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IN PRAISE OF NEPOTISM

The 2011 Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture

Thank you, everyone. I'm grateful to Belvoir for giving me this opportunity because it is a significant moment in my life when I need to take time for reflection, and try to articulate why literature, art and theatre have been so important to me—where it came from and why pushing for change has been central to my understanding and enjoyment.

In the New Year I turn 80.

My father was born in 1888. In his lifetime he saw the arrival of domestic electricity, the telephone, the motor car, the aeroplane, the skyscraper, film, radio and in his last years television. Together my parents survived a world depression and two world wars; saw the splitting of the atom and the explosion of nuclear warfare. It was thought at the time of his death in 1959 he had lived through the fastest period of change in the history of the world. Nevertheless it was a secure life, lived under the protection of the British Empire; in consequence my father, a civil engineer, who carved a career through the jungles of Malaya, was a great believer in progress. My mother, on the other hand, lived on into the 80s to see the invasion of rock n roll, and the contraceptive pill, the end of the White Australia Policy, the Vietnam War, and the decline of the British Empire. She became, in consequence, against progress.

In my lifetime these things became commonplace, and progress was defined as nuclear energy, space exploration, the fall of the Berlin Wall, electronics, the human genome, DNA and computer programming. Philip died in 1993 and by that time he had still not felt the need for a computer, and would be astonished to learn of mobile phones, nano technology, e-books or the daily digital surprises of the Internet. And even more to know he had two Ethiopian-born grandchildren. In only 18 years, since his death, our outlook

and way-of-life has become unrecognisable.

Our imagination has inspired all these wonders,. It has lit the way from who we were to who we could be and shown us how to get there. As my father's life experience shows, we are still very close to our cultural origins and still very ignorant about the ancient land we inherited. Today is not the time for me to explore again the colonial period, except to observe that while our convict stain has contributed much romantic fiction to our history, the fundamental influence of our respectable emancipist classes, who clung grimly to their European values while building a nation at the bottom of the Asia Pacific, has been too much suppressed in our popular history.

As an aside at this point I would like to say that much of the thinking behind this address has been initiated by the research, experience and reflection of the many authors whose work I have edited and published over 40 years. Those years have brought repeated challenges, as aspects of our history, our attitudes, our changing way of life have been revealed to me between the lines. And for that I continue to be grateful.

Australia, as we know it today, was built on the British model, and the benefits have been a working democracy, the English language, the Westminster system of law and governance—and compulsory, secular education. Had we been enlightened enough to learn from our Indigenous peers, or had the French chosen to colonise the country instead, we would have been a very different nation indeed. But with these British virtues we were also taught British manners and in a good many cases the arrogant illusion that we were not just of British stock but were the nicest kind of English men and women.

The burden for the arts has been that while our inherited Irish blessings have been poetry, story telling, subversion and a guilty conscience—essential for the writer or performer—the academies were British in style and have persisted so. So long as our writers and performers lived on the edge of society they kept their feet on their dusty Australian soil. And we built a strong popular culture, founded by the convicts themselves, that produced ingenuity and self-reliance, comedians and satirists, vaudeville and popular music. But the British Australians ran the economy. The best of our classical actors, singers and musicians went abroad for training and better appreciation. The best of those in our own theatres were Europeans or

Americans on the world circuit, who were lionised, enjoyed our easy wealth and moved on.

In the 1920s Allan Wilkie, a Scottish jobbing actor and comedian with an eye to the main chance, solicited the patronage of our society leaders, including Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce by setting up a Shakespeare company. Before long he found himself trapped into preaching culture and good accents to unwilling students, and has since been written into history as a heroic missionary of culture. He was not the only actor who suffered this fate in Australia. So it was no wonder that when public funding became a public issue, first in the 1950s with the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, then with the Australian Council for the Arts in 1968, the model they chose was one of British patronage and educated taste. In doing so they took no account of the distinguished immigrants from other cultures who had given us our first glimpses of Chekhov, Brecht, Gorki, Meyerhold, the Ballets Russes, modern dance, the Vienna Recession movement, and the music of Schoenberg and Shostakovich. These enterprising immigrants became early patrons of our own radical artists, opened galleries, film clubs, started new commerce. But apart from their restaurants their efforts remained a sub-culture.

