



Profile

Aubrey Mellor

He is a leading Australian Theatre Director, and was formally Director of Melbourne's Playbox Theatre - his forth Artistic Directorship of a theatre company. He is well known as an acting teacher to a generation of acclaimed Australian actors and while renowned earlier in his distinguished career for translations and productions of the classics, is now a leading proponent of new Australian writing.

He was brought up in variety and circus, trained as a dancer, visual artist and musician and graduated from the NIDA Production Course in 1969. In 1972 he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study Asian theatre. He joined NIDA's staff first in 1973 as Acting tutor, remaining with the school until 1978. He directed plays at the Jane Street Theatre (Sydney) seasons 1978-9 and was Joint Artistic Director of Nimrod Theatre Company (Sydney) 1981-83. In 1985, he returned to NIDA as Deputy Director; a position he held until the end of 1987. Between 1988 and 1993 he was Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company and became Artistic Director of Playbox in Melbourne in 1993.

He has directed hundreds of productions in all states of Australia and worked as guest director and teacher in the United Kingdom, USA and Asian countries. He has been a member of the NIDA Board of Studies and has served as director, member and advisor to numerous arts bodies including the Performing Arts Board of The Australia Council and The Australian National Playwright's Conference.

He was awarded the OAM in 1992 for services to the arts and the community. His many other awards include the International Theatre Institute's Uchimura Prize.

Source: <http://www.nida.unsw.edu.au/>

Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー
An organization tuning out world-class actors
Talking with the Director of The National Institute of Dramatic Art of Australia

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世界的な俳優養成機関

オーストラリア国立演劇学院（NIDA）の学長に聞く

I have known Aubrey Mellor for nearly 30 years. By the time we met, in the late '70s, Aubrey was already established as one of Australia's most innovative and theatrical directors. He had studied at NIDA in 1968 and '69 (the course lasted two years, not three, in those days), taught there himself after graduating, directed at the Nimrod St. Theatre, then Sydney's most exciting venue; and subsequently was to go on to become artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Co. in Brisbane and the Playbox in Melbourne. In late 2004 he took up what may very well be the world's most prized position in performing arts education, the directorship of NIDA.

But it isn't only these formidable achievements, as impressive as they are, that drew, and continue to draw me, to his amazing work. Aubrey is one of the few directors in the world, and possibly the only one in Australia, who has artistically and aesthetically assimilated the conventions, codes and messages of Asian theatre, particularly Japanese theatre, into his art. It makes no sense to talk about influences in his work, because his view of theatre—and the way he practices it—is a total enmeshing of traditions and forms, ancient and contemporary, from Australian indigenous ritual to noh, from the British rhetorical tradition and the American Method to Indian Yakshagana.

I met with Aubrey Mellor in the offices of the Japan Foundation in Tokyo on 25 May 2005, on the eve of his departure back to Sydney after a hectic week-long visit.

Here is what he had to say.

(Interview by Roger Pulvers)

“AUSTRALIA IS A PART OF ASIA. THERE IS NO GOING BACK.”

My first trip to Japan was in 1972 when I was here mainly to study Japanese traditional theater and theatrical ritual. I spent most of my time at the Komparu School of noh in Tokyo and was by no means limiting my activities to the academic realm. I felt that I

had to do noh; and, in fact, was a *shite* (leading character) in *Funabenkei*.

That stay in Japan, the first of many, taught me a great deal. In the West we start with a situation, with characters, and we build up relationships. This is our standard approach to creating a piece of theater. But in noh the last thing you learn about is these elements. You start with gestures, with the dance, with the practicing and mastering, hopefully, of the skill. After all, the word noh means skill. Then, through this, you come to know what your interpretation of your character means. Meaning comes last.

We in the West are constantly trying to be different, individualistic. But I feel that this is often a frightful waste of energy. An actor must conquer the skill and technique

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Data

The National Institute of Dramatic Art

The National Institute of Dramatic Art (commonly known as NIDA) was established by the Australian government in 1958 as an organization specializing in the education and nurturing of theater artists. Many of the Institute's graduates are leading presences in the international entertainment world of theater, film and television. In addition to such famous stars as Cate Blanchett, Judy Davis and Mel Gibson, NIDA graduates include Hugo Weaving, who played an important role in *Lord of the Rings*, and Ben Gannon, who produced *The Boy from Oz*.

Today, NIDA offers courses in acting, design, art, technical arts, directing, body movement, voice and more. Serious efforts are also put into NIDA's Open Program, which is open to participants of all ages, from children to adults. Among these programs is one aimed at improving the communication skills of people from the general public.

The new NIDA Theater and Studio complex with the 725-seat Parade Theater, studios for film and TV production work, rehearsal rooms and a library was established in 2001.

