

LYNDON TERRACINI'S PEGGY GLANVILLE-HICKS ADDRESS 2011

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening.



Could I acknowledge that we gather here tonight on the traditional lands of Aboriginal people. Let me now begin by saying that I met Peggy Glanville-Hicks on a number of occasions. She was a feisty vibrant character with a provocative mind, which she used with startling wit and intelligence. She thought about art and culture in the broadest sense and so I hope this evening I can do justice to the sort of address she would have considered worthy of her name.

Peggy wrote a number of operas and we shared many discussions about music, the merits or lack of merit of some rather famous composers and about the world in general. We had an unusual relationship, which I found very stimulating and thought provoking. However, although the conversations with Peggy and many other composers over the past three decades have been highly stimulating and always interesting, nothing thrills me more than hearing a great singer...except.... a great singing actor.

When an artist understands how to weave the text and the music together and is able to communicate every individual moment within a musical and dramatic context to the audience it is a wonderful and often awe inspiring experience. In fact there is nothing that moves me, or thrills me more, than what I would describe as total music theatre.

Fortunately for me, music and theatre are my hobbies as well as being my profession, or more specifically.... my life.... and that has been the case since I was about 3 years of age. However, I specifically love the operatic form and have done since I first heard the late Donald Smith sing Calaf in *Turandot* at the Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown when I was a very young man. Consequently, everything I will say this evening comes from that love of the form, of singers, musicians and in fact everyone who works to make art and embrace audiences in this greatest of all art forms. And it's because of that love and passion for music and the theatre that some of what I have to say this evening will be difficult and possibly provocative and controversial.

However, we are living in a very volatile cultural environment and my love for the importance of the making of art and its connection with a broader community has given me the courage to say what I believe must be said tonight.

What I would like to say this evening can be applied to classical music in general, but I will try to confine my comments to the form to which I am most closely connected.... opera. It's now two years since I took up my position as Artistic Director of Opera Australia and I've had time to understand the company, the culture in which it works and its position as a leader in the cultural life of Australia. As the largest performing arts organisation in the country there is a great deal of responsibility associated with the position that I hold which needs to not only deliver the operatic art form to the widest possible audience, but it also needs to contextualize what the operatic form means to contemporary Australians. Peter Brook, one of the greatest stage directors of his generation in his extraordinary book from 1973, *The Empty Space*, said "Everything in opera must change".... but in fact while the rest of the world has changed dramatically, very little in opera has changed since the 19th century.... and in many ways the form has become captive to its own traditions and peculiarly unaware of the changes that have taken place around it.

Opera companies and orchestras of significance world wide are closing at an alarming rate and while there are many reasons for this (including a global financial crisis) the fact that very little has changed in the fundamental structure of opera companies in two centuries is an extremely important contributing factor...we live in a very different time and the expectations which were real in the past, can be assumed no longer. We can blithely ignore that fact, and many practicing artists in classical music are continuing to do so, or we can change.... and frankly I don't believe we have a choice...we must change.

There is a very passionate small group of people who can sometimes appear to be members of a club who feel that their views are the only opinions of real importance and that presenting what they want to see is the role of "their" opera company. "All of Sydney is talking about it," one of them said to me recently, referring to a particular production that, while being successful artistically, had experienced very poor attendances. I pointed out that only slightly more than 4,000 people had bought tickets for the production that this particular person was referring to and on last count there were a lot more than 4,000 people living in Sydney..."well all of my friends have seen it" was the response...and here you have the fundamental problem.... everyone at my "club" has seen it and bummer those who aren't members of my club. That sense of patrician entitlement is not only at odds with what we regard as the Australian way of life, but it is also completely at odds with contemporary Australia.

If any arts organisation is receiving \$20 million per year in funding from government, then it is not acceptable in a democratic society for that company to only play to a small number of people who are members of an elitist club. In fact any arts organisation, which is in receipt of public funds, is obliged to justify that funding by doing its utmost to be inclusive of all members of society. Now I'm not suggesting that a large audience necessarily equates with quality or for that matter vice versa, but from a purely equitable standpoint it is unacceptable.