This has been a gallop through our history to remind us of how entrenched is the public culture we inherited, and how it has continued to impose itself upon the received taste of the performing arts. Despite ourselves we middle-class theatregoers still draw in our breath when we hear Shakespeare spoken with a local accent, or find manifest changes made to our favourite Italian opera. But we are trying to get over it.

The visual arts developed an Australian eye over a century ago. Today, for a large minority of Australians, the British style of upbringing is meaningless. So now I want to tell you about some of the tipping points in my own journey towards recognising my own selfhood as a theatre critic and writer, which began with university dramatics. These taught me about great language and great themes; and that it was in Europe that the great minds lived, until one day in 1957 when I was overwhelmed by the realisation I was not what my parents had brought me up to be and that somehow what people did on stage could hold the key to community recognition of what it was to be Australian.

But first I begin with the evening of 29 June 1972 at the Jane Street Theatre, in Sydney. Though it was only a converted church hall in the back streets of Randwick, the dress was formal as the performance in progress had been promoted by NIDA and there were expectations. As the evening progressed the men in the audience began to relax in their seats, to loosen their ties, and then join with the young author to chuckle, politely at first and then with a joyous roar. It was the opening night of *Don's Party* and the playwright, of course, was David Williamson. I laughed with the rest but the joy for me was the sight of these husbands, unwilling escorts, discovering that their destination was not British culture but the work of a playwright after their own heart. 'This is comedy at its purest', I wrote in my review. I had seen *Don's Party* before, at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, where it had been performed in-the-round, without act breaks. There I had described it as 'a study of inertia' that needed more structure. What the director John Clark had done was to reshape the play and sharpen the author's blossoming skill as a comic writer. That production set the pattern for the 'Williamson play' as the trade came to call it. The *Removalists* had already been expanded for a commercial production in Sydney and sent abroad to lasting fame, but the young executives of *Don's Party* became the core of Williamson's style and we have had the pleasure of sharing with them the crises and preoccupations of the nation for over forty years.

Two earlier incidents, however, had contributed to my exhilaration that night. The first is a story I have told many times about how, when living in London in the 1950s, I had taken a train to Nottingham to see a run-in of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, just off the plane from Melbourne. The dark little Carlton terrace, the raw vernacular, the Hawaiian shirts—the sheer colour and muscle of the performance was for me epiphany: the exquisite *School for Scandal* I had seen at the Haymarket the night before, with Geilgud and the young Daniel and Anna Massey, was blotted from memory. The *Doll* was the future. I booked my passage home. Back in WA I became a rabid nationalist and went looking, though I didn't know for what. I read battered old plays in libraries. In Melbourne I found a couple who had set up their own record label collecting folksongs; and I met the gangling young Barry Humphries, who had just recorded *Wild Life in Suburbia*. But it was a decade later, by then married and a mother of two, that I settled in Sydney with the family and landed the job of national theatre critic at the *Australian*.

Here was a platform for my nationalism. In the first year, 1967, I reviewed British comedies and wrote columns asking, 'Where are our playwrights?' Soon I was snooping for talent in the back streets and dragging young directors like Jim Sharman and Brian Syron to the East Sydney Leagues Club to watch the crowds as waiters, balancing tiers of schooners. negotiated a passage between hearty variety acts and tired torch singers. 'This is where the real audience is', I told them. I was the naïve one: they already knew. Jim would soon be directing *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* around the world. Brian, recently returned from New York, had stopped Sydney in its tracks with a Canadian play at the Ensemble about homosexual rape inside our prisons. He was an angry young man wrestling with his own ghosts, a childhood spent in institutions and his then unadmitted Aboriginal heritage. He was trying to fathom why the Old Tote had chosen him to direct *The Merchant of Venice*. We had very little understanding of the talent that was exploding around us in those days.

The Legend of King O'Malley, by Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis, at Jane Street in 1970, was my next tipping point. The Doll had provided me with the language and context for a real Aussie play, but the form was an old convention. King O'Malley showed me the new. A musical, directed by John Bell, on the life of an early Parliamentarian, it revived the tricks of the fairground and the vaudeville stage in the context of Australian history. It defined for me what I was looking for: an anti-realist form that rediscovered the traditions of our own theatrical past. It was a beginning. I reviewed it three times. In retrospect its lasting contribution was the way it opened the eyes of the profession. Coincidentally, as often happens, the Australian Performing Group in Melbourne had opened their Pram Factory in similar style, with an adaptation of Alfred Dampier's melodrama from the 1880s, *Marvellous Melbourne*. Things were moving. Each of these three performances, in their own way, lit my ambition to uncover a theatre in which those reluctant husbands watching Don's Party could enjoy their shock of recognition, the actors could build their muscles and use their own accents and my columns could ruminate about our changing society. Today our theatre is eclectic in both form and accent. We forget that what is so familiar today was once shocking, in some cases to the point of police intervention.

