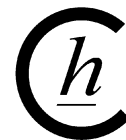


Theatre Under Howard

The 9th Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture
on the Performing Arts
given by David Marr, 9th October, 2005

This PDF available from www.currencyhouse.org.au



CURRENCY HOUSE



B SHARP



Every Tuesday morning of sitting weeks, government MPs gather in a long white room on the ground floor of parliament house. These joint party meetings rarely give the prime minister any trouble. But on 15th March this year, the meeting broke into open revolt. Men and women – on the whole, decent men and women - who had made no fuss when Howard trapped refugees on the deck of the *Tampa* and sent troops to invade Iraq – had him on the mat over the fate of three orchestras.

His government had asked James Strong, businessman, to find a way of guaranteeing ‘the long term vibrancy and sustainability’ of all the nation’s orchestras without spending any more money. Strong looked at the problem for ten months and came up with an impeccable business solution: clear the debts and force the weak to live within their means. So the Queensland Symphony was to lose 15 players; the Tasmanian Symphony would be cut to a chamber orchestra of 38; and the Adelaide orchestra – covered in honours after the 2004 performance of *The Ring* – would be pruned from 74 players to a miserable 56.

Alexander Downer had already confronted the arts minister Rod Kemp. On the morning of the MPs’ meeting, proud Adelaide’s grubby Advertiser had Downer saying: ‘I made it perfectly clear to him I regarded this as unacceptable.’ The Foreign Minister denounced Strong’s plans for ‘dumbing Adelaide down’ and pledged to fight them ‘tooth and nail’.

The debate that began that morning in the party room rolled on all week in the Senate. It was the rarest of events: a passionate debate about the arts among the nation’s conservative parliamentarians. Debate is perhaps not the right word because no one rose to support the trimming of the orchestras. One after the other, Queenslanders, South Australians and Tasmanians struggled to their feet to plead for the right of their constituents to hear Mahler and Beethoven as Sydney and Melbourne hear Mahler and Beethoven: at full strength.

The government put up no fight at all. Even on day one, Howard had expressed ‘sympathy’ in the party room and Rod Kemp emerged that day making vague promises that the embattled orchestras would ‘thrive long into the future at their current size’. The money was to be scrounged from somewhere.

That money has not yet quite been found – as usual NSW is holding out – but the defeat of James Strong’s business plan in March was an important moment in a very old debate in this country. Here were conservative politicians putting into words why they believed governments must support the arts. They didn’t use the sort of election rhetoric both sides still roll out for every campaign. They said nothing about the arts making us better human beings or even better Australians. Multiculturalism went unmentioned. The sensitive arguments of many commentators over many years on the proper role of government were ignored.

Their advocacy was simply grounded in civic pride – the right of civilised communities in a prosperous country. Queensland senator George Brandis argued the case this way: ‘Since no Australian orchestra is sustainable in the sense of being commercially self-sufficient or even close to being so, the real issue, given that reality, is whether the government nevertheless accepts that orchestras are a sufficiently important part of the infrastructure of our community and of the social capital of our nation that they should be supported.’

The arts as infrastructure. In John Howard’s Australia, libraries, museums, theatres and orchestras are on the same list as ports and roads and hospitals – traditional institutions, and necessary parts of the civic fabric. To understand what’s happened under Howard to the arts in general and theatre in particular – the odd mix of generosity and meanness, celebration and indifference, abuse and support – it’s best to keep in mind the lessons learnt in the kaffuffle over the orchestras: that the bedrock arts policy of the Howard Government is not support for the arts – it’s support for arts institutions. Big, traditional institutions.

And in the way we understand these things in Australia – let’s not talk of what’s possible in Europe – the big traditional arts companies are flourishing under John Howard as never before. Except for theatre.

Baz Luhrmann deserves credit for bringing to perfection an art form as dead and gone as opera seria. I’m talking about those star studded Arts for Labor election campaign launches which reached their height with the 1993 extravaganza at the State Theatre in Sydney that’s credited with helping Paul Keating win the unwinnable election. Always the drawcards at these shows were stars of stage and screen. The political affiliations of people working in theatre have never been in doubt: they are overwhelmingly Labor. In this almost-post-union world, theatre remains one of the most unionised corners of the nation.

