

**ANDREW BOVELL OUTLINES THE VALUE OF THE DESIGNER IN
THEATRE-MAKING**

In possibly a world-first moment a writer acknowledges the true value of the designer.

Award-winning writer for stage and screen Andrew Bovell gave the opening address to launch Currency House's most recent Platform Paper, *The Designer: decorator or dramaturg* in Adelaide. He describes design as one of the 'four great pillars of stage production... and the least understood'. As writer/adaptor Bovell worked closely with the paper's author - set designer Stephen Curtis - on the acclaimed production of *The Secret River*. Bovell observed at close quarters how the early involvement of the costume and set designers opens up new, subtle and complex levels of meaning in the development of the production, influencing his own work as writer and profoundly shaping the audience's understanding of the work – design as dramaturgy.

'The Designer: Decorator or Dramaturg'

Introduction by Andrew Bovell

Design is one of the four great pillars of stage production; the others being writing, direction and performance and yet it is the least understood beyond those who practice it and this platform paper along with Stephen's earlier book "Staging Ideas", goes a significant way toward rectifying that.

His title poses a question. Decorator or Dramaturg? He suggests perhaps what many assume to be the role of the designer and then, quietly corrects them with what the actual role entails. This, I think speaks to the style of the man. He does not holler, he does not scream and stamp his foot but he does.... Quietly correct. And when he does, you know you've been corrected.

I'd like to start by reading a short scene from the play and then discussing Stephen's design for it as a way of revealing how meaning not only resides in the language spoken by the actors but within the visual and aural context the designer creates for it.

The action of the scene is simple. Sal must leave the boat and approach their camp. As the writer, it's my job to make that as interesting as possible. You do that by creating obstacles, both internal and external. The internal obstacle is Sal's fear of this unknown place, her resistance to the landscape and to the very idea of settling here. It must be overcome if she is going to leave the boat and for the story to proceed. The external obstacle is the landscape itself but a particular element in the landscape. Mud. To get ashore Sal must cross a mud flat.

In a film or a mini-series we know how this scene would be treated. But in the theatre we play with the language of suggestion.

Stephen begins with a white floor... a daring act in itself.

He then creates this mud flat with tin buckets and actual mud. He has the children place the buckets before their mother's steps, so that she steps in a series of buckets of mud and then walks onto the camp, represented by a camp fire down stage. The boys then follow, stepping in the buckets of mud, bringing sound to the action... squelch, squelch, squelch and then they too walk down to the camp.

This white, pristine, largely untouched floor, this gentle and benign place, which has previously been established as the land of the Dharug, is now covered with dirty muddy heavy footprints.

Can the process of European encroachment upon indigenous lands be revealed any more succinctly, more evocatively? Through intelligent design, Stephen has nailed one of the core ideas of the play. A seemingly playful theatrical gesture, a family walks through the mud becomes a potent image that speaks to the themes of the work.

We clumsily trampled upon this country and left our muddy footprints all over it.

I want to talk a little more about this floor. Because in Stephen's design, it is never just a floor. It becomes a canvas upon which the actors draw with a charcoal stick to manifest a boat, a hut, whatever is required to define place and to tell the story. And Dhurrumbin, our narrator and storyteller draws the Dharug rock carvings upon this floor. These carvings are essential to the themes of the play as they speak of a prior and ongoing connection to this place. It is as good as a document of ownership. One that Thornhill refuses to acknowledge. Where his son Dick, sees a fish and a boat carved into the rock, Thornhill only sees a lot of lines that run this way and that. For to see that fish, that boat would be to acknowledge that this place belongs to someone else.

All this drawing and conjuring and making by the cast, which became such a central part of the story telling language used in the show, was not possible without the designer courageously providing the canvass of a white floor.

And everyone knows the challenges of wearing white. It shows the dirt. But that was the point. We were all trying to show the dirt.

At one point the floor joins up with the magnificent backdrop and becomes the river itself. In a crucial and joyous scene, Dick Thornhill joins Naribi and Garrraway, the Dhurag boys and goes swimming in the river. To create this, Stephen and Neil Armfield, the director use buckets and basins of water, which the boys throw at one another and pour onto the floor. The floor is raked and now there is a brilliant slippery slope for those boys to slide across. And they do in the most hair-raising fashion, accompanied by Iain Grandage's joyous music until their mothers call them home, Sal from her side of the point and Gilyagan from hers.

It is such a lovely scene for the audience to witness. It speaks of innocence and of what could and should have been. By the end of the play we know the potential of this joyous moment has been lost. It can never be again, given what takes place. And it is so tragic.

Into this scene, Stephen introduces a plastic bucket. Now the pedants of course will point out that there was no plastic in 1813. No, of course not but by placing it there, as well as other similar

gestures, throughout the play, Stephen gives the audience permission to go beyond naturalism or literalism and to engage with the story through their imaginations.

Where a film or a TV series must represent something as it actually was, the theatre is an imaginative space where anything can happen. The elements of the design are what allow that act of the imagination to take place.

