

# **Worlds Within: Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester, Henri Szeps and the Transformations of Australian Theatre**

**ANNE PENDER**  
University of New England

In *Worlds Within*, Vilashini Cooppan challenges the idea that the movement of global capital acts as a homogenising force, arguing for the significance of the ‘cultural and psychic’ connections it engenders, which operate variously with, against and beyond the flow of capital (3). This is important as a way of linking our understanding of individual lives to national life. Australian literature and particularly Australian theatre are located in and connected to world literature in many important and unexplored ways. Yet some significant contributions to this placement, this series of connections with world literature and theatre, are as yet undocumented. This essay seeks to address a gap in the understanding of modern theatre in Australia and its direct connections with European and American theatre. It explores the ways in which the actors Hayes Gordon (1920–1999), Zika Nester (1928–2014) and Henri Szeps (born 1943) lived out, and in Szeps’s case continue to live out, what Cooppan calls ‘twinned identifications and doubled dreams’ (4). Cooppan does not accept that globalisation is a ‘heterogenising’ force in which national cultures are transcended, instead charting a ‘politics of relationality’ in which the national and the global are dual ideas held in balance though subject to change (4). This is a useful idea for understanding any nation, including Australia.

The contribution of Gordon, Nester and Szeps to ‘national culture’ in its most expansive and ideal form in Australia is immense. Theirs is a socially radical and highly ethical contribution inspired by internationalist ideals. It derives primarily from their training in the techniques of Stanislavsky as interpreted by Hayes Gordon. These actors contributed to the development of the most successful independent theatre in Australia, the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney. Each of the actors also contributed to the development of a strong and vital national theatre in Australia.

A politics of relationality that transcends the national and the global is particularly relevant to these three actors because they have dedicated their lives to using the acting techniques of Stanislavsky, a system of acting in which relationality is central. At its core this relationality refers to an understanding of one’s own life, emotions and feelings, one’s own psyche, and the lives of others, through acting. The social context for this relational acting embodies a cultural ideal of creating a theatre for the people irrespective of their income or class. This ideal infused the work of the Ensemble Theatre from its inception, connecting Australian theatre to theatre in both Russia and the United States.

Before analysing the work of Gordon, Nester and Szeps it is important to clarify the framing histories of the nation that help us to understand their lives. Cooppan’s analysis of nations and the effects of global flows of capital, people and ideas is relevant to Australia. There is also a parallel analysis of postwar Australia that is useful in understanding the work of actors and writers, and informs national culture to this day. In short, Australia may usefully be understood as having entered a postimperial period of history following World War 2. This ‘stage’ of history is not over.

Historian Stuart Ward describes both Australia and Britain as nations forced to reinvent themselves ‘in the light of the fading certainties of the imperial world’ (1). The designation of Australia as postimperial was put forward by another historian, Jim Davidson, who explains the phenomenon of the ‘de-dominionisation’ of Australia, a term that refers to the experience of decline in empire in former British colonies. Davidson suggested that this phenomenon of de-dominionisation had a massive impact on many aspects of life and affected Australian society in numerous ways (141).

It is still a compelling analysis. Davidson does not ignore the changes brought about in Australia as a result of European immigration at this time. Nor does he underplay the effect of the American alliance and the many social changes of the period. However he articulates the view that modern Australia was remaking itself as a result of the particular stresses on ‘the institutions and social and political assumptions, which served us quite satisfactorily in the past’ (141).

The significance of Davidson’s analysis here is that Australia was remaking itself and that the influence of Britain on every sphere of life, including the theatre, began to wane. After the war the nation can be seen much more vividly as ‘the product of moving modes,’ to borrow Cooppan’s phrase (10). Australia was no longer a mere dominion and was open to a range of European and American influences. Hayes Gordon and Zika Nester brought a vision of the theatre to Australia that marked a break with British theatre traditions and introduced the world of Stanislavsky to the Australian theatre. Hayes Gordon brought a peculiarly American approach to Stanislavsky. His actor training workshops were unique at the time in Australia (Tait 84).<sup>1</sup>

Cooppan’s ‘politics of relationality’ is particularly relevant to the three actors, Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester and Henri Szeps, and all of the changes in Australia noted by Davidson in his landmark essay affected the theatre that they knew in the 1950s. Both Nester and Szeps were immigrants of European origin: Gordon was of Russian and Polish descent; Nester was Russian and Szeps’s parents were Polish. Hayes Gordon was an American and at the time he started teaching acting in Sydney, Australian theatre was heavily influenced by British styles and models but was in a state of flux that involved throwing off those modes.

