

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Ten: *Writing from the Heart*
With **David Berthold** and **Tommy Murphy**

Director David Berthold and playwright Tommy Murphy discuss the pressures of adapting Timothy Conigrave's beautiful memoir *Holding the Man* for the Stables stage, the deep emotional currency that the piece holds, and their interactions with Timothy's family in the process.

Host:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

DB - David Berthold

TM - Tommy Murphy

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.*

Angela Catterns (AC): In more than 30 years of Griffin Theatre Company at the Stables Theatre, no production has been more successful than *Holding the Man*. The original production, adapted for the stage by Tommy Murphy, and directed by David Berthold, premiered in 2006 in a critically-acclaimed, sold out season. Tommy Murphy and David Berthold, both on tight travel schedules, joined us separately, but within hours of each other for this podcast; part of the series celebrating 50 Years of the Stables.

AC: Welcome David, thank you for finding time to join our podcast series.

David Berthold (DB): Great to be here Angela.

AC: Thank you. So, you grew up in the theatre I read, is that right?

DB: Um, well only to the extent that quite early on in my life I became involved in amateur drama in um, in Newcastle. I grew up in Maitland and there was a lot of amateur theatre activity at that time and got very much involved. And mostly in musicals, actually, because I was very fond of singing as a kid and had singing lessons from when I was about ten. So very musical.

AC: And so, did it become apparent to you that you wanted a career in theatre and to be a director for instance?

DB: Yeah, pretty much at university, like most directors I think. If you scratch a director you'll often find someone who acted a lot, often badly, at university and I was one of those. I had a brief career as an actor at the Hunter Valley Theatre Company, which was the first of one of Australia's regional

professional theatres. That was really my entrée into professional theatre as an actor, through that company. But at university I very quickly realised that I wished to be a director and found that much more satisfying.

AC: And so, you went on to direct theatre in a lot of different places?

DB: Yeah, I spent some time at the Queensland Theatre Company and then spent five years at Sydney Theatre Company as its Associate Directorm, and during that time directed about fifteen shows there at all the company's venues. And then took up my first Artistic Directorship at the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP), so kind of just moved downstairs at the Wharf. Which was a very valuable time for me because it really... after a lot of time in theatre companies that's where I really learned to lead an organisation, it was very satisfying. And in fact, a lot of my professional relationships have emerged there and have continued with those people. And then to Griffin after that as my second Artistic Directorship.

AC: Ros Horin had been there for a long time, twelve years, I think. How did you want to put your stamp on the place?

DB: At that time, in um, around 2003, probably it's fair to say that all audiences had diminished quite a lot. The company was struggling a bit, and I was very keen to redirect the company, to doing kind of fresher work, but also engaging some of the mid-career writers that the company had not really touched. Like Stephen Sewell, Louis Nowra and Debra Oswald for example. None of whom had really had work there, even though Louis lived around the corner quite famously as a Kings Cross resident. So, I was finding a way to have fresh new work, but - with emerging writers - but also those well-known mid-career writers.

AC: You didn't stay there too long, did you, was that a kind of belief that no-one should hang around for too long?

DB: Um, it was an instinctive thing. I was there for three and half years, which surprised me as much as it surprised anybody. In that last season in 2006, it was, certainly in terms of box office it was far and away the most successful season that the company ever had. But I felt as though I'd done work there in that company and it was against the trend at the time, because at that time artistic directors tended to stay for eight, ten years. But these days it's actually not unusual at all to spend four or five years, that's rather the norm these days. So maybe I was just at the beginning of a trend!

AC: And so it was for your final season, David, that you decided to present *Holding the Man* . Was it something that you thought would be a fitting finale to your time there?

DB: No, I had not yet made the decision to leave, so it was not scheduled in that way. But it... maybe looking back it became a factor in helping me to make a decision that that might be a nice way to finish.

AC: And so why that book, and can you tell us briefly what it's about?

