

Inaugural Arts Address - Arts Education Foundation Trust

5 August, 2008

It is an honour to have been asked to present the Inaugural Arts Address for the Arts Education Foundation Trust. First let me congratulate the fine young students who have received their scholarships today. I would have valued such an award at their age and it is a delight to see the scholarships being made across music, visual arts, dance and drama disciplines. All power to you in the years ahead – may you have rich and deeply satisfying lives.

I am the product of a public school education. First I attended West Ryde Infants and then West Ryde Primary School. I subsequently attended Marsden High School from where I was fortunate enough to matriculate and received as they were then called a Commonwealth Scholarship to go on to study and graduate as a Bachelor of Music at the University of Sydney.

Education has been at the centre of my development as a person, as a musician and subsequently as a manager and leader in a variety of diverse corporate and public positions. Over most of my life I have been self taught – which I hasten to say accounts for any shortcomings in my speech today. But it is my teachers who have enabled me to have the confidence to think independently and to love learning as the most precious continuing gift in life.

Personally I would describe the rich process of life as being all about the acquisition and application of knowledge. How we manage our life in that process attests to our own abilities and character as reinforced and nourished from our home environments, the reliability and quality of our formal education and the way in which from that we are enabled to manage and grow from experience.

I still remember my formal teachers well – Mrs Reneike in kindy, Mrs McGrath and Mrs Anderson in first and second class – each of them lovely women who I can picture now and to whom I owe my devotion to and love of reading and who encouraged me not to be shy about my curiosity.

Then there was gruff old Mr Maloney in third class, the brilliant Mrs Conway in fourth, the cane devoted Mr Pollock in fifth and the rather tied old warrior Mr Heard in sixth, who seemed to me to be simply seeing his days out.

Secondary school was entirely different – one had a host of new experiences and multiple teachers. Many of them I realise now for better or worse, have impacted my view of the world and my approach to it quite profoundly. In particular people like Mr Clarke in Science, Miss McCauley in Latin, Mr Raskall and Mr Hawkins in Mathematics, and Mr Townsend and Mr Botham in History provided settings that have been central to thinking ever since.

Then there were others such as Andy Watson in Economics, Pam Kidd in Visual Arts and Francis Spillane in English and Drama who were amongst the first adults who were relaxed with me using their first names in private. Above all there was my music tutor Richard Gill and the head of physical education Maureen Fryer who remain today as the closest of friends and to whom I owe so much.

I open this speech with this recital of names because in preparing this speech I realise just how important these people were in helping me become who I am and yet we all reflect all too infrequently on that debt to our teachers and the deep appreciation we owe them. The role of the teacher is precious and it horrifies me as to how undervalued it is in our society today. Undervalued not only as to appeal as a vocation but also in selection, training, remuneration and resourcing.

Now lest you think I am a Pollyanna in this process I have firm views as to the way in which many elements of our public system have contributed to erosion in standards and aspirations in education. Much in public education today derives from a variety of curriculum malfunctions most particularly the almost indescribably stupid position that as a nation – and with a small population - that we still have no national curriculum and no immediate prospect of achieving one.

It is breathtaking that our nineteenth century colonial heritage with six little empire outposts still permeates the most fundamental building block of a modern state – its education framework. The education framework of a modern state and its logic, creativity, relevance and resilience is central to national confidence, direction and improvement. There is no way around the fact that in today's world, one's future is inextricably linked to the reliable reinforcement through a strong education system to the nation's intellectual capacity and the social flexibility and resourceful responsiveness to deal with all the challenges confronted, that naturally flows from that.

In other areas many of the systemic and industrial rigidities in public education across our nation – and there are varying degrees by state - are stultifying and owe little to ensuring a dynamic responsive contemporary and connected approach to the evolution of school education. And that evolution must occur rapidly if we are to continue aiming for the delivery of the type of modern polity which is central to ensuring the welfare of our people and their future quality of life.

In my view that intellectual core requires the wholesale renovation of our approach to and above all commitment to a national education system which reflects the best quality standards and is unequivocal in its provision of equality of access and opportunity for all. If Australia is to continue to care about and embrace the notion of egalitarian ideals as the foundation of our culture then there is much work to be done.

