

'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

HISTORY OF MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY DRAMA

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL CATHCART

CODE: 4a

DATE: 23 May, 2003

SIDE A:

Just to start Michael, you were here at the University for quite a long time. What years were you actually a student at the University?

MC: Well years and years and years and years. I arrived in 1974, that was my first year, and I enrolled in Law/Arts and I did Law/Arts for about three years and then I dropped the Law component because I just couldn't stand it any longer so I became a Pure Arts student. So let's think, 1974, 75, 76, 77, 78 I did a bit of Law and my Hons. Arts degree. So I really played around and I dropped subjects. I mean these were the days when University was free and curiosity is the name of the game. I mean no one treated me as I was malingering or exploiting the system. Lots of us did this. It was marvellous. Then in 79, this is an important year in the theatre story, in 79 I did a Dip.Ed. and I did the Dip.Ed. for a couple of reasons. Partly because I needed a qualification but mainly because I discovered that I had qualified for what was then called TEES which was the student assistance scheme from the government and I'd never had that before. I'd worked in part-time jobs, so I'd been a very full on student but I'd also worked in factories and as a security, not a security guard, but in a burglar alarm company actually answering the phone. So in that final Dip.Ed. year I managed to get government assistance and I used that money to direct plays.

That was 1979?

MC: Yeah, and then I went to ANU and I was at ANU where I wrote my Masters thesis from 81 to 82 and then I got glandular fever and got very sick and I kind of hung around Melbourne University throughout the eighties, both turning my Masters thesis into a book which was *Defending the National Tuckshop* and directing plays. So I sort of came back as a slightly older person, an older student in my twenties by then, and I directed a series of plays through the eighties - I'll have to get back to you on the dates - but I reckon I directed the last one about 1993.

Before you got to Melbourne Uni had you had any background in theatre?

MC: Not really. When I was a little boy I did, and we had a lot of theatre in our house, you know, lots of puppet shows and dressing up and stuff and my father was a school teacher who directed plays with his class annually and I used to love those. I always loved theatre and I went to the theatre a lot when I was a kid, but I was actually a musician as a schoolboy. I went to a school where you couldn't really do theatre and music. They were both very intense. You had to commit to one or the other, so I played the daggy old viola - an instrument that gave me no pleasure and no one else any pleasure but I did go to a school where music was intense and the idea that in an orchestral rehearsal you would all work in a very focused way together to achieve a result, so you could do something at the end of a two hour rehearsal that you hadn't

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

been able to do when you came into the room, was a dominant model for my own theatre practice. And I was stunned and remained stunned actually at the amount of time that actors and directors waste in the rehearsal room. I always find it astonishing when people just frig around. I reckon I had a reputation among student actors for being someone who make them work hard and I had a rule that a rehearsal lasted three hours. It never went longer and it never went less. I always had a sense of what I wanted to achieve. It wasn't what I wanted to achieve - I never knew what the outcome was going to be - but I knew how to drive a process so that by the end of it we had discovered something, and we could now say 'OK that's now part of that play'

So that sort of disciplined preparation that led you into being interested in direction, did you also do...?

MC: No, I got interested in direction because I was a crappy actor actually!

So did you actually act at Melbourne Uni?

MC: Yeah. All during those undergraduate years, from 74 through to 79, when I directed my first play, I was acting in plays. I wasn't obsessive about it. I did probably a couple of plays a year. I wasn't one of those people who was always rehearsing one play and being in another, 'cos I did other things too. I played the viola in an orchestra here and I played rugby.

And did the fact that you felt that you weren't a great actor, was that a problem for you in directing?

MC: No, no, [laughing], well when I say I wasn't a great actor, I was an OK actor! But I like directing better, I just, it's what I wanted to do.

So what was the first production you ever directed?

MC: Can I tell you about the first show I was in first or does that muck up the structure of your interview?

Yeah.

MC: I want to tell you about that because those were where the influences come from. The very first play, I think it was the first play, anyway an early play I was in, was in 1975 which was my first year in Ormond College. I lived in Ormond College and the play was called *So Many of Them Aren't* and it was directed by James McCaughey. Now James was the son of Davis McCaughey was the Master of the college, the famous and much loved Master of Ormond College and James was one of the great forces in student theatre. He was older than I was, I guess he was about ten years older than I am. I was born in 1956. Anyway, he was older than me, more experienced, he was a classicist, he'd taught in America and he had these ideas about Greek theatre, especially about how you do the chorus in a Greek play, and it really involved bringing the sort of contemporary dance that was common in New York to bear on the classical texts, and one of his techniques was to take .. Basically I suppose he felt that in translation poetry and dance had been lost. You had these rather stolid, inert words on the page but the music and power had gone. And so you had to relocate the energy into movement and dance. You had to physicalise it. And that might mean taking a phrase like 'O Zeus do not bring woe on Thebes' and taking

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

the three key sounds which is Zeus, woe and Thebes, and then you would play with the word Zeus, so Zeus would become 'ZzzzzusZzzaya' and this would be spread through the group, you know, these people were doing 'Z' and these people were doing 'ooh' and these people were doing 'Sss' and it would all be switching and they're kind of fractals almost and that would also be reflected in movement, you know, if there was a song about Woe, you know, there'd be all this kind of jagged, angular movement and this work was terribly playful because they brought the Greek plays alive. You know, when I read the Greek plays as a student, I never understood what the Chorus was for. It always seemed like the boring bit, you know, this bit of stodgy verse where people just said the same things over again, 'oh woe on Thebes, oh woe on Thebes, oh woe on Thebes' you know, and then the story would start again, and he really found a way of seeing that the chorus was where the energy of the play was coming from. Now *So Many of Them Aren't* was a play in which, it was my first experience of group devised theatre, and it was the kind of theatre that James McCaughey went on making at Melbourne University and at the Mill Theatre in Geelong of which he was the Artistic Director I think in the eighties. And all it was was a group of students who wrote about their experiences of Melbourne University and the title came from a supercilious tutor who gave a speech that said 'Well the problem with the student is that he is just not suited to being here, so many of them aren't' and it just captured, you know, you could do it now, that script, and it would still feel like - student life essentially doesn't alter you know. You go through the same battles and struggles and the same mindless bureaucracy of the university running around with a piece of paper trying to get this idiot to sign this and this idiot to sign that and people who won't let you transfer courses and things because the bureaucracy can't deal with the fact that you are young and curious and pissed off with one thing and excited by another. I remember that play with just huge fondness and it is the, you know, as a young, creative, excited, you know, highly wired young man, it was the play that changed my life.

