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Treasure is one man's junk

Rosemary Sorensen | February 28, 2008

SCOTT Rankin's plans to change the world can sound like the gospel according to St Scott, an invigorating invitation to slough off your old cloak of cynical frustration and believe in the healing, inspiring power of art.

Then, just as you're starting to feel like a convert to a new order - and wondering, therefore, if the invitation is quite as healthy as it sounds - the easygoing bloke with the weird wit rolls his eyes and criticises himself, using an earthy vernacular.

Maybe it's just all arrogant blah, he suggests, testing how deep the seeds he's planted have sunk into the soil of receptivity. If you are swept up by his rhetoric, in a very Australian fashion, Rankin makes light of his own passion, as though he's unnerved by his power to convince.

A man with plenty to say and a courageous way of saying it, Rankin talks about the human impulse to create as he maps out how to change a politician's mind about the value of culture, juxtaposing the poetic with the pragmatic. That way madness lies.

Indeed, one of the two blokes he cites as his inspiration - Vaslav Nijinsky and St Francis of Assisi - went stark raving, and the other was not what you'd call normal. But if it takes a little madness and a lot of courage to create social justice, then Rankin is content to call himself both arrogant and irreverent.

Relevance, though, is what he claims vehemently, and it's that message - art must be relevant to be worthwhile - that he's been proselytising for the past 20 years.

Rankin is the national creative director of Big hArt, the group behind the indigenous language theatre project Ngapartji Ngapartji, as well as Junk Theory, a project that grew out of responses to the 2005 Cronulla riots.

First presented at the Sydney Festival last year, Junk Theory is now at the Adelaide Festival. On the River Torrens, Rankin has moored a Chinese junk, the sails of which reflect images put together by 100 people who live in the Sutherland Shire, around Cronulla in Sydney. Young people from Cronulla, working with artists - the basis of Big hArt's approach - listened to stories from the community, documented them, and devised visual and aural representations. The vessel for those stories is the junk: a floating installation, like a benign Flying Dutchman.

The junk is connected to Rankin's own story: who he is and how he thinks. It was owned by his parents, who moored it in Sydney Harbour outside a boatshed. The family lived on the ornate boat for 21 years, placating the maritime authorities by insisting they lived in the shed, and the dockside authorities by claiming they lived on the boat.

Rankin's father, who died last month after suffering from multiple sclerosis for many years, was a gentle man, eccentric and inventive, a designer. His mother, who lives in Sydney, is an early-childhood expert, interested in what happens if self-directed play is given educational goals or turned into a commodity. Together they ran a toyshop, and the children, Rankin and his two older sisters, were recruited to make "beautiful little things" for the store.

One of the memories Rankin, 48, has of his childhood years is casting off at Christmas in the junk and sailing quietly up harbour inlets, where they would stop outside houses and sing carols. He remembers the joy when faces appeared at the windows, amazed at the vision of this exotic boat with its load of singers.

"I love the moments," he says of his role with Big hArt, "when people get it, and they go, 'I can think about that differently.' It's about an audience, waking people up to things. I'd probably be just as happy being a teacher."

Rankin enrolled in an arts degree, but deferred in the first year. "My love was social justice and art," he says.

At this time he became obsessed with the dancer whose "thighs changed the direction of dance", and with the friar who changed his church. "I was aware of truth seekers, those on a bigger quest," Rankin says of his decision to defer study and work in the community where he thought he could help.

During a "mad few years", he worked in the garden of a retirement village, where he became aware of Sydney's landscape as it changed to accommodate the building of huge cinema complexes and the like, and the way it was contributing to the drift of young people towards places such as Kings Cross. Reading about this in the media, Rankin and a friend decided to try to make a difference.

They leased space in an old building near the cinema strip in Sydney's George Street. "We had no idea what we were doing but we ran music workshops which would attract the kids and then, at the end of the day, we'd feed them and drive them home. We didn't do proper evaluations, but it was very successful."

Rankin says this was the "first artmaking-people thing I tried". The next was in Tasmania, in the mill town of Burnie, during the campaigns to prevent damming of the Gordon and Franklin rivers. It was in Burnie that Rankin met the man he calls his Diaghilev (the impresario who guided Nijinsky).

John Bakes was the son of a potato farmer, an "unassuming Tasmanian, a quiet thinker" who was producing shows in the state's backblocks in a way that appealed to Rankin. The impetus was compassion and interest in the people who would be the audience. Involvement with the community was paramount. Together, Bakes and Rankin set up Big hArt, taking advice from all kinds of people willing to assist for the price of a bottle of good whisky, so long as they knew they were contributing to a new and productive model of creativity.

"We wanted to reshape the way things worked by looking at the rhizome model, which would eliminate human resource management issues," he says. "What came first was the idea that individuals had to benefit from the projects, communities had to be able to sustain it, policy had to change, and also the work had to be exquisite or at least very good. If any one of those things was missing, it would be a failure of the project and that's just what drove the company in a certain direction."

Big hArt projects, which can take many years to develop, were funded by commercial work, with artists such as Glynn Nicholas and Leah Purcell. Some of the royalty payments would be used to finance the beginning of the next project.

The rhizome model means that instead of a top-down structure, autonomous production nodules are set up, providing flexibility to the organisation. At the time Big hArt was formed, Rankin says, he was thinking of a quote from the Australian writer David Ireland, that the "future is in the belly of the country, not the coastal rind". In a typical Rankinesque flourish, the name of the company was given a lower-case h, so that "if you're going to government (for funding support) you can call it Big Hart, and if you're going to arts organisations, you can say it's Big Art. Simple as that."

Rankin and his wife, visual artist Rebecca Lavis, with their three children, still live in Tasmania, north of Burnie, but the success of Big hArt in the wake of the ground-breaking Ngapartji Ngapartji has meant he's had to increase his role as company spokesman to almost frenzied pace. He recently made headlines with the announcement that the company was turning down \$750,000 from the Australia Council because it wasn't worth Big hArt accepting it. His point was that the council, with its offer of \$125,000 a year for six years, was "buying into something without offering sufficient money".

"The same as we do for all the other government departments we apply to, we calculate the hours required for applications and acquittals and we listen for when staff are ill-informed. If a project officer hasn't done their research, then we call the branch head, and it's important in the Australia Council to do the same thing," Rankin says.

The calculations for the six-year grant offer, in short, added up to too much work for not enough money, so Big hArt said no thanks. In Adelaide, during the festival, Rankin will be talking to other arts companies and prospective sponsors about the importance of being clear on the value to communities and governments of the work of arts organisations.

Lean and flexible is how Rankin wants Big hArt to continue.

"It's fun, creatively really engaging, but I'm very concerned now about shutting up and allowing things to ferment," he says. "Because we're so busy, I am a bit debilitated by the practical requirements of being trotted out to do the presentations." ~~Copyright © 2008 News & Media Services for the Arts and Culture (AMT) Ltd.~~

Junk Theory is on the River Torrens, near the Adelaide Festival Centre, until March 9.