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CONFESSIONS OF A GATEKEEPER



Hello and welcome everyone.

I quickly want to thank Harold for introducing me today.

Harold barely knew me when, in November 2001, he flew from Melbourne to Sydney to attend my first ever festival launch in Customs House down at Sydney's Circular Quay.

His reason was simple - he loves the arts, I was a fairly new kid on the festival block, and he wanted to show his support.

And that support has continued to this day, unabated. I appreciate it tremendously, and it's a privilege to finally share a stage with him, in what is now, mutually, our hometown. So thank you Harold.

These confessions of an arts gatekeeper which I'm going to share this morning are personal, frequently intuitive, born of 25 years of observation and experience in the arts, but also not absolutes – all are debatable, but not one, I think, is disprovable.

An arts gatekeeper is really a kind of artistic 'door bitch', someone charged with the responsibility of deciding when the 'velvet rope' is lifted, and which art will, and will not, be seen by the public of Australia.

And while the metaphor of the 'velvet rope' makes light of it here, the role is actually riven with anxiety and stress – so important do I think the responsibility is, and so potentially charged with hubris.

Gatekeepers come in many guises – festival directors, artistic directors of theatre and dance companies, museum and gallery curators, music directors of opera houses and orchestras, arts centre programmers, book publishers and record producers.

For a festival director, gatekeeping is perhaps more expansive than for any of our colleagues.

Not only do we need to make decisions about art across several artforms – in fact, for me in my festivals, across every artform – we also need to be commissioners and nurturers of new works, collaborators with arts companies both here and overseas, producers and presenters of the arts, and diplomats in balancing the needs and wishes of local artists with the brief of presenting the finest international arts.

As well, there are the restraints of budgets, the policies of Government, the availability of artists - especially international artists of stature, the statutory requirements to present work

in the state arts centres, to balance the program, to achieve financial goals, and so on and so on.

Yes, at times it's as much science as art, and one of the key roles of a festival director is producing – in every sense of the word - and I'll come back to this shortly.

My first gatekeeping role was as literary manager of the Sydney Theatre Company. Among other things, this required my reading all unsolicited manuscripts which playwrights sent to us, numbering around 200 per year, as well as working with the directors on specific productions.

Essentially, I was the first port of call for an emerging playwright, with no agent, who was hoping for a production on the Sydney Theatre Company stage.

Much of the time, it puzzled me, and I confess sometimes irritated me, that many young playwrights expected their first play to be presented by the State's flagship theatre company.

I thought this was akin to a young painter expecting their first painting to be hung in the state gallery, but I pressed on, and read away – that job was my first professional love affair with the arts.

I'm sure I made mistakes in accepting or rejecting work - I hope I most often made the right decision - but even back then, as a young man in the 1980s, I started to perceive that the gatekeepers' job might not be places to indulge our whims; or impose our ideas of social engineering; or encourage political conscription - given the magnitude of the responsibility we were handed.

And the responsibilities are large. Given that decisions made by us arts 'tastemakers' - as we've sometimes been called – could determine the flavour of Australia's cultural character, we are charged with no small task. And for those of us who believe the arts and culture are an intrinsic part of the very fabric of society, the sleepless nights grow exponentially.

So back then at the STC, and since then at three national festivals, I have tried to adhere to those standards I first set myself - to apply objective and agenda-free rigour, analysis, fairness and knowledge, to the work I've considered.

A gatekeeper also requires an ability to be a facilitator between the art, and the public who will receive it, whether that 'public' consists of other artists, people attending particular artform events, or the society at large.

And that role of facilitator - between art and audience – is something I'll explore this morning.

A good starting point is a comment made to me just a fortnight ago by two extremely eminent Australian arts figures. To paraphrase, and I hope I represent them fairly here, they felt that people had "stopped listening" to the arts.

That just as people were tired of the stock, predictable language around advertising and business, the language of the arts – its stock phrases, occasional obfuscation and inevitable spin - had become a monumental turn-off.

