

The 2010 Wells Oration
A Passion for the Art and A Passion for Asia
By Carrillo Gantner AO
Independent Primary School Heads Association
Scotch College
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Good evening.

The Wells Oration, which I have the privilege to give today, honours Eddie Wells, Head of the Junior School at Wesley College Glen Waverly Campus, who is remembered as a large personality and an inspiring school master of impeccable integrity. I give special welcome to his son and other members of his family who are with us here tonight. I did not know Eddie Wells, but I do know the impact that an outstanding teacher can have on young people. As Junior School Heads of Independent Schools around Australia, I am sure you aspire both to fill such large shoes yourself and to find others on your staff who inspire similar respect and affection. You carry great responsibility to the future of the young people at your schools and, through them, to the future of this country.

Looking at my own school experience, I would say that, while it may have influenced my personal values, hopefully for the better, it had almost no direct impact in equipping me for the career I ultimately followed. I was going to say “the career I chose” rather than “followed”, but on reflection it would be more accurate to say that, against the odds, my career chose me. It started almost by accident in the theatre, moved via the arts into Asia, and finally settled in a rich smorgasbord, or should I say sushi plate of the arts, Asia, company directorships in Australia and Asia, and work with a range of non-profit organizations in the arts and in the field of Australia’s engagement with Asia.

Tonight I am going to be talking about these two passions, the arts and Asia: my work in the performing arts and how this has influenced and contributed to other parts of my life; and Asia, specifically our failure so far as a nation to bring Asia squarely into the educational experience of every Australian school student. Neither the arts nor Asia received so much as a passing reference in my own education and, even today, for the majority of Australian students not too much has changed. My challenge to you is to rectify this for the new generation of students.

I was born in San Francisco. I came to Australia at age ten when my parents divorced, and went to school here and then to the University of Melbourne where I studied in the Arts Faculty. In truth my undergraduate education was subverted by a hyperactive life in student theatre into which I fell by complete accident, or perhaps it was because the prettier girls seemed to congregate there. I then went to Stanford in California to do a Masters in Communications, or what would now be called Media Studies, but I found this very boring so I switched departments to undertake a Master of Fine Arts in Drama. On graduation I went through the national auditions for graduates from the major US drama schools and was offered a year’s contract with a Broadway company at the Lyceum Theatre on 42nd Street. One week off the start of rehearsals, Actors Equity decided to strike the company because I was, by then, an Australian, having renounced my US citizenship because of the Vietnam War. Stanford generously invited me back as a Fellow in the Drama Department teaching acting and directing undergraduate productions.

I quickly discovered that I was a lousy teacher and, after a year, in 1969 I returned to Australia to take up what I believe was the country's very first publicly funded arts management training position. I was appointed to work as assistant administrator for the 1970 Adelaide Festival, a position funded by the, then, very new Australian Council for the Arts. This was my first serious exposure to budgets, boards and balance sheets. Then, after a year in Adelaide, in mid 1970 I came to Sydney as the first Drama Officer at the Australia Council itself, working there for three years under the extraordinary and inspiring Dr. "Nugget" Coombs, the Council's first Chairman. John Sumner, the founding director of the Melbourne Theatre Company and a very formidable figure himself, was on the Council's Drama Committee. I think it was to stop me recommending the first government funding for La Mama and the Australian Performing Group, indeed for any company other than his own, that he appointed me at 29 as General Manager of the MTC, then the oldest and largest resident professional theatre in Australia. I lasted three years until I ran aground on the rock that was John Sumner whose fiefdom the Company was for an extraordinary 35 years.

