

# A Dilettante's 31 Dot Points on the Unveiling of the Bowery Theatre, St Albans

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1. I am sitting on the stage of the new Bowery Theatre. The theatre lights are shining straight at me. I can't see the audience in the raked seating but when I shield my eyes. I see Leigh Bowery's father, Thomas, in the middle of the front row, and guess that the woman sitting beside him is Leigh Bowery's sister, Bronwyn.

2. I am supposed to speak about Leigh Bowery. I did not know Leigh Bowery and I do not know Leigh Bowery, much. The other people on the stage are the panel facilitator and two art experts. The lights in the new Bowery Theatre stop me from seeing anything beyond the stage, but they allow the raked seating people to see very well a fraud on the stage masquerading as an expert.

3. I once had a 1971 Holden Belmont station wagon. The gears, three on the tree, had a propensity to jam when changing in and out of first, rendering the vehicle immobile. I would have to pull up the bonnet in full glare of surrounding traffic and try to bash the gear linkage to free it. That same horror of being stuck in public.

4. There is a quote and it seems urgent that I remember it. It might unlock something; that must be why it needs to be remembered just now. But it is hard in the theatre stage nakedness and mind gear-jam to remember anything. I can't think of the quote and then I can't think why I thought I could need it.

5. The quote arrives: 'See Christ and you are a Christian; all else is talk'.

6. The quote is from Salinger who envisaged many things, not least the Glass family, but did not imagine Leigh Bowery, who would have been the most dazzling Glass sibling of all. The quote is not inapt, but it is not what I need, and I have wasted all of my mental bandwidth defying the lights and the stage and seat raking people to retrieve it when I could have fossicked something of use. I think I thought it fitted because it occurred, a blow to the head like a light too bright in your eyes, that there may be no-

one for whom words are less useful than Leigh Bowery. You see Leigh Bowery and you see Leigh Bowery. Explication, let alone explanation, he rendered redundant. Which makes my presence on this stage redundant, of course. Beautiful wooden stage, as yet unscarred by performance.

7. They have given me a mic. I am not a talker. I want no mic. It is a black appendage at the end of a long black cord. I wonder, in a panic, if I will wave the mic and make a clever allusion to the phallic appendages Leigh Bowery sewed on the front of the dance costumes for Michael Clark's company. (I always thought that design idea was too obvious for Leigh Bowery, as uninteresting as his work ever got.) (The mic allusion would surely be equally banal.) (I feel squeezed shut and obscurely depressed.)

8. The lights in the new Bowery Theatre seem to penetrate my skull without illuminating anything within. In the week of preparation I made a list of paradoxes or contradictions that I thought illuminated the tensions within and about Leigh Bowery, but I have forgotten the list, and I am sullen and shaky because I have tried to be clever and work on this bright stage without notes, and I am a writer, not a talker; but I am a writer just now without words written or spoken because I want somehow to convey the way in which those oppositional forces gave Leigh Bowery his force but my vocabulary has evaporated in the light-heat glare, and all I can come up with inside my illuminated empty skull on the bright stage to describe these powerful internal contradictions is the Pushmi-Pullyu, which is delightfully twee and no help.

9. I can't tell that the Bowery family members are looking at me, but they must be. Their son and brother was the greatest dandy of his time, an art happening, a unique eruption of couture, and they have to look at me trying to memorialise him. I am almost exactly his height, and I weigh a little more than his listed 17 stone (but so did he too, without doubt); but beyond that I am a plain person in jeans and a blue work shirt.

10. 'Clothes should be either threatening or challenging and should make people think.' Leigh Bowery.

11. Beau Brummel's dictum for dandies: 'Go, create your effect, and leave'. Leigh Bowery wasn't noted for obeying rules, but he observed that one.

12. This is an unveiling of the new theatre, not the official opening, because there was a confusion with dates and the family members could

only be here for this occasion not the official municipal thingo. They have stocked the seats with arts industry people who know something about Leigh Bowery, probably more than me, the invited fraud. Tracee Hutchison, the emcee, is to my left, making some introductory remarks. I would see her plainly if I looked in that direction, but my neck seems fused and I tilt my eyes towards the lights and let them fill with white diamante rainbows that make the pupils ache. I am at a crossroads in the city in the rain and the gears are stuck on my beige 1971 Belmont, and the angry horns are blaring.

