Creative Arts and the Humanities: the Festival Experience

Anthony Steel

Keywords:
Arts, festivals, elitism, business models

Biography

After graduating from Oxford and experimenting with different careers, Anthony Steel began his career in the arts as General Manager of the London Mozart Players in the early 60s. In 1972 he was hired by Don Dunstan to be the first Director of the Adelaide Festival Centre. He then went on to direct 5 Adelaide Festivals as well as 3 Sydney Festivals, the Brisbane Biennial International Music Festival and the National Festival of Australian Theatre. He was also General Manager of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and Director of the Singapore Festival. He was the inaugural chair of the Australia Council’s Performing Arts Board and in 1978 was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for services to the arts. He recently completed a term as chair of the Advisory Board of the Arts Management Program of the University of South Australia, and is a member of the Boards of Leigh Warren & Dancers and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. In 2007 he received the South Australian Premier’s lifetime achievement award in the arts at the Ruby Awards.
In my anecdotal memoir, *Painful in Daily Doses* (published two years ago), an early chapter describes my pleasure-filled, not to say rather dissolute life as an Oxford undergraduate. Towards the end of it I write, "Like most people who fritter away time in that fashion I have regretted it ever since. Most of all I regret not sticking with the classics [that is, Latin and Ancient Greek], which to me remain the most thoroughly useful and satisfying of all the humanities. It is surely because so few of today’s students enjoy the benefits of such an education that the Harvard Business School felt bound to dream up some simplistic way of teaching them how to speak properly, think logically, analyse and exercise their critical faculties. If these subjects were still widely taught, the world might have been spared the idiocies of the vision statement, the mission statement, SWOT analyses, KPIs ... and the like."

I was most gratified when I recently came across the latest book by the distinguished American philosopher Martha C Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* to see that those remarks of mine could well have served - more elegantly expressed - as an example of her thesis. For her main thrust is the sidelining of the humanities in education in the west in favour of subjects more directly linked to economic growth and the preparation of students for a career rather than for life, in an age when some think that all essential knowledge may be gained from Wikipedia and ‘wisdom’ is not a concept to be admired. Nussbaum makes the pretty big claim that the humanities – and therefore democracy too – are in grave danger and I think it worth quoting two passages from her book.

"Thirsty for national profit," she writes, "nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance." (Nussbaum 2010:26)

Later she brings us a step closer by declaring that people for whom "...economic growth is the only goal will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you never learned any other way to see them." (Nussbaum 2010:56)

And then, “Art is the great enemy of that obtuseness and artists (unless thoroughly browbeaten and corrupted) are not the reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one – they always ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways.” (Nussbaum 2010:56)

Within this context, as true for Australia as it is in the USA, it is unfortunately the case that neither side of politics is much interested in or can see the value of the arts; they are both hostage to the mantra of economic growth on which, as Nussbaum puts it, they think human wellbeing primarily depends and to which they think the humanities contribute little. Though we are seeing this phenomenon manifest itself at the moment at perhaps its most alarming, it is certainly not new.

I was fortunate enough to be a member of the Australia Council in the late 1980s when Donald Horne was its chair. He saw the lurking dangers clearly and defined them in his usual forthright fashion. In a speech he delivered at that time he railed against the “economisation of culture; this is a fundamentalist creed, the fundamentalism of the bottom line ... it’s the kind of language that turns society into ‘the economy’, citizens and
producers into ‘consumers’ and public funds into ‘taxpayers’ money’. It’s also the kind of language that reduces poems, plays, dance or books to ‘product’. How is it that people concerned with speaking up for the arts and other cultural activities have been reduced to that kind of twaddle? It comes from an attempt to ‘economate’ Australians’ imaginations by pushing the voguish terminology of markets, globalism and the bottom line into places where they have no place, or only a secondary place. This unwholesome process took its first steps down into the pits with the invention of that treacherous phrase the ‘arts industry’.

I quoted these words of Donald’s in a lecture I gave a few years ago as one of a series organised by the Friends of the State Library of South Australia in celebration of their 75th birthday. I gave it the title ‘Anti-intellectualism: the new censorship’ and it was concerned with just these matters.

