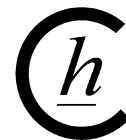


# Annual Report 2003



CURRENCY HOUSE

Presented by Katharine Brisbane  
at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual General Meeting of Currency House  
19<sup>th</sup> October 2003

*This PDF available from [www.currencyhouse.org.au](http://www.currencyhouse.org.au)*

This month it is three years since Currency House was incorporated, with the brief to be a resource centre for the performing arts and to raise the standard of public debate. That means that by now we are a toddler, that we have learned a good deal about the world we inhabit and that in the process we have fallen down a few steps and run into a few doors. Little by little from ground level we have gathered views; and it is time now to evaluate and to set a direction for the next three years.

The October issue of the Australian Financial Review's magazine contained the results of its annual think-tank on who holds power in Australia: overt power, covert power and cultural power. This year it reported in a tone of surprise that all those nominated in the latter category had little to do with the arts. 'We have come to the stage in this country' commented Robert Manne, one of the panellists, 'where the finest creative artists and thinkers have remarkably little influence on power, or the national debate, or national self-understanding.' The report continued: 'Nor is it just practitioners of the arts who are missing. Because those who had made it onto the overt and covert lists –overwhelmingly political figures—were this year excluded from contention for cultural power, the panel had real trouble isolating other individuals who had defined issues of major cultural importance or reflected Australians back to themselves.'

People who did make it onto the list included Bob Brown, Noel Pearson, William Deane, Richard Pratt, Fiona Stanley and Steve Irwin.

It is yet another reminder to us that we can, if we put our minds to it, be an influence from where we stand. Change for the better rarely comes from the top. It is achieved by pressure from below, from those whose life and livelihood are most affected. A reminder that if we at Currency House continue to listen and question, and can little by little turn anecdotal evidence into sound information, and private information into collective policy, we can in time become an engine for change. So the first task I wish set our new committee is a strategic plan for the next three years to increase our resources: to empower our artists, individually and collectively, to once more be a voice in society.

Here are some of the measures so far taken:

In 2001 Bryan Brown spoke to us fervently about the damage he believed the government-funded studios were doing to the creative aspect of the Australian film industry; and this month we received the manuscript of our first research paper, commissioned to test these views. Its working title is *Chasing the Runaways: Foreign Film Production and Film Studio Development 1988–2002*, by Nick Herd. We plan to publish it early next year as part of a forum to examine its findings.

Gale Edwards' concern about the constraints of the subscription system began a variety of discussions which in the next three years will, I hope, embrace a much wider examination of the underlying structure and customary practice of our performing arts industry. And which will absorb in due course what we have learnt this year about boards and festivals, management

and audiences, and particularly about the lot of the actor. Our September forum, which demonstrated so tellingly the deteriorating bargaining power of the actor, will be ongoing and, I hope, begin to play a significant part in what is now an urgent issue.

In the last twelve months we have begun to address the recommendations of the last Annual General Meeting. We didn't manage a debate on arts policy before the state election. The Premier's Department adamantly refused even to reveal whether they have a policy; and certainly not on the same platform as the Opposition. We are still short on events and issues in the music field and hope to redress that. But we have launched three books, run three Sunday-afternoon forums and formed a partnership with Belvoir Street Theatre to conduct the annual Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture on the performing arts. We have begun work on our first working partnership, with the University of Technology, Sydney, on a five-year plan to produce a comprehensive history of Australian television. Our last event for the year will be a talk on 2 November by our first Wayne Harrison travel-grant recipient, Christine Olsen, on research for her new film.

We are now ready, I believe, to focus more deeply. John Golder has put a proposal to the Executive Committee to begin commissioning a series of quarterly essays by senior practitioners on issues close to their heart—papers which not only raise issues but begin to seek solutions. These will then become the subject of forums and workshops and we shall see where that takes us. I think it is probably time for larger assemblies to give way to smaller working groups that will report to the main body from time to time.

To this end we encourage members to continue to press your concerns and issues about your practice. And to join or create working groups. So far we have a healthy editorial board, consisting of John Golder, John McCallum, Greig Tillotson and myself, which has established a solid publishing policy, sought out publications, found ways of raising funds, and is now providing a modest but steady income to the association. We have a de facto committee in charge of the Welcome to Television project, consisting of Liz Jacka, Nick Herd, Malcolm Duncan and myself, who are seeking out advisors and funding. And we have a embryo group led by Noel Hodda and Peter Carroll discussing the disempowerment of the actor. I hope by New Year to have an overview paper that will enable these and other groups to be placed within the context of a larger, three-year outcome.

What it will take, of course, is money. We are presently running a deficit; and this has been accelerated by the unexpected failure of the Australian newspaper's promotion of the Companion to Music and Dance in Australia. This resulted in our having to take out a \$70,000 overdraft; and the Committee took immediate action to redress this. Following an idea from Peter Fyfe we sought and found a sponsor prepared to buy bulk copies of the book. Negotiations are not concluded but the deal has potential. We have also arranged to promote the book on 2MBS-FM and 4MBS-FM in October November and 3MBS-FM in February-March. The advantage of both these deals is that the net receipt from sales is much higher than we can earn through the bookshops.

Fundraising is hard in any climate but our policy is to involve in our projects those closest to the field; and hope in this way to widen our network of friends and supporters. And speaking of friends, I want to thank the hardworking people who have been our executive over the past 12 months.

There have been some changes. Work commitments forced Peter Carroll, Sean Croyston, Robert Love and Andrew Schultz to withdraw during the year. Robert was a founding committee member and guide and mentor when Currency House was just an idea; and Sean's work with Peter Fyfe on setting up our website has been of inestimable value. In their place we co-opted Maria Crealey, who is youth music officer with the Music Board of the Australia Council; and

Malcolm Duncan, a theatre studies graduate of UNSW who is now a principal of the Insight Group, an executive search company. In his short time with us Malcolm has quietly added his weight of experience to our fundraising in the corporate sector and given us new confidence. Of the elected members, Andrew Davidson, our music guru, has had the good fortune this year to be fully employed and his commitments preclude his retaining his seat. John McCallum has also resolved to step down and devote time to the editorial board. Liz Jacka's success in gaining an Australian Research Council grant for Welcome to Television has meant that her position on our Committee becomes a conflict of interest. Councillor John Fowler of South Sydney joined us briefly but found the annexation by Sydney City Council too politically consuming. It was in his time as mayor that we received our first donation of funds from his charity ball. So I thank all of them deeply for their efforts and continuing friendship.

Happily, sitting committee members Peter Fyfe, Camilla Rountree and Nick Parsons remain, and the coopted members Maria Crealey and Malcolm Duncan, and John Golder, offer themselves for election. John retires from the University of NSW next month and is keen to develop our publishing arm. He has also discovered an unexpected skill in fundraising. We are now a tight, energetic working Committee and I recommend its members to you.

Finally, a word of deep gratitude to our Executive Officer, Margaret Leask, who has carried an immense burden. Margaret was on the Currency Press staff when we started but this year she has been working both for the Australia Council and ourselves and it's been a hard year. She leaves the Council next week to follow other interests, including ours, and we have the opportunity now to gain more of her time. But for that we need the resources. The time is right for fresh thinking in the ways we conduct our arts. We are still losing figures like Simone Young and Meryl Tankard. There is a rising dissatisfaction with the status quo. Practitioners like Aubrey Mellor and Neil Armfield are beginning now to demand new directions. The regions are becoming vocal. We have the opportunity now to work for change. But first we need the ammunition.

Katharine Brisbane

Director