In my view, for what it may be worth, the quality of that system will have several absolutely fundamental tenets:

1. First there have to be reliable national standards and national curriculum frameworks – and that is essentially non negotiable;
2. There have to be close delivery connections to local schools and school districts including the empowerment of school principals to appoint and assess teachers so that their performance is directly accountable in the same way that performance accountability is fundamental to all modern commercial and public life;

3. A mixed system will continue but it has to be one where the resource imbalance between public and private in the interests of fairness and equity must correct the systemic distortions that have eroded public education;
4. The whole approach and attitudinal fabric to the role, remuneration, training, assessment and reinforcement of teachers requires wholesale renovation so that we capture the right talented people who make teaching their first choice of career and we ensure that it is a satisfying and fulfilling one subsequently;
5. There must be an unwavering commitment to excellence – one which ensures that the talented are encouraged and appropriately reinforced;
6. And finally there must be a real commitment to the primary importance of mainstream delivery of the arts and sport from infant education on as the ying and yang essential to a fit, intellectually vigorous and well resourced nation that is healthy and empowered to confront its challenges effectively.

I think I can assume safe common territory with everyone here today in saying that Australia is imbued with an unusually talented resource of active and original creative individuals quite disproportionate to its size. However that resource has an uneven education and resource framework compromising the nation's capacity to retain talent and drive consistent effort that evolves and improves as boldly as it must to serve the people's best interest.

The challenge before us is: - how do we work to secure an effective government policy framework that will understand and embrace the need to transform the status and position of creative endeavour and creative professionals in our society?

I take it as a given that all the richest and most energetic societies have the centrality of creativity to their health and well being. In saying that I speak for a general view that creative endeavour has never been more fundamental to developing a modern society if we want one that is flexible, energetic, open to change and which reinforces and celebrates the intellectual capacity, capability and originality of Australians to our citizens and worldwide. From a national commitment to creative endeavour, invention, employment, debate, national confidence, and good social values inevitably follow. History provides our body of evidence.

I would however, be letting you all down if I give a dry recital of inputs and outputs from an historical context. Let me speak from a personal perspective: - One drawn from a lifelong love of literature, writing, theatre, film and music. But in terms of personal abiding deep relevance most of all from music.

Music is fundamental to my view of the world and the enjoyment of it – providing almost a natural prism through which I observe and perceive things so that I never really stand back and think about it deductively or didactically. I always have music in my head – I carry it around and it resonates inside me.

Music is I believe fundamental not just to a well rounded education, but also to an expansive world view for many reasons.

Music teaches us about things that are not discussed or emphasised in our lives generally or sufficiently– it teaches us about beauty and the enduring value of human creativity.

Music like all the arts provides emotional nourishment. And whilst this is not a contest with the other arts, music is particularly special because it is not primarily about our physical world having only passing reference to it – it is about another mental and emotionally felt place and experience. It so often is not about words or images of our terrestrial world but rather about invoking deep inner feelings and primal activators in us all.

Music is the only creative art that is found in all human cultures. It is universally necessary and central to life whether in an African forest or an Arabic souk; or in a formal concert hall to the many variants and music forms we might know on the world stage.

It features virtuosity in many guises and in many places,

It can be about the most simple pure notions of love through to the most complex romantic expressions of the feelings, conflicts and bonds between men and women. It offers us an expression of the pantheon of all human experience from the most vulgar to that which is sublime and in a way that can be gripping and a source of constant self renewing abundant satisfactions.

Music can lift one's spirits and move us like no other art form whether it be from the magnificent sound of a single instrument through the glory of the human voice.

Music is central to our most sacred devotions and to our most frivolous and delicious entertainments.

Music is at the very core of all human experience and expression.

It is one of the most aspirational and inspirational phenomena for youth across our planet.

It can provide deep satisfaction through playing, composing dancing or pleasurable listening.

It is fabulously portable and now pervasively available.

It provides a creative partnership to lift excitement, atmosphere and meaning in other areas of human creativity such as the theatre or film or television.

It can also reveal new found wonders in the way it can genuinely surprise one in the manner by which it can catch one up with its profundity.

And for me what is fundamentally important about music and what makes it so very special is that it is about using the sense from which, in the experience of life we are most desensitised – our hearing.

Sight, taste, touch and smell are all senses which we can switch off – we can elect not to experience any particular thing with each of them. We can't switch off our hearing in the same way and therefore what we do is that we generally have much less awareness of and sensitivity about our hearing and the aural universe – so often a cacophony - which surrounds us.

