

**50 Years of the Stables**  
**Griffin Theatre Podcast Series**

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**T H E A T R E**  
**C O M P A N Y**

**Episode Three: *The Boys***

With **Alex Galeazzi, Jeanette Cronin and Robert Connolly**

Some core members of the original team share how **Gordon Graham's** visceral, dangerous Australian play *The Boys* was brought to life. They recount the explosive response it elicited, and unpack how and why it became a theatrical hit.

**Content Warning:**

This podcast contains excerpts of drama that feature discussions of violence and violence against women.

**Speakers:**

AC - Angela Catterns

RC - Robert Connolly

JC - Jeanette Cronin

AG - Alex Galeazzi

**Angela Catterns:** *2020 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> 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.*

*[Excerpt from The Boys—Griffin Theatre Company's 2012 production]*

*Act Two, end of Scene Three:*

**Glenn:** *Women are tainted, that's what they are, there is no other word for it.*

**Stevie:** *It's time somebody cleaned them up.*

**Brett:** *Well fuck, why do they even get away with it?*

**Glenn:** *I don't know, fuck why do we?*

**Stevie:** *Yeah, we must be fuckin' mad.*

**Brett:** *Here we are, three brothers, best mates, been through everything together, and look at us, we standin' here like stunned fuckin' mullets, not able to do nothin', not able to go nowhere, there is no more gorg, nothin', and all because of them! WELL FUCK EM! FUCK YOU, YOU SLUT!!!! I'll be thinkin' of ya, only the things I'll be thinkin' you wouldn't want to fuckin' know about!!! [Door slams]*

**Stevie:** *Yeah, you too, you stupid fat ugly mole, I hope it comes out the wrong way and fucking kills you.*

**Brett:** *Let's just let them get in our way ah? One more stupid bitch comes interfering in our lives, show up somewhere she shouldn't. She'll find out that you don't mess the boys no-more.*

*[Return to podcast interview with Angela Catterns.]*

**Angela Catterns (AC):** *The Boys* was first staged at the Stables Theatre in 1991. Written by Gordon Graham, it was revived in 2012, and went on to become a classic of the Australian stage and screen, winning an AWGIE and four AFI awards. Alex Galeazzi was the director of the first production of *The Boys*. Alex, how did you end up with that gig and that play?

**Alex Galeazzi (AG):** Thanks Angela, it's a very interesting and good question, thinking back 28 years now. I'll start back when I studied acting with David Wenham at the Nepean, we both had graduated in 1986 from Nepean and I dabbled in the acting thing. But I ended up going to those very famous Griffin Monday night meetings that were corralled by Penny Cook, which were all about celebrating new Australian work and supporting the Stables Theatre. They were very, very dynamic meetings. At the time that I'd come to the Griffin, it was actually in the black. So, it wasn't really operating or functioning as a theatre. So, it was this interim period where nothing was really happening, but I had heard that in their offices in Craigend Street there were shelves of unsolicited scripts just waiting to be read. I decided that this was an extremely interesting opportunity and got permission to go to the office and just sit there and read play after play after play. In answering your first question on how I came about this script, it was one that I pulled off the shelf. And what I was instigating was Saturday morning readings, when I think back on my youthful energy! It was just doing a reading of a play on Saturday morning with a playwright and a group of actors. Then by one o'clock on that same day, we would have a public reading of the script, and these were called the Griffin Network Play Readings. So that's how I found the script.

**AC:** Did the script kind of stand out to you?

**AG:** It was incredibly powerful, yes. The script leapt off the shelf really. The language was visceral, it was obviously dangerous writing and I just felt that it needed to be heard. And I had no preconception, I didn't know any history of the play, the playwright, I was totally innocent in approaching it. And then I took over Griffin's 'D Week', which was their week of new readings, and I did a first read of it in 1989, at the Griffin 'D Week', which was already quite controversial. The ABC got wind of it and came and filmed a little bit of it.

**AC:** Actor Jeanette Cronin remembers being at the National Playwrights' Conference, when the play was first read. Was it read in front of an audience Jeanette, do you remember?

