J C Bannon Oration

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The Costs of Comedy and the Future of the Arts in Australia

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Good evening. Thank you for your generous words, Professor Markwell. Distinguished guests, Mrs Angela Bannon, Family, friends and colleagues of the honourable Dr John Bannon, Members of St Mark's College and the University of Adelaide Community, thank you.

I am honoured to be with you on Kaurna Country this evening. I pay my respects to traditional elders, and to other First Nations people present.

John Bannon was a keen supporter of the arts and in particular of the theatre, and so it's a pleasure to be able to speak this evening about the theatre and the future of the arts in Australia.

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Last year was a big year at The University of Adelaide.

We celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Patrick White. It was the University Theatre Guild that premiered White's darkly comic play *The Ham Funeral* in 1961 after it was dropped by the Festival in a major scandal. That production heralded a seismic shift in Australian theatre.[i]

We also celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to John Coetzee, whose Centre for Creative Practice graces this University, and with whom I am privileged to work

Now, let me take you back a few years.

It's 2021. We are emerging from the grim months of the pandemic. In Melbourne, a comedian steps out onto the stage at the Raw Comedy Festival.

After declaring her name, He Huang, and that she was 'made in China', pointing to her long pink skirt and matching blouse, emblazoned with colourful dragons, she paused to ask the audience:

'Is anyone else 'made in China?' They could check their clothes, she implied with a straight face.[ii]

After a dramatic pause, she said:

‘Listen guys, I’m so sorry for what happened last year’.

She was of course referring to the Covid 19 outbreak in China. A stunned silence followed and then some of the audience laughed loudly and nervously.

She continued: ‘Trust me, I didn’t do it…. I was here the whole time plus three lockdowns OK’.

She went on to describe her lonely walks around Melbourne during those interminable lockdowns and her response to being yelled at by a man in the street. ‘Go back to China’, he shouted at her.

She replied: ‘I can’t sir, there are no flights’.

When this stand-up comedian performed a version of the same routine on national television, including her apology for COVID, her comments went viral. [iii] She was accused of exploiting stereotypes about Chinese people and fended off a firestorm of protest.

Many others welcomed her acumen. She took a risk with this routine.
When I first saw it, I laughed out loud and was struck by the way the apology for Covid offered comic gold because it was potentially transformational.

At a time when the relationship between the two nations was frozen, she diffused tension and confronted Australians with their own fears, also offering a daring mockery of Chinese hubris.

When the performer joked about being told in the street to ‘go back to China’, audiences were forced to think about the engagement between citizens and the ways in which individuals can become the target of outrage that may belong to a collective reaction to a foreign government. It forced the audience to think about the relationship between the countries as she shattered a taboo topic and made us laugh.

The disconcerting gap between apologising for the virus as a Chinese woman, even though she was stuck in Melbourne, and laughing about being taunted as an individual in the street, offered an ingenious moment in Australian comedy. My simple point here is that comedy has the power to change ideas. And this moment provided a shining opportunity.

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Last year we lost the Australian comic performer, Barry Humphries. I want to focus on Humphries here for this next little while.

Many Australians mourned the death of a comic genius, a satirical superstar and an anarchic artist who had been performing for seventy years. I was one who mourned. I had spent many years interpreting the man and his work, as his biographer.

I was only too aware of the considerable costs of his life in the theatre: costs to his family, friendships and to his health and financial wellbeing.

But I was also aware of what we Australians gained from the work of this man over his seven long decades on the stage.

I want to talk now about the cost of comedy and by implication its immense benefits. In doing this I'm setting out an argument about both the content of comedy and the way it is embedded in an industry. My aim is to convince you of the power of comedy to change attitudes, and because of this, the urgency of supporting those who create it.

But let me just quickly tell you about my first meeting with Barry Humphries in order to open this up. When I first met Barry I was in a state of high anxiety.

I knew that he had been shocked to learn from his friend, the artist, Margaret Olley, that I was embarking on writing a biography of him. Barry invited me to meet him at his apartment building in The Rocks, Sydney. It was 2006.

