Australian National University

ANU Centre for European Studies Briefing Paper Series

Culture and Contact: Europe, Australia and the Arts

Robyn Archer AO

Vol. 4 No. 8 (December 2013)

ISSN 1838-0379

ANU COLLEGE OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ANU Centre for European Studies
ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences
1 Liversidge Street, Building 67C
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
W: http://ces.anu.edu.au/
F: +61 2 6125 9976

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Culture and Contact: Europe, Australia and the Arts

Robyn Archer AO
Creative Director, Centenary of Canberra

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we gather on tonight, the Ngnunnawal and Ngambri people and pay respects to their owners past and present, also acknowledging any other first people here this evening.

I will preface this lecture by saying that it will be the first of some six addresses I give in this second half of the Canberra Centenary year, and I will use each of them to focus on different parts of the Centenary program. Together, this series will act as a kind of chronicle of the year – and it's entirely appropriate that the focus of this first, is on the cultural relationship between Europe and Australia, and its bearing on one of the core streams of programming for the Centenary of Canberra. Things have changed a lot since the formation of the European Union, and significantly 2013- 14 is a period during which the EU is offering welcome special support to projects which represent Australian – European collaboration. But I need to start with Europe, rather than the EU.

When the name Canberra appears, the association is largely with the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. There are thousands of things which, as with any city's rich fabric, could be associated with Canberra; but these pale to an anonymous backdrop behind the centre-stage drama of federal politics.

There are the globally scientific achievements of the CSIRO, or the John Curtin Centre for Medical Research here at the ANU, or the Deep Space Tracking Station at Tidbinbilla; the treasures held on behalf of the Australian people in the national collecting institutions in Canberra, all recently profiled in Betty Churcher's new guide Treasures which the Centenary invested in.

Other aspects of wonder include the design of this city, planned along the Garden City or Ideal City models favoured by Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin, and the best surviving example in the world; or the fertile local visual arts and music scenes; or perhaps just its beautiful seasons and their life-affirming changes such as we feel now in a crisp exquisite spring. These are often ignored in the light of Canberra's role as the seat of government, and especially in times such as these next few weeks.

Perhaps most invisible in the capital till now is its local Indigenous community. While Canberra has been the site of many important decisions affecting the national status of Australian

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, there has been little to reflect, outside Canberra, the presence of various first peoples who have been in the region for tens of thousands of years.

During my time in Canberra, as Creative Director of the Centenary of Canberra (this European Capital of Culture style year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the naming of a planned capital for the new Commonwealth of Australia established in 1901), I have learned many things about the Indigenous habitation of this region. That the norm is to have to learn, is, I have come to understand, the result of living in a country which was colonised. Still, when I was growing up in Adelaide in the 1950s and 60s, 170 years after colonisation, our senses remained deceived, our knowledge deprived, about the original inhabitants of the land into which we were born.

Many different things flow from this. As the Centenary of Canberra has offered a kind of year-long festival, let me start by using, as example, festivals, which have become significant hubs of arts and culture worldwide. If Europe's festivals, with centuries old forerunners of seasonal or religious celebrations, drew on their cultural roots (the first Edinburgh Festival, for instance, had Shakespeare), why was Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander culture not at the heart of the first Perth or Adelaide festivals? They also, indeed, had Shakespeare.

It has taken a long time to open the well-funded festival spaces to Indigenous arts, to get to the point where it was a no-brainer for me to place Indigenous culture at the heart of these Centenary celebrations. To all these anomalies there is really just one key – colonisation. While there are many and varied wholly positive connections to Europe (indeed, my own career would be very different had it not been for my own somehow accidental interaction with European cultures - I'll say something about this later), it is the legacy of colonisation that for a long time determined our cultural behaviours.

And we should not imagine that those behaviours are entirely resolved even now: at the start of my planning four years ago, there were any number of questions as to why Indigenous arts and culture should play such a role in Canberra's 100th birthday. For me it is obvious. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders played no role in the nation-building moments of either Federation or the debate around, and planning of, a new capital for the new Commonwealth. If, as it has recently been expressed in our Forum The Future Journey of Democracy that the clue to effective democracy anywhere in the world is simply 'inclusion', then this element of programming sought to give profile to those who had been excluded one hundred years ago and more. Also of course it simply sought to express the riches and diversity of contemporary Indigenous culture in Australia – and where better to do that than in the national capital?