Hayes Gordon’s teaching of Stanislavsky-inspired techniques focused on the actor’s capacity to draw on the world within himself or herself in order to feel the emotions of a character rather than to simulate them. As Szeps sets out in his book on comic timing and acting, using the Method, actors examine different elements of behaviour: Actions, Objects of Actions, Motivations and Adjustments (27). He explains that Adjustments are the unconscious elements of our behaviour. Stanislavsky teaches actors to convey the ‘inner life of the character’ externally (5). In other words the worlds within become exteriorised for an audience.

The training with Hayes Gordon enabled Nester and Szeps to make massive personal transformations as young actors, and in turn to transform theatre in Australia in radical and dynamic ways. Zika Nester brought a direct connection to Stanislavsky, which is explored below. The experiences of these three migrants, Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester and Henri Szeps, the texts they produced, their influence on generations of actors and audiences, and their rich contribution to theatre in Australia over half a century demonstrate a complex relationship between national and international theatre, which was driven by effort, imagination and talent. The achievements of Nester and Szeps were inspired by Hayes Gordon’s ethos of theatre and

actor training, an ethos that is focused on serving the community, on theatre that is fully independent, genuinely collaborative and informed by the teachings of Stanislavsky.

### Hayes Gordon and the Creation of the Ensemble Theatre

When Hayes Gordon arrived in Australia in 1952, Australian theatre was beginning to change. Until this period Australian actors were a minority on stage, although there were some pockets of activity in various small theatres in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities. Radio provided part-time employment for many actors. However, actors who had trained and worked in Britain dominated the industry until the 1950s. In Sydney there were several small theatres operating: the Independent Theatre in North Sydney, the New Theatre and the Phillip Street Theatre. Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre offered a range of plays including the premiere of Sumner Locke Elliott's seminal play *Rusty Bugles* in 1948, and a travelling production of *Waiting for Godot* with Barry Humphries and Peter O'Shaughnessy in 1958. The New Theatre offered a program of radical plays—its original mission was to use theatre as a weapon against capitalism. It had been operating since 1932 and during the 1950s presented a range of productions that included political plays, revues, musicals and children's plays. The Phillip Street Theatre, under the direction of Scotsman Bill Orr and his partner Eric Duckworth, presented intimate revue to a fashionable crowd. It was successful commercially and presented light revue modelled on British revue styles.

In Melbourne, John Sumner, fresh from the West End, set up a small professional theatre company in 1952 called the Union Theatre Repertory Company, along the lines of English repertory theatre, and it was here in 1955 that Ray Lawler's play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, premiered. The boundaries between amateur and professional theatre were blurry, but the theatre gradually became more professional as a result of these small theatres. There were few opportunities for actors to study however, other than to go to the UK, which many did, or to gain tuition privately. This situation changed when the National Institute for Dramatic Art opened its doors in Sydney in 1959.

A new generation of actors began working in Australia in this period in the small theatres. It is this generation who came to maturity in the 1950s, and the next, who came to maturity in the 1960s (the so called New Wave), who have contributed to the dynamic, contemporary world of Australian theatre, television and film. Hayes Gordon was a driver of this change and had a major impact on the first generation of actors, as an actor, actor trainer, director, artistic director and theatre manager. In spite of his major contribution to theatre in Australia little scholarship exists on the life and work of this figure.<sup>2</sup>

Hayes Gordon grew up in Boston, the only child of working-class parents who were immigrants to the United States. His father Sam was born in Russia and his mother Bertha spoke Polish but her son never knew exactly where she grew up or anything of his extended family on either side (Durrant 3). As a young man he learned singing, magic tricks and how to run the sound and lighting systems of a small theatre. He trained as a pharmacist and moved to New York in 1941. Because of his responsibilities supporting his mother he was not drafted into the army. By day he worked as a pharmacist and in the evenings played in musicals, including in the Broadway premiere of *Oklahoma* in 1943. In that year he was drafted into the air force but his career on the stage continued during his service years. He began classes with Sanford Meisner, and appeared in the stage and film versions of *Winged Victory* (1944 and 1945). After the war Hayes Gordon appeared in *Brigadoon* (1947) and persuaded Cheryl Crawford to offer the actors in the cast significant improvements in their

conditions (Durrant 51). These included acting lessons from Lee Strasberg who had been taught by Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre. Under Strasberg, Hayes Gordon learned the techniques of acting of the Moscow Art Theatre. Strasberg had been the director of the Group Theatre, which he had founded with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford. Later Strasberg became the principal instructor at the Actors Studio. Hayes Gordon relished the opportunity to learn from Strasberg's acting and directing courses, and ultimately drew on a variety of techniques and philosophies of the teachers with whom he studied (Hughes). Gordon also worked with the actor Howard Da Silva and appeared in one of the earliest American soap operas on television, entitled *The Fashion Story*, which screened in 1948 and 1949 (Durrant 63).

