

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS THEATRE FORUM

STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

23-24 February 2014 QPAC, Brisbane

1. Introduction

The following is a report of the National Indigenous Theatre Forum Steering Committee meeting held on 23rd and 24th February 2014 at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC). It is a summary of the process, the conversations and outcomes of that event including an action plan for 2014. It is not a full transcript of the meeting, however this is available from Arts Queensland on request.

The National Indigenous Theatre Forum (NITF) is a meeting of Australia's First Nations Theatre Practitioners. It first met in Cairns in 2010 attended by over 50 sector representatives (including funding bodies as observers) and has met twice since to create a national approach to the advancement of the Indigenous theatre sector in Australia. This meeting of a Steering Committee was organised by Arts Queensland (AQ) with the following objectives in mind:

1. To identify the purpose and objectives for the Forum into the future
2. To identify a structure to organise the Forum outside government
3. To produce recommendations for broader consultation and determine in that consultation issue of representation and mandate

The attendees were:

Senior Interim Steering Group Members:

Name	State
Wesley Enoch (Queensland Theatre Company)	QLD
Lily Shearer (Gadigal Information Service)	NSW
Kyle Morrison (Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company)	WA
Rachael Maza (Illbijerri Theatre Company)	VIC
Lee-Ann Buckskin (Carclew Youth Arts)	SA
Ben Graetz (Darwin Entertainment Centre - Indigenous Producers Program)	NT
Jim Everett (Independent Writer / Poet)	TAS

Young Participants:

Name	State
Sonny Dallas Law (Blak Lines – Performing Lines)	NSW
Alison Murphy Oates (Carriageworks - Indigenous Producers Program)	NSW
Louana Sainsbury (Indigenous Producers Program)	NSW
Merindah Donnelly (Australian Performing Arts Marketplace Producer)	NSW
Teila Watson (Writer / Poet / Actress)	QLD

Government Representative / Observers / Facilitator:

Name	State
Vera Ding (Arts Queensland)	QLD
Lydia Miller (Australia Council for the Arts)	NSW
Frank Trotman-Golden (Australia Council for the Arts)	NSW
Mark Stapleton (Australia Council for the Arts)	NSW
Katina Clarke (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)	ACT
Denise Bolduc (Independent Producer / Consultant)	Canada
Sandra Laronde (Red Sky Canada)	Canada
Cathy Hunt (Positive Solutions) - Facilitator	QLD

Apologies: Rhoda Roberts (Boomerang Festival), Tammy Anderson (Actor / Writer).

2. Welcomes and introductions

A welcome to country had been provided by Aunty Maroochy Barambah of the Turrbul people at the opening of Clancestry at QPAC on the Friday night.

Vera Ding welcomed people to this meeting and introduced herself and the role to date of AQ in facilitating the Forum and seeking funding from the Federal Government through the Ministry for the Arts (previously the Office for the Arts) of \$30,000 annually to support the forum activities for three years. A key purpose of the meeting was to plan how that money can and should be used under Indigenous control.

Lee-Ann Buckskin welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged the traditional owners of the land, elders past and present. Lee-Ann provided an update on the 2010, 2011 and 2012 Cairns Indigenous Art Fairs forums of Indigenous theatre makers. It was noted that Indigenous theatre is a vital part of the theatre sector in the country and it is important that we acknowledge the work of people who went before to establish the Indigenous theatre in Australia.

Lee-Ann recapped the Australia Council's investment in a range of projects and asked everyone to reflect on where to next.