Familiarity is the enemy of art. It was so wonderful to see Belvoir's revival

of the Doll on this stage recently and the standing ovation its nonagenarian author received with his beaming smile. This was not just an old play receiving a sentimental acknowledgement but a classic reinterpretation, in the way our directors rethink and revalue the masters. It takes a lot of rigour and sophistication to make and keep a living repertoire. John McCallum was right in his Parsons lecture last year: it needs to be done. But back in 1972, when Don's Party was launched, there was not much rigour or sophistication, and no big pool of experienced talent. J.C. Williamson's were still the dominant employers, but dying; Harry M Miller was the rising star with *Hair*, *The Boys in the Band* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The new State companies were beginning to displace the semi-professional repertory theatres, the suburbs were full of amateur studios, ballet schools and musical societies. But the alternative theatre was also rising.

Don's Party had come to Sydney from the Australian Performing Group, a Carlton collective that embraced La Mama experimental theatre and the Secondary Teachers College drama school, and made a substantial contribution to the structure and impact of the Victorian College of the Arts, being built at that time. King O'Malley in Sydney was the product of a short-lived post-graduate NIDA acting course. When the group disbanded some took their new-found disreputability to Kings Cross where they turned an old coachhouse in Nimrod street into what is now the SBW Stables Theatre, home of the Griffin Theatre Company, and by degrees migrated to a crumbling factory on this site, which has since been twice transformed and is now Belvoir as you see it today. At Nimrod John Bell created a sensation with his ockerstyle Shakespeare comedies, which mutated nearly 20 years later into the Bell Shakespeare company.

Others took their new-found need to experiment in a very different direction, forming the Performance Syndicate under the leadership of Rex Cramphorn, whose work of thoughtful genius was cut short by his early death. Cramphorn was, I believe, the only real philosopher our theatre has produced, with the possible exception of Wal Cherry. Others from the O'Malley group also went on to become key figures in our theatre history: among them, Robyn Nevin, William Yang, Kate Fitzpatrick and Keith Bain, whose movement teaching has indelibly marked 40 years of NIDA graduates.

Similarly, the Australian Performing Group (the APG, as it came to be

known) lasted barely a decade, but the principal players took their rough, satirical ‘dingo’ theatre (as Jack Hibberd called it) and their practice of other theatre forms to other locations. One was the VCA, whose graduates began to set up performance groups in regional centres, the most lasting of which is the Murray River Performing Group, which spawned the Flying Fruit fly Circus, and Circus Oz. These luminaries include Max Gillies, Bruce Spence, Helen Garner, Jack Hibberd, Evelyn Krape, John Romeril, Robert Perrier and Graeme Blundell. This New Wave worked outside the old purpose-built theatres and their open-space, makeshift venues liberated the imagination from the proscenium arch. Improvisation also helped build a self-reliant, all-round performer who quickly moved into film, circus, stand-up comedy, novel writing, feminist satire and journalism, but generally evaded the directorial theatre.

So where have I been going? What has nepotism to do with this? ‘The unfair preferment of nephews or other relatives’. In other words the creation of an in-group to achieve a common purpose, defend itself from outside attack and directly contravene our democratic belief in a fair go for all. My view is that this is the way the best arts are made. They have always been like that. ‘From little things big things grow’, as Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody sing. That things should be fair and democratic, that everyone should have a turn, is antithetic to the aim of seeking out and nurturing potential, of pursuing excellence. Financially it has been wasteful of much talent and, since taxpayers’ money has been involved, been the cause of as much resentment as preferment. Paul Keating attracted ignominy in 1994 for his Creative Fellowships, awarded to artists in mid-career for two or three years, to allow them a space to create in the way they wanted. Why these people? Why should they be privileged? was the cry. Some achieved great things. Others not. That was the way of it. Now the Myer Foundation has decided on a similar experiment. The announcement mid-year was met with bemusement by a sector conditioned to applications and acquittals. But it’s not public money this time. It’s genuine patronage.