I waited nervously in the noisy and stylish café on the ground floor until he made his entrance. From across the room, I heard his unmistakable, sonorous English stage voice, loudly intoning my name. 'Anne!' he said, throwing up his hands in a gesture of welcome.

Of course, every head turned, and every conversation stopped as the coffee drinkers watched Barry sail across the room towards me. 'So good to see you', he said in a stentorian voice as though we were old friends.

Eventually the audience in the café returned to their conversations and Barry led me away into a massive board room next door.

'We can talk quietly in here', he said, gesturing to me to sit in one of the fifty empty seats at the board table.

So there we were in that enormous boardroom in the Rocks. Barry sat down in the very next seat, right beside me, and fixed me with an intense look.

Once he had questioned me about my children 'Did I know where they were right now and what they were doing" and then the clincher: 'Why are you writing this book about me?', we settled in.

The conversation was serious. We talked at length about Samuel Beckett and Barry's discovery of him as a young man. It seemed to be the key to everything.

In fact Barry appeared in the first production of a Beckett play in Australia. He and his friend Peter O'Shaughnessy presented *Waiting for Godot* at the Independent Theatre in North Sydney in 1958.

The two of them created an 'action painting' for the Godot set, tossing dirty rags and muddy objects at the back wall of the stage.[iv]

In front they hung a tangled mat of fishing nets. The reviews in Sydney were excellent, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* critic praising 'the well-played tramps and their brilliant theatrical shocks'.[v] The *Bulletin* declared the play to be 'outrageously offensive', 'intellectually fascinating' and 'superbly acted'. [vi] Another reviewer judged the directing and acting to be highly effective, observing that both actors 'do splendid work as a couple of human derelicts'.[vii] But the nightly attendance was poor.

Barry's passionate interest in Beckett provided the inspiration for his stage character Sandy Stone. With pauses reminiscent of Beckett, Sandy's speech was excruciatingly slow, and his banal descriptions of his day revealed someone preoccupied with the mundane, domestic details of life in the respectable suburbs, a kindly bore whose monologues were both pitiful and poignant. As you can see from this brief account, Humphries introduced Australia to the riches of European modernist theatre as a young man and brought some of its qualities to his own comedy.

But no one at the time realised the enormity of what Barry was doing. The point I'm making is that comedy is a serious business, with risks that sometimes leave artists stranded. Nothing came of this landmark production of *Waiting for Godot* in any real-world sense, just as nothing came of so many of Humphries' first ventures. It was only when I looked back at this early performance in the course of writing about his life, that I discovered his ingenuity.

There was one moment in Humphries' career that was pivotal for him and for us. It came about some fifteen or so years after his production of *Waiting for Godot*. I want to go back to it here because of my argument about risk, costs, benefits and investment in the arts.

…

First, let me remind you of Barry's strange and marvellous association with Gough Whitlam.

You might recall that Mr Whitlam's feature film debut occurred in the closing sequence of the film *Barry McKenzie Holds his Own* (1974) as Barry and his aunt, Mrs Edna Everage, arrived at Sydney airport to cheering crowds, red carpet and government cars.

Prime Minister Whitlam and his wife Margaret, playing themselves, stepped forward in the film to greet them:

Here's what Mr Whitlam said:

‘Welcome Barry. Australia is proud of you.
Barry McKenzie says: Thank you very much sir.’

Then Mr Whitlam says to Edna Everage ‘*Dame* Edna. Arise Dame Edna’.

Edna is overcome with the emotion of being elevated to damehood.

What did it all mean?

Gough Whitlam and Barry Humphries both went to great lengths to express cultural nationalism. Many Australians saw the Labor Prime Minister as the embodiment of homegrown radical nationalism. Whitlam’s decision to appear in a film made with Humphries, at the time an expatriate comedian, marks a potent moment in Australia's post imperial history: a moment when the politics of Australian theatre and the theatre of Australian politics directly coincided. The coming together of the two figures in the Barry Mackenzie film signified an important transition in Australian politics.

