

Imagining a Creative Nation

The 2006 Elizabeth Jolley Lecture
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by Katharine Brisbane

I am honoured to be speaking in the name of Elizabeth Jolley, whose writing I have so much admired. She is a writer who understands the meaning of drama and dramatic tension, in the most ordinary of situations, and has shown us how small people can be capable of the most fearful actions.

I have chosen this title, 'Imagining a Creative Nation' for my lecture because exercise of the imagination is the first step to making a change or solving a problem. Elizabeth Jolley understood this. So often in her writing she shows us the limitations we place on the imagination, and how powerful a motivator the fear of change can be. The arts are, or should be, about change, about showing us new ways of seeing ourselves, about foreseeing the consequences of present action, about re-examining the past and imagining the future.

I have been an observer of the arts for over fifty years now and so tonight I want to talk to you about how I see that development over that time, where we are going and the opportunities I see to be a more creative nation.

The phrase 'Creative Nation' was, of course, the title of the policy document published by the Keating Government in 1994, and hailed as a new era for the arts. Before that we had adopted the Lucky Country, as Donald Horne described it—a lotus land which we carelessly enjoyed. Bob Hawke's vision was of a Clever Country, which to me always had an undertone of sharp practice. Paul Keating's vision was more magisterial and *Creative Nation* was an important document, and written by a group of our best minds. But in hindsight it proved to be not a unique vision but an expansion of the Eurocentric version of high culture with which we were already familiar.

Essential to nationhood, of course, is government. The arts have had a thorny relationship with government—and even with the idea of social order. Traditionally artists, actors and musicians have made themselves a place in what became known as the demi-monde, the half world, which all classes of society inhabit from time to time. Artists were comfortable there; it gave them the freedom to observe the world, and not infrequently to subvert it.

So when, as happened after the Second World War, the arts and humanities were embraced by public authorities as a binding agent with which to restore the social order disrupted by war, the arts took on a whole new role in society. The British Council, for example, and the British Drama League, who brought civilising British culture to the world. Perhaps some of you remember stories of the Old Vic tour in 1948 with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, who were treated to mayoral banquets and street parades like royalty. Inspired by this movement Australia established its own arts councils and adult education courses, and, of course, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, a tribute to the ambitions of the new Elizabethan age celebrated by the coronation of our young queen in 1953.

It was in this mood of post-war rehabilitation that the Trust, as it was known, was established with seeding funding from the Government and private donations. And so began the quarrelsome marriage of art and government. A decade later when the Trust's business methods had proved unsound, and incidents like the Suez crisis fuelled growing disillusion with the Mother Country, the demand began for properly-funded government support for the home-grown product. The new generation seeking that support was very different from the old. This was the baby-boomer generation now turning 18, raised securely by a paternal Menzies Government but now betrayed by a conscription lottery for the Vietnam War. It was an angry time in which to establish good governance in the arts, but establish it they did. In 1968 the Gorton Government provided the first allocation to set up a federal funding body.

The turbulent history of the late 1960s is well-known. Incited by a world-wide youth rebellion following the end of the Cold War, there were moratoria marches against conscription and American world domination, of which the first man on the moon in 1969 became an icon. Street protest became a culture. The arts became politicised.

Dr H.C. (Nugget) Coombs, architect of post-war rehabilitation and by then Governor of the Reserve Bank, was appointed, at his own request, to establish in 1968 an NGO to be called the Australian Council for the Arts

Dr Coombs' problems were many. Outside the commercial theatre there were almost no professionally-trained managers or artistic directors. He needed time to resolve this, but time he did not have. He had a nine-month window of opportunity in which to get seeding funding included in the Federal budget and only a year before the next election. From the start it was clear that too narrow a path was being set. His vision excluded the commercial theatre and the amateur theatre as being irrelevant to his pursuit of the high arts. That left the middle ground, held by small theatres on the British model, mostly run by people trained in the British theatre, who were struggling to keep alive the notion of civilising art and 'the world's best plays'

My apologies for this history lesson but I need to set the scene. I'll get to the nitty gritty soon.

