

## **The Director: Chris Kohn**

Chris Kohn speaks with Jane May about directing *ANTIGONE* for Company B.

### **So I was wondering why, what attracted you about directing *Antigone* in Australia 2008?**

Yeah, for me it's not, I don't, nothing particular about Australia in the year 2008 beyond the fact that I am in Australia so experiencing the world as an Australian now so...and the play has resonances or is... and I find compelling and interesting so all I can do is assume that...um for some of the reasons that I find it interesting that other people coming to see the show will also find it interesting so rather than thought it's not about a particular..I don't think there is any particular themes or ideas where I've gone out thinking I need oh to do this show now because it's so politically resonant for this reason or that reason, it's just that ah.. I've found things interesting in it, which presumably or hopefully will make it the same reasons that other people will find it interesting and that's to do with this kind of looking at these figures of Antigone and Creon and how they um, I guess the different ways in which they see the roles of the, ah the kind of humans and the gods and ah the city versus the individual and the kind of argument that they each represent that I find is just presented in a very compelling way in Sophocles' text and also in the way that Seamus Heaney has translated it. So I'm interested in...um in the kind of way that ah these people - the diversity of humanity that people from the same family, the same place can have such diametrically opposed views about something and how that is then played out and also what is that, to what level is that inevitable or is – we watch these people making decisions and we see the tragedy unfolding and I think we can identify the truths in what everybody is saying so kind of.. um...it presents big questions about whether, you know, is there something inherently violent? or, are these kind of oppositions necessarily sort of part of the human condition? so, you know..

### **And do you find that you're attracted to those sorts of ideas in other texts or do you personally find that there's a bit of a theme to your choices?**

No, no, not really, I think if I'm working on an existing text, then it's usually just more about being kind of being drawn to initially read something just based on things that I might've heard of or whatever and there from that it either kind of sets off a imaginative – like it kind of asks to be put into production by me, or it doesn't, you know it's for someone else, or it's just not interesting to me or whatever, but so I don't set out with any particular ideas other than ah the kind of inherent idea that theatre is a place where.. um.. of transformation and creating worlds that people enter into that are, you know, outside of the everyday. So, that can, I mean that's, I'm interested in the transformative power of theatre but that I mean, it could, I mean, you know, that could be played out in all different kind of contexts so it depends on what comes my way or you know even if it's not a script that's already written it's what the initial idea is and um.. the seed of that idea of that dramatic world.

### **And had you read *Antigone* a long time ago, like is it something that you felt...?**

Yeah, I've been involved in about three or four other productions over the years in different ways so I did an adaptation a few years ago... um... yeah and I studied it, also, as a PhD student, actually studied the text, not on a theatrical level but on a philosophical level as well.

### **And do you consider that the text requires a particular style of performance or do you sort of leave that open to your actors?**

I think that Seamus Heaney's translation seems to call for different modes or like, different modes for different scenes because it's um, very thoughtfully written in terms of the metre, and so there's different modes where um, it's a rhetorical mode where it's sort of like um a presentation of an argument, other

modes it's just about kind of, very much focused on two humans relating to each other and so um, overall, I think that, overall the text does, you discover through rehearsal what it, what that rhythm is ...um.. scene to scene, but not overall; I wouldn't say there's an overall style that it calls for but I mean we've decided to set it in a world within a world of a community centre, but that's kind of just to give us a playing ground to play within and to give a layer against which we can read the action, the world of the actions of the characters in the play but um..

No, I mean I think that if you gave it to, this same, even this same script to five different directors would hopefully approach it in five very different ways.

**Sure, sure. And those kind of, finding those things like the community centre and setting it there, is that something that you do in collaboration with Dale, as the designer, or is that something you came to Dale with?**

I came to Dale with that. And it came out of, um, well like we had one, another design idea, but then in auditions, hearing the words spoken by actors I was sort of seeing this, I was kind of seeing it veer away from me, from the declamatory, classical, sort of formalistic style into a more of a fluid sort of, the speech, a lot of the speech was a bit more kind of, more like, some of it was more in a kind of conversational, sort of everyday sort of language and I needed a fluid world that would allow for different kind of modes of speech, basically, I think.

