

# **SPEAKING IN TONGUES**

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BY ANDREW BOVELL

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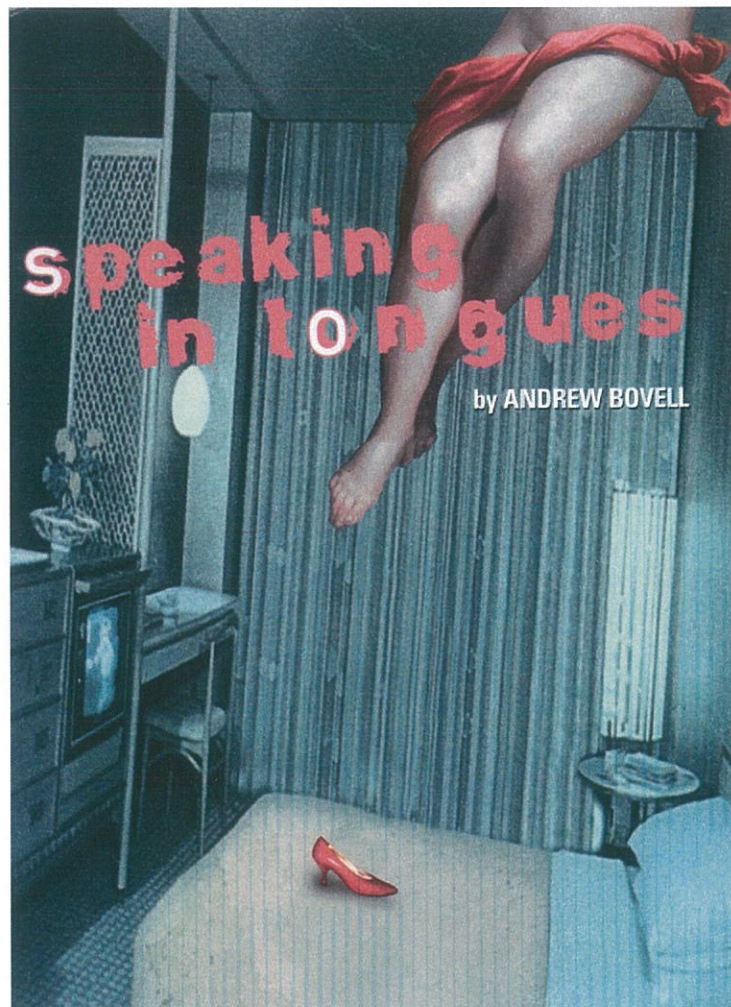
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Malthouse Education  
presents:

# ***SPEAKING IN TONGUES***

*by Andrew Bovell*



## **EDUCATION NOTES**

# *Speaking in Tongues*

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## EDUCATION NOTES

Malthouse Education presents these notes to both teachers and students, not as a definitive study, but as a jumping off point to their understanding of the text. We encourage all students to explore the play, see the performance and read the notes to assist in their VCE Literature studies. We also encourage them to respond to the play in terms of the relevance it has to their lives and what it says about contemporary Australian society and about contemporary theatre and literature.

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### *CONTENTS*

<i>INTERVIEWS:</i>	<i>PAGE</i>
Andrew Bovell - playwright	2
Greg Stone - director Discovery Seminar 2004	10
Ros Horin – director 1998 production	15
Questions for Analysis and Discussion	18
Reviews	22
Further Resources	27

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## **INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT OF 'SPEAKING IN TONGUES', ANDREW BOVELL**

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**Andrew Bovell spoke to Playbox shortly before the opening of the 1998 production of his play, *Speaking in Tongues*.**

**Andrew, would you talk about the starting point for writing *Speaking in Tongues* and about the journey of the play's creation.**

It's had a number of starting points over a number of years. Ros Horin commissioned me to write a companion piece to two earlier plays: *Like Whisky on the Breath of the Drink You Love* and *Distant Lights from Dark Places*. But neither of us was interested in doing that sort of anthology idea unless there were thematic overlaps between the pieces. Once I embarked upon that, I actually became interested in incorporating all three pieces into the one work. Even though each piece had a separate place or a separate inception, the writing process became to be about incorporating the characters and themes into the same world. So, that was its starting point.

Thematically, the starting points were about ideas of trust and betrayal, and the quest for meaning. They're fairly broad themes but I tend to write about people who are yearning for meaning (in one form or another) in a very modern, contemporary context - especially their yearning for meaning in their emotional life. So the play is really about the conduct of emotions between men and women in particular; how that breaks down; what happens when it breaks down; what are the consequences of those kinds of breakdowns.

When you write a play you have the expectation that you'll tell a story and that you'll stay with those characters for a particular amount of time and then, at the end of it, say goodbye to them. What this commission allowed me to do was to extend those characters beyond their original parameters. I was haunted by the material in *Distant Lights from Dark Places*. At the core of it is the story of a woman whose car breaks down and she accepts a lift from a stranger and she never gets home. So there is a mystery. And it was an open-ended mystery in terms of the fact that we never really found out what happened. So suddenly I had to come back to this; I had to re-examine the mystery, and that was quite an exciting challenge for me as a playwright. But I also had the opportunity to therefore take these people beyond where I'd got them to before.

Now a short play is like a short story and it really can only carry one clear idea, and you can explore that. A full-length play needs to carry several large ideas. So here I was aiming to take these people beyond their initial premise; to explore them in other situations. So the writing of the play was really driven by exploration of these people.

I'm also very interested in form and structure and dramatic shape. Stories are important to me but I try to tell the stories in ways that we're not used to seeing them. So I try to go beyond the traditional sense of linear narrative.

My structures tend to be more lateral so that the plot or story jumps sideways or backwards.

Truth is a very important theme in the lay, so the play tells the same story in a number of different ways. And each time we get different aspects. I describe it as being like a diamond. It's cut like a diamond with many face[t]s; you turn the diamond around and it's not until you've viewed it from all angles that you get a sense of the beauty of the whole. Or it's like a tightly woven rug - you pull out one strand and the whole thing unravels. They're the kind of structural things that really interest me.

Stylistically the play moves, it jumps, it begins as one thing (a cliché - a man and a woman in a motel room in the act of cheating on their husband and wife respectively), but the catch is that there's another couple doing the same thing in another hotel room and those two scenes are playing simultaneously. So a lot of language overlaps. It uses language in a musical way: there are a lot of refrains, a lot of echoes, a lot of doubling up. We have this largely comic opening as we see two married couples in a state of crisis cheating on one another. But, then gradually the play turns darker.

Another useful image is *dropping a pebble in a pond and its ripples outwards* - but it also kind of ripples downwards. So you examine the same situation but at increasingly deep levels - if you like. We're watching a lot of relationships that are going through a difficult time but each look is a little deeper and a little darker.

I should maybe explain the structure of the play. It's written in three parts. Each part has been written for the same four actors - two men and two women - but there are nine characters. So it breaks all the traditional rules of playwriting because characters are discarded in the process of the play, and the new ones introduced. Only one character who is there at the beginning is there at the end. The parts are mutually exclusive but also the people's stories cross over from one part to the other. It's partly about people telling other people's stories in the quest to understand their lives. Again, I go back to the thing about the yearning for meaning in our lives, in the modern world. For instance, in the first half of the play, one of the characters - LEON - tells a story about bumping into this guy while jogging and watching the man break down, and then being captivated by this and confronted by it. He can't understand why he's fascinated by this stranger. Anyway, he sees him a few more times - and eventually this man tells him this story. LEON tells us this man's story in part one of the play. In part two we actually get to meet the man, and we hear the story from *his* point of view.

The play is very much about story-telling; people telling one another stories; people relating to incidents that they've seen. And we keep seeing those incidents from different points of view.



***Did you create any new characters when you put the two original plays together?***

Yes, I did. In the piece which is called *Like Whisky on the Breath of the Drunk You Love*, there are four characters: LEON, SONJA, JANE and PETE. In *Distant Lights from Dark Places*, there are another separate set of four characters: NICK NEIL, VALERIE and SARAH. Now, in part three of *Speaking in Tongues*, I bring back LEON from part one; and I bring back VALERIE and SARAH from part two; and I create a new character whose name is JOHN and he happens to be married to VALERIE. The fascinating thing about this piece is that I've come back to it. I think the first go – the *Like Whisky* part – was written in 1992, and I've continually come back to it and looked at new aspects. Recently, Deidre Rubenstein commissioned me to write some monologues for her show *Confidentially Yours*, which was seen at Playbox earlier this year (1997). In that I wrote about a woman called PAULA who happens to be the wife of one of the characters in *Speaking in Tongues*! So it's extending the world of the play into all sorts of aspects. It's almost like they have a world out there, beyond me. It's quite convoluted and quite comprehensive.

***Were there any revelations for you in creating the larger work that came from that process that weren't there in the original pieces? I mean, were there larger things that you were able to say or was it really just an extension of your original ideas?***

Well, I hope it's larger. I hope the sum total of the parts is larger than each part in itself – or a fuller, richer experience. I was able to push the stories further and further and further beyond the initial limitations so I could go in deeper to the psychology of these people and what was going on. Also, it's a mystery, so, again, I was able to continue to explore different facets of the mystery.

***Is research a part of your writing process at all?***

Yes, it is. I regard research as vital but there are two kinds for me: one is formal, where I need to know a specific thing, or I need to know about a specific context or a specific world – in which case I go out and research it. This has particularly been the case with my earlier work when I wrote a series of plays about trade unionism and work – the changing nature of work. I really needed to go out and research those things. Then there's the process of informal research where, as a writer, you tend to be the sort of person who watches, listens and observes and thinks. Now that feels like it's going on all the time. The continual collection of experience, both through your life and the observation of other lives, is an important part of research.

***So was there any formal research involved in 'Speaking in Tongues'?***

No, *Speaking in Tongues* is very much an intuitive piece of writing, I would say. I've not censored myself in trying to control where it comes from. The writing itself is very controlled; it's very stylised in parts; very formally

constructed; very tightly structured. But where it's come from – the murky depths of emotion – is very unclear.

***To what extent is your own personal experience of life reflected in your work? Not necessarily actual events, but rather the way you see the world. As a playwright do you tend to rely on yourself as a resource a lot? Or do you go out of yourself and into the world for material?***

Well, it's both. I think if you just rely on yourself, you're going to eventually dry up. What I try to do is be very open and aware of the world around me so that is continually informing the stuff that I carry. So, yes, there's a level of perception that means that you're listening, and not only listening to what is heard but listening to the *sub-text of life*. Sensing what people are thinking; sensing what's being exchanged between people; sensing the mood of situations. I think you need fairly heightened awareness of all that stuff if you want to write about this business called LIFE.

***Would you comment on the STYLE of the play. Do you have any stylistic influences or are you working on trying to extend the boundaries of theatrical style?***

I would hope that I'm trying to extend the boundaries but the stylistic premise could be described as *realism* or *naturalism* that has then been subverted. The language tends to be *heightened* – it *reflects* the way we speak as opposed to being a direct transcript of the way we speak. I like to write about people who talk, but who are not necessarily articulate people. I like to write about people who are trying to communicate but don't necessarily have the facility to. That has a direct influence on my dialogue – there's a lot of hesitation; there's a lot of qualification; there's a lot of repetition. Actors say that my lines are very difficult to learn because I repeat lines and they lose themselves very easily. There are a lot of 'ums' in my work! I really push the nuance of human language. I talked before about the work being musical. When you switch off to what it means and you just listen, it's a very aural experience. And that's because it's structured in a similar way to music – it's composed.

