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INTERVIEW WITH JULIE FORSYTH – CAREER VISIBILITY: ‘YOU NEED SOMEONE WHO SEES YOU’

YONI PRIOR

Julie Forsyth has, by any measure, an extraordinary work history, as the long list of works she has performed over the last four decades attests. Few Australian actresses are offered the opportunity to test their mettle against the canon of European classic theatre, or to work at the heart of an ongoing ensemble for more than a decade. It is hard to know whether to describe this as a career, given contemporary understandings of such as a path determined upon and pursued with focus and intent. Julie herself says that a life as an actress was not something she anticipated or chose, but rather drifted into, through a series of almost chance encounters with other artists. She is an actress of extraordinary range, something she modestly attributes to opportunity as much as ability. My interest in soliciting her story for

this issue emerges from a number of my own preoccupations with the role of actor training in Australia, with the contribution of the ensemble to Australian theatre history, with the changes in understanding around the idea of an ensemble, with the lived experience of Australian actresses, and with the place of the veteran actress in the contemporary artistic and industrial environment.

Julie did not undergo an institutional actor training. Rather, she learned her craft ‘on the job’, particularly in the fourteen years she spent as a core member of the ensemble led by director Jean-Pierre Mignon at Anthill (Australian Nouveau Theatre) in Melbourne between 1981 and 1994. Here she cut her teeth on what Julian Meyrick describes as ‘productions of Molière, Beckett and Brecht plays [that] were blazingly original, but also simple, direct and emotionally connected’.¹

Since that company folded in the wake of the loss of ongoing federal and state funding in 1994, Julie has worked as a freelance actor, often with state theatre companies. She has worked most regularly with a small group of eminent directors who tend to what Duška Radosavljević terms an ‘ensemble way of working’² in the interpretation of canonical works of theatre. As such, she has lived and worked in and through shifting manifestations of the contemporary ensemble: from membership of a stable group of artists who have a long-established relationship and collaborate on the creation of a body of work over an extended period of time, to what Michael Boyd describes as ‘a contingent community in a free market economy’.³

In this latter iteration – seen most frequently in Australia in recent decades as sustained arts funding for ongoing ensembles has eroded – an ensemble is more likely to refer to a group of artists assembled for a specific project over a limited time frame. The ‘contingency’ in these ensembles indicates partly that the composition of the creative team is generally determined by the director, though it may well be of a similar composition from project to project, and this familiarity may facilitate collaboration.

The reader may note that I have dispensed with the scholarly convention of reference to the subject by surname. In part, this acknowledges my relationship with her. I met Julie in 1979, doing student theatre at Monash University, and our paths have continued to intersect over the past four decades. The interview from which this article is distilled took place in Melbourne, on 30 August 2019; it was three hours long, free ranging, and with many digressions to memories and anecdotes of performances done and seen, and stories of peers and collaborators, past and present. When we returned to this rich material after transcription, we needed to identify some themes and have co-edited this interview through several follow-up conversations and collaboration on succeeding drafts. We canvass Julie’s early career and apprenticeship as a founding member of the Anthill ensemble, her transition, at the end of that era, to a freelance artist largely employed in what Matthew Whittet once described as ‘the marginal mainstream’,⁴ and as a veteran looking both forwards and backwards upon a rich but precarious working life.

BEFORE ANTHILL

YP: What were your early experiences of acting?

JF: My first experience of acting was when I was five or six. I was a ladybird secretary in a cape of red crepe paper with black dots glued on.

At home on the farm,⁵ I would sometimes sing my full repertoire of two 1960s pop hits – ‘My Boy Lollipop’ and ‘I Love Onions’ – for visiting relatives.

My school friends and I were all into TV comedies like *I Love Lucy* and *Get Smart*. We wrote lots of comedy sketches and take-offs of advertisements.

I remember becoming possessed in a one-act play at the local eisteddfod. I played a thief in a scene with afternoon tea. I started to take all the food and sneak it in my pockets. The audience was roaring, and I remember thinking, ‘Yeah, they’re laughing. I’ll just put another scone in.’