Artists do what they have to do and those inside the tent are often unkindly nicknamed. But over history, artists have always been their own society. They learnt their craft by practice, apprenticing themselves to a repertory company, an orchestra, or a painter’s studio. People muddled along,

living on their wits; when something new made an impact it was because a group had formed to bring about change. Among our own examples in art are the Heidelberg School at the turn of last century that rejected the Royal Academy and practised plein air painting; and the modernist school of the Contemporary Art Society that introduced social realism and surrealism to Australia. Wartime refugees Eduard Borovansky in Melbourne and Gertrud Bodenwieser in Sydney gathered acolytes as they laid the foundation of classical and modern dance for Australia in the 20th century. In the remote communities Indigenous artists were communally painting the Aboriginal way, producing work of regional significance which has made their practice one of the most vibrant artistic movements in the world. Broome has for years been a centre for contemporary Indigenous music. The ABC for a good part of its life has been a haven for composers and instrumentalists of every kind of music. Such mentoring is familiar in many contexts.

I mentioned earlier the good fortune of the Doll arriving in London at a moment when the theatres were being invaded by writers and actors from the North. Their assembly in London through the efforts of the English Stage Company bred what came to be seen as civil war against the old orthodoxy and nurtured artists like John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Albert Finney, Alan Bates, Ann Jellicoe and Arnold Wesker, who swept the stages with regional dialects and angry new energy. Here in Australia the ripples were heard. We mounted their plays here, but with little understanding, until the end of the Menzies era swept us up in the winds of change and we set about our own process of reassessment and revolt. The sudden popularity of the APG and the graduates of early NIDA had far-reaching consequences. They were the beneficiaries of a restless moment in time, which drove into being a further social force that roused public emotion and changed the landscape for good: the coming of the Australia Council.

This is the upside of nepotism. There is also a darker side. But before I begin that story I want to talk about two moments in the history of other countries that demonstrate its virtues.

The first setting is Vienna in the late 19th century. The decadent and profligate Hapsburgs were still running most of Europe, between plundering gilded art collections and conceiving illegitimate children. Vienna was stifled by outworn conservative practices and battered by the industrial

revolution. Suddenly the Vienna Secession movement sprang up in protest against its exhausted academic tradition in art and launched their version of modernism. The leaders were artists Gustav Klimt and Koloman Moser, architects Josef Hoffman and Otto Wagner, sculptor Max Klinger, fashion designer Emilie Flöge; they designed clean-line buildings and furniture that changed the face of Vienna, and extravagant, painterly dresses and theatre designs that gave European society a world of new colour and shape. These were not struggling ideologues in revolt but recognised artisans who by coming together under the banner, 'To every age its art, to art its freedom' drew up a modernist manifesto, extended their personal success and joined a network of art movements surging across Europe. Within a decade most had gone their own way; but their work had imprinted a style which created an art for the machine age, first by adopting Art Nouveau and then by introducing an almost utilitarian simplicity which enabled the introduction of mass-produced furniture of good design for the middle classes. Their name survives in the Secessionist Gallery which is still a feature of Vienna today. The work they left behind is incomparable. Some of you may have seen the exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria earlier this year.

This is how great art works. It finds its own space, its own partnerships, pursues its own direction and in the end is beholden to no one. Alliances are strong; disputes are loud; and usually the energy lasts no more than a decade, during the process of discovery. Let's call it mutually-beneficial nepotism.

A movement of a different kind was the Group Theatre, a cooperative not unlike Melbourne's APG, which flourished in New York from 1931–41 and captured a pantheon of bright young unemployed, among them Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Clifford Odets, Franchot Tone, Joseph Cotton, Stella Adler, Elia Kazan, Sidney Lumet, Morris Carnovsky, Mary Morris, Lee J. Cobb. What began as a socialist collective, within the decade brought a new polemical theatre to Broadway and established training schools for a new kind of actor. These imprinted for the first time on the American theatre and its infant film industry a lasting realist style that exploited the rich variety of American humour and dialect, and reflected on the tragedies of American working life.

