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FINDING A PLACE ON THE ASIAN STAGE

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Introduction

Meeting for their 'arts day' at PricewaterhouseCoopers, the suited, confident, articulate young hotshots of Asialink's annual Leadership Program look up from their chatter to evaluate the newcomer: a casually dressed man, mild of appearance, almost self-effacing of manner who has come to talk to them about his art. Quietly he starts, describing his experience as a drummer going to Korea to meet and study with the shaman musician, called in his country 'Intangible Asset Number 82'. Then the visitor turns on a small recording machine to let the group hear the results. His quietness enhances the sound of his music and the power of his story. The group is spellbound and silent, aware of the significance of such a cultural transformation to the musician, Simon Barker, and of their privilege in being brought into an understanding of it. They are moved by the human passion behind it all—a few even moved to tears.

This paper looks at the last twenty years of Australian cultural engagement with Asia, through the prism of the performing arts. It reviews some modest achievements and important failures, and then suggests a forward path to maximise the opportunities that will benefit Australia through stronger cultural relations across the Asian region. In particular, we write about the roles and funding of the Australia Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

for international cultural engagement, and how the changing face of Australian Federal politics has had a significant influence on levels of funding for the Asian agenda.

Should we care about our cultural engagement with the Asian region? Does this question even need putting in 2012? We believe the answer to both questions is a decisive 'yes'. Today most thinking Australians who consider these things would almost certainly share our response to the first question. Sadly, on the evidence, it is clear that Australia has not yet answered the second.

The most cogent reason why we should care is that Asia is a treasure chest of cultural richness and diversity on our very doorstep. Since Asia is so far away from most other countries whose culture is largely based on Western traditions and values, this is Australia's special opportunity. We don't want to diminish our Western heritage but rather to enrich it, to embroider our multi-hued cloak with new colours and textures. The more prosaic reason is that it is in our economic and strategic self-interest to build a broader base for our relationship with the dynamic economies of Asia. Simply put, Australian jobs and security depend on the health of these relationships, a reality made even more apparent by the current Euro-American meltdown. Such relationships need to be built on more than the profit-driven, transactional nature of commerce or the diplomatic balancing acts of political calculation, important as these are. It is the 'people-to-people' links that give a relationship resilience, depth and understanding, and allow it to weather the inevitable and usually unpredictable setbacks of business and politics. Cultural engagement is at the heart of this.

To build strong cultural links with Asia we need to be proactive. It is not easy for people in Asia to access our arts by themselves: the distance to Australia is long and Australia itself is huge. Currently, with a strong Australian dollar, it is also more expensive. And what reason do people from Asia have to search out our arts when we can be perceived as having a largely derivative culture, when from a distance it appears that we are little more than a quarry or an unfenced zoo? We have to take the initiative, to invite and encourage, to knock on doors and 'be out there'. We are fortunate that we have the capacity to do so: a robust economy and a vibrant arts sector strongly supported by government. Yes, it is.

In considering these issues the two authors of this paper bring different perspectives: Carrillo Gantner has had a long association with Asia, and especially with China and Japan, as an actor, theatre manager, diplomat and producer. Alison Carroll has had an equally rich experience of the region, largely in the visual arts. She was founding director of Asialink Arts 1991–2010, which included responsibility for developing the Asialink Residency Program. This began with the visual arts and expanded to the performing arts, literature and arts management. During her tenure, the Asialink Arts program included the initiation and management of more than seventy exhibitions, dance and other performance exchanges.

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Why should we engage with Asian cultures?

The best answer to this lies in the richness and diversity of Asian performance, working with arts practitioners of another culture, and learning to understand their performance style and traditions, which in turn gives us an individual insight into how humans model and resolve their world. There is so much we can learn from Asia to enrich our own, largely Western derived, practices.

Some people argue that when we talk of exporting Australian arts to Asia, that we ought only to be talking 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 and that Asia as an arts destination has no cogency. At its extreme, this attitude could be seen as racist. When such people want a project to go to Paris, do they say it is because of 'soft-diplomacy'? No, they want it there because French culture is valued per se. The word racist might be considered too tough; perhaps 'ignorant' is better. It is an ignorance that many Australians and, sadly, not least Australians working in the arts, commonly share. It is sobering for us to learn how few of those in

leadership positions across the arts in Australia have any in-depth knowledge, let alone experience of the arts in Asia, let alone cultural fluency in any one Asian culture, let alone competency in any Asian language.

Let us consider what we have to learn from Asian cultures. Traditionally in the performance forms of most Asian countries the focus is on the refined movement of the performer, interpretation being the aspect for both audience and performer to anticipate, judge and enjoy. The key person is the actor who, after years of training of his (and it was always 'his' in the past) mind and body, initiates the action with few props and often no words. Time is not fixed, the ancient story is known and only part of it usually performed at one time. The audience can come and go.

The practice that comes closest to this in Australia is traditional Indigenous performance, with its respect for the learning of the elders, the part-performance of stories well known to the audience, the intensity of the gesture, the paucity of words and props, the merging of roles, and the important knowledge that these stories reflect.

If we let go of the Western narrative form, we can release ourselves into a metaphysical experience more akin to those of Asian cultures. We learn that the rational does not have to rule. Edward Said in his great work *Orientalism* describes how during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at the height of Western hegemony, the colonial impulse was to reinforce this emphasis on the rational and scorn the nuances of other levels of expression, thinking and performance.[i] We are still in the thrall of this attitude. Immersion in the arts of Asia leads us towards the discovery of new ways of thinking, new

forms of performance and new perceptions of our own humanity.

Noh theatre works on a very distinctive level of thought and expression, slowly building layers of meaning beyond the verbal interchange intrinsic to Western drama. Sitting in the Noh theatre, the audience is given time to change their mode of breathing and thinking: a kind of meditation can take over. The deeper our knowledge and appreciation of the form, the deeper our emotional response.

Like time, space is not measured in the same way. Spaces between objects are as important as the objects themselves. In Japanese gardens, the spaces between rocks give significance to the rocks themselves. In North Asian painting, the artists leave spaces into which the viewer steps to add their own active contemplation, a process through which the viewer becomes intimately involved in the work. Asian theatrical space is also used differently and understanding this enhances our experience. Think of the empty Beijing Opera stage on which walking in a simple circle can describe a long journey; or one small table and chair a palace.

Styles of performance also differ from Western styles. Apart from opera, where many performance strands are woven together, Western performance has developed separate traditions—spoken drama, classical dance, modern dance, puppetry and so on. Asian performing arts tend to blend these elements across such boundaries: live actors and shadow puppets together, with symbolic gesture, colour, costumes and properties; sung theatre forms with masks and stylized movement; and folk art blending many other forms. James R. Brandon writes that

Western performance is driven by content, Asian by rhythm, tone, volume, mass, colour, intensity and speed.[ii] Even in the use of the body, Asian performers work with a different intent: indigenous dance forms for the most part push down towards the earth, keeping the upper body firm and controlled. In Western classical ballet, the body aims at lightness, stretching the arms upward, lifting the heels and extending the body's reach upward. An artist who experiences this difference within the body adds a new dimension to their expressive vocabulary.

Asian music also offers difference: different scales and rhythmic structures. Yet despite these differences, music is a natural bridge and is so far the most active form in the exchange of performing arts with Asia. This is, no doubt, because music is not language-based, it literally creates harmony, and can travel economically. For all these reasons, cross-cultural work in music can more readily be assayed than other forms. Peter Sculthorpe was a pioneer in this, blending instruments from the Balinese gamelan into his compositions; the Australian Art Orchestra is another, collaborating with Indian musicians. Asia is so close to us and so many elements of Asian performance are so enticingly different and interesting. Why then has it taken the mainstream of the Australian arts so long to recognise the creative opportunities that beckon here?

Aubrey Mellor, former director of Playbox, then of NIDA; now senior fellow, LaSalle College of the Arts Singapore, had this to say to the authors about our arts sector:

On a recent return to Sydney, it depressed me to see no sign that we are in Asia, at least not in the performing arts. It worries me that Australia, in such a great position to access both traditional and contemporary Asian arts, is missing out on a giant palette of stimulus and innovation; and, in theatre, seems stuck with a repertoire that has not changed much since the days of the Old Tote. International leaders like Lepage, Mnouchkine and Robert Wilson have long been tapping Asia for inspiration, and this is enriching their work. It is sad that the rest of the world is falling over itself to access Asia, and yet our theatre leaders seem to know nothing of these extraordinary achievements. Unlike Europe and the United States, Australia has not yet seen a single professional production of any of the plays or adaptations by the many Asian Nobel Prize winners, including Kanzaboro Oe, Gao Xing Jian, Yasunari Kawabata, Rabindranath Tagore and their equals, Kunio Kishida, Cao Yu and Abe Kobo. Despite his regular productions in London, we have never seen the work of acclaimed director Yukio Ninagawa and only rarely seen that of Tadashi Suzuki. We remain ignorant of the great theatre movements of Japan and classic writers such Zeami and Chikamatsu and the innovators from the 1980s onwards, including Yoji Sakate, Kara Juro, Saito Ren, Noda Hideki and Keishi Kagatsuka. And equally ignorant of the inspiring aesthetics of Ota Shogo, Hirata Oriza, and Danny Yung of Zuni Icosahedron. Despite the wonderful work of Satoh Makoto and Wada Yoshio, who have laboured hard and long to bring Australian plays to Japan in both readings and full productions, apart from Playbox we have never offered the courtesy of reciprocity. I am delighted that Meng Jing Hui's production of Rhinoceros in Love *was recently well received in three Australian cities, but that production is now almost twelve*

years old. We must make up for lost time, and should be collaborating regularly with a range of Asian companies and artists; not only seeking new horizons in art, but also helping to position our nation in other ways.

But Australians can and do offer reciprocity. Our own cultural diversity allows us to draw on the widest palette: Indigenous, South American, Eastern European and African cultural forms enrich the Western European base. And Australia's new mix of peoples and experiences has freed us from the constraints of some older cultures. History has its drawbacks. Milanese street engineers have a saying: 'How can we change the drains designed by Leonardo da Vinci?' Australians are not bound by the rigidities of such ancient traditions. This is a great liberating dimension of Australian culture. We see this again and again with expatriate Asian artists who say that they can experiment here as they could not have done in their home country. In China, the traditional learning method for artists is by repeated copying of the work of the masters. In Australia, artists are encouraged to find their own modes of expression, their signature 'voice'. Collaborating artists can find ways to combine these two approaches so that we achieve the best of both technique and originality.

Here are some outstanding examples of Australian/Asian co-production and exchange:

The Theft of Sita

Nigel Jamieson was director of this large-scale production which followed an episode in the Ramayana about the abduction of Sita, wife of Lord Rama, which also alludes to the stealing from the poor by the rich in Indonesia.

Jamieson chose to use as narrator a humorous bumpkin who is a familiar figure in Asian theatre. The main visual element was provided by a Balinese wayang master, with giant puppets of great contemporary relevance and invention. Central to the performance was the music by both Indonesian gamelan masters and the Australian Art Orchestra. It was a fantastical mix: big, loud, funny, human and full of contemporary meaning, taking the audience into its grasp and rolling them around in its huge hands. It was a great success at the Adelaide and Melbourne Arts Festivals and then toured internationally.

Grant Nundirribala

Grant Nundirribala is a leading musician from Yilila in Arnhem Land. He went to Flores in Nusa Tenggara Timur, Eastern Indonesia (NTT), to be part of an Asialink project with musicians there and worked with the local people exchanging musical knowledge and technique. The outcome was a fine CD of the music they composed in Flores, and performances at the 2008 Darwin Festival, where it was voted one of the best events of the year. For Grant, a senior Aboriginal artist, his time in Flores was particularly meaningful to him, in part, he said, because it was the first time, by working with people outside his own group, that he became a leader. Intercultural arts projects can open all sorts of opportunities.

Ria Soemardjo

Ria Soemardjo, who lives in Melbourne, is the daughter of a Javanese father whose ancestors were musicians at the courts of Central Java where the highest flowering of Javanese culture was to be found. She is a small and beautiful woman who sings the songs of her ancestors, unaccompanied, in Old Javanese. All who hear her are entranced by the sound, aware of being in the presence of something very special, offering access to ancient Javanese

culture from someone who has direct familial links to it. Ria opened the 2008 Asialink Forum on Indonesian Culture with her songs, and her audience felt the importance and beauty of her ancient culture in a way that ten thousand words could not convey.

The Chronicle of Macbeth

In 1988 Japanese theatre director Suzuki Tadashi brought his Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) to Sydney with his version of Euripides' The Trojan Women *as part of the Bicentennial celebrations. While here, Carrillo introduced SCOT to the Melbourne Festival to which they returned in 1990 with a production of* The Bacchae. *He also invited Suzuki to direct a production in Australia and he agreed to direct for Playbox on condition the actors were adequately prepared in his training techniques. These share similarities and rigours with training for the Kabuki theatre: physical strength is built up through a variety of 'stomping' exercises that connect the lower body to the earth, the source of power, channelled through the actor. The image often quoted is of a 747 in the moment before rolling down the runway, when the engines are at full thrust but the plane is not moving; but the responsibility for supplying 'meaning' belongs with the audience.*

Several Australian actors had already discovered this work in Japan. A further group were sent to Toga to train with SCOT, and the following year Playbox brought these actors and several leading SCOT members to Melbourne for an extended workshop. From this coterie of actors Suzuki then cast his own adaptation of the Shakespearean classic, The Chronicle of Macbeth. *After a rehearsal period that tested everyone beyond their physical and cultural comfort zones, the production opened at the 1992 Adelaide Festival. It then returned for a season at the Malthouse, Melbourne, and Theatre Royal, Hobart; and subsequently the Mitsui Festival in*

Tokyo. Demanding rehearsals continued on a daily basis during the tour, and, as the cast grew stronger and more confident, so did the production. Many of the actors went on to appear in the Playbox production of King Lear, *the form of which owed much to Suzuki. This production also toured to Japan and then to Korea where it was well received. Some of the actors continued to adapt their Suzuki work into their performance technique or into the work of their own companies, including Not Yet It's Difficult in Melbourne and Frank in Brisbane.*

2

People and partnership

We move now to give some recent history of Australia's engagement, but first a note on a key principle that underpins all that follows: the critical ingredients for international exchanges in the arts are people and partnership. Together these generate the creative product. If real partnership among the parties on both sides is built from the beginning of an exchange program, surprising results ensue. Partnerships are essential in this work so that everyone has a stake in the artistic outcome. Partnership means that new ideas and new works can be forged together, giving the greatest gift to all involved. Partnership also

means that administration and costs can be shared, reducing one of the perceived barriers to engagement. Partnerships built on respect for each partner's creative and administrative contribution mean problems can be foreseen and overcome. In art as in life, this is the only way we can grow in a global world.

Partnerships are important everywhere. In Asia, where we experience cultural difference and where our expectations will be challenged, personal relationships are *even more* essential to building trust and a desire to move forward together.

The independent artist

Artists speak a common language of the heart and mind; they are motivated by their creative passions, rather than by profit or diplomatic niceties. Performing artists in particular are used to working closely with a team: they love to engage with other people and build strong relationships. Asialink's Residency Program lives on the spirit, energy and curiosity of individual Australian artists who are willing to open themselves to intercultural engagement with their peers in the region. Frequently these residencies have changed lives and artistic practice.

For many Australian artists of Asian background an involvement with the land of their ancestors is especially meaningful and rewarding. Kym Purling was the first Vietnamese orphan to come to Australia after the end of the Vietnam War. Years later he returned to the land of his birth as a jazz musician, and reported on a concert in Ho Chi Minh City where the army generals who might once have clapped his family in gaol, now clapped along to his music. Rendra Freestone, half Indonesian, returned to Sumatra to make new music which he then developed back in Australia. Chinese *sheng* player Wang

Zheng Ting came to Australia as a young man, completed his PhD in musicology, formed the Australian Chinese Music Ensemble to play in festivals around this country, and more recently returned to China to perform his own compositions on the *sheng* with major Chinese ensembles.

Many Australian performing artists have devoted much of their professional careers to involvement with the arts of Asia. Some artists of note in this vein include Matt Crosby, Yumi Umiumare, Tess de Quincey, Sally Sussman, Ian Pidd, Robert Draffin, Peter Wilson, David Pledger, Tony Yap and Andrish Saint Claire. Others, like musician Paul Grabowsky and director Nigel Jamieson, have made it an important part of their professional lives. In recent years the Melbourne International Comedy Festival has sent its touring Roadshow to Singapore and Hong Kong and presented occasional Japanese and Chinese comic artists at their own festival. Many more Australian singers and dancers tour Asian cities regularly and some have developed a brand name in the region. Others have joined touring musical comedy or revue, without their national origins being recognised.

Presenters and managers like Rosemary Hinde, Marguerite Pepper, Barry Plews and Andrew Ross have been working in and with Asian companies over long periods, often in difficult times and difficult circumstances. The first to bring Indian classical music to Australia was Clifford Hocking (1931–2006), the entrepreneur who was also Playbox's partner in the early tours of Chinese performing troupes. Another outstanding Australian creative figure was Roger Rynd (1950–2010). He was born in Singapore, grew up in Australia and travelled the Pacific extensively. In Townsville he formed the REM theatre with his partner Catherine Pease and in

1997 settled in Seoul after receiving an Asialink residency. There he became in turn founding artistic director of the LATT children's theatre, wrote an important body of plays about the Pacific, and became the first foreign director of the Seoul Arts Festival. Before his death he was made an honorary Korean citizen for his services to the performing arts

Performance companies

In the last two decades Australia has become known for its strength in various physical theatre forms. Enterprising small companies such as Strangefruit, Legs on the Wall and Stalker have toured to venues and festivals across Asia, but particularly to Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and more recently China. Of the major Australian performing arts companies the Australian Ballet has toured in Asia more than any. Sometimes it has been featured in the special country promotions that have attracted substantial federal government support. Australian symphony and chamber orchestras have also toured to major Asian cities over the last 20 years. They include the Tasmanian Symphony in the early 1990s to Indonesia, and in more recent years the Western Australian Symphony, the Melbourne Symphony and Sydney Symphony Orchestras to China. Graham 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.

Arts centres and festivals

In 2007 the Adelaide Festival Centre under CEO Douglas Gautier spearheaded an annual two-week Asian performing arts festival, *OzAsia*. Artists from India, China,

Vietnam and Japan have been featured. What makes it successful is not only the variety of programming and art forms, but the whole-of-organisation support, which each year builds the level of government and private funding. To achieve this it closely involves the local Asian communities, supports education programs and seminars, and even offers menus from the represented regions in the Centre's food outlets. The *OzAsia Festival* stands alone now, but its ancestry includes Christopher Hunt's Asian-focussed programming in his 1994 Adelaide Festival. It is a welcome sign of progress that the hostile reception it then received has today given way to greater understanding.

