

POWER AND GARDENS FOR THE PEOPLE

Athens can teach us a lot about real democracy – not the weasel democracy practised so often, British classics scholar Robin Lane Fox tells Kevin Chinnery.



Few historians of Alexander the Great can have known what it was really like to charge with massed ranks of Macedonian cavalry into a line of Persian war elephants.

Robin Lane Fox leapt at the chance to ride as an extra in Oliver Stone's 2004 film, *Alexander*. Here was insight into the business of world conquest that a library full of books could not quite provide: "I learned bloodlust," grins the recently retired Reader in Ancient History at Oxford. "And I learned about complete disregard for risk if you are in a group of like-minded people doing the same."

Stone made the film after reading Lane Fox's 1973 biography of the legendary ruler, published when the author was just 27 years old.

"The same age as Alexander, and only slightly less conceited," he says. Critics still call it the most epic and influential academic work on Alexander's life to be written in the past few decades.

We are at the Botanic Gardens Restaurant in Sydney, around the corner from where, the previous evening, we had both relived ancient Greece at the award of the second Lysicrates Prize.

It's a play-writing contest in which the audience votes on the first acts of three new Australian plays – just as ancient Athenians did at the famed Great Dionysia festival where the iconic Greek dramas were first acted.

The prize revives all the Athenian ideals: a democratic vote for new, locally written, frontline drama. But it's not some faux recreation of the classical world either. It's a reminder, for one thing, that this year's winning playwright, Mary Rachel Brown, would, as a woman, have barely existed in the public life of ancient Athens.

The prize is the brainchild of Sydney art patrons John and Patricia Azarias, whom Lane Fox first "met" through the letters page of Britain's *Financial Times*. He thinks that the idea would transplant very well to London – particularly while it still has a mayor in Boris Johnson, who breaks into Homer at the drop of a hat.

But he's intensely curious about how much these things depend in Australia on private philanthropy and the energy of people like the Azarias. Mrs Thatcher, he says, removed the British state from all sorts of things it should be doing – such as the arts, which now depend on City money and American expatriates. His successor at Oxford, too, will be measured on his fund-raising skills.

"It has become absolutely loathsome and it's not the British way" – waving away the idea that it's middle-class welfare. He does not use the public health system that he is taxed for, he snorts, "but I am absolutely delighted it exists". The same should apply to universities and theatres, too.

His talk is as sharp and precise as his appearance is not, arriving in an unmatched jacket and an ancient tie he is glad to quickly remove on this humid Saturday afternoon. He easily slips into running an Oxford tutorial: his answers frequently end with a question of his own ("would you like to be a politician?"), then leaning forward slightly for the deadly "why do you say that?" as I finish my reply.

It's 20 minutes before we slow the conversation enough to order any drinks (a glass of sav blanc each), and 40 minutes before we get around to ordering lunch (rack of lamb for both of us).

"What has the theatre meant in your life?" he asks. Er, not so much, prefer opera, I say, having seen slightly more of it. He isn't letting me get away with that. "Well, this is one of the things we are trying to change ... I do smile wryly at the amount of money that is spent on the opera. In the theatre, you are in the real living heart of human dilemmas," he says with emphasis. "It can be a struggle. The opera is a quicker notion to fix."

So why did the Athenians, alone of all the ancient peoples, feel this need to act out among themselves all the problems of life and society – plays where everything that can go wrong does go wrong?

"There was a diffused ideal of equality and shared humanity, at least among the male citizens," he says, even if there were gulfs in wealth. "They voted on everything they did. They lived in a legal culture and argued about action and responsibility. They debated during their dramas about what was right or wrong."

"It's too simplistic to see the theatre as just an exploration of a democratic city. But there was an interrelationship between their everyday life as citizens and the way the dramas unfold."

Lane Fox loathes modern professional politicians and bureaucrats, "the self-aggrandising coterie of experts ... what bollocks they talk, and what lunatic decisions". He thinks that technology can bring back the participatory democracy of Athens. "The digital revolution has made possible much more direct democracy than politicians are prepared to contemplate ... The more you ask people, the more intelligent and reflective they become."

"People can take a lot on board. It is absolutely not true that referendums lead to pig-headed mob rule ... that's a myth peddled by politicians and the commentating classes."