And probably that innovation had an impact on you as well and on your theatre directing?

MC: Oh yeah, in some ways every play I directed after that was exploring what I learnt in that first play from James McCaughey and the cast included amazing people. Mark Dreyfus was in it whose father was a well known composer and he is a lawyer these days. Russel Walsh who was one of the great influences on me. He was a fellow student and one of the great influences on my life in that period. We were very close friends and he was a driving force in student theatre. Hilary Charlesworth who is now Professor of Law at Adelaide University and gee, I can't remember too many of the others but they were exciting times.

So when did you direct your first play?

MC: Well, my first play was in 1979 in this period of. The first thing I did was I was obsessed with *The Maids* by Jean Genet and I'd seen four productions of it and I didn't like any of them particularly and I've always found that going to a play that is not very good, the actual production that is not very good, is amazingly stimulating because if you are generous and open hearted. You don't sit there thinking 'Oh I'm better than this', you hope. I think you sit there thinking, sometimes anyway, 'I can see what this play could be' and it's fascinating because someone else has worked hard and earnestly with integrity on the play isn't moving you and so if you're lucky you can sit there thinking 'yeah but I think that these go the other way round' you know, they've misunderstood. I mean the thing in Genet's *Maids* is the energy and the

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

sexual. These two maids are belting each other around and there's this orgasmic, sort of perverted, I mean the sexuality has all been perverted. Their life energy has been perverted by the fact that they have been exploited and are living in these appalling conditions and if you don't understand that ultimately this ritual they are playing out is sexual and incestuous and so on, you don't get...

So you sought to capture this in your production?

MC: Yes. I workshopped that with three students and we did this kind of ritualised play and I didn't produce it that year. I came back to it a few years later and did it and I couldn't quite get it right. But that was the first time I worked intensely with actors and it was the moment when I realised that I was really interested in sexuality as the kind of life force in theatre. I've always loved theatre to be sexy. And when I say that it sounds sort of trite but I don't feel that it's trite. I feel that the pelvis is where it all begins and that so much energy comes out of this kind of, I mean, you know, the world is full of love songs and anyway, yeah. The first play I did which has nothing to do with sexuality really I guess was a series of T.S. Eliot poems - *The Wasteland*, the last of the *Four Quartets* and some smaller dramatic pieces that he had written, including the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The great influence on me as a student was Professor Vincent Buckley. Vin Buckley who is now dead was a great Australian poet and critic. Possibly the most intelligent person I've ever met and he had a profound, profound influence on me. Of the five years I was an undergraduate I was in classes taught by him for three. Remember that in those days the class goes for a whole year, so your encounter with the teacher is very, very intense. So I'd studied Eliot with him and still believe that *The Wasteland* is his best dramatic writing. If you located the voices of *The Wasteland* and also it had this quality that McCaughey interested me in, there were individual voices - 'Madame Sosostris had a bad cold nevertheless is known to be the wisest woman in Europe with a wicked pack of cards' you know, and there was also the Chorus, so there were individual voices and then there was the Chorus. You know, the Chorus is right there at the start. [Starts to recite lines from the poem here]. You know, 'April is the cruelest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain' [more reciting in here] 'he took me out on the sled and I was frightened and he said Marie, Marie, hold on tight and down we went in the mountains'. Now if you think of that as a Chorus, suddenly the whole poem comes alive. Yeah that was my first piece of directing.

So how many people did you use for the Chorus?\_\_MC: Twelve I think it was and it was intense and a wonderful experience and what made it more wonderful was that the then Director of student theatre, David Kendall, popped up at one of the productions and afterwards basically gave me some money to take the production to Brisbane where there was the Festival of Australian Student Theatre and this was an annual event hosted by a different University every year. We took that production to Brisbane to the Queensland University and we were there for a week with student productions from all over Australia and there were shows on all day long and we watched all these different shows and we were confident that our show was really good, you know, that it was one of the best shows there. And there were also workshops, and there were dance teachers and there was a voice teacher from NIDA and there was a mime teacher. And my sister, Sarah Cathcart, was in that production and of course she's gone on to become an actor herself and is now teaching at the College of the Arts.

So where was that staged, that T.S. Eliot play?

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

MC: In Melbourne?\_\_Yes.

MC: In The Guild.

Did you do most of your productions there?

MC: Yeah.

How was the space arranged?

MC: Like it is now. I've got some strong feelings about The Guild. Every time someone makes a change to it it seems to me that they muck it up a bit more.

It was in a purer state then?\_\_MC: Yeah. I haven't been into The Guild for a while but The Guild as I recall at the moment has sort of sheets of plywood or something all over the wall that are in sections that make it look like its kind of, makes it very severe. Under those sheets of plywood are actually boards that used to be painted black. Originally they were actually brown and it was quite warm, a kind of warm space, then they got painted black and now they've got this very severe thing which also reduces the space. I love The Guild and I think The Guild is a beautiful theatre to work but everytime someone tries to improve it they muck it up a bit more and I wish someone would strip it back to the original...

So did you change the space around a lot with your productions?\_\_MC: Yeah, yeah. The technicians were not so obsessive about health and safety regulations as they are now and we set The Guild up so we worked in-the-round so you had the main seating bank but if you can also imagine on each corner there was also a bank of seating so you couldn't use some of the seats at the side of the main bank but that corner was cut off by a little diagonal that would have had I suppose a rostrum that was three high and perhaps five seats wide and so it made a kind of octagonal shape.