The arts in general and theatre in particular seemed set for annihilation once Labor lost power. But the politics were never as simple as the rallies and rhetoric suggested – on one side arts ‘elites’ and on the other the barbarians of the suburbs. The Liberals saw the arts could be won over because they were looking at the audiences. You don’t need to survey subscribers to the Sydney Theatre Company to know they’re North Shore – just look at them. Certainly I can tell because I grew up there. Even this theatre – Company B Belvoir – draws its audiences from suburbs no longer implacably hostile to the Liberal party.

So in the great Howard strategy for creating a new middle ground in Australian politics dominated by the Liberals, there was no reason to needlessly antagonise theatre and its audiences – indeed, the arts and their audiences. When the inevitable day came and the people sent Paul Keating home to Woollahra, the barbarians of the Coalition did not lay waste to the arts. Even so, it was a turning point, a moment of change.

Under Labor, the arts had surfed along on the notion that theatre, painting, music were part of a larger enterprise of national renewal and discovery. This was the underpinning of the rhetoric of Keating’s Creative Nation but the sense that Australia was on our way somewhere new, went back at least to the time of Harold Holt. Dismantling White Australia, piece by piece, was the great change once Menzies was out of the way. But from this time, the arts were also seen as part of this project of national renewal. Even before Whitlam burst onto the scene, Canberra was backing the film industry and funding the Australia Council. For the next 25 years we took for granted that the arts and government were working together to build a new Australia.

Then along came Howard - the first prime minister in 30 years to come to office with no talk, however vague, of changing Australia for the better. Of course he had big plans for economic change – many of them secret – but otherwise he wasn’t planning to take us anywhere. There

would be no more preaching about improvement and renewal. Howard didn't need the arts to prove we were a country getting somewhere. His political mantra has always been that we're fine just the way we are.

The arts don't mean much for Howard. Theatre isn't his thing. Music is difficult for him because of his hearing. He reads and his wife loves the ballet. That makes him not unrepresentative of middle-class Australian men of a certain age. The arts don't inform his view of the world or the country he leads. His understanding of Australia – an Australia many of us flinch from – is profound and profoundly political. In a way that Keating was not quite, John Howard is a political animal to the tips of his fingers.

Nothing is exempt from his political scrutiny - certainly not the arts. That hasn't meant stuffing arts boards with party hacks. Party political affiliation counts a great deal under Howard – and few if any of the high profile Labor appointees to arts boards had another turn once their time was up – but Canberra has a more subtle aim than colouring the arts Liberal. They want the arts to reflect well on the government. The ground rules are that they don't want the arts getting up their noses; they don't want to be embarrassed; and they want the arts minister to look good.

Back at the beginning that meant Richard Alston. He grasped more clearly than most of his colleagues that the arts were not a lost cause for the Government, that whatever the politics backstage, the politics in the stalls were not necessarily hostile. He had his passions – Aboriginal art, opera, early music and theatre – and he proved a persuasive advocate in the cabinet. The shape of the arts today owes a great deal to the fact that from 1996 until he left Parliament in 2003, there was an arts minister who really understood the dynamics of arts funding.

Unfortunately, Alston was also minister for the ABC and thus in charge of bringing the national broadcaster to heel – the fate the arts in general escaped when Howard came to power. Not that this was simple party politics. The boxing of the ABC is a perfect example of the rule of thumb that says what's bad under Howard usually began under Labor. Most ABC viewers and listeners are Liberal voters and love the national broadcaster – but Alston followed the vindictive course set by Labor to rein in the ABC's reporters and commentators. The target was news and current affairs but the arts - and particularly drama – bore the brunt of the budget cuts. That the ABC is now so starved of money that it will broadcast less than 20 hours of new Australian drama this year – three or four minutes a day - is the result of a bi-partisan campaign going back to the early 1990s.

Of course this has had a devastating effect on drama – on writers, actors, cameramen, directors and designers. The ABC was always a mean employer but it was once the training ground, the innovator. If the aim of government is to have drama flourishing in Australia, what's been done to the ABC makes no sense at all. But remember the bedrock principle here: Canberra's focus is on the institutions not the art.

After only two years in government, Alston announced the Nugent Inquiry. These great reports – Tribe, Waks, Nugent, Myer, Roberts, Strong – are provoked not by artistic collapse but looming financial disaster. The pattern is crisis, rescue, flatlining for a few years, crisis, report and rescue again. As Jean Battersby remarked the other day when in one of the Alfred Deakin Innovation Lectures: 'Ever since governments began to provide funds for them, the arts have been studied within an inch of their lives.'

