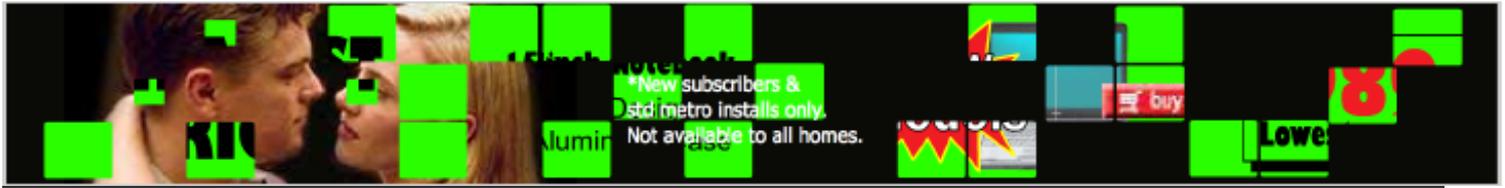


The Australian



Luvvies outside the tent

- Michaela Boland, National arts writer
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IN the five years since Bob Carr resigned as premier of NSW, and consequently as arts minister, the state's management of the arts has become widely scorned. NSW lost to Victoria for two years its long-held crown as the nation's screen production hub, despite Sydney being the headquarters of most screen professionals, both pay-TV platforms and all five Australian free-to-air television networks.

A conga-line of big musicals quit Sydney, with its large population and tourism traffic, for Melbourne, where the Victorian Major Events Company rolled out the red carpet. NSW artists were said to be heading south to Melbourne, where they had heard the arts were taken seriously. At least that's how the story went.

Lynne Kosky's resignation from the Victorian Parliament on Monday, however, has triggered some frustrated outbursts from arts practitioners and advocates down south. Kosky's hapless management of the transport system had generated news almost daily in Victoria. As arts minister she was largely invisible. Even after her resignation there was little or no chat about who might replace her.

Kosky rarely if ever attended opening nights. She kept clear of significant federal and local issues affecting the arts in her state, such as the battle to save the Australian National Academy of Music and the Victorian College of the Arts. The arts sector was left without a connected and informed advocate when it might have benefited from one.

"Absent" is how the ABC's Virginia Trioli described Kosky's term as arts minister this week on radio. The word is echoed by other interested Victorians I spoke to. "She had time problems, to get a meeting with her didn't happen tomorrow," says veteran arts lobbyist and president of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Carillo Gantner, in her defence.

When did the arts tumble so far down the order of priorities for governments?

In NSW Carr was arts minister until 2005. Victoria's erstwhile premier Jeff Kennett was an effective arts minister until 1999, assisted for most of his seven-year term by Lorraine Elliott as secretary to the arts. This model was borrowed by former NSW premier Nathan Rees who appointed Virginia Judge assistant arts minister in a double act that achieved only minor victories but failed to find a solution to the most prominent arts problem in NSW: upgrading the Sydney Opera House. When Rees left in December, Judge took over the portfolio.

Federally there's no denying Arts Minister Peter Garrett knows the sector better than most. If the rock-star reception he still receives at art events are an indication, the former Midnight Oil frontman is immensely popular but his legacy in the portfolio is as yet undefined.

He has doggedly pushed through some minor policy but not yet scored the big hit he might be remembered for. Some in the arts community say that the Sydney Opera House refurbishment, and the arts sector generally, might have benefited from the federal economic stimulus, if Garrett had pushed for it. The arts received nothing.

The downside to a premier or prime minister also heading the arts portfolio is that overall leadership is their priority; but the upsides are enticing. It sends a signal to the rest of cabinet that the arts are important. As well, leaders can distribute discretionary funding with ease, media coverage is intensified and the sector's perceived importance is enhanced.

Queensland and South Australia illustrate well the swings and roundabouts of having a premier at the arts tiller. SA Premier Mike Rann cuts a figure at many a festival, including the Adelaide Film Festival, which he instigated and which has become the nation's most innovative. But last week the director of the Art Gallery of South Australia quit, saying the state government has neglected to properly fund the gallery. The film industry was also rocked last week by puritan-style laws passed in SA that forbid the promotion of R-rated films.

Queensland, in contrast, has become a beacon for the arts. Premier Anna Bligh holds the arts portfolio, and the state is shrugging off parochialism and seeing benefits in promoting a lifestyle that involves more than a sand-fringed coastal playground.

The Queensland Art Gallery has stolen a lead on galleries in the other state capitals. The Asia-Pacific Triennial under way has attracted an impressive 200,000 visitors. Last year Brisbane crowed about hosting the Paris Opera Ballet, which Melbourne's Major Events company saw little benefit in attracting.

Figures that reveal how much the states spend on the arts are difficult to come by, especially trend breakdowns that might reveal whether the industry is of growing or shrinking importance. In the absence of such information it is instructive to note to whom state and federal governments entrust the arts portfolio.

In her first month as NSW Arts Minister, Judge reacted quickly to a public campaign for the state to expediently announce grants for community arts groups, after a delay that was threatening their viability. This victory for Judge has been offset by a few public gaffes and a perception she is a political lightweight.

She refuses to commit to a time line for renovating the Sydney Opera House and says she will raise the issue when she meets the Premier, Kristina Keneally, in a fortnight. "I'm a pretty tenacious person and very passionate, I don't know how effective I'll be," she says.

In Victoria Peter Batchelor ended his first day as Arts Minister on Thursday at the premiere of the Melbourne Theatre Company's musical *The Drowsy Chaperone*, with Geoffrey Rush. Batchelor says that, having just relinquished the community services portfolio, he is in no doubt of the importance of arts in local communities. "It has a very important role to play in making a better place to live," he says.

That's not a bad start, given that it's at the community level that Kosky's neglect is beginning to show and from where the next generation of acclaimed performers will emerge.

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