**Jeanette Cronin (JC):** Yeah, the play... I think it was the 1988 Playwrights' Conference, I do believe. And it was read in front of an audience. It was read in the Parade Theatre, and it was a pretty packed house from memory... it was fairly explosive.

**AC:** Is that right? Do you remember the audience reaction?

**JC:** Yeah, yeah. It was huge! It was very much appreciated, but you could feel the split in the audience. I remember one person got up and actually did his nut and started furiously saying that these people don't talk like this, and how dare you do it like that. It was kind of the beginning of that appropriation idea I think. He was very angry that these people could articulate the way that they did. But there was a little boy in the audience as well and I think this boy had seen a few things he shouldn't have in life and had been homeless at one point. And he was there with an advocate or

someone I think, and he was about, from memory, about eleven or twelve. He stood up and said, "I'm from there and I can articulate my thoughts, and I think what these people are saying is, you know, fair enough." So yeah.

**AC:** So, Robert Connolly was the stage manager and lighting designer for the original production of *The Boys*. Robert, do you remember Alex asking you to help stage manage this play?

**Robert Connolly (RC):** I do. It was a kind of delightful surprise. I can't even recall how Alex came across me, but I had just finished university and was trying to figure out how to make a career out of this industry that I loved, and I had been a big follower of what the Griffin Theatre had been doing. I had seen many productions there and their championing of new Australian work was quite extraordinary. So, I, you know, got this call from Alex, and he was looking for someone to be a stage manager and come on a journey with him. We got on incredibly well, and he gave me the play to read which was extraordinary, really. I had studied Australian theatre at uni, and I had read a lot of the more classic Australian texts. I could see there was a fork in the road really for the way Australian theatre was going to go and here was a really provocative work, that was really going to make a massive leap forward on how we told stories and what we told stories about. So, it was amazing, to get that call from Alex.

**AC:** So, Alex what was it that attracted you to the script? Can you give us a short description of what the play was about?

**AG:** Sure. When I think about the play, the thematic is mainly family. It's divided into eight scenes, which is really interesting, and is basically about the older son who comes out of prison. All of the scenes have the mother and the boys' three girlfriends in them, but then four scenes just have the women. So, it's really about these relationships of these three brothers and their mother, and the boys' relationship with their girlfriends and each other. And obviously it's what we would say is, dare I say it, a "Westy"—when you are talking about Sydney—a "Westy" kind of demographic. It's hard language, but also there is a real through-line of humour in it. So, it is actually a play about the women, the mother and the girlfriends dealing with what their sons and boyfriends have done. Which is a horrific act. The wonderful thing about the end is that the youngest girlfriend has a child and what we hope or what we give the audience, is that this girl is going to make a difference with her son. That she is going to take this boy and not repeat the male violence with bringing up this boy, this new child.

**AC:** So why did you want Robert Connolly on board for this project? Do you remember meeting him?

**AG:** All I can remember about Robert is, that he rode a really cool Vespa.

*[Laughter]*

**AC:** Do you remember that Robert?

*[Laughter]*

**RC:** Ah yeah, I remember coming off that bike on Alison Road and deciding to never ride it again. Near death experience driven by that bike. But yeah, I used that to get around and get to the Stables every night.

**AG:** I remember that Robert just had this very gentle quality. Which I think was very important with this very hard, violent language script. Someone who was gentle, who was easy to work with. Also,

we were on a very strict kind of budget situation. So, Robert was this all-rounder personality, so as you said, he did the stage management and also the lightning design. He also... I'm sure he oversaw the budget and I think all those skills were just so imperative to making this piece of work.

**AC:** Where did the money come from for the first production of *The Boys*? Do you remember?

**AG:** These were called Griffin Co-ops, and we were given a certain amount of money to put on the show on. And once we covered the money that it cost to put the show on at Griffin, we split the rest of the door takings. But Robert, you can correct me if I'm wrong in that.

