



Interview with Kip Williams (2004)

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conducted by Lyndon Goddard (2007)

Having graduated from Sydney University in 2008 and having then been accepted into NIDA's director's course, Kip Williams (2004) has since gone from strength to strength in the theatrical realm. He kindly granted the OCA an interview on the topic of his latest play, an interpretation of Lord of the Flies that opens in June.

First, thank you for taking the time for this interview.

It's a pleasure.

Your upcoming production of *Lord of the Flies* is unique in its staging with an all-female cast. What attracted you to this production, and what was the thinking behind this staging decision?

Lord of the Flies is a story that has long interested me. I first encountered it in my Year 8 English studies and have returned to it many times since. Whilst a student at NIDA, I was asked to direct a production of the stage adaptation using the graduating male actors. In conceiving that production, it struck me that while every character in the story is male, *Lord of the Flies* is widely regarded as representing the potential primal darkness within us all. Since then, I've been keen to explore a production with an all-female cast, which I will get to do in Melbourne later this year.

Your large-scale directorial debut came with last year's Sydney Theatre Company production of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. How daunting was it to be responsible for a production of this magnitude?

Being the youngest member of a team I had to lead was initially daunting, but the task of having to make a show left little time to dwell on this. More than anything, the magnitude of the production was an exciting thing. Having spent my student years directing shows in small theatres, the opportunity to work in the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House and with such an extraordinary cast was something of a dream.

Perhaps the most daunting element of the production was the text itself. *Under Milk Wood* was originally written to be a radio play, meaning that its structure and content were intended purely for a listening audience. Its rapid-fire succession of scenes, endless parade of characters, and dense, poetic language make it notoriously difficult to stage. The great challenge was to make this most beloved poem work in a visual and spatial medium.

What approach did you take to that production?

The approach I took to *Under Milk Wood* was to evoke a theatrical equivalent to the experience of listening to the radio. Listening to the radio is a personal experience, and is much like having a story read to you as a child. The voice of the reader washes over you and your imagination takes over, creating colours and images more vivid and individual than any picture or film ever could.

The design and staging of the play became about the actors using simple props and costumes to create theatrical suggestions of a fuller picture. Further to this, the aural origins of the writing meant that I worked with the text more like I would an opera score. In developing the movement and choreography for the show, I responded to the very particular rhythms and melodies of Thomas's writing. At times, the production took on a dance-like quality.

How difficult is it to direct actors with greater age and experience than you (eg, Jack Thompson and Sandy Gore in *Under Milk Wood*)?

It can sometimes be difficult for a young director to earn the trust of a more experienced actor, but luckily I wasn't faced with that challenge on *Under Milk Wood*. Jack and Sandy were incredibly generous towards me throughout rehearsals, both in the sharing of their wisdom and in their immediate openness to my ideas.

The ideal scenario in making theatre is for an actor's performance to arise from a process of collaboration between actor and director, and I was privileged to have this happen with both of them.

Your degree at Sydney University (Bachelor of Media and Communications) interestingly did not include any performing arts subjects. What was your involvement in SUDS (Sydney University Dramatic Society) and other extra-curricular productions during your time at university?

Whilst completing the four-year MECO degree (which also allowed me to complete two Arts majors in English and History), I partook in over twelve SUDS productions, debated for USyd, edited Honi Soit and played in a handful of bands. It was a busy time filled with a variety of pursuits, but making theatre sat at the core of my undergraduate experience.

SUDS is quite a remarkable institution. It presents a new play every two weeks and each play is programmed by a vote put to the membership. In SUDS I directed, wrote, acted, designed sets, rigged lights, did publicity and ran front of house. It offered a broad insight into the many elements that come together to make a show.

You were accepted into NIDA's six-student directorial course, having only just graduated from university. How essential was your experience at NIDA in securing subsequent professional opportunities?

My two years at NIDA were a very special time. The school offered endless opportunities to experiment and to refine my practice. It also put my work on the radar of the major theatre companies. It was through my graduating production that I secured an interview with Sydney Theatre Company to assist Andrew Upton on *The White Guard*.

From there I went on to act as Assistant Director on several other shows, including for Neil Armfield, Jim Sharman and Benedict Andrews, whilst also directing my own first professional works.

At Cranbrook, you were heavily involved in the school's drama productions. How early did you realize that theatre was something that you wanted to pursue later? To what extent did Cranbrook's drama teachers inspire and nurture that interest?

I've always been making theatre in one form or another from as long as I can remember, starting with living room plays put on to entertain my actress grandmother.

Cranbrook was an amazing place to go to school for someone like me. I don't think there are many schools that have drama programs quite like it. I was fortunate to have teachers who encouraged my creativity all the way through my schooling, but it goes without saying that the classes and productions of Mr Wickham were formative theatrical experiences. Mr Wickham expected us to take drama deadly seriously, and we did. He imparted a deep respect for the transformative power of theatre, as well as an incredible rigour in our approach to making it.

How do you think Cranbrook can continue to attract and foster interest in drama, including cultivating the talent of those who will pursue it post-school?

It would be phenomenal to see Cranbrook build a proper sized theatre to house its performances in, to expand opportunities for students to work behind the scenes, and to develop more avenues for students to direct and write their own material.

You're currently a Co-Resident Director at the Sydney Theatre Company. What does that role involve? How much freedom do you have to choose your own projects and influence their production?

The role involves many components, but the three major elements are as follows. First, to direct shows for the company. I will be directing *Romeo and Juliet* for later this year.

Second, to contribute to the creative direction of the company. This largely involves being in conversation with the core creative team about what productions the company should program for next year (a big task), and how to better engage with our audience, as well as supporting this year's productions.

Third, to assist in developing new work for the company. This involves reading new plays, directing developments, and seeing other works so as to be abreast of what new artists are emerging in Sydney and beyond.

Where do you see your career in ten years' time? What future ambitions do you have and what future challenges do you seek?

In ten years' time I'd love to have made my way through a good number of Shakespeare's plays, to have directed some Beckett and Chekhov, to have been a part of the development of new Australian work, to have run or be running a theatre company, to have expanded my opera and film directing, and to have been working overseas for some years.

Kip Williams, thank you very much for your time.

My pleasure.