And, finally, that we needed to find a new language to speak about the arts, to re-engage people.

At one, self-centered level, I don't completely agree with this. I'm extremely fortunate in that I think my own Festival audiences have never stopped listening, in fact they have listened with increasing attentiveness over the years, and my audiences, and some other festivals' audiences, have grown year by year.

And why those people are still listening is, I hope, a result of my avoiding some of the pitfalls of gatekeeping which you'll be privy to, today.

But certainly, on hearing the message of those two arts commentators, and on straw-polling some of my colleagues around the country, and speaking with audiences and the public in spades, a few key issues arose.

They were: - firstly the language around the arts – its veracity, its relevance and its vocabulary; secondly the arts world's attitude towards the audience;

and thirdly, the art itself – where problems of connection and communication lay, and issues around the producing and presentation of the art, and just what kind of art the gatekeeper decides to present.

Now each of these alone could sprout a thousand PhD theses, and in writing this speech, at every turn I saw a mile-long stream needing pursuing.

But given just twenty minutes here, I am necessarily going to speak in broad brushstrokes.

Let's look first at how arts gatekeepers get to be there.

While the primary arts gatekeeper is anyone assuming the responsibility of that "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to a work of art being presented to the people of Australia, there is another kind of gatekeeper – those who let people like me through the 'velvet rope' in the first place.

Arts ministries and arts boards - the appointers of gatekeepers - are in themselves 'gatekeeping' – deciding what kind of vision is expressed. And this, too, is a significant responsibility.

These bodies must be as rigorous as the gatekeepers themselves, and they must do an enormous amount of research before appointing any of us to positions of such responsibility.

And, in my view, more rigour at this initial level would help heal the rift between the arts and those who have stopped listening.

In my view, no one who has who has presided over the demise of an arts organization they led; or has run up a seven digit deficit; or has decimated an arts company's audience base; or had no experience in the creation or presentation of art - should be an arts gatekeeper.

But, surveying the landscape, some governments and boards around Australia haven't agreed with me on that.

Now I concede that the arts is, by definition, and of necessity, an inexact endeavour; that risk is essential; and magnificent failures are usually as valuable and defensible as glorious triumphs. But some basic investigation is often simply not happening.

While the artist should be free to create unfettered, the gatekeeper on the other hand must be accountable and, I believe, by quantifiable measures.

Critical and peer assessment, financial health of the organisation, attendances and legacy – these should all figure in an analysis of the success, or not, of a gatekeeper's abilities and achievements.

Surely we owe our artists this at the very least. That their art will be considered and nurtured by appropriate peers.

And as well as rigorously vetting those we allow to make crucial gatekeeping decisions, ministries, foundations and boards must also ask us tough questions about the art - not just about the financial bottom line.

Ask why your gatekeepers believe in an artist, ask what the audience will experience, ask why your artistic directors are passionate about a particular work.

We gatekeepers ARE accountable, and we are only too happy to stand up for the work in which we vehemently believe.

Once we have the gatekeeper in place, how do we then ensure they are listened to? How do we stave off the possibility of the world tuning them out?

Too often, gatekeepers employ language around the arts which is full of obfuscation, abstraction, woolliness and spin. It is language which is empty of veracity and clarity, and is one of the more obvious turn-offs for the public.

The most radical impact on the language of the arts has been sewn by the information age, in which blogging, downloads, twittering, texting, virals and all kinds of social networking have rendered our 'art-speak' impotent to at least one generation, with more generations to follow.

As many commentators have observed long before today, a fully-wired world has eclipsed the controlled, "we'll-tell-you-what-you'll-like" paternalism of the arts of the past. Traditional ways of communicating about the arts, indeed about everything, are being rendered useless.

While I, like all of you, despair at the banality of 95% of blogs, let alone the stripped-down emptiness of nearly all tweets and texts, in that morass is a rapid-delivery, bare-bones communication which is refreshingly, brutally honest.

