

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Eight: *Accepting the Challenge*
With **Ros Horin** and **Andrew Bovell**

When she was Griffin's Artistic Director, **Ros Horin** decisively re-established the Stables Theatre as a home for new Australian plays. Just a small part of her legacy was to program **Andrew Bovell's** smash-hit play *Speaking in Tongues* in 1996, which marked a revolution in Australian playwriting. Hear about how the two collaborated to produce the astounding *Speaking in Tongues* for the Stables Theatre, which later became the hit film *Lantana*.

Hosted by:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

RH - Ros Horin

AB - Andrew Bovell

Angela Catterns: *2020 marks the 50th birthday of Griffin Theatres Company home: the Stables Theatre. I'm Angela Catterns. Join us as we celebrate the anniversary in this special series of podcasts, where we'll hear about the theatre's history and talk to some of the country's most celebrated artists.*

AC: In the early 1990s, the beloved Griffin Theatre was faltering and looking for a new Artistic Director. The job was offered to experienced theatre director, Ros Horin. She is here with playwright Andrew Bovell and together they collaborated on one of Griffin's most successful productions. Ros, Andrew, welcome to our Stables 50th Anniversary podcast series.

Ros Horin (RH): Thank you Angela.

Andrew Bovell (AB): Thank you.

AC: Lovely to have you here. Ros, you had worked as a theatre director with all the major theatre companies when in 1992, you were invited to the Griffin as Artistic Director. Was that something of a poisoned chalice?

RH: *(laughter)* Well it was... I don't know if I would use exactly those words, but it was something of an unexpected offer one could say in that I was offered to be a leader of a bankrupt company.
(laughter)

AC: Did you know at the time it was bankrupt?

RH: Well pretty much in the second conversation, let's say, with the board. The company was bankrupt, and they had to get rid of the whole board that had led it into bankruptcy, or who had overseen that. A new board had been appointed and I think they had managed to wipe out the debt, but had no funding whatsoever. I was told it would be a very exciting challenge and my first job was to raise—they had the money to pay me for six months—and my first job was to raise money for the next six months. *(laughter)*

AC: So how and where did you find the money to pay yourself?

RH: I don't think I did pay myself for a while. In the first few years, I was there for a duration of twelve or bit over twelve years. For the first year we were just doing co-op productions and I knew it was going to take time, and one had to build up the credibility of this new company. So, no one was getting paid, I'd say, probably for the first year or two. I then managed to get an Australia Council grant to fund one production. It was sort of going from project funding, and then the next year maybe I got Australia Council, and bringing in now the NSW Ministry for two productions. And maybe a year or two later I got an annual grant and then it took another few years to get... Finally, probably after eight years, we manage to get triennial funding for the company. So, in the first years so much of it was done on the smell of an oily rag and with so much good will and generosity on the part of the artists. But I was keen that actors got paid as quickly as possible, which I think after about two years, we were able to do that.

AC: And Ros, was it your vision to make Griffin the home of new Australian writing?

RH: Yes, at that stage, but—the previous Griffin that had come before me, I think they'd sort of been maybe two stages before me, had done a lot of Australian plays. But they had also done international plays, and I thought if I was to kind of build up a company, I really needed to define it. So I very much wanted to make it an Australian writers' theatre. Um... I think that was partly why I was appointed, because my own work—I had a bit unusual career as a director because, like in my freelance work, I mostly did new Australian plays, I just found that was where my passion and interest was, just what the contemporary, social, political issues of the day were. So inevitably I would take the company in that direction.

AC: Did you meet any resistance at all?

RH: Not from the board, no, they were very excited by that. It was then a matter of kind of developing writers and you know seeing what writers were out there. And I think I gave myself... I do jump in the deep end, and I gave myself a double challenge of saying that... So, it was all very new and exciting to have a woman at the helm of the company, albeit a very, um, still fragile, still growing company. And I was very aware of the lack of opportunities that there were with all the major companies for women and for new artists. You know, it was very hard for an actor first out of NIDA or writer to get his first or second play on at any of the bigger companies. So, as well as being the Australian writers' theatre, I said this is going to be a company of first chance—a first chance company. So Andrew is probably the exception to that rule, because Andrew had had work done elsewhere before we met.

