Anecdotal I think is the politest term used to characterize my type of knowledge. What I know is unsupported by any rigorous research or objective analysis. What I have learnt is entirely subjective. It is basically unprovable, unusable and unquantifiable. I will say things and you will either believe them or you won’t. I will use all my tricks of charm and rhetoric (limited, you will detect in the next ten minutes) to convince you that I am aware, intelligent and reliable. Am I? For some it might work for others it won’t. Communication is flawed on almost every level. Everything is mortal - we are surrounded by death.

When I was at school – in the last century – I was good at three subjects. I won prizes in fact, for History and Biology in both fifth and sixth form. I did what we called 3 unit English for what was known then, as the HSC, perhaps it still is.

BUT context is all – you have to know I went to a school that would have ranked academic achievement third or maybe even fourth to other pieces of the educational puzzle. My point being? It wasn’t so hard to win those prizes in that context. That’s the thing with prizes someone always has to win them ... when you know that, what can they possibly mean?

BUT I digress the key thing for our purposes now is, I remember those subjects and more importantly to today I remember the teachers and you will realize (with a little tingle of power) they are still the subjects, those subjects I was taught properly, they are still the fields of human investigation – Biology. History. English. That filter everything I think about. Because I was taught them properly, I have an understanding of the principles and the methods. My point being - What I was taught at school, what I learnt to learn inside has shaped me intricately and permanently. It is the very fabric of my being. It is how I make sense and consequently how I communicate in the world as an adult. That is what people mean when they say teachers shape people. They do.

History is the study of the past, it may or may not illuminate the present. You may or may not subscribe to the old adage that those who do not study history are
condemned to repeat it. It may be a mountain of statistics or a pile of old love letters. It may be a way of reading a novel. The angel wants to go back and fix things to repair the things that have been broken. Benjamin’s Angel wants to make sense for then, for now, of who we are, were and will be.

Biology is the study of how organisms work, how they interact with themselves and their environment to create systems that maintain their life and increase the chances of their survival and reproduction. You may or may not subscribe to the theory of evolution, the cosmos I can tell you now Scarlet, doesn’t give a damn. As far as it is concerned you can roll holily with the high idea of God and man and the rest of creation or not ... Time will pass, evolution will continue and the heat death of the universe will wrap us all in it’s cold arms, eventually.

English is the celebration of my native tongue. It is the miracle of overcoming the seemingly impossible (communication) with the downright basic. Sound and structure. To tell you what? Who we are, in the end. Why that may or may not matter is not for me to say, that is for you to decide. All I can say is, standing here in front of you, it matters to me.

Who we are. Who am I? My identity is bound in my Biology, my History, and my Language. My own continual jostling inside those vast impersonal forces is where the cultural fabric as I perceive it comes into being. And what does it do, this fabric of shared understanding? It swaddles us and keeps us from falling. Falling apart. Falling into madness, despair, disarray. The cultural fabric is both life-line and chain gang. It keeps us in line and it keeps us in the same room. It literally holds our shared universe together because the actual universe as we know doesn’t really give a shit about us and what we may or may not get up to.

So it is that I want to put Cultural Fabric on the table as something that I hope to explore in this residency. (How could it not be, you might ask. And fair enough too)
I have a dog, which my eldest son named Fletcher. Fletcher is a two year old black Labrador. He eats about two cupfulls of dry food in the morning and two cupfulls of dry food in the evening. He eats anything else he can get hold of in the intervening hours. When we anthropomorphise him as a family we say he is loyal and loving and enthusiastic. His commitment to the family is almost comic or is it tragic? ... Fabulously, he runs in his sleep ... runs and runs and yelps occasionally. Like most of us in this concrete jungle Fletcher runs more in his dreams than he does in reality. He wakes (exhausted?) and wanders to another spot in the house where he falls asleep again and dreams of running and running. We had him desexed and he lives a eunuch among us. He eats and sleeps, will never reproduce, and then will die, to be buried perhaps under the jacaranda in our backyard. When Fletcher does eventually die my youngest son (who is five) will probably have no family memory in which Fletcher does not feature. Fletcher is intricately woven into our lives.