Here the Institute's own actors company stages productions and experimental theater productions from overseas are invited to give performances as part of the Institute's curriculum. Plans call for performances here in 2006 by Yoji Sakade (the leader of Rinkogun). NIDA operates with the assistance of funding from the Australian government's Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and donations from organizations including the Friends of NIDA and the American Friends of NIDA.

first. For instance, back in '72, I was rehearsing my noh piece. I was doing a kind of circular gesture with a fan. My teacher, Mr. Honda, was exasperated with me. He said, "Do you know what you're doing with this fan?" I hadn't. He then said, after paging through his dictionary, "You're saying goodbye to your lover. This is infinite yearning." I thought, "Oh yeah, well, infinite yearning. Sure, I can do infinite yearning." But it all fell into place for me thanks to Mr. Honda's explanation and my training. It's not enough just to feel and interpret. You have to know the mechanics first, like how to use the fan. The character comes out of that. This is one valuable thing I learned from that stay in Japan.

The poles differ, I mean, the poles of Western and Japanese theater. Each approach has its deep merits and can be accessed when necessary. Give an actor a costume at an early stage, for instance, say, a pair of shoes. They might be able to develop a character out of that. Some actors may say, "Hold it. I'm not ready for the shoes yet." Okay. But for other actors it just might be that one thing that tips them over and gives them that moment of insight.

I've spent a lot of time in Asia. I worked in China in 1979 on Peking opera, and before that had gone to Taiwan, Hong Kong and India. Each trip gave me new tools on which to develop principles, from the traditional theaters of these countries, to give to students, angles from which to see things.

In the mid-'70s, while teaching at NIDA—that was a time when such actors as Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Colin Friels and Michele Stayner were studying there—I did some noh plays with the students. I also directed kabuki with them. We even trained students how to be an audience, how to react to different kabuki gestures, for instance. What I mean is, a Japanese audience watching kabuki knows all the steps, for instance, in a stance, say, when an actor is going through a set of gestures for a pose, what is called a *mie* in Japanese. They are keenly observing the actor's skill and performance bravado, if you will, and applauding his mastery. A Western audience naturally isn't aware of these elements, so the audience reaction builds in a different way from what you see in Japan. I felt that we had to train our actors not only in traditional Japanese techniques but also in "how to be an audience," so that they would learn to appreciate the interflow between stage and spectator and be able to use it from the stage. You know, it's like being an athlete, or so some students said. It's like jumping hurdles. Each hurdle, like each gesture on stage, indicates a further step toward the goal. I applied all these things that I learned in Japan, and I dare say that this inspired many of our young actors at NIDA. Far from confusing them, it actually helped them learn and master concentration.

There are two seemingly opposite aspects of Japanese theater, or at least ritualized theater. There is the exaggeration as style that you see in kabuki, the showmanship; and at the same time there is an intensity, a distilling of the emotions, the concentration on what is seen inwardly, not done outwardly. On this trip just now I have encountered this all once again. How can these two streams coexist? Well, they do, and very well. And I think it gives us in the West tremendous insight into the actor's art: how to distill your emotions and then express and perform them in a truly theatrical manner.

Just a few more words, if I may, about what I did and saw in 1972, because that trip was so important to me as a director. I saw early butoh then, and all kinds of avant-

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garde theater, from the Red Tent Situation Theater of Juro Kara to the Black Tent, where Makoto Sato and others were working. So, when I started to come back to Japan in the '80s, I was very aware of new writing. The trouble was that there were so few translations of contemporary Japanese drama then. And Japanese theater in our era has very much been a writer-led theater. In Japan many playwrights direct their own work in their own groups, like Kara, Terayama, and others. We don't do this in Australia; in fact, almost no one does it in the West. I guess you would have to look to Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Grotowski in Poland to find something similar.

But what I discovered over all those trips was that Japanese theater was characterized by a tremendous variety. I thought then—and I continue to think now—that theater produced in Japan is much more interesting than anything coming out of America or Great Britain.

But let me return to my own roots, that is, Australia. With me, it all started when I was a kid in Queensland. My parents were in vaudeville and I had a keen interest in theater from an early age. I directed plays before I got to NIDA as a student.

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Now, NIDA is an educational institution attached to the University of New South Wales. But, though it is on campus, it is quite independent. It was set up in 1959, and the original vision was to have both an academic course and a practical training school. In addition, part of the original brief was the all-important production company. From the outset, NIDA has stressed production. Our courses are concentrated on the goal of producing plays, and I think this makes us unique in theatrical education in the world.

Back in '59 the university gave us land. NIDA then set up the Old Tote Co., where the staff directed the plays and the students ran things. I myself, by the time I got there, did AS Ming, lighting design and even acted...third spear carrier from the left, if I recall. This was great, because it gave me a lot of insights which I was able to use as a director. So many of our directors these days don't have this kind of background and are ignorant, sorry to say, of the ins and outs of lighting, design, etc. I was fortunate to run the gamut of jobs, getting hands-on experience.

