

Understanding ‘Leading that Liberates’: Liz Jones and Leadership as Life/Work

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Abstract: Masculinist and business models commonly inform notions of leadership. Drawing on the research and insights of Melbourne Business School academic Amanda Sinclair, this discussion of the professional and personal life of Liz Jones, CEO and artistic director of Melbourne’s famous La Mama Theatre, challenges these conventional understandings and presents different leadership frameworks, goals and aspirations.

Keywords: leadership, women, Australia, theatre, community

Liz Jones is the CEO and artistic director of Melbourne’s famous La Mama Theatre. She is widely recognised as a leader in the arts in Australia, and particularly in experimental theatre, which has been a major focus of her passion and energy for more than thirty years. But simply confining her contributions to ‘the arts’ cannot fully account for the nature and scope of her leadership roles. Throughout her life Liz has forged new directions in several fields – as a teacher, performer, administrator, board member, employer, manager of an iconic theatre company, entrepreneur and social justice advocate – and her influence reaches beyond what can be captured within conventional analyses of what counts as leadership. In directing attention to the full extent of Liz Jones’ life and work, the following discussion also offers an alternative framework for considering the notion of leadership, drawing on and extending the insights of scholars who call for a more holistic, reflective approach in order to release ‘leadership’ from the constraints of dominant models.

It is common to assess the quality of leadership in terms of a catalogue of individual achievements. Liz certainly has many of these to her credit. In addition to being sole artistic director of La Mama since 1979, and its manager since 1987, Liz has also been a key figure in the arts funding sector as a member of the Victorian College of the Arts Advisory Committee (1987–1992, 2004); the Australia Council Performing Arts Board Drama Committee (1993–1996) and Music Committee (1993–1994 with Richard Wherrett, 1995–1996 with Douglas Horton); the Australia Council Literature Board’s

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Writing for Performance Committee (with Louis Nowra, Neil Armfield and Hannie Rayson, 1993–1996); the Arts Victoria Literature Assessment Panel (1990–1992); and the City of Melbourne’s Youth Funding Program (2004). She has also served as a committee member of the Actors’ Benevolent Fund (1993–2001); the Australian National Playwright’s Centre (1999–2002); and was deputy chair of the National Performance Conference (1994–1996); and board member of the Chamber Made Opera Company (2000–2008).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Liz performed at La Mama in her husband Lloyd Jones’ ensemble, but since the early 1990s her career as an actor has also led to performances with directors such as Ariette Taylor in Franz Xavier Kroetz’ *Farmyard*,¹ Suzanna Chaundey in Tadeusz Rozewicz’ *Mariage Blanc*, Humphrey Bower *Texas Queensland* and Lynne Ellis in Mammad Aidani’s *She*, and David Pledge in *Eavesdropping*. More recent performances include the role of Ann Bon in *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country* (2010–2014) and Goldie in *Special* (2011). In 1999 and 2001, Liz also undertook a Churchill Fellowship to study the relevance of theatre to the community in the United Kingdom, Europe and New York, while in 1997 Arts Victoria funded Liz to represent Australia at the Fourth International Women Playwrights’ Conference (IWPC) in Galway as a moderator and performer, and in 2003 to attend the Sixth IWPC as a facilitator of two Koorie projects, *Yanagai, Yanagai* by Andrea James and *I Don’t Want To Play House* by Tammy Anderson.²

Liz was awarded an Order of Australia in 2012, capping off the extensive public and professional recognition she had already received for her work in the arts: the Victorian Arts Centre Trust’s Kenneth Myer Medallion for the Performing Arts (1994); the Sidney Myer Award for Excellence in Facilitation (2000); the Victorian Green Room Lifetime Achievement Award (2001); and the Dorothy Crawford AWGIE for Outstanding Contribution to the Profession (2008). In 1995 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Laws from the Australian National University, while her name was placed on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2002. Much of Liz’s work has been undertaken amid the joys and challenges of the community sector and it is significant that, alongside these personal accolades, she also supports the goals and ambitions of other community groups that are not related to her own focus on the arts.³

