Leading By Example: Ranga Shankara Theatre and the Status of Empirical Referents in Cultural Description

Dr. Julian Meyrick
Theatre & Drama Program, La Trobe University

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Abstract
This paper examines the terms and perspectives used by the Indian community theatre Ranga Shankara in the construction of its public identity. It contrasts these with the abstract and abstracting approaches to cultural production taken by Western scholarship in its econometric and socio-political modes. Drawing from Ranga Shankara’s website, examples are given of how the company construes its relationship to its venue, its artists and its audiences. This language is unpacked by way of pointing up the importance of respecting self-description in analysing empirical referents, particularly when these are taken from other cultures. The paper is prefaced with remarks about the use of micro-sociological context theorists such as Irving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks in constructing a conceptually adequate model of culture that is nevertheless considerate of artists’ intentions and agency. The work of the contemporary materialist-Platonist Alain Badiou is briefly cited, especially his resuscitation of the category of truth.

Biography
A Research Fellow at La Trobe University, and until recently Associate Director and Literary Advisor at Melbourne Theatre Company, Julian has directed many award-winning productions for MTC, STC, SASTC, the Griffin, MWT and his own ‘kickhouse theatre’. He is involved in Australian drama as a director and dramaturge and was responsible for expanding the Affiliate Writers Scheme at MTC and for initiating the Hard Lines play development program. He is Deputy Chair of PlayWriting Australia and an Adjunct Professor at Deakin University. As a theatre historian he has published a history of Nimrod Theatre, See How It Runs (2003), a history of MTC, The Drama Continues, a Currency House Platform Paper, Trapped By the Past, and academic articles on post-War Australian theatre, the theory-practice nexus, and contemporary dramaturgy. He is currently researching a series of case studies from Australian theatre in the post-Whitlam era, focusing on the relationship between cultural policy and creative practice. He is a member of the federal government’s Creative Australia Advisory Group.
Introduction

This paper was originally presented at a Deakin University Symposium in November 2008, one with the stern, Euclidean title “Intersecting Art and Business in the Creative Economy”. It was a formal response to actor Arundhati Nag’s description of her theatre company in Bangalore, India, Ranga Shankara. But another game was afoot. While the Symposium’s thirty-four invitees represented a good spread of countries, roles and perspectives, it was clear from the start there was a serious divide in the field. On the one hand, speakers like John Hartley and Simon Roodhouse took an econometric, market-friendly view of creative practice, presenting papers on ‘cultural science’ and comparative data analysis respectively. On the other, there were those such as Jennifer Craik, Hilary Glow and Katya Johnson who espoused a more familiar socio-political approach, and stressed the role of strategic leadership in achieving preferred cultural outcomes (Craik’s recent monograph Re-visioning Arts and Cultural Policy (2007) notes that, in developed countries, creative practice is a tool of choice for governments to address a wide range of problems, including “unemployment, social alienation, regional access, social welfare and therapy and… the creation of a sense of community and well-being” 25).

It is a caricature to say these two positions represent the upper and nether millstones of contemporary cultural analysis between which artists like Nag (and me, for that matter) are uncomfortably wedged. But it is not entirely wide of the mark. I was concerned at the Symposium to make a point about what in social theory is sometimes called ‘the ground’, sometimes ‘the field work’, but which, from the perspective of the artist, is neither a base nor a category, but a whole way of working and creating: a life. There were a number of artists present at the Symposium. But in the academy, culture is the object not the subject of scholastic locution. Creative practice is something that happens somewhere else, and even when it does not – even when academics combine, as they frequently do, the roles of scholar and artist both – the language of analysis is predicated on distancing techniques. For how is it possible to say anything useful about culture unless detachment is rigorously pursued? To do otherwise is to risk conflating the categories of taste and truth, to allow the personal impact of art to confound rational arguments about its production and dissemination, ones analysts are usually keen to broach.

Here is a thicket of academic presumption. In their specificity, even idiosyncrasy, creative practices and their outcomes do not present as fitting generalised epistemologies. They slide out from circumscribed subject areas to occupy a liminal, contested position. What gets reflected in academic discourse is what survives the bifurcation and a high price is paid for it. The problem of quality; the problem of intrinsic value; the problem of the hierarchy of cultural forms: these high-visibility issues – to name just three – return with nagging persistence in academic talk about culture. They seem to defy not only solution but even adequate construal, despite the range of theoretical approaches available and the copious quantities of data. Yet such ‘problems’ exist as intelligible and decidable operating strategies in the world of creative practice. That is, people know what they like; value what they like because they know it, and vice-versa; and distinguish, easily, between different levels of culture and types of artistic outcome. That their choices might be controversial – do tastes reflect individual preference structures or subcutaneous social and political assumptions? – does not negate the fact that what is an every day accomplishment for many, is one cultural analysts labour to explain except in the broadest economic, social and political terms.

