ADIOS CHA CHA AND SIDETRACK’S THEATRE FOR THE PEOPLE

'Adios Cha Cha: A Show of Strength. Made in Marrickville by Sidetrack theatre.' Adios Cha Cha is Sidetrack's major production for 1985, and represents a new scale of work for the company. It involves eight performers, extensive use of live amplified music, uses a large (8 metres by 5) stage space, seating the audience on three sides of a playing arena, and it has developed a distinctive theatrical language for its subject. There is both in acting style and construction a sense of an epic procession of images, and of large and powerful issues and feelings. This is essentially a realist enterprise — aiming to be accurate to a process of history — but not naturalistic.

Sidetrack's theatrical strategies are constantly developing. Adios Cha Cha comes after a series of productions which have taken various innovative approaches to shaping a theatre of realism which can still compete for its audience's attention with more usual sources of entertainment. Over the last two years productions including Loco,
Down And Out From Under and Day to Day, have each found their own way to respond to the particular energies and rhythms of the people whose experience they draw on and speak to — railway workers, migrants, kids, office workers. Each play is shaped formally by its particular subject. These subjects have some core themes — working life itself, its physical and mental demands, negotiations with identity as a migrant, changes in patterns of authority in the family, schooling as a socialising system, birth in a foreign language, and the problematic intersection of dreams, life-choices and the modelling of those choices by one's social and economic situation.

Sidetrack has a commitment to exploring the reality of the lives of working people — which includes the majority of migrants — and to finding the ordinary and extraordinary, the crushing and the vital forces in those lives. Sidetrack has been working on this since it was founded in 1979. Some of the aesthetic challenges involved, and the solutions found, will be mentioned later.

Sidetrack Theatre is a professional community theatre company, funded by the Theatre Board of the Australia Council and the N.S.W. Ministry of the Arts. An important part of its identity and purpose is symbolised by its physical location in Marrickville. Marrickville Municipal, according to the most recent census, is the 'most multicultural' (the terms used by the Census atlas) municipality in Australia — an old working-class inner-Sydney area now home to many migrant nationalities as well as experiencing like most inner-city areas, pockets of gentrification. Sidetrack operates out of a former Army barracks in a complex of huts now the Addison Rd. Community Centre. Sidetrack's premises are not a theatre, but a place where shows are prepared. Sidetrack's 'theatre' is anywhere people can gather to see the show. Performances have been done in school halls and gymnasiums, in factory workshops and canters, at migrant education centres and trade union conferences, and in many shapes and sizes of community halls and local meeting places. This commitment to touring, to making portable theatre, gives Sidetrack access to a huge audience to whom normal live theatre venues are threatening and uncomfortable places not only because of the content of shows performed but of the cultural-class overtones of the buildings, the behaviour and responses expected of the audience.

In going to the audience, as a special (but not too-special) part of a normal day, touring community theatre leaps over a major obstacle to a people's theatre. A typical Sidetrack audience is not, like the normal audience at a 'mainstream' theatre, engaging in a ritualised confirmation of superior cultural identity. They are however being empowered by the content and its treatment in the works, and by the fact — generally announced by a member of the cast before the show, that they are watching Sidetrack, who've made the show being presented themselves, and who come from Marrickville. 'Made in Marrickville' emphasises that creativity is not confined to the comfortable and fashionable suburbs or the suave culture-palaces of the central city. Sidetrack's commitment is to that majority paradoxically treated as a minority by 'mainstream' cultural production.

Recent Sidetrack shows — each produced in its own distinctive idiom and style — have included the life of workers in the Railway Workshops (Loco — made 'in residence' at the Challorla workshops), working life in a Public Service office (Day to Day), industrial democracy (The Number One Thing — made with cooperation from the Trade Union Training Authority), migration, the migrant family, patriarchy, authority and the Australian schooling system (Under The Thumb, Out From Under), growing-up, and racism (Sparrow, Zac and Ely, Silver Street Kids), nuclear madness and peace (The Bang — An Atomic Musical). Down and Out From Under — the two linked shows presented together, won the Best Theatre Award at the last Adelaide Fringe Festival. They are currently the equally significant distinction of being denounced by Senator Peter Baume, and Messrs John Tingle and John Pearce, popular talk-back radio ideologues, for 'taking political propaganda into schools'. Since 1979 Sidetrack has played to at least fifty thousand people (one year eighty thousand) per year.

For Adios Cha Cha the writing and production team included the director, the cast — many of whom perform both as actors and musicians — the dramaturg and musical director/composer. The piece is the first collectively written show of Sidetrack's not set in Australia. Research, writing and production took three months — February to April, 1985.

