

Article

# Learning to Act: Tony Sheldon's Emotional Training in Australian Theatre

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**Abstract:** This case study of Tony Sheldon considers how an actor develops versatility in emotional delivery and the capacity to work in all theatre genres. Sheldon is one of Australia's best known and most successful stage actors. He has appeared in Shakespearean drama, cabaret, musical theatre and contemporary plays written by Australian, British and American playwrights. He is one of a sizeable group of Australian actors of his generation to have learned to act 'on the job' with directors and other actors rather than undertaking formal qualifications in an institution or studio. This article examines Sheldon's experience of learning to act, drawing on a life interview with the actor. It considers the opportunities and the difficulties Sheldon experienced in his early career in relation to boundary blurring and self-belief, trauma, directorial rehearsal styles, typecasting, comic acting in partnership and managing one's character in long seasons. The article explores some of the problems that the actor has overcome, the importance of specific directors in his development, and the dynamics of informal training in the context of an overall ecology of theatre over half a century.

**Keywords:** actors; Australia; actor training; Tony Sheldon; genre and emotion; career in theatre; theatre directors

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## 1. Introduction

Actors have often gained recognition for the ways in which they excel at either tragic or comic roles. In Australia, however, actors have to be versatile and able to work across both serious drama and comedy and, in some instances, actors become celebrated because they can perform across all the genres of theatre with emotional virtuosity. This article is a case study of how an actor develops versatility in emotional delivery and the capacity to work in all theatre genres. It asks: how does an actor learn to be emotionally expressive with a psychologically healthy balance in his or her personal and professional experiences [1]? This capacity comes at a personal cost in the early years of a career that spans decades.

Tony Sheldon is one of Australia's best known performers and he has a capacity to perform in all theatre genres. He was born into a theatrical dynasty, and began performing as a small boy. He has performed in Shakespearean drama, cabaret, musical theatre and contemporary plays written by Australian, American and British playwrights, including premiere productions of plays by leading Australian playwrights, Peter Kenna and Louis Nowra [2]. Sheldon has appeared on all the main stages of Australia and has worked in many smaller venues. As well, he has written plays for musical theatre, and scripts for popular television serials and satirical revue. Further, Sheldon has directed musical theatre and cabaret. He is one of a number of performers of his generation to have worked in a wide variety of styles.

In addition, Sheldon is one of a growing group of Australian actors to have enjoyed considerable success outside Australia, in the West End in London and on Broadway in New York, beginning with his success in the lead role in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Priscilla)*, the stage adaptation of the musical film. Sheldon was nominated for a Tony Award (Leading Actor in a Musical) for his performance of the role of Bernadette in *Priscilla* in the Broadway production. Unlike many other actors of his generation, Sheldon has not moved across to television or film. Rather he is an unrepentant ‘theatre animal’<sup>1</sup>.

Significantly Sheldon is one of a sizeable set of Australian actors who do not have formal qualifications. Rather, Sheldon learned to act the traditional way through production and through working with directors in rehearsal, and by observation of other actors. He calls this training ‘learning by osmosis’. This type of training on the job is common for actors in comedy and musical theatre<sup>2</sup>. For example, Barry Humphries did not undergo any formal training as an actor: he worked with leading Australian directors such as John Sumner, Ray Lawler and Peter O’Shaughnessy at the Melbourne Theatre Repertory Company, Phillip Street Theatre and with independent directors before he began to write, devise and perform his one-man shows in the early 1960s [4].

This article describes Sheldon’s experience of actor training on the job, through rehearsals with several well-known Australian directors and through independent learning and collaborative work with other actors during various productions early in his career. In spite of the significant published research on Australian performance practice found in the edited collection of essays by Rogers and Schafer in 2008, in which lineage, traditions of actor training and specific training approaches are examined, there is very little research that closely examines the development of individual actors [5]. This article considers the opportunities together with the difficulties Sheldon experienced in his early career in relation to boundary blurring between self and character, which did cause him psychological problems. It is possible to explore a range of relevant problems and challenges for actors by considering Sheldon’s career: directorial rehearsal styles, typecasting, comic acting in partnership, and managing one’s character in a long season. This article is part of a larger project about Australian actors and it is based on an extended interview that the author conducted with Sheldon in order to find out how he articulated his own development as an actor from the 1970s and over his long career in the theatre.

