

ON THE WAY TO A BRAN NUE DAE

The 1980s were probably the most international decade in our history. Their driving force was the Labor federal government's deregulation of the banking system and the public services and its lowering of protection levels, on the principle that it was time Australia opened up to world markets.

Challenging new ideas from abroad were to invigorate our economic, social and cultural life as never before. Australia was to become the Clever Country, proclaimed the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, borrowing a slogan from Donald Horne, chairman of the Australia Council. Horne had seen a generation of public figures ignore the stinging attack on Australian mediocrity in his famous book *The Lucky Country*, and embrace the ironic title in confirmation of the very complacency and philistinism he



had attacked. But now the message had at last reached Canberra—the voice of the artist was to be heard in the land, and what better occasion than 1988, the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia?

The year 1988 was to have been a celebration of Australia's cultural and economic majority. In the event it became a display of consumerism in a decade of greed. By 1987 the world economy had become dangerously overheated and the paper-shuffling of our corporate raiders was demonstrating how intertwined and global were the economic structures. The stock market crash of October 1987 began a slide

which carried with it most of Australia's international high-fliers. The federal Treasurer, Paul Keating, had dreamed of a clever, cosmopolitan Australia which would profit from ideas from outside and from the talents assembled by our multicultural population, but the reality was an unedifying scramble for private wealth hoarded in offshore tax havens. By 1991 Australia had entered a severe recession.

The effect has been deleterious upon those arts which, under the cattle prod of the Australia Council and state government authorities, had moved closer and closer to business corporations, emulating them in style and relying upon their patronage. Major sponsors have withdrawn from the field and the institutions that seek the commendation of the sponsoring public have increasingly chosen conservative content and showy production values before any urgent need for self-expression. 'The right to fail', once the rallying cry of a vital young arts community, has been foregone in favour of balanced commercial judgement.

At the same time government support has become equally whimsical. Australia Council funding has kept pace with inflation but the Council's officers, under pressure, have become more and more legalistic in applying or withdrawing allocations, while the costs of performance have risen so sharply that federal money may account today for as little as 10 per cent of a company's turnover. State governments have been even more imponderable. In 1990-91 building societies, credit unions and state banks fell like dominos into bankruptcy. In 1991 the Elizabethan Theatre Trust collapsed while holding substantial tax-deductible donations to arts companies. The major performing arts centres, built in the last 20 years to celebrate the flowering of indigenous arts, are now so costly that they are likely to prove their memorials.

The film industry has suffered most directly from the lack of investment funds. The Film Finance Corporation finally got up in 1988 to support the financial viability of film projects; but the number of feature films is still depleted to the point that it is no longer possible to claim local production as a viable commercial proposition. Meanwhile, our actors, directors and cameramen continue to expand their reputations abroad.

And from New Zealand has come a salutary reminder of objectives in the low-budget 'sleeper' *An Angel at My Table*, the story of the writer Janet Frame, which beat the big-budget movies to a string of international awards in 1990.

One of the prime targets of the corporate high-fliers was the television companies. In 1990 two out of three major commercial networks were bankrupted. Local drama production suffered in the process, leaving the field to formula programs like *Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, *A Country Practice* and, more recently, *E Street*. (Our soaps, however, are making fortunes overseas and carrying with them a picture of Australia as legendary as *Crocodile Dundee*.) The exception has been the ABC which, though equally strapped for funds, has achieved notable success with quality drama like the series *GP* and in co-productions.

A positive development, however, has been proliferating private investment in commercial theatre. Until it died of attrition in the 1970s, J.C. Williamson's had dominated commercial production in Australia. It left a gap that other producers were quick to fill. The first crop is now superseded too, but others, with Cameron Macintosh and Helen Montagu leading the trend in global marketing, have engineered shows of an investment size and promotional scale which Australia has not seen before in live theatre. The initiative for small investors has come from New Zealand and New Zealanders now regularly come on package holidays for theatre, opera and musical performances.

In short, the push from the performance institutions has been overwhelmingly towards a corporate structure and financial independence.

This being so, the bicentenary, planned by the Australian Bicentennial Authority as a long-awaited opportunity for a wide variety of voices to be heard, was seen by the majority of performing arts companies as a chance not for genuine self-expression but to raise the profile. Writers, composers and choreographers of every kind were commissioned and their work scheduled even before it was conceived. But major works defining a recognisable Australia did not burst upon the scene on 26 January 1988 along with the fireworks. Looking back upon the contents of this book (*Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History*, Currency Press), for which seed funding was provided by the Australian Bicentennial Authority, one can see how unlikely such an expectation was.

