

# Arts are a tonic for the mind, body and soul

■ John Barrington



I came to the world of arts and culture relatively late. I grew up in a small-business family in Applecross, where dinner table conversations were more commercial than cultural — till takings, not Tosca.

As a kid I chose the surf club over Shakespeare, though I'd always been intrigued by the arts. Not performing arts, mind you. My high school drama career peaked when Mrs Bamford suggested my lack of height and squeaky voice would make me a natural for the love-struck Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Later, when the school attempted *King Lear*, The Gym was meant to become The Globe but the cast let us down. I watched from upstage right — stomach clenched — as my best mate Greg, playing Lear, fluffed the line that goes: "Never, never, never, never, never."

Moving to Melbourne for work, I got the culture bug and regularly rode the tram to the State Theatre for the latest delight. I went to the ballet and became a friend of the Victorian Opera.

One time I found myself sitting in the choir stalls with the 300 voices of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It was my first experience of surround sound.

I started getting a real buzz from seeing people perform at their best with breathtaking talent and a creativity that far exceeded my usual left-brain thinking.

I was spellbound at the silent genius of Marcel Marceau. He caught himself in an invisible maze that morphed into a cul-de-sac and then his own coffin.

I am not claustrophobic but I was in there with him: anxious, tight chest, sweaty palms. As Marceau put it: "I don't act out stories, I visualise feelings."

The artists' feelings and insights stimulate my imagination and take me out of my humdrum habits.

Two years ago we took our sons to see *Not By Bread Alone*, a PIAF performance by the world's only professional deaf-blind ensemble, taking us into their inner world.

A week later our 16-year-old asked, "Dad, what do you think blind people dream about?"

He had felt it, thought about it and empathised with the challenges faced by the disabled. In a world where we could all do with a little more empathy, this is a good thing.

A friend who took his family to see the sublime production of *The Rabbits*, starring Kate Miller-Heidke, reported that his four-year-old was restless by the end of this operatic production. But as they were walking to the train afterwards, the youngster turned to his mum and dad and said, "That big rabbit was naughty, wasn't he?"

Was it a superb opera? It won four Helpmann Awards but that youngster was none the wiser. Here was a child moved by a dramatic story of dislocation, who'd learnt a valuable, visible lesson about how to recognise right from wrong.

Lecture me all you like about rights and wrongs and I may get it and I might not. Move me with art that

touches my soul and you've got me.

It's by provoking our emotions and triggering our imagination that art can be transformational. Just as a four-year-old is hardly an opera fan, we might not be either. But we can all see more through the alchemy of artists.

This is why the arts are so important for us as a community — they let us see our world, the lives of others and ourselves in a different light.

And the arts don't just give us a momentary feel-good sense. Research from Britain, the US and Scandinavia demonstrates the long-term health benefits that come from regular attendance at the cinema, theatre, museums and galleries.

At Anglicare WA, which I chair, the arts provide a powerful medium for expression and healing in our counselling services for children and young people who have experienced trauma. And St John of God Hospital has an active arts and health program for patients, visitors and staff.

Arts-going is good for well-being, not just the mind.

Right now there's a smorgasbord of arts and culture on offer, with the Perth International Arts Festival and Fringe World now in full swing. You may know something about the arts or nothing at all.

But give it a go. Take a risk, shake up your routine, check out what's on and pick up some tickets for you, your partner or some friends. Get out of the rut, be dazzled!

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