

**KATHARINE BRISBANE*****THE ARTS AND THE PRE-EMPTIVE BUCKLE***

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I realised when I began writing this lecture that it is fifty years since I became an undergraduate at this university. There have been a few changes in that time. For one thing in 1949 there were only 2,000 students in the whole university. There was no Octagon Theatre and the Dolphin was a shed in Agriculture, I think it was, which we converted and Guy Grey Smith painted with murals. We were very fond of that little theatre. When Philip and I left Perth in 1965 I did a farewell production of Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* there.

Mine was not a distinguished degree. Philip had that for both of us. But equally for both of us this University laid down the direction of our lives. The principles we learnt here were those I still believe to be the basic principles of education: not to learn and remember everything but to have your mind opened to the world of learning: to recognise what you don't know and to learn how to find out. As we have all come to realise, it is not the end product which is important but the process, the continual process of learning, in which we engage for the whole of our lives.

Some at this university did not always think like that. Walter Murdoch, the founding professor of English, used to tell a story about his meeting with the appointments board when he took up the Chair of English around 1913. His primary task, he was told, would be to lecture five days a week from 9 to 5. When he asked how they expected him to prepare his lectures, they answered: 'We thought you would have done all that before you came.'

By 1949 when as a naïve fresher, barely 17, I enrolled here, things were much more

comfortable. The University of WA was proudly a free university. Dr George Currie was Vice-Chancellor and his door was always open to students. He even gave parties for senior students in his house in Crawley Avenue which is now the Festival of Perth headquarters. The Arts Faculty was a vintage array of individualists from the acerbic Leavisite English professor Alan Edwards, who taught me how to be a critic; the lovable Alec King, who taught me to love language; Jeana Bradley who taught me to love and engage with classic drama; and host of others, like Josh Reynolds, head of History, Jean Randall and Bidy Morrow in the French department, and, of course, the irrepressible Frank Callaway. Bob Hawke was president of the Guild, Billy Sneddon was president of the Young Liberals; the angst-ridden teenage novelist Randolph Stow; Bill Heseltine, later the Queen's private secretary, and his brother Harry, later professor, and many more who later made their name inside and outside Australia, were undergraduates in my time. More important still we had a heady injection of returned servicemen and women completing degrees under the Commonwealth Returned Services Training Scheme. There were also Columbo Plan students; and the first of the exotic displaced persons from Europe who have changed Australia forever. These people contributed a worldliness to the level of tutorial debate which was intoxicating to a school-leaver like myself.

It was a very, very secure world, here on this campus in the early post-war period; a solidly Anglo-Saxon world in which we could look forward with confidence to the career of our choice. The war to end all wars had been successfully accomplished; Australian wool was reclothing the world; and in the new mood the arts would lead the way to international peace and understanding; and science the way to material progress by the application of amazing new technologies.

Remembering the past can, however, be put to better use than just nostalgia. Corporate memory is essential to progress, particularly in today's society in which policy is determined in three-year spans. Today's society is so mobile that almost all of us are deprived of our roots.

Careers have become global; families are widely-separated; ours is no longer a monoculture. Those immigrants I went to university with are now grandparents; their grandchildren are asking the question, 'Where did I come from? Where do I belong?'

All these changes have been reflected by the arts in Australia and in turn have been affected by them. What being an Australian at the turn of the millennium means is mainly defined by what we are not: we are no longer an Anglo-Celtic population; we are no longer wholly dependent for prosperity on agriculture and raw materials; we are no longer culturally dependent upon Britain or the United States. The nouns which spring to mind are 'diversity' and 'pluralism'; more accurate is probably the word 'individualism'; for public attitudes and current language are dominated by material advancement and self-empowerment. And yet at bottom there remain received values of egalitarianism, loyalty to community and suspicion of personal ambition which contribute to a common culture that our immigrants absorb; and which provides them with a welcome sense of security.

But while public life is awash with high emotion, where are the arts in all this turmoil? Where is the subversion that characterised the 60s and 70s? The assaults on gravity, the poetry, the vulgarity? Hidden from plain sight, I am ashamed to say. Instead we have again the 'deadly theatre' against which Peter Brook once railed. The big companies, once small and ambitious, have become the captives of their sponsors and subscribers and are even more mono-cultural than they were at the start. Engagement with the turmoil is now left to the indigent fringe. Artists themselves are beginning to call their world moribund. The Australia Council recently employed Saatchi and Saatchi to investigate this. They found that while the majority of Australians are touched by the creative imagination, 'the arts' as they have come to be known, are not seen as part of their lives. It needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this. Nor an expensive market report, either. 'The condition of the Deadly theatre is fairly obvious', wrote Brook.

