

THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL  
THE TENTH MANNING CLARK LECTURE  
Delivered by Robyn Archer  
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[ this version is laid out for delivery as a public speech]

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Good evening, and thank you for the privilege of being asked to give the 10<sup>th</sup> Manning Clark Lecture. I am humbled by the quality and intellect of those who have done this on nine previous occasions and I won't pretend to emulate their eloquence, or powers of analysis. The best I can do is take you on some of my thinking's journey from Australia Day 2009 till just a few days ago, and hope that along the way, in the name of Manning Clark, I have heeded some lessons of history and given you a few morsels to chew on. I'd like to say it's been an extraordinary start to the year, but to tell you the truth, I can't honestly think of any time when life was less engaging for me. This is just another slice.

### *Australia Day 2009.*

I'm in Mildura. Last night I heard Anthony Halliday play three Beethoven Sonatas on the new Steinway proudly owned by the Mildura Arts Centre. Anthony says it needs to be played more – pianos are better when they are played – so a monthly series will be produced, and teachers will also be allowed to bring their students in for practice by the half hour on the new grand.

Anthony made it sound good. It's a kind of *Fitzcarraldo* moment. This town is a long way from any other major centre, it's bloody hot, and here were two hundred people gathered in the theatre on a Sunday evening to hear the composer's last sonata, Opus 111, created when he could no longer hear what he wrote, the inside of his head beset by tinnitus. We are three hours drive from Adelaide, six from Melbourne, nine from Canberra, it was still in the upper 30s at 6pm and we were listening to a piano sonata composed nearly two hundred years ago. Manning Clark described how things were in Australia in the early 1820s at the time when Beethoven was writing this piece :

'The behaviour and values of the white men were beginning to be influenced by the climate and environment and the peculiar

composition of their society, as well as by their European past, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Enlightened. Before 1830 observers in Sydney were beginning to speculate on the effect of the uniformity of the climate and scenery. They predicted that it would produce such a tameness and feebleness of character that the inhabitants would write little or no poetry and would have no impulse to rise in the scale of morals. In New South Wales, they argued, there was no long summer day or long winter night, no fall of the leaf, no sudden exuberance of flowers in the spring, no song of birds, no deep, continuing twilight, no season of absolute gloom. The imagery of English poetry was not understood by the children of New South Wales

...The same flatness and dullness prevailed in its society. Men sought distraction and comfort not in art, literature, or religion, but in drinking, making money and eating. The rest of the heavy dull hours were consumed in scandal...'

Audiences in Vienna at that time recognized the greatness of Beethoven, the living artist in their midst, and all the while that irascible jaundiced devotee of the Enlightenment kept writing what he could never hear. Almost two hundred years later some things have changed in Australia: we have still not yet formally broken away from our colonizers, but on this hot night in Mildura cooks, farmers, grape and citrus-growers, academics, artists and retail salespersons all gathered to hear what he had written.

Would Beethoven have edited had he been able to hear it? The chaos of turns and trills is almost overwhelming, the calm of what sounds like an exit-strategy deeply affecting: it's over, thank god, breathe... Wait! No, it's not over, note by note it still has air remaining. We emerge into a hot sun still blazing at 7.30pm and we are now reconciled to death: or at least I am. I believe that is what I understood from the piece – and a retired sage from the land (now on the Board of the Arts Centre) agrees with me.

After the concert we walked riverside to the old Woolshed where Artistic Director of the Murray River International Music Festival, Sergio di Pieri had, as is his tradition in this festival, prepared a meal for artists and supporters. The night still and warm, the sky that familiar colour of salmon (this is not mine, this is Brecht), salmon between the gums; the sound of galahs and cockatiels screeching the banks, the sight of martins dipping their buff breasts in and out of the river.

We eat tomatoes which Sergio and the Executive Director of Arts Mildura, Helen Healy have hand-picked from a local farm. They are real tomatoes, deep red, sliced, slashed with oil (his brother Stefano's I guess) and sprinkled with basil and garlic. A long table for fifty or so, the trestles covered in green plastic, a hotchpotch of glasses and local wines – the Chalmers Vermentino gets my vote every time. Opposite Anthony and me is a couple recently retired, the husband was a chemical analyst. They've lived everywhere (Perth, London, China) and he really knows his music, speaking with authority to Anthony. His wife is not a fan of Wagner – they had a long house in Emerald, so he could listen to Wagner up one end, and she didn't have to hear it.

At the other end of the table is the young woman who is a director of Chalmers Wines – Kim, an Adelaide Conservatorium graduate composer and musician who's building a house in Mildura. Her house will have a studio where she can record. She's on a mission to get young people back to Mildura. Sure it's a place where you have to go away for a while – to study, or to work – but it's a place to come back to, to give back to. *This* is the Australia I encounter on Australia Day January 2009

Manning Clark asked

'Would the price of survival as a people be the shedding of that attempt to preserve a European society?'

On this day in Mildura there was plenty of Europe afoot – German music, Italian food, but all absorbed into a twenty-first century Australia in which traditional owners at Mungo National Park an hour away debate the future of their land (and incidentally find their land on the cover of the Qantas in-flight magazine all over the world this month). It is also a country where Muslim sits alongside Sikh, Lutheran and non-believer - and all are thirsty.

This seems less a conscious attempt to *preserve* European society, than just the way it is evolving in the more compassionate and world-welcoming Australia which has at last greeted the new century. And the fact is - this is now also not so far from the reality of Europe.

