

Key Performance: Power, passion, and public life



an Arts and Public Life Breakfast Lecture
at the Sofitel Wentworth Hotel, Sydney, 20th October, 2005
by Peter Garrett, AM

In the space of a short period as Federal Labor's arts spokesman I've discovered there are some real institutional gems working in the arts world. Currency House, which describes itself as a resource centre for the performing arts, is one of those gems.

Its mission, to assert the value of the performing arts in public life, strikes me as pretty important. For without a vibrant and expansive performing arts scene we would be a duller country, drier in spirit with less capacity to imagine a better future, for isn't that what the arts at their best help us to do.

One of Currency House's ongoing activities, the quarterly publication of Platform Papers, provides a critical forum for considered thinking and vigorous debate about the arts, the role of government, future policy directions and more. Recent titles including; *Art in A Cold Climate: Rethinking the Australia Council*, *Shooting Through: Australian Film and the Brain Drain*, give some indication of the thorny challenges the arts sector is facing in this country. I commend this commitment to stirring the pot and stimulating critical inquiry about the arts – and addressing those issues facing the arts sector.

My brief is to speak about how the early discipline of music making and performing contributed to success in my chosen field, and to reveal, as Katharine Brisbane's press release promised, how my experiences as Midnight Oil front man has equipped me to be an advocate for the Arts.

I stand in front of you as a person who likes the roar of the crowd at the SCG as much as the smell of greasepaint. And I'm not talking about performing at Waveaid. I'm a footy fan and a fan of theatre, music and film. I've been shaped by exposure to Mozart, Dylan and Missy Higgins, to Dickens, Dostoevsky and Tim Winton, to Fred Williams and Tracey Moffat, to Lawson and Carey and so the list goes on.

But too often in politics, there are fallacious either/or arguments put up as a justification or an excuse for an action or view which is skewed in such a way as to suggest that there is only one acceptable choice. For example: You can have forests or jobs, but not both. Well actually if you decide and have the political will to exercise it—as former Premier Bob Carr did in this state—you can have both.

This line of thinking has been a feature of the debate in regard to the arts. There's been a prevalent suggestion that people who like the arts, for example people who read books, are a

different mob to those who like sport. Therefore, it follows, implicitly, the arts are for a select mob, a bit set apart, and it's not what the average community is interested in. Don't get me wrong, this sometimes comes from those into the Arts as much as from those who think it is a complete waste of time. Well, I think you can—and should—have both. I like both, and I think both are very important. And I suspect there are plenty of people out there who agree.

It is crystal clear that the arts make a significant contribution to the economy; recent statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show the arts employ around 85,000 people and contribute almost \$12 billion to the national economy. This is only likely to increase into the future as artists increasingly use the new global mediums of communication and new technologies such as digitisation to produce their work.

I certainly see limitless prospects for Australia to harness the creative enterprise, in ways writers Richard Florida and British academic Ken Robinson have proposed, so long as we fully commit to investing in current and new art forms and ensure artists have a secure framework to operate within into the long term. I happen to think that early exposure to the arts, particularly through some kind of Arts education but also exposure in the home and the community can instil in a young person an enthusiasm for the arts, and a greater sense of cultural, societal roots ; and , dare I say, a broader cultural understanding and education.

I was fortunate to have some exposure of that kind. I sang in choirs and then in bands. I enjoyed seeing amateur theatre just as I now enjoy performances of the Sydney Theatre Company and I am unhesitatingly enthusiastic about the arts and bring that enthusiasm to my new role.

The infamous saying of Thomas Hobbes to the effect that life is 'nasty, brutish, and short' accurately describes the career prospects for many performing and visual artists. Although my own experience has been with popular music and we were eventually able to build a sustainable career, nothing comes easily in the performing arts. Many of the features common to establishing a career in music are reproduced across the performing and visual arts spectrum.

Of course there is one big difference, namely that popular music, doesn't and nor should it, except in specific circumstances, receive government support. There is a vast commercial industry and audience base for that purpose. But the song remains the same in terms of the obstacles faced by those engaging in any artistic endeavour across the whole sector, of that I'm sure. Make no mistake this is one of the hardest games in town. The odds of enduring financial success for an artist working in any field in Australia are longer than on a Melbourne Cup outsider.

In most jobs which require training and expertise if you work hard over time you could reasonably expect to be well remunerated, to start building up your superannuation and to have a career that reaches over decades, even if you change occupation during your life.