In 1976 with Graeme Blundell – with whom I had acted in student theatre - I started the Playbox Theatre Company and ran it until 1993, with three years out in the mid 1980s to work as Cultural Counselor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing. After the first two years, Graeme moved on to Sydney to pursue a successful career in the burgeoning Australian film industry, chasing tits and bums across the screen as *Alvin Purple*. I am a persistent oaf and stayed a total of 16 years at Playbox. During my time there, with a small and manic team of creative associates, I planned every season, directed some shows and acted in many others. All told, over my years with the company we produced around 200 Australian plays, the majority of them premieres. We also presented major Asian performance companies around Australia: acrobatics, Beijing Opera and puppetry from China, Noh Theatre and contemporary drama from Japan, and puppetry from India. I ended my run at Playbox in 1993 playing *King Lear* in a production that subsequently toured several Australian capitals before playing major venues in Seoul, Tokyo and Nagoya. In more recent years I have played other roles in private business and public affairs. My wife would say it is all acting, and perhaps she is right.

If tonight I tell you about some of those roles, it is not to boast of a colourful or even a privileged life, though it certainly has been both. Rather it is to illustrate how an education in creativity and then a life in and around the theatre, on the stage and in the office, has helped me to cope with the demands and stresses of other roles beyond the footlights and the stage door.

The theatre is a collective and collaborative art. Getting any show together is an accumulation of creative partnerships underpinned by management support. Creative people are not always easy to corral: it is sometimes a real challenge to harness their great energies and greater insecurities, yet these are often the very qualities that make them powerful and provocative. Even a one man show requires a director, designer, stage manager, producer, lighting and sound technicians, wardrobe, a publicist, accountant, venue manager and front of house staff, a hairdresser and probably many others. In addition, in this age of governance and accountability, there is almost certainly a board of worthy citizens and the onerous task of accounting to federal, state and local government arts funding agencies. These days there are probably also corporate sponsors, a foundation or two, and individual patrons, all of whom demand their pound of flesh, however sweetly their request may be phrased. And then there is the audience, the subscribers and the general public who must be wooed to choose your offering over the plethora of diverse alternatives.

People skills are thus at the very centre of the whole process of theatre and people skills have been central to every other part of my life, be it diplomacy, business, philanthropy, the non-profit sector or even Collins Street farming.

High level people skills, along with the ability to make a little go a long way, to understand the value of a dollar, and to juggle complexity, are why the very good arts managers are among the most versatile, entrepreneurial, motivated and outstanding managers in the entire country, and why some of their peers in the corporate world seem so lacklustre and self-interested by comparison.

The best arts managers, like the best entrepreneurs in any field, can be creative while standing still at the centre of the typhoon. They are focused on their goal but they are also nimble, imaginative, opportunistic and positive. It seems to me that the arts, and particularly the performing arts, are frequently more entrepreneurial than much of the business world, at least those bits of it that I see in the context of the several company boards on which I now sit. Let me give a personal example.

In the early days of Playbox, 1980 in fact, with Melbourne theatrical entrepreneur and friend Clifford Hocking, we undertook to tour the 50-member Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe from China around every Australian capital city. The budget for the six week tour was well over a million dollars, which, at that time, was more than twice the annual turnover of the entire year's program at Playbox. The Board were quite properly nervous but let me do it provided we set up a separate legal entity. Joining the two business names together, we called the new company "Playking". We thought that sounded more felicitous and more Chinese than "Hockbox". We made our money back on the tour and then, to everyone's amazement, not least the Board's, in 1983 we risked \$2 million touring the Jiangsu Peking Opera Company again for six weeks around Australia and actually made money. Not as much as putting the money on term deposit with the bank for the year, but a profit none-the-less.

In the early years of Playbox my brochure catchphrase was: "Making the Improbable Inevitable". It is a pretty good description of what we were trying to do. In commercial terms we succeeded with those big Chinese companies and other entrepreneurial ventures in large commercial theatres, like the production of Tom Stoppard's *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* with actors and full symphony orchestra at Dallas Brooks Hall, and Pam Gems' *Piaf* with Jeannie Lewis at the Comedy Theatre. From 1989 onwards we did it in artistic terms by being the first professional theatre company ever to construct its on-going annual program 100% from new Australian plays. And in raising \$6 Million to build our own two-theatre home at The Malthouse which we opened in 1990.

