

Queensland Touring Think Tank

Report by John Baylis

The Queensland Touring Think Tank was held at Brisbane Powerhouse on 6 April 2009 as a part of the annual NARPACA conference. Its purpose was to respond to the Queensland Government's Touring Strategy for performing arts 2009–2014 titled *Coming to a Place Near You*. The paper outlined three pathways:

- Growing Audiences – stimulate a demand-driven performing arts touring culture in Queensland
- Easy Touring – simplify Queensland touring systems so that they are easier to use
- Smart Touring – ensure the professional development of the arts sector in performing arts touring

The afternoon began with a presentation by Angharad Wynne-Jones reflecting on her experience running the LIFT Festival in London last year and then imagining a day in the life of a performing arts centre in ten years time (Attachment 1). Participants then formed smaller groups to discuss the following themes: Demand, Partnerships, Simplicity, Size, Scale and Costs and Professional Development. Each group reported back on their discussion, focusing in particular on their top three ideas. A list of participants is at Attachment 2.

What follows is an attempt to capture the voices and ideas within these discussions. Comments have been gathered under the main thematic headings regardless of the working group in which they were made. The top ideas and solutions of the groups themselves are at the end of the document.

Demand

The strategy proposes greater involvement of audiences in deciding what tours. How do we do this? On the one hand, we have many productions that may or may not be ready to tour, and on the other we have complex regional communities that are different from each other and diverse within themselves. Between the two are the touring professionals – presenters, tour coordinators, funders – who try, with varying success, to match the two. It is worth noting the obvious – this is not a free market system. All three layers of government add subsidy at many points: to the making and maintenance of the work, to the construction and operation of venues, and to the touring infrastructure itself. A key question is: where are these subsidies best applied?

The current set-up is predominantly presenter-driven, and some would say is therefore already demand-driven – it is based on the premise that the local presenter is in the best position to know what his or her community wants, and is also well enough connected to the performing arts sector to know what the choices are. Is this true?

To invite the audience into the decision-making means we must ensure that they also know what the choices are. Even fulltime professional presenters have to work hard to stay informed, relying heavily on CyberPaddock, Long Paddock and conversations with colleagues to keep abreast. A website with menus of available work would be a tool for communities but not the complete answer.

A common question was: who will decide what work tours? Which local community members will be consulted, and would it matter if they were the same active volunteers who currently drive things? It is often these people who are the local champions, who make things happen – they are gold and should be treasured. But they can also be gatekeepers who inhibit new thinking.

Presenter-driven touring and community-driven touring are the same thing when presenters have good communication with their communities. An implicit question in many of the discussions was: what is the role of cultural leadership in all this? A community that trusts its local presenter or champion is willing to experience the unfamiliar, to 'go on the journey'. What is cultural leadership and how it can be supported?

There were a number of answers. The need for a commitment to communication was a common theme, expressed variously as:

- an acceptance by all parties that such communication is a shared responsibility of everyone
- the need for more forums for the different parties to talk: communities and presenters, presenters and makers, makers and communities
- the need for the specialised skill of brokerage between parties
- the need for network building.

There was also a call for the state government to be more active in supporting local cultural leadership. The will to listen and to respond is strong, but venue managers often find their local councils do not understand their role. State funding to support curation and developmental programming would assist by giving them leverage within their local hierarchies.

Partnerships

Touring need not be just a show in a venue. Through partnerships, other models can emerge. Some examples of partnerships that were discussed are:

- producers and libraries can work together to create and tour work. QTC is currently doing this with the State Library of Queensland
- partnerships between producers to share work, such as Theatre to the Edge through which the regional theatre companies tour and often co-produce their work
- partnerships with communities: the involvement of community members in a production can greatly increase ownership and attendance
- partnership with local businesses to use non-arts spaces – these can also lessen the barriers to people who would not normally attend a cultural venue
- partnerships between schools and individual artists through residencies and workshop programs. Schools, like libraries, are already community hubs. How do we build on this?