AC: And so I understand you made a point of changing the creative team for almost every show?

RH: I did (*laughter*). Which made it, you know, hard for myself, because as a director you love to get your favourite designer and your favourite team and really develop with them. I mean I probably took a couple of my favourites through to two or maybe three shows, but generally every year I would talk to the agents or I'd go and see the showcases. I would say who is exciting, try and pinpoint who is exciting. For example, I gave Ralph Myers his first job as a designer at Griffin.

AC: So, what were you looking for to produce at the Stables?

RH: I was looking for urgent voices, you know, writers that had something to say. But I was also looking for writers that were saying it in an innovative way. I was very interested in experiments with form or with style, but not for their own sake, and again that brings me to Andrew cause that's partly what really drew me to Andrew as a writer. I was aware of him, from Melbourne, because I'm from Melbourne myself. Yeah, so I was looking for meaty work that really meant something in our contemporary context.

AC: So, down the track a bit you came up with idea of an evening of short plays?

RH: That's right. Yes, well this was a good idea, when we had so little funding, to be able to give a lot of playwrights an opportunity. And I also thought audiences with television and film had smaller attention spans and they might really like a season of short plays. So, I think I did that in my first year, um, six short plays and it was very successful, it gave a lot of actors' opportunities and six different playwrights. Again, I think your play *Like Whiskey on the Breath of a Drunk You Love* was in my season of that, and then I repeated those short play seasons certainly another time, maybe even three times, during the course of my twelve years.

AC: So, around this time you met Andrew for the first time, is that right? And Andrew had contributed two short plays, and you suggested he write a third, so that there was a trilogy of short plays. Is that right?

RH: That's right. So, the first one, I don't know if you remember Andrew, the first one was *Like Whiskey on the Breath of a Drunk You Love*, which delighted me because it was overlapping narratives, and it was overlapping dialogue, and playing with a kind of dilemma of emotional need and wanting more in a relationship, and betrayal, and deceit and guilt, but in two different couples. And the markers of where the narrative went were happening in different ways at different times with each of the couples. It was kind of a stylised piece, and I thought it was very sophisticated, and sharp and witty. So that was the first one, and two years later I think in the second season, in '94 I think it was, Andrew submitted *Distant Lights from Dark Places*, which was completely different but also very compelling I thought. It was four different narratives intertwined but they weren't overlapping, they were seemingly four quite different stories, but what they had in common was people reaching out for a need that wasn't really being answered. It was a mystery and intrigue, you know, I loved working on that. *(laughter)* I remember after that, this is my memory, your memory might be different Andrew, but I do remember approaching you Andrew sometime after and saying "These are two fabulous plays, might you be interested in writing a third and creating a trilogy?" Do you remember what you said and where we were?

AC: What did you say Andrew? *(laughter)*

Andrew Bovell (AB): Um, yeah, I mean I was interested in doing that third piece, but I proposed to Ros, rather than doing a separate third piece, I find a way to create a bridge between the two early pieces. Uh, which was quite a leap really, because as Ros said, they were two completely different worlds and very different moods, but they shared some stylistic similarities and concerns. And I just had this sense that there was an interesting way to create a world in which both these stories could sit and exist and create kind of a very different and unusual kind of play. And I just remember Ros from the beginning going, "Yes, try it! I'm kind of with you." And she allowed me to do that, and that was the genius of *Speaking in Tongues*.

RH: I thought it was an even more exciting idea and we got quite involved together with the, with drafts going back and forward.

AC: So, you collaborated on the work together?

AB: Yeah, I would have shown Ros every draft along the way and I can't remember how many were written but if it's like anything else I have written it would have been a lot. And Ros would have been giving me quite extensive notes and feedback, dramaturgical kind of support during that process. It was, it was a difficult thing to crack, so Ros had to kind of have a lot of confidence that I could get where I was trying to get to because it was a difficult work to articulate.

