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A View from Australia

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

George Steiner, *A Festival Overture*, 1996

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

This account of international arts festivals in Australia is less one of bragging (though that too has had its place) and more one of early ignorance, gradual evolution and a happy present.

International arts festivals in Australia were first built entirely on the Edinburgh model. When first Perth in Western Australia, and then Adelaide in South Australia, cloned that model to their relatively isolated cities, the core desire was to bring 'culture' to those cities. Not that Perth and Adelaide lacked artists and performances, but those who had been to Edinburgh felt that Australian audiences were rarely exposed to the 'best' of culture. The significantly named Elizabethan Theatre Trust and entrepreneurs such as Ken Brodziak, already toured international shows and artists: I myself was taken by our science teacher, along with a few fellow students, to see Vivien Leigh play Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, in 1962. But these southern and western capitals, unlike Melbourne and Sydney with their significantly

larger populations and markets which could support profitable commercial tours of international artists, felt cut off from the culture of the 'old country'. Festivals seemed to offer a solution to this isolation and also a pathway for early cultural tourism and its cash component.

While the desire to support more art is admirable at any time, the drivers for these festivals were not altruistic in Klaić's way. Uniting Australia through culture was not part of the mission, nor was the notion of collaboration. This was to be a feast of audience enjoyment of largely European, with some American, arts and entertainment. Where Australian orchestras were involved, they would be playing largely European repertoire, and theatre companies would be presenting European or American plays. At that time the White Australia Policy was still in force, though starting to undergo the 25 years of change which would see the end of discrimination towards non-Europeans wishing to emigrate to Australia. Uniting Australia with its Asian neighbours was also not on the festival agenda at that time, even though popular singer Khamal, then a student at Adelaide University under the Colombo plan (one of the first attempts to broker positive relationships with Asia), played a role in the first *Adelaide Festival*. Khamal's repertoire was comprehensively the popular and semi-classical songs of Europe and America.

The inaugural 1960 *Adelaide Festival* was held from Saturday, March 12 to Saturday, March 26. The festival's patron was Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. Festival highlights included the first *Adelaide Writers' Week*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Dave Brubeck's jazz quartet. Perhaps the most obvious legacy was that the *Edinburgh Festival* had been cloned to a similar city in Adelaide, where you can still book a city hotel and walk to all events. Perth took longer to reconcile the model to the spread out nature of that city, and to the fact that its ownership by the University of Western Australia meant it would take longer to convince the general public that the festival was for them too, not just better educated audiences.

But these worthy pioneering efforts were undertaken in apparent ignorance at that time of the desperate need in Australia for a programme of unification and reconciliation not unlike that which Europe cried out for post-World War Two, and which Dragan Klaić saw as still necessary decades later. The main difference was that the war in Australia had not been waged just a few years prior to the revival of the festival model, but had been going on for 180 years and was still being waged. At the time of the first *Adelaide Festival*, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the continent's first people, were still seven years away from suffrage, and even further from the complete cessation of the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children from their families, and the ultimate closure, in the 1980s, of the last of the institutions which had held them.

Steiner also wrote:

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

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

While the Dutch and the French had already bumped into the Great South Land, they saw no use for it, and it was the British who saw some advantages in a big empty dumping ground for their unwanted – especially those convicted of acts of political inconvenience. No surprise that the Irish were so present in early Australia. The British declared the continent Terra Nullius¹, and thereby, in one stroke, rendered Australia's first peoples non-human, non-existent, and the injustices they encountered invisible. While there are recorded instances of clearer perceptions, sympathetic academic studies and individual instances of kindness, that inhuman treatment was still invisible to the majority of the general public when the Australian international arts festival model was imported into Australia.

The facts are that not only were there people on the continent when the British mistakenly and brutally labelled it Terra Nullius, but they had been there for 40,000 years and had complex systems of clan relationships, land management, protocols and ceremony. In 1950s Australia, there was nothing new about the idea of special gatherings for special celebrations that involved visual arts, song, dance, costume, food, kids: such 'festivals' had been around for tens of thousands of years, as an integral part of indigenous life. This forgetfulness was highlighted in Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2020 summit, in the arts stream, when so many Australian artists called out for the arts to be seen as central to Australian life, especially in education, rather than an optional leisure pursuit. Theatre Director Wesley Enoch pointed out that we need look no further than Indigenous Australia, where art had always been