And the audience around it?\_\_MC: The audience around and you still had the sense of a main body of an audience there but it did create a nice sense of being in-the-round, yeah.

You talked lots about the support that David Kendall gave you for that production. Was there a lot of support generally for theatre?\_\_MC: I don't know what means really. I suppose there must have been because there didn't seem to be a shortage of anything.

Funding?\_\_MC: Yeah there was funding. I can't really remember how we did it, I mean everything was just sort of - it was much more sort of an ad hoc world, you know. I mean universities were better funded in those days. There wasn't a shortage of money all the time. So I really can't remember how we ran it, I mean I just don't know, we just, I have no idea really, I mean I ran the organisation and I can't remember how we funded it. All I know is that funding wasn't a problem and we just put on plays.

So as a director you chose the plays that you wanted...?

MC: I had a company. Basically it was driven by directors, student directors, and if you wanted to direct a play first of all you would go and book a space and you did

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

that at the start of the year because there was a day when the bookings opened and all the directors would all line up. You'd book The Guild for two weeks in August or whatever it was and then you'd put up a notice on The Guild noticeboard saying that you were running auditions for a play and people should join you in whatever rehearsal room you'd booked. And there were rehearsal rooms all over the Union - lots of beautiful rehearsal spaces and work spaces that have been lost now to student politicians and to student administration. The whole of the 4th floor of the Union was available for rehearsals and for meditation classes and there were a series of little rooms that we used as practice rooms by musicians. The opportunity to engage in creative work and for students to engage in activities was much, much greater. And the pressure on the Union has not been caused by increasing student numbers. It's been caused by the fact that people who did administration and by student politicians who used to work in open plan offices now have little offices all to themselves. I feel quite strongly about this really. There's been a real movement away from space for general use to space being used by one person who sticks their name on the door.

And your company? Did you have a very conscious philosophy about what you wanted to do? You mentioned before that you had particular ideas about rehearsals and a democratic way of working?\_\_MC: I don't know at that stage, I mean later on we had a process of talking but at that early stage it was very director driven, I mean, I was the director and I got together a group of people who were actors and wanted to be in a play and they felt I could direct it and that's how it worked and they were prepared to sign up to my project. I have never felt doctrinaire about how theatre should be. I knew what I wanted to do and I just wanted to be left alone to do it. Peter King, for example, who now teaches at RMIT I think, was a great force in student theatre in those days. He directed plays that were much more anarchic and esoteric than mine. I always wanted to get the meaning clear. I wanted poetry that touched you and a story that you could follow. Whereas Peter was interested in a kind of deep, esoteric. I always think of Peter as a combination of medievalism and postmodernism, you know, kind of dark, weird, inscrutable, powerful, bewildering. Nothing like my work but I didn't think anything other than how marvellous it was. You know, Trinity College would come along and do a musical. It didn't worry me.

Were most of your audiences composed of students?

MC: Yeah.

So, getting back to what you said before about how you really wanted to touch your audience and move them, what productions do you feel most had that desired effect?

MC: I don't know. Look, that's an important and difficult question. If I go back to the mindset we had then, I think, we were working in an environment where there was much more confidence about two issues. The first is what sometimes is now called the importance of a liberal arts education. We all believed confidently that civilisation was renewed, revitalised and in some ways driven by the writers, the artists, the painters and the architects and the musicians and that in order to be part of that you needed to understand the history of the arts and you needed to take them by the scruff of the neck and renew them for your age and your generation. And not everyone involved in that project would have had a sense that that was about a larger kind of social politics, say left wing politics or feminist politics. A lot of people then, as still among artists actually, believe that just practising the art-form in new and challenging and exciting ways was energizing for a culture. Now as I say artists still believe that

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

but it's an idea that is kind of under challenge because marketplace economics, the idea that the freemarket is the natural condition of civilisation. Economics ... we didn't care about economics - you know this wasn't a world where the stockmarket was read out, whether the hang sen had risen or fallen, was part of the news. It was a piece of esoteric information of interest to stockbrokers. It wasn't anybody else's interest! And that world in which the arts and the liberal education were a self-evident good and a *primary* function of the university have come under challenge, haven't they, for several serious reasons. The first is to do with the rise of free market economics which now sees the university as a utilitarian institution that is here to train people for vocation and the assumption is that you come to the university in order to get a qualification that will make you rich. Now none of the people I went to university with were interested in getting rich. They were interested in making art and in teaching and studying and engaging in inquiry and as an academic I've never been interested in getting rich. It's never worried me. You know, when I see blokes who I did Law with. I ride a bicycle around town, not because I can't afford a car. I do have a little car. But I like riding a bike. When some sort of flash lawyer that I recognise as a guy I went to uni with whizzes by in his Lamborghini I don't think 'Oh, that could have been me'.

So your audiences were similarly enthusiastic about the concept of just producing art?

MC: Well, I think so. I don't want to sort of speak for everybody because I don't really know. I mean my great belief is that the university is a place of diversity and one of the follies of the university actually is that all sorts of people try to recruit the world at large to their point of view. I'm a great believer in let a thousand flowers bloom. It's just....

So tell me about some of the really memorable productions you were involved in?

