

Not magic but work

An ethnographic account
of a rehearsal process

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something and noticed that Guy had winced. He immediately broke off what he was saying to enquire what was the matter. Guy explained that he suffers from tinnitus as a result of his many years of being a drummer in a rock band and both Neil and Richard then talked in a very concerned way about the possibility of acupuncture to alleviate the problem. He was also generous in acknowledging people's successes: the prize for best actor that had been awarded to Eamon in Western Australia, the fact that Matthew was about to go to London to direct an opera at the Almeida Theatre, the intensely emotional performance Guy had given the night before in *Holding the Man*, the thirteenth anniversary of the death of Tim Conigrave. These kind of comments enhanced the bonds that created a sense of community as well as boosting individual morale.

Neil's practice of inviting the administrative staff to attend the first reading of the play text on the first day of rehearsals and to come to see the final run of the show before it transfers to the theatre is another aspect of the inclusiveness he fosters at Company B. This will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter where I consider the production within the broader context of the theatre community but it is mentioned here as it is indicative of his attempts to ensure that the company staff are kept fully informed about the work that is being created, and that the artists appreciate the wide range of activities carried out to support their work. The effectiveness of the practice was evident in the sense of common purpose I felt every time I went to the offices during the rehearsal period. Everyone, from the publicists to the switchboard operator, would ask anxiously how it was going and there was a buzz of excitement as the idea dawned that the production could well be a big success.

Note

- 1 *Holding the Man*, as has been indicated already, was not a Company B production but was slotted into the subscription season at the last minute when it emerged that the scheduled production, a new musical by Casey Bennett, author of the very successful *Keating!*, was not going to be ready in time. It is unlikely that the season would otherwise have included two such thematically similar shows, particularly one directly following the other.

Rehearsal and interaction ritual

I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: 'what is it that is going on here?'
(Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*)

It is appropriate that the epigraph to the final chapter of this study should be the deceptively simple question that underpins the whole of Goffman's lifelong attempt to understand the complexities of social experience. It stands here as a reminder that the observer who wishes to reach a nuanced understanding of a rehearsal process must continually be asking the same question, and as he or she does so, it becomes increasingly clear that what is going on in the rehearsal room is more than the making of a theatrical production. As Kate Rosmanith showed in her comparative analysis of two rehearsal processes, each production located itself in relation to the broader cultural context of Sydney theatre, and the work of the practitioners was directed as much to elaborating their place within the theatre community as to making a piece of theatre (Rosmanith 2004). I have already indicated that nothing that happens during the rehearsals can be bracketed out as not relevant to the production process that is occurring and, indeed, it is often the exchanges and activities that might be dismissed as peripheral that provide the most fascinating insights into the way the group seems to understand 'what it is that is going on', the hierarchies of power and influence that structure

the group, and the way the rehearsal experience is embedded within a broader cultural and social context. For instance, throughout the *Toy Symphony* rehearsal process, there were numerous occasions on which work seemed to stall while Neil and others engaged in animated discussions about good restaurants, where to obtain particular ingredients and the best way to prepare them. Neil is an accomplished cook and connoisseur of good food and wine and his interests were shared by others, notably Richard and Russell. On one occasion, when Kylie thought the interruption had gone on long enough, she asked pointedly whether my book was going to include recipes. Then there was the day Richard brought in a large bowl of tiramisu, made for the group by his Italian wife. The tea break was transformed into a party, everyone gathered in the kitchen, plates and spoons were found, Russell served it out, remembering to include Tess and her team working in Wardrobe. Then he got out his mobile phone and called Silvie to thank her and everyone present chorused their appreciation and thanks. It is a tradition at Company B to provide a cake for afternoon tea if anyone's birthday falls during the rehearsal period (as was the case for both Josh and Guy), yet another manifestation of the family atmosphere Neil is at pains to foster, and on those occasions, too, the sense of group coherence was reinforced.

I would argue that all these kinds of activity served the ultimately serious purpose of creating a sense of community for that particular group of people, coming together from a variety of backgrounds and having only a short period of time in which to establish the social bonds and emotional intimacy that would permit them to work together intensively. The experience of performers and other theatre artists in Australia is one of the rapid formation of groups that work together at a level of physical and emotional intimacy shared by few other professions for relatively short periods and then disperse, perhaps never to work with each other again, perhaps to meet in another combination a year or so later.¹ The on-again/off-again sociality that marks the lives of actors in the contemporary theatre shares certain features with the experience of the tribal groups on whom Emile Durkheim relied so heavily when he was formulating his theoretical analysis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). For the Arrente people of the Central Desert of Australia, as for the Inuit described by Marcel Mauss (1904–05) to whom Durkheim also refers frequently, seasonal variations in the availability of food created a pattern of life in which larger groupings of people could come together only on rare occasions. It was, however, at these times that the most intensive ritual observances took place, and the year could be seen to be divided between the sacred time of festivals and religious ceremonies and the profane time of the everyday struggle

for survival. In Durkheim's analysis, it was the intensity of the coming together that sustained members of the tribe, providing individuals with a sense of their membership of the larger community even though for most of the year they hunted and foraged in small family groups. As he put it, 'Society can revive its sense of itself only by assembling' (Durkheim [1912] trans. Cosman 2001, 259). Durkheim's analysis can also be applied to the situation of actors in the contemporary theatre and I would argue that it is the intermittent opportunity to engage in the intensive creative life of the rehearsal room, more than the nightly routine of performing for an audience for the run of a show, and far more than the fragmentary experiences involved in film or television work, that confers on actors their sense of themselves as actors and as members of a particular and privileged community.