All through the world theatre audiences are dwindling. There are occasional new movements, good new writers and so on, but as a whole, the theatre not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains... The Broadway crisis, the Paris crisis, the West End crisis are the same: we do not need the ticket agents to tell us that the theatre has become a deadly business and the public is smelling it out. It could be a comment from 'Securing the Future', the recent Nugent Report on the crisis of the major arts institutions. In fact he was writing in the 1960s.

At this point I want to except from what I have to say one section of the arts community - and that is our Aboriginal artists. Unlike their white colleagues they have persisted in their purpose from the '70s to the present. Their joint purpose has been self-expression, communication and empowerment. It has been political from start to finish; it has exploited and subverted; and more than any other aspect of endeavour it has assisted in joining the hands of the disparate tribes across the country to create the beginnings of an Aboriginal nation. In drama, small beginnings in Redfern, Broome and Brisbane have by degrees allowed the white spectator into the private world of Aboriginal life and history; more dynamic beginnings in the outback have achieved a global place for Aboriginal musicians; Australia's name in the art world has been transformed by the unique perspective of Aboriginal artists. And writing has become a further means of empowerment, of seeking in the hidden past some understanding of the present. 'To write', Jack Davis has written, 'is a political act.'

When I was young and living in Perth there was a great deal of lively amateur theatre. There were a great many private art galleries and a lively musical life. We were proud to be the most isolated capital city in the world; and while we accepted without question that London was the hub of the universe, in the meantime we made our own world. We were self-reliant and I believe reasonably content. We had our own visual artists; but in other fields taste was determined by others. We did not have our own playwrights. Our composers' work was only patronisingly received. Our writers were barely acknowledged by the literary world.

We did not know what it was to see ourselves interpreted on the page and on the stage.

Nevertheless, those memories of amateur music and theatre have stayed with me over the 30 years in which I observed the advances in the arts under the tutelage of the Australia Council. The pursuit of excellence, of creating something of our own and yet of 'world standards', has been the aim from the start and without question subsidy has wrought a transformation. We have theatres, orchestras and ensembles of outstanding quality; remarkable public and private galleries; a healthy book publishing industry; impressive training schools; a film and television industry; internationally-acclaimed dancers, rock groups, novelists and film stars. So what more do we want?

Two things: I believe in the tumult of change we have lost sight of community, of the reasons we once believed making the arts was important: that the pursuit of excellence, by its nature, has divided the arts from everyday life - and, incidentally, from the universities as part of that life; and I believe that in the pursuit of quality product the orthodox artforms have incrementally gained the high ground at the expense of innovation and investment in the future. The growth and career of the artist has been left out of the equation. Worse, in some quarters their working conditions suggest they are seen as no more than pabulum for production values.

I believe that after 30 years of subsidy only a handful of performing artists in theatre, dance and music, have control over their careers; only a handful can build their careers the way any other professional does - by seeking job opportunities, initiating new ventures, demanding reward for added value. Further, that among those at the top today we have virtually no spokesmen and women, no revered figures who engage actively with public issues and speak for their profession. No noted non-Aboriginal artists are publicly engaged in the reconciliation movement; and only a handful have gone public on the Republic. The press do not ask their views about the effects of the GST on the self-employed; on the ethics of

radio hosts or the aesthetics of a new city development. The press and the artists themselves have colluded in this: this assumption that artists have no reality - indeed no worth - beyond celebrity.

Again I except from this my Aboriginal colleagues. Prominence has imposed upon them the responsibility to speak for their wider community; and few have remained in the profession at the expense of that community. Those I remember from the '70s became public servants, land council leaders, health and cultural workers. The confidence which speaking other's words in public taught them, also showed them how to express their own. And that such expression is possible, even for the underprivileged. Our best orators in Australia today are largely Aboriginal.