AC: I understand you both spent a great deal of time in Ros's kitchen?

RH: (laughs)

AB: Yeah, yeah. I mean in those days travel was harder, we didn't move around as much, it was expensive. But yes, I used to come up [to Sydney from Melbourne] and sit and talk in Ros's kitchen I also remember that later with *Ship of Fools* as well actually.

RH: Yes, yes.

AC: So, the work was called *Speaking in Tongues*, the audience response was very strong? Why do you think that was?

AB: I don't think people had seen a play like that before, because of the way it was written arising out of two earlier works it was a very unusually shaped play. It broke a lot of rules. It, it discarded the four characters we came to know in the first half at interval and introduced a whole set of new characters um, in the second half.

RH: And then Leon came back, didn't he?

AB: Yes, and then Leon came back to sort of-

RH: Yes, one of the earlier ones.

AB: -close the circle. Yeah. So my sense about it was there was a lot of excitement about it formally. You know like, we were coming out of a time in Australian writing where naturalism was the dominant genre, uh, Aussie realism was what we were doing mostly, and this play was one of the early plays that dealt with intercutting of narrative and monologue, simultaneous use of dialogue and action, split scenes, all those great things that quite familiar to us in the theatre now.

RH: That's right and it was quite challenging with actors, you know-

AB: Yep.

RH: -because you had to be as precise as a musical- it was a musical composition.

AB: Yep.

RH: I mean I heard it as music, you know, and you had to absolutely all come together at that moment, that had to be a bass, or you know, you really, You had to have all the kind of tones and the voices and I probably... because I was also excited by the formalistic things, I kind of took that into the choreography, do you remember that Andrew? I mean it was certainly for one part of it that was originally like *Whiskey on the Breath*, I, you know, we were also exploring the actors using

similar gestures, or a similar gesture that then became something else and, so it was really fun to explore as a director and I think fun for the actors, but a bit terrifying!

AB: I remember them... I remember there being moments of resistance and that idea of asking an actor not to play their emotional impulse, that emotional truth. They did have to do that, but they had to measure that against the needs of the ensemble. So, and it is, as Ros said, it is a musical composition, so if somebody is slightly off-note, the whole piece starts to unravel very quickly. So you did have to contain your own impulses to go in one direction in order to go in a uniform direction and that probably went against some of the actors' instincts I think. And whenever that play has been produced that problem has arisen, and I have just had to really had to argue and convince the ensemble to not fear the kind of uniformity of it, because when they embrace that, when they make it work the piece really sings, and if they don't, it doesn't work.

RH: There was often this fear that set in, in week three, which is sort (*laughing*) of the week before you are coming to the final week because it's never been done... and is this bloody well going to work or not, it's so unusual and strange and that's the most challenging part to kind of get them to stay with and trust it and get over that hump. We toured the production, but it was a new cast that went to Melbourne and Adelaide, and there was no fear because they had known that it could work, you know what I mean? It's always so scary for those in the premiere production.

AB: Then kind of euphoric when the audience starts responding, and you go "ah" there is something here.

RH: Yes, there's something bigger than the parts of the whole.

AC: It's fair to say the play had quite an impact of the next generation of writers. How did you find that out?

AB: Well, you know, it was always a work that I was very proud of for its formal experimentation, uh, and it's kind of capturing of atmosphere and, and its use you know... just its economy, its used for actors in really interesting ways to tell quite complex stories, and it was a portrait of a more sophisticated Australia than perhaps we'd been used to seeing. So yeah, I'm proud of this work. Ros did a beautiful production, and it had gone on to have a really interesting life overseas, in the UK and America. It was one of those Australian works that kind of crossed the ocean and had a wonderful life elsewhere in Australia as well. But really it wasn't until Sam Strong revisited the play and brought it back to Griffin in 2011, um, and at that stage I was living and working in America, but I came back at the end of the season. And all these people came to me and said, "You don't understand how important this work has been for, for *my* thinking". A lot of young writers and directors like Simon Stone he said, "This is a really influential work, it really informed my own practice." I had no idea of that, I guess, that another... I mean I was so grateful to Sam to bring it back to Griffin and introduce the play to a new generation. But I hadn't understood that it had had an impact beyond its sort of season.

