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Talk to the X Club

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I don't know about you but I am feeling pretty battered by recent events. The horrors of Africa, Kosovo and now East Timor; tsunamis, earthquakes and tornadoes, not to mention the emotional issues which have divided and continue to divide our country internally. Our involvement in East Timor and the conflicting emotions and debates it has aroused may well come to be seen as a turning point in our growth as a nation. But meanwhile seeing out the millennium is more like witnessing the Apocalypse.

This daily bombardment is the kind of information overload that shakes our whole understanding of the way our world works. In previous generations diplomacy went on quietly behind closed doors, and corruption too. Massacres were heard of only long after the event. The speed of information and the graphic nature of the images we see leaves us appalled and confused; and makes us yearn for leaders who will make sense out of chaos, who will show us how to act decisively and rightly.

Our public figures today, however, are not of that kind. Politics have become too complex, and Parliament has surrendered to global forces the power it once had. Vested interests have pushed the public intellectual out of the limelight. We have become instead a nation of managers. Where are the subversives and the social critics? Why aren't they helping us to make sense of this turmoil? These are the people we need today. The artist is the only person in society who should have nothing to lose by speaking out.

The responsibility of the artist — and I include within this definition all those people actively engaged in the humanities — the responsibility of the artist is to contemplate and comment upon society; to define, to warn, to document, to criticise without fear or favour; to make us realise with our emotions what we fail to recognise with our heads. To make us exercise our

imaginings, singly and collectively; to make us practice putting ourselves in the place of others. To make connections, to reconcile, to show us direction. I've recently had a small reminder of this in editing a series of anthologies of plays from the '60s to the '80s. In absolute terms the works are of no great significance; as a map of the changing public consciousness, of growing confidence in ourselves as a nation, they are remarkably accurate documents which in their time helped to form our understanding of ourselves in a period of change.

It is this critical aspect of the arts in Australia — and most particularly the performing arts — that has been most constructive; and it has failed us in the '90s. Since the arts became identified as an industry, in the last decade or so, meaning has been sacrificed to taste. This has in part to do with the climate of the times; but more to do with the rise of the manager and the application of corporate principles to matters of artistic practice. Those plays I mentioned were performed within months — even weeks — of completion; and for early audiences carried the weight of current commentary. Today the average time to reach the public is two or three years. For a film the process can be up to eight years. This has a serious effect on the meaning and necessity of any work that relates to the public mood.

The Australia Council has also become ponderous and prescriptive in its dealings; and so beleaguered by its burgeoning constituency that it has taken refuge in bureaucratic restraints and more and more complex application forms designed to defeat the uninitiated. State governments waver violently according to the preoccupations of the current Minister. Melbourne under Jeff Kennett has become the entertainment capital and the fortunes of the arts are firmly aligned to the Crown Casino. Western Australia seems to have had the most unhappy run with state funding; and from my brief glimpse appears to be no better off than it was 40 years ago when I was living here. So what has gone wrong? And does it matter?

Well, yes, it does matter. Because books, paintings and music at their best tell us who we are and why. The Guy Grey Smith and the Robert Juniper on my walls in Sydney remind me daily of the world I grew up in and why it differs from the East; as do the writings of Tim Winton and Dorothy Hewett and Robert Drewe. But the corporatising of the arts has made steady progress since the introduction of subsidy 30 years ago; to the point that the

connection with the community has been lost, for the most part; and with it all meaning. In the case of the major institutions creative thinking has been supplanted by extravagant marketing aimed at manufacturing an audience based not on appreciation but on global fashion and social ambition.

Which brings me to the Nugent Report, 'Securing the Future'. This is a discussion paper drawn up at the federal government's request by Helen Nugent, a company director and deputy chair of the Australia Council, and others, on the dilemma of the major organisations. That dilemma is, baldly, that exponential growth has built these huge companies, corporations in all but name; but despite their growth they still rely on the public purse; and are prevented, because of their non-profit structure and the Australia Council guidelines, from becoming profitable. Many are also unwilling or unable to do so because of the narrow 'high art' tradition within which they work. I shall confine myself to opera in this instance because its situation is acknowledged as the worst; the Australian Ballet has similar constraints; as does the Bell Shakespeare Company which began as a tent theatre dedicated to touring country towns but quickly retreated behind the proscenium arch into more and more glossy productions for our major cities' cultural centres.

