

I have been reading Christopher Barnett's work for over 30 years now. My introduction coming through *Ulrike Meinhof Sings* and, embarrassingly, I can't recall now whether I first saw it on stage or on the page. Either way within the space of a week or so in the mid 1980s I had read the text and seen the work performed at the Performance Space in Sydney. I remember being somewhat shell shocked after the performance, but also elated. I had heard a poetry that I had never before heard in Australia – defiant, radically political, alternative and explosive. The words bounced around me, afterwards I remembered large pieces of the monologue as if it had been burned into the back of my brain:

.....th first robbery
was like th first fuck.....i knew there would be no glory
in my worldeven tho my comrade andreas my lover
andreas hoped there would be.....but when you watch those
you love either shrink or explode glamor becomes
something only an artist like any warhol can understand

and

we have a story about martin schleyer
this mass murderer turn labour expert was going to australia
..... to teach their rich about industrial democracy
well we plucked schleyer out & we left him in the back th boot of
a car we wanted to show australian workers how to teach
their rich

Ulrike Meinhof Sings was collected, along with two other extraordinary works, *th last days of the world* and *basket weaving for amateurs* in a collection by the important Melbourne based publisher Rigmarole in 1984 (*Last Days of th World and other texts for theatre*, Rigamore Press 1984). Together with the earlier works, *A Fist in th Face of Public Taste* (E.A.F 1978) and *Selling Ourselves for Dinner* (All Out Ensemble 1982), these works represent something unique and rare in Australian theatre and writing. At the time I sensed something of the "ultimate commitment" that Michael Dransfield referred to. A commitment to words, to their meaning and power, their pace and rhythm. If Barnett's work didn't make you angry, didn't make you want to take to streets then you were obviously on the wrong side of history – or that was how I saw it 30 years ago.

Recently I have increasingly found myself drawn back to *basket weaving for amateurs*. This text attacks the complacency of Australian culture and cultural criticism and takes the form of a series of voices, artists Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor and a number of critics such as Lionel Lindsay, Sydney Ure Smith, Bernard Hall, Humphrey McQueen, Max Harris and Kym Bonython as well as the generic voice of the "art critic" which functions almost like a reactionary Greek Chorus holding back art and protecting the status quo.

Early in the piece the art critic announces:

i possess no artistic sense but i find i like those pictures old & new which brings th highest price and in spite of everything sd to th contrary price still remains th practical expression of appreciation th decent middle classes have faith in what we defend it may be australia's duty & privilege to save from th wreck of civilisation th little upon which we can build again

It is difficult not to read this and not think of the way Australian culture has developed since Barnett wrote these words. The flagship companies and galleries are seen in terms of economic multipliers, grass root artists have been cut loose, made to scramble for crumbs and scraps. Revolution may not be the current aesthetic but if this country is to have a cultural future it may become an imperative.

Before we leave *basket weaving for amateurs* it worthwhile to turn briefly to the last scene of the piece. scene six consists of a single extraordinary poem which is both an elegy and a celebration:

preston

th song of recognised failure

iam a iam a i am a
th larrikin daughter of your error
th dumb child at th window
th cripple who has lost his show
th painter with nowhere to go

iam a iam a i am a
th killer of a decade's wrong story
th woman locked in sound
th man caught in the cyrstal night
th person with nothing to show

iam a iam a i am a
th city left like warsaw
th night bleached in terror
th story caught in fever
th tale left untold

iam a iam a i am a
th family album
th photograph of loss
th beginning of nothing
the failure of song

iam a iam a i am a
iam a iam a i am a

Looking back on it now this poem is at least the equal of the best work published in Australia over the last 50 years and confirms for me Barnett's position as one of our most important poet/writers. It is possible to see *basket weaving for amateurs* as an farewell to Australia for in 1993 Barnett left Australia for France never to return.

The almost a quarter of century Barnett has lived and worked in France could be seen as a kind of self imposed exile but that assumes that he wants to return to Australia. I sense that Barnett has found a level of acceptance for his work in France that would be impossible in Australia and that the political and cultural changes that have taken place here since 1993 has made a return less and less likely as the years have passed.

In France Barnett established an experimental theatre company, *Le Dernier Spectateur*, in Nantes. Working collaboratively with the marginalized and disenfranchised, Barnett, used poetry, dance and music to help empower people and has attracted praise and support from all levels of French society.

In parallel with his work *Le Dernier Spectateur* Barnett has continued to write and the evolution of social media over the past decade has provided him a new platform for his work. Indeed, like many others, it was through his Facebook posts that I reconnected with Christopher a number of years ago. What I quickly realised, however, was that social media was another medium for Barnett – like the written page or the stage. It was a form of poetic pirate radio.

Among those poems that I read on Facebook were sections of what was to become *when they came/for you elegies/ of resistance* (Wakefield Press 2013). This extraordinary work, at once a elegy for Furkan Dogan, the young Turkish activist assassinated by the Israeli military during an attempt to break the blockade of Gaza, and a memoir of Barnett's own engagement with his own political and personal struggles.

furkan
i am
listening
to wires
being
pulled
straight from heart
because murders
eat our sadness
so it is sung
by bodies
so broken
.....

when they came/for you elegies/ of resistance is a dense work, for most of the 316 pages the poem runs in two columns down the page and the read is propelled forward, taken by the rhythm of the words, the patterns. One feels like you in the middle of performance, a machine gun scattering of words. But this is also a work that keeps pulling you back in, where you keep discovering new meanings, new references – for me it was also an education, the text has sent me off in numerous directions over the past three years – learning, discovering.

And so to this exhibition. Once again many of the poems have appeared as posts on Facebook, sometimes accompanied by images of Luciano Prisco's paintings:

.....

mourn

shadows
fall over

one
another

mourn movement

want
to
walk
off world's
edge

wherever you desire
that to be

come
barefoot
amongst bone
& flesh

.....

There is an immediate connection here between Barnett's words and Prisco's dark painting. The angular edges outlined in white, the thick browns, greys and black, the thin lines of white dripping through the painting and the surprise of maroon – are reflected back in the poem in lines such as “sound from blood....”, “streaming from skin” and “walk/off world's/edge”.

Barnett has never confirmed to the image of the solitary writer – he has always been collaborating – from his theatre texts in Australia, to his work with

Le Dernier Spectateur and his poetry. Once again with this exhibition his words act as mirror for the images, reflecting and amplifying an intensity – while, at the same time the paintings are doing exactly the same with his words.

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