

# PUBLISHED VERSION

Anne Pender

**Sustained personal contact: Recent Australian productions on tour in China**

Australasian Drama Studies, 2021; (78):195-223

© Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA), 2021

Originally published at:

[https://www.adsa.edu.au/dbpage.php?pg=view&dbase=newsletters&id=79#section\\_1177](https://www.adsa.edu.au/dbpage.php?pg=view&dbase=newsletters&id=79#section_1177)

## PERMISSIONS

<https://www.adsa.edu.au/dbpage.php?pg=view&dbase=uploads&id=36283>

### Multiple, redundant or concurrent publication

In general, papers describing essentially the same research should not be published in more than one journal. Submitting the same paper to more than one journal constitutes unethical publishing behaviour and is unacceptable.

Manuscripts which have been published as copyrighted material elsewhere cannot be submitted. In addition, manuscripts under review by the journal should not be resubmitted to copyrighted publications. However, by submitting a manuscript, the author(s) retain the rights to the published material ie. copyright and moral rights remain with the author.

**Copyright permission also received by the Editor via email dated 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

**9 July 2021**

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/131075>

# ‘SUSTAINED PERSONAL CONTACT’: RECENT AUSTRALIAN PRODUCTIONS ON TOUR IN CHINA

ANNE PENDER

In 2020, I conducted a study of five Australian theatre companies that have toured to China over the last decade. This article draws on a study of three of those theatre companies: Windmill Theatre Co., Insite Arts and Red Stitch Actors’ Theatre. It examines the development of three productions by the companies and the extent of their adaptation for audiences in China. The case study productions include *Baba Yaga*, a children’s play and co-production between Adelaide’s Windmill Theatre Co. and Scotland’s Imagine; *Saltbush*, an immersive theatre production from Insite Arts; and *desert, 6.29pm*, a play produced by the Red Stitch Actors’ Theatre, who were invited to perform at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival in 2018.

This article considers the spaces of aesthetic transformation and intercultural connection afforded by the productions, the

finely balanced economics of touring to China, and the sustained personal relationships between the touring company members and their audiences, as well as with the individuals who operate the highly successful Shanghai-based presenting company, ASK (Art Space for Kids). The case studies allow for hopeful speculation about performance futures and collaborative opportunities between China and Australia at a time of strained relations. In order to understand the context for current touring, the discussion briefly considers the history of Australian theatre on the stages of China, and its evolution from the first professional production of an Australian play in the PRC: Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* in 1987.

While the history of Australian theatre in China is yet to be written and may be understood in various geo-political contexts, particularly those relating to the bilateral relationship, it is very much part of an evolving exchange system and diplomatic culture, as well as being part of recent Australian new nationalist cultural history. The 'Asianisation' of Australian theatre, to use the term adopted by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, is also relevant to this history. As they observed, this process is 'multifaceted and dynamic'.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the history of Australian theatre in the People's Republic of China (PRC) does not map easily on to the development of touring circuits of Asian cities, such as those documented by Jonathan Bollen from 1946 to 1975 (2020), the period that precedes the one addressed here, because, as he points out, the cities of mainland China were not part of the network or circuit due to their communist government, and

thereby were excluded from what was an evolving capitalist network.<sup>2</sup> However, it can be argued that Shanghai, as a locus of what Meng Yue calls ‘entertainment cosmopolitanism’ prior to the establishment of the PRC, has in recent years resumed its importance as a hub for international performance, entrepreneurialism and experimentation in the arts.<sup>3</sup> The work of the Shanghai-based presenting company ASK, documented below, demonstrates a continuation of this ‘entertainment cosmopolitanism’ in the contemporary period.

In 2012, Stephen Fitzgerald (the first Australian Ambassador to China, from 1973 to 1976) argued that we Australians need a stretch of the imagination ‘to be able to imagine a different kind of relationship’ with China – one that is not merely economic, transactional and commercial. Fitzgerald encouraged Australians to invest in the relationship in a way that we have with other important nations, such as the UK and the USA.<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald argued for an ‘intensity of sustained personal contact’. He said: ‘We have to cultivate confidence on the Chinese side that that much contact is worth it for them ... Because a good political relationship depends on maintaining that intensity of personal contact.’<sup>5</sup> The arguments are persuasive, and Fitzgerald gave examples of how to achieve this sustained personal intensity. We needed to begin, he said, ‘to think about China in a more rounded, less Anglo-centric and, dare I say, more human way’.<sup>6</sup> In the cultural sphere, this intensity of interaction seemed to spring to life between 1987 and the mid-2000s, with the pace quickening in recent years. The making of theatre and the experience of drama,

dance, opera or music is of course one of the ways in which sustained personal intensity occurs, and a genuine cultural exchange.

