

Welcome and introduction
by the Head of St Mark's College, Professor Don Markwell AM,
to the 2024 J C Bannon Oration
to be given by Professor Anne Pender,
Tuesday 19 November 2024

Angela Bannon, Victoria Bannon, Professor Anne Pender, Chair of the St Mark's College Board Linda Matthews, Nobel Laureate J M Coetzee, other distinguished guests here in Downer House and online, ladies and gentlemen –

A very warm welcome to the 2024 J C Bannon Oration.

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which St Mark's College is situated, the Kurna people, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We recognize and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs, and relationship with the land, and we acknowledge that these are of continuing importance to the Kurna people living today.

The J C Bannon Oration is an annual scholarly oration on a topic of contemporary interest, given in memory of the late Dr the Hon John Bannon AO, resident student at this College in 1962-63, Premier of South Australia from 1982 to 1992, and Master or Head of St Mark's College from 2000 to 2007.

Commencing in 2019, and missing only one pandemic year, each of the Bannon Orations has been on a topic relevant to the life and legacy of John Bannon: leadership; South Australia and the Constitution; volunteering – John Bannon's was a life that exemplified this College's ideal of service; how robust is Australia's democracy; and this year, Ann Pender's Oration on the topic "The costs of comedy and the future of the arts in Australia".

What an alluring topic that is!

While John Bannon could perform hilariously and was a witty raconteur, I think it is unlikely that – to adapt a phrase of Barry Humphries's – he would "identify as a comedian". But he certainly identified as someone engaged in and committed to the arts.

In June 1999, John prepared a document headed "Application for the position of Head of St Mark's College". Amongst "current positions", he listed that he was a director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, and the most recent of his "previous positions" was Deputy Chairman of the Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency.

Under the heading "Personal", he wrote:

"Interested in all aspects of the arts (Friend of Festival, Art Gallery, Library, Museum, Bell Shakespeare Company) and have worked professionally as an actor, presenter, and script writer for radio, television and the stage."

John also wrote:

“Married to Angela, a practising artist/craftsperson, who is also a qualified teacher and former youth worker, and currently a Guides SA Leader.”

And so it was that, with Angela’s magnificent support, John served as Master, or Head, of his old College, St Mark’s, for eight years. His reports to the College Council throughout those years frequently refer with pleasure and pride to artistic activities among the students - Arts Evenings revealing musical talent, a jazz band, a rock band, the College choir, the College play, the annual Variety Evening. Let me give just one example of a report from John: his report to College Council in July 2006 says:

“Cultural life has flourished. Two new initiatives were firstly, the College art show where thirteen College artists contributed twenty three works, which were professionally displayed. A number of works were sold, and part of the proceeds have gone to establish an art fund to support the staging of further exhibitions; and secondly an Etiquette Evening on the theme ‘How to be charming’ conducted by Mark Albas and Angela Bannon, which provided many practical tips on how to behave and respond in social settings, something which is being lost in the age of TV dinners and internet surfing.”

John continued:

“Music was not neglected: St Mark’s won the intercollege Battle of the Bands, the Choir rehearsed regularly and performed at the Founder’s [sic] Day service and Arts evening.”

John’s interest in the arts went back to his childhood. His father, Charles Bannon, was the art master at St Peter’s College throughout the time that John was a student there. From about the age of nine or ten, John worked for the ABC as a child actor and later as an adult on radio and television broadcasts until the early 1970s. He acted in school plays – apparently his first role was as a dormouse (we all start somewhere) – and his application in 1961 for a resident student place at St Mark’s College listed, amongst other school activities, leadership or participation in the debating, dramatic, music, film, and literary societies, the library committee, and editor of the magazine. Rod Matheson recalls John saying in a eulogy for his English teacher, F H Schubert, that John shared his teacher’s “admiration for the difficult poets like Chaucer, Dryden and Pope rather than the romantic poets like Shelley and Keats”.

