

# ARTS HUB CONFERENCE

Opening keynote address

by

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[ this version laid out for public speaking]

Thankyou

Can I first acknowledge that we meet on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nations, and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and extend that respect to any other First Nations people who join us today. We thank them for their continuing contribution to our shared culture.

When initially asked to talk to you today, I decided that I didn't want to ramble on in familiar territory, on my favourite topics, but to try hard to address what might be the most important thing on the horizon of arts and culture, bearing in mind, the overarching theme of the conference which was expressed to me as 'how art and artists contribute to community : stories to inspire a creative industry'. Well, I hope some of all of that remains, but little did I know that circumstances would arise that might change the focus of *most important things*.

In fact, what the circumstances have dictated is that I return to something I have talked about in the past, because for me it has become the most important thing in the context of the events of recent weeks. I think it's helpful to offer a framework for the current conversations. The most important thing to consider right now, in my opinion, is *Resilience*. No matter hard we work, no matter how brilliant our ideas, or our rigorous and skilled our practice, how ethical our stance or disciplined our business acumen, if we do not work to develop and maintain resilience, then everything we in the arts have worked for, and all that we have built, is vulnerable.

There are multiple examples of resilience in the arts, and I'll refer to a few of them later so as to fulfill the brief of giving you some inspiring stories but first up, so we are absolutely clear what is meant by Resilience, I want to go to its basics.

I was first introduced to the concept of Resilience by Brian Walker. Dr Walker is a Research Fellow with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems and is also Program Director and Chair of the Board of the Resilience Alliance, an international research group working on sustainability of social-ecological systems. Brian, together with David Salt published a book called *Resilience Thinking* which addressed an essential question: "as the natural systems that sustain us are subjected to shock after shock, how much can they take and still deliver the services we need from them?" Subsequently Brian has authored *Resilience Practice: Building Capacity to Absorb Disturbance and Maintain Function*. These two books should be mandatory reading for anyone in the arts, whether an individual artist, company, artswoker or organization. These are manuals not merely for survival, but for a flourishing life that begets a healthy continuum.

The definition of Resilience is *the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance, especially unexpected disturbance, and to undergo change, while still retaining essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks.*

The theory first emerged in relation to economic systems. Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, who emigrated to the US in the 1930s, defined the economic cycle in four stages: expansion, crisis, recession, and recovery. It's a pretty accurate description of the USA's experience of the GFC – expansion (beyond sustainable parameters), a sudden and, to most, unexpected disturbance, then crisis, recession and recovery.

In economic terms, a large corporation encounters a sudden and unexpected disturbance (which in the GFC was the collapse of various large economic strongholds). The corporation feels obliged to keep on returning the same or rising returns to its stockholders, and in order to do so, starts narrowing the base of its operations, cutting back or cancelling the smaller bits, and making its star aspects taller but narrower. The prolonging or expansion of the crisis now makes the corporation even more vulnerable and unlikely to absorb another hit.

The Resilience Alliance picked up on this and applied it to eco-systems. An old forest has a beautiful canopy. Let's say that those devoted to its care take exceptional measures to ensure that the canopy remains beautiful. But at ground level, there are powerful forces at play: the weeds and the seeds, the ground cover and the dangerous little fires are all absolutely essential to the life and longevity of the forest. If you take care of the stuff at ground level, the stuff that feeds the forest and allows the canopy to flourish, then you are being ever mindful of resilience, and continually building the forest's capacity to absorb an unexpected disturbance.

Not to care for and invest in the ground cover, the weeds, the seeds and saplings, means leaving the big trees vulnerable – a powerful storm hits, the big trees have little to hold them at ground level. They are vulnerable. And in any case, at some point of late maturity, these magnificent trees will reach the end of their lives, the forest implodes. What is left are the already strong saplings which will soon take the place of the big trees. The loss is scarcely felt – crisis and chaos are avoided.

Brian Walker also made it clear to me, that all is not lost even if the forest does not absorb the disturbance. If there is no clear continuum, nothing close to the ground to take the place of the old trees, then new forms will eventually take up the nutrients – a new entity will arise. In this case the forest has been unable to absorb the disturbance and what emerges is something very different. We have lost the forest. And this is a period of environmental chaos which can last for decades. Only if we are prepared to accept that period of desolation and absence, can we ever afford *not* to pursue resilience.

So, it's already clear how I found a pretty straightforward path to applying Resilience Thinking to the arts. This was welcomed by Brian, and the Resilience Alliance, who were aware of the connections I was suggesting. The theory is applicable to all systems, and we know the arts form a kind of ecosystem. Many have used this language in recent weeks. There's a component of the arts ecology which some might view as a glorious canopy – bright, shiny, a high degree of polish and finish, and with a long tradition which provides an easy benchmark for things which have endured and been successful and popular over time. This component of the arts ecology traditionally attracts the greatest support, though whether it always builds resilience is another question.