In this final chapter of my study of the Company B rehearsal process for *Toy Symphony*, I am concerned to explore the nature of the group sociality that was created and its function in the overall process, as well as the way the production as a whole can be seen to contribute to the creation of a wider theatre community which itself serves to recognise and validate the work of the artists and the rest of the company staff.

The theory of interaction ritual derived from Durkheim's seminal work and, in particular, Randall Collins's notion of interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004), have been extremely helpful in showing the underlying importance of what might appear to be digressions or discussions with no bearing on the production of the play. They have also helped explain some things I found slightly perplexing at the time. For instance, one evening about halfway through the run, Monica buttonholed me in the little backstage kitchen before the performance and, to my dismay, said I had done something that had seriously upset her. In the card I had sent to wish her well on opening night, I had said how much I loved her performance as Mrs Walkham and I mentioned in particular the moment at the end of Scene 8 when she picked up the stapler and the quizzical look she gave it as she walked off. She told me that the upshot of that was that she had been unable to repeat the look and had become self-conscious about it. She said that, while the director can make comments about a look or gesture, if anyone else does so, it puts a jinx on the moment and that she had been avoiding me since opening night in case I 'said something else nice about her performance'.

I was of course mortified and later asked Kylie whether this was a well known piece of theatre etiquette that I had transgressed in my ignorance but all she said was that younger actors do not feel the same way. This suggested that I had indeed transgressed some part of theatre lore. Justine, while assuring me that her own performance was sufficiently

settled to permit detailed discussion when I spoke to her four weeks into the run, told me that there was an understanding among actors in a show not to comment on each other's acting as that is 'the prerogative of the director and it might seem that the actor was taking a directorial role'. An intriguing thing about Monica's complaint to me was that her gesture and look at the stapler got a big laugh at every performance I witnessed, and her exit often elicited a round of applause as well. So her complaint could not be that the moment was completely ruined as the audience responses showed that this was not so. Perhaps it was that, although audiences clearly loved what she did, it was not what she felt she had been doing before I jinxed the moment.

Re-reading my fieldnotes in light of this contretemps, I have found several occasions where Neil or one of the actors commented (usually ironically) on the possibility that his intervention might damage subsequent performances by rendering the actor self-conscious. On Day 6, when they were blocking the first scene, Neil said how much he liked the image of alienation and suspicion that Richard had created. He said 'I love the twitching feet, that kind of accelerated foot movement' and then added 'I don't want to make you self-conscious'. Later the same day, working on the scene with the lawyer, he said to Richard 'I liked the girlie thing you did with your fingers when you stood up'. Richard denied ever doing anything 'girlie' but when Neil showed him what he had done, he laughed and said 'Now I'll be so self-conscious I'll never be able to do it again'. And, indeed, I think he never did repeat the gesture. The rehearsal process involved such detailed commentary on every aspect of the actors' bodily expressiveness that I failed to pick up the implied warning in these little asides. I did, however, make a note of them and they fed into what I came to see as a perplexing inconsistency at the heart of the play. Roland Henning has been afflicted with writer's block because he became self-conscious: 'so self-aware that now I can't do anything without questioning it. And when you question your basic instincts that closely, they seize up' yet this is precisely the 'gift' he bestows on Daniel, the acting student. Daniel's speech in the final scene was rewritten a few times over the course of the rehearsals as Michael tried to clarify the character's motivation for agreeing to meet Roland but he never completely resolved this central inconsistency.

In the stop/start reading, Neil asked Guy what he thought Roland had given Daniel and Guy replied 'he made it clear for him that he wanted to be an actor, but to do that means he needs to be honest. He passed on to Daniel the clarity he had got from Nina.' Neil pressed a little harder: 'So there is a self-consciousness of motive, a tendency to search for real motive. Maybe that is something Daniel didn't want?' Guy's

response was to fall back on the analysis he had already given when they were discussing what the play is really about: 'Daniel is having to unlearn everything he learned at acting school and rediscover what it was that made him want to be an actor in the first place'. On Day 15, they read Michael's reworked version of the speech, which makes clear that Daniel now analyses his own actions minutely, and Richard commented 'so Roland has foisted the paralysing effects of self-analysis on to someone else'. Everyone nodded but did not say whether they thought this would damage Daniel or help him to become a better actor. Michael Gow was also aware of the issue and he certainly thought it would be deleterious because he joked later that afternoon that the reason Daniel was not getting work was probably because 'every time he goes for an audition he finds himself asking "why the fuck am I here?"' (Day 15).