The Art Centre Melbourne has initiated the Kenneth Myer Asian Theatre Series as an important component of its programming. This brings high-quality performing arts companies from across Asia to Victoria and beyond, and leading individual artists from Asia to work with their Australian counterparts. Virginia Hyam, Head of Contemporary Culture at the Sydney Opera House until last year, included Asian material, some of it risky commissions in her adventurous non-genre based studio programs, and worked closely with local Asian communities. The Powerhouse in Brisbane under Andrew Ross has been an important pioneer in programming Indonesian performing arts, sometimes in special festivals that have brought Indonesian and other Asian performances to Brisbane audiences. Other Australian festival directors with an international outlook have included Asian product in their Festival programming. Robyn Archer, Jonathan Mills, Noel Staunton, Lindy Hume and Brett Sheehy come to mind, although most still seem more comfortable in the better-known corridors and green rooms of Europe and North America. Mills,

now artistic director of the Edinburgh Festival, included extensive Asian programming in his 2011 Edinburgh Festival—a revelation for many of its audiences.

Major organisations, including the capital city arts centres and festivals, have enough public funding to support new projects and they should be the leaders in this field. It is a pity, therefore, that their record in the Asian arts is not better than it is. Under the leadership of CEO Sue Nattrass, Melbourne's Arts Centre initiated the Association of Asia Pacific Performing Arts Centres at a meeting in Melbourne in 1994. It would be fair to say, however, that since then the Australian arts centres have not capitalised on this by utilising the network to generate programming or build other exchange opportunities. In Singapore an Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals was inaugurated in 2004 to promote exchange among major regional festivals. The first partners were from Shanghai, Jakarta, Singapore and Hong Kong. By June 2011 there were 19 full members of which the only Australian member was the Melbourne Festival, which joined this year. In addition, the *OzAsia Festival* and the University of South Australia's Arts Management Course are among the 14 associate members. It is yet to be seen whether the Australian members will work these networks vigorously to increase the range of product from Asia, the number of co-productions with Asian counterparts, or the exchange of personnel for training.

Community groups

Organisations at the grassroots community level have made strong linkages with Asian immigrant groups. Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) and the Footscray Community Arts Centre are two shining examples. Occasionally these linkages shift gear into the

mainstream, as with MAV's association with the ABC's *Music Deli* program and the Arts Centre's with *Mix It Up*. Most Asian communities in Australian capital cities are also involved in presenting festivals with performing arts programs supported by local government, sometimes with visiting artists and companies underwritten by governments in the countries of origin.

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As indicated, over the last ten to 15 years, significant parts of the performing arts sector in Australia have developed stronger and more mature links. Asian countries themselves have developed greatly improved arts infrastructure and increased their own interest in cultural exchange in their own region, which sometimes includes Australia. This represents an important change from their more Eurocentric focus of the earlier post-war period. Festivals across the Asian region now routinely include a high level of content from other Asian countries. Australia is not yet generally considered to be 'Asian' but has come to be thought of by some as an important regional player with a vibrant cultural scene.

But while there are successes, our record of active engagement with Asia is still very mixed. Many individuals and organisations have found creative stimulus in this field and through this work have built reputations for leadership, found new audiences and generated new sponsors. There are, however, many more for whom Asia still remains a complete blank. In this context, it is important to recognise that occasional performance tours by our leading companies and orchestras cannot be the way to maximise the benefits of exchange unless they program significant Australian repertoire and actively

engage in local creative partnerships. Exchanges of artistic personnel and programs that reflect the strengths and creative expression of their place of origin have a much better chance of leaving a lasting impact than programs that are perceived to reflect a derivative European style or content, no matter how good the company's reputation at home. Such programs usually sink without trace in the crowded and star-studded calendar of major Asian capitals, though they may provide bragging rights back in Australia.

Some of the lessons drawn from those who do work with Asia are clear: the importance of reciprocity in enhancing opportunities and benefits; the commitment to developing real partnerships; the exciting and often unpredictable outcomes of shared creative inputs across cultural difference; the virtue of playing to national strengths and unique characteristics; and the value of long-term commitments in order to build real legacies.

Carrillo Gantner writes:

> *From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, we at Playbox engaged very successfully with Asia: at the time we were virtually alone in this focus. With Clifford Hocking and other partners we toured major Asian companies around Australia—from China the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe, Jiangsu Peking Opera Company, and Fujian and Hunan puppet companies; from Japan the Kanze Noh Theatre and Suzuki Company of Toga and the Yakshagana Puppet Theatre from India. We exchanged directors and plays with China: Jack Hibberd's* A Stretch of The Imagination *with Sha Ye Xin's* The Imposter; *and whole productions with Japan: John Romeril's* The Floating World *with Tanaka Chikao's* The Head Of Mary. *We toured our productions to China, Japan, Korea*

and Malaysia: Daniel Keene's puppet play Cho Cho San, The Chronicle of Macbeth *and* King Lear. *We undertook significant work partnering with Suzuki Tadashi sending our actors to train with his company in Japan and bringing him to Australia to direct for Playbox.*

We ran an annual Asian playwriting competition for Anglo-Australian and Asian-Australian writers, and we produced many plays by Australians on Asian themes: Yamashita, Madame Mao, The Emperor Regrets, General Macarthur In Australia, Sex Diary Of An Infidel. *We helped other playwrights whose work we had premiered to have their plays translated and produced in Asia: Hannie Rayson's* Hotel Sorrento *in Japan, Joanna Murray-Smith's* Love Child *in Korea. We brought Chinese acrobatic teachers to work with young Australians on the disciplines and skills of their art. This 1983 Nanjing Project has had a profound influence on the development of acrobatics, physical theatre and circus arts in Australia.*

We achieved these things with a clear sense of purpose and whole-of-organisation focus: by building networks in Asia and partnerships in Australia, by promoting reciprocity, making bold choices and taking huge risks: 'making the improbable inevitable', as our brochure proclaimed. If the little Playbox Theatre Company with its modest resources but unlimited ambition could do these things so many years ago, why are most Australian arts centres, festivals and other performing arts managements so timid now?

3

The Australia Council

Now it is time to look at the public record and see what some real numbers can teach us. How have government agencies managed our cultural policy on Asia since the Keating Government took the initiative in 1991? The authors of this paper have lived through these changes and experienced on the ground how Australia has responded to the Asian agenda in the performing arts. We are not aware of any previous attempt to analyse the financial information that might give an indication of the level of performing arts engagement with Asia and, in particular, there has been no public analysis of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's funding and policy body in the arts.

The numbers in the graph below tell a tale, not just for those like ourselves who have had an active involvement in this work and have observed the field and the trends, but for the wider arts community. The raw numbers do not tell the whole tale but reveal enough of it for some truths to be uncovered, trends to be discerned, and conclusions drawn that might confirm the views of some and raise alarm for others. They are enough to give us some background from which to steer a way forward.

The Australia Council is the key organisation for

the extended family, we feel we have a right to tell it to behave in our own image and we take pride in its many achievements. If you work in Asia you begin to appreciate this even more. Some of the arts agencies in Asia remain in the stranglehold of a bureaucracy uninterested and untrained in any arts practice. Others are internally focussed and distant from the sector for which they have responsibility. The idea of peer evaluation, or even a grant for an individual artist, is a long way from their mind. There are exceptions, of course. We have worked happily with the Japan Foundation and with the Ministry of Culture in China, for example, and the Singapore National Arts Council is a model of focus, efficiency and knowledge. But it is worth sitting outside a dusty office in the Indian subcontinent, waiting for an audience and knowing you are just paper-shuffling, to really appreciate an organisation like the Australia Council.

The Council figures are focused on Australian performing artists and projects supported through the Council's programs for international work through the performing arts boards in their various forms, but mostly Dance, Music and Drama (or Theatre), and through the changing über-programs of Arts Development and the variously named Audience and Market Development (AMD) portfolio.[iii] We can only do this, of course, because by and large the figures are available through the Australia Council's annual reports, a commendable characteristic of open government. The figures do not include the Major Performing Arts Board because it is not possible to dissect what was spent through their programs on overseas work. Our observation and involvement in this work tells us, however, that only a small percentage

goes to international touring and, of this percentage, an even smaller percentage would have been directed towards Asia. We have included spending in places specifically named, but we have excluded named visual arts and literature programs. Sometimes the figures just say 'overseas' and the dollars relating to these have also not been included. Immediately you will see that the total is not exact.

Within the limitations noted above, the major focus of our attention is on the percentage of funds spent across two decades for performing arts projects to or in Asian destinations, as compared to expenditure directed towards the 'Rest of the World'. ROW (as DFAT sometimes calls it) is mostly Western Europe, including the United Kingdom, and North America, with only a tiny sum spent in other places like South America and Eastern Europe.

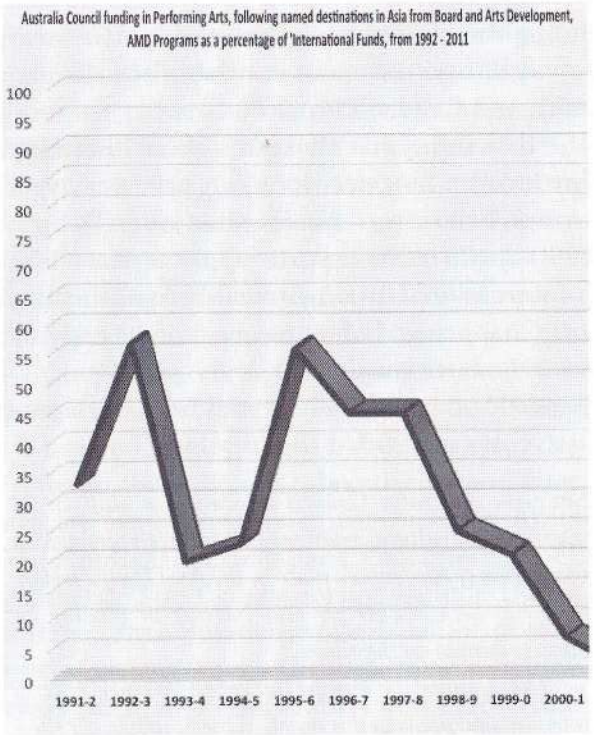
The first thing that strikes us about these figures is that broad policy decisions can have very specific outcomes. Following the Australia Council's decision in 1990–1 (20 years ago) to apply at least 50% of their international funding towards Asia, this is what actually happened. Indeed for most of the early 1990s it was well above that.