## 2. Boy Actor

Sheldon’s career began in childhood in the way that family dynasties encourage. He was just seven years of age when he appeared on television singing along with a comic actor, Graham Kennedy, on the Australian variety television show, *In Melbourne Tonight*. Before that, Sheldon had appeared on *In Brisbane Tonight*, singing the song, ‘Swinging on a Star’, alongside his mother, the popular entertainer Toni Lamond.

The young Sheldon became a regular performer on Kennedy’s television program for two years, performing songs, simple dances and short comedy sketches. Every fortnight on a Wednesday, he would set off from primary school to the television studio for rehearsals for the evening show. *In Melbourne Tonight* was filmed live and so there was no room for mistakes. Sheldon always appeared in the first half-hour of the program to comply with regulations that only allowed children to perform before 22:00.

Sheldon’s parents, Frank Sheldon and Toni Lamond, called him ‘Butch’ Sheldon, although he looked anything but butch: he was more like a choirboy and he appealed widely because of his round face, big eyes, dimples and slight lisp. His entire family worked on *In Melbourne Tonight*—Frank was a producer and Toni a regular performer, appearing four nights a week. Even Sheldon’s grandparents, Max Reddy and Stella Lamond, sometimes appeared on this popular program in ‘bring back the Tivoli’

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent quotes from Sheldon were made during interview with the author, 28 October 2014 [3].

<sup>2</sup> The author is part of a research project investigating ‘Actor Training in Australia, Past and Present’ with Emeritus Professor Peta Tait and Associate Professor Ian Maxwell. One component of this project explores the phenomenon of actors learning with directors in rehearsal.

nights, when Frank invited in all the old stars. The Tivoli was the Australian equivalent to British music hall. Frank had been a dancer himself, and was a member of the chorus when he met Toni at the Tivoli in Melbourne, where she was the leading lady to the English comedian Tommy Trinder.

The young Sheldon was 10 years old when he auditioned for the live show *Oliver*, in 1965, in which Toni Lamond was cast as Nancy. The show's choreographer was Betty Pounder, who had danced with the Australian star of music theatre in the 1920s and 1930s, Gladys Moncrieff. Pounder cast Sheldon as one of Fagin's boys—explaining that he was too young to play Oliver or the Artful Dodger—and Toni and Frank agreed that young Sheldon could participate when the show transferred to Sydney in the spring during his school holidays. Sheldon's stage debut in *Oliver* in 1966 was a formative experience: he enjoyed playing an orphan boy in this big musical, and he cherished the camaraderie of the other children, as well as the kindness of the adults in the cast. Sheldon was particularly impressed with an older boy called Andrew Sharp, who played the Artful Dodger.

At school, Sheldon met Andrew Sharp again; the 'theatrical' bond they shared, having worked together in *Oliver*, provided the basis for a lasting friendship and a productive professional partnership a few years later. Even with his family background, it was at high school in Sydney that Sheldon glimpsed the possibilities of acting as a career. He was a discontented boarder at the private school 'Cranbrook' when he met Terence Clarke, who taught Mathematics in the senior school and was feared by the boys. Clarke directed school productions and initially he approached Sheldon, suggesting he play Miranda in *The Tempest*. Sheldon was reluctant to play a female role and declined the offer. Not long afterwards, Clarke invited Sheldon to participate in a production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. He convinced Sheldon to read the part of Meg Boles, the middle-aged landlady in a seaside boarding house. The style of the play intrigued Sheldon, and Clarke encouraged him. But it was also Clarke's approach to drama, and to the young actors, that appealed to Sheldon. Clarke called Sheldon by his first name—something no other teacher had done—and treated Sheldon as a collaborator. He told Sheldon emphatically that he was good at performing. It was not only empowering for Sheldon to hear this, but also an important discovery. He had worried about not being a good singer like his mother, and about not being a good dancer like his father, but Clarke's words liberated him from these concerns if he excelled as an actor.

### 3. Personal Boundaries Blur

When he left school at the age of 17, Sheldon auditioned for a part in *The Fantasticks* and was given the role of Matt in the high-energy musical at the Intimate Theatre in Neutral Bay, Sydney. Perhaps this is not surprising, as the young Sheldon was good-looking. He was tall, slender and lithe, with an oval-shaped face, full features, high cheekbones, a broad smile and expressive hands.

