A richer tapestry of many identities*

What it means to be Australian is harder to define than ever in these complex, shifting times

I’ve been looking into what it means to be an Australian all my life. As one of a group of young playwrights who came to prominence in the early 1970s, our group mission, in so far as we articulated it, was to investigate the “Australian identity”.

In an interview I gave in London in 1973, I was quoted as saying: “There is an awful Australian uniqueness, and for the first time the Australian theatre is getting down to the business of finding out what it is.” A bit of an overstatement, perhaps, but we did see ourselves as exploring the darker side of Australian life, albeit in a satirical way. Australia’s chauvinism, materialism, conservatism and suburban conformity were put under the microscope, but even as I was savaging such tendencies in my plays, I found my country endearing as well as horrific. In those days there was a sense that the whole population shared common characteristics — our black, sardonic humour, our energy, our directness and our hatred of pretentiousness — that could be thought of as typically Australian.

Then, at a literary dinner at the start of the 1980s, the articulate, scathingly witty, but sternly moral journalist, David Marr, scolded us all for our preoccupation with “Australian identity”. He said there was no such thing. What we had been calling the “Australian identity” was nothing more than the Anglo-Celtic identity and a middle-class, heterosexual version of it, to boot. We were, in fact, a country of many identities: Aboriginal, gay, ethnic, feminist, working class, rural and dozens of others. There was no overall “Australian-ness”, and to claim we were trying to find it was naïvety at best, and arrogance at worst.

I slunk away and tried to find reasons to include feminist lesbian Greeks and rural Aboriginals in my plays, but quickly decided that it was probably better that they wrote their own plays, which they promptly did, and Australian theatre has been all the richer for it. The lesson I learned is that when one tries to make sense of a topic like “what it means to be Australian”, one has to tread warily. If you’re trying to find it was naivety at best, and arrogance at worst.

If I were writing about this issue at the start of the 1960s, I could truthfully say that being an Australian meant facing major bushfires. If you’re an Australian, it means working harder and longer and having a more uncertain future than your parents had; and if you’re an Australian over 60 and in good health, it apparently means a galloping increase in pollution and environmental degradation.

Humans as a species are very sensitive to their relative status in a community. We don’t just want to be loved, but also respected and noticed. So part of what it means to be an Australian these days is working longer hours, experiencing more stress and suffering increasing rates of depression in order to purchase the symbols of success which will make one feel respected. Forty years ago, a 120 m² house was considered quite acceptable for a family. Now it has to be double that size before one feels adequate.

The single most important measure in the political governance of most countries remains the rate of growth of gross national product (GNP), implicitly maintaining the fiction that increased consumption equals increased happiness; this despite the fact that galloping GNPs also mean a galloping increase in resource consumption and a galloping rate of increase in pollution and environmental degradation.

What it means to be an Australian varies widely. Being a rural Australian last year meant experiencing the worst drought on record, living with more uncertainty and hardship than city Australians, thanks to El Niño. Being an Australian in many areas meant facing major bushfires. If you’re a Muslim Australian, it means being under suspicion; if you’re a female executive, it means not being as well paid as your male counterpart. If you’re second-generation Greek Australian, it means being able to send up your Greek-ness and love it at the same time. If you’re a young Australian, it means working harder and longer and having a more uncertain future than your parents had; and if you’re an Australian over 60 and in good health, it apparently means that you’re happier (as a group) than anyone else.

So was the magisterial David Marr right after all? Is the “Australian identity” a fantasy? When I find myself laughing at the truly appalling Kath and Kim, I can’t help feeling that, for all our preening and pretensions on the world stage, there’s still a bit of that awful Australian uniqueness around. And any country that can laugh at its own awfulness can’t be all that bad.

One of the really good things about this country is that we remain, by and large, the world’s most successful experiment in multiculturalism. With our Muslims and Aboriginals, we have a long way to go, but there is more intermarriage between ethnic minorities and Anglo-Celts here than in any other comparable country, indicating that the long-lived racial ghettos of America are not going to happen here.

I don’t think it’s a matter of the Anglo-Celts absorbing and dominating minority groups, but a genuine interaction in which the social centre of gravity will shift to a new and

original position. The personal perspectives by doctors from migrant backgrounds, Yu (page 598), Houssami (page 595) and Santoro (page 600), reflect these changing dynamics. If the world manages to avoid travelling down its present road to long-term disaster, we might well have one of the most interesting countries in the world here, in time.

I’m alarmed at the way the world is heading — greed and envy pushing us towards what could be an eventual terrible reckoning. And I’m alarmed that we’re such an enthusiastic little helper in the whole process. But when I look around the world at the other options, I’m still rather glad I’m here and hold an Australian passport.

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From Beirut to Sydney: backyards, breast cancer, and basic opportunity

Finding a niche and fulfilment in Australia

WHEN THE MJA contacted me about writing a “perspective”, I was initially delighted, thinking that it would be related to my research in breast cancer testing. When the word “personal” entered the discussion, I hesitated, then agreed — I owe that much to my mother, my teachers, and Priscilla. My migrant background has, in many ways, given me a broad perspective of what a community is, and I have grown up comfortable with seizing the best of different cultures. At 38 years of age, I tend to see life as a series of challenges and opportunities, and I feel very fortunate that, in Australia, I have always had sufficient support to make the most of these.

My twin brother Hadi and I were born in Beirut, Lebanon, into a relatively wealthy family, the youngest of six children. I guess one could say we had everything — loving parents, private schools, and a huge apartment in the heart of Beirut. There was never any plan to migrate to another country.

When I was about 6 or 7 years old, things started to go wrong with my parents’ health. First, my mother, then in her early thirties, developed renal failure that rapidly deteriorated, necessitating a transfer to Melbourne under the care of a Dr Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, with a view to transplantation. She was supposed to return soon after, but never did. Then, within about 8 months, my father suffered a heart attack and died. I was later to hear from my mother about her wonderful Australian renal physician, who had treated her kindly and broken the news of my father’s death to her while holding her hand. Because of my mother’s very favourable experience with her medical care, she naturally wanted to remain where she had received her transplant, and it was decided that we would join her in Australia.

It was to be another 3 years before we were reunited with my mother. It was a painful time, and, while we were looked after by various members of my mother’s family, my oldest sister Sahar (then aged only 13 years) had responsibility for taking care of “the twins”. The cost of care for six children during that time consumed nearly all our resources.

When I arrived in Sydney, aged almost 11 years, I thought that this was the most wonderful place in the world (and still do), although I could not speak a word of English. There seemed to be an abundance of everything, plus a backyard with pets! In retrospect, being reunited with my mother was what largely influenced my view of my new country. I found most things easy to learn and, having had a bilingual education (I spoke fluent French and Arabic at the time), English was a relatively easy language for me to learn. By the end of my first year at school, I was communicating well, had made a few friends, and was topping my class in science. At school, and to a much lesser extent at university, there was the inevitable taunting, and the occasional “wog” labelling. It rarely affected me, and in many instances I chose to ignore it.