The following statement comes from the Council's *Annual Report of* 1993–4 (pp. 20–1):

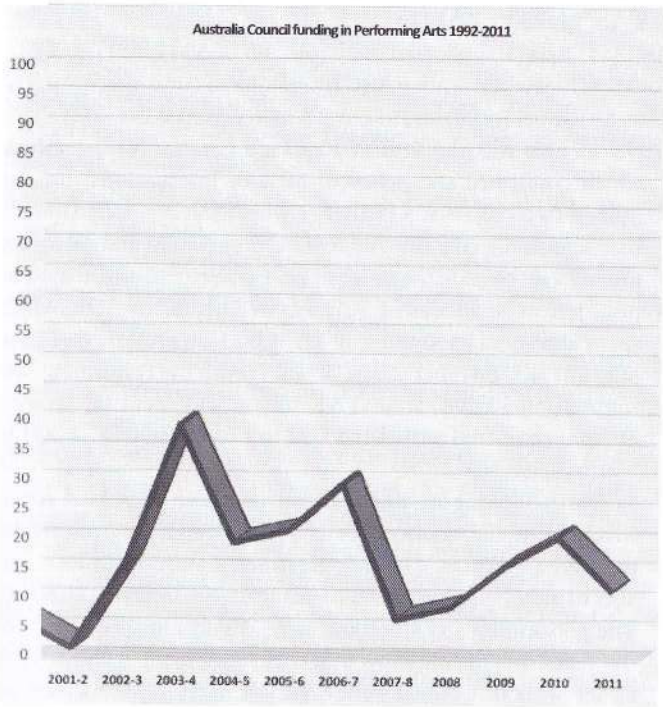
> *Since the Australia Council announced a shift in its international cultural relations policy three years ago, in recognition of Australia's place in the Asia Pacific region, there has been a 250 per cent increase in funding for projects focused on the region.*
>
> *The Council is aiming to spend 50 per cent of international funds in this region in the future; in 1993–4*

the proportion passed 35 per cent. Council's international policy fulfils one of its major statutory duties, 'to promote the knowledge and appreciation of Australian arts in other countries'.

Note that the 35%+ quoted above for 1993–4 represented expenditure from all boards of the Australia Council, not just the performing arts. In fact, the figures above show that the trend in the performing arts was well above this percentage, probably because of the entrepreneurial and international interests of this sector, and because grants to performing arts touring tended to be larger than those for other boards.



Prime Minister Keating announced the major cultural policy document *Creative Nation* in 1995, reconfirming the 50% of international funding allocated to Asia. He left office in March 1996, however, and in the eleven years of the Coalition Government that followed Prime Minister Howard loosened the ties with Asia and reprioritised Australia's relations with the United States. How has the Council managed this engagement since it took the initiative in 1991? In the decades since, the proportion of funds 'for Asia' sank to and has remained at 10–20% of the Council's total international expenditure.



Notes on the totals in Table 1

1990–1: The Australia Council's Report provided for 1% of performing arts funding for overseas projects, but this figure is not broken down by geographic focus.

1991–2: The international funding of 1% remains but is broken down geographically. In the areas we tracked, we see a high amount of funding for Asia: 33%. Indonesia stands out with some $60,000 spent in that country, Korea $35,000 and Japan $42,000. This expenditure almost certainly reflected preparation for the Australian Promotion year in Indonesia in 1993. These country-specific promotional years have become an important stimulus for geographic focus and expenditure.

1992–3: A high year for Asia at 57%, though the figures themselves are small: $166,000 for Asia against $55,000 spent in Europe and $70,000 for everywhere else. Japan received the most with $80,000, Vietnam $27,500 and Indonesia was again funded.

1993–4: 'Asia' was allotted only $66,500 of $344,000 (20%).

1994–5: A new Performing Arts 'International Fund' was instituted as a channel for major funding. Asia received 23%.

1995–6: This was the year of Keating's *Creative Nation* agenda which confirmed the policy of 50% of international touring money to go to Asia, a challenge which the Australia Council met. It introduced a new Audience Development and Advocacy program set outside the range of peer assessment and able to be proactive in broader areas. Asia was well treated by ADA, which spent almost all its funding, or $674,000, on projects there and only $67,000 on other places. Together with the Performing Arts International Fund, around $1 million was spent on projects in Asia, compared with $465,000 in Europe and $272,000 in North America.

It is worth looking at which countries these increased funds covered. In the country-focus promotional program, India received $490,000. The new Australia Centre in Manila was also of note, gaining $99,500 while Japan received $84,500. The performing arts stood out here: figures in this period for the visual arts to Asia show that they never made it above 35%. Other areas of Council were even less likely to be focused on Asia, specifically Community Cultural Development and the

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board. The Literature Board should be looked at in more detail, but spot-checks suggest their Asia agenda has been very low. So across the full spectrum of the Australia Council's international expenditure, at 57% this year was the high-water mark.

1996–7: The figure shrank a little to 45%. India was there again with $88,000, and there was modest expenditure for South America and New Zealand.

1997–8: Funding held at 45%. Major organisations undertook a lot of international travel, with touring in Asia above 50%.

1998–9: Only 25% to Asia this year.

1999–2000: Down to 21%: a year with a major Australian promotion in London.

2000–1: A continued decline, down to 7%, with a major promotion in Brooklyn, USA. Of those Asian countries that were included, the more financially attractive destinations— Singapore, Taiwan and Korea—began what became a regular inclusion. China also appeared on the list more overtly.

2001–2: The lowest point in the twenty years at just 2.5%: $36,500 for Asia compared with $814,000 for Europe and $788,000 for North America (again including the Australian promotion in Brooklyn).

2002–3: Slightly up to 16.5%, with Japan taking the largest amount, $80,000, again because of the Australian promotion year there. China, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong were dominant—again the more financially attractive destinations. There was also a showcase in Berlin.

2003–4: Up to 40% to Asia with the Japan promotion continuing to attract funding: a hefty $461,500; and again Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong and China.

2004–5: Down again to 20% after the Japan promotion. Asialink showed up with $235,000 as part of this promotion, and the Singapore Performing Arts Market received $23,500. The big event this year was *Undergrowth*, the major Australian arts promotion in the UK with funding of $336,000.

2005–6: *Undergrowth* funding increased to $695,000, and there was $220,000 for New York. Asia-focussed grants totalled 22% or $534,000, of which $337,000 was for Asialink. Japan was the major recipient and other countries received

only minor amounts. Many smaller Asian countries did not appear at all. The other trend starting to show is a retreat from international expenditure by the Council boards, leaving this to the big-spending ADA. Board funds were mostly for small and individually initiated projects.

2006–7: 30% for Asia, of which Asialink again got the lion's share, $330,000 out of a total of $493,000. Japan received most of the remainder with $80,000.

2007–8: A mere 7% here to Asia, but Asialink was not included. As the Australia Council's financial year was being switched to the calendar year, we believe the actual funds expended for Asialink were allocated in a different time frame. The annual figures from now on are for calendar years from the Council website: *https://online.australiacouncil.gov.au/Grantlist*

2008: We see 9% for Asia, and only in Arts Development, Japan getting the largest part of this with $87,000. However, if 2007–8 and 2008 are combined, Korea starts to lead with $148,000.

2009: A big international year: for Asia the total rose to 16%, or $570,000. Korea is the standout with $256,000, then Japan, Taiwan, China and Singapore. India is there, and a rare allocation for Indonesia ($7,000), and for Thailand ($4,000).

2010: Up again to 21%, with $494,000 for Asia of which $306,000 was for Korea. Japan fades.

2011 Six months to June: 12% with a total of $215,000 of which $98,000 was again for Korea.

This analysis shows the general trend of funding to Asia versus funding to the rest of the world and which areas of Asia caught the Australia Council's attention. Again we note that these figures are from certain parts of the Council's grant figures and are to be regarded only as a guide to trends.

Some Conclusions

- The Australia Council's own policies and, more broadly, the Federal Government's stated and unstated priorities, have had a direct bearing on the Council's commitment to Asia.

- Funding for the countries of South East Asia have fallen away over the last ten years with the exception of Singapore, which has coasted along in a small way through the two decades.
- The countries of North Asia have almost always received the lion's share of funding, with Japan the standout over the two decades, topped by the *Ancient Future* Australian promotion year in 1993. Support has declined in the last few years as spending in Korea has risen.
- South Asia has been an area of activity only during the *New Horizons* promotion in India in 1995–6. All the funding for South Asia has been for India with the exception of one grant of $6,000 for Pakistan in the early 1990s.
- Expenditure on China has been fairly constant but low. Taiwan and Hong Kong are also constant but low, but for different reasons: they are smaller societies than their giant neighbour and they tend to work on a more commercial model. Hong Kong's Cantonese-speaking population represents a narrower market opportunity, and Taiwan's political overshadowing by the mainland has meant it was not in the mindset of Australian artists and arts organisations.

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To view Table 2, which shows Australia Council actual funding of Australian performing arts, following named countries from Board and Arts Development/AMD programs 1991–2011, go to the Currency House website, www.currencyhouse.org.au and click on 'PP31 Table' in the update column of the Home Page.

So what might these conclusions mean?