To the best of my knowledge Fletcher has no idea of any of the things I just said, the facts of his life, the opinions I have about him, the observations I have made of his lifestyle choices and habits. None of it. He has a sense of separation from us, which he seems to know is different from his separation from other human beings. He has a sense that he is not a cat (we have a cat called Warwick who is more likely to have confused himself with fletcher than visa versa). He is not a bird or a tree. Definitely. He has an identity therefore that serves the purpose of distinguishing himself from the rest of the world to varying useful degrees of detail.

What he does not seem to have is any kind of fabric that he shares with other dogs. They bark, they sniff each others butts, they run around a bit. They get up to stuff but it doesn’t hold him beyond the biological patterns and affinities they share. Some days it seems to me that he must be so lonely. Not unloved, not uncared for, not single and lonely but ... isolated. And it seems to me that this isolation is the source of his silence, his muteness, his lack of history, his lack of investigation into his him-ness. It seems to me that welcome and involved in our
family’s cultural fabric as we make him it does not, it cannot span the vastness of his isolation. That what comes first – anecdotally, I have no proof of this and would have no idea how to make such an investigation and indeed perhaps people have – BUT it seems to me that unlike dogs and indeed all other life forms it seems to me as a human it is the fabric into which we are born that comes first. That we are all pre-tuned to the twinges and shivers along this fabric as spiders on a web. That culture, language, meaning, history are the web humanity has and continues to spin – they are an adaptation we have made as a species, they are our way of trapping knowledge, understanding and the sense of our life. Without culture we would exist in the same profound unbridgeable isolation and silence as Fletcher.

100,000 years ago his genes branched away from the wolf. It is amazing that we can end up with such a benign co-habitor through long and detailed nurturing – much of it done by chance and nature but quite a bit done by necessity by human guidance and intervention. Warwick as a cat seems more likely to have shared time on the branch with the monkeys but still there is a quality to his attention that makes us fundamentally incapable of understanding each other and more importantly stops them understanding themselves. Anyway I digress ...

The major point to this is that language and the cultural fabric are part of us, not a tool we have evolved and may or may not choose to employ. Not an option but, like walking upright and, not being covered in fur - a fact of our being. If culture has shaped our brains our abilities and our capabilities. If it is as fundamental as our heart, like our lungs an organ that keeps us alive. If - Like our skin it does more than just hold our organs in place, we breathe through it and sweat through it and sense the world around us with it. If it is so vital to our survival, then surely it must be prioritized in our education. We have government intervention in our health and safety all over the place seemingly none as it relates to the health of our cultural organ.
And if it is an ‘organ’ – distinct to the human animal – then it is also inevitable. It will happen with or without government support and consent, with or without careful planning and rigorous investigation. So we can, by relegating it to a secondary position allow it to grow wild and weedy and unkempt and choked over. Or we can maintain it. We can, with poorly considered educational strategies strip farm ourselves into massive mono-cultures or we can develop deep and detailed highly sustainable cultural environments. If it is an organ, part of our bodies, our embodiment onto and inside this planet how do we keep it healthy? How do we keep it fit and well? How do we teach children how to use their natural connection to the cultural fabric to go deeper, engage deeper, work better and think and feel more richly? The choice in all this is ours and so is the responsibility. And the first ... no, the second most important place that these choices are manifested is the schoolroom. Obviously the first place is the family, the home and the encounters with others in those first years of life.

No wonder we kick ourselves as parents because it slowly makes sense how deep the patterns are, how endless the cycles and the sorrow and the inadequacy and the confusion and the ignorance that we pass on. And that’s on a good day. I have three children. Boys. My eldest is eleven, the second is nine and, the third is five. My eldest has a natural cultural antenna, he is very interested in what is happening now; scans newspapers, web sites, conversations even the sides of buses for the current and the popular. It seems quite catholic in its criteria for inclusion and essentially ranges through sport and current affairs to music and film. It does seem to be coagulating and concentrating around film and music at the moment but I think as much as that expresses his own interests it is also to do with the glut of cultural jetsam that fame and celebrity produce in this day and age. (A glut that I think is tied to a lethal post-industrial capitalist cocktail of spiritual need and financial opportunism). But I digress, my point is that my second boy is more targeted in his use of the cultural web on which he captures his mental sustenance. He is interested in quite a specific range of things and unconcerned by the masses of other information out there. One form of cultural spidery is not better than another, I bring it up as a means of saying that from
quite a young age the use of the cultural fabric/organ begins and takes the shape of the personality that picks up on it and in satisfying that personality’s needs begins to shape them. The chicken and the egg cycle has begun.