The characters in Adios Cha Cha live in a town called St. Alyossa in an imaginary country we've constructed from aspects of many actual countries of the so-called 'under-developed' world. In St. Alyossa, the people are obedient by the example of the teachings of the Church, by the exhaustion of heavy physical work, and at the time we see them by the increasing harassment of the military. The characters represent the townspeople amongst whom a girl called Cha Cha grows from about ten to sixteen years of age. The Patron (Spanish for The Boss) owns the mine the people work in. The Patron is also growing carnations for export to richer countries (a symbol for the cash crops which include coffee, tea, tobacco, coca and in Colombia in fact, carnations, now being cultivated on land on which essential food crops were once grown). Others include Sergeant Costa and his offsider, Cha Cha's mother Cruz, One-Eleven and Luis. Costa Nazel, showing a variety of responses to the basic problems of survival. These villagers are joined by a new kind of priest, Father Pavlo. Father Pavlo is a worker-priest, inspired by the new 'liberation theology' — an important influence for change in many so-called 'Third World' countries. Father Brian Gore, recently released from unjust imprisonment in the Philippines, and the priests who hold office in the Sandinista revolutionary government in Nicaragua are examples of such clergy whose words and actions we studied.

In Adios Cha Cha we see the necessity for social change. We see that many of the basic problems of life could be solved if the people could control their own lives. If the army did not treat ordinary people as criminals, and if the land was used for the good of the many instead of enriching the few. As the people of St. Alyossa begin to see their situation more clearly, they have to make many difficult choices, including whether there is a way to put a stop to violence without using it oneself. They have to face and overcome a pervasive fear and sense of powerlessness these conditions produce.
This story is told in Adios Cha Cha in scenes of powerful realist dialogue and through pageant, music, dance and a specially developed style of grotesque pantomime. The style is vulgar, comic, vigorous and involving. Adios Cha Cha is not a documentary, or dramatised history. We have taken facts and impressions from novels, songs and photographs from many countries, from the reports of international bodies like the Brandt commission, from newspapers and journals and the experiences of actual people. But the show presents all levels of the people's experience, psychological and personal as well as economic and physical. We have created a distinctive style for the play, involving 'epic' structure and characterisation (in Brecht's sense of 'epic') and a 'reported' acting style with which characters become more than particular individual portraits. Behind each figure we would like the audience to see the image of thousands.

Specially composed music is performed live on stage on guitars, keyboard, brass and a range of drums and other percussion instruments.

Because we are reflecting the tragic experience of millions of people in the world today truthfully, we have shown the violence to which too many are subjected as part of our overall statement. Joy and hope and celebration are also strongly presented, emphasizing the resilience of the people which will in time defeat this violence.

The sources and inspiration for aspects of Adios Cha Cha are various. On one level, we researched the basic facts of Third World eco-
subject to forms of exile. Most people do not feel they have power to influence what politicians do. Many people who have come to Australia to escape oppression find themselves slaves to exhausting and repetitive jobs, or left to the limbo of unemployment.

Although we are part of the so-called ‘First World’ inequality is endemic in our society, too. As we researched ‘St. Aloysius’ we found both differences and parallels, but above all connections. Australia and the crisis countries of the ‘under-developed’ world are subject to a global economic system which means that Third World poverty is often the result of First World affluence — ‘Underdevelopment is not a stage on the road to development — it is its product.’ Labour and materials in poor countries make goods for rich countries and profits for their own elites — the owners of land and of industries.

Multinational corporations make many of the crucial decisions that affect the standard of living in Australia, as they dominate Third World economies. International financial institutions are currently lowering the buying power of the Australian dollar because they are not sure Bob Hawke can control the unions. Huge international banks dictate economic policy in vast areas of South America to protect and maximise their profits from loans. This distorts social and political developments, which are often explicitly prescribed too, as part of the exorbitant loan packages of the First World banks.

These matters are not put clearly in the Australian media, which gives minimal and misleading information on Third World politics and poverty. Poor people are regularly pictured as lazy, stupid or naturally inferior, even in cartoons and comics. They are blamed for their situation as we are made to blame ourselves for ‘failure’ in our society. We live in a society where we are made to feel inadequate and stupid and insignificant — we have ‘equality’ but not equal value in the eyes of competitive capitalism. We have made this play to say that these situations, these feelings, can be overcome. In a Third World dictatorship this may mean immediate struggle against the guns that authority turns on those who demand change. But in all societies change needs hope, and a belief in the future. We present this play to help create the hope and the courage to overcome despair and cynicism, without which overcoming there will be no fruitful change.

