

Finding the Life in the Stone

Chris Drummond

Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* is a play born of collaboration. It is also a work that mirrors, in the urgency of its themes, the very impulse that fuelled its creation.

It started, for me, in 2004 when I was at a very low ebb for a number of reasons. Every night, with the news full of war and global warming, I was searching for ideas to develop in my first year at Brink... but inspiration wasn't coming my way. It was a bleak time for a lot of people, post-9/11, with the US war on terror and Australia's membership in the coalition of the willing, the looming catastrophe of global warming being ignored (or worse, denied), the continuing refusal to say sorry to the stolen generation, the ongoing mistreatment of asylum seekers, the inexorable spread of fundamentalism, absolutism, nihilism... so many people seemed to be asking the same questions: What to believe in... to hope for? What faith could we hold for humanity...or, *in* humanity? I'd never felt such a shared sense of despair, such emptiness. Out of the convoluted processes of my thinking I found myself reading *The Future Eaters* by Tim Flannery and started to get an idea about using the book as an allegory for the way we live our lives. While thinking about these ideas I remembered an exhibition of Hossein Valamanesh's work and his extraordinary images (which seemed like theatrical spaces waiting to be inhabited) and felt he would be a brilliant artist with whom to collaborate. As soon as Hossein came to mind, I realised that Andrew Bovell, whom I'd long admired, might respond to something in this emerging idea as well. The union between Hossein's installation work and Andrew's writing was one of those wonderful epiphanies: the spare elegance, melancholia and elemental Australianness of their aesthetics would combine with the contrasting qualities of Hossein's lyricism and Andrew's hard-edged dramatism to create a rich theatrical dialogue on which to found the ambitious new work that was forming in my mind. Quincy Grant, a great composer, musician and long-term collaborator, completed the picture. Under the working title *The Extinction Project*, we began a conversation about a piece of theatre that could explore humanity's relationship to the planet, to the unknown and to one another.

The process of creating new work is a bit like Inuit carving, at least as I understand it. You do not simply take a piece of stone and say, 'I will carve this into a bear'. First you must search. Going out each day and searching and gathering pieces of stone of varying sizes and shapes, always looking for that special one. This searching goes on for as long as is necessary. There may be times when you revisit a particular stone, turning it this way and that, before setting it aside and heading back out. Then one day you pick up a stone, perhaps for the umpteenth time, turn it over and there you see it: a bear jutting out of the rock, waiting to be discovered. After the searching, all that remains is to carve away what isn't needed. Of course this, in itself, is another kind of search: a slow and delicate process in which the stone's inherent qualities, its grains and sedimentary lines dictate and shape the figure that will eventually emerge. The Inuit call this 'finding the life in the stone'—drawing forth the figure that has been there since the dawn of creation.

With a similar understanding, Brink seeks, always, to cast as wide a net as possible in its search for a richness in theatre. To do this we bring together like-minded artists, from different disciplines and backgrounds, at the earliest possible moment—writers, actors, composers, designers—everyone responding equally to the initial idea. The crucial aspect of our approach is that we ask the artists to come with nothing prepared: to come with minimal research, with no preconceptions, no decisions and no solutions ready. We ask them to begin in a kind of emptiness. It is a daunting thing, to accept an invitation to begin a collaboration

with so little momentum and so many questions: not just about the ideas, but about the process itself.

But there is a purpose to beginning in ‘emptiness’. It requires both confidence in your fellow artists and, more importantly, it requires a deep sense of self-confidence in your own capacity and a lack of ego—both essential qualities for this kind of work. It is a testament to the generosity and openness of Andrew, Hossein and Quincy that they accepted Brink’s invitation, and that *The Extinction Project* even made it to that first meeting. By committing to coming together in emptiness, a profound openness, trust and urgency were generated that sustained the artists throughout the project. And so the searching began.

Early on, our conversations were broad and freewheeling, Andrew in particular worked hard *not* to have ideas, which, as he said himself, was difficult given that he is usually asked to do the opposite as a writer. In those early sessions, the thing that struck and inspired me was everyone’s willingness to listen, reflect and wait, absorbing and learning how each other worked. Everyone was committed to finding the life in the stone together. We slowly developed a shared language and a unity of vision. As time passed and the searching continued certain discoveries came to shift the direction of the work. One major turning point came nearly twelve months after our first conversations, via an email from Andrew:

Have just returned from Paris, which was so beautiful! Saw an exhibition there devoted entirely to the state of melancholy, which brought up so many thoughts about where I would like to go with The Extinction Project.

It defined melancholy not as a state of sadness but as state of deep reflection from which new thinking will arise.

It gave me a way of seeing the postmodern period or rather the post postmodern period as a time of great reflection from which we will emerge regenerated. And having been in Paris Chris, I am naturally drawn to the Enlightenment. What if it is not an age of despair that we are confronting but a new age of enlightenment?