I'm not always aware of what style I'm working within. I write the work intuitively and then look at the end and say, "Oh, I see what I've done". With *Speaking in Tongues* what I've done is to continually change the style of the work. As I was saying, we have this simultaneous, overlapping '*dance-song*' at the beginning which then moves into quite a naturalistic two-hander – a sequence of naturalistic, two-handed scenes. Then, in the second half of the play it becomes a fractured, broken-down, fragmented slice of drama. It then moves back again into two naturalistic scenes but occurring at the same time with the repetition of language. Now, I don't know how you describe that stylistically – I need a critic to do that for me!

One critic has talked about this work as '*teetering on the edge of credibility*'. And they were actually talking about my writing in general. They said I managed to tread this very fine line between what is recognisable in the world



and what is treated as art, or what is heightened – and that can be quite effective as drama.

***When you're writing, do you have a strong visual sense of the piece? Do you imagine what the set might be or do you just write the words and let the designer or the director do the visual work?***

Well I try not to impose design upon the work. There are a couple of rules for me: I write with very few props in mind. The less business there is on stage, the better it is for me – 'business' in terms of boiling kettles, making cups of tea, eating food, handling objects...whatever. If the production then comes to introduce those things that's fine, but I try to pare that all back. So I go through a number of stages. First I try to write it imagining these people in the real place they would be. Then I bring it into the theatre in my imagination. Minimal aesthetics, that's what I see. My focus is the actor, and my focus is what they're doing and what they're saying. Beyond that, what they're wearing and notions of set, I really keep open.

Lighting is very important to me. I always tend to see light – who's in the light, who's not in the light; how bright it is, how subdued it is; how atmospheric it is. Then, of course, it's always a great delight when you have a strong lighting designer and a strong designer who take the clues from the text and create something. But I'm very wary of design being imposed upon the play. I don't like clutter, I don't like substantial objects on stage. I don't usually respond very well to naturalistic design. It think it is really odd, in the age of television and cinema, that when we come to the theatre and we sit and we're asked to pretend this is somebody's lounge room. It just doesn't add up. But, if the play is set in somebody's lounge room and the design subverts that in some way, then it becomes very interesting. For instance, hanging a painting upside down on a wall, or making the chairs really small. Something like that, some kind of comment. As long as it's related to what the play's about then design becomes really interesting.

But I do have a healthy respect for a designer's work and tend not to be prescriptive in the play. So, I never write stage directions like: *actor exits stage left* or *there is a door centre stage* – or any of that sort of stuff. That's very old-fashioned. I think most modern playwrights – or most experienced playwrights – steer right away from that type of thing.

***Andrew, you write for film and television as well as theatre. What do you see as being the difference? With the debate about theatre becoming a dying art form because of film and television, what do you think theatre has to offer that film and television do not?***

Where theatre gets in trouble is when it just tries to tell a straight, linear narrative because television and film handle that so well that the theatre can never attempt to compete. But theatre is very capable of distorting reality so that you gain a new insight; a heightened reality. Theatre is also a great medium for words, for language. Film tends to be a visual medium. As a film writer you've continually got to try to find visual representation of your ideas or

your story components. In theatre you have the privilege of really letting the characters speak. You can create very interesting structural patterns in the theatre that you can't in film. Well, you can but your work would be quite obscure! In film there is a dominant structure that it's basically a sense of three acts – beginning, a middle and an end. When I see theatre that's trying to work within that structure, I get very bored and very restless. When I see theatre that's trying to work outside of that, I get very excited. Thus, this idea that I talk about in *Speaking in Tongues* of the lateral movement of narrative. We move across and up an urban landscape and, as we do, we pick up a whole lot of contemporary stories. That, for me, is a far more interesting viewing experience in the theatre.

I'm presently in the process of adapting *Speaking in Tongues* for a film (*Lantana* - see interview in resources section of these notes) and there's no way I can employ such a structure in film. I've got to bring it into line, and it's very hard. I've got to create it within the same temporal and physical space, if you like. I've got to make sure all the events occur in chronological sequence. It doesn't mean the film can't move backwards – it does through flashback and flashforward – but they're just devices. In the theatre you can do that without the employment of tricky devices.

There are many other differences but the bottom line is I'm a writer and I'm a story-teller, and I look to all three media – stage, television and film – as being places where I can tell those stories. But my relationship to the audience is very different in each case. In the theatre I'm closest to the audience. My experience of the audience response is the clearest and strongest, and you're also honoured in the theatre in a way that you're not in television and film; you're much more anonymous in electronic media. The writing in theatre is seen as the centre and that's a very privileged position to be in, hence I'll continue to keep writing for the theatre, I hope.

***Have you been involved at all in the rehearsal process for this production?***

Yes. This isn't the first production of the play. It was originally produced by the Griffin Theatre Company in 1996, so I was there during that rehearsal process, for about the first week, and for the previews. In this new production at Playbox, it's the same director and the same set designer, but a new cast and costume designer. I have also done some new writing. In fact, the third part of the play is entirely rewritten so it was very important for me to be on the floor in those first couple of days. For this production the cast and director are rehearsing in Sydney so I've been up there. Prior to that I have had conversations with the director, Ros Horin, about how we can further the work; how we can push it further; how we can polish it more.

There comes a certain point when you've got to pull out. It's about handing the material over to them. I think it's a mistake for writers to hand around all the time because actors go through a process where they embrace the work and then they want to reject it; they want to tear it up and throw it on the ground and walk all over it. Now they need to do that to get to a point of re-

owning it for themselves. It's a bit like they're killing the demon of the writer so that they can claim it. It's not good for a writer to be around during that process because it tends to create conflict and you don't get anywhere. So I strategically remove myself to let the actors get on and do their thing and let the director establish a clear line of communication with them. But, at a certain point, I'll come back in – and that's usually at the first preview. That's very crucial because that's a point at which, if I'm not satisfied, I must speak up (or any writer must speak up) and say, "Well, no. this isn't working" or "That's not working". So it's a top and tail thing; you're there at the beginning and you're not there at the end.

***Do you think of playwrights in Australia as having a particular role in society?***

Yes, I do think there's a particular role. I hesitate because I don't think our role is any more special than any other role, it's just one of the roles that makes up the fabric of society. But, look, there are things wrong with our society. There is injustice in our society. Somebody – or a whole range of people, but artists in particular, not only writers – need to take a stand and challenge injustice. Or they need to address where they see society breaking down. I feel like they also need to speak for people who don't have a voice. Now, with *Speaking in Tongues*, that's not necessarily the case. I'm not writing about any particular disadvantaged group, but I have done so in a lot of my work. I've actively sought to represent the powerless.

I think there is also another role for art and that's about challenging the political status quo; provoking; challenging the powers that be. I've just been involved in a show called *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* that was performed at Trades Hall in the midst of the wharfies' dispute. That play's function and purpose was very clear. We set out to tell the stories of people who weren't happy and content and secure. It was a play about people who were suffering the consequences of economic rationalist policies for the past decade. People recognized that here was a group of writers and actors, and a director taking a stand. So, I think there's a very vital and important role for the artist to play. It's also a very privileged role; it's a role open to abuse. I think it's dangerous when theatre starts to lack politics. It's okay for things just to entertain but it's better if they can entertain AND take on something important; say something very meaningful. I guess that's where I'm coming from.

***What would you hope that the audience is thinking about when they leave the theatre after seeing 'Speaking in Tongues'?***

Well, I guess there are two levels: one is 'Who did it?' because it is a mystery. So I want the audience coming out engaged by the story and the characters on the level of 'Did she do that to him because of this?', "Did he lie to her because of that?' 'What happened to Valerie?' etc. etc. I want them to be engaged by the story and to try to make the connections.

On a deeper level, however, I guess I'd want them to be asking the same questions that I think the play's asking: 'How do I make meaning in what is an increasingly complex life?', 'How do I survive this life?', 'How do I conduct myself within it?', 'What's my way forward?'. So, it's about asking those deeper kinds of questions. I hope the play reflects back to people, their own situation. Not that everybody is out there engaged in the act of betrayal, but I think we're all, in one way or another, confused about what is right and wrong. We're a secular society, we don't – on the whole – turn to the church to provide us with moral guidance. On the whole we tend to resist dogma – which is one of the wonderful things about our society. But, without dogma, we're a bit lost sometimes in terms of really just grasping notions of right and wrong.

There's a quote in the play where one of the characters says, '*I don't know what's right or wrong anymore*'. That sums it up. This play is about nine people who don't know what's right or wrong anymore.

## INTERVIEW WITH GREG STONE, DIRECTOR OF 'SPEAKING IN TONGUES' – Discovery Seminars 2004

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***Greg, as an actor, what did you find most appealing about the play, 'Speaking in Tongues'?***

Well, the language is so wonderful. It's such a treat to perform any of these roles but what is particularly special about this play is the challenge of playing what seems like an intensely naturalistic scene but what is written in such a structure that needs to be choreographed. That's what sets it apart from any other play. You are intensely in the scene and playing the scene with the person opposite you and yet you have to play it like music because there are other people doing it around you and you have to fit into that. So that's appealing and that's a great challenge as an actor.

***What are the challenges of learning lines for a play like this?***

You have to learn it by rote really, I find, and you have to learn everybody else's part as well as your own and you have to be really learning and listening for cues. So, I think that is the challenge that you have when you are in rehearsal with 'Speaking in Tongues', that often you play a few lines with another actor, but then there is a big gap where somebody else is doing their bit. As an actor you have to work out what you are doing that 'down period' and keep it 'alive'. You have to, essentially, invent a reason to be quiet. And that is the fun and the challenge of the play in rehearsal; what is actually going on during the silences or while the focus is actually somewhere else.

***As an actor, is this a play where you really need to listen on stage?***

Absolutely! It's one of those plays where if you fall off, it would be hard to ad lib your way out of, although, this year we did have a few occasions where we did do that. More than anything else, it's a very complex script. You have to listen, know where you are up and not 'fall off' the play which would be disastrous.

***Taking a step out of the play as an actor; what appealed to you in terms of directing?***

When some of the same things that appealed to me as actor appealed to me as a director; the beautiful language and the challenge of making the right choices. But, as a director, it was the challenge of making each story heard. That was one of the main challenges; making sure that one of the couple's story was as foregrounded as the other couple's story. Not one getting swamped but each of them matched each other. I found that technically tricky and always something to watch out for, particularly in the latter scenes of the play where there is so much going on and so many stories being told on stage. As a director it was a real challenge to direct it so that an audience can easily know where to look and know where the focus is and make sure that each story resonated as much as the other.

The other pleasure of directing this play was being able to immerse yourself into these very human ideas and throwing oneself into that. It is a very intimate play, with very intimate relationships. Actors have to keep themselves very vulnerable in order to play those characters. They are very personal stories.

***Do you think it is a play that is written for actors of a 'certain age'?***

Absolutely! I think it's a play of the late thirties or early forties really because a lot of it is to do with infidelity in a marriage that has gone on for some time. There is a lot of middle aged angst and problems that are discussed in the play. What was interesting when we did it for students was that we were worried that it was very middle class and very mid-life in its issues but when we put that to the students they said, 'No; they're all problems that we've had'. 'We've all had relationships too you know and they break down'. It was good to find that, that the play actually spoke to young people and also that they have parents who are going through divorces and marital problems. Really though, the deeper themes of the play go beyond just that. They are about trust and betrayal, infidelity.