**RC:** Yeah, that's correct. I mean I think there were four productions a year that Griffin got enough money together to pay for the actual production of. But there wasn't a wage structure at that point, so it literally was the case, I remember that the actors, I think, you Alex, me and maybe the production designer, I can't remember, used to cut the door takings every week. Thankfully it was a massive success and we were able to make a modest but reasonable wage. But it was a cooperative production. When you think about the great success of the company and how it's going today, you know, this amazing anniversary of its time, you think back to that [cooperative] period, when it was keeping itself afloat by depending on the goodwill of people like you, Alex, and the actors, and people who were willing to roll the dice and risk whether people turn up on the night or not, is whether you got paid or not.

**AC:** Jeanette, which iterations of the play were you involved in?

**JC:** Well, I was involved in the first reading at the Playwrights' Conference, in which I played Michelle. And then I was involved in the film, in which I played Jackie, and then I did the revival in which I played the mother, Sandra.

**AC:** And so, do you remember the audience's reaction to the play when it was staged?

**JC:** Oh yeah, well the revival was only in 2012 I think, and again it was at the Griffin. It had a great set. It was actually in the back yard and they had these couches and things in the front row of the theatre. So, some of the people were literally sitting on the stage almost -

**AC:** On the set...

**JC:** I remember, Mum had an armchair in the corner on the very corner and I remember people being centimetres from my face. As I was sitting there. They were deeply involved in all the sex and violence that would happen because it was kind of happening on top of them. There was one great moment when Brett threw a can of beer on the back fence and every night he threw this full can of beer, smacking and exploding on this back thing. God bless him, he hit the spot every night. The stage manager had all these rows of beers every night, that she had to fill with water with a special way of doing it piercing the can.... and they were all lined up every night, these cans of VB. So, it was very, you know, immediate.

**AC:** So it was obviously very well received the first time around, Alex?

**AG:** Yes, incredible reaction. Just another little story about the beer. *[Laughter]* In our production they drank real beer during the show, which was kind of interesting, and fuelling. *[Laughter]* The reaction was incredibly... I remember, there many, many lines up, outside in the street to get a ticket. I also remember walking into the foyer and David Wenham saying, "Have you seen the Bob Evans review from the Sydney Morning Herald?" which I hadn't. I think he said something at the end

that this was mesmerising, a work that has to be seen. And from that moment on, it kind of was a rollercoaster really.

**AC:** So, he ended up having a role in it, David Wenham. The first time round?

**AG:** Correct.

**AC:** And so, Bob (RC) what was happening elsewhere in Australian theatres at the time *The Boys* was staged?

**RC:** I'd kind of followed the trajectory of these amazing playwrights that had put Australia on the stage for the first time and they had laid the foundations for something like that, people like David Williamson and Jack Hibberd, John Romeril and these playwrights. And then along had come another generation, which I had become really interested in when I was at uni, which were Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell, and their view was well, now that Australian stories had been put on stage, we can now tell stories of the world. Interestingly, both of their first plays were set in Russia and they were pushing "Can we be more international?". I had grown up in the foot of the Blue Mountains near Penrith and was very aware of Western Sydney and this whole world. I was yet to see anything on stage that depicted an Australia that was familiar to me. I hadn't grown up in the bush, I hadn't lived this particular version of Australia, that had been depicted by these great playwrights that had gone before. I think what I found when I read *The Boys*, was that all of a sudden, it was a world that was familiar to me, and a world we hadn't seen before. We hadn't actually seen it before in cinema either. I think people thought of Australia as a really comedic, funny place, or a real ocker country place. And so here was Alex with this play that really stood apart; I can't even think of plays at that point, or films, that were its forbears. It kind of came along and said we can depict this world, and we should investigate this world of the suburban world in our bigger city.

**AC:** Alex, what was the audience reaction to *The Boys*?

**AG:** The audience reaction very much centred around David Wenham's performance, especially for women in the audience. There were many performances where I would come down into the foyer and women would gather down there waiting for David to change and come down as 'the actor'. Because they were very, very frightened of walking out into the Cross not knowing that David was not that character. And they often just wanted to have a few words with him, to connect as a person and calm down before they walked out of that venue.

