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'Lunch with new Powerhouse CEO Lisa Havilah'

By Linda Morris

(photographs not downloaded)

The Powerhouse's CEO is ambitious for herself and for the institution.

Even before we meet at the Dolphin Hotel on Crown Street, lunch with Lisa Havilah comes with a warning.

The NSW election is four weeks away and the new chief executive of the Powerhouse Museum is mindful of caretaker conventions that public servants avoid political commentary on sticky subjects. "I have my instructions," she grins as she peruses the menu of Italian classics with a modern twist. Off limits are musings around the white-hot political controversy of a polarising arts policy: the Berejiklian government's planned relocation of the Powerhouse Museum to western Sydney (subject this week to scathing criticism from the upper house inquiry), but she can talk about the job itself, regarded as a poisoned chalice by just about everyone except Havilah.

By the time former director Dolla Merrillees left the museum, after falling on the wrong side of public sentiment with a fashion ball that cost more than it raised, Havilah had been almost eight years at Carriageworks, the longest she had spent in any job. The opportunity to lead the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences was, as she tells it, too good to refuse.

No sleeping on it. No second thoughts. If Havilah was sounded out first by Arts Minister Don Harwin, she's not saying. "I'm ambitious for my institution and I'm ambitious for myself. Sometimes I think people think it's not OK for women to say they are ambitious and it's an important thing to say." Given her success at Carriageworks, her collaborative management style, risky but popular programming decisions, entrepreneurial approach to the arts and familiarity with western Sydney and the regional arts scene, Havilah was not a surprise choice to lead the Powerhouse.

At the Campbelltown Arts Centre and the Casula Powerhouse she engaged audiences and new creatives by forging deep connections with the diverse communities those institutions served, and then turned the old railway yards of Carriageworks into a vibrant inner city cultural hub with a curatorial program rich in music, film, conceptual and installation art, dance, food, and fashion. The December launch of Carriageworks's 2019 Artistic Program which includes a diverse line-up of 900 artists across 86 projects and including 36 new Australian commissions stood as her farewell party.

"Cry? Oh my God, did I cry," she says. "The consistent renewal of leadership is critical to institutions like Carriageworks and I've always said six or eight years is the right time. Fortunately, I had somewhere to go." Her impeccable connections within the creative and corporate world - those the government hopes will underpin partnerships to lift the museum's profile and bottom line - is evident in her choice of the Dolphin's dining room for a Friday lunch. The hotel's creative force is Maurice Terzini, who curated Italo Dining and Disco at Carriageworks during Vivid Sydney 2015. Terzini's executive chef is Monty Koludrovic, from the Bondi's Icebergs, who was "super supportive" of the Carriageworks Farmers' Market.

Havilah is easy company, that combination of country girl pragmatism and affability, clear-sighted ambition and meticulous mind, suffused with an acute sense of civic responsibility and public service she says was ingrained by her parents and her years directing local-government-funded arts bodies.

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"I like working with people. I definitely want to collaborate whether it's with the creative industries, staff, government. Leading an institution is a collaborative process unto itself. I believe in decisions and hierarchy." Across the dozen and more articles I have written about the Powerhouse Museum, Havilah's predecessor was never available for interview and yet five weeks into the job, Havilah is perusing the menu with me, liking the day's special of zucchini flowers and suggesting we share it as entree. Wine? "I'll have a glass if you do." We end up having two.

Insiders point out that Havilah is a very different leader than her two immediate predecessors, whom they say seemed uninterested in the experience learned by long-serving staff. While their remit seemed largely to draw a line under the past, Havilah has shown genuine interest in curatorial expertise within MAAS and she professes to be surprised and delighted by the depth of experience and commitment. But museum staff are also girding themselves for change. Tristan Sharp, director of programs and engagement, has already announced his departure - for unrelated personal reasons, says Havilah. Post-election, there are rumours of another restructure, and staff are distrustful of new ministerial appointees to the MAAS Trust. "Staff are always generous with their faith that a good leader will eventually come," said one.

Will that be Havilah? The museum's fourth leader in six years is not the first to grapple with the idea of what a museum means in the 21st century. The Powerhouse is the custodian of a vast collection of half a million objects representing Australia's past and future, and Havilah wants it to have coherence and speak to a generation of cultural consumers to come, wherever the museum is based.

"With Carriageworks I was starting from a blank slate, there was its history as one of the first places that employed Aboriginal people and it was the place that many newly arrived migrants to Australia got their first job, whereas with the Powerhouse it's about renewal and how do you respect its legacy and history."