***We gave you a difficult job. We said that you couldn't perform the whole play but would you select some key scenes to rehearse and perform. So why these four scenes?***

Well, in some ways its heart breaking choosing the scenes because the whole play is so beautiful that you just want to perform the whole thing. But - we had to choose the very first scene because it is the most surprising. Actually the whole play is very surprising but it is very surprising how it starts, with the double infidelity in two hotel rooms simultaneously. It is one of the most difficult scenes to perform in Australian theatre, I believe. So we had to attack that one. I think that scene also really sets the play off because it is very personal and is a very simple story - two couples, a double infidelity, with each other's partners. I then chose the scenes with Leon and Pete in a bar and Sonja and Jane in a bar, in order to see a male and then a female perspective and we were then able to explore the characters further. There is also a surprising twist at the end of each of these scenes which increased the interest. There was a lot of discussion about the last scene to choose, but finally we chose the one in Part 3 which explores communication break down on a larger scale. So we see the couples in a broader picture [remembering that we also see the actors playing other characters in this scene].

***So, some of the things that influenced your choices were; structure of the text, themes within the play, points of view, would this be right?***

Yes, indeed, but part of me still wanted to keep some of the narrative running through the four scenes just so that you feel you are seeing and hearing a story. That aspect also influenced the choice of scenes. As well, I wanted to allow each of the actors a chance to have a strong acting experience and I wanted to challenge and entertain the students.



***You were mentioning before that some of the themes explored in the play may be considered to be universal. So what do you believe the play is essentially saying?***

Andrew Bovell said that the play started off being about how to make meaning in an increasingly complex life, so it is a search for meaning. In some ways all these characters are feeling spiritually bereft, all trying to find something in their lives to grab hold of. It is a play about break down in relationships, how that happens, how human beings become isolated and have trouble communicating. It is also a play about story telling, people like to tell stories. They tell lies, they tell the truth, they tell the truth and are completely misunderstood, they tell lies and they are believed. They even tell lies to themselves and believe their own lies. So, for me, it is a play about story telling. Beyond that Bovell has a love of telling complex stories himself so he really enjoys doing that in this play, and I feel he almost says, 'Ah, ha! This will really get an audience thinking!' Bovell loves theatre and there is a certain intrigue in this play.

***Yes there is. It is a kind of mystery, would you agree?***

Oh yes. A lot of the characters don't know what is really going on and are struggling to work out what is right and what is wrong. It is a bit of thriller.

***It seems to be a text that doesn't work unless it is performed.***

Yes, indeed. We found that we didn't really understand the play until we started speaking it and getting up on the floor and performing it. More than any other play I know it is a play that has to be performed. Because, even though the actors are speaking lines life is still going on and to watch the play and to watch that other action between the lines is to reveal the true meaning of the play.

***It is perhaps a play that relies on a complicity between the audience and the playwright.***

Yes, there is an enormous amount of irony. The characters are a part in a complete picture that the audience is getting but the characters are not. The audience are in some ways one step ahead of the characters. Usually in theatre you want to be ahead of the audience but in *Speaking in Tongues* the audience are ahead and the joy for the audience is watching the characters catch up.

***Greg, how did you approach the play in the rehearsal room? Did you have any particular directorial approaches that you used?***

We worked on it very musically to begin with in order to see what would happen once we just read it. To gain maximum intensity in the relationship scenes, for example in that first scene with the two couples, we took one couple away and just worked on them as separate scenes and then put them back together again. To a certain degree, the first scene has to be

approached very technically and it was an opportunity for the two couples to explore the scene as if they were alone on stage.

We used certain techniques at various times to raise the stakes for the characters. For example we would inject or impose certain things into the scenes such as asking the actors to imagine they were being watched by their respective partners, exploring what this would do to the scenes to raise the stakes. To technically find a moment within the scene where they actually physically touched the other actor, which may not have anything to do with the reality of the moment but just to remind the audience that, in their mind, they are thinking of their partner.

In the final scene we worked - which is in some ways the hardest because it takes us out on a country road, into somebody's lounge room, in a police interview room, all on the one stage, all happening simultaneously - we played around with staging that in relation to finding focus and what to focus on or what an audience would focus on. As a group of actors they were very intelligent and it was a joy to work with them. They were constantly thinking and constantly bringing in ideas each day to the rehearsal room, so the scenes were shifting a lot. Even once we were in performance it started shifting again and we began to really explore the depths of the scenes although, admittedly these depths are vast.

The other thing that is interesting about this play as a director is that any good and intelligent actor can play any of these roles because it's not a play about character - this character is this, or this character is that. Whatever actor plays the role can bring something to it and create something special. The characters are whoever the actor is as long as they are good.

***Would you agree that the intellectual nature of the play is very appealing to an actor?***

Yes, it's like a game of chess.

***In what way does the language of the play frame or drive the story?***

Certainly, it is a very important part of it and it does drive it. There are certain scenes where single words are picked up by different characters and given new meaning, re-emphasised or even juxtaposed by another character. So single words become very important.

***Do you think that in a play about miscommunication it is an irony or paradox that it is language that drives it?***

Absolutely, yes. That is Bovell's game. He is playing a game with the idea of how we misunderstand each other through our use of language. How often we just hang on to what someone is saying and try to read the signs but not really understanding. 'Speaking in Tongues' is such a great title in that regard. It's that thing of twisting the words or them not arriving with the meaning that was intended.

***In terms of the Discovery Seminars and the discussion with the students, how effective or what value were these sessions for you as a director and also for the actors?***

It was fantastic because they were great students! They were all very focused and it was very challenging for us at times with some of the questions that were directed, we really had to think. I was impressed with the passion the students had in relation to discussing this play. They also kept us on our metal and kept us honest. It helped us explore the play all together.

***Did the students present or suggest an idea or reading of the play that perhaps had not occurred to you?***

Not really, no. They certainly told us when they thought things didn't work, for example, when we tried things in a different way in certain scenes they were able to see that they didn't work in the broader context of the play.

***What was that experience like - redirecting on the floor?***

It was great, and the actors loved that too, because it is a chance to experiment and if it doesn't work, it doesn't matter. I remember that we played the scene in the bar with Leon and Pete, where Leon discovers that his infidelity was with Pete's wife. We took one direction where Pete actually knew that it was Leon, we just added that knowledge in order to explore how it would change the scene. It changed it totally. It was very entertaining to watch and the students loved watching it but, in the context of the whole play, it didn't work. But it was interesting as far as being an actor and a director was concerned. The status changed so it was like, 'Knowledge is power'.

So, while you can play around with individual scenes in this format, in the broader context of the play they simply don't work because the whole meaning and the stakes are different.

***Is there any particular advice you have for students who are studying this text?***

You must get up on the floor and do it. Read it out aloud, do that first scene on the floor and hear it. Speaking and acting it will discover ten times as much as just sitting down and studying it. It is a visual and aural play. So that would be my advice.

***So do you feel that the play requires much physical action or business?***

I think the play actually could be done very simply in terms of staging and action but I still think it is a very difficult play to do well. It is easy to stuff it up. Ultimately, I think it needs to look simple but under that there should be lots of ducks feet swimming madly. We found when we were working on it that it opened up like an onion. We would think, 'Oh, we have an understanding of this', but then realised that there is another layer, and another layer, and

another layer. It is so complex that you could keep on working on this play for months and months and still be finding new things.

***In the final scene, the character of Sarah only has four lines but has to create and occupy a very particular world - her world in her own lounge room - for the duration of the scene. Somehow she has to create that world through simple action because, without each of the simultaneous worlds, the scene doesn't make sense. Would you agree?***

Yes, and she does that with letters, lots and lots of letters. I remember that Natasha (Natasha Herbert) found that quite difficult to do, particularly as the other characters had either larger action or many more words in which to create their particular world. It is one of the challenges that Bovell has set his actors and his audience

***Is there anything else you would like to say about the play and the experience of directing it?***

In terms of the themes and ideas in the play I think that it is a play about trust and betrayal, a search for meaning in life, lies and communication, crime and misdemeanor, intimacy, synchronicity and resonance. I think that the last one, resonance, is important. There are so many aspects within the play that resonate with us and with each other and I think that the play is very carefully constructed in that regard. Six degrees of separation, if you like.

## **INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR OF 'SPEAKING IN TONGUES', ROS HORIN**

Ros Horin spoke to Playbox shortly before the opening of the 1997 production of *Speaking in Tongues*

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***Ros, what aspects of the play attracted you to directing 'Speaking in Tongues'?***

I had worked on a shorter version of this play that was the inspiration for developing the full-length play, *Speaking in Tongues*. It originally existed as a short play called *Like Whisky on the Breath of a Drunk that you Love* and that was a very exciting piece to work on because it experiments with form – the actors using language and a choral, musical approach to the text. It was interesting in that and I was also interested in the subject matter of the piece and the way it explored themes to do with seduction, betrayal and trust.

So, Andrew Bovell and I began to talk about developing a larger work with this play and another short work as the inspirations.

***Was there any preparation or research that you undertook to direct this play?***

Well, I suppose the preparation or the research was my collaboration with Andrew and quite long development process of the play. It's not an historical piece; I didn't have to go to libraries and research it. It was very much about working from my own life experience and intuition, and my instinct about relationships.

***The language in the first scenes of 'Speaking in Tongues' overlaps. You literally have two scenes occurring at once. How did you approach this in the rehearsal room?***

Well, that's one of the things that I found very exciting about the play. I felt that it needed to have a choreographic approach that reflected what was happening in the language. We had to explore very specific gestures and similarities of movement and patterns in space to further highlight the patterns and overlaps and resonances that Andrew was actually making with the language.

So, it involved quite a technical approach in the rehearsal room. It was almost like treating the text as a piece of music and, in terms of working out how to stage it in the space, treating it like a dance. The first part of the dance was about, "Will I or won't I go to bed with this stranger?" and the second part was about, "Will I or won't I confess to my husband?".

***The actors each play at least two different characters in the play. How have you worked with the actors in rehearsal to enable them to develop distinct characters and avoid audience confusion?***

Well, we certainly have worked on that in quite a subtle way that has been evolving slowly over the four weeks of the rehearsal period. Just in talking about characters we start to pinpoint essences of the characters and key differences between one character and another. We discussed how that might affect their rhythm or their speech pattern; where their character's centre is; the sorts of things that motivate their character. So, in working on any of the scenes in the play, there was some sort of discussion and awareness that took place. Building a character is naturally part of the rehearsal process.

***What do you feel are the main themes that you are trying to highlight in this production of the play?***

I think the play is quite dense and multi-layered and always, as a director, I try to just bring out the absolute fullness of the play. I don't choose one theme to stand out more than the others. I see if I can actually bring to the surface the full richness of the play in terms of its themes. As I mentioned before, I think the themes are to do with *trust, commitment and intimacy*. I think one of the other interesting things in the play is to do with *synchronicity and resonance*. By that I mean the way our chance encounters with other people – even the things that we witness from afar in other couples – can suddenly cause enormous revelation within the observer or between the characters that have shared this exchange as strangers.

***How would you describe the STYLE of the play?***

The play is in four distinct sections and I think each of those sections has quite a distinct style. That is one of the great excitements and challenges about working on it for a director and an actor. The first part, with the overlapping dialogue, uses quite a formal approach treating text as music in a way. Then we move into more naturalistic scenes that happen within the bar and the home. In part two of the play – which is the inter-cutting monologues – we explore a very different style than the rest of the play. It's again, music, and the musicality of the piece is tremendously important. The play is a very *aural* piece and a very *still* piece, and we had to find an appropriate movement style for that. Part three is different again. You have two scenes inter-cutting; it's kind of naturalistic but there's more formality to the way the scenes fit together, and every gesture and movement that happens on stage has to be very carefully placed.

***As a director, did you have a strong visual sense of the production and what role have you played in the development of the design?***

Yes, I did have a very strong visual sense of it and, in a way, was able to give the designer a clear brief of what I wanted. I wanted the design to be very spare, very simple and very elegant so that it would throw the focus entirely



onto the actors and reflect the fineness of the play. I do think it's a very elegant, beautifully crafted play in its structure and I wanted that to be reflected visually. The key design element of the play is the two intersecting blinds – black and white – and I think there are all sorts of resonances and imagery that people can read into those so I don't want to be over-explicit in talking about it.

