



CURRENCY HOUSE

YOU KNOW NOTHING AND EVERYTHING ABOUT ME

Address to the audience at the Arts and Public Life Breakfast
26 October 2011 at the Tea Room, Queen Victoria Building Sydney

Noni Hazlehurst

I count myself incredibly lucky to be an actor. Through my work, I have discovered something my parents never taught me—that it's ok to be me. With all my weaknesses and strengths, my doubts and fears, my highs and lows, it's still OK to be me. My parents and the culture I grew up in taught me that I had to be something I wasn't, to be acceptable and successful. Pretty, submissive, deferring to others, and above all else, to pretend that everything was fine. I had to reduce who I was in order to fit in. I don't believe I was Robinson Crusoe in this. Nor do I think things have changed much. These are the lessons we're taught from an early age—how to appear to be perfect and coping. But the joy of acting, of working on great plays that examine the human condition, is that you come to realize that it's not just you who feels inadequate, or does stupid things, or feels insecure at times. And as an actor, I'm able to pass that incredibly liberating message on.

But the major frustration is that most of the available work opportunities don't allow us to deal with these kinds of themes. And when actors have no option but to work with scripts that are less than inspiring, it's not illogical for the conclusion to be drawn that actors are not terribly valuable contributors to society.

Even the lucky ones, who get the breaks and have the pick of the best work on offer, don't escape from the accusations that actors are poncy show-offs and a waste of space. When Cate Blanchett recently appeared in a pro-carbon tax ad on tv, she was widely vilified. Michael Caton was in it too—but he's a bloke, who wears check shirts, so he didn't come in for nearly as much attention. According to the *Courier Mail*, the Opposition Leader used parliamentary procedure to suspend question time to attack the Govt for being elitist, even though the ad was apparently funded by union and conservationist groups. He is quoted as saying: '

This is a PM who is happy to listen to actors, but she won't listen to voters. She wants to say yes to celebrities but she won't say yes to the people of Australia. You do not give special weight to celebrities....to people who live half the year in Hollywood (hard to run a State Theatre Company if that were true) where there is no carbon tax (an emissions trading scheme comes into effect in California next year) you give weight to the voice of the Australian people.

Interestingly, he also said the views of the wealthy should not be elevated over those of average Australians. Really? So presumably mining magnates speaking against a mining tax will get equally short shrift. In a nutshell, Cate has been defined as a non-voter, and not a person of Australia, and she was described in one media outlet as "just an actor". I can't remember who wrote that—but I suspect it was just a columnist.

Senator Barnaby Joyce said how proud we all are of Cate, but that the climate change issue had nothing to do with acting, a point which Cate probably understands. Quite right —it

has to do with thinking and reading and informing yourself and coming to a personal decision—something that actors are no less capable of than anyone else. That's how all of us, actors or not, decide what kind of people we are, and that's how actors create a character—research and choices.

But whether the attacks on Cate were just political point scoring or, more worryingly, a reflection of deeply-held views about actors' and artists' capabilities, not to mention their status, they raise the issues that I want to address today—the conflation of actors and celebrities in the minds of far too many people, the misapprehensions that abound about the kinds of people actors are—as if indeed we are somehow different—and why for some reason we often seem to be deemed less deserving of respect than others—as if most people aren't worthy of respect.

So why the confusion between actors and celebrities? Well, it's not hard to work out. Just a cursory glance at Google news and the banners under the mastheads of our newspapers provides one obvious answer. Google News doesn't have an Arts category, but an Entertainment category—a random sampling last week featured the following headlines:

Shane and Liz shun pre nup
Miranda Kerr accepts the honour of top Victoria's Secret Angel
Lindsay Lohan's mug shot—a little pouty?
Tributes for tourism stalwart Keith Williams,
Truckie impaled on fence after losing keys.

