

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Five: *Running the Show*
With **Lee Lewis** and **Karen Rodgers**

What's the key to captaining a new writing theatre and flourishing as a trailblazer in the Australian theatre landscape? Former Artistic Director Lee Lewis and Executive Director and CEO Karen Rodgers discuss the excitement of a brand new play, as well as the risks, rewards, and the adventurous audiences of the magical Stables Theatre.

Hosted by:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

LL - Lee Lewis

KR - Karen Rodgers

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: So, who is really running the show? In this episode of the Stables 50th Birthday podcast series, we meet the Artistic Director and the Executive Director. Lee Lewis has been Griffin's Artistic Director since 2013, but in 2020 she is taking on a new challenge. And Karen Rodgers is Griffin's Executive Director. Welcome to you both.

KR & LL: Thank you.

AC: So, who is the boss of who?

Lee Lewis (LL): It depends on the day, and what's gone wrong and who's to blame. (Laughter)

Karen Rodgers (KR): I'd agree with that.

(Laughter)

AC: Would you? (laughter) I'd like to ask this question of you both. How did you come to a life in the theatre, Karen?

KR: Well I started off thinking I wanted to be a teacher, did my teaching degree in English Speech and Drama, and during that course a very wise lecturer said to me that perhaps it wasn't the best career choice for me. Realised I was going to be a very terrible teacher (laughter) and suggested I take up stage management. So, I started stage managing amateur productions and musicals. I did *Annie* and *Cabaret*, *Evita* and feel in love with stage management and ended up at NIDA doing the production course.

AC: So, I wonder what were the qualities that this teacher saw in you, that thought "ah, there's a potential stage manager".

KR: Well, organisation maybe? I love a list, a little bit of OCD.

LL: You are also a bit wicked.

KR: Bit wicked.

(Laughter)

LL: A whole generation have been saved from your somewhat un-toward teachings.

KR: Exactly. There is probably that as well. (laughs)

AC: And so, Lee tell me, what drew you to a life in the theatre? You have been doing it forever haven't you?

LL: Forever. Destiny. I was three years old when I first went backstage as a bluebell in a dance concert. I remember standing backstage, I can still see the floorboards back there and the curtain and some ropes. I thought it smelled amazing. And I walked out on stage and the lead bluebell fell apart and didn't know what to do. So, someone had to take control and from then I have never let go.

AC: So just elbowed the poor, lead bluebell out of the way and took over.

LL: If you are not tough enough, get out of the way, I say.

(Laughter)

AC: That's fantastic. Lee, can you just describe the role of the Artistic Director? Do you have much autonomy or freedom to make your own decisions?

LL: On paper yes, I have a lot of freedom to make decisions. But in reality, those decisions are impacted on by thoughts about audience, the people that are making work – artists and the teams around them. And a lot of the work is about various compromises, to the point where the work is on stage and the hope that those compromises won't take away the spirit of the work. So, on paper, a lot of freedom and in some ways, yes, of course, freedom. But if you take everything into consideration, it's a very narrow path.

KR: I also think at Griffin part of it is responding to the community that we live in and the times that we live in and the conversations that are going on. I think Lee as Artistic Director has been very aware of what is important, what are people talking about, what are people interested in, in looking at the program we have put together in the last few years.

LL: Different Artistic Directors are more like auteur directors and the theatre company is their company and they take it on a journey. Whereas I feel like I've worked for the idea of a company. Griffin is such an institution in Australia I think, we hand the baton onto the next person. It's more of a stewardship in my head anyway. A different Artistic Director could think differently.

AC: Do you actually choose the works that are staged there?

LL: Oooh yes.

AC: That's your job?

LL: M-hmm [yes]. But again, it's a new writing company, so we are very dependent on who writes what. So, it's responding to the playwright's voice really, and the playwrights of Australia, their voices. If they don't write it, we can't stage it. And because we don't commission work at the moment, the government took away that capacity. Because we are not commissioning, we are really responding to the writers of the Australia. We choose from what's written.

AC: Karen, what's your role, what's the role of the Executive Director?

KR: Broadly, I think it's to ensure that the Artistic Director's program can work. That you can achieve the vision of the Artistic Director, but maintain a viable commercial business sitting behind that. So it is an administrative job, but I always see it as supporting the artistic vision of the company and ensuring that that can be delivered.

LL: There's an extraordinary moment that happens though, when we look at all the plays that could be done. There is this look I get in my eyes and say to Karen and say "So" and she goes "No. No... no. We can't do it." But then somewhere in her there is the – a spark is ignited with the possibility, and so she will go away and somehow find the resources to pull off an eight-handed play in that little theatre. And that's part of the fun of it, seeing how to make impossible things happen.