DB: Well, the book is a memoir of Tim Conigrave, who - an actor who graduated from NIDA and a playwright. And who had an association with Griffin for a time, I think he was on the board, and had had a play at Griffin 1986, a play called *Soft Targets* , which was a group devised work that Tim drew together as playwright. And the book is a memoir really, but essentially it's about his relationship with John Caleo that he met at Xavier College in the 1970s when they were both students there. Tim a budding actor and John captain of the AFL football team, at the time. A very open relationship

after a number of years, and both of them contracting HIV and John finally dying of an AIDS-related illness. So, the book Tim wrote very quickly in the last year of his life, knowing that he too was dying, and wrote it very much as a love letter to John. In a way I think, actually, of saying sorry to John for all the various hardships that he'd led John through over their very long fifteen-year long relationship. So why, why that play? It was really because of a success we had at the Stables at Griffin with Tommy Murphy's play *Strangers In Between*. It was Tommy's first professional production and it was an extraordinary success, and really demonstrated a writer who was really on top of his game even though he was only twenty-four at the time. But it was a phenomenal success in that space. And like any Artistic Director I was keen to find to something else for him and quickly. I had been thinking about an adaption of *Holding the Man*, there had been some attempts to make a film of it in the 90s... the late 90s early 2000s, which had come to nothing. But the book, it seemed to me, was right for theatrical adaption, I thought, and it struck me that Tommy might be a good writer for that.

AC: Even though he of course he was much younger, he was a different generation to Tim and John, he hadn't lived through the AIDS epidemic of the 80s.

DB: And for me that was a plus, that it was a way of telling that story from the perspective of another generation. And in fact, when I brought the idea to Tommy, he had not read the book. He was certainly aware of it, it's a very famous book. But I asked him to read it to let me know whether he thought there was a play in it and whether he thought he was the right person. He saw a lot of himself in Tim I think, you know, the similar experiences in student dramatics and time at NIDA and just being in and around the Stables, for example. I think he saw a lot of himself in Tim, even though he had no direct experience of HIV/AIDS, and as you say it's a totally different generation. Much of the book was a revelation for him and I think that gave him a freshness into the telling of the story and beyond that I thought that Tommy's humour, and his very roguish theatrical imagination, I thought was perfectly suited to the book.

[Sound effect swishes into Tommy Murphy's interview]

AC: Tommy Murphy, welcome. Thank you for finding the time to talk.

Tommy Murphy (TM): Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

AC: So we spoke to Ros Horin for this series recently, she was Artistic Director at Griffin and she asked you write a play I understand. What was that one about?

TM: Yeah, she gave me a real break actually, I'm really grateful to Ros. She asked me to write a play responding to the suburb that Griffin sits in, in Kings Cross. Three writers were asked to respond to it. And I remember some trepidation, thinking I don't really know the Cross. I'm an out-of-towner—I had moved from Queanbeyan to Sydney and that became the answer to that task. To write the story of somebody who wasn't comfortable in the city, and that short play evolved into *Strangers In Between*, a full-length play that I did with Griffin in 2005.

AC: And how old were you at the time?

TM: She commissioned me when I was twenty-three I think.

AC: So, did you know then that playwriting would be your art, your craft?

TM: Absolutely, that's what I was chasing. I was about to do a year-long director's course at NIDA, but I was a playwright in disguise there, there was no writing course. So I definitely had my sights set on being a playwright and I knew by then that Griffin was the place to be. I mean it's just in the mission of that company to dedicate itself to new work. So as a writer, it was a very exciting place to find myself.

AC: And David Berthold was the director for *Strangers In Between*, do you remember how your working relationship was at that time?

TM: You see, I was so lucky at that part of my career, and later on, in that David Berthold kept moving jobs to places that were really useful for me. So I'd met him when he was at the Sydney Theatre Company, I did a young writing thing there, and then he was at the Australian Theatre for Young People and we'd worked together there, established a relationship and then he took the reins after Ros at Griffin. So, um, lucky me.

[Laughter]

AC: And so do you remember when and where he asked you if you'd adapt the Tim Conigrave novel *Holding the Man* for the stage?

