

# Adelaide Festival 2002



Shiska-Car: Morris Minos and White Minatoars

Three differing  
perspectives of  
the Adelaide  
Festival 2002

LOCKIE McDONALD

**An exposé from inside the Adelaide Festival 2002! For those who are already salivating with glee at the prospect of juicy gossip this article aims to look beyond the individuals and ask why we all behaved the way we did when discussing the Adelaide Festival 2002.**

## Which country are you from?

**A**t the outset I will state, I was and remain a Peter Sellars supporter. There we go that wasn't hard was it. I wonder how many hate lists did I just make?

Perhaps the frame of reference defining community cultural development (CCD) has narrowed so much so, that we have alienated our greatest activists, maybe the next generation of CCD workers and possibly our strongest potential allies. The unanimous condemnation of the Adelaide Festival 2002 and its attempts to engage with CCD is in retrospect curious. Yep they were at times a bit clumsy, but when one culture collides with another that happens. Try working in Lajamanu (top of the Tanami Desert) for more than a week and see how you get on, particularly if you look the wrong person in the eyes. So when the high arts collided with CCD at the Adelaide Festival 2002 it was bound to be heated. In no way is this meant to be a defence of Peter or his staff but an analysis of their treatment is warranted if only to understand ourselves as an industry or community of arts practitioners. Why was the cynicism so strong from the onset of Sellars' arrival, why was he lambasted throughout his reign and so thoroughly denounced upon his demise?



Shishka-Car: Morris Minos and Borgs

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A simple answer might be, change. He wanted to change things too fast. Another argument that has some viability is the gap between expectation and outcomes. A genuine complaint constantly aimed at Australia's flagship festivals. But I fear both of these answers, while holding some water, are far too simplistic.

But beyond the turgid gossip and politics the Adelaide Festival 2002 did deliver community dividends.

Shishka-Car management took the attitude that a festival is a festival is a festival. Having worked for folk festivals, regional arts council festivals, capital city fringe festivals and mainstream festivals for the last 18 years it seemed clear from the outset that the Adelaide Festival 2002 would be no different from previous experience. Sure we could expect more money, which meant more politics, more profile, more criticism, and a slicker administration. From the early days of negotiation it was evident that dealing with a mainstream festival was the same as, the same old, same old. Just a festival.

The paradigm of dealing with festivals when distilled goes simplistically like this: contractual negotiations will be protracted the more money that is up for grabs; support will be minimal so budget for self sufficiency; rely on the festival, who ever they may be, for publicity only. Even publicity may be sloppy, so have

your own marketing strategies and budget up your sleeve. After all if they employ you to do a job what else can they offer? The Adelaide Festival 2002s did support the Shishka-Car team substantially. Logistical and dedicated production staff were allocated to our project. They also brokered strong links with the local shire and the unending support of Country Arts SA.

I should make particular mention of Country Arts South Australia, Regional Manager Imelda Rivers who cleverly used Shishka-Car and the Adelaide Festival 2002s presence to further the cause of establishing a Ngarrindjeri Cultural Centre in Murray Bridge. Rivers negotiated with Shishka-Car to use the project as a catalyst to open dialogue between, local non-Indigenous and Indigenous leadership. This process was in train but the presence of Shishka-Car and the festival gave the efforts to start dialogue a facade of legitimacy.

The result of six months of negotiations was an evening BBQ with 60 Nurrinjerri Elders, Local Government bureaucrats the Murray Bridge Mayor, Councilors, Adelaide Festival 2002 staff and Tourism and other State Government Officials. Instead of an evening of argument each individual introduced themselves. Tom Trevorow then spoke for nearly 40 minutes asking for understanding. What followed was a frank and honest discussion about the Cultural Centre and local history. The evening finished with the Mayor standing at the front of the room making a clear acknowledgement of the Council's need to recognise that it was on Ngarrindjeri Land. The discussion did not avoid the differences of opinion but was the first sentence in ongoing dialogue. The evening was sensitively facilitated by Rob Johnston (Country Arts SA staff member). The Cultural Centre is now in the final stages of being purchased.