That is not the case for the artist / performer, not even in the field of popular music. For the tens of thousands of hopefuls, few end up making a living out of what they do, even fewer a reasonable living. And it is only the exceptional one in a hundred thousand in the music industry who makes a motza along the way. The best that the majority of working contemporary artists can hope for is a paltry, uneven return for their creative effort. For those who work in the major performing companies wage scales are Lilliputian.

Then there's the timeline of the career in the performing arts.

For a one-hit wonder it can be over in literally months. But even in the established domains, for a dancer once the career is underway your shelf life rarely exceeds ten years. For an author, the period between successful novels may run to decades. If you're an actor, struggling to make a name for yourself, you can expect to spend extended periods without work in your chosen profession.

An individual performing arts or visual arts career is not for the faint-hearted. Getting started can take forever, and once you're going it is never a smooth trajectory, more often a series of stops and starts, characterised by near poverty, punctuated by intense periods of activity.

The cost of doing the many things necessary for establishing and maintaining a career such as education, ongoing training, equipment and clothing purchase, or even of employing someone to help in these raft of activities is high. As the 2003 Australia Council report on artists' earnings by David Throsby and Virginia Hollister so succinctly put it: Don't Give up Your day Job.

I'm sure you've heard it before today, but the finding that half of all artists surveyed had incomes from their creative work of less than \$7,300 PA and that up to one third experience unemployment over a five year period is testament to the tough road the artist travels. Consequently as a performing artist you need to be stoic, prepared to take other work to supplement your arts income. You'll need to be a jack of all trades and master of one, namely your chosen craft.

Of course there are examples of those people who are feted and rewarded for their work-but, as in music, they are a distinct minority. Most people who actually contribute to the creative well being of Australia are familiar with a bottom line. It's called the poverty line and this has been a constant for many years.

I'm well aware this kind of summation does not take into account the other side of the ledger, namely art for art's sake, the general participation in making and enjoying art that huge numbers of people enjoy simply in their down time or with friends. That topic is best dealt with separately but I was intrigued by the suggestion made recently by Hugh McKay that we ought to reinvigorate the old School of Arts Halls to facilitate more neighbourhood art activity-amen to that.

Were there early disciplines Midnight Oil drew on to make our way in the highly competitive field of popular music? Well there are a few that come to mind.

The first thing I'd identify is blind faith.

Or whatever it is that sees you careering across the country night after night, stuffed into a car or van with four other blokes, playing one night stands fuelled by adrenaline and junk food and just knowing for sure that one day you'll have a sustainable career, you might even hear your song on the radio, even if the door has already been slammed in your face time and time again.

The second is co-operation.

We were a band that could only do things our way, even if that meant flying in the face of accepted practice, or even of shooting ourselves in the foot on more than one occasion. Whether we were contemplating cutting costs at the behest of the promoter by taking an unscheduled light aircraft flight across Brazil instead of the standard air trip—we didn't by the way. Or finding the extra funds to cover the inevitable overruns on the recording schedule of the latest album, simple choice borrow more money or go on tour earlier than anticipated—we did both in this case. The bottom line was we needed to work together and decide together to survive.

The third factor is imagination.

Both using the power of imagination in crafting songs but just as important we imagined a band that would be totally focused on music, that created soundscapes with words that resonated with us, not with any objective or media determined notion of what was good or bad, in or out.

The Oils' view had little to do with reaching a pinnacle of success that was judged by commercial criteria, although we were fortunate that some commercial success did come over time. We were much more focused on extracting (literally) the most out of each song, each

performance and tour as we could. And doing it with material that meant everything to us in a world that sometimes seemed to be heading off the rails.

I'm convinced that total immersion in your art, pushing yourself as far as possible in order to reach your potential as a creative artist or performer is the crux of the creative process and that the harder you push, the further you get. We are well aware of the numerous examples of artists over the years who've lived this credo to the fullest, and many died paupers.

The essential point that is sometimes missed in these histories is that it isn't a tragedy when an artist doesn't get recognition, that's a pity. It's a tragedy when an artist or anyone for that matter doesn't reach to their fullest potential wherever that lies.

The fourth thing we valued was creativity.

By creativity I mean a general embrace of the creative, through the gamut of activities that are part and parcel of a touring bands work schedule; song-writing, set design, film clips, artwork for album covers, photos, planning for special gigs and so on. I wouldn't claim that all the constituent parts of our career were particularly notable for creative excellence, and the quality of the end result obviously depended on the quality of our ideas and on who we worked with at the time. But artists always try and chase down the creative spark, light it and then wait around for the explosion. Most of the time, like anyone else out there, we were just trying to survive.