KR: It's a bit of a magician's trick in there. And knowing what's important I think too. What is important to get on the stage, what is important to maintain a happy staff. What is important to make sure the audience keep coming.

LL: What can afford to not necessarily knock it out of the park and not take the company down.

KR: Yeah.

LL: There have been a couple of projects, where I've gone, and she's gone "Really?! ...okay". I go, "Trust me – trust me it will work."

KR: I remember when Lee brought in *The Bleeding Tree*, which was my first season at Griffin, and at that stage it didn't even have characters assigned and she gave me the play to read. I couldn't believe it, I was like "Oh? That's the play we are going to do?" (Laughter) And then that has been a huge success on so many levels. Often the risk we take in new work, you just have to believe in the vision, well particularly for me, believe in the vision of the Artistic Director.

LL: We also didn't put it in the theatre for that many weeks. We hedged it that way, kept it a short season. Paula Arundell is well known in theatre, but not very well known to the wider audience by name. We really made sure that it wasn't a hugely expensive show to make in its first outing.

KR: I think because we work in new writing, we are different to other theatre companies, in that sometimes we don't know how a play is going to go. And so, we do talk a lot, we hypothesise about who this audience will be? How long can this play go for? Who is this going to attract? Whereas, if you are doing a play – Hamlet – or a play that everyone knows, it's not so much of a risk around the audience. So, we do talk quite a bit about that in our programming.

AC: So here you are making predictions about who might like a work. Are you ever caught out to be wrong?

LL: Oh yeah. I thought *Bleeding Tree* was a comedy.

(Laughter)

Not exactly a comedy, but I thought it was a lot funnier than it was, on paper. And then once we started digging into it, it got darker, darker, darker. It's a combination of the people we had working on it. But we didn't predict the...

KR: *Prima Facie*, we didn't realise how well that would go.

LL: How many people it personally connected to, sometimes you don't know. When you are playing in the world of big issues, you don't know how many people are sitting in the audience who have direct lived experience of a problem, and that's always surprising. Problems go far deeper than what we actually acknowledge and often the stories will make that visible.

AC: Let me ask, personally what it was in your character, or your upbringing, that you think gave you the skill base for your role in the theatre, Karen?

KR: Well, I have always loved story. We were always a family that were encouraged to read, to celebrate story. I loved being with people and sharing. So, I think that was probably a love of wanting to share story in terms of my career choice. Then, I think innately, I've- I think part of the role is about being able to facilitate other people's vision and work and care for that. And that I was innately interested in management and the systems, procedures, policies underlying that. There are probably a few layers to it that made me interested in the role.

AC: Lee, what was it in your upbringing to you think?

LL: There is a little bit of magic inside theatre and I have always been drawn to, that mysterious place where you can't quite define what is happening. But I also think, you don't become a director, because you're not a control-freak. (laughter) I think I found a creative path for that particular talent.

AC: So as a child were you a control-freak? Were you controlling siblings?

LL: Oh yeah, completely. Completely. It's that funny thing. As a director you have to be the person who puts up your hand and says "I know". And even if you don't you put your hand up and say "I know" and people follow you, and there is a little bit of that. And I have always been that way, even if I couldn't do something I'd put my hand up and go "I'll try that". It always amazes me when people don't do that. (laughter) Interestingly it took me a long time to come to directing, I went in via acting which was more obvious path especially for young women at that point. I'd been directing for a few years, my dad said, "Do you ever think you'll go back to acting?" and I said, "Oh no – Dad, I think I'm a director". He said: "Oh thank god, took you long enough to realise." I was like, "Thanks for telling me!" And he said: "Like I'd ever tell you anything." He said, "You have been a director since you were a little." And those are things that other people see about me that I didn't necessarily recognise in myself.

AC: So, you two have to collaborate fairly closely.

LL: Completely, completely.

AC: Do you ever disagree?

KR: We don't disagree. We sometimes don't see the world eye to eye, and we have to argue around what is important. But I wouldn't say that we disagree on things.

LL: No, we are quite in sync about big things. The job, both jobs are quite huge and it's not possible to be there all the time. We found over the years is that when something happened at the theatre, and one of us has been away or not there. We get back together, and say well this is what I did, I hope that's okay. Invariably we both would have made the same choice if we had been there. So, we haven't had any huge situations that we've completely disagreed.

KR: Doesn't mean we don't have robust conversation. We absolutely do, and I think we talk about what is important. In terms of the work that we do and the company that we are, and the staff.

LL: And we talk through things a lot. We don't necessarily land on a decision first, we are not "decide first" kind of people, either of us.

KR: I think that is true.