The mantra of the new Council was 'the pursuit of excellence'. Boards were hastily set up under the different art forms to dispense the meagre funds and for theatre it was decided to establish a major company in each capital, beginning (naturally) with Sydney and Melbourne. The State Governments quickly followed with statutes and building plans—and so began what became known as the edifice complex. It was exciting at the time, particularly the celebration of what was our own: the clever, the ingenious and the ugly, the Australian accent, the bad manners and the good heart. Bob Hawke took on that mantle—the people's hero, the drinker and womaniser who wept publicly over the dead in the Yom Kippur War; who shared our emotions and met the challenge to be our very own ocker Prime Minister.

But despite Hawke's accession, the 1980s were a different decade. The arts, having made their bed, were learning to lie in it. Nor was it even the best bed. Both Coombs and his executive, Jean Battersby, have exclaimed publicly about how they never planned a monolith, how decisions taken in haste had by 1975 been set in concrete. Now, bleeding from the cuts of Malcolm Fraser's razor gang, that slashed the heady spending of the Whitlam period, the arts learnt the language of the lobbyist and the sponsor, and began to watch the power of the major companies rise. Perhaps the trajectory was inevitable. Still, for a while we saw a growing confidence, our orchestras and dancers touring overseas, writers expanding onto the main stage, their commentary extending to the international arena. And in film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and the *Mad Max* movies and their contemporaries carried a generation of Australian filmmakers into Hollywood.

So then what happened? The 1990s were a period of consolidation. Theatre and music schools proliferated. But some of the excitement began to drain away. The answer, to my mind, lies in

that focus of Nugget Coombs, back in 1968, on the pursuit of excellence. What had been a collection of community interests had become a hierarchy, a ladder, to use Mark Latham's term, but in the wholesale rush to set the top rungs in place, we had discarded the lower rungs as collateral damage.

When I was growing up, here in Perth, in the 1950s, we had an active amateur theatre culture. I watched the Festival of Perth start up in 1953 and the Rep turn itself by degrees into a professional theatre with its own building, the Playhouse. And in the 1960s the rise of the Hole in the Wall—at first literally a hole in the wall of a derelict building in North Perth, where, until the Health Department shut it down, brought to Perth the best of the then dynamic American theatre. Since then both the Hole in the Wall and the variously named theatre companies housed at the Playhouse had vicarious careers, the Playhouse is now due for demolition, in favour of a publicly-owned theatre. His Majesty's, then the home of Edgley and Dawe, was bringing year-round variety, musicals and opera to Perth, and in the 1980s was restored with a dedication and understanding of the process of theatre-making that is the envy of every theatre in Australia.

Around Australia there was lots of dedicated arts activity in shabby makeshift premises, but few people the Government felt could be trusted with taxpayers' money. Artists, after all, were notoriously unreliable—and still are. So applicants were required to be incorporated not-for-profit structures. As a result of this policy, in 1976 the entrepreneurial arm of J.C. Williamson's, our dominant commercial chain, went into receivership, the victim of subsidised competition. And we lost most of the small theatres. These went bankrupt attempting to re-structure and pay salaries they could not sustain, or they returned to their amateur status. Newer, braver entrepreneurs attempted to fill the gap but until in 1980 when the Cameron Mackintosh machine moved into the gap in the market and rebuilt the audience for musicals, the popular theatre fell into decline. Looking back, it was probably at this point that the performing arts began to be regarded as 'exclusive'.

And so, under financial pressures and the imposition of high art, the performing arts became, not an industry, as it tried to be, but a mendicant sector, supported by an unsustainable rectitude as purveyor of our culture. A new British Council, in fact. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested by government. Some in artists, more in infrastructure. And this still continues. So why are we not happy? Why am I questioning this relentless pursuit of excellence? Why are the arts still so angst-ridden? On the other hand, why, with so many great stages, are actors still asked 'And what do you do for a living?' Because, in my view, we have failed, in this rush to excellence, to provide a sound industrial base. Worse, we destroyed at the outset the base we had.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a young actor. It's the kind of letter people like me receive from time to time from a young person hoping for a magic bullet from someone who is quoted in the press as knowing what they are talking about.