RH: If I could just add to that, because I think Andrew is really one of the best Australian writers we have and what that play epitomises, which is in all of his work, there is always an emotional depth and a real excavating of the truth. So it had all of these formalistic elements which were exhilarating and wonderful to watch. Um, but you were really taken on emotional journeys by all of those characters and I think that's why there was any interest in it for a film. Don't you think Andrew? You know it wasn't just, the characters had—the characters were terrific and there was a lot of... a big emotional world there.

AC: And so in fact you had invited a couple of well-known Australian film directors to opening night. Did you already have the notion that this play would make a great film?

AB: I had been quite... these... I had been haunted by these stories, particularly the story about the woman who never got home that night, um, the character being Valerie Summers. And the story of the man whose shoes are found at the edge of the ocean. In *Distant Lights in Dark Places*, this kind of yearning and searching for kind of meaning and connection and—and the play was both a thriller and a relationship drama. So I had been sort of playing with cinematic ideas, I mean I think the interesting thing about *Speaking in Tongues* is that it's entirely theatrical in its form, you can't do that in a cinema...

RH: That's right.

AB: It's a work that belongs in a theatre, but beyond that I knew that there was a rich story that could work in cinema, and I had been working with Jan Chapman, the producer, and Ray Lawrence, the director, on another project for some time and it had just fallen over and we were kind of heartbroken. It was Tim Winton's *The Writers* and basically we had worked for three or four years on developing that screenplay and for reasons that are peculiar to the film industry, it didn't happen. Uh, and, they kind of said, "What we need to do is a small, Australian-set story." I said I've got just the one (*laughter*) and it's about to open at Griffin. So I did invite them but I was worried because they were both very film people not necessarily theatre people, though they love theatre. And because *Speaking in Tongues* is so challenging formally I thought are not going to get it, but Ray Lawrence said, "I love it, I love it, I'm just so engaged with the stories." Jan was a little more sceptical and she needed to be because she was the producer, and she's got to have the hard head on it. And she said, "Show me a treatment, write me a treatment." I said, "Well actually I've just got one in my draw. I'll send it to you tomorrow." (*laughter*)

AC: Just so happened to have one I prepared earlier.

(*laughter*)

AB: Yes, so that's how that happened, they were there on opening night and they were part of that kind of... and saw the energy and buzz and the response to it. And that was, yep.

AC: So then did you write the screenplay for the movie, which of course went on to be an Australian classic *Lantana*? Why the change the name?

AB: Ah... mmm. There was a long conversation the religious connotation of the title of *Speaking in Tongues* and when you envisage taking a story to an international audience, an American audience perhaps if we were lucky, that term has such a particular meaning. For me, the meaning of the title was always about people talking at cross purposes, people speaking and not being heard, people speaking in languages that we don't get. Which was a take on how we conduct—how men and women conduct themselves and their emotional lives together. So it made sense to me, but they just thought it's not going to work. And so we worked hard at finding a new title that was going to work and we were up at Ray Lawrence's house in Killcare and I was standing on the verandah and I looked out down into a ravine and I said, "That's the type of place that Valerie would be found, you know, down there." You know, and it was full of lantana. I said, "Why don't we call it *Lantana*?" And I think they were both a bit like "Mmmm... why?". I said, "Look at the vine, it's entangled, it looks beautiful but if you put your hand into it you are going to get cut to shreds. It's dark, it's mysterious. It's quintessentially Australian even though it's not a native." So you know, it kind of created an image for me that spoke to both the structure and the content of the film.

AC: Were you involved at this stage Ros, in taking the play from stage to film?

RH: No, I wasn't. (*Laughter*) I probably would have loved to but it was a you know, a whole different ball game. Coincidentally I have moved over to film myself in more recent years, but that's a different journey.

