

artsaustralia berlin 02: The culturally complex Australian body in Germany

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Die Welt critics Heine and Jasper remarked in their review of the Australian Indonesian music theatre production *The Theft of Sita*, that it stems 'from that part of the world which the geo-economists insistently repeat will have a determining influence both economically and culturally on the century which has just begun'. In the context of Jean François Lyotard's conception that tradition is a matter of time, as opposed to content (34), Heine and Jasper's observation re-positions Australia in relation to the international community and in doing so, Europe, the undisputed centre of the western temporal tradition. The Australia, as the composer Liza Lim has pointed out, 'known as 'the antipodes', a place diametrically opposed to other regions on Earth (specifically Europe) ... a place where one is often made conscious of one's relationship to *somewhere else*'¹. How then are Australian policy makers relating to Europe, and more specifically Germany, at the outset of the 21st century? And just what is the culturally complex Australian body in the title of this paper?

Around 35 million people annually attend performances in theatres and concert halls in Germany. As the world's third largest economy and with a population of over eighty million, Germany is a key production, co-production and presentation market in the international arts industry. The expenditure on the arts by its capital, Berlin, represents the largest investment of any European city on arts and cultural activity². Australian contemporary cultural product is still relatively unknown in Germany. As a consequence, the Australia Council, the Federal government's arts funding and advisory body, in conjunction with the Australia International Cultural Council (AICC) has targeted Berlin as a centre from which to promote Australian arts to German, and by extension European, presenters, producers and audiences in 2002 and 2003.

Berlin, following the collapse of its ruling coalition in June 2001, is clearly in a period of intense transition – political, economic and cultural – as it asserts itself as a key player in central and Eastern Europe³. However, its extraordinary cultural profile as a city with one of the world's largest film festivals, three opera houses, and with numerous state and independent theatres and concert halls, continues to attract significant international attention.

In such a competitive market place what distinguishes the Australian promotion **artsaustralia berlin 02**⁴, which was launched at the Hebbel Theater Berlin in June this year, is that it has been conceived of as a sustained program of activity, as opposed to a discrete festival. **artsaustralia berlin 02** is a six month program of contemporary Australian performance, literature, visual arts and film featuring eleven events and over ninety artists at Berlin's major cultural venues and festivals. Part of a three to five year international strategy,

¹ Lim, Liza. Third Annual Glanville-Hicks Address, Sydney Opera House Studio, 15 September 2001. Transcript of paper provided by Liza Lim.

² Berlin has a cultural budget of € 373 million in 2002.

³ Berlin's ruling coalition collapsed as a result of financial scandal and the disclosure of significant debt. As a consequence, Berlin's cultural budget is under constant threat of reduction as part of major cut-backs in public spending.

⁴ For detailed information on the **artsaustralia berlin 02** program refer to: www.ozco.gov.au/issues/berlin

the Australia Council's Audience & Market Development Division is in the process of negotiating long-term relationships between artists and cultural institutions in Australia and Germany.

What is striking about a high percentage of the Australian work attracting German presenters and producers is that it is not only innovative in its exploration of artistic forms, but it often typifies what Homi Bhabha discusses as the performative nature of cultural communication. That is, the translational, intersecting and transitory basis of cultural signification.

Elision Ensemble's *Yuè Lìng Jié (Moon Spirit Feasting)*, a contemporary opera based on the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, with a libretto in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and a colloquial English-Malaysian dialect by novelist Beth Yahp and a score by composer Liza Lim, opened the **artsaustralia berlin 02** program in June at the Hebbel Theater Berlin. With puppets, riddles, song contests, a karaoke session and a Daoist sex manual scene, *Yuè Lìng Jié* juxtaposed the divine and the profane, which are important points of intersection for Lim (Davenport 49). Billed as 'hybrid culture' by the August 2002 edition of *Opernwelt*, this work challenged any of the stereotypes that Berlin audiences might have had concerning contemporary Australian music theatre or the cultural contexts Australian artists draw upon. In Lim's words,

As soon as one starts looking closely at what that culture is [Chinese] and what it might comprise, one sees that it is not a unitary thing at all. The rough and ready contemporary opera performances offered to the spirits in Penang are a world away from the perfections of Beijing opera and their ritual context would certainly be regarded as a relic of feudalistic superstition in modern China. From a European point of view, this very hybridity would perhaps be regarded as an impurity, less 'authentic' and less 'Chinese' than something coming from mainland China. In reality, there are many 'Chinas' and Chinese cultures.