The first professional play I ever saw was *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Town Hall. I was so excited. I laughed so much I fell off my seat.

In my last year at school, I was in the Chorus of Women in a production of *Murder in the Cathedral* in the Gothic

style bluestone Catholic Church, and speaking the text was a powerful ensemble experience.

In 1976, I left home to go to Monash University in Melbourne. Education was free and I was the first in my family to go on to tertiary study. I enrolled to do a BA and assumed I would do a Dip. Ed. and become a teacher of French and English. I wasn't really aware of the existence of drama schools. I doubt I would ever have considered applying. I couldn't imagine having a career as an actress.

I loved university life and the Monash campus was a vibrant place to be with a very active student theatre scene. I watched from the sidelines, going to plays and watching events that just 'happened' during lunchtimes. I was quite shy, and it took three years before I finally went to a lunchtime clowning workshop run by Lyndal Jones, who was the artistic director of the Student Theatre Association. I just completely loved it. Lyndal was very encouraging and suggested that I should get involved. So, the next year I auditioned for Brecht's *A Man's a Man* and was cast as Widow Begbick.⁶ And suddenly, I became a part of the student theatre scene, and for me, doing theatre completely superseded studying.

The Student Theatre Association would invite practitioners like Rob Meldrum and Jenny Kemp out to the University to

run lunchtime workshops. I remember thinking, ‘Who are these people? What’s this sort of world?’ Perhaps because of them, I began to see shows at the Pram Factory. I had seen work at the MTC⁷ on a student subscription, but I clearly remember going to see Stephen Sewell’s play *Traitors* at the Pram. The actors were behind bars, right in your face. So, there were moments of realising that there was the mainstream MTC world, and then there are other worlds – grottier, and rawer, and rougher, and noisier. And the voices were like one’s own voice. They didn’t disguise their Australian accents.

So, I was enrolled at Monash, but really only focusing on doing theatre. One day a friend, Rick Mitchell, said to me, ‘Julie, there’s an ad in the paper for a Beckett play at the Pram Factory, and I think you should audition’. So, I went. I wasn’t really nervous because I thought, ‘Well, I’m not going to get this – this is the Pram Factory’. I went to meet Jean-Pierre Mignon and Bruce Keller wearing a pair of overalls, barefoot, and carrying a basket. Jean-Pierre would tell people, for years after, that I had a duck in the basket. I didn’t. And I didn’t get the job. But weeks later they called me back, saying that they had a one-woman show called *A Banquet of Vipers*, about a woman’s horrifying experience of hospital childbirth. They offered me the role and I thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m going to work at the Pram Factory’. I didn’t realise then that the Pram

was in its last days and that a year later it would close its doors.

At this point, Jean-Pierre and Bruce had already created the company Australian Nouveau Theatre (ANT) and, after *A Banquet of Vipers*, I was offered a part in the upcoming season of ‘Artaud and Cruelty’⁸ at La Mama. It opened in February 1981 and toured to Hobart. In March, I went to the Australian Drama Festival in Adelaide with *A Banquet of Vipers*. When I returned from the tour, the company had found its own space in the Temperance Hall in South Melbourne. Anthill Theatre was opened.

I didn’t re-enrol at university that year.

I don’t remember any official offer to become a member of the company. It was just organically forming, and I was a part of it.

ANTHILL AND APPRENTICESHIP

YP: So, what you’re describing here is not formal actor training, but an apprenticeship?

JF: Yes. I had already begun to learn about acting by working with practising directors who directed student productions at Monash. I was aware of the idea of ‘actor training’: to understand how your voice and body worked, and the need

to know how to use them technically to extend your range of expression; how to read and ‘analyse’ a script; how to treat rehearsal as exploration and play: how to take ‘notes’ from a director and how to apply them in performance. Student theatre introduced me to the work and ideas of Grotowski, Artaud, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba, Joseph Chaikin, Brecht, Beckett, Tadeusz Kantor, Richard Schechner, Augusto Boal, Pina Bausch – a strong European influence at the time. I borrowed books and read about them, I read *The Drama Review (TDR)*, I watched footage of Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil ... I don’t know how much I took in or really understood of what some of these innovators were doing, but I was hungry for the ‘alternative’ approach, for ‘studio’ and ‘ensemble’ work – some way of performing that was different to what I was seeing on the mainstage in Melbourne.