Life noise is an atmospheric accompaniment that we are inured to resulting in the outcome that all too often we are poor listeners. Whether that is to something being said or to the rich aural domain provided by any number of musics. Music is quite simply central to a well rounded education and to ensuring that we are taught to listen, feel and think.

I first fell seriously in love with music when I was twelve and took up the clarinet at school through the encouragement of my closest male friend to this day – Richard Gill.

I had arrived at the clarinet by way of the flugelhorn and before that the banjo.

Much to my pleasure when I arrived at Marsden High School in Ermington I was offered an instrument to learn. Public schools in those days principally because of the initiative of the remarkable and quite eccentric Terry Hunt – the chief inspector for music in secondary schools - provided starter instruments.

I was tutored by Richard with a bunch of other kids. I had started on the flugelhorn because that was all that was available in the storeroom. As soon as a woodwind instrument became available I changed and a long relationship with the clarinet ensued.

First I learnt from Reg Bryson who was a peripatetic teacher who would arrive at home in his FJ Holden on Tuesday afternoons promptly at 4 o'clock. Nice guy but pretty ordinary teacher. Then I went to the Conservatorium to first study with Douglas Gerke and finally with the great musician Donald Westlake – a truly fine player who was the second major adult influence on me after Richard. It was there I got a pair of Symphony 1010 clarinets – a major moment.

I learnt the daily discipline that only a musical instrument or advanced sport can bring to a young person. I practised constantly – before school, at school during the lunch hour and after school.

Initially I was second clarinettist in the school orchestra and then the first when the girl on whom I had my first schoolboy crush – Ann Warwick – left after completing her school certificate in fourth form as it was then called.

During the final two years of High School I also was able to join the Public Schools Concert Orchestra which rehearsed on Saturdays in the Education Department's Glebe premises which later moved to Blackfriars in Chippendale.

From third form I had started actively composing my own music and that was to continue up until I was thirty or so.

Many great life lessons have been learnt by me from music.

For example there is a degree of professional accountability for one's work and its content that can generate critical response in ways that can be quite character forming! And that is a very good thing and has influenced my life ever since. I have always been open to professional feedback and criticism and similarly have never been fearful to provide it. There can be no doubt that, that quality follows from the rigorous standards that apply in music - where criticism and critical engagement is part and parcel of the profession.

The notion of absolute standards is central to mainstream western music cultures not only in classical music but in jazz, rock and roll and in popular light music.

It has always been my view that Australians generally do not receive criticism well and that our inability to receive criticism is matched only by our inability to give criticism in a way which is thoughtful, caring constructive and nourishing.

In music the situation is quite different because music is built on layers of disciplined study and the process of it requires that one develop a disciplined approach which not only welcomes criticism but actively seeks it out.

Music and its health, like many of the arts are dependent on a fairly forensic approach to review and assessment.

Another really great life lesson in music is the lesson of the expansive tolerance and acceptance of many ways to express one self that is central to the experience and practise of it. Music and tolerance are very close bedfellows.

There is much to be learnt from the selfless sense of community and interdependence that is reflected in much of the practise of the arts whether it is from the obvious teamwork in music performance through to the collaborative elements seen so centrally in modern video media.

Certainly my experience is that from the earliest music experiences on it made many of us strong and resourceful managers and gave us confidence and resilience.

For me one of the greatest sources of renewal and satisfaction has been in my discovery of and devotion to chamber music. You can't beat a good string quartet, quintet or sextet in my book. It is music making at its most precious: intimate, intense, conversational, fiery, dramatic and at times so ethereally beautiful that it simply and literally takes your breath away. I have derived more pleasure from the companionship of chamber music and musicians than any others and value and revere their efforts as peripatetic providers of comfort and solace to publics across this nation and around the world. They are very special people and I have never lost the thrill in listening to live performances by domestic and international quartets and other chamber configurations.

From working in a professional life in music in the 70's and then running the Australian Film Commission from the mid 1980's, I have moved on to have a commercial business career in the film and television production and broadcast industries.

The nature of my commercial work is and has always been very demanding. I believe that many of the leadership, management and to the extent that I have them, skills of persuasion are directly attributable to the discipline and experience of my music life in all its strands from school up until my early thirties.

Moreover it was in the arts that I have learnt to never, ever give up. I have learnt to keep on trying and to come at a problem from a variety of angles until a solution is found. The arts in this country – frankly as in most countries - have a tough time of it. There is not enough money, the market is hard and the activity expensive because of the nature of Australia's demography and geography.

