



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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(2016)

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Bobbing Around. (In Press)

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Reflections on the 2015 Art Exhibition and Operetta/ Morality play “The Trial of Homo Economicus: The dollar hunting animal”

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“We can best learn morals from plays and poetic writing” Aristotle, POETICS 335 BC. (Draft 1477 words)

The sixth “Painting for the Planet” Art Exhibition was held at Queensland University of Technology, Gardens Point campus on Friday 27th November 2015. As in previous years the Exhibition was accompanied by a theatrical performance engaging many students both “domestic” and international, as well as staff. The “show” was in the form of an Operetta (in Gilbert and Sullivan style) incorporating a balance between humour and seriousness (a serious farce). It continued the theme of educating and raising awareness of current national and international environmental issues and political possibilities. The “timing” of this show coincided with the “Paris 21” Climate meeting where 195 nations were attempting to reach agreement on world carbon emissions in order to try to keep global warming under two degrees Celsius.

The preparation of the event began slowly with the organisers, amongst whom were Sam Zimmer, Maria McCarthy (staff from International Student Services) and this author, finding difficulty recruiting the number of students required for the operetta. Most students were preoccupied with thesis writing, examination preparation or research tasks and there were a few occasions when we thought the show would have to be “called off”.

In retrospect, it is as well we persevered, as our numbers grew a few weeks before the date of performance and we “captured” a few outliers for specific roles. No one was exempt. We had child actors age two, eight and eleven. Our eight year old, Siddharth Basu, was asked to choose his Australian animal character and he selected “crocodile”. Coincidentally, the author had spotted a crocodile costume for large dogs in a Pet shop the previous day. It was promptly purchased and additional script was drafted for the young actor, to learn.

“I am a crocodile! Give me space, to swim and eat in this wild place. Don’t attack with guns or spears. We’ve been around for years and years”.

For this production we needed a musical backing, choreography for dance routines both serious and farcical, as well as for stage movement. We needed technological skills for the timing and presentation of various themes. We needed a wide variety of talents.

The challenge before us resulted in the emergence of unique leadership skills and individualised talents amongst the students. It also emphasised the importance of each member communicating with the others, having ideas and sharing them and using social media for this ongoing task. Collaboration and team work developed, and grew from the circumstances we were in and each had his/her strengths. Formerly shy, reticent, sometimes isolated, students, blossomed over the days that followed. They were all deeply entrenched in the “project” and owned it. The community spirit was uplifting. The warmth between the members was something this author had not witnessed to such an extent, before. Is this what usually happens in theatre?

With a “full house” of patrons both students and staff, the show began. With an ABBA overture “Money; Money; Money...” a “dwarf dance” of various members of the cast’s, limbs poking through a curtain, primed the audience for the subsequent farcical undertone.

The scene quickly changed to a Court of Law presided over by a Judge in an elevated seat. It was the start of a trial of two prisoners (Homo economicus) accused of damaging the environment and reducing wildlife habitat, for financial gain. The prisoners (Yousef Kurashi and John Mateo) are handcuffed. The former is escorted into court by four policemen from the town in which the trial takes place, Puddle on the Piddle. The Puddle police enter to the music of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Tarantara” (Pirates of Penzance) and engage in an energetic, entertaining dance routine choreographed by Anika-Jovi McCarthy, a very talented dance professional (age 15) who guided the officers (Dre West, Avis Aria, Paolo Alino) and led the troupe.

The prisoners are placed in the dock where they are asked to swear on the Red Data Book of Endangered Species to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So help us Mother Nature!”

The presiding Judge, her Honour Judge Jan (Jan Harvey, Language and Learning Services) proceeds to launch into song with a series of verses imitating the Major General from 'The Mikado'. "I am a very model of a modern High Court Barrister...I've studied at the Bar and have a quite amazing character. I listen to the woeful tales of deeds so dire and dreadful, and try to reach a verdict that is just and fair – not fretful..."

Homo economicus, dressed in outrageous bling, displaying gold dollar signs, is then questioned by the Lawyers for the Prosecution and Defence (Hyeren Cha and Clare Chandra). He is subsequently answerable to a stream of vulnerable Australian wildlife from koalas, kangaroos, bandicoots, sea lions, whales, platypus and echidnas, to lorikeets, parrots, dolphins, possums, brush turkeys and crocodiles. Most of the creatures appear above a screen as puppets acting out the appropriate body movements and emotions as the discourse in court proceeds. The puppets were operated by Maria McCarthy, Tharanga Kariyawasam, Kathleen Cremer and her eleven year old daughter Isabela.

The puppets represented many of the endangered species whose habitats are being cleared for various economic reasons thereby reducing their numbers and putting many on the verge of extinction. Each made a case against the prisoners on trial, accusing them of putting dollars before forests, oceans, rivers, soil, and air quality thereby contributing to the 'Sixth Extinction' (Leakey and Lewin, 1996).

Finally, the Jury is asked to decide whether the prisoners are guilty or not guilty. As the audience is the jury, they all, through secret ballot, cast their votes. The Clerk of Court collects the votes and passes the duty of the decision to her Honour, Judge Jan. The prisoner is found guilty of his crimes and is taken away by the Puddle Police. Meanwhile the music group sings another "Money" song.

In the course of the court debate it was stressed that the Homo economicus has not been detrimental to ALL creatures on the planet. On the contrary, some creatures such as black rats and cockroaches, continue to flourish. We were then entertained with a creative rendition of "La Cucaracha" – the cockroach by Sam Zimmer who was dressed in his cockroach outfit throughout the performance bringing a light hearted touch. He, with Judge Jan, also used their many voice ventriloquist abilities to do appropriate sounds of various creatures accusing the prisoners on trial.

The "wild things" as a group, made a case for needing help from somebody in order to assist their survival. The Beatle song "Help" is sung by everyone, led by the music group with Waseqa Hasan on the keyboard and leading the singing with her strong, melodic voice. The creatures also claimed that the situation used to be fine in the past but now they have major problems. Bernard Li (ISS staff member) then sang "Yesterday, all our troubles seemed so far away..." (Beatles), in his magnificent, voice. This was quite an emotional experience.

The show was followed by a well- deserved meal for actors and audience, arranged by Pauline Soh.

Many thanks must go Maria McCarthy whose organising ability, acting talent and guidance, kept the show and the performers together. Thanks to the performers and the hard workers behind the scenes especially Christine Wang and her team of helpers who organised the hanging of the works of art and promoted the event. Thanks also go to Stephen Bennett who created the original poster advertising the performance and to Dre West who excelled in the visual technology on the day and contributed new ideas.

A special thankyou goes to Anika Jovi McCarthy who choreographed the dance routines and engaged with John Mateo, in some spectacular tango, symbolising the push and pull, the tension between Economic man and Nature.

Desist: Desist you evil one. Resist: Resist Roxanne...:

He'll lead you to slaughter; then wipe his hands. That's the way of economic man.

Overall a strong environmental message was conveyed that wildlife is threatened and endangered by the practices of top predators, in the world and that a change in values and practices needs to take place. The performance was well received by a full house of students and a few staff. Many attendees commented that this year's performance was even better than last year's which was believed to be our "magnum opus". Once again it has been an honour to work with such sincere, dedicated and talented people and I thank them for their participation and deep commitment.

Reference: Leakey, R.E. and Lewin, R (1996). The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind. Anchor Books, Random House Inc.