Jean-Pierre Mignon and Bruce Keller were interested in writers like Artaud and Beckett, and in establishing a new small theatre company, so it seemed like everything was clicking into place. Jean-Pierre wanted to build an ensemble of actors and chose work specifically for those actors. Though, in the first few years at Anthill, there were very few actors in the company who had formal training.

YP: But he wasn’t interested in creating a formal training programme?

JF: The initial training was in the rehearsal room. Jean-Pierre was very receptive to what the actors could offer and how they explored the text, but I also found him to be precise and instructive in his feedback. Jean-Pierre definitely saw the value of some form of training to refine our skills and be in control of what we were doing on stage. I remember him saying to me that energy and imagination, and instinct and raw emotion, were all well and good but the actor needed ‘technique’ to harness these qualities in performance. That said, he didn’t think he was the best person to run classes or training sessions. He believed that such workshops should happen outside the rehearsal process, but at the same time be pertinent to the show that was currently in rehearsal.

Jean-Pierre seized every opportunity to set up workshops for the Anthill ensemble, led by both local artists and international companies who were touring and performing in Melbourne. These experiences enlightened me to the fact that there were so many other ways of learning and practising the craft of acting, beyond simply rehearsing and performing in a play.

We met Marc Adam while he was on tour in Melbourne with KISS Theatre Research Group – a European theatre ensemble based in Holland – and Jean-Pierre invited him to direct a play at Anthill. Before rehearsals began, Marc ran an intensive training with the Anthill actors over several weeks.

Mornings were devoted to physical and vocal work, fitness and endurance, and movement and expression. First up, we always all went for a 5 km run around Albert Park Lake. The physical training also included acrobatics and stilt walking, which would be needed in the show that Marc was going to direct. The afternoons were devoted to mini assignments and improvisation – make a five-minute performance around the element of water, for example – and presenting it to the group. In the latter part of the day, there would be text work or character work based on the script.

We did other workshops alongside the rehearsal of *Tartuffe*, the first Molière that the company produced, in 1983. This was a significant production for Anthill in that it was a critical and public success, and perhaps was the beginning of creating a ‘house style’. Jean-Pierre was very keen for the actors to be highly disciplined as an ensemble, both in physicality and with the delivery of the text. Jean-Pierre chose to use Richard Wilbur’s translation into heroic couplets, so every morning the ensemble worked with Jenny Kemp, who focused the group with ‘impulse work’ and then began working with the script. She elucidated the meaning in the text by rigorously working with the beats and rhythm of delivery, and guided us to insights about our characters, so simply, through the words that they stressed. At other times, two actors from the KISS

Group, Jepke Goudsmit and Jim Ennis, worked with the actors on improvisation, designed to strengthen communication within the ensemble and to develop listening skills. Then we looked at the physical comedy of the play and the style of *commedia*. There was a series of exercises – they seemed like mini-moments – all to do with the moment of entering and exiting the space. And how to work with breath, for example – what it means to show an intake of breath, to hold your breath, what happens when you exhale or sound the breath. We all watched and learned from each other’s exercises. By the afternoon’s rehearsal with Jean-Pierre, the ensemble was primed and ready to explore the play itself.

I really loved all those workshops. I was quite envious sometimes of students at drama schools like VCA [Victorian College of the Arts] and NIDA [National Institute of Dramatic Art], because I imagined that they had access to all that training, day-in day-out. But, from my point of view, the great advantage of being in a working company with an ensemble of familiar colleagues was that the training was immediately applied to the work in the rehearsal room. It was an apprenticeship. My ‘training’ continued in performance, as the work was refined and fine-tuned throughout the season, guided by the director’s notes and the immediate experience of an audience’s response. During this time, I was learning my

stagecraft literally ‘on the stage’, and public ‘review’ formed a part of that learning process. The ‘on the job’ training was public. You were being judged and critiqued from the word go. That was challenging too, but because there was the support of the ensemble and director, and there was a vision bonding us together, we were able to weather negative reviews or unsuccessful productions without losing belief in our approach to the work.