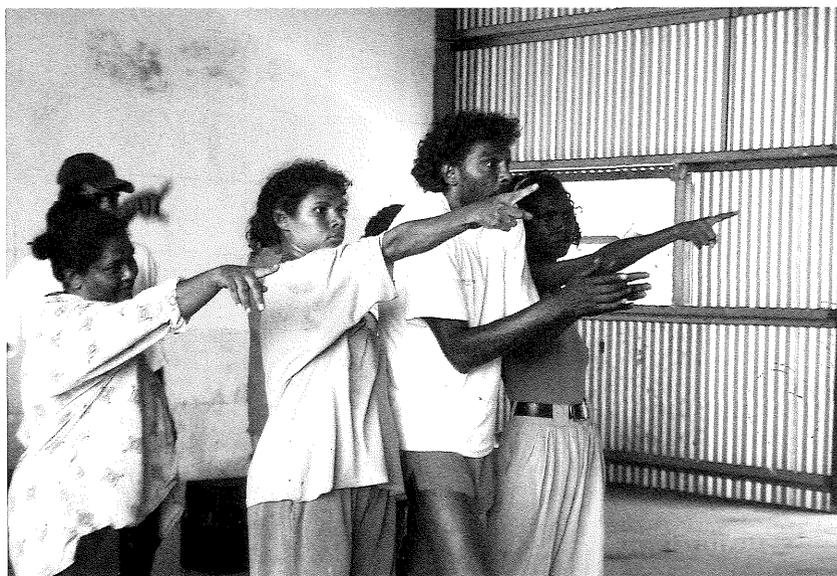
In the scheme of things 1988 was an aberration. For the arts it confirmed and confined activity within a framework that managements had constructed. The pattern of our performing arts remains unchanged, as does its capacity for self-renewal. A hundred years ago we were celebrating our official birthday with massed choirs and fireworks. Theatres were being refurbished to present sensation dramas, as the old Princess Theatre in Melbourne has been in 1990 for the current sensation, *Phantom of the Opera*. Sarah Bernhardt and the fashionable Russian pianist Mark Hambourg were filling the theatres. The Shakespearean actor George Rignold had abandoned other activities to become an actor-manager, as John Bell has done to launch his Bell Shakespeare Company in 1991. Melba's first return visit was promised, with the same excitement and political patronage as Joan Sutherland's farewell performance on national television in 1990. Singers, circus performers and variety artists were taking their acts on world circuits just as Barry Humphries, Kylie Minogue or Roger Woodward would do today. And behind it all were financial scandals and an economic depression.

It was an international culture then and it is still so today.

Opposite: 'Is you mah baby?' Tadpole (Stephen Albert) and Chorus, Kalumbura.



Rehearsing in Broome: Ernie Dingo—'So I moved up to her slowly.'



Rehearsing in Broome, 1990: Left to right—Sylvia Clarke, Michelle Torres, Ernie Dingo, Josie Lawford.

In 1991 the film star Mel Gibson and the British star Jeremy Irons both reiterated to the Australian media their complaint against Actors' Equity for retaining its protectionist policy against the importation of foreign actors and other unionists.

The film industry was an international one, they argued, and it was time the Australian industry grew up. It is not always easy to discriminate between the argument for employment and that for national identity, for Australia's history has been one of unilateral internationalism—of giving outsiders the right to enter our small country and help themselves.

The loudest argument in favour of protecting our film industry has been that of preserving our Australianness on screen—and with reason. But meanwhile our star actors and directors—Bruce Beresford, Bryan Brown, Judy Davis, Mel Gibson, Peter Weir—and younger actors like Nicole Kidman, continued to exploit the international circuit and to be claimed at home as sons and daughters of Australia.

For it is the creative individual, not the industry itself that is the lifeblood; and artists have a history of subverting rather than supporting official good intentions. The most successful subversion of the bicentenary—possibly its most lasting contribution—was a boycott of the celebrations by the Aboriginal community.

Through their ministrations, joined by a growing force of other ethnic minorities, the realisation began to spread that Australia had a significant population that did not identify with our British, convict-ridden heritage, nor find our history a subject for celebration; that we were, in fact, a multicultural society.

As the idea gained force, it received the imprimatur of government and anti-discrimination laws were passed. As one would expect, this began to make its impact upon the stage. The career of the playwright Jack Davis burgeoned, the black actor Ernie Dingo rose to stardom and the Middar Dance Company repeatedly toured the world.