Helen Nugent started out with the idea that the answer to the problems of the major companies – the orchestras, the opera, the ballet, the festivals, Musica Viva and big theatres like Belvoir - was a bit more money and lots of managerial wizardry. But the doctrine that everything can be

solved by smart management came up against the iron rule of the arts: that the fundamental costs are the cost of labour and that these costs rise on a trajectory of their own. The Nugent team concluded that the only way the big companies could be put on a sound financial basis was first a jump in government funding, and then realistic indexing of grants.

Alston was persuaded. He persuaded Howard. It took, apparently, only a brief conversation. In September 2000, it was announced that Canberra would given an extra \$45 million and the states an extra \$25 million to the major companies over the following four years. It was the biggest single boost in arts funding since the Whitlam years.

But for Tap Dogs, theatre might have done much better from Nugent. The financial returns her teams of management consultants used, showed the Sydney Theatre Company awash with money from Tap Dogs. On these unusually rosy figures, she declared this the nation's benchmark theatre company, decided it should get 13% of its turnover in subsidy and that funding for all the other big theatre companies would build from there. When the tap dance craze died and costs rose inexorably – the STC would not be the only big theatre company hit hard.

Nugent did nothing for the little theatre companies. Here is another example of the maxim that problems under Howard usually began under Keating. Back then, arts companies were sorted into big and little. We're talking Griffin, Sidetrack, Deckchair, La Mama, Legs on the Wall, La Boite, Flying Fruit Fly Circus – and so on. Most of these 35 little companies are theatres, funded through the Theatre Board of the Australia Council. There has never been enough money for them. Now there is less than ever. Yet they create most of the new Australian work for the theatre. Most new writers begin here; and most new directors; and their audiences are as big as the audiences for the major companies.

They are not surviving. Melbourne has lost Anthill, the Church and the Gas Works. The Pram Factory went years ago. There has been a culling of this middle rank across Australia – the small theatres that once were stepping stones between co-ops and the majors. If you're not one of the majors these days, you're starving. According to the Roberts report commissioned by the Australia Council, these theatres are not badly managed but their profits are static and their margins are slim. Their infrastructure is under pressure. They are forced to be less creative. In 2002, Roberts considered half of them to be financially at risk and he predicted what he called 'a spiral of decline' as penny pinching produced fewer and poorer productions. Once audiences start to fall away, he said, 'Sponsorship, philanthropic giving and other government funding is likely to follow the trend.'

Not that there's much of any of those. They all go to the big companies. The big theatre companies – the state theatre companies, Belvoir, Black Swan, Malthouse and Bell Shakespeare – have the sponsors, the donors, the political backers and the board members with the kind of business cred to lobby Howard government ministers effectively. But Canberra has left the fate of the little theatre companies to the States. And those Labor governments are not responding. In John Howard's Australia, the little companies have no political friends. The fate of these companies presents intractable difficulties for the theatre industry and for the Australia Council. The Roberts report predicting catastrophe is already two years old. Later this year when all the cultural ministers of the States, territories and Commonwealth meet again, it will be discussed again. No one is holding out much hope.

In the face of their difficulties it's a little hard to ask for sympathy for the big theatre companies. As you stride down the wharf under the fluttering Myer banners towards that sophisticated little restaurant with one of the best views in the world, for the launch of the new Sydney Theatre Company permanent ensemble, dire straits is not the first thought that comes to mind.

Indeed, the major theatre companies are not about to go under. What's at stake – to use a terrible term popularised by Nugent – is their 'artistic vibrancy'.

Most of the cost-cutting measures Nugent identified back in 1999 – smaller casts, younger casts, fewer shows, safer shows, fewer new productions – are more extreme now than they were then, despite the fresh money that began to flow when her report was accepted five years ago. Here's one example: between 1992 and 1998, the Queensland Theatre Company cut its average cast size by a third – from 12.4 actors per show to 8.7. That's now down to five actors per show. Another example: in 1991, the Melbourne Theatre Company over 120 actors in its season. This year it's employing 81.