Introductions

Participants, and guests introduced themselves through focusing on a specific success they had had in their practice since the last Forum and reflecting on a work or project they had seen that had particularly inspired them in that time. Some of the recurrent themes in those introductions included:

- The importance of a vision for the future and our capacity to achieve that vision
We will deliver our own cultural future
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre will be recognised as integral to Australian Theatre
- The importance of remembering the impact of the art of theatre
When art is able to speak in a way that goes past the brain and impacts it in a way that is inspiring
- The opportunities of engaging further with partners in other countries
Our place is potentially in the international dialogue.
- The challenges still faced by Indigenous theatre practitioners and the sector
Remember we are still at war
We are still being seen as 'development' not in the big time
- Our considerable achievements of the past few years
A sense of achievement after a number of years – and that it can take a long time for things to come to fruition
- The importance of valuing our children and young people
Valuing children and young people

Facilitation

Cathy Hunt introduced to the meeting a draft agenda for the two days that had been informed by the objectives of the session, conversations with attendees leading up to the meeting and recognition of the open source technology methodology adopted for previous forums. Two comments in particular were noted to guide the discussions:

We must not set goals that we can't achieve

We must be visionary and not focus just on our current issues

The draft agenda proposed the following items for discussion:

- A celebration of the achievements of the Forum over the last four years and identification of any barriers to achievement
- Identification of changes in the world/environment since 2012 and opportunities for Indigenous theatre and the sector in the next 3 to 5 years
- How does this all impact on the Vision and purpose of "Forum" or any new organising structure for the event

- What the goals/priorities may be for the next three taken across all areas of the sector identified in previous Forum's – *Practice, Pathways, Presentation/markets, Structures and organisational models*
- Identification of strategies/actions to achieve those goals

Consideration was given at the beginning of the meeting to creating an opportunity in the two day session to discuss the issue of a best practice model for the making and presenting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) theatre work and work of ATSI content as discussed at the Australian Theatre Forum in 2013. It was agreed that this would be a key agenda item for the next NITF and not for this meeting.

The following statement had been released by ATSI theatre makers at the 2013 Australian Theatre Forum¹.

*We believe we are at a critical moment in defining and shaping this country. As the foundation of the cultural landscape, we have a responsibility to establish the standards for the future. It was identified there is an urgent need to establish a **Best Practice Model in the making and presentation of**. Therefore, we request that the Australian Theatre Forum recommends the Australia Council support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre makers to develop a Best Practice Model. In the spirit of this recommendation, this process must be driven by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector itself.*

The Steering Committee decided to work through the first day's agenda as a single group.

3. Summary of Day One

Achievements as a result of previous Forums

The following were recorded as some of the key achievements as a result of the Forums

- The formation of a National Indigenous Touring Circuit (Blaklines)
- The development of a National Indigenous Playwrights Conference (Yellamundie)
- Access to workshops on philanthropy
- The creation of training and mentoring opportunities for Indigenous Producers
- The creation of a Black on Black annual publication in the edition of RealBlak as an edition of Real Time magazine

¹ Website ATF

Outcomes

The following were noted as some of the many outcomes from the work agreed to at the Forums over the last four years, including specific personal and organisational outcomes for Indigenous theatre practitioners:

- A range of personal and professional outcomes for Indigenous theatre practitioners around consolidation and stabilisation of organisations
- A growth in both supply and demand for Indigenous theatre content
- Increase of funding into the sector particularly from the Australia Council and Arts Queensland to support this work and some growth in philanthropy directly to Indigenous theatre companies
- The employment of Indigenous artists and other theatre workers
- Visibility and recognition for the sector, including significant representation at the 2014 APAM conference
- A growing network and development of relationships across the sector and with non-Indigenous organisations and producers, including the start of relationships with some commercial theatre producers
- Improved skills and career development opportunities
- An impact on national policy in particular through engagement with and submissions to the previous government's National Cultural Policy
- An evaluation of the Australia Council's work in market development for Indigenous theatre which is currently being undertaken and will be distributed when completed.

Issues identified and not progressed

The Committee considered the actions that had been agreed at previous Forums; key proposals that had still not been addressed and the reasons why. Some of these ideas had not been progressed as a result of undertaking more rigorous assessments of the ideas following the Forums. Others included:

- The lack of development of best practice models and protocols around ownership and acknowledgement in Indigenous theatre through not having had a significant and planned discussion around these issues
- Not having made any significant headway into national and international philanthropy for Indigenous theatre
- Not formalising Indigenous Performing Arts Training
- Not undertaking any significant research and evaluation to support the outcomes that are being created.