***As a contemporary Australian director, what do you see as being some of the emerging trends in Australian theatre today?***

Well that's a hard one! I guess I think that Australian theatre is becoming more diverse and, in that sense, far more stimulating and exciting. When you go to see an Australian play there's not just one kind of Australian play that you see. We really have developed quite a richness of writers. There are a lot of talented, interesting writers out there – both young and experienced – and I think we're seeing a reasonable diversity of contemporary writing on the stage. There's also a healthy balance of non-text based theatre. So I think there's a real blossoming of diversity on the Australian state today – and of sophistication and quality.

***What would you like the audience to be thinking about after seeing 'Speaking in Tongues'?***

I guess I'd like them to be going away extremely stimulated by this very dense and clever play that operates partly as a thriller and partly as a social commentary about the nature of contemporary relationships. So it would be great to have people talking about their relationships, their intimacy, their connections and their views with strangers – parallels between people, coincidences – and the theatricality of the piece. I hope they go away thinking they've had a really stimulating night at the theatre, one in which they've had to actively engage. I think it's a play that leaves space for the audience and for their participation, and their ability to fill in the gaps with what's happening on stage. I hope they find it enriching and stimulating!

## *'Speaking in Tongues'*

### *Questions for Analysis & Discussion*

#### Structure and Style of the Text

1. In his interview, Andrew Bovell says, "I try to tell stories in ways that we're not used to...My structures tend to be more lateral..."
  - Why do you think he says we are 'not used' to this type of storytelling?
  - What do you think he means by *Speaking in Tongues* being 'lateral'? Give some examples where you believe it jumps off sideways or heads backwards.
  - How do you respond to the narrative structure of the play?
  - In what way does the structure of the play impact upon your understanding of the story?
  
2. Andrew Bovell refers to Part One of his play as having a structure similar to 'music' or being 'composed'.
  - Do you agree with his description?
  - What effect does this style have on an audience or reader?
  - How do the styles in the other parts of the play differ from this one?
  - How is 'dancing' used as an image more broadly in the play?
  
3. Referring to the four scenes selected to be performed, in what ways do you think the written structure of the scenes impacted on the performance?
  
4. The playwright refers to his play and its style as containing aspects of - 'realism', 'naturalism that has been subverted' and language that has been 'heightened'.
  - What is your understanding of each of these terms?
  - Draw examples from the text that demonstrate what the playwright is referring to.
  - How would you describe the style of the *language* in the play?
  
5. The director of the 1998 production, Ros Horin, describes *Speaking in Tongues* as a very 'aural' and a 'still piece'. What do you think she means by this?
  
6. Greg Stone, director of the Discovery Seminars in 2004, says that the play is written in such a way it needs to be 'choreographed' and that he worked on it very 'musically to begin with.'
  - In reading and watching the play, does the text have a musical quality about it? explain.
  - How do you think this influenced the directorial decisions made re 'choreographing' the scenes.

- How would the text work if the director worked against the natural rhythm of the piece?
7. Do you believe that *Speaking in Tongues* could be written as a novel?
- What changes to the narrative and the language may have to be made?
  - The central idea of the play is about people telling their stories, therefore, what aspects of the text do you believe make it 'theatrical'?

### Point of View/Narrative Voice

1. Playwright, Andrew Bovell, says in his interview that *Speaking in Tongues* '...is about storytelling; people telling one another stories; people relating to incidents that you've seen (happening in the play). And we keep seeing these incidents from different points of view'.
- Does seeing the different points of view change/affect your initial opinion of a particular character or situation?
  - Who do you think is telling 'the truth'? Justify your answer.
2. In Part One of the play, what impact does the overlapping dialogue have on *the points of view* being presented?
3. Is there one *authorial voice* in *Speaking in Tongues*? If so, whose is it?

### Characterisation and Interpretation

1. Greg Stone, director of the Discovery Seminars in 2004, describes the intellectual nature of the play as being 'like a game of chess'.
- Do you agree with his description?
  - What aspects of the play compare to strategies of a chess game?
2. From your reading of the play, in what ways are the characters revealed to you?  
(You may like to concentrate on two characters and explore them in detail)
3. From your experience of having watched particular scenes being performed:-
- Select two characters (they may be the same two as selected above)
  - How were they recreated and revealed to you on stage? Consider voice, physicality, interaction, reaction etc.
  - In what ways did the actors' interpretations of the roles differ from your own reading of them?

4. In your reading of the text did you feel particular sympathy for any of the characters? Did seeing the characters performed alter your feelings and perceptions?
5. From your reading of the play, what is the deciding moment/action when each character's life takes a major turn? How are their lives changed?

### Meaning in the Text

1. Consider your initial reading of *Speaking in Tongues* and how you understood the text. Having watched the selected scenes comment on how *performance* enhanced or altered your understanding in relation to:
  - Individual characters
  - Relationships between characters
  - The story of the play
2. In taking a play from the page to the stage, a director has a very important role to play in terms of their *choices*. Comment on how the following aspects affected the meaning of the play for you:
  - The selection of particular actors to play certain roles
  - The blocking, or movement, on the stage
  - How the text was delivered – tone, pace, accent, dynamic, pause, silence

### Views and Values

1. *Speaking in Tongues* deals with peoples' conscience – or lack of conscience.
  - How are the actions of the characters in the play affected by the presence of, or lack of conscience?
  - How do these actions impact on their own and other people's lives?
2. One of the themes of the play is *betrayal*.
  - In your opinion, who is a betrayer and who is betrayed?
  - In what ways do the characters betray others?
3. Playwright, Andrew Bovell, describes the play as being about 'nine people who don't know what's right or wrong anymore'.
  - Do you feel that many people in today's society share this uncertainty?
  - Why do you think this may be?
  - How does this uncertainty affect each of the characters in the play?

4. The character Leon says, 'It's kind of easier to tell these kinds of things to strangers'.
  - What do you think he means by this?
  - How does this statement relate to the broader themes of alienation and uncertainty?
5. Sonja reveals her identity to Jane, while Leon withholds his identity from Peter.
  - Do you think this is a comment on the way men and women relate to their own gender?
6. What other themes and values are explored in the play generally?
7. What particular themes were explored in the selected scenes you saw being performed?
8. Shoes are used as a linking image to connect various storylines in the play. Can you think of other images used in this way?
9. In her interview, director Ros Horin talks about 'synchronicity and resonance' and 'our chance encounters with other people'.
  - What moments in the play resonate for you?
  - What connections do you make with the world of the play?

### Reviewing the Play

1. Read the five reviews accompanying these notes (from the 1998 production)
  - Make comparisons and draw contrasts between the reviewers' analyses and descriptions of *Speaking in Tongues*, the playwright's intentions, and your own understanding of the play.
2. What role could a review have in impacting on an audience's *experience* of seeing a play? What role could a review have in enhancing *meaning* for an audience/reader?

**THEATRE** SPEAKING IN TONGUES

# Sweet words for rare gem

VERONICA KELLY

JACKIE McKimmie's finely paced production of *Speaking in Tongues* vindicates La Boite's commitment to Australian plays; the contrast couldn't be greater between this nuanced and adult show and the recent cartoonish revival of Graham Pitt's *Emma*.

Andrew Bovell works dramatic language into musically patterned arias and ensembles, conveying the comedy and pitfalls of human relationships while hinting at disturbing social and emotional links between his nine, fleetingly interconnected characters.

While superficially workaday, the dialogue anatomises contemporary fears, insecurities and loves. Rarely does a playwright create from the theatrical act of listening such an intense and pleasurable experience.

Stories and story-telling are the play's main structuring device. As in Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe*, characters express their dilemmas by telling a story about an unseen person, providing enigmatic glimpses to be developed through interlocking actions. A cop whose marriage is foundering expresses his confused fears by telling his wife about a man he literally ran into, who cried by the sea because the love of his life had vanished without trace.

Later we meet this woman, who barely remembers this forlorn and possibly obsessional lover. An estranged wife tells of her unemployed neighbour's odd behaviour after the disappearance of a woman from a lonely road. He

La Boite, Brisbane. Written by Andrew Bovell. Director: Jackie McKimmie.

in turn tells the cops of the woman's fear and panic as she fled when he offered a necessary but grudging lift home. The woman's last moments of contact with her own estranged husband are registered in a series of panicked answerphone messages.

In this world of reticence and partial estrangements, a catastrophic result comes to appear inevitable. This answerphone, the technology par excellence of mechanical estrangement, becomes the apt symbol of a world whose pressures push people part.

These bleaker patterns develop mostly in the second act, to which the first serves as a kind of opéra bouffe overture. This is a conventional sex-farce adultery quartet with stylised parallel and overlapping dialogue. Formally elegant, this comic tour de force would be little more than a brilliant generic exercise without the more fractured relationships and dangerous enigmas which develop from it.

McKimmie and her cast play the script as a virtuoso musical score, a chamberpiece seemingly written for La Boite's arena staging. Matt Scott's lighting picks out faces in intricate washes of brooding colours, suggesting the deep surges of need and passion beneath the play's comic or fearful encounters.

*Speaking in Tongues* is the most crafted and rewarding play and production seen for a long time.



# Classic timing

**SPEAKING IN TONGUES** by Andrew Bovell, directed by Jackie McKimmie. La Boite Theatre until June 13. Reviewed by ALISON COTES.

**I**N THE Nervous Nineties, it's the fear of a heart attack rather than a sexually transmitted disease that tempers the excitement of a one-night stand and the kindness of strangers is underlaid with sinister implications.

Adultery in Andrew Bovell's AWGIE-winning play is always ambiguous, relationships are never what they seem, while the dialogue feints and parries and thrusts until moral issues that at first seemed obvious are set in disturbing new contexts.

Leon, Sonja, Jane and Pete go separately to a singles bar and spend (or, in one case, don't spend) the night in guilty heterosexual congress.

These four strangers in the night end up, of course, with each other's partners. But it's not as corny a plot device as it sounds, for it allows Bovell to twist the relationships through endless permutations which constantly shock and delight, while allowing plenty of laughs along the way.

And just when it seems that no further surprises are left, the actors switch to other roles in a murkier Act Two scenario and the play plumbs the depths of the human psyche in a darkly disturbing mirror image of the sparkling first act.



MIX of laughter and horror ... Carita Farrer and Eugene Gilfedder in *Speaking in Tongues* at La Boite Theatre.

This intriguing puzzle play offers questions which have no answers.

And Christopher Smith's ingenious set, with its chequerboard floor on different levels and furnishings which fit into each other like a three-dimensional puzzle, is a subtle metaphor for the frustrating games people play.

Jackie McKimmie's highly intelligent casting features Eugene Gilfedder, his impressive talents honed to a new perfection: Ingrid Mason very convincing in *Blanche du Bois*

mode: a satisfyingly gritty Carita Farrer; and Damien Garvey taking naturalism to new heights — a perfect team for an almost perfect play that is set to become a classic of the Australian theatre.

*Speaking in Tongues* captures the agonies of a fragmented postmodern world in which there seem to be no answers to our moral dilemmas, where our mutually incomprehensible voices make communication impossible.

With its delicate mix of laughter and horror, it is truly a play for our times.

## Adultery will get you nowhere

*Speaking In Tongues* by Andrew Bovell. Directed by Jackie McKimmie for La Boite. Until June 13.

