

Theatre of dreams

A “pearl-diver” of the unconscious, playwright Jenny Kemp brings our inner worlds to the stage.

Story by Nikki Barrowclough

The telephone number in Poland rings and rings but Barrie Kosky doesn't answer, nobody answers, the ringing tone becomes more and more haphazard until finally the line disconnects, leaving only a faint rushing sound. like wind gusting through a forest.

In Melbourne, Jenny Kemp's phone rings several times in quick succession on the table behind us. The click of the answering machine is a comfort.

“A slim figure huddled in an overcoat over a tiny radiator.” This was written 10 years ago in one of the few articles about her, provoking a sense of melancholy in this interviewer - although the feeling may have arisen because of a personal memory of Poland which re-surfaced while trying to find Kosky.

The point of including this in an article about Kemp - the memory was of a corridor in a Warsaw building, echoing to the ringing of unseen telephones is that it's exactly the kind of scene she might have written herself.

Kemp is one of this country's most original playwrights and theatre directors, highly respected by her peers in theatre circles outside the mainstream. She is not famous. She certainly isn't prolific. But she has a growing hand of admirers, led by Kosky, the outspoken director of the 1996 Adelaide Festival.



Kemp's work is image-rich, ambiguous Jungian, obsessed with dreams and drawn to such themes as "the landscape of the psyche" and the relationship between everyday life and what Kemp calls the "interior" world.

The extent to which her work is visually oriented can be seen in the way she explores links between her own ideas and particular works of art. For *Call of the Wild*, one of her most successful productions, written in 1998 about "an uneasy woman trapped physically, emotionally, sexually and imaginatively". Kemp used images from the paintings of Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux, including his pale, bare-breasted women.

She resists being linked in any deeper way with the surrealists, but her work brings to mind something Andre Breton once said: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality."

Paintings crowd the wall of Kemp's roomy apartment, five minutes' walk from the cafes at the beach end of St Kilda. It's mainly in her apartment that she finished working on *The Black Sequin Dress* - the play that Kosky asked her to devise for the Adelaide Festival, and the only piece of theatre he has commissioned.

Kemp sometimes goes to a nearby location to write. She introduces the information a little nervously at the end of our conversation - suspecting (correctly) that her interviewer will like the extra detail and the "colour" it provides. A few days later, she telephones and asks if its name can be left out explaining that going there "is a private ritual".

This story tells much about Kemp. An intensely private woman in her 40s. She's disconcerted when the interview turns briefly to her domestic life. Her partner is also a playwright, and they have an 11-year-old son. Kemp refers to her relationship only once, when she says that before writing the play *Good Night Sweet Dreams*, performed at Melbourne's Anthill Theatre in 1986, she and her partner recorded their dreams for a year.

She is almost equally reserved when she speaks about her work. An outsider, unaware of the nature of her plays, would certainly not suspect their image-rich content.

It takes a while to realise that this holding back makes sense - reflecting the sort of introspection that must go into her work. It would be more curious to discover that Kemp was an open, chatty, uncomplicated woman, with no desire to keep some areas to herself (although both Barrie Kosky and Elizabeth Drake, with whom she directed *Call of the Wild*, mention her quirky sense of humour).

Len Radic, a longstanding theatre critic for *The Age*, also points out that it's not surprising Kemp doesn't intellectualise about her work, given that it is so visually based. Five years ago in a review of *Call of the Wild*, which was a hit at Melbourne's 1989 Spoleto Festival (now the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts), critic Paul McGillick wrote in *The Australian Financial Review*, "Kemp's theatre is a theatre of dreams. Her images strike with unexpected power. The logic is the logic of the unconscious without any need to explain itself

...[Her] aspirations bring to mind a comment, all those years ago, by Stanislavsky: 'Realism and depicting the way of life have outlived their age. The time has come to stage the unreal. Not life itself, as it occurs in reality, but rather life as it is perceived in fantasies and visions at moments of lofty emotions, to create moods that carry over to the public unconsciously.'