Shishka-Car – The Unique community event was a feast of colour, music, dance and fast cars. A theatrical experience with a difference. It was more of a family night at the races with added bonus of an enthusiastic and polished theatre experience. THE ADVERTISER

There was one marked exception to other festivals in the Adelaide Festival 2002 that deserves some discussion. A little bloke traveling under the name of a dead English comedian, with high haircut and over abundance of exuberance talked about a vision. On the telly it sounded over the top with a smattering of eastern and new age religion thrown in. When one dug past the rhetoric of a skilled orator, Sellars' vision had strong elements of CCD. Not in the pure narrow Australian definition of CCD, but after a meal with Sellars, I was convinced the little fella had something. I was worried about his constant hugging, but remembered seeing a southern prison guard insist that a Northern Australian Aboriginal inmate look him directly in the eyes. The bloke in question was confused wondering why he was being asked to disrespect the guard. He continued to stare at the floor. I saw the same look on Sellars' face when confronted by Australia's arts culture.

In South Africa in 1999 while working on a National Reconciliation day event on the slopes of Table Mountain with a diverse racial mix of communities, I became fascinated by the *Philosophy of a Choreographer* by Alfred Hinkel. A former soldier Hinkel had fought against apartheid for many years using the only weapons at his disposal, dance and movement. Hinkel argued that a society will take on the physical attributes of its culture. More importantly the attitudes of its leaders will be manifest in the way our bodies move. His aim was to change this movement and create a people who were proud of who they were regardless of what race they were. And here comes the contradiction. His aim was to 'decimate traditional culture' as it was used by the National Party to maintain the apartheid regime.

Context is important and the political environment in Australia in the year leading up to the festival cannot be left out of the controversy surrounding the Adelaide Festival 2002. During 2001 innocent children were incarcerated on Australian soil, in adult concentration camps euphemistically referred to as Detention Centres. The medical profession has informed us that some children suffered psychological damage that may in the long term be permanent.

It is now clear that in a cynical exercise, the Government exploited the Tampa affair to assist its maintenance of power. There is a strong argument that racism has been actively institutionalised by both Government and opposition parties.

On Australia Day the expatriate writer Peter Carey gave an address in which he noted how badly Australia's international reputation had been affected by the Howard years...And Carey stressed that, while leadership was essential, we should always remember that there are two kinds of leader: those who brought out what was best in us, and those who fed on what was the worst.

In 2001, John Winston Howard feasted well...

Mungo MacCallum - *Girt By Sea-Australia, the refugees and politics of fear Quarterly Essay*

Perhaps our dislike of others was so strong that during the lead up to the Adelaide Festival 2002 we began to vilify anyone who was perceived to be from somewhere else. Or was it more insidious than that? We now had permission to vilify those who came from other cultures within our industry. Perhaps those who came from the dirty high arts pretending to be community artists? And what bigger target than a septic tank who looked odd and hugged a lot. Australians just love that personal space invasion.

I believe Sellars' vision was to deconstruct what he saw as an elitist culture, spending a small fortune of public money on a few influential suburbs. Australia's mainstream festivals were first conceptualised in the 50s or early 60s so that a select group of society could keep in touch with what was happening in Europe, the UK and the United States. Sellars argued this was a defunct notion in an age of technological communication and jet travel. An age when the majority of Australians have not met and held a conversation with an Indigenous Australian. Surely a more democratic carve up of arts money was in order.

During a recent five week tour of the Katherine Region in the Northern Territory it was fascinating to discover the Indigenous inhabitants of this region spoke 26 differing languages. If you doubt this diversity the linguists tell us that Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya have in excess of 20% of the world's known languages.

'What country you from?' A kid asks me in Kalkaringi, (Wave Hill), Vincent Lingari country. It's a common question amongst the Aboriginal community in Northern Australia. People acknowledge with this simple question their cultural differences and origins. His question haunts me. It was what Sellars was grappling with. What country is this? Where are we from, where are we going? And the answers are frightening.

