

Extract One

Geoffrey Rush:

The big thing about the VCAM is that it is, I think probably, the only institute of that kind, as it exists in the current model, in the world where drama, dance, music, puppetry, there's about 6 major disciplines, all under the one roof. Basically what's happening is that, I know the students themselves who are currently studying there, feel very up in arms because the course is going to become an academic course, rather than a practical, profound training course for their particular art form. Which means they would have to do a three year academic course and then another further two years if they wanted to go on to practice. Some people don't want to be academics – they want to actors who can really act, or singers who can really sing.

I've supported them by sending a statement. I went online the other day and I looked up the Australian Institute of Sport Mission Statement. If you change the word "athlete" to "artist" and if you change the word "AIS" for the Australian Institute of Sport to the VCAM, and then read the mission statement, you can see the gulf that we have between how a word like "elite" over the last ten or eleven years, particularly under the Howard Government, was a demonising word, a demonised word. "Elite" in the true sense means these people are going to be trained to be highly skilled, virtuosic, and as they say at the end of the AIS statement, "find the champion within."

If you play in a major orchestra anywhere in the world, you've got to be skilled – you can't be too theoretical about it. If you're going to be a dancer in a major company, you've got to really know how to dance, similarly with acting, it is elitist in the same way that we admire so much in our sports people.

I made the comment the other night based on this, at the Longford Awards [Australian Film Institute Outstanding Achievement Award with Rush was Awarded], to say that when even the head of the VCAM is saying that *elite training of artists is a very very old view, they must be also able to sell the tickets, make their own costumes, and perform**, to me that's starting education from a point of mediocrity.

Jon Faine:

If you don't have any skill or great talent for people to come to see, it doesn't matter if you know to run a book launch or read a balance sheet.

Geoffrey Rush:

Never in a million years would you accept that in a Chris Judd or a George [Gary] Ablett Junior – ever.

Jon Faine:

Gary Ablett needs to know how to sell tickets ...

Geoffrey Rush:

When you look at the great tennis players, you think we admire and love this because it is so elite.

Brain surgeons! You wouldn't want to go in under the operating knife and have someone who kind of had to make their own gown or had to do secretarial work on the side to run his particular practice.

Jon Faine:

But how do we break the grip then of people think every problem can be solved with some kind of managerial flowchart, or grid, and the MBA model...

Geoffrey Rush:

The bureaucratic nature of it is what has driven these kinds of manoeuvres. They just start to look at the number crunching, and forget the ethos involved of what an arts training is.

Jon Faine:

It's not progress!

Where did you learn to act?

Geoffrey Rush:

Well I went to Paris – I'd started through practice by joining the Queensland Theatre Company for three years, then I went to the Lecoq School in Paris, not dissimilar to the kind of structures that VCA has taken on because of institutions like that, and various graduates from that school having taught at the VCA. Because I didn't particularly want to go to NIDA at that point – I wanted a school that allowed me to become a performer and theatremaker, and find my own individual creativity. And if I'm any sort of example of what that outcome, or what that aspiration might head towards, I'd like to think that there's a role model there in some form for other aspiring performers and creative artists.

Jon Faine:

There's no equivalent example surely of something like Lecoq, the famous mime school, or its equivalent in New York, the Juilliard School....

Geoffrey Rush:

Juilliard and Yale who all contain that kind of professional crossover where colleagues of mine who were with me at Lecoq hold now major tenure at Yale and Juilliard because they recognise there that within the Juilliard there's music, there's art, there's theatre etc

Jon Faine:

And what would happen if you went to those places of excellence, of learning and excellence, and said 'were going to change the structure now, we're going to

introduce a generalist course and 25% of your subject material has to be outside the arts.'

Geoffrey Rush:

That would never happen in New York.

Jon Faine:

And yet it's happening here!

Geoffrey Rush:

The arts culture in that town is so alive and so acute .

*Rush is paraphrasing a quote from VCAM Dean Sharman Pretty from The Australian 05/06/09 which was:

"Producing elite dancers that only become ballet dancers, or actors that only act, is no longer appropriate in Australia, she says.

"The only way people are learning to sustain a real career in the theatre, for example, is if they can write the play, act, make their own costume and sell the tickets".

Extract Two

Ross Wilson:

It [learning] was all by doing things, and by listening...

Jon Faine:

And this is the thing about immersion – a school of immersion, where actors immerse themselves in acting – they don't go and spend a quarter of their time learning anthropology.

Ross Wilson:

The other thing is you have to find people who are as good as or better than you, - you don't want to be working with people who are not as good as you because they will drag you down. If you can find people who are as good and hopefully better than you, you're going to learn something.