

## **Multicultural Arts in modern Victoria: 1972-2001**

Fotis Kapetopoulos for Making Multicultural Australia

### **Preface**

Melbourne has long claimed for itself the label of Australia's cultural capital, bolstered by its claim to be Australia's most multicultural city. It is a city of arts events and festivals, of music venues and galleries, of film and theatre, and of neighbourhood and ethnic fairs and celebrations. In this it leads but some extent reflects the wider Victorian sensibility, in which artistic expression and participation in the arts have long been key dimensions of public culture. This article traces an important period in the development of this contemporary sense of artistic engagement, beginning with the end of White Australia and the emergence of multiculturalism as a public policy in the early 1970s, and looking forward from the world-shaking events of 2001, with the challenges to the multicultural consensus generated by the events in the USA in September, and the October Tampa election in Australia.

The impact on Melbourne and Victoria of non-Anglo immigration has been well recognised<sup>1</sup>. While the cultural diversity of the state is reflected in its public face, its street-life and its schools and communal places, it is important to understand the processes through which these public cultural transformations have occurred, and the drivers that will help shape future continuing developments. In part the driver is diversity, simply the mass of increasingly complex and differentiated communities that join the state's population every year. The nature of its patrician class, long involved with public institutions and participation in decision-making about the shape and qualities of the arts in all their manifestations, adds another driver. Governments have also increasingly seen that their role should be to expand cultural opportunities, and ensure that the diversity of the population is properly represented as producers and consumers of the arts. We have invited Fotis Kapetopoulos, long time director of Multicultural Arts Victoria and now an arts entrepreneur (Kape Communications) and journalist (Neos Kosmos) to give his perspective on thirty years of multicultural arts in Victoria.

### **Migrants and multicultural arts: opening salvos**

Migrants have had a major impact on Melbourne's lifestyles, on the city's economic and cultural development; they help to make Melbourne an evidently non-Anglo city. Melbourne is defined by its diverse architecture, its integrated cultural neighbourhoods, its tramways and its 'real' winters. Sydney may take in more migrants than Melbourne, but it is Melbourne that represents the most inclusive and evident forms of multiculturalism.

The mass post-war migration, mainly from Southern and South Eastern Europe has given Melbourne a European feel. Migrants in the 1970s from South East Asia, Turkey and the Middle East followed by the post-Soviet Eastern Europeans in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as recent entrants from the Africa and the Indian Subcontinent, have fashioned a unique cultural palimpsest out of Melbourne's urban and suburban environment.

Melbourne is a city built on the gold finds of Ballarat in the mid 1800s; it hosted the Commonwealth's Federation Convention in 1901 and was the industrial and manufacturing heartland of Australia during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Melbourne's economic architecture was always a significant drawcard for migrants. The social and economic dimensions at play in Melbourne also made it a significant intellectual centre both for liberals and socialists.

Victoria, and the capital, Melbourne was once the home of Australia's footwear and textile

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<sup>1</sup> A.Jakubowicz and M.Moustafine, 2010, "Living on the Outside", *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an interdisciplinary journal*, 2(3), at <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs/article/view/1603>.

industries. As federal governments embarked on economic reforms between the late 1970s and mid to late 1980s, the industry disappeared. The 1992 recession had its most profound impact on Victoria and Melbourne.

### **Bipartisan support from government**

Victorian governments of the 1990s sought to refocus Victoria's economic energy on financial, legal and educational services, entertainment events, arts and tourism as well as fashion and food services. Melbourne is now one of the best-placed cities in Australia to reap the benefits of global services provision not least due to the state's support and development of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism in Melbourne is worn as a badge of honour by most of the citizenry. Victorian governments since the mid 1970s are known for their support of multiculturalism as policy. The Liberal Premier Rupert Hamner was a truly Deakinite whose government liberalised Victoria's licensing laws, promoted multiculturalism and supported the arts. It can be said with confidence that in Victoria conservative Liberal and Labor-led state governments have both maintained a commitment to supporting cultural diversity, be it languages education, training, interpreting services, arts and culture.

It was in Melbourne that the first multicultural arts festival was born, it was in Melbourne that some of the strongest advocates for multiculturalism in the conservative and left parties are to be found.

### **Victoria rejects Pauline**

In 1996 as up to 10 percent of Australians flirted with Pauline Hanson's xenophobic and racist political party, One Nation, Melbourne was the least influenced by One Nation's call to go back to a discriminatory migration policy, limit expenditure on Aboriginal affairs and eradicate Australia's multicultural policies.

As most state premiers, the Howard government and the ALP opposition largely placated, or maintained silence as a reaction to the toxic sentiments of Pauline Hanson and One Nation fearing the loss of the 'battler vote', it was Liberal premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett who harangued Pauline Hanson all the way to Brisbane's shopping centres during the 1996 Federal election.<sup>2</sup>

The Victorian Multicultural Commission has been strengthened financially and given more power over its jurisdiction under the current Victorian ALP government. There is now a Multicultural Act which was passed through parliament in 2008 with almost unanimous support from both sides of the House.

### **Festival for all Nations and Shell Folkloric 1972 – 1984**

It was in 1972 that in one of the oldest and by now most diverse neighbourhoods of Melbourne, Fitzroy, that the Festival of All Nations was born and out of it came Multicultural Arts Victoria. By the 1970s inner city suburbs of Melbourne were altered from Irish working class ones to Italian, Greek, ex-Yugoslavian and Spanish speaking working class neighbourhoods with newer immigrants from South East Asia, Turkey and the Middle East arriving.

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<sup>2</sup> Premier Jeff Kennett was openly hostile to Pauline Hanson's One Nation party and believed from the out-set that One Nation should have been attacked head on – comments by Kennett in George Megalogenis' "The longest decade" emphasise Kennett's antipathy to One Nation.

The Festival of All Nations was initially about the presentation of the dance, music and food traditions of Melbourne's cultural diverse groups. It began as a grass roots festival led by men and women influenced by the period's social rights movements. It was for many of Australia's key multicultural artists and arts leaders the first formal platform.

The Festival of all Nations was an expression of the times; it was messy and exciting. It reflected the social and political changes occurring across Australia in the 1970s. The reformist federal Whitlam government 1972 -1975 had introduced a nascent multiculturalism policy as a response to the growing need to represent Australia's migrant populations socially, politically, educationally and culturally.

