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The New Wave: A Brisbane Perspective La Boite Theatre Company's Distinctive Contribution

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Abstract

In 1967 Brisbane Repertory Theatre made a decision that was to change the city's cultural landscape in a significant and lasting way. Faced with crippling theatre rental costs, Brisbane Rep. found a realistic solution to its decades' old problem of 'a home of our own' by converting one of its properties – an old Queenslander - into a unique theatre space. The theatre-in-the box that emerged, aptly called La Boite, opened on 23 June 1967 with a production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. This experimental space excited the imagination of a new, younger audience not previously interested in Brisbane Rep's essentially conservative fare. It attracted a new group of directors and actors keen to be part of a changing repertoire that embraced more radical, non-mainstream productions, some of which were of Australian plays. The decade after 1967 was a period of change and development unprecedented in La Boite's history. Since then the company has sustained and grown its commitment to Australian plays and the commissioning of new works, and always within the context of theatre-in-the-round. Although not unique in the Australian theatre landscape, this arc of achievement that dates from 1967 is at least distinctive. To what extent was this most significance moment in La Boite's transformational journey influenced by southern 'new waves' of change? With the benefit of hindsight, is it now time for a re-consideration of Brisbane's contribution to the New Wave? Might this lead to a deeper, more inclusive, understanding of that taken for granted term - the New Wave?

Introduction

Two political extremes could be said to have characterized Brisbane between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In 1967, the Brisbane civil liberties movement began in earnest when a powerful radical force emerged out of the University of Queensland's anti-Vietnam War student protest movement. The politicization and radicalization of Brisbane youth found expression in a raft of anti-conscription, anti-war, anti-uranium mining, anti-apartheid, pro-women protest marches. In 1968, the Queensland State

Coalition Government came to power, signaling the beginning of nineteen years of deeply conservative government under Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Yet, it was also a time of unprecedented theatrical activity in Brisbane. Changes and developments, most funded by this same government, heralded the beginning of Queensland's subsidized professional theatre industry. Part of Brisbane's New Wave was the establishment of the Queensland Theatre Company in 1969 with a production of Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* directed by Bryan Nason. Its founding artistic director was Alan Edwards, an accomplished English actor, who held the position until 1988. In 1971 the opening of the Queensland Government-supported Twelfth Night Theatre building at Bowen Hills coincided with the simultaneous setting up of a professional resident company, Twelfth Night Theatre Company, with Joan Whalley as artistic director and Bill Pepper as associate director.

Out of the radical movement emerged a particular counter-cultural phenomenon in Brisbane, the *Foco Club* which opened in 1968 and had a clear connection to the subsequent developments in the city's alternative theatre scene. A venue for popular music, visual art and drama, the *Foco Club*, albeit short-lived, inspired the emergence of a number of alternative Brisbane theatre groups, notably the Popular Theatre Troupe. Very much a part of the New Wave, the PTT led theatrical change nationally with its robust politically-slanted new work by writers such as Richard Fotheringham and Errol O'Neill and its experimentation in form, venues, audiences, and the very purpose of theatre. So radical that the Bjelke-Petersen government refused to fund them, this professional company closed its doors in 1983, marking it as the only Australia Council funded theatre company in the country which did not receive corresponding funding from its state government (O'Neill in Capelin, 1995: 54).

Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow space for a consideration of these companies within the New Wave ideology, but they are important to acknowledge within the overall context of Brisbane's participation in this historically significant nation-wide surge of theatrical activity. The focus of this paper is on yet another Brisbane company. Actively participating in this period of great theatrical change and development was Brisbane Repertory's La Boite Theatre. This paper examines La Boite's relationship to the New Wave, its distinctive contribution to it,

and challenges the taken-for-granted view that important contributions to this 'movement' happened only in Sydney or Melbourne.