**Sure, sure. And I guess it's always hard to pinpoint where inspiration comes from, but is that just something that, I mean do lots of ideas for settings, when once you've identified what kind of um qualities you want the setting to have, do they just present themselves to you?**

I was interested in it being, you know, I thought the important thing was the space that it comes out of should be a, ah, public, sort of a civic space because it's; a lot of this play is about the state and the individual and kind of public spaces and sort of plays itself out in public and so, and then I also wanted it to be a bit sort of like; there to be a quality of the everyday and something that everyday people might have a relationship with so that's when I came up with the idea of a kind of community centre type space, it's a space that nobody lives in that people come to and visit and it has different purposes for different people so it's a space that people move through.. um and then I started talking generally about those ideas and then the more I was talking about it the more I realised I was kind of referencing in my own mind a particular space in Melbourne that I've worked in, a community centre and so we just ended up modeling the space exactly on that so it's kind of pretty much.. um, it's pretty much an exact reproduction of that space, or a corner of or a half of that room put into the Belvoir. And that's because we thought we could either just look at the characteristics of those spaces and make a design based on the sort of things, sort of textures and objects and things that relate to that space, but then I thought; we you have a ready-made space there that those rules have already, over the years, shaped and modeled this place so now it is as it is, for whatever invisible reasons it's become that space with those curtains and those chairs and so we just decided to, rather than kind of work out what those rules are and then implement them, we've just choose the space that already is run by those rules and then reproduce that.

**Sure. And did any adjustments to the design have to be made because of references, specific references in the text or did it sort of just..?**

No but it means that, you know, well if, it means that, we kind of go: "are we going to have a... well these spaces often have a trestle table in them, do we require that?" Yeah, we can probably use that, so you know, we've got that. There's nothing that we have to introduce to the space specifically. I guess, that as the characters; there's some things that we bring into it, as long as it belongs in that world, as long as it belongs on one level in that space, then we can bring things in, we brought things in.

## What kind of things?

..like ah, we needed blankets so sort of blankets might be kind of in a, if that was a refuge of some sort there'd be blankets there so we put them in, or the table or um.. ahh.. what else?, other things, there's a character who transforms through having these sort of sticks, walking sticks so you know, we put them there, they'll be in the space somewhere, so there's things like that, yeah.

**Ok. I wondered if maybe, and it's a big question, if you could just tell us a little bit about your process in the rehearsal room, like you've already mentioned that actually in the audition process some of the actors' auditions in fact perhaps inspired you on the direction you might take?**

Yeah, well we couldn't, because it's um, Sophocles, from the Sophocles it's very dense in terms of it's very important that everything is, every moment is understood – which it is with any play, but with this one it's kind of very condensed, it's not a long show and yet a lot, these kind of big things happen, and so we did a, we had two kind of processes sort of side by side where, um we just play and we had to also work out how the space of the community centre kind of world relates to the world of the play. So, side by side we sort of did some kind of open play ideas of just kind of using the room in different ways and how does the character come out of that world into that world, you know, how the entries and entrances and exits work and stuff, so we had this kind of spatial play and then parallel to that was sitting around the table and really kind of identifying what's going on in each line, researching like the classical references so we could understand who the different gods are and what their roles are and um so there's that research.

**And do the actors do that research themselves?**

Oh, we sort of more commonly bring things in. We more commonly um like we'll do the kind of realise, no, the thing we need to research and bring it in and give that to the actors to read. Ah, but some of them will do their own. I mean, their research is more about their research of line to line, just kind of understanding the text, so that external stuff we bring in, or, and then, so then there's a kind of close work around the table, which then you take to the floor, and then so the last kind of week and a half we've been combining the two, like the playing, bringing it to the space, but with the kind of the like, kind of the work that we've already done on the closely looking at the text around the table, yeah. And then Jethro's always there feeding sound in and like trying bits and yeah the costumes are coming in bit by bit so that kind of, the other world yeah of the kind of design and the sound design is sort of developed bit by bit, as well, sort of pieced together, yeah, and that feeds what happens on stage, and also, we can try out different ideas for the sound as we go, things like that. Yep.