In a production at the Ensemble Theatre in 1973, the young, inexperienced performer encountered problems. Sheldon was understudy to Bruce Myles, who was playing the lead role in a new Australian play called *Goldilocks and the Three Bears R Certificate* by Robyn Moase. (Sheldon knew Moase because she had appeared in the musical *Anything Goes* with Toni Lamond, several years earlier.) After three days of rehearsals, Myles resigned, leaving Sheldon in the lead role to carry the production of this rather surreal and lengthy play. He played Baby Bear and appeared in every scene.

As an emerging young actor learning how to perform as he worked from production to production, Sheldon lacked confidence in his ability. He was uncertain about his capacity as an actor without preparatory training. Sheldon was especially nervous about working at the Ensemble Theatre, because he believed that many of the other actors had trained in American methods of acting at the Ensemble Theatre Studio founded by Hayes Gordon and run by Gordon and his former student, Zika Nester [6]. While working as a professional actor, Gordon had undertaken workshops with Sanford Meisner in the USA before he came to Australia. Gordon taught a large number of actors the system of Stanislavski, and many of them went on to highly successful careers. This group included Lorraine Bayly, Max Cullen, Jon Ewing, Clarissa Kaye, Reg Livermore, Don Reid and Henri Szeps [7].

Sheldon struggled through the rehearsals at the Ensemble for *Goldilocks and the Three Bears R Certificate*. After the preview show, the director John Macleod delivered notes. Sheldon found this process devastating because of the severity of the criticism. Macleod instructed the cast to assemble for a special rehearsal the next day. The cast duly assembled. It was the day before opening night. On his first line, as Sheldon walked across the stage carrying his suitcase, he remembered that Macleod yelled, 'Stop! What action are you playing?' Sheldon stammered a reply which did not satisfy the director, who Sheldon remembers saying, 'Well, we will all sit and wait until Mr Sheldon works out what his action is'. This seemed to happen almost on every new line. During a short break Sheldon walked outside, sobbing quietly, hoping none of the others would notice him. As they rehearsed the next act, Sheldon exploded with rage in character. Baby Bear was supposed to become hysterical and Sheldon played it with all the energy he could summon, crying and screaming, the tears streaming down his face. After this, Macleod said calmly, 'That's how I want you to play every performance. This is how you do it.' Not knowing any better and determined to please the director, Sheldon explains that he 'tore himself apart' every night. But he would cry all the way home because he was raw with the effort of actually having become hysterical night after night, without knowing how to manage the shattering outbursts of anger in performance. Without techniques for performing the outburst, he could not detach, so it took a personal toll on him as the actor. According to the English actor Annabel Arden, who, like Sheldon, did not undergo preparatory training in a drama school course, 'there is a certain distance one must maintain at the same time as being passionately involved—one must be present but detached' [8].

Sheldon did not know how to manage the emotions required for acting. He was emotionally vulnerable at this stage in his life. His childhood had been hard—with the death by suicide of his father when he was 11—and he was dealing with a number of challenging problems in his personal life as a young adult. There is minimal research on emotional vulnerability in emerging actors, but it is clear from the work of Burgoyne, Poulin and Rearden that inexperienced actors are at risk of increased personal problems. The research undertaken by Burgoyne and her partners focused on student actors in response to the lack of scholarly literature 'dealing with the impact of acting' ([1], p. 165). More recently, Terence Crawford finds the increasing professionalism of acting since the 1970s in Australia—when Sheldon began his career—as 'contingent upon the alienation of actors' ([9], p. 27). Crawford concludes that 'actors are subject to systemic disenfranchisement' in order to manifest the paradox of the contented, connected actor in contemporary Australia ([9], p. 28). In some ways Sheldon exemplifies how the 'pathology of contentment', which Crawford reveals, could only be achieved at considerable personal effort to manage to transcend this 'pathology'.

Even if he had been taught techniques in a training course, as a young actor, Sheldon still may not have avoided the situation at the Ensemble Theatre. Without an understanding of how to protect his personal self in playing the role, he suffered serious trauma. The emotional distress almost led to Sheldon's death, when he attempted to jump out of a speeding car on the Sydney Harbour Bridge one night during the season. Sheldon told me that he did not intend to kill himself but that he was hysterical, and was pulled back by another passenger in the car, who grabbed his arm and hauled him out of harm's way. He suffered every night during the season because his performance was out of control. In order to play the scene effectively without causing himself distress, he would have had to be aware of the need for controls. Burgoyne and her co-researchers explain, 'that the life-theatre feedback loop may operate in acting experiences' and he would have had to put in place specific 'strategies for boundary control' ([1], p. 165). In addition, Sheldon suffered a longer-term material effect, in that he was not invited back to the Ensemble for some 20 years, because he was considered to be 'too highly strung'.

