



# Phantom of the Theatre

*Julie Revallion looks at an example of cultural edifice-building gone wrong.*

**T**he bicentennial year brought about a number of federal, state and local government initiatives in the realm of Australian leisure. One of the more permanent outcomes of the bicentennial celebrations in Sydney is the involvement of local councils in art institutions. Some councils funded modest projects such as Fairfield's revamped School of the Arts. Others, however, embarked on major developments such as the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre at Penrith, the Hills Entertainment Centre at Baulkham Hills, the Campbelltown City Art Gallery and the Parramatta Riverside Theatres.

Considering the traditional absence of any organised local government commitment to the cultural life of their constituencies, the existence of these major cultural centres is remarkable. This article will endeavour to provide a history of the controversial early years of Parramatta Riverside Theatres and the role Parramatta Council played in its first experience

in managing a major cultural institution.

Funding for the new cultural centres came from a mix of state, federal and local council sources, with Parramatta Council receiving the bulk of state and federal government support. Once erected, however, the burden of responsibility fell squarely on the shoulders of local government. Local councils such as Parramatta have traditionally provided cultural institutions such as libraries, and have given some in-kind support to local cultural activity, but culture generally remains a low priority within the local government system. Consequently, there exists a total absence of any coherent cultural policy at the local government level. Nevertheless, Parramatta Council, lured by the availability of a hand-out from state and federal governments, decided to take on board long-term management responsibility. For Parramatta Council, the construction, funding and management of the centre has been a huge headache. Inexperienced in managing a leisure facility of this kind, the council members found themselves in the unenviable position of trying to make the arts popular and financially sustainable—something mainstream arts institutions have

been unable to do despite their small but converted audience base and on-going government patronage. Bitter political infighting, poor attendances and hostile community reactions, funding deficits and confusion over programming have all accompanied local council's involvement in arts institutions.

The Parramatta Bicentennial Cultural Centre, later renamed Parramatta Riverside Theatres, opened its doors on 17 February 1988. The basic design was for a 695 fixed-seat theatre, plus two moveable seat theatres of 200 and 100 seats each. The centre also incorporated a bar and courtyard area. Original cost estimates started at \$7 million but escalated by the time of opening to \$10.6 million. Parramatta Council provided the land, but the entire construction cost was met by the state and federal governments with the aid of corporate sponsorship. An independent managing company, Parramatta Bicentennial Cultural Centre Limited, was set up to control the centre, comprised mainly of councillors and representatives from the private sector. Spiralling costs led to an attempt by Parramatta Council to disband the company eight months before the centre even opened, with the aim of managing the centre via a

sub-committee of their finance department. The attempt failed due to a legal technicality, but it indicated Parramatta Council's preoccupation with controlling its financial liability with regard to the complex.

Astonishingly, there was no comprehensive market research undertaken during this period. While the council was busy trying to protect itself from possible financial failure, it was making few attempts to work out how the centre could be a success. There was very little idea of what market the centre would serve and with what product. Not surprisingly, early management found itself in a programming quandary. Lacking extensive audience research, or an inventory of local cultural industries, management succumbed to a type of programming schizophrenia which included drama, classical music, jazz, comedy, late-night cabaret, exhibitions, pop music, opera, business lunches and conferences, art and sculpture exhibitions, street jugglers, cafes and restaurants. Few of these options were potentially profitable.

This dilemma was compounded by the reluctance of any mainstream performing arts companies to leave their safe inner-city nests, and by technical and design constraints which prevented popular forms such as rock concerts from being performed on site. Early productions such as *The Men Who Made Australia* and *The Sentimental Bloke* promised a celebration of early white male culture, but both were box-office failures.

By October 1988, just eight months after the opening of the centre, the general manager was asked to resign amid bitter allegations of mismanagement. The centre was operating with a rumoured deficit of \$270,000. The operating company blamed council for inadequate support, the state government for incorrect budget forecasts and cutbacks in funding, and the private sector for insufficient sponsorship contributions. Parramatta Council blamed the management company which had failed in its few

brief months to establish a local constituency and generate local support.

Council attempted to install a new management team comprised of a joint venture between Playbill Australia and Michael Edgley International. However, the negotiations fell through as the groups concerned were discouraged by the bad publicity the centre had attracted and the limits on productions imposed by an inflexible design. Parramatta Council was stuck with Riverside and it obviously did not relish the prospect.



