

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Adelaide Review

It has been said that the 2002 Adelaide Festival has been misunderstood, that it was too innovative and far-sighted to be fully comprehended. That its impact will not be realised for years, say some. For a decade, says the former Director.

On the contrary, the Festival was very clear. Its purpose was empowerment and recognition to groups and creativity usually marginalised or colonised by hierarchical concepts of high culture. It was to privilege the local and the communal against the individual and virtuosic. It was to make us get real about the serious failures of our society to deal with Indigenous and social justice questions and to recognise that screen and media forms are the dominant modes in the digital economy.

One of the complications in dealing with Peter Sellars' vision is that his views are both prescient and cliched, freshly perceptive and, in the ways he himself frames them, hackneyed and unexamined. It is undoubtedly true that he took the Indigenous content of the Festival further than had hitherto been the case. I have previously noted Robyn Archer and Barrie Kosky's achievements but Sellars pushed the idea further.

In reclaiming Victoria Square as Tandanyungga and staging a series of cultural performances from various parts of Australia as well as New Mexico, South Africa and Aotearoa New Zealand, he and the associate directors made not only South Australians, but a national and international audience, pay attention to Aboriginal culture and the themes of Truth and Reconciliation. For eight days Indigenous artists were high profile guests in our city who not only performed memorably beside the imperious statue of Queen Victoria but attended performances in the Playhouse and participated in ceremonies and workshops at various venues around the city.

It has been reported that many valuable cultural interchanges took place - in the Intertwine project and during other cultural residencies. Among the scheduled performances, Black Swan's *The Career Highlights of Mamu* presented a complex and sometimes rickety mix of oral history, theatre and traditional dance. In *Skin* Bangarra Dance Company contrasted an aestheticised tableau of traditional women's culture with the contemporary trauma of deaths in custody, alcohol addiction and alienation among Aboriginal men. In *Bone Flute*, MAU Dance directed by Lemi Ponifasio,

brought together, ponderously and unsuccessfully, elements of Japanese butoh with Polynesian rituals and traditions.

But, whatever their merits, these events did not add up to enough to justify the expense and the planning time of a biennial festival. Having made a claim to raise questions and showcase culture, Sellars and his group bungled their opportunity. It was always going to be controversial to promote cultural diversity in the present climate of conservatism but to do so and then botch it, is reckless and hard to forgive. The Tandanyunga program, starting with the opening ceremony was a case in point. Even though it was equipped with a state of the art sound and lighting rig, the opening night didn't have a designated stage manager and some performers were distressed by the lack of preparation and inadequate miking. The event while containing many powerful moments was framed as a kind of New Age cultural eistedfodd.

The information on the free program throughout the week was confined to the festival's impenetrable brochure and reports in the daily paper. The website was not updated nor, in the absence of registration for the media contingent, were there email notifications either. Information about the country music concert on the final Saturday, for instance, remained sparse. And certainly there were no announcements from the Festival's publicity unit that Buddy Miller, a renowned performer with the Emmylou Harris band had been added as the headliner. It was as though the free program, since it couldn't actually lose any more money, had been left to fend for itself - and the numbers, even for the hip-hop concert, suffered accordingly.

It was obvious that attendances everywhere were thin. The excellent Shedding Light program of commissioned films had nearly full houses for The Tracker and the controversial Australian Rules - although there were only three screenings in each case - but the premiere for Ivan Sen's superbly understated Beneath Clouds was scandalously under-attended, as was the first night of Tony Ayres' Walking on Water. Similarly the expanse of empty seats at the latter performances of El Nino was an eerie sight.

The additional program added by Sue Nattrass at the behest of the Festival board seems never to have grafted on to the original framework of Peter Sellars' plan. The Barbara Cook ticket prices were steep and the other solo shows - BJ Ward, Patrick Dickson's Via Dolorosa, Max Gillies and the dance works by Ros Warby and Helen Herbertson, while individually creditable, seemed forlorn and disconnected.

Of course, the woes of the 2002 Festival go back much further than Sue Nattrass' valiant efforts to consolidate it. The lengthy and costly consultation stage, then the establishment of the ten Associate Directors created an unwieldy and uncommunicative structure which was always going to be in grief. Instead of focusing himself as the narrator, Sellars dispersed the task - as well as the accountability - and created a power vacuum which became a yawning chasm.

The Associates had all of the responsibility for raising sponsorship and none of the prestige and authority needed to make that happen. They were always on a hiding to nothing and it is clear that the experience of the Festival has been traumatic for them. If my comments are harsh, they are not directed at the often inexperienced Associates who seem only to have been thwarted, and in fundamental ways unsupported.

Many things weren't right about this Festival, particularly in its organisation, and I have asked these questions before - but when, a year ago, it was all going to hell in a handcart, where was the board, where was the general manager and where was the arts minister ?

At his parting press conference Peter Sellars hinted darkly at forces arrayed against him. It is clear that he was undermined as director and that his position became untenable but not before he had hugely contributed to his own predicament. In the guise of creating a democratic decision making process, he failed to provide leadership and has still never acknowledged his lack of judgement. It seems that, even on his return, he was only claiming credit for the festival's highlights and disavowing the rest.

I have said elsewhere that this Festival was a folly but not a calamity. However, in using the idealism of its themes as a shield for mediocrity and in claiming many individual examples of cultural rapprochement as justification for squandering a considerable budget on a flimsy and undeveloped program, Sellars and other apologists have been disingenuous. The indisputable achievements this time came at a needlessly high price and it is precisely because of the importance of its objectives that this Festival should have been smarter, more creative and more strategic. And it is no good blaming the press - or the bewildered audience for staying home, or hightailing it to the Fringe.

The Adelaide Festival had all kinds of bad bounces - and of course the Fringe doesn't have to bankroll its acts, it is the arts equivalent of pyramid selling - but it could have done so much better. The staunch supporters of its ideals deserved better, the artists who participated deserved better, and those who believe that a large-scale Festival - even one with single-minded objectives - must have broad strategies and inclusive programming, deserved better.