I'm one of the outsiders Belvoir drags in to sit on a little committee that reads plays and advises Neil Armfield. It isn't easy. We dream and Rachel Healey sits there asking – how many in the cast. Belvoir takes the risks other companies don't. It's got history with big shows. They turn the fortunes of the company around. Hamlet saved Belvoir in 94; Cloudstreet gave the theatre its war chest; and who can forget the moment when the lights came up on this stage for *Stuff Happens* and 16 men and women walked forward into the light. The sight of all those fine actors on stage together was one of the most thrilling moments in a thrilling night.

But the risks Belvoir takes are not taken across theatre in Australia. Part of the trouble is that theatre is so damn flexible. Opera lovers demand Verdi and Verdi sets the numbers on the stage and in the pit. Beethoven is as bossy. But Australian theatre makes ends meet with one-man shows, two handers – thank God for unhappy marriages – and new work commissioned under the no-more-than-six actors rule. Many of the big companies tremble before investing in the traditional repertoire. Chekhov, I'm told, is disappearing from the Australian stage.

And who bears the brunt of this? Writers, designers and directors, of course. But sadly, actors most of all. We live in a peculiar country where acting schools are funded as never before, schools that pump out over 500 graduates every year to find a place in a profession where there hasn't been so little work since the 1980s. It's Canberra once again funding institutions not art.

There's much more to actors' problems than cash-strapped theatres. Glamorous television commercials are rarely made in Australia these days, thanks to rule changes introduced by Keating. Work has all but dried up at the ABC, thanks this time to both Howard and Keating. There is work in offshore film and television production but little – at least over the past few years – in Australian film. The bread and butter for the profession remains commercial television drama – an investment the free- to-air channels are happy to make, but only so long as the Government virtually guarantees their profits. The networks have signalled that drama quotas would be under real pressure if Canberra were to allow a fourth commercial network to give them a run for their money. Change the mix of television in this country and Australian television drama might virtually disappear.

Let's forget the wannabe actors for a while and the handsome men and women who will grow old serving coffee on King Street. Let's look at the profession's most successful and ask how are they getting on in Howard's Australia. Like all unionists they pay their dues on a sliding scale according to earnings. The top of the scale is reached at the alarmingly low figure of \$45,000 a year. According to the union, they have only 43 members paying that top rate.

The big state theatres talk of a crisis – not the kind of spectacular crisis that faced the orchestras before Strong or the Sydney Dance Company now its audiences have deserted Graeme Murphy. It's a different kind of crisis. In a joint submission to arts minister Rod Kemp in May this year, Rob Brookman of the Sydney Theatre Company and Ann Tonks of the Melbourne Theatre Company called it: 'The kind of crisis that will see the steady and continuous erosion of the vitality and diversity of the Australian theatre and will eventually render it increasingly irrelevant to its audiences.'

So what happened to the Nugent windfall of only five years ago? The answer is this: once more, costs are edging ahead of income. Sorry to talk about money like this all the time. But you can't have art without money. Theatre companies have five streams of income and all are under pressure. Here's a quick checklist.

First: ticket prices are already high and have been rising faster than consumer price index for years. Companies are loath to hike them even faster. It's called the price barrier.

Second: sponsorship is reaching its limit. Corporate sponsors particularly seek value for money. The more successful a company the more likely that sponsorship has – as they say in the trade – 'matured'. Sponsorship is limited by theatre size, season size, audience size, city size. As it happens, Australian business has little taste for sponsoring the arts. In 2000/2001, only 5% of the \$1.5 billion given by business went to arts and culture.

Third: benefactions are growing but coming off a very low base. One of the problems in Australia is that we have no death duties to avoid. They've been a great source of wealth for the arts abroad. John Howard has made benefactions more attractive by making it easier for the rich to set up private foundations – but these have a long way to go before they have big bucks to offer theatre.

Fourth: David Williamson is retiring. For 20 years, he has been the great cross subsidiser of Australian theatre. Each new Williamson has been worth about \$400,000 first to the Sydney Theatre Company, then to the Melbourne Theatre Company and so on around Australia. Twelve of the 25 biggest grossing shows since the Sydney Theatre Company began were written by Williamson. And so far, no one has come up with a substitute.

Fifth – and most remarkable: an ideological obsession has seen the Howard government claw back millions from its arts grants. Again, the rot began with Keating. He introduced the idea that to make the bureaucracy leaner and meaner, its funding should be shaved by a percent or so every year. This strategy comes with the Orwellian name of the 'efficiency dividend'. Howard made the situation much worse about the time the Nugent money started pouring through, by applying the 'efficiency dividend' not just to the administrative budget of the Australia Council but to all its grants – including grants to theatre companies, big and little. Over four years it clawed back \$10 million from the major arts companies.