Since 2012, the year Stephen Fitzgerald spoke these words, and the same year that Carrillo Gantner and Alison Carroll wrote about finding a place on the Asian stage, at least a dozen Australian theatre companies have taken their work to China.<sup>7</sup> Companies offering opera, ballet, spoken-word drama, physical theatre, puppetry and children's theatre have all toured or appeared at festivals, some of them offering productions over multiple years. Indeed, the success of Australian theatre for young people in China is part of a bigger story of sustained investment in theatre for young people over a fifty-year period. In 2007, Sandra Gattenhof observed that Australia is one of a few countries that actively supports, develops and promotes theatre for the young. At that time, there were twenty-one federally funded companies producing theatre for young people. Gattenhof argued that theatre for children and youth is in some ways 'at the cutting edge of contemporary performance'.<sup>8</sup> However, the situation now is not nearly as encouraging. Due to cuts announced in 2020, only three companies producing theatre for children and youth will retain their federal funding beyond 2022.<sup>9</sup>

While the future of theatre for children and young people in Australia is in danger without significant federal subsidy, it is important to note that over time the sustained investment in theatre for young people, particularly in states such as South Australia, has positioned youth and children's theatre companies for success in Australia, and

for success in taking their work to China. The state government in South Australia continues to fund a number of youth and children's theatre companies, including Windmill Theatre Co., Patch, Slingsby, and Gravity and Other Myths. The cultural ecology of building and sustaining theatre for children and youth is complex, and its micro-history in South Australia is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the infrastructure, the ecology of theatre for young people and the artistic vision of a number of independent artistic directors in South Australia, has enabled productive relationships to develop with Chinese presenters, creative teams and their audiences. These relationships are important to understand if companies are to resume touring and collaborating in a post-COVID world.

Over the last ten years, the interest in Australian theatre in China has grown exponentially, with dozens of Australian theatre companies touring and performing at festivals. One area of exceptional growth over the last five years is in the export of Australian children's and youth theatre and theatre for families. Chinese audiences have taken to Australian theatre for the young with particular gusto, and Chinese parents are prepared to pay high, some may say exorbitant, ticket prices to give their children the opportunity to experience innovative theatre from Australia. Of course, it has taken years to reach this position with regard to cultural exchange and to have established the necessary infrastructure and professional relationships to facilitate touring on the scale of the last five years. At the time of writing, however, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic,

it appears that this relationship may have been severed, with no sign of immediate repair. It is therefore timely to analyse the artistic connections that have been evolving in spite of the current setbacks in the trading and diplomatic relationship.

### STRETCHING OUR IMAGINATION

In 1971, Gough Whitlam travelled to China in his role as Opposition leader in the Australian Parliament, and laid out a plan for a possible new relationship with the People's Republic should the Australian Labor Party rise to power in Australia. At this time the McMahon Government had refused to open up formal ties with China. Whitlam visited the PRC again in 1973 as Prime Minister of Australia, the first visit to China by an Australian Prime Minister, ushering in a new era in diplomatic relations. Whitlam was determined to project a sophisticated, self-assured and mature image of Australia on to the world stage. Indeed, Whitlam expressed what has been called a 'new nationalism' that was uncertain about Australia's position in the world, especially with regard to the changing relationship with Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> If Whitlam's new nationalism was ambivalent in its attitudes to the mother country, the relationship with China that began to develop during the 1970s was tentative, halting and like all new relationships, in need of sustained nurturing and development.

Whitlam set up the Australia Council (then named the Australia Council for the Arts) in the same year as that first prime

ministerial visit to China, an initiative that would of course have a lasting impact on the development of Australian theatre and directly impact upon the capacity of theatre companies to tour – a situation that remains the case today. In South Australia, the state government has committed funding to theatre for young people over a long period, establishing the Come-Out festival in 1974 (the first youth arts festival in Australia) and consistently recognising the needs of children and young people as creators as well as consumers of cultural products. Highly successful South Australian children's theatre companies such as Patch, Windmill, Slingsby, and Gravity and Other Myths have developed touring and international partnerships in part as a result of the sustained commitment of government to their work.

