

Inside Festivals: was it ever about art?

Keynote address by Anthony Steel – Currency House Seminar 1/6/03

It is little wonder that the word ‘festival’ seems to have attracted such suspicion, if not indeed opprobrium, in recent years. It has been fashionable for too long, wherever and whenever a few performances are flung together in roughly the same geographical location and at more or less the same sort of time, for the organisers to imagine that they have got themselves a festival. The word has been – perhaps irrevocably – degraded.

And yet there are in this country arts festivals entirely worthy of our attention and often deserving of our praise. It might be worthwhile to consider for a moment when, where, how and why some of the larger more high-profile, big-budget capital-city multi-arts festivals got their starts in life. The grand-daddy of them all is that of Perth, 50 years old this year and originally conceived as a program of evening entertainment for the delectation of country residents enrolled in the summer school at the University of Western Australia. In the first 46 years of its existence it had only two directors. Whilst it has consistently been one of the most interesting festivals in the last couple of decades I won't mention it again today, as its *raison d'être* in the most isolated city on earth is self-evident. It takes place early in the year, as do the festivals of Adelaide, Sydney and New Zealand, which has frequently enabled two or more of them to share international productions, thereby substantially reducing the overheads of each.

The Adelaide Festival, founded in 1960 by the chairman of the local paper and the professor of music at the Conservatorium to bring culture (meaning of course performers and productions from Europe, preferably the old country), and closely modelled on the Edinburgh Festival, is often seen by virtue of the

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establishment nature of its progenitors, to have been imposed on the community, though the good burghers of Adelaide have subsequently taken it very much to their hearts.

The original purpose of the Sydney Festival, conceived in 1976 by the State Government and the City Council as a celebration of the city, was to bring Sydneysiders to the CBD and its shops in high summer. Melbourne joined the pack a decade later, enticing Gian-Carlo Menotti to spread his wings from Spoleto, Italy, via Charleston, South Carolina, to Melbourne, thereby buying some international credibility for a new festival. Yet another decade later Brisbane decided it should keep up with the Joneses.

Whatever the whys and wherefores of their origins though, there is no doubt that for our political masters, of whatever colour, such celebrations serve to give broad evidence of the host city's cultural gravitas – a large multi-arts festival adds cachet to a city's rounded 'civilisedness'. In the case of Kennet's Melbourne, which ridiculously claimed to be one of a trio of cities, along with New York and London, that were world capitals of culture, it was presumably an essential ingredient. They are also good for the annual visitor numbers, they add value and they can usually be shown to have had a strong positive economic impact. So for the civic-minded they are worth their subsidy.

There have not infrequently been mutterings however that, because they are perceived to be glamorous, festivals get generous support from governments at the expense of round-the-year producing and presenting organisations that are engaged in the hard slog of nurturing Australian talent. The last time I was

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involved in such a disagreement was with Wayne Harrison when I was director of the Sydney Festival and he of the Sydney Theatre Company. But to the extent that such an argument is meant as something more serious than a thinly disguised bid for more subsidy it is disingenuous. It reminds me of David Malouf's answer to the politician's smug question "Which would you rather have, hospitals or opera?" "I want both" pleaded David. We need theatre companies, with repertoires that encourage the new but do not ignore the canon, we need festivals, we need international orchestra seasons, we could do with an international theatre season, we need as much variety and stimulus as we can get.

I would like to consider briefly, as a background to this afternoon's discussions, the political and social context in which Australian festivals operate today.

They are, of course not immune to the stresses and strains that over the past 20 years have beset the relationships between funding bodies and their clients. There have been two waves of political and bureaucratic thinking that have made the subtitle of today's seminar – 'Was it ever about art?' - so relevant. First came what Donald Horne referred to in his recent speech to the Sydney Arts Management Advisory Group – and he borrowed the inelegant word from America - as "the 'economisation' of culture. I quote: "This is a fundamentalist creed – the fundamentalism of the bottom line...It's the kind of language that turns society into 'the economy', citizens and producers into 'the consumers' and public funds into 'taxpayers' money'. It's also the kind of language that reduces poems, plays, dance or books to 'product'...How is it" he continued, "that people concerned with speaking up for the arts and other cultural activities

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have been reduced to that kind of twaddle? It comes from an attempt to ‘economate’ Australians’ imaginations by pushing the voguish terminology of markets, globalism, and the bottom line into places where they have no place, or only a secondary place. This unwholesome process took its first steps down into the pits with the invention of that treacherous phrase ‘the arts industry’”.