Throughout her time at La Mama, Liz has also prioritised working with Indigenous people and communities. The theatre has a long record of collaborations including presenting *PANDULUMURA: Two Trees Together* (*Gnarnayyarrahe Immury Waitairie*, Joe Dolce and Ray Mooney, 1990); supporting the development of the films *Harry’s War* and *No Way to Forget* (Richard Frankland 1998, 1999); commissioning *Conversations with the Dead* (Richard Frankland 1999); premiering *Little Black Bastard* (Noel Tovey,

2003); supporting a Koorie Business Network Deadly Mentorship for Artistic Direction (Andrea James, 2003–2004); and more recently facilitating the development of *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country* (Giordano Nanni and Andrea James, 2010–2014) and partnering the associated Australian Research Council Linkage grant, the ‘Minutes of Evidence’ project.⁴

The long list of Liz’s interests and achievements suggests that her contributions as a leader should be appreciated and assessed across a broader range of indicators than traditional models allow. The pioneering work of Melbourne Business School scholar Amanda Sinclair is particularly significant in this regard. In her book *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*, Sinclair urges readers to abandon conventional managerial ways of understanding leadership and explore the liberatory potential of thinking differently about ‘the way one lives and works’.⁵ By opening out the analytical framework of leadership studies, recent critical scholarship like Sinclair’s seeks to enhance understanding not simply of what counts as leadership but also of the factors that are likely to precipitate the kind of leadership ambitions that connect the interests of the individual with those of the broader society, that see leadership as life/work.

After tracing the ways in which the notion of leadership has been variously captured and confined by the values of the corporate world since the early twentieth century, Sinclair observes ‘it has become difficult to think of leadership outside this framework of meanings’.⁶ While many have argued that liberal feminist models have also fallen into the thrall of business interests,⁷ other recent reappraisals of leadership ‘innovation’ demonstrate that even seemingly transformational approaches – such as the ‘ethical leadership’ models of the 1980s, or, more recently, those drawing on so-called ‘soft/female’ values or ‘post-heroic’ formulas – are also designed to support the status quo, effectively entrenching existing power structures and resisting alternative understandings of how socioeconomic relations and personal interactions might unfold in radically different, more holistic and democratic ways.⁸

Drawing on the whole of her spiritual and professional life journey, Sinclair’s intention is to provoke critical analysis and personal reflection in relation to the question of leadership. She implores us ‘to grapple with the complex conceptual structural and political roots of leadership aspiration and to ask ourselves what leadership is for’ and stresses the importance of understanding the extent to which the two strands – the broadly social and the deeply personal – are inevitably entwined.⁹

Developing a deeper understanding of power – its structural and personal determinants – is crucial to leaders. It is not until we ‘see’ the power relations

around us and including us that we are, even temporarily, released to work more empathetically with others, imagining better ways to lead and live together.¹⁰

Sinclair's vision asks leaders to decentre the ego, move beyond 'myths and heroes' and dislodge the dominant individualistic business-oriented paradigm in order to be 'freeing in one's stance and influence', and to be 'consciously thinking about power, and the purposes to which our own and others' power is put'.¹¹ Each person needs to work out for themselves what leadership is and what it's for by reflecting critically on both the personal and the professional domains of their lives.

In the following record of my discussions with Liz Jones I draw on Sinclair's analytical framework to shed further light on the inadequacies of conventional models of leadership that focus attention on individual goals and achievement, that risk assuming rather than challenging inequity, and wherein 'personal life' and 'work' are viewed as quite different things. For Liz Jones, the values and practices of personal life and work could hardly be more connected – to separate the two would impoverish both, diminishing her freedom to be the person she wants to be in the world, and the freedom she seeks to foster in those around her.

La Mama Theatre

La Mama Theatre, or La Mama as it is now more simply and affectionately known, has been a landmark in Melbourne's inner-city suburb of Carlton since 1967. In that year Betty Burstall first settled on the quirky building and its lively Italian environment as the place to support the development of affordable, independent, experimental theatre in Australia, and to nurture a distinctively 'Australian voice' in the performing arts.¹² Reflecting the New York/Greenwich Village prototypes that had originally inspired Burstall's ambitions, the theatre itself is small, seating from thirty to fifty people, but its contribution to the creative arts over the last forty-five years has been enormous, and continues apace. Together with its roomier performance space at the nearby Carlton Courthouse, La Mama has presented approximately two thousand new works since its establishment. The theatre supports Australian writing and innovation across a range of fields encompassing playwrights, directors, actors, technicians, composers, poets, and filmmakers – Jack Hibberd, Graeme Blundell, Alex Buzo, Julia Zemiro, Cate Blanchett, Richard Frankland, David Williamson, Barry Dickins, Judith Lucy, John Romeril, Tes Lyssiotis, Lloyd Jones, and Arthur and Corinne Cantrill are just a few of the creative artists whose careers have been associated with the theatre.