When the GFC hit the US, many arts organisations went under. They had been trying to preserve the canopy, the big productions, the big exhibitions and in order to do that, cut back on the less glossy components of their work – education, community, collaboration with emerging artists etc – precisely in order to maintain or increase the return to stakeholders. Many eventually closed their doors. Building resilience would have meant saying to stakeholders, “listen we need to cut back on the big program just a tad, just for a while, so we can keep you, but at the same time help develop future artists, currently emerging from the sometimes tepid, sometimes boiling pools of smaller outfits, and developing more diverse audiences – keep widening our base of operations so when you guys are gone, we still have stakeholders, and should this GFC get worse, ensure we’re not so narrow in our focus that we topple.” If so many opera companies worldwide are in trouble, as my friend Lyndon has so often warned us (and the beginning of *our* friendship is a relevant tale which I will share later), I have to assume it’s partly because of this lack of instinct about how to be resilient. Many of those companies have indeed been resilient for a very long time – grand old redwoods if you like – but *all* systems are cyclical, and at some point, when the redwood crashes, you need stakeholders who have come to love the saplings – and the very idea of the brave, ugly little undergrowth, every bit as much as the big trees.

Bert Brecht knew this well. In the 1940s, in exile in Los Angeles, he wrote this song with his similarly exiled musical collaborator Hanns Eisler. I'll accompany myself:

Oh sprinkle the garden, the green's taking heart again  
Watering the thirsty fruit trees, give more than enough  
Give more, give more, give more than enough  
And do not forget the shrubbery, even if it grows no fruit  
And is worn out, Do not forget that, between the bushes  
There are wee-eeds, that are thirsty too  
Nor should you water, only just the fresh grass  
For the naked earth, needs refreshment too  
Refreshment too, refreshment too

(Brecht, Eisler)

You see, I defend anyone whose preference is the well-finished product. It may come as a surprise that given my own untrained early career in folk, pop, rock, variety, dirty ditties and clubs, the rare opportunity of a spare night in any city today usually sees me choosing formal music – as long as there's no AFL match I can attend. In New York in January, the New York Philharmonic at the Met, in London in March Peter Sellers' production of Purcell's *The Indian Queen* at the ENO, three weeks ago in London the Ebene Quartet playing Haydn, Dutilleux and Beethoven at Wigmore Hall, two weeks ago in Melbourne the ACO playing Bach and Haydn at Hamer Hall. These performances offered me extreme pleasure.



For many, it is only the *result*, that final beautifully finished production or performance, which matters. But as a singer, who came from entertainment ranks as the true daughter of my standup comedian and vocalist father, and went on to sing with the Adelaide ,Melbourne Symphony and Australian Chamber Orchestra, to record with the London Sinfonietta at Abbey Road and to play on the stages of the National Theatre and in the West End of London, I understand the lengthy and painstaking *process* that *leads* to the final product. I also understand that excellence does not reside in one form, genre or tradition, but that excellence can be measured *sui generis*. It's all about what you're aiming for, how well you do that, and how your peers and those who have proven experience in the genre ( at the local, regional, national and international levels) view and value your work. When regularly performing in the 1960s for The Country and Western Hour, a locally produced TV show in Adelaide, I was deeply inspired by Mary Schneider, Australia's Queen of Yodeling. More than thirty years later, I invited Mary to join the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra for the opening concert of the Adelaide Festival.

That is why, in the same period as I took pleasure from the bright and shiny platforms of so-called classical music, I also saw last Friday night, *Retrofuturismus* at 45 Downstairs in Melbourne – a marvelous display of old standards, deliberate dagginess, new dancing, full frontal nudity and Dada-like strongwoman acts by the indefatigable Teresa Blake ( who happens to be a cellist and teaches the instrument, fully clothed as I understand). Immediately prior, I had been around Vicki Couzens' Indigenous campfire at the front of Fed Square for *The Light in Winter*. There I heard ancient star stories from across three different cultures, some great songs by young Indigenous contemporary singer-songwriters and a spoken-word freestyle debate hosted by Quashani Bahd and Muma Doesa. On the following Saturday night, at the Solstice Celebration there was more free to the public work by Tony Yap, Yumi Umamare with some exceptional performance in collaboration with a young Melbourne designer, and a Pakistani guitarist using digital backing loops to accompany traditional songs.

And before that, in and out of those international trips, I was soaking up the results of all those developments we're encouraging on the Gold Coast – through BLEACH, the great little festival there (soon to be not so little) . The Farm ( Gavin Webber's company which we've established as the Gold Coast's first professional company) did a show called TIDE. They constructed an office on a tidal sandbar and stayed there for 48 hours. The audience observed from the beach, but many (including Clare Bowditch whom I had just hosted in a couch conversation and the Mayor) went out in tinnies in the middle of the night to offer sustenance as Gavin and Grayson danced and drowned. In BLEACH, there was also a live surf movie, in which a great surf band played loud onshore and surfers, including a very impressive eight year old girl, made their elegant moves to the music. And the Inaugural Social Dance Affair, brainchild of Kate McDonald, saw some fantastic GC demo dancing in diverse styles, including a mature couple giving us a tango to bring us to tears, and we were also all up on our feet for the progressive barn dance and the original Gold Coast hokey-pokey. And if I say that the major supporter of that festival is the Gold Coast City Council, then I ask you to consider the role of *that* tier of government in the matter of maintaining resilience. Tonight I return to the Gold Coast for the opening of 2970' The Boiling Point, a weekend summit of arts meets science, curated by David Pledger, and featuring, amongst others, Stelarc, Daniel Glaser and Cake Industries – all at the edge of experiment in new technologies.

