

BARISTA : *Heartstarters for the hungry mind*



heartstarters for the hungry mind

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VCA gone in a puff of smoke



This is a photograph of Adam Elliott with the Oscar he won for *Harvie Krumpet*, with Melanie Coombs as producer. He was a graduate of the animation program in the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School, taught by the likes of Sarah Watt, an internationally respected animator who has gone on to make *Look Both Ways* and *My Year Without Sex*. Melanie Coombs was trained as a producer at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, and the two have recently launched their feature, *Mary and Max* onto the world stage.

Alumni of the same school, both at Swinburne and VCA, include Gillian Armstrong, Jonathan Shiff, Richard Lowenstein, Geoffrey Wright, Robert Luketic, Andrew Domenik and Jamie Blanks.

Pretty good little hotbed of creativity, you might think. A veritable cultural ferment. Promise of the future, all that sort of thing.

As of now, the VCA no longer exists, and has been absorbed into Melbourne University like an oyster grazed by a starfish. Teeth take muscle, worn out by subtle, implacable pressure. Whatever the logic, this is a dreadful outcome, as far as I am concerned.

Robin Usher, local arts writer for The Age, has been [following this](#) in dolorous tones.

“Filmmaker Robbie McEwen accepted his degree last week before declaring in front of vice-chancellor Glyn Davis and other university officials at the Melbourne Recital Centre that “people could thank the University of Melbourne for ripping the heart out of the VCA”.

College lecturers who were there say the applause from students and their families was long and sustained, while Professor Davis appeared stunned.

Staff and students have met over the past fortnight to consider the impact of the merger, which has involved the loss of casual support staff, the merger of schools and impending

budget cuts.”

Gone now is a unique institution in Australian cultural life - across many different forms, the VCA concentrates on the craft education of potentially elite artists likely to practice at the highest level.

[The VCA](#), a pretty cluster of buildings just south of the general arts precinct, hard up against the Police stables, a genteel wander from the National Gallery, Federation Square, the Anglican cathedral and Young and Jackson's pub, is completely embedded in Melbourne's cultural life, of which the town's middle classes are patriotically fond, as in 'Sydney does glitz, we do sophistication.'

There is a weird kind of exceptionalism about this, a certain second city superiority, necessary to the collective ego up against the imperial certainty of Sydney. I think its a useful energy, but it can rely on the notion that Melbavostokians are simply superior. Of course, the cultural density of Melbourne depends on certain institutions and funding practices, and it is pretty fragile under its geometrically tiled and shiny surface. There is an older generation of activists who understand this, but they represent only some of the city's power bases. And this story demonstrates just how little clout they turned out to have.

Beyond [Wikipedia's summary](#), which simmers with tension, there seems to be little of the VCA's history on the net. Starting as the National Gallery School in 1867, it grew the other disciplines after 1972, and has a music and dance high school attached to it.

The VCA is also the final resting place of the wandering Swinburne Film and Television School, which was funded by the Victorian Education Department, and was booted out of its original home as part of the Hawke government "reforms" to higher education. The VCA simply bought it, though the computer animation department was snaffled by RMIT.

As an outsider participating in the screen life of Melbourne, I think the VCA Film and Television School is a mixed blessing. A very high proportion of my colleagues went to it, and its approach infuses film production in this town, and this cinematic subculture. To put it bluntly, it glorifies directors, doesn't get writers and shits on producers. It has also produced a very long list of successful practitioners, while its animation and documentary departments are excellent.

There is an unresolvable but creative tension inside the education of our elite artists. Do we think of practitioner education as academic, or as craft? Both the VCA and the once-Swinburne FTS tried to sell themselves to the federal government as separate stand alone craft institutions, like the National Institute for Dramatic Arts or the the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. No chance - these cost a motza to run, and maybe Melbourne is the wrong city anyway, according to the federal government.

But VCA itself has gradually been infused with this dialectical problem of the relationship between practice and ideas in art forms. It plays out differently in different areas, and I am told the whole school is warped in the direction of the dominant art form of the time. The film school has remained resolutely atheoretical; as a result, I reckon graduates tend to have a poor working vocabulary, and a deficient sense of cinema history. That is pretty sad, when it offers a full time undergraduate degree in the area, with plenty of young students still forming their artistic sensibility.

For the last several years, the VCA has moved towards a combined theoretical component to the curriculum. There has been plenty of tension about this. What theory? When taught? To what extent can we generalise conceptually between very different disciplines? What is the role of academic literacy and exams?

For the filmmakers, this debate is playing out in a more general ecology of tertiary education. There are many good departments around Australia offering praxis-based courses in screen creation. But, the VCA is *different* - it is driven very heavily by practice. As staff will point out, it is one of the only two schools at which students make their own film, which they write; in the others, projects are carried out by

groups, or there is a selection process. People come to VCA from all over Australia and around the world for that experience.

If it disappears, we as a culture lose diversity, and abandon an important approach to the high-level teaching of screen creation. It is a truism that education at this level is about intense practice and experimentation in a way which shares methods and encourages individuality. AFTRS is the only other school like this, but it has been criticised persistently for a certain sort of mediocrity. It has a lot of money, huge amounts of technical support, and creates cookie-cutter blandness.