MC: I'll tell you about some of the memorable productions that I saw before I do the ones I did myself. I mean there were so many you know. You were seeing a play a week really. I can't put dates on these for you, but the two really memorable ones that happened at The Pram Factory. Remember that The Pram Factory is a kind of independent group down there in Carlton and my friends at university were much younger than the Pram Factory group and although we knew some of those people to say hello to, we didn't kind of hang out with them. We were excited by their work and stimulated by what they did. The Pram Factory was important I think merely because it was there. The works are more astounding now in retrospect than I think they were at the time. Two productions were both directed by James McCaughey who wasn't a member of the Pram Factory collective but who worked in the space. The first was the great Orestian trilogy which was a production worked on a translation by an American called Rush Rehm. He was an immensely sophisticated likeable guy. This is a well documented production. I can tell you it was really thrilling as a young man to go out with my then girlfriend actually to sit in this space which was configured in all these different ways. They changed the seating for each of the three parts. There was no other set particularly. It was done with lighting and human energy and voices and with Chorus and with movement. That was very thrilling. There was also a McCaughey production a bit later of *Godot* that starred Will Henderson, John Jacobs who is now teaches drama at what used to be called Rusden, I can't think of what it's called now. Barbie Schushevska who was a brilliant designer and actor and Peter Findlay who still works as an actor because I saw him on the television not long ago, and that was a very clean production of *Godot* that really brought the text alive. It made me see that what I wanted to do was feel as though what I'd kind of seen on the

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

page I would see in the theatre. I got less interested in the idea as other directors were interested in at the time in kind of chopping up the text. I was not interested in that and kind of fragmenting the text and making the text out as an excuse for my own theatrical exploration and my own ideas. I became very committed after I saw *Godot* to the idea that if you found a text that you believed had integrity...

Did this mean that you wanted to be true to what you felt was what the playwrights had intended it to be?

MC: Yeah and that was interesting because I was also an Honours student in English and there was a kind of dislocation, which I still feel actually, between the way we talked about texts in the English dept. and the way we talked about them in the rehearsal room. In the English dept. which was then dominated by what we called Leavisism - the ideas of F.R. Leavis - but also under the postmodernists - the Leavisites and the postmodernists have this in common and actually many schools of English criticism have this in common - they believe that the intention of the writer is irrelevant to the way in which the text actually works. We are all familiar with that argument and the argument intellectually is a strong one, that you can't read any intention in the text and you must simply engage with the text and how you engage with the text is the point of dispute between the various schools of literary criticism. If you are a theatre practitioner or if you are an actor you find yourself saying but now 'what is the playwright really saying here'? And if you are doing Shakespeare. Truly, when I'm thinking about Shakespeare I come to believe that I've had the blazing insight that Prospero is not the Philosopher King who we are supposed to honour, that Prospero is a kind of madman, a megalomaniac who set himself up as King of this island - on which there are only two other people and Shakespeare knew that. I don't ever think that that's one possible reading. You simply bring that interpretation to bear and realise it there - on the stage. As a director I become convinced that I've tapped into Shakespeare's real intention. Afterwards I'm happy to say, of course there are many other ways of interpreting the play. My own feeling is that when you are working with actors and directors that if you don't believe that you are dealing with something that is essential to the text, that is rising out of the body of the language, that it's there and you are in touch with it, I don't believe you can end up doing great work. And then it only produces superficial results.

So did you do a lot of research for the plays that you chose?

MC: Yeah heaps. I've never understood people who say 'I'm not going to go and see that production because it might influence me' Come on! If the Melbourne Theatre Company or if some great world company is visiting town and they happen to be doing a play you'd better bloody well go! Because if you don't have anything new or challenging to say, why bother? So no I would see everything. I did a production of *Hamlet* and I spent eighteen months preparing for that. I watched every copy of *Hamlet* I could get on video, I went to productions of *Hamlet*, I read masses of criticism on *Hamlet*. It was one of the great experiences of my life. Really getting into the gristle.

That was as a student?\_\_MC: Yeah it was one of the last plays I did.

Did you involve the actors in that process?\_\_MC: No. That was the preparation that I went through before I came into the rehearsal room.

So how much of that got communicated to the actors or was it more emerging in

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

different ways rather than necessarily ...

MC: Yeah, look it's like. I think the directing of plays in this respect is a bit like any kind of academic research. See, if you think about it, in academic work there are sort of two models. The first model goes something like, you are doing your theoretical reading first and then having working out what your epistemology is, you bring your theoretical tools into play by working on a body of data with them. That's the first model. I always thought that was a very bad model because you end up proving your theory. I think the better model is that you read everything and you have all these potential blueprints in your head, and as you read and engage with your material, different blueprints kind of flash before you. Actually it's a bit like something I read in a feminist critique but it's also a bit like the Canadian structuralist Northrop Frye and actually it's sort of Marxist, so you start to, you feel that, I mean each work has to be discovered in its uniqueness, do you see what I mean, rather than being put through the kind of ideological shredder that matches your own particular preferences. You've got to hear what the work is doing, believe that the work is saying something that has never been quite said before.

[Tape runs on for awhile with nothing on it]

And then I must have formed the group I guess and I think the first production I did with the group was the *Bacchae* and I did the *Bacchae* in the Union Theatre. The Union Theatre was being stripped of asbestos and the stage area had been sealed off from the auditorium where the asbestos was and so and so it was possible to use the stage area so we built a set inside the, on stage, and the audience sat on the stage with us and we did a production of the *Bacchae* That was a very sort of powerful meaty production and it was one of the first where the people were naked or a bit naked on stage. We did a lot of workshops up in the hills behind Lorne for that. This is where I really became interested in the sort of sexual energy that is in theatre and I developed a strong sense of your responsibilities as a director then, because I thought and still believe that your responsibility is to push actors and put their minds and bodies and emotions on the line, to take them into new areas where they really take risks, and that means you have to have immense integrity because if you are dealing with their sexuality, well then there has to be an atmosphere of complete trust and not exploitation. Now it probably sounds weird me saying this because you are looking at me and I'm 46, but I wasn't that old then. You know I was in my thirties and I was much closer to the age of the actors.

How did the actors respond to that?\_\_MC: They loved it. Of course, they loved it. And I mean I was very particular about the ways in which, for examples, the actors themselves designed their own costumes, so they made decisions about what they wore or what they didn't wear, and you know, some people were modest and some people were exhibitionists. But I loved that production and I'm sure if you find anyone who was in it, they would remember it as a powerful experience in their life. Ian Holtham who now teaches music at the Conservatorium - he wrote the music for that. I'm very proud of that production.

You said that you didn't tend to fragment the text at all?\_\_MC: No.

