‘Python squeeze’: Williamson condemns cuts to arts education

Steve Dow

THE playwright David Williamson has attacked the nation's “huge” spending on sports while a “pittance” is spent developing the next Cate Blanchett or Geoffrey Rush.

Williamson has also taken aim at the funding being “ripped” from TAFE, costing 800 teaching positions in NSW alone, with fine arts “predictably” among the casualties, while Melbourne was set to lose a valuable creative arts program.

“The overall cost of our Olympic gold medals was in excess of $17 million per medal, but that was thought to be not nearly enough investment by many who oversee our elite sports institutions,” said Williamson, delivering the 2012 National Tertiary Education Union lecture in Fremantle.

“Why as a society we think it’s legitimate to spend huge amounts on our sportsmen and women, but seemingly don’t think the relative pittance we spend on developing a potential Cate Blanchett or Geoffrey Rush is as justifiable, has to say something about our national and political priorities.”

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The former Sydneysider, whose new play Happiness premieres at the Ensemble in May and his play Rupert at the Melbourne Theatre Company in August, now lives in Queensland, where “the barbarians are not just at the gate, but in power”.

Williamson, in his lecture Living Dangerously: The Future of Creative Arts Education in Australian Universities, said the new Premier, Campbell Newman, had transformed the state into a “developers’ paradise”, while abolishing the Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards.

But the playwright also took aim at other states: in Victoria, the Baillieu government had sliced $35 million from Swinburne University of Technology’s budget as part of a general $290 million cut to TAFE in Victoria.

“Swinburne is being forced to plan the closure of its Prahran campus, home to its creative arts program, which in terms of graduates being employed in the arts industry, has been one of the most successful in the country,” he said.

“Where are our future camera-men, directors, set and lighting designers, choreographers and make-up artists for television, film and stage meant to spring from? It seems, in that phrase invented by Shakespeare, the greatest artist of all time, ‘thin air’.”

In NSW, meanwhile, some 800 TAFE jobs are “slated to go and the casualties, predictably, are fine arts and ceramics”.

“Creative courses on university campuses are under just as much threat, but here it’s not the bloody-minded anti-arts mentality of conservative state governments that’s to blame but the gradual python squeeze of less and less university funding for which the federal government must take the blame,” he said.

“Funding levels for higher education have dipped to just 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product as against the OECD average of 1 per cent.”

“Skimping” on higher education was partly to do with “political cowardice”, he said.

“It’s OK to have white papers on us integrating ourselves with Asia in the ‘Asian century’ and tell us we’re all to learn Asian languages, as long as there are absolutely no plans to actually do anything.”

Yet the arts sector contributes $30 billion a year to GDP more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined, he said.

“Funding in a university flows from the number of students you teach and how effective you are as a research institution,” he said.

“Many faculties have responded to funding pressures by decreasing the staff student ratio.”

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Playwright warns of developing drama in arts funding

By STEVE DOW

AUSTRALIA'S best known playwright, David Williamson, has attacked the nation's "huge" spending on sports while a "pit- tance" is spent developing the next Cate Blanchett or Geoffrey Rush.

Williamson has also taken aim at the funding being "ripped" from TAFE programs in Victoria and New South Wales, highlighting the Baillieu government's slicing of $35 million from Swinburne University of Technology's budget.

"The overall cost of our Olympic gold medals was in excess of $17 million per medal but that was thought to be not nearly enough investment by many who oversee our elite sports institutions," said Williamson, delivering the 2012 National Tertiary Education Union lecture in Fremantle.

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Williamson said Swinburne was "being forced to plan the closure of its Prahran campus, home to its creative arts program, which in terms of gradu- ates being employed in the arts industry, has been one of the most successful in the country".

"Where are our future cameramen, directors, set and lighting designers, choreographers and make-up artists for television, film and stage meant to spring from?"

"It seems, in that phrase invented by Shakespeare, the greatest artist of all time, 'thin air'," he said.

The former Sydneysider, whose new play, Happiness, premieres at the Ensemble in May and play Rupert, about media baron Rupert Murdoch, at the Melbourne Theatre Company in August, now lives in Queensland, where "the barbarians are not just at the gate, but in power".

Williamson, in his lecture Living Dangerously: The Future of Creative Arts Education in Australian Universities, said Queensland Premier Campbell Newman had transformed the state into a "developers' paradise", while abolishing the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, "which cost the relatively trivial amount of a quarter of a million dollars".

"Creative courses on university campuses are under just as much threat, but here it's not the bloody-minded anti-arts mentality of conservative state governments that's to blame but the gradual python squeeze of less and less university funding for which the federal government must take the blame," he said.

"Despite increases in university funding by the Labor government, these increases have not kept up with inflation or increasing student load and in essence our universities are asked to do more with less.

"Funding levels for higher education have dipped to just 0.7 per cent of GDP as against the OECD average of 1 per cent."

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"It's OK to have white papers on us integrating ourselves with Asia in the 'Asian Century' and tell us we're all to learn Asian languages, as long as there are absolutely no plans to actually do anything."

Yet the arts sector contributes $30 billion a year to the GDP, more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined, Williamson said.

He said that the new national curriculum would generally be weakened by a lack of funding, despite the welcome emphasis on arts.
Playwright slams ‘pittance’ for arts

By Steve Dow

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“Swinburne is being forced to plan the closure of its Prahran campus, home to its creative arts program, which in terms of graduates being employed in the arts industry, has been one of the most successful in the country,” he said. “Where are our future cameramen, directors, set and lighting designers, choreographers and make-up artists for television, film and stage meant to spring from? It seems, in that phrase invented by Shakespeare, the greatest artist of all time, ‘thin air’.”

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Yet the arts sector contributes $30 billion a year to gross domestic product, more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined, he said.
Top playwright rues lack of arts funding

Stephen Bevis  
Arts Editor

Australia’s top playwright, David Williamson, has lambasted State and Federal governments over the funding of tertiary arts education, including at the WA Academy of Performing Arts.

Creativity drove our economy and our imaginative lives but was under short-sighted assault by both sides of the political divide, Williamson said in a lecture at the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle last night.

“What makes people happier and more excited than a new and bigger fridge is the work of creative artists who uplift and inspire, entertain and amuse them,” he said.

“List the high points of your life and they’re sure to include more books, films, musicals, plays and art exhibitions than new washing machines.”

Williamson, who taught mechanical engineering in Melbourne before turning to the stage, said many of Australia’s creative arts programs were suffering death by a thousand cuts.

In Perth for the opening of his play Managing Carmen, he said the arts were often seen as “messy and subversive” and an impediment on the road to economic growth.

“It looks at what is and says that there could be more,” he said. “It looks at what is deadly and what is dull and says there is more to life than this.”

Delivering the annual National Tertiary Education Union Lecture, Williamson said the arts contributed more than $30 billion a year to GDP, more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined.

Several State governments were cutting funding for the TAFE system and overall national tertiary education funding had dipped to just 0.7 per cent of GDP compared with the OECD average of one per cent, he said.

A recent external review found that WAAPA, one of the top 25 arts training institutions in the world, needed an overhaul and a boost of at least $3.75 million to remain viable.

Williamson said WAAPA’s so-called “over-teaching” through small, intense classes yielded excellent results and famous graduates but cost more than provided by standard government funding.

Unlike accounting, physics and many other high student-teacher ratio courses, arts training required small class sizes and expensive infrastructure.
Cash plea: Playwright David Williamson. Picture: Bill Hatto