While communities had their dance and music groups, theatre ensembles, photographers, even poets, writers and filmmakers, there was no arena, or space up until the Festival of All Nations where they could share in each others' cultural representations. The Festival of All Nations began in Fitzroy and was supported by the Fitzroy Council. Mike Zafiroopoulos was a local councillor and later Mayor of Fitzroy and first Chairman of the Festival, and Ian Roberts was a council youth worker. The Festival of All Nations was by the mid 1970s securing funding from state and federal government.

Ian Roberts as a young man was inspired by the progressive folk music and influenced by the 1960s social rights movements. Mike Zafiroopoulos was a migrant who had come here in his youth and was seeking to advance himself, his peers and cohort immigrants. He also became a key advocate for multiculturalism in the arts. Both sought to represent the new cultural dynamics of Fitzroy and Melbourne.

Roberts was brought up with strong Presbyterian values, attended a "very conservative" secondary school, he was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and Australia's involvement in it. As he remembers, "I hung out among a world of Greeks and Italians, with folksongs resounding from houses and cafes in a world of shopkeepers."

Roberts adds, "I was living among Greeks, I was immersed in the milieu of Carlton and Fitzroy, I remember I attending a Maria Farandouri<sup>3</sup> concert... the memory still moves me to tears... I remember a guy standing up pushing both his fists in the air and crying, this was when Greece was under the grips of the fascist Colonels."

When Roberts returned to Australia after his sojourn in Greece he was "politicised, more aware" and began to share a place with Danny Spooner a key pillar of the Australian progressive folk music movement. Roberts expressed his renewed vigour though his involved at the Fitzroy Council as a youth volunteer, "All these Greek and Spanish kids from the Atherton Estates and Fitzroy flats, it was a nightmare, they were shooting sparrows, going wild, playing soccer causing a ruckus – we knew we had to do something."

Roberts met Mike Zafiroopoulos and Anita Joubert a Fitzroy community worker. Zafiroopoulos was a Fitzroy councillor at the time and soon to be Mayor of Fitzroy, "I remember the meeting beginning by Anita asking, 'Do you have any idea how many different ethnic groups live in Fitzroy?' We said 'No but jeez there's a lot of them.'" Roberts continues, "She said 'there are 80 different nationalities in Fitzroy.' I can see that funny little side office Anita had and when she said 'I think we need to have a festival that celebrates all these people. It was all happening, in a funny sort of way it existed since the early 1970s, but we wanted to formalise it. And that started it and Johnson Street had just started, there was a Spanish restaurant, Colmao and a lot of us used to go to that. Much of the development of the Festival of All

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Farandouri is an internationally renowned progressive singer who made her name as a singer with Miki Theodorakis in the late 60s and 70s. She was a staunch promoter of human rights and fought against the Colonels' Junta in Greece between 1967 and 1974.

Nations was done over wine and food at Colmao.”

Roberts paints picture of a new, messy and exciting festival generated mainly by enthusiasm “You can imagine what backstage was like! All the Greeks, then there's the Spanish, the Egyptians and the Italians and the Turkish and it just went on, we were oblivious to any of the tensions in the Balkans, but I don't think we had a clue about Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or Turkey. They were all Greeks to us.”

He acknowledges that in some ways there was no examination of the issues that may impact on these diverse cultural groups, or even a detailed view of curatorial representation, “The idea was we would give each of the ethnic groups a go, in the form of nationalities, we weren't delving too deep.” The festival's chaos was exciting, “There was backstage chaos, but we eventually just gave up you had to go on and drag performers off the stage, they would not leave the stage. I remember this old Greek guy in between one of the changes, no music was on and the changes were chaos, anyway this old guy just got up and went 'Tsssss' and started dancing... all the others started clapping and we had another show on. People are hooting and then there's another lot who are screaming at him to get off and then a couple of Spanish got up and started clicking their fingers...”

Roberts went on to chart an esteemed career in the arts and was the long standing General Manager of the Melbourne International Arts Festival for which he received an OAM; he is now the Director of the Harold Mitchell Foundation.

Mike Zafiroopoulos is someone whose own career is a chart of the development of multiculturalism in the arts, “In terms of multiculturalism, I was involved with the multicultural arts movement, I do not know of any other single individual which has had such a sustained involvement with multicultural arts.”

He began in local government and has held a number of key positions in welfare, policy and finally as the director of SBS in Melbourne. He was an inaugural chairperson of Multicultural Arts Victoria and now sits on a number of arts committees such as the Cultural Infusion Foundation board.

Zafiroopoulos highlights the importance of the Festival of All Nations for the communities and artists, “The dancing groups felt that they were showing their culture to other groups. I remember in the first year or two there were no members of the audience that you could describe as the ‘wider Australian community’. But I think that slowly came about due to a project called *Restaurant of the World*. At its peak there were queues around the corner from a pub in Brunswick Street, all the way to the Fitzroy Town Hall.” He adds, “You may say, that *Restaurant of the World* began the whole Brunswick Street restaurant scene, there were only one or two restaurants in Brunswick Street at the time.”

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1972-1974) launched the Festival of All Nation's ball at the Fitzroy Town Hall in 1972, “We got Gough Whitlam there and most of his cabinet. That was a major thing! It was chaos and I remember people of all cultural backgrounds trying to talk to him, I doubt that any multicultural event can now secure the presence of the prime minister.” In fact there is a park named after him next to the Fitzroy Town Hall.

The festival now engaged a coordinator and expanded to include music, theatre, puppet shows, films, and visual arts exhibitions. The Minister of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Walter Jona, under the Rupert Hammer Liberal government, provided offices to the festival in Victoria Street as part of the immigration ministry, “I was president of the Greek (Antipodes) Festival and Luciano Bini was the head of the Italian Arts festival, which does not exist any more, wearing my Festival of all Nations hat, I extended the invitation for those two festivals to share offices with us.”

This was the beginning of the professionalisation of the festival, “Whereas before we did not care whether people were wearing different coloured socks, whether they were chewing gum when they were dancing, how they looked on stage, after a few years (of the festival) we wanted to look at the quality and standard of performers, we wanted to appeal to a broader audience, so we began to apply some quality control on the groups.”