All of these things, as I'm sure you know, are part of the arts ecology. The support for that ecology is deep and wide, including the support that artists give themselves in their unpaid efforts, as well as local, state and federal government funding, corporate and philanthropic funding and the newer avenues of crowd funding. But all of this will never be able to support everything which *deserves* support. We must be mindful of *all* components of the eco- system and not favour only one part lest we fail to build and maintain the resilience of the system as a whole. Our own personal tastes may run to just one part of the ecology. It has been my good fortune to have come from the popular/supply and demand side, and met the arts late, but never abandoned my taste for all of it. The point is, that whatever personal tastes dominate in the individual instance, we have to acknowledge the importance of all those diverse components to the resilience of the whole.

Risk and R&D, as in all successful industries, are also crucial contributors to the health of that system- and often on the surface the least attractive component. Failure is often ugly, so risk is avoided. Yet I have often drawn attention to the scientific equivalent. Many scientists spend their entire careers failing. But it is acknowledged that each failure contributes to the progress of science as a whole.

Other scientists learn that they must not take that path and are sent on a more productive one which has more chance of success. Much can be learned during the process of an experiment which ultimately fails. We must acknowledge that it's the same in the arts.

If we don't support artists and companies to take risks in form and content then we go nowhere, and the widespread rhetoric about innovation is empty. We are in danger of remaining stuck in the past, unproductive; and history has shown that while preserving examples and supporting practitioners of the best of the past (which, again for the sake of resilience, cannot be only the western and Judao-Christian canon, but must now embrace the rich cultures of the rest of the world), there have always been those artists needing to push the boundaries – to take advantage of new thinking and new technologies. And while we know what's *stood* the test of time, we cannot know what *will* stand the test of time. The best we can do for those artists is to maintain a healthy framework for risk, new ideas and experiment, in which failure is a necessary component.

[We have seen that while folk and craft traditions are maintained for generations in community ( I think of the stories, songs, and totems passed on through the unbelievably resilient Indigenous cultures of this continent), and other skills are maintained within the creative industries of the day to serve utilitarian purposes (I think of Japanese artisanship now revered as priceless treasures in our musea, but once regarded only as the utilitarian or decorative products of schools – no hero worship of the individual artist); *other* complex practices, first the provenance of prince or church, first escaped that exclusive ownership because of the advent of Humanism. This was an ideas-driven evolution of the arts. The Industrial Revolution presented a suite of *new technologies* which artists grabbed and ran with. The birth of the Modern, which many believe started as early as GMW Turner, made way for new form and content within the context of world wars which provoked challenges to humanity itself. And from mid-twentieth century we have been in the flow of a digital revolution which is changing incrementally every day, and will be a crucial influencer, already is, of the arts of the twenty-first century.

So, history shows cycles of new thinking and new technologies, both of which inspire the artists of the time to experiment with, to use to do things differently *because of* the arrival of these new things; to be bold, to take risks. What they do often upsets 'the academy' of the time, and what they do is often so new and surprising that their work has no immediate audience, indeed such work is often derided, sometimes pronounced *degenerate*. This body of work, just as vital to the maintenance of art-ecological balance as the bright and shiny end, competes for audience and support with that tried and tested already loved, already known bright and shiny component. And, of course, much of it ends up in the bright and shiny quarter – van Gogh is the prime example.

I think it's clear why Resilience is the most important thing to consider right now.

We all know that there has recently been a major and unexpected disturbance, and it now remains to be seen whether the *landscape of Australian arts*, on the one hand, and one of its component part, *The Australia Council*, have the *capacity to absorb disturbance, especially unexpected disturbance, and to undergo change, while still retaining essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks*.

Let's start with the Australia Council. It's getting on 50 years since Nugget Coombs persuaded Prime Minister Harold Holt to set up the Council, which became a statutory authority in 1975. Core principles were that 1) like any statutory authority, the Australia Council would be at arms length from government, but, also like any statutory authority, would be obliged to work with the government of the day, and 2) peer assessment of grant applications would be the fairest way to decide who was funded, and the best way to ensure artistic freedom.

We are all only too aware of international governments of the past (as recent as the twentieth century), and still any number in the present, who *do not* allow artistic freedom, and decide, often violently, the official art which they support and that which is proscribed. And while Australia has, thankfully, never been overtly subject to such measures, there have been plenty of instances here when artistic expression has clashed with public sentiment and governments have stepped in to support the popular sentiment (sometimes exacerbated by mass media arousal), against the position of the artist. I think we'd find that in most of these instances the point of dispute is rarely around aesthetics, and most often around the rights of those who hold particular moral positions or religious beliefs to silence or censor the artistic voice.

Similarly, there have been any number of instances since its founding, when changes to its structure and funding have been mooted for the Australia Council, and



sometimes carried out. Indeed, my first involvement , around 25 years ago, was one such instance. The Australia Council had been the first arts council in the world to include a department and Board which formally endorsed, encouraged and funded community arts practice: the Community Cultural Development Board was under threat and I gladly became its Chair.