We are in a dark place as a nation. When racism crosses all social and political boundaries, visionaries from elsewhere are ridiculed for their difference. It's an ill country that bristles with diversity but has a leadership that actively discourages it. We take on the physical movement, the thoughts and the behaviour of the leadership of our culture. By the sheer size, variety of its landscapes, its myriad of histories of many original nations and newcomers, Australia is many countries. It is many things to many people. And its prophets, its visionaries will come from unlikely places. Perhaps we need to open our eyes to see a broader landscape.

See the detail in the bush. See the subtle differences. So now we have a choice, we all need to decide, you need to decide: What country are you from? ■

*Lockie McDonald has worked with communities throughout Australia and internationally from Christmas Island to Cape Town to Lajamanu to Launceston, designing and implementing arts projects: theatre, circus, large outdoor events, dance, the visual arts, cabarets and community theatre. Lockie recently completed a 2 year fellowship from the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council for the Arts.*

# The 2002 Adelaide Festival - Democratisation or Amateur Hour?

STEPHEN SPENCE

An article providing recent historical perspective of the Adelaide Festival 2002.



Launch of Spirit of the West, an exhibition of the outcome of 50 community arts workshops, at West Lakes Mall, Adelaide Festival 2002. Photo: Sam Oster

*The brute fact is that the surest way to make the Adelaide Festival an irrelevancy is to adopt policies that would seek to make it as popular as the Grand Prix with all that is implied by that. That course would have only one outcome. Adelaide would be left with a Moomba Festival of the West rather than an Edinburgh Festival of the South.*

An earnest scribe expressing a view about the Peter Sellars/Sue Natrass 2002 Adelaide Festival? No! Peter Ward writing in the *Adelaide Review* in July 1993 in response to an industry meeting about the festival and its direction.

The fact is the issue of the democratisation of the Adelaide Festival 2002 has been a live debate in this State [South Australia] for at least the last ten years. The Sellars controversy is merely the latest chapter. In 1993 I was part of the prologue. I had been appointed as Secretary of the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance to the Board of the Festival by Labor Arts Minister Anne Levy in an attempt to broaden the representation on a body that at that time was a small private incorporated association. It cost \$55 a year to join. By paying that fee one could join the select elite membership, largely drawn from Adelaide's prestigious Eastern suburbs who had ownership of this country's most high profile arts event.

The Board of the Festival refused to accept my nomination. Critics referred to 'a cloth cap in the John Bishop room' and the Board stared down a duly elected Minister of the Crown to the point where I asked Minister Levy to withdraw my nomination, which she did, and in a compromise appointed Gale Edwards instead. The first move forward. An artist on the Board. Over the next ten years many more changes occurred.

Later in 1993 the new Liberal Arts Minister Diana Laidlaw, who in Opposition had strongly supported the Board of the Incorporated Association Festival in its dispute with Anne Levy, rapidly approved a complete restructure of the festival along similar lines to those suggested by the reform push I was part of. The festival became a Corporation in a manner that allowed greater Government input and broader accountability. It seemed that the Board starring down Minister Levy had not gone unnoticed by Minister Laidlaw. A number of the top end of town were very unhappy with Laidlaw's reforms and I for one experienced their wrath in a number of highly unpleasant ways.

There is and has been for too long in Adelaide an establishment that exercises control of what they regard as their city-state in a back-room, club like atmosphere. They like to think of themselves as liberal-minded, benign, and gracious. And when they're winning, they largely are. It's when they lose, or they're forced to give ground that the skull beneath the skin shines through, as Peter Sellars recently discovered.

But back for a moment to history. New structures, then Barry Kosky ran his festival, complete with Red Square, Robyn Archer became the first woman festival director, another couple of steps for the democratisation process. Robyn's unquestionable merit, talent and ability, led to her being asked to direct both 1998 and 2000's successful festivals. Robyn brought through her programming a broadening of the festival, although a carefully balanced mix between the needs of the top end of town and the masses.