With the classical texts, how did you get them to speak to a contemporary audience?\_\_MC: Well, with these, with the Greek plays. I mean it's a bit dodgy with rights, but what we did was to get a whole bunch of translations of the *Bacchae* and just sort of rendered each phrase into contemporary language, so we weren't drawing

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

on any particular translation.

So did you do that as a group?\_\_MC: Yeah, I did a bit of it because rehearsal time is valuable and you don't have that much of it. You've got to think about what the director needs to prepare. The director needs to work very hard I think. So there is stuff laid out on the ground for the cast to work with. I always used to say that you need to know how to begin, how to get the process of discovery in motion, but you mustn't be too clear about where you are going. You've got to be open to discovery because you've got to let the cast discover things. You've got to have that humility to listen and that courage to interpret. Life is like that. Research is like that. In the end I have to make the call but I have to be open to every possibility, so if someone comes up with something I hadn't thought of, I mustn't feel challenged by that, mustn't think that my authority has been challenged. I must think that is a fantastic idea! It completely turns my notion of the play on its head! That's what you want isn't it? I mean if you know what the play is all about on Day 1 why direct it?

You have very clear thoughts about how you would like to approach direction and performance. Are there any other productions in which you could say they really influenced how you thought about producing a show?

MC: No I think I just learnt. I don't think there are any more moments of revelation really, no, I think what happens is that I just learn and with awkward stage I do the *Bacchae*, *Blood Wedding* and then a play about food which was called *The Pie Fight* but should be called *Play Lunch* because that's a better name for a play [laughter] which was a group devised thing where the members of the group wrote pieces about food and then you kind of take all these fragments of things that people have written and stuff and have found in magazines and sort of make a kind of collage out of them that has a kind of narrative flow and sort of logic to it. Like a piece of music really. We did that in the Des Connor rehearsal room which is a space I loved using.

You produced it there as well?\_\_MC: Yeah we actually put it on there. And I liked it because it was a sort of knock about, muscular kind of space. You could do things cheaply there. The set for that entirely consisted of milk crates which we'd pinched and that was good. There was only about 20 milkcrates and you'd sort of pile them up to hide behind them [laughter] or you'd sit on them or you'd hold a milk crate up and pretend it was a television or a cage or anything. There were no other props so the only thing you were allowed to pick up was a milk crate! It could be an aeroplane, it could be anything. Then we did a play which was very big for that group, the awkward stage group, which was called *Desire*. And desire was a celebration of sexuality. We did that a lot, we performed that often. We did a big season of it in The Guild and then we did a week of it in The Courthouse as part of the Midsumma Festival and we took it to Sydney and we performed it in the New Theatre there...

This is the early 80s?

MC: No, no this is late. This is, I think this was about '93 when this happened. This was the last production that Awkward Stage did under my direction. Then the group kept going and they did a production of *King Lear*. Kiera Lindsay who now teaches at the Australian Centre here at Melbourne University directed that and that was a production done in the carpark of the South Melbourne market. These were all productions associated with Melbourne University.

Tell me about the last one that you did?

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

MC: *Desire* was a group designed piece about sex! It was just a joyful celebration.

So did you use any text or was it just all devised in the moment?\_\_MC: No we did text. This is sort of the folder for *Desire* here so if I look at it I can remember. One of the things that really irritates me about Programs, my own Programs included, is that people never put the year on them! [laughter] So years later you can never remember. Here, for example, if you just hold that for the camera, that was a big screen and those two people are naked behind the screen. It was a silhouette show. And that's Daniella Farinacci actually, that person there. And this is Brigit Burton and you had these basically sex scenes done in silhouette and so they were very very sexy and you had a Chorus there who would go 'ooh ah ooh'. The idea was that you would have one person who would come out and say 'I live in Lygon Street just opposite the flats and on a summer's night I see all sorts of things'. And so people came in and out of focus. You know the guy playing the trumpet. And then there was this beautiful sexy moment, I love this show, and again truly if you talk to people who were in it, we all loved it. When we all get together as we do from time to time, it's the play we recall and look, in some ways, it was quite undergraduate, you know, there was a scene where you thought you were watching a man jerking off and then suddenly his penis kind of flew off and it was clearly some kind of toy and then he took his hat off and shook his hair out and he was a girl and you realised this had all been a trick, you know, but it was sort of beautiful and it also captured stories of loss and disappointment. It was about love and desire. I'm just hugely proud of it and as I say the group wrote it.

SIDE B:

We at Awkward Stage wrote....

So as a director did you have some final call about decisions and...

MC: Yes I did and what happened was, this is the play in which, you know what it's like with these things. I don't know whether that little picture will show up... They went off and did a photo shoot without me, that's how much they loved doing it, and when they came back they had all these photos that were so kind of .... hot! [laughter] This is one called Emily's overcoat which is about a girl who was a flasher and that was an unbelievable scene and I actually told the group to go away and rehearse this and work out a routine, the girl who written it and was going to act and when they came up this girl comes in just in an enormous overcoat and then when she opens her overcoat she's stark naked and just completely beautiful, I mean heart stoppingly. So I didn't change a thing and I was able to say 'I didn't direct that!' They just did it!

So a production like *Desire*, where did you see that fitting in with other theatre that was being produced at Melbourne Uni?\_\_MC: Oh I didn't care whether it fitted in!

Were other people doing similar things?