It is interesting that different members of the group acknowledged the problem but were somehow able to put it aside and it seemed to me that, notwithstanding all the tweaking of Daniel's big speech, the play never made clear why Daniel now claimed he was grateful to Roland, nor why, if it was a disaster for a writer to be made to doubt his spontaneous, intuitive responses, it would not be equally disastrous for an actor. The blind spot was all the more perplexing given Monica's complaint to me and the perception they apparently all shared about the damaging effect for the actor of being made self-conscious. In fact, in making her complaint to me, she actually compared her situation to that of Roland in the play, being made self-conscious about his gift and being frozen as a result. I asked her whether this did not apply equally to Daniel and she said that his situation was quite different in that 'he was only being made to question why he wants to be an actor or his motivation for doing things in his daily life'. When I spoke to Guy during the run, he acknowledged that Roland's attack on Daniel would have been destructive ('he had been unable to get out of bed for days') but said that both characters discover the need for honesty and both find a kind of redemption (Roland gets back his 'gift' and Daniel may one day play Treplev). While this is dramatically neat, it raises another question as to what precisely Daniel was supposed to have done that needed to be redeemed and whether it could be compared with Roland's dishonesty and cruelty.

The somewhat specious justifications offered by everyone I interviewed, notwithstanding the reservations they may themselves have expressed during the rehearsal period, the sense I had that they were falling back on motherhood statements about the artist's need for honesty, and the fact that none of them seemed prepared even to acknowledge that there might still be a problem suggested something

important about the actors' relationship to the work they have created. This was reinforced by the responses I received when I asked about Neil's perception of Roland's sexuality and the erotic dimension to his relationships with Nick, Daniel and Steve Gooding. As has already been shown, Richard was not particularly interested in this aspect of the play, despite a good deal of urging from Neil during the rehearsals. When I interviewed Guy during the run and he told me that he saw Nick as Roland's 'big brother', I reminded him of Neil's frequently expressed opinion that Roland was in love with Nick and that there was 'a dark, shadowy area between them' and then asked whether, in the circumstances, he thought that Richard's and his instincts were more sound than Neil's. He was so nonplussed by the question that I immediately turned it into something less confrontational, fearing I had again transgressed some aspect of theatre etiquette.

The other actors were adamant that there was no attraction between Roland and Daniel either, even though Neil had told them after one performance that on that occasion he really felt that the two would be going home together after their second drink. The most categorical response came from Kylie who said 'Homosexuality is not part of the problem. This is not a play about a homosexual writer with writer's block but about a writer with writer's block.' She somewhat undermined her own assurance by then saying 'I am pleased they didn't make it into a play about homosexuality', thus indicating firstly how open the play was when they began to work on it, and secondly how easily such an interpretation could have developed. For Neil himself, notwithstanding his sense of a yearning for love at the heart of the play, what they ended up producing had a sense of rightness about it, so much so that he really did not recall any sense in which Richard had resisted exploring the character's homosexuality.

All of this alerted me to the way, for the actors in particular, but also to an extent for Neil and others, once the rehearsal period is over and the play has come into existence, the form it has taken is the only one possible. It is as though they cannot permit themselves to doubt what they have done while they are still doing it, and they cannot doubt the morality of the play they have made. They have to think it is good and that it is saying something to which they can adhere. This insight has been endorsed by other theatre practitioners to whom I have spoken, who have confirmed that actors must set aside any doubts they might have or they would not be able to go out on the stage each night and perform. As Kylie said when I interviewed her many months after the production, 'if you open up big questions, the foundations crumble' (Interview November 2010). How much time must ensue

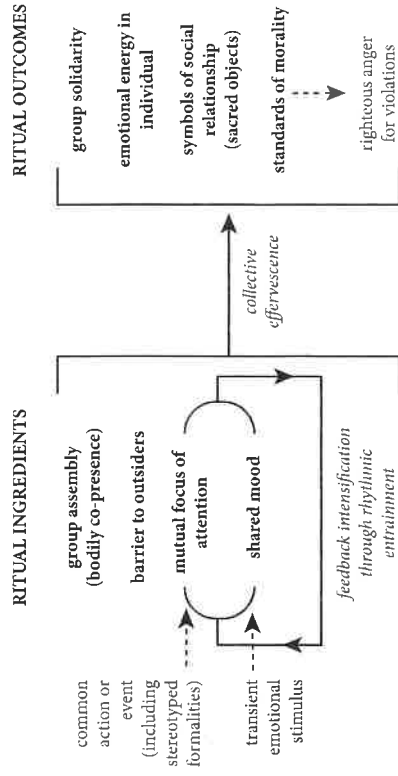


Figure 24. Randall Collins's model of an interaction ritual

before a more nuanced critical judgement emerges is not clear but it is probably several years. During the rehearsals for *Toy Symphony* there were a number of jocular references to a deeply flawed production in which some of them had been involved five years earlier. I think, however, that what is involved goes far deeper than this kind of practical requirement to maintain commitment to the task in hand and this is where Randall Collins's notion of interaction ritual chains becomes particularly relevant.

