

A black and white close-up portrait of an elderly man, Robert Dessaix, with white hair and a slight smile. The background is plain white.

ROBERT DESSAIX

ARRA
CADA
BRA

*I've said it before
and I'll say it again...*

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b brio
BOOKS

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Just a word or two before we begin.

This collection of talks of mine from gala occasions, along with a few chatty but targeted pieces of journalism, brings together performances (what other word is there?) of one kind or another. Right at the end I've added a short story: it's not my usual genre, but 'A Mad Affair' is also a performance, after all, a turn, a *numéro*, about love – right at the end of everything.

The first time around these pieces were not widely heard or read. A roomful of festival-goers in Sydney or Penang or Ballarat could well have heard me hold forth on the subject of Enid Blyton, say, or kissing, it's true, and a few of my newspaper articles – my *feuilletons*, as I'm calling them – may have caught the eye of some readers of the *Byron Shire Echo* some years ago. It's not that these audiences were unappreciative, but they were limited. Nowadays a podcast can attract an audience

of tens of thousands around the globe, while I performed for the most part in more intimate spaces – these were entertainments, so to speak, for unknown friends.



Even when I was very small (grasshopperish, really, with big hazel eyes), I already longed to perform in public – to be a concert pianist, for instance (my perky ‘Rondo alla Turca’ won an eisteddfod when I was ten); or to dance (I’d seen *Red Shoes*, and had my own dancing shoes early); but especially to act a part in front of people (off I went every Saturday morning to Doris Fitton’s legendary acting classes at the Independent Theatre in North Sydney). In a word, I longed to pirouette in the limelight, some might say less generously, but it was all much more of a tangle than that. At that age I just wanted to be *on stage*.

To this day the aromas of those performances come drifting back occasionally, waking me up to my memories: the sharp smell of a polished piano; the tangy dampness of dance – indeed, of the dancing-shoes themselves, the nose-tingling earthiness of what looks so ethereal; the heady fug of a theatre – and I can evoke it now in my nostrils: sweat, dust and a muskiness like cinnamon – which still intoxicates, still unclenches me, leaving me giddy, opening me up. At one time, together with the boys next door, and possibly Jill McFadden one door further up the road (of whom more later), I wrote little playlets, which we put on for the neighbours on a stage we'd built in the backyard, but that hardly counted. What I wanted was a theatre – a stage with curtains, and wings full of secrets, and rows of seats. What other kind was there?

Now and again I went with my mother to one or two theatres in the city which had curtains, wings and tiers of seats (to the Royal, for example, and to the Tivoli, where we sat up in the gods) to see the ballet. I was transported. *The Nutcracker*, for instance, and *Pineapple Poll*, too, and *Peter and the Wolf*, were

each a burst of pleasure beyond all imagining, lighting up my tiny life, I was wild-eyed when I got home – disciplined, elegant, smooth (*halus*, they'd call it in Java, fit for a *prince*, that's the point) – and each one evoked Europe.

More exciting still, more seriously intoxicating, was serious drama – because there were words. Drama was still a dance, of course, that goes without saying – it was hardly a slice of life (or not our life, anyway) – but with words. Not Shakespeare so much, whose words were a foreign language to me, although you couldn't avoid him, but Brecht, for instance, and Arthur Miller and eventually Edward Albee. Had I even left school when we went to see *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? What on earth could I have made of it? I peered down at the actors from the gods where I sat with my mother. I just wanted to be down there on that stage, saying those words. It was the hocus-pocus of live theatre that I loved, you see, the spine-tingling abracadabra of every play – in a sense we've rather lost sight of: 'Abracadabra!', says the conjurer, and, at the moment he does, we hear without knowing it an ancient Aramaic spell *avra*

kadavra ('it will be created in my words'). Every night at the theatre is an act of creation.

At this distance, it's hard to know if I was aware how deeply odd the whole thing was in the context of a lower-middle-class suburb of Sydney just after the war. Certainly, the neighbours were rattled. (We all lived more in each other's pockets in those days, we sang around each other's pianos and noticed things.) From time to time something was said. Is that why I was eventually taken to play tennis once a week? Whatever the reason, it was a waste of time. I was hopeless at tennis. I could sprint: my legs were too short, but I moved them very fast, like a fox terrier chasing a rabbit. To this day I put my good calves down to training for school sports carnivals, but there was no need to keep doing it. Once you've given it your best shot, that's it, there will be no transforming moment. Sprinting did not giddyingly open me up for anything.

As it proved, I had no more talent for dancing or acting than I did for tennis – none. Where talent comes from is a mystery, but it is not the product of the will or even breeding. In any case, I didn't have

any. I was a third spear-carrier sort of actor, good (if hard to pick) in crowd scenes in school plays, and, while nimble enough, with high cheek bones to boot, I was too slight to be balletic. I'm tempted to say 'petite'.

What I did have a talent for doing in public, it turned out, was talking – and not only in English, as a matter of fact. I learnt to talk not just in front of an audience (teaching, for instance, or eventually to my listeners on the radio), but also on paper in various guises: as scholar, then critic, then storyteller and finally gossip. Again, what other word is there?

Now, gossiping has a bad name. 'That's just gossip' people might say, meaning that the story you've just told is probably a lie, perfumed with malice. Indeed, at Borobudur in Central Java, the layered Buddhist monument modelling the cosmos, gossiping turns up on the lowest level, the Kamadhatu, which are the galleries of depraved desire and unbridled appetite, along with drunkenness, copulation and, intriguingly, massages. In his Epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul seems to lump gossip in with 'all manner of unrighteousness', including murder, but it may be

a dodgy translation from the Greek. However, gossip as I think of it does not by any means always entail slander or skulduggery.