There is that rare 'thing' going on at La Boite at the moment: a witty, entertaining and accessible play about love and marriage that doesn't insult your intelligence. Writer Andrew Bovell, whose film credits include *Strictly Ballroom* and *Head On* (which screened this year at Cannes) has fashioned a sublimely brittle four-handed exposition of the highs and lows of straying. *Speaking In Tongues* may be deceptively simple in form and theme, but it has a disturbing moral urgency which resonates in the mind long after the last blackout.

The play begins with an old plot similar to that used in the latest Robert Altman film, *Afterglow*. Two couples are having simultaneous affairs, and unknown to them at first, it is with each other's partners. They thrash through all the usual comic routines: mistaken identities, hypocritical accusations, drunken confessions. But what begins as a beguiling comedy of manners slips almost imperceptibly into something much darker.

Other, more damaged characters emerge, scarred by that tired old thing known as "having an affair". Beyond the window of the bedroom farce lies the bogey of guilt and betrayal, and at the end of it all the light-hearted laughter has curdled into a gurgle in the abyss. There's a killer question here: once trust has gone, how far can betrayal go?

In keeping with the play's vocabulary of the banal, someone's deadly *hubris* arrives in the form of an answering machine message, ignored. Finally, it's the terrible ordinariness of the evil in the play which leaves the queasy feeling in your stomach.

Bovell's canvas in *Speaking In Tongues* is small — he sticks exclusively to the theme of marital infidelity — but out of this limited palette he paints a whole host of human folly in his characters. There is the decently thick Pete, whose concern for his wife's personal safety is comically distracted by a greater concern for the neighbours' living arrangements (that's three kids in a two bedroom house, he muses); Valerie the relationship counsellor whose own crumbling relationship threatens not only her practice but her life; and half-a-dozen other assorted misfits clutching for a way back into the sinking ruin of their marriages.

It is Bovell's sustained inventiveness, his variations on a single theme that is startling, and the feeling that behind every line there is some greater untold horror which threatens to

unfold in your lap. In this dismal sexual hall of mirrors, everyone is cheating on somebody, and there is a price to be paid for all the cheap drinks and sleazy lounge music.

There is much to praise in La Boite's production, from Jackie McKimmie's restrained and crisp direction, to Christopher Smith's superb marble checkerboard set (one of the best I've seen at La Boite in all its grand polished detail), and Matt Scott's complementary lighting, all of which utilise the fascinating mirrorings inherent in the text.

The four actors are a very impressive ensemble, especially in some notoriously difficult-looking split-scene work. But while it was wonderful to see two veterans of Brisbane theatre together, Ingrid Mason and Eugene Gilfedder (both giving solid and charming performances), it was the younger pairing of Carita Farrer and Damien Garvey who took out acting honours on opening night, especially in the more intense second half.

The intricate game of love and chance in *Speaking In Tongues* is an intellectual treat for the theatre-goer, to be enjoyed right up to the final dark moments. For some of the most sparkling comedy and disturbing drama this year, make sure you go. To miss it would be a downright infidelity.

Simon Chan

## THEATRE

### SPEAKING IN TONGUES

La Boite

\*11 June 13.

One of the best things about *Speaking in Tongues* is its clarity of language. Based on a premise which requires the audience to decipher the interconnecting thread between ostensibly unrelated events, Andrew Bovell's writing makes the process not only thoroughly involving, but illuminating about fundamental aspects of human emotion and behaviour.

He examines the reality of 'coincidence' — in this detective thriller, it appears there is no such thing: *everything happens for a reason*. Bovell's dramatic tool of choice is a rich irony, imbuing even the seemingly most banal with meaning — and clever humour. We laugh at the spin the playwright puts on clichés (from come-on lines, to what cops look like), infidelity, selective honesty, and distrust becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy — and also recognise the truth. Like, you can describe infidelity as a 'fuck-up', but really 'that's not an honest mistake, that's calculated betrayal'. Then there's the character who says he's embarrassed he doesn't have any friends — not because he doesn't, but because he

thinks he should have. Without being overt or laboured, *Speaking in Tongues* reveals a lot about the psychological motivations of people, and their failure to take responsibility for their actions.

The play starts with the four actors on stage together, all becoming other characters who form part of the jigsaw puzzle, that one of them, Detective Leon Zat (Eugene Gilfedder), is gradually piecing together. And like all good detective stories, there's a smug satisfaction in working out connections before they become obvious.

Zat and his wife start the play onstage together with another couple — Pete and Jane — except none is with the person they're married to. Only one of the pairs goes through with the betrayal, and this sets in motion a chain of events which draws in another five people.

As complex as it is, it is never confusing, such is Bovell's skilled craftsmanship, and the calibre of the ensemble — Gilfedder, Ingrid Mason, Carla Farrer and Damien Garvey — and Jackie McKimmie's direction.

Bovell, who co-scripted *Strictly Ballroom*, comes perilously close to being too clever for his own good in scenes where he has two characters speaking virtually identical dialogue in different locations, but he stops just before the novelty has given way to annoyance. Without tight delivery the effect could also fall flat, but despite the difficult technical nature of speaking in tandem but having to change key names and details, the actors find an effective emphasis.

If there's only one slight implausibility in this deserved AWGIE winning work (best new Australian play of 1997), it's that the professional woman whose car has broken down doesn't call the RACQ, and she doesn't have a mobile. But it's not hard to let this slide when Bovell has made everything else so easy for you — and when McKimmie's direction makes the woman's terror so immediate (Farrer running through the backstage tunnels bordering the space).

As well as her ability to create an atmospheric mood (ably assisted by Matt Scott's lighting, Christopher Smith's design and Brett Collier's sound), one of the rewarding benefits of McKimmie's background as a filmmaker is the realism she brings to a scenario which could easily be implausibly extraordinary: working with the intimacy of the space, the performances are enjoyably unforced, and enable us to sympathise with each of the characters in spite of our own views of their actions. Perhaps though, Ingrid Mason's compelling empathetic qualities actually work against her in portraying Sarah, a woman who capriciously and selfishly ignores the effects of her choices on others. However, this is more an ironic observation than a criticism; it doesn't detract from the excellence of the performances or the work's meaning.

This production passed with flying colours two key tests for a reviewer — watching without even thinking about your watch, and even more impressive, achieving this when you're tired, as I was when *Speaking in Tongues* began. I certainly was re-energised afterwards — left with one final question to answer myself.

**OLIVIA STEWART**

## THEATRE

# Bovell steels himself for the tough locals

By PENNY FANNIN

He's every inch the writer. Serious expression, thick-rimmed glasses and steeped with social conscience. But for all that, Melbourne writer Andrew Bovell is nervous. It's there when he says Melbourne's theatre audiences are the toughest to please in Australia. And when he admits to always wanting to redraft his plays.

But it's too late for his award-winning play *Speaking in Tongues*, soon to open at the CUB Malthouse. The actors have been cast and rehearsals have started. The time for rewrites has passed.

Although *Speaking in Tongues* has already been staged in Sydney and Brisbane, Bovell has made a few changes to the script for the Melbourne production. "I'm trepidatious about what Melbourne (audiences) will do. I think they're the toughest in the country and I don't know why," says Bovell.

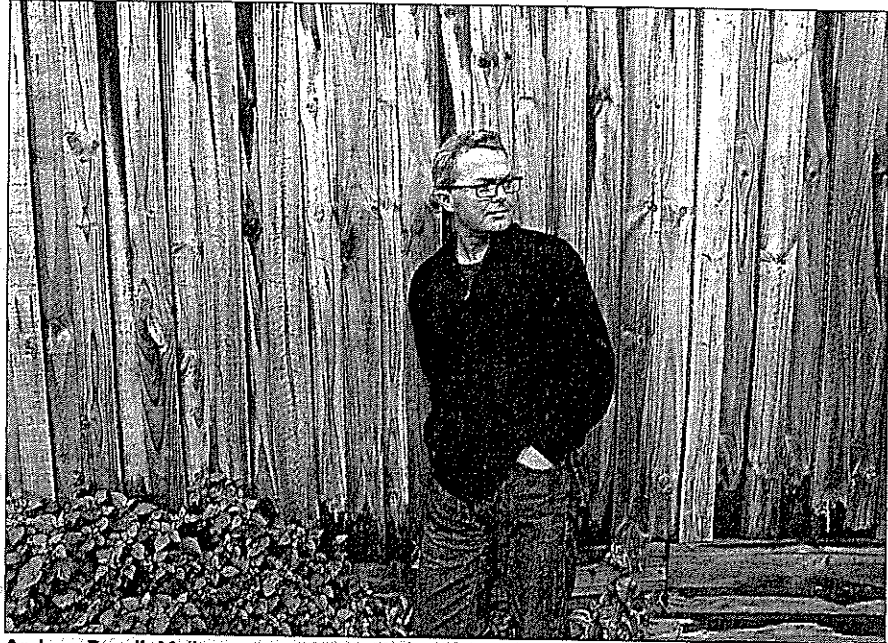
*Speaking in Tongues* is described by Bovell as a mystery/thriller, but it also deals with human relationships. "I wanted the play to have a number of levels; for me it's about the business of love, the trials and tribulations of men and women trying to love each other through an emotional-landscape," he says.

The three-part play begins with two couples who have visited separate bars with the intention of betraying their partners. Unknowingly, they pair up with each other's husbands and wives.

The couples for the Melbourne production are played by Heather Bolton, Robert Meldrum, Margaret Mills and Merfyn Owen. In the following two parts, these actors appear as other characters who are introduced as the connections between the characters' lives as they are unravelled.

"It's a very easy play to get wrong," says Bovell. "You look for a particular kind of actor... people who are adept at differentiating character. The actors in this are very smart actors and it was a pleasure to hear them dealing with the play. They dipped into its subterranean level straight away."

These levels conceal the husbands and wives, who become entangled in a vine of deception. The vine weaves



Andrew Bovell: Melbourne audiences are "the toughest in the country". Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN

through a forest of relationships, in which a girl abandons her lover without explanation and he later disappears. And it embraces a woman who runs from a stranger who offered her a lift, when he takes an unexpected turn into a bush road.

Bovell says he was haunted by the urban myth of a woman who accepts a lift from a stranger and never comes home and of the husband left at home waiting for a wife who never arrives. "These urban myths kept occurring in my work over a number of years and in *Speaking in Tongues*, I found a home for them," he says.

*Speaking in Tongues* began in 1992 as two short plays — *Like Whisky on the Breath of a Drunk You Love* and *Distant Lights From Dark Places*. The director of *Speaking in Tongues*, Ros Horin, suggested Bovell write a companion piece to these short plays. But he wanted them to have a connecting theme, so he merged the two works and their characters. The

result was *Speaking in Tongues*, which won Bovell a 1997 Australian Writers Guild award.

"*Speaking in Tongues* is about truth. It's like a diamond, it's cut with many faces and you have to keep turning it around and looking at the faces before you can understand the whole thing," he says. "It's all about contact between intimates being broken, whilst deep bonds are formed with strangers."

Bovell is now developing his self-proclaimed gem of a play into a film. He is writing the screenplay to *Speaking in Tongues*, which is to be produced by Jan Chapman who also produced *The Piano*. "It has been kind of fascinating, adapting my own work for the screen. More often than not, I have adapted somebody else's novels," he says.

One of Bovell's recent adaptations was Christos Tsiolkas's novel *Loaded*, which follows 24 hours in the life of a gay Greek boy in Melbourne.

The novel was the basis of *Head On*, which premiered at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. Bovell co-wrote the screen play with Ana Kokkinos and Mira Robertson.

Bovell says he is "a wordsmith first and foremost" and the theatre gives him room to explore language, while film is more concerned with visual imagery. Although he likes his work to be thought-provoking, he says he is not trying to start a revolution with his commentary on society.

