

Cultural Queensland is the policy but Cultural Wasteland is fast becoming the reality for local performers. We are told the Arts are on the move in Queensland and that Brisbane has set its sights on recognition as a great national centre of culture. For smaller local companies, however, the increasing emphasis on commercialism and festivals, led by the giant presence which is the Queensland Performing Arts Trust, is spelling certain death. For local companies, everything leans in favour of those which receive ongoing Government operational funding while the rest, regardless of the worth of their product, simply cannot compete. Slick expensive marketing and the high cost of using theatres like those in the Performing Arts Centre, leaves small companies nowhere to go.

I predict there will be many victims of the current Arts climate over the coming months. The first fell last week. After three months of fighting to save the vision which had been Brisbane City Opera, I was forced to surrender to the scrap heap twelve months of the hardest but most rewarding work I have ever done, side by side with some of the most dedicated people I have ever worked with. It was a bitter course of action to be forced to take and soul-destroying to realise that Brisbane City Opera, despite giving Brisbane so much in so short a time, was ultimately of insufficient interest or concern to those with the power to cooperate and ensure its survival.

Brisbane City Opera's life was short. Its first season, in May '96, was a unique and warm-hearted performance piece "Opera, A Passionate Affair!", devised by company members to offer opera lovers and new-comers a fresh approach. It was applauded by audiences and critics alike and with its minimal set requirements and small cast of ten, it should have toured all over Queensland by now. The Arts Council couldn't afford to do this. Its hands are largely tied by the obligation to tour the product of the "funded companies" most of whom also receive a large touring grant under the ARTS program (including, curiously, QPAT itself). If you're not in that select group it doesn't really matter if your product is better, cheaper or more appropriate. Without that government handout for touring, it's a closed shop. The playing field is anything but level and the needs or wants of regional Queensland are the last concern. These guaranteed ARTS touring handouts are given prior to the funded companies even submitting their detailed program !!

The huge costs of using the Cremorne Theatre as an unfunded and unsponsored organisation meant BCO's first production, despite reasonable audiences, sustained a loss of several thousand dollars. BCO battled on. The company managed to convince the Brisbane Festival to "umbrella" its next planned production, "The Consul". We saw this as the great opportunity - the production, if a success, would put the company on the map and secure its future. "The Consul" in due course was arguably the most critically acclaimed production in the Festival. It was achieved on a shoe-string budget, with a cast of twelve and an orchestra of twenty-three. All participants gave their services for a fraction of their worth, in the belief that such a great achievement and such a marvellous display of local talent would be embraced by Arts bodies and audiences alike.

It was with great disappointment that we saw all the Festival promotion focusing on the big budget commercial productions. As crowds flocked to Porgy and Bess (concert version) and Over the Top With Jim, and box office enquiries about opera productions were directed to Porgy and Bess rather than to "The Consul", we began to sense the true value placed on local talent and to suspect that the real reason we might have been included in the Festival was simply to bolster the local content statistics by 50 odd people. Certainly no-one from the artistic staff of the Festival or of QPAT even bothered to attend. The reviews for some of the "draw-card" shows were embarrassing next to BCO's raves

but no-one cared. The big shows made a lot of money and that appears to be the bottom line for the Arts in Brisbane. The fact that many people left those productions feeling disappointed or angry didn't matter. The money was in the bank, ensuring future festivals and future big budget commercial productions. The Brisbane Festival was thus deemed a success !

On the strength of two fine achievements and reviews endorsing these, BCO applied for Arts Queensland funding. This funding would have ensured many local singers regular work in 1997 and would have helped build strong foundations for BCO's future. BCO's program for 1997 involved a new production in the Cremorne Theatre, plus touring and education programs. The community-spirited nature of our operation could not be denied. The peer assessment process, which even those in high Arts advisory positions agree, "cannot operate without the risk of corruption", deemed BCO worthy of absolutely no assistance. Not one cent. To my disbelief, after much recent debate, the controversial peer assessment process is to be retained. I am certain none of those on the panel which assessed BCO's application had either operatic or small business expertise, and given this, I don't know how the decision as to BCO's worth was made. I know the panel was lacking in operatic expertise as I was invited to join it for 98's grants, in order to address this problem. The person who extended the invitation no longer works at the Arts office.

