

The State of Theatre

Speaker: The Hon. Bob Debus, MP, Attorney General and NSW Minister for the Environment and Minister for the Arts shares his views on the state of theatre and its future directions.

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By Tracy Ellis

Bob Debus was appointed Minister for the Arts in 2005 and has also been Minister assisting the Minister for the Arts at various times over the past ten years.

He is a law graduate who has worked as a publisher, lawyer and ABC broadcaster. In 1970 he was executive producer of the Department of Radio Talks and Documentaries at the ABC, and from 1988-94 held the position of executive director of Community Aid Abroad and the Freedom from Hunger campaign.

As well as an avid interest in third world issues, Bob likes reading, bushwalking and, fortunately, theatre.

Tonight, he was here strictly in his capacity as NSW Minister of the Arts – a ministry he says he coveted for a long while, while Bob Carr gave him "a few morsels and even fewer tickets" – to discuss the current state of theatre in NSW.

"Theatre is a fragile patient in a time of difficult medical transition," says Debus, "moderately sedated, but still capable of walking ... due caution has got to be exercised. It is not in a perfect state."

While the focus of tonight's topic was theatre, Debus began by illustrating its close relationship to the film and television sectors in Australia.

"Theatre was, for at least a generation, quietly subsidised by the earnings of actors and directors and writers and stage managers from **Homicide, A Country Practice, Water Rats, Blue Heelers, Hey Dad,**" explains Debus, "Programs whose equivalents are no longer going to air. Reality TV has replaced them with the kind of cheap, downmarket amateur hour of **Big Brother** and the unrivalled grace of Derryn Hinch doing the tango in **Dancing With The Stars**."

"The money actors used to make and add to the six months they spent each year in the theatre is consequently not there now, and its vision is receding like a recent, lost Golden Age."

Production in the film sector has also fallen and while, as Debus says, films like **Look Both Ways** and **The Oyster Farmer** show how good Australian film can be, fewer local films are being made now than in 1971.

The ABC's drama output has plummeted from 108 hours a year to a figure that could be as low as eight hours this year.

But a lack of appreciation for the theatre has long been bi-partisan in Australia. "Neither major political party has embraced theatre in the way that we see elsewhere," says Debus.

In many European countries, theatre is fundamental to the way life is lived and how it's discussed. "It's called a culture and provides, in Shakespeare's words, 'the very age and body of the time'." Says Debus.

While Australia, it seems, wallows in an ongoing cultural cringe where theatre is frequently "marginilised, mocked, belittled and sidelined as a dated hobbie of the 'latte quaffing elite'".

Compared to the BBC, even our personal best of 108 hours is pretty paltry. The British government, as well as funding their national theatre to the tune of A\$60 a seat (while the Sydney Theatre Company gets about \$6 a seat), keeps up a healthy pace of local television production through it's national broadcaster. BBC1 alone is expected to produce 880 hours of British drama this year, and at the other BBC channels the figure is around 1600 hours.

But here, "TV, as in film and theatre, is being tailored to our perceived tastes," says Debus.

When their budgets are stretched, theatre companies are forced to mount productions of tried and tested work – work that is more commercial, less controversial and generally a safer bet for generating bums on seats and keeping corporate sponsors happy. "But funding pressure is threatening theatre's capacity to mount productions that actually challenge us," says Debus. He insists that theatre "cannot be allowed to become a kind of fast food" and lists five reasons why we should value it:

"It can reflect our cultural identity in a way that cannot be captured in other artforms; we can see life through somebody else's eyes; it brings new dimensions to old stories; it is escapism, it can be bleak and unsettle us; and there are no takes, like in television or in film."

Debus points out that State Labor has also done much to improve arts infrastructure over the last decade and has a track record that goes as far back as the premiership of Neville Wran, who in the 1980s established a venue in a disused wharf on Sydney Harbour that would become the home of the STC.

More recently, they have undertaken the redevelopment of Belvoir St, the opening of the Sydney Theatre, the Carriageworks development and the new Utzon refurbishment at the Opera House.

But the picture he paints is of an arts ministry doing all it can to spread the available funds around between the state's various hungry artistic sectors while waiting for the Federal government to throw them a bone.

The State government, I am afraid, is unable to mount a comprehensive rescue plan for this sector," says Debus, "NSW does not have a \$12 billion budget surplus."

After a "a near decade in cost-cutting" and growth in corporate sponsorship as a means of funding, the effects are being felt in the theatre sector as a lack of vitality.

For instance, Bell Shakespeare, ironically, cannot often afford the required cast sizes for Shakespeare's plays and has to resort to finding other Jacobean plays with fewer roles to fill.

And there are fewer new Australian plays being staged by our major companies. "Cold economics takes you back into the risk-free zones of no great excitement, no great national wisdom at all," says Debus. Theatre should "provide a provocative night out, not a Sunday lunch at Mum's".

Corporate sponsorship is up by 18 per cent since 1998 and private donations are also up by 45 per cent, which would be good news if those new income sources weren't fulfilling a shortfall in government funding.

Sponsors can be fickle and corporate sponsorship doesn't last forever, "as the MCA found out with Telstra, a golden age of corporate funding can vanish overnight," says Debus, and perhaps it is not for big business or private philanthropists to ensure the health, wealth and vitality of our theatre anyway. "That should be an ongoing concern of government. It's government's role and responsibility."

Ideally, Debus would like to see arts policies being formulated that didn't say anything about funding but just illustrated the role that arts can play in the community, "a bonding, a healing, a region of toys and song and fireworks and games that build the muscles of our minds and civilize our society," he says. "Words or gestures should indeed count as much as money."

Politicians have historically directed some suspicion towards theatre, and the current political climate is no exception with the introduction of new sedition laws, although Debus concedes that "Labor, too, has had its share of CIA types."

When you add to that the fact that, in politics, "backroom hardheads calculate, almost certainly, that no marginal seat has ever changed hands based on theatre funding," you begin to see why getting more funding is such a battle.

But there is a morsel of good news. Debus used the SAMAG seminar to announce "two modest proposals" – a script assessment service and a mentorship scheme for new and emerging writers.

Debus quoted Sydney Morning Herald theatre correspondent Stephen Dunne, who wrote in his column, and repeated at a SAMAG seminar on theatre writing last year, "fixing problems at script stage is very cheap as opposed to wasting \$50,000 of taxpayer's money on producing sad rubbish that benefited from a kick-arse, no hedge un-jumped and partially untruthful funding application."

The Australian Writer's Guild ran a successful mentorship program for a number of years until the money dried up. Debus announced funding of \$52,000 to enable the Australian Writer's Foundation to take over that initiative and offer four mentorship projects over the next year.

Throughout Debus' speech, and the many audience questions that followed, hung the frustration of knowing that the Federal Government continues to trumpet its \$12 billion surplus while starving the states of some much-needed extra cash. "What could we do with another \$10 to \$20 million in the arts in NSW," asks Debus, "Its morning tea for the Federal Government, just their Arnott's biscuits."

For details on SAMAG seminars and membership: www.sama.org.au or info@samag.org