THE PUZZLING thing about Kemp is the way she speaks in the beginning, at least, in a spare, technical fashion about her work, as if she's an engineer, or a mechanic. Barrie Kosky, who told a journalist two years ago that "the notion that theatre should be real is ridiculous: it should be in a dream state, in the world of the imagination, the fantastical, the unexplained and the inexplicable", says Kemp will never be the kind of playwright who spins "great rhapsodies" about her work.

"She tends to be, not guarded, but you can see a reluctance to discuss her ideas. Jenny's world is such an interior world that to talk about it - there's an unease with that." Kosky is voluble about the fact that not one of Kemp's works has been performed at the Adelaide Festival, commenting at one point. "It is to me disgusting and shameful that Jenny's work is not more well known. When you see her work, you feel you are entering her mind or into her dreams, which is a fantastic starting point for anyone's work on stage. It's extremely iconoclastic and personal."

When Kemp is asked about *The Black Sequin Dress*, there's a slight pause. "Well ... there are a number of layers in there," she replies. "One layer is a woman who's slightly older - she might be in her 40s - who goes to a nightclub in a black sequin dress, and she hasn't been to a nightclub for a long time. She has to walk across a very shiny floor in the nightclub, and she's a little bit uneasy: she has a moment of indecision and slips and falls. And a waiter comes and helps her across to her table. Now, on one level, that is what the play is about. But the falling itself becomes synonymous with her psychic state. The nightclub becomes the underworld. In a way, in the falling, what gets examined is the Gestalt of who she is.

"There are various other layers." Kemp adds. "There's an earlier trauma in childhood, and this is linked up with the moment of waking from a

dream. There's also a train journey ... In a way. I don't want the audience to decide what is the actual reality.

"I've got some stuff written here", She continues, ploughing through the paperwork on her table, "which is, that the premise of the play is that ordinary actions have extraordinary resonances. All the woman does is walk into the nightclub and slip and fall. But there are extraordinary dimensions to the fall. What's operating is memory, dream, desire, fantasy, myth. There's a sort of mutability."

Asked if some of the images in *The Black Sequin Dress* came from something more concrete, Kemp replies. "I remember coming home [as a child and seeing my mother lying on the kitchen floor. My mother had fainted - it was a hot day. So, in a way. I've taken that moment and extended it."

KEMP'S WORK is often described as experimental theatre, although she grimaces at the expression. "Very often, theatre is dealing with societal concerns. I suppose I feel that the danger - and it's why I'm not very satisfied with the theatre that exists - is that it doesn't offer something new. It often presents our known structures and offers a critique to them, but in presenting these structures. I often feel they're getting reinforced.

"It isn't that I want to focus on the inner world, I actually want to focus on the relationship between the two. In most of my work there are the two elements to do with the everyday world and the inner world. I'd like to think that they're both ordinary, that they're both part of our living. But I don't think the relationship between the two is often focused on in theatre so much,"

Kemp's audiences must wait for her work. She is not prolific, and says she needs "a long gestation period". She says she is "awed" by people who tell her they have dozens of projects on the boil. Between 1977 and 1994, she wrote six plays, three of them in 1979: *The Point Isn't To Tell You*, *Sheila Alone*, and *Jealousy Or The Affair*.

Len Radic, commenting that Kemp is an important figure in Australian theatre because she is so painstaking, adds, "There's a lot of interest in her work when it finally appears."

Kemp says, "What I like to do is write for a long time without an end product in mind, and without any particular pressure. In a way, what I'm searching for is a pressure-point or a little hit of grit inside myself. I write myself into a place of interest. What I might do is keep a notebook for a long time, and when I'm reading a novel, or something non-fiction, when something really feels alive to me, I take notes. Then gradually I get into a flow of writing and that can go on for quite a long time."



From left: *Call of the Wild* - Margaret Mills, Victoria Eagger, Ruth Shoenheimer and Margaret Cameron; *The White Hotel* Rupert Burns, Mary Sitarenos, Peter Finlay, Sue Ingleton and Steve Sculley; *Remember*, Margaret Mills, Merfyn Owen and Margaret Cameron.