'I am 25 years old and have a deep love for theatre', he wrote. 'I completed an undergraduate bachelor degree, majoring in Drama, at Edith Cowan University in 2001. After that I started acting with the Black Swan Theatre Company for about 12 months. I then went to London for 18 months to study at the Actors' Centre.' Since then he has been living in Sydney in further study but gave up after reading an interview with me in the *West Australian* in which I stated that there was 95 per cent unemployment in the acting profession. What should he do, he asked.

How does one answer such a letter? How can unemployment be so high? And opportunities for the young so few? And for those who grasp the opportunities the riches so great?

Well, first of all it has always been so. What government support has done, by building an infrastructure which promises support, is increase competition. The despair evinced by my

young letter writer is too common a cry today, and with good reason, one of which is that we are training more students than the profession can possibly contain.

So, what can we do about it? Do we lobby for a change in government policy? Government has been generous to the arts; but being government their job is to be accountable, and so they have invested in stable, high profile opera, dance and theatre companies, orchestras and galleries. These are our flagships, our demonstrable assets, and, while we didn't really know how they came about, as Bernard Shaw said about the British Museum, try to take them away from us.

Much more contentious is the position of the artist. A good handful of our film actors are on the *Business Review Weekly's* rich list. Those permanently in our named institutions earn comfortable salaries. The rest, according to the work of the economist David Throsby, earn from their art between \$7,000 and \$30,000 a year. And this has not changed since he began his studies in 1985. And yet artists are still charged by the tabloid press with being 'exclusive' and 'on a gravy train'.

It's a dilemma for the artist because to the lay public art is either magical or a hobby. Or in some cases seditious intent. The process of art is too intangible, too risky for investment, its outcomes too abstract to be measured. When it succeeds we recognise it, but even the author can't explain how it got there.

We should not expect our governments to understand this. It is not possible for them to deal in intangibles. Paul Keating dabbled in the intangible in his time as Prime Minister by introducing in 1994 his Creative Fellowships for senior artists—the Keatings, as they came to be known—which offered around \$50,000 a year for three years to allow established artists to undertake work which making a living had so far hindered. A blue-chip investment, I would have thought. But it was one the most contentious acts of his Prime Ministership and was taken as personal largesse, characteristic of the alleged hubris that finally brought him down. And the Keatings were sharply discarded when he lost office.

So if present policy can't help us, where do we go from here? We must change the culture. And the culture is changing, whether we like it or not. We are already into a post-industrial era that offers immense opportunities for the arts, and this time the artists must take back the initiative they have surrendered over the past thirty years..

Any artist will tell you that process is at the centre of their art. That the product is an outcome at some point in the process but not the end of it. A painter who sells a painting will go on painting, using what they have discovered. Playwrights and musicians go on revising regardless of the opening performance of their work. Actors and musicians continue to work on their performance, in pursuit of that elusive moment when they fly. It can be elating, or hurtful, to have public praise or criticism of their most recent work, but in the end it is irrelevant to the continuing task they have set themselves.

'Product', says Robyn Archer, 'is the detritus of art.' So the persistent question is: how to subsidise this process responsibly?

It was these non-commercial, cultural ambitions, however, inherited from the culture-bearing amateur arts, which in hindsight have been at the root of our problems. A non-profit structure with a board of upright citizens was from the start imposed upon applicants seeking allocations of funding. There was also an undefined regulation of worthiness imposed, implying that a repertoire of popular fare—too much Ayckbourn, or Neil Simon, or Terence Rattigan and your funding would be under threat.

Paradoxically, neither artists nor government, at the start, imagined that the orchestras, theatre and dance companies being set up would go on expanding their reach and proliferating calls on

the public purse. It was certainly believed that their work would go into the commercial and the international arena in due course, as happens in other countries.

