

Margaret Hamilton

## **Benedict Andrews' *The Seagull*: a meditation on the "Great Australian Emptiness" or a cul-de-sac of the 'real'?**

*Benedict Andrews' 2011 production of Anton Chekhov's The Seagull transposes the provincial isolation of the Russian dramatist's late nineteenth century county estate to coastal Australia. In doing so, the Australian director, influenced by Patrick White's literary assault on the dominant traditions of mid-twentieth century Australia, critiques the aesthetic 'realities' of the local theatre landscape. Chekhov's character Treplev's quest for "new forms" culminates in the realisation of the pragmatic compromises key to building and sustaining a career in an artistic profession. In Andrews' production two large scale signs consisting of fluorescent bulbs forming the words 'REAL LIFE' constitute a graphic, ironic comment on not simply the illusion of life on stage, but the problem of artistic fulfilment in contemporary Australia. Against an iconic image of isolation, the quintessential Australian holiday shack, Andrews' neon reminder of the limits of the theatrical medium raises the question of the internationalist aspirations of a new generation of artists in Australia.*

Chekhov's turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'Big Four' – *The Seagull* (1895), *Uncle Vanya* (1896), *Three Sisters* (1900), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903) – have been subject to aesthetic translation by the most significant, international theatre directors of the twentieth and twenty-first century. For the South Australian director Benedict Andrews (b. 1972) the Russian writer's first major success as a playwright, *The Seagull*, appeared pertinent to stage at a time of generational change in Australian theatre (Chekhov 2011). According to Andrews, Chekhov's play not only presented the opportunity to consider the "interstices of theatre-making [...] and everyday life" and in this respect the junction between Chekhov's pre-Revolutionary Russia and twenty-first century Australia, but raised the question of what he termed in his published notes on the play, Patrick White's "war on Australian conformity" (Chekhov 2011). In citing the Australian Nobel Laureate, Andrews links the challenges specific to contemporary Australian theatre to the parochial preoccupations of mid-twentieth century settler-Australia. In a much criticised return to imported drama, this production of *The Seagull* re-deploys the senti-

ments inherent in White's critique of Australian culture to set up a tension between the nationalist rhetoric intrinsic to Australian drama and theatre and the internationalist aspirations key to a generation of directors that, like Andrews, identify European and in particular German theatre as a significant aesthetic influence on main-stage theatre production. What emerges is an iconic image of Australian isolation in a production that complicates what critic Alison Croggon identifies as theatre that "has grown past [sic] the need to merely perform its national identity" (2010: 62b).

In staging Chekhov's drama, a play that reflects on the artist's quest, ideals of artistic expression, cliché and formula, Andrews' takes up the question of the aesthetic 'realities' determining the local theatre landscape and the potential for artistic fulfilment in this context. *The Seagull* opened at Belvoir on 4 June 2011 as part of Ralph Myers' first season as the new artistic director of the company.<sup>1</sup> Myers, then thirty-two, introduced the program by reaffirming a commitment to scripts by Australian playwrights and pointing out that "[e]very generation rediscovers itself in the classics" (*Belvoir* 2011: 7, 8). According to Myers, the classics "staged here and now by us, become contemporary and Australian" (*Belvoir* 2011: 8). In this respect Myers rejects the traditional notion that Australian content equates to plays written by Australian playwrights and embraces the tendency of directors like Andrews to stage international repertoire in addition to local content. Andrews has had to defend his propensity to direct the canon and work by German playwright Marius von Mayenburg, for example, in Australia.<sup>2</sup> For the playwright Louis Nowra, the South Australian is central to the emergence of "a new breed of directors" led by Barrie Kosky (2001: 2). On the basis of their seeming indifference to collaboration with Australian writers, Nowra accuses these artists of contributing to the decline of the Australian play

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- 1 Myers' first season opened with Simon Stone's acclaimed adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. Belvoir presented *The Seagull* from 4 June to 17 July 2011. Neil Armfield had been the Artistic Director of Belvoir for seventeen years prior to Myers' appointment. This paper is based on the performance staged on 18 June 2011, an archival recording of the production provided by Belvoir and Andrews' version of the play published by Currency Press (see Chekhov 2011).
  - 2 Andrews' production of von Mayenburg's *Moving Target*, translated by Maja Zade, appeared at the Adelaide Festival, Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne and the Sydney Opera House in 2008.

