

CENTER STAGE

A Life in Theater

Cate Blanchett started acting in THEATER in the 1980s and has never left. From experimental PERFORMANCES in Melbourne to global STARDOM, she was shaped by Australia's innovative and politically ENGAGED theater community.

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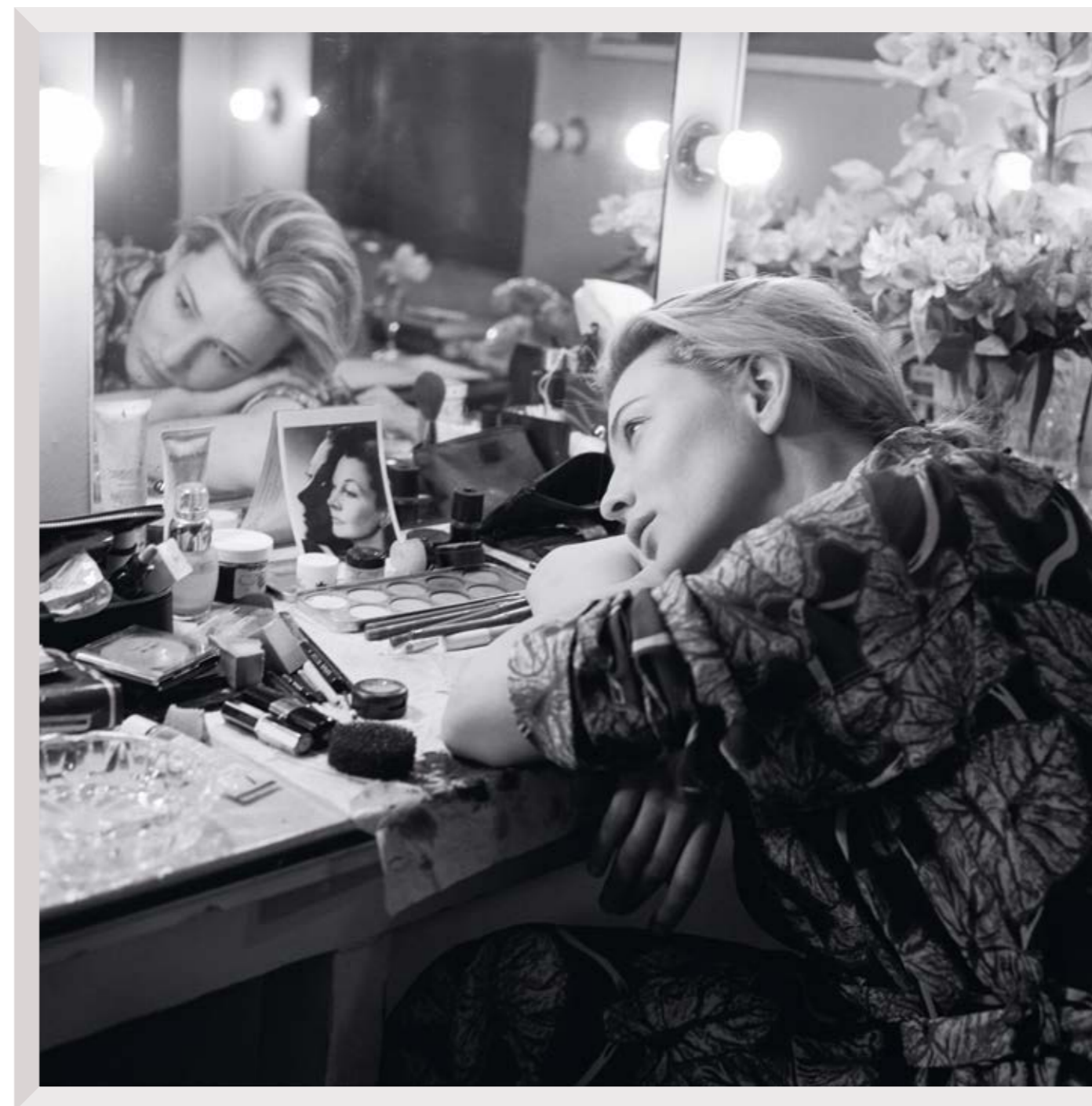
MELBOURNE'S La Mama Theatre has a long history of nurturing young talent. *The Woodbox*, written and performed by Cate Blanchett and Caroline Lee, premiered at the tiny 34-seat space on December 7, 1989. The play concerns a mother (Blanchett), unmoored by her newfound isolation when her daughter goes traveling, who takes in her older neighbor (Lee) after the woman's house burns down. Their personalities clash, however, culminating in a tragic finale. "It's slightly abstract and intriguing, with a certain menace, intensity and otherness," says director Kirsten von Bibra, after reading the piece for the first time in over 30 years. "It has its own nervous system." *Melbourne Times* critic Chris Boyd called it "the theatrical equivalent of a Rorschach inkblot" and highlighted Blanchett's "great vocal control" and her performance as having "just the right mix of neuroticism and suppressed emotion."

