

Simon Phillips – Citation

Simon Phillips is one of Australia's finest theatre directors, whose supreme artistry and showman's flair have combined in dozens of major theatre, musical theatre and opera productions in Australia and overseas during a thirty-year career. For the past eleven seasons, Phillips has been the Artistic Director of Melbourne Theatre Company, a Department of the University of Melbourne that, under his stewardship, more than consolidated its reputation as one of the most artistically vibrant, popular and successful arts organisations in Australia.

Born in Penang in 1958, Simon Phillips was raised and educated in New Zealand. He attended the University of Auckland from 1976 to 1978, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree and the John Tinline Prize in English. After graduating, Simon Phillips studied stage directing more formally at the New Zealand Drama School, and when one of his tutors, Jonathan Hardy, moved on to run the Mercury Theatre in Auckland, he took Phillips on as his Associate Director. In 1984, Simon Phillips came to Australia, becoming a lecturer and director at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). In 1987, he became an Associate Director at MTC under Artistic Director Roger Hodgman. This first period at MTC was characterised by a range of brilliantly realised and critically acclaimed productions of classics and new work, including Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Stephen Sewell's *Dreams of an Empty City*, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, and Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*.

In all his work in this first period at MTC and subsequently as the Artistic Director of the State Theatre Company of South Australia from 1990 to 1993, Phillips displayed the full range of directorial gifts. He rose easily to the technical challenges of the large-scale play or musical, yet was also comfortable with more intimate works, in which focus falls more on performance detail. He seemed equally at home in drama, tragedy, comedy or farce, whether classic or new, Australian or international. He could nurse a delicate new play to the stage and see it thrive. Although he had no formal musical training, an uncanny ear allowed him to give life to musical comedies and, later, operas.

From 1994 to 1999, Phillips was an in-demand freelance director, working regularly for the Sydney Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, Western Australian Theatre Company, Opera Australia and Opera New Zealand, among others. He returned to direct plays for MTC many times before being appointed the Company's Artistic Director in 1999.

Within his first few seasons at MTC, Simon Phillips oversaw a significant boost in audience figures, including an eighty per cent increase in MTC's Subscriber base. Audiences clearly responded to Phillips' programming, which balanced excitement with risk and entertainment with art, and his approachable personal style transmitted a welcoming image to the general public. At the same time, the Company's high artistic reputation was maintained. Phillips directed an average of three shows each year, including acclaimed productions of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *August: Osage County*, *Ninety, Festen*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Urinetown*, *The Visit*, *Inheritance*, *The Blue Room*, *Proof*, *Life x 3*, *Bombshells* and *The Tempest*. He championed new Australian writing, directing many of the Australian premieres himself, notably the works of Joanna Murray-Smith, Matt Cameron, and Hannie Rayson.

Perhaps his greatest production while Artistic Director was the MTC Theatre, the Company's long-awaited performance home. With his keen eye for detail and his deep knowledge of what

both theatre professionals and audiences need and want in a theatre, Phillips oversaw every stage of the design and fitting of the theatre. The year it opened to the public, 2009, was also the year the Company moved to its new headquarters in Sturt Street, a project that also benefited from Phillips's close and detailed stewardship.

Throughout his MTC tenure, Phillips has taken time each year for major projects outside the Company, including directing Benjamin Britten's operas in Hamburg and developing *Priscilla – Queen of the Desert* from a film script to a hit musical in Melbourne, Sydney, London, Toronto and Broadway. Recently, he has successfully refashioned *Love Never Dies*, the sequel to *The Phantom of the Opera*, for The Really Useful Company, and is currently working on the musical version of *An Officer and a Gentleman* for a major international production.

Simon Phillips is an award winning director of international standing who has contributed to the University, Victoria and Australia through his passion for theatre and the artists who make it. By recognising Simon with an honorary award, we thank him for giving us exciting, exhilarating, fascinating theatre. Such theatre has enabled us to reflect on our world, given us a place to contemplate, empathise and laugh and a time to consider the way in which we live, whether it's through the inspiration of the new or the wisdom of the old.