

# The Legacy of Handspan

Helen Rickards

..arguably the most influential company in the history of contemporary Australian puppetry..

Contemporary Australian puppetry has its roots in a diversity of cultural and stylistic traditions. Handspan Theatre which began in 1977 as an accidental artists' collective and closed in 2002 as an established Melbourne theatre company was a significant contributor to the vitality of today's industry.

Until the late 20th century, Australia's recognised cultural landscape reflected the country's colonial past and its European, predominantly British, ties. Our own voice was expressed only through a bush-based, folksy repertoire that was itself a paternalistic expression of the colonial invasion, or expansion of Empire.

Puppetry in Australia was firmly entrenched in this mould with its practitioners specialising in specific puppetry styles and techniques, mainly glove puppets or marionettes, and telling children's stories from the European fairy tale and fable canon. Few children in Australia grew up in the 1950s and 60s ignorant of Punch and Judy, but fewer had any experience of the diversity of the world medium.

The counterculture movement of the 1960s, the impact of which reached Australia in the 1970s, opened our eyes, not only to tolerance of, but respect for, cultural diversity. We

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embraced new ideas and new practice; we began to protest for social justice and equity; we dabbled in alternative ideologies...and we began to seek new forms and substance for our art.

Handspan Theatre began at a time of energetic and global artistic change. Experimentation and innovation were celebrated, new ideas were welcome, and new opportunities abounded.

We were not the first, but, in Australia, we collectively were the most outstanding, experimental puppetry-based company, surviving and flourishing for a quarter of a century.

From the outset, Handspan sought to "push the boundaries" of puppetry. We were never "Handspan Puppet Theatre", but we always animated the inanimate through live performance and retained an active curiosity and respect for the traditional roots of our art form.

We broke out of the booth, mixed puppetry styles and techniques and revealed the puppeteer to create new, hybrid, multidisciplinary work and develop an original repertoire, for which we coined the term visual theatre. Rather rudely perhaps we scoffed at puppetry purists and declared that anything



"The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek" by Jenny Wagner. In Handspan's repertoire from 1980 to 1982. From left: Andrew Hansen, Helen Rickards and Peter J. Wilson.

Photograph: © Jon Conte 1980.



Nigel Triffitt's "Secrets". Billboard at the Palais des Glaces, Paris April 1984. (Company snapshot)

could be a puppet and why use a puppet if a person can do it better?. We believed we could go anywhere and do anything.

Over its 25 years we did. Handspan's work was always image based, but its plays and collaborations explored ideas and performance arenas that covered a very broad spectrum of the industry. The company created topical, issue-based, original works for presentation in mainstream theatres, community venues, in the street, in workplaces and schools, for national and international festivals, seasons, events, public and private occasions.

In total, Handspan created 77 original theatrical works and undertook tours to 5 continents. Exploration of puppetry remained a key fascination and motivation and opportunities to participate in the international puppetry industry were eagerly sought. Various works appeared in major international arts festivals worldwide, and at several UNIMA conventions beginning with a performance of *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* at the 1980 UNIMA Conference in Washington D.C. and individually, company artists engaged in international cultural exchange projects. The medium of visual theatre is well-suited to cross-cultural and international collaboration and exposure and the nuances of visual communication and visual literacy explored

with different audiences across the globe kept company members 'on tour' for years!

Nigel Triffitt's *Secrets*, commissioned by Handspan in 1981, premiered at the Australian International Puppet Festival in January 1983 before embarking on five years of international touring to major international arts festivals. On one such tour, in 1984, Handspan performed in the London International Puppet Festival where Henryk Jurkowski, the then President of UNIMA International noted:

"I was rather impressed by this Australian input to the achievements of the world puppet theatre. In fact, we have not known much of the Australian theatre at all ... and all of a sudden – Handspan Theatre with "Secrets"... Beauty and menace at the same moments, feelings of understanding and feelings of loss, the traditional and the contemporary linked in rich and troubling expressions: of course the Australians won. Their performance will not be forgotten soon."<sup>1</sup>

Handspan not only drew on contemporary theatre movements and topical issues in its work but also attracted some of Australia's most interesting practitioners to participate in its productions.

