

I want you to imagine one of the great West Australian theatrical disasters. A piece of theatre so bad that you cannot believe it is unfolding before your eyes. A piece of theatre that you have forked out big dollars to see. It is a full house and there is a palpable buzz going around the theatre before the curtain goes up. But what unfolds in front of you is truly, sublimely awful. The actors are totally inept, they are dropping lines left right and centre as well as colliding with the set and each other. Cues are not picked up, there are pauses you could drive convoys through, there is no tension, no drama, no conflict, and it only gets worse after interval. The set is amateurish, the costumes bland and clichéd the director is tearing his hair out and way past his creative prime anyway, even the great performers in the cast can't save it. They have been dragged down to the level of the under achievers on stage. In fact at the curtain call, the actors are soundly booed and heckled by the audience. Inexplicably though, despite unanimously bad reviews, audiences flock to see it. Houses do not wane during the entire season and the subscriber base stays loyal. In fact, it only gets stronger. What's more they are bringing their children to witness this uninspiring twaddle.

- What I have just described is the theatrical equivalent of the current West Coast Eagles and Fremantle Dockers football season. I have used this analogy to remind those of us in the artistic firmament of what we are competing against in this town and how vigilant, rigorous and bloody amazing we have to be in order to get people into our theatrical spaces. There is a place in the world where art and sport do co-exist happily side by side and do not cancel each other out but that place is called Melbourne.

In a recent article in the West, Stephen Bevis highlighted the artistic 'jewels in the crown' from this state. He prefaced the

article with, ‘now that our two national football teams are barely raising a pulse in the collective consciousness, it is time to focus on the cultural jewels in this town. Nice try Stephen. In fact, God bless you for trying. Splendid idea that one. That West Australians will suddenly start focusing on matters artistic just because their footy teams are crap. ‘Dad I don’t wanna see the Eagles get smashed again...it hurts too much. ‘Okay son...I think it’s time we took you to see some contemporary dance’ And when travellers from far flung places visit our sunny shores and open up a Lonely Planet guide, believe you me, they are not looking to find out when the next derby is on as hard as we may struggle to believe that. They want to find what *we* want to find when we travel overseas, where the cultural beating heart of a city is. What makes it tick? Where is the street art? Where are the museums dedicated to our writers and artists. Where are the great musos playing that our city is renowned for. And if we have to start having guided tours through Tim Winton’s kitchen while he eats his breakfast, then so be it.

Ask any Aussie tourist recently returned from London and Europe what they did over there. They will quite happily chirp on about the amount of money they forked out for theatre shows and art galleries. I have talked to West Australians whilst in London who weren’t even aware that we had a theatre scene in Perth. It’s as if the very act of getting on a plane to travel makes us immediately discover our cultured selves. It reminds me of when a young Bruce Beresford approached the then Arts Minister of the Menzies Govt. to fund a film he had written. The minister looked at him in absolute shock and horror. ‘We don’t make movies son. That’s what they do in America’. It makes you wonder what that particular Minister did all day long. There were a couple of questions posed to us to think about before this forum.

1: Who is an artist? And 2. What is a creative economy?

Michael Checkov, no relation to Anton, has my favourite quote about the arts: ‘There are two types of people in the Arts: Those who love the art in themselves and those who love themselves in the Arts’. Cruel but fair. In actual fact we need both types.

Because those who love themselves in the arts often get things done in a way that those who love the art in themselves, don't.

- What is a creative economy? What does it look like? A couple of years ago I attended the Berlin Film Festival. It
- was my second time in Berlin and this time I honestly thought I had arrived in some Bohemian, Utopian heaven. Surely this is where the last bohemians had all moved to. Cafes and bars were all full of Young people sitting around drinking wine, smoking, clutching copies of Sartre and Bukowski,, discussing politics and philosophy (or so my German interpreter informed me) and not *Facebook*, *MySpace*, Paris Hilton and reality T.V. It was Student life, artistic life, romanticised, idealized, unfolding before me.. It made me yearn, made me sick for a time that I imagined existed once in Australia, in W.A. I got angry. Who do I blame for this loss? The perennial sunshine? Strict Smoking laws? The Footy? America? Why don't we live in the mind and the intellect anymore? Then I went out and saw some theatre at the famed Volksbühne theatre and I am sad to report....it was incredibly disappointing. A Reality check. Theatre so pretentious as to be laughable. Given that I was basing my judgement on only one show It did however bring into sharp focus what we *do* have in W.A. Access to big stories, untapped stories, an indigenous culture here that keeps us earthed and real and challenged. Stories that those in Europe could only dream about. I suddenly realised that we have so much, that if we do have a culture, then it lives in the land and not in the smoke filled café and the wine bar. Which is just as well because we have so much of it...land that is.
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- Perth is one of the best places to create and develop new works. No question. There is great support and enthusiasm and plenty of money floating around...apparently, but more on that later. And there are some truly original artists here, some well hidden, some much more in your face.....all struggling for recognition. Whenever I work