"I think writers need to be challenging the status quo, rather than acting to keep it. They should be bringing the community's notice to the conditions that prevail and questioning them. I don't know how effective theatre is as a call to arms or a call to revolution, but what it can do is clarify people's thinking toward certain issues."

● *Speaking in Tongues* opens at the CUB Malthouse on 21 July.

## **SPEAKING IN TONGUES: AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE**

**Fr. George Nicozisin**

Speaking in Tongues, "*Glossolalia*," a popular practice with many Churches today, is a phenomenon which can be traced to the days of the Apostles. A decade ago, Speaking in Tongues was encountered only in Pentecostal Churches, Revival Meetings, Quaker gatherings and some Methodist groups. Today, *Glossolalia* is also found in some Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches.

The Greek Orthodox Church does not preclude the use of *Glossolalia*, but regards it as one of the minor gifts of the Holy Spirit. If *Glossolalia* has fallen out of use it is because it served its purpose in New Testament times and is no longer necessary. However, even when used, it is a private and personal gift, a lower form of prayer. The Orthodox Church differs with those Pentecostal and Charismatic groups which regard *Glossolalia* as a prerequisite to being a Christian and to having received the Holy Spirit.

Serapion of Egypt, a fourth century contemporary of St. Athanasios summarized Eastern Orthodox theology:

*"The Anointing after Baptism is for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, that having been born again through Baptism and made new through the laver of regeneration, the candidates may be made new through the gifts of the Holy Spirit and secured by this Seal may continue steadfast."*

Bishop Maximos Aghiorghoussis, Greek Orthodox Diocese of Pittsburgh and world-reknowned Orthodox theologian on the Holy Spirit states it this way: "For Orthodox Christians, Baptism is our personal Paschal Resurrection and Chrismation is our personal Pentecost and indwelling of the Holy Spirit." There are two forms of *Glossolalia*:

- ***Pentecost Glossolalia*** happened this way: Fifty days after the Resurrection, while the disciples were gathered together, the Holy Spirit descended upon them and they began to speak in other languages. Jews from all over the civilized world who were gathered in Jerusalem for the religious holiday stood in amazement as they heard the disciples preaching in their own particular language and dialect (like in a United Nations Assembly). They understood!
- ***Corinthian Glossolalia*** is different. St. Paul, who had founded the Church of Corinth, found it necessary to respond to some of their problems, i.e., division of authority, moral and ethical problems, the eucharist, the issue of death and resurrection and how the Gifts of the Holy Spirit operated. In chapter 12, St. Paul lists nine of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, i.e., knowledge, wisdom, spirit, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues and interpreting what another says when he speaks in tongues.

Specifically, Corinthian Glossolalia was an activity of the Holy Spirit coming upon a person and compelling him to external expressions directed to God, but not understood by others. In Pentecost Glossolalia, while speaking in several different tongues, both the speaker and the listener understood what was uttered. The Glossolalia manifested in Corinth was the utterance of words, phrases, sentences, etc., intelligible to God but not to the person uttering them. What was uttered needed to be interpreted by another who had the gift of interpretation.

When the person spoke, his soul became passive and his understanding became inactive. He was in a state of ecstasy. While the words or sounds were prayer and praise, they were not clear in meaning and gave the impression of something mysterious. The phenomenon included sighs, groanings, shoutings, cries and utterances of disconnected speech, sometimes jubilant and some times ecstatic. There is no question-the Church of Corinth had Glossolalia; St. Paul attests to that and makes mention of it. But he also cautions the Corinthian Christians about excessive use; especially to the exclusion of the other more important gifts.

It appears St. Paul was questioned about the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gifts. Corinth was greatly influenced by Greek paganism which included demonstrations, frenzies and orgies all intricately interwoven into their religious practices. In post Homeric times the cult of the Dionysiac orgies made their entrance into the Greek world. According to this, music, the whirling dance, intoxication and utterances had the power to make men divine; to produce a condition in which the normal state was left behind and the inspired person perceived what was external to himself and the senses.

In other words, the soul was supposed to leave the body, hence the word ecstasy (*ek stasis*). They believed that while the being was absent from the body, the soul was united with the deity. At such times, the ecstatic person had no consciousness of his own.

The Corinthians of Paul's time were living under the influence of Dionysiac religious customs. It was natural that they would find certain similarities more familiar and appealing. Thus the Corinthians began to put more stress on certain gifts like glossolalia. No doubt the Apostle was concerned that their ties and memories of the old life should be reason enough to regulate the employment of Glossolalia. In chapter 14, he says:

*"I would like for all of you to speak in strange tongues; but I would rather that you had the gift of proclaiming God's message. For the person who proclaims God's message is of greater value than the one who speaks in strange tongues-unless there is someone who can explain what he says, so the whole Church may be edified. So when I come to you, my brethren, what use will I be to you if I speak in strange tongues? Not a bit, unless I bring to you some revelation from God or some knowledge or some inspired message or some teaching."*



Apostolic times were a unique period rich with extraordinary and supernatural phenomena for the history of mankind. The Lord God set out to make new creations through the saving grace of His Son and implemented into perfection through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit endowed men and women with many gifts in order to bring this about. One of its gifts during New Testament times was Glossolalia. But even from New Testament times, it would seem Glossolalia began to phase out. St. Paul, it seems, indicates later in chapter 14 that Glossolalia should be minimized and understood preaching maximized. Justin Martyr, a prolific mid-century writer lists several kinds of gifts but does not mention Glossolalia. Chrysostom wrote numerous homilies on Books of the New Testament during the fourth century but does not appear to make mention of Glossolalia as noted in First Corinthians.

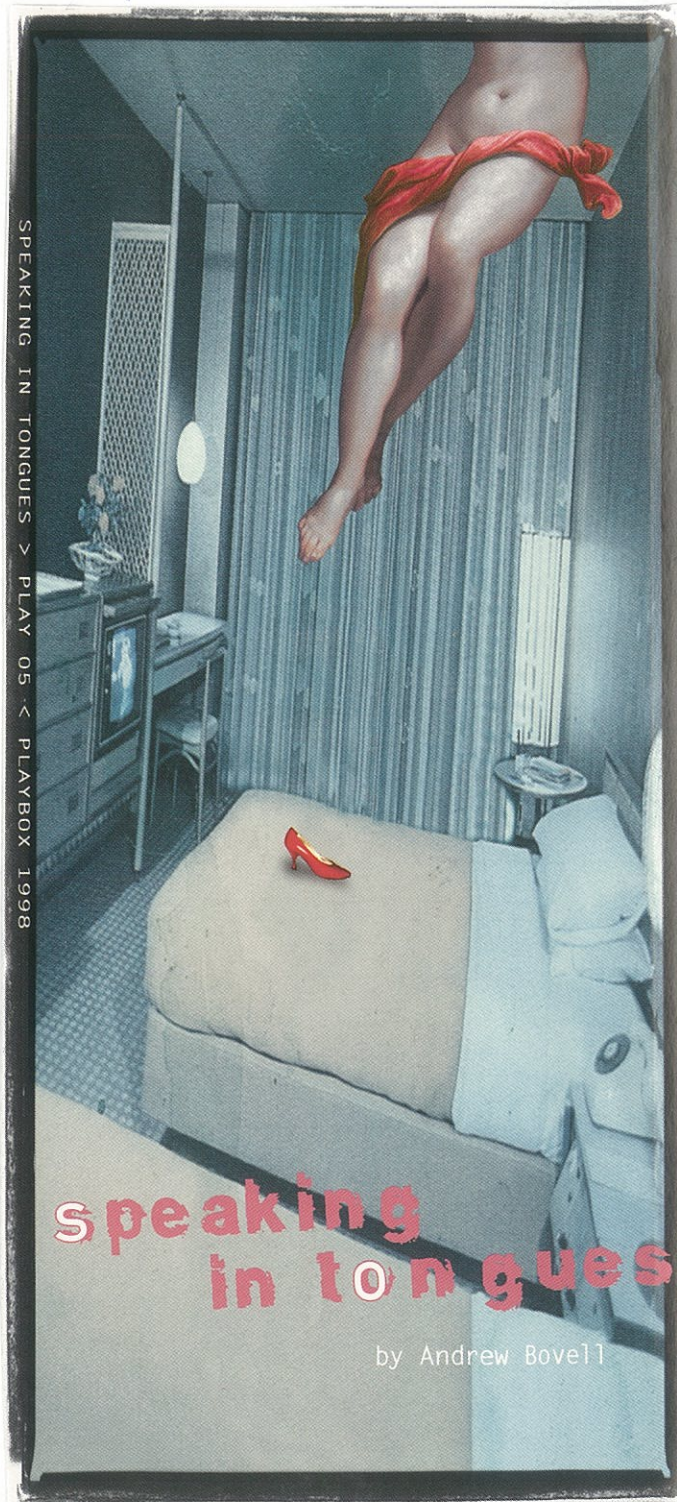
Many Christian writers, certainly the mystics, wrote about states of ecstasy during praise and worship, of seeing visions of God's heavenly kingdom, of what they perceived eternal life with Christ to be, of how the Holy Spirit spoke to them and through them, to others. But theirs was always understood, intelligible, comprehensible communication. Perhaps they could not describe in earthly and material frames of reference what they saw and experienced, but they were conscious and fully aware of what was happening. They were not in some state of senselessness. Even the monks on Mount Athos who experience divine communication and have reached a plateau of holiness, do not speak in tongues. They speak in words that are intelligible and utter clear words in hymn and praise of God and His truth.

What then is the Orthodox Christian perspective on Glossolalia? The Orthodox Christian viewpoint on Glossolalia is based on St. Paul's words in chapter fourteen of the same Epistle: "I thank God that I speak in strange tongues much more than any of you. But in Church worship I would rather speak five words that can be understood, in order to teach others, than speak thou sands of words in strange tongues." (verses 18-19) In chapter thirteen, St. Paul says, "Set your hearts, then, on the more important gifts. Best of all, however, is the following way." Then St. Paul proceeds and shares with his readership the greatest gift of all - Love!

The Orthodox Church does not rule out Glossolalia. She simply does not regard it as one of the important ones. Better to "speak five words that can be understood ... than speak thousands of words in strange tongues." This is the Orthodox Christian viewpoint.

# BACKGROUND NOTES

## SPEAKING IN TONGUES by Andrew Bovell



For more information  
regarding the Playbox  
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## INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT: ANDREW BOVELL

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*Can you talk about the starting point for writing **Speaking in Tongues**, and about the journey of the play's creation.*

It's had a number of starting points over a number of years. Ros Horin commissioned me to write a companion piece to two earlier plays: *Like Whisky on the Breath of the Drunk You Love* and *Distant Lights From Dark Places*. But, neither of us was interested in doing that sort of anthology idea unless there were thematic overlaps between the pieces. Once I embarked upon that, I actually became interested in incorporating all three pieces into the one work. Even though each piece had a separate place or a separate inception, the writing process became to be about incorporating the characters and themes into the same world. So, that was its starting point.

Thematically, the starting points were about ideas of trust and betrayal, and the quest for meaning. They're fairly broad themes but I tend to write about people who are yearning for meaning (in one form or another) in a very modern, contemporary context – especially their yearning for meaning in their emotional life. So the play is really about the conduct of emotion between men and women in particular; how that breaks down; what happens when it breaks down; what are the consequences of those kinds of breakdowns.