I'm not sure which part of the last story could be construed as Entertainment—but perhaps he will be offered a role in something on commercial FTA TV

Similarly, the *Age*, the *SMH* and the *Herald Sun* carry Entertainment as the topic, with the *Age* and the *SMH* listing it as the tenth out of 14 items. (Sport is fourth and fifth respectively.) The *Australian* at least lists Arts, but the *Canberra Times* has neither Arts nor Entertainment advertised on the front page.

And the predominant coverage under these Entertainment headings features actors ambushed by paparazzi or appearing at promotional events for their projects alongside shots of socialites falling out of nightclubs, WAGS being paraded in their finery on a revolving rotisserie, reality stars, radio announcers' new houses and the surgical procedures performed on various personalities. It seems you're guaranteed a headline if you do something controversial or outrageous, as opposed to something artistically creative or innovative.

TV is seen to be the only valid currency for actors, and if you're not acting on it, you've retired. I've lost count of the number of comebacks I've supposedly made, even though I have been gainfully employed in other ventures. But the opportunities for doing something really satisfying on TV are few; especially so for women. Even more so for women over forty and women and men of ethnic origins other than Anglo Saxon. The community most of us are actually a part of is woefully misrepresented by the mainstream media.

There are very few opportunities for high quality performing artists to show what they can do on television. The majority of entertainers who get exposure in prime time are wannabes competing in talent shows. Cheap local content.

Australia is now a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Cultural Diversity, which places an obligation on Government to raise the profile of arts, culture and diversity—both multicultural diversity and diversity of art forms. It is a given within the Convention and indeed in the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper, that arts and culture determine our social values, enabling people to express themselves better and to

work together to underpin our moral and ethical values. The recent cutting of Arts content on the ABC, when combined with the generally mediocre local offerings in the rest of the media, would suggest that the Government has a huge task ahead if it is to raise the bar to encourage opportunities to be made available to artists of excellence to gain exposure, and for great work to be seen by more than a few. One suggestion would be that local content points are awarded for quality as well as quantity.

So with the proliferation of celebrities and personalities in the public view, it's no wonder that there is a reluctance and/or inability to recognize, differentiate and validate the work of actors. The ones who haven't had the breaks to establish a career overseas, the ones who choose to remain in Australia, the ones who year in and year out struggle to make a half-decent living from a part-time career, and who, despite the odds, continue to study and work to faithfully serve their craft. The ones who are victims of the cultural cringe that still operates—unless you've made it overseas or come from overseas, you're not worthy of much respect.

Actors, so I've often read or been told, can be egomaniacs, attention-seeking, precious, divas, airheads, fragile, hypersensitive, lazy, unfaithful, vain and not terribly bright. Some may well be any or all of those things, but the same could be said of some individuals in any category of work or in any stratum of society. If you only act in television dramas, (and if you are an actor, that will kill you) most of the time you are only called on to act as yourself. You are cast according to your look—not necessarily your intelligence or ability. This is particularly true for young actors, many of whom get away with doing minimal work to develop and prepare themselves, and whose major preoccupation is more likely to be self-promotion. And there's no-one to disavow them of this approach. Quite the reverse.

Ben Eltham, writing for Crikey.com shortly after the release of the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper, asked how its stated goal 'to support excellence and world class endeavour' might be defined. 'After all,' he wrote, 'everyone in the arts thinks they're excellent.' Most artists and actors I've ever met or heard of think quite the opposite. We are driven mad by self-doubt, and by the elusive nature of perfection.

In theatre and some films there's not much work for people who lack humility, intellectual rigour, a strong work ethic and intelligence. To play a role in most half-decent productions requires a great deal of research and observation and forensic curiosity and self-knowledge. It's not just learning lines—it's studying the playwright's history and influences, the period in which the play is set, the politics that inform the play's existence, researching details about your character's back story and profession, drawing conclusions about the writer's intentions and how best to honour them.