So receptive were Australians to new expressions of Australian identity that a Prime Minister could comfortably participate in a strident and farcical attack on British foibles and the cultural cringe. Whitlam, who was often said to have lacked the common touch, capitalised on the popular appeal of the character, Barry Mackenzie, when he appeared in the second film.[viii]

Allow me here to pause to tell you about that later, in his own foray into filmmaking in 2002, Whitlam made a film called *Gough Whitlam In His Own Words*. The film was nominated for a Logie award, and, when John Faulkner gave this news to Gough, he seemed very pleased.

But Faulkner had also to give him the advance news that they were not going to win it. Faulkner recalled that ‘Gough was crestfallen for at least five seconds’ and said to him, ‘Comrade, I suppose an Academy Award is out of the question?’.[ix]

But I digress.

‘Welcome Barry. Australia is proud of you’, was an exquisite double-edged line for the imperious Gough Whitlam to deliver at this time.

Humphries’ first feature film *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* (1972) was a box office triumph in Australia, and despite its panning by the critics, many Australians were apparently proud of Barry Humphries, Barry Crocker and their creation Barry McKenzie. Whitlam's appearance in the second film may therefore be regarded as a calculated act of populism and part of his ongoing performance of new nationalism. Equally significant was the Prime minister’s bestowal of a damehood on Edna Everage. In that moment, the two mythical Australians were anointed.

One of Whitlam's first policy changes when he was elected in 1972 was to scrap the imperial honours system. In a parody of the system the Labor Prime Minister's actions in the film seemed doubly ironic as he very clearly arrogates the imperial

power to himself. As Whitlam recalled later, ‘it was the only imperial honour my government ever considered’.[x]

The choice of Whitlam for this role was part of Humphries’ evolving use of comedy as a form of satirical history of Australian society in the post war period. It has been suggested that it was Whitlam's idea to appear in the film, although Whitlam's own account does not support this. In a letter to me, Mr Whitlam referred to his film appearance as ‘my only significant contact with Barry Humphries’.[xi]

In any case, Whitlam's appearance in the second film was brazenly populist. Whitlam refused to be cowed by those who objected to the ugliness of Barry Mckenzie and his antics in the motherland. Yet it was a highly ambivalent nationalism. My argument here is that Humphries and Whitlam took risks in exploring the possibilities of a new nationalism for Australians in the 1970s. Both of them recognised the need to throw off the symbols of colonialism. They faced up to the inherent difficulty of finding alternative Australian emblems of civic pride and belonging. And so the anarchic aesthetics of this moment were important for upending the cultural cringe.

Whitlam played a cameo, was dismissed by the Governor General, and lost the next election. But Humphries continued with a lifelong campaign to mock, parody and destroy the cultural cringe through comedy. And now to my last point about this and this is critical.

The first film, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was financed by the taxpayer, the first major film to be funded by the newly created Australian Film Development Corporation. It made an enormous difference to Humphries and the director, Bruce Beresford, to have the financial support at a critical stage in their careers.

Humphries had *also* been awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship in 1970 to write a live show at this time, selected from 156 applicants.[xii] He had already been working for fifteen years as a performer. Harry M. Miller matched the funding, enabling a production at a critical time in Humphries’ career.[xiii]

Although many critics missed the point of the satire in the film completely, the film was a popular success. Patrick White wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* praising the film and declaring it to be ‘the first film by an Australian director which could hold its own internationally’.[xiv] Manning Clark wrote to Humphries, reassuring him that ‘*Wake in Fright* and Bazza McKenzie are two things we have to accept as being a mirror of what we are – as what is part of us all’.[xv]

For Humphries the popular success was heady but personally difficult. He had only recently survived a long stint in hospital rehabilitation after almost dying of his addiction to alcohol. Alcohol had already cost him his marriage and almost his life.

In fact, the films were costly for all concerned. The avalanche of criticism took its toll. For Humphries this highlighted the divisions between popular and highbrow appeal. Bruce Beresford was shocked by the vehemence of the critical response to the McKenzie films, and was treated as a pariah who would never be capable of making any other type of film. Beresford told me that this affected his career for many years

afterwards, and that he was unable to work in Australia for a long time.[xvi] And the actor, Barry Crocker, never worked in film again.