From its long-time headquarters in Gertrude St Fitzroy, Handspan embraced Australia's evolving alternate arts industry with its members making work with musicians, comedians, dancers, circus artists, theatre-in-education practitioners, writers, community artists, directors, choreographers, community, indigenous and multicultural artists, and, other puppeteers. Handspan members were active participants within, and advocates for the wider Australian arts industry. The company became a hub for Australian puppetry. Company members, worked as artists-in-residence and taught in schools and tertiary institutions<sup>2</sup> and community organisations; led community events and festivals; published *Manipulation*<sup>3</sup> – the forerunner of the Australian Puppetry Journal; wrote the history of Australian puppetry<sup>4</sup>. For several years, Handspan's workshop was the meeting place for the Victorian Puppetry Guild and UNIMA and was the host location for numerous national and international visiting artists as well as many great parties! Richard Bradshaw was heard to say of the company, "Handspan is a network."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout its history artists worked in and with Handspan developing their own work and exploring and extending the potential of the art form. It's hard to count over all that work and time, but currently the list of those who worked actively with the company totals several hundred and includes practising artists from all disciplines and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Initially, we were a collective operating under the 'manifesto' of founding members Ken Evans, Helen Rickards, Andrew Hansen, Peter J. Wilson, Maeve Vella and Christine Woodcock which in the early 1980s evolved into a company, with a constitution and a business plan, governed by its members. From 1987, when Trina Parker took on the role for the first time, artistic directors made their mark, but its membership remained a key to Handspan's direction and to its success and eventually, signalled its closure<sup>6</sup>.

Another of the early catchphrases was that there was a Handspan flash that characterised the company and its work. Every show or undertaking at Handspan was different. We sometimes toured repertoire for years, generally stopping because we were sick of it rather than because it had run out of options. But we were never interested in repeating ourselves or following a formula. Of course,