**AC:** Because he was such a violent character on stage?

**AG:** He has a great talent, David, to—especially with that character—somehow, he is able to turn the light off behind his eyes and have an incredible ability to be dead in the eyes. I have never seen it before. I don't think I have seen it since. And that is a very scary thing, when someone loses the volatility and vibrance in their eyes. I remember the audition process was also quite confronting, because I was unsure whether to cast him as Brett in the play, because of David's age, I was unsure. But he did a fantastic audition and I said—his nickname was Daisy, his nickname at college, and I was Jim—anyway, I said "Daisy, I'm really struggling with the age thing here," and he looked at me with those dead eyes and said, "If I don't play Brett, I'm not in the show." And that sealed that. And another interesting thing about the auditions was that Lynette Curran came up to me in the auditions and sat next to me. And she definitely wasn't going to be in it. 100%. She just came to visit me in the audition process, to say to me how important she felt it was that the production was to go on—"It had to go on." So, after about 15 or 20 minutes of gentle discussion, I said, "Look Lynette, I think you'd be perfect for the mother, would you just go centre stage of the Stables and we will do a

little read of something.” She’s got a child-like innocence, in this woman’s body which was just so perfect for that character. Then we worked it out and she was part of the cast. A couple of interesting, interesting people.

**AC:** Jeanette, there were some fairly notable reactions from journalists that saw the play as well?

**JC:** Yeah, we had the ABC come in as well, and there has to be an angle on everything.... And can I just say, one of the things that I love about the play and the film, is that it kind of exposes the anatomy of violence. It gives the hatred a logic, that mother character is like this onion and she’s complicit in all that stuff and it’s so tricky. And a lot of people I spoke to, journalists and things were very interested in that, because there is this kind of fuzzy area around Mum that people just don’t know what to make of it. Anyway, I was talking to a journalist and it was one of those stand-up interviews in the theatre, which we only had a certain amount of time to do, and we were talking about sexual assault and sexual violence and things. And I said something about it and the journalist pretty much asked me whether I had been sexually assaulted. I just actually called her on it and gave some sort of ambiguous answer. I sort of said, “I can’t believe you’re asking me that.” But it was kind of a weird thing of, “Oh well, we can sort of ask anything personal, because we are all talking about it.” It was just weird. It was weird. It became currency. You know again that kind of, salaciousness became currency again. And I thought, what kind of currency is that? It is an onion. I don’t know if that makes sense, but yep.

**AC:** Was the Stables a place you think, where risks were taken, Robert?

**RC:** I think the way Alex directed the play, and the way he created this atmosphere for the actors, was quite wonderful creatively, but it did invite the actors to kind of step off the ledge a little bit. I think all the men involved in the play did talk a lot about what it was as men to be exploring those deep profound issues of misogyny. And I think the actors found it very hard to kind of unwind and disconnect from the character after you know, digging deep. You know this kind of old adage, I guess as a performer that you can’t judge the character you are playing. In order to play the character, you have to actually try to understand them. So, you are asking these men to play these roles and to kind of try and understand the psychology of them. I remember feeling that after the production each night, that these actors were still kind of deeply embedded in these people that they were playing. And that’s not to say they didn’t return to who they were, it’s just that the echoes of that into their own life was very clear during that time. I think that creative risk, is um, why these performers have gone on to have such great careers, because they do take those risks.

