

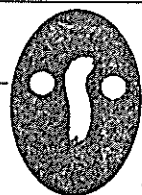
# A dearth of gladiators for the forum series

THE Melbourne Festival Forum series is basically a good idea. But if you are expecting Christians versus lions, a savage time with the spears and the fangs, look elsewhere. The George Fairfax Studio is no Coliseum.

Yesterday the festival's artistic director, Richard Wherrett, faced a quiet, attentive audience. Mr Wherrett and his interrogator, Chris Westwood, head of arts for ABC Radio (the forums are being broadcast), sat in two black chairs at the front of the blood-red 'History of the Tango' set. Ms Westwood asked short, well-phrased questions; Mr Wherrett gave short, well-phrased answers. It was all rather polite.

The most provocative question came from a member of the audience who suggested that, instead of the Spain-and-the-Americas theme, the festival should look more to its heavier-populated local ethnic groups, such as Melbourne's Greek community, for inspiration. He suggested dropping Paul Bangay's 'Botanica' and use the money to build a "long-term, outdoor venue" for specialist culture.

Mr Wherrett replied that there was some criticism that this festival did not cover other ethnic groups. "Il Globo" called the festival 'the worm', I think. They weren't too happy about the lack



## FESTIVAL NOTEBOOK

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of Italian content." He agreed there should be more indigenous works. "But that does not mean discontinuing 'Botanica'. I think the two things should be considered together."

Mr Wherrett, by the way, does not believe the festival has a theme. "I prefer the word 'bias'," he said. Of his "journey into the unknown" (mentioned in the festival brochure), he said he has discovered various things, including "that the tango is not flashy, but serious, deeply felt, darkly emotional and political", and, "That we have to adapt to and enjoy the weather, which I can only describe as crisp."

He paid tribute to those hardy-hearted people who sat *outside* at Southgate, and also to Melbourne audiences. "Perhaps Melbourne considers and debates ideas to a greater range, depth, intensity and passion than Sydneysiders."

WEDNESDAY'S visual-arts forum, 'Vocalising the Visual', was livelier. Three

local arts practitioners described their vision for the visuals.

Curator and writer Juliana Enberg said she did not intend to "unpick the hem of Balenciaga or fixate on prisms turning" but to look to future MIFAs and what they could do.

"The issue of visual arts within the festival is undoubtedly always going to be a vexed one — the visual arts in their serious and sometimes esoteric mode do not make the stuff of gasp and clap... How do you allow the visual arts their rightful place amidst other cultural activities? How do you bring the visual arts into focus without resorting to kitschery, wizzbangery and erasure of content?" Ms Enberg said.

Painter and Victorian College of the Arts lecturer Philip Hunter also acknowledged the difficulties of producing comprehensive, challenging and accessible visual arts events. "In the brochure I read about the festival's desire to build on its tradition of excellence — this festival is six years old and more realistically it might be argued that some very firm foundations have been laid and these might assist the people of the city to create a tradition of excellence in the future. The visual arts component as yet does not enjoy the benefits of those six years... 1992 was the very first time it was

formally allocated a budget percentage."

Sculptor Gale Hastings emphasised the importance of a visual arts program that spoke to the artists and to the viewers. Ms Enberg said MIFA did not have a clear identity for its visual arts. "That is not to say thousands of people haven't flocked to frocks or meandered through stately groves... In the area of visual arts MIFA at present falls between the stools of popularity and culture... It should not fall between those two places but stand on them and build upon them."

"Before we can truly have an international festival of the arts we must determine whether Melbourne will be a passive or active site; a place where a travelling carnival of other people's cultural sideshows get positioned or a place which... allows a maturation of local culture which can be viewed as international in breadth and approach," she said.

"I believe MIFA's visual arts component should get out of the National Gallery of Victoria and become a celebration of Melbourne's hundreds of art and cultural sites. MIFA can and should give emphasis to other spaces which create the culture of the city rather than just store it."

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