And don't forget that acting is one of the few professions that is publicly assessed. Actors actually have to be resilient and tough, and emotionally able to deal with having their deepest, darkest feelings exposed or their reputations shattered by a bad review. Woe betide the actor who isn't prepared to leave their ego at the door of the rehearsal room. If you're striving for honesty, you can't afford to be precious. But there's a difference between being precious and being sensitive. Sensitivity is crucial for an actor. It's one of the human qualities it's our duty to promote.

Of course, occasionally we're paranoid. When you go for endless roles that you don't get, self-doubt can start to creep in. After I had my sons, I cut back on acting work quite substantially as most of it took me away from them. Lifestyle TV was the perfect solution. (Not for my life as it turned out, but that's another story.) Consequently I only appeared in three or four plays over a 15-year period. So when Robyn Nevin asked me to play opposite her in David Hare's two-hander *The Breath of Life* at the STC, to be directed by the wonderful British director Max Stafford-Clark, I was thrilled but nervous. I met Max on the first day of rehearsal and was in awe of his reputation and soon-apparent high

standards. It didn't help that in a press interview early on in the rehearsal period, when asked why she had cast me, Robyn replied that she couldn't think of anyone else she could bear to share a dressing-room with for seven weeks. It was not the response I'd hoped for—that it was my talent, wit and intelligence!

After two weeks of rehearsal, neither Max nor Robyn had given any indication that I was doing ok. Before we began work on the second Friday, Robyn gruffly said that she wanted to speak to me at lunchtime. As far as I was concerned, that was it! I was going to be sacked. I spent the rest of the morning in a state of shock, trying to prepare myself for the inevitable DCM—don't come Monday—speech. At lunchtime she marched me outside and said, 'I want to offer you two more plays for the opening of the new theatre building.' My knees buckled and I told her what had been going through my mind. She looked at me archly. 'Don't be ridiculous, Noni!' she barked. High praise indeed!

The real truth is that every one of us, actors or not, has done things or exhibited behaviour that could be construed as egomaniacal, attention-seeking, precious, diva-like, air-headed, fragile, hypersensitive and stupid. If we're honest, we must acknowledge our less than perfect states from time to time. Noel Coward said: 'It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.'

And it's honesty that is in very short supply in the public domain right now—along with respect, generosity, tolerance and empathy. The great writers, whose works actors are occasionally given the chance to perform, writers like Shakespeare and Ibsen and Chekhov and Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, write about these things in the service of humanity. They remind us of our weaknesses and vulnerability. They acknowledge and examine our pain and our loss and lack of love, our alienation and our isolation. They demonstrate that any of us, given the circumstances and environment can behave badly, or create tragic consequences from our actions or our inaction, or be beaten down by the vicissitudes of life. They help us to recognise that we need to empower women and help men heal their broken hearts. They show us that we are not alone.

The great writers are considered great because they use language to convey essential truths which, if performed and directed faithfully and well, reach out over the centuries and touch us and remind us that we are alive and human. They encourage us to engage with our imaginations—to walk in someone else's shoes and to empathise. It is our power to truly imagine the world and the worlds inside us that constitute our moral sense. And it is my great privilege as an actor to have the opportunity to examine this work and my own psyche and to offer myself as honestly and authentically as I can to an audience in a spirit of deep humility and kinship.

For me, the best work means that you have the chance to move and to affect an audience, to engage them, to unite them, if you like, by creating a character that is as complex and real as they are.

I can't be *just* an actor any more than you can be *just* a business man or woman or *just* a housewife. We are all immensely complex individuals who share, at heart, the same need for love, support and understanding. We are all actors, most of the time—who have chosen to embrace some of our characteristics to present to the world, and to those with whom we are intimate, and to keep other parts of ourselves hidden. The actor's job is to mine his or her own character and experience, to find the qualities demanded by the playwright in the telling of their story. We have to create a character that the audience can understand and feel for as a human being, who, like all of us, has made choices that may or may not serve them well, but who is still worthy of compassion. If we can do that, we are serving the great writers whose work we perform, who write about the human condition, and ask that we examine our consciences and empathize with our fellow man.