Thirteen years after Whitlam's first state visit to the PRC, the first professional production of an Australian play opened in China. Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* played at the Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai, and ran for six weeks to packed houses. Carrillo Gantner directed the play in which a local Chinese actor, Wei Zong Wan, performed the role of the sole character, Monk O'Neill, who lives on his own in the bush and enacts scenes from his life as the play progresses. Playbox Theatre in Melbourne (founded by Gantner) provided some of the production elements, including colour gel for lighting, and Gantner brought in some bottles of Foster's Lager for authentic props.<sup>11</sup> The decision to perform this play at that time is still a little surprising, given it is a strange monologue by one old man who has rejected society, and is waiting to die. It is a complex, idiosyncrat-

ically Australian play and it is hard to imagine what many in those Chinese audiences made of it. It is possible that some were captivated by the idea of an old man (however misanthropic) who may be some kind of repository of wisdom and they may have delighted in the vivid, broad-ranging, at times wise and sardonic elements of his monologue. Due to an outbreak of hepatitis in Shanghai, the planned tour of the production across China was cancelled and the residents of the city were quarantined. The production also played in Beijing for a short season in September 1987.

Gantner had initially arranged for four Australian plays to be translated and offered to the Chinese company for staging (including *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* by Ray Lawler). Gantner felt certain that the Lawler play would be chosen, but to his surprise they selected the Hibberd play.<sup>12</sup> The one-man show format appealed to the director of the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, Sha Ye Xin (also a noted playwright).<sup>13</sup> The actor cast by the company director was Wei Zong Wan, and the play was translated by Professor Hu Wen Zhong of the Beijing Foreign Studies University (he had completed an MA in Australian Literature in Sydney under the supervision of Leonie Kramer, the first female professor of English in Australia). Hu made a literal translation in one version and in a second translation attempted to find Chinese expressions that were equivalent to the Australian colloquialisms.

According to Gantner, disaster was averted when the Shanghai City Cultural Bureau declared the play to be offensive, and decreed

that it would only be open for Communist Party members, rather than to the public (*Neibu*). This would have resulted in a box-office failure and prevented wide-ranging cultural exchange. David Ambrose, who was second in charge at the Australian Embassy, travelled from Beijing to Shanghai to address the problem. Over a long lunch with the city officials, he found that it was not the obscene language or the fact that the character simulates urinating into a barrel that caused the offence. Rather, as Gantner recalls, it was:

an extravagant line in the script which was followed by the words, ‘Homer said that’. The translator had used the common transliteration for the classical Greek writer’s name as ‘He Ma’ (hé mǎ) but in other tones this meant ‘hippopotamus’ which, unbeknown to me, was street slang for the ageing Mao Zedong. Inadvertently we were sending up the Chairman. Even the translator did not recognise the slang.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, Ambrose charmed the officials and the ban was lifted. Gantner says that every night the hippopotamus moment drew laughter from the audience, who also appeared to enjoy the crude language, including the infamous line in the play ‘You two-timing, fuckwitted mongrel of a slut’.<sup>15</sup> However, the translation of this line was not as vulgar in Chinese. Gantner had wanted the character to urinate (as per the stage directions) but was overruled by the company director who insisted on a simulation with a sound effect of urine trickling.<sup>16</sup>

The successful Chinese production of *A Stretch of the Imagination* in 1987 provides a fruitful example of interculturalism and of cultural exchange in the theatre early on in the relationship between Australia and the PRC. It was part of a two-way exchange in which Playbox produced a play by Sha Ye Xin under the title *The Imposter* in 1987, adapted by John Romeril, and the Shanghai People's Art Theatre staged the Hibberd play.<sup>17</sup> The exchange marked a jumping-off point for everything that followed. Only a handful of productions of Australian plays have been performed by Chinese companies since that time. The production of *Stretch*, however, reveals intense and sustained personal contact at many levels and represents a ground-breaking event in Australian–Chinese theatre history. By contrast, each of the productions under discussion below featured Australians taking a show to China rather than an Australian play being performed by a Chinese company. However, their intercultural significance is evident, and the sustained personal contact that each production entailed – through the long years of planning and the interactions on tour – is indicative of the transformational possibilities of touring Australian work to China.

### TAKING IT TO CHINA: AUSTRALIAN THEATRE ON TOUR

As will be demonstrated in this article by the case studies presented below, it is through touring that meaningful intercultural relationships

can be developed and that collaborative possibilities emerge that lead to transformative theatre. Moreover, the potential for transformative cultural exchange through person-to-person interaction in the theatre is only possible when high-quality, innovative theatre-making enables it. The opportunities for cultural diplomacy are rich. As is evident in the case studies explored below, there is therefore a strong connection between sustained investment in the arts in Australia and effective cultural diplomacy abroad.