Julian Meyrick reflects on the way the Anthill ensemble expanded through the 1980s when he observes:

The irony is that so many things the company was doing – like overseas touring or working with actors from non-English-speaking backgrounds – came to be highly valued after its demise. Back then, Anthill’s values seemed idiosyncratic. Today they seem prescient.⁹

JF: And I learned from the other actors. In the 1980s, European actors, who had emigrated to Australia, seemed to find their way to Anthill. Alex Menglet was a third-generation Russian actor who had trained in the State School of Performing Arts in St Petersburg, and Dalibor Satalic had graduated from the

Zagreb School for Acting. Both became ensemble members for the 1987 season of three Chekhov plays. Jacek Koman joined the following year. Like Alex, Jacek had been born into a theatre family, basically brought up in a dressing room. Their knowledge of theatre history, their insights into the psychological workings of character, their experience and skill brought maturity to the ensemble.

YP: How did they influence your own development? Do you have a sense of what you took on from the European tradition?

JF: I think I really noticed and appreciated how they trusted their own process. They were comfortable with taking their time; they didn't lock in early choices; they remained open. They seemed so at home on a stage. Jean-Pierre and these European-trained actors had a respect for the text, and for the need for detailed study – and a belief that everything you need will come from the text if you work with the givens that are there in the text. Jean-Pierre used to caution against searching for answers in academic analyses of the plays or getting caught up making up histories or stories about characters that couldn't be supported by the text. And to work with precision. With words, with focus, with timing and rhythm.

YP: I imagine it also made a space for actors from Europe whose accents might otherwise have limited the roles they might be

offered in more conventional contexts?

JF: Yes. The diversity in the cultural backgrounds of the actors was most noticeable vocally. Audiences were suddenly hearing a mix of accents but without that accent being ascribed or particular to a character. Sometimes someone would come up and ask, 'Why did that character have a Russian accent?' And I would say, 'Because he's Russian. The actor is a Russian person!' I think Anthill in the 1980s became a theatre in Melbourne where actors with non-Australian accents could work without having to be cast as a character who is a 'foreigner'.

YP: But this mixture of Australian and European sensibilities (and accents) also created a particular 'house style' in performance?

JF: Yes, those influences of classical European training converging with Australian humour and energy, and Australian accents like mine, did create a particular 'house style' in performance: on the one hand, abrasive and unlikely; on the other, humorous and intriguing.

YP: Perhaps the audience took a while to catch up? Because if you have been conditioned to English-speaking drama, then there are narratives encoded in accents.



FIGURE 1: JULIE FORSYTH IN *THE MISANTHROPE*, ANTHILL THEATRE/ SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY, 1985. IMAGE: BRANCO GAICA.

JF: That's true. At first, it may have been disorienting or confusing for an audience trying to place the different accents in the narrative of the play. I suppose what was distinct about the Anthill

work, as well as the cast diversity and accents, was the very particular choice of works that were not Shakespeare or, rarely, Australian plays. They were European classics – Molière, Chekhov, Beckett. And some contemporary French plays, some of which were more successful than others.

YP: You talk about the 1980s as a time when the arts were relatively well funded, which allowed a company like Anthill to flourish and make a mark on the local and international landscape.

JF: Once the company was invited to perform in festivals – first in Australia, then overseas – there was a real sense that we were

part of an international theatre circuit. It was a very exciting time. One of the great benefits of being invited to international performing arts festivals was the opportunity to see work from around the world. I think it was the works of ensemble companies and their directors that had the most impact on my development as an actress at that time. The work of Théâtre du Soleil under Ariane Mnouchkine was a particular benchmark. Peter Brook and the International Centre for Theatre Research, the Georgian Film Actors' Studio, Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater Wuppertal, Grotowski and his Theatre Laboratory ... you could see that the direction and the process and the time taken produced affecting theatre and elicited great ensemble performances. It was the era of the ensemble!

KIDS' STUFF

YP: The work with the greatest longevity from that period was the solo show *Kids' Stuff*. How many years did you perform that work?