And then for 2002 came Peter Sellars saying from the beginning that the usual cultural appeasement of the top end of town was not on his agenda, unless they wanted to become involved in his efforts to take the festival somewhere else. He wanted to give it for once to artists and communities who interacted together at the shallow end of the resources pile. He wasn't exactly quiet about it. He sang his messages from the rooftops across Australia, on a televised lecture at one stage. Another step for democracy?

Around about the middle of last year the knives started flashing and the teeth started to bite. And as so often in Adelaide both, once bared, were sharp. Not enough 'substance' to the programming, not enough program period. In the 'genius/loony' debate, 'genius' started taking a back seat. Peter Sellars 'resigned' and Sue Natrass was given the unenviable task of finalising a festival with only months to go.

That's the background and there have been pages and pages written, airwaves filled to bursting points, and everyone has at least one view, and they all tend to centre on Sellars himself. To genius or loony, add uplifting/patronising, radical/predictable, new/old-hat, democratic/amateur hour in Dixie.

For me it's a mixed bag, that goes something like this.

There is no doubt in my mind that the democratisation process that has affected the festival over the last ten

years has been a good thing. With the Sellars festival it reached a crossroads and decided to take the path least travelled.

On this point the debate inside my own head has finally come down on the side that says this also was a good thing. He stirred the possum, challenged conventional thinking, took the festival and put it somewhere else for a while. In the process this big fish in our fish tank was savaged as viciously as many of us little fish who've lived in this fish tank a long time have been over the years for trying to drag Adelaide into a 21st century that doesn't resemble the 19th.

Many of us tried to tell him. Many of us suggested that he needed to construct a few deeper connections than those he seemed prepared to make. Many community cultural development and other cultural activists who've been doing the business in this town for a long time talked to Peter about strategic alliances, offered to input into his processes. Peter rather like an absolute monarch gave lip service to good ideas, and then decided who he would involve himself with and who he wouldn't. He obviously felt no need to connect broadly at a grassroots level. In many cases the people he ignored, or didn't phone back, or promised to widen the debate with 'the next time I'm in town' and then didn't, were those who could have helped him the most.

In the general debate there was some suggestion that he was going 'straight to the community' rather than through 'filters'. In many cases those 'filters' were the established leaders of community cultural development and community activism in this State who for some reason he either felt he could ignore or didn't understand the consequences of ignoring. Despite repeated attempts to engage Sellars many watched as detached observers as he was torn apart. Those who watched could have helped, had he shown much interest in the help. Instead the irony was he remained a top end boy himself in terms of his international positioning, living in his world, connecting through his

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Auntie Veronica Brodie and the Governor of South Australia, Majorie Jackson, at the Intertwine International Weaving project, The Parks Arts and Functions complex, Adelaide Festival 2002. Photo: Trevor Fox



Launch of Spirit of the West, an exhibition of the outcome of 50 community arts workshops, West Lakes Mall, Adelaide Festival 2002. Photo: Sam Oster

**Why does CCD seem to be positioned more and more in the mainstream arts? Is it despite the worthy arguments presented justifying such collaborations, because the product is cheaper? The community participants in such events are unpaid and that doubtless has an affect on the size of the budget required to produce an event.**

networks, and the limited way in which those top end networks overlapped with communities of established networks. It was a bit like having a rich kid slum it with us for a while, but on his terms, on his agenda, and as close as he was prepared to get and no closer.

This was a great irony in a festival that was supposed to be about connecting at a grassroots level. The grassroots is a much bigger and more complex place when you live in it, than when you visit it from first class. Anyone attempting to stimulate the grassroots has to be prepared for the backlash from the establishment when it comes and who better to dig in with than the grassroots dwellers and their defence organisations. He could have achieved so much more if he'd paid more attention to that point.