This is a central difference between theatre and film and TV. In the latter a thing is what it appears to be. In the theatre it can be anything we need it to be. And this fluidity of representation, engages a theatre audience in a very particular and wonderful way.

And of course by using objects that are more familiar to us, that in fact we use ourselves, we are reminded that this story, though set nearly 200 years ago, remains uncomfortably close.

When Stephen talks about design, he is quick to remind us that it goes beyond the set and is, in fact a collaboration with costume, lights and sound. In the case of *The Secret River*, Tess Scofield designed costumes, Mark Howett was the lighting designer and Steve Francis designed the sound.

The costumes for the Dharug characters were a challenge from the beginning. Would they be naked, would they be clothed in the materials that existed at the time, animal skins and woven plant materials?

In fact, Tess used both these elements... nudity when it served the meaning of the play and various takes on the traditional clothing. But, like the plastic bucket she also made a bold step toward the present by using modern elements such as board shorts, skinny jeans, booty shorts and singlets. By doing this, Tess draws our attention from the past to the present to suggest that the consequences of what was done then are still being played out now.

This is not decoration. This is dramaturgy.

At an early creative meeting Tess raised the idea of using ash to whiten the white characters' faces and charcoal to blacken the Dharug characters. In the volatile terrain of race identity such a gesture could prove controversial... it's implication being... at least on the indigenous side that they were not black enough to portray traditional indigenous characters.

Tess wanted to emphasize the whiteness.... And the blackness as a suggestion of how each would have appeared to the other. She was drawing on the theatrical tradition of the mask to do so. But the brilliance of this idea only became apparent in the course of the show... as the sweat from the actors and the action of the play made the colour run and spread so that at one point in the play, at its most optimistic, when black and white seem close and familiar, everybody is the same colour... a dirty kind of smudged brown.

This points to the writer Christos Tsioklas's position that racism won't end until we are all mongrels, until we are all different shades of brown.

And then in a further gesture... white talc is used as gun powder during the massacre. The gun men blow from a handful of talc to represent a gun shot. As they do this their faces whiten.

So with each shot these men seem to reassert their whiteness. And the whiteness magnifies the horrific and monstrous expressions on their faces as they kill.

It is one of the most powerful and effective scenes in the play. One of the most powerful scenes I have ever seen in the theatre. It is strong on the page but the collaboration between design and

direction elevates it to something elemental, to something deeply felt and experienced. It is breathtaking.

This goes way beyond decoration... this is about building the emotional and intellectual experience for the audience.

This is dramaturgy.

The key element of Stephen's design is the huge backdrop that towers over the play. It has been described as the trunk of a giant Eucalypt, the cliffs of the Hawkesbury, the river itself. It is all of these things and none of them. Stephen describes it as just a cloth. But it is just a cloth that becomes the thing we need it to be in any particular scene. It is not literal. Again, it is an invitation to engage imaginatively with the work.

The key element is its scale. When we need it to, it dwarfs the human figure, emphasizing our vulnerability in that wild landscape, our human frailty and our arrogance. And when we need the human figure to stand tall and proud, it somehow wraps around them and holds them up. It presents them, if you like, to the audience.

Stephen juxtaposes this element of scale with a down stage point of focus... a single fire place which each family gathers around in turn. In collaboration with Mark's lights, the audience's attention can be drawn to the intimate familial moments that give the work such texture.

As a play *The Secret River*, is really an intimate story about two families who live on different sides of a point, trying to work out whether they can live side by side or not. The tragedy is that they almost do. But the play's focus is quite domestic. But Stephen's set elevates this story, it addresses the enormity of what is being said. It lets us know just how high the dramatic stakes are in the play. It reminds us of the importance of this largely untold history.

Stephen took as his beginning point for his design, Kate Grenville's description of the Hawkesbury as a "Cathedral of Light". And this is exactly what he has created.

Walking into the theatre, like walking into a grand cathedral, we are humbled, we are settled, we are prepared for the story that is about to unfold. We see the beauty and the enormity of it. We are in awe. We are made aware that we have entered a sacred space. Before a word has been spoken the set prepares us for what is about to unfold. I am sure that the impact this work has had on the audience is due in large part, to the contemplative space the set puts us in at the beginning of the show.

Some projects demand the best from the artists who work on it. I think *The Secret River* demanded this of us. We were acutely aware of our responsibility to tell this story well. We owed it to Kate Grenville. We owed it to Cate Blanchet and Andrew Upton who first dared to imagine this as a piece of theatre and we owed it to our audience. But most of all we owed it the indigenous peoples of Australia whose culture survived and flourished despite this dark history. This play demanded our best and I think we gave it. But we were each only as good as each of the other components of the show. And that's how it should be. It takes each of those four pillars (and a great support team) to ensure a memorable show.

If you want to understand how design works, I can highly recommend the platform paper to you.

Thanks

Andrew Bovell