

Tuesday 1 May 2007
Melbourne Arts Centre



The changing role of the arts manager

'Baby Boomer To Gen Y'

Kenneth Myer Lecture for the George Fairfax Fellowship

Sue Nattrass AO

Edited by Ruth Rentschler





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Deakin University
Centre for Leisure Management Research
Bowater School of Management and Marketing

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Kenneth Myer Lecture in Arts & Entertainment Management

Edited by Ruth Rentschler

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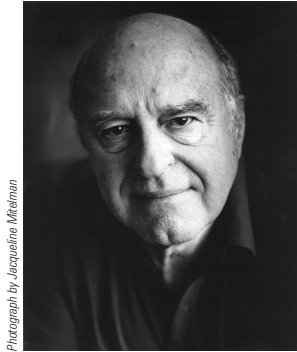
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Acknowledgements

The George Fairfax Fellowship

The George Fairfax Fellowship in Arts & Entertainment Management at Deakin University enables visiting practitioners and scholars in the cultural arena to enrich our understanding of national and international issues in cultural management. The Fellowship was made possible by the generous support of important donors, including the Myer Foundation, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University. Sue Natrass expresses her sincere thanks to the donors and the Fellowship for making her fellowship possible.



Photograph by Jacqueline McElman

George Fairfax AM LL.D
4 April 1928 – 8 September 1996

For more than twenty years, as technical adviser, chief executive officer and finally general manager, George Fairfax was the central coordinator of the design brief and planner of operational needs for the \$200m multi-venue Victorian Arts Centre, establishing its operations, management structure and staffing. In this time he helped to establish the Arts Centre as, indisputably, one of the finest performing arts centres in the world today.

George Fairfax, actor, director, arts manager, was a man of great vision, integrity and generosity of spirit. Passionate about the importance of the arts in our lives, he had an extraordinary ability to draw the best from everyone whether they be artists, administrators or bureaucrats. As a fellow artist once put it 'he opened up the territory, created the conditions, maintained the landscape, made things possible. George was engineer, builder, carer and fighter for all of us'. George Fairfax has become a legendary figure in Australian theatre history.

George Fairfax's association with Deakin University extended over ten years. In this time, as chairman of the Arts and Entertainment Management Course Advisory Committee, a position he still held at the time of his death, George was instrumental in establishing the unique arts and entertainment management graduate diploma which, in 1996, was extended to include open learning students from all over Australia and New Zealand. George held the belief that the principles of running an arts organisation were much the same as any other business and that arts management needed to be taught, as it is at Deakin University, in an innovative school of management.

Deakin University has recognised the important contribution made by George Fairfax to this University by establishing the George Fairfax Fellowship in Arts & Entertainment Management. The Fellowship, which is awarded annually, brings distinguished practitioners and academics in arts and entertainment management from this country and from overseas to the University. It also provides the opportunity for open learning students to have first-hand experience and interaction with the visiting Fellow.

Vicki Fairfax
2007

Preface

Arts managers are vital for effective leadership of arts and entertainment organisations in an environment of change. How have arts managers changed since the 1960s? Sue Natrass recalls her long history of working in the arts to trace the evolution of the arts manager and its changing role. In particular, she charts the different educational and professional challenges for arts managers, whom she sees enhance and strengthen the social fabric. She argues that arts managers have changed from self-taught male managers to professionals of either sex leading organisations in a complex, changing environment. Sue Natrass, our George Fairfax Fellow in Arts and Entertainment Management for 2007, presents the Kenneth Myer Lecture in this our tenth year. This is an important milestone. We are celebrating not only the new arts manager but also the success of the George Fairfax Fellowship for Deakin University, the arts as industry and the communities that they serve.

This topic is particularly relevant in 2007 as it is the year that Melbourne hosts the FINA World Swimming Championships. Sue Natrass is the artistic director for the cultural festival for FINA. This is a major event for Victoria. Events are crucial to developing community cohesion, from small community events to mega-events such as the Commonwealth Games or the Olympics. Events are also part of the leisure environment, which has sport and arts components. In this sense, our view of leisure sees old and new customs assume new meanings for new arts managers.

As Australia experiences a significant shift in investment and employment towards leisure and recreation fostering growth and development, the arts manager plays a key role in promoting appreciation for our heritage and identity. However, there is still a lot that we need to know about the needs of arts managers. This key note address is based on memory and mastery of the literature. It is relevant from arts policy and practice perspectives, and will be of interest to persons who work in arts and entertainment, particularly musical theatre, a background in which Sue Natrass 'learned the ropes'.

Our publication places on record key changes in the role of the arts manager, a topic chosen for debate by the current George Fairfax Fellow. It raises questions about the translation of rhetoric into policy and practice. It balances a process of scholarly and practical inputs for future inquiry. This volume places arts management at the forefront of discussion, in order to emphasise its importance to national debate.

Jenny Treloar again has provided professional event coordination in the preparation of the Kenneth Myer lecture. I appreciate her tireless efforts to complete this project.

Thank you, Jenny, once again for your dedication.