The perennial favourite road song by AC/DC 'Long way to the Top' puts it like this:

Hotel motel, make you wanna cry,
lady do the hard sell, know the reason why,
gettin` old, gettin` grey,
gettin` ripped off, under-paid,
gettin` sold, second hand,
that`s how it goes, playin` in a band.' (Young/Scott/Young)

So you need all of the above and then add a dose of luck, some decent business advice, which means developing some business skills to interpret the advice, and some good timing, and you may make more than one or two CDs and build a lasting career.

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There's a poignant moment in the recent Australian film *Little Fish* starring Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving and Noni Hazellhurst amongst others. The Blanchett character having gained traction in escaping her drug-filled past is unable to raise the loan she needs to purchase a small business and so conclude the transition from junkie to functioning adult. The problem is that she can't be approved for a loan because of her past criminal record. Desperate, the only option she can see to move her life forward is to return to her sordid past by participating in a drug deal to raise the capital.

Whilst agonising over this dilemma she passes a building where a primary school choir made up of kids from most corners of the earth is rehearsing the song 'Flame Trees'. Jolted from her brooding reverie she steps inside for a moment to listen. Bear in mind, for those who haven't seen it, the film deals with heroin addiction in the western suburbs of Sydney and up to this point has been a gritty and dark affair.

Now the lyrics of 'Flame Trees' by Cold Chisel are sung solo by a primary school kid.

Kids out Saturday afternoon just pass me by
I'm just savouring familiar sights'
We've shared some history this town and I
I can't stop this long forgotten feeling of her
Try and book a room and stay the night.
Number one is to find some friends
To say you're doing well
After all this time you boys look just the same.
Number two is the happy hour
At one of two hotels,
Settle in to saying do you remember so and so?
Number three is never say her name.
Now all the kids join in for the chorus
Oh, the flame trees will blind the weary driver
And there's nothin' else could set fire to this town.
There's no change there's no pace, everything within its place
Just makes it harder to believe she won't be around (Walker/Preswitch)

It's a song known and loved by many Australians of a certain age, and that moment, coming as one of our most notable screen actors gazes at the young promise of the new Australia, this scene lifts the film out of its narrative path and evokes a host of reflections for the viewer.

In a flash one thinks of the passing of an Australian era from the plain simple country town life to the multicultural and more complex society of today; of Nolan's Ned Kelly mask gazing out across a hostile landscape, a character trapped by circumstance and history; of the sweep of north coast country written about by poet Les Murray; of the eternal tales of innocence lost; of assorted private journeys.

In other words this artful, art-filled moment transports us, reconnects us, as I believe art always can, and that is why we need to celebrate and champion this most fundamental of human expressions.

Some argue that the worth of art can't be measured, that the effect of art is negligible. But such reductionist logic flies in the face of a long felt experience of the enriching capacity of art and the never ceasing desire of people—lots of people—across classes and cultures, to engage with art. As Karen Armstrong put it recently, 'Any powerful work of art invades our being and changes it forever.'

Labor has a profound belief in, and track record of, supporting Australian arts and artists. I want to continue that tradition and am now engaging in a major review of Arts policy. Comments, recommendations and suggestions are welcome as we build an Arts policy that can serve Australia well into the future.

This means among other things looking at better funding arrangements for the Arts and the national broadcaster, including moving on from the efficiency dividend which is now straight

jacketing arts bodies and making the development of new and innovative work that much harder.

The efficiency dividend acts as an extra constraint to development and innovation by slowly strangling struggling arts companies. The Australia Council has declared the cumulative effect of the dividend 'unsustainable', for both arts companies and the Council itself. This means looking at better ways of organising taxation arrangements so as to maximise the amount of private and public investment into film and arts more generally.

We are making very few films at present and our local film industry share of box office has declines significantly in the past ten years. This means reviewing media laws so as to ensure the presence of Australian stories remains on our television screen. Compared to most countries with similar economies we lag woefully behind in having home-grown faces and stories TV. It means recognising that the most significant challenge to artists, especially those working successfully in the new digital media and in our burgeoning indigenous arts community is to safeguard their intellectual property.

This means placing the highest possible premium on freedom of expression and removing the long arms of government from interfering in the creative process, whether by stacking arts boards with political appointments or leaning on funding organisations that support critical or edgy work. Finally this means standing up and saying proudly, as I do today, that art is as important to the life of the country as sport. Saying that I can and do take great solace both from surfing and Emily Kngwarreye's paintings—that each evokes in me what is to live in, and love this country.

Peter Garrett

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