

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

**GRIFFIN
THEATRE
COMPANY**

Episode Two: *Going Solo*
With **Sheridan Harbridge**

Stables stage regular **Sheridan Harbridge** joins **Angela Catterns** for the second episode of our 50 Years of the Stables podcast series, *Going Solo*. Many of you saw and loved *Prima Facie* by Suzie Miller at Griffin in 2019; now it's your opportunity to hear Sheridan explain what it was like to be a solo actor delivering the gripping one-woman show night after night in the intimate Stables space.

Interviewer:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

SH - Sheridan Harbridge

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.*

In 2019, Sheridan Harbridge performed in the sold out, one-woman show *Prima Facie* at The Stables. She had always envisaged a career as a serious actor but her career was hijacked, in a way, by an interesting turn of events. And in fact, she became best known for her quirky comedy and musical performances.

Sheridan Harbridge, welcome to our 50th Anniversary of the Stables podcast series.

Sheridan Harbridge: It is a pleasure to be here.

AC: And so, when was your acting path hi-jacked and how did that happen?

SH: Yes, well I, you know, graduated from NIDA and it was like, "Oh yes I'm going to have a lovely, serious career, being an actor. I am going to do what Cate did or have my obligatory guest-y on McLeod's daughters." I was doing some back up singing for a friend's album, and he was running a Sydney cabaret competition and I was sort of chatting to him. He was like "Oh you know, you should do this. There's a prize, there's money." And I was like, "Ooh there's money – great!" [laughs] This cabaret thing sounds easy! Of course, months rolled by. He'd registered me, I forgot, the day before the competition I suddenly went "Oh God! I haven't done this thing" and I messaged my friend and said "I have gastro, I can't do it". But then my boyfriend went "Mmm... I think you should do it; I've got a funny feeling about it." And any time anyone has said that to me, it's worked out. Including my audition for NIDA. I was not going to do it and someone said "Mmmm... I think you should do it".

AC: You've got a good feeling about this.

SH: Yes! So, I ended up writing a show on the back of a napkin, about how I hadn't written a show. Turned up like a total A-hole unprepared and did this, won, and it ended up getting a whole show commissioned out of it for the Adelaide Cabaret Festival. I took that show to Edinburgh, I toured through Europe with the show and sort of really found my clown, I would say. The relishing of disaster theatre, which is my favourite kind of theatre. Like really pulling the façade down and going, the audience is here, I'm here, let's see how much we can mess with this form. I still make many

forms of that sort of theatre and play that clown, which is kind of like a woman who really was wishing things were going better!

AC: And so, you were a solo performer?

SH: In that show, yeah, yeah, and I went on to write a full musical about Marie Duplessis, sort of using all the things I had learnt in that solo show, and I wrote a musical with three other people and we ended up going to New York with that and winning the New York Music Theatre Festival. I just had this great detour, that I think I was put on this earth to do, and it all made much more sense to me than pursuing that *straight* acting. But it's just opened up so much.

AC: So, you're a singer and a dancer? Do you enjoy entertaining audiences?

SH: I can sing. I would say my dance is more like I move with passion [laughs]. I have been in many musicals where the choreographer has just asked me to "hop in the back and just do step-togethers". Yes, so, I would say theatre with music is my favourite kind of theatre. Because music just bypasses thought processes and goes straight to the gut and the groin you know? I love that kind of theatre.

AC: And you're a singer as well?

SH: Yes, yes.

AC: And so recently Sheridan, you've performed solo, to much acclaim, in the Griffin production of *Prima Facie*. A very dramatic play about sexual assault, that was written by Australian playwright and criminal defence lawyer, Suzie Miller. Let's listen to an excerpt from that play.

SH [recording]: "It's not emotional for me, it's the game. The game of law. I stand, very professional, I call for a dismissal, the judge is swift. It's all over. The barrister's rule is the winner. Cannot flaunt it. Every winner might be the one who loses the next day. We don't call it losing, we call it 'coming second'. Today, the crown prosecutor came second. Thank the other side when you leave, "Thanks, Mr Crown", don't make eye contact, blah, blah, blah. I motion my client to up and leave. Everyone watches my exit. Leather satchel across my chest. Saunter. Turn at the door, nod to the judge, gesture my client to do the same. Outside the court. "Heeeey, he's free! He gets to go home." His mother is there weeping. She holds my hand to her chest. I like the mothers, they know, they understand. I tell them "I gotta dash, I have another case to prepare. I don't want to see you here ever again." My client nods, shakes my hand. Respect. Power. Today, I was a winner. Today I came first." [laughter]

AC: And so how many characters did you play in *Prima Facie*, Sheridan?

SH: In that, just the one, Tessa, but she throughout the show jumps into many other characters. Sort of as she's bringing it all up, and towards the end of the show when she is in a court scene, she is playing prosecutor, jury, her family. I think that within that scene, there's about ten people that she is pulling up really rapid fire. Yeah that was, ooft, that was a time.

AC: So, was that the first time that you worked solo in a dramatic context?

SH: Yeah, it was actually, yeah!

AC: And was that easy for you?