Ruth Rentschler

Melbourne May 2007

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
The George Fairfax Fellowship	vi
Preface	viii
Introduction	x
Women in the Arts	1
Performing Arts Structure	3
Marketing was not a Word ...	7
Cultural Nationalism	9
Public Accountability	11
The Arts Centre	12
Diversity, Events and Festivals	14
And so to the Future ...	16
References	17
author's note	18
editor's note	18

Introduction

In 2005, Katya Johanson and Ruth Rentschler wrote:

'The period between 1950 and 1970 is often popularly considered one of cultural desolation in Australia. At the time, commentators called these the "years of unleavened bread" or "the ice age". This view was shaped by events such as the cold war, the 1951 attempt to ban the Communist Party, the rise of organisations such as the Association of Cultural Freedom, fear of the Asian invasion, and evidence of Soviet espionage that emerged after the defection of Soviet diplomat Vladimir Petrov. (p.8)

I was not thinking of these things when I started my professional career in late 1962 as lighting board operator for Barry Humphries' first one-man show at the Assembly Hall in Collins Street. The young entrepreneur, Clifford Hocking, took a gamble and broke tradition by allowing a 'girl' to do this job when his lighting man remembered he had a university exam. I was excited at the opportunity, glad to be paid for work instead of doing what are now called 'internships' for the Union Theatre Repertory Company, and either didn't have, or was ignoring, my own university exams.

Women had played very important roles in other areas of the performing arts up to this point but there was a real paucity of women in the technical and technical management areas – particularly in the commercial theatre where I worked for the following twenty years.

I was certainly the first female assistant stage manager and stage manager to work for the Tivoli circuit. In fact I was considered such an oddity that when the Sydney Managing Director, Lloyd Martin, came to Melbourne during the set up period of my first show, his Melbourne counterpart snuck him into the back of the Dress Circle to actually observe the phenomenon of this woman working on the stage with all the men. I was 22 years old, green as grass, 'managing' 35 or so stage staff whose average age was about 45. I learnt a lot about the theatre, people and life from these guys—they were tough and once they accepted me, were very generous, supportive and protective. There were no female technicians at that time, indeed not for another decade or so. Some twenty years on Lloyd Martin, then CEO of the Sydney Opera House, asked me to share my experiences with his female staff and to explore the opportunities that were currently open to them and could open up in the future. Even at that time only a very few were working, or were interested in working in the technical side of theatre.

Women in the Arts

There were three or four women who had taken a leading role in the development of the arts and the cultural nationalism quietly germinating through the conservative fifties and sixties.

Gertrude Johnson, a Melbourne-born singer, abandoned her international career to return to Melbourne in 1935. She was a successful woman of independent means who was determined to start a national theatre movement that would provide training and employment for Australian performers here rather than losing them to overseas markets. Within four years, through her forceful personality and connections, she had been appointed as Director of the Australian National Theatre Movement, a position she retained until her death in 1973. She founded the National Theatre, the National Theatre Drama School, the National Theatre Opera School and the National Theatre Ballet School. She started professional ballet and opera companies in 1948 and a drama company in 1951. These companies created many productions which successfully toured Australia, in the process giving valuable training and work to performers, designers, composers and playwrights. Gertrude Johnson was also instrumental in increasing public, private and business support for the arts and is credited with having created the field of professional arts administration in Australia (Office of Women's Policy 2005).

Gertrude Johnson's creation and leadership of the Australian National Theatre Movement, and the work it undertook and support it garnered, was a catalyst in the formation of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and later, through it, the current national Ballet and Opera Companies and The Australian Ballet School. This is a huge legacy left by a largely unsung heroine.

Hélène Kirsova was another strong woman who is little remembered. She had a huge influence on the development of dance in Australia, although it is her male contemporary, Czech-born Edouard Borovansky, who is rightly given most credit for furthering the development of ballet.

Little is known of Kirsova's early life and dance training, but we do know that she was a founding member of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and that she first came to Australia as a well-reviewed leading dancer with that company. She met her future husband, the Danish vice-consul in Sydney, and returned to marry him there in 1938. Like Gertrude Johnson, Kirsova opened a ballet school and within twelve months had started the first professional ballet company, eventually called the Kirsova Ballet. She presented her first major season in 1941 and from 1942-1944 it continued to perform in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane (Potter 1995, p. 66). Kirsova's studio was a gathering place for artists of all disciplines and she commissioned work from Australian designers, notably Loudon Sainthill, who later succeeded so well in London. The Company folded in 1944 through no clear cause, but it has been written that:

'Any examination of the reasons behind the demise of the Kirsova Ballet, the issue of gender bias, conscious or unconscious, in the male-dominated world of theatrical management in Australia of the 1940s cannot be discounted' (Potter 1995, p. 70).

One cannot overlook the significant role played by Irene Mitchell at the Melbourne Little Theatre (now St Martins Theatre) with her colleagues George Fairfax and Brett Randall during the fifties and sixties, and John Sumner at the Union Theatre Repertory Company (renamed the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1968). These organisations were the major source of 'on-the-job' training and career development for many Australian performers and creative and production personnel.

Nationally, probably the most influential figure in advancing the Arts throughout this period was H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs. As early as 1947/48 he sat on the Committee on Post-War Education which was asked by Cabinet to examine the question of the possible formation of a National Theatre. It postulated a body supported by the Commonwealth Government which would fund a national professional drama company to tour Australian cities and towns and encourage regional theatre groups. However the idea was not accepted by Treasury. It took six years, a change of government, a planned visit by the new Queen, and sustained persistence, before the Elizabethan Theatre Trust was formed. In its first year it presented Medea with Dame Judith Anderson; a season of drama including Summer of the Seventeenth Doll; a musical, The Boyfriend and The Australian Opera Company's production of an all-Mozart Opera Season. After the death of Borovansky and the winding up of the J.C. Williamson Ballet Company the Trust added ballet to its repertoire.