The Group Theatre made its first national impact with a short, polemical drama by Clifford Odets, called *Waiting for Lefty*, about a protest meeting of

taxi drivers taking part in a strike then actually occurring in Manhattan. ‘The first scene of *Lefty* had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage,’ wrote Harold Clurman. Odets said much the same thing: ‘the proscenium arch of the theatre vanished and the audience and the actors were at one with each other,’ and so did Robert Lewis, one of the original performers, when he described how, at the end of the play, ‘the audience and the actors spilled out onto the sidewalk, mingled, moved together, talking, talking, talking—into a nearby cafeteria, as though this were a magic moment that could not be allowed to die.’

That audience was witnessing, probably for the first time, a work with immediate reference to their own lives, dramatized in the multiple urban accents in the air about them. I too have been a witness at such unforgettable moments, here in the 1970s. This was intimate theatre.

So what caused the Group Theatre? The twin menaces, as Howard Taubmann called them: the Depression and Hollywood. This was the brink of the Great Depression. Unemployment had risen to 25%. The theatre industry had been devastated by closures and the lure of the new talking picture industry. In 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt forced through his New Deal, which stimulated work projects by encouraging loans, renovating public buildings and providing a subsistence wage.

The artistic community grasped the initiative. They discarded the frivolity of the 1920s and set a new generation rethinking the basic tools of the drama. Among the groundbreaking works of the period were Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, Orson Welles’ black *Macbeth*; T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*; Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* and films like *Citizen Kane* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Entering the field in the late 30s were Arthur Miller, and the works of Brecht and Weill. As the subsistence dried up the talent moved to Hollywood, where they led the drive for a realist film industry, of which Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* remains the most celebrated. The canon they bequeathed in writing, acting and film is unique in American history.

What we were doing in the 1970s was on a smaller scale but not so different. Our aspirations for a national voice and a career path were similar

and the ideologies lasted as long as the energies of the participants. What were the ripples that followed? What happened to those gains? Our resources were sparser, and more widely scattered. The period achieved as much as it did because for the first time the opportunity offered by public funding gave backbone to the determination. But in retrospect it becomes apparent that the government response to this storm of iconoclastic nationalism was a mixed blessing.

A more sophisticated government might have provided a support mechanism dedicated to what was original and defiantly our own; and understood the importance of building an audience to share these changes. Instead it put its faith in the old classic culture and the audience on which it had been built. In our eagerness for change we swept away the old pro-am companies, and the aging stars who had founded them. We disdained commercial enterprise, starved to death our national theatre circuit, J.C. Williamson's, and sold off the real estate. In the late 1960s Sydney lost three of its grandest theatres and only achieved a replacement for the Theatre Royal through a campaign mounted by a group of theatre practitioners and the Builders' Labourers' Federation. Audiences' old habits of heatergoing faded and new habits had to be re-established. Commerce was now in conflict with culture.

The 70s was, remember, the time when the Nobel prizewinner Friedrich von Hayek was leading a movement to replace our former measures of cultural value—on the ground that we humans were unstable creatures—with the more reliable face value imposed by the economy. Measurement—business plans, performance indicators, auditors' reports—were about to hit the new subsidized arts. We did not then understand the potential of what we had. Instead of doing a stocktake we demanded a new slate. We built opera houses and cultural centres, opened training schools and regional halls of culture, reestablished a film industry, expanded our state orchestras and ballet companies and engineered the establishment of state and federally-funded theatre companies. It was a huge achievement in a very short time and one we celebrated. But we didn't bring the audience with us and we laid down rules of engagement in the minds of the Council and the public which drew a line between the informal theatre groups in their makeshift playing spaces and those privileged to play in the rising halls of culture. We wrote

into policy the old high art and low art of the colonial era.

In last year's Philip Parsons lecture John McCallum talked eloquently about how our theatre has been full of beginnings, how initiatives have been taken, been applauded and then discarded. About how we have been bower birds, picking up shiny blue bits of world culture, and how the time has come to apply that knowledge more widely to the treasures of the world's classics and our own. The blame for our dilettantism he laid on the audience, for rejecting our most exciting, groundbreaking work as 'too difficult'. Those husbands who unbuttoned themselves at Don's Party had not kept up with the pace of change.