It was the American writer Edmund White who, in his excellent book *The Flaneur* pointed out the obvious .. Not long ago I was invited to one of those *mondain* dinners the French know how to give with such grace, and are made up of such startling combinations of guests that they are invariably exciting and ( to use a favourite French word that always makes Americans bridle) terribly 'amusing'... We were all talking about how Paris was changing. I piped up and said "First of all, the average Parisian is no longer white'. Everyone looked shocked and dismayed . Then they all laughed ruefully. I was surprised by their surprise. Wasn't it perfectly obvious that Paris was now a black and tan ( and golden yellow) town ? Perhaps until that moment they had never thought about the true change in the complexion of their capital. Edmund White *The Flaneur*

One could make the same observations about London and Berlin . Similarly one can still be surprised at the surprise of the British today when you comment that considerably more than half of Australia's population states it has no ancestral connection with Britain, or that Melbourne is still the world's third largest Greek City. Conversely, despite the overwhelming support for Prime Minister Rudd's eloquent , moving , and deservedly admired apology to the stolen generations a year ago, I suspect most Australians have still not grasped the enormity of first contact and subsequent colonization , nor what has been lost by such persistent failure to acknowledge the wisdom , and make use of practical skills and models , we Europeans trampled.

In the Zocalo , the main square, of Mexico City, you can now see how the Spanish erected their first cathedral directly on top of the ruins of the Aztec temple, now visible through archeological excavation. Our colonizers were no different .

Yet it is only through subsequent immigration that Australia has become the country it is today ; subsequent that is, to the power of the original inhabitants. Despite all the odds, a continuing presence and gathering strength of the indigenous peoples of this land also accounts for the way we have survived thus far. We'd do well to take greater advantage of that.

One of the most interesting moments for me at the 2020 Summit, was to hear Wesley Enoch's response to the Euro-American socio-economic-style questing for models which would place arts at the centre of society ( where they truly belong) instead of where they often sit in the minds of Australians and others now, at the dispensable fringe. Wesley rightly commented that Australian Aboriginal cultures for tens of thousands of years have had culture sitting dead centre and indivisible from the rest of life. You need look no further for effective models. Yet looking at precisely what we are standing on, and have stood on so heavily for so long, feels too hard for some as comments like Wesley's are dismissed as appealing but impractical . We regularly miss the pointers to survival.

And survival has many guises: there are many aids to accessing them if you care to look. *Economic* survival is on our minds at present; it's part of the conundrum of global dependency which the current crisis makes all too evident. It was a matter of sadness, I think for many of us, that despite well regulated financial institutions and a buoyant economy, our dollar and our investment wealth were the mere playthings of global speculation. America fell, but we fell just as hard and continue to struggle. Manning Clark felt of the 1960s that :

'the decline of faith begat nihilism, and nihilism begat hedonism; the pleas of the followers of the Enlightenment with their faith in human perfectibility, had all dropped from a roar to a whisper. Mammon had won... the dreams of humanity had ended in an age of ruins'

What might he have thought, then, of the noughties ? I imagine that given he saw glimmers of hope to follow the 60s , he would have ranted at the greed , carelessness and lack of control which brought about the current crisis, but perhaps have welcomed the opportunity offered to humanity because of this crisis, to look beyond money and materialism to other more sustaining values and a more robust spirituality , whatever its core.

Large in our hopes and fears for survival is the land. This harsh and fragile place which Aboriginal Australia had managed to use, inhabit and preserve for 50,000 years has in just over 200 years been brutalized into its own crisis. We need more people here, but can we quench their thirst ? The vision splendid of Deakin and the Chaffey's for Los Angeles in the Riverland deserts was shared by many: irrigation was the answer. That magnificent dream lasted about one hundred years, just long enough and cruel enough for people in places like Mildura now , to feel as if their families had always been on this land , and feel deep grief at somehow having failed it , and their kin, as they are forced to walk away.

Greed and the quest for profit resulted in more grapes than we can make wine from, more citrus than we can sell, rice and cotton up-river still expanding despite talk of federal control.

My connection to the Murray is of the blood – not intravenously as it is with my mother, but through her, still of the blood. Not Mildura, but down river a bit in Cadell and Morgan. It's one river, says Kim, as she plots a collaboration with another composer who wants to do a concert at the Murray Mouth, at the Coorong. It's for the environment but it needs to be about reconciliation too, she says. There's tension: down at the Coorong they blame the fruit irrigators. Up in the Riverland, they blame the rice growers in Queensland. But it's just one river and we need to work together.

My mother was born in 1924. Much closer than I to the times moment when Chaffey's dream had already become reality. Those angels of the citrus and the grape would bless either side of the mighty river and grow wealth and prosperity in the inland.

My mother's father, Ted Wohling, was suspicious of government grants – ' you'll always be under the government thumb if you take one of the soldier's grants' someone told him as he and his mates emerged from their service for the 9th Light Horse in the middle east during World War I.

He took a punt instead – literally, the punt that ferried passengers over the river between Morgan and Cadell. He did that night and day till they eventually moved to Adelaide in the 40s. But they were surrounded by the blockers and the itinerants who worked them . The stories abound – my mother still alive to tell them: of the blocks and the dried fruit industry that followed and the packing sheds where Mary spent her holidays working for pocket money.