Australian companies travel to China for a range of reasons besides the commercial, and a host of reasons may explain why Chinese audiences respond positively to the productions under discussion. There are also a number of factors that govern the specific productions that are accepted for presentation and showcasing at festivals. Some of the reasons that productions are invited may be driven by an imperative for cultural exchange and diplomacy, others relate to a desire for exposure to English among audiences, and some are primarily related to the development of cultural tourism both within and from outside China. For example, the primary rationale for the staging of *A Stretch of the Imagination in China* in 1987 was to develop cultural exchange. On the other hand, it might be argued that the main reason Chinese parents take their children to Australian plays on tour in China today is to expose them to English. Yet it would appear from the evidence of those who toured that the parents value the creative arts and seek the opportunities for their children (and themselves) to enjoy a theatrical experience that encourages creativity, freedom of expression and play.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to know definitively what motivates Chinese parents and is equally difficult to disentangle some of the discourse around cultural diplomacy from the more intrinsic artistic interests of audiences. The comments by actors, directors, producers, ambassadors and other entrepreneurs gathered for my research contribute to an understanding of this rapidly evolving theatrical relationship.

It is important to remember that presenting companies, such as the one with which two of the three companies explored here are working, are private corporate entities and are profit-making. They have a commercial interest in Australian theatre and their margins are tight. The cost of paying award wages to Australian actors is high. Governments frequently subsidise freight and travel costs for touring productions through the Australia Council, DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and state programmes, in order to defray the large costs of touring. The impetus for small sets that are easy to transport is of course primary. The presenting company in China pays the actors and the costs of their accommodation and ground travel costs in country. One South Australian theatre company producer told me that her company makes a small profit on their tours to China and that the tours take two to three years to arrange. The Chinese presenting companies prefer to see a full production before commissioning a tour and these are usually at festivals such as the Adelaide Festival or ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People).<sup>19</sup>

Both Windmill Theatre Co. and Insite Arts have been working primarily with one presenting company in China, Art Space for Kids (ASK), and have developed strong and sustained relationships with that company. This demonstrates in a variety of ways the importance of person-to-person contact in this sphere, and the strength of that particular company. In fact, the success of Australian theatre for children and youth in China over the last five years has been made possible primarily through ASK, based in Shanghai. Art Space for Kids was founded by Forrina Chen, who has developed a company with more than twenty venues that presents international theatre to children across China. Forrina Chen and various theatre-makers in Australia have developed personal and professional relationships over the years that have enabled successful tours. Before the catastrophic effects of the pandemic in early 2020, ASK had scheduled hundreds of performances by overseas theatre companies for 2020 and 2021 from Australia, Ireland, France, Denmark and many other countries. According to the theatre practitioners and administrators who were interviewed for this research, Chen and her colleagues have a particular interest in Australian children's and youth theatre, because of its high standard, its aesthetic variety and its intense appeal to their audiences. Each of the practitioners has a different view of what that appeal is, however, and it is difficult to define.

In each case study, the evidence for collaboration and the value of 'sustained personal contact' between the touring company members and their hosts becomes clear. It is particularly evident

from the two productions that were designed primarily for children and families. The intensity of collaborative artistic activities is high, ranging from adapting the content and adding a local actor to play a new character to aid with translation or bridge the action, through to participating in themed workshops with children after the performance and short individual ‘encounters’ with each member of the audience and his or her parent.

Each of the companies under discussion has a different operating structure, aesthetic style, target audience, relationship to funding organisations, development process and approach to working in China. Windmill Theatre creates theatre primarily for children and youth, while Insite Arts and Red Stitch make theatre primarily for adults. In two of the case studies the productions entailed collaboration with an international partner theatre company, demonstrating the breadth and complexity of the creative process. Two of the productions are devised works created by three or more artists, and the other is a text-based work. The discussion draws on first-hand accounts by participants interviewed by the author to explore the recent experiences of actors, directors and producers involved in three touring productions and their reception by Chinese audiences, against a backdrop of expanding access to, and increasing interest in Australian performance in the PRC.

## REVISITING A RUSSIAN FAIRY TALE: *BABA YAGA* BY WINDMILL THEATRE CO. AND IMAGINATE

The Australian Children's Performing Arts Company, known as Windmill Theatre Co., presented the two-hander *Baba Yaga* to audiences in China in a four-week tour in 2019. The company also presented the play at the Taipei International Children's Festival, on a tour of the UK and Ireland and showcased the production at the ASSITEJ festival in Norway – the only Australian work to feature at this major international event. Windmill Theatre Co. is funded by the South Australian state government and employed some seventy artists and arts workers in 2019–20.