"One of the fallacies is that you call something democratic when it has just a little bit of democracy. You learn from studying Greek that this is weasel language. The Athenians understood the truth. The Romans took one look at democracy and said, 'we are not having this' – managed to redefine it as if it were mad, or preferably guided by a few utter and complete shits like Caesar or Pompey."

But isn't the world already full of terrifying populists with easy answers? "You are



Robin Lane Fox loathes today's "self-aggrandising" professional politicians. PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER PEARCE

It is absolutely not true that referendums lead to pig-headed mob rule.



already being too scared. People aren't fools. They think 'what's in it for us?' The Athenians took tough decisions, too, he says. "The more they had to, the better they got at it."

Lane Fox is one of the many people who joined the British Labour Party to vote for its new far-left leader Jeremy Corbyn, in his case in order to wreck the party. He refuses to vote Tory because of "bloody student loans which make it doubly impossible for young people to buy property".

This is of keen professional concern to Lane Fox who, since 1970, has been the popular gardening columnist of the *Financial Times*. When he is not divining new meanings into Alexander the Great or St Augustine, he is answering emails from homesick expat bankers in Singapore who want to talk about their witch hazel shrubs in Surrey.

Now he fears a "cultural disaster" if young people don't experience their own gardens until middle age, and is campaigning to have more common garden spaces created in Britain. "It hugely matters, when I think of the stability, and range of interests, and alertness to the world that gardening has given me."

We talk cricket. He has seen Miller, Lindwall, Lillee and Thomson in his time – but thinks Shane Warne and Mitchell Johnson top the lot. He does not believe in the afterlife, he says, "but I occasionally have a dreadful thought as I go to sleep. I'll die, and the next words I hear are, 'well bowled, Warnie; Mitch, you're next'."

There is great respect for Australian classical scholarship, too.

"You see people trying to airbrush ancient languages out of the system. They are meant to be too difficult, so people are writing about Homer when they are reading him in Penguin translation. Not here. It's properly done, and people are properly trained. My cohort from Oxford and Cambridge are very, very impressed by it."

He views history as he does politics: "Above all, it must be accessible."

He approves of popular history, but dislikes both the lofty specialists and the

dumbers-down, who assume the public cannot understand anything. "The past was made by us. No more than our political life should it be shaped by a minority cabal. My experience of the general reader is they are a damn sight sharper than those who have never met one realise. This is not some strange mystique so complicated you can't understand."

He is reading Robert Harris' Roman political thriller *Imperium* and admits startling the people breakfasting at The Australian Club, where he is staying, with loud expressions of delight at Harris' clever guesswork – of which there is much in ancient history – about Cicero's Rome.

"He has the social gradation so brilliantly. These small groups of people who are manipulating vast decisions. It is wonderful. You cannot believe these people are such shits."

He worries about the politicisation of history and its rewriting to suit modern politically correct tastes – such as the campaign against the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford's Oriel College.

"The historian is like the god Janus, with two faces. We can see what those in the past could not see: that the way Aborigines were treated was outrageous, for example. But you have to see how many people were saying that at the time."

"If it was not questioned then, you have to be careful of writing 'presentist' history. At the time, believing something else may not have been an option those people understood."

Morality in history, he warns, is like a travelator at the airport, constantly moving along. It is not an escalator up to some moral high ground on which we can look down on the people of the past.

As we finish, Lane Fox confesses that he lives in the ancient world. Thucydides and Herodotus are companions constantly on his shoulder.

"But it is so easy not to have any sense at all for the totally weird, slightly battered vision of the ancient world that non-scholars have."

I say he needn't worry about the relevance of his work when the President of China himself, Xi Jinping, refers to the "Thucydides trap" – the fear that China and the United States, like Athens and Sparta, are doomed to go to war. We are living out the old dilemmas, we agree. **W**

BOTANIC GARDENS RESTAURANT
Mrs Macquaries Road, Sydney
2 racks of lamb, \$64
Green beans, \$7
Home-made bread, \$2.50
Chocolate tart, \$16
Pannacotta, \$16
2 glasses of Baby Doll sauvignon blanc, \$20
Sparkling water, \$9.50
Tea, \$4
Long black, \$4
Total including surcharges: \$144.43