In daily life, everyone gossips, everyone suspects that more is going on than they're being told and so enjoys speculating about what that might be. For me, gossip is a kind of choreographed chatting (not just speaking) that goes beyond hard facts. Religious discourse also goes beyond hard facts, of course – what were the reports of the resurrection and the virgin birth, for instance, if not gossip, indeed of a fairly common kind at the time: 2000 years ago many a frightened woman put her pregnancy down to an immaculate conception – but religion is the sort of gossip that takes itself very seriously indeed. For all the singing and dancing and men parading in sumptuous finery, it doesn't delight as over-the-back-fence gossip does in its conjectures about what is hidden. From my point of view, good gossip, as I once tried to explain it, 'serves a comedic purpose in the drama of our lives. It's an impudent, disruptive game with appearances ...'¹ And that's what a performance is.

In moving over time from performing as a teacher in front of students studying Russian to gossiping every week about books on national radio, I actually had a sense of coming into my own at last, not of sliding into the abyss of scandalmongering. I took more and more pleasure in going beyond the rehearsal of facts (which others, notably scientists and historians, already did so well). At root what I did while an audience listened was muse aloud – with more panache, I hope, than I could act with – on what might be behind appearances (of genius, everydayness, virtue, scholarship – any number of things). You listened to me in those days as much for *how* I said things as for *what* I said. In later years, hitting my stride, I kept on gossiping in festival tents and town halls in all sorts of far-flung places from Vancouver to Vladivostok. After a few years, as I began to write memoirs and novels, the gossiping became a sort of buttonholing, a kind of waylaying of the reader in order to create myriad selves – for me and the reader. To be honest, my novels were largely memoirs and the memories in these memoirs often misremembered.



There is a slight difference between gossiping on a stage at festivals or on the radio and gossiping in writing, as you might notice reading the pieces in this collection. If a live audience is watching you on a rostrum, you have intonation and gesticulation to throw into the mix – you don't have to find the right word for everything immediately, as you generally do on the page. You can take your time in a talk on the stage, digress, loop around, do a real Proust if you want with your sentences, without losing a single listener: the rise and fall of your voice, the loudness and softness, the pacing, the gestures all hold the audience in step with you. When you write articles or books, however, and even in the transcriptions in this collection, although the rhythms and intonations can be guessed at (I hope the brackets and dashes help here), the writer needs to be better behaved. The tone may sometimes even verge on the prim, but I hope it never sounds throttled. I would

like to think there was always an edge to the voice you hear in your head.

On the other hand, what you *can* do on the page is create the illusion that what you're saying is for *this* reader – *you* – and nobody else. In fact, a lack of resolution (nothing *too* meandering, but unresolved is acceptable) can even be an advantage in a written piece, attaching your reader even more closely to you lest you both end up lost. The pleasure now lies in the intimacy of the conversation itself. 'I felt as if you were talking to *me*,' readers remark occasionally. I wasn't, of course, I've never met them before in my life, but I'm delighted that a reader might think so.

One great advantage of believing in truth (as I do) is that you can lie and gossip with gay abandon, you can retell your truth, say it backwards, shout it, whisper it, have your way with it, imagine it in French. In fact, you can't speak at all unless you do believe in truth, all you can do is make noise. If you don't believe anything objectively exists, you can't even speak to denounce rumours of its existence. As the philosopher Jeff Malpas puts it, there is 'always a multiplicity of possible ways of speaking the truth,

although there is no *a priori* guarantee that our speaking is, on any particular occasion, true'. Malpas cites Foucault to back up his argument, something I would usually avoid doing. The task of speaking the truth, this overly quoted Frenchman averred, 'is an infinite labour: to respect it in its complexity is an obligation that no power can afford to short-change, unless it would impose the silence of slavery.' Well put. This is an ideal credo for any writer, indeed any creative artist. You look, you listen, you smell the air, and then you write about what you've experienced in whatever way takes your fancy.

There is, by the way, an occasional repetition amongst these pieces given how pivotal they've been in turning me into who I am. Enid Blyton and Lane Cove, for instance, were bound to pop up more than once, not to mention sex and God. Besides, when you write for such disparate audiences you're bound to repeat yourself from time to time. Who in Ballarat or Ubud, I thought to myself, could have heard what I'd said in Byron Bay? What readers of the *Byron Shire Echo* would remember something I'd written for the *Monthly*? I hope the few repetitions that remain here

are forgivable. Now and again I felt that if I removed a remark I'd made earlier, the narrative would fall apart, and so I left it.



Let's turn first to a handful of the talks I've given over the past few years. In reading the talks, you will have to imagine the rising and falling of my voice as I chat on about Sanskrit or where babies come from, you will have to conjure up in your mind the quality of the vowels, the erectness of my stance (like rhubarb after rain) and my overactive hands, or else some of the ragged phrasing will drive you to distraction. In the end, hearing me speak will be up to you.

Talks, by the way, even short ones, are extraordinarily demanding to write – at least the way I do them. I always want the audience to think I'm improvising, the pages I'm holding no more than an aide-memoire, although this off-the-cuff *allegretto*

may have taken me several weeks to compose. Yet, once delivered, the whole rehearsed performance is almost instantly forgotten. Forever. It's all a bit Japanese, really – the pleasure is in the momentariness. It goes against the grain in some ways to offer readers my scripts. 'No, no,' I've often said, when asked if my thoughts on kissing or my love letter to a Collins dictionary will be printed somewhere, 'no, it won't. It was a talk, and it's over – that's it.' And so it was, and is, but it's also not – not quite. See what you think.

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