As someone who works in quite a deliberate end of the cultural fabric making I have a rationale ... a philosophical underpinning, I have thought about it a lot (too much perhaps, or not well enough ...) My point being I have another card in my hand apart from history, biology and English, that I must declare at this time. When I was 13 I bought ‘never mind the bollocks here’s the sex pistols’. This is a pop cultural product associated with a type of music called ‘punk rock’. I could probably recite every lyric to every song on the album if not accurately at least passionately. Punk rock carried inside it connections to Da-Da, and to Modernism generally, to a kind of Historical Materialism, to a destabilizing use of cultural product towards social change and to a (slightly misguided) Romanticism that every act of destruction was an act of creation. At it’s core was the idea that any cultural act was valid and seizing control of the cultural conversation was an act of rebellion or in some hands revolution that would make the world a better place. The aesthetic is very Do It Yourself and has resulted in lots of very naive art and resultant lo-fi sensibilities. The vital thing here for us to grab hold of is DISOBEDIENCE. Punk rock was all about disobedience. It lured me as a thirteen year old and has held me for the last 34 years. Consequently I value disobedience. Highly.

Disobedience is central to the act of creation in the punk rock rule book and the engine of many of its greatest legacies. In fact, I would take this even further and say Disobedience IS vital to all art and art as we know - apart from breaking up the blank space on our living room walls - is one of the keys to defining, engaging with and most importantly utilising effectively the cultural fabric that holds us all together. As a parent? Raising children AND believing in the cultural NEED for disobedience is a complete fucking nightmare. My guess is, it is just as difficult for all the teachers out there. SO? How do we enshrine disobedience? How do we reward disobedience? We need a discourse and some seminars on disobedience.
Types of disobedience and how to constructively maintain disobedience whilst also maintaining order and stability for the classroom (and or family). History is one way of helping children to see that disobedience can be constructive and indeed can lead to a better world. But how do you teach a classroom about revolution and not find yourself first against the wall?

2.

I should probably talk about theatre for a bit and where it fits for me in this ‘cultural fabric’ and how we will inevitably have to go through that particular looking glass in this particular residency because that is where my few skills and limited experience are to be found ...

Theatre is now.

It is of now and therefore, inevitably about now. That is the most abiding characteristic of the form for me. It happens now, in front of you and is gone for ever. Forms of recording drama have evolved mighty quickly into other forms in their own right. Theatre remains. Now only. A deliberate live act, witnessed by an audience. And the audience are vital too, actually - because the theatre bear does not shit in the woods unless it is being watched. Rehearsals are not performances and performances are only cancelled when no-one turns up to watch them. If someone turns up the show must go on.

Rehearsals. See, the definition of theatre’s now-ness gets increasingly complicated and elusive the more an attempt is made. Because it is NOW but it is a special kind of now. It is a now that has been talked about, planned and discussed. Designed and lit. A now that has been rehearsed. A now that also includes the past and is in dialogue with the past; a now that is already a then and, a now that was in some way made then. A sort of Meta-Now ...
There’s the now we are all in. Then there’s the personal now that each one of us occupies and then there is the Universal, the cultural river that streams and burbles and eddies around us. To my mind it is the careful and deliberate offsetting, tuning and marshalling of those 3 massive forces that makes the Theatre space resonate with thrilling insights, emotions and shimmerings.

For Peter Brook - famously - Theatre was best encapsulated in the definition The Empty Space. But I don’t think it is an empty space in the same way I don't think that an acoustic guitar shoved full of clothes suddenly becomes a suitcase. What I am saying is, there is more going on than emptiness, even in his elegant and simple definition at the beginning of the book because there is watching and there is playing and there are associations immediately and those associations and wonderings, those images conjured, can be ordered and tweaked and made to RESONATE.

Theatre is a specific space certainly, but it is a resonating one, like the body of a beautiful instrument. Resonating as a present participle to keep it in the here and now AND as an adjective to keep us imagining what that does to the meaning of space.