MC: No, not really. Oh, yes they were, I mean one of the three things was that Scott Brennan who is now a comedian on the television and is a dear friend of mine, I love Scott dearly, one of the running themes in the story was that you kept catching up with this boy who had this problem with his mother who was a wardrobe and his father was an armchair and their eldest boy used to be a couch but he decided to become a *chaisse longue* and they were furious because as the father said, 'I don't

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

know what's possessed you boy, neither your mother or I have any French features'. And then what the eldest son revealed was that while he might want to become a chaise lounge the other son was actually a cross dresser and the whole furniture thing fell away and the family faced the fact that their teenage boy was dressing up in his mother's clothes and going out. Where if the father had been furious at one of the boys for being a chaise lounge he actually amazingly tried to understand what his son was doing. So instead of kind of having the kind of parody, you know the father who couldn't deal with possibly his gay but cross-dressing son, I went for, we went for the unexpected, the father who on the one hand in this kind of comic book scene, where everyone was a piece of furniture, when he was confronted with a real human situation he actually tried to reach the boy and understand what it was that made his boy want to cross dress. It ended with Scott coming out and doing the final number, dressed absolutely gloriously singing 'I always knew that I could be beautiful' and the whole cast is singing and then in the end they turn to the audience, singing 'You always knew you could be beautiful'. And we had sang and danced and shared this time together and it's all been beautiful and it was a real sort of feel good final number. A beautiful affirmation of humanity and love and tolerance and sexuality and I was so proud of that work. To me it is a glorious moment in my life.

It must have been a culmination of a lot of the work that you had been doing?

MC: It was. It was, yeah. It's not a point of closure for me because I do other plays later but not at Melbourne University - that's the last - I mean there may be other plays to come - but for the time being that is the last of the plays I did at Melbourne University.

Now what you were talking about, how there was a bit of an overlap in terms of the use of space between The Pram Factory and Melbourne University. What relationship did you see between the theatre you were doing at Melbourne Uni and the theatre outside, off campus? You spoke to me about the MTC before and your views on that...

MC: Yeah, well that's right. In those days we were united against a common enemy and the common enemy was the Melbourne Theatre Company which we all saw as a bastion of bourgeois complacent theatre, subsidised to the hilt, producing reactionary English-style repertory theatre. Interestingly you know we were not that fired up about doing Australian work. I'm not really sure because I've never really thought about this before, but if you look at The Pram Factory I can't really think of it as a theatre that was committed to doing Australian texts. But it's an Australian theatre because it's Australians. More of an issue for us anyway was the idea of finding an Australian voice. So that one of the targets we had, and Russel Walsh used to use this phrase, we used to target what we called 'The Theatre of Beautiful Speaking' which we parodied as actors with marvellous English voices. You know, actors who still used to go to London. It was important to us to find a kind of poetry in Australian diction.

So your own translation of the *Bacchae*, did you include Australian colloquialisms or...?

MC: No, no. It wasn't self-conscious. It wasn't that people were going crikey or cripes or strike me lucky. It was just more that you had to believe that the way we spoke. I mean the problem with the Greek stuff is that no matter what you do it always sounds a bit like a translation because you're dealing with concepts that don't

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

readily exist in English, like rosy-fingered dawn [laughter]

So you saw the MTC as a bastion of conservatism?

MC: Yeah we did and also we were pissed off because we knew that the university gave them a lot of money and it seemed to us that the university was kind of propping up this reactionary theatre. What I'm relating to you was a view that was common then. I'm not espousing a view that I now hold. I've changed a bit now because I'm married to Hannie Rayson and Hannie's produced by the MTC, so, I've kind of crossed over, but ehm [pause]. Also I think the MTC genuinely has changed but it still concerns me that the subscribers of the MTC are still an elderly and privileged crowd. They are still a theatre company that are a bit at the mercy of their subscribers.

What about the Pram Factory, at the time, how you thought about the Pram Factory?

MC: Well it was exciting but it wasn't my world. I mean I just went down there and saw plays and came away. It was marvellous and exciting and smelly and dangerous and a fire trap and all those things.

But it was a very distinct world from the student theatre at the university?

MC: Well I think, well from my group it was. I don't really know, you know each generation has its own kind of connections. They were not my friends but look it was part of an exciting, wider, bohemian Carlton. It was part of what it meant to be a student. I mean there was a strong sense that you were a student. Some students still have this but there are lots of students now who don't. We were so clear that we were in this sort of heroic stage of our lives called being a student and that somehow something essential about freedom and justice and telling the truth and the future of our nation was our responsibility.

And theatre was the medium?

MC: Well it was for us, yeah.

You said before that at one stage and I don't remember when that was that you could basically see a play a week at Melbourne University. Did the role of theatre in the cultural life of the university change over the period that you mention?\_\_MC: Well I don't know. You say we had a role in the cultural life of the university. We kind of talk that talk now because we want to. Why do we do that? We do that because we are fighting a political battle to protect theatre. I think the university was a place of immense diversity. I think you could have gone through the whole of your university experience and never seen a play, because what you were interested in doing was playing hockey. That's what I think a university should be. I mean I never went and saw a hockey match but I rejoice in people who did hockey or went bushwalking or joined an orchestra or a jazz band.

But there seemed to be a lot of students who were involved in theatre?\_\_MC: Yeah, there seemed to be a lot of students. It was quite a world and there was myth though and how would you quantify this though? I mean you couldn't just base it on impressions, you'd have to do some counting. Not everyone had the view that it was an open shop you know. There were a lot of people who wanted to do plays who felt it was a kind of closed shop. That people were putting on plays with their friends in it and since the spaces were fully booked there were some people who couldn't get a

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

play on and just missed out. It never seemed to me that that was what it was. As I told you I would put up a notice inviting people to come to audition and I accepted everyone who came.

So you didn't have a sense that there were cliques?

MC: Well there were alliances, little teams of people who always worked together.