SH: Oooh no! [laughter]

AC: But having worked solo in the musical theatre-

SH: I was definitely confident to do it. I definitely wasn't afraid of that. The challenge was wonderful, and you know, there were other people who read that script, who went, "No. That's just my worst nightmare." Out of just not having that company on stage with you to be pushing that show along. But I felt from my solo travails, in solo comedy, I went "No, I'm ready for this." I definitely knew that it had been sort of 15 years of jobs that really was leading me to that skill set to pull that show off. As soon as I read the first page I went, "Oh gosh! This was meant to be." Everything I have trained for has come for this moment. So, jeez it was difficult, but I really relished the challenge.

AC: And what did you think of the subject matter?

SH: I know it's such a boring word, but so *important*. Especially at this moment. I was struck by when I read it that I went, "Wow, I haven't read a show about sexual assault". Even though it is a common plot point that appears in literature, theatre, film, it's never all about that. And that suddenly struck me as quite a strange act of violence, that something as big as a sex assault is usually so minimised and showed to be a plot point to trigger someone else's behaviour, whereas this show really goes into the years and years and years of fallout from an act like that being done to you.

And it shocked me that I had not seen that before and I think yes, this funny thing when you read it and you go "Oh, haven't I seen this before?" And then went, "Oh my god, I haven't." And Lee Lewis said it a few times in Q&As, Lee Lewis the director: "There's nothing new about this show." And she meant that as in this is almost a humdrum, bog-standard sex assault. I'm sorry to put it that way, but it is. And we never actually picked it apart to see what that is. It was like something had to be more remarkable about it. But you really go wow, this completely stops a woman's life, and the people around her. So, I think it was extremely important that we actually saw it and faced up to the fact that we don't respect the fallout of sex assault.

AC: Did you research the role?

SH: Oh yeah, I did a lot. In fact, the script wasn't ready to start. New work—it's always right down to opening night, you're still tweaking and actually till closing we were still tweaking. So, I couldn't really spend time learning it, knowing it was going to change so much.

So, I watched a lot of documentaries and I hung out at court and just saw trial after trial, to just get that vibe. Because it's such theatre. And actually, when I was there, I went, "Why haven't I done this before?" All theatre and film is based around the judicial system but yet I'd never been there. I actually couldn't believe you're allowed to go sit there and watch people's lives get torn apart. At first, I was quite emotional. People were being found guilty and I'd start crying with their family and they're like, "Who is this person just crying with us?!" But after three days it was just like being there with popcorn going, "Come on, what have you done!" You get very desensitised. I really sat in that for a while. Which was really eye-opening.

A lot of docos out of America, where their 'Me Too' movement has just blitzed ours. They've been able to move much faster, so there was a lot of stuff coming out of there which was pretty hard to take.

AC: And you performed the play for an audience of women from a women's refuge, is that right?

SH: Yeah, oh yeah, that was really something.

AC: How did they respond?

SH: They got petty vocal, which was awesome. There's one part towards the end of the show where I see him, my assailant, for the first time and he asks if he can take me out for lunch and someone in the audience went "Nooooooo!" and I really had to not go, "Yeah sister!" Afterwards the response from people, women coming up and going "you just told my story." It just made everything seem really vital and I'm really glad that we did that. Yeah!

AC: So, you believe it was an important show?

SH: Oh my god, yeah! They had never seen their story told back *for them*. Like I said, it's not just a part of a bigger picture or a plot point. These are women who—incredibly smart and intelligent women—who once had a home, once had a family and can't now go back to their base. So they're in these refuges and just have to wait the years and years for the system, the judicial system to come in and clean up shop. And it does, it takes years for these things to go to trial. So, it was affirming of the work that Suzie had done, to write that show for those people.

AC: And what were the main challenges for you, Sheridan, playing this part?

SH: Well, learning the goddamn thing! [laughs] 90 minutes long, and by the time we'd done development, I had three weeks to learn it essentially. And that was crazy. My ears and eyes were bleeding. And just the level of exhaustion that comes with that.

Also then, the carrying of the material. In so many ways Lee and I kept avoiding rehearsing which wasn't helpful. Cause like, "Aw no we've gotta do that scene, let's have another cup of coffee, anyone watching Game of Thrones?" We did a lot of procrastinating! But the carrying of the material really did permeate into my life in ways. I knew it would, but it happened in unexpected ways. I suddenly felt very unsafe and I didn't expect that. I had been walking around as an untouched human and I'd never had my sense of safety pricked. And suddenly, I knew it could be, and I hadn't even thought about that and I was waking up at 2am and checking my locks and things like that. And I went, "Oh my god this is me just considering the material, let alone it having actually happened to me." So, there was a weight that came with it. Yeah, a sense of what it is to have someone take something from you.

AC: And the play had quite an effect on the audience. Can you describe some of the reactions that you had experienced?

SH: That was quite hard sometimes. People would leave. There were lots of trigger warnings with the show. But stuff would happen where someone would buy a friend a ticket without really realising. And a couple of times that happened where people... We had to stop the show. People leave and that was confronting to go, "I don't want this to be traumatic for people, it's meant to be affirming in some way." The show does sound traumatic, but actually by the end, it's a call to arms. It's a very positive response that comes by the end. So, when that happened that was always really hard to take.