In his short biography of Hayes Gordon, Lawrence Durrant states that Gordon was not a member of the Communist Party of the USA (73). Gordon worked as a vocalist for CBS radio in 1951, after being dropped from the cast of *Carousel* because his name appeared in *Red Networks*, and he was subsequently overlooked for work in other productions. He refused to sign what was known as 'the loyalty oath' at Columbia Broadcasting, a declaration that he had never been a member of the Communist Party. He also refused to list names of any of his associates who had been members of the party (Durrant 73; Hughes). He was certainly sympathetic to some elements of Communist ideology, and these informed his outlook for the rest of his life. Gordon contributed to a campaign for the desegregation of the National Theatre in Washington and supported various other political causes in small ways, such as the Spanish Refugee Relief. He was also an active member of Equity (Durrant 74; Hughes). Gordon was blacklisted as a 'red' and lost many opportunities, jobs and friends as a result. Unemployed because of this blacklisting, he accepted a role in *Kiss Me Kate* on a tour of Australia on behalf of J.C. Williamson Limited in 1952. He remained in Australia for the rest of his life.

In 1956 Hayes Gordon began teaching acting to small groups in a rented hall and then in his own small flat in North Sydney. Patricia Hill, Clarissa Kaye, Lorraine Bayly, Reg Livermore, Max Cullen, Jon Ewing, Tony Wickert, Sophie Krantz and Don Reid were some of the earliest students to take advantage of this opportunity. Two years later the group with no name performed a series of 'one-act studies' by Tennessee Williams: *Variations on Similar Themes*, to an audience of invited guests. On 11 May 1958 they established a theatre company. A document written by hand at the time lists Hayes Gordon at the top of the page as Proprietor and Director, Lorraine Bayly as Business Manager, and Noel Pelly as Public Relations Officer. Under their names, Members are listed: Lorraine Bayly, Kevin Dalton, Jon Ewing, Des Freeman, Ann Granger, Patricia Hill, Clarissa Kaye, Sophie Krantz, Robin Lawlor, Reginald Livermore, Lew Luton, Don Newland, Tony Wickert. Associate Members' names follow: Ray Bennett, Don Reid, Wayne Polzin.<sup>3</sup>

The company ran as a cooperative venture with two-thirds of any profits to be distributed to the company and the remainder to be shared equally among members (Durrant 111). For the first twenty years they performed in the round, and there was no star system. For many years at the Ensemble the actors did not take a bow after the performances, preferring to leave the audience with the emotions of the play and its world rather than with the actors appearing as themselves (Pender Interview with Zika Nester). The worlds within took precedence over the spectacle—the very opposite of Brechtian acting in which the players draw attention to process and craft so that the audience never forgets they are watching drama. Eventually Hayes Gordon persuaded Nester and others that it was important to allow the audience to

express their appreciation for the actors, with the actors standing on stage (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).

Gordon's teaching of Method acting techniques drew on his own understanding of Stanislavsky through Meisner, Strasberg and others. It was revolutionary for many local actors who were more accustomed to obeying a director and being told what to do on stage and how to do it. According to Zika Nester Hayes Gordon 'asked us questions . . . it wasn't a didactic way of teaching . . . we were there for the audience . . . he was such an idealist . . .' (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).

By 1970 Hayes Gordon was in demand as an actor and director. In that year he directed a re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing in 1770, at Kurnell, in front of an audience of some 50,000, and in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip. The event, for which Hayes had spent many weeks preparing, was interrupted by some noisy university students, who upstaged the actors, and there were problems with the sound system (Curran and Ward 206). Yet Hayes Gordon, the once blacklisted American director of this strange pageant, who had arrived in Australia with no money and his reputation in the US smeared, had by this time achieved considerable success as a performer, actor trainer and theatre director. The invitation to direct the re-enactment on this historic occasion demonstrates that he had also secured insider status in his adopted country. Gordon brought his talent as a performer, his experience of various acting teachers and Broadway musical theatre as well as a fierce sense of independence as an artist to his new life in Australia, and into the lives of many actors who went on to make a major contribution to theatre in Australia. One of these actors was Zika Nester.