(2001: 2). In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, a time characterised by the interdependence of director and playwright, Nowra argues that as part of the “postmodernist ethos” classic texts offer young directors the opportunity to “stamp their authority and ego” over the writer by “dismantling” a play and “interpreting it anew” (2001: 2). Actor Colin Friels, a vocal opponent of Andrews’ work, similarly, objects to what he refers to as “postmodernist stuff from Germany” and claims that director-dominated theatre “has little to say about how we live now” (qtd in Neill 2012).

Andrews, as the comment from Friels suggests, constitutes a key figure not only in debate concerning the declining number of Australian plays staged locally, but the question of aesthetic lineage and cultural geography.<sup>3</sup> For Croggon, the influence of European theatre, as opposed to British or American, on Kosky, currently the Artistic Director of the Komische Oper Berlin, Andrews and Michael Kantor constitute a palpable “sign of a profound cultural realignment” (2010b: 60). What is a distinctly European consciousness in Croggon’s terms cross-pollinates with local practice to create “oeuvres of particular interest”, according to the Melbourne based critic (2010: 4a). Andrews has referred to the local theatre landscape as “pretty prosaic and literal” (qtd in Iaccarino 2004: 27). In his adaptor and director’s note he recognises the “inflection” of his *Seagull* as “distinctly Australian” and in this respect his approach reflects the vernacular tradition that emerged with the new nationalism that accompanied the New Wave of drama and theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, he points out in the notes accompanying the play that the project reminded him of the “Great Australian Emptiness” White coined to characterise a society “in which the mind is the least of possessions” (Chekhov 2011; White 1989: 15). Why, then, return to White and a mid-twentieth century image of the nation in 2011? According to Croggon, writing in 2010, “the smallness and undeniable provincialism of much of the [Australian] culture has paradoxically sparked a wave of artists who situate themselves aggressively as local artists participating in global culture”, and she identifies Andrews as such a director (2010: 4a). Denise Varney has similarly

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3 For an example of discussion in the press concerning the number of new Australian works staged by government subsidized theatres see Lane 2010.

pointed to the parochial tendencies of main-stage Australian drama (2012: 13).

Chekhov's play *The Seagull* offers a lens through which to consider idealist conceptions of art, the artist and everyday life, that is its materialist 'reality'. Under Andrews' direction the play constituted a platform to reflect on Australian theatre at a time when "mainstream theatre has begun to shake off the conservatism that still rules much Anglo-Saxon theatre practice in the UK and USA".<sup>4</sup> In the original script the Russian dramatist's four principal players are all practising artists dislocated from the distractions of metropolitan life in an intergenerational social comedy that speculates on the ways in which art and life interlock. A series of "unclosed triangles" define the relations central to the play (and I will use the simplified Russian names of Andrews' adaptation based on a literal translation by Karen Vickery in this paper): the aging actress, Arkadina (played by Judy Davis), her son, the suicidal Konstantin (Dylan Young) and her lover, the famous author, Trigorin (David Wenham); Konstantin, at the outset of a career as a playwright at the opening of the play, his young love and aspiring actress, Nina (Maeve Dermody) and Trigorin; Masha (Emily Barclay) and her unrequited love, Konstantin and her pragmatic choice of a husband in the school teacher, Medvedenko (Gareth Davies); local doctor Dorn (Billie Brown) and Polina (Anita Hegh), the wife of Ilya (Terry Serio), the manager of Sorin's (John Gaden) estate (Paperny qtd in Flath 1999: 492). What emerges is a series of discussions about love, literature, the state of theatre and acting as a profession. For Andrews Chekhov's ironic meditation on the process of creating art out of life culminated in the question: "What does it mean to be an artist in Australia?" (qtd in Chekhov 2011) It is a question that concerns, as critic John McCallum notes, the emergence of the auteur, as opposed to the genre director, the emphasis on adaptation rather than new work, and the legitimacy of artistic gestures characteristic of performance art, as distinct from the illusion of fictional representation (2011: 16).

An L-shaped fibro holiday shack designed by Myers transposes the provincial isolation of the Russian dramatist's late nineteenth century country estate to coastal Australia in Andrews' production. In

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4 "Benedict Andrews in conversation": <http://www.belvoir.com.au/productions/everybreath/interview>.