The entrusting of the expression of one's culture to someone of another culture is a delicate transaction. So it is a sign of the continuing ties between the European and Australian cultural elite that of the five major flagship arts festivals in Australia, four are directed by European men:

and at the same time Simone Young wields her baton in Hamburg, Barrie Kosky is the Intendant of the Komische Oper in Berlin, Sir Jonathan Mills is in the middle of his 7th Edinburgh Festival, Tim Walker manages the Royal Philharmonic in London, Wendy Martin is programming at South Bank there, the Artistic Director of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, Nicholas Milton, is a rising star in the world of European conducting , and Daniel Keene's plays are still produced much more often in France, in translation, than they are here in Australia. Despite the increasing clamps on global mobility, especially for certain artists and artists from certain countries, there is no impediment to mobility at the top.

But some parts of the relationship still merit questioning. When our major galleries show French art (French Masterpieces, Lautrec, Monet) or British (Turner for instance) and especially with associated brands such as Musee d'Orsay, Giverny, the Tate, Australian audiences flock to these lavish blockbusters. That is great, and who am I, who have had so many opportunities to see these works in Europe, to deny the pleasure to Australians who do not have those opportunities of travel and cultural exploration. I don't deny them. But I do also observe and acknowledge that there are far less takers for Indigenous or Asian art in exactly the same spaces. Australia's cultural benchmark is still Europe, and for the broader population as far as painting goes, it is actually French – old French, that is.

So, let's switch to Europe for a moment

The name Dragan Klaic is well known to cultural practitioners and academics throughout Europe. Dragan was a theatre scholar and cultural analyst. Born in Belgrade, he was a citizen of Europe, an inhabitant at large of the EU itself, and passionate about the potential power of arts festivals. Dragan died prematurely in 2012, and Christopher Maughan and Franco Bianchini at De Montfort University, Leeds, are putting together a book which will be a tribute to his research into festivals. I am lucky to be a contributor.

I might also add in proffering my credentials to say anything at all about Europe, that I am currently the only Australian resident member of the European House of Culture, and a mentor in the European Festivals' Association's Atelier program that I have joined in Varna, Singapore, Izmir, and Ljubjiana. I am glad to say that of the 35 young festival director/managers we have mentored each year, there are now always some Australians, and that two previous participants have worked in the Centenary Programme team. In this instance, a wholly European institution continues to mentor bright young Australians in the cultural sphere.

Dragan Klaic's faith in festivals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as a uniting cultural force, seems to have had much in common with the altruistic beginnings in the mid 1940s of the Edinburgh Festival, about which George Steiner wrote in his 1997 A Festival Overture:

> "Its proud and joyous image of an Edinburgh in Europe, of the Festival as the enactment of a European communion (a more demanding word than 'community') looked to an eclipse of tribalism, of sectarian violence, of brute power-relations. This foresight of hope had, after Europe's near self-slaughter, every rational legitimacy"
>
> George Steiner, A Festival Overture, 1997

While it is true that post-war Edinburgh desperately needed new economic drivers, there's no reason to doubt the founders' desires for a cultural framework that might help to pull Europe together again. Dragan's desire was to deconstruct the silos of national identity, and construct in their place platforms on which the differences in language and practice could be better understood and shared. While Greece's former Minister for the Arts, Melina Mercuri's desires for better understanding between the different cultures of Europe resulted in many positive collaborations and much-needed sources of mobility for artists through the European Capital of Culture program, that program has also bred a kind of necessary civic and regional bragging and competitiveness that I doubt Dragan would have found productive.

International arts festivals in Australia were first built entirely on the Edinburgh model. When first Perth in Western Australia, and then Adelaide in South Australia, cloned that model to their relatively isolated cities, the core desire was to bring 'culture' to those cities. Not that Perth and Adelaide lacked artists and performances, but those who had been to Edinburgh felt that Australian audiences were rarely exposed to the 'best' of culture. The significantly named Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and entrepreneurs such as Ken Brodziak already toured international shows and artists to Australia.

But these southern and western capitals, unlike Melbourne and Sydney with their significantly larger populations, and markets which could support profitable commercial tours of international artists, felt 'cut off' from the culture of the old country. Festivals seemed to offer a solution to this isolation, and also a pathway for early cultural tourism and its cash component.

