

FOREIGN EXPERIENCES OF AN INVETERATE EXPATRIATE

Karl Phillips

Over the many years living outside Australia, I have come across the occasional difference in culture, language, ethnicity and behaviour. Norms in one country are frowned upon in another, and absolutely should not even be considered in many others. We have all experienced the idiosyncratic in others in one way or another. The following lines are just a few of the many revelations and experiences that I found in the communities and societies that I have lived within since leaving Australia in 1964.

1. Endurances

Endurances, what are these you may ask? Well apart from being miles away from one's family, friends and country and odd feeling of being homesick, an expatriate has to endure a great many other things. Slings and arrows are the least of it. The most common endurance is, of course, to be questioned by a local national so, 'when are you going back' (this is when just have just arrived), or 'why are you still here' (as if you, having been here a couple of years, are now blocking the air waves and would you kindly remove yourself). That one particularly applied when I was much younger. Now it's 'do you go back often' and then 'do you ever go back' (you poor bugger, you're a cast-off). You have gradually entered the realm of being neither here nor there, so to speak. By this time, you have become fairly well acquainted with the local culture and are quietly accepted by your co-workers, that's if you are still working! You are certainly aware of the latest tawdry marital details of tabloid celebrities without consciously wishing to know. But even so there continues to exist this difference between them and us. It's something to do with what makes you, but it's also something that makes you intrinsically Aussie. For some of us, and that included me, it's because we continue to hold on to memories of one's life spent in Australia, however many years ago that may have been. It's the generator of nostalgia and it's part of what keeps you going.

2. Keeping in touch

Some of us try to keep in touch with Australian culture. One way is by seeing the occasional Aussie movie shown at London's Australia House by the Australian

Film Society. This is when many of us bump into other lost souls in search of a country. The pre-film drink with snacks and nibbles allows us old-timers to search out the regulars to have a chat, but not without noticing the new fresh faces milling around the bar. Those newcomers that are here today just for the one screening and soon drifting through. Many of the movies shown do not make it to general release in England, being, shall we say politely, 'for home consumption only'. Nevertheless, these movies, however parochial, do contain dialogue, locations and social interaction that we can all identify with. Scenes that contain sign posts to our past. Occasionally we get a 'blockbuster' like 'Pricilla, Queen of the Desert', 'Strictly Ballroom' or 'Muriel's Wedding'. On the whole, these types of films are very occasional and shown way after general release! It's mostly to do with the local distributors meanness and the high cost of copy rental. A recent addition to the evening's programme occurs just before the screening and only after the chattering and laughing audience, having some of us, just consumed the best part of half a bottle of red or white. This is the picking of the lucky winner of the real estate prize draw. It's a raffle of a sort, you win a couple of bottles of wine and in return you get pestered to visit a London hotel to hear how advantageous it be for you to own a piece of Melbourne real estate, located as I remember, in South Yarra. Some are even talked into buying an apartment, and owning a piece of property is, I suppose, one way of remaining in touch.

Others attend lectures given by the staff and visiting experts at the Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at the University of London. Among the occasions when I was able to attend, there was a book launch for Les Murray's poetry and he read a number them from the volume. Now if Les Murray doesn't summon up some memory or some place in your past in Australia. His prose and poetry make it almost seem possible to reach out and touch Australia.

There was also a book launch for Tom Keneally's book about the Irish diaspora, 'The Great Shame', which was certainly the most attended event that I have been to there. Many of the London literati were said to there, not that I can remember them by name.

A book launch that had some controversy about the subject matter was Peter Carey's 'The True Story of the Kelly Gang'. Peter read quite a few passages from it, including the letters written by Ned to his wife. These letters throw a completely different light on the man. The social situation makes the man turn to crime or so one feels from these lines. One begins to feel compassion for him and his family. He becomes after all just human being trying to survive injustice, and not the rebellious mythological icon we grew up with. Certain people back in Australia were not happy with that book.

A semi-professional theatre company, 'The Blue Tongue Company', a few years ago would give play readings in the Downer Room at Australia House. They were enjoyable evenings and a real insight in new playwriting in Australia. One evening I cannot forget, though I forget the name of the play, though it was something to do with Pacific Time Zones. Anyway, someone in cast had a friend who came along to see her. The friend was Kylie Minogue, who was going through a bald patch in her career at the time. At least that's what I told. No one seemed to notice her, which wouldn't be the same today, would it.