Resonating is not echoing which is a repetition and a diminishing. Likewise, it is not amplification. Both these are too literal. Resonating is the orderly harnessing of tones, semi-tones, harmonics and vibrations. It is the deliberate structuring of those things to make a chosen sound. Resonance involves harmony and dissonance; it involves layers of input that are sometimes contradictory, conflicting. It involves disjunction and diminishing. It involves problems, all lined up to vibrate together into one unified heavenly swell.

It is a singularly human endeavor.

As you can tell, I am no musically trained sound theoretician, these are my terms and so I am defining them for us now. Resonance in the context of theatre, points
to deliberately tuning the layers of material at your disposal. It involves playing with the literal. It demands we remember there is brown in shadows. Purple in clouds, sadness in joy ... Practically then, what have you got at your disposal? The script. The cast. The setting. The clothes. The lighting. The sound. The tempo. The venue. The audience, your own understanding of the associations and cultural vibration of the people who will come. Of the material being put on stage, all this can be delicately separated out and each can be attended to deliberately or intuitively or both to create a cascading arpeggio of ideas and emotions.

It is all there to tune and retune to the times and the space in which we live. And most importantly and inescapably it will happen. Here, now. It won't happen there, then because that was a different production. And it won't happen again unless it's a huge success, and even then - you see - it's not happening again, because what will be happening again will be the return season of a success. And that's a very different audience mindset. And might involve a cast change. And once more unto the breach we all go for that careful process of structuring and tuning the show’s particular resonance ... 

And this may all seem like the long way round to restating the bleeding obvious but it is obvious and for that reason, often ignored. And when ignored the evils of generalisation get their miserly grip on the delicate bud of our priceless expression. Why is generalisation a problem you ask? Because it is not in confrontation with time. It is not engaged with things as they are happening now. It is outside of the now. Making rules about life in inverted commas, not life as it happens. When we lose touch with our now-ness we lose touch with openness, a sense of danger and adventure.

So it is when the audience can feel that fabulous, astringent tension in the air that what they are witnessing is happening now, and only now - that is when they are open to difference and to change. That is when you get them, and some of them - for ever.
SO. Theatre happens now and it happens in more than an empty space, hence the resonating space. That space will be more or less deliberately tuned by the many choices made by the theatre practitioners. Those choices - that tuning - communicates the real meaning of the experience. Theatre is not here to put on plays therefore, it is rather that plays are one (very effective and significant) contribution to the putting on of theatre.

This disobedience towards the author. Towards Authority is vital to the reinvention and reinvestigation of the stories and the patterns and the habits and the human entanglements that constitute us all. At the risk of generalizing ...

The principle is this: There is no right way to do a play. The whole thing is up for grabs. There is no perfectly formed rendering of the play. So, we have a script and we work towards a production. All the answers to all the questions which face us as we set out on the near impossible task of bringing this world alive, now, for us, will be predicated in one way or another on how to make this play resonate for our audience here, now. In this space. The themes will shape themselves, the meaning will evolve, the cart must not be put before the horse. The theatre as it exists now will tell us how to do the play, and we will find the theatre in the play only by doing it this way. The theatre will come first, the play second.

Now this is contentious for writers (Authors ... Authority) brought up on the erroneous notion that their words are sacred and their musings finite. And it is right at this very important crossroads (the crossroad of the sacred and the finite, form and content, theory and practice) - that ‘literature’ – which is all well and good in the book club and the streamlined curriculum designed to eradicate a love for the magnificence of great writing ... Literature – does not count for much in theatre. We all know good acting and bad acting is a matter of taste and a matter of time. There is no hard and fast definition even from theatre to theatre let alone country to country let alone time to time. The same implacable criteria applies to set design, to lighting and sound and costumes. And of course the same applies to directing and unsurprisingly that is how best to assess writing for the
theatre. It is of now - if it speaks to now, it is good and, if it muffles, confounds and/or distorts now it is not. What is remarkable about Hamlet, what is remarkable about The Seagull – and there are many great, great plays – what is remarkable about them all, is that they can be re-tuned to now and make sense, make tunes, make us hear and feel NOW.

They may well fit the bill for literature status but that is quite separate from their theatrical value. When you set out as a writer to write literature you'll be hard-pressed to write a play. Just set out to write a play, then put it on – if it works it'll be nothing like you imagined.

