

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY SPEECH 20/9/16

FIRSTLY I'D LIKE TO THANK THE UNIVERSITY FOR THIS GREAT AND UNDREAMED OF HONOUR. I CONFESS THAT IT FEELS LIKE A FABULOUS KIND OF SHORT-CUT. A BIT LIKE THAT MOMENT WHEN YOU ARE TRAVELLING INTERNATIONALLY AND YOUR NAME COMES OUT OF SOME AIRLINE COMPUTER'S ALGORITHMIC LOTTERY AND YOU ARE SUDDENLY UPGRADED TO BUSINESS CLASS.

I'M ACUTELY CONSCIOUS OF THIS FOR TWO REASONS:

- ONE BEING THAT MY WIFE THE PLAYWRIGHT VERITY LAUGHTON IS SLOGGING HER WAY THROUGH A PHD AT THIS AUGUST INSTITUTION RIGHT NOW – AND TO BE AWARDED A DOCTORATE FOR WHAT I HAVE HAPPENED TO DO..... AND IN MY CASE LOVE!..... FOR 42 YEARS, SEEMS A BIT LIKE CHEATING;**
- THE SECOND REASON IS THAT, WHILE I DEEPLY ADMIRE AND APPRECIATE FORMAL LEARNING, I WAS IN MY DAY, A RELUCTANT STUDENT WHO CHOSE NOT TO PURSUE HONOURS OR ANY OTHER POST GRADUATE QUALIFICATION. I WAS JUST BURSTING TO GET ON WITH LIFE. AND SO IT HAS CONTINUED, WITH ANY SUBSEQUENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER STUDY PARKED - BECAUSE THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SO MUCH TO DO.**

BUT I'M GOING TO ACCEPT IT ANYWAY!

NOW THIS MAY SOUND LIKE I DON'T PLACE GREAT STORE BY TERTIARY EDUCATION - WHICH COULD BE SEEN AS A BIT UNGRATEFUL UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.....BUT NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH.

WHILE I MAY HAVE BEEN CHAMPING AT THE BIT TO GET ON AND MAKE THINGS HAPPEN, MY THREE YEARS AT UNIVERSITY (NOT THIS ONE AS IT HAPPENS) WAS WHERE I RECEIVED THE GREAT GIFT OF DISCOVERING WHAT IT WAS THAT I DID WANT TO DO.

MY UNDERGRADUATE YEARS WERE SPENT EXPANDING MY WORLD VIEW, RUBBING UP AGAINST GREAT LITERATURE, DISCOVERING THE DISCOURSE OF IDEAS, LEARNING HOW TO LEARN, LEARNING WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO LEARN AND WHAT I DIDN'T. SOMETIMES THE PATHWAY LED UP BLIND ALLEYS, AND SOMETIMES THROUGH MAGICAL DOORS INTO UNIMAGINED AND THRILLING DISCOVERIES.

BEST OF ALL I GOT TO HANG OUT WITH A WHOLE LOT OF OTHER PEOPLE WHO WERE SIMILARLY ENGAGED IN DISCOVERING THAT CREATIVITY – HUMANITY'S QUESTIONING, EXPRESSION AND DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS - WAS TO BE AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING THAT WOULD COME.

MY COHORT WAS ENORMOUSLY FORTUNATE IN THAT CAMPUS LIFE AT THAT TIME OFFERED A STRING OF MIND-EXPANDING DIVERSIONS MANY OF WHICH WERE IN NO WAY RELATED TO OUR FORMAL COURSES OF STUDY. WHETHER IT WAS:

- **THE HEADY POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS THAT WERE THE MASS STUDENT-LED PROTESTS AGAINST AN UNJUST WAR AND AGAINST RACIAL BIGOTRY; OR**
- **THE CHANCE TO MAKE BAD THEATRE OURSELVES; OR**
- **THE REGULAR CAMPUS GIGS OF SOME OF AUSTRALIA'S BEST MUSICIANS; OR**
- **THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE A COMPENDIUM OF CLASSIC CINEMA THROUGH THE UNI FILM SOCIETY....**

ALL OF THESE AND MANY MORE EXPERIENCES, THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN VIEWED BY A STERN OUTSIDE EYE AS INDULGENT NON-SEQUITERS, DROVE THE EXPANSION OF MY LIMITED WHITE-BREAD WORLD WHILE A DEGREE MAJORING IN ENGLISH AND POLITICS SEEMED TO ARRIVE ALMOST AS AN INCIDENTAL BY-PRODUCT.