The Associate Directors who were left to do most of the work of putting the festival together were appointed through a process few at the grassroots level were part of. They were not an organic part of the process. There was no expression of interest and no interview process that was known at the grassroots level. Peter seems to have collected people on his travels; a shiny stone here, a bright bauble there. Few knew who they were or even who was in the running until they were announced. To Adelaide activists they were largely an unknown and untested quantity. Some were felt by many not to be skilled or connected enough to pull off what they were supposed to achieve. Their roots did not go deep enough into the communities in South Australia. Most were like Sellars himself, imported into South Australia in the lead up to the festival. The top end kid brought a lot of his new best friends with him, and they despite their best intentions and a number of worthy efforts were just not steeled in the South Australian communities activists or artists.

In the film industry for many years there has been a policy debate about whether we have a film industry in South Australia or a South Australian Film Industry, and the latter has been the primary priority. Rightly in my view. In

many ways the Adelaide Festival 2002 was as much a 'festival in Adelaide' as we've had before. True it used our raw materials but the value adding, was done largely by outsiders. Is that much different from a 'normal' festival?

The Administrative side of the festival had grave misgivings about the festival's direction. There were a number of high profile resignations of people who are not philistines, are not reactionaries, but who saw Sellars as a man on an agit-prop-social-realist agenda they could not reconcile with what the festival should be. Their loss damaged the event. On the other side of the ledger the stories I hear back from people at grassroots level cannot be ignored. A construction worker friend raves on and on about the Indonesian students mural in Victoria Square outlining the struggles for social justice in that country over decades. As he bluntly puts it, 'if it wasn't put up by the festival it wouldn't have been allowed.' He was also impressed by Maori and Aboriginal rappers. 'Rap dancers' I say, 'No' he says 'they made it clear it's not rap dancers, it's rappers.' Like the difference between opera and operetta I suppose.

The Parks program is widely talked about as a success for those communities, 'Shishka-Car' down in Murray Bridge put young people in touch with artists who as one journo said to me 'now all have Lockie's (artistic director Lockie McDonald) phone number for the next project they want to do.'

State Theatre and the Holdfast Bay Community Choir were involved in a deeply moving and significant co-production of Pat Rix's 'My Life, My Love' that my six and a half year old sat still through for an hour and a half to proclaim it the best show she'd ever seen. And she's seen a few. The professional opera singers, actors, musicians, combined with the community choir of disabled and able bodied to tell an Adelaide story of Islanders, Aborigines, whites, drunks, and all our ghosts.

'El Nino' my 74 year old mother-in-law regarded as the most marvellous experience. She's no slouch and not shy

as the State Director of the Opera once discovered when he asked about something she didn't like, so that's a pretty acid test passed for the showcase event.

The questions that come out of the festival are many and varied and have been discussed by many Alliance activists and committees. Some of the points that were made in addition to the observations on Peter Sellars and the Associate Directors made before include: Why was the 'El Nino' film made in America, why wasn't it made in Australia using local artists in line with the local, community, nature of the festival theme? A small bitch I know but there are job opportunity issues for Australian performers here.

Is it the role of a flagship company like State Theatre to be doing co-productions with community groups? This is the second in the last few years, and there have been more if one counts the productions featuring students from training institutions. While the Alliance has provided an industrial framework for these co-productions to proceed in a regulated way, a number of our members regularly raise concerns with such concepts.

Why does CCD seem to be positioned more and more in the mainstream arts? Is it despite the worthy arguments presented justifying such collaborations, because the product is cheaper? The community participants in such events are unpaid and that doubtless has an affect on the size of the budget required to produce an event.

Whilst the SA Alliance would accept that the Sellars festival gave ownership to a different group of people in Adelaide than those who normally enjoy the benefits of the festival's activity, there is a lack of understanding as to why a change of 'ownership' leads to a perceived increase in unpaid work. Indeed there is a certain irony that the democratisation of the festival has been interpreted as meaning the removal of the economic underpinning for some. Has democratisation revealed a class system within the arts? Surely not!