Partnerships open up possibilities, but they are hard: organisations and communities with different trajectories must find a common goal. The creation of a shared language is essential. And closely tied to partnerships is the notion of brokerage – the process that facilitates the deal, the bilingual element in the creation of that shared language.

The idea of partnership is also important when thinking about how to get more Queensland work touring nationally. The relationship between a producer and presenter is itself a partnership that needs to be cultivated over time. Not all companies can afford to attend Long Paddock, so the role of brokerage is particularly important here as well. Critical Stages has been successful because it has built trust in its brand and so is able to create touring opportunities for companies without the resources to do this themselves. Should there be a Queensland equivalent?

Roadwork is another emerging partnership, this time between venues with an interest in programming risky work. More niche circuits like this help increase diversity and build audience development expertise in the presenters themselves.

The principles behind effective touring partnerships are: listen to what the community wants, allow at least three years for the partnership to develop, and be prepared to engage deeply.

Simplicity

Performing arts touring in Australia is anything but simple. How much of this is a necessary part of a complex activity, and how much is simply noise? At the very least there should be a simple way to access information about the various components of the system: Long Paddock, CyberPaddock, Critical Stages, Roadwork etc.

One size does not fit all. What is possible for a one-person show that packs in a suitcase and can do one-off performances at short notice, is not possible for a large production that needs to fit its regional Queensland tour into a three-week window in a 35-venue national tour. And touring is about more than just performing arts centres – different content suits different types of venues.

There needs to be better coordination between the cultural calendars of local communities and state-wide touring schedules. Tours often cut across pre-existing local events and festivals. A local organiser, a regional hub or an online local cultural calendar could ensure this didn't happen,

Touring funds need to be distributed in a transparent manner – all parties should be able to apply, and they need to be able to understand the rationale and process behind the decision-making.

Size, Scale and Costs

Size matters, in two ways. It matters because Queensland is big and therefore expensive to tour, and it matters because a big show is expensive to buy and sometimes impossible to stage.

Some presenters would like to showcase Queensland work, but find the production requirements of the larger companies are beyond them. The result is they buy work from interstate. Should it be part of the brief of the state companies that they offer work that is appropriate for regional touring? Or should regional venues be better equipped so that regional audiences can experience the same quality of work as their metropolitan cousins? Should Queensland presenters be forced to buy Queensland work first?

Perhaps there needs to be different touring models for the different parts of Queensland – especially for the special needs of the west.

A good touring model should take into account the size and production values of regional venues, should simplify tour schedules and subsidies, should fund the gap between demand and viability, should assist the coordination of producers and venues, should support state-wide marketing, and should not have a planning process that is too long or too hard.

Professional Development

A touring culture that has its roots deep in local communities and its branches reaching out to the best work from anywhere will need new skills: skills in determining audience's desires, skills in brokering the deals to get the work to where it is wanted, skills within the community to understand how to present the work they want when there are no local professionals.

The role of the broker needs to be recognised and trained. (Confusingly, the broker is also often called the producer – not in this instance the creator of the work, but rather the one who 'produces' the environment in which the work can be made or presented.) Brokers are the connectors, the ones who know the networks, the markets, the short cuts. Mentorships are one of the best ways to create such people, as the knowledge involved is intuitive, experienced-based, passed on by the doing.

If presenters are to be cultural leaders, they need more time and space to talk to each other about the cultural value of the work – current forums are too focused on logistics and budgets.

And those who make the work should understand how to sell it to regional presenters and communities.

But why not reverse the flow? Instead of producers pitching their shows to presenters, what about communities pitching their cultural needs to producers? They say: this is what we want – who can supply it? South Australia has a rotating Regional Centre of Culture program where selected regional towns access funding support for a year-long program of participative cultural activities – Queensland could consider a similar approach based on community pitching.

Online technology could link regional communities to the work as it is being made. Community members could comment on the emerging work and artists could benefit by finding out early how engaged the potential audience is. Blog sites and the like could open up the discussion and be an essential part of the creative development process. If the work eventually tours, it will be the culmination of an engagement rather than an isolated event.