Ever since Nugent, the Australia Council and the industry have been conducting a quiet campaign – lobbying, begging, arguing – to be saved from this annual squeeze. The annual cut is even worse because the underlying indexation of government grants doesn't match the real rising costs of the arts. Then comes the 'efficiency dividend' to drag grants down further every year.

Late last year there was a private presentation at the Australia Council of a draft internal report called Arts Catalyst. I have a copy of the power point presentation. There is no doubt how seriously the council takes the crisis caused by years of cumulative 'efficiency dividends'. The predictions were dire. The power point reads: 'Government funding model is unsustainable, squeezed by partial indexation ... both for arts organisations and Australia Council.'

I have this good news: in the May budget Canberra effectively exempted the major companies from the 'efficiency dividend' – though only the major companies and only for the next three years. Ten days ago, the Australia Council out of its own pocket pledged to help the little companies, at least for those same years, survive Canberra's bizarre habit of Indian giving.

Nugent is now - as Helen Nugent herself recommended in 1999 - being reviewed. Indeed, she wanted a full scale review to happen much sooner than this. Nugent 1 was run by a team of the country's leading business brains. The focus was solvency. Perhaps Nugent 2 might take the

daring step of addressing issues of quality. Not that the financial challenges are entirely solved. Successful as Nugent 1 has been politically, there's now a danger of the arts drifting back into the old cycle that was supposed to be broken forever: crisis, report, rescue, flat lining, then back to crisis again.

John Howard works by embracing his natural opponents. The forestry workers rising to cheer him in Launceston's Albert Hall in the last week of the election campaign, was a very John Howard moment. His government has also embraced the arts. They're ticking over without any big vision fuss. Labor - spooked by the abuse of 'elites' and anxious to shake off the memory of Keating - has all but abandoned them.

Labor's last couple of arts policy campaign launches were held in backrooms of Sydney pubs. Arts leaders couldn't get anywhere near Mark Latham before the last elections. He was deliberately distancing himself. Remember his insider/outsider critique of Australia? Well, he didn't want to be seen with arts insiders. He did come to Hedda Gabler at the Wharf Theatre and members of the cast recall his hopelessly awkward appearance at drinks afterwards. It's hard to credit, but Latham had nothing to say to Cate Blanchett. He couldn't wait to get away. Since losing to Howard, Labor has had eight or nine arts spokesmen. The latest is Peter Garrett. He's full of goodwill and getting himself up to speed. But it's a sign of how little clout the arts have these days with Labor that Garrett is not even a member of the shadow cabinet.

The Libs in Canberra have the field to themselves. Inside the party, there's no shortage of generalised, educated, middle class goodwill towards the arts. And on the surface at least, the big infrastructure companies are flourishing – or at least busy and solvent. The focus on institutions means, curiously, that this is a government very reluctant to see companies fail. So Graeme Murphy's Sydney Dance Company will be rescued come what may. And when Bell Shakespeare feels short changed by the Major Performing Arts Board, they can come to Canberra to be topped up from the Minister's Playing Australia fund.

There comes a time when some companies should fail. It's the phoenix principle in the arts. All of us old enough to remember how wonderful it was when the Old Tote died and the Sydney Theatre Company rose from its ashes – will know what I mean. But this Government in this field would seem to lack the courage to let this happen. It would be read as a failure, the Government's failure. The imperative is to maintain the structures. There's perhaps more political pressure these days to avoid failure than achieve success.

What the Government wants from the arts – and I'd be saying much the same if Labor were in power in Canberra – is solvent companies, happy constituents, no embarrassments and votes. So in almost every way, the principle of arms-length funding is a political stumbling block. These days, bluff Rod Kemp waves goodbye each year to about \$150 million on its way to the Australia Council. Not that he ever really loses the power of the purse. No minister has had so much arts money to dispose of personally as Kemp has now through various funds. And the power of the purse – the fact that so much is in Canberra's gift – means arts industry leaders are extremely reluctant to criticise publicly John Howard, his government or Rod Kemp. The arts world is schizophrenic: raging in private, silent in public.

