



Richard Wherrett

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ONLY YEARS LATER, WHEN HE was 14 or 15 and his body was beginning to fulfil its athletic promise, did Richard Wherrett nearly strangle his father on the living room floor. It was after his father had come home yet again in a drunken, hell-bound stupor and given his wife, Wherrett's mother, another thrashing. 'I remember quite vividly,' says Wherrett, 'having the thought, "I better stop now or he mightn't live."'

As a small boy, though, Richard Wherrett had found it all too harrowing and he would lock himself away in his bedroom, trying to shut out the sonic boom of violence downstairs. His elder brother, Peter, felt compelled to join the battle instead, and it became part of his grotesque bedtime ritual.

'I would wait for the explosion of violence downstairs,' Peter says, 'in which case I would try and intervene, or else our father would come upstairs, pull my bedroom door closed, and then change into women's clothes . . . He didn't know I knew . . . It didn't really bother me because I came to appreciate that [changing into a woman's clothes] sedated him. It changed his personality from violent to passive and on those nights he was cross-dressing I knew I would be able to get to sleep.'

Richard learnt of his father's predilection for frocks from Peter many years later. 'There were clothes,' Richard says sardonically, 'that wouldn't fit my mother.' He dismisses, however, any connection between his father's habits and his own sexuality, except for the obvious 'psychological wounds' the violence caused. 'I quake in the presence of violence now,' he says. Peter believes his father influenced his own sexuality only to the extent that he became interested in the phenomenon of transvestism. 'I am a bit of a student of the subject,' he says.

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The five-year age gap between the brothers was crucial to their understanding of their father and their own character developments. Peter, who was to become one of Australia's leading motoring journalists, not only saw his father in women's clothes. He saw him when the violence finally subsided and he had crawled into a carapace of tearful anguish and self-reproach. At these times he was a man who could be pitied.

Richard was to emerge from his suburban incubus the pre-eminent figure in Australian theatre: director of the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) for 11 years, artistic director of the Melbourne International Festival for two, a man both hailed and pilloried for theatre that, to quote his own manifesto, was to be 'grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun'. What he didn't say, of course, was that many of his productions, for all their elegance and camp opulence, were an antidote for the extraordinary loneliness he has always felt and an indication of his determination to enjoy himself. (His production of the Broadway musical extravaganza, *Beauty and the Beast*, opening in Melbourne in July being only the latest example.)

Although purged now of his childhood anger, he seems haunted still by the brutishness of it all and the acute sense of feeling utterly alone, a feeling, Peter believes, that accounts for his brother's sense of isolation. 'He [Richard] was always very tentative in the family relationship because he was terrified of my father. So he hovered on the family scene, and kept out of things, except on those occasions when our father showed mad moments of humour and exuberance.

'When that happened Richard became hysterical with laughter. It was like someone had popped a bottle of champagne and he was this child again, enthusiastically and exuberantly giggling. But then they would put the cork back in the bottle again and the bubbles would die.'

TO MEET THE MAN THEY once called Australian theatre's most powerful individual is, in some ways, to re-discover the boy who survived those roughhouse suburban, albeit middle-class, days in Sydney's West Ryde. The memories cling to Richard Wherrett still like limpets, pepper his silky conversation and send dark clouds scudding across his handsome, sensuous face.

From this pit of sadness you think there is no climbing out, until Wherrett, himself, reminds you that life—his life included—is also wonderfully, wildly funny at times, and that on the other side of his dark moon is a luminous soul which manifests as boundless, inordinate, joyous energy.

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In other words, if it had just been dependent on his father, Eric Wherrett, pharmacist, epileptic, drunkard and transvestite, born of Sussex, English stock, there probably would have been no hope. But as it was, mercifully, there was Lyle McClintock too, Wherrett's beautiful, diminutive, aristocratic mother in whose blood flowed all the life-affirming qualities of the Irish.

A familiar household scenario would see Eric Wherrett come home in a violent rage and the three of them—mother and two boys—escaping to one of the nearby cinema houses. Their mother particularly loved Jerry Lewis films, to the point that just seeing the credits on the screen would have her doubled up in her seat in anticipation of the wisecracks to follow.