The production was Blanchett's second at the theater, a former garment factory in Melbourne's Carlton suburb. Two months earlier, she made her professional stage debut there in Kris Hemensley's *European Features*. Bob Pavlich cast Blanchett after directing her in the 1987 Law Revue sketch-comedy at Melbourne University. "It was clear she was one of the university's most interesting performers," says Pavlich. Comprised of vignettes featuring an eclectic array of characters, including artist Egon Schiele and poet Friedrich Hölderlin, the non-narrative play was called "an opera for voice" – an apt beginning for a theatrical career that has always resisted the simple or conventional.

Founded by Betty Burstall in 1967 after she became enamored by the avant-garde Off-Off-Broadway scene in New York City,

La Mama champions pieces whose rough, grassroots qualities separate them from the "well-made plays" of Australia's commercial theaters. Experimentation supersedes production values. Costs are deliberately kept low, both for audiences and productions. What matters most is that local writers, directors, actors and composers are given permission and support to take risks.

Burstall's initiative did not arise in isolation. During the early 1950s, Melbourne University was the breeding ground of Barry Humphries, whose Dadaist performances preceded his international fame as Dame Edna Everage. The 1960s and '70s witnessed a surge of radical developments in the Melbourne theater community, most notably the formation of the Australian Performing Group, which eventually generated over two dozen companies by the 1980s. Their collective impulse was to avoid the moribund theater that dominated the country's subsidized stages. Theater, they implied, must be more than socially irrelevant realism that pays no attention to the body below the neck. It also should not give the text primacy. In the spirit of Vsevolod Meyerhold (rather than his peer Constantin Stanislavski, whose more naturalistic style inspired the Method in America), this movement explored the intertwined nature of psychology and physiology as well as the intersections between visual art, architecture, dance, film and literature. "It reclaimed French, German and Russian experimental theater from the 1920s and '30s – nonrealistic, ritualistic and physical," says director Barrie Kosky, a longtime friend of Blanchett's. "Melbourne was its epicenter, with an established scene that had a mixture of comedy, cabaret, dance and theater. That didn't happen anywhere else in Australia."



BRUCE WEBER



These artists' exploration of myriad modes of interpretation, storytelling beyond narrative and how bodies move through space found additional fuel in the Adelaide Festival, which welcomed major international figures from John Cage to Pina Bausch. The biannual event's impact on this community cannot be exaggerated. "When I was young, it was the only festival of the arts," says playwright and director Andrew Upton, Blanchett's husband. "This rare quality meant that, if the things which arrived were good, they banged in your brain with such distinct force that you kept hold of them." Blanchett experienced this firsthand. In 1988, Melbourne University's Edge Theatre Company, in which she and Caroline Lee were active, performed their devised play about climate change, *Talking About the Weather*, at the festival's Fringe. Between nights sleeping in tents, the group attended two epic productions from different strands of the Meyerholdian tradition: Quebecois director Robert Lepage's six-hour *La Trilogie des dragons* and Peter Brook's nine-hour adaption of *The Mahabharata*. "We were on fire after seeing them," recalls Lee.

Not only were these landmark productions formally inventive, but they also conveyed a political engagement with global society and a seriousness concerning theater as labor-intensive – characteristics that resonated strongly with these students and which have deepened for Blanchett over 35 years. She appreciates that good ideas remain only ideas unless realized through rigorous material work, as a joint effort by the actors, director and technical

team. "It was important that we weren't operating in a silo or in elitist circumstances," says Lee, regarding the sizable contingent of her and Blanchett's peers interested in the cutting-edge. "We were passionate about art as a transformative element in society and about theater's potential to change the world."

THE AUTONOMOUS ACTOR

Lindy Davies, who directed Blanchett in *Electra* at Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Art in 1992, attended preparatory workshops for Brook's *Mahabharata* in Paris. The Melbourne native found herself there after a bout of stage fright. That destabilizing experience forced her to question contemporary training styles, which prioritize heightened emotions over the advancement of meaning while fostering an overriding need for others' approval. "It's the only profession where you wait for everyone to clap before you can go home," says Davies. "That's very damaging to a person's soul and integrity."

In pursuit of a deeper understanding of the acting process, she sought time with Brook and the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, both of whom engaged in research regarding theater's quintessence, as well as Kristin Linklater, a renowned vocal coach who introduced Davies to the notion of impulse. Drawing on their work, Davies developed her unique approach to training "the autonomous actor" who, she describes, is always "kinesthetically alive, with a powerful inner strength and sense of self."