### **Zika Nester**

When Zika Nester arrived in Australia in 1953 she looked forward to furthering her career as a concert pianist. Born in Harbin, China in 1928 to Russian parents, Nester played with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra at the age of 11. She spoke and read Russian fluently. In spite of her father, Mikhail Goldberg's disapproval, she also took acting lessons from theatre director and actor Zoya Arkhadava Prybiskava (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).<sup>4</sup> Nester's teacher had been a student of Stanislavsky and took the young girl under her wing, helped her to develop as an actor, and encouraged her to perform on stage in Shanghai. But her parents steered her towards a career as a concert pianist.

Zika and her husband Dimitry struggled to make a living when they first moved to Sydney, having been prevented from taking any money out of China. Nester taught piano to children and attempted to break in to the concert scene in Sydney. Romola Constantino told her that her concert appearances kept her in stockings (Pender, interview with Zika Nester). This did not dampen her hopes. But it was Nester's appointment with Eugene Goossens that forced her to reconsider her career plans:

. . . he asked me to play for him, and I asked him what he wanted me to play. To cut a long story short I ended up playing a whole concert for him. And I was getting quite worried because he kept saying, 'What else can you play?'—Doesn't he like anything? Were the people in Shanghai so wrong? Was I just hopeless? And then I remember he got up—and he was a big man, and there's little me. And he comes towards me, and I thought this big bear of a man, is he going to strangle me or what? And he put his paws on my shoulders, and now

his voice is still ringing in my ears, and he said ‘What on earth possessed you to come to this godforsaken country? You should be in Carnegie Hall, girl.’  
(Pender, interview with Zika Nester)

Nester saw Hayes Gordon perform in *Kismet* and immediately made up her mind to join his North Sydney acting classes. It was to be the beginning of her life-long association with Gordon, the Ensemble Theatre and the acting school they developed together. The acting lessons were gruelling, reducing the student actors to tears on many occasions. Moreover Hayes Gordon sent many of the young actors to a psychiatrist. Max Cullen and Henri Szeps also testify to the rigour and testing qualities of the training (Pender, interviews with Max Cullen and Henri Szeps).

Nester, who was fluent in Russian and had studied Stanislavsky’s many texts, argued with Hayes Gordon about his approach and his interpretation of the Method. But she persisted with his classes and understood that his approach to the Method was a mix of New York interpretations of Stanislavsky and Gordon’s own approach to training actors. Most importantly she believed all her life that the training had given her ‘real authority’ as an actor (Durrant 139; Pender, interview with Zika Nester). Nester also brought her direct knowledge of Stanislavsky, having read all of his work in the original Russian, and the intellectual heritage of the acting techniques she had learned as a teenager, to the Ensemble Theatre and later to the drama school.

It was not only the acting lessons offered by Hayes Gordon that made a revolutionary change to actor training in Australia. Once the small theatre was established in a boatshed near Neutral Bay, Hayes Gordon began offering the actors regular opportunities to perform and occasionally to direct or design. For example, Reg Livermore and Jon Ewing directed Congreve’s *The Double Dealer* in 1961 and Max Cullen designed for *The Physicists* in 1963 (Burfitt 61–62). The selection of plays in the first few years offered a challenge to performers, actors and the theatre establishment of Sydney. Zika Nester appeared in a production of *The Physicists* by the Swiss dramatist Durrenmatt in the summer of 1963–64. A proponent of epic theatre, Durrenmatt was a politically active playwright and author. *The Physicists* (1962), a comedy, is an absurdist tragicomedy that questions the creation of the atom bomb and science more generally.

It was a radical and significant choice for the fledgling theatre company, reflecting Gordon’s deeply felt ‘politics of relationality.’ It set the pattern in which Gordon and his company regularly offered actors and audiences an experience of contemporary American and European drama in his program, in addition to productions of classic English plays. The commitment to contemporary plays, particularly by American and Australian playwrights continues today. *Orpheus Descending* and *Garden District* by Tennessee Williams were amongst the productions of the first few years (in 1960 and 1963 respectively), J.P. Donleavy’s *Fairy Tales of New York* dealt with race relations and Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall’s play *Billy Liar* took as its subject matter the impoverished lives of the working classes in England after the war. The Ensemble championed Australian plays in the 1970s, staging *The Ass (Heads and Tails)* by Don Mamouny, Graham Pitts and David Pross in 1975 but also maintained a commitment to staging new British and American plays.