Consequently at Opera Australia we have taken this very seriously and we will do our utmost to play to as many people as we possibly can. In fact Opera Australia will play to an estimated 500,000 people in 2012 and present 354 performances across Australia while employing more than 1,600 people. Of those 1,600 employees, fewer than 70 are employed in administration and 337 of those performances will be on the main stages in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Our programming is popular but without being populist. It has a reason for being and a narrative, which invites more scrutiny within its broader aspirations. Those aspirations include playing to as many people as possible and putting the audience first and foremost right at the forefront of our programming initiatives.

Creating a program, which is fascinating enough for many thousands of people to buy a ticket and to crack the code for opera to be regarded once more as a popular art form within the context of a new Australia. Because this is a very different Australia to the one that I, and most of you who are here this evening, were born to. After the Second World War, European migrants brought to Australia their cultural history. They had, if not a regular connection to it, an understanding of opera, ballet, chamber music and the symphonic repertoire. The people who have arrived in Australia in more recent times do not have that same cultural or artistic heritage.

They bring with them very different artistic languages in music, theatre, dance and indeed food.... and I will address the latter shortly. Consequently these new Australians do not share our passion for the European art forms I've mentioned previously.

I've spoken before about the dramatically changed ethnic demographic of Australia's

east coast cities. But that changed demographic is not reflected in our audiences. The faces you see on our stages and in our orchestra pits do not represent accurately the faces you see on our streets. Not surprisingly our audiences are of a similar narrow ethnicity and the dramatic difference between the ethnic demographic you see on our streets, compared to the demographic of the audiences in our theatres, is alarming.

I noticed recently in our extremely successful production of *La Bohème*, which has played to 45,000 people in Melbourne and Sydney that when we had an African-American soprano and a Korean tenor singing the leading roles, we had more audience members from those ethnic communities, than we usually see in the theatre. But within our major performing arts organisations we are in real danger of creating an elitist arts community and an audience, which is not representative of contemporary Australia. The 2011 Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Bruce Norris was quoted recently as saying.... "The people who go to the theatre are just like me; white, middle class, educated, small L liberals, progressive".

This is fundamentally the audience who we play to also, although I would add to this "older and conservative"...and let me say categorically that there is nothing wrong with this.... it is imperative that we endeavor to play to all Australians. However, it is unacceptable for us to presume that we will ONLY play to that audience. Bruce Norris' play, *Clybourne Park*, which premiered in Australia at the Melbourne Theatre Company in September, contains very similar subject matter to what is occurring right now in Australia's east coast cities. Norris sees a society divided by race and income. Comfortable white suburbs and economically depressed black suburbs...and if you happen to live in Sydney, it's the Western suburbs on one side and the northern and eastern suburbs on the other. Recently I was discussing the dramatically changed demographic of Australia's east coast cities with a colleague and he responded "but this is Australia".

Yes it is...but it's a very different Australia to the one that our parents knew and if we ignore the changes, which have already taken place we will see our audiences decline dramatically. However... our food culture has voraciously embraced the changing demographic and consequently some of the most innovative eating in the world can be found in Sydney and Melbourne.... and there are now some wonderful restaurants in Brisbane and throughout the rest of Australia. It's a hybrid of extraordinary eating experiences...so why haven't we, as creative artists in music and theatre in particular, replicated the success of our creative culinary colleagues.... why are we so protective of our meat and three veg that we refuse to consider the extraordinary tastes of Asia.

What I'm saying is particularly relevant to the major performing arts organisations. A number of companies from the small to medium sector are creating work which is much more representative of contemporary Australia. The style of our performances too needs discussion.... but this is a complex conversation. We expect to see English or American acting styles represented on our stages and when we don't see that from ethnically diverse artists we complain about over- or poor acting. This is because we want to see a Korean singer, for example, acting like a European.... or an American. In fact what was extremely interesting in the Opera Australia production of *La Bohème* recently was that the artist to whom I'm referring responded emotionally (particularly at Mimi's death) the way a Korean man would respond.

We from Anglo/European stock may not like that acting style and emotional response, but when you watch Asian cinema you will see exactly that.... a very different style of acting...an Asian style...and Asian audiences connect strongly to it because it reflects the way they are conditioned to respond.

So...if we are serious about playing to ethnically diverse and wider audiences we need to consider the performance styles we employ and the way we attempt to communicate artistically with a changing and very different audience. It will not work if our expectations continue to be for Asian artists to pretend to perform like Europeans while at the same time try to communicate with their ethnic audience.