Some years ago John McCallum, referring to the Australia Council’s latest grants handbook, noted in *The Australian* that “the Major Organisations Fund provides multi-year funding for what it calls ‘good governance’. Apart from a vague introductory reference to ‘artistic excellence’, this seems to be the Fund’s main concern. No one talks about art any more”. In earlier times Nugget Coombs, the first chair of the original Australian Council for the Arts, and a banker for heaven’s sake, declared that when speaking about the finances of an arts organisation one should never use the words ‘profit’ and ‘loss’ but rather the word ‘cost’. It seems that today even ‘cost’ is a dirty word.

More recently the emphasis has been on ‘access’, the latest bureaucratic buzzword from the vocabulary of the politically correct. A couple of years ago the right-wing British journal *The Spectator* carried two editorials that went straight to the heart of the matter – for the current thinking comes to us direct from the UK. One said “The Arts Council...has launched a scheme called Arts for Everyone,...intended to encourage more people to ‘participate in arts activities’. The funds collected by the lottery provided a golden opportunity – now lost – to re-establish the importance of elitism in any civilised society: not the elitism of social snobbery, but the elitism of intellectual and artistic value, open to all who are willing to participate in civilisation’s conversation.

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However, for elitism to flourish, there must be an elite who are capable of distinguishing the artistically and intellectually meritorious from the meretricious..”

The other article protested that “...the present government...seeks to assure people that their cultural tastes, activities, desires and achievements are as good as any in the world, past or present. What the people admire is, *ipso facto*, admirable. And who (other than a cultural snob) is to say that Hamlet is better than EastEnders, and more worthy of serious attention? By claiming that Bob Dylan is the Schubert of our times a politician can demonstrate that he is a man of the people, and no elitist. Popularity is the measure of all things. By paying serious attention to even the most vulgar, degraded and intrinsically worthless manifestations of popular culture, an intellectual can show that he is a man of the people. He demonstrates by his attention that he is open-minded and not a force of conservatism. That is why the genius of Mozart can hardly be mentioned these days without an allusion to Michael Jordan, a mere sportsman; as if aiming a ball at a basket were of the same order of activity as the writing of a string quartet.” And so say all of us – or I do anyway.

What of the responsibilities of the Board of a festival, or for that matter of any arts organisation? Don Dunstan always said they had two jobs – to hire and fire the CEO and to take care of the bank balance. Even these clear responsibilities have become somewhat muddled by uncertainties as to who should be the boss. Should the artistic director be the ultimate and not just titular head of the organisation, as used always to be the case? Or should the job be split, as often happens now, so that there is an uneasy duumvirate, with one member looking

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after the programming and the other the money and the administration, each reporting in supposedly harmonious tandem to the Board? This latter arrangement is fraught with danger and as likely as not to fail. It was for instance, in my opinion, a major factor in the farce into which the 2002 Adelaide Festival eventually deteriorated and it certainly made my first year in the Sydney job a misery..

Dunstan's definition implied that the Board, having once hired the artistic director, should let that person have their head and never interfere with the programming. Thus, when a Board member of one of my early Adelaide festivals pleaded with the Board to reconsider their previous approval for me to invite the distinguished composer Hans Werner Henze as artist in residence, on the triumphant grounds that "I have looked him up in Pears Encyclopedia and he doesn't even rate a mention", the chairman felt he had the political backing to tell him that such choices were none of the Board's business. On the whole I would argue that festival boards have stuck pretty well to this principle.

A more potentially disruptive custom that seems to be creeping in is the direct representation on boards of major sponsors, which is inevitably a very unhealthy arrangement. One of my first ambitions in Sydney was to cut the link between the Festival and those massive occasions in the Domain, so accurately described one year by a sub-editor on the *Herald* as 'tribal picnics'. I was told by the Board member who represented the major sponsor that if I were to take such a step that would be the end of their very considerable sponsorship.

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Tribal picnics were just what were needed in the low season for television ratings – art was at the bottom of their wish list.