13. Later, Thomas will tell me that he was with his son as he died and he is curious why people say that he died on New Year's Eve, the last day of 1994, when it was closer to three in the morning on New Year's Day 1995. He makes a note to himself to check the official death certificate. Later, Bronwyn will say that Leigh Bowery always refused to fit in any box society offered, and in fact when he was buried his coffin was too big for the grave and they had to wait while the hole was dug wider.

14. Later, Thomas will tell me something amusing about meeting Boy George, and he will say that Lucien Freud drove him around in a Bentley despite never having gained a driver's licence, and he will size me up and say 'You're a big bugger, just like him' referring to his son Leigh Bowery. I will say that I look a lot smaller though because I am not in 18-inch platform shoes, or wearing stilettos inside runners. He will nod and seem to agree.

15. Later, Bronwyn will tell me that she wonders if Leigh Bowery would have turned up to the opening of the Bowery Theatre. On balance, she thinks not.

16. When Leigh Bowery died there were obituaries in the major British newspapers, in the Japanese press, in the *New York Times*, but silence in the country of his birth. I had thought to contrast the treatment of the genius from Sunshine with that afforded footballer Ted Whitten from next-door suburb Braybrook who died later in 1995 and was given a televised state funeral, a bridge named in his honour, a sporting venue named in his honour, an annual commemorative match and a large public statue.

17. When Leigh Bowery was interviewed by former glam rocker and future convicted sex offender Gary Glitter in a zenith of television surrealism, he observed that he came from Sunshine which he called a

‘sub-orb’ of ‘Mel-born’. Glitter sat on a scrolled throne. Leigh Bowery was in a red caped one-piece suit with gold epaulettes, thrusting cleavage, white gloves, red lipstick, with belts across his face and a light globe at each ear.

18. When Leigh Bowery was called a ‘sick pervert’ by an audience member on a Welsh TV show, the epithet seemed to be due to the way he dressed. The man who said that probably didn’t know that Leigh Bowery claimed to have had anonymous sex with a thousand men, or that when he did his enema act on stage some watchers were splattered with his shit.

19. To my right are two art experts. I did not know they would be here. I have spent a week reading and researching visual art because I thought I would need to make clever remarks about his role within, influence on, embodiment of, et cetera. Leigh Bowery, daubed with the descriptor ‘modern art on legs’ by Boy George, quite apart from his public faecal explosion which might have mimicked the paintwork of certain Abstract Expressionists and the thought processes of some later artworld darlings, inherited elements of Dada, Surrealism, punk and Fluxus, and also maintained plausible connections to Manzoni and his artful excrement. Now I don’t need any of that because the men to my right just out of my lock-necked vision are the ones who will arbitrate such matters in this discussion. Fuck. It.

20. I even gestated one original thought during the week, or so it appears: I cannot find anyone who has previously paralleled Leigh Bowery and Bouffon, which might be a rich seam for some lonely academic to mine. As it happens, I scurried out midway through the only Bouffon performance I ever attended, which was so long ago now that Leigh Bowery was probably still alive, and was harassed by the malignant arsehole-clowns on every step of my retreat. It isn’t a great time to be recalling that acute discomfort.

21. Tracee starts reading something I wrote about Leigh Bowery. She doesn’t seem phased by the lights or the stage, not wrecked by the knowledge of unknown figures racked up in the raked seating. The Brimbank Council reps told me the reason they named the Bowery Theatre the Bowery Theatre is because of something I wrote about Leigh Bowery 15 years earlier called ‘The Great Unknown Melburnian’. After a decade and a half it provided both a spark and a solid chunk of fuel. I wonder if

Tracee is reading things I was planning to pass off as fresh insights. I tilt towards her, light smacking my cheeks, but hear nothing she says.

22. Leigh Bowery told Richard Torry, 'Embarrassment is the unexplored emotion'. It was as much his metier and material as fabric and face paint.