Humphries, however, was resilient and indomitable. As I mentioned he defeated alcoholism. He pioneered topical, referential satirical comedy in Australia in the 1950s and kept it going across the world until just a few years ago. Carol Raye, Max Gillies, John Clarke, The Chaser, Denise Scott and others who are working today, developed satire that drew on Humphries' work, and brought innovation to it.

The flipside of topical satire is that the work dates quickly. The factual reference points of the satire become hard to trace over time, particularly for new audiences, and then eventually the performer is consigned to history.

Barry Humphries was always in trouble with someone. He was banned on many occasions, perhaps most infamously by BBC television for a song called 'True British Spunk'.[xvii] He ran into serious trouble again in 2003 when Edna insulted Hispanics in the United States in a column for *Vanity Fair*, instructing readers to:

Forget Spanish … Who speaks it that you are really desperate to talk to? The help? Your leaf blower? Study French or German, where there are at least a few books worth reading, or, if you're American, try English.[xviii]

Swamped by complaints, the editor attempted to explain, calling Edna "an equal opportunity distributor of insults" (a line used by Edna herself).

In the last few years of his life, Humphries and Edna crossed the line several times. The actor called transgenderism a "fashion" in *The Spectator* in 2018, causing great offence.[xix] The anarchist came up against social change. The Melbourne International Comedy Festival changed the name of their award, known as the Barry Award, in response. Audiences are powerful, and if they feel insulted, they can shut down a comedian. And they did. That is the ultimate risk of comedy.

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I want to move to the present now to continue with the theme of cost, risk and public investment in the arts. We are living in a period in which we are wilfully exposing our artists to extreme risks, risks that are even greater than their work intrinsically carries.

During the pandemic, the national government, under the former Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, provided a major rescue package for all Australian workers except those working in the performing arts, and those working in public universities. Under the JobKeeper Scheme, employees who were eligible were paid $1500 per fortnight through their employers. You will also recall that for two years theatres and other venues were closed and festivals were cancelled.

The decision of the government at the time to withhold the JobKeeper allowance was tough for workers in the performing arts: musicians, actors and all the associated workers across the industry. The criteria for eligibility was difficult for many arts

workers and it excluded casual employees who had worked for an employer for less than twelve months. It excluded freelance workers on short term contracts. The harshness of excluding performing artists from the rescue package dealt a heavy blow to the industry. Insolvency followed for many arts companies. Many critics of the scheme linked it to an ideological crusade waged by the former government on the arts in general.

It is difficult to counter this argument. Why did the safety net exclude our artists? In the Bannon Oration last year, Frank Bongiorno argued that we live in a particularly utilitarian democracy. I can only reinforce this. We witnessed harsh treatment of the vulnerable during the pandemic: older people, children and artists.

In a report from the Australia Institute in 2021, we learned of the extent of the problems. Pennington and Eltham cite the Australian Bureau of Statistics Impacts of COVID-19 Survey showing that Arts and Recreation Services were hit harder than any other industry by the pandemic.

They report that by April 2020, 53 % of businesses in the sector had stopped their operation, and that Live Performance Australia indicated a loss of $24 billion of 'lost output' and 79,000 jobs in 2020. [xx]

In summary, workers in the arts and entertainment sectors experienced extreme conditions during the pandemic. They lost their jobs, their income, their security, their careers.

This is where the story becomes more complicated, because of the precarious conditions for arts workers well before the effects of the pandemic set in. The important macro context here is that overall per capita expenditure on the arts declined from 2007 until 2018 by 4.9% and Australian expenditure in relation to GDP is well below other OECD countries.[xxi]

The point on which I want to focus is that arts workers were already suffering precarity and insecurity of income well before the pandemic.

In a comparison of government support for arts with governments in France, Germany, Canada and the UK, researchers found that the Australian support packages for cultural activities were lower as a percentage of gross domestic product.