We have an Australian performing aesthetic which I love very much and am keen to amplify but that also will need to evolve and change to reflect what I'm attempting to articulate here. When we do have performances that accurately reflect the street demographic, and when those artists are able to respond emotionally the way they have been conditioned to respond from birth, then we will communicate with very different audiences and be seriously doing something of profound importance artistically.

Of course there are instances when an Asian artist will adopt a European performance style.... I'm not suggesting totalitarianism here...but that context needs to be articulated very clearly theatrically. In the meantime we will need to balance our performance styles very cleverly so that we continue to satisfy our existing audience but at the same time play in a style that connects to the new audiences that are so important to our future.

Then when we are creating new work we really need to get over this cultural cringe of desperately trying to create an opera that Alban Berg may have written if he were still alive. The premiere performance will of course get rave reviews, very few people will buy a ticket, and then it will never be played again...primarily because it's too expensive and the European aesthetic which we are presenting will appeal only to a very small audience.... and most of those people have complimentary tickets!

That is then considered to be "brave programming"...it's not.... It's predictable and it lacks courage, innovation and creativity. Brave programming is having the courage to program what critics will criticize you for, but will make a genuine connection to a real audience, who will become passionate supporters of the art form. As someone who has probably performed the leading role in more operas by contemporary composers than any other Australian, I can say with a certain amount of coalface knowledge that for too long we have alienated audiences and driven them away from new operatic experiences because the work itself has had little relevance to a potential audience...and in some cases not wanted to find an audience.

There have been too many instances when new operas have been exercises in indulgence for academic composers.... most of whom have no experience or understanding of the theatre or the operatic form. There are of course some wonderful creations, which have deserved a wider audience, including Brett Dean's *Bliss* and Richard Mills' *Love of the Nightingale*, but until we are able to convince a potential audience that contemporary opera is relevant to the twenty first century, we will continue to struggle to find that audience.

Am I suggesting we should not commission new work? Absolutely not but I am suggesting that we should be a lot more rigorous in our processes of selection and that we should not continue "lemming like" down a dead end street as we have been doing for many years. I'm not suggesting a prescribed formula for composers either but their needs to be a balance and we need to create opportunities for a kaleidoscope of composers who are fluent in genuinely contemporary music and theatre.

Since 1973, when the Australia Council was founded, more than 160 operas, or as some of them have been called, Music-Theatre pieces, have been commissioned and presented. Not one of those 160 plus operas has entered the repertoire.

Most have had a handful of performances and disappear forever because they have not connected with an audience...So why don't audiences of any significant number want to see new operatic work? It is my view that we need to reassess who we are playing to and make an active and deliberate connection with contemporary Australia.

We need to be informed by the culture of today that is in our own backyard and create new work that genuinely reflects the culture of our time and place. After all that's what Mozart did and that's how Verdi built his success. Part of Opera Australia's role as a leader in Australia's cultural life is to create new work, which ideally should tell our stories within the context of the operatic form. Creating this new work is expensive and as I've indicated, it has been virtually impossible to find an audience for this new repertoire.

So.... let me propose this. It may be that we need a national creative laboratory that would enable contemporary operatic repertoire to be presented nationally by Opera Australia, in association with the regional opera companies in each state, which has a driving imperative to create new Australian work that relates specifically to contemporary Australians. What is now known as Opera Conference, could become a new initiative for the creation and development of new Australian Opera...telling our stories within a contemporary operatic context.

The funds, which Opera Conference is now using to present standard repertoire, could be directed specifically towards the creation of new operatic repertoire with a clear purpose to connect to a substantial audience. In the short term, while we endeavour to establish a new audience, it's vital to communicate with that audience as clearly and as directly as possible and to elicit from those new audience emotional responses which intersect with those of our traditional audiences so that there might be a connection which joins different cultural and artistic responses.

This is not the forum for me to promote a social policy.... but.... the ethnicity of our vibrant communities must be included in our major arts organisations...in exactly the same way that the migrant influence on our culinary activities has been both profound and immensely popular. A patchwork quilt of individual artistic and cultural communities being an integral part of a broad artistic and cultural life should be of paramount importance to all of us.

