

ROBYN ARCHER

FESTIVAL DIRECTOR

I'm proud to have been associated with Big hART's 25 years of projects. When I look at the long list of this company's works I recall that I invited their very first show, *Girl*, to the first festival I had the privilege to direct - the National Festival of Australian Theatre. This national capital's festival presented the very best of broadly defined Australian theatre. As curator I included dance theatre and music theatre as much as plays. Big hART's appeal was clearly its subject matter, but it was not only the raw interface with social issues. That Scott also attracted actor Lex Marinos' participation in *Girl*, and subsequently Kerry Armstrong and Roger Woodward to *Big hART Works* - a show in a carpark which I invited to my next festival gig, Adelaide 1998-2000 - indicated an ambition to ensure a professionalism intertwined with the non-professional presence of participants directly involved with the subject material. This ambition has been maintained throughout the company's history all the way to its lively present.

kNOT@Home looked at homelessness in Melbourne and offered the perfect image for my Melbourne Festival: a comfortable, always occupied bed at the front of Federation Square, just outside the barriers, before that civic meeting place was opened to the public. It drew attention to the kids sleeping rough in that wealthy town. *Radio Holiday* celebrated the caravan and Tasmania's threatened shack culture for Ten Days on the Island, and had a further manifestation for the Centenary of Canberra as caravans drove from remote locations all over the continent to a gathering in the national capital. I loved the way Scott talked about 'nation building' - not just in terms of the roads they travelled, but in the way family and friends bond on such journeys, and manage, in moments of such rare genuine leisure, to consider the big issues and talk about them. The company established a residency at the Canberra Theatre Centre and yet another splendid actor, Trevor Jamieson, was there to perform, to lead, to guide.

Big hART has featured on every festival platform for which I have been a fortunate, temporary guardian, and the company's work always sat well next to the finest from around Australia and the wider world.

Should we mention the obvious: that those on the outside of these often 'outsider' projects don't always find that mix comfortable? For those of us who have come to appreciate process as much as product, the odd ragged edge at the time of performance, despite the company's insistence on excellence, is rendered insignificant in light of the clear benefits to participants and the communities they come from. This view comes from one who insists on the best, both from myself and the artists I engage with, and one who defines excellence as a sui generis quality. Some artists need to lock themselves away to perfect their craft and deliver the dazzling results of that craft, in place and on time every time. I will defend that kind of commitment, selfishness and isolation to the end. But there are other artists who choose to work in community, to use their craft for the purposes of social change: such artists are the kind who work in and for Big hART. They have been doing so for 25 years and they provide a service as vital and essential as any other artist or doctor, nurse or police officer.

Congratulations, Big hART, your work will continue to resonate with audiences, and in places with people our society often chooses to ignore.