TM: We were seated in Beare Park down in Potts Point and he started speaking about the book and I hadn't read it. I think I'd read, um, there was a chapter that had been published in a collection of gay literature, and my husband had read it. And I'd actually teased Dane for crying at the end of the book and I completely misunderstood what *Holding the Man* was. And as David started floating this idea that maybe it was an adaptation, I was secretly going, "I hope he doesn't wanna ask *me* to do that." And I- I kind of interrogate why, because I think some of it was bit of um, a bit of internalised homophobia. I was scared that I would be pigeon-holed as a gay writer and that that was a problem. I now see that as a badge of honour, of course, and I'm so grateful that I got to do that remarkable story and was given that responsibility of taking Tim's book to the stage. But at the time I questioned it for reasons which were a bit suspect I think.

AC: And so, he did of course ask you adapt the book?

TM: Yeah he did! Yeah.

[Laughter from Angela]

TM: Coming off the back of *Strangers In Between*, he did that wonderful thing that I think Artistic Directors should do more often, which is to act with absolute trust and say, "This play will be on, so get busy". Ah... there's no deadline for a writer like opening night and it makes things happen. It was a wonderful, thrilling, daunting probably pressure at the time but it made the work get done.

AC: And you didn't have a lot of time though, did you?

TM: No, we didn't and that was a virtue. I think the other virtue was not really understanding what *Holding the Man* represented to its readership. I was a little bit naïve about that, and I guess it was fairly early in terms - I mean sort of pre-social media - so it was even pre-Facebook. Now, now I really understand it, because, you know it's been a film now and we regularly will get, still, social media sort of, I get messages out of the blue asking about *Holding the Man* and commenting about it and... But I didn't know what Tim's book meant to people, that it had been this gift that people give to each other a lot. It's a book that a lot of people give to people to explain their coming out, so

it represents a really formative time in a lot of gay people's lives. But then it's also a book that, because Tim's writing is so vivid and extraordinary, you feel like you've lived with these characters, you're grieving them. You want to - you *need* to - include your loved ones in the experience. So it's a book that a lot of people gift to each other, and because of that, its reach is extraordinary. It's useful that we didn't know quite all of that, all that, you know, the cultural capital that *Holding the Man* holds, we weren't really aware of that going into this stage adaptation.

AC: And I mean, were you aware of the sort of era in which it had been born, because you are a slightly different younger generation?

TM: Completely. Completely, and I did shudder about that a little bit, and David guided me through that. I was concerned that I wasn't entitled to write about a cultural moment that I hadn't lived. I hadn't lost anyone to HIV/AIDS, and my experience of it was from the eyes of a child. But it became an asset for us in the adaptation because, you know, in the way that, you know, I think playwriting *should* be, there's a process of discovery and through the history we were discovering what that time was. And so I think for that reason we wrote it in a different way than the generation who had experienced might. There was probably at times a bit of an irreverence which was useful, but also a deep respect and sort of dawning horror that the numbers and that the stories of courage that had happened so recently in our city, and that we were standing on the shoulders of those people.

AC: Mm. I understand the late Penny Cook came to the first workshop of the script.

TM: That's right, yes, yes.

AC: For her input was something of a turning point?

TM: Absolutely, there were many experiences like that, where people who were dear to Tim helped us in the process, and yes, Penny was probably one of the first people like that. She had such an excellent dramaturgical brain as an actor, so she helped us in that regard but she also sort of encouraged us as somebody from Tim's camp. And then there was that other extraordinary thing that kept happening in this adaptation, and that was the connections to Griffin itself. Penny had been a founder of the company, and she had encouraged Tim when he was writing a play at the Stables. There were all these strange connections that kept happening like that. But really that was David's impulse, to adapt *Holding the Man* for the stage, that it had a connection to the building in which we would be performing it. When we took the play elsewhere, that just became a connection to theatre more generally. But in that first production it was about dramatising action that was taking place on a stage where in fact the real stage action had happened. You know, there was that... It kept on pointing not only to theatre but to that building where the audience were sitting.

[Sound effect swishes into David Berthold's interview]

AC: And it all had to happen really pretty quickly, didn't it David? Was that a stressful time or did it all kind of fall into place organically?