South Australian researchers, Pacella, Luckman and O'Connor (2021) therefore labelled Australia a 'global outlier' and linked the impoverished contributions to a more generalised 'antipathy' to the arts by that particular federal government.[xxii] So, what has the current Labor Government done about all of these problems that were highlighted and made worse by the pandemic? The Minister, Tony Burke who is minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, and the Arts, and also for Immigration (that huge set of responsibilities for one Minister speaks volumes) promised a lot, particularly for musicians and for writers. We can only wait and see.

We already know that the production of Australian television drama has declined over the last 20 years. And we are still awaiting new local content quotas for

streaming platforms, but the government has delayed introducing the promised new legislation.

The pandemic revealed systemic problems with the cultural economy and the increasing precarity of artists in Australia. It demonstrated the way in which performers are marginal as economic agents. The irony is that during the long lockdowns, Australians turned to the arts online wherever they could: to find music and drama online to sustain their spirits, to reduce the monotony of lockdown and to enrich their lives. But the turn to online consumption has left the live performance sector with a big problem. Audiences are still turning away from live events. Live events are expensive to run, and now there is a shortage of technically qualified sound and lighting crew as so many technicians fled the industry. It is difficult for creators to exert control over their work in the online world or to find fair rates of pay.
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I want to highlight one more difficulty, one more cost of working in the arts before I conclude.

In 2019 a young Australian actor by the name of Ben Steel made a documentary called *The Show Must Go On*. He was looking closely at why so many performing artists struggle with depression, anxiety and addiction problems. Steel reports in the film that suicide attempts amongst members of this industry are double the national average.

Even before the ravages of COVID-19, researchers reported mental health issues, excessive drug and alcohol use and suicidality amongst performers. A study published in 2015 that focused on the wellbeing of actors in Australia found a raft of problems related to economic and psychological stress. Performers were found to *have* higher rates of anxiety, depression and substance abuse than amongst the general population.[xxiii] In that study, 78 % of actors were found to be abusing drugs. Another study of Australian entertainers found that the Australian entertainment industry urgently requires early prevention and intervention programs.[xxiv]

The links between mental health and income security are demonstrated by other recent research as well. I won't dwell on this research here, but it is sobering and it is an ongoing problem in the arts that cannot be ignored. When Ben Steel's documentary film *The Show Must Go On* premiered it was accompanied by a Wellness Roadshow and the national union of arts workers also began to offer regular workshops and support for actors. These are ongoing.

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What does all this have to do with comedy, you might ask.

Comedy, and by that I mean comic performance onstage or on screen is one of the biggest components of the performing arts sector. Comedy is, for example, the

largest component of the Adelaide Fringe. The Melbourne International Comedy Festival is one of the three largest comedy festivals in the world.

And in spite of everything, comedy is growing in popularity. This makes the question of how we should respond to the crisis I've been talking about even more pressing. We must hold on to our knowledge that comedy and participation in the arts more generally is important for wellbeing, both for individual wellbeing but also for the collective good.

To continue to make comedy is important because of the known capacity for comedy to generate social change, enhance sociality and harness a free exchange of ideas.

We *can* support artists as they are developing their careers, and as a society we can invest in the arts, paying artists fairly and ensuring that they are not left stranded by the gig economy or left out in the cold through punishingly inappropriate quota regulations.

We can also support young people to participate in the arts. Access to the arts should not be a function of one's postcode, or available only to the wealthy as a private good.

On a personal note before I conclude, I am pleased to be working on a large Australian Research Council Linkage project called Comedy Country: Australian Performance Comedy as an Agent of Change, with nine industry organisations. We are exploring the ways in which performance comedy in Australia has shaped social change from the postwar period to the present.

The project has several dimensions. For example, we are evaluating the industry from the performers' viewpoint through a massive survey in order to improve the working lives of performers. We are conscious of keeping artists well and educating young people about resilience so that they do not risk their health or their lives in the pursuit of work.

We are publishing histories of performance comedy to demonstrate its centrality in shaping our lives: on stage, radio, television, film and online. We are conscious that all of this comes at a cost but that Australian performers are also an economic powerhouse.