Brisbane Repertory's La Boite in 1967

At first glance, Brisbane Repertory Theatre in 1967 would seem to have nothing much in common with those centres of burgeoning theatrical activity at the time, Sydney and Melbourne. Dominated artistically and organizationally since the early 1950s by Babette Stephens - a forceful, dynamic and charismatic artistic presence - the amateur Brisbane Repertory programmed its often professional-standard seasons with box-office successes from West End and Broadway in its favoured venue, the proscenium-arched Albert Hall located in the centre of the city. English born, connected by marriage to a prominent Brisbane family, and much-admired reigning queen of Brisbane theatre at the time, Babette Stephens was Brisbane Repertory's Council President during the late 1950s and its Theatre Director between 1960 and 1968. Although seemingly an unlikely person to re-shape its future away from her signature theatrical style, a decision in which she fully participated saw La Boite develop in an unexpected way to become by the mid-1970s Brisbane's alternative theatre company and the place to go, in Katharine Brisbane's words, to see the red meat of theatre (Blockside,1974)

The First La Boite

In June 1967, one of the most significant 'openings' in Brisbane's theatre history took place - the opening of Brisbane Repertory Theatre's first mainhouse production in its own theatre – the first 'La Boite', an intimate, 70 seat, box-like space created for the purpose of theatre-in-the-round, in a converted cottage in inner-city Petrie Terrace. With its interior walls ripped out and benches placed around the remaining walls, a performance space of exactly 22 feet 3 inches square was created (Blockside, B., 2001).

The issue of finding a home of their own had come to a head in early 1967 with the closure and subsequent demolition of Albert Hall, BRT's rented theatre space since

1942. During Babette Stephens' term of influence the Council was dominated by respected business men such as Brisbane City Council Alderman Lex Ord and Real Estate Director Bruce Blocksidge, and acting on good business advice, she and her Council acquired a real estate portfolio of four adjoining properties in Petrie Terrace. The free services of her husband, prominent solicitor Tom Stephens (their Honorary Solicitor), was an extra boon.

It was Brisbane Rep's Council President Bruce Blocksidge who had the idea that one of the old houses in their property portfolio could be converted into a theatre space (Blocksidge, B., 2001). He had recently been to Hayes Gordon's Ensemble Theatre in Sydney with his wife Jennifer Blocksidge and had been very impressed with what he saw – an old boat shed converted into theatre-in-the-round with audience sitting on all four sides of the stage. Very economic in design, he realized this idea could translate perfectly onto one of their properties (Ibid.). Initially Babette Stephens opposed this idea seeing it as a retrograde step into rough theatre – her dream was of owning a magnificent place in the heart of downtown Brisbane (Blocksidge, J., 1978). Once convinced of the efficacy of the project, to her credit Stephens “very strongly identified with it” (Ibid.), completely embracing the notion and selling it enthusiastically to the membership.

At some point, in the lead-up to its opening, the space was christened ‘La Boite’. French for ‘the box’ it was an apt description of the old house's box-like space. It was Bruce Blocksidge who thought of the name. When studying in London, he lived in the Victoria League Student's Club in Bayswater. Close by was ‘La Boite’, a coffee house, “a little place frequented by well known theatricals – I think Sir Laurence Olivier was one, to drop a name!” (Blocksidge, B., 2001).

The first La Boite opened on June 23, 1967 with a production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* directed by Babette Stephens. Except that it did not have an unchanging ensemble of actors and no-one was paid, La Boite began its life very much like a professional English repertory company: it played every week including Christmas and Easter from Thursday to Saturday – when one play was in rehearsal another was in production. Stephens joked that with the demise of the famous

Windmill Theatre in London, La Boite could with impunity adopt their famous slogan “We Never Close” (Stephens, 1967). During the short span of its life (1967 to 1971), thirty-eight productions were mounted in this first La Boite.