But where was the industry to support that hope? Where was the opportunity for profit?

The pressures this has created over these years, were outlined by John Bell, of the Bell Shakespeare Company, in a recent speech to a business breakfast at the Sofitel Wentworth in Sydney:

The industry has become far more professional and accountable. Its Boards of Directors today are a lot more than figureheads. Forty years ago the Board of Directors of an arts company consisted of a group of worthy individuals whose names looked good on a letterhead—you had to have at least one judge and a couple of prominent socialites—a title or two helped a lot. Nowadays recruiting a Board is a delicate and serious business. You need people who are leaders in their own fields, dedicated net-workers with good political and corporate connections. They have to be prepared to make substantial financial contributions to the Company, spend a lot of time at sub-committee meetings, rehearsals and performances, be on tap to offer pro bono advice, be held responsible in the case of economic downturn—and to do all this for nothing.

Was this ever imagined in the early days?

In 1972 on the last night of the old Theatre Royal in Sydney, Toby Robertson, director of Britain's Prospect Theatre Company, made a defining statement about this public culture. The reason a theatre like the Royal (built in 1875) was worth preserving, he said, was because it had been built by actor-managers and designed from the stage out. That is, by an actor looking out at his audience, knowing he needed to engage their full attention making sure they could see and hear him while providing enough seats to be profitable. In the twentieth century, said Robertson, theatres were, for the most part, designed by architects and local authorities, whose view of the theatre was from the stalls.

That was certainly the perspective of Dr Coombs and his contemporaries. He was not trying to create another public service, his dream was to make possible, here in provincial Australia, the creation of the theatre and ballet he loved. 'Few', he was fond of saying 'but roses.' In his other life he had wide experience in the art of the possible, and we owe him a great debt. But you can't grow roses—even a few of them, without the regular application of a great deal of manure.

What he never understood, I believe—probably none of us considered this enough—was that the view from the front stalls is an illusion. That is the point of theatre. The reality is the backside of the scenery, the mechanics in the flies, the production workshop, the training schools, the marketers, the ticket sellers, the struggle, the hopes, the necessary failures that make the triumphs. What we see from the front stalls is only the magic. And yet that magic dictates the policy of arts subvention, not only here but in most first-world countries since the end of the Second World War. How different it might have been had we chosen at the start to build, as Robertson suggested, from the stage out.

It is this rise of the illusion of cultural power that has denied the arts the sweat of experiment and the price of failure as a necessary stage on the road to success. Today, too few writers, film actors, opera composers, get more than one—perhaps two—chances in the big time. There is too much at stake for the producer, leading to too many constraints on the creative process. This loss of community is also now evident in the content and administration of our arts. While in the 1970s, going to see new work in one improvised venue after another we used to say we were grateful if the second act had arrived by opening night, today it takes two or three years for a new play or television series to find its way into the system, even from an established

name. For film it can take up to ten years. It is hard for writers for performance to find anything relevant to say with timelines like this. It is not just in the law's delays that justice is denied. The outcome has been an increasing conservatism, and a growing view of the subsidised arts as a jumped-up sector of the entertainment industry. It is a crippling waste of talent and everywhere I go the frustration is palpable.

Last year I published a book which documented these issues in the rise of arts subsidy from the 1960s, of which I was an eye witness. I called it *Not Wrong—Just Different*, the headline of an article published in 1971 in the *Australian* about the up-and-coming playwrights. The invitation to give this lecture was accompanied by the suggestion that I might call it 'Not Wrong—Just Different', to which I replied that today it would need to be called 'Once Different, Now Too Much the Same'.

(I was, however, heartened by a feature article in last weekend's *Australian* about Bryan Brown's new TV series, which offers opportunity to a whole new group of writers and directors. Just the way he described their process reminded me of the freedom and autonomy in creative work we once had. Desperately, the article was flagged 'Can Bryan Brown Save TV Drama?')