The encounter cannot be completely online – there needs to be face-to-face meetings, old-fashioned chin wagging – otherwise why would anyone bother to go to the website?

Some ways forward

Here are the top ideas and solutions that were fed back from the groups.

Demand

- Creating and informing demand depends on champions in local communities.
- There needs to be a diversity of product: not just fly-in/fly-out shows, but also workshops, residencies, creating works in the region and touring them within the region. There also needs to be space for controversial work which will divide community opinion.
- Need structures for mapping and delivery, for finding out what is available and for scheduling it to avoid clashes with other community events – these can have a huge impact on small communities.
- It is important to have cultural leaders and curators who feedback the wishes, desires and interests of communities, but also take a role in shaping demand. They can create a demand that the community didn't know it had because it didn't know the product was out there.
- Regional communities should have access to the same types of arts experiences as city people, and this means these communities need cultural leaders who help them to become aware of these experiences and to access them.

Partnerships

- There should be funding support for partnerships between arts and non-arts bodies such as libraries, agricultural shows, and partnerships between performing arts centres and non-traditional spaces. Funding could underwrite the risk of such ventures. Similar initiatives could support regional companies to tour their own areas.
- A brokering service for smaller Queensland companies, many of which find it difficult to tour within the state, let alone nationally.
- Schools are the backbone of communities and should be central to thinking about partnerships. They should be given access to RADF funding to encourage more artists-in-residence in schools, and teachers need access to a menu of artists available for such residencies.
- Two principles for partnerships
 - 1) if you ask community what they want, listen to the answer
 - 2) good partnerships take time and should not be funded as one-off events.
- Regional artists have difficulty establishing networks beyond their local areas. The state government could take a role in facilitating such networks.
- Despite the aspirations of their managers to present cultural product, many regional venues function as halls-for-hire because of local government priorities. The state government could assist here with funding.
- The main time that presenters and producers meet is to buy and sell product. This should be complemented by other forums that increase awareness on both sides of what each party does and aspires to do.

Simplicity

- An online menu of products by makers accessible by both consumers and presenters would allow communities to make choices.
- A regional local coordinator could encourage collaboration between all parties. The coordinator would work on the ground with communities about what they want, advise presenters on touring products that might work well in the communities, then help to bring the audience to the eventual work.
- A central touring fund accessible to all parties – communities, venues, promoters – would create transparency.

- Is simplicity the right goal? Demand is complex and a simple model may not be possible if it must deliver work that covers the needs of all parties.
- Touring is a relationship between audience, presenter and producer. The presenter is the lynchpin. They must gauge the needs of their community and be empowered to program for that community without undue financial or council pressure. Taking risks in programming is the key to audience development.

Size, scale and cost

- There need to be meaningful relationships and partnerships between all stakeholders – communities, presenters, makers, coordinators – for the issues of size, scale and cost for be properly considered.
- There need to be different models to support touring to a variety of communities and venues across the state
- Funding for touring is crucial. There is already a big investment in venues – 11.5 million seats each year in the NARPACA venues alone waiting to be filled – and there are artists and shows that want to tour. Funding for touring is the connecting link, otherwise we are not getting the value out of our existing investments.
- Venues need to be supported to regularly upgrade their technical infrastructure.

Professional development

- Creating dialogue and sharing is the responsibility of all parties – those who make, produce and tour the work, and those within communities. Professional development is not only for those in the city.
- There should be regular opportunities to hear about the challenges and needs of regional communities and presenters.
- There is a place for online communication to contribute to the making of work, but it needs to be grounded in face-to-face contact.

Attachment 1

Ten years on.... A provocation by Angharad Wynne-Jones

Here's my fantasy of what might happen in a day in the life of a cultural centre in a town near you. Spot the touring product if you can.

Dawn: ceremonial welcome between elders and young people of the town and Aboriginal elders and young people from a community in the Northern Territory prior to a discussion of the 5th 3 year cultural exchange plan. The plan involves two way home stays, archival research and documentation of cultural practices, and planning for a week long regional festival of music and arts. In partnership with Garma and Darwin festivals and the Inuit Cultural Association in Edmonton, Canada.