*Baba Yaga* is based on a Russian fairy tale, and is aimed at seven- to twelve-year-old children and families. It's a flamboyant, high-energy, high-tech, loud, colourful play featuring dance, music, extravagant lighting, gigantic animated figures and the creation of 'a retro-futuristic world'.<sup>20</sup> The two key characters embody light and dark, innocence and experience, the mundane world and the world of nature; a young innocent, timid girl is led by the extraordinary older woman and has to achieve three tasks to escape from the older, witch-like character. The play takes elements of the traditional *Baba Yaga* tale and brings a contemporary sensibility and sense of wonder to its key themes. Both of the characters are clown-like, with the contrasting comic energy of the two characters, cacophonous music and boisterous physical style making for an engrossing story of self-discovery. Instead of the traditional forest setting, the play is set

in a tall apartment complex with a lot of rules. Vasilina, dressed in a drab grey puffer coat, spends her day dealing with the demands of the residents. There are so many complaints about one noisy resident that she gathers all her courage to go up to the 101st floor to the penthouse, home of the larger-than-life, eccentric old woman who sings, dances – she even flosses – plays two recorders from her nostrils, has a cat to answer the phone, and strides around in her bright yellow maxi gown and fur coat, with a large basket on her head. Here, Vasilina is encouraged by the statuesque, somewhat crazy, creative animal lover and begins to relax, dance, enjoy and express herself and how to be herself and pursue her own interests.

The creation of rich character and the devising of the show is ingenious; it was a three-way collaboration, with the title role developed by Christine Johnson, known to many for her exquisite eccentricity in the *Kransky Sisters*. Shona Reppe of *Imaginate in Scotland* created the original Vasilina with an elf-like whimsicality. Rosemary Myers co-created the show and directed, taking the first tour of the play to China. The casting of Elizabeth Hay as Vasilina (to replace Shona Reppe in the Australian production and tour to China) is also a strength of the production. Hay assays the gentle and wound-up character with comic brilliance; her repressed, nervous demeanour is touching and her blooming confidence highly affecting.

The production of *Baba Yaga* features physical theatre, dance, music and extraordinary animation. It depends on a strong rhythmic dynamic between the two characters, Baba Yaga and Vasilina. In

China, surtitles were screened so as not to interrupt the dynamic with a translator character. Sometimes a translator character is introduced to a play to facilitate the story for the Chinese audience. One of the additional features of Windmill's work in China is to offer post-floor workshops for children over which Windmill retains creative control. The company engages an education consultant to devise the workshop activities and the actors conduct the workshops, with members of ASK facilitating and translating as necessary. The activities include craft and other play that relate to the themes of the story. This additional experience has proven highly appealing to Chinese children and to their parents, and offers the opportunity for genuine exchange between the actors, audience members and facilitators. Another important element of the *Baba Yaga* tour was that after every performance, each of the children in the audience queued up to have their photo taken with one or both of the actors. It is a time-consuming, additional requirement for the actors, but of great importance to the Chinese audience members, and a key element in the person-to-person contact that facilitates cultural exchange. Elizabeth Hay told me that she and Christine Johnston enjoyed this part of the routine, especially hearing first-hand the reactions of the children and parents to the play.

The artistic director of Windmill, Rosemary Myers, and one of the performers in *Baba Yaga*, Elizabeth Hay, both reported to me that they had been anxious about its reception in China, primarily because of the central theme of the play: it is about not conforming

to rules, about breaking out and expressing oneself fully. They were surprised at how favourable the audience response was to the play, and the fact that the children and the mothers in the audience responded so positively.<sup>21</sup> Hay explained to me that many of the mothers in China who brought their children to the performances and queued up with their children afterwards to meet and be photographed with the performers, expressed strong affiliation with the character of Vasilina, and told Hay in conversation that she reminded them of themselves. It was a revelation to Hay, and demonstrates the wide appeal of the play, its clear narrative trajectory and its universal themes. This connection afforded by the personal interactions of the child – almost every child in the audience of every show, and his or her parent – with the actors after the performance, is an example of a genuine exchange, a moment of personal connection that Hay described to me at length, with warmth and excitement and a strong sense of the importance of the connection to the audience in those interactions.

### **CHILDREN'S CHEERING CARPET: *SALTBUSH* BY INSITE ARTS AND COMPAGNIA TPO**

*Saltbush* is one of the most popular productions to travel to China in recent years; it is an immersive dance and multi-media play directed in collaboration by Jason Cross, former Come-Out Director and director of Insite Arts, and Davide Venturini from the Italian Compagnia TPO. The original funding for the development of

*Saltbush* came from the Australia Council. Cross is a dancer by training and met Lee Cumberlidge in 2010 when Cross was directing *Come-Out*. Cumberlidge was a director of Insite Arts and Cross is now a co-director with Cumberlidge of the non-profit organisation.<sup>22</sup>