This is, I'm afraid, a too-generalised history lesson. Artists do survive, of course, they do have their own industrial structure, but one that remains unacknowledged, even suppressed: it is called the casual workforce. Paul Keating at the Entertainment Industry's Helpmann Awards on Monday put his finger on it. Looking out at the glamorous audience he said: 'This is the best-dressed Centrelink crowd I've ever seen.' Artists themselves are major contributors to arts subsidy by undertaking other work in order to afford the low returns they receive for their art.

I have been sharply reminded of these changes not only by my own documentation of a time when experiment was uppermost and failure was a right, but by another book whose editing and publication has occupied me for the past twelve months: the autobiography of the theatre and film director George Ogilvie, which he has called *Simple Gifts*. His story, as a practitioner, parallels mine as the critic. And the writing was enabled by the gift of a Keating Fellowship.

Ogilvie was one of six children of a Scottish baker and his wife who settled in Canberra in the 1930s, and in the book he documents the apprenticeship system that prevailed before training schools, and the persistence needed, then and now, to win success in the theatre. George, like others of his generation, escaped to England where he found a job with the last melodrama company in England, and learnt how to perform a new play every night in a new town every week. Back in Australia he was an actor in the first Trust company, presenting popular classics in the English manner, then became an apprentice director with the Union Theatre Repertory Company at Melbourne University, and the Melbourne Theatre Company, where gradually the vision of what an Australian theatre could be became a reality.

In 1982, after twenty years as a theatre director, he was invited into the film industry by the *Mad Max* director George Miller. He made films one after another as well as directing opera and teaching; and within a few years received the film industry's top award. Not working, I think, has ever occurred to George Ogilvie. It's how it once was and he is one of the few survivors. Next month, at 75, he begins directing a new TV series for the ABC.

I asked my son Nick, who is a filmmaker, to comment on George's chapter on film. What did he think of it? 'Think', said. 'All I could feel was a deep, deep envy.' Today not even our most popular directors can make even one film a year. Kennedy Miller is doing very little now. The revered Ray Lawrence, director of *Lantana* and *Jindabyne*, has made three films in twenty years. He earns a living making commercials. Private investment has dried up, competition for the modest government funding is intense and the choices are usually in favour of the little films, the safe ones. The same is true of the main stage today. In the smaller theatres a highly

competitive independent movement survives and finds a healthy audience for diverse and contentious work. But the gap between them and the big-time grows wider.

It takes so much more determination today to assert the individual voice, because the stakes are so much higher. But it is the eccentric that we remember: epic shows like *Bran Nue Dae* and *Cloudstreet*, movies like *Muriel's Wedding*, *Strictly Ballroom*—and now *Ten Canoes*. And personalities like Baz Luhrmann, Meryl Tankard, Barrie Kosky, Simone Young, Russell Crowe. Focused, single-minded artists not attracted to working by committee. Ogilvie, too, is not all that popular with management, but actors trust him with their life.

So how do we resolve this intransigent problem of the relationship between public authority and the arts, if the arts increasingly require to be subsidised?

One of my pleasures, as founder, in my retirement, of a non-profit think-tank called Currency House, is to supervise the publication of our quarterly essay, *Platform Papers*, on politics and the performing arts. Working with authors at the coalface of current issues, prevents me from becoming too despondent. So I was heartened by the response to this month's issue, entitled 'What Price a Creative Economy?' In it the author claims that the relationship between government and creativity has already changed irrevocably, and we must learn to manage change or be left behind. The author, Stuart Cunningham, is the director of a Queensland think-tank for innovation. He argues that a new sector, defined in the late 1990s as the creative industries, is making a significant impact on the economy of the UK, China, Korea and Singapore. In London, he tells me, it is the second biggest industrial sector after financial services. And it is a much larger and more influential sector in Australia than we recognise, representing up to 5% of the economy.