While the desire to support more art is admirable at any time, anywhere, and surely the founding festival fathers were doing this for all their own finest and noblest reasons, drivers for these festivals were not altruistic in Dragan's way. Uniting Australia through culture was not part of the mission, nor was the notion of collaboration. In the late 50s, early 60s, these were to be a feast of audience enjoyment of largely European, with some American, arts and entertainment. Where Australian orchestras were involved, they would be playing largely European repertoire, theatre companies would be presenting European or American plays.

At that time, the White Australia Policy was still in force, though starting to undergo the 25 years of change which would see the end of discrimination towards non-Europeans wishing to

emigrate to Australia. Uniting Australia with its Asian neighbours was also not on the festival agenda at that time, even though popular singer Khamal, then a student at Adelaide University under the Colombo plan (one of the first attempts to broker positive relationships with Asia), played a role in the first Adelaide Festival. Khamal's repertoire was comprehensively the popular and semi-classical songs of Europe and America.

It's not exaggerating to say that as our great arts festivals were spawned, our cultural vision was still largely blinded, by the long legacy of colonisation, to the cultural richness of both our Indigenous population and our regional neighbours.
At the inaugural Adelaide Festival in 1960, the festival's patron was Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother: festival highlights included the first Adelaide Writers' Week, Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, and Dave Brubeck's jazz quartet. Perhaps the most obvious connection was that Edinburgh had been cloned to a similar city in Adelaide, where you can still book a city hotel and walk to all events.

But these worthy pioneering efforts were undertaken in apparent ignorance at that time of the desperate need in Australia for a program of unification and reconciliation not unlike that which Europe cried out for post World War 2, and which Dragan Klaic saw as still necessary decades later. The main difference was that the war in Australia had not been waged just a few years prior to the revival of the festival model, but had been going on for 180 years and was still being waged.

At the time of the first Adelaide Festival, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were still seven years away from suffrage, and many years away from the complete cessation of the forcible removal of children from their families, and the ultimate closure, in the 1980s, of the last of the institutions which had held them.

George Steiner continued in his Festival Overture (1997):

> "we now know of the neutrality of the arts and of their performance in
> the presence of barbarism, of the enigmatic capacity of human beings
> to appreciate music, art, poetry, profoundly in the evening, indeed to perform such music
> or write verse, and then to proceed to bestiality
> the next morning"

In 1960s Australia the ongoing battle was not obvious. Growing up in suburban Adelaide, I had no idea that Aboriginal people lived there. We are reluctant to blame the early festival pioneers for their ignorance - just as I am reluctant to blame my parents for smoking in small rooms in humble houses when their only infant daughter had been prone to skin and lung disease since birth. But we should not be wary of noting the ignorance and neglect the past now reveals, especially given the progress since, and the present strengths and optimism.

While the Dutch and the French had already bumped into the Great South Land, they saw no use for it, and it was the British who saw some advantages in a big empty dumping ground for their unwanted – especially those convicted of acts of political inconvenience. No surprise that the Irish were so present in early Australia. In declaring the continent Terra Nullius, the British, in one stroke, rendered Australia's first peoples non-existent, and the injustices they encountered invisible. While there are recorded instances of clearer perceptions, sympathetic academic studies, and individual instances of kindness, that inhuman treatment was still invisible to the majority of the general public when the European international arts festival model was imported into Australia.

The facts are that not only were there people on the continent when the British mistakenly and brutally labeled it Terra Nullius, but they had been there for 40,000 years, and had complex systems of clan relationships, land management, protocols and ceremony.

In 1950s Australia, there was nothing new about the idea of special gatherings for special celebrations that involved visual arts, song, dance, costume, food, kids: such 'festivals' had been around for tens of thousands of years, as an integral part of Indigenous life. This forgetfulness was highlighted in then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2020 summit, in the arts stream, when so many Australian artists called out for the arts to be seen as central to Australian life, especially in education, rather than an optional leisure pursuit.

Theatre Director Wesley Enoch pointed out they need look no further than Indigenous Australia, where art had always been central to life and community. It is a sign of the good things that have happened, albeit so late, in Australia, that Wesley is now the Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, and the first Aboriginal man to direct one of the state theatre companies. Though, in case we go too far in thinking Australia somehow exceptionally backward, it is worth pointing out that it was only in 2006 that Jacques Martial became the first black man to head up one of France's major cultural institutions (Parc la Villette).