23. I thought to share the hot tip for anyone interested that the only truly great footage of Leigh Bowery's notorious birthing act with the naked red paint-sodden sausage-linked Nicola Bowery is not found in any of the documentaries on him but in the last 10 minutes of *Wigstock: The Movie*. I can no longer imagine how I might work that in.

24. Leigh Bowery's dad Thomas has badges in his jacket lapel and I fancy they are glinting in the light that is bouncing off my face. Later, Thomas will give me a white serviette on which he has written his new address in block letters because he has lost the thing I wrote and would like me to post him a copy. Thomas and I were both born in the Mallee and neither of us will ever have our vision paid-homage-to-slash-nicked by Alexander McQueen or John Galliano. Later, Thomas will tell me that his wife died six months before his son and grieving two people at once is confusing and hard, and I will tell him that I am not surprised by that at all.

25. Bronwyn and her family have flown from the other side of the world for this event. She has lived in China for a long time, and that might be further away from Sunshine than London was, even. Leigh Bowery's younger nephew speaks English with a Chinese accent. I think about what it might be like to have Leigh Bowery, or the memory and legend of Leigh Bowery, as your uncle.

26. Tracee says, 'My first question is to you, Michael' and the rictus is pulling so tight I think my face skin will split like a melon. I am trying to get Salinger's useless quote out of my head now and remember whether I should mention Percy Grainger or not, because he may have been the only Australian as original and dazzling and diverse as Leigh Bowery: his fame was international, he was promiscuous in his enthusiasms, and he was mad. Grainger said, 'I live for my lusts'. It is a five word quote, but I can't remember it verbatim, and I didn't write it down, and talking about someone different when not everyone even knows about Leigh Bowery, astonishing though that is, might add confusion for the raked seat people.

27. The white light is bending and sending me woozy. I have key words I want to hit, like an actor stepping on her marks, and theoretically those

words will cue the phrases I formulated, but they are ablated by the squinting whiteness, and I fumble vainly for any of them: pantomime dame; prodigious; prodigy; provocateur. I will not mention, once, how funny Leigh Bowery was, and neither will my fellow panel riders. I don't make the point that he was an anti-art icon who is now claimed forever by gallery walls. I do recall that the motto of Sunshine West High School was 'Courage and Wisdom', which is useful, and that the school logo was the Pink Panther, which is not.

28. This civic building is sturdy and worthy, but it is melancholy that it commemorates Leigh Bowery's endless absence. If Leigh Bowery was still alive, he would now only be 56. And he has been gone so long.

29. There was one writer who might have managed to get Leigh Bowery into appropriate words and I wonder if they ever met. Kathy Acker knew about a lot of things. In *Blood and Guts in High School* she ventured, 'Every day a sharp tool, a powerful destroyer, is necessary to cut away dullness, lobotomy, buzzing, belief in human beings, stagnancy, images, and accumulation.' And then in *In Memoriam to Identity* she wrote, 'This society hates and locks up its madness because they hate and lock up themselves.' And if neither quote is quite on point they are both pretty close and you would have backed her to get even closer still if she had wanted to.

30. Tracee has asked her question, and it is a skillful question, and I realise for the first time that she will lead me through, a steady hand guiding a pilgrim blinded by befuddling light. Some words arrive from somewhere, so I pay fealty as best I can, and rejoice that the prophet—so well known in other places and so little known here—has finally been given some honour in his own land. He may have been cruel and preposterous and living only for his varied and mighty lusts, but he was incendiary and extraordinary and he mattered.

31. There are many things I didn't say about Leigh Bowery on the stage of the Bowery Theatre, just a few kilometres from his family home. The allotted time passed too swiftly. I just hope his dad is happy; his neat avuncular dad who, 15 years ago, when I interviewed him in a dingy office inside a Salvation Army warehouse, was matter-of-fact and displayed little emotion until illuminated by a single memory, and transfixed for a moment by perplexity and wonder, with the special gifts his son Leigh Bowery had even as a child, told me: 'The thing with Leigh, it was

amazing: he could put two sticks in a vase and you'd look at it and say, 'That's magic!' Shaking his head and beaming pride, because he knew for certain he would never completely apprehend Leigh Bowery either.