- interstate or even overseas, some of the wittiest, most unique and downright talented people that I collude with are W.A ex – pats. But there is always a sense of resigned
- inevitability about the idea that we have lost our brightest and our best and will keep losing them to everywhere else. That’s just what happens over here. I agree it is important to spread your wings elsewhere. It is a rite of passage for every west Australian and it is a necessary Sabbatical. It opens our eyes, it gets us out of our comfort zone, it gives us edge. Those of us who make the long trek back home usually do so for the same reasons...family, someone died, someone got ill, someone got pregnant. Affordable house prices used to be right up there as a reason but sadly no more. Very few of us come home for artistic reasons though. We don’t make a conscious decision to return to try and make W.A a more exciting, vibrant, dynamic cultural space. And it deserves to be. Because everywhere deserves to have its voice heard. Whether its Oodnadatta, Wagin or Kununnarra. We can’t just accept that Sydney and Melb. Are the only two places worthy of a cultural life. We often hear the catch cry: ‘Yeah but Perth is a great place to raise your kids.’
  - I say, if a city doesn’t have a strong, beating cultural heart , if its not a place that inspires and encourages one to be brave, original and to push boundaries, then I wouldn’t *want* to raise my kids there’.
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  - Getting our artists to stay put is indeed a challenge but what would keep you here? Certainly when the theatrical life of a new play is only a two and a half week season, it is not much incentive. You certainly can’t make a living as a writer. Also, I have lost count of the amount of artists that have received resounding indifference toward their endeavours by the local constabulary, media, funding bodies etc and have then gone on to have national success over east and/or internationally only to be applauded and feted as returning heroes by those same indifferent people,

- as if they have always been dear to our hearts. There are other reasons for our huge diaspora. We all know that up
- until very recently, Perth was a big cheap country town in which to live. I knew of a plethora of artists residing elsewhere, that seriously considered moving back here and make a go of it. Now that it's a big, *expensive* country town *that* option is not so attractive anymore. It was easier to get work up when you also didn't have to worry about how you were going to survive as well. As in Sydney and Melb. Because then, the *work* was *all* you had to concentrate on.
- There are many reasons why its hard to have a national career from W.A but I'm going to throw out the least popular one, the thing that W.A artists *don't* like to hear. There are opportunities for W.A artists to have national careers but the best way to achieve that is to...'write, direct and produce exceptional, edgy and groundbreaking work and you *will* find a national audience, rather it will find you. The 'we are so isolated' cry doesn't hold water anymore. We are part of a global community now, we are all connected. However the only way to create world class work is to be *exposed* to world class work otherwise we tend to live in a bubble, legends in our lunch box. To be fearful of interstate artists coming over here is outdated and wrong. It's like John Butler saying: 'I don't want to jam with Eric Clapton coz that would be a bit confronting'.
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- I want to briefly talk about the issue that should be seared into every artist's mission statement with a branding iron. The issue of getting a younger demographic into mainstream theatre spaces. If there is any reason at all to be doing this thing called art then it is this. It should become our national obsession to work out why we have almost lost an entire generation and it should be our goal to get them back or die trying. This doesn't mean that we have to pander to them by presenting soulless multi media

- presentations full of (bells and whistles) at the expense of a good story, thinking 'that'll get 'em in'. Because that just
- reeks of a cynical marketing exercise. Gen Y and Gen Z love a good story as much as anyone. So by all means put the bells and whistles on stage, just attach it to a well structured, gripping narrative.
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  - And If kids start flocking to our new theatre (that's the proposed one in Northbridge) because they associate it with the James Dean like aura of the recently deceased star of the New Batman Film then bring It on. If they think, Dark Star, Middle Class theatre, Dark Star Middle Class theatre, Batman...middle class theatre...The Joker.....Middle Class theatre. Until it merges in their brain as one helluva of a funky good time and they cant separate the two concepts....bring it on! Personally, I have a few suggestions for names. The Dorothy Hewett theatre. Surely the greatest playwright we have ever produced and one of the most interesting, daunting women to have ever breathed air. The David Noombajarra theatre. Two time AFI winner and one of our greatest indigenous actors. Unfortunately in Perth the profile of local actors tends to sit somewhere just above garbage collector in terms of importance. But, both Dorothy and David have at least stepped on a stage. Or the Derbal Yerrigan theatre. The Noongar name of our great river. But.....perhaps it needs to be actually *on* the river to warrant that name.
  - Recently I was interviewed by senior journalist from the Australian, Paul Toohey about my thoughts on the Economic Boom in W.A. I replied that in years to come I would love my children to study the Boomtime in high school as that outrageously inventive and wacky time when all that great street art appeared in the city and all that mad, mind blowing, controversial theatre got people excited again and the live music scene exploded once more and dragged kids away from their pseudo online

- communities and any old stick in the mud who tried to shut down inner city live music venues because of the lack of noise restrictions was resoundingly told to ‘get a life’, move to the suburbs and the streets were alive with a sense of who we are and what we stood for in this decade, the Noughties.
- If however its main legacy to W.A is that we leave behind more over priced real estate, more oversized houses with lock up garages and flat screen T.V’s , more reasons to stay behind white picket fences and not invigorate our communities by spilling our social and civic life out on to the streets, and if we also only leave behind large holes in the ground in the middle of the desert, then it will not have been worth it.
  - Thank You