My thesis delves into the causes of this apparent audience apathy. And my question is: how well do we know our audiences today? What have we done to bring them along with us on our hectic ride in pursuit of the new? For a few years we had a creative boom as artists released their pent-up energy. Many expatriates returned to be part of the renaissance, lured by the prospect of 12-month contracts at our major new theatres. But with the burst of expansion came the demand for more and more funding to support this experiment. Out of the Government's admired principle of 'the pursuit of excellence' emerged the artists' corollary: the high-risk demand, 'the right to fail'. That second principle still persists in funding applications and is still unresolved. Why has it come to this? Because when the changes to theatre practice happened in the 1970s the managements were new and the audiences were not prepared. With all this turmoil about art and money, excellence and fair dealing, not a lot of thought was given to the audience.

They were not ready for the Opera House in 1973. The Australian Opera had lost to the ABC their claim for the largest hall because they had no subscription base to prove they could fill the auditorium. The Old Tote Theatre Company, our then State theatre destined for the Drama Theatre, was only just moving from their rickety hut on campus, today known as the Figtree. Don Dunstan's South Australian Government had dashingy hired an ensemble of actors to prepare for their Festival Centre opening but had no idea who their audience might be. It took them four years to find out. In Brisbane it took Alan Edwards eleven years to gain audience acceptance for his government-imposed Queensland Theatre Company while the established pro-am groups clung defiantly to their territory. The shock for all these

organisations was immense. And in the Old Tote's case it meant bankruptcy within five years. It was quickly replaced by what is today the Sydney Theatre Company.

These massive changes, and the resentment they caused, all contributed to a climate of division, together with a ukase from the Australia Council against commercial enterprise, which discouraged self-reliance. With government support we have built opera, theatre and dance companies, orchestras and chamber music performance that have pursued and achieved excellence. But in doing so, I believe that, despite their best efforts, this government support has removed these groups further and further from the democratic heart of Australian culture.

I was struck by this after paying a visit to the Victorian College of the Arts for the launch of our July Platform Paper, which examines the causes and process of its controversial takeover by Melbourne University. The VCA's founder, Lenton Parr, would have been familiar with the Vienna Secessionists as he set out in 1972 to create a community of artists.

'I believe,' writes Richard Murphet in his paper, that the establishment of the VCA in 1972 as a multi-arts training institute was an act of visionary prescience unequalled in the arena of tertiary arts training in Australia; and that in its maturation it has developed features of a model of highquality training in specific arts disciplines within the larger context of a community of artists able to research outside the boundaries of their own art form... It was that culture that was on display in the SaveVCA campaign, when students from across the campus combined their artistic talents and spoke out with one voice.

When the VCA was established it would have fitted into the well-established model of a practical tertiary institution: Teachers' college, TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) or CAE (College of Adult Education). It was in the 80s that the trouble began, when the Dawson plan under the Hawke Government conflated them—that is, vocational training skills, and a broad education for the professions—into the one institution. Arts practice as a subject for university study is a recent development and the relationship between practice and the academy has been and remains an uneasy one. Philip's career was evidence of this.

The physical training of artists' skills, I believe, has no place in a university. The 'pursuit of excellence' in the process of making art can only be learnt by daily practice and the company of equally motivated colleagues. Whether it be dance or music or acting or building installations, the atelier is the place for it: a centre where the student can hone their skills and stretch their imagination; where every day can bring a new realisation of what might be possible.

I raise this point as evidence of my argument about audience, because I believe that the erosion of this learning-by-doing aspect of our education system, the most egregious of which is the status of secondary music education, is one of the major reasons for the decline in status and recognition of our artists today. There is no better appreciator of the arts than the man or woman who has tried to do art themselves. It is a great sorrow to me that, while our years of putting our taxpayer's money into creating an environment that has produced some of the great actors of the world on stage and on film, the contribution they make and the respect they receive extend only a short way beyond the cognoscenti.

As the process of making art has become more and more estranged from the average Australian, actors in public life are suffering the consequences. The art of acting is to a great degree a hidden one, in that performance appears natural, and untaught, in the way that the ballet dancer's or a violinist's is not. In a recent speech for Currency House, Noni Hazlehurst gave this account of the actor's relationship with their audience:

Another misconception is that we lose ourselves in the role, that we believe in the circumstances. We don't. We're aware of every lolly wrapper, every shuffle, every snore, every whisper. We're always aware of what's just happened and what's coming up, of where we are on stage. We know when we've got the audience's full attention and when we're losing them, and maddeningly, we usually know why we're losing them. And just occasionally, we're aware that we've struck a chord of recognition and empathy with the entire audience. You feel that delicate silence, that hovering sensibility, when you could literally hear a pin drop. You know that you've struck a deep chord of understanding. That's what makes it all worthwhile. We're all feeling and experiencing some profound human truth together.

