

Response by Katharine Brisbane to David Hare's Parsons Lecture

17th October 2004, Belvoir St Theatre

David's Picasso story reminds me of one Peter Kenna liked to tell, of a rich American visiting Picasso's studio in Paris. He didn't like what he saw and said: No, I was really looking for something more realistic.

'How do you mean, realistic?' asked Picasso.

The American produced from his wallet a photograph of his wife. 'Like that', he said. Picasso perused it for a minute. 'Ah, I see', he said. 'You mean your wife is small, flat and black and white?'

Which again poses the question of what is reality? What is truth, what are lies and trust, issues that were so poorly argued in the recent election. I am Katharine Brisbane, chair of Currency House and I was Philip Parsons' partner for 35 years. Welcome and thanks to David Hare for his memorable and timely lecture.

So what is reality in public life when every aspect is being edited and fictionalised? It's an issue that goes to the heart of what the performing arts—more than any other aspect of the arts—represent today. And David Hare has defined the problem astutely. It's not a problem confined to Australia, as he has shown, it is something common to the western world and we have allowed fashion and advertising, the by-products of the arts, to appropriate from us the central place in social thinking. Fifteen years ago or more Philip and I used to watch with irritation how the news programs on TV were increasingly accompanied by re-enactments, as though we could not absorb a piece of information without a visual aid. It has become so widespread today that the only reason cabinet decisions are not accompanied by the sight of black legs entering and exiting from the corridors of power is that parliamentarians themselves have become actors engaged to perform the art of photo opportunity.

David Hare's work has long been directed to finding ways of engaging his audience in the issues that occupy him. It is a constant exercise of renewal. He is now faced with the problem that his public can no longer distinguish fact from fiction; and he has taken action in *Via Dolorosa* and *Stuff Happens*. We too, in this country, need to take action to take back our right to our fiction for the sake of the artist inside us. But we lack what David demonstrably has, and that is a literary tradition. Thackeray, Auden, Hardy, Beckett may be attacked by individuals but they have outlived their critics. Our writers are not so fortunate. Our literature came under attack again recently with the Free Trade Agreement, which places our fragile film and television industry against the full force of the Hollywood machine. 'We need our stories' was our cry. But that argument is without substance in a country that still lacks a culture that demands them at every level. Only yesterday Barry Jones recalled on Radio National's Music Show the Federal Cabinet debating in his time whether we really needed symphony orchestras while recordings were so readily available. We have our stories but we don't have the culture that understands how they are made.

Currency House is my team's small attempt to address this. I was for 30 years a publisher. Philip and I began Currency Press in 1971 to publish the work of the Australian playwright and over 30 years built up a library that demonstrates the Australian theatre and film industry do indeed have their stories. But when I retired in 2001 I looked back over those years, and at the time before when, as a newspaper columnist I documented the rise of the subsidised arts. And I

realised that in building our great centres and engaging with government, we had created as many problems as we had solved. And so I began looking at what went wrong and how to fix it. I saw that the once strident voice of the practitioner had become silent; and so our aim has become to provide the resources for informed discussion and a platform from which those voices can be heard again.

We began with private discussions and have now begun to examine our findings. We commissioned a research paper to investigate whether we taxpayers had got our money's worth from the publicly-funded film studios; and found, inevitably, that only the creative team, the creators of our stories, had failed to benefit from the rise in foreign production. And last year we published the seven preceding Parsons Lectures, which give a keen insight into the thinking, and changing thought, behind the growth of Sydney theatre over the last ten years. In July we launched Platform Papers, a quarterly essay on politics and the performing arts, to give a platform to practitioners. In these we looked first at the decline in ABC arts programming. The second examines the exponential changes in the music industry and urges the individual artist to grasp the opportunities offered by independence. The third essay, out in January, is what I believe to be a seminal work defining how the natural generational change in the Australian theatre has been fatally damaged by blows to the centre. The brief for these essays is to define a problem and propose a way forward. I recommend them to you as one small instrument towards change.

Last weekend we had an election. The arts have traditionally been of the left and another term with the right has been dispiriting for many of us. While I personally found it so, we need to bear in mind that such feelings are based not on sober proof but on expectation. Conservative government is not intrinsically wicked. Its declared purpose is to conserve the best of the past for the future.

And the artist's job is not to make government policy but to exercise our imagination. To enable people to see the consequence of their decisions, to see the other person's point of view, and to understand that the healthiest democracy is one that accommodates colourful debate at all levels. In other words, to subvert. We have always been governed by people to whom the arts mean nothing. That's our tradition. It's time we began to think independently of government and sponsorship, to decide our aims, gather our ammunition, to examine the lessons of the past, to find a bridge across these gaps of incomprehension. We must learn better how to subvert the tools of the time, as David has done in *Via Dolorosa*, to present not just the facts to be faced but the feelings those facts arouse.

That's the job Currency House is setting for the next few years. I hope you will come and join us. And there is more about us on our website. So thank you again, David Hare, for the way you too have defined a problem and shown us a way forward. Philip would have been as grateful as I am.

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A PDF of David Hare's lecture "Why Fabulate?" is also available.