

# Performing Artists – “We are Here, We are Visible”

Messariti, Anna, based on research by Messariti, Anna; Tsoutas, Nick; and Chandrabhanu, for the Office of Multicultural Affairs [Access to Excellence: A Review of Issues Affecting Artists and Arts from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds - Volume 4: Performing Artists - “We are Here, We are Visible”](#) Wollongong, Centre for Multicultural Studies - University of Wollongong, 1994, pp 83-87.

**by Anna Messariti**

## **Conclusion**

Performing Artists of NESB in Australia are agents of social change. They are actively involved in a socio-cultural reorganisation process which has little to do with their ethnicity or their region of origin. It is clear from the findings of this research that a change of environment triggers a serious reorientation of cultural and artistic perceptions amongst artists of NESB, especially in relation to the traditional artforms they bring with them. Often, the transplanting of a traditional artform in Australia dramatically changes its meaning and significance - its character is somehow 'made over' to adapt to the new setting. Socio-cultural reorganisation in Australian society has occurred very rapidly and involved a multiplicity of social processes which have operated and which continue to operate concurrently. Culture contact has created a society in which elements are transmitted constantly from culture to culture and which has meant that the cultural patterns of this society continue to change.

At times, there is resistance to and a lack of recognition of these processes. In the arts, this results in a failure to acknowledge artists of NESB as agents of change, which takes the form of marginalisation. As a result, the programmes of subsidy which prioritise them become

marginalised and the issues which arise because of this can sometimes be treated by the Anglo-dominated establishment with an attitude of concessional compromise resulting in tokenism. Worse still, is when this tokenism is coupled with paternalism, which is particularly visible in some of the smaller Australian cultural centres. At the centre of this discussion have been the notions of excellence and Australian culture. It is apparent after an examination of individual artists in six states, as well as several state and the federal arts funding bodies, various multicultural arts service organisations and the ABC, NIDA and the STC - that one cannot continue to analyse and assess practice in contemporary Australia from only the points of view of skill, craft, innovation, professionalism, heritage, technique and style. Such things are very important, but equally so is the quality of change - and the responses and reactions that it inspires.

Powerful and influential people oppose the multicultural agenda because it makes them feel threatened. Artists across the board have pointed the finger at journalists and at the standard of artistic criticism in Australia. The critical press is cited as being one of the greatest obstacles to socio-cultural change. Consider this reaction by Melbourne journalist, Beatrice Faust:

Who wants multiculturalism? Not the men of the Snowy Mountains Project. Not the kneaders of pasta and pourers of terrazzo, not the cheerful corner shopkeepers. During the 1950s and even into the '80s it was still possible to envisage prosperity through hard work - the goal was not cultural recognition from the WASP majority but meat every day and eventually a three limousine wedding with a twenty tier cake for the daughters... The children of this hard working generation became the multiculturalists, capitalising on their ethnic origins to gain a fast track into the dominant middle class... They are not concerned with culture, after all, but

with acceptance. The ultimate goal is not cultural integrity but class mobility. Multiculturalism is in practice and in fact, a homogenising trend that does not respect the diversity of cultures, but shows contempt for culture itself.

The article was called 'Steering a Careful Course for Cultural Recognition' and it appeared in *The Age* newspaper on 5 January, 1993. Oversimplification and stereotyping lead to an exceptionally narrow view. On the one hand, she provides a backhanded acknowledgment of the fact that ethnicity has become an issue in the search for identity. On the flip side of the coin, she denies the possibility that the psyches of migrant people can be expressed through the arts. Her opposition to multiculturalism is argued on the basis that early migrants came from 'a secure place in the educated middle classes of Northern and Western Europe' and that more recent migrants have 'come from the working classes of Southern Europe and The Mediterranean'. As a result, the later migrants find the local culture 'inhospitable, elitist and racist'. Such a view could be described as patronising and ethnocentric, but it is basically just ignorant of the meaning of cultural identity. It reduces cultural identity to nothing more than mere 'customs' that migrant people want to preserve because they are far from home.

At times, artists of NESB are assessed in a reductionist way and their need for cultural expression and recognition is regarded by the various regulators of the arts industry as being little more than social engineering. Based on our interviews with individual performing artists, as well as with representatives from key arts organisations, it was possible to identify a range of attitudes about multiculturalism in the arts which deny the importance of cultural identity. They are as follows:

- There are not enough NESB artists working professionally to warrant a serious consideration of their development.
- Generally, artists of NESB have very low standards of professionalism.