The distinguished American music commentator and critic Alex Ross commented recently in the New Yorker magazine: "the question of where the money will come from is one that opera companies all over the world are anxiously pondering, whether they derive the better part of their funds from the state, as in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, or draw on private donors in the American style.

What the art form needs in either case is a persuasive justification for the expenditure." It is my view that this "justification" must come from a democratic support base that embraces the operatic form into the mainstream popular culture of our time. There has long been an expectation from a small but vocal group of people that Opera Australia exists only to serve them. As inflammatory as they may think this sounds, I do not subscribe to this philosophy.

I love singers... it's who I am and who I've been for most of my working life.... but...we produce operas for an audience.

A marvelous group of individuals, many of who are subscribers to Opera Australia, who pay a lot of money to attend the operas, which they love passionately.

Some of them are patrons and I am constantly overwhelmed not only by their generosity financially, but also their wonderful generosity of spirit.

Many of them however are not wealthy and they often save up, or pay off their tickets for months on end and it is our job to provide those ticket buyers with the best possible experience they can have...if the audience is not interested in what we are doing, or if we ignore what the bulk of our audience is telling us, then we are not only behaving irresponsibly, we will also see our audiences decline dramatically, and as a consequence the employment possibilities for singers and musicians will also be reduced substantially.

This situation also influences repertoire choices and even though there are singers who insist on telling me that they are now ready to sing *Poliuto* or something else from another little known opera, or composers and their supporters who complain about not enough new work, the statistics show quite clearly that the audience for that repertoire at the present time is limited to less than 5,000 people...in some cases substantially less. That means popular repertoire must "subsidize" the unpopular repertoire.

The popular repertoire is then regarded by this "claque" as inferior but begrudgingly necessary so that Opera Australia can do "what it should be doing". Consequently, because of this sense of entitlement, there exists an unfortunate attitude amongst a small group of people towards the popular audience, which is, to put it mildly, disappointing.

Despite the fact that I would love to present Donizetti's *Poliuto* or Messiaen's *St Francois Assisi* for example, as well as many other fascinating or rarely heard operas, the fact is we can't afford to do them. The global economic climate is extremely volatile to say the least and under our current funding structure we need to earn through ticket sales alone, \$56 million next year to maintain our current level of activity. That's right \$56 million excluding fundraising, sponsorship and government funding. Whether we like it or not, we are in the entertainment business and if audiences are not interested in buying tickets to our productions, and if we don't secure sponsors for those productions, then we are out of business.

Now I could garner great support for this speech from "the club" by demanding more government funding for the arts... that's what is expected from someone in my position to do when giving a speech of this importance.... but before I can do that, we all need to play to an audience that accurately reflects the demographic of contemporary Australia and we also need to remember that everyone who pays tax in Australia is indirectly supporting what we do.

Privileged access to significant amounts of public funds for a small group of people was the catalyst for the French Revolution and it's one of the reasons why the Middle East is undergoing such a dramatic political transformation right now. The next 10 years could well be the most provocative and volatile time in the history of arts funding in this country. In the UK and throughout Europe this has already begun...but it will accelerate over the next few years. The world has changed...you and I may not like it... but for better or worse, we had better get used to it.

All major arts organisations will need to secure more income from new sources but particularly from sponsors and donors. The American system will become the norm and we will need to be extremely nimble in how we adapt to this new arts world.

When reflecting on this situation, I'm reminded of what Charles Darwin said: "It is not the strongest that survive, or the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change". Now the AFL in particular, has embraced the rapidly changing demographic of Australia. The work that it is doing to create an audience from the grassroots of each community is exemplary and there is no better example of this than the development of the AFL in Western Sydney.

Creating an audience where there wasn't one and connecting new cultures to a strange new sport is a phenomenal achievement.

Even the incredibly conservative and patrician organisation known as Cricket Australia has been forced to think outside the square and look for new markets to sell its product, which is where 20/20 and Big Bash suddenly take centre stage. For those of us who love cricket, the changes, which are taking place within that sport, are not dissimilar to what is taking place right now in our arts world.

The darling of the establishment, Test Cricket, has been unable to find the audience that it enjoyed in the past and 20/20 cricket or Big Bash Cricket has become the income driver for the entire industry. It's much shorter, arguably more exciting, and there are a lot of "sixes" and "hat tricks" in a short space of time. The purists hate it and detest the popularization of their sacred game. They loathe what Kerry Packer did with his tremendously innovative World Series Cricket where the players wore colored uniforms.... shock...horror!! That was a national outrage!!