And then there is this part of the show where she says "One in three women have experienced sexual assault". And to look out every night and go, "Wow I'm actually really speaking to one in

three.” You know there are about 40 people in this room who I could be speaking exactly to right now and that was always [shudders]... really hard.

AC: When you say trigger warnings, what do you mean by that?

SH: They would put up signs in the foyer saying “difficult material”, there were signs all through the website when you were booking just going “this is sensitive material”. Just to make sure the right people were coming and people who did not need that experience in their life [could avoid it].

AC: And so, were there benefits of performing solo as opposed to working with an ensemble?

SH: Well.... I had lots of room in the dressing room [laughs]. I decimated the dressing room. You know what, I really actually enjoyed it. In a way I wasn't alone. I had my stage manager who was just this beautiful man, Khym Scott, and he really was my partner in crime. Because, such a big show to manage every night, I would do something which he knew I was trying to modify and usually you have some repartee with your scene partner, but instead I'd look up at him and he was great. He'd come down after the show every night and we would talk through what worked, what didn't work, what he preferred, what needed to clip along and that was essential, because you can really lose your way, even after listening to that clip which was filmed earlier on. Oh my God, I mean four weeks later, that was a really different scene and that was all through the management with Khym. So that was essential to make sure the show didn't get soggy or I didn't get self-indulgent, because it's usually your scene partner who is on your back about that kind of thing. It was great though, it got so elastic and so flexible.

AC: But do you feel more pressure going solo?

SH: Oh my God, yeah. I felt every night as I was waiting to walk on stage and the lights went down and the music started, I would start laughing like a maniac. Like out loud. Going, “Why am I doing this to myself, this is awful, this is, why, this is torture. Walk on”. But by the end, it was worth it [laughs].

AC: And what about the Stables, Sheridan? What's it like to perform in that theatre?

SH: Ooh! I love that little, little fancy diamond. People call it many things. A kite, a diamond. I always notice when I'm drawing blocking into my script that I sort of, when you draw a line up and down, it looks like a beautiful vagina. And that is how I see Griffin, that stage is a big, warm, welcoming vagina. [laughter]

I love that space, it's so... It's actually great and awful to be that close to the audience. In *Prima*, it was so confronting to *hear*. I could hear them rustling, I could hear them breathing, I could see their bloody Apple watches lighting up and it was hard not to have an inner monologue if they were rustling “Eurgh, you're boring, you're being boring”. I was always tempering that to go “No, they're enjoying you.” There was like an evil angel and a good angel on my shoulders.

And actually, I did appreciate it, we went to Canberra for a week after Griffin and I couldn't hear them. It was like I was alone and I *needed* that to just do the show and get a bit confident and go “Oh I'm good, I'm good at this.” And then when we went to Parramatta, I could hear them again, my inner voice was much nicer to myself. I was much more reasonable going, “That's fine, they're just eating a Choc Top, because you can at Paramatta.”

So, but the beautiful thing about having them so close, is that you can talk. You can just talk. You're not putting on a big show, you don't need bells and whistles, you are just looking them in the eye. They can see you sweat; see you breathe. It's quite wonderful.

AC: How was it working with the writer, Suzie Miller?

SH: Ah! Suzie has just been marinating the show for 20 years, her whole career. Like in the way that I felt like everything in my career had led up to having the exact right skills to perform that play, I think her as a writer, things just fell into place.

She said she'd been pitching the show for years and years and no one was interested and it just struck at the right time and Lee saw that it was right to program at Griffin. And what she did so well, and I think is *absolutely* the key to the success of the show, was she managed to be able to write it for those within the law and those outside of the law. It wasn't boring for those in the law and not too dense for those outside of it.

So, we were playing to rooms and rooms of lawyers. They were all there with their wheelie baggage, coming in—

AC: Straight out of court.

SH: Yeah! And they loved it. They really, really loved it. You know, anyone who goes into law has a fairly big sense of themselves, so they loved seeing themselves up on stage. And that's what Suzie didn't shy away from, is the big characters and big bravado that you *need* to stand up in court every day. They're all actors.

She was fantastic to be editing in the room. When we first read the show, it went for two hours and it was just... I couldn't even speak, my mouth was [sore mouth sounds]. So, over the four weeks, we sort of got half an hour out of the show.

And also having her in the room, because she worked in the law for so long, to hear... I mean she never says the character of Tessa is *her*. But it's definitely- she has been boiling all the things that Tessa says. So, to hear Suzie explain all these things in her words was like better than any research that I could ever could have done. I was taking Suzie's mannerisms, her tone, her attitude to things. I just feel that all through the show, which made it so easy to have this rich character, the writer, and actually put her in the show.

AC: Thank you so much, it has been a delight to speak to you.

Thanks for listening to Griffin's special podcast series, where we are celebrating 50 Years of tThe 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**.

Transcribed by **Dominic Scarf**.