Sitting in the glass-walled offices of the Bell Shakespeare Company in The Rocks, distinguished alumnus John Bell talks Armageddon. Earthquakes. Tsunamis. Global warming. All manner of calamity is on his mind as he prepares to mount another assault on the high peak of Shakespeare’s canon, *King Lear*.

“Everybody seems fixated with Armageddon at the moment,” he says. “It’s all about war, natural disasters and worldwide economic collapse. I think *King Lear* is very much about that, too. Is this the vision of the promised end? Are we destroying ourselves?

“In *King Lear*, the poison starts with the family and then it spreads and spreads and spreads. Wherever there is a lack of compassion or responsibility in the person who is in charge, then you can expect the worst.”

He says the end-of-the-world themes are also rife in popular entertainment. “All the big movies are disaster movies. The cinema is full of people being swallowed up by the earth and things blowing up,” he says. “There’s a kind of decadent relish in seeing mass destruction.”

Bell throws his hands up and smiles. The actor, director and founder of arguably two of the most influential theatre companies in Australia, Nimrod (which sowed the seeds for Belvoir Street) and the Bell Shakespeare Company, has been pondering the human condition for five decades. Chaos doesn’t scare him.

Dressed casually in black jeans and T-shirt, Bell is charming, funny and in command of any topic of conversation. A graduate of Sydney (BA Hons ’62), his general knowledge is intimidating and his expertise in Australian theatre history is encyclopaedic. He has an OBE, an AO, and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University (1996). In 2009 the arts industry awarded him the highest honour at the annual Helpmann Awards the JC Williamson Award for his contribution to the country’s cultural life. He is, officially, an Australian Living Treasure.

This year marks two important milestones in an illustrious career. In November, he turns 70. He will celebrate it with his wife of 45 years, actress Anna Volska and their two daughters, playwright Hilary, 43 and actress Lucy, 41.

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the Bell Shakespeare Company, an enterprise that has changed the landscape of Australian theatre, and made Shakespeare more popular than ever. The company has introduced two generations of school children to the Bard’s work and presented more than 25 Shakespeare productions on the main stages of our cities and in regional centres across Australia.

As an acclaimed actor, Bell has also inspired a new wave of performers. Among his finest work is Shakespeare’s villains are among his most acclaimed roles including that most uncompromising bad guy of all, Richard III. He first played the role in 1975, opening at Nimrod the night Gough Whitlam was sacked, and again with the Bell Shakespeare Company in 1992. When he reprised the role in 2002, *The Australian*’s theatre critic John McCallum wrote, “one day you’ll be able to tell your grandchildren that you saw John Bell act.”

Bell is showing no sign of slowing down. *King Lear*, directed by the company’s associate artistic director Marion...
Potts, opens at the Sydney Opera House this month and will tour nationally for five months. After a short break, he will take to the stage again in the Sydney Theatre Company’s stellar production of Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, alongside Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving and Richard Roxburgh.

“I will be on stage nearly every night this year,” he says. “It’s very odd for me, I have to change all my daily habits and routines to make it work. But it’s very exciting. Lear is one of the great roles for an older actor. But you can’t be too old because it is very, very demanding and a bit of a lonely slog. Although I think now, having done it twice before, I won’t knock myself out too much. I have enough knowledge and technique to see me through.”

His previous Lear was in 1998 when Barrie Kosky went to town on the themes of dementia and chaos. This time the production will focus on the psychology of the family. “I’m very interested in exploring those family dynamics which then spread out to dynamics of community and then take on a more global significance,” Bell says.

Bell, who says he prefers “a tough director”, will be working on *Uncle Vanya* with Hungarian director Tamás Ascher, whose production of Chekhov’s *Ivanov* stunned audiences at the 2009 Sydney Festival. “I’ve played Vanya and I’ve played Astrov. This time I play the Professor, the old guy,” Bell laughs. “Everybody in Sydney seems to have bought tickets for it so it’s got to be bloody good. The guy opposite me at my weekender up the coast, he claims he’s never been to theatre in his life, and even he’s bought tickets.”

The play is the thing

Growing up in East Maitland, Bell acquired a taste for theatre through the circus. Each year he was taken to Newcastle to see Wirth’s or Bullen Brothers. He recalls shuddering through the lion tamer act and remembers the clowns as “terrifying anarchists”. But it was another tent that captured the boy’s imagination.

At Christmas time, Sorlies’ tent was pitched in Civic Park opposite the Newcastle Town Hall. It was here that Bell first fell in love with the magic of theatre, watching pantos such as *Aladdin* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Vaudeville performer Bobby Le Brun was Bell’s first role model.

Aged 15, Bell discovered Shakespeare through an inspirational teacher, Brother Elgar, at Marist Brothers College. He was hooked immediately and when he saw Laurence Olivier’s film version of *Richard III*, his career path was set.

“I knew I wanted to be an actor, particularly a Shakespearean actor, from a very early age,” Bell says. “But my mother made me promise to get a degree first. She said if you get a BA, you’ll never be out of work – bless her soul.”