Breakfast provided by the CWA

Breakfast meeting of Transition towns – <http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

A national and international network of towns developing and sharing information about post peak oil and climate change adaptive economies. Using Open Space technology, a self organising conferencing technique, enabling face to face and virtual conferencing, – stakeholders include local, state and federal politicians, service providers, health and welfare partners, farmers, local businesses, school heads, tertiary institutions and artists. The artists have developed a series of performances and interventions that engage audiences' adaptation processes and behaviours. They are sharing these with their international colleagues in a new dynamic on line performance environment, developed with colleagues at RMIT (Melbourne) and ZKM (institute for Visual media) (Berlin) in preparation for a series of international online performance collaborations to be held in decommissioned coal power stations across Europe and Australia.

10 am Fed Minister for Water speaks at the 10 year anniversary celebration of the Murray Darling River cross state agreement, which was developed through a series of cultural projects along the river system between artists, farmers and river side residents. The projects used a system of consensus voting and e-democracy to develop the project brief. The New Economics Foundation and The de Borda Institute, and OurKingdom (openDemocracy's UK politics section) used the Modified Borda Count (mbc). The mbc is a system of democratic voting designed to facilitate the identification of a consensus, if and when one exists. By posing problems as open rather than closed questions, it allows all participants to bring their preferred solutions to the table; next, after an open multi-optional debate, it asks everyone to cast their preferences on (one, some or hopefully) all the options listed; and then it identifies that option which gains the highest average preference.

<http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/participation%20and%20democracy%20consensus%20voting.aspx>

This system was then used to forge a water use agreement in 2010 from Brisbane to Adelaide and the mouth of the Murray has been continuously open and flowing since then.

Midday Schools performance

Supported by Department of Education and Training, Chunky Move has been in residence at the centre for six months. They have been teaching daily dance classes in five primary schools and choreographic sessions with students in two of the local secondary schools, as part of the federal cultural entitlement agreement which ensures that all students have access to a minimum of five hours per week of experiential cultural learning.

There are performances by all the students and the company shows its first draft of a work, created during the residency that it will be presenting when it returns for a regional tour the following year.

The students, company members and artistic collaborators talk about the process and the experience to an audience of other primary and secondary students from across the region following the performance.

The company members also talk about the skills they have been learning from local trades and business people in the Another String scheme – which enables artists to study a trade or profession alongside their artistic professional practice.

The students and audiences are invited to stay on for the next event.

Lunchtime: A dance performance by a group of people from Bangladesh, environmental refugees, who have been relocated to the town. Following the traditional dance performance lunch is served by the local ERA (environmental refugees association). In a workshop facilitated by the CSIRO, low-tech flood warning techniques are shared between the Bangladeshi arrivals, the local indigenous people and survivors of the 2020 flood disaster. From drums to mobiles, bicycle trees to radio, message sticks to twitter an array of tools and processes are identified for climate disasters community communication and a brief developed for a team of visual artists and media specialists to develop their functionality and user friendliness.

Partners: DFAT, Departments of Immigration and Climate Change Adaption, and CSIRO

In the afternoon – Long Paddock

Teams of Artists, Producers and academics from Knowledge Transfer programmes of Tertiary Institutions present the outcomes of research projects hosted by cultural centres and their audiences over the previous 2 years. Research topics have included themes of fear and grieving, transformation and interdependence and Histories of the Pacific. The audience includes connection and context directors (used to be programmers) and participants from cultural centre's expert audiences group. They are invited to present the final performances/events of the research projects. These range from a radical solo stand up comedy act to a community orchestra commissioning an internationally acclaimed composer to create a work for them.

New research topics and partnerships are proposed to be selected and hosted by the cultural centres in the following year and the criticism and failure session is very popular, with a vibrant analysis of what worked, what didn't and what unexpected outcomes emerged from a range of professionals – critics, artists, audiences and context and connection directors.