Thus my paper reflected a micro-sociological turn, though not one I chose to foreground. Goffman, Garfinkel and Sacks sound like a firm of New York solicitors. In fact, they are three so-called ‘context theorists’ who have attempted to restore to social theory a concern with everyday agency and the “interaction order” (to use a favoured term of Erving Goffman). Goffman’s The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life
(1959) is a well-known and widely acclaimed book. It has attracted admirers as far afield as playwright Alan Bennett, who has reviewed Goffman’s other work (Bennett 1994). Harold Garfinkel’s Studies in Ethnomethodology (1967) is less well-known but has been no less profound in its impact. Ethnomethodology is more systematic, more consciously ‘a system’ than Goffman’s disparate sociological writings. But in Garfinkel’s concern with ‘mundane behaviour’ and ‘members’ accounts’ of that behaviour, he is likewise focused on the intricacies of social interaction. The work of Harvey Sacks, the most micro of the three, exists only as a compilation of lectures. The discipline he founded, however, Conversation Analysis, is a rigorous, formalised method for studying the sequencing of every day speech. Formal, yes, but in the profound attention paid to particularity the results are far from removed, and this is true of all three approaches. Neither Goffman, Garfinkel nor Sacks construct a ‘meta-language’ by which to pronounce on the absolute meaning of human action. Rather they cultivate a range of mid-level concepts to elucidate complex behaviour without either ironising it (reducing social agents to ‘dopes’ who do not know their own motivation) or abstracting it (leaving out agent’s accounts and promulgating structural models of an over-determining kind).

Towards the end of my response I threw in a remark about Alain Badiou. It was, in retrospect, a lazy and dishonest piece of showmanship. Whatever else Badiou might be – contemporary resuscitator of ontology; uniter of analytical, continental and post-structuralist philosophical traditions; developer of a system re-conceiving the idea of the subject and the category of truth – he is not an afterthought. Yet I included the paragraph confident that such is the growth of Badiou’s reputation and, more importantly, the impact of his writing, that my cheap trick would appear, in time, a justifiable allusion. At any rate, I could not present my argument without mentioning his name. For both Badiou and the context theorists, albeit in different ways, have a feel for the ontological plane of existence, for what is actually there, aside and outside the endlessly reflecting mirrors of systems of thought juggling abstruse critical categories (ones often denying that anything but the categories themselves can truly be known). Thus what started as a humble attempt to remind colleagues of the importance of what is dryly called “the empirical referent” ended up a polemic against the abstractive tendencies of contemporary humanities scholarship. It was not intended to be so. My material got away from me and I had to face robust questioning afterwards. Nevertheless I felt, and still feel, that my position is basically correct. So, having Talked the Talk, I Walk the Walk and let the paper stand as I originally delivered it, in all its flawed intransigence.

Arundhati Nag and Ranga Shankara: A Community Theatre

There is a quotation on Ranga Shankara’s website by the writer Girish Karnad which says that “a playwright carries within himself the audience he writes for”. Thereafter follows a succinct description of the problems of dramatic writing – problems unlike any other – and a conclusion: “A play has to work at the time of its performance so that it can become a part of the culture of its time and thereby find a place in the history of that language... Everything is risked at the moment of performance. That is the moment of truth when the playwright and his audience either love or hate each other. Those limitations, those tensions, that nail-biting [moment] – [this] is what makes theatre such an exciting place to be”. This is a comment by a creative artist on the value and dangers of creating art. It may be compared with a quotation from David Throsby, Australia’s leading cultural economist, on the econometric assessment of artistic value. It comes from his classic paper Perception of Quality in Demand for the Theatre (1982) in which he states: “Revealed preference theory tells us that people indicate something about their underlying preference system by their market choices of given commodities. Acceptance of certain behaviour axioms then allows us to infer the nature of their indifference system for these commodities from observation of their behaviour. In these terms, an individual’s or a group’s preference structure for certain
art objects or events, can be modelled, allowing replication in certain circumstances of these decision-makers’ judgements as to artistic quality” (66).