A generation has grown up with giga-hertz of visual and aural noise in our imagist, advertising culture - and they've learnt that their primary communication job is to sift the noise from the useful thought-stream.

And our arts messages risk being sifted out with everything else, as the wired generation hone in on their edited social networking information.

In the 21st Century, I believe that the difference is that the listeners - the audiences and consumers of culture – have developed an innate ‘bullshit’ radar, which is finely tuned to vet empty rhetoric, false promises and self-serving spin.

Audiences are now simply too savvy, too connected, too informed and too busy to indulge the rhetoric of old.

They are as tired as all of us, of being bombarded with art-speak, corporate-speak, ad-speak or marketing-speak.

Then there’s the language we employ inside the arts world.

A couple of years ago I received a submission from some very fine artists whom I admire enormously. The submission was for a physical-theatre work, with very little text, a very simple set, and a duration of just one hour.

The submission said the production was going to, and I quote: “Explore the evolution of structures of power, and the coercive language of political persuasion, while highlighting contemporary dilemmas of communication breakdown, as experienced in themes of the Holocaust, Diaspora, forced migration and repression, through research into present-day Geo-Politics” Unquote.

Now I’m not out here to belittle those artists– they do make terrific work - but I think this is an indication of how far we’ve sunk in our demands of artists, and what they feel they now need to say to gatekeepers, just to get their work seen.

These artists learnt that the way to securing support for their work – from funding bodies, foundations, festival directors and other gatekeepers – was to describe it in such impenetrable, all-encompassing, ‘political-hot-button’ terms – with, I might add, not a single mention of the word “audience”.

To me, any sane person’s antenna would spring to attention at the notion of a single, simple, short performance – with little or no text - being able to explore in any kind of significant way such massive, complex and all-encompassing themes of, and let me repeat it: - “the evolution of structures of power, and the coercive language of political persuasion, while highlighting contemporary dilemmas of communication breakdown, as experienced in themes of Holocaust, Diaspora, forced migration and repression, through research into present-day Geo-Politics.”

Yet this project, with this description had been through several filters, including a prominent producer, none of whom seem to have questioned its claims, as well as one arts funding body which was already eagerly resourcing its development.

Did no one say: “Hang on a minute, at the very least, how can you possibly convey this massive thematic content, with your chosen form?”

Perhaps the first question a gatekeeper must ask is for whom are they keeping the gate?

Is it for themselves? Is it for their peers? Is it for the audience? Or is it for society at large?

The answer to these questions rests partly in the kind of responsibility the gatekeeper has.

For me, with international arts festivals presented by the major cities of Australia, I believe I am keeping the gate, and presenting work, for that city's citizens, including its artistic community.

And such a broad brief is again fraught with danger.

When one spends so much time immersed in art and the arts, your focus can't help but narrow, become more particular, more specialised.

Our taste becomes refined – necessarily - and can lead to our losing sight of the people to whom the artist is speaking.

I remember going to an Australian arts festival one year with a friend who brought her 21 year-old son along. His eyes were wide with wonderment at everything he saw, whereas for me, the work was passé, derivative and irrelevant.

And the areas of interest to which my 25-years of decision-making and immersion in the arts now lead me personally, may not be works which might inspire or enlighten a 20-year-old student, a 30-year-old banker or a 40-year-old nurse.

So in all my gatekeeping deliberations, I attempt to keep one eye dedicated to viewing the work through the eyes of the festival's audience. This is one of the greatest challenges of being a gatekeeper – keeping gate for people other than myself.

And one of the key reasons I believe people have stopped listening to some gatekeepers is because, on occasion, we have kept the audience out of the equation, underestimating them, and sometimes insulting their intelligence.

Some artistic directors, curators and producers actually assert that audiences don't matter. That whether people attend our presentations or not is immaterial. "A discussion of audiences attending arts events is infantile" one colleague has said.