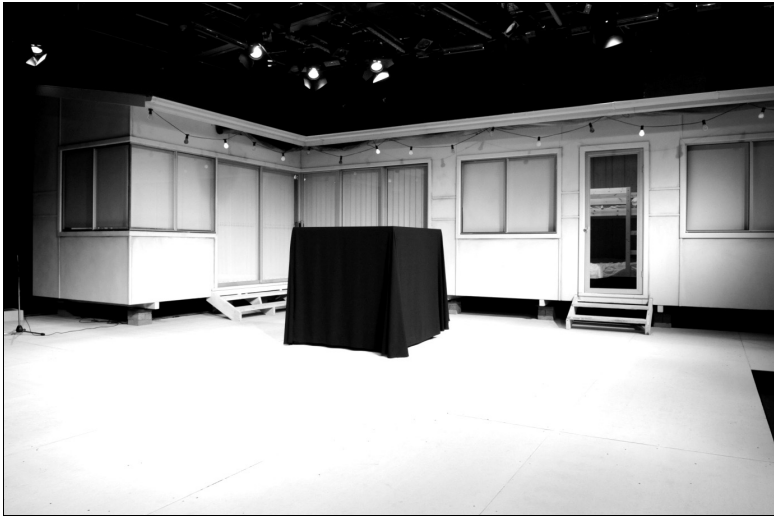
many respects the set for *The Seagull* continued Andrews' engagement with defining images of Australia, the "model suburban house" of his production of White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, staged by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2007. Andrews has described this scenographic image as not simply the "monolith of the Dream Home" but "the DNA of the McMansion belt, and, of the neo-conservatism of Australia under John Howard where the fear of a rising interest rate will win elections and continue to breed that Great Australian Emptiness"<sup>5</sup>. Here, Andrews identifies the cultural "void" that inspired White's précis of the mid-century nation as a latent, reactionary presence triggered by the economic circumstances of middle class Australia. Varney's analysis of White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla* sheds light on Andrews' notion of the DNA of the dream home at the heart of the Howard era by pointing out that "Great Australian Emptiness" the novelist "sees as an infection that stymies Australian culture is ready to be filled" by consumer culture (2012: 12-13). According to Varney, White's plays predict that the distraction of Mixmasters and white goods and the prospect of having "everythink now", will offer recompense for the abyss at the crux of an apprehensive settler nation and thereby permit Australia to remain largely introspective and provincial (White qtd in Varney 2012: 10; Varney 2012: 13).<sup>6</sup> In the Australian director's language the McMansion belt emerges as a consequence and emblem of this barren self-absorption. White's condemnation of what Andrews terms the "conservative, monocultural hell" and "cultural disease and spiritual sickness" of suburbia at the heart of the Menzies era (1939 – 1941; 1949 – 1966) re-emerged for the director under Howard's recent, long-term leadership of Australia (1996 – 2007).<sup>7</sup>

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5 Andrews qtd: [www.benedictandrews.com/text\\_basas.html](http://www.benedictandrews.com/text_basas.html)

6 White's spelling of the word everything as 'everythink' is indicative of the Australian working-class accent of the period.

7 Howard's leadership was distinguished by the so-called Pacific Solution, a decision to process the refugee status of 'unauthorised arrivals' on Nauru, a twenty-five square metre island and Manus, a remote island of Papua New Guinea. Designed to inhibit 'boat people' from entering the Australian Migration Zone, the Pacific Solution played a crucial role in the most significant electoral swing to the government since 1966 in the November 2001 election. Andrews qtd: [www.benedictandrews.com/text\\_basas.html](http://www.benedictandrews.com/text_basas.html).



Ralph Myers' set for *The Seagull*, directed by Benedict Andrews, Belvoir.  
Photo: Heidrun Löhrr

Chekhov's major dramas are typically set at a distance from urban centres of 'culture', in the country, as opposed to the city. Australia, as McCallum points out, "is a strangely vacant place" and in Andrews' three dimensional stage environment this geographic image of the nation contextualises the artist's predicament and its expression as a disjunction between the European ideal and the 'real' (2009: vii). Here, against the backdrop of 'idyllic' isolation, the aesthetic preoccupations of Konstantin, his quest for a "radical new language", momentarily bring to mind White's earlier literary assault on conformist Australia, if the director's notes to the play are taken into consideration (Chekhov 2011: 4). As a down-market holiday house, Sorin's country estate not simply renders the locale of Chekhov's play accessible to the local spectator, but links Chekhov's dramatic conditions to the iconography of the 'Australian way of life' and the normative traits Howard sought to safeguard as "that golden thread of Australian values that hasn't changed" (Howard qtd in Baringhorst 2004: 151).