The late Giermo Cesarinas was a choreographer of Mexican background who became the festival’s first creative director. As Zafiropoulos says, “I first saw him in Sydney and he impressed me the way he danced Greek and he was Mexican, so I thought ‘this man is very talented’ I made a deal with him and asked him to come over and be an artistic director.”

The festival had insufficient resources to fund a creative director so Zafiropoulos approached Shell and secured major sponsorship, “I went to Shell and I met a guy there in public programs, he was a nice man, I went to get \$3,000 or \$4,000 to get airfares and he offered me \$40,000! With \$40,000 we thought gosh, we could go to the Arts Centre, so we developed the Shell Folkloric concerts that went on for several years, maybe 9 years.”

Giermo Cesarinas came to Melbourne annually and spent several weeks selecting performers. He, a representative from the Victorian College for the Arts (VCA) and Mike Zafiropoulos constituted a selection committee. “We looked at the groups and would select who can perform, and it was not just the groups but what they stood for and represented. So for the first time we got into the politics of exclusion.”

He adds, “We excluded them if their standard was not great, but we would also assist them get their standard up, as a form of development.” This was the first real attempt at curatorial guidance and choreographic balance that the Festival of All Nations had. Zafiropoulos emphasises its importance, “The fact that we went to the standard of Giermo Cesarinas, we knew that we would not sustain multicultural arts unless we reached a certain standard and quality of presentation: the choreography, costumes, the presentation, the length of performance we redefined tradition, if tradition meant you needed to dance for 10 min we said ‘sure but in this case its two minutes’”

Shell Folkloric was so successful that Shell sought to spread it across Australia, but he reflects tinged with some regret, “We were not smart enough to popularise the program, even though we started the whole thing, we slowly lost control of the other states. Shell and Giermo controlled the program and in some ways it left Festival of All Nations to flounder and eventually it also meant the demise of Shell Folkloric for all sorts of reasons.”

It is difficult to detail all the reasons as to why the Shell Folkloric and the Festival of All Nations ended and the many people that were involved will have diverse views as to the core reasons. Some reasons include the national extension of the program; the resources need to go beyond competent folkloric representations and augmenting costs. Not least was the uncomfortable relation between the arts and folklife in Australia which still exists; access and equity issues confronting artists who maintained a close link to their cultural and linguistic roots, as opposed to contemporary arts trends.

The Festival of All Nations and the Shell Folkloric remain to date the last major attempts in Australia to engage with folkloric dance through professional choreography. Zafiropoulos condenses history and pin points to the birth of Multicultural Arts Victoria, “The Festival of All Nations, started to look at its future especially since Shell had taken over all the folkloric work. We started to get more money from the Australia Council for the Arts and we did not want to use the Fitzroy Town Hall anymore. So we became more of a resource centre rather than a presentation organisation, which was in my opinion a mistake, we should have kept both things going.”

Equally by the early 1980s more activities were being generated across Victoria, as Zafiropoulos says, “Every municipality had some form of multicultural festival.” Importantly performers had new expectations of payment, “Groups started to expect reward for their work yet organisations, from voluntary to government, took advantage of folk groups. I remember someone from a country town, telling me ‘bring me a couple of groups and we’ll feed them’ and I did it and in hindsight, I don’t know why we did that, I got offended, but why we did we do that? And look at these days the proof is there – look at Mix It Up and many other programs, look at Peter Mousaferiadis<sup>4</sup> (Cultural Infusion) who is charging what we should have been charging all along.”

Mix It Up, a partnership between Multicultural Arts Victoria and the Arts Centre, features culturally diverse programs international and local, and it is funded by Federal and State to the tune of \$700,000. Yet the development of certain successful programs is not enough to suggest that multiculturalism in the arts has successfully shifted into the mainstream for Mike Zafiropoulos over the last 30 plus years, “Mix It Up has lifted up the standard but has not been embraced by the wider community, yes it has 50,000 audiences over a year, that’s great but in the same way that other artistic activities attract a loyal audience, it has not done that.”

He is emphatic when he says, “WOMAD is the model I had in mind... Let’s face it is a Festival of all Nations we have done that at the Myer Music Bowl, if they bring in international artists singing in different languages and attract thousands of people from other states, it means in my mind that we have not yet take full advantage of the world artistic contributions that exist here. By mixing up the international and local standards we would get there.”

But being at the centre of any movement, it is hard to know where you began and where you have ended, which is something that Zafiropoulos acknowledges, “We have been part of the movement and it’s hard to see how far we have moved. One of the things we need to recognise is that now multicultural arts are an integral part of all arts. No one sees multicultural arts as unique, strange or spectacular. Multicultural arts have integrated in the arts scene, but not fully, there are still large artistic organisations which do not pay proper tribute to multicultural arts.”

Ian Roberts concurs with Zafiropoulos’ assessment, “I’m still surprised at the huge strides that have been made. Yet, I am equally surprised at how much of a bias is still built in but I am optimistic. I am gratified. I have had a number of conversations with people who are going to be programming the new Recital Hall. If there was ever a venue that was made for what Melbourne is made up of in terms of acoustic musicians and spoken word and chamber performances it is that recital hall. For the first time you will have a place in Melbourne, it will be like a town hall, where you will be able to get out your ud or your bouzouki, or whatever it is that you play and you will be able to play from a stage without a microphone like a chamber performance.”

Some of the artists which presented work in the Festival of All Nations, or emerged from within it, included composers Tasso and Christos Ioannides, (now in residing in Greece), Latin musicians Apurina, the multicultural Junction Theatre Company (no longer around), Dr Chandrabhanu director of Bharatam Dance company, the Polonez Song and Dance Ensemble, Czech soprano Miluska Simkova, and Flamenco dancer Charito Saldana among others.

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural Infusion is a company headed by Peter Mousaferiadis which promotes culturally diverse arts and performances in schools, organises events like Australia day and conduct national and international touring <http://www.culturalinfusion.com>

## **The flowering of the artist and natural dissent 1983 – 1992**

Parallel to the development of the first multicultural arts festival and multicultural arts organisation was also Melbourne's first arts festival rising from within the Italian Arts Festival, the Spoleto Festival of Three Worlds. Spoleto was an ambitious festival linking Melbourne to Charleston in North Carolina and Spoleto in Italy. The main driver of the festival was Luciano Bini a lawyer by trade and a passionate promoter of Italian arts, he remains the head of the much smaller Italian Arts Festival; he was also one of the earliest chairs of Multicultural Arts Victoria.