Political parties spend much time demanding of arts organisations that they never take such grave risks as to find themselves in danger of failing to balance their budgets because their ‘product’ hasn’t appealed to a sufficiently broad cross-section of the community. In the UK, where they suffer from this kind of nonsense also, these pernicious attitudes are succinctly illustrated in a list of ‘Ten Commandments for the Arts’ drawn up some years ago by Sir John Tusa, until recently managing director of the City of London’s Barbican Arts Centre. Here are six of them:

• Thou shalt worship the arts for what they are, what they were and what you will make them be in the future. Thou shalt not betray the arts by pretending they are what they are not
• Thou shalt not seek false profits – these can only be made by selling the arts short, in the search for quick and easy money
• Neither shalt thou worship false prophets, in particular the kind who say you should feel guilty about what you are doing because it does not get a mass audience
• Thou shalt not make graven images of performance indicators nor bow down before them – these are false gods who almost always point you in the wrong direction
• Thou shalt not covet the riches, fame and glamour of the commercial world – you’re just as good as they are even if poorer. But trying to ape them will get you nowhere
• Thou shalt make the arts as accessible as you can, because you want everyone to enjoy them; but if accessible means dumming down thou shalt forget it

What has all this got to do with arts festivals, as we understand them in Australia today? There is no reason why they should be immune from such political and bureaucratic interference and nor are they. Every mainland state capital city has a large multi-arts annual festival (or at least will have when Adelaide joins the annual pack in 2013). They are all, in varying degrees, generously supported by their state governments. Is that because each of those governments is striving to outdo the others in the delivery to its citizens of the kind of program - cutting edge, innovative, choose your own clichéd epithet - that most of us think of in this context? I fear not. It is because they see tourism dollars, beneficial economic impact, ‘bread and circuses’ to please the voting public.

Some of these festivals started off life with fairly modest artistic ambitions. The oldest of them all, that in Perth, began, I think one could say, as a pro-am affair. The Sydney Festival was founded as a summer celebration of street parades, face painting in the
park and other such activities; Brisbane’s Warana was similar. In Melbourne the Spoleto Festival, as it was initially titled after its older sister in Umbria, was initially designed as a political sop to the Italian community of Victoria. Only Adelaide began life with wholly serious intentions, modelling itself shamelessly on Edinburgh.

As time went by however, in the 1980s and ‘90s, each city looked to rival Adelaide and, at least from time to time, each has succeeded in that aim. That is why the South Australian government has decided to stage the Adelaide Festival each year, in view of the uncomfortable fact that its reputation as the leading event of its kind has crumbled and in a rather frantic attempt at least to keep up with the ever more threatening Joneses.

What deserves closer scrutiny is the way the politicians have approached this new and in many ways admirable encouragement of our festival. Some years ago it was decided that the Adelaide Fringe Festival (the largest such celebration in the world after Edinburgh) should be staged annually, in the Adelaide Festival off-years, standing alone without being a fringe to anything; but what the heck, it was enjoying such enormous success with the broader voting public.

And, in the eyes of the media the Fringe was rapidly taking pride of place in the autumnal scramble of what became known as ‘mad March’. This was perhaps inevitable when the dominant Adelaide print outlet, the Murdoch-run Advertiser, is interested in quantity of readership rather than quality of content.

It reminds me of the situation in Sydney, where I ran three festivals in the mid 1990s. Channel Nine had just become our principal sponsor when I attempted to offload from our program the annual concerts in the Domain, arguing that they were so popular that they didn’t need the festival umbrella under which to hide; in addition these ‘tribal picnics’, as they were so accurately described one year by a Sydney Morning Herald sub-editor, cost us around one eighth of our total programming budget and I knew that I could use such a sum much more responsibly in the context of an arts festival. When I floated this idea at a board meeting the Channel Nine representative (yes there was one) responded succinctly “If they go we go”. So they stayed.

That little anecdote shows very clearly the danger of sponsor-driven programming. And which is the largest sponsor of the Adelaide Festival? Why, the State government of course. The Festival couldn’t exist without it. But not since Don Dunstan’s day have I seen evidence of a close political understanding – and encouragement – of the kind of programming an arts festival needs in order to be worthy of the name. Step by step the festival here has been encouraged by the politicians to appeal to an ever-wider audience and, to be fair to them, they have put their money where their mouths are.

In 2008 the buildings along the ‘cultural boulevard’ of North Terrace were illuminated in garish colours, a wheeze that appealed to a great many people who crowded the street every evening after dark to enjoy this little touch of Disneyland. The government promptly gave additional funds to the 2010 Festival in order to ensure – with a change of colours of course - a repeat of the wonderful sight of hundreds of thousands of voters and their families being artistically uplifted.

In 1992 Rob Brookman, artistic director of that year’s festival, introduced to the program a large and very successful component of – for want of a better phrase – ‘world music’. From the following year Womadelaide took place in the festival off-year and things continued that way, to everybody’s satisfaction, for the next decade. Then the government, seeing how popular it was, promised enough support for it to happen annually.
They were buoyed by half-hearted threats from WOMAD (World of Music and Dance), the franchise’s parent body in the UK, to move it otherwise to Melbourne. This would have entailed a great loss of face following the defection of the vroom-vroom car races to Victoria. Stephen Page, director of the 2004 festival, embraced Womadelaide, as it provided a bit of solid comfort for those still feeling deflated by the farcical Peter Sellars experience two years earlier.