Hayes Gordon also understood the potential of commercial theatre and did not balk at the opportunity to play Tevye in the Australian premiere of *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1967. After one performance, a visiting Russian official invited Hayes to Moscow, as a guest of the Soviet

Government, for the purpose of visiting the Moscow Art Theatre. Gordon suggested that Zika Nester go in his place given that she was fluent in Russian. In 1972, with additional funding provided by the Ensemble Theatre, actor Lorraine Bayly accompanied Nester on the trip, which turned out to be a nine-month study tour of theatre training schools all over the world, beginning with a month in the Soviet Union. At the Moscow Art Theatre Nester found the atmosphere conservative and morally rigid but some of their training regimes were extraordinary. At other breakaway theatre schools she found inspiration. Nester explained to me that the theatre was a part of life for ordinary people. Sitting on a bus one day she overheard two women who told her that they worked in a clothing factory. The women were talking about a production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* they had seen the night before at the Moscow Art Theatre. Nester recalls:

[T]hey were discussing the play in a really erudite way, as if they were members of the industry. . . . [T]hey were talking about how Andre, the Andre they had seen the previous week, was much better than the Andre they had seen last night. That's when I said 'Excuse me, I can't help overhearing what you're saying. It sounds like you go to the theatre a lot.' And she turned to me and said 'Oh no dear. We used to go a lot, but they've moved us now, and we live in [the equivalent of] housing commission flats, but outside of Moscow, so it's very difficult for us to come to the theatre often. So we only manage about twice a week now.' (Pender, interview with Zika Nester)

Nester was impressed by the knowledge of drama and theatre that these women demonstrated, and by their participation as theatregoers, as well as the ethos of theatre as belonging to everyone. Nester not only borrowed from some of the techniques she observed in the actor training in Moscow and Leningrad when she returned to Sydney but the experience of talking to workers inspired her to ensure that the Ensemble remained accessible and resonant for a broad audience, and that its acting school taught the students a code of behaviour that centred around humanitarian ideals, high ethical standards and internationalist principles. They not only taught a system of acting based on Stanislavsky but passed on a vision of theatre and society, and an enlightened politics of service to one's fellow man.

The tour also included visits to several New York acting schools including the Actors Studio and Sandy Meisner's Neighbourhood Playhouse. Every week Zika Nester wrote to Hayes Gordon describing the training methods in extensive detail, analysing the techniques and philosophies she had observed, with the aim of teasing out the most appropriate methods for the acting school they were developing in Sydney. The wealth of knowledge brought back to the drama school, in combination with Nester's own training as a young woman, allowed her to drive the work of the school over the next few decades.

The details of the genesis of the Soviet visit are not easily obtained. Durrant suggests that the Russian official was a trade union secretary 'later suspected of having KGB connections' but does not provide any more facts or clues as to the context for the Russian official's invitation (Durrant 178). According to Zika Nester he was the General Secretary of the Union of Cultural Workers of Russia (Pender, interview with Zika Nester). Hayes Gordon would not have wanted to be associated with the Soviet Union in any way that would have compromised him, especially when he had suffered so unfairly in the US during the McCarthy years. He was therefore wise to send Zika Nester and Lorraine Bayly on the study tour, waiting until the political climate in Australia was less hostile than in 1967 before taking up his invitation, and even then ensuring that the Ensemble contributed to the cost of the trip.

Zika Nester built on her studies of actor training techniques when she returned to Sydney. She drew on the range of approaches and philosophies at the various acting schools she had visited and her excitement about putting her new knowledge to work when she took up the reins again at the acting school. Nester devoted the rest of her life to the Ensemble and although she performed in plays and on television herself, she taught acting at the Ensemble studios and managed the acting school for many years until it closed its doors in 2009. Nester's influence on numerous actors through the acting school as a trainer and mentor connects those actors to the rich heritage of Stanislavsky, to some key ideals of the Moscow Art Theatre and to an ethos of citizenship and service to others in the theatre. Her own 'politics of relationality' is therefore significant in the development of theatre in Australia.