Aboriginal artists have demanded their rights from government; but for white artists the existence of the Australia Council has created a climate of dependence, bounded by guidelines which conspire against individual artists entering public controversy; or revealing the reality of their lives. The guidelines themselves, which have continued to set at a premium the young, the new and the correct, have discounted the contribution of the mature artist and left those in the middle-age without recourse.

The ABC's John Cleary has coined a phrase to describe this condition. He calls it the Pre-emptive Buckle. The occasion was a discussion with Rev. Tim Costello about the rise of gambling addiction in Victoria and his perception that the charities now dealing with the problem had earlier failed to oppose government-supported gambling for fear of losing their subsidies. It was, said Cleary, a pre-emptive buckle. I believe that 30 years of subsidy has brought about a similar genuflection in the arts' way of thinking: I think it is time for a moratorium.

Nobody but I, it seems, thinks this situation is odd, though most agree it is debilitating. But nobody under 40, as I keep reminding people, remembers life before the Australia Council.

Or, as it was called in the first instance, the Australian Council for the Arts.

No one at the outset wanted this dependency. The aims were creative freedom for the artist, innovation, excellence and public accessibility. It was to be our Australia Council, to stand beside us, not above us. I don't think for a moment that the founders imagined that the companies being funded would accrue larger and larger debts; or that in 30 years morale and risk-taking would be at such a low level. So I have been retracing these beginnings to try to see what went wrong. The answer is surprisingly simple, in retrospect. Too narrow a track was set.

In pursuit of 'professionalism' that healthy amateur culture which I remember, was discarded, the provision of subsidy to new competitors drove the commercial theatre to bankruptcy; the early support for research and development sought by the founders from universities was eroded by ill-run residencies and mutual distrust; the politics of subsidy inevitably ensured that the product became the measure of progress, not the arduous process of artistic development no national cultural policy was drawn up which took account of all the aspects of cultural life; no industrial infrastructure was built to support the artist from youth to age.

So let me tell you some history. In 1968 I was the national theatre critic of the Australian. I remind you of the word 'national' because when I took the job in 1967 it was a suitable part-time occupation for a journalist with two young children to cover the professional theatre around the whole of Australia. I wrote two columns a week which appeared, I also remind you, on the leader page. There was no arts page at that time. The arts, as much as there was, was accepted as being part of life. I travelled interstate once every three or four weeks and my columns carried news, reviews and debate. Similar commentary appeared regularly on art, music and film.

In 1967-8 the debate was the Gorton Government's decision to establish an Australian

Council for the Arts to develop opera, ballet and theatre. Other arts were already supported by the Commonwealth Literary Fund, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, the Committee for Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers. Exhilaration mixed with scepticism characterised the responses; the worst fears were thought to have been realised when Dr H.C. Coombs was appointed chairman and convenor.

Dr Coombs, who retired as Chairman of the Reserve Bank to undertake this venture, is one of the iconic figures in the history of fiscal policy, Aboriginal reconciliation and the arts, and was, of course, a distinguished alumnus of this university. However, at that time he had been badly damaged by the disrepute of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, our first funding body which he had founded in 1954; the fear was that the lessons of history would be repeated. The announcement of the first Council - a conservative group of eight, mainly academics and politicians - only confirmed this. Coombs was, however, a man of goodwill, altruism and determination; and he had the ear of government. Federal subsidy for the arts would never have been achieved without him.

In October 1968 he invited me to join an interim Drama Committee to make a report recommending the direction the Council should take. At that time the staff consisted of the appointed chairman, the newly-appointed executive officer, Dr Jean Battersby, and a couple of seconded public servants. Patricia Rolfe from the Bulletin was also invited and I suspect that Dr Coombs, being a pragmatist, thought he'd rather have us critics inside the tent than outside. In the event we were ineffective both in direction and criticism and I have not been invited onto such a board since.

At our first meeting in October we debated the question of 'raise or spread', i.e. to provide substantial funds to a few privileged groups in order to show visible progress rapidly; or to spread the money among the existing groups for the purpose of upgrading them by degrees. The total sum at that time was \$1.4 million. We voted unanimously for the former

and considered the stages by which this might be achieved; but were pre-empted by the announcement in December that the bulk of the funding would go to the Melbourne Theatre Company and the Old Tote Theatre Company. A small amount was set aside for 'special projects'. Worse, dispensation of these funds would be undertaken by the MTC, the Old Tote and the Elizabethan Theatre Trust. The 'deadly theatre' we had so hoped to escape from had triumphed again. COLD RAGE IN THE THEATRE stormed the headlines.