For weeks? “Oh no. more like a year,” she replies, slightly startled. “And I might gradually discover what it is that I’m writing about. It’s a hit like a snowball coming downhill. An energy slowly accumulates and I get into a generative state with it.

“The idea of writing without necessarily having a preconceived idea, in a way to freefall with the writing - of course, it gives rise to its own problems. that sort of writing, because you have to sort it out afterwards,” she adds thoughtfully. “It’s like pick-up sticks. You put all your sticks down and you’ve got to read the pattern. And after about a year of writing, a really difficult task is then to go, ‘Well, what is it?’

The interesting thing about Kemp is that she started off as an actor (she attended NIDA but dropped out after a year) and spent four years working in theatre in England. returning to Melbourne in her mid 20s.

“I feel I’m a late developer,” she remarks at one point, “and I think it’s got to do with the fact that I went from being an actor to a director. And the reason I became a writer is that as a director I could never really find anything that I could fully express myself through.”

Significantly, a Kemp production which drew critical acclaim in 1983 was her adaptation and direction of *The White Hotel*, the international literary best-seller by D.M. Thomas about the experiences and psychology of a woman living in Europe before and during World War II. The most tantalising aspect of the book is the way the first half is written as if by Sigmund Freud, analysing the woman through the sexual fantasy journal she sets in a “white” hotel.

Leonard Radic comments, “She has a very strong imagistic sense, and as such she is very much part of a distinct movement in Australian theatre which is image-based rather than text-based.”

Radic believes this movement owes much to a “visual generation” brought up on films and television. But Kemp, pointing out that she didn’t watch television until she was 13, says her visual orientation began in early childhood. Her father, Roger Kemp. was an artist, and everyone in the family drew or painted.

AFTER KEMP gave up acting, she drilled into drawing and visual arts, although she never stopped missing theatre. She “returned” in 1977, after attending a number of workshops, and directed *Peer Gynt* with the Australian Performing Group. The artists she names as influences include Edvard Munch, Max Ernst, Vasili Kandinsky and Jeffrey Smart, but she stresses that it’s not the paintings themselves that inspire her writing.

‘The writing comes from inside, and then particular works become key paintings [depending] on where I’m at - and what feels resonant in relation to that material.

“I do find myself coming back to the Paul Delvaux paintings. [His images will also influence the design of *The Black Sequin Dress*. They’re a kind of landscape of the psyche. They’ve got a timeless feeling and provoke a feeling of the dream world, an inner landscape.”

Kemp adds, of using Delvaux’s images, “What actually happened was that a really tangible relationship started to build between the visual art area, and myself and the theatre. There was always something very compelling about my relationship to the visual arts, and I was able, through those paintings, to start to bring that era to bear in the theatre world. It’s got something to do with the fact that there’s a kind of remeditative relationship possible with a painting.”

When Kemp talks about “the landscape of the psyche”, it’s hard not to start thinking about her place in the Australian landscape, and her influence, as a playwright, on the Australian psyche. “In Europe, there’s a placement in the culture for fairytales and myths, and a sense of folklore and magic,” she remarks. “Our culture is very economically formulated and materialistic. There’s no sense of old culture. I was fascinated by that when I came back from Europe. I found it fascinating because apart from it making [Australia] seem like a desert, it also had a positive element which was the possibility of being able to create something new. That out of an emptiness can come something ‘other’,”

Towards the end of the interview, she gets up and takes from her bookshelves a copy of *Surrealism: Revolution by Night* (published by the National Gallery of Australia to coincide with its surrealism exhibition of 1993). She opens it up at the section where Delvaux’s paintings have been reproduced, and gazes at the work.

A few evenings later, while I’m re-reading the same chapter (“Surrealism, Freud and Psychology” by Kenneth Wach), a line leaps off the page. “The surrealists were the pearl-divers of the unconscious.” writes Wach. Then Kemp’s pearls are the plays that emerge at the surface.

Sourced from GOOD WEEKEND SEPTEMBER 16, 1995

(A Magazine supplement for The Age)