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Batchelor moves to front of house

Robin Usher
January 23, 2010

VICTORIA'S new Arts Minister, Peter Batchelor, has hit the ground running in his new portfolio, although perhaps that should be that he has hit his seat in the Playhouse stalls hard. He went to two opening events on the day after his appointment was announced - the Ron Mueck sculpture show at the National Gallery of Victoria and the first night of the Melbourne Theatre Company's hit summer show, *The Drowsy Chaperone*.

He intends to continue in this manner because he enjoys going out. "I have been a minister since the beginning of the Labor Government in 1999 and that means I have been busy with a lot of commitments," he says. "But I always took advantage of any window of opportunity to go to arts events. Now it is going to be part of the job."

Batchelor, who is also Energy and Resources Minister, replaces Lynne Kosky in the arts portfolio after she resigned for family health reasons. "I admire her for what she has done for her family," he says.

"But I will be able to raise the profile at shows. The pressure to meet and greet people will be easier to fit in with Energy and Resources. You don't tend to go to many wind farms at night."

He knows first-hand the pressure Kosky was under as Transport Minister because Batchelor was in charge of that ministry for seven years. "It was hard going and there is not much time for anything else in that job."

Batchelor says he lobbied for the arts position against stiff competition.

He was full of praise for Geoffrey Rush in *The Drowsy Chaperone*. "He is so skilled that it is not surprising he is an international star. What is surprising is that he continues to make a local contribution."

Batchelor even put his critical hat on to observe that the show's director, Simon Phillips, pulled out every trick that was available from his bag.

"Reports are the show will sell out, so I told all the Philistines at Energy and Resources that they better move fast if

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they want to buy their tickets."

His ongoing interest in the arts had already given him a preview of the NGV exhibition. On other business on the Mornington Peninsula last year, he took the opportunity to call in to the McClelland Gallery to see Mueck's *Wild Man*.

"I had no hesitation in going to the NGV opening because I knew I would like it," he says.

But he says that his first days in the job have not been all show business. He is aware of the problems at the Melbourne Recital Centre, which, after a disastrous first year, is now offering a much smaller program.

"Lynne [Kosky] was working on it and I want to make sure that it is resolved sooner rather than later," he says.

He also gave an assurance that development of the Arts Centre would continue after the first phase - the \$128.5 million renovation of Hamer Hall - begins in July.

He says the project will "evolve" and points to the development of Melbourne's sporting facilities as an example of the process. "Upgrades went ahead without any guarantees, but they certainly happened. This Government puts an emphasis on the arts because we know that economic and social benefits flow from it."

He remembers the debate in cabinet when the first NGV Winter Masterpiece exhibition was being considered, he says. "It was very thorough and there were lots of questions but it has turned out to be such a huge success that other states are copying the concept."

The arts budget has nearly doubled under the Labor Government, from \$218 million a year to \$431 million. "Per head of population, we spend significantly more than NSW or Queensland. Our total arts expenditure nearly matches the Federal Government's."

He says Premier John Brumby was a little "cranky" earlier this week when he heard ABC broadcaster Virginia Trioli criticise Victoria's commitment to the arts. "The Premier was quite justified in getting cranky because that does not reflect what is happening."

The Comedy Festival is a huge community drawcard, he says. "The economic benefits are obvious but there are strong social benefits as well. The festival brings people together in the city but there is no risk of aggression because everyone is having a good time. The same thing is true at the film festival."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2010/01/22/1263663162295.html>