This, to me, is patronizing in the extreme, repugnantly elitist and alienating. I would stop listening too, if I, as an audience participating in art I was told "Bugger off – we don't care about you."

One of the Big Lies of the Gatekeeper, is the myth that all good artists disregard the audience, that they simply express their burning vision, and if it finds an audience well and good.

Now, I have spoken to thousands upon thousands of artists in the world, literally, over my 25 years in the arts, and many of them – the best. And to a woman and man almost all are hungry for communication – a dialogue and communion between their work and an audience.

But in perpetrating this lie, that the audience doesn't matter to the art, the gatekeepers cleverly neuter criticism.

If the artistic director's decisions weren't validated by attendances, if no one came to experience the work, it had nothing to do with the gatekeepers curatorial deficiencies. It had only to do with the fact that the art was never made for an audience in the first place, or that the audience was too unsophisticated to appreciate the work.

Admittedly, I grew up in the collaborative field of theatre, but was it so different in literature and visual arts? Were my colleague playwrights, composers, actors, and directors unique in hungering for their work to be seen by an audience – to communicate their visions to society - to you and to me? I think not.

I don't know if you all remember the scandal around the American Peter Sellars' direction of, and resignation from, the 2002 Adelaide Festival.

Much has been said about this, and I don't want to get bogged down in it here, but it seems to me that Peter had a vision which did not include a strong concern for audiences – for what the people of Adelaide would actually experience, at his festival.

I think he was clear about this from day one. But no one had the guts to ask – what exactly will end up on stage in March 2002?

Had they asked, I think Peter would have answered – “that's not the point”. Because he was deeply interested in process, and legacy, but not so much, I think, in immediate outcomes, presented to the public at the actual festival.

Now there is a place for this to be sure – process and legacy are gems in the artistic lifecycle - but the place is not, in my view, at an international arts festival, which has as its raison d'être, and I quote: “the presentation of great art for two weeks every two years, to the people of Adelaide.”

And while I believe audiences matter dearly to artists, they have picked up on some gatekeepers' contempt for audiences, by omitting audiences from the language of the artistic equation.

If my memory is correct, in all my years of literary management and festival direction in Australia, no artist's submission to me has ever said: “and audiences will love it”.

And I don't mean 'love' in a populist, escapist, entertainment sense. The art we truly love is art which connects – by shaking, moving, inspiring, illuminating, shocking or challenging us.

And I believe nearly every artist wants audiences to love their work in at least one of these ways, but none dare say it, so poisonously have we excluded audiences – the recipients of the artists' vision and a crucial part of the artistic equation - FROM the equation.

Once we include the audience in the conversation around arts, once we get them listening, we have to ensure that the work they are experiencing is in its best possible shape.

The next pitfall into which some gatekeepers fall is the “Sally Field Syndrome” – the heady temptation of wanting to be able to say to all artists, Sally's giddy Academy Awards proclamation of: “You like me, you really like me!”

One of the gatekeeper's primary jobs, I feel, is to deliver the tough love which can help draw the best from our artists.

And it's a very fine line to tread.

On the one hand we need to be utterly supportive, to provide the perfect nurturing environment for an artist to create, but simultaneously, we need to help guide them, where useful, to optimally realise their vision.

Frankly, and this will come as a surprise to many gatekeepers, I don't believe our primary role is to be loved by the artistic community, or even to be loved by audiences. The role is for us to love, and care for both.

Producing is as critical in the performing arts as it is in film, and the role of a good producer is hands-on in both.

My own feeling about the crisis in the Australian film industry in the past decade has been the screaming absence of tough love by gatekeepers whether they are financial gatekeepers - those funding films - or hand-on producers.

This has led to the indulgence of so many "writer-directors" – the new pervasive moniker for dozens of film artists - when both of those skills, "writing" and "directing", are worlds apart, and very few people on the planet are blessed with the ability to be sensational at both.