**The dogs bark and the caravan moves on, Sellars has gone, the carnival is over.**

The dogs bark and the caravan moves on, Sellars has gone, the carnival is over. The intensity of the debate has flared and folded, the consideration of the goats entrails probably just beginning. The early consensus is that the big winner from the experiment has been the Fringe under local girl Katrina Sedgewick, who did have the local networks and connections, and milked them for all she was worth to pull off a blockbuster. A Fringe for all seasons, for all classes, castes, and preferences.

The democratisation of a festival is a worthy thing, but cultural democracy can be cold comfort without economic democracy, and the conclusion seems to be that for many this festival did not pay sufficient attention to that issue ■

*Stephen Spence has done lots of 'stuff' in community cultural development as a performer, in production management, as a writer, a Board member of Port Community Arts Centre, and an activist in Actors Equity and MEAA. He has been Chair of the SA Arts Industry Council, a Board member of the SA Film Corporation, President of the SA Trades & Labor Council, and an elected City Councillor. In September, 2002, he will take up a position with the British Union – Prospect based in London.*

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# Critical comment - letter to the editor

DON CHAPMAN

The Editor  
*Artwork Magazine*

While the paint is still drying on the evaluation of The 2002 Adelaide Festival, I wish to address the unprecedented condemnation of its performance by the media and the new State Government. Patrick McDonald, Arts Editor of *The Advertiser*, ridiculed its poor box office attendances and resulting bottom line completing a dismal and dismaying picture. In his opinion the community was 'shuddering' from the experience of the 'worst turnout since 1994'.

But, the bleak perspective didn't end with *The Advertiser*. *The Adelaide Review*, and national publications, *Arts Monthly* and *Real Time*, gave the festival a fair hiding in the months following its short season. Much of this criticism may well be deserved, but what is missing is a balanced perspective and a deeper insight into the festival's overall performance.

In April 2002, a 'Reflection of The Festival' was staged by the Community Arts Network of SA Inc (CAN SA). Several artists, artworkers, a festival associate director and Taoundi College coordinator, spoke about their direct experiences. They reported many positive experiences, ongoing programs and employment outcomes that are never going to appear in a simple, 'bums on seats' assessment.

The audience at the 'Reflection' were representative of the community arts and cultural development sector of South Australia. They were very supportive of

the outcomes of festival programs staged at Taoundi College, the Parks Arts and Function Complex, Murray Bridge and Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

The picture wasn't all rosy, but what was overwhelmingly clear was the need for a full and independent review before the fallout 'kills' the possibility of the arts having a role in engaging communities through our one major festival ever again. It is the only sound and sensible way for the new Festival Director and his State Government managers to plan the next festival.

The review would need to be thorough and include the following:

- Analysis of audience attendances and new audience development;
- Participation by communities, individuals, artists, volunteers and organisations compared to previous years;
- Evaluation of the wider economic benefits including box office, other industries and new employment opportunities;
- Examination of the management model including the relationship with administration, and an analysis of public submission and community engagement processes;
- Evaluation of community benefits, including Reconciliation, Victoria Square events, Queen Elizabeth Hospital events, Murray Bridge Indigenous Programs, Taoundi College

events, plus analysis of loss of benefits through failed programs including Artists Week, Talking Country, other regional programs and the extent of disaffection among communities;

- Evaluation of sponsorship and marketing, including the full story behind that 'Hitler' commercial; and,
- An open call for public submissions from all festival stakeholders, including audience, communities, organisations, funding bodies, sponsors, documenting their experiences and suggestions for future festivals.

Without such a thorough review the paint will dry on the lessons of this festival and new cracks will appear during the heat of the next one.

Yours Sincerely

**Don Chapman**  
Artworker

*Don Chapman was the part time Arts and Cultural Development Officer at City of Onkaparinga during the Adelaide Festival 2002 and coordinator of two festival projects, the 'Southern Youth Festival' and 'Talking Country'. Both of these projects were excluded from the final program of the Adelaide Festival 2002.*