The pre-eminent politicians of the theatre at that time were two Englishmen of naval origins and strong links to Dr Coombs and the Elizabethan Theatre Trust: John Sumner of the MTC and Professor Robert Quentin of the Old Tote. My documents show that all the decisions were made and announced long before our report was submitted; and that there was widely dissenting opinion among the individual members of our committee.

To do Dr Coombs justice, it was clearly essential to the survival of his scheming that the first government grant be dispensed and show demonstrable results before 30 June 1969. A further election was looming and in fact occurred in October. The Council had no infrastructure for handling money and he needed the help of people with experience - there were not many to choose from at that time. 'It seems preferable', he had said at the 1968 Adelaide Festival, that the Council should be formed from persons of known widely-ranging interest in the arts. This does not preclude practitioners but the essential requirements are: first, a wide and discriminating interest in the arts; second, an understanding of the problems associated with the support of the arts; and third, a capacity to persuade government. I take this to be one of the main functions of the Council: to act as an advocate for the arts and an influence on government ways of thinking. I do not think that a practitioner is necessarily the best advocate.

It is interesting that he makes such a point of advocacy; and indeed the arts community were pressing hard for open government; but from the start the Council determined not to

enter into correspondence with the press and its constituency or to raise its voice in any other language than that of the public servant; and has continued in that policy to this day.

The Coalition won the election and plans continued reasonably smoothly until Prime Minister Gorton was replaced by William McMahon. But these early decisions set a pattern which has been followed, I believe, to this day. Policy and planning continued to be pre-empted by politics. Gough Whitlam's failure to consult before issuing his magisterial proclamation in January 1973, that all the arts funding bodies would be combined into a statutory body called the Australia Council, caused an even greater storm, particularly from those eminent artists who had been active in the campaign to bring Labor to power.

But to return to those early days. In considering the Australian theatre as it was then, we on the Drama Committee were allowed by Dr Coombs to include neither the amateur theatre nor the commercial theatre. The consequence was that a strong culture of Little Theatres, as they were called, actor-managers' theatres using amateur actors, was lost.

I'd like to take a moment to tell you something of the honourable history of these theatres, of which there were many in our major cities. In the late '20s when the Depression struck, together with talkies and entertainment tax, most forms of live entertainment went out of business. In Sydney, of 16 commercial theatres only two remained by 1935. All over the country actors thrown out of work began to set up speech and drama studios with ancillary small theatres. By that time wider travel and the arrival of radio in the 1920s, had begun to make correct speech something of an issue for the upwardly mobile, an idea encouraged by this enterprising new crop of elocution teachers.

More importantly, these studios provided not only training in rounded vowels but opportunities for playwrights, scene designers and above all directors. The position of the director as we know it today derives from these studios. The director was the professional; his or hers (there were many hers) was the vision; and many directors were both skilled and

learned in their craft. They were there to tutor their cast, to teach them every step and every inflection. From being a life of entertainment, acting became a serious investigation; and the actors very much dependent upon the theories promulgated by the directors. It was really not until the late 1970s that actors in the new subsidised theatre began to achieve a level of independence in the interpretation of their role. Now in the '90s the wheel has turned: directors have again reasserted their status as custodians of the personal vision.

These early theatres were Australia's training ground. And because they were held together not by commercial imperatives but by a common belief in the civilising influence of good theatre, they were also quick to adapt the avant-garde social theories of Europe and America to the Australian stage. From Europe in the '30s came the works of Chekhov, Stanislavski and Meyerhold; and from the United States the socialist Federal Theatre and the Living Newspaper. This was still the picture when I left Perth in 1965. Furthermore it was those principles, held by the public servants who joined the Canberra Repertory Society, that made their mark on Coombs and his associates when they conspired to create first the Trust and then the Australia Council.

And, of course, it is those same principles that have driven the Australia Council: given it in Prime Minister Whitlam's terms 'a twofold objective - the pursuit of excellence and the spread of interest and participation'. This would seem to be an uncomplicated aim; one we all believe we would know how to achieve. All along the way, however, self-censorship, ideologies and the shifting guidelines covering what is 'excellence'; and what is 'innovation' have conspired to prevent the quiet, steady progress of artistic practice.