DB: Well it didn't *have* to happen quickly, I mean I could have programmed that, you know, we could have commissioned him and then gone on a two-year cycle of development, and so on, so on. But I knew Tommy, and I knew how quickly he worked and how he enjoyed working quickly, and by that time our creative relationship was very secure and very well-practiced. And so that made me quite confident that we could get it up quite quickly. So I programmed it for the last play in 2006, last just to give us just enough time, but I thought to get it out and about quite quickly, I thought was a wise thing.

AC: And Brian Thompson offered to do the design, I think he knew many of the people in Tim's story?

DB: Yeah, very generously. You know, I don't think Brian had ever designed at the Stables, you know, but he is one of the world's great stage designers who did it for next to nothing, and did it out of love. Because as you say, he, like many people in Sydney theatre circles particularly, knew Tim and knew many people in the book. In fact, Tim stayed at Brian's house for a period when he was a student at NIDA.

AC: And you and Tommy went to Melbourne before opening night to meet Tim's parents. That went well?

DB: Tommy is very ethical person, and this was his first experience of writing real lives, and he's since done it a lot with famous people and about famous people. But his approach was very ethical, he had long conversations with as many people who are *in* the book as he could find. He generated a lot of trust in the project, and a lot trust in him as a writer, and a lot of people gave him memories and material that they might not otherwise have done. And similarly, he was very assiduous and very caring about dealing with Tim's family, Tim's parents. But we'd not - Tommy or I had not met Dick and Mary Gert Conigrave but - we'd been in communication - but we thought it would be a good thing to do to meet them not in the foyer on opening night [laughter]... where we knew they would be seeing themselves portrayed on stage in various awkward situations. But to actually meet them. Yes, we travelled down to Melbourne, down to Brighton, and spent a good four hours with them on a Sunday afternoon drinking Riesling, and sharing lots of things. You know, Mary Gert in particular shared with us many, many things. Shoe boxes full of letters that had arrived at the house, people just posting them, hoping that they would arrive. Which I think that had been very healing for Mary Gert over those years. But we also shared with Mary Gert and Dick just what they could expect in the show. They didn't want to read it, they were quite happy not to read it, but-

AC: And I think in fact Tim's father had not even read the book?

DB: Yes, to our surprise Dick told us that afternoon that he had not read the book.

[Sound effect swishes into Tommy Murphy's interview]

AC: Tell us about the opening night Tommy? Were you nervous?

TM: Well, the first opening night included Tim's family, so I didn't watch the play. I, you know, in that way that in the Griffin you can, and in every play in the Griffin you watch across the diamond-shaped stage and see the other members of the audience inform your experience of the play. For me, that night that meant that Mr and Mrs Conigrave were seated there, watching these strangers who had adapted their son's story, their story for the stage. I only watched what was going on for them. And they were incredibly generous and gracious in their response to the play. For Mr Conigrave, he had told us already they he had never been able to bring himself to read Tim's book. Mary Gert, his mother, had told us that she had a few glasses of wine and read it in one sitting one night. Only once, and uh, but ah, Dick Conigrave never managed to read the book. Yet he was prepared to sit in a public audience and watch our tampering with his son's story. I found that incredibly courageous and generous of him to do. And I was concerned for them and only watched their reactions all night.

AC: I don't think tampering is quite the right word, Tommy!

[Laughter]

TM: Realising it for a new form. [Laughter]

AC: And how did he react?

TM: It was like watching someone, I don't know, land a 747 or something, you know? Like he just this look on his face, gritting his teeth, sometimes kind of nudging the people around him. Like if there was a mention of someone in the play, there's a moment where his daughter is mentioned and he kind of nudged and pointed to her and had a joke with it. But the rest of the time it seemed to be a kind of... I don't know gritting his teeth, I was worried that it was agony or something. But the response that they spoke to us about afterwards was something else. They were incredibly proud of Tim, incredibly trusting of us in doing this adaptation, and at every sort of subsequent production and transfer that the show was lucky enough to have, they came along and they were very, very proud of their son.