European festivals also have their ancient antecedents, best evidenced by a carnival such as Basel's Fasnacht, where early pagan behaviours mix with the marking of Christianity's Lent, along with those hallmarks of festivals of all kinds – an excess of indulgence compressed into a tight timeframe. There are many such remnants, of festivals in which Europeans for thousands of years marked the seasons or times of religious significance, or both.

For me, festivals are at their best when they acknowledge those arcane characteristics of excess and compression. These tend to be more clearly observable in generic festivals which cater for passionate fans of the genre – a food or beer festival where there is way too much of both, a film festival from which buffs emerge wide-eyed from weeks in the dark, or the huge music festivals

like Hungary's Sziget, England's Glastonbury or Adelaide's Womadelaide where non-stop stages give fans a surfeit of the music they hunger for.

The international festivals in Australia began much more politely and, even by 1972, the fare had not changed dramatically. The Adelaide Festival's archive lists
Leo McKern, Timothy West, and Timothy Dalton, popular performances of Jesus Christ Superstar and The South Australian Theatre Company's production of The Alchemist featuring Australian actors. Other highlights included the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, Charlie Byrd Trio and Cleo Laine.

Adelaide Writers' Week featured an author from the Soviet Union: that was a step forward at least, since it took a long time for festivals even to stretch beyond the language of their colonisers, and even today a so-called 'foreign language' production is a rarity. Not for this lecture, but that too is a sad reflection on the dominance of English, the failure to affirm and strengthen other European languages, and the perceived box-office risk of anything not in English. Writers Week also featured the beat and experimental American poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. Significantly, Ginsberg's desire to interact with Australian Aboriginal people caused controversy at the time.

But the 1970s would see significant change in the Australian political and cultural landscape. Plays were being written in the Australian vernacular, Australian composers like Peter Sculthorpe were writing contemporary classical music with distinctly Australian undertones, and the country was being urged to understand its place in the Asia-Pacific region.
Art centres in Aboriginal communities furnished artists with the materials which would allow Indigenous Australians to start recording their stories, painting their landscapes, in ways more portable and saleable than the fragile bark paintings, or the environmental art, which they had always practiced. We started seeing stage productions of the work of Jack Davis, the first Aboriginal playwright.

Significantly, 2013, the year of Canberra's centenary, is also the 50th anniversary of the Yirrkala bark petitions. Yirrkala is the community that Ginsberg visited. The petitions are paintings on bark presented to the Australian government at the time to demand change in the status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. They would prove in hindsight to be one of the most significant stimuli to change in the early 70s. This year there has been wide acknowledgement of this anniversary.

Also in this year, the Centenary of Canberra has devoted a large slice of its resources to the commissioning and presentation of works by and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities. Works have come from all over Australia to the national capital, and the local Indigenous community has also been extensively engaged: the latter especially in support

of ‘re-imagining’ a capital which to date, despite the unique nature of its elected Indigenous body which deals with relevant local government matters, lacked the Australian people’s awareness that a local Indigenous population, artists and nearby rock art sites even existed in the region.

This overt inclusion is in step with other major festivals who now not only do not ignore or neglect the riches of Australian Indigenous culture, but welcome it with open arms, as there are enthusiastic audiences for the theatre, dance, music , film, writing and visual arts of Australia’s first peoples. Since the 1970s the growth in Indigenous content in arts festivals has expanded enormously, and it is now positively sought and commissioned. I say cautiously that Indigenous performance may now be almost as attractive to certain Australian audiences as an import from Europe: dance company Bangarra’s seasons tend to sell out in every city they tour.
This is not quite yet the case with visual arts and music, despite their outstanding popularity outside Australia.

This new phase of inclusion is not just because of the vision of artistic directors who are both quick to recognize work which will please and provoke audiences, and are also good at understanding the cultural significance of this work, but because of the decades of action by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders themselves. It is they who bring such weight to the cultural significance that lies at the heart of their traditions, language, traditional ceremonies, contemporary art (film is now very important) and their stories – and they who have worked so hard to share their knowledge and their art and, through that process, to draw attention to how much further Australia has to go, to close the gap in so many spheres of their lives.

