

# Actors, Chairs and Transformation – A discussion between James McCaughey and Meredith Rogers\*

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**Meredith:** I am planning to write something about the transformational nature of the relationship between the actor and the chair and so I've been thinking about chairs in the Mill shows. You did the main chair stuff after I'd left I think – that piece?

**James:** That was 1982 I think.

**Meredith:** Was it? Right. That was a full performance wasn't it?

**James:** Yes. We'd just completed a trilogy of local history plays at the Mill – *The Wool Game*, *79 The Burning of Bentley's Hotel*, and *Clyde Company Station* – and staged *Ladies of Fortune* by Colin Ryan for the opening of the Geelong Performing Arts Centre in 1981. I wanted to go back to the question of what performance is, of what the actor is doing and how that engages the audience and draws them into a world that is being created. There were quite a few strands to that and the exploration with the chairs, to be candid, started as a slightly more finite undertaking, approachable alike for actor and audience – a more accessible part of a project which was often dealing with abstract materials.

I was trying to get, not to what the actor was conscious of wanting to do, but to the things that came out not exactly oppositionally but ... things that would

surprise me. So, for instance say with William (Henderson, a member of the company since its inception in 1978), there was some really good work done with frames because William is so rangy, so sort of in your face as a performer, and that's not necessarily interesting to reinforce or re-emphasize in performance. But when I asked William to work with a frame, with him emerging and disappearing from/in it so that he was sort of sliding off the edge and then partially reappearing that was interesting.... Draff (Robert Draffin, an actor in *Clyde Company Station* and a member of the company from 1980) and Neil (Greenaway, designer for several productions, an actor in *Clyde Company Station* and a company member from 1981) did an absolutely exquisite duet using a balancing frame and a ladder, which I remember with great pleasure.... And ... so that's a long way of saying that yes we did do a very brief season of two or three public showings at the Mill and some lunchtime stuff in the foyer of the Geelong Performing Arts Centre which shared this work with the public – and those showings included the piece with chairs.

I'd made it quite clear to the funding bodies that there wasn't going to be a major work that year and I have to say that it probably indicates how times have changed but I remember how extraordinarily supportive they were. I guess they were pretty ... happy with what we'd done in the first four years. But I remember Clarkson (Paul Clarkson, Director of the Victorian Ministry for the Arts at the time) saying that he really appreciated my letter.... And this gave us space so that we didn't have to ... create a major play that year and could go back to the elements of performance. So in short yes (or in long) the chairs work formed itself into a choreographic kind of identity that had a sort of entertainment value.

**Meredith:** Barb seemed to think that you'd done a lot of stuff like that with the students as well? (Students in the Performing Arts Course that James created for Deakin University).

**James:** Yes well I don't know whether I got this from Nan (Nanette Hassell, dancer, choreographer, founding artistic director of Danceworks) and a co-creator of the performance course) – anything I got directly from Nan was from the very early days because Nan was only around ...

**Meredith:** she was around when I was there so that was 79 and 80.

**James:** Oh she was there that late? So an early exercise that we did with Nan was a solo with an object and that was something that we'd give the students but it absolutely had to be the propensity of the object to move, to sound, or just to be ... so I suppose that was a great exercise in the “suchness” or the “thereness” of the object. That was done exclusively by the students for sure but I do remember that what emerged from that quite early on was not at its best the ingenuity of the performer but it was the – sacredness is probably too strong a word – but the numinousness of the object itself.

So what I would then do with the students was ... in general I was interested in working from an object being what it was to a thing being what it wasn't but saying that both arms of that were important for it not just to be smart-aleckery. I think that was true of human action too but it was obviously true of objects.... So there would be then exercises for the students in which the object would have to be used for whatever it was and then for what it wasn't and then I think ...

I got quite interested in change being at the heart of performance so there had to be a transformation – not just of the object but that while you were watching, something had to be in a process of becoming something different. That was at the very heart of the performance event and that's the work I was doing with the company when I gave them all a nervous breakdown – actually talking about what is the transformation that happens in the being of the actor her or himself.