In the world of opera and classical music we are now in a situation where we must connect to a wider public in the same way as the AFL and to seriously examine what cricket has done with 20/20 and Big Bash.

Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour is one way to do this and we are very excited by the tremendous response we have received from sponsors and the public both nationally and internationally.

However, we also need to look at 20/20 versions of opera performances which might run in tandem with our test match opera.... Now I can hear the complaints, the outrage and insults that will be directed at me from "the club" already...but...cultures change and because of those changes, audience tastes change...sometimes very quickly.... and if we as creative artists don't respond to the changes which have already taken place in our society we will see the amount of opera presented decline dramatically....and at the same time we will see a decline in the standard of the work presented.

I find it peculiar that extremely successful productions of Shakespeare's plays can be cut, have the text in famous speeches moved from the beginning to the end, and often include texts from other writers in those same Shakespeare plays, and yet there is only admiration from the audience and the press for a wonderful theatrical experience!!

However, if a note of Mozart or Verdi is touched, there is a barrage of vitriol from "the club".... why is this so? William Powers, in his thought provoking book "Hamlet's Blackberry" suggests that the way our brains now work has been influenced by new technology, our attention spans are shorter and even the way novels are constructed has changed. We use different mechanisms to read a book such as iPads and now you can even read a book in "social mode". Consequently we need to change how we communicate the art we make to contemporary society and the use of digital technology is a vital tool in our repertoire.

This should be of major importance to all of us because we have become far less relevant to Australian culture than the sports that I've mentioned and our challenge now, is to engage with the notion of art as a popular cultural phenomenon in the same way that major art galleries have done.... and in reference to my earlier comment regarding audiences, major state and national galleries are now audience-driven and their success has been both striking and dramatic.

It's also interesting to observe that contemporary art has found an extremely large audience.

But it is the area of western contemporary classical music, or new music as it is now called, and contemporary opera that has failed to find a true connection to a significant audience. I've offered one possible solution to this problem by suggesting a change to the function of The Opera Conference, but we must also seriously examine why new work is substantially less popular than the standard repertoire.

This is not the case with contemporary plays. Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, while hardly being a new play, is regularly presented by theatre companies throughout Australia and even though critics may scorn and deride his work, David Williamson's plays are a very important part of the repertoire of every major Australian theatre company...audiences want to see them.

Can I say in conclusion that despite the enormous challenges we face, the growth of Opera Australia over the coming two years will be exceptional by any standard. We will play to more people in 2012 than the company has played to ever before in its history and by re-imagining what an opera company is, and means, in the 21st century, we have been able to democratize the operatic form for many thousands of people. The fact that Opera Australia's turnover will increase by \$30 million in 2012 alone is phenomenal in this difficult economic climate. I hasten to add that we will not have a \$30 million profit. I'm referring to a \$30 million increase in the overall budget.

This has been achieved because we have focused on making the art we are presenting as popular and diverse as possible, while at the same time making sure that everything we do is of the highest quality.

This is done by using the uniqueness of our place and by creating a popular contemporary context for what we are doing. And because we are engaging with a wide audience, we are placing the operatic art form firmly within the popular consciousness. So.... where is the line and where won't we go in terms of sacrificing the quality of our art.

While ever excellence in everything we do remains our primary priority we will ensure that our art maintains its integrity. Just because a painting or a performance is popular does not mean it is inferior. On the contrary, the greatest works of art are enormously popular. We will always ensure that the making of great art is our primary goal and we will do everything we possibly can to achieve that objective and to present the most interesting repertoire as possible.

But...we want as many people from the widest demographic to be part of this extraordinary experience and we will do our utmost to embrace a wide popular audience into our community, to play to as many people as we can and to see in our audiences, on our stages and in our orchestra pits, the faces of new and contemporary Australians, the faces of Aboriginal Australians, as well as our long term traditional supporters.

At Opera Australia we are committed to ensuring that great art embraces the faces, which represent Australia in the 21st century. Peggy I salute you and Ladies and Gentlemen I thank you for coming here this evening and for listening to what I've had to say.

© Lyndon Terracini 2011