Both Karnad and Throsby are focused on the same thing: theatrical performances. They are concerned with the same variable: the level of success or failure. Yet they have profoundly different ways of describing, evaluating and expressing this concern. One can sympathise with the problem – and it is a problem – of saying anything about creative work that is axiomatically true and not subject to immediate rebuttal as perspectival. But the approaches seem disjunctive. It is a guess, but probably an accurate one, to assert that artists do not go to Baumol and Bowen’s *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (1966) to solve problems of value, while Constantin Stanislavski’s *My Life in Art* (1924) is rarely required reading for cultural economics seminars. Is the disjunction a useful one? Or does it point to hampering gaps in the nodal rhetorics that taken together form our understanding of the creative industries? Put simply, if artists and cultural analysts use radically different languages to describe their cultural experiences, how can we be sure that they are talking about the same thing? Even when common terms appear – and the word ‘community’ might be one – unless an effort is made to synchronise the approaches, these may acquire specialised connotations. They will then act as terms of disguise, appearing to promote collective understanding when in fact they are doing the opposite. Under these circumstances constructive dialogue – at a policy, professional or academic level – declines into a stoush over definitions. Any link to reality is lost by a contest for the right to offer a primary description of creative work.

My current research, focused on the Australia Council and its relationship with a number of performing arts clients in the post-Whitlam years (1976-1996), suggests what I have outlined is the default position for government-artist interactions: lack of cooperation between stake-holders; lack of understanding of different points of view; a determination to construct a meta-language for valuing creative processes and products (Meyrick 2009)9. But no meta-language can capture the reality of creative practice in this way, and the belief that there could be is harmful and erroneous. We should be labouring instead to invest terms with complex orientations and associations, to enrich and expand them, not reducing them to prescriptive meanings which, given what I have outlined, exacerbates the lack of common understanding. This is true of the term ‘community theatre’, for example. And the description of Ranga Shankara Theatre by Arundhati Nag is an exercise in just that: a demonstration of how a key concept may be enriched by the elaboration of a specific example. There are three aspects of Ranga Shankara’s identity which return to the operator of capture ‘community theatre’ an improved sense of meaning: i. its physical self, the building, location and resources; ii. its artistic self, the men, women and children who put on its plays or attend them; and iii. its proselytizing self, the training programs it offers to different groups to create a bond with the company over time. These are not expressions of an immanent notion of ‘community theatre’, they instantiate the category. In particular examples lies general meaning. Often in cultural analysis we try to move from the general to the particular, when our task would be better served by doing the opposite: moving from the particular to the general.

*i. Physical Self.* It is significant that the construction of Ranga Shankara’s venue was the result of efforts by a range of stake-holders, both grass-roots and institutional. Contributions were made in kind, not only in cash, so the theatre was literally built by its supporters. On the web-site there is reference to “the selfless contributions made by hundreds of donors” and to “invisible friends who stand by the theatre”10. The metaphor of ‘invisible friends’, of connections of sympathy both high and low, in the neighbourhood and beyond it, suggests a widespread sense of ownership of the theatre, which in tum strengthens connections of sympathy. ‘Community theatre’ is here an expression of diverse social forces around a common object with a simple and widely understood mission. It connects efforts from the bottom-up and the top-down
simultaneously to meet somewhere in the middle. Australian counterparts might include the establishment of the Nimrod Theatre, now the Stables Theatre in Kings Cross, Sydney; Company B Belvoir Street in Surry Hills, Sydney; and La Mama Theatre in Carlton, Melbourne which recently purchased its theatre through small sum donations by hundreds of artists and patrons. Such efforts contrast with the building of major performing arts complexes, whose existence is the result of political fiat. Sometimes the narrative of these venues is so fraught the result is a challenge to the sense of community ownership (the case with the Sydney Opera House, for example) 11.

ii. Artistic Self. It is significant that Ranga Shankara connects to both professional and amateur practitioners, and provides support for all manner of projects at a high level of industry and market profile. The division between professional and amateur theatre has bedevilled Australian theatre from the inception of professional non-commercial theatre in the 1950s 12. It is observed more lightly by Ranga Shankara, as a matter of practical balance. By providing a venue for those “with a thirst to perform” as well as overseas troupes and its own productions, the company feeds a way of working that is philosophically and theatrically inclusive. A quotation from the web-site: “Ranga Shankara celebrates the glorious traditions of theatre…. Through making available the performances of experienced artists to new theatre-goers and practitioners, through allowing both the young and the veteran to engage over endless cups of tea, through jointly lugging sets and painted flats well into the night, through heated discussions over beliefs and styles, we evolve our dramatic art and craft”. This holistic view is found in Australian theatre only rarely now, and is typically the first casualty of public assistance, which requires governance parameters and Key Performance Indicators that work against such a porous brief. La Mama might fit the bill, or Sydney’s New Theatre and the few remaining ‘pro-am’ companies around the country. The ‘little theatre movement’ was a significant part of Australian theatre from the 1930s until after the Second World War. As a sector it traversed the line between amateur and professional. But the advent of government funding from the 1960s onwards meant a sharp re-inscription of the difference. As a result, Australia’s understanding of ‘community theatre’ split in two: on the one hand, theatre by professionals for the community excluding the community; on the other, theatre by the community for the community excluding professionals.