A Spoleto Festival of Three Worlds was presented by Luciano Bini to the then state Labor Minister for the Arts, Race Mathews.<sup>5</sup> The first Festival was held in 1986 and was by all accounts a significant success. A key advocate for the Spoleto Festival was Mary Traynor who was married to Melbourne Jazz Club owner and leader of the popular JazzPreachers, the late Frank Traynor who initiated the Australian Jazz revival of the 1960s. Mary Traynor was one of the key advocates of the Spoleto festival, multicultural arts and was a member of the Australian Folklife Association. Like Ian Roberts, Mary Trayner was connected with the progressive folk music revival of the 1960s.

Traynor maintains that Spoleto was taken from its Italian stewards by state government bureaucrats who had underlying racial motivations, "It was simple they (bureaucrats) could not come to terms with the fact that Italians, 'wogs', could run such an excellent and internationally linked arts festival." Traynor adds, "They wanted an arts festival so they took it from Bini and the Italian community to create the Melbourne International Arts Festival. They did all they could to destroy the festival."

Sauro Antonelli now a community manager at a local government and smaller player in the Spoleto says, "In talking to some of the key players, I did get a sense that they certainly felt hard done by. I'm not sure the bureaucrats understood the Spoleto Festival concept anyway. It was probably imposed politically and the bureaucrats had to follow the line. So when they got the chance to restructure it they quickly tried to bring it back but under a different umbrella a Ministry of the Arts umbrella."

Antonelli though draws on the conflict between what the Italian community tended to want to see and the ambitions of Spoleto. "It was always Luciano Bini who wanted to raise the Italian Festival to a higher professional standard which lead to the development of the concept of Spoleto - The Three Worlds: Spoleto, Charleston and Melbourne. So the intention was to lift it up from there. So it lost that specificity to the Italian community."

So, where was the Festival of All Nations as the Spoleto Festival was being tossed around like a political football? The Festival of All Nations had been transformed into the Piccolo Spoleto, under the aegis of Multicultural Arts Victoria formed in 1983. The Piccolo Spoleto was an arts 'festival' aimed at presenting emerging and immigrant artists.

Yet, a clear focus and purpose diminished. It was no longer 1972 and the artists and communities that had grown through the Festival of All Nations and Shell Folkloric, began to see themselves as artists and demanded access to the so-called mainstream of funding and recognition in the arts. It was no longer simply a matter of presenting ones culture or folkloric traditions. Artists no longer felt the need to be represented by a multicultural festival, or to be seen only as 'multicultural artists'. The emergence of other festivals for emerging artists such as the Melbourne Fringe Festival also muddied the water in terms of the role of the Piccolo Spoleto.

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<sup>5</sup> Race Mathews was Minister for the Arts under the Labor led government of Premier John Cain from 1982 – 1990.

A key player in the discussions, debates and development of both policy and arts programming in the context of multiculturalism and the arts between the 1970s and up to the 1990s was anthropologist and internationally recognised choreographer, Dr Chandrabhanu.

As he says, “My whole training was in Indian Classical Dance and in Malay folk dance. My main understanding of what I would call classical art was in Indian dance. One of the issues that people are talking about now in relation to contemporary dance, is the fact that a lot of people have forgotten the fact that modern dance, as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and all those people, actually goes back to Indian dances.” Chandrabhanu arrived in 1971 to study Monash University. “I did not want to come to Australia, I wanted to go to London, but I had a scholarship to study Anthropology.”

He reminisces; “What was happening here in the 70s and 80s was that you had a lot of people coming out from different countries and what they did, like me, they looked at the arts here and most of us came from very troubled environments. From 1968 to 1969 I was in the US for a year but when I went back to Malaya I was an outcast. I did not belong to any one of the ‘races’, I was not Chinese, Malay or Indian, I was all of them, during the (Malaysian) race riots of ‘69 I was in the US, so by the time I came back home I was confused. Malaysians wanted to know where my loyalties lay, and most of my good friends did not care about race, so we became outcasts.”

Chandrabhanu sensed a “naivety” in Australia about arts but also felt a new freedom due to the development of a multicultural policy. “I felt that by 1975 I had a base. In most cases when I interacted with people of a migrant culture, it was always that thing ‘we are all wogs here!’” But, he also expresses cynicism about the motivations of government arts bureaucrats in the 1980s, “The multicultural arts policies were put in place because it was perceived that Australia’s population was changing, there were more and more people demanding the same kind of participation in the arts industry with funding and support so what do they do, they create a multicultural policy – all people are equal but the amount of funding that was available for the non-Anglo arts was minimal and particular here in Victoria.”

Chandrabhanu had developed a serious dance career by the 1980s “From 1981 to 1985, we were putting on three seasons a year and I was getting full houses for my work. And for ‘ethnic dance’ as they called it, that never happened.” He embarked on an overseas tour of India, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, and when he returned he was by his own admission “a celebrity.” As he admits, “I thought this is very interesting. I am from overseas but I had to create my own career with an Australian base. I think part of my success was the fact that I could speak eloquently – you need the jargon – but at the same time you had the grass roots of ethnic dance – the various ethnic groups were not silly, the Greeks were doing their own thing. In a way the Greeks were very lucky they had support from their own community.”

Chandrabhanu points to the rapid rise of The Australian Ballet which needed “more and more funding and then along come all the ethnics saying we want to have our dance groups, and most of it was done within the community and I would say the view from above was that these are very unprofessional people all community based so the community should support them.” He emphasises, “Anywhere the ethnic dancers tried to cross over to become professional theatre it became very problematic – they wanted to apply for grants.”

A dramatic watershed for Chandrabhanu and a new opening for other artists of culturally diverse background was in 1985 when he decided to shift from the Open Stage at Melbourne University to the fully professional George Fairfax theatre at the Arts Centre, “All of a sudden I had new audience, and there was a perception that if you were at the Arts Centre you were good.”