BUT THE META-PROJECT OF A UNIVERSITY IS SURELY TO CREATE BETTER HUMAN BEINGS.

FOR ME IT PROVIDED THE TWIN GIFTS OF TURNING MY BRAIN INTO THAT OF AN ADULT AND OF SHOWING ME WHERE MY PARTICULAR PASSION AND MY PARTICULAR USEFULNESS MIGHT LIE.

THAT MAY SOUND LIKE A SELFISH LINE FROM THE ULTIMATELY PRIVILEGED – NOT ONLY WHITE, MALE AND LIVING IN THE FIRST WORLD, BUT ALSO A BABY BOOMER - REAPING THE REWARDS OF MY PARENTS SACRIFICES, A WORLD THAT HAD BECOME, RELATIVELY SPEAKING, GEOPOLITICALLY STABLE ALONGSIDE THE ARRIVAL OF AN ATTENDANT ECONOMIC BOOM BORNE OF ADVANCING TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALISATION.

AND INDEED THERE ARE PLENTY WHO REGARD THE PURSUIT OF A LIFE IN THE ARTS AS ULTIMATELY SELF-INDULGENT, INDEED TRIVIAL, WHEN LINED UP ALONGSIDE SAY MEDICINE WHERE WE ARE ABLE TO REPAIR, PROTECT AND EVEN FIND BETTER WAYS TO CREATE MORE HUMAN BEINGS. OR ENGINEERING WHERE WE CAN USE OUR IMAGINATIONS AND SKILLS TO ENFORCE OUR WILL UPON THE PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE OF OUR WORLD. THE OUTCOMES OF THESE PURSUITS ARE SO TANGIBLE AND, IN MANY CASES SO DEMONSTRABLY GOOD FOR OUR SOCIETY.....

THE ARTS TEND TO BE A LONGER GAME. I LIKE TO THINK THAT, THROUGH THE ARTS, WE ARE ENGAGED IN BUILDING BETTER HUMAN BEINGS FROM THE INSIDE.

THAT SOUNDS IMPRESSIVE – BUT HOW? HOW DOES A PLAY, A BOOK, A SONG OR MORE RARIFIED EVEN, AN OPERA, MAKE US BETTER HUMAN BEINGS? I WILL PROVIDE ONLY THE SHORTEST ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION WHICH IS BEING EXHAUSTIVELY RESEARCHED AT THIS UNIVERSITY RIGHT NOW BY MY FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE JULIAN MEYRICK AND HIS TEAM.

ULTIMATELY THE ARTS AND THEIR VALUE LIES IN THEIR INTRISIC VALUES AND EFFECTS:

- **THE CONNECTING OF HUMAN TO HUMAN AND FROM CULTURE TO CULTURE**

- **BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY**
- **THE SOCIALISATION OF A SPECIES THAT IS AS SUBJECT TO DARWINIAN IMPULSES AS ANY OTHER**
- **THE BUILDING OF UTOPIAN VISIONS WHILE ALSO WARNING US AGAINST OURSELVES**
- **VALUING THE INTANGIBLE, THE NUMINOUS, THE THING THAT HAS NO TANGIBLE PURPOSE AND YET WHICH INSPIRES US**
- **IMAGINATION, CREATIVITY, INNOVATION – ALL THOSE TERMS THAT WE USE TO DESCRIBE THE ELUSIVE PROCESS BY WHICH WE MOVE OUR WORLD FROM ONE PARADIGM TO ANOTHER**

WHILE MANY MAY ARGUE THAT THE ARTS HAVE BECOME MARGINALISED BY THE MARCH OF MATERIAL PROGRESS, I ACTUALLY BELIEVE THAT WE MAY WELL BE ON THE THRESHHOLD OF A NEW GOLDEN AGE OF THE ARTS GENERATED BY HUMAN BEINGS' INEVITABLE DESIRE TO CONGREGATE, SHARE, TALK & LISTEN.