**That's great, thank you.**

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## The Set & Costume Designer: Dale Ferguson

Dale Ferguson discusses with Jane May the process of developing set & costumes for *Antigone* (with interjections from the director Chris Kohn – indicated by his initials after each statement)

**So I'll just ask you Dale, are you involved in the - Chris was just telling me a little bit about the rehearsal process, I mean I wondered if, are you involved in, do you sit in on rehearsals at the beginning of the process?**

As much as I can, especially in this process with um Chris, as in we've approached this design in that, the set is like an anchor, a bit, we've really anchored the set to liberate the rest of the production so we could then find out what it was, so by giving and that sort of so how the costumes evolved is really truly from the rehearsal.. um, what we learned from rehearsal, or what comes out of rehearsal so that um, a lot of the dramatic conventions have been made up as you've gone, haven't they Chris?

Mm, mm, mm (CK)

So it's really hard to make that kind of call when you're not even knowing when anyone's going on or off stage and so it's kind of nice for me seeing it, um, you know it's a bit of a.. sort of like going round a room like this where you don't know what's there, it's sort of good.

**Yeah, I mean, yeah cause I haven't even seen, cause we saw the set design when they brought in the model box on the first day but just from being in the Admin office, well I haven't even seen some of the costume designs yet**

No, yeah, well any drawings are sort of hidden (*laughs*) so that no-one has any preconceived ideas about what they are because, um, I sort of talk to Chris and get hints and often it will be like he'll say: "I see the girl – Antigone - in an evening dress" and ok, so that's um like but it may not be like a queen, you know so you end up with a certain situation and then he'd mention that I think it's a texture – so maybe it's sequined, just take that, and then that becomes an anchor, and then sort of that you can say: "Ok, she's in a sequined dress, what's the situation around that? How does everyone else relate to that?" So that's sort of how I've been working, and then: "If she's in a sequined dress, what's her sister?" So that became the next relationship and once I've worked out that relationship - visual relationship - like the sister and Antigone, Ismene; um, that became the next thing, so it's like resolving one problem at a time.

**Yeah yeah, I find that really interesting. Does that mean that a particular style evolves or do you... is it much more eclectic than that?**

It's probably more eclectic. Soon as you see a style evolve you head in the other direction, (*laughs*)

**So you want to make it really clear, you don't want anyone going 'You look like a..'**

You don't want to have any red herrings in there, like false identifiers of something that actually isn't, or things like, set up a convention that is not intended. So you've got to be careful – it's a bit of a jigsaw puzzle, or a Rubix cube, you move one thing you kind of have to think of something else as well because you don't want them to look as if everybody is say from the, like some of them look a bit formal, we don't want it to look like they've all come from this one formal party somewhere, it's compositional and it's also, it's kind of about careful eclecticism, kind of thoughtful eclecticism, I think. (CK)

**Ok, sure.**

So I sort of try to think up situations and then soften it, I suppose is a lot of what I've been doing. For instance: the messenger as opposed to the guard and the difference in status they have, how long that messenger has to be in the room before we have any inkling about his role in the room, so a lot of those sorts of things.

**So you don't want to sign anything to show anything before..?**

Yeah. And the hardest thing when you've got this kind of production is that everything just sits well, and yet you don't want it to be bland so you've got to try and keep it bold and therefore you've got to - I'm sort of prepared that I'll make some mistakes and make some changes because I think that's a big part - it's just not fearing being wrong, otherwise you just bland it out.

**Yeah that's where you get the best results I guess. And what about working with colour in, I guess both in the set design and the costume designs, again I imagine it's more organic, do you make any conscious choices with colour in, say the costume designs?**

Yeah, you do but again that's where you're driven by the fact that the set was the original anchor so that's provided the canvas on which to work so you're thinking, um 'Well, how does that colour relate to that?' and then you sort of avoid obvious - ah choices about, say the colour red - red says too much too often, you know, um so we also have the imposition of the eccentricity of a hot pink curtain because that was in the original room that we based it on and a choice we would have thought we were very clever if we'd made that choice, and as a result it's just based in truth and to me it's just going to be right. I don't have to question it and that's liberating, I don't have to question it.