For Collins, following Durkheim and Goffman, ritual is 'a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership' (Collins 2004, 7). His model of the way an interaction ritual functions can be applied virtually without modification to rehearsal. The ritual ingredients, as listed, could almost be a description of the essential elements of rehearsal process: a number of participants gathered together in a particular place from which outsiders are barred, focusing their attention on a common object, the mutual focus of attention intensifying the experience over a period of weeks in the case of rehearsal, and creating what Collins calls 'emotional energy', although in the diagram reproduced above he uses Durkheim's term, 'collective effervescence'. This is totally familiar to theatre practitioners for whom the rehearsal experience is so absorbing, so emotionally and intellectually fulfilling while it is going on that nothing else really comes near it. One director I know told me his wife said that once he began rehearsals for a new production, she knew he would be lost to her and their children for the duration. Even when he was at home, his thoughts and his passion were elsewhere. She used to say it was as though he had a

mistress, but she knew she just had to wait for opening night and he would be returned to her. Something of this passionate involvement also affects the mere observer of rehearsal, as I have lived it on many occasions, and the experience is obviously far more powerful for those who are full participants, sharing an intense communal life while bringing their imagination, their craft skills and the deepest levels of their emotional life to the creation of the work.

In Collins's model, the ritual ingredients produce ritual outcomes that include an enhanced sense of self worth and group solidarity both of which are manifested in a tangible way through what he calls 'sacred objects.' The outcome of the rehearsal process is the production and I suggest that in terms of interaction ritual theory, the production constitutes a sacred object for the people who have made it and that it functions as the central symbol of the relationship that existed between them. This explains to an extent the reluctance of the actors to question what they have done, the sense I gained that my questions were somehow inappropriate or that I was being fobbed off with superficial answers. The production they have made has a life of its own, it marks the lives of those who have worked on it (I have already commented on the way that, for members of this group, their own reference points to the past were frequently productions on which they had worked together) and it becomes somehow sacrosanct. The production is of course never totally fixed, it continues to grow throughout the run and performances differ from night to night. Justine told me that one of the great joys of the production for her was that it felt different every time they did it. She said that on some occasions Nina falls in love with Roland, but not every night: 'it happens when we get out there' (12 December 2007). Guy, too, told me that things changed from night to night and that, for instance, the moves in the scene where Daniel is trying to escape from Roland were not set precisely, which meant he had to remain alert and respond to what Richard was doing. He really liked that and felt that if the part were absolutely nailed down, the task of performance would become boring.

It might appear that there is a contradiction between the actors' own sense that the production is a living, organic thing that changes night by night and my perception of it as a sacred object that, once realised, is no longer open to question. I think, however, that the two perceptions are mutually compatible, and that what change are details of emotional intensity, the addition of bits of business (sometimes sanctioned by Neil, like the change of gesture suggested for Dr Maybloom on 'marital problems', abandoned by Russell when it failed to get a laugh, sometimes introduced by the actors themselves, like

Nina's attempts to interrupt Roland during his rant about the writer's creative process), and of course there is the huge variable created by the impact of audience response on the overall experience. What do not change are the larger issues concerning their understanding of the work they have created, their loyalty and commitment to it and to each other. The emotional energy generated between the participants during the run of the play is, however, very different from what occurs in the rehearsal room. When performing at night, the actors may conserve their energies during the day so as to be able to perform at full force when required, but the camaraderie of the dressing room and the emotional high created by good audience response do not come near the experience of the rehearsal process. As I observed it in the case of *Toy Symphony*, once the play opened the energies that had been concentrated in the rehearsal room were dispersed: Neil and Damien went to Houston to do some preliminary work on the opera production they would be doing there the following year, the production staff (as Liam confirmed) were already thinking about the next three productions, the designers were no longer involved and the actors' task was the more mundane one of execution rather than the all-consuming one of creation.

Nowhere is the distinction between the energies involved in rehearsal and performance more clearly delineated than for the actor who is rehearsing by day while performing another show at night. This was the case for Guy during most of the rehearsal process for *Toy Symphony*. It was not until Day 27 that the run of *Holding the Man* was finally over and Guy seemed to be completely reinvigorated by the knowledge he did not have to perform that night. A week earlier, on Day 21, he told me that he was by then 95 per cent focused on *Toy Symphony* and was beginning to find the ongoing work for *Holding the Man* a distraction from what he really wanted to be doing. Then, most revealingly, almost as though that admission had been a betrayal, he said quickly 'don't get me wrong. I still love *Holding the Man* and I'm not pulling back from it in any way.' Guy was, as it were, caught between two worlds, each making demands on his energy; enthusiasm and loyalty and the language he used made him sound like a married man falling in love with another woman. In Antony Sher's account of making his Richard III, his thoughts were consumed by the possibilities of the role long before the actual rehearsals began. He was still performing in *Tartuffe* and David Edgar's *Maydays* in the weeks preceding the rehearsals but what clearly preoccupied him, fired his imagination and even haunted his dreams was the Richard to come. He says in his diary entry on the last night of *Maydays*:

I feel a sense of relief that it's over. I was proud to be in it and loved the rehearsals and early performances. But in these last few, hectically busy weeks it felt like climbing a mountain. (Sher 1985, 131)

As other actors have told me, there is no way back to the passionate involvement of the rehearsal room once the production has opened and this is perhaps one explanation for the fact that the atmosphere at the opening and closing night parties was so different. I have already noted that closing night was relatively subdued compared with the high octane excitement of opening night, and I think now that this is because the opening night party is really a rite of passage that marks the culmination of the rehearsal process, liberating the director and designers to begin to engage in new creative ventures and signalling the end of that period of maximum creativity and group solidarity and the onset of a more normal rhythm of work for the actors and production crew. In Durkheim's terms this constitutes a move from sacred time to profane time, and there is no such shift or culmination being marked by the closing night party. Another reason for the difference in intensity between the two might be that an excessive display of emotion in respect of the production that is closing could suggest that the artists in question do not have any other work in the pipeline. Actors are extremely sensitive to the need to present themselves as much in demand and I noticed that this fact has even come to impinge slightly on the intense sociality of the rehearsal room itself, now that mobile phones are an obligatory part of an actor's equipment. As soon as the rehearsal was interrupted for a coffee or meal break, actors and others tended to disperse to the four corners of the room to check their phones for messages and to make calls. I mentioned this one day to Russell and he concurred that mobile phones have made an enormous difference to social interactions in the rehearsal room and that, whereas in the past, people congregated around the tea urn and continued to discuss issues arising from the work, they are now in separate corners, talking to their agents. There was certainly an attempt to impose some control over the use of phones and if anyone's mobile rang during a work session or they were observed sending a text message, they had to put a \$2 coin in the jar Kylie had placed on her desk on the first day, the money collected going to charity at the end of the rehearsal process. These practices are an acknowledgment of the disruption such interventions from the outside cause to the mood and concentration in the room but it is clear that, given the institutional reality that most actors in Sydney are freelance and getting work is by no means certain, none of them can afford not to be on the lookout for more work. The ritual of checking the message bank frequently

during the day suggests, however, that there is also some need for actors to demonstrate to each other that they are in demand.

Collins shows that ritual interaction chains constitute multiple symbols that function as markers of the group and serve to enhance the group's sense of its own identity and legitimacy. I have argued that the central symbol is the production itself but places can also be sacred objects and their importance as symbols for the group in question will be indicated by the fervour with which the group controls access to them and the 'righteous anger' members feel at 'violations' (to use the terms Collins has included in his model). The rehearsal room, the backstage area of the theatre and, in particular, the actors' dressing room are all places that, as I experienced the work process, seemed to me to be overlaid with emotional connotations that exceed the practical demands for safety and privacy. Seeing them as sacred objects in relation to the interaction chain helps to explain the fact that traditional superstitions associated with the theatre, while regarded with an affectionate scepticism by many, are nevertheless enforced. Respecting superstitions such as not whistling in the theatre, not saying 'Macbeth', not wearing green, not saying 'good luck' but 'break a leg' (or 'chookas', which is the Australian equivalent) is part of the way actors signal their membership of a privileged group and, indeed, police that membership. As shown with the incident of the school student from Dubbo who whistled during the tech rehearsal, individual members of the group may claim scepticism but when it came down to it, tradition was respected. Monica belonged to an older generation and she, perhaps, felt more 'righteous anger' about infringements than some of the others. She complained vehemently to Kylie one day about the presence of an unauthorised person in the backstage area during one of the matinee performances for school students. It is part of Belvoir's practice to invite homeless young people who frequent a local drop-in centre to attend these performances and it appears that this particular boy had been watching part of the show from the vom and had even wandered into the dressing room. Kylie explained to Monica that they had made an exception in the case of this boy who often came to performances and they were trying to make him welcome and give him a place where he could feel safe but Monica's sense of violation was not assuaged.

When I went backstage unannounced after a performance, as I have mentioned earlier in this account, I realised I had committed a serious *faux pas*. Nothing was said and I withdrew immediately but the sense of outrage emanating from all five actors was palpable. They were about to enjoy a glass of champagne together and it was clearly a valued moment of private socialising for this group-within-the-group. Monica used the

word 'protocol' when describing the company's unspoken understanding of the director's role and responsibility, and Justine's comment about the 'director's prerogative' indicates a similar awareness of territory and limits. The experience of observing rehearsals and the run of the production showed me that even in the egalitarian, overtly inclusive Company B Belvoir there are nevertheless hierarchies, groups-within-groups and a veritable minefield of unspoken rules and practices. These functions not only to exclude outsiders but also contribute to the aura that surrounds certain places, such as the dressing room, and to the creation of a sense of membership of a privileged group that extends beyond Company B and includes the theatre community more broadly. The beliefs, practices and shared terminology, as well as the names of the artists who figured in rehearsal room anecdotes and gossip indicate that the theatre traditions to which this group of artists were laying claim reach back into the historical past of British theatre and that the broader community within which they define themselves includes British and American theatre and cinema. There is a theatre community that extends across the English speaking world to which Australian theatre artists see themselves as belonging and, even though most will never work outside of Australia, their identity is defined to a significant extent in relation to this larger entity.