Clearly, taking care of art in community, supporting those artists whose passion it is to create excellent work in and with community, is one of those things which works towards the resilience of the landscape. Close to the ground, the arts come to be valued by many who would not call themselves arts lovers, or by those for whom economic conditions do not allow them to be part of the ticket-affording audience.

So, during my term, the CCDB remained alive and kicking, and the support of community cultural development was eventually enhanced through the introduction of Community Partnerships and the Key Producer 6 year funding model. This was in turn a kind of precursor to the grants model introduced last year -offering the possibility of long term and more flexible support for regularly funded companies.

Despite various similar attempts at change, and the failures and successes to do so, we would all have to agree that the Australia Council has remained resilient. It has continued to stay true to its charter, funding Australian art and artists, collecting the best data about the arts in Australia, and being the repository of the best overview of the arts one can have in the nation, and of our art and artists outside Australia. It has been highly admired by other similar arts bodies throughout the world.

Over the last two and half years, the Australia Council has been through massive changes as a response to The Australia Council Review. The main change was as a response to the criticism that the structure, which had not changed materially since inception, was preventing new forms in the arts from a fair go. Since 1975, in large part because of the dramatic developments of digital technology, but not only that, many artists were finding it difficult to access funding through the traditional grants prism of theatre, dance, literature, visual arts, Indigenous Arts etc. Many artists and companies were already struggling with how to frame and pitch the multi-art nature of their work, and newer forms and younger artists were finding the traditional framework outdated.

The result was the first change to the act since its introduction in 1975. This change to the nature of Council itself to a skills/expertise based Board in line with other statutory bodies meant that Council members were no longer representatives of particular genres. The executive and staff worked incredibly hard to devise a new grants program which streamlined one hundred and forty categories into five grant categories which are broader and have much simpler criteria: many who had found it challenging to fit into the old, narrower criteria, could now apply. This, along with new Strategic and Corporate Plans, new Awards and fellowships programs and other initiatives, all seemed to indicate broad approval by the sector in general, and endorsement all the way by the Ministry.

[As Chair of the Nominations and Appointments Committee, I was able to be part of the process of expanding the pool of peers from around two hundred and fifty to more than six hundred and fifty – and the loosening up of the process so peers could have more flexibility around their availability: no more three year terms, but a certain amount of meetings within a limited timeframe, so a peer could choose not to be on the panel if there was a conflict of interest. The results of the first round, just published last week, seemed to justify the changes, *especially* with the result that twenty percent of those successful were first time applicants.

I also was able to be part of the process of assembling peer panels for the Six-year funding assessments. I dropped in to a couple of the assessment meetings and found the quality of the discussion excellent as that exceptional mix of peers bravely attempted the almost impossible task of ranking the arts organisations across this huge continent. While the program is now postponed, those rankings will continue to provide valuable information.

At this point, with a vast amount of work under the belt of the Executive and Staff and Council too ( believe me, compared to what we've been doing in these last few years, twenty years ago it was a doddle), I would have said that the Australia Council was a strong and resilient organization. It seemed to have strengthened its relationship with the arts sector, both the bright and shiny bits and the areas of greater risk and research, and the government as well. The changes in the grants program were welcomed, as was the Six-year funding which held the promise of lightening the administrative burdens of regularly funded organisations.

The final Six-year assessment was held the morning after the Budget came down.

The Budget contained a couple of things. Firstly, it largely preserved quantum funding for the arts – no mean feat in a budget which went easy on cuts in other areas, and might have found the arts easy prey to compensate. Yes, the Australia Council has an efficiency dividend in line with other agencies, but there is pretty much the same amount of money for the arts. The second thing was the information that a significant amount of that arts funding would be transferred away from the Australia Council to the Ministry of the Arts.

The question now is, will the Australia Council be able to absorb this transfer, clearly a major and unexpected disturbance, and undergo the consequent necessary changes *while still retaining essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks* ? Has the Australia Council built enough resilience to absorb this shock ?

The first signs are encouraging. It seems that the organization, through this long process of re-structure, has indeed preserved support close to the ground, as so many artists and artswomen have recently spoken out in support of what the Australia Council does. The Ministry of the Arts has publicly reaffirmed the importance of the role the Australia Council plays.

So, let's assume for a moment that the Australia Council *is* resilient enough, despite a dramatic reduction in its funding capacity (and that's significant) to continue essentially to uphold the values it espouses (in particular, its belief that despite its faults, peer assessment is still the fairest way to disperse government funding for the arts and thereby to maintain artistic freedom) . And let's assume for a moment that the Australia Council can and will do what its mission states-

“to champion and invest in Australian arts”

While the strategic and corporate plans now require modification, let's assume also that the Australia Council will remain committed to its vision and goals - 1) Australian Arts are without borders, 2) Australia is known for its great art and artists, 3) the arts enrich daily life for all, and 4) Australians cherish Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Arts and cultures.