When you write a play you have the expectation that you'll tell a story and that you'll stay with those characters for a particular amount of time and then, at the end of it, say goodbye to them. What this commission allowed me to do was to extend those characters beyond their original parameters. I was haunted by the material in *Distant Lights From Dark Places*. At the core of it is the story of a woman whose car breaks down and she accepts a lift from a stranger and she never gets home. So there is a mystery. And it was an open-ended mystery in terms of the fact that we never really found out what happened. So suddenly I had to come back to this; I had to re-examine the mystery, and that was quite an exciting challenge for me as a playwright. But I also had the opportunity to therefore take these people beyond where I'd got them to before.

Now a short play is like a short story and it really can only carry one clear idea, and you can explore that. A full-length play needs to carry several large ideas. So here I was aiming to take these people beyond their initial premise; to explore them in other situations. So the writing of the play was really driven by exploration of these people.

I'm also very interested in form and structure and dramatic shape. Stories are important to me but I try to tell the stories in ways that we're not used to seeing them. So I try to go beyond the traditional sense of linear narrative. My structures tend to be more lateral so that the plot or story jumps sideways or backwards.

Truth is a very important theme in the play, so the play tells the same story in a number of different ways. And each time we get different aspects. I describe it as

Recently Deidre Rubenstein commissioned me to write some monologues for her show, *Confidentially Yours*, which was seen at Playbox earlier this year. In that, I wrote about a woman called PAULA who happens to be the wife of one of the characters in *Speaking in Tongues*! So it's extending the world of the play into all sorts of aspects. It's almost like they have a world out there, beyond me. It's quite convoluted and quite comprehensive.

*Were there any revelations for yourself in creating the larger work that came from that process and that weren't there in the original pieces. I mean, were there larger things that you were able to say or was it really just an extension of your original ideas?*

Well, I hope it's larger. I hope the sum total of the parts is larger than each part in itself – or a more full, rich experience. I was able to push the stories further and further and further beyond the initial limitations so I could go in deeper to the psychology of these people and what was going on. Also, it's a mystery so, again, I was able to continue to explore different facets of the mystery.

*Is research a part of your writing process at all?*

Yes, it is. I regard research as vital but there are two kinds for me: one is formal, where I need to know a specific thing, or I need to know about a specific context or a specific world – in which case I go out and research it. This has particularly been the case with my earlier work when I wrote a series of plays about trade unionism and work – the changing nature of work. I really needed to go out and research those things. Then there's the process of informal research where, as a writer, you tend to be the sort of person who watches, listens and observes and thinks. Now that feels like it's going on all the time. The continual collection of experience, both through your life and the observation of other lives, is an important part of research.

*So was there any formal research involved in *Speaking in Tongues*?*

No, *Speaking in Tongues* is very much an intuitive piece of writing, I would say. I've not censored myself in trying to control where it comes from. The writing itself is very controlled; it's very stylised in parts; very formally constructed; very tightly structured. But where it's come from – the murky depths of emotion – is very unclear.

*So, to what extent is your own personal experience of life reflected in your work? I don't mean actual events but rather the way you see the world. Do you tend to rely on yourself as a resource a lot? Or do you go out of yourself and into the world for material?*

Well, it's both. I think if you just rely on yourself, you're going to eventually dry up. What I try to do is be very open and aware of the world around me so that is continually informing the stuff that I carry. So, yes, there's a level of perception that means that you're listening. And not only listening to what's heard but listening to the sub-text of life. Sensing what people are thinking; sensing what's being exchanged between people; sensing the mood of situations. I think you need a fairly



heightened awareness of all that stuff if you want to write about this business called *Life*.

*Could you comment on the style of the play? Do you have any stylistic influences or are you working on trying to extend the boundaries of theatrical style?*

I would hope that I'm trying to extend the boundaries but the stylistic premise could be described as realism or naturalism, that has then been subverted. The language tends to be heightened – it reflects the way we speak, as opposed to being a direct transcript of the way we speak. I like to write about people who talk, but who are not necessarily articulate people. I like to write about people who are trying to communicate but don't necessarily have the facility to. That has a direct influence on my dialogue – there's a lot of hesitation; there's a lot of qualification; there's a lot of repetition. Actors say that my lines are very difficult to learn because I repeat and they lose themselves very easily. There are a lot of "ums" in my work! I really push the nuance of human language. I talked before about the work being musical. When you switch off to what it means and you just listen, it's a very aural experience. And that's because it's structured in a similar way to music – it's composed.

I'm not always aware of what style I'm working within. I write the work intuitively and then look at the end and say, "Oh, I see what I've done". With *Speaking in Tongues* what I've done is to continually change the style of the work. As I was saying, we have this simultaneous, overlapping "dance-song" at the beginning which then moves into quite a naturalistic two-hander – a sequence of naturalistic, two-handed scenes. And then, in the second half, it becomes a fractured, broken-down, fragmented slice of drama. And then, again, moves back into two naturalistic scenes but occurring at the same time with the repetition of language. Now, I don't know how you describe that stylistically – I need a critic to do that for me!

One critic has talked about this work as 'teetering on the edge of credibility'. And they were actually talking about my writing in general. They said I managed to tread this very fine line between what is recognisable in the world and what is treated as art, or what is heightened – and that can be quite effective as drama.

*When you're writing, do you have a strong visual sense of the piece? Do you imagine what the set might be or do you just write the words and let the designer or the director do the visual work?*

Well I try not to impose design upon the work. There are a couple of rules for me: I write with very few props in mind. The less business there is on stage, the better it is for me. ("Business" in terms of boiling kettles, making cups of tea, eating food, handling objects.....whatever) Now if the production then comes to introduce those, that's fine but I try to pare that all back. So I go through a number of stages. First, I try to write it imagining these people in the real place they would be. Then I bring it into the theatre in my imagination. Minimal aesthetics, that's what I see. My focus is the actor, and my focus is what they're doing and what they're saying. Beyond that, what they're wearing and notions of set, I really keep open.

Lighting is very important to me. I always tend to see light – who's in the light, who's not in the light; how bright it is, how subdued it is; how atmospheric it is. And

then, of course, it's always a great delight when you have a strong lighting designer and a strong designer who take the clues from the text and create something. But I'm very wary of design being imposed upon the play. I don't like clutter, I don't like substantial objects on stage. And I don't usually respond very well to naturalistic design. I think it's really odd, in the age of television and cinema, when we come in to the theatre and we sit, and we're being asked to pretend this is somebody's lounge room. It just doesn't add up. But, if the play is set in somebody's lounge room and the design subverts that in some way, then it becomes very interesting. For instance, hanging a painting upside down on a wall, or making the chairs really small. Something like that, some kind of comment. As long as it's related to what the play's about then design becomes really interesting.

But I do have a healthy respect for a designer's work and tend not to be prescriptive in the play. So I never write: *actor exits stage left*, or *there is a door centre stage* – any of that sort of stuff. That's very old-fashioned. I think most modern playwrights – or most experienced playwrights – stick right away from that kind of stuff.

*You do work for film and television as well as theatre: what do you see as being the difference? With the debate about theatre becoming a dying artform because of film and television, what do you think theatre has to offer that film and television do not?*

Where theatre gets in trouble is when it just tries to tell a straight, linear narrative because television and film handle that so well that the theatre can never attempt to compete. But theatre is very capable of distorting reality so that you gain a new insight; a heightened reality. Theatre is also a great medium for words, for language. Film tends to be a visual medium. As a film writer you've continually got to try to find visual representation of your ideas or your story components. In theatre you have the privilege of really letting the characters speak. You can create very interesting structural patterns in the theatre that you can't in film. Well, you can but your work would be quite obscure! In film there is a dominant structure and it's basically a sense of three acts – a beginning, a middle and an end. When I see theatre that's trying to work within that, I get very bored and very restless. When I see theatre that's trying to work outside of that, I get very excited. Thus, this idea that I talk about in *Speaking in Tongues* of the lateral movement of narrative. We move across and up an urban landscape and, as we do, we pick up a whole lot of contemporary stories. That, for me, is a far more interesting viewing experience in the theatre.

I'm presently in the process of adapting *Speaking in Tongues* for film and there's no way I can employ such a structure in film. I've got to bring it into line, and it's very hard. I've got to create it within the same temporal and physical space, if you like. I've got to make sure all the events occur in chronological sequence. It doesn't mean the film can't move backwards – it does through flashback and flashforward – but they're devices. In the theatre you can do that without the employment of tricky devices.

There are many other differences but the bottom line is I'm a writer and I'm a storyteller, and I look to all three media – stage, television and film – as being places where I can tell those stories. But my relationship to the audience is very different in each case. In the theatre I'm closest to the audience. My experience of the audience response is the clearest and strongest. And you're also honoured in the theatre in a

way that you're not in film and television, you're much more anonymous in those electronic media. The writing in theatre is seen as the centre and that's a very privileged position to be in, hence I'll continue to keep writing for the theatre, I hope.

*Have you been involved at all in the rehearsal process for this production?*

Yes. This isn't the first production of the play. It was originally produced by the Griffin Theatre Company in 1996, so I was there during that rehearsal process (say, for about the first week) and for the previews. In this new production, it's the same director and the same set designer, but a new cast and costume designer. And I've also done some new writing. In fact, the third part of the play is entirely rewritten so it was very important for me to be on the floor in those first couple of days. They are rehearsing up in Sydney so I've been up there. Prior to that, I've had conversations with the director about how can we further the work; how can we push it further; how can I polish it more.

There comes a certain point when you've got to pull out. It's about handing the material over to them. I think it's a mistake for writers to hang around all the time because actors go through a process where they embrace the work and then they want to reject it; they want to tear it up and throw it on the ground and walk all over it. Now they need to do that to get to a point of re-owning it for themselves. It's a bit like they're killing the demon of the writer so that they can claim it. It's not good for a writer to be around during that process because it tends to create conflict and you don't get anywhere. So I strategically remove myself to let the actors get on and do their thing and let the director establish a clear line of communication with them. But, at a certain point, I'll come back in – and that's usually at the first preview. That's very crucial because that's a point at which, if I'm not satisfied, I must speak up (or any writer must speak up) and say, "Well, no. This isn't working" or "That's not working". So it's a top and tail thing: you're there at the beginning and you're there at the end.

*Do you think of playwrights in Australia at the moment as having a particular role in society?*

Yes, I do think there's a particular role. I hesitate because I don't think our role is any more special than any other role, it's just one of the roles that makes up the fabric of society. But, look, there are things wrong with our society. There is injustice in our society. Somebody – or a whole range of people, but artists in particular, not only writers – need to take a stand and challenge injustice. Or they need to address where they see society breaking down. I feel like they also need to speak for people who don't have a voice. Now, with *Speaking in Tongues*, that's not necessarily the case. I'm not writing about any particular disadvantaged group, but I have done in a lot of my work. I've actively sought to represent the powerless.

I think there's also another role for art and that's about challenging the political status quo; provoking; challenging the powers that be. I've just been involved in a show called *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* that was on at the Trades Hall in the midst of the wharfies dispute.

Its function and purpose was very clear. We set out to tell the stories of people who weren't happy and content and secure. That was a play about people who were suffering the consequences of economic rationalist policies for the past decade. And people recognised that here was a group of writers and actors, and a director taking a stand. So I think there's a very vital and important role for the artist to play. It's also a very privileged role, you know, it's a role open to abuse. I think it's dangerous when theatre starts to lack politics. It's OK for things just to entertain but it's better if they can entertain and take on something important; say something very meaningful. I guess that's where I'm coming from.

*What would you hope that the audience is thinking about when they leave the theatre after seeing **Speaking in Tongues**?*

Well, I guess there are two levels: one is "who did it?" – because it's a mystery, so I want them coming out engaged by the story and the characters, on the level of "did she do that to him because of this?"; "did he lie to her because of that?"; "what happened to VALERIE?" etc, etc. I want them to be engaged by the story and to try to make the connections.