At the time her sons thought her a bit eccentric, but that's how little Richard Wherrett became a movie buff and a Jerry Lewis impersonator. His impersonations would then become tours de force during those rare times of 'exuberance and humour' at home when he sensed his father was receptive to some light humour. Richard would drop into entertainment mode and milk the moment for all it was worth. 'In other families it might have been a giggle,' says Peter, 'but with us it was absolutely hysterical because it was like, "Thank God, we can actually have some fun."'

For Richard, the fun, intermittent though it was, stopped when he was about 12 or 13—at the time Peter left home. 'I used to run around being very funny,' he says, 'and then suddenly one day I stopped, and I think the reason was simple. I didn't find anything particularly funny about the world anymore.'

Nonetheless he had developed a hankering for show business and a talent for entertaining. After comic impersonations, his first instincts were for dancing, but his instincts let him down, even though at school he won prizes for ballroom dancing and deportment. (He also won prizes for running and broad-jumping.) So he turned to acting instead but after falling off the stage during a duelling scene in a Sydney University production of *The Three Musketeers*, gave that away too. It was only in London in the mid-1960s that he found his metier. Directing. He found that he could motivate people, give them courage, extend them beyond the barriers.

WE MEET IN HIS RENTED apartment high above the city with breathtaking views of the harbour to the east and the great urban jungle to the north-west. Inside, it is all mirrors and lacquered surfaces and stairwells, just like a stage set. Wherrett is dressed casually in calico

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pants, white singlet and a powder blue shirt. His hair is long and streaked and judging by how much he fiddles with it, unfamiliar to him. His matinee good looks still command attention but the past 16 months of gruelling work on his new film, *Billie's Holiday*, have gathered in saddles and ridges around his jaw and under his eyes. He is, quite literally, exhausted, although at 54, still an impressive specimen.

He is also a wonderful interviewee despite a long-held—and erroneous—view that he is a difficult man to deal with. Wherrett tackles that head-on. 'It took me a long time to understand that I can very readily have a manner which can be read as supercilious, superior, disdainful, things like that, whereas I think it's more shyness.'

The biggest difficulty is knowing when to stop asking him questions, given how eloquent, erudite and thoughtful are his responses; as well as working out the right balance between placing on record his public achievements and exploring his private life. Both create headlines, but in a sense the private life is only explicable—and relevant here—once the public career is understood.

Within days of returning from England in 1970, where he had taught at an acting school and worked with various repertory companies, Richard Wherrett had been appointed associate director of the Old Tote Theatre Company, the forerunner to the Sydney Theatre Company. 'His arrival at Old Tote brought the fresh winds of change,' says actor/director Robyn Nevin. 'He had enormous energy and enthusiasm. There was a great spirit about Richard that we young people then needed and responded to positively.' From 1974 to 1979 he was co-artistic director of Nimrod, the most important alternative theatre of its day in Sydney.

Already, he had established a reputation for style and daring as well as the distinction of directing Gordon Chater in *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin*, which he later took to London, San Francisco and New York. It won him, Chater and Steve Spears coveted Obie (off Broadway) awards for best director, best actor and best playwright respectively, the first time non-Americans had achieved such a feat.

'I think he was the most imaginative artistic director, the most forward-thinking one we had had at that point,' says Katharine Brisbane, veteran theatre critic and co-founder of Currency Press.

At Nimrod, according to Brisbane, he showed that he was committed to new plays by emerging local playwrights such as Alex Buzo, Alma de Groen, Steve Spears and Michael Cove. He showed a commitment to developing the box office standing of individual actors such as Robyn Nevin, John Gaden, Ruth Cracknell, John Howard, John Hargreaves and Noni Hazlehurst, in sharp contrast to the J.C. Williamson tradition of seeing actors as part of an ensemble.

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He showed also that he was prepared to revive works such as Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* when the mood and fashion said it would be a huge risk to do so. 'When Richard turned around and did the *Doll* he reminded us of the virtues of realistic drama in Australia,' Brisbane says. 'It was quite revolutionary at that time because the trend then was anti-realist. It was experimental and iconoclastic.'