During the season at the Ensemble Theatre, Sheldon learned some of the common concepts of acting that the other Ensemble actors used. He learned about 'Playing Actions', about 'Sense Memory' and 'Belief in the Situation', but he felt like an outsider because he did not fully understand the ideas or how to use the associated techniques to his advantage. Looking back, he acknowledges that learning to

act takes at least 30 years, and that in his early days while learning quickly from other actors, he simply drew on his own resources. However, directors such as John Bell, Terence Clarke, John Krummel, Richard Cottrell and Roger Hodgman offered Sheldon roles that suggested some faith in his capacity to play them. They 'taught' him ways of working in the theatre and techniques for performance. After working as an actor for more than 40 years, he believes in learning many techniques and approaches to acting, and drawing on the appropriate and useful techniques as needed.

#### 4. John Bell, Shakespeare and New Australian Plays

In 1973, John Bell cast the 18-year-old Sheldon as Joe Cassidy in the premiere of what has become an Australian classic, *A Hard God*, written by Peter Kenna ([2], pp. 112–16). The play is a raw, intense, realist work with some comic elements, and when Sheldon first read the script, he was stunned by the power of the role of the young male character Joe, and its personal resonance. It was as if the character had been written for him in its exploration of the struggle of a young man with his sexuality. Kenna, who had begun his career as an actor, made the character of Joe semi-autobiographical, since Kenna was also a devout Roman Catholic. John Bell had an Irish Catholic background and the world of the play was his world, too. Although Sheldon had no experience of Catholicism, he recognised the young man's struggles, which meant that he played Joe with an authenticity that was exceptional.

Sheldon brought an interpretation of emotional vulnerability to Joe that was close to his own life experience. Playing opposite his school friend, Andrew Sharp, cast as Jack Shannon, enabled him to find a less awkward way of making the intimate relationship between the two teenaged characters credible as they struggle with homosexual longings and the strictures of their faith. A 'buffer' for Sheldon in this production was provided by Gloria Dawn, who played the character of Joe's mother Aggie Cassidy with dry humour and stoic strength: 'it was like having a surrogate mother in the show', Sheldon explains. Dawn was a popular star of variety and musical comedy in Australia, and Sheldon had known her since he was a child.

After the stage production of *A Hard God*, Sheldon was invited to appear in a television film adaptation of the play to be produced by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was broadcast in 1974. He felt anxious about performing in front of a camera. Suddenly self-conscious, Sheldon dreaded the intimate sequences which he knew had to be filmed in front of a director and crew, even though Andrew Sharp and Gloria Dawn were among the familiar cast members. To add to his difficulties, he felt that the director, Carl Schultz, did not engage with the actors about the performances or content of the work. For Sheldon, Schultz's reserve and unstinting focus on the technical elements of framing shots made a stark contrast to Bell's emotional commitment and energy during the rehearsals for the stage play. As a director, Bell could draw out emotional exchanges.

It was in the rehearsals and production seasons of *Inner Voices* (1977), *Twelfth Night* (1977) and *Much Ado about Nothing* (1977) that Bell taught Sheldon techniques. Sheldon recalls that Bell was full of ideas and enthusiasm for the text and all dimensions of the performance, and keen to help anyone who felt anxious about playing the work of Shakespeare. He arranged sessions for inexperienced actors to read the sonnets out loud, in order for them to familiarise themselves with speaking the Shakespearean language. In doing this, Bell offered the actors a way through the mystique of the verse and a practical method for establishing meaning within its syntax, rhythm and vocabulary. Sheldon was cast as Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. He found it a challenge to locate a quieter voice after the 'bravura and nervous tics' of his character, Ivan, in the premiere of Nowra's *Inner Voices*. Because Ivan does not speak for most of the play, it required an intense focus and concentration on Sheldon's part. The style of the play is non-realistic and the action presents a nightmarish fantasy world. Performing the final monologue was difficult, because of its stream-of-consciousness style and its revelation of a man descending into madness. The sheer length of the monologue frightened Sheldon, who was anxious that the *non sequiturs* might bore and frustrate the audience. John Bell reminded him that the audience does not know how long the speech will be and instructed him to take his time, to vary every sentence and make each utterance as surprising as possible. For Sheldon, it was an invaluable lesson about pace,

timing, sound and meaning in a monologue. Bell taught Sheldon to focus on what the text offered, and to find the best way of communicating its meaning to the audience.