The most successful play of 1988 was the adaptation of Xavier Herbert's 1938 epic indictment of miscegenation, *Capricornia*. The most popular local commercial show of the period was the satirical revue *Wogs Out of Work*. Other ethnic comedy began to raise its profile. Asian influences began to assert themselves in contemporary music, puppetry and dance companies like the One Extra Dance Company with its Malaysian choreographer Kai Tai Chan and the Melbourne Indian-led Bharatam Dance Company.

And while all this was happening in the cities, a new spirit of confidence was stirring in that melting pot of multicultural Broome. The inhabitants of this rundown relic of the pearling industry on Western Australia's north coast are a medley of all the nationalities attracted to it by the pearling—Indonesians, Malays, Chinese, Japanese, Europeans and Aborigines. Along with the traders came the missionaries, Irish, English and German; and more recently the tourist operators and the British building tycoon Lord McAlpine, to whom most of the town now owes its tenancy.

Music and dance have always been part of the colour of this remarkable place, so where better as the birthplace of Australia's first multicultural musical?

Bran Nue Dae by Jimmy Chi and his band Kuckles had its premiere at the 1990 Festival of Perth and has since toured nationally to great acclaim. The story is Chi's own, of a black boy expelled from the mission school who runs away to Perth and then finds his way home, accompanied by his lost Uncle Tadpole and two hippie tourists. The music, the work's major asset, is an eclectic mixture of every influence before and since the invention of the transistor radio—country music, revivalist hymns, Kurt Weill, Cole Porter, reggae... In the end Chi's characters—priest,

blacks and tourists—are all found to be related and find happiness in a multicoloured heaven.

History may prove that *Bran Nue Dae* was a watershed for our theatre as much as *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was in 1955. And it may prove to be the lasting legacy of the bicentennial year. For while the work itself gestated for a decade there is no question that the consciousness-raising of the late 1980s provided the climate and the confidence that, against all odds, brought it to the stage. Time will tell whether it has the power to change the direction of the mainstream of entertainment.

Generally, musical composition advanced in Australia in the 1980s, particularly in its ethnic component in folk and dance music, musicological groups like Sirocco, and the place that our pop music has made in the world music industry.

Our symphony orchestras have their composers in residence and our film industry has made a substantial contribution to the reputation of Australian music overseas. Asian, European and Aboriginal influences are widely noted in the music of composers like Peter Sculthorpe, Ann Boyd, Ross Edwards, Moya Henderson and Nigel Butterley but have not yet been absorbed into an unselfconscious expression of our ethnic origins like *Bran Nue Dae*.

More than any recent work, *Bran Nue Dae* has demonstrated to a wide audience that, while at the commercial level we remain an international market, we are at grass roots a cosmopolitan culture. Out of an eccentrically diverse collection of influences has come a work that is wholly original. What *Bran Nue Dae* gives us is a new and startling view of our country—a new way of assessing our self-confidence, our sophistication, our maturity.

Ever since the postwar years we have become accustomed to such terms as 'new Australian' and 'multicultural' to describe the influx of immigrants. But the very fact that officialdom had to invent such terms testified to the ambivalence with which the newcomers have been regarded by the older, British-oriented Australia, and to the uneasy muted debate that has surrounded our immigration policy. As for Aboriginal Australia, its continuing history of oppression and outright cruelty at the hands of the British-Australian establishment fills today's Australia with guilt, too often breeding further cruelty.

Each of our 'ethnic minorities', we piously believe, is enriching our culture, but exactly how is rarely discussed beyond mention of restaurants and the Special Broadcasting Service. Then into town comes *Bran Nue Dae*, the work of a Chinese-Aborigine and his equally diverse band, with a cast of mainly novice actors assuring us of the great Aboriginal scheme of kinship under which we all turn out to be related in the end. Nothing is baulked—but history is precisely that—a thing of the past. It grows into a celebration, a great paean of forgiveness and joy:

On the way to a bran nue dae
Everybody, everybody say.

Within the celebration is a very healthy Australian scepticism—Aboriginal Australians, of all people, have reason for it. But hope runs above it all—hope for all of us, for a new Australia. Perhaps, just perhaps, after all the argument about national identity, artistic integrity and arts funding, Broome is leading Australia towards a bran nue dae.

Katharine Brisbane

Excerpt from *Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History*, edited by Katharine Brisbane and published by Currency Press, 1991, \$75.
Photos courtesy Peter Bibby, Magabala Books.



Rehearsing in Broome, 1990: Choreographer Michael Leslie blocks in a movement with Vanessa Polena (Chorus).



'I feel someone wants to testify!' Kalumbura.