We did it again when we bought the land next to The Malthouse on which ACCA now stands during the Kennett government's early fire sale of state assets. We then watched gleefully while another branch of the same government announced its grand plans for the site that no one had told them they no longer owned. Of course theatre people are a kindly lot: we helped them out of their embarrassment by selling the land back to the government at a profit while adding a covenant that provided for The Malthouse to be perpetual managers of the entire enlarged site under the Crown Lands Act.

In all these adventures I learnt about raising money and about investing money. Most importantly I learnt that one should never underestimate the value of a good idea, nor the

amount of sweat, time and, on occasion, sheer bloody mindedness that are necessary to realize it, nor the importance of working with people who share the same dream. These lessons have been very useful for business, the community sector and for philanthropy.

A dear friend and theatrical colleague once said to me: "Your next line is in the eyes of your fellow actor." This is true for every single thing we do in life. Look closely into people's eyes, listen closely to their speech and, even more importantly to the meaning behind the words, and you learn not just the actor's skills to mimic movement and voice, but also to read character, to anticipate behaviour, to prepare your next move. Actors learn to read people between the lines. As the honey throated Leonard Cohen sings: "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in".

Actors most of all, but all people like to tell you about themselves, their families and jobs, their customs and their country. When travelling in Asia, all you need is to listen with curiosity, respect and good humour. If you get this far, you are already some way to understanding, and on the road to personal connection. In most Asian countries the personal connection or relationship comes first in both chronology and importance. Indeed the relationship is considered far more significant than any business deal that might follow. You can enjoy the relationship without the business but you won't enjoy the business without the relationship.

Language is vitally important as the best entry point into a richer understanding of any culture, our own or that of others. A majority of Australians, however, seem to think that English is enough, that everyone should learn our language. New technologies reinforce this unfortunate tendency. Everyone wants to know about China these days but few want to tackle the challenge of learning its language.

I'm sorry to say that my own passion for Asia was not a result of my schooling. I attended a well-known private school down the road from here in the 1950s and early 60s. We were offered Latin, French and German. Through school and university I did nine years of Latin and five years of French. Apart from a deep aversion to split infinitives and a long love affair with ablative absolutes, I now regard these as largely wasted years of study. I should have been putting my efforts into studying Chinese and Japanese. Schools should prepare children for their future. My school failed me. Increasingly our future lies with Asia and I was not prepared.

Five year olds starting school in your classrooms today will enter their adult lives just at the time when China and India regain the position they held for hundreds of years, until about 200 years ago, as the world's two top economies. What skills will today's five year olds require to harness the opportunities this presents?

It is become blindingly obvious that the only chance for Australia to address global issues like climate change, pandemics, humanitarian disasters, wars and the movement of people is if we work closely with our neighbours in the Asian region to do so. What knowledge, skills and understandings will the five year olds at your school need to achieve workable solutions vital to their wellbeing?

Within Australia we are now in a period of the greatest growth in immigration that Australia has seen since white people first arrived from England and Ireland. 40% of our immigrants currently come from Asia, with Indians the fastest growing group, followed by Chinese. Some see this as a threat to a mythical racial purity. I see it as a wonderful opportunity for

Australia, but only if we can harness the treasure chest of creative and intellectual gifts these immigrants bring to add to the rich fabric of our lives and our culture. How can we ensure that Australians are equipped with the skills and understandings to continue to build a socially cohesive society?

Last Century Geoffrey Blainey wrote about “The Tyranny of Distance” for the early Australian settlers. In this century we talk about the death of distance. An increasingly interconnected and mobile world demands of our young people not just technology skills but, even more importantly, well developed cross-cultural communication skills if they are to thrive and prosper in their world.

I’ve been encouraged to hear that federal and state Australian Ministers of Education have recognised that our young people require new skills, new knowledge and new understandings to equip them for these new times.

In ‘*The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*’ of 2008, all Ministers of Education agreed that QUOTE “New and exciting opportunities for Australians are emerging as a consequence of global integration and international mobility..... and the rise of India, China and other Asian nations.” END QUOTE. The Declaration explicitly states the need QUOTE “for Australians to become ‘Asia literate’, engaging and building strong relationships with Asia.” END QUOTE.