I can't see anyone disagreeing that these are all good things for the Australia Council to continue to do and to preserve, albeit with reduced financial capacity... although... even then, it *isn't* always about the money. We can never discount the power of the human spirit in managing disturbance. Sometimes these moments of extreme challenge can result in new forms, new ideas, and radical new propositions for maintaining and building resilience. I think of one of the Australia Council's most articulate critics.

Scott Rankin, founder of BigHart, has been deft at maintaining the resilience of that company through the thick and thin of 25 years. At a certain point he refused Australia Council funding because of the then onerous nature of reporting (we had hoped to solve a lot of that through the Six year funding model), and for a long time the greater proportion of the company's funding has been from non-arts sources, though the company does now receive Australia Council funding. I'm not suggesting that everyone's funding challenges will be met through corporate or philanthropic sources. Even though those sources, especially philanthropic, are ever more promising, it's a mistake to think we are America. We are not, and it will be a hard ask for some time yet; though I do admire the way the philanthropic sector in particular is so keen to make the connection between art and community, art and disadvantage, art and those in regional and remote Australia – as well as the bright and shiny end.

But I can't underestimate the power of the passionate belief that artists have in their work, and their extraordinary ability to survive, to find ways to make it happen, and to remain resilient. Big Hart is an inspiring example.

I want to turn to the second question of resilience in a moment – that of the landscape of Australian arts – but perhaps a couple more examples make a neat transition. [In a conversation a few years ago with author, Anne Summers, she spoke about the challenge of us all living longer, possibly decades longer than our parents, and how no-one had prepared us to take care of ourselves way beyond our parents' retiring age of 60 or 65. Anne at the time said she thought she might well have one more big book in her, but that was hardly going to do the trick. Now we see how in such a short time Anne has heartily embraced online forms to reinvent herself in the digital space, and become resilient.]

In the field of music and opera, how has a company like *Aphids* stayed alive for more than twenty years? Doing small adventurous shows, developing faithful audiences for new music and taking them on a journey with new music theatre and opera, developing international markets for its work, and its founders David and Cynthia knowing how to embrace a succession plan.



The State Opera of South Australia began in defiance of the unimaginative programming of opera. A small group of friends needed to hear Janacek and Stravinsky: it began in a lounge room ( where Chamber Made returned under David Young's direction), became New Opera South Australia and is now State Opera SA, which did manage the very first Ring Cycle in Australia – and a great production it was – and subsequently presented a varied repertoire including works like Dead Man Walking.

Our cultural landscape is awash with individual artists and companies who thus far have remained resilient. [It goes without saying that many more have not been able to absorb the disturbances that have come their way, but that's the same in all fields.]

So what about now ?

In terms of resilience, will the landscape of Australian Art , so diverse, so capable, as in sport, of punching above the weight of a relatively small population, so widely spread apart, absorb this disturbance while *retaining essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks* ? The first thing which is essential to understand, today, is that *we do not have the detail* on the National Program for Excellence in the Arts. [The government's website states "Guidelines will be published in the coming weeks and have been framed according to the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines, which ensure that public funding is spent in a fair and transparent manner. Applications will be made under these guidelines and assessments will be made against the published eligibility criteria."]

Until those guidelines and eligibility criteria are known, artists and companies do not know whether they can apply, and the Australia Council cannot determine where its funding role lies; though the Council has already been very clear in its statements, and again last week, of its commitment to individual artists and to the small to medium sector. I trust, that in the interests of the resilience of the arts sector as a whole, the Australia Council would try to cover those things that the NPEA doesn't. Given the current government's determination to stop double dipping in other sectors, we assume that it won't be allowed in the arts.

However what we *can* all say with some confidence is that, whatever the effect of this disturbance, the arts are not going to disappear. The commercial sector will prevail – there will be musicals, films, contemporary music and digital arts of many kinds. At the other end, the amateur component will prevail – individuals and companies across the country will continue to enjoy participating in theatre and music and musicals and reading and writing and painting and sculpting. And those companies whose funding is protected within the framework of ‘Australian Major Performing Arts’ companies will also prevail.

So why the anxiety ?

Clearly it’s because there’s a fear that the very component which is at the edge of risk and experiment, in many case the very endeavor which is so admired internationally for its unique creativity and energy, the successes of which eventually fetch up in all those other sectors, the breeding ground and the feeder - is the very component which might find it hard to remain resilient. And if that link in the ecosystem is depleted, then the full effects may not be felt for some years, but will be very serious.

You would hope that a transfer of arts funding would not hit just one sector. Some years ago, when The British Government decided to make cuts to the arts, every company which received government funding, from the largest to the smallest was notified, and asked to make a plan. I'm not sure I have the figures exactly right, but it was something like – what will you do with a fifteen, thirty or fifty percent cut ? They judged the best plans, and cut accordingly. Interestingly, in terms of resilience, many of the smaller companies fared much better, as they were used to making work with limited resources anyway. Light on their feet, and highly flexible, many flourished in this atmosphere.

When a \$6 million transfer of Australia Council funding was announced earlier in the year for the establishment of a Book Council (the details of which may also be announced in coming weeks), it was still of a size that was relatively manageable. Certainly it did not affect one genre alone, and, again, we wait for the detail in order to ensure that the two sources of support for books and literature work compatibly.