The cast of *Electra* quickly learned that Davies's process is intense. "It moves from the inside out – very structured, slow, and deep – so the actors discover, for themselves, the center of the truth of each moment," says Sarah Ducker, assistant director on the production. Echoing the anti-Vietnam War movement's rejection of authority and the transcendental explorations in art popular throughout the 1970s, Davies ensures nothing is imposed or predefined for the actor. She begins not with table reading but by exploring the ideas surrounding the play's creation. Dictionary work follows, in which the actors look up the definitions of each important word in their lines. In the rehearsal room, she projects the text onto the walls, which helps free the actors' bodies. Speaking, she explains, is not simple but rather a complex neurolinguistic

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process, so she creates space for each actor to work in expanded time and find the need to speak and experience the words physically. Those not speaking actively listen and react, rather than respond, with their own lines. Next, Davies puts assorted props in the room. Moving through this landscape and constructing a three-dimensional world helps reveal additional layers of meaning in the text, from which the set gradually evolves.

"Lindy demands absolute authenticity in the utterance, and if she isn't satisfied, you have to go back again and again until the word is inhabited through an imagined image," says von Bibra, who studied with Davies. Adds Ducker: "The actor is not pretending, which gives the character a richness and complexity you cannot get just working with your intellect." Each person develops a strong inner life, which leads to mercurial, surprising performances every night. They discover who their character is rather than decide how to play them.

When Blanchett assumed the lead role in *Electra*, she rehearsed independently with Davies over Easter weekend, at times for over 10 hours a day. Their relationship was remarkably synergistic – the result of Blanchett's socially conscious theater experiences, from the Adelaide Fringe to engaging audiences over tea after La Mama shows; her foundational work with movement teacher Keith Bain, who ingrained in her a lifelong understanding of space and the need for movement's specificity; and her intellect, strong work ethic and relentless curiosity. "Cate is brave, generous, selfless and, most of all, egoless," says Davies. "Therefore, this profound transformation could take place. She bypasses the rational self. She's playing actions, not doing objectives. She organically transforms words into experiences and shares with us the character's perspective, which she experiences for the first time as she looks through their eyes."

Decades later, the influence of this approach remains evident. "When you're onstage, it's like the creation of a new world," says Isabelle Huppert, Blanchett's costar in Jean Genet's *The Maids* at the Sydney Theatre Company (S.T.C.) in 2013. "You need to take this complete freedom and explore the immensity of possibilities. Cate and I were completely in tune with that. We had a lot of pleasure pushing the maids' craziness as far as we wanted. It was an infinite playground for us. I wish we could have done it longer."

*This spread:
Cate Blanchett as Lotte in Botho Strauss's
Big and Small (Gross und Klein),
directed by Benedict Andrews.*



Director Katie Mitchell enjoyed a similar experience in 2019 during Blanchett's most recent stage production, Martin Crimp's *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other*, at London's National Theatre. "I had a tricky conceptual idea and set of parameters for how to stage the play that wasn't embedded in its D.N.A.," she says. "Cate ran with it beyond anything I could have envisaged in terms of ideas and imagination. The German word *konsequent* comes to mind – to follow ideas through to their absolute end."

ENGAGING COMMUNITY

The director Melissa Bruce recalls a designer friend telling her, "Come have a look at this," before leading her to a rehearsal for *Electra*. Soon after, she needed an understudy for a pregnant actor in her S.T.C. production of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. "Cate was the first person I thought of," says Bruce. The pregnant actor left – two days into the run. With the same enthusiasm she gave Davies and after only one day's rehearsal, Blanchett joined the complex production with characteristic fearlessness. It was her debut at the company she would later run with Upton from 2008 to 2013.

That fearlessness also manifests in a predilection for portraying vile, appalling characters without apology. "You're not there to narcissistically present an image of yourself – you're there to delve into something much darker, deeper and stranger," says Kosky. "That's the sign of a great actor. Cate is open to that in every pore

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— Tamás Ascher

of her body.” Director Michael Gow observed that inclination in her *Top Girls* performance. “If they’re playing bad characters, a lot of actors say they have to find sympathy,” he says. “Cate didn’t. It was so bracing and exciting.” Impressed, Gow cast her in his S.T.C. production of David Mamet’s provocative, debate-inducing *Oleanna*, which concerns a student who accuses her professor of sexual harassment. Blanchett starred alongside Geoffrey Rush, who also admired her *Electra*, and earned the Sydney Theatre Critics’ Circle Award for Best Actress in 1993, the same year she won Best Newcomer for Timothy Daly’s *Kafka Dances*.