THE COLDNESS & ISOLATION OF TECHNOLOGY, THE MISERY OF MONEY, THE STRESS OF ASPIRATION, THE GRIEF OF PRESSURE, THE DICTATORSHIP OF TIME, THE JEALOUSY OF ATTAINABLE PERFECTION, THE HOMOGENEITY OF THE MEDIA, THE DEHUMANISATION OF EVERYDAY TRANSACTIONS LIKE BANKING & SHOPPING – IN SHORT THE MYRIAD WAYS THAT WE HAVE INVENTED TO MAKE OURSELVES MISERABLE WHEN IN REALITY WE ARE WEALTHIER, HEALTHIER, BETTER EDUCATED, MORE WIDELY TRAVELLED, LIVING IN LOVELIER HOUSES WITH EVER-MORE FABULOUS GADGETS & IN EVERY SENSE BETTER OFF.....

ALL OF THOSE THINGS THAT THREATEN TO REPLACE FAMILY, HONOUR, COMMUNITY, LOVE & RESPECT – WILL SURELY, OR, WE MUST BELIEVE, REQUIRE THEIR ANTIDOTES.

IT MIGHT BE UNFASHIONABLE TO SAY SO, BUT THE ARTS HAVE SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE NEEDS. IF WE WERE A FOCUSED MULTINATIONAL CORPORATION INSTEAD OF A LOOSE AFFILIATION OF CREATIVE TRIBES, WE WOULD BE CREATING A KILLER BUSINESS PLAN WITH “*HUMAN INTERFACE*” AS ITS KILLER PRODUCT. WE WOULD BE MARKETING REAL LIFE CONNECTION.

WE WOULD BE RUNNING FEAR CAMPAIGNS ABOUT HOW EMPTY YOUR LIFE WILL BE IF YOU DON'T GET THE ARTS INTO IT. WE WOULD BE WEDGING TESTIMONIALS FROM ARTS BELIEVERS BETWEEN LATE NIGHT COMMERCIALS FOR ESCORT AGENCIES AND AB EXERCISERS. WE WOULD BE MAKING A TICKET TO A GREAT ARTS EVENT AS DESIRABLE AS A GREAT BODY, FABULOUS HAIR, NICE CLOTHES AND A BACKYARD THAT HAS BEEN MADE OVER FROM A HOMELY MESS INTO THE AESTHETIC EQUIVALENT OF A NATURE STRIP OUTSIDE A USED CAR YARD.

LET ME MAKE THIS A BIT MORE TANGIBLE....

WHEN I AND MY COLLEAGUES STARTED WOMADELAIDE 24 YEARS AGO, WE DID NOT DO SO THINKING ABOUT TOURISM, NOR THE ECONOMY, NOR THE CITY'S VIBRANCY, NOR REPUTATION. IT WAS NOT STRATEGIC. IT WAS BORN OF A BURNING DESIRE TO SHARE MUSIC AND DANCE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD WITH OUR COMMUNITY. IT WAS BORN OF A BELIEF THAT, IF WE EXPERIENCED EACH OTHER'S CULTURES, WE MIGHT GROW AS HUMAN BEINGS. IT WAS BORN OF A LOVE OF THIS CITY AND THE BEAUTIFUL SPACES THAT IT PROVIDES IN WHICH TO MAKE AND SHARE ART. I LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT ITS GROWTH AND THE LOVE THAT PEOPLE HAVE FOR IT IS TO DO WITH PEOPLE'S UNCONSCIOUS RECOGNITION OF THIS AUTHENTICITY.

