

Currency House Inc and Australia Business Arts Foundation

2009 Arts and Public Life

SING THE DISCORD, CHEER THE UNDERDOG

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Ladies and Gentleman, good morning.

Could I begin by acknowledging that we gather here this morning on the traditional lands of Aboriginal people who for thousands of years were caretakers of this place; they shared their stories, performed their rituals and passed their knowledge on through many generations.

As we have evolved throughout the world and made extraordinary discoveries our lives have consequently changed dramatically. We have continued to tell our stories but we have found different mechanisms to do so.

We have written them, we have painted them, we've written music to tell them, we've broadcast our stories on the wireless and made electronic images and told them through movies and television. Now the technological advances that we have made have enabled us to tell our stories in ways that are phenomenally advanced from a technical perspective.

However in recent times the essence of our story telling has become predictable, conservative and lacking in genuine creative inspiration.

Recently my brother presented me with an interesting book and in it I found some extraordinary words which were penned by J.F. Archibald who many of you will know as the first editor of *The Bulletin*, and of course the Archibald Prize and Fountain have been named after him. He was an exceptional human being. In it, J.F. Archibald describes how he selected A.B. Patterson from thousands of budding poets who submitted their work to him in the 1880s. He then wrote to Patterson offering him work and this is what he said:

Mr Patterson,

I want you to remember that Australia is a big place and I want you to write the stuff that will appeal not only to Sydney people but that will be of interest to the pearler up on Thursday Island and the farmer down in Victoria. In all public issues the press are apt to sing in chorus. But if you go to a concert you may hear a man sing in discord which is put there deliberately by a composer and that discord catches the ear over the voices of the chorus. Well Mr Patterson, don't be afraid to sing the discord ... for the same reason do not be afraid to cheer for the underdog ...

The book is called *Once a Jolly Swagman: The Ballad of Waltzing Matilda* by Matthew Richardson.

J. F. Archibald could have written these words yesterday or indeed this very morning and his letter could have as much, if not more, resonance today than it did then ... so we need to ask has anything changed? I could begin by asking, why is it that we have become so suspicious ... indeed antagonistic towards the voices that do not sing in harmony with our own? As artists our work has become frightened and insecure ... what has happened to the boldness and the cavalier daring of our performing aesthetic. Of course the work we are doing now is much more professional, even, ... dare I say it, sophisticated ... but where is our core ethos? What has happened to our desperate desire for our strident and sometimes uncouth voice to be heard as it did so powerfully in this city with the premiere of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. (1955)

We are a nation that began with criminals; we then became a nation of immigrants. We now imprison those who seek desperately a better life in Australia. We have become a nation of gatekeepers and that arrogance has seeped into our culture and sadly into our artistic life.

We have embraced the presumption of ownership of this land – the land that has been inhabited for thousands of years by Indigenous people ... but now it's yours and it's mine and God help anyone who would want to share it with us.

We have become mean spirited, frightened and insecure - just like the work that we are making that we too often refer to as art.

At the same time we have continued to make art in pretty much the same way as we have always done.

I wrote in *A Regional State of Mind* in 2007 that it is essential that we try to listen to the new voices, the small innovators, the new ideas that at present are unable to make themselves heard amid the hubbub of technological confusion.

And it's worth considering that if we fail to question, if we continue to do things the way we have always done, we will continue to get what we've always had.

As Artistic Director of Opera Australia it is vital that I listen to the small voice at the back of the chorus with as much interest as I listen to the Brunhilde at the front of the stage.

I have no idea what that small unusual voice might be trying to say, but it is imperative that I allow my sound scape to include the unusual sounds that may be the voice of the future, that may enlighten me to look at things through different eyes so that our way forward may be a healthy, inclusive journey that charts a course for brave new voices and ideas.

Dr Brendan Nelson recently wrote:

“in facing the future, what we need most is one another; we should look for leadership that values the health and integrity of human life as highly as achieving our economic objectives, we should be outward looking, compassionate and reconciled with our Indigenous history; we should value tolerance, self sacrifice and courage”

I believe we could, and indeed should apply all of these important points to how we make art. Within our major organisations you rarely, if ever, see an Indigenous face; not on the stage, not in the pit, not on the concert platform, nor in the workshops or in the office or in the audience.

Indigenous people are, to use J. F. Archibald's words, the underdogs. Theirs is the voice that too often sings the discord but sadly we continue to ignore those voices which may jar in our comfortable art spaces. We need to do something; I need to do something within our programme ... and we will.