Yet still there persists this niggling notion that acting isn't a worthwhile or honourable profession. Well, it depends on your definition of what's worthwhile and honourable.

My adrenalin rush, my sense of worth, comes from participating in a piece of work that has the potential to transform and inspire people and nourish them. Waiting in the wings, hearing the audience chattering, I feel thrilled knowing that it's up to me to take them on a journey, to use my years of training and experience and living to try to move and inspire them, to make them think and feel, and to satisfy their imagination. To serve them and to serve the writer. My heart thumps, I flex my muscles and focus my brain on the task ahead.

Theatre is completely different from television and film, not just because the stories and the quality of the writing are generally far superior, but because it's live. It's a real human interaction. Hundreds of eyes are trained on your every move and hundreds of ears are tuned to every word. The audience hand over their imaginations and wait to be transported to a different reality. They have forked out significant amounts of cash and gone to some trouble to come and see you, so you can never be blasé or bored. Every night, the dynamic is going to be different. I don't do it because I want attention or to show-off. I do it to communicate and to engage. I don't believe that I, or anyone else, can claim to be special. But we are all unique, and I choose to utilise my unique skills and talents to connect with other people. It's a most exciting challenge, this story-telling. The hold we have over the audience's attention is incredibly fragile. Someone having a coughing fit or talking, or a phone ringing, can distract everyone, actors and audience alike.

Another misconception is that we lose ourselves in the role, that we believe in the circumstances. We don't. We're aware of every lolly wrapper, every shuffle, every snore, every whisper. We're always aware of what's just happened and what's coming up, of where we are on stage. We know when we've got the audience's full attention and when we're losing them, and maddeningly, we usually know why we're losing them. And just occasionally, we're aware that we've struck a chord of recognition and empathy with the entire audience. You feel that delicate silence, that hovering sensibility, when you could literally hear a pin drop. You know that you've struck a deep chord of understanding. That's what makes it all worthwhile. We're all feeling and experiencing some profound human truth together.

The frustrating thing is that there are so few opportunities to do this work, this calibre of work. There aren't too many directors who can draw the best work out of actors, and even if there were, there aren't enough venues to give enough actors the chance to work. Very few actors get the opportunity to really show what they can do, to demonstrate the range of their ability. And as audiences, we aren't exposed to the best nearly often enough. When was the last time you went to the theatre and were completely blown away? We see a lot of reasonably good theatre, but not enough amazing theatre. We've become used to getting up after a play and saying, 'That was good, where'll we go for coffee?' I overheard one woman after a performance saying to her friend, 'That was great. It was exactly the right length. As Barry Humphries brilliantly named one of his shows, 'At Least you Can Say You've Seen It.'

I want the audience to respond with their hearts, not just their heads. Feelings are just as important as thoughts, and we deny our feelings far too often. Showing your feelings is seen as a sign of weakness, but suppressing your feelings doesn't make them go away. Expressing them is not a reason to be considered a sissy or a girl. It's shocking to me that films that deal with emotions are described as 'chick flicks'.

So does this work have value? Well, in my view, anything that reminds us that we share more similarities than differences with our fellow human beings has value. Anything that

comforts, enlightens, and challenges is valuable. Anything that is memorable because it provided us with solace or insight or empathy or temporarily transported us with delight has value. Anything that shows us that being beautiful, loud, rich and rude is not the only way to succeed, is valuable.

But as Clare Bowditch pointed out on ABC's recent Artscape discussion about the National Cultural Policy, artists don't even have a category to define them if they have to apply for the dole. The creative industries aren't considered a legitimate career. And virtually no employer is going to take you on, on the understanding that acting is your first love so it's ok for you to take time off to go to an audition, or do a three-day guest lead in a TV drama.