In reflecting on the period and the impact of contemporary dance he sees the move to create “a contemporary Australian dance idiom” without a sufficient understanding of the relevance of folkloric and other dance styles forms from a non-European or non-Anglo perspective has create poor contemporary dance. “Graham Murphy, Jonathan Taylor from the Australian Dance Theatre and Elizabeth Dowlman were trying to push contemporary dance rather than contemporary ballet and that was the main thrust of dance. I was paralleling that, I saw myself as part of the contemporary Indian dance movement, I saw myself as different that is why I did not want to apply for funding.”

In 1987 there was an overhaul of the Australia Council for the Arts and they called for a meeting for all the so-called ‘ethnic artists’ as they sought to see what issues confronted them. Chandrabhanu recollects with amusement, “They had no idea what was about to happen. We sat at a hall somewhere, it was very interesting because there were people from Italian theatre, Ukrainian dancers Greek musicians and all had very different outlook and no-one knew what was going on. Some people said ‘we just want to be exactly what we are now, we are happy doing our thing’. I got up and made a big statement and asked, ‘what is multiculturalism anyway?’ I said, ‘The osmotic cultural influence has been going on for a long time we just fail to recognise it’” .

On another level Chandrabhanu was also agitating for better recognition and evaluation of culturally diverse arts practices that went beyond the Festival of All Nations and its offshoots. “The Festival of All Nations would come every year and they would pay \$150 to be on for two min and I refused to be part of that tokenistic nonsense after awhile.”

Three months after that Australia Council for the Arts consultation Chandrabhanu received a letter from the Council letting him know that he had been nominated to sit on the first peer group assessment panel for dance. He remained on the Council’s dance board from 1987-91 and he was the first culturally diverse representative in the Australia Council for the Arts.

It was a “shock” for Chandrabhanu to hear senior Australian choreographers like Nanette Hassall <sup>6</sup>, the founder of Dance Works, talk with such little knowledge about the relationship between ethnicity and dance. “It was astounding to note that many did not understand how important say Indian classical dance or other Asian art forms were in the development of contemporary dance in the 1920s and beyond. I remember that first meeting, Leigh Warren and Lucette Alders and we realised that this is hard stuff to decide who got the grant and who didn’t and then to set policy as well in two days.”

By the early 1990s Chandrabhanu felt that the policy informed quite well as to how arts funding was to go. “That was when the report *Access to Excellence* came out. What is excellence and what is professionalism became key issues.” As the landmark report suggests “The fraternity of peers which determines excellence needs to be consciously kept open to diversity, a diversity of personnel on funding bodies, in galleries and in theatres and in publishing houses. At the same time, the established peers need to be trained to the aesthetics

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<sup>6</sup> Dance Works was founded in 1983 by Nanette Hassall to provide an arena for the production of Australian choreography by emerging Australian choreographers. Hassall's background with contemporary companies in the United States and England meant that the process of dance making was a defining notion in her vision for the group. She aimed to develop a company in which mutual support and co-operation allowed all company members to function as creatively as possible. Hassall resigned in 1989 and company dancers Beth Shelton and Helen Herbertson jointly shared the directorship from 1989 to 1991. Under Herbertson and Shelton the company developed a strong community focus. Dance Works was directed solely by Herbertson from 1992 until 1997 after which Sandra Parker became director. Following the withdrawal of triennial funding by the Australia Council, Dance Works folded in mid 2006.

and politics of diversity-as excellence.”<sup>7</sup>

By 1992 we had debates; again the argument now was who are the gatekeepers? How is excellence perceived? As Chandrabhanu reflects, “One of the things that was said in a negative way about all ethnic dance groups that were doing their own thing, like the Greek dancing groups, was that if you give them money they’ll just go out and buy costumes. So costumes were out, because contemporary dance was moving into the area where costumes were not important, in fact dance was not important.”

Intangible cultural heritage was thrown out it seems. “It was 1990 when I was on the Australia Council, and we applied for a grant and I was very involved in dance politics and I was aware that the percentage of money that was going to dance in Victoria was very minimal and most of it was going to Dance Works.”

Chandrabhanu had a reputation as a letter writer; he wrote letters to organisations, journalists and reviewers complaining about their response to his work. “There was racism and ignorance. The reviews that were written by Neil Gillet in the early years were literally culturally offensive. You know, Indian dance is a lot of ‘feet stamping’, he was honest at least, he would say: “Chandrabhanu is the best dancer in Australia at the moment – but I do not like his chosen art form” What kind of a review is that? Do you want me to turn myself into a ballet or contemporary dancer? Hang on a moment! It took him from 1985 to 1997 to realise that in those years Australia’s population had changed people like me were making works which were not just the preservation of heritage.”

The notion of innovation and excellence began to plague artists of culturally diverse background as no funding was available for art forms that transcended tradition and contemporary forms, such as Indian classical dance, Butoh, Chinese classical dance and Flamenco. As Chandrabhanu highlights “The Australia Council said ‘we will not give you a grant if you just repeat what you learned, we will give you a grant if you do new work’ innovation – the word innovation came in and I said “what the hell is innovation?” By the mere fact that I am performing Indian classical dance in a theatre at the Arts Centre, is already innovative. It is outside its traditional setting.”

Paying homage to tradition is something that it seems that many in the arts funding system still find difficult to deal with in the context of culturally diverse inspired art. “Contemporary dance is in crisis, in Australia the whole state of contemporary dance is in real crisis, we have gone past the post modern issue, Dance Works has closed down, Bharatham closed in 2000. I thought it’s not worth going on. In 15 years of Bharatam I had done all that I can and all the people I had trained. That is another thing, training, you have to have a training component in the company, and I said, ‘we have always had a training component in the company’ I was creating new dance vocabulary, I was creating new work, and my dancers came from diverse cultural backgrounds, they were not all Indian.”

He goes on to highlight people like Aroon Munioz who started in his company and became a choreographer, then went to the VCA and now lives in Madrid, “he created some wonderful works but he became disillusioned with it all and left. Tina Yong created some great works and in the end she became disillusioned with it and left it all. These were my babies.”