From what we have considered so far you are probably thinking that it might well be asked ‘was it ever about art?’. But the heart of a festival lies not in the usefulness for many different reasons of its outside shell but in its kernel, programming. Philip Johnson, the grand old man of American architecture, (he is in his nineties and still practising) is a great admirer of the work of Frank Gehry and was asked for his reaction to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. When asked whether he thought it simply a fine building or would it also be a satisfactory place for housing art, Johnson replied “When a building is as good as that one, fuck the art”.

And indeed, if you got too carried away by the glamour and the cachet of the festival as event, you could be lulled into thinking that to delve too closely into the detail of a festival’s program is to nitpick. And there is no doubt that festivals are excellent marketing tools. People love events and in the arts a festival is in many ways the ultimate event. Audiences can be enticed to dip their toes in entirely untested and unfamiliar waters during a festival, having once been attracted by the idea, and can easily be persuaded that if the whole turns out to be bigger than the sum of its parts they will still have had a jolly good time and will have been a bit adventurous in the process.

It is, I believe, a self-evident truth, which I have certainly appreciated for the last 30 years, since I first held the dual responsibilities of director of the Adelaide Festival Centre and artistic director of the Adelaide Festival, that organisations

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with round-the year- activities like an arts centre or a theatre or dance company, orchestra or gallery, have to try to some extent to appeal to a fairly wide cross-section of the community in which they operate. It is festivals which should be in the best position to pursue the shock of the new with no holds barred. A few thoughts on this subject from those Adelaide Festivals in the 70s.

At one of them I was sitting on a panel with that sharp-tongued British commentator Bernard Levin. He described the artistic director of a festival as a secondary creative artist. If you to any extent accept this notion, then it is clearly essential that the director be given *carte blanche* to carry out whatever his or her programming vision is. This doesn't absolve the director from the need to be fiscally responsible, nor to keep within broad guidelines which the Board may set down as being in their view relevant to the place and the community where the festival is being mounted.

I gave what became a notorious interview on ABC television when, in answer to the question (which I must say was like a red rag to a bull) as to whether I agreed that the recently announced festival program was elitist and not for the people, I replied "Of course the festival is not for the people, in the same way that a cricket match is not for me". I was attempting to show that by definition an arts festival could and should not be expected to be of interest to everybody, and that to compromise the programming to ensure its appeal to a wide cross-section of the community was not a good idea. The ABC switchboard was jammed with calls for my dismissal. When I left Adelaide in 1978, to go to work in Los Angeles, I was described to the media by one of my Board members as "like a shot in the arm, stimulating but painful in daily doses". I took this as a compliment. .

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I did not realise to what extent the need to prosecute these arguments would still be so pressing thirty years on. Yet as recently as 1998 A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on the first day of that year's Sydney Festival, stated in support of the popular nature of the program "There are a high gloss and energy about the presentations which are appropriate", adding with what appeared to be a nice touch of candour, "for this is a city that gets things done and likes its style to be transparent and showy" and then declared "A problem with festivals everywhere is that they can become caught up in over-seriousness and, often, with avant-garde pretentiousness.

Festival directors, a bit like second-rate lecturers, are inclined to believe that their festival is measured by its capacity to bore audiences. The more boring the more worthy..." Let's gloss over the fact that that year's director was also a columnist for *The Herald*.

The supermarket trolley approach to programming, whereby the artistic director searches out the most interesting (or sometimes, just for the hell of it, the most outrageous or weird) work from around the world, was contemptuously dismissed by Peter Sellars. But it's all very well for him; he lives in America and travels the world. . In Australia the tyranny of distance is still with us and it is not always easy for either the public or practitioners here to experience new trends and directions emerging in other countries.

So overall this exposure to new work from other parts of the world has undoubtedly had an effect on arts practice in this country and an influence on the

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enormous confidence that has arisen over recent decades in the work of Australian creative artists. Nothing is created in a vacuum. This confidence has in turn led to a huge recent increase in the interest in and appreciation of Australian work around the world. Australian festivals have played a not insubstantial part in this as it is often at one of them that international impresarios and presenters first make their acquaintance with the work. In a context where a fixation with the bottom line and a consequent desire for safety at the box office hold such sway, we have to make certain, as Robyn Archer so forcefully argued to an Australian Business Arts Foundation breakfast in Melbourne a couple of weeks ago, that the support is there to ensure the birth of the next *Cloudstreet* or *Theft of Sita* .