In addition to those activities, we are offering stand-up comedy workshops to high school and university students with one of our industry partners, the Centre for Democracy, here at the History Trust of South Australia.

These workshops offer students a chance to immerse in stand up, give them an opportunity to express their views in performance, and to understand comedy and satire as a vehicle for democratic expression. Professional comedians are leading the workshops with myself and a colleague overseeing the program. Comedy and satire are central to our democracy and young people deserve to participate in an art form that allows them to venture into public debate through the arts.

A nation without its own home-made comedy is a sad prospect. A country with no local television drama, writers who cannot make a living, and no music festivals is an impoverished country. We are at a perilous point in our national culture. Gough Whitlam and John Bannon supported the arts in Australia. I hope that current leaders will start paying attention to the broad risks of ignoring art and artists. As I have argued, comedy itself is a risky and costly business. But the costs of failing to support our performing artists, of failing to invest in art and artists, are far more expensive.

Notes

[i] Pender, A. (2024). Patrick White and Adelaide: *The Ham Funeral*, the Playwright and the Cultural Cringe, in *Reflecting on the British World: Essays in Honour of Carl Bridge*, eds. Jatinder Mann and Bart Zielinski, Peter Lang: New York, pp. 203-220.
[ii] Huang, He. (2021) Raw Comedy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4m5bJhZN4I
[iii] Huang, He. (2022) Australia's Got Talent https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_rNaqV8B1c
[iv] Pender, A. (2010) *One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries*. ABC Books: Sydney, p. 74.
[v] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1958, p. 5.
[vi] *Bulletin*, 14 May 1958, p. 24.
[vii] *Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 1958, p. 16.
[viii] For a full account of the making of the two Barry McKenzie films and their reception in relation to new nationalism, see Pender, A (2005). The Mythical Australian: Barry Humphries, Gough Whitlam and "New Nationalism", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol 51, 1, pp. 67-78. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2005.00361.x
[ix] Faulkner, J. (2014). Whitlam was a towering figure in our party. ABC News Online, 21 October. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-21/faulkner-whitlam-was-a-towering-figure-in-our-party/5829926
[x] Whitlam, G. (1985). *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Penguin: Melbourne, p. 141.
[xi] Letter from Gough Whitlam to Anne Pender, 25 May 2004.
[xii] Pender, A. *One Man Show*, p. 175.
[xiii] Pender, A. *One Man Show*, p. 176.
[xiv] White, P. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1972, p. 6.
[xv] Manning Clark to Barry Humphries, letter reproduced in *Bazza Comes into his Own*, Sun Books: Melbourne, 1979, p. 73.
[xvi] Bruce Beresford to Anne Pender, 29 May 2007.
[xvii] For a full account of this incident, see Pender, *A. One Man Show*, p. 166.
[xviii] For a full account of this incident, see Pender. A. *One Man Show*, p. 380.
[xix] Barry Humphries in an interview with Lloyd Evans, *The Spectator*, 21 July 2018. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/on-the-offensive/
[xx] See Pennington, A. and Eltham, B. (2021). Creativity in crisis: rebooting Australia's Arts and Entertainment Sector. Report. The Centre for Work, Australia Institute. p. 24.
[xxi] *The Big Picture: Public Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative Activity in Australia*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2019, p. 5.
[xxii] Pacella, J., Luckman, S. and O'Connor, J. (2021). Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 emergency on the arts and cultural sector and responses to it by governments, cultural agencies and the sector. CP3 Working paper no. 1, University of South Australia, p. 29.
[xxiii] Szabo, M., et al. (2022). Psychological wellbeing of Australian actors and performing artists. NIH. 37, 2, pp. 106-117. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35637563/. See also Maxwell, I., et al., (2015). The Australian Actors Well Being Study: A Preliminary Report, *About Performance: The Lives of Actors*, 13, pp. 69-114.
[xxiv] Van den Eynde, J. et al. (2016). Working in the Australian entertainment industry. Final Report. VCA :Melbourne, p.5.