So was there much encourage of people who hadn't been involved in theatre to become involved?\_\_MC: I think so. I don't think you needed to encourage people, they just came. It was one of the things you could do while you were at uni. The other thing that is different now from then is that we had a great privilege then. I don't quite know how to think my way into this issue but we had a great privilege in that because academics were less stressed, less pressured, you know, academic life was more leisurely in a way, we had the advantage of having senior academics who were committed to theatre and who were committed to the university life and saw part of their contribution to university life as directing plays. So even if they might have been teaching in other departments they directed plays. So the head of the French dept. directed plays, that's Colin Duckworth, he directed in French. You had James McCaughey and you had a guy called Charles Kemp. Now Charles wasn't a big influence on me but he was a big influence on other people and he ran workshops in which he explored his own kind of theatrical agenda and he was quite interested in technical stuff like how you bring the invisible person into a room and sit them down and keep the audience believing in the invisible person, that kind of technical stuff. He was an academic. These academics obviously were communicating skills to younger students. The students were also very confident that they were learning from each other. McCaughey ran a course also. You must not forget this. McCaughey ran a drama course for the university for I don't know, three years maybe, which was known as an inter-departmental course, run by the Arts faculty and I don't quite know how that works. I think it meant that other depts. who were under pressure to include drama as part of a major I guess, but anyway it was, well I didn't do that course, but lots of students did and that had a big influence. What I'm saying to you is that there is less sign of academics being able to do this now - being involved in activities of the student union. So there has been a movement towards professionalising that input so now you've got a much bigger staff employed by the union to provide, in the role of artistic director and so on. Those people are much more present and much more influential than they were when I was a student. The first director of student theatre to me who was a real force, I mean David Kendall was a force, but he was a sort of bohemian mate. I thought of him more as someone who was just keeping an eye on things

Was he in the position of artistic director?

MC: He was artistic director and my understanding was that he was employed half time. There was a much thinner staff there. There wasn't proper supervision spaces because they were all very damaged and a lot of equipment would get knocked off over the years, so security of the spaces and also broadening of technique does require... It's much better having a properly staffed student theatre office. But the first student theatre director who influenced people deeply was Eva Czawor who the foyer is now named and you would have been told the sad story of her death. But she was a completely inspirational director and I had the joy of working with actors who had worked with her. I mean literally walking out of a production they had just finished with her and coming into my rehearsal room and they were so wired and so

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

sensate. She was I thought the most gifted trainer of actors I've ever seen. A beautiful, beautiful person.

Did you ever go into any rehearsals with her?

MC: I don't remember that I did. Once you become a director. There's a great story about Stanley Kubrick and he is lighting a scene and it's taking all day and the reporter there says to Stanley Kubrick, 'do other directors take this long to light a scene?' and SK says, 'I have no idea', so once you get into directing if you don't also act, which I don't, you sort of lose touch a bit with how other people direct. When I do watch other people direct I am always reassured because what they are doing doesn't seem that sort of weird. I love reading books by the way by directors because I find them very ...

Now tell me about the critical response to your work? Was it reviewed by people other than *Farrago*?

MC: Yeah it was, yeah I always get good reviews. I think I was a good director. I'm confident that I was a good director. We even got reviews in *The Herald Sun*, I don't quite know why, but uhm.

What was *Farrago*'s reaction?\_\_MC: I don't remember getting a bad review ever. Look the shows always made money. When I say they made money we always got our budget and had \$500 in our bank account as the seeding money for the next production. I always felt you could do a show for \$5,000. You could probably balance your books on that and we always balanced our books, we never needed to be bailed out. And we were always just ahead. One of the things I learned from student theatre and I still believe today and it's essential in any form of creative work is that you should know what your budget is and your aesthetics should match your budget. I was in Sydney last week for a conference in putting history on the television, on the ABC, and the head honchos from the ABC said to the assembled group of historians and documentary makers, 'Don't you worry about the budget. Come up with the dream and we'll worry about the budget'. I think that is very strange advice. I think you should say to people, look 'we're prepared to fund a series of projects with this amount of money so think about what you could do that would completely satisfy with that amount of money', so I think if you've got \$500 to spend on a set you direct a play with a ladder, a bucket and a piece of string and you make it magical. If you've got \$5 million then it better look tremendous.

It's interesting that you say that, I mean \$5,000 isn't a lot of money to work with for a production. Did that make you look for more creative ways of presentation or production? Do you think this factor affected your work?\_\_MC: I think all theatre is about scripts and actors and the audience and everyone else is there to facilitate that, the director, the lighting guys, the set people, the lighting woman and the set can get in the way of a production. A set will only work for you for 5 minutes. You know, you'll walk in and you'll go wow! But you don't sit there all night, thinking wow! If the acting or the script is crappy the set doesn't keep the show alive for you. A good piece of theatre should be able to work without a set and without its lighting because sometimes people say to you, 'don't worry we'll achieve that matter with light' and no, because all you can do is light something. You have to create an event and if you light it it amplifies it and makes it magical and mysterious, I mean theatre lighting is just incredible. You cannot make something out of nothing with light.

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

Now you said before that you yourself produce a very diverse range of plays. Did you find that there were other particular trends in the other student theatre around you? Perhaps the colleges, did they have a particular penchant for particular plays, or ...?

MC: No I think it varies from year to year, you know, because the colleges are such sites of privilege, often what would happen is that someone who would enjoy being in their school play at Melbourne Grammar or at Scotch or at PLC would come in and want to do more theatre. So they would become the efficient, private, privileged, secretary of the drama committee in their college and they'd want to go on doing *The Boyfriend* or some sort of activity for ruling-class boys and girls to put on funny clothes and to sing and dance. That was always a problem and Trinity was always doing that. They did it shamelessly, tirelessly and enthusiastically over decades.

What about Ormond when you were there?\_\_MC: Well Ormond in those days wasn't such a privileged and self-satisfied place. I don't know why really but it was a very diverse place and there seemed to be lots of bursaries for students who couldn't afford to pay fees. Somehow the fees didn't seem too expensive but I don't know how that could possibly be because I was paying my own fees by what I was earning over the summer. I was working in a factory and that managed to pay my fees. I just cannot think how that worked, but that's true. That's not quite true. There were three terms in those days and my grandparents paid for one term and I earned enough to pay for the other two terms. Then I used to earn enough money to live on by working for a burglar alarm company, answering the phone at night. That's how I paid my way.

So did you do productions at Ormond as well?

MC: When I was a student? Yeah, I did. I acted in the college play most years. One year I was the secretary of the drama committee and the play we were doing had a director who, well he had emotional problems and disappeared for a while, and I just took over and I directed the play for four weeks to sort of keep the show on the road, then he came back and finished it off, to my great relief because I had no idea what I was doing! But I kind of learned a lot from that experience. In a way that was my first taste of directing.