Opera has never been the people's theatre, except perhaps in Italy. Elsewhere it has been a creation of the court. I was taken to see such a court theatre recently in Gotha, in northern Germany where Prince Albert came from. It is a beautiful baroque theatre converted so the king and his friends could enjoy musical entertainment. (This is not to denigrate it because it began a theatre tradition important in German theatre history.) But part of my tour took me behind and beneath the stage where some 40 unfortunate stage hands were required to crouch in space a metre and a bit high, to work the stage scenery and effects. That is the tradition out of which opera grew; and it has come to be regarded round the world as the apogee of musical achievement.

But opera as it once was died with the First World War. The generations of monied aristocrats who patronised Covent Garden died — and by degrees opera was subsumed into corporate sponsorship. A new kind of networking culture grew, popularly represented by Sir Humphrey Appleby doing discreet deals in the foyer; or most recently here at home the dreadful Vicky in the ABC series *Dog's Head Bay*, plotting for a seat on the Opera Board. Tickets for

Covent Garden, before it closed this year, were 200 pounds each.

This is the culture we set out to emulate, and now we have it. Sydney — it was agreed in the 1950s, between two urbane Englishmen: Sir Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Sydney Symphony; and Sir Charles Moses, head of the ABC — Sydney would never be civilised without an Opera House. And so a decade and a half later we got one. Not the one we wanted — but then at the time we didn't know what we wanted. We just wanted to be like London and New York.

By degrees, and at great expense, we built up our national opera company. And a good company it is. We have some very fine opera singers who now commute around the great houses of the world; and we do our best to keep up their standard. Thus began the treadmill. Opera repertoire derives from two centuries of European music and requires a very particular vocal training. The audience, equally, requires particular training, both musically and socially. Thirty years ago there was a high degree of received opinion about what great art was; but there has since been a revolution in the composition of Australian society and many of the old benchmarks of worth have been overthrown. This is certainly so in the musical world which has become so eclectic that we have a genre known today as world music. Where does opera belong in all this? It is hard to make any other answer than 'in the museum'.

This is no new opinion. The wonderful Theodor Adorno was preaching this at Frankfurt University in 1961. 'Neither from the musical nor from the aesthetic point of view', he wrote,

can we avoid the impression that the operatic form is obsolete... What thirty years ago induced the judgement that opera was passé was not mere surfeit with the world and its forms... The dawning insight, rather, was that in style, in substance, and in attitude the opera had nothing to do any more with the people it had to appeal to if its outwardly pretentious form was to justify the prodigal extravagance required...To a human intellect trained to watch at the movies for the authenticity of each uniform and telephone set, the improbabilities could not but appear absurd...When the entire current operatic repertoire in America dwindled to hardly more than fifteen titles including Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the petrification was confirmed.

But opera has survived, in Germany, the United States and Australia;

and survived by globalisation. By recycling singers and directors around the world, many of them our own. And by making more and more fantastical productions. Because today in the subsidised theatre, every show has to be an event. What 'to do' with it becomes the essential question. How to market it. The Nugent Report acknowledges this demand for repeated sensations — 'experiences', they call it — and claims that these companies have lost audiences because of greater discrimination and competing entertainment. I believe it is rather that these theatres have lost meaning. They have also lost loyalty, any sense of ownership of what they stand for. In this they have been abetted by the cultural centres, built for display, not for meaning; and designed to exclude the cultural outsider.

In the late 1960s Philip and I went to visit Jörn Utzon at his home in Denmark. And at that meeting he described his plans for the interior of the Opera House, which by then he had been prevented from completing. He talked about the movement through the building in terms of a symphony: how in the slow opening movement the audience would walk up his grand Mayan staircase, and enter the foyer, how the colour, grey at first, would gradually increase in volume and variation as one entered the hall and conclude triumphantly as one took one's seat facing John Coburn's great curtain of the sun. All I could think of, as he was talking, was: what on earth do we have to put behind that curtain which could possibly fulfil these expectations? For nothing in the theatre ensures failure more certainly than too high an expectation in the audience. At that time the Australian Opera was still in its infancy and federal subsidy for the arts was only 12 months old.

The Opera House has fulfilled Utzon's dream of reflecting the quality of the city and becoming a building for the people. Day and night there are crowds around it. Every public celebration is centred on Bennelong Point. But only the select negotiate the complexities of ticketing to attend the performances. The staff work hard and imaginatively to increase use, with free concerts, philharmonic choirs; conventions, children's events. But the message of grandeur, of self-importance, is embedded in the overarching beams. It's the message every such public building has put out since the Comédie Française was built for the perpetuation of French tradition. It is not a message which Shakespeare ever received.