The evening performance

International premier of a new work by Romeo Castelluci in collaboration with the state theatre company to be broadcast live on the ABC and streamed on "ourtube". Romeo like many international theatre directors, now creates scores for performances to be mounted locally as opposed to touring existing product. The work has been made with his own company following a residency Romeo had in the cultural centre three years ago. Remounted and rehearsed with the state theatre company, it will tour across Australia after its sell-out three week season.

The cookhouse

A nightcap in the community kitchen. Which is run as a social enterprise and employs 30 members of the large 60 plus generation. They tend the vegetable and herb garden on the roof of the centre cooking and serve delicious local organic product with style.

Attachment 2

Think Tank Participants

Adam Tucker, Ausdance Qld
Adrienne Jones, Kite Arts Education@QPAC
Andrew Bobeldyk, Logan Entertainment Centre
Angharad Wynne-Jones, Producer
Ann-Marie Ryan, Empire Theatre
Ann Webb, Goondiwindi Arts Council
Anne Toovey, Flying Arts
Annette Kerwitz, Qld Arts Council
Anthony Peluso, Country Arts SA
Arthur Frame, Qld Arts Council
Bow Campbell, Australia Council
Camilla Tunnell, Qld Art Gallery
Cate Farrar, Youth Arts Qld
Cheryl Jorgenson, Mackay Entertainment and Convention Centre
Chris Mangin, Opera Queensland
Crystle Fleper, Judith Wright COCA
Dan Evans, Metro Arts
Deborah Murphy, QPAC
Debbie Wall, Arts Educator
Destry Puia, Caloundra Events Centre
Gary Mears, Ipswich Civic Centre
Graham Nunn, Qld Poetry Festival
Glenn Terry, Critical Stages
Hamish McDonald, Darwin Entertainment Centre
Hania Radvan, Arts NT
Heather Hale, Longreach Arts Council
Helen Bain
Jane Atkins, Opera Queensland
Jane Campbell, DEWHA
Jean McTaggart, Mt Isa Civic Centre
Jessica Kelly, DEWHA
Jo Thomas, Producer/Performer
Joanne McDonald, Country Arts SA
John Baylis, Arts Consultant
John Flanagan, Brolga Theatre
Judith Anderson, Qld Ballet
Julie Beveridge, Qld Poetry Festival
Julie Woodward, Flying Arts
Katherine Hoeppe, MAPS for Artists
Kelvin Cordell, Gold Coast Arts Centre
Ken Lloyd, Country Arts SA
Les Currie, Parade Theatres, NIDA
Lewis Jones, Empire Theatre
Libby Anstis, Qld Theatre Company
Libby Lincoln, Expressions Dance Company
Lisa Trevellick, Redland Performing Arts Centre
Liz Burcham, Metro Arts
Lorna Hempstead, Tropic Sun Theatre
Louise Bezzina, Judith Wright COCA
Louise Campbell, Cicadas - RAPAD
Luke Cowling, Critical Stages
Marcus Hughes, Ausdance Qld
Mark Radvan, Imaginary Theatre
Michelle Oxenham, ADVICE
Natasha Budd, Kite Arts Education@QPAC
Nigel Lavender, Qld Music Festival
Norelle Hentscel, Judith Wright COCA
Noelene Galloway, Brisbane Powerhouse
Paul Makeham, QUT
Peter Owens, Rockhampton Venues and Events
Phil Finklestein, Cairns Civic Theatre
Peter Lavery, QUT Gardens Theatre
Rebecca Atkinson, Brisbane Marketing
Robyn Adams, Cicadas - RAPAD
Rod Ainsworth, Bamboin Inc.
Roderick Poole, Regional Arts Victoria
Ruth Hodgeman, Judith Wright COCA
Saffron Benner, Playlab
Scott Alderdice, University of Southern Qld
Sean Box, QADIE
Shari Irwin, Roundhouse Theatre
Steven Maxwell, Markwell Presents
Suellen Maunder, JUTE Theatre
Susan Linge, Townsville Civic Centre
Ted Burling, RAPAD
Thom Browning, Imaginary Theatre
Wendy Blacklock, Performing Lines