The rituals in an interaction chain function to create a sense of group membership and solidarity but, as Collins shows, this is by no means incompatible with stratification and conflict. Indeed, he claims that rituals have 'a double stratifying effect: between ritual insiders and outsiders; and, inside the ritual, between ritual leaders and ritual followers' (Collins 2004, 41). This is totally borne out by what I observed in the *Toy Symphony* rehearsal process, where the enclosed space of the rehearsal room was protected from outsiders but where the protocols governing responsibilities within the work process and the hierarchies of respect and veneration created a highly stratified situation notwithstanding the rhetoric of inclusiveness, the laughter and the fun. In fact, the greater the veneration, the greater the sense of self worth conferred on those lower down in the hierarchy by their membership of this privileged group. The network of relationships that existed between various members of the *Toy Symphony* company due to their having worked together on other productions (as shown in figure 4) greatly facilitated the rapid formation of a sense of community amongst the group of people brought together for the intensive period of rehearsal and performance. This network was extended by further bonds created by links to other artists with whom one or more had worked at some time and by their response to theatre, film and television productions they saw. Conversation in meal breaks

often revolved around productions they had seen and they were vitally interested in what other actors were doing and who was working where and with whom. It was evident that they, like many other actors, go frequently to the theatre, in particular to opening nights, where their presence functions to celebrate and honour the work of the artists who have made the show in question, as well as affirming the existence of the theatre community to which they belong. This was indeed what seemed to be happening at the opening and closing night performances of *Toy Symphony* where, as I have recounted, the level of excitement was significantly heightened by the well known actors and showbusiness personalities in the audience who, by their presence, were celebrating both the production and themselves.

Other elements in the creation of a sense of self worth among the members of the group include such things as Neil's insistence throughout the rehearsal process on the cultural importance of the work they were doing, the little speeches he made to mark significant stages in their creation of this first production of a new work by a distinguished Australian playwright, and his generous acknowledgement of the achievements and honours gained by other members of the company. When the nominations for the Australian Film Institute awards were announced and it emerged that all the actors in the *Toy Symphony* cast had been nominated for different awards for their film and television work (apart from Guy who had been totally immersed in the Tim Conigrave play all year), there was a significant boost in energy levels and excitement in the room, and a great deal of additional bonding as though the recognition of their peers enhanced the respect they already had for each other's artistry. It became evident to me that the function of such awards and prizes is far from negligible, even among artists who express some scepticism about the criteria and the nature of the jury process. Other incidents involved the expression of support for colleagues in other theatre companies. They were all strong in their condemnation of the Melbourne critic who, after having been admitted as a favour to a preview performance of Michael Gow's production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, published a negative review before the production had even opened. Everybody in the room wrote personal messages of friendship and encouragement on a group fax for the opening night of *Riflemind* at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), another new Australian play receiving its first production in that season.² In all these ways, the sense of community within the *Toy Symphony* company was enhanced and, at the same time, it positioned itself in relation to the larger theatre community and in particular to the STC, the best funded and most prestigious company in the state.

Judging from the gossip and the joking in the rehearsal room, the STC was the company against which Company B measured itself. Relations with other companies, notably Griffin, were warm, as evidenced by the fact that *Holding the Man* was a Griffin production that had been transferred to Belvoir at the end of its run at The Stables, but it was the STC that figured most frequently in rehearsal room banter. While lighthearted and often self-deprecatory, this seemed to function as a kind of group bonding, consolidating the sense of being a valued contributor to a company whose identity was formed in part by what distinguished it from the STC with its more lavish funding and connections to the corporate sector. But there was also genuine warmth and no other company received the imprimatur of a fax from the *Toy Symphony* cast although it is unlikely that there were no other opening nights in Sydney during that six week period. It is an interesting fact that most of the artists who work for Company B Belvoir also work for the STC, sometimes in the same season, and the people I interviewed were well able to articulate what they perceived as the major differences between the companies and what each contributes to the larger entity of Sydney theatre. When I asked people what working for Company B meant to them, I was struck by the frequency with which their definitions of Company B involved contrasting it with the STC and also by the extent to which in their minds, Company B was synonymous with Neil Armfield. Monica said she had found Neil very sensitive to the actor's needs and ready to give approval 'so that the actors feel valued' and for Justine, too, it had been a delight to work with Neil, who 'is able to empower the actor during the process', while for Richard 'Company B is a life raft of a place' to which he has returned for creative sustenance at intervals throughout his career. One of them said that Company B is the arthouse theatre while the STC seems to fulfil a corporate function and another said that while STC productions have bigger budgets, Company B productions 'have heart and are culturally richer'. For members of the production crew, too, Company B represents an ideal model of work in which collaboration is emphasised over hierarchical relations and, as Liam put it, 'everyone's contribution is valued and people feel able to offer'. For him as for other members of the backstage staff, it was not just the work but the way it was produced and, even more interestingly, its social impact that contributed so much to their sense of the place occupied by Company B in the broader theatre community. The idea that the work they produced 'challenges people's attitudes' (Liam) and is 'socially relevant' (Kylie) played an important part in their self image and their sense of being engaged in work of cultural and social significance notwithstanding the low level of remuneration provided by the theatre.

