


feel the power of can



Canberra, Australia's capital city, home to some of Australia's most vibrant Youth performing arts companies in the country. **Estelle Muspratt** gives us an overview of the region and dispels a few myths along the way.

When I moved to Sydney as a 19 year old many eons ago, I had to endure what a colleague has recently labeled, 'the cultural cringe about being 'Canberran''. So a typical scene would play out like this: I would say, 'I am from Canberra' and the person or people with whom I was speaking would, and I am not exaggerating, suck the air in through their teeth and then moan in a slightly pained way. It was usually accompanied by a pitying look.

In hindsight I can see why many Australians may have this reaction. You, as thousands do annually, probably came here, harried on and off buses, pushed from cars, into and out of large buildings where you were regaled with programs and stories about your collective history, culture and country. Your trip was probably as long and unforgiving as the previous sentence.

Or perhaps you came through on your way to somewhere else, stayed the night attempted to hit the town when all the franchised pubs were almost empty and you couldn't get a meal after 10pm. Maybe you, like so many of us locals, are sick of journalists referring to 'Canberra said', or 'Canberra does' in reference to the many nefarious,

dodgy diatribes emanating from the supposed hallowed halls and grassed areas of the house on the hill.

Fair enough.

Let me take the next 1600 words to give you a slightly kooky and very different view of the nation's Capital - as a seeding ground, a resilient field of opportunity endlessly ploughed and almost always different.

Canberra is young. As such it is a constantly changing and evolving city of approximately 300,000 that serves a whopping 500,000 because our borders magically extend into 'greater NSW' or what the local tourist authority calls the 'Capital Region' including the wineries and Goulburn Goal.

As a young artist, an emerging practitioner or a young person living in our nation's capital city, opportunities to make art, watch art and immerse yourself in art can come from both the most obvious and bizarre of places, events and spaces. Recently I popped off to *Music at Midday* at the Canberra Theatre Centre - hundreds of people attend 'gold coin donation' lunchtime concerts, produced by the Band of the Royal Military College Duntroon. The hundreds

are usually septuagenarian but the band is committed to including a youth element in every concert. Officer Commanding and Music Director of the Band, Major Geoff Grey believes that, 'the bands profile and exposure locally and nationally means they are perfectly placed to take the lead in developing pathways for young musicians in the ACT'. At their concerts school children, emerging and aspiring musos perform alongside seasoned professionals on a lit stage, to a full house, surrounded by uniforms and the grandeur, pomp and ceremony of a Sousa march!

In this forum young faces, their eager art flowing across the audience, stand above walking frames glimmering blue under the gold lights of the stage. A man with Alzheimer's or dementia sitting close to me waves to no one in particular but is noticed by one young artist on the stage who bravely waves back, even though she has probably been told not too. Canberra's emphasis on providing opportunities for young people to access arts activities is usually about involving as much of the community as possible. The myriad of opportunities provided to young people was a very pleasant surprise for Major Grey. 'I am far

more aware of what Canberra's youth arts community provides for our city's young people than I have been of any similar opportunities in Sydney, Melbourne, Townsville or Adelaide.'

Tuggeranong Arts Centre, nestled alongside the Tuggeranong puddle (another of our infamous man-made lakes) and under the majestic Brindabella Ranges, works tirelessly in this cross generational and often cultural community context. Their remarkable outreach programs have recently seen 800 young people both in and out of schools, participate in the annual Moon Festival. Visual and performing arts activities allow children to meaningfully access the 2008 'Culture in the spotlight' which was South Asia. Traditional art forms were taught, learnt and adapted and then performed to audiences at the Moon Festival day in massed choir performances, drumming displays and visual arts exhibitions.

For Pip, Canberra's access and opportunities surprised her. Pip moved to the capital from Sydney to take up the position of Artistic Director of Canberra Youth Theatre in 2006. The biggest positive about being a practitioner in Canberra she believes, is the 'many opportunities

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to develop a theatrical work and get it up'. Canberra, she says '... is a great creative playground - rehearsal and performance spaces and resources are easily accessible and very affordable - sometimes free. There is the freedom and available resources to experiment or explore an idea or skill. I don't know if emerging and established practitioners here understand how fortunate they are and make full use of the myriad of opportunities available to them which practitioners in the larger cities would dream of having.'

Recent statistics compiled in the lead up to the Cultural Ministers Conference held in Canberra in February appear to back this up. The media release I received states that 13.5 million, or 85 per cent of Australians attended a cultural

venue or event in the twelve months leading up to the survey. Comparatively Canberra's figures reveal that its residents boast the highest attendance figures of any State or Territory, at 89.8 per cent. While the rest of the country spends \$14,678 million annually, or \$36.39 per week individual ACT residents spend on average \$49.54 per week on culture - again the highest of any Australian State or Territory. This bodes well for youth arts organisations as well as those non-youth organisations that run youth programs. A quick count of the 25 artsACT funded key organisations tells me that seventeen work with young people and young artists, providing our young artists with accessible and definable pathways to development and the future.

Now to be fair, these artistically and culturally liberated Canberrans are not always popping off to enjoy the wares of our own home grown performances and arts activities. Over every and any weekend you can toddle off to a national cultural institution, the repositories for all things that are 'Aussie', and enjoy, mostly for free, a myriad of public programs, exhibitions and hands-on arts activities.

Did you know that Canberra Arts organisations and artists have access to our national cultural institutions and their contents and have excellent partnerships and supported by great budgets? Ba boooow - that brings me to dispelling the first of several myths about us and our capital. Artists living and working in Canberra quite rightly compete for working relationships with these institutions. Much of the time our interstate colleagues and companies are viewed, by these same institutions and their staff as better artistic producers based on what appears to be little more than geographic criteria. Individuals and organisations based in other capitals are often viewed as 'national', and as such, as being 'better'. Sadly, this is increasingly the case even with ACT Government run and funded institutions.

We are losing the competitive edge in salary and work life balance in the making a career pathway. Who can blame us when working for the government will yield you twice your 'arts' salary for what amounts to maybe half the work? Despite the fact that the ACT is now really struggling to find professionals who are willing to or indeed can collaborate artistically with our young people we are committed to keeping the arts alive for our community through youth.

Did I mention that Canberrans are a resilient bunch? Our backs are fused with bureaucratic red tape and our minds run with the same agility and poetry of Paul Keating's speech writer Don Watson's prose. You can't keep us down! We keep making art, training others to make art,

even through the increasing loss of seasoned artists to the larger state capitals or, dare I say it because I am one, to the public service.

Yes that's right, I am a servant of the public of Australia and I take this moment to dispel myth number two - living and working in Canberra gives us some sort of edge, some sort of advantage with our federal politicians. The truth of it is that people that represent Australians in either the House of Representatives or the Senate come here to work, make new or change existing laws and on Thursday night or Friday morning they and most of their staff go home to their own states and artistic moments. They have no commitment to Canberra or Canberrans and why should they when they are rightly busy trying to uphold the rights, the wants and needs of their constituents.

I am thinking about all of this as I drip satay sauce on my t-shirt at Gorman House Arts Centre - a heritage listed Government facility that houses the great Manu, companies and independents. A step away from the prawn chips and curry stand at the markets CYT's ensemble is staring the adaptation of Marcus Zusak's *The Messenger*. Through the haze of the South American paposas frying on the BBQ, past the fruit man and the glove woman and across the courtyard I know that QL2 Centre for Youth Dance is auditioning emerging dancers for their Quantum Leap program. Somewhere, in some room, theatre or foyer, here or across town at Belconnen a group of passionate, 'we've only got gaff tape and a script, sort of' emerging artists who have been 'summoned together out of the cafes, colleges, whore-houses and knife-fighting parlours of Australia's capital' are madly rehearsing for their contribution to Belconnen Community Centre's Wet Season.

As I attempt to suck the sauce from my shirt, I am thinking about when I, like these young artists, rode the glorious waves of artistic innocence and exuberance ashore what would, years later, become a career. Often for Canberrans who mentor and open their theatrical homes, souls and wallets to young artists, it is all about supporting the ebb and flow of play, often learning from their failures, and in doing so celebrating the success that come from learning by doing.

I remember the satisfaction from creating each and every day and the constant stream of second hand fridges that came into and out of my homes over the years. Pouring lemonade on my now very stained shirt must look odd to the two young men who approach me to ask where the Ainslie Arts Centre is. I point, murmuring the directions and wonder to myself if they are off to Music for Everyone's Rock School or Canberra Youth Music's wind

ensemble or big band rehearsal. As I watch them amble off I remember what I got as a young artist working with mentors who would later become peers and I find that I miss this giving back, this making of pathways.

Several weeks ago the nation beat a path to Canberra - it doesn't happen often but when it does we locals take notice. On this day Canberra, the place of the people showcased the best of opportunity and choice making. Our nation stopped and watched our Prime Minister make a long-overdue apology to our Indigenous people. Amid all of the people, the words and the publicity, were children and young people; the next generation. Among them was my mate Georgia, who in the marbled halls of Australia's Parliament House sang for all those gathered. She and her peers stood alongside our Prime Minister, Kevin O7 and (at the time of writing) Leader of the Opposition, Dr Brendan Nelson and the men and women who, as children themselves, were stolen from their families. Georgia's voice joined her peers, and the sound multiplied by a hundred fold in a moment. It is a place in history in which she is part of, because she lives in Canberra and importantly she did it through the arts. It is not a conscious decision to include young people and art in moments like this. It is just what happens, what always happens here it's an expectation unspoken and always met.

It is appropriate then, that our city was named for the traditional owners of this area, the Ngunnawal (nunawal) people's word Nganbra which means meeting place. I now will dispel the final myth - nothing happens in Canberra. In the nation's capital you can get a meal after 10pm, you never see the polities (and that's fine) and life is art and art is life - and we live ours rich in the knowledge that our contribution provides us with pretty remarkable choices. With those choices come tremendous artistic opportunity. Feel the power of Canberra. ★



Estelle Muspratt is a freelance writer, award winning theatre maker, event manager and soon to be a student - again. She is the ACT Director on the National Board of Young People and the Arts Australia and a member of Canberra Youth Theatre Management Committee.