Chandrabhanu is cynical about the impact of multiculturalism in the context of arts policy and funding, “It (multicultural arts funding) put us into a category, instead of looking at the fact that we were influencing, as well as being influenced by the diversity of activities and

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<sup>7</sup> *Access to Excellence: Overview Report* Review of Issues Affecting Artists and Arts from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds - Volume 1: Overview Report Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994.

cultures in Australia, it was a divide and rule policy – it was like; ‘put them in their category and they’ll shut up’ but in fact we never shut up!”

Sue Hammond a senior arts bureaucrat in the Ministry for the Arts, later Arts Victoria, at that time, and key advocate for a policy response to multicultural and folkloric arts says, “It is about synthesis. It is the Chandrabhanu thing where he used to say that ‘You have to understand all of the building blocks in your own art form before you can possibly begin to synthesize anything new. It’s not about any one of those things it is about a multiplicity of things. You have to look at the issue and the individual as well as the tradition, and the art form, before you can come up with an overall policy. Each one of those things requires different solutions.”

### **A period of watersheds and the rise of the professional artist 1992 – 2001**

By 1992 Piccolo Spoleto had run up thousands of dollars in deficit. Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) the Piccolo Spoleto manager was by now a meld of advocacy, artists’ management company, media producer through a monthly publication *Directions* and an event presenter. It was facing a deficit, low staff morale and was locked into a conflictual relationship with its key funding body the Ministry for the Arts (Arts Victoria).

MAV was a passionate mix of all that was created since 1972 but lacked clarity of purpose in the wake of the 1990s and was fading. Gone were the naive enthusiasms of the 1970s about representation of ethnicity, gone was the largess of the multicultural policy of the 1980s. It was 1992, one of the darkest and deepest recessions was hitting Australia and especially Victoria, and MAV was working off the past with no clear direction.

The spectacle of Shell Folkloric had vanished and in its place was left a mere \$30,000 that was distributed by Multicultural Arts Victoria to a range of over 80 ethnic folkloric dance groups on an annually basis. There were some country tours of ethnic dancers and a publication titled *Directions* which was a paid for supplement of the Melbourne Times.

An increasing number of artists of diverse cultural background were now challenging the notion of ‘multicultural arts’ and the attempt by arts bureaucrats and arts managers to usher them into the ‘community arts’ or ‘community cultural development’ sectors.

Community arts, in which multicultural arts had been embedded, had by that time begun to mean low quality and unprofessional, as the landmark report Access to Excellence writes; “Community arts, at best, is classified as being on the margins of excellence, potentially excellent but not yet excellent. At worst, being a community artist involves a pronouncement that the work is of such a kind that it can never be truly excellent in the terms of the canonical artforms.”

The focus for most arts funding bodies was on innovation and contemporary, with no engagement with intangible traditions, or non-Anglo arts canon. And multicultural increasingly began to mean folkloric which had been tainted by the somewhat ersatz and in Dr Richard Kurin’s words, from the Smithsonian Institution, a “flea market” concept of Shell Folkloric.<sup>8</sup>

The most significant departure from the past occurred in 1992 when Multicultural Arts Victoria under new stewardship accepted one reality, (among others), that regardless of the

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<sup>8</sup> Dr Richard Kurin the Director of National Programs at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC in his book, *Reflections of a Culture Broker: 1997*, names all events which seek to represent all ethnic groups without a strong curatorial or research base as flea markets whereby every one gets a few minutes on stage, a podium or a stand to present their wares.

polemic by many in the multicultural arts sector there was a serious need to address excellence. Excellence had to be found for how can cultures, many of them with thousands of years of tradition in folklore and high art have no capacity for excellence? Why worry what the mainstream perceives as canon, the idea was to subjugate that canon to its rightful place in face of excellent non-Anglo arts practices.

Excellence in curation, presentation and marketing of arts and artists of culturally non Anglo background was the core focus of MAV regardless of criticism from some who saw it as a 'sell out' to the elite. Added to that understanding was the need to create a more defined space for folkloric activity but within the context of authenticity and intangible cultural heritage.

Sue Hammond, Mary Traynor and others the Australian Folk Trust also sought to define a new space for folklife. The \$30,000 grant distributed willy-nilly by MAV among a diverse range of ethnic folk dance and music groups was set aside to establish the Victorian Folklife Association (VFA) and Australian folklorist Dr Gwenda B Davies became its first part time director. She has a view more in line with the view as expressed at the Smithsonian Institution and would say, "we have to work to reveal that folklife is much more than superannuated hippies".

Importantly, MAV now shared space with the VFA and was able to define more clearly its role. Much of its role was influenced by the new leadership as George Papadopoulos the longest serving chair of MAV between 1992 and 2001 says, "A Greek play here will be a sell out if it's properly promoted. That's related to the professionalism, the ethos the artwork that is being put forward by. Whether they are Greek, Turkish, Albanian, Spanish. Now the difference is that as an older generation dies and that happens regrettably. One has to watch out for that. Over time the multicultural element changes simply by the fact that the passing on of the generations. And yet young people sometimes return to the fold in a sense that they will pick up some elements of a cultural heritage and redevelop it in a new context."

It was with the National Folklife Conference: traditions, transitions, visions : folklife in multicultural Australia : in 1992 that MAV also began to align itself with the notion of 'cultural broker'. Dr Rirchard Kurin from the Smithsonian was a key note speaker who talked about 'cultural brokerage'.

Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) would from 1992 to 2001 define itself as a broker. MAV would broker between the communities, the artists and the mainstream arts sectors; artists and funding; between Australian artists and international venues and presenters all focused on the excellence of Australia's diverse artists. Even folkloric could be brokered between as intangible folklife through the VFA. Importantly MAV's brokerage would extend to audiences and media.

As Sue Hammond says: "While things like folklife are about keeping a continuous link, its not about dancing in the streets and pretending to be living in the village. It's actually about preserving our history our historical knowledge and understanding. I think you have to know where you're coming from to know where you are going to. You don't have to cling on to the past but I think you need to understand it and we have refused to do this."

Some of the key artists who began their careers in Festival of All Nations, Shell Folkloric and Piccolo Spoleto were invited back to MAV as stable artists. New artists came and always the premise was 'excellence' in practice within its cultural setting, importantly in presentation and marketing.