Also have you ever come across the description ‘The Children of Saturn’? It is a medieval reference to those who sit outside the mainstream and was generally used to describe those of a melancholy disposition.

It describes the emotional state I’m trying to capture.

This email inspired, infused and informed the work from that point forward. The notion of melancholy as a state of deep reflection out of which new thinking arises was a wonderful response to the personal and global despair that had originally fuelled the project. As well as this, the allusion to Saturn offered another thread that would have a major impact on the work. Seeing Goya’s ‘Saturn Devouring his Children’ as part of the exhibition gave Andrew an image of ‘eating the future’—a metaphor for humanity’s relationship to the planet that referenced Flannery’s evocative title—while pointing to the human scale of the ideas we were exploring, the horrors visited upon children by their parents. The discovery of this image, which would eventually sit at the heart of the work, was a crucial turning point and yet just one example of countless such shared discoveries.

All in all, with everyone’s schedules, it took nearly two years before we finally came together for a sustained period of work on the floor. Together—with seven wonderful actors: William Allert, Paul Blackwell, Michaela Cantwell, Elena Carapetis, Cameron Goodall, Carmel Johnson and Rory Walker; choreographer Rowan Marchingo; and designers Geoff Cobham and Gaelle Mellis—we set about generating as many images and ideas as we could

during those crucial three weeks. Performance images, installation images, choreographic ideas, songs and musical ideas, narrative possibilities... it was open-ended and exhilarating work. Andrew was the driver of the narrative search and it became clear as we worked that he was reaching forward trying to put some flesh onto the bone of the emerging images in front of him... trying to find the order, the pattern that could bring it all together. Meanwhile, Hossein, Quincy and the actors, day after day, continued to infuse the room with images and atmospheres, embedding them into Andrew's imagination, tugging at him to continue to see things in a different light.

One example of the powerful nature of the collaboration was how Hossein's eye lifted the intensity of the actors' improvisations from the very beginning. I remember on the first day asking for tables and chairs to be put into the space for an improvisation exploring dual-realities. We were about to begin the first task when Hossein stopped me, walked forward and made a few adjustments to the placement of the tables and the chairs. Instantly there was a clarity to the space, a power to the configuration and everyone laughed in delight at seeing such beauty in the simple re-positioning of rehearsal room furniture. The effect on the actors' work was extraordinary... there was such economy in Hossein's sense of space, so distilled and energised did it seem, that it immediately informed the tone and precision of the actors' work. It was an event that suited perfectly Andrew's detailed eye and over the course of the workshop this sense of distilled power continued to grow within every element of the work.

By the end of the three weeks Andrew came saying he felt he had found the pattern he was searching for, the framework of the piece. He proceeded to lay out a series of interconnected narratives that were the first draft of the stories now contained in *When the Rain Stops Falling*. As he recalls it,

It wasn't the stories that mattered. I knew they would change and they did. It was the principle of how narrative would be organised... that the stories would unfold across generations and time periods and that they would be told simultaneously and in parallel... we knew or discovered that the work needed to reach back into the past and deep into the future... and on top of that I had this rich source of story, character and image that had been generated in the workshop.

The wonder of the collaboration for all of us was the way that so many of our shared discoveries were woven into the tapestry of those narratives. At the end of the work, with one last morning together, almost as an afterthought, we asked the actors to share one more personal story, this time of an incident of travelling with friends, from their teenage years—a way of exploring an emerging narrative about the journey of Gabriel and Gabrielle. The power and vulnerability of the stories shared that day was unexpected and deeply moving—all the more extraordinary, given the emotional exhaustion of the actors after three weeks of intense and confronting work. It was the final gift of the workshop, setting the compass for Andrew, and for the play, to speak of the unseen universes that lie, beneath the daily surface, in each of us.

Finally, Andrew entered the commission phase of the work and for quite some months there was silence until one day I received an email which said in part: '... the play is like pissing glass... I keep thinking that something is going to shift and that I will see the light but the thinking is turgid.' And here is the painful truth of the creative experience. Despite the enormous journey already undertaken, and the knowledge that there was real substance in his thinking and ideas, once alone, Andrew *had* to begin a new search that would prove just as long and difficult as the first. From this very dark place Andrew edged his way forward through the stories and characters, piecing the work together fragment by fragment. Slowly the play started to reveal itself to him through hard labour and a steadily growing stream of

epiphanies. It was as if the work was demanding that he reach and reach before it would reveal itself to him. But what he was carving was extraordinary.

When the Rain Stops Falling is a world eked out of a desire to understand the destructive nature of humanity and its capacity for compassion, transformation and survival. Through this collaboration, which often at the darkest moments led one artist to help reopen the imagination of another, an expansive canvas has been opened up, revealing a clarity of vision that is a testament to the power of the shared journey. For his part, Andrew Bovell, through his openness and skill as a writer and collaborator, has taken the threads and echoes of so many conversations and ideas and woven them into a story of his own making, but one that captures the collective dreaming of a group of artists and profoundly communicates that dream to its audience.

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