What emerges is a central *Bildraum* or image space to borrow from Walter Benjamin, based on the quintessential Australian shack, the bleaching light, searing heat and sound of cicadas localising Chekhov's

trope of isolation (van den Berg 2008: 9). From this focal scenographic image, an 'authentic' space that defines cultural memories, shapes characters and performer and audience interaction, Andrews sets up an aesthetic critique of the "myopic complacency" and "small mindedness" he identifies as a legacy of the Howard years in Australia.<sup>8</sup> The sliding doors of the lounge room of the shack conflate interior and exterior spaces, reflecting the changing states of mind of the characters as a fluid or discordant relationship to the 'great outdoors' of Australia. Davis as the "self-admiring egoist", to cite Chekhov's description of his character Arkadina, dressed in a simple but elegant emerald dress in the first Act, is hard to reconcile with the drab interior of the shack, its wood panelling, old couch, unmade bunk beds, retro TV, and the coloured party lights hanging from the roof (qtd in Gilman 1995: 77). As a result, the gulf distinguishing the rich inner life of the players and the apparent deficiency of the external world characteristic of Chekhov's work finds expression in a local context (Corrigan 2009: 176).

Andrews immediately foregrounds the disjunction between "on stage (in art)" and "offstage (in life)" and the representational strategies at his disposal (Flath 1999: 495). In the first of a series of dialogic-monologues, Young as Konstantin stands on one of the white plastic outdoor chairs arranged for the audience of family and friends due to gather for the theatre piece he stages in the production, and looks into the audience from the thrust stage as he delivers the line "Now this is what I call theatre" (Chekhov 2011: 2). Andrews situated the lake Chekhov had pictured as a background in and beyond the audience in the auditorium in keeping with a number of notable international productions of the play, including Peter Zadek's *The Seagull* at Bochum in 1973. Konstantin, then, jumps off the chair, walks downstage and declares, 'Nothing fake ... The lake ... The horizon in the distance ... Pure space ...' (Chekhov 2011: 2). Here, reality is not the framed natural backdrop of Chekhov's play, but rather the audience, and in this respect Andrews complicates the non-symbolic status of nature in the production by foregrounding the illusory appeal of the Russian dramatist's depiction of lake-side Bohemia. Chekhov's conception of the landscape as "pointing to nothing beyond itself" finds ironic expression in the refracted gaze of

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8 Andrews qtd: <http://www.belvoir.com.au/productions/everybreath/interview>.

the spectator in this production (Corrigan 2009: 173)<sup>9</sup>. Implicit in the fictional lake of Chekhov's drama is the mythography of the ocean, a symbol of despondence and longing at the threshold of the void that defines the tyranny of distance, to use Geoffrey Blainey's seminal term, intrinsic to Australian identity (Corrigan 2009: 173; McLean 1998: 2, 5).

Not only is the Australian director acutely conscious of the Russian dramatist's sceptical treatment of the symbol, but the operation of theatrical and literary representations in Chekhov's play. How love, for example, is defined and experienced through songs and literary and theatrical fiction (Tait 2002: 250). In the Belvoir performance this translates into the transnational cult pop sensibilities of Andrews' generation. As Konstantin enters carrying a shotgun and the bird of the play's title, the "symbol" is literally "dead, stuffed", dumped on the top of the glass cube on wheels that constitutes his makeshift stage (Reid 1998: 617). By the end of the production the image of the seagull is arguably "forgotten" in light of Konstantin's offstage suicide (Reid 1998: 617). "Life", as John Reid argues in relation to Chekhov's text, "does not stop in order to blossom into the radiant significance of a symbol" (1998: 617). In contrast to Paul Schmidt's acclaimed translation of Chekhov's play and the critique of the "easy little moral" (Chekhov 1997: 114) of late nineteenth century Russian theatre in the text, Andrews' Konstantin emphasises the limitations of theatre, its roles and the artificiality of the medium:

When I see actors on stage pretending to be real – pretending to eat, drink, walk, talk, love – wear *jackets* – I want to scream: STOP. STOP TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL YOUR FAKE FEELINGS. STOP TRYING TO TRICK ME ... YOUR REALITY IS NOT MY REALITY ... When I see the same clichés – the same reheated lies over and over – I want to run screaming from the theatre and bury myself in life. (Chekhov 2011: 4)

The rich immediacy of life that Konstantin seeks to embrace, however, is at odds with the "bloodless abstractions" inherent in the form of the theatre Andrews has him stage in his production (Reid

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9 Yuri Corrigan is discussing Chekhov's approach to the symbol and specifically his short story *Happiness* (1887) in this article, but his notion of the non-symbolic status of nature in this story is applicable to *The Seagull*.

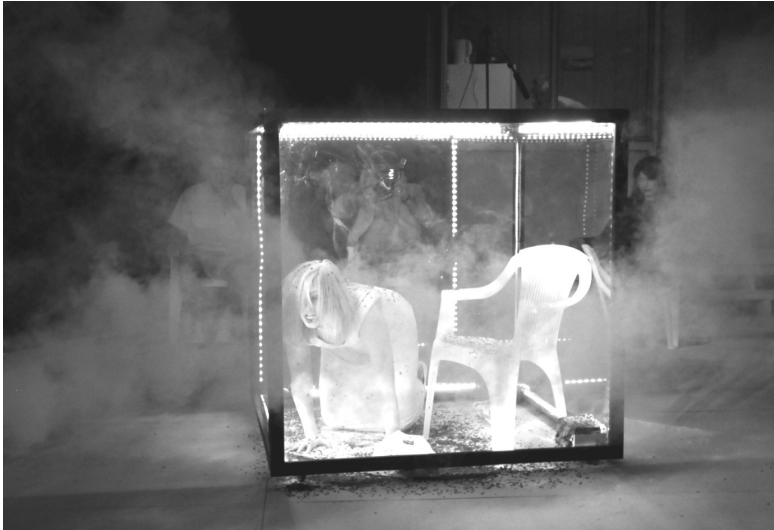


1998: 608). Konstantin's unsuccessful drama is often read as a caricature of the Decadents in the Russian's original play. It is worth noting, however, that the first Russian symbolist drama emerged in Nikolay Minsky's *Alma* (1900), after Chekhov had written *The Seagull*. Furthermore, Chekhov points out in his notebooks that "[t]alent destroyed" Treplev (Konstantin) (qtd in Senelick 1977: 213). What, then, does Andrews' adaptation of the 'decadent' play as an example of experimental theatre, or "pseudo-avant-garde drive!" in the words of Andrews' *Arkadina*, suggest in the context of contemporary Australia (Chekhov 2011: 10)?

Andrews arguably parodies what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as a dramaturgy no longer subordinated to the text but governed by the image and other forms of conceptual performance in his staging of "cliché-ridden" theatre (2006: 93; Chekhov 2011: 11). From the kitchen, illuminated in red, the sound of Chekhov's hired man Yakov, played by Thomas Unger, rubbing the rim of a glass under a microphone creates an atmosphere that sets up a spoof on performance art. Konstantin pulls the curtain off the cube to reveal Maeve Dermody as Nina in a long, white dress and white tennis shoes on a white plastic outdoor chair, pressing her hands against the side of the cube as she rants:

The earth is dead. All living things are dead. We killed them. We the dead killed them. Humans dead, lions dead, eagles and lizards dead, antlered deer and polar bears dead, starfish, seahorses, carp dead dead dead .... (Chekhov 2011: 8)

Nina's amplified voice fills the space and in a literal realisation of the line "We breathe ash", she grabs a handful of ash from a bag and hurls it over her shoulder (Chekhov 2011: 8). Mel Dyer, Assistant Stage Manager and the Cook of Chekhov's play, adds to the farcical nature of the scene by entering and blowing smoke from a handheld smoke machine around the glass box. Yakov heightens the comic effect by suddenly smashing the first of several wineglasses under the microphone in the kitchen. Nina rolls the cube in the direction of *Arkadina* and *Trigorin* seated downstage left, forming a quasi-first bank of seating with their backs to the spectator. Nina screams 'Listen! I am speaking to YOU!', as Konstantin pushes the cube towards his mother and her lover (Chekhov 2011: 9). Finally, two signs consisting of large-scale letters made of long fluorescent bulbs reading 'REAL LIFE' are wheeled onto the stage in the Upstairs theatre at Belvoir.