The first thing the guidelines did was kill the culture that created the Australia Council. All those actor-managers who so much believed in best practice and disdained the commercial, found themselves ineligible for subsidy. To qualify, a company had to have a board of worthy citizens and pay actors at least the minimum wage laid down by Actors' Equity. Rehearsal

pay was also required. Many theatres attempted this but failed in competition with the more handsomely resourced companies; and so we lost our avant-garde. At the other extreme the commercial theatre also died. J.C. Williamson's Ltd, a century old in 1976, unsuccessfully sought support through an Industries Assistance Inquiry and went into liquidation. As it stood JCW deserved its end because it had lost touch with its patrons; but a more enlightened government agency would have seen that as owner of the largest theatre chain in the world JCW was providing a valued facility to a new band of entrepreneurs just starting out. Instead it took another fifteen years and the assets of Cameron Mackintosh to return the commercial theatre to its former strength.

Neither of these forms, neither the Little Theatres nor JCW, was primarily about excellence; but they were about active participation and accessibility. They provided the audience base upon which to build. People have a hundred reasons for choosing to go to a play or a concert and these reasons are more to do with sustaining a social life than about sustaining artistic standards.

The Nugent report on the major arts organisations makes a reflection on this in admitting they have lost the audience base; that today's audiences are more worldly, better informed, have more diverse interests and much more choice in entertainment than 30 years ago. It does not, however, show any recognition of the huge cultural changes that have taken place and their influence upon social behaviour and musical taste.

A third element that lost out was the university campuses. In my day the universities were the leaders of cultural progress. In Perth it was the University which built theatres, encouraged performance and became the home of the Festival of Perth. Similarly the Sydney University Dramatic Society, now over 100 years old, contributed many of the great names in our theatre. In Melbourne what was the Secondary Teachers College in Carlton spawned not only the Australian Performing Group and the Victorian College of the Arts but a new kind

of actor-based performance which has changed our expectations of theatre. The University of Queensland was famous for the political satire of the Popular Theatre Troupe and for exploring touring in that expansive state. In 1968 the universities and their offshoots were demonstrably the leaders of artistic thought.

Dr Coombs, however, was keen to involve the universities in development programs and proposed residencies and other fellowships. But the early attempts were not successful on either side and the proliferation of creative arts courses since the '60s has done little to break down the barriers of suspicion between the profession and the theatre. Despite this, and in part because of the amalgamation of universities with training schools, theatre studies have proliferated. The older ones have turned inward into performance theory; the younger ones have become training academies. But the uneasiness about where their graduates stand in making a career, remains. Music has done better: our conservatoria range from the conservative to the avant-garde but they are all centrally connected to the practice of music today.

Meanwhile in the '70s, a new kind of alternative theatre, the young lions, as they were called, and almost all university-educated, quickly replaced the old-fashioned little theatres. So we did not miss the old guard too much. They were set in their ways and this was revolution. It was a time of the first moon landing; of anti-Vietnam moratoria; the arrival of the Pill; of anti-censorship street battles, of new beginnings of a film industry. As Wordsworth said of another revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive

And to be young was very heaven.

Nevertheless, revolutions have their consequences. In 1973-74 the artist Clifton Pugh with the Victorian Labor Arts Policy Committee and later Arts Action, railed against the new Labor Government's betrayal of democratic principles and the arts policy drawn up prior to

the election. Once more calls for a proper examination of artists' needs was pre-empted by a hasty report to the Prime Minister which set in stone the aims of the Australia Council - though the pain was somewhat assuaged by a tripling of the Council's budget. Furious debate then raged about the composition of the various boards, about peer assessment and the content of the Australia Council Bill. Arts Action produced a discussion paper in 1974 which said of the culture debate: Conventional definitions have long been with us and are essentially bound up with aspirations towards the 'excellent', the proven edifices which the middle class of this and other countries understand, own and occupy. To that group, the 'excellent' means formalism, historical acceptance and sheer gloss. The ALP should be pursuing not 'excellence' in this sense, since it is there to be found already, but sufficient variety of artistic expression to allow even the most socially and economically disadvantaged of our community access to enjoy and criticise. Within those parts, excellence is to be found, the elite are not its custodians.