### Henri Szeps

One of Hayes Gordon's exceptional strengths as both an actor and a director that struck Zika Nester immediately was his ability to achieve both depth and humour in performance (Pender, interview with Zika Nester). This ability seems to have been developed in one of his pupils in particular: Henri Szeps. After seeing a play at the Ensemble boatshed theatre in the round, the young science student joined Hayes Gordon's acting classes. It was 1962. The following year Hayes Gordon cast Henri in *The Physicists* alongside Zika Nester, Reg Livermore and others. Szeps studied with Hayes and several years later took his teacher's advice and worked up a club act. Hayes told his pupils emphatically that they should all do 'vaudeville, variety, stand-up comedy. There is no better way to learn to relate to an audience, to sense them, to interact with them' (Szeps 21). It was advice that Henri Szeps accepted fully and which helped him to develop his own abilities as a comic actor, eventually bringing him to prominence on national television in the landmark series *Mother and Son*. Szeps quotes Hayes Gordon's advice to actors to do comedy in his autobiographical, one-man play *I'm Not a Dentist*, where he admits to having felt at home at the Ensemble and confesses that Hayes Gordon was one of a 'long line of father figures that I'd been collecting through life' (Szeps 21). Henri Szeps is not only a comic actor however — his range is wide, and over his long career he has performed regularly at the Ensemble Theatre, and contributed to its development. Most recently Szeps appeared in David Williamson's play *Cruise Control* in 2014.

In addition to his acting career Szeps also writes plays and in *I'm Not a Dentist* he uses comedy to make sense of his own life as an actor. In the play, Szeps explains his attraction to Hayes Gordon as a performer, demonstrates the way he uses the techniques he learned from Gordon, and offers an ingenious dramatic account of a 'politics of relationality' in which his identity as an immigrant child in Australia shaped his own sense of responsibility to other refugees as a global citizen—'There is no such thing as a stranger' Szeps says. His play portrays his beginnings in Europe and his education in Australia, firstly as a scientist and secondly as an actor with Hayes Gordon at the Ensemble Theatre.

Henri Szeps was born in a refugee camp in Switzerland. His parents fled Poland in 1938. Because of health problems in the camp Henri's mother sent him to live with a Swiss family called Meyer. He learned to speak German and when he was later reunited with his mother at the age of three he was unable to communicate with her, having very little French or Polish. Eighteen months later his mother sent him back to the Meyers because she was too ill to care for him. He relearned German. At the age of six Henri was sent back to his mother in Paris but ended up in an orphanage outside the city after a short period with her. Two years later Szeps emigrated to Australia with his mother and sister. His stepfather followed.

Katharine Brisbane describes Szeps as a ‘classic comedy actor’ (575). Szeps is an extraordinary comic actor and like his teacher Hayes Gordon he understands comedy. In *I’m Not a Dentist*, Szeps transforms the events of his own life into jokes, anecdotes and moments of intense theatricality. Like Hayes Gordon he is an entertainer. Szeps’s early life with its constant movement and recurrent loss is presented in comic terms in the play:

I’ve worked out that I had at least six changes of parenting, and five changes of culture and language in my first 8 years of life on the planet. Multiculturalism? I invented it. Is it any wonder that I became an actor? It was either that or become a psychopath. Wherever I was I never felt I belonged. (6)

This is the way Szeps transforms his tumultuous early life as an immigrant into drama, and personalises a politics of relationality between human beings of different nationalities. He covers the emotion with humour and says that ‘from that time on I have had a normal, happy, new-Australian, wop, reffo up-bringing’ (6).

Szeps first discovered the pleasure of acting at Greenwich Primary School in Sydney, and says it was the first time he felt ‘really alive’ (15). On stage he recalls feeling comfortable and powerful. The reasons for this were only apparent to him later and relate to the certainties of the script in a play and the way it takes you in a particular direction. ‘You know what is coming next . . . the rules, the certainties of the theatre and knowing how the play will end,’ provide something much more stable than the chaos of Szeps’s early life (Jones). This comfort and security, from the actor’s point of view, informs Szeps’s view of the power of theatre for the audience as well. In his book on comic acting he explains that watching drama

takes the unruly parameters out of life and confines them to a manageable, imaginary world, up there on the stage. Up there, because that world is important, because it is man-made, our fears and problems can be given free rein. They can be inspected bravely at close range, and in the case of comedy they can be blown away by laughter. (2)

Szeps’s play is about his development as an actor and as a human being. The two are difficult to disentangle and the focus engages intimacy and comic self-deprecation through relived memories. He embraces the vaudeville style, warming up the audience as he sings ‘I’m on My Way’ from the musical *Paint Your Wagon*, recalling his first professional role.