I can't remember whether there was actually work with the chairs with the students.

**Meredith:** I have this exercise that I took from the Mill in some way and I always assumed that the wording came from you or Nan, even possibly as a Mill night exercise, where you use the chair. You find several ways of being with the chair in which you depend on the chair and then you reverse it and the chair depends on you.

Does that ring any bells?

**James:** Yes that would probably be right ...

**Meredith:** You see it sounds like your wording to me.

**James:** (Laughs) It probably does sound a bit more like my wording than Nan's. I think that the other thing that was happening, and I think that this ultimately does relate to chairs, is that I really wanted to get into the specificities of human action. Now I suppose that, in keeping with the time, there was a lot of interest in what I think now would be called pedestrian action.

**Meredith:** Yes

**James:** But I don't think that I was ever like the Judson people – not that I ... I've only seen derivatives of their work – in which it was enough to do it, you know whatever the pedestrian action was, so that the thing is merely walking, sitting – though we did do things that were walking, standing, sitting, running but a lot of that was pedagogically based and when it came to the actors I was never greatly taken with that really minimalist, pedestrian stuff. What I know I wanted to get to was a sense of the real precision of both observed and, I guess, imagined action; and we did a lot of work with what it is to sit down and what it is to stand up

and then of different interdependencies with the chair; not, at that point, doing balancing acts or that sort of thing but really looking at the remarkableness of the particular. I think that gave onto what I think of as the Sarah Cathcart work (it wasn't by any means only Sarah but she did it much better than anybody else) playing with the observed, reported actions from particular areas of human activity – like the leisure ones, of bowls say – which was based on observing, both physically and in an auditory way, the sounds and movement of bowls players and then bringing them back with some precision. So I think that was where some of that lead but in the more exercise-based stuff with the chairs then the thing to do was to – well what I remember best were those rows that we had in which we kind of created a choreography of the shared, divergent and varied observed actions. And then in the re-aggregated work that we made out of that we played a lot with arrangements of the chairs both in relation to each other and in relationship to space. Rob Meldrum came down and joined us for a while (William had injured his knee) and did some lovely work. I don't know whether any of that has any causal connection with what was for me a very important production of *The Chairs* with Barb and John (Barbara Ciszewska and John Jacobs) I don't think so I think that's just a coincidence ...

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**James:** In terms of your intellectual, imaginative, aesthetic enterprise in these explorations, I think the chairs work was something of a side issue. It was good fun and the work was quite good but it was a restricted investigation and it definitely was a bit safety netting there for me in public sessions of performance because if we were going to do any public work with this I needed something where I knew I could do it and I knew that I could fashion it. We used to finish with it because it did look together. Though actually the Draff and Neil duet was phenomenal.

**Meredith:** I remember. Was that with a ladder?

**James:** Draff simply took one of those square A frames that used to sit off the back of the aisle ways (on the seating modules in the theatre) and he just did a series of quite extraordinary balancings off that while Neil took the long pole that used to pull the blinds closed in the saw tooth (roof windows) and there was a series of rings in the wall which I always had to trust were actually anchored in properly and, in the manner of the times, were never investigated properly; and Neil did a series of counter-dependencies which, again, were fantastic.

In each case they were doing something the opposite of what they were. Draff has an exuberant physicality so he worked on balance. Neil is somewhat floppy in stance so his work involved a series of straight lines.

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**Meredith:** Yes they were fantastic and that's why I wanted to pick your brains, in relation to the chairs work, about ideas of modifying the body in relation to objects?

**James:** Well the only thing that really interested me there was the human body in relation to objects. It's not quite the human body transformed but certainly the human body defined by what the object offers and demands and challenges. But you know to me it was one of the things that took a long time for the actors to say yes, but actually there is the moment at which the body transfers weight or doesn't transfer weight and it's so absolutely palpable to the outside eye. So there are a whole series of moments when you might think you're in the chair and you're not and the chair's really good for that. It's interesting to reflect isn't it, that the Alexander technique classes are entirely oriented around a chair and a bench and you spend twenty minutes in an Alexander class on a chair and the more I do

this stuff the more I think how incredibly great Alexander was , and a chair defines human action. How you stand up from a chair and that defines everything and how you sit back down into it and that defines everything.