JF: Ten years. 1984 to 1994. Seventeen seasons, I think. Several return seasons in Australia, a season at the Donmar Warehouse in London and lots of international touring to festivals. The last performance was in Canberra at Jigsaw Theatre in 1994, when Anthill had lost its funding and was folding. I rang



FIGURE 2: JULIE FORSYTH IN *KIDS' STUFF*, ANTHILL THEATRE, 1984.
IMAGE: JEFF BUSBY.

Jean-Pierre Mignon and Katherine Sturak from the foyer in Canberra on opening night and said, ‘They loved it; it went well’. And they told me that they were just moving all the company stuff into a storage space. The rest of the company was back at the Gasworks Theatre¹⁰ (where Anthill had relocated in 1992), packing up.

Jean-Pierre came back from France in 1984 with this play by Raymond Cousse. The main character is a nameless little boy. His age wasn’t specified but I imagined him to be about seven or eight years old. It’s set in a small French village, and the little boy spends a lot of time looking through keyholes into the bewildering world of adults. It’s about a child encountering sex and death, and the meaning of words in an adult world.

Katherine Sturak did a beautiful translation where she didn’t mess with the French language conventions. She did almost a literal translation, in a way. For example, in French the little boy would say ‘*la sœur de la sœur de Marcel*’, which is a funny roundabout way of revealing that Marcel has two sisters. Katherine translated it word for word, so it became ‘the sister of the sister of Marcel’. It was so enjoyable to say rhythmically: it was funny, it became the child’s very own language, the character’s language, and it was just quite beautiful. I remember starting it feeling, ‘I love this little boy,

I love this world’.

And then from this world, this French village, all these other characters emerged. The little boy’s best friend, Marcel, Marcel’s sisters, the teacher, the butcher, the policeman, characters from French nursery rhymes. Perhaps thirty other characters.

Bruce Keller was the assistant director and, at first, we worked with him playing all the other characters, while I was focused on finding this little boy and his voice and his innocence – what was troubling him, and what he was thinking about. And then slowly I started to take on other characters. First, his very best friend, Marcel, became my imaginary friend and then slowly his external presence was eliminated so that his character came through mine. One by one, characters were created and added to mine, so that eventually, Marcel and all the characters existed in my little boy. Through this careful layering, we were ‘growing’ a whole village.

We developed that show over almost seven weeks. That length of rehearsal would seem like a luxury now. The process was very slow and very layered. And there was only the ‘acting’, only one actress. Just the body and the voice in an empty space. There were no props and no set as such. It was ‘poor theatre’.

I loved that show. I really did. Jean-Pierre’s eye was always

keeping it in check. We had to make sure it didn't become too sentimental – too cute. Its longevity allowed us to keep refining it. In the end, I felt like I knew every breath of it.

AFTER ANTHILL



FIGURE 3: JULIE FORSYTH IN *HAPPY DAYS*, MALTHOUSE THEATRE, 2009.
IMAGE: JEFF BUSBY.

YP: Anthill lost its funding and folded in 1994. By that time, you had developed a very strong reputation as a skilled actress of enormous range. What was your experience of moving into the world of the freelance actor?

JF: I was very lucky, in that, after fourteen years' work with Anthill, I had played so many roles. We were a youthful ensemble, so the model of casting the character to your actual age didn't apply. And the company did Molière, Beckett, Chekhov, Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Brecht, and *Macbeth*! And I had performed three one-woman shows. So ... by the time I was thirty-seven, I had played an entire career's worth of classic roles. I suppose it saved me from doing auditions! I think I've done about four theatre auditions in my entire life.

All the same, when Anthill ended, I assumed my career was over too. In the Anthill years, even though we were mostly only paid when we were doing a production, I only did two shows outside the company. My first theatre job after Anthill came eight months after it closed, when I was offered work at the MTC as part of an 'ensemble' of actors, in a season of eight short plays. And then I was offered a role in a Handspan production, *Daze of Our Lives*, performing with puppets and puppeteers.

YP: And following your long collaboration with Jean-Pierre Mignon, you established some similar, if less intensive, relationships with a number of directors?