LL: We work through to a decision.

KR: I think everyone would agree, it is an important relationship because if this breaks down or we weren't on the same page, it wouldn't be a nice place to be.

LL: I'd add the Chair of the Board into that mix as well. If that three-way isn't really functioning well, it's really hard for a company to feel healthy.

AC: Would it be fair to say the Artistic Director has a sort of right to take risks, and the Executive Director has a right to mitigate those risks?

KR: I think in broad terms that's probably right.

LL: It also flips sometimes as well, because sometimes I can mitigate the risk of one work with another, or in the cast. Other times Karen will push the boat out insofar of a spend on something. She'll put the budget up, which means the target goes up. I get really panicked because that thing of having to make it good enough for that many tickets. So sometimes she'll go "No, I think this is actually going to work," and I go- (inhales). So, it's a 'who takes the risk when' kind of question. Because it's new writing; it's always going to be risk. There isn't something where you can say, this is definitely going to work.

AC: So, there is an element of danger in your work isn't there?

LL: Oh yeah! (laughter)

KR: Of course, oh yeah! (Laughter)

LL: That's the fun!

(Laughter)

KR: More sick-making!

LL: More what?

KR: Making you feel sick.

AC: Really?

(Laughter)

LL: Yeah, I do describe it as extreme sports – a new writing theatre. I love a good game of tennis which what state theatre companies feel like, a good safe game of tennis.

KR: There is something when we go into the first preview on those works, that have never seen an audience before. It's like the nervousness of knowing how that work is going to be received by its first audience.

AC: Yes, a white-knuckle ride.

LL & KR: It is, it is.

KR: I get so nervous on those nights to see – are the audience going to see what we saw in this? It can be nerve-racking but...

LL: Oh yeah, but addictive...

KR: It's addictive as well.

AC: So, you both have to know who your audience is? Do you know who your audience is?

KR: We do, but we also looking for new opportunity.

AC: So, it varies from play to play?

KR: Absolutely.

LL: Try to make it so.

AC: Really?

KR: And institute it in the company, like Batch Festival, which Phil Spencer, who is the Artistic Associate, has brought to the company. That brings in new audiences, and new ideas and new artists and that's really exciting as well for us, to make sure we continue to stretch what we can be and who might come to the theatre. It's always interesting to see people who have never been to Griffin before.

LL: You can tell because they try and get in the window.

(Laughter)

LL: And you are like... no. I love them so much because it means new people are coming.

KR: We always get really excited, they are new: “Oh you’ve have never been here!”

LL: “Who is the crazy woman in the window smiling at me, I don’t know!” I’m like, “Yay you made it!”

AC: So, how would you describe Griffin audiences?

LL: Oh, they are the best in the country, (laughter) hands down. They are literate, and curious and often impatient but willing to walk up the stairs. So, they are mostly fit. (laughter) Ah, and I would say the company attracts, across different ages. Our age demographic is unlike any other company. We go from quite substantial young audience through to literally anyone who can still make it up the stairs. We have patrons in their 80s who have been coming all of their lives and take pride in the fact that they can still elbow people out of the way to get into the second row. It’s just, their willingness to hand their night over to a place that is not guaranteed, that’s kind of interesting. Compared to an audience that go looking for something that reassures them.

AC: So, they are taking a risk.

LL: They are taking risk. That’s what I love about it. Across the different ages they are all rat bags at heart, and that’s why they like the risk. I mean it was a bunch of rat bags who started it. Lilian Horler and Anna Volska – still rat bags, they don’t seem it now, but they really are! That’s the fascinating thing about the found space compared to the original big glossy space. The gloss will attract a different need in the audience.

KR: We do talk about the audience enjoying the risk, being interested in the risk. Not only of coming to space that is so intimate, you know in that amazing corner-

LL: Awkward corner.

KR: Awkward corner (laughter)! You know the experience of being in such a tiny space, being able to see the audience on the other side. What that intimacy brings. But also, often our audience may not love every play, but they are willing to come back and give the next work a try. They often at least talk to us – “we might not have liked this one but there will be something in the year that we will like”. That is exciting as well.

AC: Do you think Griffin, and what you have been programming, has had an effect on the more mainstream theatre companies in this country?

