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# AUSTRALIA CULTUREBLOG

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## **Geoffrey Rush: 'Art doesn't do well in the dark. But that's where we've put it'**

The actor on why Australia should be proud of – and support – the nation's 'rampant amount of theatrical activity and film'.



*Geoffrey Rush: "Art doesn't do very well in the dark. But that's where we've put it." Photograph: Laura Owsianka*

Geoffrey Rush has an air of polite indignation about him. It's not that he objects to dusting off the costumes of his most memorable characters for an exhibition of his storied career – from [Captain Barbosa](#) to the formidable [Lady Bracknell](#). But rather that Arts Centre Melbourne has more than 510,000 other objects relating to dance, theatre, circus and opera in its cavernous vaults, never seen by the public.

There are exceptions – the [Kylie Minogue exhibition](#) in 2005 attracted 460,000 visitors, for example. But treasures such as Nick Cave's songbooks and the typewriter used by Ray Lawler to write the [Summer of the Seventeenth Doll](#) are locked in near-perpetual gloom. "It's an unfortunately metaphor for the arts, to have these things buried under the Arts Centre," says Rush. "Art doesn't do very well in the dark. But that's where we've put it."

Rush, of course, is one of Australia's most polished advocate for the arts. He recalls as a boy watching a documentary about starving residents of frozen Leningrad boiling and eating wallpaper while under siege from the German army. "They had a most wonderful library that they could've easily chopped up for firewood, but they didn't," he says. "They wanted it for its artistic value. I found that deeply moving."

Do you think we have the same kind of attitude to the arts in Australia? "No, maybe not. Not a direct way. But people are certainly interested in exhibitions and, yes, that may be in a pop culture Kylie kind of way, but we'll be studying that pop culture in 100 years' time."

He has come from visiting the V&A Hollywood costume exhibition currently touring to Melbourne. We want to see the detail of costumes from films they've loved, Rush observes: "It's a voyeuristic thing, as if you actually are standing that close to Bette Davis." Voyeurs of Rush can regularly find him with a tub of popcorn in front of a 35mm film at Cinema Nova in Carlton, which specializes in art house and Australian films.



*Waiting for Godot: Mel Gibson as Estragon and Geoffrey Rush as Vladimir at Jane Street Theatre, Sydney, 1979  
Photograph: Branco Gaica/Arts Centre Melbourne*

He says that the state of Australian film and theatre is "up and down as always" but has undergone a significant shift in scale since his formative days in the 1970s, when he shared a stage with Mel Gibson in a production of *Waiting for Godot*.

"Back then, there were subsidised theatre structures and the underbelly that was challenging people from a creative or political standpoint," he says. "It's exponentially bigger and more embedded now. There's a rampant amount of theatrical activity and film, even though we are bashed by the media who say we should compete with Hollywood."

Rush cites Australian films such as Snowtown and Bran Neu Dae as innovative work that has been able to beat the odds and gain exposure. The issue isn't the films themselves – "there's always been diversity in Australian film" – but that there isn't enough cash for effectively marketing these releases.

"Cineplexes are almost like theme park rides now. It's becoming like online gaming," he says. "More thoughtful films find a market, but it's based around a tent pole blockbuster model. A few years ago, Hollywood filmmaking had a strong counter-cultural bent and we started seeing extraordinary films in the

mainstream environment.

“We got Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola emerging at that time. But you don’t really get a Kramer v Kramer in the cinema any more. That kind of thing is going to HBO. Breaking Bad would’ve once been an edgy mainstream film.”

Rush himself has traversed the cerebral to the mainstream, and back again. The one common thread in an amorphous career has, perhaps, been the costumes themselves. Whether powdery and lecherous as the Marquis de Sade in Quills or ermined as the milky-white King Berenger in the Broadway run of Exit the King, Rush rarely fails to draw the eye.



*Exit the King: Geoffrey Rush as King Berenger in 2009 Photograph: Arts Centre Melbourne/Hugh Hartshorne*

In part this can be attributed this to a spell clowning at the Queensland Theatre Company and a subsequent period under the tutelage of French mime Jacques Lecoq in Paris. “The constant touchstone for me has been the Lecoq school and the mask work and clowning in Queensland,” he says. “Every month, I’d do something radically different, a new character or costume. I realised I wasn’t a juvenile lead, I was a character actor.

“I became very aware of the shape and silhouette of a character’s costume. The locomotion and centre of gravity that the costume gives. Whether the costume invades the spaces or retreats from the space.” He has played six kinds of characters, he thinks, “clowns, ratbags and fools”. And it was a role that required all these

genres and more – the great comic actor Peter Sellers – that has most resonated with Rush.

It's the sheer span of personas and an oddly shared background, rather than the brilliant but tortured neurosis of Sellers, that drew Rush to the Life and Death of Peter Sellers. "I got to play Peter Sellers and his own mother in the film, which is something you only really do once," he says.

"Sellers' identity was one of comic megalomania, a man with a very dislocated alter ego. But he really brought something to me. His major characters, Clouseau and Strangelove, had such such a curious combination of elements and such distinctive shapes. No Frenchman in the world wears Burberry and hounds tooth, but Sellers made it work."



*A handbag? Geoffrey Rush with the costume he wore as Lady Bracknell Photograph: Laura Owsianka*

That ability came from Sellers' experience of vaudeville, says Rush – if you're playing to 500 people you need to come on and make a splash.

"You see it today in Australia with people like Josh Thomas doing standup, all working off that older heritage of knockabout subversive humour."

For all of his on-screen flamboyance, Rush's advocacy is workmanlike. He fronted a campaign to head off a proposed redevelopment of a train station in the Melbourne suburb of Camberwell, where he lives with his wife, actor Jane Menelaus.

Without much fanfare, he mentors young actors – and provided vocal support to students protesting against funding cuts to the Victorian College of Arts, a small revolt against a worrying trend of cuts to the arts in several states and, potentially, federally.

"Arts is generally the first thing that gets cut by government as they don't understand the scale of the industry and how valuable it is," he says. "I knew from studying in a studio with Lecoq how invaluable it was to have that creativity and imagination in a course. When I went to Lecoq, nothing else existed like it in Australia, but now we have the VCA, which we need to cherish.

"The resilience will always be there from artists. There are all kinds of things governments have done to the arts, but there's a reason why it's still here. People on the shop floor have enough drive to ensure that the arts will never go under."