This fine aspiration has taken a long time to be embedded in education policy. In 1903 Prime Minister Alfred Deakin knew that Australia’s future would be QUOTE “linked to the Asian region in the closest manner in trade and in strife” END QUOTE. From the 1970s to the early 2000s there were no less than 20 reports on Asian studies and Asian languages in Australian schools and higher education. The most important, perhaps, was the 1988 Asian Studies Council Report called ‘*A National Strategy for the Study of Asia in Australia*’ which had as its objective that QUOTE “most Australians will have some understandings of Asian cultures, geography and economics by the year 2010..... and the study of an Asian language to be normal by 2000. These objectives are reasonable and feasible.” END QUOTE.

So how are we tracking on this?

In a major step towards achieving Asia literacy for all young Australians, you may know that the new Australian national curriculum identifies ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ as one of three cross-curriculum priorities in all learning areas, at all levels of schooling. This requires all young Australians to gain knowledge, skills and understandings of the histories, geographies, literatures, arts and cultures of the diverse countries of Asia. The Australian Curriculum has identified inter-cultural understanding as one of ten general capabilities expected of all young people by the time they leave school.

This is excellent progress. But will it be achieved? And by when? The magnitude of the challenge to achieve Asia literacy is substantial.

A recent study by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) found that only a tiny minority of students currently undertake studies with an Asian focus in Year 12 History, English, Geography or Arts.

Typically, 65% of Modern History students in one large state (NSW) chose to study Germany, 19% chose Russia and 2% chose China. How does that happen? I am sure you

know the reason better than me. The pattern is not driven by student choice, but rather by the teachers' choice of content. We can't blame them. Most teachers have had little opportunity to learn formally about Asia in their own education and there are no plans at all to ensure that new teachers are equipped with Asia literacy.

Look at literature. The ACER report tells us that the most studied Asia focused text across Australia is Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. In the VCE, four texts were listed as 'Asia focussed texts' yet not one of them was by an Asian author, as though Asia has no literature of its own. Similar dismal stories are repeated in other subject areas.

I am sorry that I cannot provide some data from the junior school years. You will know better than me that there is no readily available data to provide a picture of curriculum content in Kindergarten to Year 10 across this country. The last time data was collected in 2002, it indicated that around 50% of schools taught either nothing about Asia or only superficial and stereotypical content like the "Three Ps: pandas, poverty and paddy fields".

The truth is, that without significant investment in the Asia literacy of our teachers and school leaders, we will be challenged to meet the aspiration of the *Melbourne Declaration*. I urge you to investigate the situation in your own schools and to make the general point to state and federal governments at every possible opportunity that much more needs to be done. This is especially important right now when we are uncertain who our Federal Government and Education Minister might be. We may know in the next two days but meanwhile I find it scary that Christopher Pyne, who has been the Shadow Education Minister, could say in late May, QUOTE "Our largest concern with the draft National Curriculum relates to the three cross-curriculum perspectives, namely the imbalance of the focus on:

- Indigenous perspectives
- Sustainable patterns of living and skills; and
- Knowledge and understanding related to Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.

We would immediately revise these." END QUOTE.

Mr. Pyne wants a new cross curriculum perspective on Judeo-Christian values. There is nothing wrong with that, but why does he think that such values are incompatible with an understanding of indigenous issues, sustainability or Asian literacy? I, for one, don't get it. Does he not want students to know something of Australia's past and of our future? Or how we must adjust our lives to survive in this dry land? From where does he think Australian jobs increasingly will come?

This snapshot of how we are tracking with Asia literacy also requires brief mention of the status of Asian languages in our schools. I am afraid that the story here only gets worse. The Asia Education Foundation - part of Asialink with whose inception I was actively involved and which I Chaired for 14 years - has released four landmark reports this year which provide the current status of Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean Languages in Australian Schools.

