

What matters in Australia today

Four perspectives

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Adelaide Town Hall, 128 King William Street, Adelaide

Jointly presented by the Australia Day Council of South Australia and The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre at UniSA

Presentation by Katrina Sedgwick, Festival Director, 2009 BigPond Adelaide Film Festival

So many things matter in Australia today:

- taking a principled stand and leading the way on addressing climate change
 - meaningful reconciliation and closing the gap between indigenous and non indigenous people
 - continuing to provide free access to education and health support for all of our community
 - continuing to provide support for those in need through welfare
 - getting real about our water supply
 - understanding that we as individuals, who perhaps take for granted our standard of living, do need to make hard choices and sacrifice some of our luxuries and habits to contribute to the changes our society, and indeed our planet, now demands from us

Across all of these issues, energy is required not only to make substantial change but also to preserve what we have in the face of difficult economic pressures. We need to be active, not passive – as a nation, in government, but also importantly as individuals who each contribute to our society – and who each consume precious resources from our world.

The way a nation is colonised or invaded always seeps into its national identity from then on. So, when the nation of Australia began as a terra nullius penal colony it established us as a nation that is anti authoritarian, self deprecating, identified through loyalty and mateship, a nation that sees itself as equal, as classless, as secular, as tolerant.

However whilst we allow difference it is within certain sometimes conservative limits, and rather than being equal we are in fact a nation with vast differences between rich and poor – a gap that, as with any capitalist society, continues to extend.

Yet we still have a national identity that overwhelms these realities.

We are a nation that looks outwards – we are interested in seeing the world, we love to travel – but as part of that we look overseas to acknowledge our successes and to justify our actions. Its not just manufactured goods we import but approval also.

Sometimes, we import ideas when, with long term investment we could generate them at home – and we allow our own creative capital to be ignored and exported without celebrating and indeed exploiting to the benefit of our nation.

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Our relaxed, laconic, understated national self pervades everything – and I love this Australian-ness. Our sense of Humour, our bravery and loyalty, our healthy dose of cynicism.

But it also leads to a more troubling passivity in our community – the ‘she’ll be right mate’ mentality can lead to our acceptance of the status quo, our dislike for tall poppies, our contempt for ‘the elite’.

Adelaide’s ongoing reputation around our nation [not always unfairly] is that we are a bit frumpy. Being known as the city of churches in part comes from the city being established by settlers – and to this day we remain influenced by one of my favourite acronyms - the OAFS – the old Adelaide families and the sense of establishment and conservatism that comes with that old money and sense of entitlement. We have been radical at times – but we are also a place that finds change a challenge – we can take years to make simple decisions – let alone difficult ones.

What matters for me in Australia today are ideas and imagination – lateral thinking, problem solving – thinking outside the square and then ACTING ON IT.

Being bold and taking risks – creatively, administratively, politically and energetically.

Working in the arts in Australia is an immensely inspiring community to be a part of. It is full of artists taking risks, believing in their ideas and going for it. Thinking big, problem solving, being lateral and creative.

Our finest artists, across our society and across the artforms, are making great work that challenges us, illuminates our lives, reveals truths and asks questions. These individuals and organisations are passionate about communicating what they have to say. In choosing to be artists they are often marginalised, committing themselves to a life without security or financial stability and being labelled in Australia – particularly in the worlds of media and politics – as self indulgent, pretentious, art farty, latte sipping wankers – which of course sometimes they are! But they are putting their money where their mouths are – taking risks and seeing their ideas through to realisation.

I think artists and their dynamic work processes provide a model many other sectors of the community could learn from. I’m not suggesting we should be unaccountable and entirely unbureaucratic – but I am astonished at how many wonderful ideas, that need to be implemented with urgency and energy, can suffocate and disappear in a swathe of red tape, newspaper polls, and a general fear not just of change but of maybe, possibly, upsetting some of the people, some of the time.

At the 2020 summit, an overwhelming recommendation to come from the arts stream was that the arts must play a central role in education. Its not that we want to create a huge number of aspiring artists - far from it – when it comes to numbers of artists less is more – too much mediocre art is created already and frankly many so called artists need to wake up to themselves and stop what they are doing immediately!

But engaging with the arts throughout schooling is vital for so many reasons – it teaches children to think laterally, to problem solve, to play with ideas outside the rules. This freedom of thought, this improvisation is vital for being creative in all aspects of your life. And this acceptance of new and wild and crazy ideas in a creative context is empowering and liberating for children and gives them tools for every other aspect of their learning.

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Plus being invited into the arts at a young age and shown that the arts is for everyone to enjoy gives our next generation the confidence and enthusiasm to engage with the arts throughout their life – to feel that the arts is for them. And at its best, this can give you wondrous and illuminating, challenging and thought provoking, entertaining and life changing experiences that can enrich and expand – and above all make people THINK.

Research and development in almost every field matters enormously in Australia today. Development not only of ideas but of people – the elite who show promise and who can ask the questions and even find us the solutions.

That means letting go of the idea that elite and elitism are dirty words. Sportsmen and women are comfortably elite – as a community we happily foster the excellence of the finest of our sportspeople. We all embrace the notion of seeking out kids who show promise and innate talent for sport and giving them the support and resources to reach their full potential – knowing full well that only a tiny percentage of them will grow to become the champions we love.

But in recent times, when the word ‘Elite’ is applied to ideas, to intellectual life, to the arts it has become a pejorative term.

Yet meaningful development of a talented artist or academic or scientist, over a long time frame can produce results that make our country immensely proud whilst challenging us and making us confront hard truths.

The AFF has an investment fund which recently has supported one of the most important films ever produced in Australia – SAMSON & DELILAH. Telling the story of two Indigenous teenagers living in a remote Aboriginal community, this film is not just a love story, and a stark and sometimes shocking insight into the reality of life for these young people, but quite simply an extraordinary work of art.

Director writer cinematographer Warwick Thornton was identified as a filmmaker with talent over a decade ago by Sally Riley, the manager of the Indigenous Unit at the Australian Film Commission – now Screen Australia.

This unit is unique in the arts in Australia in its long term support of talented practitioners. Selected filmmakers work with the unit over many years, developing scripts, learning about the business, being match made with colleagues and collaborators, being funded to create short films, to attend workshops, to write scripts – and finally to make a feature film.

SAMSON & DELILAH is the first feature to be made through this painstaking and long term process. What a result. At its very moving world premiere in February at the BigPond Adelaide Film Festival it received a standing ovation, and then went on to win our Audience Award.

It was selected to play in the Un Certain Regard competition at the Cannes Film festival this May – and last week won the Camera D’or prize at Cannes as the best first feature film.

Over its opening weekend in Australia SAMSON & DELILAH had the highest box office income per screen of any film in release – even beating Wolverine – and has the highest per screen income for a new Australian film since 2001.

This is in the climate where we constantly read how no-one wants to watch ‘depressing films’. Not true. We want to watch great films. We want to be challenged. And a first time film maker like

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Warwick Thornton can deliver us a truly great film after receiving the kind of elite training and support and investment required to develop a highly skilled professional.

Identifying talent and nurturing it, allowing a talented individual to reach their potential – or allowing an idea to be fully explored to its full potential – this is about elitism. About putting our resources carefully and strategically into Research & Development – in the arts and sciences – that possibly can lead to results that are rare and wondrous.

In the future, more than ever, our country is going to be about ideas and how we realise them. Let's embrace and meaningfully support the amazing creative capital that already exists here in our society. Let's allow our thinkers and artists and innovators to generate ideas and then let's implement them with courage, without compromise, with boldness and with conviction.

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