As a result of this disquiet, AFTRS has been torn to pieces, and is being rebuilt around different models, which incorporate a full time undergraduate degree. It will take a while to see how this plays out.

Two very bad things have been happening to VCA Film and Television School over the last few years. With no other support mechanism available, the VCA fell into the hands of Melbourne University. That meant it was subjected to the same gross financial pressure of any other department, and has been subsumed in the particular machinations of that institution. I am not qualified to talk about that monumental train wreck, (which included [Melbourne University Private](#)) except to say that I once taught a useful screenwriting course there, it was cheap, it was oversubscribed, and it was abolished.

Unfortunately, film and television production is very expensive to teach. It needs technology, studio space and one-to-one contact with staff. The place is infused and inspired by industry staff on casual contracts. Ever since the school started in 1967, students have carried an outrageous financial burden to make their films, which has been a material problem in their subsequent careers.

Now, they are getting a lot less money spent on their educations. Here's [Robin Usher](#) again:

'The National Tertiary Education Union's Matthew McGowan says trust in the administration under dean Sharman Pretty (pictured) is breaking down as anxieties grow about job security.

"Students enrol in the VCA, not Melbourne University, but that identity is under threat," he says. "Promises given to the VCA about its future identity after the merger are being trashed."

A 2005 heads of agreement over the merger also states there will be no changes to the college's funding without consultation and that its identity will be preserved.

But Professor Pretty responded by pointing out the VCA no longer existed. "When the Federal Government withdrew the \$5 million subsidy of the VCA, replacement money was supplied by Melbourne University until 2011," she says. "The university rescued the VCA and now the aim is to make it sustainable."

Her first priority is dealing with a \$1.5 million deficit this year, before tackling the looming \$11 million shortfall."

That "sustainable" bit is about charging the schools rent for their studios, and cutting the staff-student ratio to cross-campus norms, and dividing a continuous program into semesters. By saying that the VCA no longer existed, Pretty is pointing out that the bits of it are just departments in an enveloping university, elements in a faculty of arts, fragments in a larger beast with a huge financial problem.

Under the Melbourne model, as one anonymous staff member told me on Friday, "students will learn in five years what they currently learn in half that time, with less production opportunities."

As the [VCA student website](#) neatly says,

“Without immediate action the implementation of the “Melbourne Model” will see the V.C.A. ultimately dissolved into a broader, conventional fine arts degree. Limited specialisation will exist only for full fee-paying post-graduate students, in much larger numbers and in courses of reduced quality and length.”

Across the board, the education of artists faces a huge financial problem. It tends to be expensive in itself, requires a heap of subsidy by the student, and leads to a rotten income afterwards. That means students cannot afford to be significantly in debt afterwards. In this case, students will end up between \$70-100,000 in hock at the end of the full five years; and that is without thinking about the costs of their productions.

To make matters worse, this sector does not require a tertiary ticket for entry. It kinds of assumes it in a general way, but people demonstrate their value by performance. Why on earth would you now go to VCA?

I reckon this is the end. The FTS may stagger along educating foreign students and rich kids, but it will be a shadow of its former self. Students and supporters are [fighting back](#), but I don't fancy their chances. Melbourne has a huge capacity to create arrogant institutions, and Melbourne University is a doozy; to solve this problem under any model requires both funding and a visionary commitment to build a campus like, say, the Slade, the Royal Academy, The Cooper Union, the Julliard School or UCLA School of Film and Television.

Any resistance is up against the new Dean, Professor Sharman Pretty. [Profiled with anodyne distance](#) by (ironically) Robin Usher, she is one of those contemporary change merchants who serves her employers well, sometimes in the service of good, and leaves a trail of rage behind her. [Here is](#) an unpretty picture of her previous job as Dean of Auckland University's National Institute of Creative Arts; before that she was a major player in the [Sydney music controversy](#) depicted in *Facing the Music*, the documentary from Bob Connelly and Robin Anderson. Ironically, she was resisted by an academic Department of Music which was protecting its identity against a more practical Conservatorium. The amalgamation [went ahead](#) in 2005.

Is this a disaster for the profession? I reckon. And the Melbourne film and television community is just waking up to the problem. It is like the old joke about the aquarium - the fish swims in water, and doesn't know it exists until the tank cracks.

Was it inevitable? I tend to cast the amalgamators and empire builders as malevolent in stories where diversity is crushed, but Melbourne University is probably just playing out a script set by numbers, and decisions in Canberra. There are some tipping points which could have saved the VCA and its film school, but they required too much vision from too many players who had nothing to gain. The federal government stuffed up much bigger things than the VCA.

There is never any point in wallowing in lost battles and keening over the rubble of broken dreams. Leave that to the historians inoculated by their own peculiar discipline. But we do need to realise the community now has an education problem, and address it. The enemy here is mediocrity, and a failure to nurture true creativity at those points where it intersects with people's lives.

Melbourne University has cut the music theatre and puppetry courses as well. An act of barbarism.