I want to tell one story about my personal relationship to theatre. Because you have, as we've been talking about – now - the immediate, the world as it is, here now. US. Alive. But you also have yourself. Your on-going relationship to your past, your self, your time on this planet. This is the unstoppable force and the immovable object. The rock and the hard place between which we all exist. When you come into the theatre, be it as audience or into the rehearsal room as theatre-maker you bring all your you-ness with you and that is the next piece of the puzzle.

Personally? Theatre saved my life, seriously it changed and remade my life and not once but twice. So far.

I left school in 1983. They were still caning boys in those days, Hawke and Keating had only just got in and Australia was still very much a prawn and Barbie type of boondock. Engagement with the region extended to New Zealand as the nearest member of the Commonwealth. 1983. BUT my tale takes place seven years prior to that ... In the deep, dark mists of 1976. I was ten. The sun was about to set once and for all on her Maj courtesy of Cook, Matlock, Rotten and Jones. We privileged white Australians still in the thrall of ideas and ideals that would seem as alien now as the cane and the sport mad school. Rugger, cricket or poofter being the extent of the choice in those heady days. To be honest Poofter chose
me because I would have loved to play cricket for Australia except I never got taught the rules. It was assumed that knowledge was inherited like our rights and our privileges. Poofter also chose me because my dad was an avid subscriber to what was then the Nimrod theatre company. I assume that means my dad was a poofter. Who knows? Either way, I had been exposed to theatre and the rules made sense. So, there I am at what could only be characterized as a Dickensian institution for the most important citizens in our democracy. White. And because it’s a laugh after the game they do a school play and because I fall into the category of Poofter I sign up for it. Smiling from ear to ear.

I’m not telling this right. I was a ten year old boy at a school in the middle of nowhere. It was dark by the time the train arrived there. I was surrounded by boys, peers I didn’t really understand, and divisions and structures I didn’t really get. And there was a school play. A place I understood. An ambition I could genuinely and realistically harbor. A safe haven. The play chosen was the bushrangers. I think the title contains the plot, setting and characters in its entirety. I was cast as one of the bushranger gang and was also understudy to the very good front-rower playing Macabe. A major role. Anyway this is me. This is my time, this is my thing. At last, something I can love in this damned, incomprehensible place. Unfortunately none of the staff took it at all seriously so they could only rustle up costumes and props for the main gang members. It hit home hard, I was filler. An extra. The understudies were going to go on in their casuals. I was heartbroken. This was supposed to be my chance to contribute to the life of the school. Some boys do this, some do that. This was meant to be my shot at my that. A week before the opening (and closing) night a package arrived for me (packages were exciting at the best of times). A box with my father’s familiar illegible scrawl on the top.

Inside was a full-scale replica of a flintlock pistol. You could pull back the hammer and shoot it. You still can. My boys play with it completely oblivious of the fact that it arrived in my hands like a life buoy before I drowned. A message from home that said we think what you are doing is important.
I never got to play Macabe but I had the best fucking prop in the whole show. I made sure I was in every school play from that day onward and my life was never the same again.

I tell that story now because personally you risk the things you love – A personal connection and relationship must be staked on the Now. That story is about theatre inside my life. Theatre as a place to be. A place that allows, liberates, frees and satisfies some thing inside me. Of course there has been that handful of shows that has affected my sense of theatre forever. Of course there are plays I read time and again. We all have those, they are all mostly different for all of us – thank god.

I want to place the ideas of theatre’s power for change and my personal connection to theatre in a broader conversation about culture. So lets start with a bit more about that Australia I grew up in. It really was a very different country. I think probably a different world. But there was at that time some incredibly exciting writing going on. Incredible playwrights who are I think linked by a project - shared explicitly or not - a project of getting The Australian Voice and Australian stories on stage. I think that project is done. In fact I think the follow on project is so far advanced I really am talking about something long gone. The current project which is well into it’s third decade is Australian Theatre not Australian Plays (necessarily) but Australian Theatre. Personally I date its lucid inception in my life, from Neil Armfield’s production of Hamlet with Richard Roxburgh as the Dane. That was when I learnt the newness, the specificity, the immediacy and the lifeblood of theatre. It taught me how to adapt the classics to our time and place and, it taught me that the classics were for us to play with. That we had as much right to them as anybody else. It has as I remember it now all the qualities that I would associate with the Australian theatrical voice. It was spare, but the imagery burnt into you. It was naughty, dangerous, disruptive. The emotional weight of the play took you by surprise because it was played lightly, ironically with abandon.
That’s my personal mark in the sand, of course time is nothing like history, time is hazy and the development lines between Nimrod and Belvoir alone are so blurry that to say definitively something happened on the 9th of May in the year of our lord such and such is a nonsense. But a personal relationship brings a history and in my history that is the moment Australian Theatre changed emphasis. And the meaning of being an Australian at the theatre was allowed to be more than just an investigation into what made us unique and interesting but telescoped out into what made us particular in the scheme of all things human. In the big culture that throbs and grinds all around us before we are born and long after we are dead …