In the opening minutes of *I’m Not a Dentist* Szeps recounts a memory of being woken early in the morning in Switzerland to be sent back to his mother by train. It is Christmas time. He and his foster father, Mr Meyer, have stayed the night in a strange house and his foster father is present to put him on the train. Henri is six years of age. His foster father asks him to sing ‘Silent Night.’ In this moment of the play, the adult actor Henri Szeps returns to this excruciating childhood experience and begins to sing as though he were that six-year-old child, lightly, obligingly:

Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht, Alles Schlaft. And I can’t remember the next line . . . He’s showing me off to these people who I don’t know very well. I think one of them is my real mother come to take me back. And now I’ve dried. And I know the song so well! That is my earliest memory of forgetting my lines. (4)

The emotion is clear and pure in this recollection and is bound up with a sense of having to please others as a child and the painful inability to perform on cue for strangers, an enduring fear for actors. The play is subtle and works on a number of levels. This remembered experience is important for the audience in understanding Szeps, but also in the way in which it illuminates why Method acting became so appealing to him, and how it connects human beings, especially when the memories are painful for the actors.

Two memories that are dramatised in the play from the period Szeps spent in the French orphanage demonstrate his ability to focus his own sense of loss and its evolution in his memory. He presents the occasion on which his mother brought him to the Rothschilds orphanage outside Paris. He is led away by a stranger up a big staircase:

My mother had fallen ill again . . . I still remember my mother's voice wafting up this grand, echoey staircase, and she was in tears down there. She was saying, 'But there must be another bus back to Paris!' She'd missed the last bus . . . Now the funny part of this is that even though I was totally distraught at being separated from my mother again so soon, what actually brings the lump to my throat when I think about it now is not that. It is the thought of her, lost, displaced, alone, down there in the foyer. (11–12)

A few moments later he tells the story of another child who waits outside at the gate every visiting day for his mother, knowing full well that his mother has died (12). It is in the presentation of these recollections that Szeps practises the reliving of experience that is part of Method acting. The memories are not focused so much on his own sadness, however, but draw on it, and find their expression in an authentic, empathic response.

Szeps also recalls his early inspiration to act in this autobiographical play. He delivers the opening speech of Sakini in *The Tea House of the August Moon*, imprinted on his brain from his high school performance in that play. Szeps's drama teacher took the boys at Randwick Boys High to see Marlon Brando in the film of the same name. Szeps's recollection of the effect of this experience is witty and convincing as it fiddles with chronology in the telling:

A film had been made of *The Teahouse of the August Moon* starring Marlon Brando and Glenn Ford, in which Marlon Brando played my role. I can say that if I want! Marlon Brando played my role! Yes, I'm a big fan of his but he might very well be a fan of mine too! *Mother and Son's* shown over there on PBS! I can just see him sitting there on his island, watching television, saying, 'God, I love that asshole dentist. Why don't I ever get roles like that?' (20)

A moment later Szeps reveals that when he saw Hayes Gordon in a play as a young man and realised that Hayes had been trained by the same people as Brando, he thought 'that was it' (21).

In this play, Szeps speaks directly to the audience. He appeals to their own memories and sense memories, rather than simply presenting his own. The emotional centre of the performance comes late in the show and it is in his own performance of 'The Band Played Waltzing Matilda.' Szeps sings it without musical accompaniment on a darkened stage. He introduces this sequence by recalling the 1960s and says 'Everything we had taken for granted was being questioned.' Then he says 'This is my favourite anti-war song' (29).

After singing it he hums the chorus of ‘Waltzing Matilda’ and sings just one line ‘And his ghost may be heard.’ And then he tells a joke. This is the way Szeps achieves depth of feeling and humour in moment-by-moment transformations on stage. He also avoids being the central character in the story. Although he is the central and only character in this autobiographical one-man show, he makes the audience central by tossing the topic back to them, joking, posing questions and recalling comments and one-liners from other actors.