Public funding has clearly leant towards those countries that might offer at least a partial box office return: Singapore, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This has become particularly clear since the Audience and Market Development division of the Australia Council came into being. Underlying this concentration on the more 'Western' market orientation in these countries has been their sophisticated, State-supported arts infrastructure: performing arts complexes, focused arts bureaucracies, festivals and colleagues familiar with a global stage with whom it has been easier to share understanding and build long-term relationships.

In the early 1990s, in keeping with a rising enthusiasm to engage with Asia, the objectives and the spread of activity were much broader. We see more activity in the 'non-commercial' countries such as Indonesia or India where they had very little expectation of commercial return. Separate arrangements were made for government-supported projects, compared to fully commercial projects. Jennifer Lindsay spelt out the reality in 1994, in her ground-breaking publication *Cultural Organisation in Southeast Asia*, namely that your venture was either government-supported and therefore a 'propaganda' exercise giving away tickets, or an entirely commercial event like a pop concert.[iv] There was no middle way. Even today it is difficult to put together a financial package to send a project to these countries. The physical and management infrastructure is less likely to be there, their organisations are often run and supported by individuals without institutional backing,

and festivals and other special events are dependent on fleeting support. As the tougher commercial criteria were brought in under Audience and Market Development policies, funding for projects with the 'non-commercial' countries fell away and the Board programs did not pick up the deficit. Today it is still the case that much of Asia is omitted from Australian funding models which require viable budgets based on significant but, in reality, non-existent support from the receiving country.

This has meant that, as the period under review proceeds, to see an Australian program in India, once the 1996 promotion was over, or in the Philippines, Indonesia or Vietnam, is to be surprised. We note that expenditure on the Asialink Residency Program under which many performing artists have worked, is not itemised country by country. Many of the artists on Asialink residencies to these countries have returned to Australia with plans for projects and reciprocal exchanges that have arisen out of their experience but have then found it almost impossible to raise the funds to bring such projects into being.

When looking at the figures, it is interesting to note the significant activity with Singapore. In recent decades Singapore has invested huge sums to make itself a cultural destination and so it punches well above its weight for a tiny island state. It supports a performing arts centre (Esplanade), a regional performing arts market, an important international festival, a range of producing and presenting managements, and various attractive and well-managed venues. Korea is also interesting. Some five or six years ago we started to see more Korean arts officials coming to Australia, and usually armed with money. They were being proactive,

positive and inviting. A lot of Australians were invited to arts markets, festivals and events. Both Korean and Australian arts practitioners have benefitted from these invitations and, in return, Australian arts organisations have invited Koreans here. Pro-activity works. The Australia Council figures show how this has led to an increasing number of programs in Korea. Importantly they have been backed by goodwill and good organisation on the ground in Korea. In the meantime we have seen the 'retreat' of Japan. What has happened there? One element has been the general reduction in funding and programs, including the closure of the Japan Foundation's specialist 'Asia Centre' in Tokyo. Another has been the rise of China, which has attracted increasing attention from all sectors of society, including artists.

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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 of these countries are of high strategic importance to Australia, both have wonderfully rich and diverse cultures, so it is certainly Australia's loss to pull back from cultural engagement with them. The 1996 Australian promotion in India was the best we have seen to date, because of the high quality of the selected work and because the engagement with local artists was so successful. Alison Carroll was in the audience and watched as the world-weary citizens of Delhi, forced by good manners to attend a performance by the Australian Art Orchestra, thawed as the

excited audience in the hall rose to applaud this wild collaboration with Indian artists. Real money was spent on our side, and real effort put into a high-quality wide-ranging program. Commercial viability and ticket sales were not the priority: the goodwill generated has been ongoing and should be intrinsic to the planning of all promotions of this kind.

The promotions in Indonesia, first in early 1990s and then more recently, have suffered in two ways: neither had the level of support given to the Indian promotion and the relations developed in Indonesia were, and remain, based on individual enthusiasm. The income and funding streams so important in AMD criteria do not exist in the Indonesian archipelago.

Interestingly, the 2010–1 year of Australian Culture in China was felt to be a rather lacklustre affair focussed predominantly on the visual arts. Despite the huge revenues some Australian businesses are earning from China, and despite active lobbying by the Australian Ambassador, negligible support came from the Australian corporate sector. In addition, those engaged in the delivery of the programs, while hardworking, often lacked the appropriate skills, experience and networks, illustrating the loss, during the Howard years, of specialist and experienced cultural counsellors. To compound matters and needlessly put offside highly competent Australian arts managements, DFAT even gave the management of Australia's Cultural program in the 2010 Shanghai Expo to an American agency

The case of Indonesia

Indonesia is an exciting and culturally rich country but it has received very little funding support for engagement through the Australia Council. Why this is so is partly explained by it not being seen as commercially viable. But there are other issues as well. Since 2001 Indonesia has had the misfortune to be judged as unsafe for Australians due to the perceived threat of terrorism. Negative 'travel advisories' have been constant, and, given the proximity of our nearest neighbour, when trouble arises the media paints a frightening picture. This has deterred many visitors and business people, and with them artists, teachers, students and public servants, eligible to travel under various programs. Indonesia also does not always have the infrastructure that makes for easy touring. You have to want to go there and you have to want to engage. But, if you do, the results can be extraordinary.

One of the best examples of international engagement we have seen is the Japanese-initiated and supported festival *Kita! Japanese Artists meet Indonesia*, which in 2008 played throughout the archipelago. They engaged, they collaborated, they used the streets and the public spaces just as the Indonesians do. And it looked wonderful: so exciting, so new, so dynamic, so funny, so political, so young, so great. The Japanese invested in people and time, and, as the Japanese can do, they produced the best promotional material we have ever seen. The graphics reflected the energy and youthful zest of the whole engagement. They got it right.

As Indonesia for these reasons is currently off the Australia Council's radar, any government

funding for cultural engagement is left to the DFAT bilateral council, the Australia Indonesia Institute (AII). The AII has kindly provided figures of recent applications for funding. In 2010–1 they received 29 Arts and Culture applications for $588,000, of which 15 applications were approved for $153,000. This means applications for $435,000 were left unsupported. That's a lot of unsatisfied 'desire to engage'. In 2011–2 (to midyear 2011), the AII had received 17 applications requesting $304,000. Four applications were approved for $52,000.

4

The Politics

The years 1991 to 1997–8 were the high-water mark for Australia Council funding in the performing arts to Asia. This was followed by a severe decrease to 2000–2 and then fluctuations as low at 7% and high as 40%, but mostly in the 10–30% range. We are not aware of any instruction from Canberra nor of any formal change in policy from the Council's own 1990–1 decision for 50% of their international funding to go to Asia, yet its own numbers clearly indicate how the signals from Canberra influenced outcomes.

Paul Keating was Prime Minister when the Australia Council seized the Asian initiative. The Liberal-National

Coalition Government won election in 1996 and its new priorities quickly percolated throughout government agencies, including our national arts funding body. Perhaps in part this is explained by the different nature of the Government's appointments to Council membership, which gave much greater representation to business and other non-artist members. Since the Labor Government took office in 2007, there has been a modest rebalancing towards Asia.

We do not believe that any Australian government of the last 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. We think it fair to say, however, that our governments have generally 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, even more, in 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.

Outgoing Australia-based BBC correspondent Nick Bryant on Radio National's *Saturday Extra* (3 September 2011), talked of Australian politics being 'increasingly provincial and parochial', a Prime Minister in Julia Gillard who had famously said, on her first official overseas visit, that she was not interested in Foreign Affairs, and Opposition Leader Tony Abbot quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying

he didn't give interviews to foreign correspondents because it made him appear 'up' himself. Everything looked terrific about Australia, said Bryant, except for its politics.

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In the end, the key point of this paper is that leadership really matters. After Keating 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 that 'the dollars are not there, so why should we be?' The authors of this paper would like to think it was time for the sector itself to promote change and generate leadership in this field. All of us in the sector have failed in allowing the programs and policies that Keating supported to be seriously diminished or ignored.

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In the Howard years, Asia went off the map in the minds of those in charge of the Australia Council. A graphic example was the announcement in June 1999 of the Government's *International Initiatives 1999–2001* with funding of $10 million, of which the Australia Council highlighted 'several significant Australian arts events overseas'. These included the work of the painter Howard Arkley at the Venice Biennale, the stage adaptation of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* in Europe, Australia Week in London, our part in the Hannover World Expo in 2000. The lone non-European event was the Festival of Pacific Arts in Noumea in late 2000. The media release for this

program of 'international initiatives' lists *Cloudstreet* again, the rock group Yothu Yindi in Amsterdam, two gigs in London, and Howard Arkley. The Pacific Arts Festival is not mentioned in the media release, though as the sole non-European inclusion, it might have been expected. The general description of the Festival, however, opens with the following: 'New Caledonia is part of mainland France and therefore opens up the opportunity for Australia to promote the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in an appropriate context in Europe.'[v] What? To justify the funding the writer felt obliged to deprive the festival of its real context and attach its importance to cultural links with Europe. Need more be said?

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Since then the political focus on our arts engagement with Asia has remained low. 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 eleven-year incumbency, in response to sustained lobbying and in partnership with the Arts Minister Rod Kemp, they 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% '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.

Both authors of this paper 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 $20 million, of which we believe less than $500,000 had been committed before the program was axed. It cannot be that government 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 itself is too uninterested to use their potentially powerful voice to tell them otherwise? Does working in Asia simply sound like a junket? Anyone who has tried to build an overseas project that transcends cultural difference—to raise funding, generate partnerships, profile and audiences—knows that the idea of it being a junket is laughable.

Now, under Arts Minister Simon Crean, we have the promise of a new national cultural policy, the first in 16 years. Interestingly, his *National Cultural Policy* discussion paper circulated in 2011 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 the Ten Point Plan of action outlined at the end of this paper 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 broad engagement with the Asian region.