How salutary it should be , when we hear governments all over the world speak of grand new plans, to think of Chaffey's vision and the nation's hopes at that time. With hindsight it's clear : irrigation was not the long-term answer . Now Mildura's been doing it tougher than most.

Last year they had the added pain which that other idea, Federation, also just over a hundred years ago, brought about : they were seeing their counterparts across the river in NSW get a 4% water allocation when they , in Victoria , had nil.

Even more so now, the man-made political division of States was working against the way the land is. Perhaps a new Republic would consider re-Federation – something which I playfully suggested in 2001 – everything above Capricorn, the rest of the West, Queensland below Capricorn taking care of its share of the current NT, NSW the same, South Australia Victoria and Tasmania combined. A fantasy of course, but it makes more sense of the land

River towns like Mildura are doing it tough, as some cut back their vines knowing there will be nothing for five years, as orchards dry and decay before our eyes, as mental health facilities overflow with those in the pain and dismay of what they see as betrayal of their family ; they are leaving the land. And they are being subtly and not so subtly counseled to move away altogether; the Riverland is no longer the bread-basket it was; the age of the Drought Refugee has already begun.

No-one wants to believe what pessimists say – that this could be a ghost town in fifteen years. The new solar farm is the right idea – jobs and new energy. But the arts ? Why on earth are the *arts* flourishing in Mildura?

Today, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2009, the townspeople of Midura and the long weekend visitors are pretty faithfully doing their bit to be Australian. I am, alas, failing to have a day off. I am here to work in my mentorship role for the suite of five festivals that occur throughout the year in Mildura – and work I will until I get on the plane to take me back to the beach and the bronze-whalers stalking our every splash this summer at Henley.

But I like the atmosphere here. Drinking honey wheat beer, watching the Australian Open in the brewery, I am the early savage Manning Clark wrote about. The difference is that I am at the same time, working on a Brechtian cabaret I have written called *Tough Nut*, which I will start to direct at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, in 'less than two weeks' time.

You see, I was in high school by the time we got TV and so my first translations of Caesar and Pliny and Catullus were done watching things like *I Love Lucy* and *Rawhide* (I am a longtime Clint Eastwood fan). I thought of the pioneering neurosurgeon who commissioned a Richard Le Maistre house and retired to the tip of Bruny Island to translate classical Mandarin poetry. It turns out he only never needed four hours sleep, in two two hour blocks every twenty four hours of his life, so he was able to have two serious specialties - neurosurgery by day, classical Greek and Mandarin by night. I whimsically slide over my fantasy of a Glenn Murcutt or Gerhard Schurer commission, and a life of Catullus, Caesar, Pliny and Gibbon on a beach with sharks, crabs, big gulls and oyster catchers - and honeywheat beer from the Mildura Brewery.

Well, I'm not throwing a prawn on the barbie today, or even a snag. I'm staying at the Grand where each night Stef brews up his magic in the cave beneath. I'm having a superb coffee at his Café in the main street while we work. My Australia Day is legit - just devoid of kitsch and cliché.

Two weeks prior to Australia Day I had been addressing participants of the 3,000 strong conference of Arts Presenters America in New York. There was a lot of talk about the new administration and I felt a distinct pang of gratitude for Nugget Coombes and the late Jean Battersby et al. The USA doesn't have a department of the arts and culture, and has never had the equivalent of an arts minister. We offer all kinds of suggestions about how well it could work, but this mob is gloomy about the prospects for any such thing, despite their excitement about a new president. 'They'll just never create a new bureaucracy in this climate' a Washington insider says.

I flew back from New York when it was -1°C. I arrived at Henley where it was 41°C - a personal best ever for biggest temperature variation one port to the next. In such picaresque frameworks my life is measured.

*Feb 1 2009*

Six days later I'm on a plane to Perth. I've come home from Mildura and arrived on Monday night. It's hot and getting hotter. By Wednesday in Adelaide it reaches 45.7°C. For a long time the thought of weeklong old-fashioned 100 plus heat terrified me. The prospect rose up against me like the fire in Ron Howard's *Backdraft*, or the storm in *The Perfect Storm* - a monster with a voice and a personality. But recently it hasn't been like that. It's an effort to think, but I can, and I do keep working in that dry Adelaide heat. It isn't sexy like Sydney or South East Asia, but doesn't drain you either - a lengthy partnership versus a passionate affair.

Nevertheless I'm happy to go to the Qantas Lounge, the plane, another Lounge in Melbourne, work in Melbourne, another Lounge that afternoon, plane to Sydney, taxi to hotel, hotel to rehearsal, rehearsal to hotel. Next day two pitches to my esteemed festival director colleagues (I was singing Dessau at 9.30 in the morning) then in the afternoon another airport lounge and finally back to Adelaide - it had cooled down a bit - only 43° that day.

A day and a half later ...I'm back in the Qantas Lounge - it's less than six days since I saw Anthony play and now I'm on my way to Perth. I'm bumped up to Business Class - 1A. Good, I get a decent Neil Perry feed, and I can work.

I've been re-reading the Clark Short History - the words at the end stick in my mind:

'The giant of British philistinism in Australia has received a mortal blow...Australians have liberated themselves from the fate of being second-rate Europeans..'