Author Bill Gammadge has pointed out in his recent book The Biggest Estate on Earth: how Aborigines made Australia just how complex traditional Aboriginal land management was, how well they sustained the land and how foolish their colonisers were not to recognize this knowledge. More than two hundred years later some of that practice is only now being re-adopted. The stages and spaces that festivals offer have also now been rightly occupied by the cultures of Australia’s first peoples: but many ask when their societal principle of arts at the heart of society will also be re-adopted, and reflect on how much has been lost, and how different Australia might have been had the British colonisers recognized the ‘sovereignty’ which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders now claim. Paradoxically, what many of us long for is the kind of centrality of arts and culture which we continue to observe in so many European countries to this day.

Meanwhile, Australian festivals and celebrations have played an unanticipated role. The model imported from Edinburgh, initially excluding the cultures of Australian first peoples, has morphed via various models and practice from all over the world , but most significantly from Europe by inspirational festivals such as the Kunsten Festival des Arts (Frie Leysen, take a bow), Wiener Festwochen , Hollnd Festival (with former programmer Lieven Bertels now

Artistic Director of Sydney Festival) , Theater der Welt , The Rhur Triennial, Roma Europa, Malta Festival (Poznan) and many more, into an all-embracing Australian model which positively seeks out Indigenous work for commissioning , presentation and touring.

Just this year The Secret River was co-commissioned by the Sydney Theatre Company, the Centenary of Canberra, the Sydney Festival and Perth Festival. An adaptation of Kate Grenville's novel of the same name, it is an uncompromising work that looks at the fatal consequences of first contact between freed convict landowners and the local Aboriginal population. The work has just won multiple awards at Australia's prestigious Helpmann Awards - so it was an intelligent investment by the Centenary as our co-commissioning role continues to attach to its success. It is also the subject of heated debate about precisely this issue of trusting one's culture to those not of that culture. This debate surfaced in the Australian Theatre Forum which the Centenary of Canberra hosted in May and it applied to both Secret River and Hipbone Sticking Out, both of which we co-commissioned.

Indigenous artists question who has the right to tell Indigenous stories. While senior whitefella artists feel they are helping to give profile to Indigenous stories, and also feel as if they are participating in skills-exchange, development and opportunity; ownership and autonomy are still sore points for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. And precisely because of the complex clan and country protocols that have existed for thousands of years, there are many parallel cultural complexities as well.

Those of us, and I must include myself, who have been raised and educated within a wholly European cultural framework, often had little patience for these details in the distant past – it is another thing we have been obliged to learn, and a knowledge we now respect. We did not, many still do not, grow up in an atmosphere where cultural respect is core to the rule of life.

The process of Kungkarangalpa: Seven Sisters Songlines was assisted in this respect because it was a project arising from the longterm academic pursuits of ANU researcher, and co-ordinator of Songlines of the Western Desert ARC, Diana James, who was introduced to me by Margo Neale, from the National Museum of Australia, also a participant in this project. That Diana is fluent in Pitinjanjara language and was able to introduce director Wesley Enoch, a Stradbroke Island man, to the community and get their blessing, that all protocols were observed, meant that the process was a healthy and respectful one. Wesley, as theatre director, provided a simple yet highly sophisticated theatrical platform in which these songs could be sung, and the stories told in a way which echoed traditional ceremony and story-telling.

A triptych of huge screens became a landscape within the outdoor setting of the Australian National Museum, the singers sat to the side as Diana read a simple translation, and the dancers performed on red earth. They took their time, as they would in a more traditional setting. And the setting at the Museum played a large role – because it did not set up the expectations that a

theatre does. The minute these stories must be contained within European stages and auditoria, they are instantly bound by the conventions of those spaces and their audiences' expectations – no breaks or coughing or talking amongst the performers, a seamless flow of performance, 'proper' projection of the voice – in other words suddenly subject to all the conventions that the European theatre historically demanded for those spaces. Exactly the reason why Peter Brooke insisted on using an open-air quarry for the performance in Australia of his works The Ik and the Mahabarata – to break them free from the European space.

This was an interesting element in Hipbone Sticking Out. The work evolved from a long and ongoing collaboration between the theatre company Big hART, and the people of Roeburne in the Pilbara. No doubt the authentic voices, especially of the young kids, were given a platform, but the work began with actor and long time collaborator with Big hART, Lex Marinos, as Greek philosopher; and on one occasion the narrative dropped into the world of Vermeer and the Girl with the Pearl Earring, tying that world of European commerce to the pearling industry of North West Australia. Director Scott Rankin set this vast sweep of European historical moments against the much older presence of Indigenous culture in the area.