Robyn Nevin last year took a famous swipe at the prime minister in her Australia Day address: 'A new railway can attract the presence of the Prime Minister' she said 'but the opening of a new theatre, the Sydney Theatre, also of national and international significance, can't.' She wasn't thanked. Though she hadn't said anything particularly rude, she had broken the rule of the trade that complaints are kept in house; that arts CEOs don't ventilate their worries in public, don't lobby through the press and use all their professional skills to disguise the

problems of the system. Robyn Nevin had a swipe and arts bureaucrats had the vapours. They said to one another: 'It just doesn't help.'

This is a government – and again, would I be saying much different if Labor were in power? – that is extraordinarily sensitive to criticism. There's a maxim in the industry that when the arts and government collide, it's not much use pleading that we 'live in a democracy'. They don't mind democracy in Canberra, they just can't get their heads around the notion of public funding for projects critical of Australian government policy. It's the ABC all over again. The Howard Government is unhappy when the same sort of questioning – or worse, ridicule – crops up in what the Murdoch papers call the 'taxpayer-funded' arts.

Inspired, perhaps, by the mass outbreak of Easter 2002, five video game makers applied for, and were granted funding by the Australia Council's New Media Arts Board to develop a video game called *Escape from Woomera*. The Age reported: 'Players are challenged to escape using the means at hand – refugee action groups, sympathetic lawyers, bureaucratic means, digging tunnels or scaling fences - all based on actual events.' When news of the \$25,000 grant broke in April 2003, the council came under attack from both Kemp and Philip Ruddock. The immigration minister declared: 'The decision reflects poorly upon the Australia Council and its judgement, that the organisation should lend its name to the promotion of unlawful behaviour.'

Censorship is never censorship. There's always some other principle invoked. But it wasn't hard to reply to Ruddock's attempt to find other reasons to push the Government's political barrow. One of the video makers, Kate Wilde, remarked: 'There are plenty of computer games where people get shot and run over and mutilated, and there's no controversy about that.' The Australia Council was condemned for backing the game by politicians, newspapers of both stables and even a leading refugee advocate who thought the game demeaning.

But how times change: in March this year, *Escape from Woomera* could be played at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne's Federation Square and in April at the Griffith Artworks and Dell Gallery. It's doing the rounds right now without a hint of controversy – but then this is not the time for Ruddock or Amanda Vanstone to be preaching good behaviour to the arts.

Why is it always about boatpeople and detention? *Through the Wire* was a verbatim piece written by Ros Horin who was then artistic director of Sydney's Griffin Theatre. A staged reading in January last year at the Riverside in Parramatta caused an extraordinary buzz. The show was to open in the Sydney Opera House studio in October. Another 22 venues across Australia wanted to take it too. The prospects could hardly have been more favourable for subsidy from the arts minister's Playing Australia fund. But it didn't happen. It went in a winner and came out with nothing.

The fate of *Through the Wire* is a cause of speculation and distress across the theatre industry. The story can still only be partly told because the people directly involved won't talk. They have to survive. What appears to have happened at the meeting of Playing Australia last year was this: despite the show having a very high score on application, the minister's representative persuaded the committee not to recommend it for funding - on the basis that it was not yet a fully-fledged production. Other shows were rejected at the same meeting on the same – unexpected – ground. That's where the story stands for the moment. In the industry there's little doubt that Canberra was simply not going to back a politically unpalatable show.

Through the Wire was rescued by the NSW Ministry for the Arts which funded eight weeks of what was to have been an 18-week tour. Private backers took it to Melbourne. It won the 2004 Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award and was highly commended a few weeks ago in the Victorian Premier's literary awards.

Another new rule was cited by Playing Australia as a reason for not funding a tour of Version 1.0's new work about the Iraq War, *The Wages of Spin*. It had a season at Sydney's Performance Space in May this year and the Theatre Board of the Australia Council pledged \$90,000 'Mobile States' funding towards a five-city tour of little venues. It was rejected by Playing Australia for being too capital-city focussed.

These were flurries. *Two Brothers* was a crisis in which the displeasure of the Government was made clear to the Australia Council and to the two principle theatres where Hannie Rayson's play ran to mixed reviews and – in Melbourne – abusive controversy. From the start it was promoted as a play 'inspired by the relationship between Treasurer Peter Costello and his clergyman brother and outspoken critic, Tim.' Again the subject was boatpeople, this time drowning by the hundreds as the Australian Navy watches on. The lone survivor of the catastrophe reaches Australia only to be knifed in the dark by the nasty brother – and soon to be Prime Minister – 'Eggs' Benedict.

As the Melbourne Theatre Company opening approached, Rayson was targeted by the Herald Sun's Andrew Bolt. Here's just a sample: 'While the rest of us debate what medals to give our dead soldiers, sailors and airmen, the MTC accuses them and their comrades of being so evil that they deliberately left women and children to drown. And you subsidise this vomit of smug hate. If you still need proof of how far up its own fundament our artists have crawled, go to tonight's premier of Hannie Rayson's play, *Two Brothers*. You must excuse my crudity, though Rayson should be the last to complain. After all, see how cruelly and hysterically she smears our defence personnel, and anyone who even votes Liberal. God, to think such stuff passes now for art.'

So stung was the Government by *Two Brothers*, that a debate began among senior ministers about abolishing the Australia Council. The military was particularly enraged. As it happens, a number of arts budget proposals were sitting on Peter Costello's desk when all this blew up. But John Howard calmed this behind-the-scenes debate down. The proposals went through. But Kemp made the displeasure of the government known to the general managers of the Melbourne Theatre Company and the Sydney Theatre Company. He also spoke to the chair of the Melbourne company – and now Chancellor of Melbourne University – Ian Reynard. According to reports, the minister said to Reynard: 'Why do you persist in biting the hand that feeds.'

Kemp does not deny making his feelings known at the time. He told me: 'The generally poor reviews by critics across the political spectrum suggest that *Two Brothers* was more of a political rant than a significant contribution to Australian theatre and political commentary. Equally, comments by those closely associated with the play that it wasn't aimed at particular individuals were entirely unconvincing.'

On ABC TV's *Insiders*, Barrie Cassidy asked the Treasurer if he were annoyed by the thinly disguised portrait of him in the play. He was. 'What else can they say about you: mass killer, serial adulterer? You know, in some sections of the theatre anyone who votes Liberal is just considered fair game.' So what could the arts industry look forward to while he was treasurer or prime minister, Cassidy asked. The contender replied: 'I will always make a good subject for their plays, Barry. I would only ask they be a little more accurate in the future.' We need to know, this is a man who took *Two Brothers* literally, personally and politically.

Bottom couldn't bear to leave the stage. Remember him, after performing Pyramus and Thisbe, offering the duke a bergomask or an epilogue? Well, I'm offering a couple of last thoughts and a song.

We've been having these debates about the arts, governments, policy and funding from the year dot. Philip Parsons, who we're remembering and honouring today, campaigned on this front all through his career. All the reports, all the ingenuity, all the carefully drafted policies for decades have been driven, of course, by a passion for the arts – but driven also by the political imperative that the arts in Australia are made to get by with too little. From my Patrick White years I have a favourite image of his mother, Mrs Victor White, patroness of little theatre companies, arriving swathed in furs and pearls to advise them that everything on stage can be made with hessian. We're still in the hessian years.

Let's cut through all this and get to the point. Expensive as they are, the arts need more money – not for the sake of the companies, certainly not for the bureaucrats, and not only for the sake of the artists. For our sake. To release this country's imagination by mining the creativity that's there, waiting to be discovered. In its private soul searching late last year, the Australia Council gave a figure that would transform the arts in this country: another \$40 million a year. It's peanuts. It's a few miles of freeway. But there's no limit to where it could take us all.

Well now give me money

A lot of money

Wow, yeah, I wanna be free

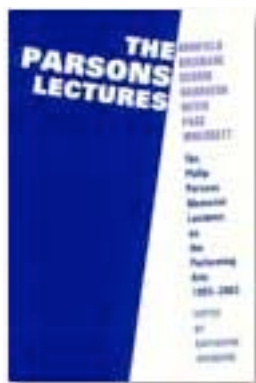
If I could hold a tune I'd sing this Beatles' classic now on behalf of all the arts and my particular love, theatre:

Now give me money

A lot of money ...

That's what I want, yeah

That's what I want



Previous Philip Parsons Memorial Lectures on the Performing Arts were given by

Katharine Brisbane,

Wayne Harrison,

John Derum,

Richard Wherrett,

Neil Armfield,

Robyn Nevin, and

Stephen Page

They are available in a Currency House book.

See our website for details: www.currencyhouse.org.au