Then I hear:

"Ladies and gentlemen, once we have reached our cruising altitude we'll be serving you lunch - and we will screen a movie today. Today's movie is...Australia"

I ...am... delighted. This is simply perfect. I have been resisting seeing Baz Lurhman's epic. I saw trailers on Qantas flights for months. I didn't like the look of it. Then indifferent or bad reviews and friends who hated it and some pretty ugly Nicole-bashing by the Poms. I thought of Brian Mathews' introduction to *Manning Clark :a life* when he quotes Manning's response to the Bulletin's Sept 1962 review of *The History*:

'I wonder whether it is worth it to publish a book in Australia. One exposes oneself to such hostilities. I doubt whether I could endure it again'

I guess the difference with cinema super-stars is that they are wealthy enough to be able to endure those blows – both Baz and Nic are on to their next projects, as the Academy Awards Ceremony showed. But somewhere it has to hurt, and I don't hold with hitting below the belt.

This was the right place and the right time to see this film. No investment – passive. I took the first officer's advice, and settled back.

The retro intention of *Australia* is obvious from the opening titles – the motto in English and the kitsch coat of arms. You can't really bash up a fillum for doing what it says it intended to. You can criticise the director's intent, and you can perhaps debate the use of gigantic public funding (Tourism in this case) for a folly – but that's something different.

Of all the things I want to say about this film, I want to go to the very end first; because the greatest surprise in Baz Luhrman's *Australia* is the final moment, when the film wants to play on the heart strings and force our emotional response.

The beautiful Aboriginal boy is about to run slomo after 'King' George, his aboriginal elder or spirit. Lady Ashley can't bear to let him go, Hugh's chest heaves in sympathy but knows it must be so... ok ok it's kitsch and cliché – Baz stated this clearly at the start. But, lo, what do I hear? It can't be true. But yes, thine ears do not deceive thee. It *is* so: the ultimate emotional crunch moment of this film boldly entitled *Australia* is scored with Elgar – the Enigma Variation we all know so well, Number 9, Nimrod.

I am gob-smacked by this more than anything else in the film, I suppose because I didn't see it coming, no-one wrote about it, no-one warned me. I am infinitely more surprised by this than by the much discussed wobble board which is featured for all of ten seconds. Elgar! Elgar who himself was so dismayed that his pomp and circumstance had been usurped through official channels to become the ultimate jingoistic jingle of the Empire – Land of Hope and Glory.

Here his Enigma was a million miles away from being enigmatic. In order to bring the film to an emotional ending, Baz needed the heart and soul of Empire. Despite more than a hundred years of splendid music from Australian composers, despite a legion of them working in Australia and throughout the world today, the makers of this film resorted to the heart and soul of Empire. If *ever* there were a reason to move towards an Australian Republic then this is it.

Nothing could be more culturally revealing of our own sense of nationhood than this choice. Even if I give those responsible for the soundtrack the benefit of the doubt, this one is hard to reason. It is for me one of the queerest and kitschiest films of recent years – and the caricatures are as much in the music as they are in the vision. The ten seconds of wobble board are no different from the echoes of Big Country, the Marlborough Man, the Magnificent Seven: we get a mouth organ, some dubbed lyricism meant to be the kid's dreaming leitmotif, a bopping dance band at Gov house, waltzing matilda, and of course – *Somewhere over the Rainbow* in multiple versions.

This film is a queer creation. The bulging beefcake of Hugh Jackman's chest, Nic's androgynous form in contrast to those of the Aboriginal women, the beautiful and beautifully groomed young 'creamy' boy – and Judy. Actually, this film is as camp as a row of tents. The 'china man' (reference *The Hawaiians*) plays *Rainbow* on a ukelele (reference the Israeli uke version which references the Tiny Tim version) and we hear this just creep in again at the end as we roll to end credits.

So, it is *not* the Tiny Tim recording – which at least we can understand in Australian terms of The Yellow House and Martin Sharp and his encouragement of Tiny Tim's memorable marathons years later whence that version arose – it is the Israeli one. And it just happens to be *that* version which gave us one of the strangest moments of the 20:20 summit. No sooner had we arrived and sat down in the Great Hall in Parliament House, all of us primed and ready to think and give of our best ideas, than we were asked to sit and receive for a moment. The first feed was a video report on the Youth Summit which had preceded us. What was the soundtrack to that video? Louis Armstrong singing 'What A Wonderful World' and that Israeli version of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'

Where was any single person involved in that video, or signing off on it, who might have asked 'why wouldn't we use an Australian song here?' The following day someone spontaneously sang Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's 'From little things big things grow' – why not that?

There are literally hundreds of songs that could have been used – just as there are for the ending of the film *Australia* – but no. The choice was music which is not only stirring (we all know that – we can all just about say where we were when and how we first heard the Enigma Variations) but goes much deeper. It is English – it *sings* England – and somewhere we all know that.

It is peculiar how often Australian composers and composition are ignored. Music, past and present, of every kind and at every level is one of our greatest artistic endeavours and accomplishments. Why is it so left out of the conversation?

The soundtrack of *Australia* is pastiche – saccharine strings, thumping timpani – just as the director ordered and in line with his stated intent. Hugh's sculpted chest is a dead ringer for that of Charlton Heston in one of my very favourite films *The Naked Jungle* in which a mail order bride (Eleanor Parker) fetches up in the Amazonian jungle to be a planter's wife.

In fact it is she who stares down his apparent coldness saying 'an instrument is better when it is played'.

The opening sequences of *Australia* are pure *Blue Lagoon*. *Indochine* makes an appearance, as does *Out of Africa* (the adventurer who just has to be off and away regularly and leaves the little lady to struggle with nature at home), as well as *Gone with the Wind* and its copy *Tap Roots* starring Susan Hayward and Van Heflin in lieu of Vivien and Clark.