Fine idea, and the lunatic chaos of its ambition is entertaining; but as a performance locked into the conventions of a European theatre space, the way we judge it is already partly pre-determined. The European theatrical form is the most obvious given, and the authenticity of the stories told sometimes sit at odds with this form.

Thus, the consequences of our conjunction, and the forced dominance of one culture over the other, are felt daily in my profession. Yet those tensions were given unprecedented opportunities to be explored, and perhaps new steps to resolution to be made, in the program in Canberra this year. Local dance company QL2 took the opportunity, again assisted by the level of our investment and the trust we placed in the company, to produce a show called Hit the Floor Together which brought together choreographer Daniel Riley McKinley, a young Aboriginal man who cut his dance steps at QL2 with Dion Hastie and Dean Cross to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island dancers from all over the country and the large local troupe, to create an inspiring work which patron of the Centenary of Canberra, and of QL2, Sir William Deane, commented had an evident spirit of reconciliation, both in process and end-product. QL2 is one of the best arts companies in the ACT. I hope one of the legacies of the Centenary will be its continuing strength.

But there were many other aspects of this program that felt confident and positive. The tribute at Belconnen Arts Centre to local artist and activist, Kevin Gilbert, I Do Have a Belief, was the expression of genuine bonding between all of those, from many a different clan and country, bound by their respect for all that Kevin Gilbert had done and still means.

There is so much of this program that I would like to expand upon here, but there is not enough time this evening. You can still explore the program fully at www.canberra100.com.au by searching the Indigenous Cultural Program.

And you will also be able to read much more detail in the expanded version of this address in the chronicle version later this year. There are so many deep stories still to surface, I hope not lost. In addition to theatre and dance, there has been local and national music galore, the visual arts program has been astonishing, with still more to come.

Unexpectedly, I was perhaps most moved by the performance of Constantina Bush and her Bushettes. Constantina is the drag persona /alter ego of actor Kamahi King, who also played the father in the Tiwi play Wulamanyui and The Seven Pamanui and made a valuable contribution to the forum Inside/Out; new actions for change by First Australians. I'd seen Constantina before in Melbourne – invited to perform as part of the Black Cabaret at the Ian Potter Gallery for the NGV 150 celebrations which I directed. But when she performed at the Forum dinner the full import of her work came down on me like a torrent.

The weight of humour, sophistication, classic drag self-deprecation, gut-busting laughs in which the sacred places of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander culture were lampooned – by one of their own: and all this coupled with superb stage presence and simply a great singing voice. For me, amidst the cryingly funny moments, it exposed again our ignorance about where Australian Indigenous culture is at this moment.

Many fail to recognize the parallel level of achievement by younger Indigenous people in law, film-making, the public service, higher education, especially via the Charles Perkins scholarship… and to where ? To Cambridge and to Oxford. I respect the art of cabaret – it is my own medium and the one in which I have garnered greatest expertise. I trust the medium to tell the biggest, deepest stories in the shortest most succinct ways, and Constantina did all that.

She said – I can sing, I can dance, I can make you laugh by being absolutely outrageous about things that you fear to mention. This is there we are now: don't condescend by imagining that we are any less than this – intelligent, gifted, incredibly self-aware, and confident enough to take the piss out of ourselves.

And there are other good news stories this year. Local Canberran, Jennifer Kemmarre Martinello, had a beautiful show at Canberra Glassworks and was also awarded a major two-year Australia Council fellowship. She subsequently became the overall winner of the National Australian Indigenous Art Award, arguably the most prestigious of its kind in the country. Barramundi Scales is a painting by Gija artist Lena Niyadbi who began painting in her 50s through the Warmun Art Centre in the Kimberley: supported generously by the Australia Council and Harold Mitchell, it has been sized up to grace the roof of Paris' Musee du Quai

Branly and is now seen by the hundreds of thousands who ascend the Tour Eiffel. What more potent symbol could there be of the current relationship between Australia and Europe?

The Australian company Big hART will present Namatjira in London: this theatre production, seen here in Canberra last year and starring that fine actor Trevor Jamieson, is about the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, famous for his watercolour landscapes of Central Australia. Some of his works will be amongst the Royal Academy survey of Australian Landscape. It feels a long way from the time, actually only 15 years ago, when what Europe mainly wanted was still 'traditional' Australian Aboriginal art, and spurned the efforts of contemporary Indigenous Australia.