As it looks to the future, La Mama's vision 2012 statement still reiterates its long-held commitment to 'those seeking to explore beyond mainstream theatre; producing work by theatre makers of all backgrounds and

encouraging works that explore, deconstruct and critique form, content and social issues'.¹³ The theatre employs approximately twenty people, welcomes a range of volunteers and presents over fifty works each year. Within Sinclair's framework, even without the personal influence of Liz as leader, La Mama as an *organisation* in many ways already reflects 'leading that liberates' through drawing on the power of theatre to encourage the public to "see" the power relations around us and including us' and to reflect on just how deeply the personal is embedded in the political.¹⁴

While the National Trust now acknowledges the significance of La Mama as a theatre, the building was originally constructed in 1883 as a print shop before housing various businesses such as electrical engineering and boot and lingerie manufacturing.¹⁵ The double-storey red brick structure still sits well back on its site, beyond a leafy laneway garden with plenty of seating and a kitchen or bar to entice patrons to linger a while. The performance space is at ground level, and up a rickety staircase is the theatre's comfy engine room that embraces workers, volunteers, performers and all sorts of visitors amidst its desks and books and pictures, and its costumes, computers and couches. It is here that I settle in to chat with Liz Jones about what she understands by leadership, and the place of La Mama in her life/work for the last forty years. Drawing on Sinclair's analytical approach, I begin by asking Liz to reflect on the experiences that have influenced her view of the world and how she has chosen to live her life, before moving on to consider her thinking as a leader in the field of experimental theatre in Australia.¹⁶

Liz Jones: early life experiences

From early on it was either sink or swim. With her father serving in the military, and her mother fully supporting the peripatetic lifestyle a career in the army required, Liz and her three younger siblings grew up in many different places. Along the way they adjusted to the new homes and schools and friendships that had to be found in regional and urban New South Wales, in north Queensland, in Canberra and in Singapore. Such an upbringing meant different things to each of the children – for Liz, who was born in 1946, it meant going to eight schools and three universities and she thrived on the opportunity to encounter different people and circumstances.

Liz's curiosity about other ways of experiencing life beyond the constraints of mainstream Australia quickly came to define her world view. As a nine year old in a tiny rural school north of Newcastle in New South Wales, she was enthralled by her handsome, athletic classmate Timmy Lester, who with his sister Esther became the first of many friends in the Aboriginal community. Although at the time she'd known little about the fuller story behind the kind of history that was then taught in Australian schools – like

many, her education about what it meant to be a 'whitey' had to wait until she was well into adulthood – the strength of this friendship, and of the barefoot freedom of those school days, feature prominently in her early memories of how life could be lived differently.

But it was her father's posting to Singapore that provoked a more profound awareness of social inequalities. Between the ages of eleven and thirteen, Liz lived with her family in a Singapore University housing complex, a community with a far broader spectrum of cultures and values than the local army base – or suburban Australia of the 1950s or 1960s for that matter – would have provided. Having friends from different countries did not only further stimulate Liz's attraction to people considered to be 'outside' mainstream society. It also informed her enduring commitment to finding ways to foster social justice by promoting the values of a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Singapore opened up her world both personally and politically. Liz was allowed to roam alone by bus, shocking friends of her mother who remained, nevertheless, staunchly proud of her daughter's freedom, which contrasted so strongly with the closed confines of army life that she herself had decided to embrace. As Liz approached her teens, her exposure to a diversity of life in Singapore meant that she could already appreciate the significance of the changes that Lee Kuan Yew's leadership would signal. Many of her friends' parents had long been opposed to segregation and Liz had prevailed on her own mother and father to remain in the multiracial 'Island' Club when they were pressured to withdraw. Despite the conservative context of much of their lifestyle, her parents had always been open to new ideas, in part reflecting her father's knowledge of racial complexities in Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew soon closed down the whites-only clubs, such as the Tanglin Club and the Swimming Club, where her parents had also been members.