What then is the culturally complex Australian body? This term, coined by Keith Gallasch, the editor of the national performing arts broadsheet *RealTime*, is indicative of the shift in perceptions about Australian culture in a contemporary context. As a consequence, it is worth quoting at length Gallasch's conception of the socio-historical manifestations that have resulted in the culturally complex Australian body.

'Australian performance vibrates with the energy of a distinctive Australian body - not an inherited monolithic Anglo-Celtic, masculine body, but an increasingly complex, multicultural, even bionic body.⁵

The appeal of this bold physicality is integral to a cultural tradition that has defined itself since the 19th century in terms of a hostile landscape and of sporting prowess. Beating the British at cricket was a meaningful way for the colonial child to challenge the parent Empire. Australians, their politicians and the mass media continue to revel in international sporting victories.

Australia's vigorous physicality is rooted in its convict, working class and lower middle-class origins - urban battlers and rural pioneers, Stoic, reticent and wary of high culture and the intellect. Compounding this is the image of the Australian bushman and the fraternalism of mateship promoted since the first major surge of national feeling in the 1890s. Until recent times the iconic Australian body has been male, eschewing the arts and the intellect associated (unlike in Europe) with the feminine. This is also a body which has been admired as eternally

⁵ The bionic body that Gallasch mentions is a reference to the Australian artist Stelarc, who began working with a robotic arm in the late 1970s and whose high-tech experiments, ingesting transmitters, for example, superseded his earlier high profile work, which involved suspending himself from meat hooks inserted into his flesh.

young (Federation of the states was not achieved until 1901), an image amplified by an enduring sense of the sacrifice of the young Australian male body. The indignities of the Boer War, the losses at Gallipoli in World War I (celebrated April 25th annually as ANZAC [Australia & New Zealand Armed Corps] Day), the Great Depression and the Vietnam War sustained this vision. At its worst, this body has eclipsed all others, the bodies of women, Indigenous Australians and immigrants; at its best it has generated pride and pleasure in an uncomplicated sense of national identity.

However, the waves of immigration and social change following World War II have created a more culturally complex Australian body. Bodies from other nations and races, Indigenous and women's bodies, bodies with disabilities, and gay and lesbian bodies demand to be recognised as integral to Australian culture. For more and more Australians the arts and the intellect have now become part of the everyday.' (38)

This 'everyday' expounds significantly upon H. C. Coombs', the founding Chair of the Australia Council, vision of the arts and national identity in 1970s Australia. For Coombs, 'Supreme virtuosity in the arts, as in sport, provides the opportunity for a kind of vicarious achievement, which gives widespread personal satisfaction and contributes to a sense of national or community identity. Australia is the land of Melba, of Joan Sutherland, of Robert Helpmann, of Judith Anderson, as well as of Don Bradman, Rod Laver and Phar Lap.' (40)

The very terms of reference have shifted. Australian artists are demonstrating a growing awareness of, and engagement with, Australia's positioning in the Asia Pacific region. It's an engagement that contrasts starkly to the sense of Empire, the association with Covent Garden, inspired by Melba and Sutherland.

Presented by the Hebbel Theater, the performing arts component of **artsaustralia berlin 02** is perhaps the most pertinent example of the way in which Australian artists are re-negotiating conceptions of identity and history. In September, the Hebbel Theater will present the Performing Lines productions, *The Theft of Sita* and *Blood Links* by William Yang, as well as *The New York Gig* by Robyn Archer and Paul Grabowsky.