Cynicism as a product of despair of real contact with one’s own life seems a particular affliction of affluence without significant power. Many intellectuals and artists in our society seem subject to these afflictions. Styles of intellectual and artistic work become circular, narcissistic, content-less. Abstract expressionism in painting, even the cult of Beckett’s minimal theatricality, seems symbolic declarations of this melancholy alienation. These are not sufferings like tortoise and violent death and poverty, but they are disabling of the will to work for change, and are therefore self-perpetuating. To counter both the false images of Third World poverty, the distorted explanations of the motives for revolution prevalent in our society, and to counter the debilitating ecstasies of post-modern form, we have worked to make Adios Cha Cha a ‘show of strength’ in feeling and meaning.

Creating a Style

We wanted to show the basic structure of oppression — how it operates both materially and ideologically, and we wanted to show the process of learning to see one’s oppression as part of a system, and moving towards action for change. This was to be shown in a place that was no single country, but that reflected the essential situation of many. This proposed a challenge of style, to deliver the experience of the characters powerfully, and to avoid alienating the audience through didacticism or ‘preaching’. The answer is essentially to make all the signifying systems of theatre work, engage the senses as well as the intellect — to use powerful stage-images, movement, the energy of dance and song, as well as words.

A consciously developed aesthetic guided the use of these elements. The company considered carefully the overall style of playing, and did special work to develop the necessary skills — parody and grotesque, dancing the waltz, the cha-cha and the cumbia, exercises in ‘reported’ acting, Chinese acrobatic fitness training, and work on musical skills, especially group work on Latin American percussion instruments and rhythms. The content and intention of scenes being devised was discussed on all levels, as was the ordering of scenes, the making of transitions. Contrast, alternation and surprising conjunctions of images and energies became a more important principle of structure than traditional narrative — our play ends defiantly and strongly, but there is no question of narrative closure. Just as with the current real history of so many peoples, there is no clear answer to how things will end.

Gabriella Cabral, Jai McHenry, Robyn Laurie in Adios Cha Cha — Sidetrack Theatre
It might be useful to summarise the progress of an important sequence—the movement into and out of the scene which we call the Pavlo-Patron scene, where these two characters, the radical priest and the mine-owner and land-holder confront each other. They argue during the scene over what the people of St. Alyssa need. Pavlo says they need fresh water, decent working conditions, protection from the daily violence of the Guard ‘... they deserve to have the basic necessities without having to lick your arse ...’ The Patron demands any responsibility for the military, and emphasises the benefits of economic growth and cash flow ‘... the people need guidance, discipline ... are you a subversive, Father?’ Although both the Priest and the Patron are played in a larger-than-life style, the dialogue itself could read like a somewhat stilted ‘naturalist’ conversation. The conversation is however contained in a situation which gives it a dimension of theatrical ‘dangers’, of extremity and evening dress. It begins with the Bourgeois Waltz, with actors in clown noses, tuxedos and long gowns dancing with stick dummies of The Emperor, the Lady, the General, the Professor and so on. These dummies have three dimensional caricature fabric-sculptured faces. The Priest enters in his usual simple clothes, and the dancers move around him. Three ‘couples’ take up a position on each side of the playing space to cheer and titfer as the Patron scores points off the Priest. Their incomprehension and ludicrous contempt of Pavlo charge the scene with more-than-naturalistic energy. When Father Pavlo leaves, with the Patron in disbelief at his defiance, the Waltz starts up again, and the Guests dance off couple by couple until we see a single female guest waltzing and chattering in lonely absurdity with her ‘General’ partner, infinitely isolated. Meanwhile one of the guests has been called in to join the band-stand with ‘his’ partner and begins a night club style rendition of ‘Strangers In The Night’, a little man in a too-large tuxedo and clown-nose, with manner suggesting the Chaplin ‘little tramp’. The Sergeant and the Private blunder in noisily drunk, disconcerting the singer. They toast the young soldier’s first killing of a prisoner under interrogation. She was, he declares, a ‘dirty rotten union-organising slut’. They drink to his machete, the Fatherland, the government and his lost virginity. They are the brute force behind the bourgeoisie chatter and the Patron’s bluster. Their scene continues, involving harassment of a young woman who is unlucky enough to meet them on her way home. They attempt to waltz with her and end up fighting. The singer and musician on the band-stage have been present all through reacting to the scene, providing music where needed. ‘Strangers in the Night’ begins as a funny-pathetic ‘number’ but develops biting irony.