Leading into the recent G20 meeting in Cannes, on 2 November 2011, the British *Guardian* newspaper published a graph of the economic situation of the G20 members. This is the most powerful politico-economic world group to which Australia now belongs, and includes most of Europe, USA, UK and the 'rich' countries of Asia including Japan. Who had the *highest* Human Development Index (that is, the quality of life index measured in economic terms)? Australia. Our figure was .94. Who had the second highest GDP per capita—tellingly after Singapore? Australia. We can afford to do better.

5

Other government funding bodies

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

After the Australia Council, DFAT is the major Commonwealth player involved in taking Australian arts abroad. Not surprisingly they are very different in their focus: the differences in the role of a ministry of foreign affairs and one of the arts is something that often causes strain in countries around the world. Foreign Ministries want to use the

arts to promote an agenda of political and economic advantage for their country; arts ministries usually believe their role is to support artists to be as creative and interesting as possible. Asialink used to say that 10 per cent could always be found at each end of DFAT's and the Australia Council's agendas that was unacceptable to the other (the Council wouldn't fund a politically-pleasing golf exhibition and DFAT wasn't comfortable with sex) but everyone could work well with the 80 per cent in the middle.

DFAT has many outstanding officers who are experts on the politics and economies of particular regions, and not least on Asia, but it is not an arts organisation nor is it staffed by arts professionals. Looking to the political security and economic agenda (core business for DFAT) is not always productive for the arts. DFAT does have a Cultural Relations Branch specifically for its 'soft diplomacy' possibilities but its status in the Department is moot. Where DFAT does sit up and focus on the arts is when an Australian artist presents in another country what DFAT believes to be a negative image of Australia. And occasionally, tension can flare the other way when a diplomat or politician inappropriately exploits an art piece for political ends. But DFAT is a good partner. It knows the international situation. In our experience the locally-engaged arts officers in Australian diplomatic posts abroad are usually well-informed about the local cultural and current conditions in a way that we cannot emulate from Australia. On the other hand they know little of the complexities of the field in Australia itself. A supportive Ambassador can make a huge difference to the conduct of our cultural engagement, even when the Embassy's direct budget

for such work is painfully small.

In the 1980s Australia went through a period when DFAT appointed specialist arts people as cultural counsellors to major posts in Asia. Carrillo had that experience in Beijing 1985–7 following his eight years at Playbox where he was actively engaged with China. Others are the cultural writers Jennifer Lindsay in Jakarta, Alison Broinowski in Tokyo; and, succeeding Gantner, Nicholas Jose in Beijing. Soon after his appointment as Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer cancelled these positions on the grounds of cost savings. It is understood that it costs around $500,000 to keep an Australian-based officer in the field.[vi] DFAT's budget saved costs, but what we lost were people on the ground with active and informed cultural fluency and networks in both countries. They had status and 'clout' with government and cultural circles in the host country in a way that their locally engaged replacements could never enjoy. They had authority to negotiate exchange programs, and, frankly, were able on occasion to bypass the Department in Canberra to facilitate links more speedily.

We believe there is more that DFAT could do even within existing resources to enhance Australia's broad relationships with regional countries. Placing a higher value on the role of culture only enhances other dimensions of any bilateral relationship. Many Australians still think that culture is what you do on Saturday night. Across Asia, culture has a much broader meaning, encompassing language, history, philosophy, food, arts and much else. In countries like China where culture and ideology are intimate bedfellows, an understanding of the intricacies of the culture becomes doubly important.

DFAT bilateral councils

The DFAT-funded bilateral councils, like the Australia Indonesia Institute (AII), the Australia China Council (ACC), the Australia Korea Foundation (AKF) and the Australia Japan Foundation (AJF) each receive dismal funding: the AKF, for instance, receives $750,000 per annum to distribute across the entire range of culture, media, education, science and technology, Australian studies programs and any other people-to-people exchange areas. The councils all make some valuable and productive grants across diverse areas but, in most cases, current funding is less than they received when they were established 20 to 30 years ago. They also have high overhead costs relative to their grant-making capacity and they each keep to their own territory. It seems to us worth proposing a wider discussion of their role. While we can understand that no Australian government has wanted to be seen downgrading relations with these countries, it is surely worth examining whether other models might serve our national interest better. Would putting the funding for all the councils into one collective 'pot' provide a more strategic and coordinated approach to our relations with the region?

The Australian International Cultural Council

For the several Australian Focus Country promotions in Asia over the last two decades, the Australian International Cultural Council (AICC), funded by DFAT and chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, has been the lead agency. Their website states:

The AICC mounts country-specific cultural programs which aim to strengthen and deepen ties with the countries through integrated events and activities in the performing arts, visual arts, literature and film.

So far it has undertaken focus-country or focus-region promotions in:

2001—United States
2002—Germany and China
2003—Germany and Japan
2004—South East Asia
2005—Singapore, United Kingdom and India
2006—United Kingdom and India
2007—France and Malaysia
2008—Indonesia
2009—United Sates
2010—China
2011—Republic of Korea
2012—India

The figures for international funding from the Australia Council have usually reflected the engagement of Australian artists in these promotions.

For the successful Japan and India promotions, Australia had specialist arts people on the ground in each place. These people in turn brought in various arts institutional partners, especially Australian, that were keen to work in the host country. Many of these partners brought a lot of their own resources and often they had existing connections with the country on which they were keen to build. But there has been little support to follow up the initiatives already taken so the goodwill and potential built has been allowed to fade. Governments by their nature deal in tangibles: they count the media space achieved and the audience numbers, then move on. The train had moved to another station.

The model for these major promotions seems to work well if:

- They are driven by specialist arts people who understand how to make the most of the available resources;
- The resources of all parties are combined;
- A long lead-time is available to make the relationships productive;
- The artists and companies included in the program already have a commitment to the host country and already have relationships there. This is especially important if there is a collaborative element to the work presented;
- There is support to continue to build on the events in the promotion in the years that follow. Often this is critical to any real legacy.

Would these promotions not work even more effectively every time if there were better advance coordination between a single agency charged with the delivery of Australian culture abroad and if they were led by an experienced arts manager? In this way there would be one pool of money for artists and companies, and one management to deal with them instead of being shunted off to scrounge funds from a variety of sources. We discuss this in the options for the future at the end of this paper.

AusAID

AusAID, which sits within DFAT, plays a very important role in the delivery of Australian international aid programs, not least in Asia. It currently funds little in the arts, focusing on 'capacity building' which in their framework sits uneasily with arts activities. There are some 'capacity-building' arenas, especially

in a place like Indonesia, where cultural programs of skills and management training could be beneficial—Australia has excellent institutions and programs for the professional training of artists and arts managers, and our arts infrastructure is very strong. Bringing students into these programs would enhance a country's capacity to strengthen its own cultural assets and create future partners for cultural exchange. One of Asialink's many projects has been the production of three popular 'how-to' booklets in the Indonesian language on Event Management, Exhibition Touring and Community Cultural Development for use in that country. Australia could do much more in this field.

Australian cultural centres

In the past, some Australian posts have included spaces and program support for cultural events within the diplomatic compound. Manila had a very successful Australia Centre in the early 1990s, and Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore were among posts that had active programs on site. The threat of terrorism put paid to these, but also time has moved on. The arts have become more sensitive to the overt role of Government hovering over them, and an arms-length relationship is both cheaper and more credible.

Our advocacy is for Australian cultural centres, located at arm's length from Government, including a physical presence separate from the Australian diplomatic post in that country. Some six years ago the Australia Indonesia Institute investigated the cost of setting up an Australian Cultural Centre in Yogyakarta. The cost of rent for suitable premises, one Australian locally engaged director, three or four local staff, and some core running costs totalled around $200,000

per annum. In countries like Indonesia or India where local infrastructure is tricky, this makes good cultural and financial sense.

A similar facility in China would be a more expensive proposition today. Major city rents are rising as the country moves to a market economy. But many other countries have made the jump and opened important cultural centres in Beijing: the Japanese, French, German and Spanish all have facilities there and regard them as central to their efforts to keep their national profiles high on the Chinese agenda. In Beijing, Australia only manages one locally engaged officer working in the cultural field and reporting to the public affairs counsellor whose focus is on gaining local media attention, most often for visiting Australian ministers.

The states' agencies

We mention almost in passing the state government arts agencies involved in international relations as our experience inevitably focuses on Victoria and its agency Arts Victoria. Mainly through Asialink, however, we have had some experience of the arts agencies of other states. State agencies are important supporters of Asian programs through their grant systems and also through their support of key arts organisations. Queensland has made a big point of supporting Asian initiatives such as the Asia Pacific Triennial. Western Australia had a policy of supporting Indian Ocean programs for a time, but this seems to have faded.

Victoria has a good record as a supporter of international activity. This support is based on the state's policy document *Victoria and the Arts 21 Strategy*

which was published by the Kennett Government in 1996 and has had bipartisan support from successive Victorian governments.[vii] *Arts 21* established a stand-alone International Program with specialist staff and policies. These staff could work across art forms, appropriate in the international context. The policy has been flexible and responsive, accepting proposals from the sector as well as initiating new programs itself. Arts Victoria has been happy to work with the Australia Council and DFAT, and has been willing to amend programs to meet their different criteria. Their funding for their international work, however, has diminished from around $800,000 in 1999 to $620,000 today, although this does not include any special allocation. In 2011 this added another $150,000.