The significance of the first La Boite 1967 to 1971

The significance of this moment in La Boite’s history should not be underestimated. At a time of great national and international cultural, as well as social and political change, Brisbane Rep. chose to be part of cultural change rather than opting for the status quo. The experimental theatre space that was the first ‘La Boite’ excited the imagination not only of existing members but of a sector of the Brisbane public that had not previously been interested in their Albert Hall productions. A new, younger audience and a new group of directors and actors were attracted to the intimate, warts and all, feel of La Boite. Very much an actor’s space, it attracted talented performers many of whom went on to have successful professional stage careers such as Barry Otto (who took roles in eight plays), John Stanton, Hazel Howson, Judith McGrath, Muriel Watson, Kaye Stevenson, Frank Gallacher, Jennifer Blocksidge and Russell Kiefel.

The harshly realistic English drama *Look Back in Anger* which opened La Boite was in stark contrast to the essentially conservative fare generally offered up by Brisbane repertory and signalled a change in programming that slowly progressed to more non-mainstream and even Australian plays as the influence of the anglo-centric Babette Stephens faded and that of new Theatre Director Jennifer Blocksidge emerged. Certainly, the repertoire under Jennifer Blocksidge did not change overnight; rather, with each new season, she slowly introduced more challenging, contemporary works by Harold Pinter, Peter Shaffer, Brian Friel, Edward Albee, Jean Paul Sartre and Peter Handke, as well as the occasional Australian work. In 1970 for example she programmed Hal Porter’s *Eden House*, the first three act Australian play to appear in a Brisbane Repertory season since the 1962 production of *The One Day of the Year*¹.

Although no David Williamsons or Jack Hibberds had burst onto La Boite’s tiny stage, a dramatic change had taken place and one that set in train a process of

experimentation and calculated risk-taking that has continued to characterize La Boite's development ever since.

The new La Boite building: the nation's first purpose built theatre-in-the round

If La Boite is to make a serious claim to being part of the New Wave, then it is the developments in the early 1970s that are of particular significance. Most significant was the opening of Australia's first *purpose-built* 200 seat theatre-in-the-round in 1972, substantially funded by the Queensland Government. I doubt there were too many State governments around Australia at the time that were funding new theatre buildings for amateur companies. And the decision to create this second "in the round" performance space strongly signaled that this was to be a space for experimentation, innovation, for alternative theatre, different to that which one would see in a proscenium-arched space.

As the new Theatre Director and Council President respectively, married couple at the time Jennifer and Bruce Blocksidge were the vital change agents with the vision for a different kind of future for La Boite and the political clout to make things happen. The Blocksidges, part of the Brisbane 'establishment', enjoyed good relationships with senior members of the Queensland Liberal Party and of the Brisbane Anglican Church. These connections may well have made the difference when La Boite applied for government funding for their new building and were successful in obtaining a \$40,000 subsidy to be matched dollar for dollar by the theatre (*The Courier Mail*, Sept. 24, 1971). Particularly useful relationships for La Boite were with the Deputy Premier and Treasurer Sir Gordon Chalk, the Minister for Education and Cultural Activities Sir Alan Fletcher and the Director of Cultural Activities, Arthur Creedy. Bruce Blocksidge recalled that "Sir Gordon Chalk was the one who was able to persuade the government to come to the party" (Blocksidge, B., 2002) and an annual grant was also secured to assist in meeting the running expenses of the Theatre (President's Message in *A Refined Look at Existence*, Program, 1972). Without Chalk's belief in and financial support of the building project it is hard to imagine how La Boite could have been built. When this former Leader of the Queensland

Liberal Party, Deputy Premier, and Treasurer died in 1991, his importance to the organization's evolution was recognized: "Sir Gordon never missed an opening night and indeed without his backing and support at a very crucial stage of La Boite's development things could have turned out very differently for this theatre" (*La Boite News and Views*, May 1991).

It should be noted that Queensland (and remember this was the Bjelke-Petersen era) was then in the unique position of being the only State Government in Australia to have created a Cultural Activities section within one of its departments, Education. Creedy's appointment was interesting too. A graduate of Cambridge and London University, he had worked in universities internationally and was an accomplished pianist, actor, producer, dramatist and critic (Brisbane, 2005: 66). Queensland history at this time was full of paradoxes.

