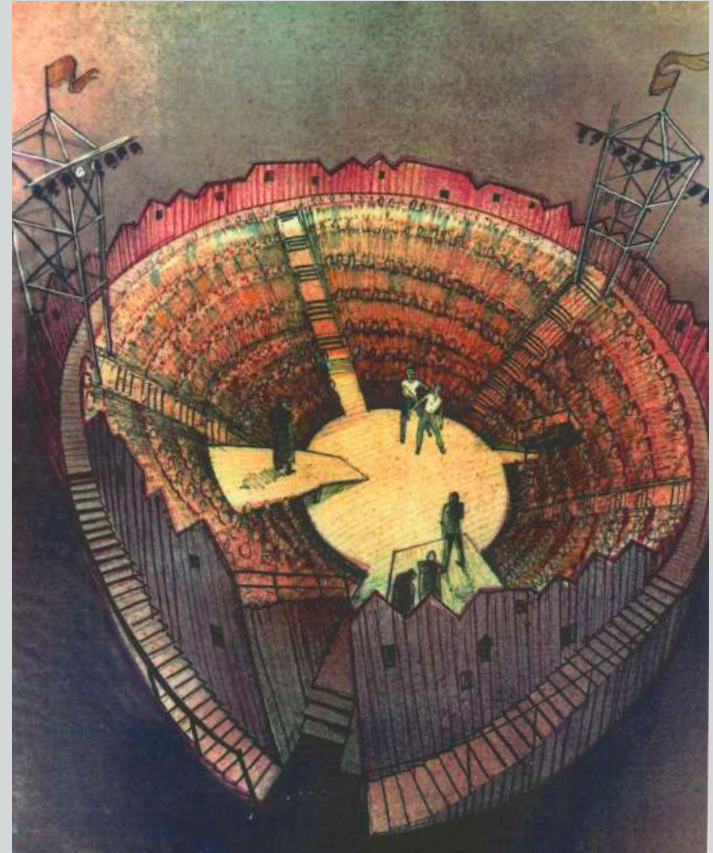


Bell Shakespeare Company

In 1989, an arts benefactor, Tony Gilbert¹, approached the Trust with the idea of supporting a project involving the works of Shakespeare. Well-known Australian actor/director John Bell was known to Tony from student days at Sydney University, where Tony had seen John's performances, particularly in **Shakespearean roles**. He had money and the willingness to support a project through an organization such as the Trust following Nimrod Theatre's financial woes and demise². Adam Salzer asked if I would be prepared to do some work setting up a Shakespeare company. It was agreed I would do the administration with John directing. At that time there was no company name, it was just a Shakespeare Project, to play in the round like at the Globe Theatre. John, who had worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Tote Theatre Company and Nimrod Theatre, wanted it simple and portable.

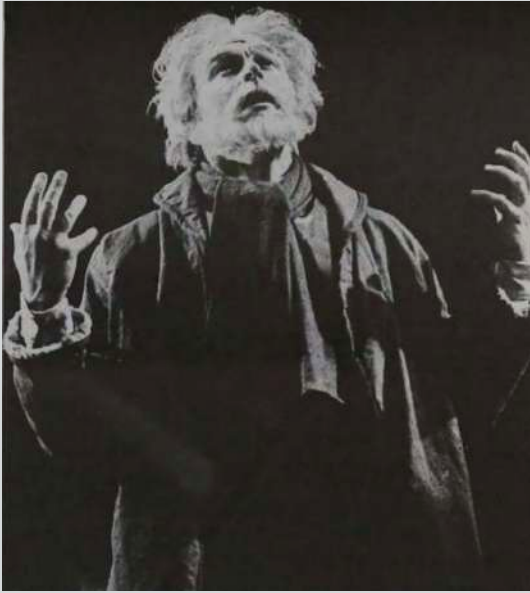
I was charged with finding out how to construct a traveling portable theatre and its cost. I met with circus people and looked at tiered seating in the round put up and down whenever circuses came to town. I visited one circus west of Sydney to talk about problems and material. Their seating was more basic than the comfort and safety we wanted. I could see an industrial or worker's compensation issue in the wings if seating was not safe. This portable, possible, concept theatre was called the Wills Theatre. With John's input, I prepared a budget based on a speculative outcome for two productions within a very short time frame. The idea was to do *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*. We talked at length about the real costs of what he wanted as well as looking at costs for the seating. The setup figure was just under \$1 million. We knew to get



An artist's impression of tent theatre-in-the-round.

¹ Tony Gilbert, AM (1923-2009), businessman and philanthropist. Was a Board member of Nimrod Theatre for 12 years and then for Bell Shakespeare (1991-2004). A major benefactor of Bell Shakespeare and the University of Sydney. ('Gentleman with a love for theatre', obituary by John Bell, *The Australian* 1 May 2009.)