When Sheldon was cast as Claudio in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, he was replacing the actor John Walton, who had been a member of the cast in a successful, landmark production of the play in 1975 ([10], pp. 159–60). Just five cast members were replaced, and the challenge for the new actors of 'catching up' to the others and entering the spirit of the play was considerable. Sheldon recalls finding himself 'surrounded by a close-knit ensemble jabbering away in "fruit shop" Italian accents, ad-libbing and embracing with abandon'. For Sheldon, at the beginning of rehearsals it was terrifying, 'like the first day at school in a foreign country. But we quickly asserted ourselves and entered into the rambunctious spirit, making the roles our own', he recalled. In each play, John Bell taught Sheldon how to break down a script and to play individual sections rather than attempting to play 'a whole sweeping idea'. This technique helped Sheldon to modulate, shape and temper his performances, and to slow down and focus on speech as it unfolds in sequence throughout a play. Bell was determined 'to stop the actors putting on the plummy "Shakespeare" voice we had been brought up with' and to 'earmark Shakespeare as both popular entertainment and Australian theatre—not a British cultural appendage' ([11], p. 129). This production and that of *Twelfth Night* were important in Australian theatre and brought Bell and the actors national attention. For example, the critic Katharine Brisbane, in her contemporary review published in *Theatre Australia* in August 1977, highlighted the production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, and she praised many of the actors and the direction and vision of John Bell. She stated that 'As Claudio Tony Sheldon is splendid—a difficult feat to follow John Walton's memorable performance last time' (reprinted in [12], p. 264).

### 5. Terence Clarke and the Hunter Valley Theatre Company Ensemble

In 1976, Terence Clarke invited Sheldon to join a new theatre ensemble, the Hunter Valley Theatre Company, based in Newcastle, and Sheldon leapt at the opportunity. It was not only a chance to contribute to a new venture, but Clarke promised Sheldon roles that would help to extend him. For some time, he had been concerned by several comments made by two people whose opinions mattered. In a conversation with John Bell, Sheldon had confided that he would like a break from playing 'sensitive homosexual boys'. Bell quipped, 'Can you play anything else?' It was a joke—and Sheldon recognised it as that—but the words stung. He had played a young homosexual schoolboy, Donald, who seduces a married man in Simon Gray's play *Spoiled* in 1973. Peter Carroll played the role of the married man. Katharine Brisbane expressed admiration for Sheldon's performance in the role, but cautioned him emphatically after the show. She said, 'Yes, wonderful, again ... but you really should stop playing these roles'. Sheldon knew that Bell and Brisbane were right and that he should break away from the one kind of character. But their words provoked deep anxiety. He wondered if he could play other roles. During the run of *Spoiled*, Sheldon asked the actor Peter Carroll one day: 'Should I apply to NIDA [Australia's National Institute for Dramatic Art]?' Carroll thought about the question and advised Sheldon not to bother. 'You wouldn't cope with them. And they wouldn't cope with you', he said with conviction. It was a relief to Sheldon to hear Carroll confirm his own thoughts. Sheldon knew that he would find it difficult to endure the 'breaking down' of student actors 'to rebuild them in a different image' that he believed would be the aim at NIDA, and feared that he might not survive it. He would continue as before, learning from directors and other actors during rehearsals and bringing to each new role the 'concentrated tenacity' that Brisbane herself observed in his work, early in his career<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Writing in her column 'Round Up 1977', published in *Theatre Australia* in February 1978, Brisbane noted Sheldon's 'concentrated tenacity' as Ivan in *Inner Voices*, stating that this role by Sheldon was one of the 'performances I look back on with greatest affection' (reprinted in [12], p. 276).