Maeve Dermody as Nina acting in Konstantin's play in Chekhov's text. *The Seagull*, directed by Benedict Andrews, Belvoir. Photo: Heidrun Löhr

'Real life' is a tenuous, artistic fiction that finds ironic expression in a drama in which the characters already "self-consciously go about their lives as though they are characters in novels and plays" (Strongin qtd in Tait 2002: 23). The transition between Act III and Act IV of Chekhov's play mirrors the transition between Act I and Act II. Here, the sound of Roy Orbison's *In Dreams* duplicates David Bowie's *Fame* and Barclay as Masha spins round and round, taking up where Nina had left off, as Brown's Dorn did earlier in the production. The songs of pop and capitalist consumer culture frame the characters' emotional and fictional engagement and establish internationalist reference points for the play in the twenty-first century. In Act IV, the ash that Nina had thrown over her shoulder in the glass cube of Konstantin's theatre-within-theatre episode rains onto the stage and the black flakes extinguish the metaphorical promise of Australian sunlight. (Those spectators that had seen Andrews' epic, eight hour 2009 production *War of the Roses* with Cate Blanchett as Richard II would have recognised the ash as a scenographic signature from this production). Andrews staged most of the action in the final Act of *The Seagull* in the insular realm of the shack. Against this backdrop the imposing 'REAL LIFE' neon sign re-appears

and a number of its bulbs, now dysfunctional, flicker on and off and finally out. A kaleidoscopic series of contrasts heighten the straight-jacket of stultification and judgement intrinsic to the character of Konstantin and the ossification of the other characters in the play. It is not the "mongrel aesthetics" of postmodernism, however, that Ross Gibson argues Australian artists are adept at as a result of colonialism that characterises the aesthetic logic of Andrews' production (qtd in McLean 1998: 9). In contrast to the notion of playful indeterminacy, principle reference points emerge in Andrews' Australian-European dialogue, as opposed to the "postmodern nomadology" Gibson identifies in his discussion of the void accompanying the abatement of British authority (McLean 1998: 9-10).



Emily Barclay as Masha and Billie Brown as Dorn. *The Seagull*, directed by Benedict Andrews, Belvoir. Photo: Heidrun Löhrr

Andrews' scenic realisation of Konstantin's theatre as histrionic and ultimately an ironic and counterfeit expression of the concept of 'new forms' raises a number of parallels to the aesthetic the German director Thomas Ostermeier objects to as "Capitalist Realism" (Boenisch 2010: 345). According to Peter Boenisch, Ostermeier returned to the model of individual characters and narratives as a political rather than aesthetic act in light of a cultural context that appeared

to defy orientation and coherent narration (2010: 345). Ostermeier's "reinvested" realism counters capitalist realism, and reflects a consciousness of the doctrine of social realism in the East (Boenisch 2010: 345). That is, rejects what he identifies as the self-referential, socially irrelevant and politically impotent ideals of postmodern and postdramatic work and its ostensibly radical appeal (Boenisch 2010: 344). Andrews has directed for Ostermeier's *Schaubühne* in Berlin and his staging of Konstantin's play suggests a similar distrust of the dissolution of character and narration.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, his production could be described as neo-realistic or more accurately "neon-realistic", to borrow from Boenisch, if the lighting effects and the use of cult pop songs are taken into consideration. As critic Jo Litson points out, "Ostermeier [...] has had a profound affect on contemporary Australian theatre" (2011). Andrews, like Ostermeier, has demonstrated an interest in the inconvenient "truths" of contemporary society, and in *The Seagull* these concern the theatre profession.

Chekhov's play, a work of literature that ushers in a new form of theatre just prior to the turn of the twentieth century in Russia, offers a pragmatic picture of artistic 'reality' in that his characters are all ultimately defined by convention. As Laurence Senelick notes, the old forms Konstantin rallies against at the outset of the drama suit Arkadina's public, the audiences for her work, and despite Trigorin's consciousness of his limitations and dissatisfaction he persists by working within the bounds of tradition set by Tolstoy and Turgenev, masters of the form (1997: 212). Nina resolves herself to a life of routine performances as a provincial actress and even Treplev's attempt to break from the old forms culminates in him questioning his capacity to reproduce literary convention: "I always wanted to invent new forms – 'a radical new language' – but now I just sound the same as everyone else [...] Trigorin uses formulas. He's got it all worked out" (Chekhov 2011: 47). Does Chekhov's "negative objectivity", then, manifest as a 'cool' account of the reality of artistic endeavour in an Australian context at the hands of the South Australian director? (Senelick 1997: 213) Or more precisely, is the local theatre landscape, both experimental and main-stage, a blind alley, ultimately subject to formula? While the Belvoir production constitutes a refreshing challenge to stale interpretations of the Russian

