

SUMMARY By Roger Pulvers

SPEAKERS: Leith Morton, Keiji Sawada, Megumi Kato

2005 年度全国大会シンポジウム II  
“Australian Culture: Surviving the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”  
Australia’s Vision of the Future

Roger Pulvers \*

Australia was discussed, argued over and examined in Kyoto in June 2005. Given the scant coverage that Australian cultural, social and political issues get in Japan, this two-day-long symposium provided a marvelous venue for experts on Australia to come together and assess the state of the Australian nation and its relevance to Japan.

Cultural issues were addressed by three people who have dedicated their careers to the furtherance and propagation of Australian culture in Japan; and I believe that the audience came away, after the presentations and highly stimulating interaction, with a clear notion of where Australian culture stands today and where it might be heading.

Distinguished poet and scholar Leith Morton, with his encyclopedic knowledge of Australian culture, managed in the time allotted to give a clear overview of the history of Australian literature from Furphy and Stead to Carey, Hazzard, Bail and others. Leith persuasively reminds us that Australianness is not the issue in question; nor is the issue whether our writers are derivative or not. It is the merits of the individual work that collectively go to define our culture and its direction. His reading of his own poetry, with its brilliant imagery and sly humour, was as good an indication as any that Australian culture, vibrant and original, suffers no identity crisis whatsoever.

Sawada Keiji’s contribution to cultural relations between Australia and Japan is immense. In his talk he presented the very latest information about the state of our film and theater, putting it all into an historical perspective. Keiji underscores the contemporary relevance of our theatre to society; and his views on Aboriginal theatre are insightful and enlightening. He discusses Australian plays that have toured to Japan and collaborations promoted by cultural institutions like NIDA. Now that NIDA is under the direction of Aubrey Mellor, who has a serious commitment to Japan and Japanese theatre, we can look forward to the growing development of ties between the two countries.

In her talk, Kato Megumi pointed out that Australian literature began life as part of a colonial heritage and has turned into a multicultural phenomenon as part of the Asia-Pacific region. This is perhaps a model for other former colonies in the region as they cope with ethnic issues within their borders. Megumi presents a thorough overview of Australian fiction set in Asia, which has long been one of the special areas of her academic concern. Major works of our literature have taken up intercultural problems that arise when Australians come into contact with Asian customs; and Megumi focuses on them in her discussion of fiction by Robert Drewe, Blanche d’Alpuget, Yasmine Gooneratne and Ouyang Yu, among others.

The presentations of the three experts raised many questions of cultural direction that will remain for Australians to deal with in the coming decades. Listening to their presentations, it occurred to me that our culture has always had to cope with definitions of cultural values that were formulated and

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\* Foreign Language Centre, Tokyo Institute of Technology

propagated in Europe and America. This is why Leith's focus on the quality and value of the individual works is so important. It helps us keep focus on the essential point that a culture is made up of creative individuals, all of whom are answering to their personal obsessions and vision.

But as we contemplate where Australia is heading and how its culture will fare, we must bear in mind that books and plays and films are not produced in an international vacuum. Our cultural history does start in a colonial context, as Megumi tell us; and it develops amidst often crushing competition and pressures that come from overseas. Our budding and successful film industry in the 1930s was all but put out of business by Hollywood buyouts; our theatre still develops under the pall of British and American "mainstream" theatrical values. It appears as if the multicultural theatre "season" that we experienced briefly in the 1980s has now given way to yet another wave of derivative productions inspired by our big brothers in the Anglophone world.

We continue to produce some of the world's greatest actors who have gone out into the big bad world and have justifiably made a name for themselves. Cate Blanchette, Nicole Kidman, Russell Crowe (really a Kiwi), Hugh Jackman and Heath Ledger, to name a few, are Australia's gifts to world culture. In addition, they retain a commitment to Australia and return home to appear on our stages and act in our films. They are making a uniquely Australian contribution to world culture.

In that sense, the cause of Australian culture in the coming decades may be more one of crossfertilization with other cultures than one of development solely on native soil. In the past 30 years we have had at least three theatre renaissances. We created our own theatrical language and themes in the late '60s and early '70s, at the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney and the Pram Factory and La Mama in Melbourne in particular. This was further reformed by new voices from the Aboriginal community. Though the mainstream Australian theatre, as represented by the major companies, has largely reverted to the old conventions and choices, there are some Australians who are reaching out to Asia and redefining the grammar of theatricality on our stages. The same can also be said for some of our writers and filmmakers.

If we once went from a colony to a post-colonial crucible, and if we then proceeded to turn into the brash new kid on the block, producing highly original novels, superb actors and a fascinating Australian-British-American-European-Asian mix, then perhaps in the coming years we will create a culture in our fiction, theatre and films that will be the first to assimilate all the above traditions in a unique and enduring form.

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