In the first production presented by the fledgling Hunter Valley Theatre Company, Sheldon played the comic entertainer in John Romeril's radical new play, *The Floating World*. The play is now regarded as an Australian masterpiece, with its incisive exploration of the long shadow of the war in the Pacific, its haunting satire and its quirky vaudeville elements. The action takes place on a 'Women's Weekly [Australian Magazine] Cherry Blossom Cruise' to Japan. Sheldon appeared in the role of the ship's comic, inside one of two large rotating funnels on stage playing a drum set. After each of his jokes, he played a tune on the drums. It was an extraordinary production that enraged some audiences. In Muswellbrook, some audience members were so shocked by the play that they walked out, demanding their money back<sup>4</sup>. Others found the raw insights into Australian xenophobia startling, and admired the portrayal of delusion triggered in the main character, Les (played by Michael Rolfe), recalling wartime memories.

Sheldon appeared in a range of roles after the Romeril play, cast by Terence Clarke as: Tom in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*; the young boy Alan in *Equus*; and in other plays such as Michael Boddy's *Hamlet on Ice*, Barry Oakley's *Bedfellows* and John O'Donoghue's *A Happy and Holy Occasion*. It was a productive year for him as a member of an ensemble; he shared a house in Newcastle with two of the other company members, Robert Alexander and Kerry Walker. Clarke was always a supportive, encouraging director who enjoyed rehearsals and laughed a lot. 'He was full of character ideas for all of us', Sheldon said. For Clarke, however, it was important for actors to follow their instincts and he would respond well to the actors' inventive interpretation of a line or the addition of a piece of business. It felt safe and joyful to be in the rehearsal room with him. In Sheldon's view, Clarke was and is an accomplished actor himself and inspired others to want to please him. Clarke, like John Bell, shepherded, bolstered and supported the actors, giving them freedom to discover a character and a role, without denting their confidence as they experimented. Sheldon had rich opportunities to play a range of roles and stressed in his interview that it was these directors 'who taught me...they really taught me to act'.

## 6. From Comedy to Robert Helpmann's *Dracula*

In a production of Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1977), Sheldon realised that he had learned a great deal as a child watching the way comedy worked in the studio of *In Melbourne Tonight* and other comedy acts on stage and television. Johnny Lockwood said to Sheldon, 'You're my rock, you're the only person I can trust on this stage'. He was referring to Sheldon's dependable capacity to play what is termed the 'straight man' in comic performance—a role Sheldon had imprinted on him from his early experiences of variety and vaudeville routines. He knew how important the 'straight man' is for the 'funny man'. The early lessons of watching comedy had paid off for Sheldon, who has experienced other productions in which that discipline and trust between actors broke down because they compete to be funny, and all balance is lost between comic characters and their foils.

Later Sheldon put his finely honed 'straight man' to good use in *Comedy of Errors* (1978), opposite Drew Forsythe. The trust and the comic effect were achieved. Nick Enright wrote the character of Florindo for Sheldon, as a foil to the comic character in the significant and hugely popular musical adaptation of *The Venetian Twins* (1979). Again Sheldon played opposite Drew Forsythe (Tonino and Zanetto). Julian Meyrick described Sheldon and Tony Taylor in the cast as 'musical theatre *Wunderkinder*' in this historically significant production ([14], p. 163).

In 1978, Sir Robert Helpmann cast Sheldon in *Dracula*. Everyone in the production was instructed to arrive at the first rehearsal knowing his or her part. On the fourth day of rehearsals, the entire show was run. Sheldon recalls that 'all of the blocking happened at lightning speed'. For the next three weeks, the cast ran the show twice a day. Helpmann watched in silence, never uttering any comments

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with author, 2 June 2015 [13].

to the cast. Perhaps this was a director who assumed that his cast knew how to act. For Sheldon, it was once the show opened and the season lengthened that he found a problem, because it was difficult to rein in his character's performance, which was melodramatic and yet comic. This was particularly challenging, as his performance seemed to grow uncontrollably. There was no intervention and the director was not with the production. Sheldon struggled because he did not know how to maintain the character without becoming ridiculous. In hindsight, he acknowledges that he became grotesque. Several months into the season, Helpmann came to see the show and afterwards—in front of the entire cast—looked at Sheldon and said quizzically, 'And what are you doing?' Helpmann reflected back the character. It was humiliating but it hit home. Immediately Sheldon reined in his emotional performance, and he never forgot that lesson. He believes this necessary curbing of a character from getting more expansive is only learned through experience of working in long runs, and cannot be taught. But this also calls into question the idea that a production can simply run and run without re-rehearsal or intervention and feedback.

