

Beloved island festival under fire

Tasmanian economist
Saul Eslake sees
value in the arts

ATTHEW WESTWOOD

The Coalition went into last year's federal election without a formulated arts policy, instead arguing that measures to stimulate a stronger economy will in turn lead to cultural prosperity.

The economy grew by 2.4 per cent last year, despite the spook of a negative quarter and the prospect of losing our AAA rating. But so far that economic uptick has not led to any increase in support for the arts.

Is the arts sector to be at the mercy of peaks and troughs in the nation's productivity and performance? Economist Saul Eslake says the arts "will almost always do better in a thriving economy than in a stagnating one", but it's not sufficient to rely on that alone.

"One of the things that's frustrating about the present federal government's attitude to the arts is that, on one hand, they keep mouthing the importance of small business in the economy, and preferring small business over big business with tax breaks, instant asset write-offs and lower company tax rates," he says.

"Yet when it comes to the arts they take the opposite view. Particularly through the funding cuts to the Australia Council they have imposed the greatest burden on individual artists and small arts companies... while to some extent sheltering the well-established major companies, who have bigger financial resources of their own, and can have greater access to corporate support and high-net-worth individuals. I think that's one of the more regrettable aspects of the current government's approach to the arts."

The Tasmanian-raised economist is speaking as chairman of the Ten Days on the Island festival, which gets under way across the state next week. The program, curated by artistic director David Malacari, includes the local premieres of Terrapin Puppet Theatre's *You and Me* and the *Space Between*, Nathan Maynard's play about mutton-bird harvesting, *The Season*, and performances



PETER MATTHEW

Playwright Nathan Maynard's *The Season* will be performed during the festival; chairman Saul Eslake, above right

by the Xiamen Philharmonic Orchestra from China.

A former chief economist at ANZ and at Bank of America Merrill Lynch, Eslake also served as chairman of the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Board in 2005-11, and was a board member of the former Australia Business Arts Foundation. His personal interests include the visual arts and classical music, especially 19th-century nationalist composers such as Dvořák, Sibelius and Rimsky-Korsakov.

He believes "unequivocally" that the arts contributes to the larger economy and for this reason warrants investment. He refers to last week's report card on the nation by the Paris-based OECD. It points out that while education policies focus on the STEM disciplines — science,

technology, engineering and maths — they have downplayed the role of "innovation-related arts disciplines". The absence of arts initiatives in the government's Innovation Agenda, Eslake says, is a weakness in the policy.

Eslake does not believe the arts should be exempt from fiscal restraint when other sectors have to make savings, but he regrets that there has been a decline in federal arts funding in real terms, and that small to medium arts companies have suffered a disproportionate impact. Updated figures from the National Association for the Visual Arts, prepared by Economists at Large, show that real per capita arts funding has declined by 17.5 per cent, from \$20.20 per person in 2008 to \$16.68 per person in 2013.

Some may find it irksome to

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SAUL ESLAKE
FESTIVAL CHAIRMAN

make the case for arts funding in utilitarian terms such as the economic contribution of creative industries, but Eslake says the argument can't be won without quantifiable evidence. Indeed, his home state is sometimes referred to as an example of the economic benefit of the arts and inbound cultural tourism.

"You don't need to spend long in Hobart to see that the arts is part of what brings people here," he says. "People do come here specifically to go to MONA (David Walsh's privately owned Museum of Old and New Art) and while they are here, there are other arts activities that they become involved in. There are more commercial galleries now, the number of practising artists has grown. Supply has helped create some of its own demand."

However, the biennial Ten Days festival Eslake has chaired since October 2015 has faced financial challenges, including a significant loss from the last event in March 2015, when management also drew down its reserves. In addition, he says, the state government has cut its allocation by half from 2019, while continuing to fund other festivals run under MONA's banner.

As a consequence, Eslake says, it has been difficult for Ten Days to raise support from other sources. He says he and chief executive Jane Haley have attempted to deliver an appealing festival while reducing expensive imported shows and including more regional events.

The chairman says the board has considered the possibility that there may be no future for the festival.

"But we have found, talking with communities and arts organisations, that there is a great deal of affection and respect for the Ten Days brand," he says.

"There is a widespread belief that if Ten Days folded, then regional Tasmania would be more or less bereft of the kind of experiences that Ten Days has brought to it over the past 15 years."

The best argument, he says, is to present a strong festival that provides the evidence of continued community support.

"Nothing would make me happier than if, at the end of the month, people in Tasmania say, 'Ten Days was a fabulous festival, what a pity the government is halving the funding for it,'" he says.

Ten Days on the Island is at venues across Tasmania.