Whilst most rejected applicants write abusive letters, I took a proactive tack in the belief that if you know something to be wrong you must do all you can to make it right. We put together an interim rescue plan which would keep BCO together and place the company before the public again for one season this year. It was important not to lose all the ground we had gained. The plan sought relatively small assistance from several sources. \$10,000 from the Arts Ministry directly and \$10,000 from Brisbane City Council. This money, though not forthcoming from either source, was to have funded a marketing and sponsorship consultant. All BCO then needed to do was have QPAT agree to assist with a return season of "Opera, A Passionate Affair !" I proposed the production be included in QPAT's Prime of Life, and Education programs which, when added to the mainstream performances, would have assured healthy attendance. The risk for QPAT was minimal. They may not have made much money but they almost certainly would not have been out of pocket.

The real frustration is that we almost did it. Whilst waiting the six weeks for QPAT to respond, I succeeded in gaining a grant from the Arts Office for a marketing and sponsorship consultant and also assistance to enable BCO to accept an invitation to take our production to the inaugural National Opera Festival in Canberra, immediately following the Cremorne season. I even received a letter from the Arts Minister stating how pleased she was that Brisbane City Opera was soon to represent Queensland in Canberra. I was not however prepared for QPAT's response. The archival video of the production which I had submitted was simply returned in a postpack with an accompanying letter informing me that QPAT could unfortunately not assist, "due to financial constraints." There was no consultation, no face-to-face communication, no follow up meeting, just QPAT the Arts giant, sitting on its collective hands as Brisbane City Opera slid silently into an unmarked grave.

I don't see how such things can happen. I am incredulous at the slow pace, extended silences and lack of communication between so many government employees in so many government funded Arts departments. Did the Arts Office and QPAT ever have a communication about BCO's demise, I wonder? Did either or both acknowledge our

achievements but fail to see the real importance of a small scale opera company in a State of this size, and a city with a growing number of Festivals each requiring music theatre productions? Was BCO ultimately the victim of the long established animosity between QPAT and the Arts Office? Finally can the government really be serious about Cultural Queensland policy when a company like BCO can rise so splendidly and fall so easily?

"QPAT is not the government", we are told and "Tony Gould does not run the Arts Office", but most of us simply don't believe that. Perhaps, like the complete rejection of BCO's funding application, the failure of QPAT to lend a hand at the eleventh hour was just another bungle that people will soon forget. Perhaps on the other hand it was a calculated decision by QPAT to rid itself of something which might occasionally call on its might for a helping hand and deplete, in a small way, its great wealth.

I see the day looming when no-one but heavily funded companies or outside commercial operators will be able to afford to use the theatres within QPAC. BCO was welcomed to QPAC by staff members who saw the company as a new potential long-term client. We paid our bills last year but when we had no more dollars left to give, the big back was slowly turned. Perhaps now that QPAT controls the QPO, their new Musical Director, Stephen Barlow will be given the go-ahead for his public ambitions to mount small, intimate operas in Brisbane. With Barlow resident in England, one has to question the degree of loyalty to local performers which might be expected if this is a direction QPAT chooses to take. Ironically, if BCO had received the same degree of venue subsidy as the highly funded Opera Queensland, then our 1997 season would have been possible and BCO would have survived.

When the Queensland Performing Arts Trust does not see the nurturing of local performers as part of its brief and the Arts funding process is full of problems which can see real achievers left stranded, then I see little hope for many of Queensland's arts workers. The unmarked grave yawns for more victims.

What really irks me is that none of the bureaucrats who decided the fate of BCO, certainly no-one in QPAT's large programming department, bothered to come and see either of BCO's productions, even though they were right under their nose. Repeated invitations were met with no response. How can it be that it is these people who are deciding the future of artists in this city and not those with the talent, the vision, the expertise and the ability to create wonderful products whilst balancing impossibly small budgets?

It has always been the case that the middle men; agents, entrepreneurs, theatre owners, and the like, get fat on the backs of talented artists. I for one will continue to fight to see some of the power returned to those at the grass roots level whose right it is to own it. I have had enough of knocking on bureaucratic doors with cap in hand and of dealing with Arts administrators who don't even bother to see productions by exciting new local companies. It is a demeaning and demoralising position to be in and a terrible reflection on the inefficient and irresponsible management of so much Arts money in this State.

As the Biennial prepares to say its last hurrah, the next Brisbane Festival looms as yet again another extension of the QPAT giant. Our Lord Mayor has apparently pledged a repeat of his hefty \$1,000,000 Council contribution to the inaugural Brisbane Festival, only if Mr Gould is again at the helm. Perhaps this will be a good time of year to take a

holiday and see some of the Brisbane performers working in Southern centres because there is little or no work for them here.

Soprano Jennifer Parish is director of the highly successful operatic quartet Operatifi, now in its third year. She is the former director of the recently defunct Brisbane City Opera.