Incidentally, Virginia Trioli, the moderator on the Artscape special, addressed her first question to Clare Bowditch thus: 'As the practising artist on the panel', (obviously not as important as Wesley Enoch, Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company) 'when was the last time you sat at the keyboard to consider the significance of the National Cultural Policy?' Probably the question was meant to be facetious, but the implication was that as an artist, Clare was preoccupied with herself rather than the bigger picture. Not that she was a distinguished member of her profession and a Board member of a number of cultural institutions. The ABC graphic described her only as 'Musician'.

Further evidence of the underlying assumption that 'she's just an actor', occurred recently on the Conversation Hour on ABC local radio in Melbourne. Jon Faine, a former lawyer, was the host and his guests were the American actress Gillian Anderson, and Eva Gabrielsson, widow of the writer Steig Larsson, Anderson was in town on a publicity junket for the new Johnny English film. Despite her many award-winning appearances (Baftas, Golden Globes etc) on stage and in film, her only other credit to be acknowledged was the X Files. Eva Gabrielsson, who was Larsson's collaborator on the Millennium series of books including *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, was in Melbourne to promote her book *There are Things that I Want You to Know*, which outlines the struggles she is enduring to have Stieg's work, including unpublished manuscripts, controlled in the way he would have wanted. After listening to Gabrielsson's story about ongoing fights with Larsson's family and her grief over his death, Faine drew Anderson back into the conversation:

'Gillian, I'm watching you watching Eva and it's almost as if in your mind you're thinking, "If I was to play this woman how would I play her?"'

'Oh! gosh no,' replied Anderson. 'Not at all. I'm just sitting here with a great deal of respect and admiration for another female human being who's speaking the truth.'

Faine pressed his point.

'But do you also go through life looking at people and thinking, wow there's a great character for a story that needs to be told?'

'No, it hasn't crossed my mind.'

'OK, well, I'm reading too much into it, but that look of studied concentration on your face. I thought that, well, here's someone who is always on the lookout for a strong female character.'

'No, you can drop it. It's got nothing to do with that.'

'Well, you'd be very good at it, I'm sure.'

And when the extraordinary singer and actor Mandy Patinkin was in Australia a couple of years ago with his one-man show, he went on Sunrise, one of the few shows where professionals can perform live on Australian TV, and blew everyone out of the water with a live performance of a demanding Sondheim song at 8 am. Mel and Kochie came up to him at the end, thrilled to have one of the stars of the network's show, *Criminal Minds*, as a guest. "Wow, who knew you could sing? That's amazing! And you can act too!" they twittered to this internationally-renowned and respected Broadway star. Clearly no homework was considered necessary for just an actor....

There's also a misconception that if we're on telly or in movies that we're wealthy and therefore out of touch with "real" Australians —which almost any actor who only pursues the profession in Australia will attest couldn't be further from the truth. Recently on Q & A , a question was put about whether a carbon tax should be put in place now, considering the GFC. The headlines were full of stories about the sky falling in and people's super being eroded. I'd been reading about the famine in Somalia, and suggested that maybe we should thank our lucky stars that our economy was relatively healthy and donate \$2 each to Somalian relief—the price of half a cup of coffee. Predictably, the tweets flowed in about the rich has-been ex-Playschool presenter who had no right to an opinion and no understanding of what it was like to live in the real world.

And just a passing reference to the tired old chestnut that is so often trotted out—the arts gravy train. There is no arts gravy train. The vast majority of arts grant recipients make very little go a long way. Actors are photographed at opening nights and award shows and on red carpets, wearing clothes and jewellery that in most cases have to be given back the next day, and it's generally assumed that we lap up the attention. Most of us loathe it. We do it because it's in our contracts, if we're lucky enough to get one once or twice over many years of trying to earn a living. We're obligated to publicise our work, to do the interviews, to be photographed, but many of us would rather be at home with a book. It's the work that we love, not the publicity.