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10 Andrews directed Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and David Harrower's *Blackbird* for the Schaubühne in Berlin in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

dramatist's play as psychological realism, the final act emphasises enclosure and the problem of artistic fulfilment or 'REAL LIFE' in contemporary Australia. Andrews' signature black ash arguably functions as not simply an ironic comment on the idea of formula, but the oppressive criticism that 'director's theatre' has attracted in this country.

As a director Andrews sets out to "critique reality", and in this respect he reflects the attitude of Ostermeier, "a self-declared cultural materialist" (qtd in Taylor 2007: 21; Boenisch 2010: 340). For the Australian director, however, the goal is to construct a different vision of reality, an account "that's sometimes more beautiful and more nightmarish" (qtd in Taylor 2007: 21). Or in the words of his character Trigorin, "I have an obligation to describe the present – to *criticise reality* – to have opinions about globalisation and the financial collapse, about popular culture and the death of authenticity" (Chekhov 2011: 25). In writing about these issues, however, Trigorin acknowledges that no matter what he writes "LIFE ITSELF – the one thing I should be writing about – moves further and further away" (Chekhov 2011: 25). He is "left stranded like a passenger on a platform watching the train recede in the distance [...] in the end, I feel that I'm only capable of writing landscapes – everything else I write about is fake – I'm a fraud" (Chekhov 2011: 25). Here, Trigorin points to the landscape as a pure site of expression, as stable and secure and in doing so, reinforces discourses that conceal the interplay of different bodies and histories that constitute the social reality of Australia. For Andrews the question of cultural production concerns a specific trajectory of practice, often subject to critique as white, male and middle class or as what Croggon elaborates on as a Eurocentric intellectualism exemplified by White and "regarded with open hostility" (2010: 8).

In their discussion of the marginalisation of female and Indigenous voices as a result of what they term the "cultural constipation" central to the myth of the New Wave, Maryrose Casey and Jodi Gallagher (2009) raise the question of the dominance of male artistic directors in Australian theatre history. With reference to the painters of the Heidelberg school and the Angry Young Penguins Casey and Gallagher note that "Australian culture constitutes the avant-garde as a group of male friends who are one step ahead of the pack" and point to the notion of "world-class" as an "indefinable" defining

factor in what currently constitutes leading, cutting-edge theatre in Australia (2009). Not only is Andrews key to the current generation of male directors dominating Australian theatre, in Casey and Gallagher's terms, but he arguably maintains a critical distance from Australian culture by directing in Europe, where he has "made work for the best part of the last decade", and like the Nobel Laureate White, has been subject to the influence of the international "shifts and innovations" Simon During attributes to White's early work (qtd in Varney 2012: 9).<sup>11</sup> It is a critical distance that potentially reinvests in the rehabilitation of the faded suburbia of Howard's retrograde image of the country and his appeal to Menzies' "forgotten" middle class, as opposed to the regional concerns of contemporary Australia, its Asian-Pacific 'reality' (Menzies qtd in Johnson 2007: 196). While the "tension between the written language and the theatrical language" – key to productions of classics by a number of directors, including Elizabeth LeCompte's "radical deconstruction" of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, titled *Brace Up!* – has impressed the director, Andrews' specifically frames his engagement with *The Seagull* with reference to White's image of mid-twentieth century Australia (Andrews 2001: 23).

White's sentiments in his famous essay, 'The Prodigal Son' published in 1958, are directly reproduced in the 'Adaptator and Director's Note' accompanying the published play:<sup>12</sup>

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves. (Chekhov 2011)

According to Andrews "[w]e are the inheritors of this culture"; a culture of backyards and Hills Hoists if Kosky's vision of suburbia is cited as an extension of White's catalogue of images of Australia. Kosky, an artist so often associated with Andrews, presented a mi-

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11 Andrews qtd: <http://www.belvoir.com.au/productions/everybreath/interview>.