When the family moved back to Australia, Liz found herself at Telopea Park High School in Canberra and was eventually invited to be a prefect with responsibility for looking after 'the Causeway kids' who came from the more deprived areas of the city. While she enjoyed this role, country Australia was very different to the stimulating life she had led in Singapore. In 1963, the family shifted to Townsville for yet another army posting, but the city was little closer to the multicultural environment she missed. Although many Aboriginal people lived in the region, none attended the university where Liz was majoring in English Literature. But what she lacked in society she made up for in her studies and it was here that her lifelong love of avant-garde theatre began. She fell in love with the works of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter.

Liz completed the final year of her degree at the Australian National University (ANU) following her family's return posting to Canberra. Inspired by Ken Inglis's innovative approach to teaching American history, Liz

learned more about the social and historical injustices underpinning contemporary discrimination against African Americans. She read James Baldwin, studied *Brown v. Board of Education*, and researched the notorious Jim Crow laws. The parallels with the Australian situation seemed clear. When she began her Diploma of Education at the University of Sydney, she majored in Philosophy and Comparative Education, completing her research on 'Challenges in Aboriginal Education'. Her intention to interview a young Charles Perkins was soon turned on its head – under Perkins' questioning she was forced to reconsider her own thoughts and approaches – but her lifelong commitment to 'raising awareness of white Australia's callous disregard of the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples' began to take hold.

Early career: 'making a difference' by empowering disadvantaged kids

By the time she graduated from the ANU in 1965, Liz had decided to dedicate her working life to 'making a difference' in the lives of those less fortunate than herself. While she initially devoted her energies to teaching, her interest in theatre remained. Moreover, 'work life' soon merged with 'personal life' as teaching connected her to people from both fields who would go on to become enormously significant in her life as friends, partners and business associates, while her values were both tested and shaped by experiences within and outside the workplace.

An important learning opportunity occurred during Liz's first year of teaching in rural New South Wales when the principal, on returning to the school after a period of leave, strongly objected to her acting in a senior role. Fortified by the support of the union and the advice of an older mentor and colleague, Liz successfully defended her right to assume a position of responsibility at Wagga Wagga High School despite her relative youth. This experience underpinned her lifelong commitment to trade union membership while her growing preparedness to publicly declare her politics also overcame her reticence about joining the moratorium movement, helping to mediate her love of family – she now had a brother as well as a father in the military – and her personal convictions about the injustices of the Vietnam War. Similarly, her enduring scepticism about bureaucratic gate-keeping and ineptitude can be traced back to a telling encounter with the NSW Department of Education, which denied her permission to take leave of absence in 1968 to join her new husband Christopher Manning who was working in Indonesia. Liz and Chris had met at ANU and she decided to travel to Indonesia no matter what. Two years later she received a letter officially approving her absence, leading to a strong sense that one should 'never be ruled by rules and regulations' and a

‘healthy disregard for bureaucracies’ that would later help greatly in running La Mama.

In many ways, the time in Indonesia was a turning point in Liz’s personal and professional life. She spent eighteen months teaching Agriculture students who wanted to qualify for American universities. While she’d loved teaching in rural Australia, and had developed a strength in working with difficult kids, she found teaching English in a third-world university ‘a fraught thing to do’. Where she’d been looking to learn about Indonesian life and culture, she felt instead like a ‘neocolonial agent’ simply imparting Western culture. She was ‘lost’ and ‘nowhere’.

The decision to return to Australia, and eventually to separate from Chris, who saw the broader world as the focus of his life and work, in part reflected her political commitment to confronting the needs of her own society and culture. She took up teaching again, this time at University High School in Parkville, just across from the University of Melbourne, and close to Carlton where her interests in education and theatre once again converged. Two teachers involved with the school were already deeply committed to the performing arts and went on to become important people in Liz’s life and work – the actor Lindy Davies has been a lifelong friend and colleague while writer and director Lloyd Jones became Liz’s husband and father to her children and stepchildren. And it was through teaching that she also met Betty Burstall, who had founded La Mama a few years previously. The enmeshment of life, work and family was beginning in earnest.