This was probably the last attempt to argue about the arts in their own language. By 1975 we were exhausted, by the expansion of enterprise and by the politics of survival. One key figure, Robin Lovejoy, had resigned the previous year as director of the Old Tote. My comments on his departure were prescient: [Mr Lovejoy's] problem, and that of all the regional theatre companies, has been that of holding to, or even initiating, plans for development and consolidation in the face of the overwhelming day-to-day task of keeping the house in order...expansion in any business dictates its own momentum. The danger point soon comes at which the organisation outgrows the working capacity of its founder and that is the point at which a structure devised by far-seeing policy is most needed.

The Old Tote went into liquidation five years later. That problem of exponential growth, together with the short-term planning enforced by annual funding applications and the pressure not to be 'commercial' has been at the root of most such downfalls.

In July 1975 a Senate Inquiry was established to 'ensure that the Australia Council and the Board properly and effectively carry out their task of overall promotion of the arts in Australia'. And in November the Labor Government was peremptorily dismissed.

There followed a period of financial accountability. By 1979 the publisher Peter Ryan in *The Age* was inveighing against 'the subsidised scribblers', quoting A.D. Hope as expressing 'disappointment and surprise at the extraordinary creations being conjured up and served to us as serious writing by the aid of the Literature Board'. In 1981 the major companies were cut by 20 per cent and eight small companies had their funding withdrawn altogether. Part of that funding was later restored but of these theatres only Sydney's Ensemble Theatre survives today. BLEAK FUTURE FOR THE ARTS, headlined *The Age*. Direct appeal to government was more profitable. The National Film and Television School and the National Institute of Dramatic Art both received the means to build and maintain handsome new complexes; the Australian Opera and Ballet and the two Trust orchestras marched to Canberra and achieved direct-line funding and a rise of 10 per cent.

By now the business men and women were moving in and meeting government on its own terms. The Australian Ballet went on strike over relations with management. In 1982 Timothy Pascoe, arts business adviser and former director of the Liberal Party, became executive chairman and set about 'restructuring' the Council. In 1983 Bob Hawke's Labor Government took office but did not replicate Whitlam's largesse. In 1984 Professor Di Yerbury began her stormy incumbency as peacemaker, with Donald Horne as Chair. Concern at the major organisation's expansion led to the short-lived introduction of ceiling funding. On 11 June the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial reported on 'voices of alarm' by the major theatre bodies that the Australia Council, in line with the arts policy of the Federal Government, will shift its funding away from the traditional areas to 'community arts'. This fear was apparently confirmed recently when the Melbourne Theatre Company ...had its funds reduced by 21 per cent...the awful spectre has arisen of companies like the Australian Ballet or the Australian

Opera being forced to the wall, while money is poured into face-painting competitions held in municipal car parks.

In this melee quiet artistic practice had no chance.

The Council's major problem has always been that of being accountable to government. The freedom of the late 60s with its emphasis on the quality of life created a climate out of which idealistic initiatives like the Australia Council could be born; but it was a short-lived flowering. Mutual incomprehension confronted the arts community the moment the first Arts Minister was appointed by Prime Minister McMahon, a last-minute act which led to the ill-fated Peter Howson being dubbed the Minister for Odds and Sods and a Pain in the Arts

Explaining the funding of artistic practice to the unsympathetic ears of government became the unhappy task of the executive officer, Dr Jean Battersby, and as Justin Macdonnell has vividly outlined in his book *Arts, Minister?* there were ministers who took no interest, those who took too much interest; and those who just wanted to meet the actresses.² But they all had the same problem, that Cabinet was not concerned with artistic practice; if public money was to be invested, then they wanted results. *ARTISTS ON THE GRAVY TRAIN* became the tabloid response to the inevitable disputes between the Council and its constituency.

The 1980s saw the word 'industry' promoted in response to the criticism and began to present a case for the arts based on its contribution to employment, the quality of Australian life, the film industry, tourism and export, supported by appropriate data. It was an effective move in the short term but finally only confirmed the values of the 'economic fundamentalists', as Donald Horne called them, and left the arts open to be judged by those values. That was the dilemma: we now had Coombs' 'persons of known...interest in the arts' and the 'capacity to persuade government' but they found themselves attempting to find concrete terms in which to defend the abstract, forced into talking about civilised life in the language of performance indicators and asset management.