Inevitably Historicization in that way, seems to infer progress and the progress-narrative characterises the past as essentially a step towards the better present. It always does, but it isn’t like that, it is waves of change and inquiry that swirl together like a beautiful ice cream – you know that ice cream with surrounding bulk of vanilla and the burnt brown veins of delicious caramel? Every generation has their own particular caramelly concentration that it is attracted to but it is the whole-ness of culture that is the remarkable organism that binds us and holds us together. Madness in this ice-cream metaphor might be seen as too much of the caramel intensity of one’s now-ness and not enough of the softening, binding all-embracing ice cream of the wider, older culture. The human experience.

So, the human experience, aka the cultural fabric …

Culture, if we set aside for now inherited genetic patterns – the impulses in bees that lead to hives and Ants that lead to nests. Culture is a uniquely Human endeavor because it is the intersection of our Nowness - because all life is bounded by the tyranny of time and space. You can only be here when you are here and it can only be now – Culture is formed at the intersection of our now-ness. Our personal inner life history, memories, associations and our shared collective knowledge including the humiliating knowledge that we might be
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ignorant of something – and that’s important - self-awareness is a huge engine of creation as is ignorance.

Culture is the intersection of those things with the genetic patterns we inherit. Let me reframe that - those patterns are the paper on which these interactions are writ if you like. And these interactions between the self and the world; the world as past and the world as present - are the way culture is made and makes who we are. It takes place in language and writing. It takes place in gesture and encounter. The mushiest most electrifying bit of it takes place in our eyes. The eyes are the window to the soul because the soul of humanity is Culture. How we interact with it and allow it to affect and change us in our singular finite life-time. The rest to be brutal is biology.

A pattern emerges, it’s called your identity.

To my mind, the most perfect expression of the conundrum and the bugger that is life can only be found/experienced/grasped collectively in the performing arts. Because they are subject to the very boundaries of life itself. Time and space. And theatre is always (at its best) charged with two simple conflicting themes Identity and Death which are probably two parts of the sentence that says – ‘Life’. Full stop.

So, for my money, theatre is the very well-spring of our Culture. It is bound by the rock and the hard place that forms the tiny crevice in which we live – time and space – and it summons identity out of nowhere until death (or completion) in a massive exhorting hymn to Life. The other art forms are hybrids, off-shoots and refinements, don’t get me wrong that is nothing to do with their invaluable contribution to this thing called humanity BUT if you want to be right there on the pulse that connects you right back to the beginning of thought. To the beginning of co-ordinated and defined thought and to that moment when consciousness flickers into being, socially, then theatre is the medium for you. People will say cave paintings. But they aren’t cave paintings, they are set designs. Those people
back then crawled down into those deep, forbidding places with only a sputtering animal fat candle for light. They crawled over creepy bugs and down narrow, tiny spaces – they could barely breathe, They couldn't turn back. And then they gathered there and in that tiny hopeless glow in that vast subterranean gloom, they drew a backdrop and told the story about the thing that was uppermost in their consciousness. Survival. Defeating death. Staying in the light a bit longer. Staying together just one more year, one more season at least. Please. And not someone else. Me. US. Now.