As Chair of the Trust, Nugget Coombs saw with concern its domination of the Arts in Australia. He approached government with the concept of setting up a Council for the Arts to remove the roles of 'Government advisor' and 'financial agent' from the Trust. Under this new concept it was also agreed that the major companies—The Australian Ballet and The Australian Opera—should have greater autonomy. In 1968 Nugget Coombs resigned as Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia and accepted the inaugural Chairmanships of the Council for the Arts (which developed into the Australia Council) and the Council for Aboriginal Affairs – both great interests and passions of his.

These pioneers of our contemporary Australian arts culture laid the foundations for the development of the arts and its administrators of today.

Performing Arts Structure

What was the structure of the performing arts during the so-called 'ice age' when I began working in the arts? Well, very different from today obviously!

Nugget Coombs wrote about the post war period:

'It is hard, in retrospect, to realise how poverty stricken was theatrical life in Australia. There was no indigenous professional theatre. J.C. Williamson concentrated on importing West End musicals and other successes complete with principal performers' (Coombs 1981, p. 234).

Not a lot had changed by 1962. The three large commercial companies, J.C. Williamson's, Garnett H. Carroll and the Tivoli Circuit, were still importing shows from the West End and Broadway and, with the very rare exception, also imported principal performers—including their costumes! These imports were often not the original 'stars' but their understudies or other lesser-known or, at least in Australia, unknown performers. Occasionally the original director was brought in to direct the show, but more often than not, it was the stage manager, choreographer or an assistant director from the original production who was given the job. It was very rare for Australians to be given key creative positions.

There were no specialist lighting designers making a living out of their craft. The lighting was done by the director and the head electrician discussing what mood was required and then the electrician deciding how to achieve it, with the director deciding on the placement of the cues. Lighting equipment was very unsophisticated by today's standards—most lanterns didn't have lenses. Lighting boards were huge cumbersome beasts, often ten feet or more in length and six feet tall, in three banks for the pink, amber and blue lights. For complicated cues the operator had to simultaneously employ two hands, one foot, an elbow and, on occasions, their nose to move the dimmers and master controls! By contrast, today's lighting boards are not much bigger than a lap-top computer.

There was no production manager as we know the role today. That is, someone who develops and monitors the budget to ensure the production is delivered on time and on budget, then organises and oversees the production from the construction to the bump in and set-up, and the technical side of the rehearsal period in the theatre. The production manager allocates both the technical and the creative teams sufficient time in the schedule for them to refine their work to support the performers and achieve the highest artistic standards.

No company manager toured with the productions; very few technical staff toured except one or two for the set-up in the major capital cities. The local theatre management looked after the company when it was in town and made the onward rail bookings for the touring party. Yes rail bookings—the Melbourne to Perth trip was a special favourite! Two changes of train as the rail gauge changed from State to State. Even on the Melbourne to Sydney

trip we changed trains at Albury in the middle of the night—from the 5'3" Victorian rail gauge to the 4'8½" of New South Wales. The Perth trip took three days, but there was a piano on board and, as I recall, a lot of time was spent dragooning the show's pianist to keep playing while we got louder and more raucous!

I look back and wonder how the shows got on—I know they were technically less complicated and sophisticated than today. Computers were not in use in offices, let alone running lighting, flying and stage machinery. But they were still big shows, heavy shows, that relied then on human grunt and skill to set up and operate.

The stage manager's role too has changed a lot in the last 40 years. We stage managers of the early sixties drew up the production schedule and the plots for the technicians; we ran the rehearsals in the rehearsal room and in the theatre. We were around for the bump in and bump out. We reproduced the lighting when the show moved to another city and we were responsible for the artistic standard of the production after the director returned to the U.K. or the U.S. We rehearsed understudies and the company if necessary and we often auditioned and cast replacements if we lost a cast member on tour. We looked after the administrative side—injury claims, rehearsal schedules, travel schedules and passed on lighting and other technical information to the next city. And we often had to understudy as well! We also 'called' the shows from the prompt corner, using very simple communication systems—a hand-held microphone, some very sound distorting speakers in the wings, the odd set of earphones with long leads that often got caught in the scenery, and cue lights! Very, very few stage managers had had formal training. The first graduates of the technical course at NIDA entered the workforce in 1963, the rest of us had learnt on-the-job. Now, general and specialist courses abound in the universities and through TAFE.

In 2007 many of the tasks on a stage managers list in the sixties are now done by specialists. But the stage manager of today has more detailed administrative responsibilities that are needed as a result of the changes in legislation and work place regulations. There were no Occupational Health and Safety laws as such in 1962, although Workers' Compensation existed for workplace injuries. We were not such a litigious society. We didn't undertake formal risk assessments on the productions as a whole, or elements of them. We were all aware that we were working in a very dangerous work environment and tried to focus on safety. But it didn't stop us working on top of very tall wooden ladders or fully extended 'tallscopes' on raked stages; or working up to five days straight without going to bed; or pulling or lifting extremely heavy weights. We did what we had to do to get the shows on and really had only ourselves to monitor our safety. There are now management and production personnel specialising in risk assessment, and proper rest breaks are demanded and respected.