Over the past few months I have been asked countless times what I'm going to do at Opera Australia; what operas will be in my first season, who will sing them, who will direct, who will conduct them. Then of course there are people who are more than confident enough to tell me what operas I should program and who should sing, direct and conduct them.

While these fundamentals are important to many thousands of people and of course they are of great importance to me, what we need to first address is the role and purpose of an opera company in the 21st century.

Over the past 53 years of Opera Australia's life many things in the world have changed. Many things except the way we make art inside an opera company. We need to, and we must, change the way we do things. We must question the status quo, we must look for smarter ways to make art, we need to be brave, inspired and creative. We must be heroes and show leadership that is inclusive of everyone in our society, inclusive of every dissonant voice and we must consider every underdog.

There have been times when Opera has changed the course of history.

Many of you will be aware that after the 1842 premiere of Verdi's *Nabucco* at La Scala in Milano, Italy, the following day thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of that city. They carried placards on which were written the simple words, "Viva Verdi". Yes, they were celebrating Verdi's success but they were also saying 'Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia ... 'Viva Victor Emanuel, King of Italy'. This was during the period when Austria was occupying Northern Italy and it was the catalyst that united Lombardy and carried the Italians to drive the Austrian army out of their homeland.

Verdi's opera united the population and the great chorus 'Va pensiero' is still today the unofficial Italian national anthem. It has enormous significance.

Encores at La Scala were banned during Toscanini's time. However, when Riccardo Muti was installed as Artistic Director of La Scala, the first production he presented was *Nabucco* and there was an encore on the opening night – the first in more than 50 years – it was the great chorus 'Va pensiero'. I stood next to people in that audience who sang along with the La Scala chorus ever so softly, with tears rolling down their cheeks – this is the extraordinary effect that opera can have.

It has been a political catalyst; it has literally changed the lives of millions of people. But sadly we have allowed this greatest of art forms to become a bit player on the grand stage. This must change. Of course there are exceptions and the recent Opera Australia production of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* is a notable exception – it had a wonderful director, outstanding conductor and a great cast. There were no gimmicks. There were no gratuitous attempts to shock or distract from the narrative. It simply allowed the piece to speak for itself – but that dissonant voice must not be relegated to a minor role.

In his forward to Edward Said's excellent book, *Music at the Limits* Daniel Barenboim noted that:

“the humanity of music, the value of musical contemplation and thought and the transcendence of the idea as expressed through sound are all concepts that regrettably continue to decline in the modern world. Music has been isolated from other areas of life; it is no longer considered a necessary aspect of intellectual development. The music world has evolved into a society of specialists who know more and more about less and less.”

If we are to be brave in our making of art, we must have a point of view and it takes courage to challenge the passing fads. But from my experience in the Sunshine State it is vitally important to boldly challenge and indeed refuse to submit to the “wild erratic fancies”, to

quote Banjo Patterson, that are often imposed on us, and to strive to preserve the nobility of genuine creative inspiration.

It's vital that we distinguish between the trendy and fashionable and art that is of genuine substance. Too often we are seduced by the shocking or the supposedly sexy and we are swayed by publicity and marketing to believe that what we might be seeing is of artistic importance – it may seem entertaining but it is not art; it may be fashionable and gimmicky but is not art.

For those of you who are familiar with the Jedward phenomenon you will understand exactly what I mean.

But let me be very clear. I'm not saying that art cannot be entertaining – it very often is and it should be, but it should also have the capacity to allow us to see the world and ourselves very differently and ideally to change our lives.

It's my view that we must commit to do the hard work that the making of art requires and to be there for the long haul and ultimately for the greatest artistic and cultural rewards.

May I remind you that Wagner did not toss off *The Ring* in a few sessions – it was the work of a lifetime. Today the idea of spending your life creating one work of art does not fit at all with our design for living. But there are artists I've met in South East Asia, who will, and do spend years on one piece and will make three pieces in their lifetime. This of course is an extreme commitment and although the work they make is (and you would expect it to be) exceptional, very few people are in the position to do that. However, we need to have that level of importance placed on every work that we make.

Over the coming years I hope that at Opera Australia we will be able to find a new path which will celebrate and honour the making of art through the operatic form in an inspirational and revelatory manner.

We will not ignore the discord and we will celebrate that great Australian tradition and cheer for the underdog. We will be diligent, committed, open and passionate about what we do and I hope that you will consider joining us on our journey.

Ladies and Gentleman, thank you.