

**ITEM 3.1. HONOURING JOHN BELL AO, OBE****FILE NO: S051491****MINUTE BY THE LORD MAYOR**To Council:

On Monday, 19 October 2015, I presented the Key to the City to John Bell AO, OBE with his family, friends, fans and fellow theatre workers present.

This is the highest award the City of Sydney can make and one that should only recognise the highest achievement and contribution. John has made an extraordinarily significant contribution to the cultural life of our city and our nation as an actor, director, producer, theatre company founder, teacher, performing arts advocate and Shakespeare enthusiast.

His enthusiasm for Shakespeare is infectious – even for people who were taught Shakespeare not wisely or too well. John and Shakespeare are synonymous across Australia. That's not surprising. Audiences have linked the names Bell and Shakespeare for almost all John's life in the theatre.

John's career in the theatre has been extensive. In his time, he has played many parts not and just by Shakespeare. Ben Jonson, Chekhov, Sheridan, Strindberg and Rostand also feature in his repertoire. Audiences still talk about his *Cyrano de Bergerac*! He has also ventured into the 20th century appearing in works by David Williamson, Tom Stoppard, Peter Shaffer, John Arden and Bertolt Brecht. Many believe his performance in the title role of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* is one of his greatest triumphs. There have also been roles in film and television, and even a musical!

John's distinguished career as an actor is matched by his equally distinguished career as a director of plays, musicals and opera. His influence on theatre in Australia is significant, even seminal. In the years before Bell Shakespeare, he directed over 25 Australian plays. Over 60 per cent were world premieres.

The first was the legendary *Legend of King O'Malley* at the Jane Street Theatre in June 1970. That production helped kick start the new wave of Australian drama. But the new wave needed venues. Ken Horler, a barrister and friend of John's from university, found a former stables building in Nimrod Street, Kings Cross. Over several months, a team of volunteers gave up their weekends to convert it into a theatre.

In December 1970, the Nimrod Street Theatre opened with John and Ken as co-artistic directors. The irreverent knockabout style of *King O'Malley* helped define Nimrod's early house style. As John's wife Anna has observed, Nimrod allowed theatre to be silly.

It wasn't all vaudeville and circus. It was at Nimrod Street that John introduced David Williamson to Sydney audiences with his gritty production of *The Removalists* and continued to develop a new Australian approach to Shakespeare.

Audiences continued to build. Within three years, Nimrod needed larger premises. A former salt factory in Surry Hills was found and transformed. The house style that emerged at Nimrod Street further developed, but its essence remained. As John notes in his book, *The Time of My Life*, it's a house style that was informal, warm and welcoming.

While Nimrod no longer exists, except in the memories of the theatre people who worked there and the audiences who enjoyed their work, it has left Sydney with a wonderful legacy – two magical theatre spaces. The first Nimrod Street Theatre is now the SBW Stables in Kings Cross and home to the Griffin Theatre Company and Nimrod in Surry Hills is now Belvoir. John Bell's key role in giving Sydney this legacy should not be forgotten.

As John acknowledges in his book, many people have helped make this possible - whether helping to build two theatres with their bare hands, helping to raise money or by volunteering in other ways to ensure these theatres remained open.

Many of these people gathered at the Town Hall last Monday to honour John.

The companies now resident in these theatres continue Nimrod's spirit – Griffin with its commitment to producing new Australian work and Belvoir with its commitment to fresh approaches to theatre. John himself continued to develop his approach to Shakespeare which largely began with Nimrod.

Not content with starting one theatre company, John established a second. Twenty-five years ago, Bell Shakespeare was born. It is now Australia's leading touring national theatre company. Over the past 25 years, Bell Shakespeare has presented 25 plays by Shakespeare plus the compendium work *The Wars of the Roses* and stage adaptation of *Venus and Adonis*. Yet it has not confined itself to Shakespeare. Plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors have featured, along with theatre for children.

The company has taken Shakespeare into regional and remote areas and introduced people experiencing social disadvantage to Shakespeare through its Hearts in A Row program. It worked with Indigenous communities, Juvenile Justice Centres, disadvantaged community groups, students and in disaster-struck regions.

Its schools program, Actors at Work, began almost at the same time as the company itself. Actors at Work introduced school students to a new dynamic approach to Shakespeare which possibly also helped build future audiences. John and his wife Anna were frequent participants in its early years. The program is complemented with presentations of Shakespeare designed for primary and secondary school audiences, student masterclasses and immersive Shakespeare workshops.

John's revels with Bell Shakespeare now are ended with his announced retirement as Artistic Director. Bell Shakespeare will not melt into air, into thin air, nor shall it dissolve. John has ensured this by mentoring a successor, new artistic director Peter Evans.

John continues to act, currently appearing at Belvoir in Chekov's *Ivanov*. A holiday with Anna in Central Australia is planned and he may resume painting, an early interest. But in his retirement will he be content, like the Earl of Worcester, to entertain the lag-end of his life with quiet hours?

Theatre lovers suspect, and perhaps hope, not completely. For a consummate man of the theatre like John, there will always be new roles to play, and new plays to direct. We wish him well, and we thank him for letting us see, over many years, something of the stuff that dreams are made of.

**RECOMMENDATION**

It is resolved that Council commend John Bell AO, OBE for his extraordinarily significant contribution to the cultural life of our city and our nation as an actor, director, producer, theatre company founder, teacher, performing arts advocate and Shakespeare enthusiast.

**COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE**

Lord Mayor