We never took days off in times of family crisis, or even if we were quite ill, because we felt we could lose our jobs. Anyway, the old axiom 'the show must go on' was followed even at times in potentially dangerous circumstances.

In 1962 the theatres were owned and managed by the producers. The commercial producers—especially J C Williamsons—had been presenting the best of musical comedy, theatre and variety and had also toured ballet companies, opera companies, classical musicians and orchestras. The cost structures of the industry were different. The cost of labour and raw materials for set and property building were comparatively cheaper than today. Australian artists were not paid well and received a small living away from home allowance; accommodation was not provided or sourced for staff or cast. Principals were not paid for rehearsals or for time-out between cities. In 1966 as a stage manager on my first show for Williamsons I was paid less than the chorus and dancers and didn't receive a touring allowance. At that time stage management was not covered by any union.

The theatre owners kept their theatres filled with their own and other products and at times mounted shows primarily to stop the theatres from being dark—not the best surety for a box-office success. They took considerable risks, but the breakeven levels were not as high as those which many producers face today, and the theatre rent was not going out to a third party. The men who ran these companies and theatres had also learned on-the-job. A number of them were in a 'family business'—the Carrolls and the Edgleys for example—and others began as 'call boys' in the days before dressing room communication systems, knocking on the dressing room doors 'calling' the actors to stand-by for their cues.

In producing a show they worked, I believe, from top level budgets only, rather than the very detailed budgets of today. I know that J.C. Williamson's first detailed production budget was drawn up in 1970. Some of the Heads of Departments found it difficult to come to grips with having been given a budget which detailed every wig, every pair of shoes and every costume, and what could be spent. There was no detailed costing done of the set or props. Before this time the staff had been used to just going ahead and making the shows. I think the lack of focus on the budget detail resulted from producers usually having to buy and reproduce the original set and costume designs in order to gain the rights to a show from overseas. Difficulties arose when the original plans and designs that were provided were not updated - as often many changes had happened along the way to the Broadway or West End opening.

There were rarely budgets for lighting or sound. The lights available in the theatre were used, whatever their suitability, so lighting hire companies were very rare. Lighting hire and sales is now a major industry in its own right - as shows and events hire and tour an entire specialist rig. Lighting is now heavily computerised and turn around times, especially

on concerts, are tight with more standardisation of equipment and venues, the less set-up time is necessary.

The 1970 production of *Promises, Promises*, a Burt Bacharach musical, was the first to use complex sound reproduction techniques for a live show. Before this time orchestrations were written with the strings and rhythm section against the voice, with the brass and woodwind just creating the 'colour' between vocal lines. Bacharach brought to the stage arrangements that were used in the recording studio, where the levels of both orchestra and voice could be controlled. For this show however, before the use of radio microphones and the sophisticated reinforcement of orchestras, singers had to try to project over brass sections, heavy percussion and woodwind in the live theatre. This proved to be very difficult. So we tried to create a balance between stage and orchestra by covering the orchestra pit in plywood and using microphones on the instruments, unsophisticated as the microphones of the day were. It wasn't very satisfactory for anyone—particularly the poor musicians—who were crowded into a small airless pit, the conductor who stood in the pit with his head covered in a clear Perspex bubble in the plywood lid; nor the actors who felt little connection with the music and the conductor. But the tools we needed were not yet in use!

From here on, sound design became very important and another new arm of the performing arts industry was spawned. Sound is now often the most sensitive issue in productions as the audiences are all exposed to great sound reproduction through the latest technology in their own homes. And each person is an 'expert'.

Marketing was not a Word ...

'Marketing' was not a word in the theatrical lexicon in the early sixties. Shows were sold through subscription brochures and party bookings. Advertising campaigns basically focused on newspaper ads. Television commercials were rarely used and radio promotion was also limited. Posters were plastered wherever possible and many of us talked our way around the generous hearts of the police in the middle of the night, with a bunch of posters in one hand and a glue brush in the other! Pasting up and café/shop distribution of posters and handbills is another allied industry that developed around the arts and now has some aura of legitimacy.

But publicity was all-important in selling a show. The arrival in town of the stars and the female dancers of a touring show was always a photo opportunity at the train station. The 'girls' were dressed to the nines and beautifully made up whatever the hour, and they were expected to enter and leave the theatre every day looking like 'stars'. Some were paid special dress allowances so they could represent the companies at the highest standard of glamour and grooming.

The other big 'marketing' event for a musical was the arrival of the cast album in the country. This timing was sometimes manipulated in order to build anticipation and excitement. The original cast album of *My Fair Lady* was kept out of the Australian market for a long time after the success of the show overseas was known. The inability to buy the album created such a fever-pitch of excitement that people who travelled overseas would buy a copy in the U.K. or U.S. and when they got home, hold parties for the sole purpose of listening to the 'contraband goods'. It was important dinner party one-upmanship if you could claim to have heard it. A great marketing ploy! The strategy was used in reverse by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice when they released the album of *Jesus Christ Superstar* world-wide with such great effect long before the show was produced.