My inner smart arse (of which there is plenty) is saying what about sport? Sport is bound by time and space - often more explicitly than theatre. Sport brings people together and offers a communion, sport would be old, I would say at least as old as the cave theatres. So what about sport? And I reckon it's this. Sport is of the day. It is of the light. The open space. It is super-immediate. It is about prowess and triumph. It too is a hymn to life but it does not grapple with death. It is not of the dark and of that terrible surrounding blankness that both defines and eradicates us. Now in this day of electrickery (bring back the sputtering animal fat candles I say). In this day and age you can choose to live in the light the whole time. But you will die and after being born it's the next big thing. Pity not to wrestle with it. Maybe not ...

As I say theatre is a commitment. It's uncomfortable and creepy. And difficult to get to.

Tamas Ascher who directed Uncle Vanya for STC in 2010 said that the stage must be a place of destiny. Now destiny is of course a dirty word in any small I liberal democracy because it negates freedom of choice. Destiny is as old as the cave theatres and as hard to sell in the modern world. But destiny is important to the meaning of theatre and to its value. When someone dies their life quite suddenly has a distinct shape. In the context of their life chance and randomness begin to take on the inevitable. And the meaning of their life can really only be read with any certainty in the light of that finite pattern. That is what it feels like when
someone dies. Their life sets, not in stone but certainly into a narrative. And I think it does become stone over time. It is no mistake that those classic sculptors set their heroes and leaders in stone. The story can shift and move in life but not so much in legend.

I am not an actor or a stage manager so it is very rare for me to go back stage during a production. In fact the first time in my adult memory was during the STC tour to New York of Hedda Gabler in 2006. It was fascinating for me for two significant reasons the first was to see through the gap in the flats the audience’s attention. They pour into this crucible of light through their eyes. Every face is alive. Every one is bearing witness to something that seems to be happening inside them as much as it is happening in front of them. Their attention does not interfere with the action on stage it kind of embraces and inhabits it. The second insight I gained was into actors and to a lesser degree stage managers and stage hands. The zone just out of the crucible of light – what we call in the business off-stage is a place unlike any other I have ever been privy too. The attention of the folk there is quite similar to that of the audience they are half right here right now and half in some silent inner meditation.

The stage you see, is a twilight zone between life and death. That is why the stage when it is in the right hands is literally a crack between this world and the next. It is inhabited by ghosts. Actors are half taken over, stage managers are like acolytes or officiaries at some strange wake, cycling through eternity. The narrative has defined the world and the stage is a place of destiny.

This world and the next ...? But we know. We have known since Darwin ... We know there is no GOD. We know there is no after life. But something inside us yearns for that silent crucible that shimmers across time and talks of who we are and how we might be better or at least no longer worse. About how we can LIVE in this strange subterranean void.
There is a lot of talk in ethics about the difficulty of society and legislation keeping up with science. That’s very dry. The big bugger of an issue breathing down our necks as a species is the resolution of our spiritual yearnings with the Godless universe that we find ourselves in. God lent authority. God leant moral certitude God lent an understandably finite version of eternity. God had a beard and was light. There was a way. There was a truth. There was a narrative that closed. All this is gone for many of us and yet the evolutionary pressure inside us has not abated.

Language it is considered by many who know far more than me - gives a great and simple insight into how we ended up with Gods and spirits and ancestors. We name something. It is taken away. The word remains in the conversation. The idea remains in our minds. And so an absent thing has a presence in our lives. A very real, very functioning presence. In the beginning was the word.

That evolutionary drive that makes language possible, fills us with absence, indefinable fears and hopes and yearnings. Our memories of the dead. Our memories of the happy children we were or we knew next door. Our ability to see here now and remember what it was like. We are filled with absence. Spiritual beings in a godless universe. Only culture will soothe that ache. And never quite.

There’s a lot of talk in business and economics about creativity and the arts. This is important but like most things to do with money stops at the first solution. It is not creativity that is being sought so desperately it is meaning. Money only works when it buys you what you want. And the fucker is what you want is never exactly what you thought and so it isn’t ever what you get.

Now there’s only a couple more things I need to clarify amongst the many dangling threads – Firstly in relation to theatre: I rather cavalierly claimed Identity as a key recurring theme, identity in theatre?
Oedipus? Hamlet. It seems to me all the great plays are about one person usually finding out who they are and often in the best plays they do that through action. Action that tells them (and us) who they are by how they go about getting there. That’s what we are there to watch. Again and again. We are there to witness the way to get to know yourself before the blackout.