\$110 million is clearly much more significant, especially when the ring-fenced arrangement for those companies within the majors framework, and those programs which the Council delivers on behalf of the government, prevents the reduction from being distributed evenly across the organisation. If, then, that amount has to be applied only to the Australia Council's discretionary funding, then the hit will be felt most intensely in the peer-assessed grant programs, and the Council's own initiatives in the form of research, capacity building, international relationships etc.

In the most recent round there were more than 2000 applicants, and more than 400 organisations applied for Six-year funding. It's a lot of beautiful ambition for a much smaller pie, and I suppose it goes without saying that, given the demand, we'd love to see a much more generous line of supply to our highly creative and ambitious ecology. We're not only important to that most precious thing – the maintenance of civil society – but we're also important to the country's budget bottom-line. But we're unlikely to be able to argue for more resources until we can get more Australians to understand to what degree they use the ideas and products of arts on a daily basis, and thence be upstanding in their defence of their support. I'll come to that a bit later.

At *this* point, just a caution again – *we don't yet know the detail of the NPEA.*

If the guidelines reveal that the NPEA is open to applications from all those who have been traditionally funded by the Australia Council, then perhaps very little will change. And why not? The Australia Council has a record of funding nothing but excellence. When you go through the agonising process of assessment, you see just how much excellence remains unfunded – which was the argument that saw an increase in Australia Council funding a few years ago. And, by the way, I personally do not resile from a definition of excellence: it's something as simple as 'exceptional skill and accomplishment, being the best in one's chosen field, as judged by those with local, national, and international experience and expertise in that field'. We should also assume that anyone judging whom and whom not to fund on the basis of excellence, understands that excellence is not limited to any one field.

The nervousness lies in the current lack of detail, that perhaps some will be excluded, and for those who passionately believe in it, the fear that peer assessment will not be part of the process.

But detail or not, disturbance or not, it is timely in any case for all of us to consider the way the whole ecology works. There's not enough time here to cover all the implications of the commercial and amateur sectors I mentioned earlier. Katharine Brisbane has long pointed to the strength and necessity of amateur passions: and my past work in Tasmania and now on the Gold Coast has shown me exactly how the arts are embraced and pursued at that level. Singing and musicals dominate. And, touching on the commercial, for some years now our highest funded company, Opera Australia, has regularly worked in partnership with a commercial producer to revive old musicals. There's a huge amount to be discussed there if we are genuinely looking at the entire ecosystem.

The bit that *is* worth considering in our current context is the relationship between the sector which many fear may now be more vulnerable than ever (those who made the two thousand, four hundred plus applications ) and the sector which is protected from that kind of instability. While corralling larger companies, excluding them from peer assessment, and protecting their funding solved any number of challenges at the time, the strategy also created a false sense of hierarchy and set up false barriers to the natural porosity of artistic endeavor and collaboration. Its administrative model doesn't really reflect the reality of an interdependent ecology which is ultimately the poorer if any one link in the chain fails.

The letter published last week by AMPAG, and again the statement this week by the Melbourne Theatre Company, acknowledge these companies' dependence on individual artists and the small to medium sector. And a number of those companies have been working, and continue to do so, in collaboration with individuals and companies in the small to medium sector.

Sydney Theatre Company and the State Theatre of SA are also obvious examples. I think of Matt Lutton in Perth being supported years ago by Richard Mills when he was at Western Australian Opera – and now Matt fetches up at Malthouse. Good to read this week that the WA Orchestra is intersecting with emerging composers. Opera Australia also recently worked with Kate Miller Heidke on a work for young people. And this morning you will hear from Lindy Hume, AD of Opera Queensland, which is having real success in bringing opera to the people of regional Queensland through Lindy's community chorus initiatives.

These companies, whose funding is protected, are very much part of the solution to building and maintaining resilience in the ecology as a whole. We know that the small to medium sector is not only important to Australian audiences, but is vital as the proving ground and feeder for larger companies in the future.



It was in the tiny provocative New Opera South Australia that Lyndon and I first met – the opening of the Space Theatre in the new Adelaide Festival Centre with Brecht and Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Before that, Lyndon had taken his first musical steps in the Salvos, and I in apprenticeship to my father. It's *all* part of the ecology. The people now at the perceived top of the tree did not get their chance under a cabbage leaf - it was in the small to medium sector.

When I was invited, with no formal training whatsoever in music, to take the lead in a piece of European music theatre, to open a new theatre and sing with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, I was the hostess and ditty-singer of a Dirty Dicks style tavern – how bloody small to medium can you get ?

And it's a good example of how perceived barriers can be broken down.

While ballet will hardly intersect with dancers not trained in the tradition, there's a horde of other artists who can be involved: the small to medium sector is flush with designers (lighting, set and costume), composers, choreographers who could contribute to the success of the form.

The very least that orchestras can do is commission and play more works from Australian composers, and while that is also true of opera, it can also work with the smaller, less cumbersome and more efficient opera and music theatre companies. As I said, some already do. It's not good enough to say audiences don't want new Australian work: this demeans the audience. If all we ever do is supply the demand of what audiences already know and want, we go nowhere: that is a wholly *unambitious* strategy.