**Yes, yes.**

Yes (CK)

So, for me this production is about visual anchors, what is a known, and then what are the unknowns and how do you just sort of just build it, that's why ...I think if you went in, you just can't go in without every element - loose as a goose

No, it'd be too hard (CK)

you've got to have one post and in this case the post has been the set, the room.

**Right, right, ok - and did you actually go to the room that Chris...**

Yeah, Chris worked in it

**..realised he was imagining, and is it quite, is your design quite faithful to the actual room?**

Yeah, Chris has told me to go and have a look at it to get a feeling for it and when I went there, I just said 'This is it' because there were elements of it that I felt would really lend themselves well to the space and I immediately went in there and orientated myself in the theatre and therefore when I saw Chris at the first meeting after I went, I had a bit of an instinct how it related to the Belvoir, how it twisted, and how it was put into the theatre; it also had a ceiling which I felt was an element that I thought would work well in there; a stage within a stage..

Yeah (CK)

**Okay and do you have to work with the lighting designer as well, or is that something that comes a bit later?**

Yeah, I do, but in this production, we've imposed such a narrow theatrical grid for, parameters really, which should hopefully be a virtue in that we want it lit like a room and that we want to get in there and we might say, oh that was a mistake but at least you know it's going to look...

(Chris Kohn leaves)

**And yeah, I guess this way you're working with Chris on this particular production, just going back to that, do you always work like that or do you think there's a particular relation with Chris..?**

This is the first time we've worked together so it's sort of a new area for me.

I always have that sort of element of... *Peribanez* was sort of make it up as you go, um, it was such an epic piece and a sort of relatively small budget and so that was um a similar kind of make it up as you go but not, not – I always sort of made a choice and then dismissed it, it was wrong - here I've just gone in with no fixed ideas; that's the difference.

**I just think that, yeah, it really kind of, what you've been talking about really highlights the fact that yeah, you just do have to be, seems like the best results are when you're open and you can hold your nerve, in a way..**

You have to, I don't think, um I think – either two things, either the designer is young and completely out of line with the connection with their director I don't think you could go in and do this if you were particularly inexperienced because you would lack the confidence to know that you weren't doing enough work, know what I mean?

**Yes, absolutely**

You can argue whether it works or doesn't work. I don't think that you can argue that the process hasn't been thoroughly *work*; that the process has been lazy, know what I mean?

**No. And just to finish, maybe if you just could tell us a little bit about when you first read the script of *Antigone*, what were your impressions, what struck you the most; I guess about the ideas that the play was expressing, conveying?**

A lot of the things the chorus said struck me as being relevant to a world deteriorating and a world in crisis.. um ..and a world of - that is environmentally.. um.. there is an environmental chord that was struck in this that I didn't read in the original, the translation we're doing, I read it in the slightly more verbose, yeah, it lacks the clarity and simplicity of this version, yeah but that was the thing that I was struck by the most, um by in the first read and just how, um how much; what a wide view of the world it had and how he saw it through this prism of tragedy, of human tragedy.

**And do you think that there are, that those ideas are coming out in the design elements of the production?**

No.

**No, you think there's other..?**

I think it's such a, um – I think the text, well the space is so um, ah neutral for this show, stage within a stage, it has no metaphor.

**Right, it's a ground on which to present this work.**

And they can control how much of that comes through and how much of a family drama this is or how much the court exists just by their mannerisms, so it's sort of based in the neutral space and when we went into it, you don't even know if they're going to create a situation or just use it as a stage, so, yeah.

**And then the costumes, they don't sound as neutral, just in my, from what you've said – do you think they're heading in the direction of saying something a bit more specific or do you think it's still?**

Not saying something more specific, more of a blend of um - character, status and their relationship to each other and their costumes are linked to their state of mind. For instance, um, I've deliberately put Antigone in a fabric that's very heavy, it has a lot of gravity, because she's, rather than floaty, that has weight as opposed to her sister, who has air. Creon, he's deconstructed his costume is deconstructed because everything is taken off, to say he exposes himself is wrong, but maybe to show a more brutal approach, I've sort of tried to show the brutality in his personality.

**And what about Haemon's?**

With Haemon to show - ah - more his servility.

**Yeah, right**

His situation is more linked to Antigone and Ismene. Their status is similar.

**That's great, thank you, thanks very much.**