AC: And you must have been proud of yourself, I mean this play really took off, didn't it?

TM: Relieved and surprised, yeah. It was meant to have a fairly short outing with just the Griffin audience, you know, that limited capacity. And then we extended for Mardi Gras in 2007, February 2007, and then we were so lucky, like it just kept on getting further opportunities. Melbourne, Brisbane, there was another production in Adelaide and then there were also... we made it to the West End as well. And David's production went to London. Then there were - there still are productions, I mean there is a production in Italy, there's a production about to happen in - a regional UK production, and there's one on the cards for Brazil. So, um some of those are translations as well, which is really interesting to see.

[Sound effect swishes into David Berthold's interview]

AC: And so there they were at opening night, or at one of the opening nights I think David, were they happy with the result?

DB: I remember Mary Gert being very vocal in the audience [soft laugh]. Just instinctively I think, just sort of saying, "That didn't happen." [Laughter] Or, or just muttering under her breath, which was very amusing for us. [Laughter] But they were incredibly proud, both of them. And in fact they, they came to many opening nights, the production had a very long history stretching through to London four years after it premiered, and Mary Gert was there as well, in London.

AC: So it was a triumph. Did you have an inkling then of the subsequent life that this play would have?

DB: We were very nervous about it, because it's such a deeply loved book and you know, to have never been out of print since it was published in '95. I think fourteen printings, I think, something like that. And if we'd got it wrong, we knew we would be barely forgiven [laugh], you know, for this first theatre adaptation, and no one might get another chance. But I think even on the very first preview performance, when we saw the response of the audience, we were aware that it was working, and certainly on opening night too that was even more evident. As you would expect, that first season was very well sold before we even began, just on the beam of the book, no other reason. But then it became obvious that there was a much wider audience available to it.

[Sound effect swishes into Tommy Murphy's interview]

AC: Did you enjoy the whole experience Tommy? Were you caught a bit off guard by its success?

TM: Well, it's sort of occupied my life for almost a decade, because after we finished the play I then set my sights on the film, and it takes a long time to raise the money... you know, and, and also for me to kind of gain the screen skills to make a feature film happen. So I think from that conversation in Beare Park through to the premiere of the film, yeah, that's a decade and ah, it really occupied a lot of my thinking time and a lot of my creative energy.

AC: Yeah, that's large chunk of your life thus far. What do you think has been the long-term impact of that on you personally?

TM: Well, there's this strange collaboration that happened with Tim Conigrave. He's a writer that I admire, greatly. I never got to meet Tim but yet, in a weird way I did. I learnt so much from Tim's brazen honesty. I think the trick to Tim's wit and why his story is so compelling is because he doesn't shy away from telling a truth. That at the time, he was writing was an uncomfortable truth, but he as everyone told us, you know, in every interview we did, and we did a lot of interviews with people that knew Tim and John, and everyone pretty much in some point in that interview would whisper to us, "You should know: Tim could be a bit of an arsehole". [Laughter] And I was like, "That's- that's abundantly clear!" But it's also why we have this remarkable memoir.

[Sound effect swishes into David Berthold's interview]

AC: So this was your last production for Griffin, David. Did you feel you'd explored every nook and cranny of that tiny stage by then?

DB: Yeah, I think that was probably one of the reasons for leaving. You know, I was directing about two or three productions a year in the season there at the Stables, and spatially there's not a lot you can do. And because of the economics of the building you know, you can rarely have plays with more than four or five actors involved. *Holding the Man* had six, so we actually invested quite a lot in it in those terms. But yeah, I think it was one of the factors for leaving.

AC: Do you think the success of *Holding the Man* had a lasting impact on Griffin and its reputation?

DB: Yeah, absolutely, and its history is studded with really famous premieres of plays that have had very long lives. You know, Michael Gow's *Away* in 1986, probably one of *the* most produced plays in the repertoire, um, you know, and Andrew Bovell's *Speaking in Tongues*, which went on to be the film *Lantana* of course. *The Boys*, which has had two productions, a very famous first production and then a subsequent revival. And *Holding the Man* is part of that. Um... but they're just the really famous ones, there are also, of course, many dozens of others that have had various lives beyond their first productions.