Another paradox is Jennifer Blocksidge herself. Although trained in the English theatre tradition (she was English born and bred), she was excited by the explosive cultural shift in Australian theatre that was well under way by 1970 with the New Wave generation of playwrights, directors and actors. Taking a tough-minded approach, she imposed a new artistic vision that was aimed at making La Boite a part of this new theatrical territory. That La Boite had outgrown its 70 seat makeshift theatre and a new purpose-built theatre in the round was planned gave Blocksidge the opportunity for a fresh beginning.

La Boite Theatre opening with an Australian play

The new La Boite opened with a Gala Premiere Performance on 10 June 1972 in the presence of the Vice Patron Hayes Gordon², the building having been officially opened the week before³. The opening play was the non-naturalistic Australian play, *A Refined Look at Existence* by Rodney Milgate⁴ directed by Jennifer Blocksidge. That her choice was an Australian play (and a challenging one at that) to open the new theatre was a strong indicator of the direction she intended to take La Boite. In her program notes, she signaled that audiences could expect to see more and more Australian plays in future seasons:

Theatre has been the "orphan" art of Australia. Today there is a growing awareness of the importance of "doing our own Theatrical Thing" rather than

relying on the label “It’s good – it’s imported”. Hopefully, Repertory Theatre will be part of this awareness. The atmosphere and size of La Boite should lend itself well to this sort of venture.

(*From The Director in A Refined Look at Existence*, Program, 1972)

As well as its ‘Australianness’, there were other reasons for this particular choice related to the theatricality of the piece and its potential to show off the flexibility of La Boite’s performance space:

... it is not a play of any one mood or style. There is laughter in it and tears ... there are obvious characters and obscure ones. Also because its shape is particularly suited to “the Round”, both in its setting and in its emotional pattern. Hopefully, the flexibility of our Theatre’s shape will be apparent in this first production. If, as we claim, we have something unique to offer audiences, then I wanted them to see why. Finally, this is a theatrical play. I feel that even if you dislike it, you can hardly ignore it!

(Ibid.)

Based on the Greek story of the Bacchae and set in a mythical Australian country town called Dirch River, the play took the audience on a journey from scenes of domestic disharmony, to murder, to a pop concert complete with a rock band playing original music, to a horrifying conclusion. Brisbane theatre critic Peter Charlton called it “a disturbing play” that has “something very pertinent to say about twentieth century life” (*The Telegraph*, June 12, 1972):

You leave the theatre overwhelmed by the immense spectacle of the final act – the reverberating shot, the sudden, sharp death, and the sad, worldly-wise soliloquy by Donny at the end. By comparison with what has passed before – the commonplace, almost hackneyed first act, the literally absurd second act – the third is overpowering. ... Jennifer Blocksidge’s blocking is excellent, considering the inherent difficulties of presenting what is almost three plays in one.

He praised the performances of actors Kaye Stevenson, David Chandler, Michael Williams, Ray Meagher and John Dwyer but most praise was heaped on Bille Brown for his performance of the pop star, Donny “who makes this play work both as a piece of entertainment and a chunk of theatre” (Ibid.). David Rowbotham’s review in the *Courier Mail* was far less enthusiastic. With a headline that stated “New theatre needs stage elevation” he spent some space recommending the theatre add an arena platform “to give the actors some physical equality with the audience” (Rowbotham, 1972). Of the play itself, he said it “must come in for some questioning” concluding that it was “a decidedly strange (and oh yes, interesting) evening in a new, unique theatre” (Ibid.).

In this first season, the new Australian smash-hit from Nimrod Street Theatre, *Biggles* by Michael Boddy, Marcus Cooney and Ron Blair brought to the new La Boite stage a rougher, more larrikin style of theatre that found great favour with younger audiences. The first play to be performed in the thrust in the versatile new theatre, the sexually explicit *The Chapel Perilous* by Dorothy Hewett was so popular that it had an extended season (Blockside, J., 1972).