Artists did not desire the polemic as much as the profile and MAV would engage in the polemic when the work had achieved its goal as set by the artist. As a broker, MAV was now

responsible for providing excellent services to artists and to communities. Some of the key artists by which MAV was defined in that period, particularly from 1993 to 2001 were also artists who had established a reputation for excellence in their form.

Artists like ethnographic photographer Emmanuel Santos, Flamenco dancer and choreographer Chari Saldana and Flamenco, Indian Australian actor and writer Rajendra Moodley, Chinese contemporary and traditional dancers and choreographers Tina Yong and her partner Sun Ping, Japanese Butoh dancer and choreographer Yumi Umiumare, contemporary visual and new media artists, Fassih Keiso from Syria and Sandor Matos from Hungary, Chinese Australian artist Zhou Xiaoping and his collaboration with Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike.

It was the policy of MAV to present artists of such quality that it would be increasingly difficult to label them as “community” and therefore marginal. MAV abandoned what can be described as the Puritanism of progressive multiculturalism by opening up more to the sensual and avant guard, the traditional, contemporary and the popular.

It was about competence, innovation, tradition and markets as tools to break down barriers. Many artists in their 20s and 30s did not carry a chip on the shoulder about their skills and their position as ethnic artists. Immigrant artists like Fassih Keiso, Sandro Matos, Emmanuel Santos, Tina Yong and Sun Ping were, not unlike Dr Chandrabhanu, trained prior to arriving in Australia and did in some cases additional training and development. Others like Chari Saldana and Flamenco guitarist Richard Tedesco who grew up in Australia felt as comfortable with AC/DC as they did with Paco De Lucia.

As Saldana says: “When I began working on my own projects in the late 80s I formed my own group called Arte Kanela (formerly Sole Sombre) and because we were predominantly in Fitzroy, we grew up in that area, and our influences were very different, we had a vibrant live music in that area and great musicians be they jazz, rock, funk we were moved by all of it, and we were living and working in an area with lots of artists and migrants.”

The rationale for MAV’s existence was in part the idea of making the organisation unnecessary through excellence, as it was felt, that in the long run, artists of non-Anglo background would no longer need MAV’s advocacy having now occupied the ‘centre.’ In essence if managerialism was the new creed for Victoria and the arts then MAV would be the most adept at it. In becoming more part of the game and by supporting the best possible artists the issue would be less about access and equity, and more about recognition and money.

In 1996 after some years of change and success, One Nation and the Howard Government’s discomfort with multiculturalism bolstered MAV even further. It was in this period that multicultural artists associated with MAV achieved significant watersheds artistically and politically. It seemed almost like an apotheosis of the rights based multicultural movement from the 1970s onwards.

Artists such as Yumi Umiumare, Charito Saldana and Tina Yong secured Women Artists’ grants by the Victoria government as the state’s most senior emerging women artists, not multicultural artists. Others such as photographer Emmanuel Santos, media artist Fassih Keiso, visual artists Naomi Ota and Sandor Matos generated significant international and national recognition with major collecting institutions in Asia, the US, Europe and Australia collecting and presenting their work. Multicultural artists were finally out of Fitzroy, or the ghetto, at least it seemed like that.

Importantly these artists re-energised the somewhat artificial debate between traditional and contemporary art. Tina Yong and her partner Sun Ping through Wu Lin in their acclaimed *Journey of the Northern Tiger* and *Nushu: The Women’s Script* drew on Chinese classical or

character dances and developed “a vocabulary that communicates the style of Asian dance, particularly its theatricality. But they have also responded to their own experiences of ballet, contemporary and Indian dance”<sup>9</sup>.

Charito Saldana’s and Arte Kanela’s Flamenco interpretation of Garcia Lorca’s *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* won critical acclaim media and secure full houses at the Malthouse Theatre. She was able to present Flamenco as a contemporary, improvisational dance and music form, with its own traditions and sources in a completely new and contemporary space, not unlike what Chandrabhanu did by shifting from the Open Stage to the Fairfax Studio.

Saldana says emphatically, “I was determined to have *House of Bernarda Alba* presented at a mainstream venue so we presented it at the Malthouse. It was very successful we had great reviews in *The Age*, *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun*, and it reached 95 percent capacity – it as supported by the Spaniards and mainstream or non-Spanish audiences. I wanted to break up the whole polka dot notion of Flamenco and I succeeded in that.”

In many ways the creative, marketing and presentational excellence turned the rhetoric about excellence on its head and the advocacy came from empowered artists, not organisations as Saldana points out; “I remember arguing with Arts Victoria who wanted me to restructure my budget to reflect a 40 percent house and I would say ‘you don’t understand the Spaniards will come to this’ they just could not understand that they were thirsty for high quality venues and professional innovative Flamenco.”

Saldana and Arte Kanela had already an established reputation for ‘excellence’ prior to securing any government funding; “We were regulars at the Melbourne International Arts Festival which we did for twelve years, we came in as a street act, which most of the locals were then, not just ethnic performers, as most of the MIAF were international acts. Then we began working at Port Fairy Music Festival, Apollo Bay Festival, Brunswick Music Festival and we performed at all the Victorian festivals and key national festivals.”

Saldana and her musicians Arte Kanela secured funding from art specific boards like dance and music not community arts funding for programs such as, *Flamenco Rock* which toured nationally. Saldana also secured a dance fellowship by the Dance Board of the Australia Council for the Arts to study under some of the most prestigious Flamenco dancers in Spain in 2000. The musicians from Arte Kanela have recorded with Cat Empire, have undertaken fellowships in Spain and Canada and are in the 2009 WOMADelaide.