Another notable aspect of his work was his fondness for luxuriant theatre. In his productions, for example, of Peter Handke's anti-realist plays, he showed a penchant for staging visual spectacles—or as Brisbane put it at the time, using 'actors as art objects'. It was the harbinger of things to come where to watch a Wherrett-directed musical or play was to witness a sequence of exquisite tableaux.

In 1979, Wherrett, much to the surprise then of the theatre world, beat a field of 36 other candidates to become director of the Sydney Theatre Company. All of a sudden he had the money and resources to mount extravaganzas. In his first year, for example, he took a monumental gamble in staging a piece of epic theatre such as *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It triumphed. The following year he presented *Chicago*. That, too, was a resounding success. Then, in his fifth season, he directed Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, an eight-hour production which was so ambitious that had it failed at the box office the company would have probably collapsed. Again, it was a hit, both with the public and among the critics.

Certainly from at least one actor's point of view, Wherrett has always been a dream to work for. 'I would hate to say he is the best director I've ever worked with, otherwise I might never get another job,' says singer/actor Geraldine Turner, who has been in at least eight Wherrett productions. 'But certainly he is one of the best.'

'As an actor you need to feel nurtured and he is good at nurturing and making the actors think they have created it all themselves. He also has a wonderful eye. A lot of directors may be good with texts but moving people around and making stage pictures is his thing. The other aspect is his great casting.'

The critics, however, have not always been so kind, in particular *The Bulletin's* Brian Hoad with whom Wherrett had a long-running public battle in the mid-1980s. Hoad, like a number of his colleagues in the media, believed Wherrett was obsessed by elegance and style over meaning and substance. Wherrett, never particularly phlegmatic with criticism (although he disputes this), believed Hoad was consumed by cynicism and destructiveness.

Playwright David Williamson agreed with Wherrett, although that was hardly surprising given that he, too, had suffered from Hoad's well-aimed slings and arrows. 'I think Richard virtually resurrected quality theatre in

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Sydney when it was almost down on its knees,' Williamson told me. 'He wanted to bring imaginative, exciting and flamboyant theatre back to Sydney . . . So the criticism directed at him was that he should have been doing grittier, tougher, more searing studies of human disintegration rather than spending money on costume designs.

'Maybe I'm a little biased but I don't think he avoided plays of substance or hard-hitting plays of social criticism. However, he also did plays that were stylish and satiric and determined not to leave entertainment out of the equation.'

Wayne Harrison, Wherrett's successor at the STC, believes Wherrett's appointment was a significant turning point in Australian theatre. 'He represented a new wave of Australianness,' he says. 'He was the first recognisable Australian director of a major company in Australia. Previously they had been English or devoted to the English repertory system. He was very much reflective of the city in which he lived and worked.'

Adds Donald McDonald, now general manager of the Australian Opera, but from 1980 to 1986 general manager of the STC: 'He synthesised a recognisable Sydney style and he made a successful transition from alternative theatre to mainstream and then re-defined the mainstream.'

Wherrett's 11 years at the STC saw his splashy musicals interspersed with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Williamson's *Emerald City* and *Siren* and Michael Gow's *Away*, to name but a handful.

And yet as Brett Sheehy, his close friend and, until recently, assistant general manager of the STC, observed, Wherrett hungered for the world to be beautiful and it was a desire often reflected in his choice of productions. 'I remember at one repertoire meeting in about 1988,' says Sheehy, 'we were discussing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and there were compelling reasons to do it. But Richard didn't want to put that domestic ugliness on the stage. He didn't want to see it himself . . . Richard sees no point in imitating that pain for people. In his art he wants to take people somewhere else, and that is a utopia . . . I can't imagine him accepting any project that doesn't lift the heart.'

RICHARD WHERRETT IS ABOUT AS close to tears as he might allow himself in an interview. It is seven years since his lover, Wayne Hall, died, but talking about it now, like this, can still overwhelm him.