Only 18.6% of primary and secondary school students in Australia currently study an Asian language, decreasing to fewer than 6% in Year 12. Overall this has declined by 25% since 2002. The Coalition government of the day has a lot to answer for in stopping bipartisan support for the NALSAS program. Even General Cosgrove, the then head of our Defence Forces, said to me at the time that Australia's security would be better assured by proper support for the NALSAS program than by one more tank for his army.

Currently Indonesian has been dropping 10,000 students a year for the past 5 years – only 1,100 students across Australia now study Indonesian in Year 12, the language of our largest neighbour, the fourth largest country on earth by population and the world’s biggest Islamic nation. In Chinese, 94% of Year 12 students are of Chinese heritage and only a tiny handful, all Koreans living in Australia, learn Korean. This is a seriously troubling state of affairs.

Wherever today’s five-year-olds live and work, they will be mixing in a multi-national, multi-faith and multi-cultural setting. And since Australia’s engagement with Asia now exceeds our engagement with the rest of the world combined in trade, investment, immigration, tourism, education and humanitarian assistance, it is obvious that Asia literacy will be essential, not optional.

Are we going to fail another generation of Australian children?

It is my vision that by 2020 we will live in an Australia in which our children can speak with respect and knowledge about Islam; can communicate comfortably with our largest and nearest neighbour, Indonesia; and can take up the opportunities offered by the intellectual and economic powerhouses of China and India. I hope for an Australia in which a unique, vibrant, creative culture has blossomed, a culture that understands its Indigenous connectedness to land and is fed as much by the influences of the great civilisations of Asia as by those of Europe. It is an exciting opportunity and glorious challenge. It is also an essential part of our future security and economic prosperity.

Almost twenty years ago at a national theatre conference in Canberra, I said that there were only two and a half arts managers in Australia who could speak any Chinese, and I was exaggerating about my half. I don’t think this has improved much since, yet the opportunities in our region for Australian arts, as for Australian business, demand that we lift our game.

While I can enjoy theatre in any language and while I believe passionately that we need to invest much more in the development of Asian language skills across the national schools’ curricula, one of the greatest gifts I carry from my life in the theatre is a love of my own tongue, English, in its many colourful variants. When you have to learn lots of lines you not only improve your memory, you polish your mind with the steel wool of words. Forty years ago at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival I played Claudius in *Hamlet*, Iachimo in *Cymbeline* and Touchstone in *As You Like It* in nightly rotation for a whole summer. Lots of words. Buckets of bloody subtext. The stage littered with meaning.

Like the focus of any love affair, words sometimes get me into trouble, especially when I seize on some obvious word play and choose not to listen for the meaning. I do know what words mean. I treasure irony, bad puns and even blatant cliché. I abjure inaccuracy. I have always delighted in Christopher Hampton’s line at the start of his play *The Philanthropist*: QUOTE “I don’t know what you meant to say but I know what you said.” END QUOTE. The ability to use language meaningfully is one of the reasons I respect good playwrights so highly. Indeed all good writers. The best of them have the ability to craft words into muscular, evocative and coherent metaphor, dialogue and insight. What they do is very important to the health of any society.

As Hamlet says of the troupe of players visiting Elsinore: QUOTE “Let them be well used; for they are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time; after your death you were better

have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live” END QUOTE.

The live theatre teaches courage. It requires enormous bravery to go on stage every night. While audiences generally want you to succeed, they are also ever ready to condemn your smallest failing. Often we do fail, sometimes badly. We usually know it ourselves first and worst, and then we suffer secondary burns from the public humiliation of critics and the empty seats for the remainder of the season. It is salutary and toughening.

Learning to accept constructive criticism, however, is an important lesson for life. It's usually only our most intimate and trusted friends, or our partners, who dares to say it straight.

