

Laconic Aussie couldn't put it better himself

The American art of public speech-making is yet to be embraced, writes **Julie Perrin**.

MELBOURNE Cup Day and Australia Day mark the anniversaries of Barack Obama's election and inauguration. The President of the United States has given us a goldmine for speech analysis, redolent with echoes of JFK and Martin Luther King. But it's difficult to find Australian counterparts.

We have such a modest heritage of speech-making. Paul Keating, Gough Whitlam and Robert Menzies are in the line-up but why is so little attention given to the art of public speech-making?

In her collection, *Well May We Say . . . The Speeches That*

Made Australia, Sally Warhaft suggests that we are not so interested in the performed word. "Australians do not consider theirs an oral culture. Talk, we believe, is a substitute for action . . . 'rhetoric' is almost always preceded by the adjective 'empty'."

Australian film and television reveals that we are not prone to verbal flourishes. Understatement and biting wit are our strong suits; we speak minimally, with laconic asides, often issued from a narrowly opened mouth.

My first meeting with American exuberance was when I was backpacking in my 20s. A toothy

young American joined a bunch of us in a piazza in Florence. He was wildly excited about an ice-creamery. "Just wait!" he exclaimed, hands wagging at the sides of his face. "Your taste buds are gonna go tap-dancing on your tongue in their party shoes!" I was more struck by the performance than the ice-cream.

When I visited the US recently I wondered if I would find clues about speech-making in everyday speech. Australians have been immersed in American sitcoms for decades and the sensation of walking onto the set is hard to shake off when in America. At first I didn't know whether they were serious or sending themselves up.

From coast to coast I found people who seemed to relish the spoken word. The sultry voice of

an Amtrak Southwest Chief conductor had lulled me into believing the food might be edible. At a function at a library in California I learnt that the librarian had spent the day judging a public speaking competition for state secondary schools. A week later I was on a bus with a woman who was principal of a Boston private school. I asked her about public speaking competitions. "Oh yes, we are hosting an international competition at the moment." It seems they happen all the time.

I noticed verbal felicities on a day-to-day basis. Like most travellers, I often asked directions, not quite understanding and then asking for clarification. I found people patient and highly specific. At Yosemite National Park I did a few laps of the tourist village looking for the

lost and found office. I asked a garage mechanic and he pointed to a building. Impatient to get there I headed off but he remonstrated, "You'll find it a lot easier if you listen!" I have to admit that it's a fair call to someone who can't find the lost and found.

Later I took a walk on the valley floor. There was a performance in progress at an amphitheatre. A child of no more than five was on the stage. His father held a video camera and several other family members sat in the audience. The child recited a poem of several minutes' duration complete with actions. He was rewarded by rapturous applause.

Somehow I think that it would take more than an audience and a camera for Australian children to be so at

home with the performed word. I'm not anxious for us to give up the laconic shrug; performing on cue can sometimes be just too cute.

Thoughtful words delivered in real time to a gathered audience is unforgettable. It begins with a lack of distraction, one human listening to another.

If I had a plan for encouraging public speech it would start at the meal table with the television turned off. It has as much to do with how we listen as how we perform. It need not be about spin and slick delivery — just watch Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush in *The King's Speech*. I'd love to see us fostering the pleasure of beautiful, timely, powerful words. There's nothing like it.

Julie Perrin is a Melbourne writer.