These scenes have been summarised to indicate how the flow of surprising and constantly altering incident modifies the reception of each part—the transitions are crucial to the effectiveness of the scenes themselves. The scene that follows begins in a contemplative mood, with the music of pan-pipes as Father Pavlo, tired and worried, puts out the stools for his literacy class. In this scene, The Naming, the people discuss equality and respect, fear and power. There are no blackout or curtains in the show, the action is continuous through two one-hour ‘halves’.

Before going on to say something about other aspects of style, it might be worth quoting briefly from one of our sources to support why we found the new style of orientation to the poor made the liberation theology clergy important to our play. Father Brian Gore is a priest known to Australians because his work on the island of Negros in the Philippines led to his unjust imprisonment by the Marcos government. The following is part of a speech given by Father Gore at a memorial for Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador (assassinated March 24, 1980):

‘... the Church must be the voice of those that have no voice and it must be our duty to cry out for the people—ask not for charity — but demand justice.” These are the words of Romero — who fought for millions of people of El Salvador, and these words are not solely for those people, but the people of Latin America, Central America, The Philippines, East Timor and the many other countries around the world in similar situations. We can never, we Church people especially, can never be silent in the face of such suffering, torture and death. It is inconceivable for a Christian person, especially a Christian leader, to be silent — for silence is as good as acceptance.

Romero is a symbol of what the Church must be, the voice — that is the least we can be, the voice — the cry of the common people. I think Romero was another Moses. In a world of few prophets, the compliant Christians need to be reminded that the vast majority of the Christian population is living in hunger and sickness, and suffering — living under repressive regimes — we cannot live in the past — we must think of what is happening today — that this very moment most probably, people are being picked up, imprisoned, tortured and then being disposed of. Sometimes it’s so hard to believe that this is going on...

As I’ve suggested, the style of Adios Cha Cha is the product of a conscious aesthetic. The main reference points for Western theatre today are clearly Naturalism or the persisting naturalist habit and the ‘breaks’ from it (to follow Raymond Williams’ analysis). These breaks include of course the ‘Epic’ practice which Brecht opposed to the ‘Aristotelian’ or individual-tragic mode. In Australia currently
there are particular inflections of naturalist practice and, less prevalent, active alternatives to it. One important variation is the 'rough', 'popular' style associated with the Australian Performing Group and Jack Hibberd's Popular Theatre Plays. This larrkin comic style has been an important influence in satirical-critical works.

The rules of the dominant naturalist practice are familiar. They include the readily identifiable setting, (originally the bourgeois domestic 'room'), psychologically intricate characters whose individuality and uniqueness is dwelt upon and with whom the audience is encouraged to identify, dialogue giving the impression of 'natural' speech and a narrative continuity (a 'story'). There are of course variations, experiments and bending of the rules. One factor which is constant, and definitive however, is the rule that the aim of acting is to become the character, and that there is a fourth wall through which the audience gazes at the action, passive and ignored — apparently — by the actors.

In Adios Cha Cha the audience is encouraged to remember that the actor is an actor, to clarify the force of the 'character' as a report and comment on reality. Actors play multiple roles, they address lines directly to the audience, share reactions with the audience as well as with other actors. The play mixes sequences which are like naturalistic scenes in the way the dialogue flows 'conversationally' amongst characters, with 'natural' interruptions, changes in direction, mistakes and jokes with others where the dialogue is formalised or overshadowed by action or image, and in which the figures are emblematic, 'standing for the many'. Actors are engaged in playing actions in the Stanislavsky fashion sometimes, in others making part of a tableau or procession or grotesque group. A wedding is celebrated by the audience being hauled in to join the dancing. Some characters are continuous, others exist only for the scene they appear in, but even those who persist are not intended to be 'Aristotelian' individual heroes, but to epitomise social forces.

Naturalist practice tends to negate the historical as an actor in human experience and by the dominance of its conventions the credible drama creates the 'problem' of didacticism. To show social and political forces creates unfamiliar breaks in the personality-driven narratives, which therefore feel obtrusive and 'obvious'. The priorities taught by this practice are implicit in the that story-shaped experience and in the containment of relevant causality to the personal. Dominant ideologies of human experience are therefore confirmed.

Adios Cha Cha seeks to deal with social and political forces as actors in its story, and so we have set out to go against the naturalistic grain with matters of great seriousness told in a way that is vulgar, comic, vigorous and involving.

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