² Nimrod Theatre Company, Sydney, founded in 1970 by John Bell, Richard Wherrett and Ken Horler, produced mostly Australian work until its demise in 1988. Originally located in Nimrod St, Kings Cross, the company moved in 1974 to Belvoir St, Surry Hills, where the venue became known as Belvoir St Theatre, now occupied by Company B. (See *How It Runs, Nimrod and the New Wave* by Julian Meyrick, published by Currency Press, Sydney, 2002.)



John Bell as King Lear, Nimrod Theatre, Sydney, 1984, (reproduced in *Trust News*, June/July 1990).

safe, touring seating, particularly for the audience sitting ten rows high, would be difficult and expensive; without serious patronage it could not be done.

For the first production, we went to the Hordern Pavilion at Sydney Showground. It had seating available in a quasi-globe setup in an empty pavilion with a stage. It was problematic as John wanted changes in the set to achieve certain effects and did not want to be confined by a small stage, but it worked. Tony Gilbert was very happy and funded the company to get underway. Our 1990 news release was dated April 23rd, Shakespeare's birthday. (*Front Row*—formerly *Trust News*—June 1990.) The company was not called Bell Shakespeare at that stage. The intention was that it be financed completely from the private sector with shareholders and donors. There were many appeal dinners and lunches. With John at the helm, we met with a major English offshore bank. They came forward with a substantial offer of assistance, giving the project credibility. At the dinners, John recited and a couple of musicians played music of the period. He would wander round the tables and everyone would be asked to donate before they left.

The first performances took place in January 1991 during the Sydney Festival. It was very hot in the Hordern Pavilion but they were good productions and enjoyable. At the opening night there was quite a buzz for *Hamlet*. By

then it had the imprimatur of Bell Shakespeare Company. It was John's company and he was free to do what he wanted. A perfect example of setting up a company; first find your Artistic Director, everything else follows; the money, administration, programming. The plan was to have twelve actors with a backstage crew presenting two touring productions a year. John was quoted as saying, 'If the Trust establishes this company successfully, it will change the attitude of every actor in Australia towards the Trust.'

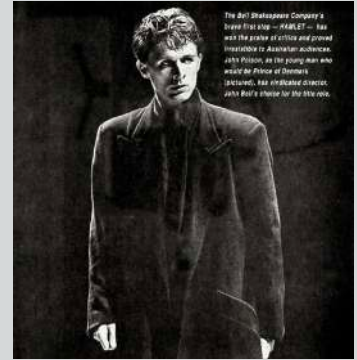
Adam Salzer was the company's Executive Producer, and once it was set up, my job was done. A new board of management was established, of which Tony Gilbert was a member, and **Bell Shakespeare** became independent very quickly. There was a terrific response from individuals and supporters, but unfortunately, initially, the arts industry was somewhat cool about the project, another tall poppy syndrome moment in Australia, perhaps. Regardless, the Company celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2020 and attracts audiences for its excellent productions which tour around Australia.

In discussing how to 'sell Shakespeare', a marketing expert was brought in to advise. He listened as good ideas went around the table; such as appealing to the audience's academic side, higher intellect, sense of history. He stood up with an object in his hand, saying "it was very

simple. We would mount a campaign and this year it is for a 'can' of Shakespeare and that's what we're going to give 'em, a can of Shakespeare." So there we were, back to a consumer driven package, all higher thoughts pushed aside!

I left the Trust in 1990 not long before the first season of the Bell Shakespeare in January 1991. My abiding memory and overall impression was I had come from a war zone where everyone was fighting in corners and no one was really heading in the right direction. There were advisers showing directions, like Ken Tribe, and it was a grueling experience. I had the responsibility of sorting the orchestras out. It was grueling to do so because I was under personal attack, as would anyone have been who took on this challenge. This was balanced by the fact I could do something I had wanted to do for a long time; run a freelance orchestra, and take on unusual dates involving challenges no-one else wanted. Having an orchestra of colleagues, the Elizabethan Sinfonietta, who stood with me artistically and administratively with full support, was the other side of the coin. The players were important as people and they contributed (and those still around continue this), to the musical fabric of Australia in a way most people will never understand. They supply the background support for the young Richard Tognetti³ coming forward. They have given those people substance to work on, they are not lost at sea anymore. There is guidance and help and they have given it because of their demonstrated capacity to show what is possible outside of the employment orchestras. The musical fabric of any country is the people involved in it working outside the normal established groups. In England, besides four London orchestras, nearby in Guildford there is an amateur orchestra, and a Brighton Orchestra; dependent on this vast pool of players vying for positions in London orchestras. They provide the standards upon which that orchestral or musical community rests its future.

In the arts, there has to be something to take away that is more than a good reading of Shakespeare or a good performance of a symphony. There has to be something else available to all and I am proud to be part of that.



John Polson as Hamlet, 1991.

³ Richard Tognetti, AO (1965-) Australian violinist and conductor, studied at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Artistic Director and Leader of the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