12 Currency Press published Andrews' version of the play, which went to press before the end of the rehearsal period.

niature Hills Hoist in flames to the Mayor of Adelaide from the back of a Harley Davidson to open his 1996 Adelaide festival that featured the icon across the city (qtd in Chekhov 2011). For the South Australian director the cultural debt White sketches manifests in *The Seagull* not only in the typical Australian holiday shack but in the paradox of Davis and Wenham as Russian literati, in reality arguably more recognisable as high-profile Hollywood success stories than Arkadina and Trigorin. As real life stars of the screen Davis and Wenham literally embody the 'reality' of commercialism, as opposed to the youthful idealism of Young's Konstantin. Barclay as an Emo-inspired Masha that drags on a bong, the daughter of Ilya Shamrayev played by Serio as a brusque Ocker with a Ute in his role as the manager of Sorin's estate, further recasts the repertoire of images and reference points White identified in his essay. Set at a distance from an urban centre Andrews' *The Seagull* ostensibly signifies the freedom of a holiday. Yet, like the rare genre of the Australian beach play, its liberating possibilities are stifled (Tompkins 2006: 29).

Andrews' reference to the Nobel Laureate's seminal critique of Australian writing and the metaphor of Australian literature as barren, as arid as the Australian interior, constructs a point of textual authority with regard to what is increasingly referred to as internationalist theatre in Australia. While he contemporarises Chekhov's play and clearly situates it in Australia he envisions the play as "simultaneously Russia then and Australia now" (qtd in Chekhov 2011). In doing so, his dialogue with the "Great Australian Emptiness" foregrounds Australia's (historical) relation to *somewhere else* – Europe. Like the realisation of Chekhov's character Konstantin in the final Act of the play, the challenge for Andrews is not necessarily a question of new forms, "whether something is new or whether it's been done before" or imaginings of Australia (Chekhov 2011: 48). Instead Andrews' *The Seagull* represents what McCallum terms an "extended theatrical vocabulary" shaped by a sense of Australia's (provincial) nationalism and a conscious internationalism (2009: 105). But does this production as a theatrical hieroglyph fostering a broader cultural realignment, if Croggon's assessment of Australian theatre is correct, infer that the "local cultural topsoil" is "perilously thin; rich in

places [...] but fragile”, to cite Deborah Jones’ concept of arts practice in contemporary Australia (2008)?<sup>13</sup>

Chekhov is recognised for a dramaturgy that points to the fact that what is not in the play is the reality of the spectator; his characters, for example, are not where they would like to be or what they imagine themselves to be in reality. *The Seagull* consistently points to the artistic life of the capitals beyond the seclusion of Sorin’s lake-side estate, and in Andrews’ production this raises the question of the relation of a nationalist, as opposed to an internationalist aesthetic and context. From the “special lightness” of the “alternate rhythms” of the opening Act set in an “Australian dreaming place” *The Seagull*, as it is staged at Belvoir, concludes in the claustrophobic space of the shack (Andrews qtd in Chekhov 2011). It is a conclusion that points to the potential outcome for Australian theatre if the opportunity Andrews has identified for a new generation of artists to develop work that resists the “middle road” is lost.<sup>14</sup> For the director “artists must be given the conditions where they can make work that is ambitious, personal, and not always slave to first ideas or the dumb drug of fame”.<sup>15</sup> In staging the Russian dramatist’s exploration of the balance between artistic integrity and pragmatism, Andrews asks questions of main-stage theatre and its ability to deliver this artistic platform in Australia. Ultimately, Andrews’ role as a director is shaped by the international theatre landscape and from this perspective, perhaps the neon sign that reminds the spectator of ‘REAL LIFE’ amidst the signature black ash can be read as comic recognition of the need to “sell” the image of the director. Andrews’ scenographic engagement arguably neglects Australia’s socio-geographical reality in so far as the island-continent distinguished by Indigenous history is ultimately ‘marooned’ in the Asia-Pacific region. However, his production of *The Seagull* constitutes an important contribution to aesthetic and cultural debate regarding theatre in twenty-first century Australia.

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13 Deborah Jones is the former arts editor of *The Australian*.

14 <http://belvoir.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Benedict-Andrews-Interview.pdf>.

15 Ibid.



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