'We'd only known each other eight months,' he ventures ' . . . but the day he died I think I can say in all honesty I was the happiest I had ever been in my life. I had a fabulous job [director of the STC]; I was

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returning from my second tour of the world in one year where I'd had a production [*Emerald City*] on in London and I just had one [*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*] in New York. I had a nice home in Sydney. I had friends.'

Wherrett and Hall were at a bar in Los Angeles. They had decided to have a trial separation so that they could work out the geographical obstacles facing them. 'He was a very naïve country boy from West Virginia, part Cherokee Indian, and the prospect of him living outside his own country was very strange to him,' says Wherrett.

Wherrett was due to return to Australia in three days. He left the bar early and told Hall he would see him back at their hotel. It was the last time he saw him. For the three days left to him, Wherrett combed Los Angeles with a friend in search of his lover.

'I had to include the possibility that he'd pissed off, that he didn't want to see me any more,' Wherrett says. 'I really couldn't entertain the idea he was dead. So the best scenario I could put on it was that he loved me so much he couldn't say goodbye.'

Wherrett, bewildered and shattered, eventually boarded the plane for Sydney and it was only when he arrived home that his friend Anne Churchill Brown told him that Hall had been killed on his motorbike travelling down the San Vincente freeway. (Does it matter that he was going in the opposite direction to their hotel?)

'There's a strong possibility,' says Wherrett, 'that if you subscribe to the Freudian view that there are no accidents then Wayne kind of killed himself. He was HIV-positive. He wasn't sick and he'd only found out a year before, but it bothered him a lot. Maybe he just thought, "I'd rather . . ."'

The subject of AIDS and sexuality is broached tentatively, although it needn't be, given the forthright and courageous way Wherrett chooses to deal with his own HIV-positive status. Courage is, after all, the master quality that Wherrett aspires to. 'Everything else stems from that,' he says. 'The next two are love and truth and I don't think you can love and I don't think you can be truthful without courage.'

Unless you've been to war or you're a member of the gay community the truth about AIDS still defies comprehension. Wherrett has lost 65 friends or acquaintances in the past 10 years from AIDS. In the week that this interview was conducted the pandemic claimed three more of his friends—close, lifelong friends—and although we spoke on five or six separate occasions during that week, he barely mentioned it. It took another friend, Les McDonald, to spell out details, like the fact that two of the funerals were on the day that Wherrett returned to Melbourne, before flying to Europe, and that one of them was the friend who had

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helped search for Wayne Hall in Los Angeles. 'You get a bit hardened by it,' McDonald says, 'otherwise your whole life would just be thinking and talking about death. A lot of us have stopped going to funerals because there are so many of them and often you have said your goodbyes already.'

Wherrett believes that apart from the series of illnesses that prey upon someone living with AIDS, guilt about being homosexual and shame at being HIV-positive can also contribute to a person's rapid decline. Wherrett is neither guilty about his homosexuality nor ashamed of being HIV-positive.

About his sexuality, he says: 'I believe I realised [I was gay] when I was 17 and I went to a party and I saw in front of me two guys kiss. And I think all that happened was the penny dropped that it was actually okay, and that it was an expression of, well, love I suppose, or affection.

'I mean I really think I knew I was gay from very young. I was doing it at 11. Wanking boys. And I sort of knew that what I got out of it was a bit different to what they were getting out of it. But you know, there again, I was fairly typical in that I thought I was the only one.'

Wherrett, however, has not been exclusively homosexual. In the early '70s he had a well-publicised relationship with actor Jackie Weaver. It was possibly the greatest love of his life and to this day they remain very close friends. 'He is one of the most important people ever in my life,' says Weaver. And then after a hesitant pause, 'He is one of the greatest loves of my life.'

So why did it end? 'I don't think it's possible for a gay man to have a lasting relationship with a heterosexual woman.'

WHERRETT DISCOVERED HE WAS HIV-POSITIVE 10 years ago. He has never discussed it publicly, he says, because no-one has ever asked him. At the same time, when he left the STC in 1990 amid rumours that he had AIDS, he never chose, in dismissing the scuttlebutt, to clarify the issue. Quite rightly, he assumed that many people still held the belief, wrongly, that an HIV-positive diagnosis was tantamount to having AIDS.