Later on in his career, when Sheldon was playing Bernadette in the long-running stage adaptation of *Priscilla*, each night before curtain he consciously ran through in his head a list of Simon Phillips' notes from rehearsals. 'It saved me', he explained, continuing about the importance of that discipline of recalling notes regularly, and maintaining restraint in performing a character over long seasons.

### 7. Simon Phillips and *Priscilla*

There can be a personal difficulty when actors are cast to type, and particularly in a role that is close to personal experience without sufficient guidance. Yet this casting can also offer an actor the chance to bring considerable emotional insight to the acting of a role. If the problem of typecasting worried Sheldon as a young, emerging actor, his reservations about continuously playing the same kind of character returned later in his career. After his extraordinary success playing Arnold Beckoff, the family-minded Jewish drag queen in the landmark American musical play, Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1983–84), he was offered many such roles. He worried about the fact that he had found himself back in musical theatre. He appeared in several musicals, and then with relief returned to spoken word theatre to play with a large cast in a play called *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1994), written by the American Wendy Wasserstein. The play explores the lives of three middle-aged, Jewish-American sisters during a family reunion in London. The cast included Ron Challinor, Judi Farr, Max Gillies, Genevieve Picot, Jacki Weaver and a new, young actor called Rachel Griffiths.

Therefore Sheldon reluctantly agreed to play the character De Bris in *The Producers* (2005), once more worried about playing another flamboyant, queer male, concerned that he would not be offered any 'serious' roles in spoken word theatre again if he continued in the musical theatre. Sheldon went on to win a Helpmann Award—the top awards in Australia—for his performance as De Bris (Best Male Actor in a Supporting Role). In spite of this recognition, he had reservations about participating in a 10-day workshop at the Melbourne Theatre Company in preparation for a musical adaptation of the cinematic *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2006) for the stage. However, the experience of the workshop with Simon Phillips transformed his view. Phillips appreciated Sheldon's suggestions for script changes, welcoming his contributions, and Sheldon and Phillips developed a rapport during the 10 days and discussed many of the aesthetic decisions for the stage musical. When Sheldon was offered the lead role of Bernadette some months later, he slipped into the rehearsal period easily. Phillips was sensitive to the performers and he gave them helpful signposts. For example, he cautioned Sheldon in the role of Bernadette: 'Don't forget you're a lady', he said whenever Sheldon was too crude, strident or manly in movement or intonation. Most importantly, the director and other creative team members supported Sheldon's interpretation of the role. He modelled the character on female impersonators he had known. Sheldon recalled the personalities of some of the members of the Les Girls troupe—who enjoyed a glamorous lifestyle and were extroverted and amusing people—that he had known as a young person because they always came to Toni Lamond's shows. For him, it was important to embody that "'old school" star glamour' that he had observed, in his character Bernadette,

who imbibed it 'as a child watching MGM movies'. The designer Lizzie Gardiner listened carefully to Sheldon's ideas and said, 'I'm going to make you look like Rita Hayworth'. No doubt it was this attention to a highly respected actor's interpretation of character by the director and the designer that allowed the actor to excel. In 2011, Sheldon was nominated for a Tony Award in the USA for this role in the Broadway production in New York.

## 8. Conclusions

In the Australian production of *Priscilla*, Sheldon's sense of 'connection and enfranchisement'—to draw on Terence Crawford's term—enabled him to succeed and flourish. Over the years, he has struggled with typecasting, boundary blurring of the personal and the character, alienation—in Crawford's special sense of the term—not to mention trauma. His powerful experience of connection, both creative and social, that is at the heart of the theatrical enterprise as Crawford describes it, has always been the motivation and condition of Sheldon's sense of achievement. Like all actors, his career has had peaks and troughs, and he has overcome considerable obstacles.

Sheldon learned to act through working with directors and actors and through his own assisted study of other actors. He firmly believes in using techniques from different training methods, and has learned lessons from specific directors, from other actors and from his own mistakes. His physical agility on the stage, economy of movement, vocal and dancing talents, and the overall warmth of his acting are special strengths that developed over many years. He is dedicated to the ideals of ensemble acting, although he has only experienced membership of an ensemble once in his career when he was a member of the Hunter Valley Theatre Company. Sheldon excelled in the musical and the spoken word theatre, and has appeared in works that bring high art and popular cultural forms together. His success and perseverance as a performer reveal some of the dimensions of the phenomenon of training on the job for actors in Australia, and its complex dynamics in the ecology of theatre over almost half a century.

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