The production premiered in 2009 and has toured throughout Asia and Europe, with several tours to the PRC from 2014, 2017, 2018 and 2019. It is a ground-breaking work in which children are invited into the performance space at various moments during the performance to interact, dance and play with and on the shimmering forms and images projected on to the floor, to explore the play of light and music as they move with the two performers, and as they watch the performers and the children on the opposite side of the lit space. Sensor and infrared cameras are used to facilitate some of the interactions. An extra resonance is created because the audience can see the faces and reactions of the audience members across from them, and the performers can play to either side. When I asked Cross for the target audience age for the play, he specified it as four to eight years, explaining however that the play appeals to all ages, and that extended families came to see the show in China, including grandparents. Cross reported that this was often the case when the play toured the USA as well. Cross is realistic about the fact that adults purchase the tickets and that their enjoyment, or more specifically their enjoyment of the children's enjoyment, is a strong driver of participation and approval. Critically, however, the play seeks to meet the needs of the young child in exploring and fully immersing in the sensory experience of the theatre.

In the Australian production, the Indigenous playwright and actor Jada Alberts narrated. During the first two years in which the production toured to China there were no translations offered: the immersive experience did not require it as the text is light, running to a mere one-and-a-half pages. Later, a translation was made, and each line was read out by a Chinese actor directly after the English line was delivered. If they had an actor who could sing, they sang some of the lines. Cross explained to me that the pitch range is challenging so this was not always possible.

The production takes place in a darkened flat space with massive coloured images projected on to the floor: animals, rivers, birds and plants that enchant the children and take them on the journey of the play, encouraging them to move in relation to the images on the floor and in time with the music that features throughout. The digital images are derived from forty original paintings made by artist Delwyn Mannix, who also served as visual director. Jason Cross wrote a visual treatment in response to a dialogue between the co-creators. The original premise for the devised work arose from a discussion between a group of Indigenous artists – Lou Bennett (musician), Delwyn Mannix (visual artist), Dionne Hastie (choreographer) and Sasha Zahra (dramaturg) – around the question: ‘What would it have been like for an Aboriginal person many years ago to try to cross the continent. Would they survive?’<sup>23</sup> The narrative takes the form of a journey made by two friends as they cross urban landscapes, rivers and deserts, responding to the sensory joy of the landscapes around

them. Hastie (Djabugay), Bennett (Yorta Yorta/Dja Dja Wurrung) and Mannix (Wangkangurru) drew on their own personal histories of their own people in creating the production story.

The collaborating artists from the Compagnia TPO in Italy created the images that form the basis of the large digital projections and guide the choreography; they worked with Spartaco Cortesi who designed the sound. *Saltbush* offers a spectacle via the massive projected images of paintings on which the dancers create the action and narrative, as gradually children are invited in and around the changing landscape and into the story of a crossing of country. Children chase butterflies and turtles, jump over lily pads, dance to clap sticks, follow the stars in the evening sky, watch a boomerang arcing across the stage (all digital) and learn about the idea of country through song. Lou Bennett (formerly of the musical trio Tiddas) collaborated with Cortesi in Italy to compose the melodic, sometimes haunting pre-techno style musical score.<sup>24</sup> The production is created in a space using a five-metre top rig, two projectors and a four quad sound system that can be taken to a variety of spaces.

*Saltbush* lends itself to cross-cultural performance because of its rich, experiential substance, multi-media elements, lightness of text, visual splendour and engrossing physicality of dance and rhythmic movement. It introduced audiences to exceptional contemporary dance performed by Caleena Sansbury and Sani Townson (formerly of Bangarra Dance Theatre). The nature of the performance itself encourages personal contact between children

and performers in the space, and allows for a genuine connection during the performance.

Jason Cross toured with the first tour to China in 2012. He explained to me that Art Space for Kids selects touring productions on the basis of what their producers believe will appeal to their audiences, and of course not every children's production would be suitable for their audiences. He takes the view that success is purely related to the quality of the experience, the human experience in the theatre. Forrina Chen says that 'as long as the quality and the emotion is real, and straightforward, and touching, it can break all language barriers'.<sup>25</sup> As Cross suggests, Chinese audiences are no different from others in responding to theatre, but there are cultural and language considerations for the presenting company taking the risk. The audiences cultivated by ASK to date are aspirational, outward looking, eager to experience international theatre. They are drawn from one stratum of Chinese society, a wealthy stratum, and the experience of *Saltbush* demonstrates their openness to innovative forms of theatre, their interest in ideas and in exposing themselves and their children to intercultural exchange through an immersive theatre experience that is not always driven by an interest in learning English.