iii. Proselytizing Self. Finally, it is significant that Ranga Shankara offers a range of training programs that seek to value-add to the diverse relationships it considers its own. This includes specific offerings not often found in the programs of Australian companies, a course for theatre critics, for example, as well as classes in lighting, stage design, acting and movement. Training has a double intention. It is not only the on-selling of expertise, the offering of outreach programs for those interested and able to pay. It is about sustainability, building up a skills-base that can be drawn on by the company in the future. Another quotation from the webpage: “workshops at Ranga Shankara are driven by the idea of enhancing the skills of the theatre community and ensuring we train and skill practitioners in all aspects of theatre… We look for partners when we conduct our skills workshops so that we can make the best Indian and international facilities available to participants.” ‘Community theatre’ thus has a hard core. It has traditions, skills-sets and values; it has habitus. It is not an administrative fabrication that can be re-shaped according to swiftly changing agendas. It not only has identity but agency, and it is subjectivizing empowerment, within determinate parameters, that the company imparts in its workshop program.

As may be clear, I am using the example of Ranga Shankara to shed light on the telos of cultural analysis in Australia, to show its aporias and unexamined givens. I also explore a key term, ‘community theatre’, by unpacking an empirical referent using the language of its own self-description, rather than deploying an ex ante definition and reading the referent in terms of a departure from it. This last tendency should be a grave concern for anyone who cares about creative practice. For despite the caveats
appended to social theories and economic models that these do not furnish complete
descriptions of the reality of cultural production - which is messy, contradictory and
confusing – their totalising, teleological and reductive tendencies all to often go
unchecked. The valorisation of theory over observation and the crypto-structuralist
leanings of even the most self-aware post-modern approaches promote analyses which
are top-down and etiolated. A definition is given, of ‘community’ by, say, Ghassan
Hage, Giorgio Agamben or Benedict Anderson. Then a reading of the referent is
offered using a short grab from an abstruse theory as an Archimedean fixed point.
Else, the language of self-description is ignored entirely, as in classical economics, and
a model of action put forward expunging all contextualising features.13

So common is the subsumption of the specific attributes of cultural production by
broader sociological, anthropological, economic and political modelling that, in
academic circles at any rate, the manoeuvre goes largely unremarked. After all,
traditional aesthetics has long since fallen into disuse. And nothing artists say gets
treated as of analytical significance. And so a gap opens up between the field and its
attendant discourses, between practitioner and analyst, which is hard to close because
intellectually foundational. Most of the time, different stake-holders rub along by doing
what anyone does when faced with a division they cannot ameliorate: ignoring it.
Sometimes though this strategy does not work (it did not work at the Labor
government’s 20.20 Summit in May 2007, for example, with its wildly diverse range of
participants,)14 And it exerts a high cost. In the deregulated marketplace of
contemporary humanities scholarship, the anarchic, even impertinent disregard of the
specificities of creative practice is repaid in kind by practitioners who display
indifference to analytical perspectives and distrust of those who promote them. The
problem is not easy to solve. There is no meta-language for describing cultural
production, as I said before. Different approaches illuminate different aspects of the
field, but saying this and nothing more is inadequate. There has to be a way of ranking
them in terms of each other, and the reality of creative practice. To do otherwise, to
assume an equivalence of value between different discourses, is to give up on the idea
there is anything real that needs apprehending. This relativism, pluralism’s shadow, is
also impertinent.