New South Wales is notorious for leaving its state-based international activity to the Australia Council. It has always claimed to have very meagre funding for Asialink programs (though the NSW arts staff have tried hard to make things happen). Apart from Victoria, none of the other states has stand-alone programs. From Asialink's experience, a good relationship with Asia has existed naturally in the Northern Territory, though their budgets have decreased in recent years. Arts NT has always been interested in programs which include their artists working in Asia (projects in the Philippines and in Eastern Indonesia come to mind), and which take advantage of their proximity and expertise.

Arts Victoria has taken Asia seriously. They have a memorandum of understanding with the Singapore National Arts Council and a whole-of-government relationship with China and Japan through Sister-

State links with Jiangsu and Aichi. These include the arts. For state governments, trading partnerships are always in mind, but Arts Victoria insists that the opportunities are for artists in their own right. In assessing Asia-related projects, Arts Victoria looks for opportunities, creative engagement, some financial return and—of particular relevance for the performing arts—an extension of the original season to expand the employment of artists. It's an excellent model and its reach and effectiveness would be enhanced with greater funding

6

Arts training

A key part of the Asia agenda ought to be what we learn about Asian culture, especially as part of our secondary and tertiary education, and in particular, in specialist arts areas. Knowledge, it is said, is power. The introduction to the Federal Government's discussion paper on a new *National Cultural Policy 2011* notes the importance of training in the arts, and how much money is expended by the Government on the Australian Youth Orchestra, the Australian Ballet School, the Australian National Academy of Music, the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) and so on. It runs to nearly $20 million per annum. This figure does not include the major

state tertiary training providers for the sector, particularly the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), Queensland University of Technology (QUT) or consider the many music conservatoria and other institutions.

This sector, of course, feeds all our performing arts practice. If Asia is both culturally interesting and nationally important, it is surely worth contemplating how much focus our arts training institutions place on teaching their students about Asia and Asian cultural practice. Little has changed since the early 1990s. What Alison Carroll wrote for an Asia Education Foundation Conference in 1994 holds as true today: 'People don't want to teach about Asia because they don't feel they have the background—there is nervousness to address the huge cultural issues and agendas under-riding much of Asia's cultural work.'[viii]

Then eleven years ago, in 2000, in a paper for the Asian Studies Association of Australia Conference, she argued for 10 per cent of the international curriculum in our tertiary arts education sector being focussed on studies of Asia 'by 2005'.[ix] This very modest target seems today almost unattainable. The paper quoted Peter Eckersall, an expert in Japanese theatre, who

> believes there is a decrease in the amount of material on Asia in curricula because of perceived economic forces on graduates ... recently more conventional training institutions for mainstream theatre practice have retreated from anything except EuroAmerica. We are seeing a narrowing of outcomes, determined by a supposed notion of what the industry is.

Alison did an audit of what was happening in the tertiary training sector at that time, and found almost no change since the early 1990s in the formal core curricula of the institutions in which these staff and students taught or studied.

The research in 2000 saw Queensland University of Technology as the most proactive institution in the area of Asian cultural literacy, with courses including Dance and Theatre of Asia, Asian Identities and Visual Arts of Asia among their offerings. These changes arose from QUT's internationalisation policy articulated in the mid-1990s, access to wider expertise across the whole university, the appointment of key people like dancer Cheryl Stock, who had had long experience of working in Vietnam, to head dance in the Creative Industries Department at QUT, and many exchanges of staff and students.

There was, however, a significant increase in personal exchanges among staff and students ('lots of travel, lots of residencies, lots of guest lecturers'). These short sharp residency and guest projects are, of course, very welcome. In the early 2000s, Lindy Davies, then head of the School of Drama at the VCA, spoke of the residency of Indonesian dance master Sardono Kusumo: 'You had an immense impact upon the students. Your ability to interface your own traditional training and your experience of Western art was inspiring.'[x]

Some of the training schools have benefitted by the importation of Asian experts and a range of independent artists have had a continuing influence on the development of technical skills and work disciplines in the fields of acrobatics, circus and

physical theatre across generations and geography. Lu Guan Rong, today the head of teaching at the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne, itself a direct outcome of the Nanjing Project, was one of seven visiting teachers in 1983. Twenty years ago, Dr Chandrabanu led the professional Bharatham Indian Dance Company in Melbourne, but has long since returned to Malaysia to pursue his art and teaching.

*

So what is the situation in arts education in 2012? How things are presented is important and indicative of an issue's sensitivity. In this light, the VCA's promotional brochure for its 2012 programs is notable for not including one student profile or general photography of a person of Asian background—though the student cohort includes many. Under the course offerings, any reference to Asia is slight and fleeting (for example, only one among 15 of the 'leading figures' from the industry coming as guest lecturers is of Asian background, while nine are from Europe and the UK). Musicology/Ethnomusicology refers to the French Revolution, Stravinsky and Wagner, and even Latin America, but there is no mention of Asia at all.

Besides the professional training programs at the VCA, WAAPA and NIDA, there are many more general performing arts programs at QUT, Ballarat, Deakin, Monash, Flinders, UNSW and Wollongong that can and do include small elements on Asian performing arts in their programs, but in none is it core curriculum. Queensland again seems to be in the forefront with the Conservatorium of Music in Brisbane including a three-year program built around Indonesian performing arts. At a time when

the Australian university funding model has pushed our tertiary institutions to chase high-fee paying students from Asia to sustain their core operations, is it not extraordinary and depressing that no Australian tertiary institution providing professional arts training, or more general performing arts studies, has made any serious effort to develop core curricula offerings around the arts of Asia?

For tertiary institutions focussed on getting their students jobs in the future, understanding the way the arts of Asia work must be a key component for enabling them to work in our own neighbourhood. It is about the performing arts representing the world that in itself is cross-cultural. Knowing about Kabuki, Beijing Opera or the wayang forms may not seem essential for a young Australian actor wanting to appear on television, but an appreciation of such different forms can only expand an artist's expressive vocabulary and enrich their experience.

Of course, the education sector is itself self-reflexive. If there are not the right skills in the mix, the students who might one day teach are not taught. In the last year, agreement among the states has been reached for the first time to include in the new national curriculum of the secondary school sector an underlying theme of understanding Asia, so perhaps in some years' time we might begin to see wider change: information on Asia at school should, we assume, lead in due course to changes at the tertiary level and beyond. Such things ought to be self-evident to more people, not least those in positions of leadership. Sadly, however, even the relevance of the proposed theme has been challenged by some in the Federal Opposition.

7

Towards a better future: a Ten Point Plan

As we have outlined, there are serious problems in the field of Australia's cultural engagement with Asia. The authors have talked and written about these matters for 25 years and yet so little has changed. We want to see more. 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.

We therefore put forward a Ten Point Plan to redress the focus over the next ten years. We need specific policy, specific money allocated against targets, and a specific body to realize this agenda.

Here is the Plan:

1. Funding quotas

Funding is crucial. So is its intelligent application. Of the Australia Council's and DFAT's Cultural Relations budget we advocate 60% of international funding be allocated for Asian engagement over the next ten years. Today the Australia Council's international funding for Asia is around 20%. We need to raise the bar.

It is always controversial to put percentage quotas on funding figures. You can always make a case against quotas 'for Asia': 'Artists want to go to London, Berlin, Florence or New York, not Beijing, Delhi, Tokyo or Jakarta.' Arguing for Asia is harder. The focus on Asia is in our national interest. Logically that means it needs more resources and attention, not less.

2. Spread of focus

As a broad guideline that reflects relevance and opportunity, we propose expending this 60% as follows:

• China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan)	20–30%
• Japan and Korea	20–25%
• India	15–20%
• Indonesia	15–20%
• Balance of SE Asia	15–20%
Total	85–115%

3. The Middle Way

By the Middle Way we mean that open stage between individual engagement (e.g. residencies) and the big tours by major companies. This is where the creative collaborations between Australian artists and colleagues in the region are supported to develop new projects and present them to audiences in the participating countries and beyond. This should be established as a new program with new funding, a minimum of $3 million per annum to be administered by a new Australian International Cultural Agency (AICA)(see Point 8).

4. In-country Australian cultural centres

In-country 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. The new centres should be established as independent NGOs at arm's length from government but with advance funding commitment on a rolling triennial basis for their ongoing operation and programs.

5. Arts management capacity building in Asia

A program of support from AusAID should be established to bring arts managers and students to Australia from developing countries to participate in the arts management programs which already exist at tertiary level in most states. An evaluation should also be made of the potential to deliver short-term arts management programs and materials in the region.

6. Cultural directors in key embassies

Australian-based cultural directors drawn from the ranks of professional arts and cultural managers should be reappointed to key Australian diplomatic posts. The directors of established in-country centres might also fill this role. Otherwise the cultural directors should be employed by the new agency, the AICA, but be attached to the Australian diplomatic mission. Priority missions are those in Beijing and Tokyo along with Jakarta and New Delhi until such time as Australian

cultural centres can be established in the latter two. We would also want to see cultural directors posted to our missions in Seoul, Bangkok and Singapore at the earliest opportunity.

7. Major events

Major events can have various manifestations but the currently favoured model is the year-long Australian cultural promotion program in another country. We have noted previously how these can be run effectively. The funding can be co-ordinated through one agency (see Point 8). It is our view that the very big companies such as the Australian Ballet and the symphony orchestras should only be included in these promotional years when and if they have already built real, long-term creative relationships in the host country, and if they are touring a repertoire that is distinctively Australian. Otherwise, taking a hundred Australian musicians to give concerts of Mahler and Mozart in Shanghai is largely a waste of money and effort.