But, on a deeper level, I guess I'd want them to be asking the same questions that I think the play's asking, you know: "how do I make meaning in what is an increasingly-complex life?" and "how do I survive this life?" and "how do I conduct myself within it? What's my way forward?" So, asking those deeper kinds of questions, I guess. I hope the play reflects back to people, their own situation. Not that everybody is out there engaged in the act of betrayal but I think we're all, in one way or another, confused about what's right and wrong. We're a secular society, we don't (on the whole) turn to the church to provide us with moral guidance. On the whole we tend to resist dogma – which is one of the very wonderful things about our society. But, without dogma, we're a bit lost sometimes in terms of really just grasping notions of right and wrong.

There's a quote in the play where one of the characters says, "I don't know what's right or wrong anymore". And that sums it up. This is about nine people who don't know what's right or wrong anymore.



## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR: ROS HORIN

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*What aspects of the play attracted you to directing **Speaking in Tongues**?*

I had worked on a shorter version of this play that was the inspiration for developing the full-length play, *Speaking in Tongues*. It originally existed as a short play called *Like Whisky on the Breath of a Drunk That You Love*, and that was a very exciting piece to work on because it experiments with form – the actors using overlapping language and a choral, musical approach to the text. I was interested in that and I was also interested in the subject matter of the piece and the way it explored themes to do with seduction, betrayal and trust.

So Andrew and I began to talk about developing a larger work, with this and another short work as the inspirations for it.

*Was there any preparation or research that you undertook to direct this play?*

Well, I suppose the preparation or the research was my collaboration with Andrew in the quite long development process of the play. It's not a historical piece, I didn't have to go to libraries and research it. It was very much about working from my own life experience and intuition, and my instinct about relationships.

*The language in the first scenes of **Speaking in Tongues** overlaps. You literally have two scenes occurring at once. How did you approach this in the rehearsal room?*

Well that's one of the things that I found very exciting about the play. I felt that it needed to have a choreographic approach that reflected what was happening in the language. We had to explore very specific gestures and similarities of movement and patterns in space to further highlight the patterns and overlaps and resonances that Andrew was actually making with the language.

So it involved quite a technical approach in the rehearsal room. It was almost like treating the text as a piece of music and, in terms of working out how to stage it in the space, treating it like a dance. The first part of the dance was about "will I or won't I go to bed with this stranger" and the second part was about "will I or won't I confess to my husband".

*The actors each play at least two different characters in the play. How have you worked with the actors in rehearsal to enable them to develop distinct characters and avoid audience confusion?*

Well, we certainly have worked on that but in quite a subtle way, that's been evolving slowly over the four weeks of the rehearsal period. Just in talking about characters we start to pinpoint essences of the characters and, key differences between one character and another. We discussed how that might affect their rhythm or their speech pattern; where their character's centre is, and the sort of things that motivate their character. So, in working on any of the scenes in the play, there was some sort of discussion and awareness took place. Building a character is naturally part of the rehearsal process.

*What do you feel are the main themes that you're trying to highlight in this production of the play?*

I think the play is quite dense and multi-layered, and always – as a director – I try to just bring out the absolute fullness of the play. I don't choose one theme to stand out more than the others. I see if I can actually bring to the surface the full richness of the play in terms of its themes. As I mentioned before, I think the themes are to do with trust, commitment and intimacy. I think one of the other interesting things in the play is to do with synchronicity and resonance. By that I mean the way our chance encounters with other people (even the things that we witness from afar in other couples), can suddenly cause enormous revelation within the observer (or between the characters that have shared this exchange as strangers).

*How would you describe the style of the play?*

The play is in four distinct sections and I think each of those sections has quite a distinct style. And that's one of the great excitements and challenges about working on it for the director and the actors. The first part, with the overlapping dialogue, uses quite a formal approach; treating text as music, in a way. Then we go into more naturalistic scenes that happen within the bar and the home. Then part two of the play (which is the inter-cutting monologues) explores a very different style than the rest of the play. It's again music, and the musicality of the piece is tremendously important. It's a very aural piece and a very still piece, and we had to find an appropriate movement style for that. Part three is different again. You've got two scenes inter-cutting; it's kind of naturalistic but there's more formality to the way the scenes fit together, and every gesture and movement that happens on stage has to be very carefully placed.

*Did you have a strong visual sense of the production as a director, and what role have you played in the development of the design?*

Yes, I did have a very strong visual sense of it and, in a way, was able to give the designer a clear brief of what I wanted. I wanted the design to be very spare, very simple and very elegant so that it would throw the focus entirely onto the actors and reflect the fineness of the play. I do think it's a very elegant, beautifully crafted play in structure, and I wanted that to be reflected visually. The key design element of the play is the two intersecting blinds – the black and the white – and I think there are all sorts of resonances and imagery that people can read into those so I don't want to be over-explicit in talking about it.

*As a contemporary Australian director what do you see as being some of the emerging trends in Australian theatre today?*

Well that's a hard one! I guess I think that Australian theatre is becoming more diverse and, in that sense, far more stimulating and exciting. When you go to see an Australian play there's not just one kind of Australian play that you see. We really have developed quite a richness of writers. There are a lot of talented, interesting

writers out there – both young and experienced – and I think we're seeing a reasonable diversity of contemporary writing on the stage. There's also a healthy balance of non-text-based theatre. So I think there's a real blossoming of diversity on the Australian stage today – and of sophistication and quality.

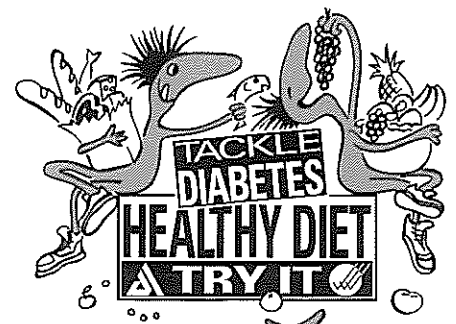
*What would you like the audience to be thinking about after viewing **Speaking in Tongues**?*

Well, I guess I'd like them to be going away extremely stimulated by this very dense and clever play that operates partly as a thriller and partly as a social commentary about the nature of contemporary relationships. So it would be great to have people talking about their relationships, their intimacy, their connections and their views with strangers – parallels between people, coincidences – and the theatricality of the piece. I hope they go away thinking they've had a really stimulating night at the theatre, one in which they've had to actively engage. I think it's a play that leaves space for the audience and for their participation, and their ability to fill in the gaps with what's happening on stage. And I hope they find that enriching and stimulating.

- Andrew Bovell describes the style of the first part of the play (in the two hotel rooms and then in the homes of the two couples) as "composed" and "structured in a similar way to music".  
Director Ros Horin comments that in directing this part of the play, she treated it in rehearsal "like a dance".
  - Do you agree that this part of the play has musical, dance-like qualities?
  - What effect does this style have on the audience?
  - How do the styles in the other parts of the play differ from this one?
 (If you have a copy of the play, you might like to try workshopping a short section of this part of the play in class in order to explore the complexity of the text and its staging.)
- Ros Horin mentions that the key design element for this production of *Speaking in Tongues* is the two intersecting black and white blinds and the imagery that people can read into them.
  - What did the blinds represent to you?
- Andrew Bovell says that he writes with "minimal aesthetics" in mind for the design of his plays. He also considers lighting to be very important in the overall design.
  - What are the particular design challenges in presenting this play?
  - How important is lighting in responding to these challenges?
  - How effective do you feel the set and lighting designs are in this production?

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The Playbox Education Program is generously sponsored by  
 DIABETES AUSTRALIA - VICTORIA  
 VICTORIAN HEALTH PROMOTION FOUNDATION  
 and MONASH UNIVERSITY.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION: SPEAKING IN TONGUES

- *Speaking in Tongues* deals with peoples' conscience - or lack of conscience.
  - How are the actions of the characters in the play affected by the presence, or lack of conscience?
  - How do these actions impact on their own and other people's lives?
- One of the themes of the play is betrayal.
  - In your opinion, who is betrayer and who is betrayed?
  - In what ways do the characters betray others?
- Playwright Andrew Bovell describes the play as being about "nine people who don't know what's right or wrong anymore".
  - Do you feel that many people in today's society share this uncertainty?
  - Why do you think this is?
  - How does this uncertainty affect each of the characters in the play?
- The character LEON says: "It's kind of easier to tell these kind of things to strangers".
  - What do you think he means by this?
  - How does this statement relate to the broader themes of alienation and uncertainty?
- SONJA reveals her identity to JANE, while LEON withholds his identity from PETER.
  - Do you think this is a comment on the way men and women relate to their own sex?
  - What does it say about these particular characters?
- Shoes are used as a linking image to connect the various storylines.
  - Can you think of any other images used in this way?
- Andrew Bovell says in his interview that *Speaking in Tongues* "... is about storytelling; people telling one another stories; people relating to incidents that you've seen (happening in the play). And we keep seeing these incidents from different points of view."
  - Does seeing the different points of view change/affect your initial opinion of a particular character or situation?
- Do you feel particular sympathy for any of the characters? Why?/Why not?
- What is the deciding moment/action when each character's life takes a major turn? How are their lives changed?

being like a diamond. It's cut like a diamond with many face[t]s; you turn the diamond around and it's not until you've viewed it from all angles that you get a sense of the beauty of the whole. Or it's like a tightly woven rug – you pull out one strand and the whole thing unravels. They're the kind of structural things that really interest me.

Stylistically the play moves, it jumps, it begins as one thing (a cliché – a man and a woman in a motel room in the act of cheating on their husband and wife respectively), but the catch is that there's another couple doing the same thing in another hotel room and those two scenes are playing simultaneously. So a lot of language overlaps. It uses language in a musical way: there are a lot of refrains, a lot of echoes, a lot of doubling up. We have this largely comic opening as we see two married couples in a state of crisis cheating on one another. But then gradually the play turns darker.

Another useful image is *dropping a pebble in a pond and it ripples outwards* - but it also kind of ripples downwards. So you examine the same situation but at increasingly deep levels – if you like. We're watching a lot of relationships that are going through a difficult time but each look is a little deeper and a little darker.

I should maybe explain the structure of the play. It's written in three parts. Each part has been written for the same four actors: two men and two women – but there are nine characters. So it breaks all the traditional rules of playwriting because characters are discarded in the process of the play, and new ones introduced. Only one character who's there at the beginning is there at the end. The parts are mutually exclusive but also the people's stories cross over from one part to the other. It's partly about people telling other people stories in the quest to understand their lives. Again, I go back to the thing about the yearning for meaning in our lives, in the modern world. For instance, in the first half, one of the characters – LEON – tells a story about bumping into this guy while jogging and watching the man break down, and then being captivated by this and confronted by it. He can't understand why he's fascinated by this stranger. Anyway, he sees him a few more times – and eventually this man tells him this story. Now LEON tells us this man's story in part one. In part two we actually get to meet the guy, and we hear his story from his point of view.

It's very much about story-telling; people telling one another stories; people relating to incidents that they've seen. And we keep seeing those incidents from different points of view.

*Did you create any new characters when you put the two original plays together?*

Yes, I did. In the piece which is called *Like Whisky on the Breath of the Drunk You Love*, there are four characters: LEON, SONJA, JANE and PETE. In *Distant Lights From Dark Places*, there are another separate set of four characters: NICK, NEIL, VALERIE and SARAH. Now, in part three, I bring back LEON from part one; and I bring back VALERIE and SARAH from part two; and I create a new character whose name is JOHN and he happens to be married to VALERIE. The fascinating thing about this piece is that I've come back to it. I think the first go (the *Like Whisky ...* bit) was written in 1992, and I've continually come back to it and looked at new aspects.