A way ahead is to resuscitate the category of truth and apply it, via a suitable language,
to creative practices to reveal their axioms and local histories. A type of materialist
Platonic revisionism may be seen in the work of Alain Badiou, for example, one of the
most influential philosophers writing today. This is not the place to give even a brief
description of Badiou’s ontological approach – laid out in his two masterworks L’Être et
l’Événement (1988) and Logiques des mondes (2006) – but the repercussions for
cultural analysis are profound. The first this paper has tried to illustrate: not subsuming
a creative practitioner’s language of self-description, but working with it, through it, to
illuminate and critique cultural processes. The second is more radical. It stems from a
renunciation. Badiou asserts, on behalf of his discipline, that philosophy itself has no
truths of its own, but that these are historically generated by four ‘conditions’ – art,
science, politics and love – which are themselves reliant on events to bring them into
being. Thus creative practice has truths of its own to impart which can be apprehended
by attendant discourses but not reduced to them and certainly not re-stated in a
‘higher’ (ie. more truthful) way. The ‘Real’ of existence (in the Lacanian sense) stands
outside the languages we devise to seize it. It is captured, to the extent that it can be,
by actions faithful to the events that bring it into subject awareness.

The job of cultural description is thus harder than it looks, and this is a reversal of
current cultural theory/cultural interpretation relations such that the former over-
determines the latter on all important points. On the contrary, it is interpretation that is
the cutting edge of cultural description, where the Real of creative practice is caught in
the form of words deployed to articulate it. Or not. This is an important point. For
Badiou, truth is infinite but humanity’s efforts to seize it are discontinuous and fraught
with the error. There is always a gap between what is presented (the Real to creative practice), what is re-presented (creative practice to the public) and what is re-re-presented (cultural descriptions of creative practice to the public).

All the more reason, then, for cultural analysts to match conceptual audacity with empirical rigour. As Badiou says we must be “militants of restrained action”\textsuperscript{15}. Or as Arundhati Nag remarked with forgiving exasperation in a similarly oxymoronic vein: “there are lessons to be learnt. \textit{But can they be taught?”}
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Footnotes

1 The title of Professor John Hartley’s presentation was “Cultural Science: Computing Cultural and Economic Values for Creative Power”, and his work in this area can be accessed on http://www.cultural-science.org/aboutus.html. Professor Simon Roodhouse, of London’s University of the Arts, was a sympathetic responder to Hartley, and his own contribution, “Creative Business Architecture and Networks” showed a consonant concern with ‘rational boundary making practices’ by governments intervening in cultural markets. His work on cultural precincts – eg. Roodhouse 2006 – makes sophisticated use of quantitative data in urban regeneration planning. Professor Jennifer Craik, from ANU, was unsympathetic, if not hostile to the idea of ‘cultural science’ and by extension to econometric views of cultural provision. Her own are laid out in Re-visioning Arts and Cultural Policy: Current Impasses and Future Directions (2007) in which she describes cultural policy as “a mix-and-match composite of objectives, mechanism, outcomes and evaluation measures” (xvi). Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson presented work on notions of excellence and access as these apply to the indigenous performing arts in Australia. Their work is presented more fully in the Currency House Platform Paper Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts and Policy (2009).

2 In her book, Patronizing the Arts (2008) Marjorie Gerber devotes considerable space to the problem of creative practice and its relationship to the academy. She argues that the former is misrepresented when it is aligned with humanities scholarship: “Humanities scholars study the history of literature, film, art, architecture and music, and for most departments in modern universities that “history” continues to the present day. But historical, formal, textual and political analysis of the arts… is quite different from art making. Grouping the arts with the humanities, though thematically plausible, is in fact a category mistake…. To find a better analogy for the activities of art-making, we should look to the sciences” (140).

3 Within the academy there are endless attempts to square the circle, to get a fit between creative practice and cultural analysis. For an upbeat example see Brown (2000), a paper which discusses the problem of design practice within academic institutional frameworks.


6 By ‘meta-language’ I mean those approaches which habitually subsume the language of every day action – which includes that of creative practice – into a taxonomy deemed to be superior in descriptive veracity. Obviously all analytical paradigms deploy ideas and terms of their own. By there is a bent in contemporary social analysis, given its structural proclivities, towards ‘grand theorising’. For a discussion of this, and of the key debate between Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schultz cf. Heritage (1984), chapter 2.


My Griffith Review article gives only an impression of my research to date. But the researcher does not have to go far to appreciate the dysfunction that has afflicted government-artist relationships in Australia over the last thirty years. See, for example, MacDonnell (1992).


This is the remark that got me into hot water with my colleagues. But I have considered the problem as it affects theatrical performance at length in Meyrick (2003).

This government-sponsored event brought together 1002 specialists and activists from a variety of fields for two days of community consultation at Parliament House, 19-20 April, 2008. It included 100 participants in a so-called ‘Creative Stream’. Three responses to this can be found in Storyline magazine “Coming Down From the Mountain” (2008).

Quoted in Infinite Thought: 58.