One of the things that I don't know about Alexander, and it might be worth asking, is at what point in his thinking the chair comes in. It's fascinating that inherently the chair has, not exactly a metaphoric power but a crucial interrelationship with human ...

**Meredith:** Yes well Barb, of course, with her capacity to hit the nail on the head on occasions described it as a kind of exoskeleton.

**James:** Isn't she brilliant. I told you about Barb's version of the blinding of Gloucester didn't I? (In which the scene from *King Lear* is enacted on office chairs.) It is one of the most frustrating things about doing these workshops that never ever go anywhere. Honestly we could just go back and do it and charge people to see it tomorrow; this stuff just gliding over the floor on this office furniture.

I think that one thing that was reasonably successful about the *Clyde Company Station* was the way we suggested the development of an early colonial "civilization" just by the slow introduction of a very finite number of pieces of furniture.

**Meredith:** The thing I always remember is what we called "coming through the wall".

**James:** Yes it dimly comes back to me as you tell me. How did we do that?

**Meredith:** We just put a chair against one wall and then told the audience they had to go into the other space and there was another chair in the same place on the other side of the wall and William took up exactly the same shape on the chair

that he had had in the first space. But when I talked to Mum about it she said, “Oh the thing I remember was you all sitting without chairs!” in the *Clyde Company Station* so that must have been where we started doing the sitting without chairs although we did an awful lot of that in *Ladies of Fortune*.

**James:** That’s a bit of an early, or late seventies to eighties move from the body alone in the space, creating everything, to the body ... yes because I guess that in the heyday of the late sixties up to the seventies it was the body as everything wasn’t it.

I told you, didn’t I, that we found a photograph of Tom and Jake in the *Chalk Circle* ... aesthetically it’s really interesting to see how minimalist it was. I wouldn’t want to be that minimalist anymore ... but it was very interesting at the time because it was re-releasing, it was rediscovering theatre.

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**Meredith:** My problem or my question is that I realise that, in Home Cooking (Feminist theatre company established in 1981 by Meredith Rogers, Barbara Ciscewska, Rosalind Hill and Suzanne Spinner all of whom had connections to the Mill Theatre Company), we blithely talked about “transformational acting” as if we knew exactly what it meant and I think what we thought it meant was something like that the objects were as important in the visual field as the actors which is, you know, a real thing. And then I know that normally when people talk about transformational acting well I’ve got no idea what they mean but its huge. You look it up on Goggle and ...

**James:** What do people say on Google?

**Meredith:** Well there’s lots of acting schools advertising various ideas about transformational acting. A big thing is acting as self-realising, as improving your

potential to do other things so, you know, you do transformational acting to transform your life.

**James:** Well that's a very nineties move isn't it? Or maybe it's eighties, anyway end-of twentieth century move, from what was a technical, aesthetic point early on. That's very interesting. I like that.

**Meredith:** Oh? I find it a bit distressing.

**James:** Well no I mean I like it as an irony. Although one of the things we'll have to decode out of the present is the whole interplay of the therapeutic, not as we defined it in the 70s and 80s as therapeutic for people with particular pathologies but generally therapeutic, with the whole artistic enterprise. That's – well, whether you like it or don't like it, it's a major phenomenon at the moment. But just going back, if we just leave aside for a moment the absolute madness and mayhem of the sixties which was ... so full of contradictions – so inherently contradictory even – and like the big bang ... an extraordinary explosion of energy, and then ... as the pieces fell to the floor and one tried to start to put them together in a way that was a sustainable development and that could relate to a wider audience and so on ... then I think there was terrific emphasis on the actor as theatre maker and so ... once people ... actually started putting clothes on again at the end of the sixties (laughter) – the actor was just in all black and, typically and classically would be sitting in among the audience as they arrived to make it absolutely clear that when they entered the space there was no possibility whatsoever that this person really was Clytemnestra – it was Meredith Rogers who was going to show us (inaudible) and so it became really important to say that the actor as theatre maker (and I think that's when that term starts to come in) could actually do lots and lots of different things and you wanted to emphasise that they could. Now that also became shellacked and too easy and used without any aesthetic