So as a map of identity if you like we have the world, now - the world as it lives inside you personally and, the world that is contained and defined in the timeless cultural fabric. Making sense of all those different push-me pull-yous is the impossible task theatre practitioners set themselves. Because theatre is a mercurial amalgam of the eternal now, the unknowable self and the ever-receding past. It is about life and death and how to live. And it is right there in front of you. Now. And then gone for ever, until tomorrow.

Secondly I need to talk a bit about the work the STC is doing with the department of education social work and so on. I think it’s important to contextualize my connection to you and I suppose describe at least one place where the practices make an explicit link. Then finally I will outline very, very sketchily what I hope to do with the next few sessions that will make up my residency.

School drama is a project that Cate and I began in the second year of our Artistic Directorship. We met with Robyn Ewing about how to refine and define the STC’s commitment to education. We all felt that there was quite a bit of stuff out there for secondary schools but the primary children were being under served and demanded something else. Not only did they demand something other but more importantly where the children are at educationally? They OFFERED something other. A chance to learn through drama, not about it. Basically, we provide schools with actors who initially teach the children how to bring texts to life and more importantly teach the teachers how to use drama and drama exercises to bring texts alive for the children. The results are increases in comprehension of core texts but more importantly increased focus, increased interest and increased confidence.
We decided to pilot this very simple program starting with as I recall six schools then, increasing that to ... I can’t remember ... twelve? In the second year, then even more in the third year. We also tied a lot of research up with it to find measures for the ANECDOTAL increases in engagement that we were witnessing. Those pilot three years came to an end last year. Now we are working out how to roll the project out through other state theatre companies into primary schools around the country and into the regions.

This is not just nice, happy, cute kittens. This is how we will keep art alive in the dialogue for children’s lives. Education is becoming an increasing slab of monoculture mania. Pressure is on teachers to deliver ever more distilled and unified curricula. Art is awkward, apparently pointless and does not deliver KPI’s in the short term. Millions of years of evolution have made corn. Millions of acres are ploughed up to carry corn every year. But every grain is still designed to survive. We are on a path towards a sort of mass identity. Is this good? What can this mean? DISOBEDIENCE, tricky KPI’s might be our best bet. But how will we keep alive the awkward dream of the human on this planet? ART. Cultural control of the fabric. And so, School Drama is a way a small little way of keeping the dialogue alive, real, active and interesting in the class room. It is a way that teachers can re-invigorate their practice and students can honestly say they know what character means, what an improvisation is and that the creation of theatre is a collaborative dialogue that involves text and visuals and more than anything else Chutzpah. That the naughtiest kid was FINALLY the best at something. That the quietest kid was hilarious because she saw everything and understood everyone. That every story only makes sense when you bother to think about it. Engage with it. Give it a bit of your life.

I mean look - we are each one of us only everything we ever learnt. And some water.
So finally, the residency ... Well, I speak English, I am from the western tradition especially the English speaking western tradition. So it will be a limited focus with narrow and rather dull parameters culturally. BUT it'll be very easy to find the texts I am interested in unpacking. It's theatre so ... it’ll be kind of bourgeois centric white Christian/post-christian late capitalist stuff. Some would argue you could learn as much from a corn flakes packet. I won't make such big promises. I am not a teacher so it will be disorganized and have no real pedagogical shape. Within that admittedly narrow field of expectation I can only say it will be something I am very, very interested in investigating. Something I cannot do without others. Following on from the cultural fabric idea I want to explore the ‘chinese whispers’ of cultural production, so I propose this. We all read either Oedipus (by Sophocles or Seneca), Hamlet (by Shakespeare) OR The Seagull (by Anton Chekhov). I won’t tell you why, but they are the territory. I then have a plan that will involve some writing, perhaps some improvising and certainly much chatter about how the fabric does or does not exist in and because of each of these major texts. It will be as Daniel Keene says, all about responding, like any good drama. I will propose, you will respond to which I will respond and so on, until our time is up and then we will either have or not have an outcome.

I’ll be honest, my primary KPI is repeat business. I think there are, to borrow from Dawkins some very, very powerful cultural memes at work in those texts and I have an investigative method for opening and releasing those memes into our life. It will be useless if we don’t have a modicum of repeat business and I really, really hope that you will join me. It will be something. It will.

Thank you.