Change*, was part puppetry/part water ballet. It was set in a pool, and used the local fire brigade and other local resources. The movement in community theatre at this point was very strong throughout the Commonwealth, with the Community Theatre Board giving it a badge of respectability. It was

a new style and a new approach, but I had the feeling that for all its novelty, Handspan was starting to move outside its natural areas and was searching for new directions around this time.

It was looking for new ways to establish itself and it hadn't found them. It was involved in community style theatre which struck me at the time as being something of an aberration. It had done some highly interesting work but it started allowing itself to get diverted and like the Pram Factory started to lose its artistic dynamism probably with new members wanting to take it in other directions. I don't know about that but, from observing their work, it seemed to have lost something of its initial flavour and it became no longer a force in Australian theatre. But that was also true of Anthill, Pram Factory ... These theatre companies no matter how fine their record of achievement, tended to have a limited life. It's unfortunate but seems to be in the nature of theatre – we've seen it since happen with Playbox. Companies start to lose their freshness. Now that's a function of individuals themselves – we all start to do that. It's also partly changing tastes. For instance in the last few years we've seen the movement away from text-based work – there's a whole range of directors who want to see themselves as doing something different – we've seen the emergence of a directors' theatre rather than a writers' theatre.

One of the best of Handspan's works was *Four Little Girls* which had Picasso as the writer, and was adapted by Ariette Taylor, its director. It was absolutely mesmerising. I saw it in Melbourne and again in Adelaide

The company seemed to be going into a state of decline slowly but steadily over the last three or four years – that might have been a reflection of the fact that they were changing their personnel. It became a matter of public note and I was registering the fact myself that they seemed to be moving from director to director in a vain attempt to re-establish themselves. As a journalist, you tend to react to this kind of commentary and to take it aboard and it becomes part of your judgement. I could see it through the work they were doing which was palpably declining.

The work that people remember best is their early work and by the time a new generation

was in contact with them they were not at their best or their greatest so there was nothing that newcomers could latch onto and build upon. If you're going to go into visual theatre you need to have a new style and vision. You need to have individuals who stand out and are memorable. So unfortunately Handspan didn't have a lasting legacy. They did give visual theatre new style and new practitioners...some individuals stand out for sheer originality ... the work was visually memorable and original ... It's difficult to pinpoint where they may have made a difference. There are so many elements of that thing called 'style' and you can't disassociate the influences from all those other influences – other theatre companies, film, TV, cartoons ... All these are part of the atmosphere at any given time and I don't think you can say that any particular thing is directly influenced by Handspan.

These companies were all a part of the tapestry of the times but those times have very definitely changed.