In his performance of Eric Bogle’s haunting anti-war songs he reaches the audience, drawing on his own personal sadness about war and its traumatic effects on him and his family. He puts himself at the centre of Australian life with his choice of song and mode of singing, and moves the emotion outward. The worlds within are carefully evoked to mobilise the audience in an emphatic anti-war statement. Szeps deftly links a sense of Australian nationhood to a more global sense of humanity. It is this direct connection the actor makes with an audience that defines acting for Szeps. He says:

It is in creating the spark of life. There, in front of the audience, on the split second, it is she who must breathe life into the moment and touch the audience. By a series of such moments she will take the audience through the journey of the play and bring that world to life. (25)

That capacity to touch the audience is the profound effect of a relational politics. Worlds within the actor are made visible and real by the actor, and become the world of that audience.

Like so many other actors who worked at the Ensemble Theatre in the early years, such as Lorraine Bayly, Max Cullen, Reg Livermore and others, Szeps frequently returns to the small theatre on the waterfront, and has appeared regularly in plays at the Ensemble over the last fifty years. These actors and the generations that came after them have made the Ensemble the most successful independent theatre company in Australia. The Ensemble has sustained a commitment to producing new Australian, British and American plays, and making access relatively easy to broad audiences.

Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester and Henri Szeps have lived out the ideals of this independent theatre, never giving up on a highly ethical approach to drama and theatre committed to serving an audience and a community. They have also pioneered an Australian style of acting that draws directly from the teaching of Stanislavsky, and from the techniques brought to them by Hayes Gordon. Their acting, teaching and writing demonstrate a complex ‘politics of relationality’ in which the ‘national and global are dual ideas held in balance’ (Cooppan 4) and in which internationalist ideals are prominent. These ideals are particularly evident in Szeps’s autobiographical play *I’m Not a Dentist*.

The lives and creative achievements of the three actors explored in this essay reveal a direct connection between the individual imagination, their lived experience and ideas of nation conveyed through their work. The European heritage of Stanislavsky brought by Nester to Australian actors, its American interpretations through Gordon and the autobiographical renderings of self as a figure for nation through Szeps in his play, reveal the ways in which the worlds within individuals, and the ways they portray those worlds in their art, have transformed their lives and that of the Australian nation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example Collin Ballantyne introduced Stanislavsky's ideas to actors in his amateur theatre groups in Adelaide immediately after the War (Pender Interview with Elspeth Ballantyne).

<sup>2</sup> Peta Tait discusses Gordon's teaching in her 2008 article listed below and Beverley Holmes's PhD thesis offers an account of the development of the Ensemble Theatre entitled 'The History of the Ensemble', Sydney University PhD Thesis, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Document held at the Ensemble Theatre Archive, Ensemble Theatre, Sydney, on the opening page of a large scrap book sighted by the author on 29 May 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The spelling of Nester's teacher's name may not be correct. Nester died before I could check it with her.

## WORKS CITED

- Brisbane, Katharine. 'Henri Szeps.' *The Companion to Theatre in Australia*. Ed. Philip Parsons. Sydney: Currency Press, 1997. 575.
- Burfitt, John. *Ensemble Theatre Celebrating 50 Years: A Great Stage of Life*. Sydney: Ensemble Theatre, 2008.
- Cooppan, Vilashini. *Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Curran, James and Stuart Ward. *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2010.
- Davidson, Jim. 'The De-dominionisation of Australia.' *Meanjin* vol. 38, no 2, July 1979: 139–53.
- Durrant, Lawrence. *Hayes Gordon*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1997.
- Hughes, Robyn. Interview with Hayes Gordon. 19 October 1993. Accessed 1 July 2014. <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gordon/interview3.html>.
- Jones, Caroline. Interview with Henri Szeps. *The Search for Meaning*. ABC Radio National, 1992.
- Pender, Anne. Interview with Zika Nester. 27 April 2013.
- . Interview with Max Cullen. 11 June 2013.
- . Interview with Elspeth Ballantyne. 31 July 2013.
- . Interview with Henri Szeps. 18 October 2013.
- Stanislavsky, Constantin. *Building a Character*. London: Methuen, 1968.
- Szeps, Henri. *All in Good Timing*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1996.
- . 'Henri's Story.' Refugee Council of Australia. Accessed 14 May 2015. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/resources/refugee-stories/henris-story/>
- . *One Life, Two Journeys: I'm Not a Dentist; Why kids?* Sydney: Currency Press, 2003.
- Tait, Peta. 'Bodies Perform Inner Emotions: Stanislavsky's Legacy.' *Australasian Drama Studies* 53, October 2008: 84–102.
- Ward, Stuart. "'Post-Imperial" Australia: Introduction.' *Australian Journal of Politics and History* vol. 51, no 1, March 2005: 1–5.