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Once more unto the breach

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John Clark is out, a new board is in, but drama continues to dog Australia's most prestigious theatre school, writes BRYCE HALLETT.

Two households, both alike in rank,

In fair Kensington, where we lay our scene.

ON A COLD, rainy night last week the expansive foyer of the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Kensington was packed with audience members for works showcasing the schools final-year acting students. On the bill were Stephen Sondheims *Assassins*, directed by the theatre schools head of acting, Tony Knight, Dario Fos *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, staged by guest director Darren Gilshenan, and Moliere's *The Hypochondriac*, directed by Christopher Hurrell.

Behind the scenes, however, lies a long-running battle between two combative cultures – one vanishing, the other entrenching its position – replete with the opportune successions, stymied ambitions and intrigue of Shakespeare.

The latest casualty of the power struggle at the top is John Clark, until 2004 the artistic director of NIDA for 35 years, who resigned from the board last month. His parting shot? To attack the board for what he sees as its lack of transparency, inability to debate significant artistic and educational issues and, moreover, the governance of the renowned acting school that boasts Cate Blanchett, Sam Worthington, Judy Davis, Baz Luhrmann and Mel Gibson among its alumni.

When the expatriate Australian Lynne Williams was appointed to the newly created dual role of director and chief executive officer of NIDA in 2008 – replacing the much-admired Aubrey Mellor and Elizabeth Butcher, who together had led the school for 30 years – it inevitably sparked fears the new management model would be inappropriate for such a prestigious, demanding, close-knit training ground for actors, directors, designers and production personnel.

Two years into the top job, Williams' position continues to be questioned behind the scenes as the old guard makes way for a management model more characterised by private consultancy, myriad committees, outsourcing and a marketing department in overdrive to protect the schools image.

Politics at board level and a culture of change for change's sake are damaging the schools reputation and lowering its standards, a well-placed source claims. The board is a marionette theatre with enough puppets to make the real actors not matter.

Clark's departure follows last year's resignation, after 30 years, of librarian Christine Roberts, who left with a parting shot via an email circulated to staff: I choose not to work in an environment ... in which my qualifications, ability and experience are not respected.

NIDA's head of movement, Julia Cotton, also left in what are understood to be similarly bitter circumstances. The future of respected singer and teacher Avigail Herman is under a cloud despite her having worked tirelessly to introduce an accredited music theatre diploma course.

Clark says that he was insulted when chairman Malcolm Long phoned him to say that the other board members were intimidated by him.

He urged me to resign. Look, I'm all for evolution and change but why can't it be managed properly without them making enemies? says Clark in the upper floor study of his Paddington terrace. Change is inevitable but there's a way of doing it without creating bad blood, closing down communication or bullying people.

Williams rejects the assertions. It is an effective board and like all boards it needs refreshment and a broad base of skills to draw on, she says. We are in transition ... I don't sit here as a guru; everything is discussed.

We are fostering an open and productive culture of engagement and enjoyment, but I am sensitive to the difficulty faced by John [Clark] in letting go. He had an amazing vision and is still revered but we have to move on and meet the challenge of sustainability.

The Herald has seen documents showing that a review undertaken last year by consultants Egon Zehnder for NIDAs management found the board lacked open dialogue, spent too little time on issues of strategy, staff and student welfare, and that CEO information was seen as a fait accompli.

Furthermore, board meetings were prone to friction and petty discussion rather than genuine debate. Tensions flared because of a small number of disaffected directors.

On the subject of the boards role in relation to artistic policy and vision, the review found that it was responsible for approving but not determining artistic and educational policies.

By contrast, NIDAs recent annual general meeting got under way in a no-nonsense manner. The meeting duly noted Clarks resignation and that board members Chris Puplick a vocal opponent of Williams Jeni ODowd and Ben Winspear would not stand for re-election.

Chaired by Long, the occasionally fiery meeting was described by one member as being akin to a hot shoe shuffle. Finally, a board was formed that backs Williams and her vision of a school with diversifying interests across artforms and a range of media.

The newly elected members are the director of ABC Television, Kim Dalton, the chief executive of the Arts Centre in Melbourne, Judith Ishwerwood, the former owner and manager of Arts Management Pty Ltd, Virginia Braden, and the lawyer Bruce Cutler, who had close ties to the school through its finance committee.

The only actor, and one of the few theatre identities on the board, is Pamela Rabe but any arguments that the board is stacked with film people, or that NIDA has turned away from being a classic theatre school or is downgrading its stage acting courses, are rebuffed by Williams and Long.