John continued his artistic interests at the University of Adelaide and at St Mark’s College, of course alongside other interests, such as in student and national politics, and in sport. It is said that his performances in University plays included playing the Boy in “Woman in a Dressing Gown” so well that Googie Withers asked him, unsuccessfully, to tour with her. John performed in many revues of the Adelaide University Footlights Club, and at St Mark’s in the College Choir and Variety Evenings, and singing around the pianola, including his beloved Gilbert and Sullivan. It is said that he impersonated Hitler - in German! – and Churchill, and the report of the 1963 Variety Evening said that John Bannon and friends – quote - “produced some quite diverting songs”; and “Bannon’s brilliant exposé of Menzies had the audience rocking in their seats”.

In the years immediately before John became Premier of South Australia in 1982, his portfolios in Opposition included being Shadow Minister for the Arts; it is a great pleasure to welcome the current Shadow Minister for the Arts, John Gardner MP, to St Mark’s this evening.

For most of his period as Premier, John Bannon served also (from 1982 to 1989) as Minister for the Arts – the second member of this College, after Don Dunstan, to be Premier and Minister for the Arts simultaneously. An edited volume entitled *The Bannon Decade: The Politics of Restraint in South*

Australia devotes a full chapter to the arts, which sets out what it calls the “conscientious support and good management” that John brought¹, and while the chapter records constraints as well as successes, John emerges in my mind as the very model of a modern Arts minister. It is a delight to welcome another outstanding former Arts Minister, Di Laidlaw, to St Mark’s this evening.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his own background and educational interests, John Bannon took particular pride in the development of youth arts in South Australia, including through Carclew – just up the street from where we are – as well as the Come Out Festival and theatre-in-education programs. One of John’s early announcements as Minister for the Arts, on youth arts, said that - I quote - “the importance of access to the Arts for children and young people, both in and outside of the school context, should not be under-estimated. The Arts, skilfully introduced at an early age, would set a path for an extensive enrichment of a person’s lifestyle, that would be carried into and throughout adult life”.

Those words are powerfully true of John Bannon himself!

So any discussion of the arts in Australia is something that would be of great interest to John Bannon, and this topic is very fitting to his memory.

We are deeply fortunate that the 2024 J C Bannon Oration will be given by Professor Anne Pender, Kidman Professor of Australian Studies and Director of the J M Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide. Anne is also Chief Investigator on a large Australian Research Council project entitled “Comedy Country: Australian Performance Comedy as an Agent of Change”.

Anne was previously Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of New England.

A First Class Honours graduate in English at the Australian National University in 1986, she is also a graduate of Macquarie University in editing and publishing, and of Harvard University in education; and she earned her doctorate from the University of New South Wales ADFA in 1998.

Anne’s research interests are reflected in the titles of her several books, beginning with *Christina Stead: Satirist* in 2002, followed by *Nick Enright: An Actor’s Playwright*, *One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries*, *From a Distant Shore: Australian Writers in Britain 1820-2012*, *Players: Australian Actors on Stage, Television and Film*, and most recently *Seven Big Australians: Adventures with Comic Actors*. Those seven big Australians include Barry Humphries, Noelene Brown, John Clarke, and Max Gillies.

Anne’s interest in Australian expatriate writers and performers, including comedians, has been enriched by several visiting fellowships overseas, as well as within Australia, including at King’s College London, Copenhagen, and Harvard.

She has given talks elsewhere on such engaging titles as “Where has all the satire gone? What’s wrong with Australian satire?”, and – wait for it – “Poor old pinko conservative, half-arsed political puritan, crypto-fascist: Barry Humphries and the politics of satire”.

Would you please join me in welcoming Professor Anne Pender to give the J C Bannon Oration on “The costs of comedy and the future of the arts in Australia”?

¹ Andrew Parkin & Alan Patience (eds): *The Bannon Decade: The Politics of Restraint in South Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 1992, p. 302.