In these years, though, education was still the major focus of Liz’s commitment to advancing social justice. After a ‘very liberating’ time at University High and a stint travelling through Europe, she took up another teaching post at Brunswick Girls’ High School, a poorer, more cosmopolitan suburb just to the north of Parkville and Carlton, where Betty Burstall also taught. This school took a more radical approach to education, embracing the insights of scholar-activists who regarded ‘education from below’ as a key way to challenge and transform inequalities in society. But the school was inspiring in other ways, too, especially in enabling women to occupy key leadership roles. The principal, June English, encouraged Liz to become involved in a La Trobe University task force research project hosted by the school. Under the direction of academics Tony Knight and Lesley Clayden, Liz led the teaching team on the project. With June’s continuing support, Liz eventually headed up a new mini-school that was formed with her fellow project teachers, Prue Gill and Roger Holesworth. Teaching in the 1970s was extremely exciting: the Whitlam government boosted financial support of schools, innovation in teaching was welcomed, and it was possible for local initiatives to respond to the interests and needs of individual students. Liz recalls that the teachers ‘did lots of great things with the kids’ at Brunswick,

where they decided to limit the size of the mini-school ‘by the number of kids fitting in the bus’.

But Liz’s core investment in teaching as a way to achieve her ambitions was being challenged as family demands and other interests and opportunities came more urgently to the fore. After taking leave to care for her long-awaited baby Liam in 1976, she found it difficult to go back to the intense environment of the mini-school. She had ‘less time and energy to be as responsive as she had been before to needy kids’ and it was hard to accept the style of leadership that had replaced her own, with students being given a lot of unstructured freedom but insufficient independence. Liz ‘had never felt like this about leadership’ – it was never important for ‘the kids to need *her*’. She decided to teach part time and to relinquish leadership roles for the time being. She soon became pregnant again and after Nedd’s birth returned to Brunswick High to coordinate and teach in the migrant English program. But with so many damaged refugee students to manage and her own life changing around her as her family grew, she once again decided to give up the demands of full-time teaching and leave the coordination responsibilities to others.

As teaching was becoming less central to her life, Liz’s interest in theatre continued to grow. Throughout these years she had enjoyed working at La Mama as a performer and in front of house. By 1976, however, when baby Liam was barely three weeks old, she found herself being asked to run the whole organisation. Betty Burstall had been living a new life in Greece and her replacement manager Ann Eckersley had also decided to leave the theatre, explaining to Liz that La Mama would close if she could not take on the role. With the support of her husband Lloyd and her mother, Irene, Liz decided ‘to give it a go’. She was on leave from teaching and could do the administration at home while looking after Liam.

The experience provided an important opportunity to think more deeply about what it meant to lead an organisation like La Mama. When Ann decided to return in February 1977 she and Liz shared the management role, overseeing a hugely successful festival featuring all of La Mama’s past performers. But by October that year, and much to Liz’s surprise, the pair had fallen out, with Ann seeking to dismiss Liz for ‘not managing’ and Liz standing her ground and refusing to ‘be sacked’. Betty came back from Greece to talk things through with both women, urging them to establish work plans and regular weekly communication. From that point the leadership of La Mama proceeded more clearly, with Ann and Liz also supporting each other personally to meet the competing demands of work and parenting. When Ann left to live in Bellingen in 1979, Liz began the task of running La Mama on her own, a leadership role that has been at the centre of her personal and professional life ever since.

Reflections on leadership as life/work

Sinclair claims that ‘renewed attention to backgrounds’ can increase understanding of ‘leading that liberates’¹⁷ and her work encourages leaders to reflect on their ‘growing up and early adulthood’ – not only to understand their leadership predispositions and assumptions more fully but also to imagine ‘new ways of being’.¹⁸ Based on their own interviews with a number of leaders, Sinclair and Valerie Wilson explain that the effects of childhood experiences on leadership styles can be categorised according to three factors: relationships with parents (especially the presence or absence of fathers); birth order and sibling relationships; and, finally, experiences of ‘border crossing’ that exposed children to ‘multiple cultures, language groups and socioeconomic classes’.¹⁹