Yumi Umiumare’s contemporary Butoh work transcends the disciplined, sublime and traditional; in *Fleeting Moments*, based on the erotic writings of a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese courtesan to the aggressive, chaotic, pop cabaret, *Tokyo DasSHOKU Girl*, a frenetic response to Japan’s obsession with *kawaii* or cuteness. *Tokyo DasSHOKU Girl* won a Green Room Award for Innovation in 1999 and completed its national and international touring cycle in 2004! As Gravestocks from the Melbourne Times writes: “The show’s eclectic personal expressions hark back to Flash Gordon cartoons and Fellini’s *Satyricon*. While the creative inspiration maybe cinematic the presentation is strongly influenced by cabaret and the Japanese dance form Butoh.”<sup>10</sup>

Emmanuel Santos, is the most inspiring humanist photographer in Australia. He draws from the Magnum tradition and his own personal values. Institutions such as the State Library of Victoria, the Brussels Museum of Art, Melbourne Jewish Museum, Mother Jones Foundation, and Museum Victoria among only a few have collected his works. More recently he a series

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Stone “Tiger’s tale told in movement” *The Age* Wednesday 28 April 1999

<sup>10</sup> Rob Gravstocks, Turning Japanese – they more than think so’ *The Melbourne Times* October 13, 1999

of his works were sold for \$USD 45,000 in Hong Kong's Sotheby's – clearly a major step for a so-called multicultural artist. Santos has since the early 1990s produced significant cultural photographic essays of the global Jewish Diaspora, which is one of his largest projects, as well as a diversity of other ethnic and cultural groups, such as Indian, Aboriginal, Greek and others. His deep concern with those rituals that define us culturally as human beings and his own deep sense of culture and spirituality make him an excellent conduit between the cultures he works with and the mainstream photographic and collecting institutions.

As Santos reflects on his trajectory; “As a migrant there is always this feeling of inferiority, I don't know if it's the artists themselves, or the view of the arts administrator, especially that people that come from developing countries that their level of maturity is not up to the so called western standard of sophistication. I had to work ten times harder than the average Anglo artist who came from the stable of the Australian art schools or cliques, to be recognised as the photographer that I am now. If you are a new migrant you have to prove yourself more than any other Australian or should I say even Anglo artist.”

Santos believes that there was “a greater acceptance of diversity in the arts in Australia” which began in the mid 1990s, but that had also to do with global developments, like the rise of Asian arts as he points out, “Look at China, it has become a major player in global arts now, as has India, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, even the Philippines, it is no longer the ‘centres of the arts like New York or London.’”

He adds; “Asian arts have a voice in the market, collectors are now going to Asia, from my experience European galleries and art dealers, are now seeking Asian arts, they are desensitised by western art. They are tired of bland contemporary art which is repeated from Germany, America and resurrected somewhere else and it was the migrant artists who put more into the aesthetics of contemporary arts.”

He highlights how the visual arts, are like dance, where diverse cultures have impacted to create something new. “You cannot have contemporary dance, theatre, music or visual arts without diverse cultural traditions.”

For all these MAV artists or artists associated with MAV I that period, authenticity and tradition, particularly one's own cultural traditions were critical to their work. As Santos adds “Authenticity is essential, in the 90s the era of appropriation created a lack of authenticity. The moral pride and authenticity of art has come mainly from migrant artists.”

Another visual artist and photographer Syrian born and trained, Fassih Keiso was able to eroticise traditional Arabesque and Oriental images and critique the Puritanism of the west and Islam. When he arrived in Australia it was MAV which was his first port of call and it was MAV which brokered Keiso's work and himself as an artist. MAV had developed a strong enough brand to be heard by contemporary galleries and performance spaces who in the past relegated MAV to the realm of ‘community art.’ Fassih Keiso went on to complete a PhD in visual arts and his at times demanding and controversial work has been seen in New York, where Keiso also had a residency at PS121, Paris, Singapore, Malaysia and nationally.

MAV itself generated long-term strategic international networks, projects and media profile in places like Singapore and Malaysia at a time when Pauline Hanson was on the cover of all major Asian papers. The Memorandum of Understanding between Arts Victoria and the National Arts Council of Singapore, which celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year in 2008 was initiated by MAV.

MAV generated in international exchange with Singapore, India, Turkey, Greece, Malaysia, and the US – a significant achievement for what was then, and remains, a relatively small organisation. Interestingly the organisation had moved back to its original house Fitzroy Town

Hall and became a key factor in the rejuvenation of the precinct as they did in the 1970s.

MAV worked hard to facilitate new opportunities in the mainstream for refugees from the ex-Soviet Union through the development of a purely Eastern European and Balkan chamber orchestra the Orana Chamber Orchestra. Orana received significant critical acclaim for their unique interpretations of traditional and contemporary Eastern European, Balkan and Byzantine music. There were a myriad of projects and artists – and a small essay could never do justice to them, but does suffice to say that a template was set in which excellence was no longer the preserve of Anglo arts bureaucrats and creative directors.

The issue of audiences was used by MAV to question the marketing and presentation of programs in mainstream tax funded institutions and venues. MAV in partnership with the Victorian College for the Arts, the Australia Council for the Arts and various mainstream organisations developed the Multicultural Arts Marketing Ambassadors Strategy (MAMAS) under the lead of Lee Christofis. MAMAS trained new arts marketing professionals of culturally diverse background. In many ways the work which was laid down in the early to mid 70s, the questioning in the 80s to 90s and the work, which as generated in the 90s to 00 facilitated much creative activity not only of MAV now but within much of the arts and cultural sector.

MAV and the general so called ‘multicultural artists’ sector in Victoria between 1992 and 2001 displayed growth a new found sense of confidence and had a stronger impact on the mainstream; the discussions about representation, access and equity in funding seemed to still be present but in different forms.

New neighbourhoods of Ethiopians, Chinese, Indians, refugees from the Balkans will continue to establish and new work will come, new entrepreneurial energies. Some new forms will collide and meld with old rituals and values and all will be authenticated in the context of a multicultural Australia.

But as Papadopoulos reminds us, “We were combative because we saw the political dimensions and the politics of multiculturalism in the arts were also the politics of struggle for what were not great resources. Governments were not generous in their budgets. Nor were they prepared to spend significant amounts on multiculturalism. Therefore we were always up against people who were better placed in terms of their political clout to get their resources from government or private benefactors.”

If anything at all, MAV between 1992 and 2001 was able to overcome the general mistrust expressed by the arts media and many in the funding bureaucracies. This mistrust that was an outcome of multicultural arts being equated with non-Balkan choirs singing Balkan songs badly, non-Arab Oriental dancers dancing badly, political silk screen of migrant women in factories and bad venues, poor choreography and sexless art.

Whether a Greek bouzouki, a Turkish ud and a Chinese urhu – its all one melody.