Bell was offered a place at NIDA in 1959, its inaugural year, but kept his promise to his mother and took up a BA at the University. He joined the Fencing Club, Debating...
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and The Players on his first day (not realising SUDS existed). For the next four years, he “mucked around” with fellow students Clive James, Bruce Beresford, Robert Hughes, Leo Schofield, John Gaden, Richard Wherrett, Mungo MacCallum, Les Murray, Bob Ellis, Laurie Oakes, Ken Horler and Germaine Greer (who gave a memorable performance in the lead role in Brecht’s Mother Courage in the Union Theatre in 1963).

“It was quite an extraordinary range of people, very competitive, very ambitious, very self-congratulatory, but full of enthusiasm and plans to take over the world. And some of them did,” he says.

Bell remembers large audiences from “downtown” coming to see SUDS and The Players – performing Shakespeare, Brecht, Sartre and Aristophanes – because there was very little theatre on offer in Sydney in the early 1960s. North Sydney’s Independent did pro-am productions of British plays, the Ensemble produced contemporary American works; and once in a blue moon Britain’s Old Vic toured a Shakespeare.

“But you never saw what I’d called serious or experimental theatre. Audiences came to the University because we were doing stuff that you couldn’t see anywhere else. The productions might have been pretty patchy but people wanted to see those plays,” Bell says, admitting that he played lead roles with no training and “got away with it”.

After Bell performed Giovanni in John Ford’s Tis Pity She’s a Whore, he received a fan letter from Tony Gilbert, who worked in his family’s car company. Bell met him for a coffee and formed a lifelong friendship. Years later Gilbert became the patron of Bell Shakespeare, offering the money to set up the company.

“Some very valuable association came out of The Players,” Bell says. “People were very fond of the campus and many graduates came back to direct us and mentor us. Sydney University gave me a lot of encouragement and self-confidence.

“It exposed me to a great diversity of opinion, too, because I’d been brought up in a Catholic home and a Catholic school, so I thought I had it all worked out … you had your six reasons for the existence of God, your six reasons for why the Catholic Church is the one true faith, your six reasons for this and that.”

Bell chuckles. “So to hit university and all these people who said ‘stuff all that was’ a total culture shock. I think what it gave me was scepticism about everything, which I think is very healthy, not cynicism, which is something else, but scepticism. To examine everything, ask questions, never believe just what you’re told, never take anything for granted, keep examining all sides of every question. That’s what it taught me and that’s the most valuable thing and I have to remind myself to keep on doing it.”

**Such stuff as dreams are made on**

Marion Potts (BA ‘88 MPhil ’96) never thought it was possible to make theatre directing a full time career.

“Especially not if you were female,” she says. “At high school I was interested in getting little projects on stage but I didn’t think you could actually be a theatre director.”

Now the 44-year-old has more than 60 productions under her belt. This month, she directs King Lear, a play she counts as her biggest challenge to date. “Harold Bloom says it hovers just outside of our expressive range,” she says. “It’s so big and it’s quite elusive but at the same time it absolutely cuts to the core of everything you know. It’s just that expressing it is so mind-boggling.”

A week after we sit down to talk in the Bell Shakespeare board room (where a poster shouts all of Shakespeare’s marketing points: “witchcraft, lust, murder, madness, lies, nudity”), the news breaks that Potts is to be the new artistic director of Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, one of Australia’s most influential companies. It’s an astonishing achievement for a woman working in a climate where it’s difficult for female stage directors to get a look in, let alone rise to the top.

Potts is modest about her achievements. She simply says she has been “very, very lucky” and credits much of her success to her early years in SUDS at Sydney University, while studying a BA in Arts/Law straight out of high school.

“I’d never really directed anything before but I was really bitten by the theatre bug in SUDS,” she says, adding that she started making theatre with students who went on to become leaders in the arts in this country. Her SUDS contemporaries included Andrew Upton (co-artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company with his wife, Cate Blanchett), Patrick Nolan (artistic director of physical theatre company Legs on the Wall), Chris Mead (artistic director of Playwriting Australia), Tom Healey (theatre director and literary manager at the Australian Script Centre) and Ian Maxwell (now Associate Professor in the Department of Performance Studies at the University.)

“All these people have really actively contributed to the theatre industry and that in itself attests to the importance of SUDS; and the way the theatre landscape has been shaped by people who started out in SUDS, I think is really telling,” she says.

Potts never saw herself as a performer. “Even today, I’m in absolute awe of what actors can do and what they put themselves through,” she says. “I did perform in SUDS we all did but I always recognised that I’m an introvert. I was always more interested in being behind the scenes and having more of an overview of the whole production.”

Potts gained a first class Honours degree in French, then studied directing at NIDA, and secured a year-long affiliate role with the Sydney Theatre Company, which allowed her to observe and assist in the creation of several productions as well as work on her own projects. At the same time, she took up a research scholarship to undertake a Master of Philosophy in Performance Studies at Sydney.