Marketing is now a sophisticated science as well as a creative solution to selling a product or gaining brand recognition. It hasn't taken the gambling element out of performing arts presentation, but it helps provide information that can reduce or at least clarify the risks being undertaken. Market research undertaken both before and after the event can provide information about the type of entertainment and every aspect of the experience the ticket buyer seeks. Ticketing systems offer customer relationship marketing modules that make it possible to build up a profile of every ticket buyer, their preferences, what events they have bought in the past, what donations they have given to an organisation, who they prefer to sit with, what merchandise, food and beverage or other add-ons they have purchased—even what they eat for breakfast!!

There are many fields available for information gathering so marketing of new events can be directed to very tight or very broad-based targets. With the advent of on-line selling, text messaging of offers, email bulletins with links to ticketing websites—and whatever the next iterations will be—many more outlets are available for information, promotion and sales. Communication amongst peer groups is so fast and so frequent now that 'word of mouth'

or should I say text 'word of thumb' can spread like wild fire and the demand for tickets can be satisfied instantly through on-line purchasing from the computer, the blackberry, and the mobile phone, or by telephone booking!

No longer do you have to have looked for the ad in the newspaper, made your decision, gone to the theatre box office, and maybe slept outside overnight to get a ticket to a popular show. Then, when you finally got to the counter, you would pour over a box plan, ask for a particular seat, wait while the seller went to a rack and pulled out a bunch of tickets. She would chose one, tear the trip off to balance the number of tickets-sold to money in the cash drawer at the end of the day. Of course, if you got off-side with the seller at the outset, you would never get the ticket you wanted, you had to accept whatever was offered to you.

Every organisation now endeavours to have strong brand recognition within the potential audience, a strong relationship with its clients and the opportunity to grow the audience base with every production. Contemporary computerised tools help make that possible.

With these tools come increased complexities for the arts managers. They have to understand how to get the best out of the programs available but also know the ticketing code of practice and the privacy laws and how they apply to the use of the information gathered. Computerised ticketing has offered financial security for the transactions, mass selling at great speed, widespread access to ticket outlets, sophisticated data collection, and bar-coded entry into venues. Bar coding offers a management tool for the house manager to know how many of the audience are still to be seated before the performance can start, how many are 'no shows', and the opportunity to track misuse of lost tickets.

Marketing is also about foresight and big ideas and the 'guts' and the ability to back the ideas. There was a quantum leap in arts marketing practice when Patrick Veitch was appointed general manager of The Australian Opera in 1981. When he arrived the Company was in deficit by more than \$1 million. Many thought that administration should be cut back to reduce costs, but Veitch was an enthusiastic entrepreneur of considerable charm and he used it and all his marketing skills to turn the company around. Instead of cutting staff he added new staff in the areas of fund-raising and sponsorship and increased the net income considerably within the first year while reducing spending in areas that did not affect the artistic integrity of the product.

He broadened the audience base of the Company with his initiative of Opera in the Park in 1982. In the first year over 100,000 people in the Domain witnessed Dame Joan Sutherland in *La Traviata*. Many were attending a live performance of opera for the first time. Veitch, in conjunction with ABC Radio and Television, introduced live simulcasts from the Sydney Opera House; he introduced subtitles which broadened access to and understanding of opera, and he introduced more ambitious and professional levels of sponsorship and fundraising into the Australian arts scene. These were big initiatives in a short time frame which have had a lasting effect on the industry by raising the sights of what was possible.

Cultural Nationalism

But let's go back to the 1970's where we can see large changes in the structure and nature of the arts industry arising out of the growing cultural nationalism of the sixties in Australia and, with the rising prominence of television, the lack of commercial product being written in the U.S. and the U.K. for theatre.

In Melbourne, La Mama had been formed in 1967 to nurture new Australian Theatre and it spawned the Australian Performing Group (APG) which was based at the Pram Factory. Playwrights, performers, directors, technicians, musicians and poets were all given initial exposure at La Mama and the group of creative people who came together to form the APG developed styles of performance and content which were distinctly Australian and in direct contrast to those at the English-repertory-based Melbourne Theatre Company. La Mama remains today as a nursery for new Australian work and talent and many of the original APG performers and creative personnel are now the 'elders' of the industry. Organisations like these two were poised to lead change and development in the seventies.

In Canberra, a year later, John Gorton had become Prime Minister. He was a pragmatic supporter of the arts believing that showing support for them would win votes. He also thought that film and television were the contemporary art form, widely accessible, and were worth encouraging. By contrast he personally had little interest in other 'elitist' art forms. But, he was concerned that relying on imported product was the result of a failure to develop an Australian identity—and he was keen to alter this. Coombs had been appointed Chair of the new Council for the Arts by Holt shortly before the latter disappeared and enabling legislation had been drawn up. Gorton did not wish to proceed with the legislation that gave the Council specific legislated functions and considerable autonomy. However, he supported the Council being set up and working as a funding body, but saw it as an extension of his own presence as Minister. On this Nugget Coombs wrote:

'Generally his comments [about proposed grants] were good humoured, astringent, and sometimes sardonic. He made no attempts to influence the Council's judgment, and I do not recall his refusing to accept its advice on the grant to an individual or an organisation. He was, however, insistent that what political benefit might be derived came to him'. And further:

*'There can be little doubt... that John Gorton changed the prevailing view among politicians of the significance of the Arts from their own professional point of view.'*¹

Prior to the 1972 Federal Election, Whitlam and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) received great support from the arts community. Some States had 'Artists for Whitlam' Committees. There was unusual interest by artists in the politics and the policies being developed and many worked actively for Whitlam, making TV commercials and campaigning through

1 Coombs H.C. *Trial Balance* p. 246

the media. Whitlam believed that an increase of support for the arts would bring greater economic and social equality for Australians and access to experiences that would give them a better quality of life.

