To explore another level of society

Hotel Obsino writer Adam Broinowski speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Writer and director Adam Broinowski spoke with the World Socialist Web Site *about* Hotel Obsino*, which was recently staged at the La Mama Theatre as part of this year's Melbourne Fringe Festival. (See* Hotel Obsino*: inner-city poverty and despair*)

Broinowski began his stage career in 1994 and has performed in Australia, Britain, South America and various Asian countries, including Japan, Malaysia, Korea and Singapore. A research fellow at the University of Tokyo from 2003-2005, he studied Japanese avant-garde theatre during the 1920s and 1930s and the post-WWII period and has been a member of Gekidan Kaitaisha (Theatre of Deconstruction), the Tokyo-based experimental theatre company.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain something about your play's background and subject matter?

Adam Broinowski: I chose the subject because I was living in Fitzroy [an inner city Melbourne suburb] in 1999 and began noticing an increase in the number of heroin addicts. There is always heroin around but it had become very visible. At the same time there were numbers of people being released from mental institutions by Jeff Kennett [then Liberal state premier]. They were basically being put onto the streets with no protection, preparation or care and so they were wandering around not knowing what to do with themselves. Many had been institutionalised for long periods and didn't really know how to survive.

I'd discovered the Hotham Hotel and was interested in the architecture and history of the building and thought this would be a place where these sorts of people would be staying. A friend and I had previously made a sound sculpture of the building and the immediate environment, but I actually wanted to meet the people inside and find out what they were like—to learn about their opinions and what kind of lives they were leading.

I was looking for a different view of society and presenting things that were not generally being portrayed in theatre. I wanted stories that had some guts to them and were not just about middle class characters preoccupied with their own personal relationships, which seems to be a constant in contemporary theatre. Theatre used to be a politicised medium—it has this natural potential—and so I wanted to bring a sense of this back into theatre and to explore another layer of society.

RP: You started on this in 1999 but then left the idea for a while?

AB: Yes. I went overseas, wrote another play, worked with a theatre company in Japan for five years and was busy doing other things. The show was also Melbourne-based and particular to Australian audiences and so I couldn't really do it anywhere else. But it always frustrated me that I wasn't able to stage it because I felt it had a strong script.

RP: The characters are largely cut off from events and context. Dave says that he misses Pentridge prison, which is now closed, but not much of the external world makes its way into the hotel. Was that deliberate?

AB: It was a dramatic device to develop the intensity of the narrative and in some ways to contain the characters, whose existence is at a different pace and reality, either because of drugs or their general lifestyle. They're outsiders and isolated. Their only contact with the outside world is through institutions—the police, the health services, the soup vans or community services—and I was trying to emphasise this.

RP: Their plight, of course, is a direct result of government policy decisions, Liberal and Labor, to shut down mental health facilities. In the program notes you describe society as "a system that lacks not resources, only care." Could you elaborate?

AB: I meant that Australia is not a poor country. We have all sorts of resources at our disposal and shouldn't have any homeless people. We are very rich but choose not to put these resources into looking after people who are not otherwise disadvantaged. Society's values are upside down.

RP: The problem is 'we' don't control these resources. They're in the hands of a tiny and very wealthy elite.

AB: Yes. It's a society which follows a profit-led, capitalist economic system and one driven by personal gain.

RP: Could you define Noah's relationship to the setting? Was he meant to be a detached observer or supposed to change the

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relationship between the residents? I found him a rather under-developed character.

AB: A lot of people have said that and I guess it is a mixture of how it was played and how it was written. Yes, he could have been further fleshed out, but I didn't want to focus on him so much. He was a cipher—a kind of prompt—who could only come alive in response to the other characters. I'd worked in rehearsal on the other characters a lot, and to some extent ran out of time on his responses and reactions to the others.

It's difficult because the idea was to have a neutral observer, but one whose neutrality expressed a kind of moral ambiguity. I wanted to show how this sort of character can be quite calculating and removed—engaged with the characters but not engaged on their level. A bit like when middle class people get in touch with this layer but tend to treat them like specimens. That was the idea behind it.

RP: The program notes refer to "growing fear and paranoia". How have things changed since you wrote the play in 1999?

AB: I really felt this in 1999 because it was all around me in the hotel and in everyday life, so to some extent not much has changed. We know how paranoia is whipped up in order to have an outcome that the politicians and others want, but I guess I'm also alluding to how these methods have expanded. It certainly started in 1999, or earlier, but the changes that came from Australian involvement in the Iraq war, for example, are on a much larger scale. This trickles down through society as a whole and tends to make people much more defensive and scared of anything that is slightly different or unusual.

I don't mean to suggest that my show is just a mirror—that would be very unBrechtian—but I'd like to say that it is a distorted mirror in that there is a hierarchy in the hotel, which might also reflect the way race and power work in Australia. Obviously this is in a very broad and indirect sense, but there is certainly something that is recognisable.

RP: Have these pressures impacted on writers and artists? The censorship laws are certainly now more restrictive.

AB: Yes, and there is a certain self-censorship by some artists who probably believe that if they speak out clearly and politically they will be excluded and not get a government grant or whatever. Others might feel that it won't be popular to present something that is slightly harder, harsher or clearer about society on stage. It's almost as if some artists have become scared of their own voices, which is a real problem.

RP: Have you felt this sort of pressure?

AB: In a subtle, indirect way. It generally means that you don't get your show picked up by a larger producer or theatre. They basically try to ignore you, which is debilitating because you can't develop unless you get some sort of community response.

RP: What's been the response to *Hotel Obsino*?

AB: I was pleased with the reaction. It sold out for the last week and there were always people who hung around at the end wanting to talk about the show. They were obviously stimulated and interested, which was encouraging.

RP: How readily did the play translate into Japanese?

AB: The difficulties were in the nuances of cultural meanings. The Aboriginal character speaking in a certain way, for example, doesn't really translate into Japanese, unless you make the character Ainu. The play is about people from so many different cultural backgrounds and accents, that it is difficult to do in Japanese, apart from making the language rougher. Some things worked and other didn't, but we didn't try to find all the cultural equivalents.

RP: I'm guessing that you're fond of films by Japanese director Shohei Imamura, who focused much of his work on the most oppressed sections of society?

AB: Yes. Just before he died he made a good short film in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the US. It was part of a collection by a whole number of directors. His was about a returning Japanese soldier who turns into a snake, which is very interesting.

Imamura came out of the Japanese New Wave in the 1960s, a group which was critical of the war and of the American occupation and the Japanese administration. The Theatre of Deconstruction had some connections with this group. Imamura remained politically engaged throughout and didn't fall for the eye-candy approach to cinema.

RP: How do you see things developing in Australian theatre and your future work?

AB: It's tricky coming back from another country and takes time to fit back in or find what your role is. I want to continue working the way that I have been up till now, that is, to engage with social themes on a deeper level—not like journalism—but in a way that resonates, and present perspectives that people may not have thought of.

Film and television does some things better in terms of social realism and using factual material, but theatre provides a valuable opportunity to bring important issues together in a live setting and somehow transform that space, so that the audience comes out with a slightly different perspective. Hopefully this experience gets them to think about the issues raised in the show and more deeply about their own lives.

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