Constantly, surprisingly, the stories of these increasing instances of outreach and interchange, fold back into Europe – and thankfully, they do so with increasing ease, though nothing is ever just easy. In his show Jack Charles V The Crown, Jack openly stated the irony of the struggle to tour his show to Britain. It has been invited, but he is continually refused a visa because he has a criminal record: odd, he thinks, when his country was used for their criminals in the past. But many other artists do get to share their work with European audiences, and this is certainly in positive territory at present.

For me personally the tryst with Europe came late and wholly unexpectedly. Raised at the paternal knee of a stand-up comedian and singer who pre Word War 2 was performing in Australian variety, and introduced me to the tail end of Australian vaudeville in the 50s and 60s, his great-grandparents had been performers in the East End of London prior to their hasty exit early in the twentieth century. I knew them too, while learning from them all, an Australian take on an English popular artform. My first performances were in clubs and popular variety. My first venture into the arts came late, at 26, unexpectedly, when I was invited to sing Annie 1 in Brecht/Weill's The Seven Deadly Sins. The following year I met John Willett, brought out as dramaturg for The Threepenny Opera. He gave me my first gig outside Australia on my first trip ever outside of Australia – at the Royal National Theatre in London.

John inspired me to learn German, and to spend time at the Berliner Ensemble. He introduced me to cabaret – its history in Paris, Vienna, then Barcelona, Zurich, St Petersburg and finally its zenith in Berlin. I wrote my own cabarets, recorded Brecht at Abbey Road with the London Sinfonietta and put together my own historical overviews in Café Fledermaus, and Le Chat Noir. The irony is not lost on me that just a few weeks ago I had the honour of being Awarded best Cabaret Performer of 2013 for Que Reste'il – my survey of French song from the 1880s to the 1970s – performed here at the National Gallery of Australia to accompany the Lautrec show (many of the songs I sing were written in the late nineteenth century) and at the Spiegelgarden, brought here by the ex-Canberran owner, David Bates and his family.

And the blessing Canberra bestowed on me 20 years ago, when the Canberra Theatre Trust invited me to direct my very first festival here, added to my bow yet another string , that of festival direction, which has occupied, along with singing, writing, directing and all the rest, 20 years of making big cabarets, which is what festivals are in their mix of old and new, accomplished and emerging , all brought together by the art of juxtaposition. Festival direction, in turn, gave me the opportunity to dive wholeheartedly into European culture: in this guise, I have been able to see many of the great artists of Europe and invite the best of them to Australia – often for the first time.

There is nothing to reconcile in all this. Not for a moment would I depreciate the value that European culture and traditions have given me, born on this, the other side of the world. But my own passion for European culture, my own continuing activity in the realm of the cultures of the EU countries, does not demand that I ignore the twists and ironies of British occupation and the dominant position of European cultures not only in the past, but still alive to some extent today. And this is not limited only to what has been an uneasy relationship to Indigenous culture.

The cultural relationship with Asia continues to fluctuate. In the face of so much rhetoric and forecasting about the Asian Century, some cultural practitioners and leaders have lamented a current turn away from Asia and a view more focused on Europe. Is this a direct result of changing policy?

Today, Asialink continues to provide strong platforms for exchange, and very recently new awards were given for Australian artists working in Asia: The Adelaide Festival Centre hosts the OZASIA festival. Are we on the cusp of another turn of policy? Has the turn from Asia been financial? With the GFC, and the rise in the value of the Australian dollar, European product became much cheaper. Given the recent trend downward of the dollar, will European product again start to prove expensive? Will those two factors, the return of a focus on Asia and the falling Australian dollar see the cultural gaze shift once more?

Later this year an Australian/Chinese collaboration within the Beijing-based National Theatre of China will be seen in Melbourne. Cho Cho is directed by Peter Wilson who once based his puppetry company, Skylark, here in Canberra. David Finnigan, the Canberra writer, director and performer who was the key figure in establishing YOU ARE HERE which we commissioned for the Centenary and which will be one of its legacies (a Canberra festival celebrating independent and experimental art), is currently crowd-funding to bring two Philippine artists to Australia. Australian theatre director Aubrey Mellor, now based at La Salle college in Singapore, is behind a move to breathe new life into once active theatre exchange between Japan and Australia. Currently this focuses on a play about the Internment camp at Cowra.