I remember I was in Christchurch on election night in '72 with a show *No, No, Nanette*, starring Yvonne de Carlo and national identity, Bobby Limb. After the show—I guess about midnight New Zealand time—I was walking past the stage door desk and heard the phone ring. On picking it up I heard the unmistakable Whitlam voice, asking to speak to Bobby Limb. Bobby had fronted the TV ads of the campaign, to the detriment of his own career in the long run, and the new Prime Minister was calling to thank him for helping to get the ALP over the line. And the arts community rejoiced in the promised increased funding.

The Whitlam Government passed legislation in 1973 to establish the Australia Council as an independent statutory agency. Prior to the passing of the statute, the arts community argued strongly for the inclusion in the structure of the opportunity for practitioners to have a say in policy development and in allocation of the grants. As a result, the art-form Boards were set up as the major decision-makers with strong financial, artistic and administrative autonomy and were made up predominantly of arts practitioners. It was the birth of 'peer assessment' in fact. The Council itself included a strong proportion of arts workers and coordinated and serviced the Boards.

The promise of increased investment in the Arts became a reality and made it possible for a broadening of the art forms being practiced and the burgeoning of Australian work being created and presented.

1973 also saw the opening of the Adelaide Festival Centre and the Sydney Opera House and the commencement of building of the Victorian Arts Centre. And the creation of state ministries for the arts in 1973 formalised State Governments' arts patronage. In 1974 a decision was taken to build the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. The new venues needed to fill their theatres, and the increased funding for product meant that the whole arts sector was expanding and the demand for arts workers of all types was growing at a significant rate. (By the mid eighties the capital cities of each of the States and Territories had a performing arts centre to serve their communities and a network of such centres was being built in many regional cities around the country).

New companies were being created through the seventies in capital cities and also in rural Centres—like the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury Wodonga. Puppetry and Theatre in Education companies, new style theatre companies and contemporary dance companies are some of the art forms that became part of our now diverse Australian culture offering a wide range of employment opportunities.

Public Accountability

The seventies also saw a marked change in the balance between commercial theatre and subsidised theatre. By 1976 all of the 'big three' commercial companies had disappeared. Commercial theatre ownership had changed and most were now in the hands of property developers. The contraction of the commercial sector and the development of arts centres meant that ownership and control of the majority of venues was now in the public sector. This raised the level of public accountability in the industry as these capital intensive buildings had to be operated and maintained as public assets. Responsibility for their management fell to a new breed of arts managers who needed all the skills of the commercial entrepreneurs and theatre owners, plus the knowledge and administrative ability to answer to the public and government. They had to determine the right balance between political and economic realities and the use of the assets for the benefit of the broader community. There was suddenly another set of stakeholders. As a result, these arts managers needed a broader skill set than their commercial predecessors.

With increasing government funding, including more recently local government funding for the arts, another skill became fundamental in the basic tool-kit of skills required by the arts manager! To be able to write a compelling submission for funds that was well argued from both the artistic and the business perspectives! It was and is an essential survival skill!

The Arts Centre

I joined the Arts Centre in Melbourne, Victoria, in November of 1983 as Operations Manager twelve months before the Theatres building was officially opened. I had come straight out of the commercial sector and had a great deal to learn about how an organisation operating under an Act of Parliament with a strong interface with government could operate. It was a very steep learning curve for me but it gave me a whole new perspective on what the arts could mean to the community.

When George Fairfax asked me to join the staff at the Centre I felt the timing was wrong, I was working then for Kenn Brodziak and had been since 1975 when he bought the name J C Williamson. George asked me not to say 'No' but to think about it for a few months. I did and three months later I went to see George and to tell him that I definitely was not coming to the Centre. I went to his office which was in the old YMCA building behind the Arts Centre to do so, but before I could get a word out he started talking about what he believed the Centre could mean to the arts and the Victorian community. Within ten minutes I was almost crawling across the desk in my eagerness to accept the job.

In week one I was able to bring my experience of commercial theatre to the presentation of the Broadway production of *Pirates of Penzance* at the Concert Hall which opened in January 1976. This began a long tradition at the Arts Centre of the presentation of a musical in the Christmas holiday period.

The opening of the Arts Centre did have an impact on the Arts scene in Melbourne, although not the negative impact that some sectors of the industry had prophesied. The major hirers of the venues, The Australian Opera, The Australian Ballet, the Victoria State Opera, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Musica Viva, and the Melbourne Theatre Company all benefited by the growth in audience numbers that came with the move.

The Centre was seen as being very successful and grew the market for the performing arts as a whole. It encouraged audiences to try other art forms and venues and expansion of the sector continued. Fortunately, when the Playbox Theatre in Exhibition Street burnt down in 1984, the Arts Centre was able to make available the Studio—now the George Fairfax Studio—to the Company until it was able to find and fit out its new home at the Malthouse. This put some of the Centre's programming plans on hold until full access to the Studio became available again, but it was important to Playbox and for the Centre to support an important player in the theatre sector. Consequently, programming managers needed broad skills to fill the gaps in the palate of arts events offered to the public without clashing with the major hirers, and to fill the venues. The education programs became very important for these reasons and to develop the audiences of the future.