There were many ways in which different members of the company positioned themselves and the work in relation to historical tradition and to the broader theatre community extending beyond the shores of Australia. There was Tess's delight when she discovered that the hat she had found for the Alien Nanny in the wardrobe store had originally been worn by a character in the very first production of Patrick White's *Ham Funeral*, delight that was shared by Neil when the Nanny's costume was first shown. He said the hat should really be in a theatre museum and his response ensured that everyone present took a moment to appreciate the web of connections represented by the faded and fraying ribbons of that little material object. There were also Neil's short disquisitions on the origins of phrases such as 'break a leg' and 'chookas', and the explanation he gave when insisting that the boy who whistled should leave the theatre. And there was the dilapidated scrap of paper that Monica carried in her handbag with the comment by Micheál mac Liammóir that seemed to her to sum up so powerfully the actor's experience:

But with the actor it is different: we are born at the rise of the curtain and we die with its fall, and every night in the presence of our patrons we write our new creation, and every night it is blotted out forever, and of what use is it to say to audience or critic, 'Ah but you should have seen me last Tuesday.'

I love the fact that she had typed out the quotation and carried it with her for years as it is such a telling example of the sense of connection between actors across space and time, sharing the same anguish of working within the ephemeral.

According to the theory articulated by Randall Collins, there are three orders in which symbols circulate and prolong group membership beyond the period of the ritual itself. Firstly as objects of attention of 'emotionally entrained but otherwise anonymous crowds' and secondly as symbols built up out of personal identities and narratives, and he comments that these 'are two quite different circuits of social relationships' (Collins 2004, 87). Applying this to the rehearsal/performance situation, there is the production itself, the sacred object emerging from the ritual intensity of the rehearsal process, and its nightly iteration to new audiences can be seen to constitute the object of attention in the first order, and then there is the whole gamut of discourse surrounding that particular production as it lives on within the culture and the talk about other performances and the artists that made them that figures so prominently in rehearsal room conversations. These 'third-person narrations', to use Collins's term, constitute the second level within which symbols circulate and it is of crucial importance for the creation of a

sense of group membership, hence the amount of time devoted to this kind of talk during the rehearsal process and the amount of emotional energy it generates (figure 15 provides a telling image of the energy that circulates around such narrations). Collins claims that there is a third order and this is the most intimate level of circulation because it occurs within the mind of the individual and is, thus, very hard for the sociologist to get at. He says 'We might as well say that this is a sociology to dream about, and indeed, it encompasses a sociology of dreams' (2004, 99). This reminded me that during the *Toy Symphony* process, three people in the room mentioned that they had had a dream about the work and, for each of them, the impact of the dream was such that they wanted to recount it the next day. On each occasion, the dreamer recounted the dream to Neil and it was Neil who responded even though others were present and able to hear, another example of the way Neil operated as the lightning conductor of the energies in the room.

The first dream was Justine's and it occurred early in the process. On Day 6, as soon as she arrived she told Neil she had dreamt about him. 'You were at my house and we were surrounded by all the toys in the house, and all the actors were there too, and you said we should play with the toys and make them tell a story.' The dream had made her feel very happy and she said that was unusual as her dreams were 'usually disturbing'. The dream seems to contain a reassuring mix of references to her work on *Playschool*, where she is an accomplished and highly successful presenter, and to *Toy Symphony*. The second dreamer was Guy and his dream also involved a house. As he told Neil on Day 21, 'all the cast members from *Holding the Man* and *Toy Symphony* were at a beach house and there was a large sign saying it was Patrick White's first house'. The reference to Patrick White was perhaps triggered by the talk that had occurred in the rehearsal room only a couple of days earlier (Day 19) concerning the connection to the first production of *The Ham Funeral* created by the Nanny's hat, but the dream suggests in a delightful way Guy's perception that what they are doing is an integral part of Australian high culture.

The third dream was mine but I include it here because it differed so markedly from those of the participants in the ritual process and can thus be seen to reveal important features of the way the process was lived and experienced by those involved. In my dream as I told Neil on Day 15, I was in the rehearsal room and Neil suddenly turned to me and asked me to read a part. I had to leave my place on the safety of the sidelines and enter the dangerous space of the 'stage' and, when I picked up the script that was lying there, I found that it was not written in normal prose but was a kind of rebus, the text interspersed with pictures that

represented words or phrases. Most of the pictures were photographs of people but, though I vaguely recognised each photograph as being of some celebrity, I did not know any of the names. It was a totally humiliating experience and then, as though my subconscious had not made the point sufficiently clearly, when I went back to my table, a young man was sitting in my place. I said hesitantly 'isn't this my seat?' and he replied with an airy wave 'no, this is where I always sit'.