With this success, Blanchett’s inclination was not to seek stardom but to work harder and once again engage community. She asked director Neil Armfield if she could join Company B at Sydney’s Belvoir Street Theatre, where, from 1994 to 1997, she received another education of sorts playing a quartet of challenging roles: Nina in *The Seagull*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Miranda in *The Tempest* and Rose in *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, Stephen Sewell’s searing meditation on Australian politics and power. While the latter three were revivals, *The Seagull* allowed Blanchett an opportunity to originate a role in the group – to remarkable ends. “Cate had everything for Nina: the voice, the imagination, incredible enthusiasm and this beautiful clumsiness,” says Armfield. “She was heartbreaking. I remember coming home one night to a message Jane Campion left on my answering machine saying it was as if Chekhov had written it for her.”

Belvoir Street was unlike any theater in Australia and supported a host of significant directors, including Kosky and Benedict Andrews, who directed Blanchett at S.T.C. in his marathon Shakespeare cycle *The War of the Roses*, Botho Strauss’s *Gross und Klein* and *The Maids*. In 1984, 600 theater supporters each pledged AUD\$1,000 to prevent the former Nimrod Theatre Company space from being converted into an apartment block. In the new organization, all employees, from ticket sellers to actors, received the same hourly rate. “The idea was that everyone’s contribution to the work was equally important,” says Armfield. “It was extremely idealistic.” This ethics of shared responsibility resonates with Andrews and director John Crowley’s observations of Blanchett as one of the most generous performers toward other actors, and the community-building she and Upton undertook at S.T.C.

Like much of the most noteworthy Australian theater in form and content, Company B’s 12-person ensemble arose not by mimicking foreign ideas but by vigorously refracting them through an Australian consciousness. Armfield drew inspiration from Shakespeare’s troupe but more importantly from his tenure with Jim Sharman’s company, Lighthouse – a group that moved together from show to show, performing plays written for them and radically interpreting classics. “Whether Chekhov or Shakespeare, the plays were framed in an Australian domestic environment, making it something audiences could touch,” says Richard Roxburgh, who

starred opposite Blanchett in *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* as well as two Chekhov plays at S.T.C., *Uncle Vanya* and *The Present*. Armfield’s *Tempest*, for example, directly responded to the country’s recent Mabo and Wik judicial decisions, which established for the first time in Australian law that the country had been inhabited by Aboriginal peoples before the British invasion.

Illustrating these plays’ sociopolitical relevance was paramount – an ethos that guided Blanchett and Upton during their celebrated tenure at S.T.C., in which they programmed season after season of provocative repertoire, and that continues to underpin their creative decisions. Productions must not be neutered historical curiosities, as if frozen in aspic. That endeavor always entails taking a risk, though. But, as Blanchett and Upton understand, theater provides a safe space to experience life’s extremes and therefore demands risk-taking in order to unmoor audiences, spur conversation and, if possible, instigate social change.

A PRODUCTIVE RESTLESSNESS

Blanchett’s request to join Company B was an early expression of her relentless experimentation, which continues to manifest, in part, in her acceptance of complex roles, from Susan Traherne in David Hare’s *Plenty* to Hedda Gabler. “She’s still evolving and not frozen in any kind of persona,” says Jonathan Kent. The same sensibility appears in the plays she has chosen to direct: Harold

Pinter’s *A Kind of Alaska*, David Harrower’s *Blackbird* and Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*. “There’s no theatrical style or form that Cate wouldn’t gladly try, as her imagination is ignited by previously untried possibilities,” says Tamás Ascher, who directed her as Yelena in *Uncle Vanya*. “This is the main source of her artistic strength.”

Upton recognizes this spirit in all of Blanchett’s endeavors and believes it reflects broad aspects of the Australian cultural conversation. “Pushing boundaries is a key part of it, and an inventiveness with the artifacts at hand,” he says. “You don’t just talk about the object: you pick it up, look at it, test it. And Australian audiences will come and listen. They want to hear what different noises those objects make when they are bashed together by different hands, to different ends.” The act imbues productions with a quintessentially Australian character, in which something wholly new and honest forms when ideas, local and imported, come together in unexpected ways. “Cate takes a scene and taps it like a big block of coal to see where the crack is,” says John Crowley. “She’s trying to open up material and never pin it down because she’ll be back at it again tomorrow.”

“That nonstop inventiveness is married to psychology,” adds Benedict Andrews. “But parallel to that is a quick, left-brain inventiveness which belongs to clowning. It’s not taught; it’s just built into her. And that raw instinct goes toward the type of theater she wants to make.” 🍷