Orson Wells was one, Woody Allen is another, but not the scores of "writer/directors" which the film world has been saturated with recently.

Where was the producer saying to the writer – no, you cannot direct this yourself – you need an objective eye, a great directorial talent, to realise your vision.

And vice versa - where was the tough love when endless good directors decided they no longer needed the writer, but could go it alone.

For me, those words on a single CV – "writer director" and sometimes even accompanied by "producer" and "actor" – that is a clarion call of alarm.

I think they should appear on one person's "occupation" column, as rarely as "pediatrician", "brain surgeon" and "anesthetist" should appear on a single doctor's CV.

But for so many it sets off dewy-eyed admiration for the genius polymath before them, and a complete loss of objective assessment.

In festival curation I believe a producer's 'tough love' is integral to the process of developing and programming work.

Time and again we see flawed Australian work slapped on the stage prematurely, or under-realised, because the festival director hasn't embarked on their producing, editing and dramaturgical responsibilities, analyzing and discussing with the artist issues of - form, rhythm, pace, musical structure, emotional arc, a scene's exposition, and so on.

I know why we resist. We do love artists and are in awe of their talent. And yes, rigorous

producing can lead to conflict, argument and sometimes even a loss of love between the artist and the gatekeeper.

But in the end, this is the job we've been given, and dereliction in it can do more damage to an artist, and their future, than having rejected their work in the first place.

The issue of love and camaraderie brings us to the next potential pitfall of the gatekeeper and another reason our message is not cutting through.

A fact of artistic life is that we'll always be subject to nay-sayers. We are frequently easy targets, and sometimes half our lives seem to be spent defending what we do, especially in the cyclical rise, from time to time, of conservatism, suspicion of artists, and demonizing of culture.

Most recently, in the middle of this decade, some heated debate arose around so-called "elite artists" and "the intellectual elite".

I remember the caning David Williamson got from the shock-jocks when he wrote an incisive and satirical piece about "Aspirational Australia", where aspiring to a new bar-be-que and extensions on the house were more honourable pursuits than aspiring to a better society through social justice and education.

Now I'm not concerned here with the 'blame game', but when a political party can assemble focus groups of regular Australian citizens, as happened for the 2004 federal election, and be told by those citizens that an advertisement criticising support for "elite artists" will score polling points, then we have to look at how the broader community is viewing us.

And out of the neo-conservative milieu of the past decade, and the wide acceptance by the community that the term "elite artists" was inherently pejorative (while the term "elite athletes" sent chills of pride up all our spines), came a hardening of our united valorous front.

Being under attack, we had to close ranks, fight as one, and resist any chink in our collective artistic armour.

In my view, the arts world threw self-criticism out the door, and the capacity for self-criticism is one of the fundamental requirements for the health of any person or group.

There is public self-criticism in every sector of society, but here was virtually none in the arts. Our embattled "united-we-stand" position read as "we're never wrong" and, as often, "that all art is great ... and for the common good".

In many ways I applauded this closing of our ranks. And I will fight to the end for the rights of artists and the importance of what we do.

But by never openly taking a critical look at ourselves, our artists, or our art, by presenting an infallible, united front, ironically we leave ourselves open to a new attack over our apparent lack of discrimination and judgment. And I think this reads, at worst, as our being liars, and at best as our being delusional.

The German painter Gerhard Richter said: "The most important thing, in life and for humanity, is to decide what is good and what is bad. And it's the most difficult."

I believe this applies to art, as much as to life and humanity, and I think that of all pursuits on the planet, deciding what is good and what is bad in art is the ultimate in difficulty.

For me, there is a raft of parameters on which I rely, to make my own judgement calls.

They include a loathing of what I call “Prozac-ed art”, where a comfortable eradication of the spikes and troughs of art’s rapture and horror, leads to an anaesthetised Pleasantville of the Benign. This I fight at all costs.

I look to artists who make waves rather than ride them.

I judge work by its originality and its response to this 21st Century.

