

The Australian

Leaving Asia out of the loop

- by: Alison Carroll and Carrillo Gantner
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Strange Fruit performance on the Sydney Opera House forecourt. Picture: Stephen Cooper

Source: *The Australian*



Regular Asia visitors Legs on the Wall perform *My Bicycle Loves You* at the Sydney Theatre last year. Picture: Bob Barker

Source: *The Australian*



Leigh Warren and Dancers in last year's OzAsia Festival.

Source: Supplied

SOME argue that when we talk of exporting Australian arts to Asia, we ought to be talking only of their role in soft diplomacy: that is, assisting Australia's political and economic agenda.

The implication is that the arts in Asia should not be valued on their own terms.

Enterprising small companies such as Strangefruit, Legs on the Wall and Stalker have toured across Asia, particularly to Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and China. Of the major Australian performing arts companies, the Australian Ballet, has toured in Asia more than any. Australian symphony and chamber orchestras have also toured to major Asian cities over the past 20 years.

Graeme Murphy and the Sydney Dance Company toured to China during his directorship and more recently he has choreographed a new work, *Mulan*, with a company of dancers in Shanghai.

In 2007 the Adelaide Festival Centre under Douglas Gautier spearheaded an annual two-week Asian performing arts festival, OzAsia.

But while there are successes, our record of active engagement with Asia is still mixed. There are many for whom Asia still remains a blank. While a focus on financial viability may be inevitable in choosing where to tour and perform, it comes at a cost, especially the loss of access to, and creative engagement with, many dynamic and exciting cultures of Asia, including India and Indonesia. Both countries are of high strategic importance to Australia, both have wonderfully rich and diverse cultures, so it is Australia's loss to pull back from cultural engagement with them.

The years 1991 to 1997-98 were the high watermark for Australia Council funding in the performing arts to Asia. This was followed by a severe decrease to 2000-02 and then fluctuations as low as 7 per cent and high as 40 per cent, but mostly in the 10-30 per cent range. We are not aware of any instruction from Canberra nor of any formal change in policy from the council's own 1990-91 decision for 50 per cent of its international funding to go to Asia, yet its numbers indicate how signals from Canberra influenced outcomes.

We do not believe that any Australian government of the past two decades has been "anti-Asia". On the contrary, in this period our growing economic dependence on the region has highlighted Asia in Australia's consciousness. It is fair to say, however, that our governments have failed to appreciate the benefits of the kind of wider and deeper engagement that comes from cultural and broad people-to-people links.

When talking about Asia, governments think and talk in strategic and economic terms. In a similar way, Australian business thinking tends to be transactional and short term. There is pitifully little recognition of the long-term strategic or even financial benefits of building broadly based relationships through culture, education and other value-based programs if an immediate dollar value is not on the table.

Since Paul Keating was prime minister there has been no political leadership endorsing broad cultural links with Asia,

and government agencies, as well as the majority of people in the cultural and educational sector, have responded accordingly. The attitude in the arts would seem to be: the dollars are not there, so why should we be? It is time for the sector itself to promote change and generate leadership in this field.

Various arts ministers have come and gone, none with any particular interest in Asia. The strongest supporter was Alexander Downer when he was minister for foreign affairs. Near the end of the Coalition's 11-year incumbency, in response to sustained lobbying and in partnership with arts minister Rod Kemp, it announced new support of \$20 million over four years to take Australia's arts to the world and especially Asia.

However, the incoming Labor government then imposed a 2 per cent efficiency dividend on all federal departments. What was among the first money that DFAT surrendered? This hard-won funding for the arts. Why? Probably because it was too closely identified with Downer. DFAT had never placed a high value on cultural exchange, and perhaps it thought that, as a new program, no one would notice its untimely demise.

We have had meetings with arts ministers of both sides in the attempt to further the Asia cause, but with little success, apart from the short life of Downer's \$20m, of which we believe less than \$500,000 had been committed before the program was axed.

It cannot be that ministers are unaware of the dynamic growth and change across the region. Why, then, is it so difficult to imagine how engaging with Asian cultural markets might also inject a beneficial new dynamism into the Australian cultural sector?

Is it such a low priority because politicians think there are no votes in the arts, let alone in artistic engagement with Asia? Or is it because the arts community is not interested in using its potentially powerful voice to tell them otherwise?

Now, under federal Arts Minister Simon Crean, we have the promise of a new national cultural policy, the first in 16 years.

Interestingly, his discussion paper circulated last year to provoke the arts industry's response did not mention Asia once in connection with the arts. We hope that when the policy is released it will rectify this omission.

Addressing our 10-point plan -- see below -- would be a good starting point. It would also be productive to link this enriched cultural policy into this same government's white paper on Australia's engagement with the Asian region. There are serious problems in the field of Australia's cultural engagement with Asia. We have talked and written about these matters for 25 years yet little has changed.

We need action -- action backed with sticks and carrots -- or we shall continue to lose out in so many ways detrimental to our collective and creative interests.

This is an edited extract from Platform Papers No 31, Finding a Place on the Asian Stage, by Alison Carroll and Carrillo Gantner, to be launched by Kevin Rudd in Melbourne today (Currency House, \$14.95). Carroll was founding director of Asialink Arts. Gantner is president of the Melbourne Festival and chairman of Sidney Myer Fund

Ten ways to boost this country's arts partnerships with Asia

1. Of the Australia Council and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's cultural relations budget, 60 per cent of international funding be allocated for Asian engagement during the next 10 years. The Australia Council's funding for Asia is now about 20 per cent.
2. We propose expending this 60 per cent as follows: China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan): 20-30 per cent; Japan and Korea: 20-25 per cent; India: 15-20 per cent; Indonesia: 15-20 per cent; Balance of southeast Asia: 15-20 per cent.
3. Creative collaborations between Australian artists in the region supported to develop new projects and present them to audiences in participating countries and beyond. This should be established as a new program with new funding, a minimum of \$3 million a year.
4. Australian cultural centres should be established in key places, especially in priority countries and where existing local infrastructure is minimal. Start with India and Indonesia.
5. A program of support from AusAID established to bring arts managers and students to Australia from developing countries to participate in tertiary arts management.

6. Australian-based cultural directors drawn from the ranks of professional arts and cultural managers be reappointed to key Australian diplomatic posts.
 7. Big companies such as the Australian Ballet and symphony orchestras should be included in cultural promotional programs overseas only if they have already built long-term creative relationships in the host country, and if they are touring a repertoire that is distinctively Australian. Taking 100 Australian musicians to Shanghai to give concerts of Mahler and Mozart is largely a waste of money and effort.
 8. Within three years, all related federal government funding should be brought together into one new body, named here as the Australian International Cultural Agency, although following the Goethe Institute's example, the name of an Australian cultural icon might equally be used.
 9. As a prerequisite for funding, all tertiary education programs for arts practitioners must include at least 20 per cent Asian content in their core curriculums, including Asian histories, cultures and art forms, as well as practical sessions with visiting Asian artists and teachers.
 10. A first step towards establishing a new Australian International Cultural Agency is for the government to initiate a review into the delivery of our overseas cultural engagement and especially with Asia.
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