All this is well done in terms of pastiche, and for a fan of the genre, which I am, enjoyable.

Now, if it had only been called *Lust in the Bulldust*, or *Top End Tales*, *Sunburnt Country* or *Wide Brown Land*, even *Darwin*, fewer bright folk might have been less upset. Despite the odd 'below the belt' she also gives now and then, I'm usually happy when Germaine (Greer) dares to give something a wallop: she often says things that everyone else is too timid to dare. But I also understood Marcia's (Langton) defence: the attempt to include a stolen generation story in this matinee movie tribute may well be genuine, and if you accept the pure camp milieu, then Germaine's objection to scrubbed clean Aboriginal people is beside the point – *everything* in this film is airbrushed.

And as offensive as many have found it, there are just as many people in Kazakhstan offended by Sasha Barron Cohen, and I expect a number of Vietnam Vets by *Tropic Thunder*. If Robert Downey Junior can be not only praised, but also nominated, for blacking up – then why shouldn't Ursula Jokovich for Baz? Well – I'm being flippant, and to tell you truth even I was a bit taken aback by that use of what was once known as Max Factor Egyptian Number Nine. But, if the retro thing is consistent, there are precedents from Joan Collins to Debra Paget, Ava Gardner to Sir Larry and even, in the very flesh, Frank Thring- the very last word in colonial camp

But we *know* why it offended: because this film was not promoted or anticipated as kitsch campery and airbrushed fantasy. The title *Australia*, and the endless promos on Qantas and elsewhere else had us believe this would be something we, as Australians, could be proud of – an emblematic clarion call to the landscape we adore. Instead, we suddenly started seeing the trailers and felt a bit like that poor sod on Lesbos – 'I've got nothing against gay women, he says, and they're very good for our tourism, but I can't call myself a Lesbian, yet that's what I am – give me back the title of my identity.'

What the film *Australia* does is demonstrate just how strong, how subterranean, our ties to our colonizers remain. They are terrifyingly deep, as this cinematic moment proves. Deciding at the last moment that what would define the film's soundtrack would be Rolf Harris' wobble board, was in the end just another kitsch effect. The Enigma is England.

Interestingly, there is a perfect comparison for the use of this piece of music. Director Ang Lee is someone whose work I admire very much, whose films I can watch over and over: from the harsh but poignant gaze of *The Ice Storm* to the bitter sweetness of *Brokeback Mountain* – a distinctly un-camp not-queer movie (Heath Ledger at his very finest, the Oscar should have been his for that performance), Ang Lee has been able to tell complex and incisive American stories. Turning to the culture of his own background, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* gave him a magic realist path to its colourful strengths. *Lust Caution* is also about China's past – but all these films have a much wider reach than just the intimate human drama that plays out within their narratives.

It is something to which Baz's *Australia* also aspired – a romantic drama that might say so much more.

In *Lust Caution* a group of students committed to the Resistance are stationed in Hong Kong. They form a drama group for the creation and performance of revolutionary plays. We see them make their debut in front of a packed theatre. We are already in more complex territory with Ang Lee: intense sexual tension has already been established early in the film, and we are now not only in a series of flashback, but in a play within a film.

The young drama group want to create a patriotic feeling in their audience.

If they move that audience in the play, the effect will also be to stir the audience in the cinema. We follow the narrative from curtain up; we are anxious for the film's heroine whose character has never acted before and who is *not* resistance-minded but has joined the group really because she has the hots for the group's serious-minded and sexy young leader.

We whip through a few grabs of scenes and then arrive at what looks like a climax of the play as a mother is about to mourn her dead son and utter the final call to action from the Hong Kong stage 'China will not fall !'

But before she makes her final impassioned speech, in a moment of pure Brechtian dramaturgy ( what is know as 'the alienation effect') the camera turns to side-stage where one of the group lifts a needle onto a vinyl record sitting on a turntable.

Ang Lee 'shows' the mechanics of theatre in which someone is deliberately starting up a piece of music to accompany the climactic scene. The camera whips back to the mother on stage as we hear the music ... it is Elgar, yes, exactly the same, Nimrod, which Baz used to conclude *Australia*.

The difference is that in *Lust Caution* there is no mistaking the intent; firstly we never hear more than a few scratchy seconds of it – just enough to recognize, then it skips and jumps, comes back in a few bars to the next bit of the scene ; secondly the easy access of the students to this vinyl underscores the British presence in Hong Kong – it is a British Colony; thirdly the students are working within one colonised part of China to ensure that the rest , having fought and won its battle with Britain, does not go under to Japan. But most importantly, we in the cinema see that this piece of music is *deliberately* used to stir the play's audience , who remain as ignorant of the ironies of using Elgar , as is the Australian audience ignorant today of the ironic ( even tragic) manipulation inherent in its use at the end of the film *Australia*.

The difference is that Ang Lee's intent as a film-maker is to reveal the musical manipulation and irony to us, while Baz keeps his audience in the culturally colonized dark in order to manipulate emotion which, even more ironically, is supposed to be reinforcing the anti-colonial spirit of the film's ending – the Aboriginal boy reluctantly freed by the English woman to follow his dream(ing).