And let’s consider this in the context of a changing world where ideas of globalization and democracy are powerful, but are they real? As part of the Centenary’s inclusion of culturally

diverse communities, we held a FORUM, shared with one in Melbourne for my other festival The Light in Winter, about The Future Journey of Democracy.

Many things were discussed: the Arab Spring, the use of social media, different democratic rights even within Australia, and those of Canada, Somalia, as well as the capacity for democracy in Burma in the near future. One of the participants in Melbourne was an economist, Australian–born, but of Greek parents, and had spent time working in Greece. We discussed whether, in the country where democracy is said to have been born, modern Greek citizens have full democratic rights. It is admirable that as few as three people wanting to protest can have the benefit of official police escort and cleared streets, but in the end it seems that the European Union will largely determine the quality of their lives. Is this democracy?

And is there a democratic approach to culture? Can that word even be applied to arts and culture? It may also seem ironic that I, who so defend inclusion and the value of the arts to as wide a possible an audience (coming from a family that has little connection to the arts – making my programming for the community much easier – I am disinclined to condescend to less arts-educated audiences); I also defend to the last the intrinsic value of those arts which require intense individual endeavour (such as the virtuoso musician or singer) and protected performance conditions. I use the word elite in exactly the same way for the arts as for sport – a performer whose skills are supreme in their field.

And in this context, Europe is still inspirational, and of course the reason why so many Australians still aspire to work there.

I made an early decision that the Centenary of Canberra celebrations would be created by Australian and Canberran artists, scientists, sportspeople, thinkers, leaders, historians , architects, designers, teachers, as well as the Canberra community itself, especially inclusive of its Indigenous community . As much as I may have been tempted at first to imagine the biggest most boastful arts festival ever held in Australia – using all my international contacts , including those great artists worldwide, perhaps especially in Europe, in the end it seemed appropriate that a celebration of the national capital should focus on Australian talent.

It is surely a mark of the increasingly strong and intricately interwoven relationships between Europe and Australia, that so much European content surfaced anyway as part of these celebrations.

Our one direct international commission was from UK artist Jyll Bradley, whose City of Trees can still be seen at the National Library of Australia. But Europe prevailed all around - Toulouse Lautrec : Paris and the Moulin Rouge, Turner from the Tate, Mapping Our World –from Terra Incognita to Australia, which will arrive at the National Library of Australia in November with riches from all over Europe, the European Picnic with the CSO at Government House, The

Famous Spiegeltent from Belgium, the English Touring Company's collaboration with Brink Productions on Thursday, the play inspired by Jill Hicks, Henry 4, and the anniversaries of the Alliance Francaise and of that unique model, the Telopea Park school.

There is Spain's assistance with Peter Sculthorpe's Great Southern Land, the Netherlands new eco Embassy building, and their solar team and cars that will be around for SPIN, Canberra's Weekend on Wheels in October, and of course the terrific weekends during September/October for the program called Windows to the World when Embassies and High Commissions will open up to the public. In addition, the programs of the CSO, the Canberra International Music Festival, the Canberra Chorale, Salut Baroque! and Musica Viva have presented all kinds of music from Europe. Coming up is Orff's German blockbuster and Sydney Dance's Project Rameau.

There have been film festivals from numerous European countries, and in the realm of Big Issues/Big Talk, there have been any number of superb thinkers, scientists, economists and educators who have come to Canberra from Europe this year to invite us into their worlds of research and innovation, as well as events such as the anniversary of Montessori in Australia.

Suffice to say that this presence exists naturally, welcome, unbidden, an inherent part of Australian culture. Though there is still much work to be done in terms of Indigenous rights and responsibilities in Australian society at large, and still much work to be done to ensure that Australians eventually come to love and support the work of their own artists, and their contemporary artists in particular, the European cultural presence is undeniable, and now sits much more comfortably alongside Indigenous and other Australian creativity. The Centenary year, and our culture generally, is richer for the more careful consideration and evaluation these days of what is 'great art'.

Robyn Archer
July, August 2013 Canberra, Tokyo

ANU Centre for European Studies
ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences
1 Liversidge Street, Building 67C
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
W: http://ces.anu.edu.au/
F: +61 2 6125 9976