- Generally, artists of NESB have a very low level of innovation.
- Most artists of NESB belong in the folkloric category and therefore fall outside of the funding guidelines.
- Most artists of NESB lack commitment to an artistic vision and their own development on a long-term basis.
- Audience levels for artists of NESB are very low.
- Taking into account all of the above, artists of NESB cannot compete/are disadvantaged when they compete with artists of ESB for audiences and for funding.
- Artists of NESB do not represent Australian culture, but their ethnic origins.

Many of the individual artists approached were very much aware of at least a lack of sympathy and at times considerable opposition to the concept of multiculturalism in the arts. This was despite priority programmes, special committees, multicultural arts service organisations and special projects which emerge from the mainstream from time to time. It was not uncommon for apparently successful artists to express dissatisfaction with funding decisions and the critical appraisal of their works. Receiving financial support because targets have to be met, knowing that there is still a lack of interest and understanding of the artform and its cultural bearing, is frustrating and at the end of the day, successes end up feeling like tokenistic concessions. At this stage in the development of Australia's performing arts culture, artists of NESB are wanting the experts who make funding decisions, or who review them or who are in the business of educating others about the performing arts in a critical way - to acknowledge that excellence is by no means culturally neutral, objective or static. Each culture has its own frames of references, and arts practice needs to be examined with that in mind. Cultural diversity means different ways of valuing and quality emerges when a work

lends itself to multiple interpretations and audience responses. In essence, the regulators of the performing arts industry in Australia need to be sensitive, informed and articulate, as opposed to ethno-specific and condescending. They need to acquire cultural awareness and skills, in addition to their artform expertise.

The greatest obstacle for performing artists who were not born in Australia is English language. In theatre, an artist of NESB with a background in acting or directing has enormous difficulty finding and making work in Australia. Many such artists are usually nurtured by their first language and cultural community, but become frustrated because they cannot progress beyond an amateur/hobby level of practice. There is little scope in such a context for further growth and while the artist is capable of reaffirming or celebrating the values of the community, the community is unable to support, understand or prioritise the artist's vision of professionalism. Moving into mainstream theatre practice proves impossible for most first generation artists because a combination of factors stand in the way of progress: poor English, thick accents, ethnicity and working methods. The occasional 'foreign' roles which pop up for film and television are welcome when they come, but are hardly enough to sustain a career. Only in highly specialised areas such as puppetry, is there more of a sense of interchange between artists of diverse cultural backgrounds, obviously because of the lack of emphasis on language and the value which is placed on visual sense and the ability of the artist to conceptualise. Within the mainstream, these obstacles are rarely discussed and there is some hiding behind the 'art is universal' argument, which denies that cultural background plays any part in the level of success an artist might enjoy. This can in part be attributed to the very poor NESB representation on boards of management and trustees, arts administrative bodies, funding selection panels and committees and in training institutions.

In the dance field, artists still speak about language as a key issue, but they tend to focus on ethno-specificity. It is clear that how the body moves in this artform area is culturally

determined - influenced by a wide range of factors which include philosophy, cultural psyche and world view. Even though many dancers interviewed had been able to develop cross-culturally and admit to being influenced by a range of cultures, they do not deny that they were strongly affected in what they do by their own cultural orientation. Most dance artists of NESB living in Australia wanted more than anything to maintain their levels of expertise and to keep on performing and making work. Additionally, they wanted to seek and expand their audience in order to expose their artform to people from both within and without their cultural community. They realised generally that there was a need to make adjustments but often experienced disappointments because they were professionally isolated and thus unable to effectively communicate their artistic vision. Often, they felt the need to travel back to their country of origin to communicate with fellow practitioners and to work within an informed critical arena, but the cost of this is often prohibitive. There needs to be greater opportunity for these artists to achieve their goals within Australia, which should begin with a revaluing of the forms in which they work.

In Australian society today, there are many intellectual, artistic and spiritual traditions and forms, through which different kinds of people express their views of the world and their sense of identity. Performing artists of NESB, because of the culture contact and cultural diffusion that they initiate, play an enormous role in the business of socio-cultural change. Contact between artists of NESB and the institutions of arts and culture is crucial for a nation which has rejected assimilationism in favour of cultural diversity. A rethinking of the concept of excellence must begin with a recognition of the cultural relevance of NESB artists and an understanding of the processes which are involved when elements from a range of cultures are transmitted between one another. At the present time in Australia, there is a shortage of people who can appraise the changes which have taken place within non-Anglo artforms either because assessors are unfamiliar with the original

forms or because they lack the cultural skills necessary to analyse the changes. There is a need to develop people who can do this in order to redefine the role and work of NESB artists in all artform areas.