3. Careers

For many arriving from Oz in search of job experience, life change, enlightenment, adventure or plain fun, England or Britain represented and still represents an ideal destination and base camp. Entry and residency, certainly for the short-term working holiday, is still relatively easy. Yes it is, and the language and culture is almost recognisable, apart the occasional word or cliché in an unintelligible accent. When I first came here, it wasn't direct from Oz, but via Denmark. I came over partly for economic reasons (I wasn't making much money as a teaching assistant at the Royal Academy School of Architecture in Copenhagen, full-time employment was practically non-existent). My parents had moved to London, so going over there, after living in Denmark for seven years, was made just a little easier. It was still a quite wrench though, as I had formed deep ties with that little country; I'd even married a Dane. Professionally, I had re-qualified as a Danish architect by going back to school. Working in Copenhagen from the beginning, I had formed close and lasting friendships with my colleagues. In fact I was accepted as a fellow professional of equal standing and a surrogate Dane to boot. Yes, it was a quite wrench to leave. Working in England at the same level was not so easy. It was hard to make headway at the start, against xenophobia and a distrust of the professional visitors and immigrants and one of somewhat leftist social political views. I had certain ideas about the role and responsibility of the architect in society. That was one of the lasting legacies I took with me across the North Sea. I still have it.

4. The London scene (in more ways than one)

Eventually after changing jobs a few times, I found the right job with local authority department, where the architects and engineers had similar views about providing better state-funded housing and recreational and social facilities. Many of my colleagues were resident in the borough, so we often socialized after work, including house and garden parties. But working in suburbs did have its downside; it tended to cut down on going to the West end for new movies, theatre and concerts.

Any cultural activity, like going to the theatre, which I particularly enjoyed, was something of an effort to arrange, because of travel involved. But in the beginning when I had just arrived, I found myself getting totally immersed in theatre. So much so, that I enrolled at a local drama school, the Mountview Drama School in Crouch End, Hornsey, for evening classes. My first year I was in the stage management class and this set me up for the acting course I was to do for the following two years. In stage management I got such an understanding of what goes into producing and running a theatre. It isn't just about the props, the lighting and the sound. It was also fun, that is unless one made a cock-up with the lighting sequence during a performance. The following year, I started acting classes. I guess I'd had always wanted to tread the boards; I tried it at school in Julius Caesar. But at drama school, this desire to be a thespian came in the shape of a whole lot of hard work. There were interminable speech, dance and singing exercises and then the rehearsals. As I remember it, two weeks before first night, we had rehearsals were every evening after work. That meant getting back to my place from Euston, so I could drive to the school. Sometime the rehearsals could get a little heated and ratty with frustration. Fafs and forgetting lines were common, due of the repeated efforts to get the dialogue, the mood and action right. I stayed with the school for two years and acted in a few productions, including the old guy in the cemetery in Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town', Ted Hughes's translation of Sophocles's 'Oedipus Rex', Becketts' 'Krapp's Last Tape'. For the latter I had to pretend that I was peeing in a bucket. There not being a toilet on stage. Missed one show after sustaining a broken arm during rehearsals for Tennessee William's 'A Streetcar named Desire'. That was more or less the end of my association with the school. I tried out at some of the amateur repertory companies in the area and even got an audition for a musical, which I think was for a Gilbert and Sullivan production, but nothing came it. Leaving the school, where I had formed a bond with the other students in my class, was painful, but we all had to go. Some went on to greater things. One or two became well known in TV, one a fixture in 'EastEnders', the other an occasional senior police superintendent in the odd crime series, because of his fruity upper class accent. It would appear that all officers below the rank of superintendent do not have a private school and Oxbridge university education and do not speak like the Queen. He and I did not bond well. He came over a little like a colonial district commissioner, if you know what I mean. We suffered each other for the sake of the play. In the end, the plays the thing and we are merely actors.



Karl Phillips is a divorced architect, originally from North Sydney, NSW. A year after graduation he moved to North America, working in both Canada and the US, first West and later East Coast. He interrupted his stay in Montreal to study the French language in Paris 1967/68. After returning to Canada for a short stay, Karl Phillips moved permanently to Europe. Eventually settled, he married and divorced in Denmark. He has no children. Graduate studies in Copenhagen in the late 70's. Resident in London, apart from graduate studies in Massachusetts in 1987, since 1979. Presently working for the US government. Enjoys opera, theatre, art, good food and wine and travelling in Europe, preferably with friends.

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