Look at the passion of American, and now worldwide, audiences for John Adams or Phillip Glass. There are skilled ways of championing our own creatives, of following a strategy whereby audiences get a taste for the new (look at visual art, look at contemporary music, look at literature, look at film – audiences are *excited* by new things) and start to demand it.

Theatre and contemporary dance are even more obvious – there need be no barriers. It is in theory, and often in practice, all one interdependent ecology, and the small to medium sector clearly feeds the larger and often longer established companies.

The companies in that group who understand that, already see the value of intersecting across the ecological whole. This aspect is also the source of some of the nervousness: if there is any depletion of the proving and training ground that the small to medium sector provides, the result down the track will surely be a smaller pool of talented and experienced artists and artswomen from which the larger companies can draw.

And what then? That's the point where our canopy might lack the means to refresh itself.

And again, disturbance or not, it's timely to consider the resilience of the small to medium sector itself. So many of the regularly funded organisations are not only deeply appreciated by Australian audiences, but also have huge reputations internationally. I love what the Australian Chamber Orchestra, for instance, does as a perfect example of a 'major' Australian company, and having them as an international emblem of excellence in chamber music makes me feel very confident about the reputation of Australian arts.

But equally companies like Back to Back, Circa, ADT, and Polyglot are constantly fielding international invitations and give our arts profile outside Australia a true sense of the diversity of our creative endeavor. And *those* more established so-called small to medium companies ( it's kind of crazy, because reputationally , qualitatively and in their roles as cultural ambassadors they are surely major ) are being fed by even smaller ones in the feeder chain.

So.... *is* the landscape of Australian arts resilient enough to absorb this disturbance ?

The answer is that we just don't know at this very moment. But the minute we do know what kind of artistic endeavour the NPEA is going to fund, and how it's going to do it, then we, all of us in the eco-system, can re-strategise accordingly.

In this landscape, and in this context, let's get to the theme of the conference: "what do art and artists contribute to the community ; stories to inspire a creative industry?" I'll say this. First of all I don't accept that all artistic endeavour is part of the creative industries. That term surely has some hint of potential profit or at least the inference that the arts can be self-sustaining. They can't all do that.

Yes, there are economic/industry consequences for some arts. Particularly when you ask what the audience wants and give it to them, you are more in the camp of entertainment than arts – and that applies to opera and orchestras every bit as much as it does to musicals or pop. You're giving the audience what it wants. It's a matter of supplying a demand, a chance for everyone to make a buck. Something that starts as a one-off piece of art or design can sometimes be picked up commercially and reproduced for a profit. Government stimulation of that industry is warranted every bit as much in the arts as it is in agriculture.

But there is another branch of artistic activity which doesn't yet have audiences or markets as its first objective. An audience will eventually be necessary, as a gauge of whether the ideas presented have a meaningful and valuable trajectory, and as a means of sustainability; but in the first instance it's the idea, the development of the idea and the form, the exploration of how to express the idea, the experimentation with form through new technologies that is of prime importance.

Unlike the supply and demand side of the arts, the bit which asks what's popular and delivers that, this other bit will sometimes be using artistic expression to shed light on things which are not popular. It might use the malleability and porosity of the arts, the grey area between the reductive black and white of much popular mass media opinion-building, to debate the awkward and challenging topics of our time.

Of course there are crossovers: highly entertaining works can often have a very serious message. I just played/sang a role in a new musical based around a death in custody case. Works of art with a very serious aesthetic intent can often be highly entertaining. But one approach essentially sets out to give particular audiences what they want, whether that be spectacle, beauty, awe, skill, sets and cossies, fabulous artists, known, loved and long-proven repertoire, joy and pleasure in the finished product; while the other tends to be part of the closer to the ground stuff, and the R&D, which is passionate about process, experiment and risk, and because of that will be almost inevitably less glossy, less finished, but just as important.

Together they form this interdependent arts ecology. Neglect any bit of the system, and you neglect the maintenance and development of the long term resilience of the whole.

And it's not just that the artists in the whole ecology *contribute* to the community. They *are* the community – they live in a geographical community, they pay taxes, they educate their kids and buy food. And whether those artists are at the much-loved and applauded end, or the bit which I call the unknown, ugly and unloved, the existence of both is essential for a complete community.

If we imagine a world without music (either chosen, or unbidden and coming at us every hour of every day), without visuals (screen or other), without design, then we must quickly come to the conclusion that artists are as essential as nurses, policemen, plumbers and garbage collectors. And they deserve respect, and the means to live, because of that.

One of the side-effects that this disturbance has had is, most regrettably, the rise of something we could be forgiven for thinking was starting to disappear. The anti-art vitriol that, yet again, springing inexplicably from some fellow writers lucky enough to get paid for their columns, and then spreading to the anonymity of social media, was sickening.

It became again so clear that many Australians (all of whom, I'm sure, listen to music, and watch films, go to festivals of entertainments they like, wear design and have it in their homes, love their kids accidentally to come across the delights of EARTH or Polyglot and many others in the small to medium sector) still have no respect for the artists who create all those things, and fail to see the connection between the original artists who go out on a limb with their new ideas, only to see them fetch up in all kinds of commercial applications – and often with little recompense for the way they are ripped off.

