

Arts Diary

Raymond Gill

THERE'S nothing like a change in government to shake the foundations. Arts Victoria is one such institution undergoing a restructure in the wake of the new Government. Simon Ambrose who was Arts Victoria's general manager for Arts Development and Festivals is no longer there. Only appointed just before the state election, his job has disappeared. However, Deborah Jeffries is acting in that role. Ambrose's departure has come as a shock to some heads of arts organisations who had been making detailed submissions to him. "But he's our lifeblood," exclaimed one company head when told of the change by *The Age*.

But the inevitable uncertainty that comes with changes at the top also creates windows of opportunities for others. Some in visual arts and architecture circles certainly see the change in government as a chance to talk up the possibility of the Government not going ahead with the \$136 million renovation of the National Gallery of Victoria at St Kilda Road.

That project is dependent on the State Government proceeding with the \$96 million promised by the previous Kennett Government. Although NGV director Dr Gerard Vaughan has said he expects the Government to proceed with that funding, both Premier Steve Bracks and Arts Minister Mary Delahunty have not given specific undertakings as yet. In fact, when Bracks recently launched the NGV On Russell premises he waxed lyrical about the NGV's new Federation Square building but only gave a vague reference to Sir Roy Grounds' building on St Kilda Road.

The arguments against the \$136 million renovation are several. The first is cost — \$136 million is a significant amount for a renovation. (Compare this to \$145 million for Canberra's new National Museum of Australia and \$110 million for Melbourne's new Commonwealth Law Courts, which contains 40 courtrooms.)

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Then there is the argument that the amount of extra space the renovation will bring is only 20 per cent. The claims of the NGV doubling its exhibition space largely refer to the Federation Square building. Then there are the aesthetic arguments, with many in academic architectural circles claiming the renovation will effectively destroy the integrity of the 1968 building. Some architects argue the NGV is one of the best examples of brutalist architecture in the world. As one leading Melbourne architect told *The Age*: "If this was a Victorian building of a similar scale there's no way they would be building new walls inside it or touching it at all. There's a lack of respect for modernist buildings. That they could tamper with one of the finest buildings in Victoria and one of the finest brutalist buildings in the world is outrageous. If you look at books on world architecture Australia usually only gets two mentions — for the Sydney Opera House and the NGV at St Kilda Road."

Meanwhile, those organisations that will occupy the new Malthouse Plaza development initiated by the Kennett Government are waiting for the go-ahead by the new leaders. The building, next door to Playbox, will house Chunky Move, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, storage for Playbox and a sculpture garden. Premier Kennett drove a hard bargain on that project and wanted it to be delivered for \$6.9 million but the cost is now \$9 million. It was expected to be completed by early 2000 but now looks as if this will be early 2001 once the Government approves it — which is expected. Tenders have been called for the project but are now on hold.

In the meantime, Chunky Move has booked the National Theatre, St Kilda, for performances in the second half of 2000. ■