basis so that you start to chuck costumes on and all those other scenic things ... so it just starts to look like ingenuity or economics. But actually to go back what we want to say now is well why should one ever be interested in theatre or performance and so that's where I think transformation starts. It's actually only a mutability of role. If you think about the collectivity of the time and so you think about saying well all action is also collective and interactive and borrows from each other's action and interrelates to each other so maybe that actually takes us eventually to where we were with chairs, where, once we'd worked out what were the really interesting ones, you'd teach them to each other and that would make a language. So I think in that sense of transformation it's a collective event that contains individuation and can return to the collectivity and then return back to the neutrality of bedrock. That at least is where I think it starts. And you know we did our bit of that and I don't feel too badly about some of the stuff we did.

I remember there was a particular moment; we had created a circle on the floor and there was a circle of people sitting round you and you walked around the circle to do whatever it was you were going to do (I've no idea what it was) and it became absolutely clear to me at that moment that it didn't matter how many times you said, "That's Meredith and she's there and she's a theatre maker and we will see what role she's going to show us." No, the audience said "Who is this person?" Now that question goes many, many different places but in terms of transformational theatre, and this is not necessarily the most important place it goes, but it is then to say, "what is the phenomenon of that being in the space and how is she or he transformed just by the act of performance. There's a very interesting thing to be caught up with there, but also what are the things that that person can show *malgré lui*, almost in defiance of conscious stuff and that's where you start to get the really great stuff of performance.

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And where that also takes me ultimately is back to the simplest and most obvious of all questions and that is ... why is acting or theatre a fundamental human activity.... And then the questions get really hard and I'm not even sure what they are but ... something do with role and this is I think what would be intellectually quite sustainable ... but what interests me much more is my own conviction that we each have within us – I would not say à la the great postmodernist credos – just an absolutely infinite variety of beings that will only come to being in terms of the influences that we hear – the languages that we are in – because I don't believe that – but that we each have within us at least three beings and that there's some key – you know that there's actually – you know how the most cruel person can sometimes be the most virtuous – and if that's so ... then there's a transformability within each of us....

**Meredith:** I suspect that there are two roads diverging out of the sixties well at least two ... two capillaries in this context, two footpaths ... and that one is what you're saying and that's going back to the question of who is this person who is before us but then there's the other version which is some sort of conscious training to transform.

**James:** There is a very interesting question there about different kinds of actors and it's not only about saying that only transformable actors are good because if you take someone like Neil Pigot – he's not a transformational actor. What's great about him is his thereness – his clarity and ...

**Meredith:** something like transparency – almost like they're opposites actually.

**James:** Yes.... But it seems to me ... that the most crucial thing in performance is that you must always be uncertain about what it is that is happening before you or what may become, because otherwise there's no reason for you to continue to look. I suspect that comes from things that are both true of reality and of the

medium that because the medium is constituted in the interactive attention of the audience with the performer that the audience must have a sense of uncertainty because otherwise there's no reason to keep looking not because they're consciously bored but because they could say I've got it and once you've got it well then ... (it's over). But also in terms of life – and I think that this is the point where Buddhism comes in as a ... partner to whatever enterprise – the nature of life is inherently mutable so that unless you have a sense of mutability in front of you then what you're seeing isn't life. I always loved that expression that people love art but they love life even more and so when art decides to turn away from life that people will choose life.

**Meredith:** Where did that come from?

**James:** I have no idea. I didn't read it I just heard somebody say it and they're just words that don't go away.

\*I asked James, my director, mentor and friend, to discuss these things with me when I was embarking on a Masters thesis on the theme of "Directing Transformation for the Theatre". Later I wrote a PhD thesis on James' work at The Mill Community Theatre Company in Geelong. That thesis was eventually adapted to a book and published by ASP in 2016.

<https://scholarly.info/book/the-mill-experiments-in-theatre-and-community/>

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