Mellor, now dean of performing arts at Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore, missed the meeting to attend an International Theatre Schools conference where, he says, NIDA was strangely absent.

He expressed dismay this week that the board hadnt been refreshed enough. The industry needs assurance that change will be for the better, and based on the experience of experts in arts training as well as expert practitioners.

Peter Reeve, director of the NIDA Foundation Trust, is among many staff, graduates and theatre industry figures contacted by the Herald who argue that the school sorely lacks a director of theatrical standing or note.

Documents given to the Herald show that a development plan to celebrate NIDAs 50th anniversary last year, including a national touring exhibition and a comprehensive performance program, were shelved. It had been spearheaded by the trust, an independent body that raises funds for projects and activities not covered by government funding or operational income.

The strategic plan for NIDAs 50th was developed with enormous enthusiasm and depth but it was lost in the timing and the politics of appointing a new director, Reeve says.

For the program to have progressed there needed to have been an artistic director in place who had relevant industry knowledge and associations whilst the transition occurred. I was disappointed and felt that a unique and rare opportunity had been lost.

IF THERE ARE cracks behind NIDAs gleaming facade, Williams is not letting on. Cordial and measured, her focus is on the present and the near-future, not least finalising what she calls the schools third phase: the Centre for Contemporary Performance Practice, where postgraduate courses and practice-based research will be housed.

The foundation of the school lies in theatre skills, says Williams in her unprepossessing office overlooking NIDAs imposing concrete, glass and steel foyer. But we need to let our students know what is out there in film, TV, digital, physical performance, music theatre and playwriting. Our students need strengths in a range of disciplines and its important that their skills are transferable.

Mindful of her detractors, Williams says quietly that she is up for a challenge and sees no reason why artistic leadership and financial management cant be done by one person.

Soon after moving to Britain in 1985, the Wollongong-born, Sydney conservatorium-trained singer established an arts touring organisation and was involved with cultural and educational programs of the London organising committee for the 2012 Olympic Games.

At this point in my life I am not performing or directing but facilitating and this gives me enormous pleasure and makes it worthwhile. Its a complete myth when people say I dont have the experience or qualifications to do this job. I am out for my students. NIDA is a complex place to run and I still have a lot of work to do in gaining peoples trust. Its my responsibility to ensure that the quality and rigour of the work is high and that the students are industry-ready.

The director deflects criticism with the consummate ease and charm of a politician. Theatre remains the touchstone and Im interested in the students being self-starters who engage with ideas, devise work, create improvisations and produce work ... The majority of the board have been incredibly supportive of my approach and investment in enterprise and the way NIDA is moving in a direction that the industry supports.

One teacher, who asked not to be named, says the schools style of management had changed dramatically in the past 18 months but the student population seemed largely unaffected by the politics and changes at the top. There have, however, been instances where dedicated, staunchly proud and loyal teachers claim to have been treated disrespectfully or to have been sidelined by the chief executive without explanation.

There is a blatant disregard of tradition and legacy, alleges one source. The lack of communication or consultation on important issues is appalling. All too often you find yourself left in limbo or trying to ascertain what the director has in mind.

The teaching staff live in a dont ask, offer or consult environment and whatever decisions are made ... are relayed by underlings. I was supportive of Lynne [Williams] at first but not any more. As a CEO I have no idea if shes good, bad or indifferent but as an artistic director shes out of touch and lacks a depth of vision. NIDA is only as good as its reputation in the industry and its not as secure as it once was just ask the kids coming of of WAAPA [the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts].

Williams insists NIDAs role and challenge is to give students a firm basis in acting and theatre as well as skills across a range of cultural expression, be it film, television, physical theatre, music, motion-capture computer games, corporate performance or production.

She insists her gaze is on the big picture, not destabilising conjecture or petty personality disputes. What I am about is ensuring [that] NIDA keeps pace with a changing industry and has currency in it.

We are in good financial shape but what the government gives us it stands at \$7.5 million a year, boosted in the May federal budget by an extra \$4 million over four years isnt enough so we must rely on fund-raising and strategic alliances ...

To this end, NIDA aims to forge closer links with the Australian Film Television and Radio School and the University of NSW, among other schools and training institutions.

Fundamentally, were committed to nurturing future industry leaders and agents of change, says Williams, who has indicated that she intends to stay in the job for a maximum of five years. It is vital to the development and sustainability of our cultural identity that we nourish creativity and allow the students to experiment and take risks.

Meanwhile, Clark believes he was left with no choice but to resign. My knowledge and experience are no longer valued and the board never seemed interested in discussing important issues, he says. Theres no accountability. I was fed up in the end.