Heath Ledger is a typical example of a wonderful actor who found the concomitant publicity torturous. When we filmed Neil Armfield's *Candy*, Heath was relentlessly hounded while he was trying to work—photographers would leap out from behind trees, several times in the middle of a take on location, snapping him in his junkie character's wardrobe and make-up, and those photos were printed with captions describing him as dishevelled and untidy without any reference to the film. Questions were raised about his personal habits. He was followed to and from work every day. Meanwhile he was trying his best to portray yet another extraordinary character in the magnificent body of work he left us. He had no peace and was too gentle a soul to escape being stalked and affected by the press every single day of his too short life. I have suffered only a tiny fraction of what people like Heath endure, but I have experienced some of the humiliation, vilification, embarrassment and belittlement that the gutter press can cause through their scant regard for the truth. It hurts me and worse, it hurts my family.

The National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper sets out the proposition that

it is time for a new phase of policy development designed to bring the arts and creative industries into the mainstream of Australian life...based on an understanding that a creative nation produces a more inclusive society, and a more expressive and confident citizenry by encouraging our ability to express, describe and share our diverse experiences—with each other and the world.

Yet what happens if the expressive and confident citizenry is dominated by aggressive, abusive voices that engender intolerance, exclusion and ignorance? That can only lead to pain. What happens if the mainstream media largely ignore the economic, emotional and intellectual value of and contribution by the arts and actors, while lauding image-focused celebrities and personalities who are primarily in the public eye because of the way they look and how much money they earn? A cultural drought and the attendant despair of young people starved of true beauty and a sense of belonging. Junk food is bad for you, likewise junk culture. St Thomas Aquinas said: 'Happiness is to be found in reflection, not distraction. The ultimate felicity of man lies in the contemplation of truth.'

It is not true that I am just an actor or that you are just what your business card says. If we reduce ourselves and each other to a one word description we are denying the very essence

of our humanity. Artists are not a pesky luxury—they have the power to remind us how being truly alive, warts and all, really feels. I'd like to quote from a speech by the Scottish writer Andrew O'Hagan given at the opening of the Sydney Writers' Festival in 2007.

If we are truly alive, we have a duty to connect with the planet we inherited and that others will inherit in their turn. If we are truly alive, we have a role to play, every one of us, in the realization of peace and tolerance in our time. If we are truly alive, and we know what the imagination can do, it will not be in us to sit dormant whilst the planet and its inhabitants are ruined by unfettered commerce, or whilst thousands are killed by the pre-emptive and ruinous urges of Christian or Islamic fundamentalisms. If we are civilised, we imagine our way past political correction or selfish pride. We speak truth to power. We question our media. We spring to the defence of liberty. We take care of the world's resources. We listen to the past. We question our feelings of superiority. We teach our children the truth of our culture and what it has done and what it has failed to do. We keep a close watch on this heart of mine—and yours and yours and yours. And we never forget that we are moral beings, not machines. This is what we do if we are truly alive. This is what we do if we live close to our imaginations.

The arts carry human rights and wrongs better than anything. They may be entertaining or diverting, but their role in a civilized world is neither for distraction or diversion, but for engagement : every day is Sorry Day in the world of the arts and every day is Humanity Day and Contemplation Day and Tolerance Day and Get Your Finger Out of Your Arse Day. In the company of great actors and writers and artists we have what we need—for they help us to live our lives. This is what the arts do—they make experience and history survive, they make life itself survivable and most beautiful. They remind us that we are not alone. The arts are not a lifestyle—they are life.

Socrates said: 'Are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul?' Many people acknowledge that without an appreciation of, or exposure to' the arts, our lives are significantly reduced. More people need to be persuaded of that view. The arts—literature, theatre, art and music hold up a mirror and remind us that there is a way to be yourself that is beyond fashion, and a coherent personal way of looking at the world which would suggest that we have reason to rejoice in our existence, despite its many struggles.

We have a responsibility to pass the torch of human imagination to a new generation. Jonathon Rose in his remarkable book *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* quotes a cowman's reaction to being exposed to the world of great literature for the first time. He said: 'It was like coming up from the bottom of the ocean and seeing the universe for the first time.'

All of us, not just the privileged few, and all of our children deserve to have that experience.