I look to work which absorbs and embraces new technologies.

I prefer work which explores, unencumbered, the issues, politics, social conditions, and human concerns which reflect the complexity of this 21st Century world.

I judge art by its ability to: inspire, illuminate, challenge, enlighten, shock, and entertain; it must be work which explores and pushes the boundaries of existing artforms, and, we hope, demolishes some of the walls around those artforms.

I judge art by its ability to speak directly to us, about our time and place.

I look for art which questions rather than answers.

I reject nostalgic or museum art – work which makes no reflection on the world we live in today.

I am deeply suspicious of art whose goal is simplistic social engineering. To me, the best work is complex, ambiguous and even confusing.

Now I concede these benchmarks are all particular to me.

Many gatekeepers have different parameters, and many believe that no judgment call can be made at all, citing myriad other reasons why they reject or accept certain work – whether it be hiding behind budgets, or a specified theme, or declaring an awkward ‘fit’ with the other works in an artistic director’s program. Or giving no reason at all.

And I respect their right to resile from stating that, in their opinion, one artwork is better than another.

But for me, that doesn’t work.

While there are no absolutes in judging art, if working as an arts gatekeeper for 25 years has given me not a speck more ability to decide that one work is better than another, if I am no more capable than my five-year-old nephew, then I should resign this morning.

You see, I believe connoisseurship is relevant.

Indeed, I think my job is to distill the essence of contemporary art and performance, from literally hundreds of possible projects, and thousands of artists, and to identify the elements

which mark particular works as critical to our age, to investigate the trends and shifts which will ultimately mark an artist's vision as one for posterity.

It's a job which requires sometimes heartbreaking decisions to discard the extraneous, the superficial, or the derivative - no matter how impassioned their creators have been - and to search through hell and high water for those gems of originality and excellence which speak to our times with urgency, intelligence, compulsion and vigour.

Because everything is now possible in art, and anything can be art, we need to be extra-vigilant, making judgment calls even more often than ever before.

Finally, I concur with the late, great, founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, who said:

"the Director's job is the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity."

And this judgment must also extend to context. We must judge what is the best context in which the art is seen.

Every production, even wonderful productions, are not automatically best seen at an international arts festival. Nor are they necessarily best seen in a flagship company's program – whether it be dance or theatre, opera or music or visual arts.

Rigor is required in making the call of whether our particular artistic forums are the best possible launching pad for the art at hand. And very often they are not.

One quick example.

Programming my first Sydney Festival, in 2000 I traveled to Caracas and was escorted by armed guard to the favelas, where I saw what seemed to me to be a wild, passionate and raw theatre adaptation of one of the great South American novels.

I was seduced by the dangerous ambience of the city, the security drama of the event, and the commitment and emotion of the performers. I immediately programmed it.

What then ended up on the stage of Sydney's Theatre Royal – as bourgeois a setting as one could imagine – read, in that context, as an ill-fitting, awkward, second rate production, which made no connection between the audience and the soul of the work.

For me, it was lesson brutally learnt.

And, speaking of context, another great challenge in festival direction is the frequency with which I have to view work in a foreign language I don't understand, and to therefore assess that work solely on its physical core, visual look, integrity of performance and instinct.

(pause – look at watch)

And I am way out of time so I just want to say that despite all of this, I actually adore my job as a gatekeeper. It is filled with endless joys and rewards -

- facilitating an artist's extraordinary vision,
- enabling that vision to affect people and society,
- and yes, in a tiny way, helping art to change people and therefore change the world
– because I believe art can change our world.

No job could be a greater privilege or gift.

And finally, I have never ceased to be astonished by the resourcefulness of art. So any action by gatekeepers, any philosophy of festival direction or curation, or production - is ephemera.

Art is the substance, and while there will be peaks and troughs, forgettable cycles and explosions of genius, as there have been for millennia, 'Art' is the most tenacious survivor, and ultimately nothing we do will silence it.

Thank you!