**DESERT, 6.29PM: RED STITCH ACTORS'  
THEATRE, MELBOURNE**

Red Stitch Actors' Theatre presented *desert, 6.29pm* at the Wuzhen Festival in 2018 upon invitation from the festival organisers. It was a significant event for Red Stitch, as it was the first time that the independent company had toured internationally. In addition, the playscript had been developed through the Red Stitch new writing programme, INK (the brainchild of Ella Caldwell, who is Artistic Director and was one of the actors in the touring production). The play is a spoken-word production written by Morgan Rose, featuring a cast of five characters. Carrillo Gantner came to the premiere of the play in Melbourne and, after some consultation with Caldwell, recommended the production to the director of the Wuzhen Festival, Meng Jinghui. Gantner has had a long association with Meng, who had asked him for a recommendation.<sup>26</sup> After reviewing video footage of the play, a translation of the script and set specifications, the festival invited Red Stitch to present the play. Red Stitch was the only Australian company to perform at the Wuzhen Festival, often regarded as the Adelaide Festival of China.

In contrast to the works discussed above, *desert, 6.29pm* is a play for adults. It is a dark play about a family in which the gay teenage daughter contemplates suicide, the father imagines dying, the visiting son takes off his clothes in the living room, and the mother seems unable or unwilling to communicate with any of them. An acidic humour infuses the action. It is a play in which people talk but don't say

much, but much of what they say is both portentous and astringent. Each family member also fantasises silently and this thought process is presented through short monologues that punctuate the dialogue. The desert of the title refers to the place, a small town in the desert of no particular significance and not named, but is also the desert of the lives of this ordinary family as they meander through one evening.

Rose's play offers realism with an absurdist edge. The characters are recognisably alone, desperate and bored. All interrupt one another, intrude into one another's thoughts and privacy, and ask the same questions with an almost choric banality that is typical of families. The script is funny, understated and disturbing. For the Wuzhen Festival, the production offered surtitles of the script projected above and beside the action. The play was translated in Australia and the entire script was retained – there were no cuts.<sup>27</sup> Once the invitation to perform at Wuzhen was accepted, the company was instructed to drop the male nudity in the play as this would not be allowed at the festival in China. For the festival in Wuzhen, the male character stripped to his underwear. Ella Caldwell told me that 'the moment between us was just as dangerous and vulnerable' as it had been in the original when he was naked. Caldwell did not believe that change affected the mood or the impact of the scene at all. She also told me that the humour of the play was not lost in translation or in performance at the festival, with the audiences responding well to the darkly comic dialogue of the script.

The season of the festival (six performances) was sold out

and Caldwell reported that the audience of 180 per night was full of young people – often not the case for theatre in Australia. Of the three productions explored here, *desert, 6.29pm* was most likely to be risky for an international audience, with the primary audience being Chinese nationals, notwithstanding the fact that theatre attracts young people in China and is considered ‘a safe place to discuss ideas’.<sup>28</sup> Caldwell was delighted with the positive response to the play. The reviews were complimentary, and the young audiences relished the humour of the dialogue. Ironically, the acidic comedy of *desert, 6.29pm* at times echoes that of *A Stretch of the Imagination*, demonstrating that Chinese audiences enjoy bleak humour, eccentric, sometimes cruel characters, and absurdist drama. As Max Gillies (who has played Monk O’Neill in productions of the play in 1976, 1977 and 1990) observed, the Hibberd play is about ‘performance and personality – about the performance of personality’ and *desert, 6.29 pm* also explores this preoccupation of *Stretch*.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note, however, that concerns held by the Red Stitch team about the response to the play in China were legitimate. They were aware that David Williamson’s *The Removalists* had been shut down at the last minute in China in 2018, after one performance at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. The play was to have been performed at the Beijing Nanluoguxiang Performing Arts Festival, but was banned at the last minute, ostensibly because of the crude language and violence in the play. Williamson speculated that it was because of the police brutality in the play that raised sensitivities in China.<sup>30</sup>

Each of the productions explored here, and the companies that presented them, is different in style, approach to genre and target audience. Both of the productions aimed at children and families include a strong musical element, a high component of physical theatre or dance, and a distinctive, rich and original aesthetic. Each play is innovative, theatrically bold and transformative. The creative development of each production was complex, the technical elements are powerful and the content somewhat daring. The opportunities for cultural diplomacy that are demonstrated by the tours are potent and significant. The person-to-person contact occasioned by the performances and by the additional interactions of the cast with audience members and presenting company officials have made a considerable contribution to the bilateral cultural relationship over a ten-year period. Most importantly, the artistic achievements of the creators of these productions are exceptional, revealing a capacity for innovation and experimentation across genres that finds a ready audience in China and other countries. The success of the three productions in China demonstrates the openness of Chinese audiences to a wide range of theatrical expression for audiences of children and adults, an appetite for experimentation in theatre, and a strong interest in the interpersonal elements afforded by the post-floor opportunities of interacting with the actors in workshops or in conversations that allow for a photo to be taken of each child and parent with the actor.

