

**HARRIET ELVIN'S SPEAKING NOTES FOR  
"RAPT IN FELT: OUR STORIES"  
TEXTILE WORKS, 1 JUNE 2018**

- When I first heard about *Rapt in Felt: Our Stories* I was intrigued and, to be honest a little perplexed.
- It seemed such an unlikely juxtaposition of art forms:
  - the tangible and enduring nature of felt art
  - combined with the ephemeral and fleeting nature of improvised drama, through poetry and song.
- Then Helen Cox and Lynn Petersen kindly asked me to be guest speaker tonight - and I could see that I was going to have to get my head around what it all means.
- Well, I knew that both improvisation and felt making are passions of Lynn.
- And I could see, too, that this clever combination of the visual and performing arts were a nice reflection of my own professional responsibilities, managing both a gallery and a theatre complex.
- But at first, I couldn't really see what the connections were, and how it could all work.
- However, on delving deeper into the subject, I discovered that, while an apparently unusual combination, these are two forms of art, or craft, which do indeed have several powerful connections.
- They are, of course, both ancient practices.
- Felt made from wool is considered to be the oldest form of textile – its origins steeped in wonderful legends.
- And the practice of telling stories, through improvised verse and song, is as old as humanity itself.
- Both are creative processes – ones that involve transformation, the creation of the new from the old.
- Whether this be the transformation of fibres into new fabric through the making of felt.
- Or the transformation of lived experiences, and creative insights, into new theatrical expression.

- **Importantly, both processes are characterised by the unpredictable.**
- **As Lynn says, “both arts require a sense of adventure, and the capacity to react quickly to surprises”.**
- **There’s that wonderful - although perhaps slightly daunting - sense of the artform taking you into unfamiliar territory, which you have only limited capacity to control.**
- **The delightful surprise - and risk - of serendipity.**
- **The process of felt making, and the whole concept of dramatic improvisation, both embrace the unknown as a source of creativity.**
- **I see this as a marvellous antidote to our increasingly regulated and controlled society, our meticulously planned world.**
- **In each case, the creative journey requires courage; skill; and a capacity for joyful exploration.**
- **In *Rapt in Felt: Our Stories*, these qualities will lead to a remarkable and rich collaboration, as the Canberra Region Feltmakers, and Chrysalis Theatre Company, interact with audiences, and work together.**
- **Perhaps most importantly, both partners in the collaboration will bring to it a passion for telling stories.**
- **Indeed, all art is really about telling stories - each work of art, whether visual or performing, is imbued with the stories of its creator - or the stories of others, modified, and interpreted, and brought to life, by its creator.**
- **Textile art has, since its first origins, been closely linked with storytelling.**
- **There’s an ancient tradition of telling stories while textile art is being made: the voice employed, while the hands are kept busy.**
- **We’re reminded of this in the film *How to make an American quilt* in which the women tell of their experiences of love, and marriage, while sewing a wedding quilt.**
- **But of course, the story may be the subject of the textile work itself – perhaps most famously in the Bayeux Tapestry, that exquisite piece of narrative art.**

- There's something very special, very personal, about the way in which we see the hand of the creator, the storyteller, in a textile work.
- These pieces often become family heirlooms - like, in my own family, the sampler stitched by my great-grandmother, Harriet Sutton, to demonstrate her skill in needlework at the age of 13.
- And just as textile art embodies, and tells, stories so too does improvised theatre.
- It's surely no accident that "spinning a yarn" can describe the physical process of converting fibre materials into yarns
- But can also mean telling a story, especially a long drawn-out or fanciful one.
- This project makes us aware of the importance of shared stories to our community – indeed, for building community.
- It reminds us, in our frenetic contemporary world, of the value of slowing down, and immersing ourselves in the glory of the now, the never-to-be repeated moment, as our shared stories bring us together, and remind us of our shared humanity.
- The works that are basis for this project are rich, diverse and highly skilled.
- It's impossible to do justice in a few words to an exhibition as large and varied as this.
- So, let me just make a couple of general observations, and highlight some features that I feel makes this body of work so appropriate as the basis for improvised drama.
- The first thing to notice is the remarkable versatility and adaptability of felt, as a medium.
- The range of objects displayed here is extraordinary – every type of clothing, including jackets and coats, skirts, tunics, vests, wraps and capes;
- Accessories, like bags and baskets, shawls and scarves, jewellery and hats – wonderful hats that often seem to have a personality all of their own;
- Objects, like vases and teacups, pots and blankets, lanterns and vessels;
- Through to decorative items like wall hangings, and sculptures of subjects as varied as boats, birds and flowers.
- The full range from practical and wearable, to decorative, and whimsical.

- In a glorious range of colours and textures.
- These diverse objects are united by the skill of their creators and by a pervading sense of playfulness, delight in the process, and the joy of discovery.
- Importantly for the improvisation partnership, there's a very clear sense of the stories embedded in these objects, both in the works themselves and in the artist statements that provides context for them.
- Throughout these statements, words such as: "this reminds me of" – or "I was inspired by" – or "this brings back memories of" – tell us the story behind the work.
- And the word "special" keeps on recurring.
- These works, evoke stories of special moments – memorable experiences –
  - of encounters with the natural world,
  - of family occasions,
  - of creative workshops, shared with others,
  - and of travel to distant lands.
- In some cases they convey the idea of special experiences yet to come.
- One artist describes her basket as *An object full of hopes, dreams and longings*.
- While often the story is embedded in the nature of the work – in its subject, or colour, texture or decoration -
- In other cases the fibre itself is what conveys significance – it could be made of scraps of fabric, from a box of family treasures; or pieces of wool, saved from childhood.
- These works of dense fabric are also dense with meaning.
- They give solid form to the artists' memories and experiences, hopes and dreams, so that the exhibition as a whole is rich and many-layered with stories.
- It will be further enriched, and further layered, when the stories come alive, and are added to, through the work of Chrysalis Theatre Company – that name itself conveying both the texture of the chrysalis and the process of transformation.
- Well, visitors to exhibitions are often passive viewers.

- But this is different – this is theatre embedded in an exhibition – a multimodal event in which interaction between audiences and artists creates an immersive, and inspiring experience.
- The felt makers will create new felt objects, in real time.
- While the improvisers create new songs, and poetry.
- And so this project allows us, as visitors, to be active participants, to gain a richer engagement with the works, as the artists invite us to react to them, add our own stories, and spin new yarns.
- We can be physically wrapped in the warmth and comfort of felt as a textile.
- But we can also be rapt in the delight and wonder of felt making, and improvised drama as art forms, as we create new stories and celebrate shared narratives, producing an enchanted circle of creativity.
- So, as we step into that enchanted circle, I'm delighted and very honoured to open *Rapt in Felt: our stories*.