Well, that triumphant and moving moment of partition clearly hasn't quite happened yet , and the film's inability to escape the deep and long clutches of colonization hasn't helped. As Pascal Mercier writes into the words of his enigmatic character Amadeus Prado in *Night Train to Lisbon* :

Kitsch is the most pernicious of all prisons. The bars are covered with  
The gold of simplistic; unreal feelings so that you take them for the  
pillars of a palace.

There is countless evidence that colonisation has made palace monkeys out of us – from wastefully ignoring the precious resource of first nations, to still eating Christmas hot roast when the thermometer hits 40' , to managing to forget when we joined the US in a war against Iraq, that our nearest neighbour is a country of 220 million Muslim people. And would our nation-building have been different had we fought an early battle of independence , as did the Americans ? Which decisions might have been different had Englishness and an unconscious longing for the old country not still remained unchallenged, untested by the pain of going it alone .

In one sense Her Majesty is indeed symbolic and the change to a Republic also symbolic, though at the bushfire memorial service her daughter made it clear that she was representing The Queen of Australia. I can see that it would be perfectly polite to wait until after the end of Her Majesty's reign though, having only met her a couple of times and chatted just once, ( though I did have a very long conversation over dinner with one of her favourite bishops and that was revealing) I dare to speculate that she herself may have been a little surprised , if pleased, at the result of the last referendum. And yet again, there's the Wills factor coming up...

But whenever the next move happens, we should not doubt that it will be a matter of survival. Perhaps not *whether* we survive or not, but in which way we survive, with how much strength and dignity, and to what degree an authentic sense of national identity is nurtured , as opposed to that which is myopic, naive and kitsch.

I assume that this time it will be a simple question , not deliberately obfuscated as the last time was . I trust we will be asked 'Do you want Australia to become a Republic ?' Given an affirmative, it will then be appropriate to work out what kind of Republic it will be. Clearly there are no remaining economic reasons to stay tied to Britain – I hear many say their economy is in free fall, and indeed Manning Clark rightly signaled the UK's joining of the European Union as the last straw in any preferential arrangements.

Certainly it would be a loss not to be part of the Commonwealth Games – the last one in Melbourne was a ripping success. And the change to a Republic in itself will not guarantee survival – I know many will argue that it is a recipe for disaster. But the fact is nothing and no-one can claim to reveal the perfect path for geographic or economic survival. The world is too uncertain, and despite the very best thinking and best-intentioned policies, no country, no land, no city is yet resilient enough to absorb all the disturbances which seem destined to come their way this century.

But what about the survival of the spirit and the soul? For Manning Clark, as for Tony Blair, it meant the Catholic Church – and for many others it remains Faith. What about the rest of us? Raised in the high church of England my faith was easily destroyed by its local ministry, just after Confirmation; I studied my catechism so hard on the promise of a gold edged prayer book prize – topped my Confirmation class and never got the prayer book because the minister was chucked out for knocking off one of the lady parishioners – could have been worse I suppose.

So, if there is no economic or environmental certainty and no formal faith either for many, can I make a case for Art as a pathway for spiritual survival?

Alas I can't claim Baz's *Australia* as a source of spiritual uplift or enlightenment. Once I'd gotten over the initial shock of so much camp (no critic, no commentator had warned me – and that is one of their jobs), I quite enjoyed it as a popular entertainment – an exercise in referencing earlier forms. But given the musical betrayal in its final moment, it's hard to forgive – especially given the title. This is the price of a false path to survival – the one that does not want to, or cannot, change. While the compassion in this film for the stolen generation may be real, and indicates an authentic change which is thankfully at last in the wind, the music in the end is deeply tied to an unreconstructed dependency on our colonizers

If we are to grow, we need our artists to sing with authentic voices. The early colonial painters' eyes were often betrayed by their cultural backgrounds – they painted Aboriginal people with European features, the trees were not the right kind of green. By the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, though artists may still have needed the authority of European education and experiences, their eyes told them something different – the Heidelberg mob quite literally 'saw the light' and we started to have an authentic visual record of Australia.

Same with the composers – tell me Sculthorpe, Meale, Plush and Edwards could have written what they did anywhere else in quite the same way? The twentieth century case is strong for literature and film, and eventually our playwrights adopted an authentic vernacular: we've had the benefit of all that for a good while now.

Authenticity is important, and I think one of the problems many have had with the film *Australia* is that it lacks authenticity. Not just that it starts with documentary newsreel, leading the audience to think this will be factual, and then proceeds with pure fiction, but that many have come away saying 'this is *not* Australia and I don't want the global cinematic audience to think so.' Unlike Indians who perhaps are saying of *Slumdog Millionaire* – 'yes, this *is* India – joy and colour and warts and all – this *is* India'

You see, I still claim Anna Kokkinos' *Head On* as one of the greatest Australian films ever. Why? Authenticity – about Melbourne, about its youth, about the complexities of ethnicity, about the texture of our inner cities, about the music, about the performances- especially the Greek Australians Alex Dimitriadis and Paul Capsis

Yet authenticity is still often mysteriously held at arms length.

Does authenticity have anything to do with survival? I think so. Too much under the rug, too much clinging to the past and ignorance of the present surely undermines the spirit. It has something to do Pascal Mercier's

'You're not really awake when you don't write.

And you have no idea who you are.

