Item 3.2

Vale Vittorio Bianchi

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

On Tuesday 18 March 2025, Kings Cross lost a strong link to its colourful past with the passing of one its most flamboyant identities, Vittorio Bianchi.

Born in Seiano, a village 37km from Naples in 1934, Vittorio migrated to Australia when he was 14. Arriving in Sydney, he initially lived in Belfield with his uncle, aunt and 2 sisters, Maria and Rosa. His first jobs were in a box factory, working for his uncle at Paddy's Markets, and then as a shoe salesman.

In 1964, the then-owner of the Piccolo, a tiny coffee shop in Rosyln Street, offered him a job. From that moment, Vittorio and the Piccolo would be synonymous. He later became a partner in the business and in 1994 he bought it.

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Kings Cross was the centre of a colourful nightlife, which spilled into the early hours of the following day. Catering to people of all ages and interests, it was supported by a dense and diverse residential population and the guests of the many tower hotels, including the Sebel Town House, which opened in 1963. Les Girls, just up the road on the corner of Darlinghurst Road and Roslyn Street, opened in the same year.

Open 24 hours a day in those years, the Piccolo not surprisingly attracted an eclectic clientele: locals, visitors from the suburbs, celebrities staying at the Sebel, performers of all types looking for somewhere to go after their shows came down.

Among those who drank Vittorio's coffee were Marianne Faithfull, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Gough Whitlam, Reg Livermore, Brett Whiteley, Jeannie Lewis, Noah Taylor, Ben Mendelsohn, Graeme Murphy and me when I was Member for Bligh.

Vittorio was an ebullient if sometimes acerbic host. If you had recently attracted public attention or a small dose of fame, he would make space for you, even if it was already full. If you hadn't been there for a few months, he would likely greet you with: "Where have you been? I thought you were dead!".

He was a natural performer, and spent 5 years training as an actor with Hayes Gordon's Ensemble Studios. Getting work as an actor was however difficult in those days, given his thick Italian accent. He did however perform regularly with Cabaret Conspiracy, a weekly Sunday night event at Garibaldi's in East Sydney in the late 1970s.

The Piccolo was his principal stage. It was here he could perform as himself and enjoy the friendship of many of Sydney's actors and performers.

In 2015 and again in 2016, the Piccolo briefly became a theatre, when it presented Piccolo Tales supported by a City of Sydney grant. Devised by Vashti Hughes, a cabaret performer and a close friend of Vittorio's, it told the story of Kings Cross from the 1950s. Vashti alternated between playing Vittorio and iconic figures from each decade, among them a notorious nightclub boss, a 19-year-old American soldier on R&R during the Vietnam War, a Les Girls star, a nightclub DJ and a young mother.

Vittorio was the other cast member. The Sydney Morning Herald reviewer wrote of his performance "… while the man himself, sitting in his customary window seat, chips in insults, grumbles about the service, and lends his voice to musical numbers which include a hilarious rapped-out list of fashion and social crimes."

The audience was limited to just 20 people for each show – 10 seated inside and 10 sitting outside on the pavement. At its return season in 2016, the audience increased a little, with people sitting on the ledge of the park opposite wearing wi-fi headsets.

In June the following year, the Piccolo closed, brought about by the lockout laws, rising costs and Vittorio's deteriorating health. Its closure was reported by several media outlets, with most recalling its significant past, its clientele and its recent national prominence gained through the TV series, Rake. As one writer noted, "Cleaver Greene, played by Richard Roxburgh, was forever falling out of bed in his tiny flat upstairs and heading downstairs to the Piccolo Bar for something to revive him before a court appearance."

At the time of its closure, Vittorio told the Sydney Morning Herald: "I will miss all the crazy people, all the artists, musicians, writers and politicians that used to come. That was the only coffee shop open at night, all night," he says. "People never wanted to go home."

All the crazy people, the artists, musicians, writers and politicians that once frequented the Piccolo, now are mourning Vittorio's passing. Mingled with this are memories of the Piccolo, its walls covered with photographs, the aromas of minestrone soup and coffee and Vittorio's engaging presence.

With Vittorio's passing, King's Cross has lost a little of its soul.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

(A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Vittorio Bianchi and his significant contribution to Kings Cross and Sydney's show business and show business communities;

(B) Council express its condolences to Vittorio's many friends and family; and

(C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to Vittorio's family.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor