

1

The functions of the Corporation are [...] to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.¹

The ABC is not fulfilling its charter obligations in relation to the Australian arts.

There is a long history of budget cuts, poor management appointments, poor policy decisions, Federal Government interference and a lack-lustre Board which lie, in large measure, behind the declining significance of ABC television, radio and online services in the flourishing composition of Australian arts. The ABC has been in trouble in other areas of its activities, too. Its credibility as a news organisation—which, amongst other crucial criteria, means its capacity to remain independent of the views of the government of the day—has been severely challenged.

Its role as an innovative training centre for media professionals, who move on to other broadcasters, has largely disappeared. Its role as a leader and setter of quality standards across Australia's electronic landscape of features, documentary and drama is no longer assured. There is a broad community perception that the current ABC board and management lack compelling policy aims and, under government pressure, have contented themselves with managing the organisation's decline—perhaps even overseeing its partial dismantling before too long.

Nowhere is the problem of decline more strongly felt than in the area of the arts. Arts coverage has gone down markedly. Budgets have been slashed. New programming ideas are thin, and often confused. In the recently created administrative structure, derived from the happily brief, chaotic times of former managing director, Jonathan Shier, there are no substantial administrative positions tasked exclusively with a responsibility to the arts. In TV, the arts and entertainment are folded together. In radio, there are no overarching arts editorial positions. There are few pressures within management which might actively promote the Australian arts as an area of important creative debate or which might creatively enable access to envioning art-practices as a major source of program ideas and commissioning in either radio or television. Strikingly, the one recent report on the ABC's arts profile, Liz Jacka's *Arts Programming on ABC Radio, Television and Online* was commissioned, not by management, but 'by the Community and Public Service Union on behalf of its ABC members in ABC

'Our ABC' a Dying Culture?

Radio'.² It was commissioned, in short, by staff, not because the management or Board wanted to think aloud about the creative future of the organisation, but because of a staff awareness that arts content, commissioning and specialist program-making in the arts are in danger of disappearing.

Given these circumstances, it is an understatement to say that the ABC has been particularly inept at telling viewers and listeners exactly what creative new ideas it has regarding programming, arts programming or otherwise. All too often there is a sense that nobody needs to know, a hope that, if nothing is said and little discussion entered into, then issues such as their failing performance in the arts area will perhaps pass quietly unnoticed. The ABC seems not to have learnt that, whether the issues are large or small, the image problem becomes more rather than less intractable. Whether the question is a very public one—for example, how the sackings, the commercial re-orientation and the staff demoralisation of the Shier period came about—or whether it is a very specialist one—for example, why Classic-FM's only internationally lauded arts program *The Listening Room* was canned—the standard response is to hoist drawbridges and drop portcullises. A stunned, disbelieving audience is left to hear the sound of footsteps racing down the winding stairs into cellars deep within the building.

This bunker mind-set is itself a symptom of the malaise. The ABC is entrusted to be one of our key national centres of critical culture, in other words, one of the places where a national conversation about art,