8. A new Australian International Cultural Agency

Within three years, all related Federal Government funding should be brought together into one new body, provisionally named here as the Australian International Cultural Agency (AICA), although following the Goethe Institute's example, the name of an Australian cultural icon might equally be used. The AICA should have government representation but operate at arm's length from government. Its functions would include:

- Strategic overview;

- Linkage of programs to national priorities and national interest;
- Establishment of funding priorities;
- Program development;
- Funding of major national profiling years;
- Promotion of a positive international image for Australia (Brand Australia) and especially in Asia, through many channels including programs that nurture rich cultural exchange, wide people-to-people diplomacy, and the development of Australian Studies abroad;
- Recruitment of the cultural directors to be posted to the major Australian diplomatic missions (see Point 6).

What is the appropriate level of funding for the AICA? If we started by putting in one pot the funding currently spent by the Australia Council's international programs, DFAT's Cultural Relations budget and the cultural budgets of DFAT bilateral councils and the Australian International Cultural Council, we would have a strong starting point. More could obviously be achieved with more, but it is not just new resources that are needed but new resources well applied through a strategic framework and coordinated program delivery.

The common arguments against such a body are these:

- *Cost.* But surely the virtues of a clear strategy, co-ordination of resources and forward planning is as valid here as in any other area of activity? Surely it might even save some ineffective expenditure?

- *Our small population.* It is said that the other countries that have such bodies, like the British, French, Germans, Japanese, Italians, Koreans, Chinese, Dutch, Swiss and Scandinavians have a much bigger population and GDP than Australia. In many cases this patently untrue. Taking Britain as an example—a country with three times our population—we would be much better resourced than we are now if we could allocate a third of the British Council's budget to AICA.
- *Unnecessary change.* People and organisations always defend their patch. It's natural. So the most commonly used argument against change is that it won't be the same. Exactly.

Frankly, even if you accepted the points against change, we would argue that we need such a body more than the other countries. Apart from our geographic proximity to, and our economic dependence on, Asia, we are huge within our own borders and difficult to access externally and internally. We are 'confusing' to people in Asia because of our indigenous/British/immigrant/transitional culture. As a nation we aren't easy to understand, which often tells against us, as do our regular political swings and roundabouts. And then, we criticise ourselves too much. We are not good natural promoters of ourselves. A new body would work to counter these negatives more effectively.

9. Tertiary education

As a prerequisite for funding, all tertiary education programs for arts practitioners must include at least 20% Asian content in their core curricula, including Asian histories, cultures and art forms, as well as

practical sessions with visiting Asian artists and teachers, and collaborative projects with Asian creative colleagues. This matter should be monitored and coordinated by each education provider's Academic Board.

10. A major review

A first step towards establishing a new Australian International Cultural Agency is for the Government to initiate a major review/inquiry into the delivery of our overseas cultural engagement and especially with Asia, by appointing a small, senior review panel backed by staff and resources. The panel's terms of reference should include a review of the current situation, a comparative examination of how other countries conduct and resource their cultural engagement programs, and recommendations to government on how things could be improved for Australia's benefit.

As Mao Zedong said, we learn from the past to serve the future. Let us learn and act.

Endnotes

i Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books 1979.

ii James R. Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre, Cambridge: 1997, p.10.*

iii The Australia Council figures are meant as trends. They are taken from the following sections of the Council's program areas:
Dance: Touring; Presentation and Promotion; Development; Skills and Development; Partnerships and International Ties; Market Development
Music: Touring; Presentation and Promotion; Development; International Pathways; Skills and Development; International; Skills
Theatre/Drama:
Touring; Presentation and. Promotion; Development; Playing the World; Skills and Development
Performing Arts:
International
Audience Development and Advocacy:
International Marketing and Promotions; International Activities; International Market Development and Promotion; International Export and Market Development; Arts Export; 2002 Showcases; Performing Arts Markets; International Market Development and Promotions
Arts Development
Community Partnerships and Market Development
International Market Development; Strategic Market Development.

iv Jennifer Lindsay, *Cultural Organisation in Southeast Asia*; a guide for artists, performers and cultural workers, Australia Council, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Myer Foundation, Sydney 1994.

v Australia Council Promotional Folder, June 1999.

vi This figure was quoted for a senior member of staff in Tokyo. No doubt other cities would be cheaper. There are two usual lines of employment at Australia's overseas posts: 'Australia-based' or shorthand 'A-based', meaning the person is sent from Australia and their employment includes salary, living and travel costs for them and their family, school fees, and so on, and the second is 'locally-engaged' where the person lives locally, and just has their salary paid. The second is, obviously, cheaper.

vii *Arts Victoria and the Arts 21 Strategy: Maintaining the State for the Arts.* Auditor General's Special Report 41 ordered under Section 16 of the *Audit Act* 1994. Victorian Government Printer 1996.

viii 'Asia and Arts Teaching,' Asia Education Foundation Conference, 10–11 October, 1994.

ix '10 % for Asia', Asian Studies Association of Australia, Annual Conference, Melbourne, July, 2000.

x *35,000 days in Asia*, The Asialink Residency Program, 2004, p.56.

Authors' Note

We have used terms like 'Asia' and 'cultural engagement' as usually accepted in practice in Australia: that the geographic region includes the region east of Pakistan, and 'North Asia' includes the various Chinas, Japan and Korea, 'South East Asia' the countries of ASEAN and the old Indo-China and 'South Asia' the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan. Cultural engagement is a broad term; for this paper we take it to mean the space where people who work or take part in the arts (as creators, administrators, audiences, discussants), and who come from different backgrounds, get together to exchange ideas or work or to do whatever is meaningful.

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PP30: January 2012

INDIG-CURIOUS: Who can play Aboriginal roles?
Jane Harrison

Non-Aboriginal authors are increasingly incorporating Aboriginal themes into their writing. Some argue it is the actor's skill to portray characters of any race, age or gender. While the protocols are clear these do not always translate to performance. Will it ever be right for a non-Aboriginal to interpret the Indigenous way of life? No matter how familiar? Jane Harrison says it is a question of who is in control.

PP29: October 2011

DEMOCRACY VERSUS CREATIVITY IN AUSTRALIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC
Nicole Canham

Our classical musicians have lost touch with the larger public, says clarinettist Nicole Canham. We are guardians of a tradition full of beauty and imagination; isn't it up

'Should we care more than we do about our neighbours in the Asian region?' ask our authors, who have spent a lifetime in such engagement. This has been called the Asian century and our geography gives Australia a unique opportunity to take advantage of not only the energy so evident in the Asian region but also the rich, exciting treasure trove of arts practice there. But too few of us in the arts acknowledge this or take steps to increase our knowledge, understanding and engagement. In practical terms, there has been a decline in public support in some quarters over the last twenty years, and at best an up-and-down support in others. This paper puts forward a Ten Point Plan for action, and proposes the establishment of a new overarching Australian International Cultural Agency to spearhead a new strategy, the co-ordination of resources and forward planning.

Platform Papers No. 32: July 2012

Clinton Walker on *'History is Made at Night: Live music in Australia'*

ALISON CARROLL, AM was founding director of Asialink Arts 1991–2010. She has initiated arts programs for Australian artists in 19 countries of Asia in visual arts, performing arts, writing, and arts management.

CARRILLO GANTNER, AO has brought many Asian performing arts companies to Australia. He has served as cultural counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing and on a diversity of public bodies on Australia-Asia relations; and has held many other positions in Australian and international public life.

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Platform Papers invites considered responses to this paper for publication in the July edition.

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mainstream, as with MAV's association with the ABC's *Music Deli* program and the Arts Centre's with *Mix It Up*. Most Asian communities in Australian capital cities are also involved in presenting festivals with performing arts programs supported by local government, sometimes with visiting artists and companies underwritten by governments in the countries of origin.

*

As indicated, over the last ten to 15 years, significant parts of the performing arts sector in Australia have developed stronger and more mature links. Asian countries themselves have developed greatly improved arts infrastructure and increased their own interest in cultural exchange in their own region, which sometimes includes Australia. This represents an important change from their more Eurocentric focus of the earlier post-war period. Festivals across the Asian region now routinely include a high level of content from other Asian countries. Australia is not yet generally considered to be 'Asian' but has come to be thought of by some as an important regional player with a vibrant cultural scene.

But while there are successes, our record of active engagement with Asia is still very mixed. Many individuals and organisations have found creative stimulus in this field and through this work have built reputations for leadership, found new audiences and generated new sponsors. There are, however, many more for whom Asia still remains a complete blank. In this context, it is important to recognise that occasional performance tours by our leading companies and orchestras cannot be the way to maximise the benefits of exchange unless they program significant Australian repertoire and actively

engage in local creative partnerships. Exchanges of artistic personnel and programs that reflect the strengths and creative expression of their place of origin have a much better chance of leaving a lasting impact than programs that are perceived to reflect a derivative European style or content, no matter how good the company's reputation at home. Such programs usually sink without trace in the crowded and star-studded calendar of major Asian capitals, though they may provide bragging rights back in Australia.

Some of the lessons drawn from those who do work with Asia are clear: the importance of reciprocity in enhancing opportunities and benefits; the commitment to developing real partnerships; the exciting and often unpredictable outcomes of shared creative inputs across cultural difference; the virtue of playing to national strengths and unique characteristics; and the value of long-term commitments in order to build real legacies.

Carrillo Gantner writes:

> *From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, we at Playbox engaged very successfully with Asia: at the time we were virtually alone in this focus. With Clifford Hocking and other partners we toured major Asian companies around Australia—from China the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe, Jiangsu Peking Opera Company, and Fujian and Hunan puppet companies; from Japan the Kanze Noh Theatre and Suzuki Company of Toga and the Yakshagana Puppet Theatre from India. We exchanged directors and plays with China: Jack Hibberd's* A Stretch of The Imagination *with Sha Ye Xin's* The Imposter; *and whole productions with Japan: John Romeril's* The Floating World *with Tanaka Chikao's* The Head Of Mary. *We toured our productions to China, Japan, Korea*