It is surely significant that Australia is said to have the highest rate per capita of music and film piracy in the world: and that is a very clear indication of disrespect for the artist. So *there's* an area we could all devote more energy to right now– simply getting Australians, those who do not identify as arts-lovers, to acknowledge that they are probably using the products, or the results of ideas of artists every day of their lives.

It becomes less of a question of what can art and artists do for the community, but perhaps what the community might do for the artists who live among them. We are so continually in the position of having to justify our existence. Perhaps we need to spend more time getting our communities to articulate their intersection with arts and how they value our presence. Perhaps if that were better and more loudly proclaimed, those writers and broadcasters so inexplicably bent on voicing contempt for their fellow artists, might hold less sway.

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Towards the end of last year, I had the very good fortune to be in Amsterdam for one of the events which honoured my longterm friend and colleague Frie Leysen. Frie was here in Sydney for the Australian Theatre Network's conference in January. She had been awarded the Erasmus Prize – a very prestigious award given by the King of the Netherlands and entailing a handy cash component, but also a week of events curated by Frie.



The one I attended was a conversation between several arts luminaries including Peter Sellers, who gave the keynote, the Iranian theatre director Amir Reza Kohestani and Seonghee Kim, Artistic Director of the Asian Culture Complex - Asian Arts Theatre due to open in September in Gwang-ju South Korea– and , of course, Frie herself.

Peter praised Frie for her superb work over the last thirty years, but he said something very bold . Given the state of the world, and the rising popularity of extreme governments, he said her work, and his, had actually come to nothing. He talked about the arts' response to the Second World War – when festivals such as Edinburgh and Aix were deliberately constructed as platforms for the reunification of Europe. Without them, he said, how could we have listened to German music again?

We had seen what extremism could result in, we could see exactly the extent of death and destruction and pure horror that extreme ideology and hatred could come to. And look at the world now, look at *Europe* now, was what he said, picking up on themes I had heard a year before in the context of the European House of Culture where people were talking about cities in which people no longer trusted strangers, where suspicion prevailed.

Peter suggested that the tools and approaches that he and Frie had so deftly deployed for so long, the work they were so proud of, had actually resulted in no lasting effect. The immediate mid-century postwar artistic response had not been resilient, and unless new tools and approaches were found, the arts would have no role in joining that most urgent of challenges, the maintenance of civil society and the creating of a harmonious future. This was reinforced very recently, just a few weeks ago in London, when I heard Daniel Barenboim give the Edward Said Lecture at Southbank. As inspiring as his East-West Orchestra has been, as brilliant as its performances and receptions are in London and New York, the orchestra cannot now play in Israel or in Palestine.

In the Q&A part of the evening conversation with Frie, moderator Neil Wallace asked Frie : “Well, if you agree ( as she did) that new tools are needed, what are those tools ?

Frie, cigarette as always in hand, took a long time to reply, and finally said, this most courageous and articulate of advocates of, and warriors for, the arts I have known “Well, I think, for a long time, in the interests of pleasing our audiences, and pleasing those who fund us, we have just been too polite”

I was thinking of concluding of something like I Got Plenty o Nuthin – but, sorry , it’s Brecht again , and the composer the third of his great musical collaborators Paul Dessau. I hope you’ll read it as I do, as a magnificent, if tough, expression of resilience

### **Song of the Flow of Things**

Often as you may see the river sluggishly flowing

Each time the water is different.

What's gone down can't come up again. Not one drop

Ever flows back to its starting point.

Sung Chorus:

Don't try to brush away the wave

That's breaking against your foot: so long as

It stands in the stream fresh waves

Will be always breaking against it.

I was seven years in one place, had a roof over

My head

And was not alone.

But the man who kept me fed and who was not like anyone else

One day

Lay unrecognizable beneath a dead man's shroud.

All the same that evening I ate my supper.

And soon I let out the room in which we had

Embraced one another

And the room kept me fed

And now that it no longer feeds me

I continue to eat

I said:

Don't try ....

In this way I too had a name

And those who heard that name in the city said "It's a good name"

But one night I drank four glasses of schnapps

And one morning I found chalked on my door

A bad word

Then the milkman took back my milk again.

My name was finished.

Like linen that once was white and gets dirty

And can go white again if you wash it

But hold it up to the light, and look; it's not

The same linen.

So don't speak your name so distinctly. What is the point ?

Considering that you are always using it to name a different person

And wherefore such loud opinions ? Forget them.

What were they, did you say ? Never remember

Anything longer than its own duration.

Don't try etc

I spoke to many people and listened

Carefully and heard many opinions

And heard many say of many things: "That is for sure".

But when they came back they spoke differently from the way they spoke earlier

And it was something else of which they said: "That is for sure".

At that I told myself: of all sure things

The surest is doubt.

Don't try to brush away the wave

That's breaking against your foot: so long as

It stands in the stream fresh waves

Will be always breaking against it

( Brecht, Dessau)

Thankyou.