On 17 February 1989, the Parramatta Bicentennial Cultural Centre was renamed Parramatta Riverside Theatres. The council was coming to the belated awareness that the centre had to be directed at and positioned within the local market. The idea of a cultural centre was considered too highbrow for the area, and the name change indicated an important change of direction. Productions performed after that time explicitly sought to popularise the high arts, but had limited success. Reg Livermore's Aussie opera *Big Sister* failed to

popularise perhaps the most intimidating of all art forms, the opera.

1991 will hopefully be the first year that the complex will operate in the black. Local publicity is more positive and the centre is gradually shaking off the 'white elephant' image. This year will be the first year that a mainstream company will perform on the site and productions of the Sydney and Melbourne Theatre Companies are planned for later this year.

Meanwhile, the cultural life of Parramatta continues to be defined largely by the market. While Riverside struggles to increase attendances, to woo city-based art institutions and make belated connections with local arts groups such as the Western Sinfonia, most local cultural life continues elsewhere. The three local cinemas, live music venues, Rosehill racetrack, Parramatta Leagues Club and Stadium, shopping centres, the extensive Eisteddfod program, schools and multicultural centres, lounge rooms and street corners continue to provide the sites where meaning and pleasure are generated by the community.

So why did the local council choose to import the cultural forms of the inner city with so little understanding of the dynamics of local cultural life? Firstly, the value of the elite arts, such as watching live theatre, contemplating artworks, and listening to classical music was unquestioned. For the state, federal and local governments involved it seemed appropriate that, during the 200th birthday of European settlement in Australia, the public should start being a bit more sophisticated and civilised. We could be forgiven for asking whether this was a prime example of the continued vitality of Australia's much talked-of cultural cringe? What else could explain the preferential treatment afforded to the erection of arts centres? Any other leisure facility, even if government agreed to fund it, would have been subjected to the most rigorous analysis and needs assessment. The council seemed to believe that the cultural centre would,

by some mysterious and unexplained action, uplift and transform the very consciousness of the people, strengthening community pride and focussing community identity by its very presence.

For the Parramatta Council, in the early stages, a cultural centre located in their very own local government area offered a potentially promising opportunity for them to share in the prestige and exalted status accorded to the arts in this country. This is the major reason why a council such as Parramatta, which had previously displayed little interest in local cultural activity, suddenly decided to accept responsibility for a major cultural institution.

A constant theme within the rhetoric which surrounded the erection of Parramatta Riverside Theatres was the ambiguous notion that the centre

would fill a 'cultural gap'. It was assumed that the arts imposed on a community could potentially become a leisure resource for all sections of Australian society. This betrays a deep ignorance of how the arts operate in their social context. Participation in arts institutions fundamentally constitutes class affiliation, and it will take more than the regionalisation of arts centres to change that. If art is to broaden its audience base then it must tackle the serious image problem it carries within the majority of the population. Even then, without change in the content and context of its operations it will fail to compete with the diverse number of other leisure facilities available elsewhere.

The advent of cultural centres has done one thing. It has resulted in local government emerging as a major player in the public provision of public facilities. Within the field of

cultural provision, local councils such as Parramatta have failed to fulfil their potential to be responsive to local needs and in touch with the unique characteristics of their constituents. It can only be hoped that in future forays into culture, local councils will base their decisions within a sound cultural policy framework which positions cultural centres within their social, political and economic contexts. Today, Riverside Theatres stands imposing yet forlorn in the depressed downtown area of Parramatta. It exists as an expensive reminder that cultural facilities provision requires a policy framework just like any other area of government intervention.

**JULIE REVALLION** is a graduate of leisure studies from UTS, Kuring-gai.



# Green Fields

*New communities require new cultural identities.  
Marla Guppy reports.*

**F**or the last hundred years Sydney, in the company of other cities across the world, has attempted to develop some control over the scope and style of urban expansion. Rapid urban growth has undermined successive metropolitan plans. It has placed increasing stress on the

fragile environment of the Cumberland Plain west of Sydney. It has also been responsible for a seemingly unending succession of new communities, many of which have been developed without the attendant infrastructure and services to allow for an acceptable standard of community life.

Large estates of both public and private housing have covered what was previously rural land. Existing towns and settlements have been altered in both character and dimension. Making sense of this changing environment continues to be a consuming task for both older communities and new arrivals.

Much has been written about the level of social and cultural dislocation that has come to be seen as an almost in-