Some time between the planning of arts centres and the mid-1980s community attitudes strengthened regarding the need for equality for people with disabilities. The Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 legislated on issues of access to buildings and services, but many venues had already tried to retrofit disability access in response to fairness and

expectations. However there are still problems in some venues built before the legislation took effect and they require constant sensitive management. The very nature of arts centres and the comfort they offer all patrons created expectations with some people that all venues should offer the same standard of facilities. Arts centres had moved a long way in the availability of food and beverages, proximity of car parking, ease of access to ticketing and availability of function rooms. The remaining commercial venues had to refurbish to compete for product and audiences. It also became necessary for arts managers to become skilled at food and beverage contract management and familiar with computerised ticketing systems and car park management.

I had to learn quickly the skill of persistence after the change of government in Victoria in 1992. The Kennett government policy of privatisation was to be applied to BASS Victoria. At that time it was a department of the Victorian Arts Centre and had been set up under George Fairfax as Victoria's first computer ticketing system before the Centre opened. The aim was to provide good service for the patrons and an income earning business for the Centre. It was very successful by 1992, enjoying a very large market share of the ticketing business in Victoria and providing about a third of the Centre's income. As no proceeds of the sale or replacement funding was to come to the Centre if BASS was privatised I was very concerned about the impact this would have on the operations and program of the Centre.

I started negotiations with government for an alternative scheme to part-privatise the business and meet the demand of the industry for a national ticketing system. I felt with a commercial partner we would grow the business so that our half share would maintain the Centre's funding. More than twelve months later this was agreed and I was dispatched to Los Angeles to negotiate the sale of the half share to Ticketmaster. I'd not sold a business before and certainly had not sat across the table from chiefs of a large U.S. company and their merger and acquisitions lawyer. It was an enlightening experience but one that ended up with a good deal for the Centre and returned good profits while the deal was in place. I tell this story because all arts organisations now need to run profit centres to augment their funding, and managers need to understand business management and the best way to leverage their success.

With the advent of arts centres there is a greater need for co-operation between the groups who hired the venues and the management of the venues. There are many ways they can support each other. The separate entities of the past were more competitive and didn't have the advantage of the synergies that 'living together' and working together can bring. The managers had to recognise this and be open to the needs of others and the benefits that cooperation in some areas could bring. On the whole, I believe that the arts organisations in Melbourne are very supportive of each other, and I like to think that the Arts Centre can always be a leader in this.

Diversity, Events and Festivals

The eighties were a boom time for the arts as they were for business. The Australia Council and the State ministries were further developing policies that encouraged diversity of work. The Melbourne International Festival was inaugurated in 1986 bringing more international work and artists to Melbourne, commissioning local work and exporting some overseas.

Links with Asia were being developed by the Arts Centre and by Playbox. In 1983 the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe took part in a training project with Flying Fruit Fly Circus students in Albury/Wodonga which was important in the further development of new circus in Australia. These were the beginnings of the diverse international links that now exist through program exchanges, co-productions and personnel training exchanges.

When the recession hit Australia at the end of the eighties and into the nineties it seriously affected the arts sector. Corporate sponsorship dried up, people had less disposable income. Fewer shows, shows of lower risk and lesser production values were produced; and funding remained static or was diminished. A number of corporations and businesses were wound up as a result of the economic downturn and the excesses of the eighties. Luckily arts companies were used to surviving on the smell of an oily rag, so they tightened their belts again to wait out the downturn. To my knowledge, only one arts organisation went out of business.

The nineties brought in the era of the 'Event', including festivals of all types, major performing arts events, major sporting events, major exhibitions. Anything that had the ability to draw crowds from intra or interstate or from overseas and would have a positive economic impact. There is now a pool of trained arts and events managers who are mobile, smart, and highly skilled and who work on short term contracts to plan and stage the events. These events also provide business opportunities for lighting and sound hiring companies and technicians. The scale of some of the major events, indoor and outdoor, makes risk assessment, particularly for the safety of performers and audiences, even more important as an essential tool of the modern arts manager.

1994 was a formative year for the arts in Australia. It saw the instigation of the first national cultural policy in our history—*Creative Nation*. The policy recognised the value of the arts and cultural heritage to the enrichment of the people of Australia. It recognised the challenge of the new technology and how it might threaten our identity; that culture creates wealth, creates employment and adds value to other industries through good design, innovation and marketing. And it recognised the indigenous culture of Australia and its role in expressing what it means to be an Australian.

A year or two before this, the program manager at the Arts Centre told me that the Aboriginal Theatre Trust from Sydney wanted to produce *Munjong* a play by indigenous writer Richard Walley about racism and a black death in custody in a country town. No

Sydney mainstream venue was prepared to accept a booking for the production. We immediately invited the company to Melbourne for rehearsal and to perform in the Studio. I then read the script. I read it through white eyes with a white sensibility and I didn't think it was very good at all! So we decided to offer the Company the Studio for the entire rehearsal period to give the production every chance of success. That performance still lives in my memory. It was one of the most moving plays I have seen and taught me a great deal about black/white relationships and the skill of indigenous people in telling a difficult story with great power and humour. The acknowledgement of indigenous culture in *Creative Nation* was vitally important in helping us all to understand our culture.