LET ME VENTURE FORWARD A STORY THAT MIGHT CAPTURE, IN SOME WAY , THE POWER OF GREAT ART AND AN INSTANCE WHERE THE SAME PIECE PLAYED OUT IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT SPACES AND YET PACKED THE SAME BREATH-TAKING EMOTIONAL WALLOP. THIS IS THE STORY OF BRINGING PETER BROOK'S MIGHTY PRODUCTION OF "THE MAHABHARATA" TO AUSTRALIA AND TWO VERY DIFFERENT OPENING NIGHTS – ONE IN ZURICH AND ONE IN ADELAIDE.

I WAS WORKING AS ADMINISTRATOR AND ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR TO LORD HAREWOOD ON THE 1988 ADELAIDE FESTIVAL WHEN WE GOT THE CHANCE TO JOIN A CONSORTIUM OF INTERNATIONAL PRODUCERS TO COMMISSION PETER TO CREATE AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE VERSION OF THIS EXTRAORDINARY WORK THE YEAR AFTER IT TRIUMPHANTLY PREMIERED IN AVIGNON.

THE COMMISSIONING PARTNERS WERE THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, THE BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC, THE CITY OF ZURICH, THE ADELAIDE AND PERTH FESTIVALS AND THE AUSTRALIAN BICENTENNIAL AUTHORITY. THE FINANCING AND CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS WERE HIDEOUSLY COMPLEX AND WE CAME PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO LOSING THE PROJECT ON A NUMBER OF OCCASIONS – BUT THAT IS ANOTHER STORY.

THIS STORY IS THAT OF THE CLOSING MOMENT OF THAT PIECE ON THE OPENING NIGHTS FIRSTLY IN ZURICH AND THEN IN ADELAIDE.

IN ZURICH THE WORK WAS STAGED IN A VAST WATER-SIDE SHED DESIGNED FOR SHIP CONSTRUCTION THAT SAT ON THE SHORES OF THE ZURICHSEE. OVER THREE SECTIONS AND ALMOST ELEVEN HOURS FROM 8PM TO 6.40AM THE NEXT MORNING, WE WERE DEEPLY ENMESHED IN THE STORY OF THE MONUMENTAL BATTLES BETWEEN THE KAURAVAS AND THE PANDAVAS AND THE INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESE HUMAN PROTAGONISTS AND THE HINDU GODS. THE WORK PROVED TO BE WORTHY OF A TEXT OFTEN SAID TO BE THE GREATEST OF ALL HUMANKIND'S STORIES, CONTAINING AS IT DID A RARE BRILLIANCE OF NARRATIVE AND DEPTH OF PHILOSOPHY. THE DESIGNS WERE RAVISHING, THE DIRECTION THAT OF OUR GREATEST GENIUS OF THE STAGE AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POWERS, AND THE PERFORMANCES BY A CAST DRAWN FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD UTTERLY SUPERLATIVE.

IN THE FINAL MOMENTS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF THE LORD KRISHNA, WE FOLLOWED THE ASCENT OF THE PANDAVA BROTHERS INTO THE SPIRITUAL WORLD. SOUNDS SIMPLE ENOUGH WHEN YOU SAY IT FAST - BUT SENDING PEOPLE TO HEAVEN ON STAGE AFTER NINE HOURS OF STUNNINGLY GOOD THEATRE DEMANDS SOMETHING RATHER SPECIAL TO PROVIDE THE MOMENT OF CATHARSIS THAT ALL GOOD THEATRE SEEKS.

IN ZURICH WE WITNESSED THE BROTHERS SET OUT ON THEIR JOURNEY ACCOMPANIED BY MUSIC OF ABSOLUTE PERFECTION FEATURING, AS I RECALL, A STUNNING SOLO ON A GIANT CONCH. AS THE MUSIC SWELLED, THE BROTHERS MOVED AWAY FROM US AND THE GIGANTIC DOORS OF THE BOAT-SHED SWUNG OPEN TO REVEAL THE FIRST RAYS OF DAWN SHOOTING ACROSS THE LAKE – ONTO WHICH THE BROTHERS SET SAIL.