AB: Yeah, it's always a slightly sad journey when you kind of, you know, you you've have worked really closely on something, you've created a work, and then suddenly it has a whole other life with a different set of people. I always feel like, ah, you're leaving people behind. And that story particularly, I had a number of iterations and a number of versions and each time I thought, "Ah, I wasn't able to take the original creators along with me".

AC: And such a big jump I imagine from the tiny little stage at the Stables, to you know, the elaborate sets, and that kind of thing that is involved in filmmaking. It's a very tricky space there, isn't it. Did you enjoy working there Ros?

RH: I did, I enjoyed working with that space as a director. It forces you to be inventive. I think we did some fab—you know, wonderful sets there. For *Speaking in Tongues* it was very simple, I think we just had a blind or something... I might be getting mixed up I'm not sure, but I don't remember having very much for *Speaking in Tongues*, but the other play we did *Ship of Fools* we had... that was a time I worked with one of my very favourite designers, which was Dan Potra.

AB: That was a beautiful set.

RH: Yeah, it was beautiful set. And I found that there were so many things you could do in that space, but you know, when I finally left after twelve years, I was very much wanting to explore other spaces.

AB: It's the intimacy of the venue, I think, being that close to a work, being that close to the actors. Melbourne has La Mama and Sydney has Griffin, the Stables Theatre, and both those spaces are central to Australian storytelling in the theatre. There is something about the proximity, the audience has to be a part of that drama and to be covered in the actors spit and sweat. You know, it makes the experience very particular.

AC: Why would you say it's important in the past and indeed the future of theatre in Australia, that theatre?

RH: I think for all the reasons Andrew just iterated. You know it's a sympathetic space, I mean it does—the audience does engage, it's so much easier to engage. If it's a theatre for new writing, all that helps, you know, to be able to express it in such an intimate space is wonderful and it's a powerful space. I think we need smaller spaces like this in the country.

AB: Yeah, the economics of it work, we can take more risks with a space of that size. But both with La Mama and Griffin, the commitment to Australian storytelling has been vital. And I was actually unaware that Ros had, that that's how you'd marked out the company. I thought it had always been that, historically.

RH: Well, it had done a lot of Australian work, but also overseas work. You know a mixture of things, yeah.

AB: But for theatre companies like Griffin to have stood up at that time and said we need an exclusively Australian house, um, and our writers are worth that and we have to develop them in this experimental space. I mean, every theatre culture has had that and at that time Australian writers, Australian playwrights, were fighting still against that kind of sense that the best stories were still written overseas. So, if you look now at contemporary Australian playwriting it is so strong and it is so diverse but the roots of that lie back in the late 80s and the early 90s when people really committed to developing new Australian work.

RH: You know there was a formative or seminal experience that I had through being involved in the Women in Theatre project that took place at Belvoir sometime in the mid 80s. Where the Australia Council, through Chris Westwood's lobbying or whatever, suddenly threw a few hundred thousand into the pot and said put women's plays on, give women directors an opportunity and so on. And you know, it was in Belvoir Upstairs, not in the small theatre, I remember one of the first writers that was done, had not done much before that. And people had huge expectations, there was no period of script development or dramaturgy. And it failed, it bombed, where the critics destroyed a particular writer's career and confidence absolutely. I think another driving force I had when I was running Griffin was a belief in development. The sort of thing that Andrew's describing that we did, even though he had more experience than most of the writers I had worked with. And so that often before I put something on stage, it was two or three years in development. And I think that has absolutely kept going as part of Lee's vision and most directors since. But if you are doing a new Australian play you have got to give it every opportunity, you know.

AC: Absolutely. Ros Horin, Andrew Bovell, thank you so much for your time, it has been a delight to talk to you.

AB: Thank you.

RH: Thanks Angela.

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin's special podcast series, where we're celebrating 50 Years of The Stables. For more anniversary activities head to Griffin's website: griffintheatre.com.au

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*The 50 Years of the Stables podcast series was produced by **Margaret Murphy**, hosted by **Angela Catterns** and recorded & edited by **Diamantina Media Group**.*

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