JF: Yes, again I was fortunate to work with certain directors with some regularity over a similar period of time, fourteen to fifteen

years. This made the transition from the hermetic security of Anthill to the larger mainstream companies less intimidating. There were three directors, in particular, who gave me many opportunities to work within the companies they were leading at that time: Simon Phillips at the MTC, Neil Armfield at Belvoir Street, and Michael Kantor at Malthouse. So, I had the benefit of regular creative collaboration with the same directors and actors – that opportunity to develop a common work ‘language’ together, to reach an ease of communication and understanding that enables everyone to be more frank, and less self-conscious, in the rehearsal stage in particular. And in recent years, I have worked with several female directors. I guess that is a sign that they are now finally making inroads into that arena, but I have worked with a woman director only nine times over the last forty years.

YP: All those directors were interested in interrogating the canon and also tend to have an ensemble approach to directing, but did the roles you were offered change?

JF: Well, they all chose work from the classic repertoire, but also plays from the British and Australian canons. I was given roles in Shakespeare and Tom Stoppard, and Patrick White, as well as new Australian works. I suppose I had a reputation as someone who worked in a ‘heightened’ sort of way – I’m not really sure how to describe or define that.

YP: I suppose my sense is that you come to projects as somebody who is brave and prepared to go the extra mile – who has an extraordinary range and a very distinct stage presence – and who is also a seasoned ensemble member. But you can also do those difficult, tragi-comic roles.

JF: I was often cast as characters with a comedic bent, such as Molière maids. I really enjoyed the anarchy of comedy. I never really described myself as a comedienne or a clown, but others did, and while I understand why, I always felt that the ‘comedy’ of characters, especially in Beckett or Chekhov or Patrick White, came from the characters’ very own take on the world. It was embedded in their pain or their dilemma. The challenge was to create that co-existence, not just to make them ‘funny’.

So, the roles didn’t really change. I certainly continued to be offered comedic roles, wonderful roles. However, while Beckett and White and Brecht were still on the cards, especially with Michael Kantor, I realised that even though I was then moving into my ‘age-appropriate’ forties – I would probably never play roles such as Ranevskaya or Lady Macbeth again.

YP: What occurs to me is that these roles – Beckett, Patrick White – actually require very refined technique and are technically very demanding. And you have done a number of these works

multiple times.

JF: Well, the training workshops, the long rehearsal periods, the detailed direction and insistence on precision and rigour with the text at Anthill ... I think that prepared us technically to have the confidence and endurance to take on demanding roles, to be able to 'lead' a play, if needed.

Some productions have had long lives involving return seasons and overseas tours. But other works I revisited in new productions, under new direction. With *Happy Days*, which I performed in two different productions twenty years apart,¹¹ I was very grateful to have already analysed the text in great detail in the earlier production at Anthill. It gave me a direct and sure way in, because at Malthouse with Michael Kantor, we had less development and rehearsal time, and it's a very complex and demanding role. I was also the actual prescribed age of the character. A woman in her fifties. As the character, Winnie, says, 'no longer young, not yet old'. Perfect. I did *The Ham Funeral* twice with Michael, so same director, different production.¹² And I revisited *Endgame* in a new production at MTC.¹³ I could do Beckett until I'm dead. Because I think that you just grow into these things. That's what Beckett's all about, really, you know? And so, hopefully, those opportunities still exist.

PRESENT / FUTURE / PRECARITY

YP: Has your approach to the work changed over the years?

JF: Well, yes it has. When I began working in theatre, it was more usual to have six or sometimes seven weeks in the rehearsal room before moving into the theatre. In most of the companies where I've worked over the past decades, that rehearsal period has been reduced to four weeks. Good theatre is still made within this time frame, but insightful exploration of the play and/or gelling as an 'ensemble' cast are sometimes compromised by the brevity of the process.

And over the last ten years, a new generation of directors and theatre-makers have been reshaping the landscape and it is timely. There is beginning to be more diversity in the stories being told and who directs and performs them.