From the discussion above, it is possible to view Liz’s early ‘biography’ as falling within each of these categories. Liz confirmed, for example, that her father had been an enormous source of strength for her as an individual, supporting her unfailingly – as he did with each of his children – through difficult or painful decisions. It is the third experience of ‘border crossing’, however, that dominates her recollections of childhood and early adult years, supporting Sinclair and Wilson’s findings that leaders ‘who are comfortable working with diversity often had childhoods characterised by crossing borders – geographic, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and emotional’.²⁰ Such backgrounds can have many legacies in adulthood, including the leader being more likely to ‘challenge traditions, power structures and other bases by which outsiders are excluded’.²¹ The following discussion moves on from Liz’s recollections of her earlier formative experiences to consider her more mature reflections on the nature and purpose of leadership. The notion of ‘diversity leaders’ once again emerges as particularly relevant to her style of leadership, which she consistently represents as life/work.

Since becoming sole CEO and artistic director in 1980, Liz has sought to steer La Mama through a maze of business and bureaucratic challenges while remaining true to its core philosophy and purpose as a community-based arts organisation committed to a diversity of artistic vision, to innovation, and to exploring minority as well as general concerns. A key focus of her leadership has been to devise a number of ways to protect and promote the culture of the organisation itself. After Betty Burstall returned to Australia, Liz employed La Mama’s founder as script adviser and when failing eyesight made this role difficult, Liz asked her to stay on as ‘an elder’. In 1983, when La Mama became incorporated in order to meet the funding requirements of bodies such as the Australia Council that no longer dealt with sole operators, Liz appointed Betty chair of the committee of management. She also made it a rule that all members of the committee had to have some meaningful involvement with La Mama and set about finding individuals already

connected with the theatre who had the stipulated areas of expertise in law or marketing. Overall, this management strategy has worked to avoid the ‘terrible conflicts’ that plague many boards, especially in the arts, because members already embrace, or at least clearly understand, La Mama’s values. Similarly, Liz prefers that all employees be practising artists not only to demonstrate their commitment to La Mama’s values but also in order to ‘know vulnerability’ and ‘understand the bravery’ of going out and presenting ideas.

In its everyday management, Liz has seen La Mama evolve to become a ‘gentle place to work’, where people can express themselves by personalising their own space and, above all, where laughter, and a certain degree of relaxation, is encouraged. In contrast to the common practice of holding board meetings around high tables, at La Mama all meetings, including committee meetings, take place on couches around a low table, with food and drink at the ready. Liz’s favourite observation of the ‘feel’ of La Mama is from a visitor who claimed that ‘coming into the office is like taking a little trip to the country’ where you can leave the pressures of the world behind.²²

But while it was one thing to set about maintaining La Mama’s values in fulfilling its social and theatrical roles, it was quite another to meet the challenges faced by La Mama as a not-for-profit company that has to survive not only within the highly competitive arts sector but also amidst the shifting political and financial context of the broader economy. Managing money remains a central concern with much of the time and attention of staff consistently focused on attracting government, public and philanthropic funding for its operations. Liz had long ago thought that buying the La Mama building would help secure the theatre’s future and fortify it against an over-reliance on external support. However, given the precarious financial status of many community organisations, and the persistent reluctance of the Del Monaco family to sell their building, her bold aspiration seemed destined to remain something of an entrepreneurial fantasy.²³

The urgency to act came to a head in 2007 when La Mama faced a serious crisis after the Australia Council put the theatre on notice that its triennial funding would not be renewed. Infuriated by the Australia Council’s assertion that the theatre was no longer ‘strategically relevant in what is a burgeoning Melbourne arts scene’, Liz decided to raise La Mama’s profile and ‘trumpet’ its achievements to the public and funding bodies alike – ‘Our children are all over the country’, she said in one of several media interviews in 2007 and 2008, ‘we’ve just got to start becoming a bit more vocal about it’.²⁴ She also decided the time was right to renew her efforts to bring about the purchase of the building. Following discussions with the committee of management and with advice from a network of trusted friends and colleagues – and husband Lloyd’s agreement to sell their house in Williamstown if

necessary – she decided to proceed. After the death of their mother and great La Mama advocate Rose, the Del Monaco family also fortunately agreed to La Mama having first option on buying the building. The daunting task then became to raise two million dollars in three months. Following more public appearances and appeals for community support, and with an exceptional surge in pledges of financial assistance from both individuals and private philanthropists, and finally the federal government, the title was eventually transferred in 2008.