Not to mention who you aren't'

Pascal Mercier *The Night Train to Lisbon*

And *is* there a price to pay for this? I'm not sure there is. We don't have to lose our connection to our European past – there are many personal as well as public riches to feed us from these connections and it is a legitimate part of our authenticity. An Australian Republic doesn't have to give up the best of the Westminster system. Unless someone can clearly propose any other alternative to the American system, a direct election that would bankrupt us to give us a wealthy media star hero leader rather than the kind of good, wise and modest person which the majority of our party-elected governors-general have been, I would be opting for a Republic with minimal change to the current system- and one incidentally, which retains one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities we have – compulsory voting.

And in that Republic, I will not stop singing Brecht and Eisler. I don't expect our orchestras to stop playing Mozart either – as long as they play more Australian work too. And I shall never stop thrilling to Elgar's Enigma Variations. As it happens, Nimrod is the first piece of music I knowingly heard as 'classical music'. Showbiz, rock, folk, burlesque - these formed my *métier*. But at 19, as so often happens, I was in love with someone who responded as only a lover can by saying 'you've got to listen to this', sharing the things they are passionate about. It was that piece of music, vinyl on a record player, and my musical world changed forever.

But we don't have to pretend any longer that that's *all* there is or that what the old country valued is the *best* that there is. We can claim food for the soul from the works and the artists who are 100% of this land – the Aboriginal people of Australia – and those who have no connection whatsoever to Britain, or to Europe. If this understanding were deeply inside us for a few more generations then I would hope that a film-maker doesn't reach unconsciously for Elgar to make his emotional point.

The other price is simply that of nurturing our artists and allowing a few more to live above the poverty line. If we believe in the ability of art to feed our souls and that that nourishment helps us to survive in challenging times which require vision, lateral thinking and the kind of creativity which art can not only display, but inspire, then yes, this is a price for survival – and I would say it's a small price.

It's been an apocalyptic summer. We must learn from this. Instead of *talking* so incessantly about the Aussie spirit and the great nation, we would do better to take hard and heroic *action*. We live in an inhospitable land and there are some things we will never be able to control – 'droughts and flooding plains' are two of them. We have found antidotes to most of the snakes and spiders, but no matter how genuinely we grieve the dead, there's no antidote to a shark if you swim in his territory, nor to fire if you forget its awesome power and settle in its inevitable path.

But given that many of us in so many ways are kept ignorant about our environment, through a hangover of colonial mentality; often still behaving like tourists who go unprepared into the danga; given that we do not take nearly enough advantage of the complex ancient knowledge that Aboriginal peoples have of the land and their tried and tested methodologies for living safely in it: when tragedy strikes it is undoubtedly splendid the way the people of this country are quick to help each other out.

You will have noticed in the quick response to the recent bushfires that entertainers, artists and sportspeople are the first in the frontline to offer their services to help the drive for instant cash. Arts Centres all over the country were beleaguered with calls from artists wanting to do something to help –giving the main thing they have to offer, which is their time and their talent in lieu in most cases of the actual cash, which few have to spare. In the few instances where cash isn't a problem, they dig deep too – half a mil from Nicole is a generous donation. Many will say 'she can afford it' but I think no-one parts with that kind of cash easily. Good on'er. And good on'Er Majesty as well, for opening *her* private purse too.

What it made me think though was that in tough times I rarely recognize the initiatives that look after artists. Some may well benefit from the recent stimulus package through being parents. Some may benefit from the schools package which will allow for the construction of new halls or theatres where such artists could play – though that would require a reinstatement of healthy artists-in-schools programs which have all but disappeared. You may have the new space – the builders, electricians, roofers, glaziers, drivers, petrol companies, caterers, teachers and students will have the benefit, but without restimulated programs for the inclusion of artists they'll miss out. First to step up to help are the artists and entertainers, but how often do we find a specific measure to help them out when times are tough.

It's a fact of cultural values – if arts and culture are not valued as essentials of life, essential food for the soul of the nation and its people, then when times are tough of course their creators and interpreters will not be considered in the same way as health, education, defense etc. Yet paradoxically, the first thing people turn to in crisis, as was evidenced in the bushfire telethons and services is music – singing – playing - stories

Alas, in times of economic crisis people do understandably look to hospitals, schools pensioners and workers who've lost their jobs, but exactly at the time it is most needed, food for the soul is often deemed expendable.

Yet it's a mistake to cut away or neglect artists in disproportion – your town, city or nation's artists can keep the spirit alive, and if your artists are encouraged towards authenticity – real responses to life as it really is in the here and now, then that helps too. Thinking and talking about reality helps – as does the mere inchoate experience of great beauty. If meditation in prayer to a deity is deemed helpful, then surely meditation in front of the visual splendour of Emily Kangewarre or the aural inspiration of Ross Edwards is also not just helpful- but essential.

There's been recent talk about Roosevelt and the Depression. Indeed Mary Travers wrote a substantial piece about it in the Weekend AGE a few days ago. The New Deal website tells us:

Under the New Deal, the notion of work expanded beyond the construction of roads, bridges, dams, and buildings. Government patronage for the arts inspired creativity, provided entertainment, and promoted American culture. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) became the New Deal's largest employment agency. Under the WPA the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Music Project employed thousands of artists, writers, actors, film makers, musicians, and dancers. Other government agencies also supported aesthetic endeavors....they produced documentary photographs, and the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture commissioned post office murals. Not only did this New Deal for the arts put Americans to work, it also celebrated American workers, the nation's history, its talents, and its diversity. Arts projects did not necessarily ennoble ordinary lives, but these lives became the subjects for plays, interviews, murals, and photographs, producing a documentary record of how the Great Depression affected them.