Wherrett is not convinced that HIV is the cause of AIDS, nor that a person's T-cell count is necessarily indicative of whether a person has the virus. (His doubts are reinforced by a small, dissident group within the scientific and medical community.) His T-cell count has been in the healthy range ever since being diagnosed. In fact, Wherrett is testament to a person's ability to be HIV-positive and live a perfectly healthy life.

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This is, in fact, one of the reasons he has been prepared to go public for the first time.

‘A lot of people when they first are touched by the infection get sick,’ he says. ‘I have no memory of ever being sick, so I could have been HIV-positive for much longer than 10 years. But I have had an extraordinarily healthy life. I have never had syphilis, gonorrhoea or any other related kind of sexually transmitted disease. The worst illnesses I have ever had are flus and colds.’

Certainly discovering that he was HIV-positive didn’t change his philosophy or make him grasp the nettle any more firmly than he was already grasping it. As he says with a wicked smile: ‘I live extremely. It’s a bit like Gwendoline [in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*]. I need something sensational happening most of the time, most of the day, or I get bored. I also achieve a balance in my life but I don’t achieve it by moderation. I tend to realise balance by swinging from one extreme to another.’

It is hardly a secret that Wherrett loves a party, although this shouldn’t be misconstrued as a sign of wild promiscuity. ‘In my relationships I’ve almost always been monogamous and faithful,’ he says.

On his 50th birthday he arranged for about 70 of his friends to go to seven different dinner parties in Sydney simultaneously as he cruised from one to the other in a limousine. Later that night about 300 people converged on Geraldine Turner’s house. They included actors, directors, designers, media and business people and drag queens.

Jackie Weaver says she has known Wherrett to stay out three nights in a row without sleep. ‘He lives like a man who is 20 years younger,’ she says. ‘I went to the Mardi Gras party with him and I came home at 3 am and he had only just started dancing.’ Wherrett counters that he’d gone to bed at 10 pm and woken at 3 am because that’s when the best music started. His argument is unconvincing. ‘He has a genetically inordinate amount of stamina which just flaws me,’ says Brett Sheehy who shares an apartment with Wherrett. ‘After a dance party he is the first person to race home and get ready for the recovery party . . . I have seen him go for 36 hours because he doesn’t want the fun to stop. He’s been out all night and at four in the afternoon I’ve said to him, “Go to bed,” and he says, “No, I don’t want it to end.”’

The horror of being alone is, of course, part of the explanation, one which Wherrett readily admits to. ‘I’ve got a shocking disposition to melancholy,’ he says. ‘In the Elizabethan sense. It’s a typical Hamlet syndrome and it’s the outsider syndrome. The more your head is filled with thought, the less prone to action you are . . . [So] I am not good

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when I am alone. Too much thinking and if it goes on too long I can spiral.' (*I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!*)

Wherrett's propensity to plummet is well known to his friends. It's part of what makes him, in their eyes, adorable—not because he suffers, but because he gives voice to his suffering with huge dollops of energy and self-effacing humour. It often leaves everyone—Wherrett included—laughing until they ache.

Sheehy remembers coming home one evening and finding Wherrett sitting on the couch with a glass of wine. 'I said, "How are you?" He said, "Not too good really," with a smile. And I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Well, there's no point really." I said, "No point to what?" And he said, "I don't know, I was just lying here in the middle of the floor looking at the ceiling thinking I might as well end it all and then I thought: Before I do, I think I'd like another glass of wine.'"

That set them off. The spell was broken and the two of them were in hysterics. As is the case with many a brooding soul, Wherrett is extremely funny. In his domestic habits he is, according to Sheehy, neat and clean to the point of obsession. When he makes his bed in the morning, he emulates five-star hotel standards by folding back the sheet corners so that they are turned open for him when he is ready to get back into bed that night. His ties and shoes are all arranged neatly too. There is one drawer for white T-shirts and one for black T-shirts, all of them immaculately folded. Sheehy believes it's part of that need for beauty again. 'He couldn't stand to open a drawer and see jumble or chaos.'