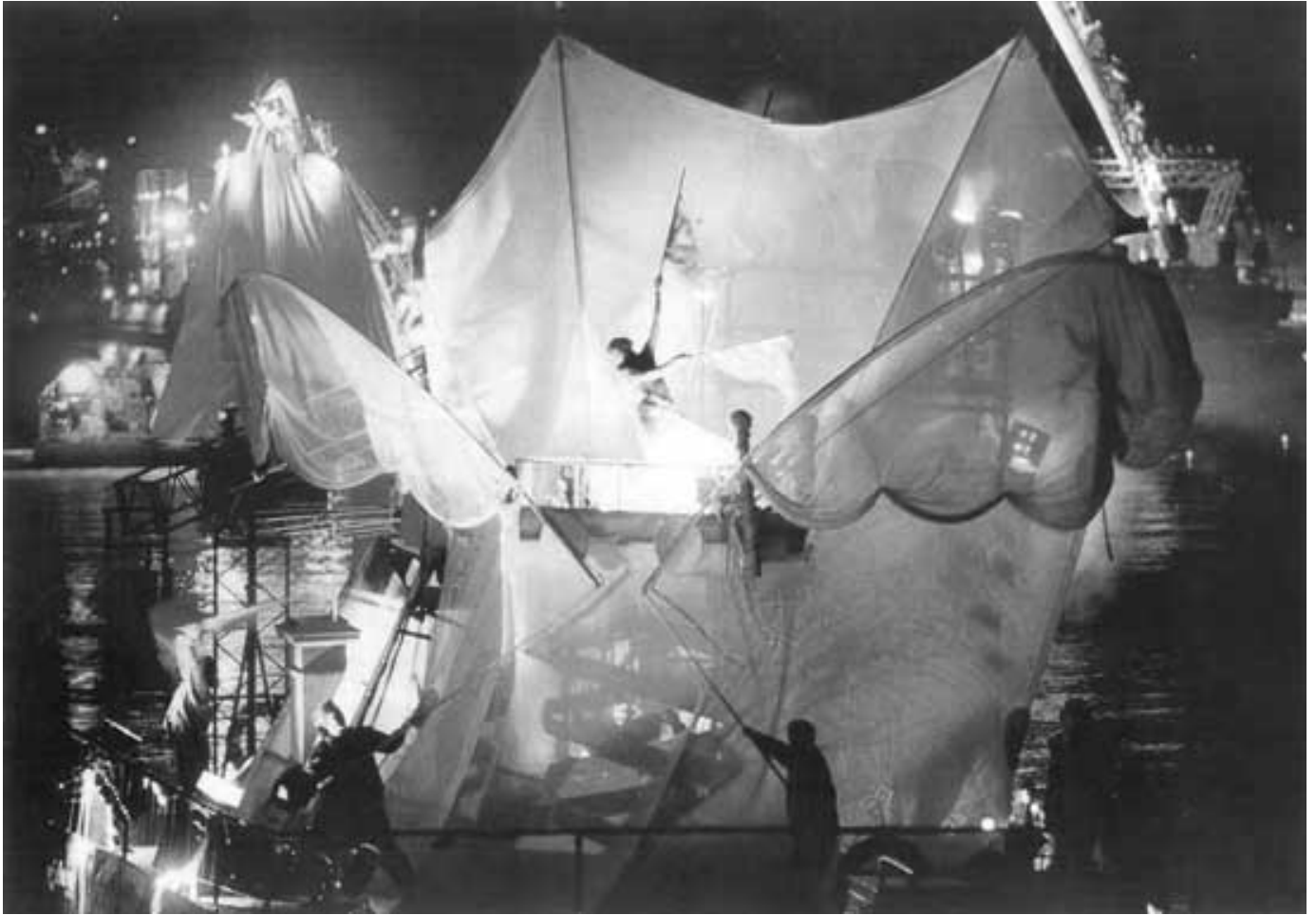


"Lift 'Em Up Socks". Tom E. Lewis and puppeteer Rod Primrose on the final Handspan tour to Die Macht des Staurens' Festival, Vienna, 2001. (Photograph: © Jeff Busby, 1997)

this had its disadvantages – we never really knew what we were doing, we were unpredictable and we failed sometimes, (not as often or spectacularly as we succeeded, fortunately). At its height, Handspan was a close-knit community of mutually respecting and interdependent artists, or as Andrew Bleby noted in the closing party eulogy - at times it was like a family, at others it was like chaos theory itself.<sup>7</sup> After 25 years, membership energy had ebbed as individual careers became prioritised, and although the company was independently corporatised, its name and its work were ours and it was better for it to close than lose the flash.

Handspan successfully established its visual theatre as a cross-generational art form, creating and producing work for mainstream adult audiences as well as for children and families. During the company's existence and to a significant extent through its aegis, the medium of puppetry and design-based theatre extended beyond its traditional boundaries and made unique contributions to the wider theatre industry.

Worldwide recognition of the unique quality of Handspan's work was highlighted at the Festival Ibero Americano de Teatro in Bogota, Columbia, in 1994 where the company's production of Picasso's *Four Little Girls*, adapted and directed by Ariette Taylor won the UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts, singled out for the technical perfection and high poetic and imaginative quality of the production.<sup>8</sup>



Handspan Theatre/Circus Oz co-Production: "I Dreamt I Could Fly", Yarra River, Melbourne Moomba Festival 1994. Designer: Ken Evans. (Photographer unknown.)

Handspan's artistic initiatives were not the company's alone, they were part of a national and world-wide movement of exploration in live theatre and their legacy is the industry's inheritance today.

The Handspan Theatre archives, puppets and memorabilia were donated to Arts Centre Melbourne's Performing Arts Collection.

Helen Rickards © January 2008

*Helen Rickards was a founding member of Handspan Theatre in 1977 and the Executive Director of its membership from 1980 to 1986.*

## Footnotes

1. Hendryk Jurkowski, *Festival Opinions: Handspan of Australia: Secrets*, published in The U.K. Puppet Centre magazine **Animations**, September 1984.

2. Tertiary puppetry course have been established by Handspan theatre founding members in Melbourne. At Swinburne University,

Ken Evans runs a puppetry course in the Theatre Arts Department, and Peter James Wilson and Gilly McInnes run a Masters Course in Puppetry through the Production School of the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. (**Note 2015:** Both courses have now been closed.)

3. Maeve Vella, founding editor of **Manipulation** magazine for puppeteers (1980 – 1990).

4. *Theatre of the Impossible: Puppet Theatre in Australia*, by Maeve Vella and Helen Rickards, Craftsman House, 1989.

5. Richard Bradshaw, while Artistic Director of the Marionette Theatre of Australia, 1980s.

6. Handspan's assets on winding up have provided UNIMA Australia with a travelling scholarship fund ever since.

7. Andrew Bleby: MC Handspan's 25th Birthday and Closing Night Party, 13th July, 2002.

8. *The Productions Created by Handspan Theatre*, catalogue compiled by Lizz Talbot for the Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection. (2003)