Wayne Harrison, then the STC’s Artistic Director, spotted Potts’s talent and offered her a job as assistant director, which led to a full-time contract as the company underwent a massive expansion. She soon found herself bumping in three shows in three cities in one week on a regular basis.

“I was really thrown in the deep end,” she says. “It was also a time when people such as Wayne and Gil Appleton were actively campaigning for more women in the theatre and opportunities for women directors. I was fortunate, I was in the right place at the right time.”

The issue of women’s representation in the higher echelons has recently reared its head again when leading arts practitioners gathering for a symposium at Belvoir Centre.

**“I’m in absolute awe of what actors can do and what they put themselves through” – Marion Potts**
Looking back at her student days, Potts says her time at Sydney University offered her everything she could have hoped for. “It gave me a really practical base for the work I was eventually going to pursue but it was always providing me with an academic parallel as well that would keep informing it and fuelling it. “And one of the things I have found really rewarding since is being able to go back. Whenever I’ve had a play that has required a specialised perspective or expertise, I’ve been able to ring up an academic who taught me, go and have lunch, and really pick their brains. I did it for Taming of the Shrew with Penny Gay very recently. [Professor Gay is a Shakespeare expert in the Department of English.] I feel very passionate about universities maintaining their sense of collegiality, offering industry professionals the chance to draw on the knowledge of academics. There are people like Margaret Sankey [Professor of French Studies] and Penny Gay and Gay McAuley [of the Department of Performance Studies] who I will always feel comfortable contacting as a resource for the work that I do. The University must remain a living thing for the industry.”

Potts, who lives in the inner-west with her husband, actor-writer Ned Manning and their two children aged six and eight, says the Sydney theatre scene is thriving but all companies large and small face the challenge of dwindling audiences, particularly those in the 30-45 age bracket who are busy with young children. “People have time poor lives and there are a lot of entertainment options competing with theatre. But one of the great things about the main stage companies is that we are facing the issue in a collegiate way. It’s daunting but I think we can win. We have to work together to connect with people in a world that is changing so rapidly.”

Potts plans to keep directing in her new role and she’s excited about being an advocate for the arts and having an impact on the industry within a company setting. “I’m a big believer in the transformative power of theatre,” she says. “With any project I do, and in any company I’m lucky enough to have a role in, I want to be questioning the sort of people we want to be and the sort of society we want to shape. I think theatre has to do more than just reflect society by holding up a mirror. It also has to show us that we can take charge and effect change as well. “One of my favourite Shakespeare quotes is from Hamlet, that we know what we are, but we know not what we may be. Theatre allows us to imagine a different future for ourselves and that’s what really is important about it.”

**Method in the madness**

Meanwhile, John Bell’s passion for the theatre – and for Shakespeare – is undimmed. “He is a writer who constantly asks who are we and how should we live,” he says. “The plays are endlessly fascinating, you can do them again and again and still find new meanings. I want people to see and understand and like and appreciate Shakespeare, that’s what drives me.” He has no plans to retire and imagines he will lead Bell Shakespeare for another three years or so before he hands over the reins. But he will never retire from performing or directing. “I like doing both. There aren’t that many acting roles left that I want to play or can play, certainly in Shakespeare I’ve done them all. But I’d like to do one or two more, maybe one a year or one every couple of years at least. That keeps me busy enough with everything else going on here.”

Bell’s influence on the theatrical landscape of Australia is profound and ongoing. “I think we’ve nurtured several generations of Australian actors, directors and designers working on the classics, working on great material and that’s been very sustaining for them,” he says. “Shakespeare is much more popular now than it was 20 years ago. There’s almost too much now. You look in the paper and there are four or five different Shakespeare plays being done in Sydney every week - on the beach, by the pool, in the park, all the major companies are doing Shakespeare regularly, it’s almost too much. I mean God, how much more can we take!” He’s joking, of course. “Our purpose was to make Shakespeare popular and accessible and I think we’ve done that. Now I want to keep getting better and be more adventurous. We’re working on developing experimental work and we’re getting into indigenous communities to put the plays into their own languages and we’re continuing the education work. It’s tremendously challenging but we’re in good shape.” For Bell the role of theatre today is the same as it was in Ancient Greece. “It allows us to look at ourselves honestly and at the way we behave – whether it’s in the family or in the workplace or in a political situation,” he says. “It makes us ask ourselves, how should we live? How can we preserve ourselves and the world around us? And it has to do so in a way that is exhilarating as well as enlightening. It can’t just be a sermon. It needs a sense of celebration. We come together to celebrate in theatre. That’s what the Greeks did, they would come together and celebrate because coming together and telling a story is a way of coping with it. That’s still the way it should be done.”

**Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow**

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**The plays are endlessly fascinating, you can do them again and again and still find new meanings**

– John Bell

**King Lear at the Sydney Opera House, March – 10 April; Canberra 15 April – 1 May; Brisbane 5–22 May; Melbourne 27 May – 12 June; Perth 18–26 June. Uncle Vanya at Sydney Theatre from November 13. Marion Potts takes over at the Malthouse Theatre in 2011.**