This current decade has put added pressure on many arts managers as major infrastructure in their organisations is aging and the restoration and on-going maintenance will present funding problems into the future. Governments want the arts bodies to be as self-reliant as possible and for them to look to the corporate sector and philanthropy for financial input. This puts pressure on administrators to refine their business models and to further develop the marketing and development function. Many corporate sponsors are looking for substantial and increasing business outcomes, so a rigorous cost benefit proposition must be developed to ensure that there are real returns for the arts partner. A major fundraising campaign through annual giving, major donations and bequests takes considerable resources, research and planning if it is to be successful.

The whole human resources function of recruitment, training, succession planning, employee and industrial relations and performance management is becoming more important in order to ensure that the culture is aligned to the vision of the organisation.

The arts manager needs to be across so many areas: risk management policy and frameworks that examine the risks associated with asset management; compliance with statutory obligations and regulations; contract management and corporate governance; financial management and business continuity; operational management; strategic workforce management; occupational health and safety; crisis management, security and public safety. The complexity in management of the performing arts has gone a long way beyond the 'let's put on a show' mentality of the early sixties.

And so to the Future ...

As an arts sector we have spent a lot of time justifying funding and arguing for increases in funding by pointing out the economic benefits of government investing in the arts. Economic impact studies have been undertaken on shows like *Phantom of the Opera*, imported art exhibitions, festivals and other major events. And certainly these arguments and the level of employment in the arts have seen the arts gain traction with governments. But by the mid nineties it seemed we may have used these tactics to the detriment of recognition of the other values of the arts in our communities. We had to shift to a more balanced position—a position that will have to be maintained into the future.

In this time of global markets, multi-national organisations, fears of climate change and world-wide threats, most people feel a real need to belong to a community that is of a size that they can understand. They want to relate to other people in a personal way in a community of human scale. They want a strong community in which they can participate and feel proud of. The arts and sport—our culture in fact—are strong tools with which to bring together communities. Government policy is now focusing on strengthening communities and there is increasing hard evidence to show that tolerance and acceptance of diversity, better health, higher employment rates and wages are some of the outcomes of community access to the arts and our heritage.

The arts managers of the future will understand the importance of our unique culture and be highly trained, creative thinkers who can lead organisations or their departments. They will believe in the necessity and value of the arts for the community and be great “convincers”. They will find new arguments that convince whole of government of the value of the arts and so open up new funding from different government portfolios in addition to the arts portfolio. They will convince donors and philanthropists of the value of their contributions to the arts. They will look for new businesses or ways of leveraging existing businesses to support programs. They will examine the benefits of widening their circle of potential partners nationally and internationally. They will nurture their staff and their stakeholders. They will ensure diversity in all areas of their organisations, both management and program. They will never forget that all that they do serves what happens on the stage and ensures that it reaches a wide audience.

The managers will know that arts management is a demanding and diverse job needing diverse skills. But, as I have been these past 45 years, they will be exhilarated by the joy of the performance and the positive effect it has on the audience, the community and its well-being.

Sue Natrass AO

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author's note

Sue Natrass AO

Sue started her professional life in the arts in 1962 as a Stage Manager and has worked since as a Lighting Designer, Production Manager, Director, Producer, Administrator, Artistic Director and as a Board Member. She was recruited to the staff of the Victorian Arts Centre by George Fairfax in 1983 and succeeded him as General Manager in 1989. Sue has been Artistic Director of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, CEO and Artistic Director of the Adelaide Festival and Interim CEO of Melbourne & Olympic Parks. She is currently Chair of the Collections Council of Australia, the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals, and the Cultural Program Working Group for the 2007 World Swimming Championships. Sue is a Director of Federation Square Management Pty Ltd, the Harold Mitchell Foundation, the John Truscott Design Foundation, the Theatre Royal Hobart and the Melbourne Football Club; and a Trustee of the Brian Stacey Foundation, Melbourne & Olympic Parks Trust and the Sydney Opera House Trust. Sue has been given a number of awards including most recently the 2006 Dame Elisabeth Murdoch Cultural Leadership Award. She was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia for services to the Arts and the Community in 2002.

editor's note

Associate Professor Ruth Rentschler (PhD 1999 Monash) is the Executive Director Centre for Leisure Management Research and director Arts & Entertainment Management at Deakin University in Melbourne. She is also Associate Head of School (Research) in the Bowater School of Management & Marketing. Ruth is the author of publications in the cultural field including the Cultural and Entertainment Industries Handbook, *Shaping Culture*, *Innovative Arts Marketing*, *The Entrepreneurial Arts Leader* and *Creative Marketing* (with Ian Fillis). She is on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, and has guest edited several issues of the *Journal of Arts Management Law and Society*. She is deputy chair of the board for Multicultural Arts Victoria. She is a keen enthusiast for Aboriginal art. In 2004-05 she completed a project funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies on the Aboriginal art market. She is currently completing important projects on arts governance in partnership with Arts Victoria and Chamber Music Australia and on inclusion in arts, sport, recreation and tourism with the Department of Victorian Communities.