Reflecting more closely on her leadership style, Liz explains that ‘she doesn’t lead from the front unless she has to, unless provoked’, a situation that clearly precipitated the extraordinarily ambitious campaign to secure the freehold. She is prepared to be a traditional assertive leader ‘when necessary’ and always makes decisions when they need to be made. But her overall ‘style’ of leadership is ‘to lead by example, with warmth and care’. She has set out to encourage a highly supportive environment at La Mama, where there is a sense that everyone is like family – for Liz, ‘all her life is an extension of her family life’. She prefers to give autonomy and responsibility to others (including accompanying her to dreaded ‘networking’ cocktail parties), is frustrated by people who don’t or won’t take the initiative or embrace change willingly, and will step in when individuals ‘behave badly, affecting the welfare of others’, earning her ‘disapproval’.

In contrast to leadership styles that foster dependency, Liz strives to create a working environment that not only supports but also empowers young women. With women’s inclination to undervalue their skills and ambitions still apparent in 2012, Liz actively intervenes to promote talented young women to managerial rather than administrative posts where possible.²⁵ While having strong personal views in artistic matters, she ‘tries not to have lots and lots of opinions about everything’ – artists know more about their art than she does and she views her role as providing the structure and space to ‘allow their work to flourish’. She will certainly make judgements about which show to have at La Mama ‘but she is not doctrinaire’ and all scripts are read.²⁶ While there are no ‘arbitrary barriers’ to people, as ‘a whitey’ she has had to learn from others how to make La Mama a safe place for Aboriginal people and Richard Frankland has been an influential guide and mentor on these matters. Liz explains that her ambition for La Mama to be an inclusive space calls more broadly on the idea of the theatre itself as a ‘safe place’, which has the potential to encompass ‘older people, children, families, sick people’ and not just those who are conventionally thought of as theatre-goers.

Final thoughts

As our conversation came to a close Liz reflected on what leadership has meant for her, a discussion that yielded a heady distillation of what has mattered over the longer course of her life/work. In personal terms, whereas her relationship with Chris and his family had extended her understandings of injustice outside Australia and fortified her resolve to act, her marriage to Lloyd has brought her home to her self, giving her faith in her creative soul, and the capacity to focus on ‘the world we’re in now’. Professionally – as a teacher, manager, artistic director – she has been empowered by ‘caring for the creative part in peoples’ souls and spirits’ and seeking ‘to create spaces and environments’ to nurture creativity. She is committed to the positive, to moving forward, to being a ‘yes sayer and not a no sayer’ in both her leadership and her mothering style – she knows she can always go back if she makes a mistake ‘when later reading the fine print’ (and has had to at times).

Whether reflected in her decision to confront social injustice in Australia rather than abroad, to teach for sixteen years at Brunswick High School, or spend the past thirty-six years as artistic director of La Mama, Liz has directed her career path towards changing existing situations from within rather than constantly pursuing new horizons elsewhere. Her overarching philosophy has been to ‘look for positives in the situation you are in ... to *being* where you are’. And she agrees with feminist publisher Di Gribble’s observation that, in the end, success means ‘having someone to love, something to look forward to in the morning, and go home to at night.’

Sinclair claims that how people ‘navigate their early experiences and what they take from them are central – though often unconscious – planks in the way they approach the task of leading and influencing’.²⁷ Through bringing together Liz’s recollections of her formative years with her later reflections on her style of ‘leading and influencing’, the discussion has served to highlight Liz’s extraordinary achievements. In so doing, it has also highlighted the narrowness of prevailing leadership models and brought out the potential of more holistic understandings, wherein leaders can be ‘released to work more empathetically with others, imagining better ways to lead and live together.’²⁸

¹ For further reading see Ulrike Garde, *Brecht & Co.: German-Speaking Playwrights on the Australian Stage* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

² Jones’ report on her Churchill Fellowship was published on the Churchill Fellowship website: Liz Jones, Churchill Fellowship report, <http://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/reports/arts-performing/theatre-stage/>.