LL: Yes, without a doubt. Ten years ago, doing Australian work was too risky for a lot of the main companies. The language they had around it was risky, and they were afraid of that risk and they would try and hedge it in various ways. Short seasons, put it in the smaller space. Do it with new people so your big audiences weren’t necessarily attracted. Cheap, cheap, cheap ticket prices and that all showed a lack of faith in that work. Now, all the companies have substantial commissioning and development programs and they are putting the works on the stage and they are figuring out how to make it work with their audiences. They’re also – when Sam [Strong] started doing revivals, the other companies weren’t doing revivals of Australian plays, they weren’t saying, “Well this is an Australian classic”. So, we have started to have that conversation, about which of our plays are classic. So, all of those ideas have been trickle-ups from Griffin. So, it feels a little bit relentless on our part because we are always going “AUSTRALIAN PLAYS AUSTRALIAN PLAYS”, but it feels like over the last ten years it’s had an impact!

KR: I think audiences too are excited about our voice and who we are and our stories. They want to see them and want the opportunity to see those on the bigger stages as well. I think that has come from some trust in what we do as well.

AC: You wouldn't call it the most comfortable theatre?

KR: Hahaha, no.

AC: For both actors and audiences, and yet everyone loves working there. And everyone loves seeing plays there. So why do you think that is?

KR: I think there is a magic in the actual physical space. There is a magic in that corner. I know Lee says "awkward", and I know as a director obviously it is. There is something beautiful about being in the theatre and being so close. They cannot escape, it's inescapable. The work is always so clear, and they can't get away with anything, and I think there is something beautiful about that. I also think maybe that there is something about getting back to the basics, there isn't any trick in there-

LL: The basics of storytelling: there is story, an actor and an audience. Ultimately you don't need a lot more than that. We have a bit more, a few lights, a bit of sound, design, but a not a huge amount more. And there is something reassuring in that. Sometimes when you go see the big, big show and you go for the big spectacle and for the "wow" of it, to be transported. It takes so many millions to transport you. But sometimes it's just a combination of words and beautiful actor to feed from you and you are transported. I think, the humanity of the Griffin space is what is starting to attract people. Especially as people are seeing more entertainment on screens, when they get to Griffin, it's like no other entertainment experience. The intensity, the deep humanness of it, it's just that close you can't avoid it. Some people run away from it.

KR: Some people don't like it

LL: They can't handle it. It's too much for them.

KR: Fair enough, if it's not for them.

LL: Well they are not for me then!

(Laughter)

KR: And the actors is an interesting question.

LL: There are some actors who don't actually like it, it's too close.

AC: Too close.

KR: And you are right, backstage is... you know, those conditions are...

LL: Appalling.

KR: Appalling is the right word!

(Laughter)

LL: But it's a good community builder. By the time you have changed in and out of your Spanx a few times in front of people you are family for life.

(Laughter)

AC: Is there talk of moving Griffin to a larger venue?

LL: There was. About 10 - 12 years ago, there was a big conversation about that. About it being not fair a new writing theatre shoehorns every work into the same shape. But we tried producing with STC and Belvoir and both of the plays would have gone better if they had stayed in the Griffin space. The audience understands it differently, the works are often directed differently with the focus being on the play. I remember seeing that in my formative years at Griffin, thinking, "No I think there's something here, I think we have to keep it here". There has been a proposal run by council to build a second theatre that Griffin also manages. So, a larger theatre, Belvoir size, that could help to support the smaller theatre, which is a really interesting proposition. Cross your fingers in the next 10 years or so that might be the solution to the completely unstable financial situation at Griffin.

KR: The commercial viability of 105 seats is ridiculous.

LL: It would be fine if we priced it about \$350 dollars a seat. Which is terribly uncomfortable seat to pay that much money for, I dunno, you want to be having some Opera House seats for that I reckon.

AC: Karen, what are you going to miss most about Lee when she moves on to her new challenge in Queensland?

KR: I'm going to miss Lee's intelligence, and I'm going to miss Lee's humour. And I'm going to miss the challenge of that sparkle in her eye when she comes in with some new ideas.

LL: She is not going to miss the messiness of my desk or my inability to open incoming mail.

(Laughter)

AC: What will you miss most about Griffin, Lee?

LL: The laughter. It's an extraordinarily fun place to work, there is nothing like it. I don't actually know... The company if you like has been the making of me as a young artist and I don't necessarily know who I am beyond the company. So... I will miss everything about Griffin, hopefully I think it's *in* me.

KR: We have been talking about Griffin being an opportunity company and I think for both Lee and I, because I've also had the opportunity to learn what it means to be the General Manager of a subscription company with a venue. There is really nowhere else in the country that you can do that. And many of our staff really use it as a pathway and an opportunity to go on and explore other things in their careers. I think there is something unique about Griffin. We talk about it being an opportunity for writers, for actors, designers but it's also an opportunity for the administrative staff and creative staff as well, and that's exciting.

AC: It's been a delight to talk to you both, Thank you so much.

KR: Thank you.

LL: Thanks Angela.

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin's special podcast series, where we are 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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