Collaborative ventures with China are an obvious way to extend theatrical exchanges. Until the events of 2020, Art Space

for Kids regularly hosted Australian practitioners to work with them and they are actively involved in collaborative development of productions with a plan for such productions to tour both China and Australia. There is of course no certainty about when or if these collaborative ventures and the tours will resume. The relationships developed through touring and collaborating explored here have extended those which Carrillo Gantner initiated three decades ago and are the kind of relationships that Stephen Fitzgerald had in mind in 2012 when he talked about Australia and China at forty, because they require sustained personal contact. They are not merely transactional but transformative. Clearly, they require ongoing investment, time, patience, vision and imagination.

## NOTES

- 1 Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 82.
- 2 Jonathan Bollen, *Touring Variety in the Asia Pacific Region, 1946–1975* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- 3 Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 171.
- 4 Stephen Fitzgerald, ‘Australia and China at Forty: Stretch of the Imagination’, Lecture 12 November 2012, 10, online: <https://aus.thechinastory.org/australia-and-china-at-forty-stretch-of-the-imagination/>, retrieved 26 October 2020.
- 5 *Ibid.* 11.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Alison Carroll and Carrillo Gantner, *Finding a Place on the Asian Stage*, Platform Paper 31 (Sydney: Currency Press, 2012) 3.
- 8 Sandra Gattenhof, ‘Not Second Class Theatre: Why Australian Theatre for Young People Is at the Vanguard of Performance Making’, Keynote Speech Presented to Drama Tasmania State Conference, 20

- April 2007, 4, online: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/7314/>.
- 9 Hannah Reich, 'Australian Performing Arts Facing "Doomsday Moment"', 14 November 2020, online: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-14/australian-theatre-impact-of-covid-19-funding-cuts-youth-theatre/12871604>.
- 10 Anne Pender, 'The Mythical Australian: Barry Humphries, Gough Whitlam and "New Nationalism"', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 51.1 (March 2005): 67–78.
- 11 Conversation with Carrillo Gantner, Anne Pender, 3 February 2021.
- 12 Carrillo Gantner, 'Hugging Bears', An Address to the Australia–China Institute for Arts and Culture, 22 May 2019, online: <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/stories/hugging-bears-an-address-by-carrillo-gantner-ac>.
- 13 Email correspondence from Carrillo Gantner, 24 March 2021.
- 14 Conversation with Carrillo Gantner, Anne Pender, 3 February 2021.
- 15 Jack Hibberd, *A Stretch of the Imagination* in Katharine Brisbane (ed.), *Plays of the 70s*, Vol. 1 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1998) 191.
- 16 Conversation with Carrillo Gantner by Anne Pender, 3 February 2021.
- 17 The play satirises corruption in Chinese society and was banned in China at the time. Personal communication with Carrillo Gantner, 1 April 2021.
- 18 I acknowledge the advice of Dr Jonathan Bollen about the context of touring productions to China and his valuable comments on a preliminary draft of this article.
- 19 Interview with Teena Munn by Anne Pender, Producer and General Manager, Patch, 14 September 2020.
- 20 Shona Reppe speaking about the development of Baba Yaga, online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQP-ljveiGbY>.
- 21 Interviews by Anne Pender with Rosemary Myers, Artistic Director, Windmill, 8 September 2020 and with Elizabeth Hay, Actor, 14 September 2020.
- 22 Interview with Jason Cross by Anne Pender, 30 September 2020.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Forrina Chen, online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOo-0qp8wDxs>, retrieved 4 February 2021.
- 26 Conversation with Carrillo Gantner.
- 27 Interview with Ella Caldwell by Anne Pender 29 October 2020.
- 28 Personal communication with Carrillo Gantner, 1 April 2021.
- 29 Max Gillies in conversation with Paul Monaghan and others, including Jack Hibberd, at the Double Dialogues Conference 'Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination*', *Double Dialogues* 11 (Winter 2009): 3, online: <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/jack-hibberds-a-stretch-of-the-imagination/>, retrieved 4 February 2021.

- 30 David Williamson  
quoted in *Sydney  
Morning Herald*, 6  
June 2018, online:  
[https://www.smh.com.  
au/entertainment/  
salty-language-blamed-  
for-australian-play-  
being-axed-in-beijing-  
20180606-h111nv.html](https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/salty-language-blamed-for-australian-play-being-axed-in-beijing-20180606-h111nv.html),  
retrieved 4 February  
2018.