

Katharine Brisbane, *Not Wrong—Just Different: Observations on the Rise of Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Sydney: Currency, 2005, 370pp.

AU \$34.95 (pbk)/ \$59.95 (hbk)

ISBN: 0868197777 (pbk)

0868197645 (hbk)

There have been several historical, scholarly accounts of Australia's recent theatre history, but none written with the authority and experience of Katharine Brisbane. From 1967 to 1974 she travelled Australia reviewing theatre productions in every capital city for the *Australian* newspaper, subsequently writing essays and articles for *Theatre Australia* and the *National Times*. In 1972, with her husband Philip Parsons, Brisbane launched Currency Press, initiating the most important publishing venture in the performing arts. For the first time there was a knowledgeable and comprehensive collection and publication of new plays, and subsequently several important contributions to theatre history, particularly the invaluable *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (1995), edited by Philip Parsons, who tragically died two years before it appeared in print. Australian theatre scholarship, and Australian theatre itself, owes an incalculable debt to Currency Press and its two founders. After her retirement in 2000, Brisbane set up the non-profit association Currency House. The latest publishing venture from Currency House is the Platform Papers, the seventh of which, by David Throsby, is *Does Australia Need a Cultural Policy?*

Throsby's title signals the intellectual thrust of all Katharine Brisbane's work, its energetic opening of debate at every opportunity. Her position during the years when Australian drama first defined itself in the form of the New Wave, inventing a challenging, larrikin voice in plays that had first airings in Sydney at the Jane Street and Old Tote theatres and at La Mama and the Pram Factory in Melbourne, remains absolutely unique. Never again will it be possible for any individual to comprehensively cover Australian theatre, and never again, I suspect, will there be the kind of creative revolution that we had in drama between 1970 and 1985.

The book consists of a helpful Introduction and a selection of Brisbane's reviews and articles in chronological order, with interpolations that consist of a *post hoc* commentary that provides a context for the reviews and, sometimes, with the benefit of hindsight, candidly makes different judgements from her original ones. There is a Foreword from Robert Drewe. Her Introduction lists the public roles she played, expanded later

in the book in the descriptions of her participation in the early days of the Australian Council for the Arts. But she was also a participant in the battle to save Sydney's Theatre Royal, was an anti-censorship activist, a founding committee member of the Australian National Playwrights' Conference in 1972, and had many other important public roles.

Appropriately, the book begins with an article written for the *Australian* in 1967 entitled "The Role of the Critic," an exemplary, clear-headed analysis that is not only demonstrated in the well-informed pieces that follow, but elaborated upon in subsequent articles such as the 1971 "Not Wrong, Just Different" and "The Critic as Advocate." This is a critic who has thought long and deeply about the critic's role, and who, fortunately, had sufficient public space allotted her to open up cultural debate, to record historical moments (sometimes with extraordinary prescience) and to act as advocate for an always struggling cultural genre. She joyfully records theatrical triumphs, as generous in praise as she is fair in condemnation. Ironically but inevitably, her 1971 analysis of the shrinking role of the critic in Australia, the de-professionalising that arose from part-time criticism, was proven by her 1974 replacement as national critic by state writers, inevitable in view of the sheer volume of work, but also a sad diminution of a public intellectual's role. My own career as theatre critic for the *Australian*, and later for the *Age*, since 1979, has seen an ever-shrinking proportion of space allotted to theatre criticism by the newspapers.

Another strength of this collection is its immediacy. This is not a recollected historical record, but one that required on-the-spot judgement, and it is a delight to read the first impressions of major productions, plays, acting triumphs (and sometimes catastrophes) from someone better placed than almost anyone else at the time to recognise what was significant. The authority for this comes not only from an extraordinary breadth of reading and knowledge in the field, but also from an invaluable exposure to much overseas theatre work in England, Europe and America as well as the major Arts Festivals in Adelaide and Perth. Furthermore, the establishment of Currency Press also represented a commitment to the development of Australian drama that was unparalleled.

The freshness of a detailed production history is thoroughly enjoyable, without any sense of events being made to fit a pre-conceived intellectual structure. Nevertheless there are certain important themes that run through Brisbane's work. One is the clear sense that amateur/professional demarcations are a waste of time, since they are historically interdependent,

and indeed remain so. Another is the opinion that theatre architecture has been a crucial determinant in Australian drama's development. The importance of found spaces to the New Wave, the destruction, particularly in Sydney, of the nineteenth-century grand theatres, and their replacement in every state by state theatre edifices of varying degrees of efficacy, is a sub-textual story of its own. Her final words on David Williamson, describing him as captive of the theatres his work helped build, lament the wedge driven between commercial and "high" art. There is much shrewd political comment, particularly on the subject of subsidy, but also a history of Australian censorship, of the growth of an arts bureaucracy, and a sense of Brisbane's delighted recognition, along with contemporary audiences, of an Australian national character emerging through larrikin beginnings. The complete lack of snobbery is salutary, (something distinct from the ability to distinguish quality in performance), and is seen in the recognition that such phenomena as theatre restaurants have been extremely important in the whole picture.

The critical judgments are spot-on, from the description of John Romeril's *The Floating World* as "an unruly masterpiece" in 1974, to the conclusion that Jim Sharman's *A Cheery Soul*, starring Robyn Nevin as Miss Docker, was "a production the like of which we may never see again." The comparison of the Melbourne and Sydney productions of Jack Hibberd's *A Toast to Melba* is a penetrating analysis that goes to the heart of Hibberd's weaknesses as a playwright. Richard Wherrett's transformation of the Sydney Theatre Company into a "theatre of panache" initiates a discussion of the risks of putting style before content. Yet she defends the operatic stylishness of the STC's 1981 return season of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, starring John Bell and Robyn Nevin in "superb virtuoso performances" demonstrating that style can make a path to the truth through performance.

The book's final section, "Retrospection," records, along with thoughts on why we need the arts and on the origins of subsidy, the important subject of the rise of Aboriginal theatre that had accompanied the development of a white national culture and some wise and impassioned words on valuing process rather than just product.

Not Wrong—Just Different is an invaluable addition to our records of cultural history, and its clarity, humanity and intelligence, along with its unique historical specificity, make it as enjoyable as it is accessible to the reader.

Helen Thomson, Monash University