Her team along with Create Infrastructure has developed the architectural brief for an international architectural competition at the Parramatta site criticised by Greens MP David Shoebridge for giving scant attention to the museum's precious collection - which only goes ahead if the Coalition wins majority government and was damned by the inquiry for its scant regard of the collection - while starting the digitisation of the Powerhouse's world-renowned collection, the first such project attempted in Australia.

It will be 2020 before we see how Havilah influences exhibitions and commissions but I get a sense that the new CEO does not think the blockbuster model of imported shows is the best fit for MAAS. She's interested in stirring public conversations about ourselves and gives the example of Australia's changing urban environment, and how the museum might, for example, show life in a far hotter, sunburnt country "I'd like to see us really focus on investing and creating great exhibitions that are driven by the institution and its collection. The opportunities sit in not just one discipline but looking at shows that bring a number of disciplines together through one idea, across film, fashion, health and design."

Our main course of Randall Family risotto of spring pea and prawn soon arrives, a pretty sea green display on the plate. For dessert we try Zokoko chocolate tiramisu, two spoons to share an Italian favourite that looks as if Terzini's nonna had made it fresh that day.

Havilah was born in Grafton, brought up on a farm near Berry, her father Euie, a research agronomist with the NSW Department of Agriculture, her mother Lyn, a ceramicist. Her first job was working as a strapper of horses for a country and western singer and she raised Australian Illawarra Shorthorn cattle while president of Berry Rural Youth Club. At a public high school she felt so

disengaged she missed out on university entry. "I failed," she says and then instantly corrects herself. "I didn't do so well." It disappointed her father who had ambitions for his bright, eldest child of three. She studied art at TAFE, then painting and creative writing at the University of Wollongong also starting a law degree mostly for her father's sake.

By then, she had met her husband-to-be Glenn Barkley, a former senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia now represented by Sullivan + Strumpf, but then a young contemporary artist and ceramicist a year below her at university. They helped set up and run an artists' space in an old kitchen warehouse. For these young creatives, it was the usual story of trying to find a backdoor to break into the art world. "It's not easy being a creative, making work, particularly sustaining a career over a long period of time," Havilah says, a concern that has long underpinned her commissions.

Turns out she was a better arts administrator than abstract painter. The art school undergraduate got a youth art skills grant of \$2000, begged \$10,000 from council and convinced BHP to give \$5000. "For three years I worked nights at the local seafood restaurant and days at the gallery. Even though it was on such a small scale I just loved creating exhibitions and working out how to survive. It was like constant pressure all the time to pay the rent and sell art and support that organisation to develop but I just knew that was what I wanted to do."

Once she secured government funding for a full-time manager, the first regional art space to do so, Havilah took the job of assistant director of the Casula Powerhouse, and stayed for six years, flipping the traditional model of the sterile gallery, finding audiences and creatives among Islander and Asian communities; using art and culture to build social cohesion. "Life is not siloed," she says. While in her next role at Campbelltown Arts Centre she helped organise the 2006 wake for lawyer John Marsden, buried with his rosary beads, a couple of bottles of whisky, a phial of amyl nitrate and a marijuana joint.

Two years ago she was "project co-ordinator" of her brother John's wedding. John has Down syndrome and lives independently with his wife Glenda, who also has a disability. "My mum and dad were so amazing; they insisted on mainstream education [for John] and at that time it was a new thing and they fought really hard for that. They had such high expectations of him and supporting him to be the best he can be." She pauses and gathers herself. "Sorry, I'm not sure why I'm upset. They never treated him as a person with a disability. I was totally protective as a sister. He's a fantastic artist as well, he's a painter and does drawings, very intricate drawings, he's shown in all these exhibitions."

Havilah has taken on the role of navigating the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) on behalf of the couple. "On one hand, it's this wonderful resource that will positively impact my brother's life forever, it's incredible, but it has taken all of our minds and resources to access it. "It's a question; how are people who aren't supported accessing the resources? The level of administration around it ... the auditing, the assessing and getting through a range of different processes and how it works with service providers, there is so many layers to that." Inclusion is more than a once-a-year workshop, she says, needing to happen across every institution. "If you love someone living with a disability it does shift your perspective. It is not an equal world."

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/lunch-with-new-powerhouse-ceo-lisa-havilah-20190222-p50zoc.html>