Noni's career has earned her the reputation of being one of the most

loved actors in the business. And yet, the day following a report of her speech the Sydney Morning Herald published a letter which read, in part, the lament of Noni Hazlehurst is hilarious...Actors are puppets. They do not cure anything, fix anything or create anything. They do as they are told, walk and talk, dress up and enter and leave. Most would be lucky to get a job at the post office if 'acting' hadn't rescued them. Simple as that. This is no worse than Cate Blanchett received for putting up her hand to support the carbon tax. But why did the editor choose to publish a letter that is no more than ignorant abuse? Clearly he thought it was representative of public opinion.

Those who are old enough to look back on Australia 40 years ago, will remember a time of vibrancy—and some still bear the scars. The period from post-war to the early 1970s saw the rise of so many great names: Nolan, Tucker, Olsen, Pugh, Whitely, Boyd; of White, Horne, Greer, Keneally, Malouf, Williamson, Buzo; Sculthorpe, Meale; Weir, Beresford, Schepisi... The earlier talents took their ambitions to Britain; the baby boomers directed their energies to subversion at home. And it's hard today to deny the legacy. It was fun but it was also anarchy. A concatenation of public events which shook the foundations of Australian life, loosened the reins for a moment and lit up the idea that for the individual anything was possible. It was within this restless climate that our now-powerful federal arts body came into being. Today the demography is very different. Civil strife abroad and at home has accelerated and we have entered a new wave of high anxiety. The arts should be questioning, arguing, voicing opinion and dissent about what is grandest and ugliest about being an Australian in the new century. But the arts seem not to be the right forum. Our artists do not penetrate the collective consciousness. For the most part they are cause for suspicion and discomfort.

Let us look briefly again at what occurred in the 1970s. In 1968 after years of conservative government Australia awoke to a need for change, and embarked on a period of unprecedented civil disobedience and bad taste. Promiscuity, ribaldry, men (and women) behaving badly became the grist to public debate and press commentary. And out of this sprang a nationalistic counterculture that defied the class system, opened new music venues, applauded Australian sounds and local bands. A (temporary) halt in censorship was achieved and a host of polemical theatre groups sprang up, founded

not by practicing artists but by young rebels determined to sweep away outworn convention. Out of this again came campaigns for support to build an Australian TV and film industry and the performing arts. And so it continued, a wild ride of youthful chutzpah, a collage of buffoonery, iconoclasm and occasionally art, that lasted a decade before the protagonists moved on to address their mid-life crises. This was an almost unprecedented expression of what we believed to be ‘ourselves’, a public discarding of middle-class pretensions and a celebration of working-class tradition. In response to this chaos the early structures of government financing quietly worked to impose a control of their own, discarding old ways, establishing new state-supported companies and attempting to direct the raw new talent towards better-approved standards of performance.

By the mid-70s the national opera and ballet were well established, the wildness of the New Wave was being corralled and most of the former theatre culture was gone, their audiences lost to the new State theatres. Following the rejection of an appeal to the Industries Assistance Commission in 1976, the aged JCW threw in the towel. With it went that long history of musical performance, and some of our finest theatre buildings, under the hammer of Whelan the Wrecker. But the vacancy was quickly filled by shiny new toys brought by British impresarios Cameron Mackintosh and Andrew Lloyd Webber. So energised were we by these rising entertainment structures that we barely noticed the demolition of a culture of inclusion that could never be reconstructed.

Today, despite these obstacles, we have a huge arts industry. More people attend arts ventures than sport, according to the polls. In forty years it is a record of which we should be deservedly proud. And yet (with rare exceptions) the leaders of this industry are not influential in the way leaders of other professions are. A new play may be acclaimed but is rarely discussed as an insight into, or barometer of, our culture. Books re-examining our history may win awards but reflect little on public policy. Today’s poets and philosophers may be respected but are seldom listened to. Things not quickly understood or easily measured are too easily condemned or dismissed. ‘She’s just an actor’, was the press response to Cate Blanchett’s public appearance in favour of a carbon tax. As was the Twitters’ response to Noni Hazlehurst on the screen of the ABC’s Q&A. ‘It is generally believed’, Wilson Tuckey, MP,