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Arts Festivals - Are They Necessary?

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*Yours as  
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ARTS FESTIVALS - ARE THEY NECESSARY?

By DON DUNSTAN.

I think I should say at the outset that I doubt whether the question asked in the title of this article is in fact answerable. Necessity is a very undisciplined word; it needs to be fenced off with barbed qualifications. But I will say that I think certain kinds of Arts Festivals in civilized countries are highly desirable. I simply do not think a case could be made for their absolute necessity. The arts of a community are ultimately the products of its recreation; they come into full flower after the crops have been gathered, the machines have been oiled, and the plague has ended.

Nevertheless, in the recording of a Nation's achievements history has always placed the arts and sciences on the same shelf, as it were, as economic power or efficiency and military might or cunning. Few nations are remembered solely for their battles, though quite a number are remembered for their wealth. We also have the example of a few societies which fought and banded badly and yet left mankind glorious artefacts and interesting ideas. Their statues still stand and their books are still read while the earthworks of their neighbours are ploughed in and the cannon rust. There is a moral to be drawn from this for Australia.

Arts Festivals are of course not at all new to the human race. In fact they are as old as the corroboree. There were the Egyptian Coronation Festival Plays, three thousand years BC, and the great drama festivals of classical Greece. European kings and autocrats delighted in showing off with grand festive entertainments for their courts, and engaged favourite artists to organize

them. It was with the spread of learning and leisure in the 19th and 20th centuries that the high arts were removed from their aristocratic mould and placed more or less within the reach of anyone who wished to indulge. The works and events had not been so accessible for two thousand odd years.

But there is an astronomical distance between the peasants' Dionysia of Ancient Greece and the Jacaranda or Butterfat Festivals of provincial Australia. And there is an equal distance between, say, the theocratic Osirian Festival of Canopus which Herodotus described and the municipal Edinburgh Festival of today. For one thing, the ancient Festivals were basically religious in nature; audiences and artists watched and participated in events which were designed to celebrate the spiritual status quo. That the great Greek dramatists survived such establishment business is to a certain extent the measure of both their ability as writers and of the uniquely human archetypes of the Greek pantheon. But in the democratic West now, and in Australia, we have secular arts and arts festivals. What we go to see are the works of individual artists or groups of artists, and if their vision is political or religious, it is individually motivated. There is no official line, though there may from time to time be a consensus.

I mentioned the Edinburgh Festival specifically because it is the Festival upon which the Adelaide Festival is said to have been modelled. In fact, the Adelaide Festival in crucial ways is not at all like Edinburgh's, where a significant part of the programme is provided by British artists and performers. They are in a sense at home, performing to a home audience and displaying the

achievements of a vital national artistic effort. It is true that there is at Edinburgh a tradition of having important European theatre productions, for instance, in the Royal Lyceum Theatre, but nevertheless effectively the Festival's major achievements have been, as it were, local ones.

By contrast, the Adelaide Festivals have been largely imported, with the result that every two years there has been a two week cultural feast of foreign dishes that often haven't travelled well and sometimes seemed predigested. The pieces de resistance were the big European (preferably British) stars who were nightly carried on high through the doors of the Festival Club to the tumultuous applause of a Festival social matriarchy. Incomprehensibly gorged and sated, the participants have emerged from these feasts self-satisfied and entirely complacent about the fast of almost famine proportions that faces them. Only occasionally will they emerge to eat at the tables of local and national artists whose cooking, though often as good and occasionally better than that supplied at the feasts, lacks the allure of foreign names.

So I would say at this point that Arts Festivals of the solidly imported kind are clearly not necessary in Australia. It is good and out-going to observe and learn from the works and ideas of other countries, but it is just as important to celebrate our own achievements which, let it be said, are quite considerable and demand honour and encouragement. Sir Robert Helpmann has in fact indicated the way in which this can be done. He spoke for Adelaide, but his words apply equally to the Perth, Moomba or Butterfat Festivals. He argued firstly that the great fast should be done away with and that a real effort be made to establish a

year-round cycle of worth-while events. He then argued for a culminative Festival that would be far more representative of Australia's own talents with, say, a few first class people brought in from overseas to perform with, direct, or conduct, local theatre companies, ballet companies, or orchestras. He suggested further that the Federal Government should make private grants to the Festival, or to artists or special projects, tax-deductible. And then finally he said that there should be a far more authoritative role given to professional artists in the job of designing and implementing the overall programme.

These are very sensible suggestions and could very easily be carried out. Financially they mean a festival without crippling travelling costs and transport overheads; artistically, they mean Australian companies and performers would be able to work with and learn from highly talented guests. It would also mean a Festival with a much greater degree of exclusiveness, which is what a Festival should have, since Australian companies would not be forced to tour their festival productions interstate to cover transport costs.

However, the danger inherent in all large-scale artistic planning is what might be called committee-proliferation, where generally well-meaning city worthies find themselves pontificating on matters about which they are often very ignorant and more often very conservative, not to say costively puritanic. Artistic decisions made by committees of this kind, even when professionals are represented, are naturally cautious, whereas a nationally oriented festival would need dynamic direction, new ideas, and an ability to be adventurous. The direction would have to be informed, intelligent, subtle and flexible, and also capable of rocking

the artistic boat. It would have to guard itself against top-heaviness.

It seems to me that ideal cultural organizations are therefore ones in which the board looks after the banking and leaves the real decisions to, depending on the size of the undertaking, a small handful of inspired professionals. As with the Sydney Opera House, our cultural organizations have for too long been planned from the outside looking in, that is from the board room looking across into the studio. With the Opera House the result has been attractive architectural shells that have no relevance to what is to go on inside or to what Sydney needs in the way of community-oriented theatre buildings. With arts festivals there have been similar exercises in status-seeking, so that we have often been provided with shells without substance. To repeat, arts festivals are not an absolute necessity, but they are highly desirable. And it is desirable, in fact if they are to do their job it is necessary, that the gulf between the board room and the studio be closed.

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