Let me jump to the present for a minute. Now, as head of NIDA, I want to re-establish our tie with the professional theater. The Old Tote eventually folded; and then there was the Nimrod and now the Sydney Theatre Co. But we at NIDA have seen our ties with the professional stage become rather tenuous. I am trying to redress this. I have asked the STC for more free tickets for us. I want to do plays with them. I want our students to go on secondment there, as interns or whatever. I'm talking with the unions so that the students can work for free for a term as part of their academic program.

So, what I am trying to do is prioritize the practical aspects of training, so that students will go out there and do what they have been learning. We also need a lot of work on the new technology that the theater is using. We have fallen behind in that; but there are a lot of good people in Sydney who I want to bring in to enlighten us.

The weakest point right now in our program would probably be writing and directing. Next year I am turning the one-year directors' course into a two-year course, and we will be training directors in acting, lighting, sound, etc. As for our writing course, it now lacks rigor. There's just too much nurturing of writers' feelings, coddling, if you will. I want the course to be more demanding and craft-oriented. I think we should force young writers to write in particular styles. For instance, we might say, "Do act one as if Ibsen were writing it, but finish the play like Chekhov."

In addition, I want to make the writers' course more practical, so we are going to work with The Australian Film Television and Radio School. We'll have three courses: creative writing; theater writing; film and TV writing. The writing students can choose from these. But, of course they have to do theater writing. I want to excite students about the potential of the theater itself. In Australia, naturalism reigns supreme. This means that a lot of plays look all too much like television. What I have always been interested in is things that can only be done on the stage, for instance, two different time frames represented simultaneously on stage, or two actors playing the same character at different times of their life. I think it was Japanese theater that opened my eyes most to this potential. When I came here in 1972, I saw a kabuki actor gesturing over his head, moving his arms high in the air.

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You know, I had never seen an actor gesture above his head before to create an emotion. In Australia, the naturalistic theater dictates—and this is what we see on TV—that acting should look “real.” But what is real? Whatever an audience accepts is real. We have to be more open to all aspects of theatrical expression.

The problem, I suppose, is that many actors prefer their comfort zone, what they know. A lot of acting can feel pretty uncomfortable, particularly at first, I mean, if you do something that you think is “unreal.” When Tadashi Suzuki came to the Playbox in Melbourne with his method, many of the actors got pretty tired at first. They couldn’t sustain the energy level. But after a while they really got into it, and I think it helped their communication skill and lent complexity to their interpretation of roles.

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People are tired in Australia of theater as TV, I am convinced of that. Why go to the theater when you can see it at home for nothing? Audiences want something different, and that is why they flock to our festivals, where they can see startling and imaginative productions.

Unfortunately, in many ways we have gone back to the days of the old cultural cringe in Australia. I think we are more Anglocentric now in our theater than we have been for a long time. Very conservative. The Sydney Theatre Co. is looking more and more like the Old Tote. In fact, programming in all the state theater companies is looking like late '60s programming, when British plays dominated our stages. The state companies are underestimating the aspirations of their audiences. We need new themes, new designs, new theatricality. And what we are getting is a lot of red lights and smoke.

We do have our own non-naturalistic forms. We have a great comedic style in Australia. (This even turns up sometimes on television, as with the hyperbolic antics of the mother-and-daughter team of Kath and Kim.) But this is limited. Big theatricality is rarely seen on our stages. Audiences are hungry for big cast plays, for instance, for plays with imaginative narrative. Audiences, remember, are really part of the performance too. The performance isn't there without interaction on some level. We do have directors and writers who are aware of this. Many of John Bell's productions for Bell Shakespeare use asides and direct playing to the audience. Playwrights like Louis Nowra and Steven Sewell have written plays that are highly theatrical, and the plays of our greatest playwrights, now deceased, Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett, have not been seen here. I would love to see productions of them in Japan.

There are also a lot of theater collectives now, groups that are experimenting. We have not seen such activity on this scale since the days of the renaissance in Australian theater that started in the late '60s. Groups like the Australian Performing Group (APG) at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, La Mama, also in Melbourne, and the Nimrod in Sydney were rebelling then against what was a staid theatrical establishment in Australia. The small groups working now may not be consciously rebelling like that, but they are defining their own distinct styles. They want to stand out from what came before and also from each other. So, they'll bring in an Iraqi string instrument player or a Polish actor and do a play. This kind of non-naturalistic input is rare in the established Australian theater.

Australia is not just a bastion of Anglocentric culture but a vibrant multicultural, with a mixture of the indigenous, the Celtic, the Anglo, the American, the European and the Asian. The good news is that now there is more cross-racial casting, and a lot of groups are working with Japanese, Indonesian and Malaysian theater practitioners, to name a few. Whether our present ultra-conservative government wishes to admit it or not, we are in Asia, we are a part of Asia, geographically and now culturally. There is no going back.