But it also tells us that these measures were controversial. No doubt they were useful : for artists and companies where documentation and healing were part of their practice, this would have been splendid. And some artists ( Steinbeck and John Ford for instance) found inspiration in the stories of ordinary people in tough times. And we have plenty of those – big hArt being one of them. But there are some artists who prefer to wait tables or work in healthcare rather than engage in arts projects which are to them contrary to their desire or aesthetic – they prefer to keep the art pure. If there's a temptation to follow Roosevelt, then let's make sure that our artists are not dragooned into projects which prove counter-productive to the most important gift they have to give – innovation and creativity. But at least the New Deal for the USA in the 1930s acknowledged the importance of art ,and created jobs for artsworkers.

And on February 16<sup>th</sup> this year, the New York Times reported that the US stimulus package includes \$50 million for the National Endowment for the Arts. This had originally been rejected by the Senate, and some of the ensuing arguments are interesting for us:

[Louise M. Slaughter](#), Democratic co-chairwoman of the Congressional Arts Caucus. "If we're trying to stimulate the economy, and get money into the Treasury, nothing does that better than art."

Robert Redford "Ticket takers or electricians or actors — all the people connected with the arts are at risk just like everybody else is.

"I hope the maximum amount of the \$50 million finds its way into the pockets of artists and those who support them," said [Reynold Levy](#), president of [Lincoln Center](#). "An employed dancer is as important as an employed construction worker. His or her family has many needs, owns a home, buys a car and makes an impact on the economy."

Ed Harsh, president of Meet the Composer said "It's a tremendous validation of the role of artists as an economic and a spiritual force,"

Most interesting is that success seems to have come from pointing out that artists are workers too and that the sector is a vital economic driver. Well, if that's what it takes, so be it, but I wish we could also persuade with arguments about the inherent value of the arts .

As it happens Mildura is the perfect test case. In this fluid moment the story has changed again; now the banks are not foreclosing because that would require an accurate evaluation of the properties and businesses they have leant to – it would become obvious that the banks' assets are worthless, and that would signal collapse. So now there is just a prolonged agony as growers can continue to sit on small properties where vines wither and fruit trees die. The new solar plant project will bring new jobs and as it is one of the fastest growing regional cities in Australia ( because people are leaving the land ) the service sector is growing. But it's not pretty. Isn't this therefore, one of those places where the townsfolk should be screaming against any investment in the arts ?

In January, the Murray River International Music Festival doubled its attendance for most events. In late June Mildura runs one of the most successful Writers' Festivals in the country. Last year Julian Burnside and I helped to launch the Art Vault, an incredibly sleek contemporary art gallery on Deakin Avenue , and out back splendid workshops with superb print-making and other facilities, and upstairs two beautiful apartments for artist residencies – they have been overwhelmed with requests for these. The Arts Centre acquired its new Steinway through both the public and private philanthropic purse.

And guess what ? Three days ago I was back in Mildura, for the start of their Mildura/Wentworth Arts Festival. Around in Langtree Avenue, opposite the Brewery , BigArt has set up their GOLD project .Young people , once at risk , and a professional team, will interview farmers and growers at risk about their current situation on the land – the stories will be told and recorded, and healing will begin. Their data will provide the fodder for an online archive and a theatre show later.

Out in the streets last Saturday night literally thousands gathered to see the district parade their kids, their Turkish women, their Phillipino community, their growers , their retailers, their vintage car salute to the Chaffey Brothers and Alfred Deakin, and their fieries returned from Victoria and given the heroes' cheers they deserved. Then all sat down , thousands of them, in the streets to feast together, and crush grapes – a community united in the face of great hardship.

This is the traditional beginning of their arts festival – that's what the banners read – Arts Festival. Mildura understands, as do many other towns battling climate change and drought, stuff-ups with water and an embattled global economy, that art is not a dispensable item in the survival pack. This town is providing an essential model for the role of art not only in battling isolated regional centres, but for the whole of the country. When times are tough, the soul needs Art even more - and I'm not talking just about entertainment which we all know historically has thrived in Depressions – I'm talking about Art .

So there I was, back in Mildura – still hot at the start of March, with many firefighters still bracing themselves, and still today, in Victoria, textile workers wondering what happened to their jobs. Hugh's compered the Academy Awards, and Heath has his Oscar at last.

It should be a simple and wise thing to learn from history, and to get into the habit of listening more often to the voices of historians, or to grab at knowledge passed down. I've been glad to have Manning Clark as a companion during this couple of months . He wrote:

Ever since the beginning of European settlement in January 1788, Australia had been fashioned to be a pioneer in the period of bourgeois democracy, and a conservative in the era of the people's democracies. In Australia power belonged neither to visionaries nor to women, but to ruthless and tough men. Throughout its history its people had been taught to equate material success with happiness, and material achievement with public virtue'

I hope that this moment – in extremis on the land, and equally in the pocket - may bring us to another place , an Australia not harking back to colonial subjugation or cultural myopia , but one full of happiness and virtue , proud to step forward , with artists proudly at its heart . I am as fearful and cautious as the next person of that hard thing of 'breaking away' of 'going away' – from school, from a profession, from parents, from what you know, from whom you love, from the way it has been. But my pride , my curiosity and my sense of adventure overcome any such fears when I think what new pages of Australian history are to be written when ,through our artists, we have a new song for all of us to sing , and something truly of our own to move us in the moments that matter.

Thankyou.

**Robyn Archer**  
Mildura, Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne  
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