If Randall Collins is correct about the third order circulation of symbols, then these three dreams contain vivid indications of the sense of community shared by the active participants in the creative process, of the house in which they were safe to play and tell stories, the relation of this house to the broader culture, the role of Neil as an authorising and enabling figure, contrasted to my own strong sense of demarcation between insiders and outsiders. The experience of trying to 'read' a text in which photographs of unknown people replace names is comic when recounted (like most nightmares), but was in fact very close to what happened when Neil and the actors exchanged 'third person narrations'. I was always aware that the anecdote contained valuable insights along with the gossip but often did not hear the name or had no idea of the identity of the person to whom they were referring. It is perhaps also interesting that the two insiders who dreamt about the process and felt strongly enough about it to recount the dream to Neil were those whose membership of the group was the most peripheral: neither Justine nor Guy had been in a play directed by Neil, Justine had never performed at Belvoir, Guy was the youngest member of the group. I was of course a total outsider, given a kind of tenuous membership as observer that in fact served to confirm my outsider status. This helped make me aware of the complexities involved in regulating the life of groups that come together for brief but intense periods in which intimacy and emotional trust must be rapidly generated and then equally rapidly dispersed, and where the stability that makes possible such fluctuations is derived from a huge, amorphous, intangible entity conceptualised as 'the theatre community', that manifests itself locally (the 'Sydney scene') and nationally, and more mysteriously, is felt to extend across the English speaking world.

Reflecting now on the creative process involved in the making of *Toy Symphony* and on other rehearsal processes I have been privileged to observe, I am struck more than ever by the complex nature of rehearsals as they have evolved over the course of the last century and by the role

of the director who is the lynchpin of the whole enterprise. In a good rehearsal process, it is the director who stimulates, facilitates and elicits the creativity of a large number of different artists and then somehow draws all these inputs together and shapes them into a coherent work of art. Neil Armfield's particular gift is to do this while enabling each individual artist and artisan to feel they have made a genuine contribution and that without their contribution the work would have been the poorer. Randall Collins's theoretical elaboration of the distinction between 'power rituals' and 'status rituals' and the differing levels of emotional energy generated in these interactions suggests that rehearsal in the contemporary theatre can be seen as a very effective status ritual, 'a situation of emotional entrainment rising to a palpable level of collective consciousness' (Collins 2004, 114) with all the associated benefits of positive self image for the participants and enhanced creative energy released around the group's objective. Some rehearsals function as power rituals, little different from those in operation in highly stratified situations such as the military; this would probably apply to the work of charismatic but autocratic directors like Kantor or Wilson, who strictly control the input of all the contributing artists and workers, subordinating it to their own personal vision, but equally to the large theatre companies in which the director of the production is an employee like all the others and major decisions about programming, budget and personnel are made by head office. By contrast, the *Toy Symphony* rehearsal process, like other successful status rituals, built a high level of collective effervescence, empowering the participants, enhancing their sense of belonging and of the cultural value of their work.

In the introduction to this account, I mentioned my unease with the authorial role attributed to the director over the period of so-called 'director's theatre' and claimed that, in my experience, the authorial process involved in contemporary theatre is far more complex and creative input comes from many sources. The playwright is certainly the author of the script, although as has been recounted in relation to the *Toy Symphony* process, the script itself can be subjected to a significant amount of rewriting by the director and other members of the production team. The foregoing account of the *Toy Symphony* rehearsal process raises questions about the extent to which the director can be said to be the author of the production, even when the director in question is an artist of Neil Armfield's stature and undoubted authority. It also raises questions, and begins to provide answers about what authorship in a genuinely collaborative process involves. This is where, it seems to me, theatre practice has a great deal of value to contribute to contemporary debates about appropriate management systems in institutions and

enterprises far removed from the performing arts. Theatre practitioners have, throughout the twentieth century, been evolving protocols (to repeat Monica's term), and whole systems of unspoken rules and practices whereby the director directs but does not thereby infringe the creative autonomy of others. The actors and designers in *Toy Symphony* knew that, by accepting the work, they were tacitly agreeing to take direction from Neil. They not only trusted Neil's judgement but felt that the experience of working with him would bring benefits to them in the pursuit of their craft. While every member of the group, including Michael, knew that it was Neil's vision that was being created, they also knew that this vision was the product of a genuine group process and that the outcome would be affected, sometimes in major ways, by their personal contribution. Working in a process of this sort requires particular skills on the part of the director and generosity of spirit on the part of the rest of the group. There has to be both shared recognition of the utility of the protocols and an allegiance to something greater for which all are prepared to devote their energies and which, in turn, replenishes those energies.

Unleashing the creativity of others does not lead automatically to chaos or anarchy, and complex enterprises can be run without the authoritarian or bureaucratic interference that so saps the energies of the people working in them. I suggest that theatre practice of the sort exemplified by Company B's *Toy Symphony* process constitutes a highly effective model of group creativity, and it provides many insights into ways in which the full imaginative and intellectual potential of a group can be paradoxically both unleashed and harnessed to a common end.

Notes

- 1 The level of intimacy that is created is doubtless what leads to the frequent use of the notion of family as a means of describing the relationship between theatre practitioners but there is a paradoxical sense of insecurity at the heart of the theatre family, as Camilla Ah Kin has pointed out: 'It is the emotional commitment with the expectation of impermanence that sets a theatre family apart from actual blood family where the depth of connection is assumed to be life-long' (Ah Kin 2010, 9).
- 2 *Riflemind*, written by Andrew Upton and directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman, had its world premiere at the Sydney Theatre Company on 10 October 2007. Tess Schofield designed the costumes and Damien Cooper the lighting for the production, and this overlap doubtless added to the sense of connection between the two productions.