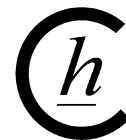


Annual Report 2004



CURRENCY HOUSE

Presented by Katharine Brisbane
at the 4th Annual General Meeting of Currency House
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This time last year I began by quoting Robert Manne's comment in the Australian Financial Review's survey, about how little influence on government, or the national debate or national self-understanding, our finest creative artists now had in this country. And we set an agenda to implement a three-year plan to chip away at that problem. Well, it hasn't gone away. The recent election campaign vividly demonstrated the truth of that comment: the issues of ethics, tolerance, self-understanding and national expression, which preoccupy a substantial part of our community, played no part in the debate. It remained mired in the swamps of economics.

What came home to me, in that campaign, yet again, was that we must stop thinking it's our government's fault that the arts don't matter. Artists themselves have come to believe they don't matter. They are just a luxury to be put aside at will in the national interest. What we need to show is that we are the national interest.

The problem, as I said in my Parsons Lecture speech earlier this month, is that people in government, people in public life, may like attending arts events; but they don't know how they got there. They don't know that a musical takes years of trial and error to build, that for a director to make one great film he or she needs the funding for six; that a symphony which takes two years to write may earn the composer one performance and a recording. To the general public what a performer does in rehearsal is as obscure and, to many, as unnecessary, as what a scientist does in the lab. What the general public wants is a successful film and a cure for cancer. This is the problem Currency House is continuing to address in our strategic plan.

Publishing

So what have we done this year? Our priority has been to get on paper resources that can be used to mount an argument for better understanding. The first of our research monographs was published in May with assistance of the Australian Writers' Guild and the University of Technology, Sydney. This was *Chasing the Runaways: Foreign Film Production and Film Studio Development in Australia 1988–2002*. To test the anecdotal evidence about the state of the film industry we commissioned Nick Herd to examine the history of the government-funded film studios and assess their value as a use of taxpayers' money. It was sent to parliamentarians, both State and Federal, to the Australian and New Zealand film industry and this week has been given to the delegates attending the International Affiliation of Writers' Guilds Conference in Sydney.

This was a valuable but expensive enterprise. And it led to John Golder's more profitable proposal this time last year for a continuing series of quarterly essays, the first of which was published in July. John retired this year from the University of NSW and has become a tireless editor for Currency House. We owe him an enormous debt. Little gets past his eagle eye in

factual errors, misspelling and poor grammar; and we can be immensely proud of the small list of publications Currency House has built up in its short life.

Platform Papers as we have called them, are already, and will continue to be, a huge benefit to us. They enable us to go deeper into the issues our discussion days have raised; and to distribute their thinking more widely. It has gained us members and subscribers nationally. And in time it will bring to the fore the voice of the informed practitioner. The first essay examined ABC arts programming; the second the need for more independence and collaboration by artists. The third is, to my mind, the first serious examination of the rise of the contemporary theatre and why it has reached today a state of paralysis. Its message is well argued and has profound implications.

We have been feeling our way towards uncovering these hidden thinkers and inevitably the essays will vary in standard; but as a collection they will, I hope nurture each other to make a much-needed contribution to self-understanding. We can't hope for better until we understand what we have.

Our third publication, to fill the slot of cultural history, is *A Leader of His Craft, Theatre Reviews* by H.G. Kippax. This will be launched at the State Library on 11 November, and will, I hope, remind journalists and practitioners of a time when a critic held a position of power in the press and manifestly affected the box office. The style is authoritative, not to say pontifical, in a way that might surprise readers today. But there is no question that he had enormous influence upon the careers of actors and playwrights like John Bell and David Williamson.

Other activities

The publishing has occupied more of my time and energy, and that of the committee, than I would wish and we have had fewer events this year. Apart from book launches, we had two sessions on the disempowered actor called *Ways of Survival*; and gained some important background. I had hoped to make this a subject for a further monograph, as a supplement to the Throsby Report, *Don't Give Up Your Day Job*. But so far the circumstances have not allowed.

However, we had two events around Martin Harrison's 'Our ABC' *a Dying Culture?* and we propose to continue the practice of having a seminar after the publication of each Platform Paper. On 14 November we shall hold an afternoon session based on Chris Latham's *Survival of the Fittest*, and led by independent musicians and producers on the ways they have found to earn a living. And a further one on the structure of the theatre industry in late January. Clem Gorman, president of the Jazz Action Society, has offered to convene a Sunday afternoon event in March or April on the parlous state of jazz, presently entitled *For Love or Money?*

This time last year at our planning meeting we made the following resolutions about future events:

- Each event should involve the membership.
- Each event should further our direction with information and argument.
- Each event should be financially self-sustainable.
- Each event should aim to draw in new spheres of influence.

We are working on these. The questionnaire you received today is your chance to have your say about our activities, so please let us have your thoughts.

Finance

The audited accounts are tabled. We are working by piece-work, raising funds to supply each publication as it arises; but we have not yet found a way to fund our overheads. We need to remedy that. Platform Papers, however, has provided the opportunity for a renewed membership campaign and to extend our influence nationally. Again I wish to thank John Golder for the way he has sought out funds for each of our titles and most particularly ongoing funding for Platform Papers. I thank also Mark Ramsden, who has recently agreed to be our financial consultant. And Malcolm Duncan who has been tireless in seeking sponsorship and helpers within his corporate network, particularly for our TV project. This is an on-going partnership with UTS for research into Australian television history and we received a grant of \$10,000 from the Australian Film Commission towards this funding. Malcolm has undertaken a working group to raise further funds for this, with the aim of holding a corporate event in March to showcase the project; and a second working group will begin work in the new year on planning a series of breakfast talks for business people on the arts and public life.

Committee

In conclusion I wish to introduce to you Eamon Flack, who has joined us for the last two months as our part-time executive officer, following the resignation of Margaret Leask. Margaret has been with us from the beginning, working largely voluntarily and we owe her a deep debt of gratitude for her dedication under hard circumstances. I miss her vigilance and attention to detail on which I had come to depend. Thanks to Currency Press we now have an office which we are gradually organising.

Ross Steele, who undertook at the start the role of a Responsible Person in charge of our tax-deductible funds under the Cultural Register regulations, has retired from that post and the position has been accepted by Malcolm Duncan, whose CV you have. I also wish to thank those other dedicated committee members who have worked so hard this year. Peter Fyfe, who has spent long hours creating our splendid new website and now keeps it up to date; Maria Crealey, whose knowledge of what's happening in the music world has filled an important gap in our Committee, Nick Parsons, our filmmaker, and Camilla Rountree. Camilla's workload as a producer at Riverside Theatres during a period of huge expansion there has taken her away from us and she retires from the Committee. I thank her for her help and advice over the past three years.

So thank you all for your sympathy with the aims of Currency House. We have a Committee now with a solid set of skills and I welcome the new faces, both to the Managing Committee and the working groups, who will do much to help us consolidate.

Katharine Brisbane

Director