My approach to the work now is to be more self-sufficient. I work to serve the play and the direction and bring my experience to the 'ensemble' and the project. I learn my lines earlier. But I'm more pragmatic about the transient nature of each collaboration.

YP: So, what sort of roles do you tend to be offered now?

JF: As I said, it's a new landscape, but there is still interest in directing classic works, and absurdist works, and over the

past decade, I've performed in Racine, Shakespeare, Beckett, Patrick White, and Dario Fo – who's a bit of a favourite because there's licence to be extreme and farcical, and grotesque!! Of course, I'm an ageing actress now. I hope there might be some lovely crone parts in the future!

YP: Those parts are actually much more interesting, aren't they? The ones where you can be a bit ugly are so liberating!

JF: Always more interesting! Last year I was in an all-female production of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* at the Sydney Theatre Company and it was brilliant. We were playing men. There were amazing transformations courtesy of the fabulous design by Jonathon Oxlade. He gave me a bald head, and a moustache, and a little pot belly and I had a ball. We all did. Perhaps I have found my niche in small grotesques.



FIGURE 4: JULIE FORSYTH IN *ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST*, SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY, 2018. IMAGE: DANIEL BOUD.

YP: I guess doors to conventional roles start to close in your sixties anyway, and it becomes harder and harder for women in particular to find regular employment. And in some ways, perhaps you continue to work because you were seldom a contender for conventional roles, and you have this track record and enormous range? But it's not a living wage, is it?

JF: No, it isn't a living wage, and there are many factors, including getting older, that have an impact on how much work in the theatre ageing actresses get offered. Many theatre actresses I know are looking to work more in film and television as they age. It's not just about the money. Theatre can be gruelling

and the schedule is relentless. It is emotionally and physically demanding.

YP: If you were starting your career now, how do you think a very young Julie Forsyth would manage in the current environment?

JF: You need someone who sees you. If Jean-Pierre and Bruce hadn't seen something in me at the beginning, and given me a go as they did, perhaps I wouldn't have started at all. Because I wasn't seeking it. I had no plans to be an actress. And I don't know whether it would be possible to do what I've done these days, unless there was the possibility to be part of an ensemble – a group of people where everybody is developing work and discovering things together. And where there is less emphasis on casting to type or age. I don't know if those chances exist for young actors now, in the same way. They're going to Hollywood. Or to Europe, or London. Many young actors are looking for movie careers.

YP: I think few, if any, young actors will have your experience of an ensemble. There's no funding for that. It's spoken about a lot in training institutions, but more as an approach or an ethos – or a feeling – than as an actual group of people engaged in a long-term project.

JF: Well, with Anthill, the 'ideal' of working as an ensemble was inspired by the work of particular European models, with a

nod to Jacques Copeau's company at the beginning of the 1900s. The more experimental of these 'ensemble' companies operated as laboratories rather than production houses. In Melbourne in the 1970s, the APG at the Pram Factory was an ensemble, a self-managed collective. Like the APG, ANT had its own home venue at Anthill in the 1980s; both venues were 'hubs' for alternative theatre, and both companies developed a 'house style'.

There seemed to be enough funding to support a vibrant alternative theatre scene in the 1980s, and several independent venues as well. And there was the luxury of time – time to take your time, time to work stuff out, work beyond the predictable, and just be free to create together without 'the pressure'. That's what I believed gave me the desire to pursue theatre for so long – that ensemble 'apprenticeship' at Anthill has given me longevity in a career I never thought would last as long as it has.