After her first visit to the new La Boite, theatre critic Katharine Brisbane commented on what “an interesting space” it was, describing it as:

... literally a ‘box’. The arena is square, with steeply raked seating and gives a satisfying feeling of being enclosed in the same space as the characters and their problems, while at the same time being securely above them. This makes for an excellent play-audience relationship.

(*The Australian*, September 8, 1872 in Brisbane, 2005: 212)

For his brick, concrete and timber design of La Boite Theatre, architect (and later President of La Boite Council) Blair Wilson was awarded the 1972 Clay Brick Award. Both he and Bruce Blockside were subsequently awarded the Theatre’s highest honour of Life Membership for their roles in the planning and realization of this unique Australian theatre building (Nomination Form, Feb.20, 1973).

Innovation and experimentation: successes and failures

In her final two years as Director, Blockside did not deviate from her artistic policy to produce challenging plays from contemporary world theatre and the best new Australian plays that she could obtain rights for.

She was proud of the fact that six of the ten major plays in her 1974 seasons were Australian (Blockside, J., 1974). Most controversial of them all was Jack Hibberd’s *Captain Midnight V.C.* directed by guest director Lindsay Smith which Blockside described as “a production that provoked violently opposed comment – ‘shocking waste of good talent’ was one, and ‘the most exciting theatre in years’ was another” (Ibid.). *Courier Mail* critic David Rowbotham did not like it. Under a headline reading “Play’s Virtue – It’s Short”, he wrote “the kid-actors who pour their energies into political pudding plays like this one, simply have no experience of the complexities they are tackling” (Rowbotham,1974). On the other hand, Bruce

Campbell of the *Nation Review* commented: “Lindsay Smith has done a remarkable job fashioning a rough amateur cast into a sparkling, rough ensemble ... It is provocative and stimulating” (Campbell, 1974). Whilst it did well at the box office, Blocksidge was more interested in the new aesthetic that Lindsay Smith brought to the theatre:

Two things about the production stood out for me. The first was the use made of the shape and the spaces of the theatre; the second was Lindsay’s idea of Open Rehearsals where the audience became involved in discussion with the actors. As you are all probably aware – closer audience/actor contact is a particular aim of mine, and I was delighted with Lindsay’s idea.
(Blocksidge, J., 1974)

Just as risky was the demanding, but much praised *A Stretch of the Imagination* by Jack Hibberd, with Barry Otto playing Monk⁵. Yet another ‘first’ in 1974 was the beginning of a trend to foster Queensland writing, that, thirty-odd years later, now governs La Boite’s artistic policy: the production of Jill Shearer’s play *The Trouble with Gillian* was the first time a new, full-length work by a Queensland writer had been premiered in the new La Boite .

The really explosive play for 1975 was Nick Enright’s production of Edward Bond’s *Saved* which ‘provoked one of the most interesting nights in the theatre’s history’ (Blocksidge, J.,1975). During a performance dozens of people, led by a group of fifty Lions Club members, walked out during a violent scene in the play in which a baby in a pram is stoned to death by a group of youths. “It was a shock to us” said Blocksidge. “We had warned the group the play was meaty and the leader had accepted the warning” (Ibid.). Reflecting on this difficult and very public experience, she turned the incident around to be one that spoke of the true value of theatre, which, according to Blocksidge, was to provoke and challenge:

To us... it was one of those rare and precious occasions that happen too seldom, when communication was made as a result of protest – both for and against – which led to animated discussion and exchange of ideas among all concerned (actors, audience and administration) and resulted, in some instances, in a change of attitude.
(BRT Newsletter No.5, 1975)

It was this embracing of innovation and experimentation by Blocksidge that contributed to La Boite’s growing reputation as the place to go for the most exciting and risky theatre in Brisbane.