Some of you will have seen the text of a brilliant speech delivered last year in Minneapolis by John Tusa, director of the Barbican Arts Centre in London. I want to quote from his proposed catechism of belief about the arts, for together with his equally apposite ten commandments, it sums up succinctly the weaknesses and dangers inherent in the new politically correct thinking:

- Question: Do you believe in accountability, to the customers, the funding bodies and to stakeholders wherever and whoever they may be?

Answer: I do sincerely believe in accountability, but I believe in responsibility first – the responsibility which includes a duty to the arts as well as the people who subsidise them

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- Do you believe that the arts shall be for all the people all of the time and not a few of the people some of the time?

I do not believe in subscribing to impossible ideals. I do passionately believe – and experience and history are on my side – that even if some arts or particular creations are enjoyed by only a few and understood by fewer still, they may still change the world

- Do you believe that the arts must be inclusive and that funding them can only be justified if they are?

No. Very few activities in society are entirely inclusive. If inclusiveness were the chief criterion for funding, there would be few activities that deserved it. In any case, why pick on the arts?

- Do you condemn elitism, elitists and all their works and attitudes?

Only up to a point. If by elitism you mean a deliberate attitude of wrapping up the arts in arcane rules and terminology, so that people are put off by them, then I do. But if you mean the sustained pursuit of the excellent, the best, whether it is easy or difficult to understand, then you're on your own

- Do you believe in focus groups as a guide to arts programming?

You mean, do I believe that when five or six are gathered together we should grant their request? No. We can't ask for what we do not know. On this basis, the arts would never have advanced from the known or familiar

- Do you believe in art for art's sake? Yes, I do. But my culture ministry only seems to believe in art as an instrument of social or economic policy

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As I said at the start of these remarks, festivals are now two a penny. The future holds the most promise, perhaps, for those with specialist programming policies, and/or those held outside of capital cities. I am thinking of Ten Days on the Island, the first of which (I wasn't at this year's) had a palpable effect for good in Tasmania; and the Queensland Biennial Music Festival, a sensible extension of the earlier Brisbane gigs and developing in such exciting ways under Lyndon Terracini. Pity we can't include Canberra's National Festival of Australian Theatre in that list any more.

I find the likely continuing relevance of the capital city multi-arts festivals more problematic, except - in the case of Sydney, Melbourne and increasingly Brisbane - as part of very large and full cultural calendars in big, grown-up cities. I would make an exception for Adelaide. As is so often said, like Avignon and Edinburgh, Adelaide works perfectly as a festival town because of its compact size and the attractiveness and convenience of its urban planning.

It has the tradition, it has the political support and the backing of the community (Adelaide is inordinately proud of its festival - once every two years the festival director is second in importance only to the premier). It has the ability to attract all manner of ancillary goings-on, conferences, meetings, seminars, symposia, and its huge fringe festival, thereby turning itself for a couple of weeks into a hothouse of the arts on a truly national scale.

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Having grown so familiar with this quite extraordinary quality of the city, I was fascinated to be jolted once more into recognition of it during the *Ring* cycles a few years ago. They took over the city almost to the extent that the festivals do and the *frisson* of excitement and the underlying feeling of ownership added immeasurably to the acute sense of occasion that pervaded the town for the period of those three cycles. This is not a feeling that the eastern capital cities could hope to engender – nor do they need to, for they have other ways of flexing their cultural muscles that are more appropriate to their size and stature..

You will remember that that iconoclast Barrie Kosky suggested that the Melbourne and Sydney Festivals should shut up shop and leave the field to Adelaide. Since we have now reached a situation where it is very much every city for itself, it would certainly be nice to see an intelligent coordinated approach. So I would go along with Barrie so far as to suggest that, if there were ever formulated a proper national cultural policy of a kind put forward by Keating but in the event not delivered by Creative Nation, Adelaide's should be designated as the national festival and supported accordingly, with the others left to develop their own individual identities as state responsibilities. But since we live in a federal system I won't hold my breath...

Anthony Steel
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