Like marriage, acting requires physical fitness and endurance too. You breathe better and think more clearly when you take care of your body. Working with the famous Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi was, if you will excuse an analogy in poor taste, my small, personal *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Not just the endless hard stomping exercises that gave me tendonitis in the feet, but the testing of physical limits well beyond where I thought I could go. I called it "Samurai training" for actors. I recall opening night in Tokyo in his *Chronicle of Macbeth* where Suzuki made us do a complete and full-force run of the play that ended thirty minutes before the curtain of the premiere. We were distressed but then he screamed at us that it wasn't enough and sent us out again still pouring sweat to give even more in the opening performance. We hated him in that moment but we did it, and afterwards we felt exhilarated - proud of ourselves and admiration for the master. The lesson is that all of us are capable of giving more and better of ourselves if we challenge the limits of our comfort, or if we are properly led by those who have been there and back.

As Groucho Marx said, "Those are my principles but if you don't like them I've got others". So here are a few of the others I draw from my time in the theatre that are applicable to the other worlds in which I move:

First, the arts offer a very egalitarian culture. Ability matters much more than personal history.

The theatre is non-sexist, at least more so than any other profession I know. Think of the many outstanding women who are leaders in the performing arts. In any context, not to use properly the intelligence, creativity and strength that exists within 50% of our population is simply a waste.

The arts should be central to education. There is a host of studies documenting the beneficial impacts of the arts, ranging from enhanced physical and mental well-being, improved academic performance and creative problem solving, as well as fostering a more caring, inclusive and dynamic society.

Because they frequently live close to the edge of insecurity and fragility, actors understand and can harness emotions. Whatever business we are in, understanding the emotional source of our own and others' motivation can be very powerful. Along with love, guilt is a great motivator, as any professional fundraiser knows.

Money is not central to the artist's motivation and losing money in the arts is not a sin. Corporate heavies who come on to not-for-profit boards often assume that something is wrong with the business model when they find that the more you produce, the more you lose. They have to be educated gently to understand that some important things exist for

reasons other than profit, that government support, private patronage and philanthropy play a critical role in a dynamic society and should be seen as evidence of success, not failure. Of course the arts have to be business-like but they don't have to be like business.

The theatre has taught me that Einstein was right: "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

In the arts you learn quickly that, even when you do something well, someone can do it even better. The Chinese say: "*Shan wai you shan*" - "Beyond the mountains there are more mountains." Or: "*San ren xing bi you wo shi*" - "Three people walking, one must be my teacher." These ideas are both a useful admonition to humility and a challenge to do better. They are also a reminder of why in art, business, philanthropy, education or any other serious pursuit, a mentor or exemplar can play a very useful role.

Our pathways to new worlds of enrichment are illuminated through the arts. My love of China and other Asian societies came initially through an exposure to and appreciation of their performing arts. And like so many other Australians, my understanding of wider indigenous issues was initially aroused through exposure to their vibrant visual culture. The arts can pave the road to Reconciliation.

On a deeply personal basis, I have learnt that acting is a powerful form of self-repair and personal reconciliation. To take on a role as someone else is to have a healing internal conversation with yourself and others very close to your heart. Playing *King Lear*, I found myself having nightly conversations with my own handicapped daughter who had died many years earlier and whom I had failed badly while she lived. Playing any role on stage is to learn something of both yourself and of a different life, and therefore to learn something of respect and compassion.

To learn about one's self is perhaps life's greatest lesson from the theatre or from any art. I have learnt that my skills are not the same as many others' around the board tables at which I now sit. I like to think that makes me more useful, not less. I act and react differently. I can read the Profit & Loss, but I can also imagine outcomes not shown there. I place more trust in my intuition about people and projects than in their Power Point presentations. As Lord Acton almost said, "Power corrupts but Power Point corrupts absolutely". Over time I have learnt to move without anxiety between the world of the arts and the world of business. I have friends in both worlds, and in other worlds.

It is the actor's business to move between roles and to find truth in all of them. I have had the double happiness of also moving between cultures and finding immeasurable enrichment in the experience. I only wish that my school education had equipped me to make even more of the opportunities that subsequently beckoned.

As the ancient Chinese sage, Guan Zhong, wrote around seven hundred years before Christ:
If you plan for one year, plant rice.
If you plan for ten years, plant trees.
If you plan for one hundred years, educate people.

Thank you.