TRULY ONE WAS PERSUADED THAT THEY WERE HEADED INTO A PLACE OF BLISS. THE RESPONSE FROM THE AUDIENCE – PREDOMINANTLY GERMAN SPEAKING SWISS (NOT KNOWN FOR THEIR DEMONSTRATIVE NATURES) - WHO HAD SPENT OVER NINE HOURS OVERNIGHT WATCHING A PRODUCTION *IN ENGLISH* WAS TUMULTOUS.

SIX MONTHS LATER THE SAME MOMENT PLAYED OUT – BUT THIS TIME IN A DISUSED QUARRY IN THE ADELAIDE HILLS BEFORE AN AUSTRALIAN AUDIENCE. THE ECSTATIC POWER OF THE MOMENT WAS, HOWEVER, AGAIN CAPTURED WITH THE FINAL MOMENTS PLAYED OUT JUST AS THE FIRST RAYS OF DAWN CUT ACROSS THE RIM OF THE QUARRY TO THE EERIE STRAINS OF TOSHI TUSHITORI’S MAGNIFICENT MUSIC. AND THE REACTION FROM THE AUDIENCE WHO HAD SHIVERED THROUGH A NIGHT WHEN TEMPERATURES HAD PLUNGED TO BELOW TEN DEGREES WAS NO LESS EXTRAORDINARY THAN THAT OF THEIR SWISS COUNTERPARTS.

THESE TWO EXPERIENCES REMAIN FOR ME THE MOST POTENT I HAVE EVER WITNESSED IN THE THEATRE – AND THEY WERE UTTERLY DIFFERENT IN SO MANY WAYS AND YET SO TOTALLY THE SAME. IN APPROPRIATING AND RE-CREATING THAT GREAT LEGEND, BROOK ALSO CREATED SOMETHING UTTERLY NEW FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE THAT SPOKE ACROSS TIME, SPACE AND GEOGRAPHY IN SUCH A WAY AS TO PROFOUNDLY AFFECT AUDIENCES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE GLOBE.

SUCH IS THE POWER OF GREAT ART.

THIS IS ABOUT THE PICTURE OF OUR COMMUNITY THAT WE HOLD IN OUR HEADS. IT'S ABOUT WHAT WE THINK, DREAM AND DISCUSS. IT'S ABOUT THE STORIES THAT WE TELL EACH OTHER – EACH ADVANCING OUR GREAT NARRATIVE AND OUR CAPACITY FOR NEW THOUGHT.

FOR THOSE MANY OF US WHO HAVE NO DEEP RELIGIOUS FAITH, IT'S ABOUT HAVING SOMETHING THAT PROVIDES MEANING IN OUR LIVES. AND FOR THOSE OF US WHO *DO* HAVE DEEP RELIGIOUS FAITH IT CAN ALSO BE ABOUT CELEBRATING THAT FAITH THROUGH ART.

FOR ME, TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CONTINUE TO LEARN ABOUT OUR WORLD, OUR INNER LIVES, THE ENDLESS CAPACITY FOR HUMAN BEINGS TO BRING A NEW ANGLE TO PERENNIAL ISSUES, TO RE-INTERPRET AND RE-CREATE, HAS BEEN A MASSIVE PRIVILEGE. AND TO THEN BE ABLE TO SHARE THOSE EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS WITH THE WIDEST POSSIBLE AUDIENCE HAS BEEN NOT ONLY A FURTHER DELIGHT, BUT AN *OBLIGATION*.

WHATEVER YOUR CHOSEN FIELD OF ENDEAVOR, I HOPE THAT YOU FIND NOT ONLY SUCCESS AND PERSONAL FULFILMENT BUT ALSO THE SATISFACTION OF ADVANCING, EVEN JUST BY A TINY FRACTION, THE GREAT MESSY PROJECT THAT IS THE HUMAN RACE.

MANY THANKS AGAIN FOR THIS GREAT HONOUR.