This idea of material product has dogged the Council from the outset. All the public statements, inquiries, reports, that I can remember - even the 'visionary' Creative Nation document released by Paul Keating in 1994 - have been studies in the tangible, such as income and popularity. They are partial views from the consumer's viewpoint: policies to achieve 'excellent' product; money provided in pockets, according to current need. It is no wonder that in every debate over funding and innovation the 'proven edifices' of orthodoxy, as Arts Action called them in 1974, have become more and more entrenched. For all his achievement, Dr Coombs' weakness was that he was not in the business. He was neither an artist nor an entrepreneur; he was a consumer; and he wanted the arts to make him happy. Not long before he died, he was at a celebration in the garden of the Myer family home in Toorak, surrounded by musicians and dancers. Someone asked him why he had done so much for the arts. 'When you look like me', he said humbly, 'you need to have beauty about you.'

In 1986 a genuine attempt was made to increase accessibility, downsize the Council, and reduce the drain on the public purse by encouraging better administration. This was a parliamentary inquiry into Commonwealth assistance to the arts chaired by Leo McLeay. It had virtues, the chief of which was that for the first time it took into account the whole of government's involvement. 'The Council', he wrote in a book on the report 'is by no means the only form of government involvement in the arts. Council funding represents about 6% of government cultural funding in Australia; perhaps 20% of government arts spending.'³

The report, quaintly titled 'Patronage, Power and the Muse' - perhaps a kindly attempt by Parliament to adopt the other side's language - made many resolutions, some of which (like triennial funding for major organisations) were implemented; but the argument fell apart on interpretation. While its motives were very much in line with the Arts Action paper of 1974, its resolutions were industry-based, urging means for developing potentially profitable sectors, like the recording industry. The Committee argued 'that the Council's proper field of responsibility is the subsidised arts. With limited exceptions, other, much larger, areas

of cultural development are the province of other agencies.’ The implication was that, in the scheme of things, the ‘subsidised arts’ weren’t doing much for the economy. Without recognition of due process we can arrive no other conclusion.

Nevertheless, I wish at the time I had paid more attention to that figure of 6 per cent. There is worth in the idea that the Council stop viewing its constituency as the ‘subsidised arts’ and take account, as the McLeay report did, of all levels of creativity; and to see the artist’s development as the most important component in building a pyramid, of which participation is the base and excellence is the peak. For a start we need to recognise and respect the contribution made to the quality of audiences by wide participation at the grass roots - in school drama, music and dance; in the amateur festivals; and in the many pro-am co-operatives that survive as long as their energies last; in the daily practice for pleasure; in creation and conversation on the web; in the purchase of CDs, in the enjoyment of radio, TV, concerts and film. All this is not about excellence but about a hundred other things, of which participation is the common element. Then for the improvement of skills we need training and we do have fine schools in every state

At the next level in our pyramid we need a good look at the sources of employment at the end of the ‘90s. We need small ensembles of every kind: avant-garde, popular and classical to give our performers steady practice. We need major production houses for legitimate theatre, classical and popular music; and a circuit of commercial entertainment; and we need distribution mechanisms both nationally and globally. And finally we need national and international stars. Ancillary to these we need a healthy film, recording and television industry; and academic practitioners to undertake research and development and provide the background for history and criticism.

But more than that, at this level we need to see how each can advantage the other, how the new digital technologies might overcome our isolation; how training in the arts

might assist industry in changing its thinking in the conduct of industrial relations, to see the consequences of short-term planning, the advantages of a better environment. And most of all we need proper recognition of how the huge cultural changes, nationally and globally, have changed the way people think about the arts. And about 'excellence'.

A talk by an American educationist called Harold Taylor years ago has remained in my mind. 'Anyone can learn the technology', said. 'Anyone can find out how to build a highway. But it is the artist who will ask the questions: Where will the highway take us? Who will be displaced by the highway? And what will the ability to reach its end in half the time contribute to the sum of human happiness?' In the present age, when we are drowned in choice and information overload, when values are seen as relative and territories are jealously guarded, we need the humane, discriminating voice, the one that upholds moral, ethical, spiritual and aesthetic values as basic to human happiness, to speak out loudly on our behalf.