WHEN RICHARD WHERRETT LEFT THE Melbourne International Festival in October 1993 after two not entirely happy years as artistic director, his career path looked uncertain. Within a few days he had been offered the script for what was to be his first feature film, *Billie's Holiday*. Due for release in September, it is a film Wherrett describes as a 'contemporary, urban, romantic, musical comedy' about a man struggling to get his domestic life and career happening fulsomely, satisfyingly and coincidentally—something which has always eluded Wherrett. Late last month it received a warm response in the marketplace at the Cannes Film Festival and was subsequently sold to international distributor Miramax for art-house screenings throughout the US and Britain.

In 1994 he took his highly successful production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* to New Zealand; directed a Louis Nowra play *The Temple* for the STC as well as a Peter Shaffer play *The Gift of the Gorgon* for the Queensland Theatre Company.

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On July 8, 1995 his production of *Beauty and the Beast* will open in Melbourne, and is being slated as the biggest musical yet staged in Australia. After 106 productions in 25 years, one-third classical repertoire and more than a third Australian work, Wherrett confesses to being concerned about being 'marginalised' into the big blockbuster musicals. He says he would still love to do 'brave new theatre', only no-one has asked him. The same applies to opera, even though he has previously directed two major operas.

There is an uncomfortable symmetry for Wherrett about his directing *Beauty and the Beast*. After all, it is a parable about the dehumanising effects of a life without love and for seven years—since Wayne Hall's death—this has been Wherrett's lot. He has had six major relationships in his life and he believes all of those partners have left him. 'Perhaps I'm not very nice,' he muses. 'Perhaps I'm not a good fuck, I don't know . . . I think I'm probably really difficult to live with. The demands I make of life, I make of love too. Just pushing things to be better. It's probably daunting. I'm very tiring. It's like "give us a break".'

'[Even something as prosaic as going to the movies] I'd be out with the paper circling every possible movie, giving them a notation one to 10. [With me] you can't just go to the movies. It's not as easy as that. Haven't got enough time, so you've got to pick the right movie for that mood of that day until finally it's too late and you think, "Let's just go to dinner".'

'But I'm now more self-aware. I check myself a lot because I know I'm pushing people too far. I think it's what makes me a good director. I push people to help them crash through the barriers that are preventing them from doing what they want to do. But over dinner people don't want that so much. They just want to have dinner.'

On the day Richard Wherrett left the STC in August 1990 after 11 years at the helm, playwright Louis Nowra wrote: 'I have always thought that his fondness for the "look", for the artifice, for the spectacle of musicals, was to try to cover up the emotionally devastating idea that people are fundamentally alone and can never reach across the void to connect with someone else. It is such a frightening idea, no wonder he has had to sweeten it.'

In a sense Richard Wherrett still hovers on the edge, like he did when he was a little boy sheltering in his bedroom. In an existentialist sense he is like Hamlet or Prince Hal or Macbeth, an outsider reeling from the hurricane inside his own head. He may love romance and adventure, in the Byronic sense. He may be drawn to glamour and beauty and travel. He may have found success in his public life and friendships in his private.

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But in the end he is still an outsider, laughing at his own melancholy. When he can.

Postscript

Richard Wherrett went on to write Desirelines with his brother, Peter, a book about their harrowing childhood. In February 1999 a collection of stories about Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Mardi Gras! From Lock-up to Frock up, was published. He was also preparing an account of his theatre life.

At the time of writing, his production of the Justin Fleming play, Burnt Piano, was scheduled to open at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, as was his production of Merchant of Venice for the Bell Shakespeare Company.

Since publicly declaring his HIV status, Wherrett had, by his own account, been rumoured to be near death on at least six occasions. The truth is that although he was struck low by meningitis in early 1998 and required a few months of convalescence, his health has remained good. As for romance, Wherrett said he was still without a partner, but no longer fretted about it. There was nothing quite like a mortality scare, he said, to put things in perspective.