

Filmmaker, actor and gallery director speak out against arts cuts

Richard Phillips
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The *World Socialist Web Site* discussed the Abbott government's budget cuts this week with award-winning independent filmmaker Paul Cox, Jo Holder, director of The Cross Art Projects Gallery, and Kevin Hopkins, a Melbourne-based actor and drama teacher. Their edited comments are below.

Paul Cox has written and directed over 30 documentaries and features during his more than the 40-year career. He has just completed shooting his latest movie—Force of Destiny—which is loosely based on his difficult struggle with liver cancer over the past six years.

Before discussing the budget Cox spoke about his recent work in India and responses he received there about his statement to the *World Socialist Web Site* defending the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

"I've just completed shooting my new film. I shot parts of it in Kerala in India. You should know that they read your site much more in India than here in Australia. It's quite popular there.

"Quite a few people over their reminded me about my comments about the attack on the Detroit Institute of the Arts. I didn't know your site was reaching that far. This is amazing.

"Everyone who interviewed me in Kerala kept bringing it up. This was pleasantly and wonderfully surprising. They kept talking to me about it. In the end I had to say I've come here to make a film not to talk about politics."

Turning to the budget, Cox bluntly denounced Attorney General Brandis whom he said "knew nothing about arts" and added: "We are going into the wilderness with these people.

"I've said this before but civilisations crumbled because they didn't recognise the importance of the arts and cultural development for the survival and the

development of humanity.

"The budget and everything in it is for the elites. In the past there were small individuals who were able to sneak through the filmmaking maze and get things produced and distributed. They will be the first to go.

"The big film corporations will stay and they will keep producing rubbish. Commercial filmmaking might even expand in Australia—they will become more violent and Tea-Partyish—but there will be very few Australian productions made with anything serious or important to say.

"I'm very lucky I was able to make my film before this budget cycle. I received some backing in India and from a few individuals here. Screen Australia didn't give me anything until right at the end because I'd already generated my own backing and support...

"Young people with talent and something wonderful to say should not be stopped. It will take a little time but they will bounce back because the world has a conscience and the voice of truth cannot be silenced. Not everyone in the world can be bribed.

"The health cuts and the \$7 medical co-payments are also a disaster. This will cost a lot of lives because people won't be able to afford to go to the doctor. People will die miserable deaths. Every nurse and social worker I've spoken to at the hospital says exactly the same thing. It's insane—there's no other word for it."

Jo Holder, whose gallery is in Kings Cross in Sydney, said she was very concerned about the cut back s and their impact on visual artists.

"Although the Australia Council said the major performance companies won't be badly affected, the government's budget is a huge matter of concern for individuals," she said.

"The situation facing emerging artists is already very

difficult but if you want to show your work, you need to apply for a new works grant. This is usually about \$20,000. But this is what it costs for a normal low-budget exhibition, for a decent catalogue and other basics.

“If an artist is unable to get a grant then they can’t exhibit and obviously their ability to develop—to become known and go on to better things—is seriously hampered. How are emerging artists supposed to develop if they can’t get their work out there?”

Kevin Hopkins has worked in film, television and theatre for over two decades, including as a member of the Australian Shakespeare Company. He was until recently the head of acting at GOTAFE Regional Academy of Dramatic Arts.

“The budget is going to seriously hit independent companies and individuals,” he said. “This is disturbing because it means those on the bottom end of the scale, those who are already struggling to keep their heads above water, will be hamstrung and silenced. But it’s this part of theatre that’s often the most creative, experimental and challenging; it’s where differing opinions are more easily expressed and where artistically and politically critical and dissenting statements are made.

“The government’s decision to increase corporate sponsorship of the arts is an obvious move for further arts funding cuts and to offload any responsibility for this by the government. It’s very difficult to be an independent and politically critical artist if your work is sponsored by the corporate sector.

“There are lots of small independent theatre companies in Melbourne who are completely dependent on small grants to survive. Many of them will go under. The Australian Shakespeare Company that I work with has never been funded by the government in its 30-year existence. It’s received a couple of tour grants but no on-going funding.

“I applied for a small theatre grant for a play I wrote called *The Container*, which is about asylum seekers and is staged in a shipping container. I didn’t receive any funding.

“Abbott’s recent claims that the arts sector has been spared sounds like he’s setting us up for even more severe cuts. What can be done about all this? I think the first thing is to understand that it’s not just the Abbott government but part of a breakdown in the profit

system. If Labor was in power it would be doing the same thing.”



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