It has been included in their programs, though without any responsibility of theirs for it, by the directors of the four subsequent Adelaide Festivals. Womadelaide is a marvellous celebration, even if in recent years its programming policy seems, to this pair of ears at least, largely to have abandoned its genuine world music emphasis in favour of yet another excuse to stage a glorified rock concert, and it’s good to have it around, though not necessarily in these circumstances.

So now we have – or soon will have - the Adelaide Festival, the Adelaide Fringe and Womadelaide competing for business each March in a city of something over a million inhabitants and very few head offices of businesses to which to appeal for sponsorship; all in pursuit of a critical mass of art and entertainment that is supposed to be beneficial to all. We must now gird our loins and make this work, spurred on by the success and example of a similar crowded calendar in Edinburgh in August. We will just have to try to forget that that set of jollifications takes place in a wholly different geographical and cultural context.

The question has to be asked, though, whether such a plethora of excitement can possibly be of advantage to the Adelaide Festival, presumably intended still to be the main game, however swamped it will now be by often artistically questionable, not to say sometimes downright strident, competitors, rivals for the discretionary and the sponsorship dollars, both of which are able to outshout the Festival thanks to their populist nature.

Populism is, as has already been suggested, what governments are after, and they will stop at little to achieve it. In such an avowedly anti-intellectual environment the Festival proper struggles to be heard. It is designed for the élite, the latte drinkers, the chardonnay set and other such descriptions applied to anyone who desires or worse still provides artistic experiences which rise above the level of pop culture.

In a marvellous editorial on this subject some years ago the British journal the Spectator opined, “The funds collected by the [national] lottery provided a golden opportunity, now lost, to re-establish the importance of élitism in any civilised society: not the élitism of social snobbery, but the élitism of intellectual and artistic value, open to all who are willing to participate in civilisation’s conversation. However, for élitism to flourish there must be an élite who are capable of distinguishing the artistic and intellectually meritorious from the meretricious.”

I am not for a moment suggesting that the Fringe and Womadelaide are without value – how can they be when each gives house room to genuinely worthwhile artistic endeavour and overall enjoys great and deserved success with the public? I am simply attempting to make a case for the need for the Adelaide Festival to take pride of place again; for the politicians and the media to carry out their responsibilities to lead rather than follow; and to support the view that the festival needs encouragement to reach the peak of artistic achievement.

Its programming must therefore be rigorous, reflective of the Zeitgeist, if a large multi-arts festival is to be anything more than a grab bag of events in the way that the Fringe unashamedly is. The best artistic directors are not chosen for their skills at marketing
and sponsorship raising, vital to success though these activities are. The director should be fully engaged in assembling the best and most uncompromising program possible and for this the full support and understanding of governments, sponsors and board is crucial.

Everyone likes a festival and the word is much overused. They enjoy such popularity because they are ‘events’, in inverted commas, and the public loves events. So you can attract the punters to the idea of a festival; they get caught up in the excitement, they will stick their necks out and take risks, they will lap up what they would avoid like the plague during the rest of the year. Festivals also help to focus the mind of the ticket buying public. You can segment your audience, as does the Adelaide Festival Centre with its guitar and cabaret festivals, or you can have a really good idea and slowly but surely encourage the audience to support that idea – as with the Oz/Asia Festival.

Increasingly, and, thank goodness, there is a flourishing of smaller festivals with particular programming attitudes – in this State take the classical music festivals in wineries, at Coriole and until a few years ago in the Barossa. I ran the first two Brisbane Music Festivals, not small but at least with a coherent program policy. There is Ten Days on the Island in Tasmania, at this point my favourite of all Australian festivals, one of the most successful examples in our history of a true community celebration, both widely popular and artistically impeccable. And there are many other examples around Australia.

With all this feverish activity the large mainland capital city editions are on notice. I firmly believe that such festivals need to pull their socks up and nowhere more so than here in SA. Adelaide’s claim to the crown of these festivals is almost as exaggerated and silly as its still-too-often-heard claim to be the cultural capital of Australia. If we are to try to take a positive attitude, and surely we must, then at least let the board seize the opportunity provided by the shift to an annual festival to take a long hard look at what the thrust of future programming should be, and let the government and sponsors resolve to get right behind that policy.

I suggest that it need not be at all prescriptive. Artistic directors who, I understand, will be appointed for at least three years, should have it made clear to them that this festival for many years led the way, that in view of fierce and well-funded competition it now needs an injection of new ideas which will enable it to acquire once again a distinctive identity that will restore its preeminent reputation, both within the hectic activity of the State’s mad March and around the rest of the country and beyond.

And it needs to be unashamedly élitist in the true and best sense of that word. It was James McNeil Whistler who remarked, “Art happens: no hovel is safe from it, no Prince may depend upon it, the vastest intelligence cannot bring it about, and puny efforts to make it universal end in quaint comedy and coarse farce”.

References

Steel Anthony, 2009 Painful in Daily Doses Wakefield Press, Adelaide