

# The trouble with Australian theatre

## Half the trouble with Australian theatre is caused by directors who feel they are above realism'

**T**HE rumour was that the Sydney Theatre Company was no longer interested in mainstream naturalistic playwrights such as David Williamson or Hanneke Rayson. Or so Williamson said. The Melbourne Theatre Company might showcase Joanna Murray-Smith's *Rockabye*, but Sydney wanted to lure the kids with an edge so sharp that there would be no place for anything like literary theatre. Then Cate Blanchett opened as Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a production by the great Liv Ullmann. It was straight, it was classical, it showed what theatre could do rather than what could be done with the theatre.

It could hold any stage in the world — and not simply because of Blanchett's histrionic skills — but it was naturalistic and muted. Someone remarked it was a bit Scandinavian for Tennessee. Much quieter than the superb Melbourne Theatre Company production of that more recent American domestic August: Osage County — which also delivered, on the note, without distortion.

Both were far removed from



**We want the best actors commanding the respect of directors who will allow the best of our playwrights to take their places alongside the Pirandellos and Greeks.**

Blanchett's last appearance on the stage in Benedict Andrews' deconstruction of Shakespeare's history plays, the eight-hour *War of the Roses*. Blanchett was a superb Richard II and Lady Anne in *Richard III*, but the production took Shakespeare as its demolition site with its smeared body fluids and blood spitting. There was plenty to admire in *Wars of the Roses*, plenty to deplore. And then there was Andrews' radical revisiting of Patrick White's *Season at Sarsaparilla* with veteran Peter Carroll in drag and a Big Brother-style camera.

No one after *Streetcar* could suggest that the STC disdained naturalism or traditional production — the company

will mount that textbook classic *Uncle Vanya* next year. But there is, throughout Australian theatre, a powerful pull away from traditional illusionistic conceptions of the theatre.

Traditions and the innovations that disrupt it are two sides of the one coin. The theatre of Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan hardly nurtured the mime-oriented experimentalism of Robert Wilson.

Nor could you have plays like Eugene Ionesco's if you stuck to Ray

writer's theatre that is also an actor's theatre, where the director serves the text and highlights — and disciplines — the strength of the actor. We need Rush and Steve Sewell and a director such as Kate Cherry, who can quietly find the music in a Hanneke Rayson play. Maybe in the end we need it more than the declamatory atonal music of Andrews and Kosky. Half the trouble with Australian theatre is caused by talented directors who feel they are above realism and well-made plays. Often they cut their teeth with student theatre and have been too narcissistic to grow up. It's much easier to treat student actors like puppets and to improvise a text than it is to treat Judy Davis like that. Most cut-and-paste postmodern tinkering with classics make Joanna Murray-Smith look like Racine on a good day. But for every production such as *Osage*, there's hand-me-down cardboard rubbish of the traditional kind.

**We want the best actors commanding the respect of directors who will allow the best of our playwrights to take their places alongside the Pirandellos and Greeks.** A theatre which is ancient and modern, classic and cutting-edge, Australian and internationalist, with a deep instinctive sense that to make it new, you have to have a theatrical eye for the glitter of the old. Where is naturalism in all this? Well, we need a theatre that has emotional truth, and we need a theatre that understands the magic of its own artifice.

Source: smh.com.au

## 'Failed' treasurer Costa warns on health budget

A NSW Coalition government should launch an audit of the state's finances as one of its first moves if it is elected at the next elections and use the outcome to push its policy program, former NSW treasurer Michael Costa said.

The "failed politician", as he prefers to be known, having quit Parliament, said health spending was the biggest threat to NSW's finances. The state Treasury estimates that within 20 years, health will consume the entire budget - it accounts for 28 per cent now - unless spending is brought under control. "I'm writing a book called *I'm Fat, Ugly and Stupid - what's the Government going to do about it: memoirs of a failed politician*, Mr Costa told the NSW Business Chamber, going on to refer to the Federal Government's stimulus package as the "Rudd re-election stimulus package".

It would take "10 years to incrementally change the system," he said, due to the complexities involved. The Federal Government was "wedged on health", he said, given its commitment before the last federal election to sort out its health budget, which it had yet to do. Health spending, split between the federal and state governments, had a host of inefficiencies. The Federal Government needed to cover key areas, Mr Costa said, calling for national industrial relations and occupational health and safety systems. States should avoid areas such as consumer affairs that could be handled on a uniform basis nationally.

## 10 Things You Didn't Know About Olympia Snowe

**1**. Olympia Jean Bouchles was born on Feb. 21, 1947, in Augusta, Maine, to Greek immigrant George Bouchles and Georgia Goranites Bouchles, whose parents emigrated from Sparta.

**2**. Both of her parents died before her 10th birthday. She was raised by an aunt and uncle in Auburn, Maine.

**3**. She received her primary education at St. Basil's Academy, a Greek Orthodox school in New York, then returned to Auburn, graduating from Edward Little High School in 1965. In 1969, she earned a degree in political science from the University of Maine.

**4**. She married state Rep. Peter Snowe in 1969. After he died in a car accident in 1973, she ran successfully to replace him in the state House.

**5**. In 1976, Snowe was elected to the state Senate. Two years later, she won election to the House of Representatives, becoming the first Greek-

American woman in Congress.

**6**. In 1989, she married John McKernan, then governor of Maine. The two met while serving in the Maine legislature in the 1970s. They also served together in the House of Representatives.

**7**. After being re-elected to the House seven times, Snowe ran successfully for the Senate in 1994, becoming the second female senator from Maine (after Margaret Chase Smith).

**8**. She is very popular with her constituents. In 2000, she was re-elected with 69 percent of the vote; she won 74 percent of the vote in 2006.

**9**. Snowe is known as a moderate. In February 2009, she was one of just three Republicans to back President Obama's economic stimulus bill.

**10**. She sits on four Senate committees and is the only female Republican on the Finance Committee.