³ La Mama has secured funding from VicHealth to employ a community outreach officer to coordinate the theatre's collaborations with a diverse range of local social justice initiatives including *Big Issue* vendors, *Roomers* magazine (for people living in rooming houses), Childwise (for victims of abuse), Glen Reach (for adults with mental illness), Prahran Mission, AMES Noble Park and Dandenong (recently arrived refugees), Melbourne Centre for East Timorese Diaspora, Carlton Church of All Nations Drop-In Centre, Roller Coaster and No-Strings Attached (theatre of disability), Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-op (Geelong) and Vietnamese Youth Media (Footscray). La Mama has also fostered the development of other theatre companies such as APG and Tribe. See Liz Jones with Betty Burstall and Helen Garner, *La Mama: The Story of a Theatre* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 1988), 45.

⁴ Liz is a partner investigator on the Australian Research Council 'Minutes of Evidence' project, which is hosted by the University of Melbourne and brings together leading Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, researchers, education experts and community members to encourage a shared understanding of the past and promote new modes of publicly engaging with historical and structural injustice. At the heart of the collaboration is a verbatim theatre performance *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country* that draws on an 1881 Victorian government inquiry into the Aboriginal station at Coranderrk, near Healesville in Victoria. Project outcomes include public and school performances, curriculum modules for Victorian secondary students, public forums, and a broad range of academic and general publications. Partners include University of Melbourne, VicHealth; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Wannik Unit; Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI); Ilbijerri Theatre Company; La Mama Theatre; The Koorie Heritage Trust; Arts Victoria; Regional Arts Victoria; and the State Library of Victoria (see also note 16).

⁵ Amanda Sinclair, *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007), 182.

⁶ Sinclair, 28.

⁷ Sociologists Billing and Alvesson claim, however, that feminist critiques based on women's 'alternative values' hold out more radical possibilities for changing organisational functions than those that draw on equal opportunity, meritocratic, or women's 'special contribution' perspectives. See Yvonne Due Billing and Mats Alvesson, 'Four Ways of Looking at Women and Leadership', *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 5, no. 1 (1989): 63–80.

⁸ Sinclair, 18–33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 168–9.

¹² Burstall was a secondary school French teacher and passionate in her support for experimental theatre. In 1993, she was awarded an Order of Australia for services to the performing arts. For further reading see Liz Jones et al., *Story of a Theatre*; Graeme Blundell, *The Naked Truth: A Life in Parts* (Sydney: Hachette Australia,

2008) and Hilary McPhee with Ann Standish (eds), *Memoirs of a Young Bastard: The Diaries of Tim Burstall* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012).

¹³ La Mama website <http://lamama.com.au/about/our-vision/> (accessed 8 February 2012).

¹⁴ Sinclair, 89.

¹⁵ The La Mama building was built in 1883 as a print shop for Anthony Reuben Ford.

¹⁶ I came to know Liz Jones through her association with the 'Minutes of Evidence' project on which I am lead chief investigator (see note 4). I interviewed Liz for two hours, with key questions shaped by Sinclair's observations on leadership. We met and corresponded subsequently to clarify details and agree on the final version.

¹⁷ Sinclair, 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., 64, 58, 55–74.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 63. A detailed account of experiences common to 'diversity leaders' is outlined in Amanda Sinclair and Valerie Wilson, *New Faces of Leadership* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

²¹ Sinclair, 63.

²² See also Jones et al., 34.

²³ For discussion see Jones et al.; Liz Jones, 'Filling the Silences', *Australian Women's Book Review* (1994); Liz Jones (ed.), *The La Mama Collection: Six Plays for the 1990s* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1997). See also Claire Reinelt, 'Fostering Empowerment, Building Community: The Challenge for State-Funded Feminist Organisations', *Human Relations* 47, no. 6 (1994): 685–706; and Liz Jones, Churchill Fellowship report.

²⁴ Jo Roberts, 'For the Good of Mama', *Age*, 17 February 2007. Ironically, Arts Victoria increased its funding to La Mama that year by 20 per cent (to \$200,000). See also Matthew Stanley, 'The Challenge for Carlton's La Mama Theatre', *Stateline*, (ABC Television, 11 April 2008). See also note 3.

²⁵ For further reading on women's reluctance to take 'the top jobs' in the arts, see Maddy Costa, 'Thinking Outside the Box', *Guardian*, 9 June 2008.

²⁶ See also Jones et al., 7–10, 40.

²⁷ Sinclair, 64.

²⁸ Ibid., 89.