

SPOTLIGHT

THE PRAM IN 1981

Approaching a hair pin bend

Every year for the past three I have dutifully clambered up the steps at 325 Drummond Street as the early autumn sun fitfully rises over Lygon Street, cassette recorder in one hand and recent press releases in the other, and asked the infernal question, about directions for the coming year.



by Suzanne Spinner

To put this question to any other theatre company would be superfluous in the extreme, but around the Pram the answer is of vital importance because past practice is never taken for granted. Moreover in recent years, when it has been under threat from all flanks, the question has been posed in the most fundamental terms — will it survive, if so, how and in what form?

Every year if I have not exactly come away with "the answer", I have at least impaled the key phrases and maintained an up to date lexicon of the shifts in vocabulary around the place. The key phrases for 1979 were, "New Economic Policy", "Semi Autonomous Projects" and "Positive Discrimination in favour of women"; in 1980 the big word was "Ensemble" and all references to director were to be excised henceforth and replaced by "mediator". Phrases from earlier times still rang around the building — "Collective" (as in "Collective meeting", "Collective decision", "Collective hassles" etc etc), "Self-management", "Group-devised" and "Theatre worker" tended to be stayers.

I'm happy to report that this year is no different, except that the words currently in vogue have a familiar ring to them, in fact you could almost say that they have been resurrected or, as it might be said, revalued and reinstated. They are "Director" as in, "outside directors", "new directors", "the need to foster the growth of..."; and "Writer" as in "outside playwrights", "new playwrights", "the need to foster the growth of...".

Thus in the first issue of *APG News* incorporating *The Perambulator* and *The APG Newsletter* we find:

The APG this year will help five directors to get their projects off the ground. At a time when arts funding is being severely reduced, the Directors programme is a boldly progressive scheme. The successful applicants are David Kendall, Roger Pulvers, Peter Friedrich, Richard Murphett and Val Kirwan. Although the five proposals are different, they are all concerned with exploiting the possibilities of unusual texts.

The General Manager of the APG, John Timlin described the new policy of allocating a proportion of the budget for outside directors to work at the

Pram as, "the most radical turn around — in the past directors were superfluous, at best". He added that the Ensemble (who are now known as the Core Group) had begun to feel the need to get people in to direct; and it was on this basis that Nick Lathouris came in and directed the Ensemble's most recent show, *Kate Kelly's Travelling Circus*. Now it has become a matter of supplementing the greatly depleted Ensemble and ultimately arriving at an ensemble company "in a more organic way". So it was decided to give the directors a chance to open up the place.

Though the Ensemble actually chose the programme, "choosing the directors was choosing the programme because each director's application was on the basis of a particular programme. But," he added, "they have had absolute freedom in casting." The two productions to date, David Kendall's production of *The Real Life Of Sebastian Melmoth* and Roger Pulvers' production of *The Two-Headed Calf* have included no APG actors and only one actor who has worked previously in an APG production. Timlin added that as yet a form between the different groups had not developed, but that he had hopes that it would eventuate, and from that rapport and exchange at least the basics of the 1982 programme might emerge.

Jon Hawkes, long time APG member, has only recently returned

with Circus Oz and he finds the move toward directors an "interesting" volte face: "I guess I find it ironic that the APG now sees as its saving grace the Directors' Development Fund. It's very funny that a group that has been so anti-director ends up saving itself by employing directors. But on the other hand it's a great idea because it's good to have a group other than the Theatre Board making decisions about which directors are supported, simply because it means you get a different point of view."

The search for new playwrights has been a recurrent enterprise since 1978 when their first major playwriting competition led to the production of Barry Dickins' *Foolshoe Hotel* and Stephen Sewell's *Traitors*. The judging of this year's competition has only recently been finalised. In excess of a hundred scripts were received and read by the Core Group — Peter King, Denis Moore, Richard Healey, Danny Nash and Val Lekowitz. According to Timlin there were many Williamson imitators and would-be or actual television writers. He added that the competition obviously does a lot to publicise the fact that the Pram Factory is still in existence.

There have been a number of scripts coming in after the closing date. These are still being read because there is a commitment in the competition to mount productions of two scripts, and

as yet only one, *Steel City Sister* by Joy Wiedersatz, has been definitely programmed. In addition six rehearsed readings of new Australian writing have already been presented on Sunday afternoons, and more are scheduled. The readings have included selections from the current Playwrights' Competition as well as new works by established writers: Jack Hibberd and George Dreyfus' new musical comedy, *Smash Hit*, which had been commissioned last year through the Music Board of the Australia Council was recently read. These readings have aroused considerable interest and have been attended by between eighty and one hundred people, and as well have provided an invaluable service to the writers themselves.

In addition to producing the two plays chosen from the Playwrights' Competition, the Core Group are in the process of devising a portable music theatre piece and they will be performing later this year in the new play by Tim Robertson based on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

As John Timlin said this time, and has no doubt said before — "The Pram has a way of coming good every time there's a crisis."

Indeed I imagine in a year's time I'll be back there again and that then the key words may well be "new venue" and "organically created company".