AC: And so, in your mind what's special about the Stables, about that place?

DB: I think it's the obvious things, it's the intimacy and... it's very rare to be able to see actors very close up like that. There's something quite special too, about that triangle shape I think, that you do experience the production with the audience on the other side of you, but they're not, they're not *directly* opposite you they're oblique. And I think that obliqueness I think is helpful, I think, and in fact you know the early inhabitants of that Stables, you know the Nimrod folk, you know, when they moved to Belvoir. When that stage was being designed at Belvoir, they essentially reproduced the

Stables space, just bigger, because - in fact the same designer, same architect, designed both spaces the Stables and Belvoir - because they thought that that, that essential relationship between actor and audience needed to be maintained but also amplified. Which is why Belvoir now, of course that stage is now one of the very best stages in the world.

AC: And so, why do you think it's important - the Stables Theatre in the whole, you know, cornucopia of Australia theatres?

DB: It's the act of nurturing and, not only playwrights, you know. It's dedicated to Australian work, and particularly new Australian work, and in more recent times some, you know, key revivals. Which I think can be a good part of Griffin's life. But not just playwrights, it's also actors, designers and so on. You know, the very long list of professional artists who have begun working there, you know, I mean the the famous ones like Cate Blanchett and so on, who had their first gig there with *Kafka Dances* as an actor. But also if you look at Tommy's work, *Strangers In Between*, that was designed by Alice Babidge, who - that was her first gig out of NIDA, and now she's on the top flight of stage designers around the world, you know, working in the Komische Oper in Berlin, and the Deutsche Oper, and all over the place. And there are, you know, multitudes of others, designers and actors as well as playwrights who, who speak of that space really fondly.

[Sound effect swishes into Tommy Murphy Interview]

AC: And so of course, because we are here celebrating 50 Years of the Stables, Tommy, how would you describe the experience of working there, in that space ?

TM: Well, there is no hiding on that stage, there's no hiding for the director, no hiding for the actors. There is something about the architecture of the space that also means there is no hiding for the writer, and that is why it is the great new writing theatre in Australia. It's in the architecture and the history. And you feel it just in the smell of that building, the reputation, but everybody that works there as well comes with the dedication to that cause and we know that they work with limited resources but extreme passion and talent to do something that is very difficult, to be articulating a response to our world right now. It's a crucial time for new writing, it's a crucial time to be asking what is the truth? And how can we be kinder to each other? All of these things that new plays do so well. It's a place that is loaded with its history but has this ongoing potential to stop the traffic and make us know who are more fully. It's a very, very special place.

[Sound effect swishes into David Berthold's interview]

AC: And so David, the experience and success of *Holding the Man* must have occupied your life for a long time. Did it have a personal impact on you?

DB: It did, and it returned to the Stables in Griffin's Season in 2007 after I had left the company, as a revival. And then later that year, the Sydney Opera House picked it up. So it went over to the Opera House, into the Playhouse, for a three week season where you couldn't get a ticket. And then Melbourne Theatre Company picked it up for its Subscription Season in 2008, I think. And then so it went! So I have, over the next - over two or three years after the premiere, actually - a lot of my time was spent restaging *Holding the Man* in various places. Before it finally went off to the West End in London in 2010. But for me personally, it had a big impact as well, in that it underlined, for me, the powerful impact that a piece of theatre can have on the lives of others. You know, everyone involved in that production can tell you stories of being approached by people, not only in foyers but beyond foyers, in tears, telling us how much Tim's story, but also the theatre production, meant to them in shifting their own lives. And that was incredibly sustaining for all of us involved in the

production, the actors and everyone, the actors of course bearing the brunt of a lot of, a lot of those moments.

AC: Fantastic, David thank you so much.

DB: Thanks Angela.

AC: Tommy Murphy, it's just been great to talk.

TM: Thank you Angela.

[music]

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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