The act of building the Opera House, and the centres in other states

that followed, committed our major companies to a style of performance quite alien to the egalitarian nature of our society. Informality, community and active participation are the essential components of our mass activity: at sports matches, pub gigs, dance parties, street parades and so on. We are not short on audiences. Kids today know how to sniff out places without the aid of marketing. But our major arts organisations, trapped inside their edifices, have no chance of testing the mood of an audience: they are committed to timetables half a decade ahead. Seasons are cast, sets and costumes are budgeted and designed long before the director and conductor have begun to think about the work. It's an assembly line. Can anything be more meaningless?

Contrary to what you may think, I am very fond of opera; and was once a subscriber. But increasingly I found it difficult to commit myself to paying out so much money so far in advance. I take things day by day and have a lot of commitments. There is every chance that when the moment comes I would rather stay home and watch *The Bill*. In that I think I am pretty typical. So ways have to be found to attract me; to make yet another scheduled production of *Rigoletto* an event. To make it relevant. Would a setting in the Habibie household with General Wiranto in the title role tempt me to change my mind?

I've talked about the barriers for audiences created by imposing buildings; and about the demands of the global treadmill. The next deterrent is the performer-audience relationship within the auditorium. The monumental nature of these buildings, the sense of occasion they emanate, the smart dressing they exact, the rigid structure of the stage, the black hole created by the orchestra pit, the mono-directional projection of the music and the vast size of the auditorium, all contrive to impose upon opera in particular a certain form and repertoire that is literally grand and inevitably conservative.

There is such a thing as contemporary opera and music theatre. Melbourne and Sydney are alive with it and Lyndon Terracini's group at Lismore in northern NSW is one important centre for experiment. But not only can these pieces find no place in our opera halls — the halls and the works are incompatible. For practical reasons the new work is largely chamber opera, often using electronics, stereophonic projection and film; to transfer it to an opera house would require it to become something quite unlike itself.

The handful of modern operas which have been adapted to these spaces have usually suffered from the expansion of their resources. From a translation into what the Nugent report calls ‘an experience’.

This is the plague of the modern theatre. The most welcoming theatres on the east coast are places like Belvoir Street and The Performance Space in Sydney and Playbox in Melbourne. Modest buildings with commonplace exteriors but friendly foyers and bars where you may find someone you know. And where the ‘excellence’ of the show is not of primary importance because the actors are familiar and you win some, lose some. But even they are feeling the pressure. Belvoir Street, for example, is investing in grand events like Cloudstreet, which has joined the festival circuit and is presently playing with great success in London. It’s good to discover we can do this; but not at the expense of the family at home. This is particular a problem for our dance companies, We had an instance recently in the very public dispute between Meryl Tankard and the Arts Minister in Adelaide over the Australian Dance Theatre’s touring.

For the major theatre companies, the concerns that decide a season have begun to shift from issues of meaning and necessity to those of marketing and style. Is such a work promotable? What corporation would sponsor such a work? Is there a way we can connect with a sponsor’s product? (The Nugent Report gives much praise to a quite literal connection made between the Sorbent company and Circus Oz by employing giant toilet rolls in the ring as the safety buns.) Then the company must consider the Australia Council guidelines. Are we doing enough new work? Employing enough women or Aborigines or non-English-speaking actors? And so on. Making meaning while carrying this burden is a doomed enterprise.

All this is spelt out in the Nugent Report. It’s full of depressing statistics. Let me give you a few. Total federal and state funding today is \$86.6 million, of which 57.9% goes to music, 18.7% to opera, 13.1% to theatre and 10.3% to dance. Subsidy per seat ranges from \$6.32 for a Bell Shakespeare performance in Sydney to \$181.09 for the WA Opera in Perth and \$422 for the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra in Hobart. Most companies are in debt. Opera Australia’s is the largest at \$13.9 million; all complain that they fear earning a surplus lest their government grant be cut. This has happened. The report discusses the pros and cons of doing more commercial entertainment, of cutting back

on staff, on cast sizes, of changing marketing practices, better governance. None of this is new. But no part of the report raises the question of whether their work is appropriate to Australia in 1999; whether we have invested our money in the wisest way. What to do about these mausoleums we have built for our artists. Most particularly it failed to comment on whether all this globalised 'art' has any meaning for Australians and whether our artists have the theatre they deserve.