**AC:** What impact do you think it had on your career Robert?

**RC:** Look, I think it gave me a kind of sense of a creative life that I could have, you know. It was my first creative job really outside of university, working with Alex and the Griffin. And so, you know, I was in my kind of early 20s, and it really gave me a sense that you do things, and that you could comment on things, and that art could explore things that were important and relevant. That kind of politics of putting on a play like that, the social kind of analysis of it, all these type of things, which in a lot of ways is that theatre kind of does incredibly well today too. You know, its capacity to look at things quite quickly and quite sharply. So, I think definitely it was a massive thing, massive for me. Coming out of university as a young man, you know the potential to meander around for a while wondering what I was doing. If I think about it, it was a real gift that Alex provided this opportunity for me to actually work on something so significant. I mean on a personal level too, I mean, I met David Wenham and we became very close friends and I have made a whole bunch of films with him. And even to this day I’m still collaborating with him and—you know, I talk to my own kids about this—you kind of have to treasure the people you meet along the way on this creative kind of journey,

because you don't know thirty years or fifty years later, you are still collaborating and sharing your creative journey with them. Very significant Angela, I think in my life looking back to that production, it's significant as any creative step in my entire career really.

**AC:** And Alex what about you? What's your response to that, what impact did this play have on your career?

**AG:** Yes. So, it was really the first professional directing gig after graduating NIDA and I'd actually done development readings the year before. So, it's an interesting parallel to Robert, because I did the reading in '89 and then I got into the directors' course at NIDA, and kind of had the script under my arm literally, and in my head for a year at NIDA. Then I graduated in January, and then I directed *The Boys* in February the next year. So again, like Robert has said, it brought a lot of attention to me and to the cast and to everyone involved and to Griffin. Which was fantastic! Everybody in the industry did come and see it and it was a significant leapfrog, I think the Artistic Director of STC Wayne Harrison came, and we developed a strong bond and I went down to STC for probably the next seven to eight years with Wayne. So yes, incredibly important, as Robert said relationships, and even talking now it's really great to revisit the importance of those creative relationships.

**AC:** And Jeanette, you've had involvement with The Stables and Griffin since, then haven't you? Tell us a little bit about that?

**JC:** Yeah, I have been lucky enough to do lots of things at the Griffin and of course *The Boys* is like a familiar planet that I'm a satellite around, you know, that I've had this opportunity to visit. And David Wenham is crucial in that as well, because I was doing a film with him when they were getting ready to do *The Boys*. That's how I kind of ended up auditioning for the film, there that is again. It's been great to work with Griffin over years. It's been another familiar planet.

**AC:** So why do you think it's a special place in your opinion?

**JC:** Well, just the fact that they do new Australian work. The Griffin Theatre Company champions that, and they were also the champions of actors. They used lots of different actors there. So, lots of different people got a gig there, always did, and that was great.

**AC:** So, it's still an important theatre in Australia?

**JC:** Absolutely.

**AC:** Alex?

**AG:** It makes me think of the space. That unique triangular, hot pot, hotspot space is so dynamic. You can see the audience, you have triangle there, that strong physical space and you really need to work it. And I just think when you are in there with the audience for that 90 minute or two hours, you are really in the show. It's all about truth and connection and actors relating to each other. It's a true actor's space I feel. There is no hiding.

**AC:** And Robert what's your opinion? Do you think it's still a very special and important theatre in Australia?

**RC:** Without a doubt. Without a doubt. It's a very, very significant part of the Australian theatre landscape, continued over so many years to champion new works, new talent. It's a testament to what Alex was saying, that kind of value of a physical space, the unique nature of this physical space.

Like I can't imagine *The Boys* being performed in its first production in a big cavernous space. You know, part of its visceral pleasure was sitting there, as Jeanette was saying, in the most recent production, you are sitting there with everyone, with the actors right in front of you. And I love the kind of intimacy that that offers an audience. It's a real triumph over the years and the many years to come, I'm sure that this physical space has kind of been a magnet for so much talent over so many years, and so many creative risks. It's a real adventure for theatre space to go on and I think it's quite extraordinary.

**AG:** I would also really like to say thank you to all the people who were involved in that first production and to Griffin. Because it was an amazing risk on something that was totally kind of quite shocking, and the people involved, all the creative teams, actors and production just took it on whole heartedly. And Griffin were amazing to support that.

**AC:** Well that's lovely. Alex Galeazzi, Robert Connolly and Jeanette Cronin thank you very much for joining us to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Griffin Theatre Company's home the Stables.

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](http://griffintheatre.com.au)

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