However we have seen our creative community achieve a huge amount and as an Australian I take real pride in the breadth and quality of that achievement.

There are many great things in our country produced by our writers, composers, actors, directors, visual artists and filmmakers and they are all the product of tenacious conviction from exceptionally talented fellow Australians. Much that is done in our country is all too frequently not acknowledged. None of it could happen without support and education. As I reflect on all the experiences of my life and the remarkable opportunities I have been given I have this sense of obligation to offer thanks to my teachers and for my education.

It is fashionable today to defend music education by saying that it assists students in other skills such as language, mathematics and the other sciences. And that is undoubtedly true. For example, Nicole Kidman said of her research for the fine Sydney Pollack film, "The Interpreter" that it surprised her enormously that most of the extraordinary linguists who work as interpreters in the U.N. played a musical instrument.

We should use each and every available argument to defend and promote the fundamental need for formal and comprehensive music education from the commencement of school onwards.

But on a personal note I have to tell you that it saddens me to think that we are increasingly compelled to defend music by reference to other impacts rather than to reference music itself.

Music is good for one. Period.

It is good for the soul.

It is good for human tolerance.

It opens one's perception.

It frees one's mind.

It reinforces our capacity to feel and understand.

These are things I know to be true and I know in saying so I speak for all those who have had the privilege to develop or even liberate, a kind of umbilical connection to music through the work of one of more marvellous teachers.

The feelings released by music and the devotion to beauty it represents are probably some of the most noble, positive life affirming outcomes in the diversity of all human activity and all Australian children should have an absolute right to know and have the experience of it. I have been lucky – so many have not.

So let me finish by summarising to you all what I said in one of the opening addresses to the Creative Australia group at the 2020 Summit convened by the Prime Minister in April.

I believe the destination challenge for us all for the year 2020 is to arrive at an agenda framework which delineates the priorities we believe will secure a mainstream policy centrality for creative endeavour and heightened focus for public patronage, because the so called creative industries have a value which is not simply capable of objective financial measurement because it is so fundamentally intrinsic to civilisation and its evolution.

It seems to me that when setting out on any long journey it is essential to have a destination in mind as otherwise one will get lost and probably run out of provisions.

So let me describe what I believe 2020 should in our area look like:

1. By 2020 the need to uplift the creative confidence and literacy of the community will have been embraced and a comprehensive national education curriculum deployed which includes compulsory music, writing, visual arts and digital media strands from primary level.
2. By 2020 we will have in place a benchmark physical, social and digital infrastructure which nurtures, nourishes and secures a platform for intellectual and creative endeavour and provides a certainty of support for the talented. We will have achieved this goal by policy recognition that on-going investment in such capacity is as important to the national effort as transport, health and other national infrastructure programs;
3. Action by 2020 will have fostered a climate for philanthropic support and private investment which, harmonised with improved government support, will have seen the total body of activity in the provision to the community doubled at a minimum as to quantum and as importantly consumption.
4. By 2020 there will have been a long standing successful national indigenous theatre company and expanded operation of the National Indigenous Television Service which will be accessible to all Australians.

These elements would work together dynamically. Expanding our view of creativity and as importantly coupled with a robust employment and communications framework will have secured digital distribution for a comprehensive range of creative industry activity across the nation. And that is the end of that summary of my 2020 opening remarks.

Interestingly education resources, curriculum and the role of teachers and their training were key priority emphasis areas across the outputs of a variety of strands from the Summit working groups. The nation knows this needs urgent attention. We all have to fight to ensure that the core role of the arts for mainstream inclusion in that national program from primary school is not lost - I believe the quality of our nation's future is dependent upon it. The national sense of a well developed emotional intelligence to match normal aspiration to intellectual development which I am certain is central to a clear and confident future is reliant on that emphasis.

The 2020 summit was governed by goodwill and constructive spirit across the spectrum. There was a real focus on hard work to identify workable long range policy directions. It is but one strand of national effort but I felt there was a sense of renewal and openness of government to debate, to differences and a commitment to inclusion with a public participation which seemed real and confident.

I hope I am right.

The future of our nation and the education framework on which it is so fundamentally dependent requires the renewal of a national approach with bold goals and a clear plan.

This is our time to finally see the renewal of our commitment to teaching and as important to ensuring the arts are given their rightful place at the centre of that process of national education reform.

**Kim Williams AM,
CEO & Managing Director FOXTEL**