When we look at the structure of the performing arts this way, like a pyramid, the gap in the framework becomes obvious, as do the divisions that have come to exist between one section and another. We can see how artists are caught in the gulf between training school and the elite heights. The structure is simply not there. Art is divided from commerce; innovation is frustrated by bureaucratic constraints. We make big investments in first performances that are thereafter confined to history. We have recordings that cannot find distribution; we have writers and researchers languishing because they not fit the guidelines; we have companies and institutions trapped on a path not of their own making because they are loaded with debt and not their own masters. We need to find means outside the 6-per-cent Australia Council to overcome the barriers of status and build a structure within which we all can participate. We need a national cultural industrial policy.

Julian Meyrick, in the June issue of *The Australian's Review of Books*, documented the demoralised state of fringe theatre and called for urgent attention to 'the position of

pro-am theatres, that intermediate layer of ongoing alternative companies that combine a thin, sometimes nonexistent resource base with a high skills level and an innovative artistic thrust.' He compared this with the sense of mission which drove the alternative theatre in the 1970s: Directors, actors, designers and production personnel, once rigidly marked off from one another, now washed together in a swell of social relations: actors talked back to directors, directors turned their hands to writing; writers became critics: and critics became practitioners. An industry that had been as stratified as a geological formation began to flow. The notion of what it meant to be an actor changed.

This has begun to happen in popular music; but the theatre today is as stratified as it was in the 1960s. Radical change is needed. For a start it is imperative to begin to recognise the profit motive where it patently exists; and to initiate an inquiry into the career patterns of performers and how to improve them. To the Australia Council the creative artist has been central and in recent years it has become more and more prescriptive in its efforts to prevent the snowballing needs of organisations eroding the investment in individuals. (The Performing Arts Board's 1991 policy of affirmative action for women and migrant works is an example.) With writers this has been remarkably successful: a grant usually results in a book. A book is a tangible asset. But with the performer more long-term measures are needed. The downfall of Communism has shown that the most productive people are those who own their means of production. But our artistic directors, who spend years building up a non-profit organisation, take away at the end only their experience and termination pay. Actors are still only as good as their last performance; they still lead a mendicant life dependent upon the kindness of strangers.

Twenty-seven years ago my husband and I started a publishing company and, like so many small ventures, we worked for seven years without salary. Today we have a financial, as well as a cultural asset. The Literature Unit is permitted to have such clients with commercial motives; why not the others? The recent Nugent Report on major organisations goes

some way to address this. The idea that ‘excellence’ and commerce are incompatible is so entrenched in our culture that we no longer question it; but it derived, I remind you again, from the amateur arts. When I look around Perth and see how devastated the theatre has become in recent years as a result of government interference and artistic despondency I wonder what the years of struggle have been about.

As yet there is no standard history of the Australia Council that traces its extraordinary cultural influence. Nor any published study which seeks common cause in the demise of so many arts companies. With the exception of David Throsby and Glen Withers at Macquarie University I know of no involvement by university researchers in the many reports and papers which the Australia Council has issued over the years. These are omissions the universities must try to remedy. There has been some individual research and published argument; but much research remains to be done to help us understand the causes of our mistakes; and to try to rebuild a sense of community and mutual obligation. For we, the arts community, have made the Australia Council what it is today, by maintaining the principle of peer assessment; and by taking responsibility for its governance. But the disillusionment presently being expressed suggests it is time for a reassessment.

Given the rapid turnover both of the Council’s boards (or ‘units’ as they are now called) and of staff; and the many restructurings they have undergone, any possibility of supporting what I have called ‘the quiet steady progress of artistic practice’ has long ago been abandoned. Overwhelmed by increasing demands for support on a budget which each year falls further behind the expressed need, the Council and its members have, I believe, begun to seek bureaucratic reasons to reject applications. It’s a counsel of despair. Where once they were actively exercising the spirit of the law to support the needy, now they take refuge in the letter. For the Council’s own sake as well as their clients, we need a moratorium.

‘Growth’, writes Julian Meyrick, ‘is often presented as the inevitable corollary of Gough

Whitlam's 1973 funding increases. More money led to more theatre. But it is at least possible it happened the other way round: more theatre led to more funding; that it was the internal values of the new drama that demanded increased public support.'

He's right. I was there. There have been other creative flowerings, in other generations. This one was fortunate in having the will and means provided to nurture it. Another way, for another very different and much more divided culture, now has to be found.

Katharine Brisbane

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