JULIE FORSYTH: PERFORMANCE HISTORY

1980	1985	1992
A Banquet of Vipers	The Misanthrope	The Crimson Island
1981	Kids' Stuff	The Chairs
Quick Death to Infinity	The Misanthrope	Life is a Dream
To Have Done with the Judgement of God	1986	School for Wives
A Banquet of Vipers	Kids' Stuff	1993
Exiles	Macbeth	Mother Courage and her Children
Pour en Finir Avec le Jugement de Dieu	1987	The Force of Habit
1982	The Cherry Orchard	Kids' Stuff
Ruins	Uncle Vanya	1994
The Hamlet Machine	The Three Sisters	Kids' Stuff
The White Door	Kids' Stuff	1995
The Condemned of Altona	1988	Short Works
The Stranger in the House	Kids' Stuff	Daze of Our Lives
1983	Summer of the Seventeenth Doll	1996
The Stranger in the House	Kids' Stuff	A Cheery Soul
Tartuffe	1989	Daze of Our Lives
Slow Love	The Imaginary Invalid	1997
Tartuffe	Kids' Stuff	The Comedy of Errors
Tengul	Happy Days	The Real Inspector Hound
Summer of the Seventeenth Doll	1990	After Magritte
1984	The Imaginary Invalid	Mr September
Don Juan	Peer Gynt	1998
Romeo & Juliet	1991	Cloudstreet
The Time is Not Yet Ripe	In the Cold Cold Morning Light	The Caucasian Chalk Circle
Kids' Stuff	Endgame	1999
	The Marriage of Figaro	Cloudstreet

2000	2009	History of The Elephant Man
The Small Poppies	Happy Days	The Popular Mechanicals
The Chairs	The Book of Everything	2018
The Ham Funeral	2010	The House of Bernarda Alba
The Small Poppies	The Book of Everything	Accidental Death of an Anarchist
2001	Elizabeth: Almost by Chance a Woman	Bottomless
Man the Balloon	2011	2019
The Tempest	The Book of Everything	Escaped Alone
Old Masters	Return to Earth	
2002	2012	
Great Expectations	The Book of Everything	
2003	2013	
The Visit	Phèdre	
Babes in the Wood	Romeo and Juliet	
2004	The Book of Everything	
The Miser	2014	
2005	Private Lives	
The Ham Funeral	Night on Bald Mountain	
Journal of the Plague Year	The Dream	
Metamorphosis	2015	
2006	Cybec Electric Play Readings	
Babes in the Wood	Endgame	
2007	The Popular Mechanicals	
Dimboola	2016	
Exit the King	'O' The Play	
The Madwoman of Chaillot	2017	
2008	The Popular Mechanicals	
Moving Target	The Real and Imagined	

NOTES

- 1 Julian Meyrick, 'Julian Meyrick on the Fate of Melbourne's Legendary Anthill Theatre', 2017, online: <https://dailyreview.com.au/fate-melbournes-legendary-anthill-theatre/68090/> (accessed 12 July 2019). For further analysis of the policy environment of the 1980s and 1990s, and the impact on Anthill Theatre, see Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre after the New Wave: Policy, Subsidy and the Alternative Artist* (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2017).
- 2 Duška Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 23.
- 3 Michael Boyd in Duška Radosavljević (ed.), *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-Makers* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013) 33.
- 4 Matthew Whittet, Unpublished interview with the author, April 2005.
- 5 Julie grew up on a sheep farm near Hamilton in the west of Victoria, some three-and-a-half hours' drive from Melbourne.
- 6 This student production of Brecht's *A Man's a Man* (Alexander Theatre, 1978) was directed by Di Treloar and featured a number of students who went on to make their careers in the theatre. Alongside Julie and myself were the late actor, activist and writer, Tim Conigrave, and actor Arky Michael.
- 7 The Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) is the largest repertory theatre company in Melbourne.
- 8 The season comprised productions of Antonin Artaud's *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* and Richard Murphett's *Quick Death to Infinity*.
- 9 Meyrick, 'Julian Meyrick on the Fate of Melbourne's Legendary Anthill Theatre', np.
- 10 Anthill moved operations from the Temperance Hall in South Melbourne to the Gasworks Arts Park in nearby Albert Park in 1992.
- 11 Julie first performed in *Happy Days* in 1989, directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon. She reprised the role, under Michael Kantor's direction, in 2009.
- 12 Michael Kantor first directed Patrick White's mordant comedy *The Ham Funeral* for the Belvoir Street Theatre in 2000, then for the Malthouse Theatre in 2005. In both productions, Julie Forsyth played the role of Mrs Lusty.
- 13 Julie first performed in *Endgame* in 1991, directed by Jean-Pierre Mignon. She reprised the role, under Sam Strong's direction, in 2009 at the MTC.