The Theft of Sita is the result of collaboration between Australian composer Paul Grabowsky in association with the Balinese composer I Wayan Gde Yudane and director Nigel Jamieson. More than one hundred and fifty shadow puppets accompanied by a jazz-infused gamelan score, retell the ancient Indian Ramayana Sanskrit myth against the backdrop of the contemporary socio-political climates of Australia and Indonesia. In *Blood Links* solo performer William Yang traces his Chinese background through a series of slides that interweave cross-continental familial connections, severed and intact.

artsaustralia berlin 02 is a multifaceted approach to developing new audiences for Australian arts by generating exchange and dialogue about contemporary cultural issues, political and social, through an exploration of innovative artistic practices and forms.

Australian history, based on the subjugation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, was integral to the exhibition *People in a Landscape*, an overview of recent Australian printmaking from the mid 1990s to the present day, which was shown in Berlin in June and July. This collection provided a rare opportunity for German audiences to experience a number of powerful works produced by Indigenous printmakers, many of whom live in remote rural communities in Australia.

Other highlights of the **artsaustralia berlin 02** program include Choreographer Phillip Adams, who will participate in the annual International Dance Festival and Ros Crisp, currently artist-in-residence at Berlin's Tanzfabrik. At the Tanzfabrik, Crisp is developing her new solo work *raft* with sound artist David Corbet. The Berliner Jazzfest will feature a double bill of The Sandy Evans Trio and The World According to James in November.

In the context of literature, literaturWERKstatt presented Amanda Stewart at *Weltklang – Nacht der Poesie* and at the Kulturbrauerei in July; the Bücherfest hosted a reading by Peter Carey from his Booker Prize winning novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang* at historic Bebelplatz; and the International Literature Festival will present Phillip Gywnne, Sonya Hartnett and John Tranter in September.

In December **artsaustralia berlin 02** will wrap up with a major presentation of Australian film coordinated by the Australian Film Festival at the Arsenal cinema at Potsdamer Platz.

The long-term objectives of **artsaustralia berlin 02** are underpinned by the relationships that have been established with German presenters and producers, who have access to a broader European touring network. *The Theft of Sita*, for example, will tour to venues and festivals with a history of co-production with the Hebbel Theater Berlin: the Aarhus Festival, Rotterdamse Schouwburg and TheaterSpektakel Zurich. As a consequence, the **artsaustralia berlin 02** program has been largely determined by local artistic directors, and in particular Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann, Deputy Director, Hebbel Theater Berlin and Artistic Director, TheaterSpektakel Zurich⁶. This approach has enabled artistic directors to select Australian work as part of their normal program; work which is appropriate for their audiences and networks. In addition, it is based on a clear financial investment by the presenter in Australian cultural product. This infers a risk on the part of presenters, and in doing so attests to a belief in the quality of Australian arts and its ability to attract audiences and impact culturally in Europe.

To facilitate this process the Australia Council hosts in collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade visits to Australia by key presenters and producers. The Visiting International Publishers program has brought a number of German publishers to Australia, and every two years the Australian Performing Arts Market attracts an increasing number of international delegates. To complement this activity the Audience & Market Development Division of the Australia Council supports Australian representation at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the most important date in the publishing industry's calendar, and Cologne's contemporary music fair, PopKomm.

The following quotation from a letter by Schwaegermann to the Australia Council is indicative of not simply the success of these programs, particularly given that Schwaegermann has programmed five Australian works in the 2002 TheaterSpektakel festival, but the future direction of Australian arts in an international context.

After my visit to Australia I arrived back to a Europe that ... appears less open minded towards the future. There is a lot to do here if we really want to step into the 21st century. It is my impression that the next generation of Australian artists will be free to create new

⁶ Schwaegermann will continue to act as the Deputy Director of the Hebbel Theater until the end of 2002, as well as artistically direct TheaterSpektakel Zurich.

forms of expression. In contrast, the 'weight' of cultural systems and traditions in Europe is at times limiting.⁷

In Berlin where the urban environment is so heavily endowed with historical meaning, Australian artists are carving their own reputation as artistically innovative and exciting, and above all culturally complex.

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⁷ Letter to Philip Rolfe, Director, Audience Development & Advocacy, Australia Council, 22 March 2000. Provided by Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann