

# Q & A

**HILARY MCPHEE, APPOINTED IN MARCH 1994 FOR FOUR YEARS AS CHAIR OF THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL, BELIEVES THAT GETTING ARTS ONTO THE AUSTRALIAN AIRWAVES SHOULD BE THE FIRST STEP IN DEVELOPING AN EXPORT MARKET FOR THE AUSTRALIAN ARTS COMMUNITY.**

## **What is the Australia Council?**

It is the Commonwealth Government's arm's length arts funding body. It was set up 20 years ago to promote the arts, meaning we give out grants to individual artists and organisations for specific projects. Its charter is still to promote the arts in any form we think is appropriate. For the last 20 years the Australia Council has focused on enabling artists to spend time working on their art. There is now a need to develop audiences—something we have not done consistently in the past. This does not mean that the focus will be off individual artists or groups, but it does mean the Council will put a lot of effort into ensuring the art will get to as wide an audience as possible.

Therein lies a connection with broadcasting. We are extremely interested in developing the way popular and high culture is broadcast both here and overseas as a way of showcasing Australian work, and also as a way of extending the access to Australian creative work in remote areas of Australia and internationally.

At the moment the idea of arts broadcasting is limited and its concepts often boring. The few magazine-format arts programs are on the national television broadcasters—there is nothing on commercial television at all. There are some fairly highbrow arts programs on ABC Radio but not a lot on commercial radio. I believe there is much to be done to increase the audience for Australian creative work in terms of production values, encouraging arts broadcasting which is accessible and a lot more enticing, rather in the way that sport is. I found the response to the ABA's Siphoning report revealing. The only real arts organisation which responded was the Australian Opera. We don't have a lot of sense of Australian cultural events being absolutely central to the culture, unless they are sporting.

## **The list contained all sporting events.**

That's right and this is perhaps something the Australia Council should have a role in. But look at how sport is broadcast. In the last five years or so the way sport is



**Hilary McPhee**

filmed has greatly improved and so has the amount of coverage. A lot of money has been spent putting cameras in interesting places so the audience gets more than it would by attending a live game. I think the arts could learn a bit from the way sport is broadcast.

## **So you are looking at innovations?**

I'm looking to get arts material onto the airways, but I am also very concerned that we have some real input into the production values.

We have theatre, ballet and opera filmed occasionally as if you are sitting in the audience, the screen feels like a proscenium, which is usually a fairly inadequate substitute for the real thing. There are many other art forms which do not get anywhere near broadcasting and are probably more appropriate than the big production numbers are, where you do depend very much on the full experience of being in the theatre, to get the most out of it. I think music can be broadcast very much better than it is and there is much to be done for the visual arts. Craftspeople have a lot to share with an audience. And Aboriginal culture could be more widely understood and appreciated if it was creatively documented on television.

## **When you talk about expanding the listening base, are you also talking about expanding the audience's knowledge?**

Well, of course there is an educational

function. But I like to think of the arts, or people's participation in cultural events, as primarily entertainment and voluntary rather than compulsory. I think the Australia Council comes at it from that angle. People's participation in the arts in Australia is going up in leaps and bounds—the numbers are phenomenal—but I suspect we are not getting much extra reach. We are not passing on a sense that the experience is exciting to a wider public who may never imagine they would get anything from the arts. And I think that is something broadcasting can help us do.

## **The ABA recently released a discussion paper on Australian content for commercial television. As head of the Australia Council, what are your views on this?**

The ABA's approach seems to be spot on. As a result of Australian content regulations in the last few years, we have a clear demonstration that the audiences are out there for Australian programming, indeed often prefer it over imported culture. However, if we do not get it right this time, audiences will be swamped by imported material. I'm not keen that we over-regulate by any means. We need to provide our own filters to the rest of the world's media and recognise that we have the capacity to develop our own talent pool to produce an internationally competitive and creative product. We must keep on encouraging our producers and broadcasters to develop the Australian broadcasting industry to the point where our work is competitive with imports. It is always more expensive to develop the original material than to buy imports. If we don't have a system whereby the broadcasters are kept on their toes, they will always buy in, because there is more short-term profit in it. We have to find a way of investing in production to subsidise Australian content, while additional markets are developed and costs can be reduced.

## **Do you think Australian content translates to culture?**

Yes, of course. It is all part of the same debate.

### **Sport?**

I think sport is culture too.

### **You have a very broad definition of culture.**

Yes I do, particularly if we are talking about television. When looking at the commercial and national carriers we are talking about popular culture. It encompasses sport and a whole lot of other material and events that perhaps a view of the arts, with a capital 'A', would probably not define as culture.

### **The merging of the Arts and Communications portfolios has led to the suggestion that cultural issues are likely to be given greater prominence in discussions of media and communications issues.**

#### **Do you think that is a good thing?**

Yes, my impression is the dialogue is happening. I don't think it is possible any longer to have separate strategies for arts and communications. The two parts of the portfolio are interdependent.

### **Do you think the merged Department will be of benefit to the arts community?**

I think it will be of benefit to the communications industry as well. There are mutual benefits in all this.

### **The Government is to release a cultural policy statement soon. What would you look for in such a document?**

I hope it will tackle some big ideas about the way arts and communications can work together.

### **What effect do you think convergence is likely to have?**

I think we are going to find there are more opportunities opening up for Australian talent which will flow through into multi-media. At the moment there are not a lot of opportunities, except in drama and advertising to a limited extent. For example, with convergence we could find the gulf between educational and entertainment programs, and drama and the arts start to close. I think the conventional boundaries

6 The ABA's approach seems to be spot on. As a result of Australian content regulations in the last few years, we have a clear demonstration that the audiences are out there for Australian programming, indeed often prefer it over imported culture.9

will start to break down. We will have a much more interesting flow through, which will be good for creators, that is, the individual artists who can adapt to new media, performing arts groups and special projects. I see a lot of opportunity there. But we urgently need to get the copyright issues right so as to maximise artist's incomes.

### **Television ratings suggest Australian audiences like watching Australian programs, the same applies to books. What are the implications for cultural policy?**

In some areas of publishing, such as educational, more than 80 per cent of materials used are Australian in origin. That is terrific, but we can't just assume that high level will remain, because this market is very small and very expensive and we have not yet developed good export networks. Every other major English-speaking market that I

am aware of has developed an export market. We need to develop exports and make ourselves profitable and develop more in the way of joint venture. Government does have a role here, but basically the producers have to do it for themselves in a competitive environment utilising and developing Australian talent. For example, education is rapidly becoming screen-based. Computer games are in the class-

room as well as in the home. But there is very little locally produced material yet. It is so easy to buy-in and minimally adapt for local consumption. We could do much more.

### **So the aim is to avoid being swamped by another culture rather than keep out the best things?**

If we get this right, we can have the pick of the lot but still have our own producers providing 50 to 60 per cent of what people see. We need an industry strong enough to enter into partnerships and produce for other markets. I think that is very important. The whole notion of Australian content will be more interestingly defined as this develops. We are not talking any more about work made in Australia about Australia. I think we are talking about work made here with an Australian eye on the rest of the world. ☐

## **PROGRAMS CLASSIFIED C OR P**

The following table contains programs granted 'C' or 'P' classification by the ABA between 15 August 1994 and 13 September 1994. Producers interested in submitting programs for classification should contact Liz Gilchrist on (02) 334 7840.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>New/renewal</b>	<b>Decision date</b>	<b>Applicant</b>
Sebastian and the Sparrow	Australia	C	renewal	26.8.1994	Network TEN Australia Limited
Ship to Shore 2	Australia	CAD	new	26.8.1994	Barron Films (Television) Limited
Young Adventurers; The	Australia	PRC	new	26.8.1994	Ben Cropp Productions Pty Ltd

CAD C Australian drama.

PRC Provisional C.