In 1973 on the last night of the old Theatre Royal in Sydney, before it was demolished, Toby Robertson, then director of the British Prospect Theatre Company said something very wise. He said that until the 20th century all theatre buildings were designed from the perspective of the stage, because they were built by men of the stage. And they burnt down at regular intervals, offering fresh opportunities for change. In the 20th century they have been built of pre-stressed concrete; and by committees of businessmen and councillors whose perspective was the front stalls. Our public buildings and our public policy on the arts have, on the whole, been designed from the point of view of the consumer, not the creator. My paper on Sunday [The Arts and the Pre-emptive Buckle] deals with how in the history of the Australia Council politics have dictated that product, the 'proven edifices' of art have always overruled the progress of artistic practice. And so we have today at the top not work which is un-selfconsciously an expression of our character; but work that is struggling to be like the rest of the world.

The story is not all bad. There is a tremendous groundswell of energy coming from the young people who are interested not in globalisation but in internationalism: that is, not making work identical to the rest of the world; but absorbing and reflecting the world while living and working at home. They are using all kinds of new forms, for which there are as yet no definitions; and new ways must be found to appreciate them. Bruce Elder, the pop music critic, has written about this:

The key to understanding popular culture ... is a recognition, and an acceptance, that like can only be measured against like... I call this genre-based criticism. It is the only useful kind of popular culture criticism. But the process of evaluation is complex because the genres are constantly changing and evolving, The challenge is to define the qualitative values which are the measure by which a genre evaluates itself.

So there's the dilemma. If we are constantly turning back to what we know in public policy, how can we be anything but reactionary? How can the new generation bridge the gulf that now exists between the energetic groups working in the back streets and the corporations imprisoned in our cultural monuments? It can, and will be, done, by what I call the 'trickle-up effect'.

One of the big opportunities still awaiting the major organisations depends on a recognition of the distinction between globalisation and internationalism. Phantom of the Opera is globalisation; Cloudstreet is internationalism. It is not the work that needs to be standardised but the industrial structure; the network by which the success of a work can be maximised. We have seen how our Aboriginal artists have found their way to the major art galleries of the world; we've seen how movies like *Strictly Ballroom* and *Shine* have defied their lack of genre. But none of these works have yet made a proper financial return to their creators. That is where we need to corporatise and globalise.

All the innovation in this country has come, not from government, or big business or the legislature or the Church. Such authorities respond only when they have to: to electoral pressure and to practical results. Innovation comes from the individual and the small community interests. And it comes out of crisis. When we can't go further in one direction we are forced to seek another. The arts have reached that crisis. It's time to look around at what other interests are doing; to take lessons from the methods of the country communities in crisis; or the reconciliation movement. To forget the divisions between artistic genres and build again from the bottom. Divisions only remain as long as does the status quo.

Now I want to talk about football for a minute. I have been fascinated by the politics, particularly in NSW, between Rugby League and Union. For 91 years there has been a status quo. League, the workers' game with an intense community loyalty, has been the majority code north of the Victorian border and its clubs have been major contributors to community life, health and education. Union, the gentleman-amateur game, played by private schools and universities, has a much smaller following but is also played in Britain, New Zealand and other parts of the world. In other words the potential is global. Enter pay TV. Union turned professional about four years ago and in the style

of the big end of town now has a business plan to take over League. And both are moving in on AFL. Clubs are being bribed or forced into amalgamation, country clubs are no longer supported by their associations and are closing down. The community unity created by generations of Saturday afternoons is being broken.

It's exactly same problem faced by the arts. Community participation and loyalty is being destroyed in favour of a giant but anonymous new global congregation of reactionary forces preaching uniformity. And what holds that congregation together? Fashion. Fashions come and go and are no help in 'Securing the Future'. My money is on the community clubs. That's where the trickle-up effect will come from.

Since the arts were politicised in 1968 by the establishment of the Council for the Arts, we have increasingly allowed the big end of town to control the resources; and already we have seen, like the country football clubs, the erosion of the regions and increasing conservatism. We need to get back to an artistic climate in which our artists can speak up for what they believe; can reflect the problems and celebrate the character and diversity of our country; and earn with that diversity and ingenuity a respected place in the international community. We can only do that by starting again, once more with meaning, and together making the trickle up-effect.

Katharine Brisbane