

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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**Adelaide Festival 2002**

The 2002 Adelaide Festival has been full of earnest innovations, sparkling surprises and reflective moments. It has also, for audiences at least, been an organisational shambles.

When director Peter Sellars introduced the theme of Truth and Reconciliation to the festival he was being both provocative and impertinent. It was not as though we needed to be told our responsibilities by a visiting American, especially one with so many brash ideas.

Such as persevering with the plan to turn the civic Victoria Square into Tandanyunga, the gathering place for the Kaurna people, and the centre for the festival's Indigenous program. For more than ten days Aboriginal artists from all over Australia gathered to perform and share their culture with visiting companies from New Mexico, South Africa and Aotearoa New Zealand. They also walked the streets of a capital city as welcome guests in a major festival.

With thematic threads running across art forms from dance and theatre to painting and crafts, media and film, the festival in Adelaide worked conscientiously to make culture, identity and social justice, matters of persistent urgency.

But it could have done a much better job. Some events relied too heavily on good intentions while others, including the free program, were disastrously under-publicised even on the festival's own website. The brochure, also, was needlessly impenetrable. No wonder people skedaddled over to the Fringe.

This festival has notoriously been bogged down with unwieldy structures, murky communication and sloppy management. At his farewell press conference on Tuesday, Sellars insisted on the need to let directors "be who they are". If only the charismatic 2002 director had played his natural game and provided the high profile public narrative the ambitiously interconnected program needed.

In his effort to create a democratic artistic process Sellars created a monster. The consultation was expensive and took too long, it also by-passed too many South Australians. And the appointment of ten Associate Directors impossibly garbled the process of program development. Besides having the quixotic task of raising sponsorship and insufficient recognition to publicise their plans, they worked in an administrative vacuum. Sue Natrass's arrival, just prior to the dismal program launch at the end of October last year, and her attempt to bring structure and financial accountability, was way too late.

Also, the plan to add more familiar fare to the festival- Barbara Cook, Nick Cave, BJ Ward and various other solo shows - only confused things. By then the Fringe had also beefed up its line-up with competing international shows, and the ten day Festival program - in effect eight days - was groaning with events, all competing with each other and, as we will no doubt see, slicing attendances to well below box office predictions.

Sue Natrass valiantly provided improvements to the Festival management, but her rescue package may well have obscured the symmetries of the original program and added to the overall deficit.

Festivals around the country, not just Adelaide, all face competition for talent and crippling international exchange rates. The new Rann government in South Australia now has the challenge of securing a cultural asset with a forty year history. The 2002 Festival has proven costly and its controversies badly managed, both politically and by its board, but the program has also intrigued and emotionally engaged international visitors and the community which hosted it. It has been a folly, but not a calamity.

2004 director, Bangarra Dance Theatre's Stephen Page has some consolidating to do and faces the problem that Sellars has already pre-empted the Indigenous content he may feel is his charter. To succeed he will need an astute and comradely general manager, a decent budget - the sort that Melbourne is now prepared to cough up - and any deficits from 2002 written off.

It will be money well spent. The Adelaide Festival is too good to lose. But the rivalry with the Fringe means that some smart choices are needed to bring back the broad audience that a large scale festival needs.

He claimed recently festivals are about diversity and cannot be represented by one person. That's OK in theory, but festivals invariably need a front person and this one was no different. Ironically, Sellars continued to represent the 2002 Festival even after he resigned as its director.

In past years, Robyn Archer, Barrie Kosky, Lord Harewood, Rob Brookman and Anthony Steel all had been similarly visible. It is notable that when Christopher Hunt stepped back from his excellent festival in 1994, it lost momentum and events, such as his Open Roof program of Asia Pacific arts, floundered without his advocacy.