What production?

That was a play by a guy called Colin Ryan whose nickname was 'Speedy' Ryan who was a clever writer and a very shy, tall, lanky guy who lived in Carlton. It was a Melbourne piece and it was about the sort of land scandals of the 1890s, don't know what it was called. But it was another sort of McCaughey style you know chorus piece.

What about outside the colleges? Did you find that other people who were doing productions in The Guild had particular styles or tastes?\_\_MC: Yeah I think so. I think a lot of us were kind of influenced by McCaughey and by this idea of sort of shaking things up. As I say Peter King was important. Russell Walsh was important and did serious productions of Chekhov. He did a lot of other things too but he did productions of *The Three Sisters*, the *Cherry Orchard* and *Seagull*. *Seagull* was his first. I was in *Seagull*. They were very beautiful and poetic and were about relocating the kind of energy of the Chekhov play. Yeah, he was a marvellous director.

Were there certain theories of theatre that you read about that influenced you?

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

MC: Yeah, well the sort of guru of everything was Peter Brook and his book, whatever it was called, the *Empty Space*, was I guess the kind of seminal text.

Was everyone around you reading it?

MC: We all had copies of the *Open Space*. The other key texts were Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*. I suppose the predominant text was Peter Brook's production of the *Marat Sade* which he did with the Royal Shakespeare Company which is on video and that got shown from time to time in the Union Theatre, when it was operating as a cinema. I think that influenced a lot of people. It's in the style I'm talking about. It's tribal theatre really! Like nothing you'd ever seen in a school play or at the MTC. Yeah, profound.

What about Stanislavsky?

MC: Yeah we all knew about Stanislavsky and I had certainly read *An Actor Prepares* when I was a student and I think we all believed... Basically there are two models of acting aren't there? One model says that the truth kind of exists inside you and the other model says that acting is about observation, that it's about getting the walk right and voices and things. And by and large, we all believed, although I was different, but most directors, the common wisdom was that, I mean this is, we're coming out of the sixties remember, even though this is the seventies and eighties, the logic of this period is laid down in the sixties. We're simply pursuing a kind of paradigm that is created by the counter culture really and the logic is that truth exists - people always used to point here for some reason - you know, find yourself and there was a lot of stuff about the breath that was kind of mysterious, as the kind of site of truth. Then Stanislavsky kind of hooks into that somehow, that you kind of find that character within you, you look for their depth and you invent their kind of biography, and so on. People thought of that as inward but it seemed to me that Stanislavsky could also be read as kind of outward research. That you actually went out and found out about you know, what it was like to be a Russian peasant or what it was like to be a King. It wasn't a bad thing to look at the way people walked and the way they held themselves. My feeling was and still is actually that actors fall into two groups. Those who mysteriously want to start from the inside and discover their inner truth and those who like to begin with physical work, with a kind of physical task to do, you know, that their elbows are joined together and they are joined to their knees and if you give them a task like that somehow you can build a character. It doesn't really matter where the actor starts because everyone ends up in the same spot anyway with a fully physicalised character that they believe in. When I'm auditioning I usually watch the group because I always have. I have this rule that about two out of every ten actors want to start with the physical stuff whereas most people want to kind of lie on the floor and imagine their character! I try to locate the group that need to physicalise early on and give them a kind of other approach. I've come more and more to the view that research is important. That you've got to know about the world.

Obviously you wanted to give the actors an opportunity to work in the way that they were inclined?\_\_MC: Yeah, I believe that the truth existed in the group and your task as the director was to find it. I never. There's so much to talk about, I mean, one of the evils of my generation of directors was blocking. We never used the term blocking really. 'I've got the play blocked', you know, we'd all say that. But the idea that you would sit down and block the play first or even design it first was just horrendously inflexible, you know, you would get in there and just flow into the room and you'd work it out and it would kind of take shape. I now understand because I've worked

## 'Interview with Michael Cathcart', University of Melbourne

closer to bigger productions that actually you do need to make decisions beforehand because schedules are tight and money is involved and if you want a set you've actually got to design it before the actors come along because you've only got six weeks to work with them and it takes longer to build a set so you've got to plan all that. What that means is that a skilled director actually knows stuff. And I guess that's what I've learnt as a director, that after a while, you know, you come across a dramatic problem and you think actually I know the solution to this because this happened in the *Bacchae* and we spent all day trying to solve this. I just know. If they come in one by one and each say their line it will work. So you just suggest that to them as a possibility and you move on. So you actually learn theatrical skill.

So, how has all this experience in student theatre influenced your career today?

MC: Well, everything I've just said to you.

It's a big question.

MC: It's an important question. Everything I've just said to you over this interview, I still believe really. The two things I do now professionally I suppose is interview people on the radio and write history and both of those things are forms of performance. If I'm interviewing somebody I'm interested in how I draw them out, how I make them be their best, just like with an actor. How I challenge them. And I'm also interested in my own performance on radio. I've been doing radio for four years and I enjoy it and people tell me I'm good at it. On radio I try to be exactly as I want an actor to be and that is, on the one hand I want to be vulnerable. I want to open my throat and the soft parts of my body to the audience, to the microphone. I want them to feel that I'm listening, that I'm filled with humanity and emotion, that I'll be honest and spontaneous with my response to what I hear. I want that to be true of myself, to be open to the experience. But I also, being vulnerable like that doesn't mean you have to be weak, because you might a combative interview on your hands. You might be dealing with someone who actually decides to take you on or with someone who won't actually answer the question and your role as the person in the media is actually to hold them to account. Because they might be the Minister for the Arts or they might be receiving a huge subsidy for a company that does crappy work. All creative work is about paradox and that search for the moment of strength and promotional nakedness. Being an interviewer is that combination of strength and nakedness that I wanted actors to find. Here's another, look at that, I love that poster. This is *Desire*. Isn't this just a beautiful photo?

Oh I recognise it, yeah, Scott Brennan!

END