The Transition from ‘Amateur’ to Professional Artistic Direction

The year 1975 marked the end of an era for Brisbane Repertory’s La Boite with Blocksidge’s decision to resign and the realization of her dream, the appointment of its first professional director, Rick Billingham, considered at the time as “one of Australia’s most talented theatre directors” (Lunn,1977). Billingham caught the crest of La Boite’s version of the New Wave and he rode it for all it was worth, programming alternative, often Australian, non-commercial, experimental plays in amongst enough sure-fire box office successes to keep the theatre financially viable. Australian plays he programmed during his tenure included *The Floating World* by John Romeril, *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* by Stephen Sewell, *Visions* by Louise Nowra, and *Young Mo* by Steve J. Spears; new devised works *Happy Birthday East Timor* by John O’Toole, Richard Fotheringham et al and *Mr Herod’s Christmas Pageant* by John O’Toole; and Queensland plays *The Kite*, *The Boat*, and *Nocturne* by Jill Shearer and a revival of *In Beauty It Is Finished* by George Landen Dann.

Wave after wave of activity over the succeeding decades (with many a dumper along the way testing its staying power) saw the eventual emergence of a fully professional company in 1993 under Sue Rider as Artistic Director. Her commitment and Sean Mee’s after her to new Australian works and in particular to the support of new Queensland writing is the distinctive outcome of those early decisions to create for Brisbane artists and theatre-goers an alternative theatre space and a determination to make this space available for Australian writing. Not many Australian companies that arose or changed as a result of the New Wave can claim as can La Boite to have survived in a continuous line of theatrical activity and to have realized so fully the aim of the new wave generation of writers, actors and directors – the telling of our stories to an audience that really wants to hear them in a space that foregrounds actor/audience relationship. Today, La Boite Theatre Company commits 100% to Australian writing, mostly commissioned new works and the majority by Queensland playwrights.

The last word should go to the theatre space itself. La Boite in Hale Street was a performance space that had very special appeal because of the possibility its engaging

architectural configuration offered of an unusually intimate relationship between actor and audience. It was this subjective power of the iconic building, the inclusive nature of the performing space for both audience and artists, that seemed to engender notions of identification, gratitude, pride, a sense of belonging to something both extremely contemporary yet steeped in Brisbane Repertory's history, that bound people to it, that gave it a very strong cultural identification in Brisbane, and made communities care very much about La Boite and its destiny

The performance space in The Roundhouse, La Boite's new home in Kelvin Grove's Urban Village at QUT since 2004, has been deliberately designed to be a larger version of the original Hale Street La Boite. Less forgiving of actors' shortcomings, less intimate for audience members, more demanding to direct and design for, the space presents new challenges. At the same time, the wisdom of the design is in both its connection with the past and in the symbolic statement it makes about La Boite's capacity to change and develop, about its community status as Brisbane's second major theatre company, and about its potential to grow in state and national cultural significance.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Blockside followed this up in 1971 with three more Australian plays: Queensland Joan Priest's *While Bennie Waited*, Thomas Keneally's *Halloran's Little Boat*, and Alexander Buzo's *Rooted*.

² Other Vice Patrons were Sir Gordon Chalk and John McCallum, the Brisbane-born actor who, in partnership with his wife Googie Withers, enjoyed a long stage and film career in England and Australia.

³ La Boite Theatre was officially opened on Sunday June 4, 1972 by the Theatre's Patron, the Governor of Queensland, Sir Colin Hannah, in the presence of the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, Sir Gordon Chalk, The Hon. Max Hodges, Dame Merlin Myer (The Sidney Myer Charity trust donated \$1,500 to the project), and members of the Theatre (President's Message in *A Refined Look at Existence*, Program, 1972).

⁴ The play had its first season, directed by Robin Lovejoy and Rick Billingham, at the Jane Street Theatre, Sydney in 1966 (Brisbane in Parsons, 1995: 367).

⁵ Otto was about to become nationally well known as an actor through his work with Nimrod and Old Tote Theatre Companies in Sydney (Brisbane in Parsons, 1995: 421).