These industries include the arts, architecture, media, broadcasting, fashion, the recording industry and all the IT web designers, programmers, bloggers and creators of the ever expanding platforms. The potential of these creative skills has barely been touched, according to Cunningham. And one of the significant aspects is that, while the reach is global, the internet is asserting individual and community opinion and skills in a way with which the mass market cannot compete. Sure, there is a lot of rubbish and misinformation. Nevertheless, blogging and dot.com commentary are rapidly eroding the authority of the press and government control of public opinion. My first awareness of this power was the way news of the Tienamen massacre back in 1989 came out of China by fax and email. How many Australian lives in Lebanon have recently been saved by the cell phone? The pop industry largely by-passes the daily press these days. Dance is developing its own form for presentation on DVD. You know, I'm sure, what I am talking about.

Here is what Cunningham says about the financial position of the arts in Australia today:

In quantum terms, the tax dollar spend on the arts is very small indeed and judicious increases are certainly called for. The Productivity Commission... estimates that Culture and Recreation, the sector where the arts are placed, received less than 1% of its income from the public purse. Compare this to the enormous 14.3% allocated to some manufacturing sectors, and 9.5% to textiles, clothing and footwear. Clearly, the idea that the arts are more heavily subsidised by our hard-earned tax dollar than other sectors is laughable. Thanks to the efforts of excessively influential lobbyists, the amount of corporate welfare routinely thrown at failing industries and mendicant companies is massively greater than that given to the arts. According to the Productivity Commission, tax breaks and handouts that the Federal Government gave to business last year amounted to \$4.6 billion.

If, says Cunningham, the arts could stand up for themselves better, and be defended not only by cultural policy but as a skills sector at the leading edge of innovation, then ways could be found to reward them better. The internet, he points out, is crammed with bloggers producing

inventions waiting to be adapted and exploited by industry. This may seem to be a long way from what we think of as art—Deborah Reidl's performance of Brunnhilde, for example—but if you just think of the skills that go into the staging and the recording, the creative skills are enough to give one pause. It's the potential of the reality, the view from the stage. Not just the magic.

To engineer such a change of culture, however, would require changes in government policy and regulation and the cooperation of a variety of portfolios. Not an easy task but the British Government is seriously pursuing it. Only last month Chancellor Gordon Brown launched a 12m pound program aimed at finding the people who will lead Britain's cultural sector into the future. The arts, he said, was the key to the growth of the British economy and they were seeking 2,000 people for a leadership program.

What becoming part of the creative sector would mean for the arts, of course, would be the loss of its dubious exclusivity, a loss of the magic in favour of a recognisable, exploitable reality with which to construct a sustainable, renewable, industrial base. It's a powerful argument which our training schools, particularly, need to take on board; and one in the words of the economics writer of the *Australian*, is 'a valid argument for government support'

So my story so far is that in the last forty years we have built up an impressive amount of cultural real estate and have found ways of filling it, but we still have no apprenticeship system for performers and no profit motive for companies. No obvious pathway for the students coming out of our training schools, few opportunities of any permanence, almost no recycling or exploitation of past successes, only the occasional chance of becoming a millionaire. We now have Dr Coombs' 'Few, but roses', but at an enormous cost of unused talent. I look back at the McLeay Report of 1987, a report of the Parliamentary Expenditure Committee that recommended devolution and a greater recognition of areas like the recording industry. We derided it at the time but Leo McLeay was the first to rub our noses in the fact that the Australia Council funding was a pathetically small part of what he saw as the arts sector.

But to do as Stuart Cunningham suggests, would require a radical rethink, both for government and the artist. The marriage consummated by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust rubs along but is as unhappy as it ever was. We badly need to find another way.

So to conclude these ruminations, I have no solution to offer, but I do believe that we are being carried along by momentous changes and need the imagination to grasp the opportunities. A columnist in last Sunday's *Age* dismissed Cunningham's argument as 'scary' and the language as intimidating, and he will not be alone. But it is already happening, so it is up to us. If we could begin by persuading our artists themselves to recognise the opportunity offered of joining, and contributing to, a huge new creative sector, the chance of being seen as the advance guard of an exciting new globally-reaching creative economy, then perhaps all of us could also begin to imagine, and contribute to, a Creative Nation.

Thank you.

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