The barriers to achievement in these and other areas were determined to be:

- The lack of an on-going resource, including staffing between Forums to progress ideas. (It was recognized that many people had committed to actions on top of their current roles over the last four years hence the achievements that have been made. However people have the pressure of other commitments and often change jobs where the role is no longer appropriate)
- The need for changes in culture to occur in many non-Indigenous organisations for some proposals to move forward including the need to

commit existing resources rather than requiring additional funding for Indigenous projects and developments.

- The need for increased financial resources

Changes to the environment and new opportunities

Discussion on changes impacting on the sector focused around the general political changes at Federal and State levels since the last Forum; the changes at the Australia Council with a description by Lee-Ann Buckskin and Lydia Miller on the progress being made with the new strategic plan; and the need for Arts Queensland to move back from a direct facilitation and organisational role for the Forum.

A range of opportunities were identified for the development of the sector over the next few years including:

- Developing International First People protocols for creating and presenting theatre
- Researching overseas models of practice across a range of areas for example the approach to raising philanthropic support for Aboriginal Theatre in Canada
- Developing more co-productions with non-Indigenous arts organisations for which best practice models and protocols are required
- Seeking an Indigenous approach and non western models across the whole way the sector does business
- Re-framing the responsibilities of non Indigenous companies towards Indigenous theatre development in funding agreements from the Australia Council
- Creating a deeper engagement with Elders across all business, including an engagement with the National Indigenous Cultural Authority being progressed through the Australia Council
- Taking advantage of significant new structural and funding changes at the Australia Council
- Exploring options for engagement with State arts agencies and any proposed state based developments for example the extension of the Queensland Cultural Precinct to incorporate a new Indigenous focused facility at Kurilpa Point.

Creating a new organisation

Before moving on to discuss the future, consideration was given to the possible need to create a new organisation; what the vision and purpose of such an organisation may be in relation to the Forum; and what structure should be considered.

The Committee agreed that in the medium to long term a new entity was required to progress the vision and ideas that had emerged over the last four years and explore further opportunities for the development of the Indigenous Theatre sector in the future.

Vision and Purpose

In considering what the vision and purpose of such an entity could be, the Committee looked at the original vision and ideas behind the Forums, how different the sector may look in 10 years time and specific functions an organisation could have including:

- Undertaking more research and evaluation
- Creating greater employment opportunities
- Advocating to government and others
- Co-ordinating national discussions and events
- Providing advice and support. Including to independent artists about funding sources, resources, referrals etc.
- Assisting practitioners in States with little funding and infrastructure
- Providing advice around touring
- Facilitating new opportunities

An initial statement of **vision** emerged at the end of Day One around:

The desire to change the national face of Australian Theatre, and

To create a healthy vibrant industry of artists and theatre makers that embed cultural protocols and values in their practice

A draft **statement of the key purpose** of any new organisation in achieving that vision was articulated as being:

To Strengthen and grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre to provide a leadership voice in the arts for the 21st Century

It was agreed that a new organisation should be underpinned by a statement of **values** including those around the issue of cultural safety.

The following were suggested as possible **goals** for the first three years:

- Formulate and implement models of best practice for the Australian theatre sector
- Increase Indigenous employment across all areas of theatre practice
- Develop and increase the market for Indigenous theatre

Organisational and governance models

To facilitate discussion around potential structures for any new organisation Cathy presented some examples to show how other organisations were created and structured including:

- Theatre Network Australia
- Theatre Network Victoria
- Australian Theatre Forum
- First Nations Australia Writers Network
- Creating Australia
- Godinymayin Ijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre

This resulted in a discussion around these models and others such as the Association of Northern, Kimberly and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) around the following:

- Continuing a loose affiliation of organisations with no formalised structure and any grants continued to be auspiced through other agencies

- The desire to have a *de-centralised and de-colonised* structure whilst having to operate within the ‘legal models’ available in Australia.
- Forming a structure such as an incorporated association or non-profit company
- Opportunities for an organisation to be ‘resident’ in an existing institution (it was agreed that this should be an Indigenous organisation)
- Opportunities for the Steering Committee to continue the work as an ‘Interim Board’ of a new organisation while the appropriate appointment of members and directors is formalised
- Considering the Forum as an annual gathering to provide comment on the direction and priorities of any new organisation.

The day closed with a discussion on the need to consider two key issues, a short term solution for the new organisation and a plan for the Forum particularly around the issue of Indigenous theatre practice. At the Committee’s request the first day finished at this point to enable Cathy to summarise the outcomes for the following day and for participants to consider the proceedings overnight.

4. Summary Day Two

At the start of the second day Cathy presented the summary of the first day. This included a diagram with a short description of the focus of a new organisation summarised from the outcomes of the first day.



With a proposed amendment to change International Recognition to International Sustainability, the Committee agreed the summary provided a focus for discussions and dividing into two groups worked further on the vision and purpose statements for a new organisation, and came together to discuss the key goals.

The group agreed to the following working vision, purpose and goals:

Vision

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander song lines are the heart of Australian theatre

Purpose

- Strengthen connections nationally
- Advocate for our art form (nationally and internationally)
- Grow capacity (as a collective).

Goals and Strategies

1. Formulate and implement models of best practice for the Australian theatre sector
 - The first strategy might be to organise the practice conference and one of its tasks is to create protocols, prosecute them. Other activity could be collaborations between people and companies, commissioned writing, working with elders to tell stories, case studies of existing theatre projects, scriptwriters conferences, producers meetings etc
2. Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, employment and training across all areas of theatre practice (i.e. the whole sector of indigenous and other)
 - The first strategy under this goal might be to do the baseline research of who is getting employment now.
3. Develop and increase the markets for Indigenous theatre

(The annual forum is the bedrock of the establishment of the organisation. An annual gathering is a better phrase because the word 'forum' may now read by some participants as like the three events held in Cairns. So the group added a 4th goal.)
4. To deliver an annual forum/gathering to inform (shape) the work of the organisation.
 - It will be like an annual council of members. It receives the annual report and informs the direction for the next three years.

5. Actions and Next Steps

Key decisions from the two days were:

First Nations theatre practitioners resolved to form a new Indigenous cultural organisation within 6 months, around the draft vision, purpose and goals articulated above.

Senior people within the group are to work with the support of Arts Queensland and the Australia Council as an interim Board. These members are: Lee-Ann Buckskin (SA) Rachael Maza (Vic) Lilly Shearer (NSW) Ben Graetz (NT) Jim Everett (Tasmania) Kyle Morrison (WA) Wesley Enoch (Qld), Rhoda Roberts (NSW). A Torres Strait Island (TSI) member is to be identified and approached to join the group by the next forum.

Young Participants and government representatives are to be cc'd into outcomes from Interim Steering Group decisions and these participants and representatives are:

- Sonny Dallas-Law

- Merindah Donnelly
- Teila Watson
- Alison Murphy - Oates
- Louana Sainsbury
- Lydia Miller – OzCo
- Mark Stapleton – OzCo
- Katina Clarke – DFAT
- Vera Ding - AQ

A three day gathering/**Forum** will be held in 2015 (or at end of 2014) with a focus on practice and will include a General meeting of the new body to appoint the first formal Board.

An **Indigenous theatre worker** will be contracted as soon as possible to progress planning for next forum. This will be a temporary contract only and will be to progress tasks outlined below with the primary focus to be on delivering the next forum. Contract to conclude at end of next Forum. This position will report to the Senior Steering Group for Forum content – but be supported by AQ for the logistical delivery of the next forum. Senior Steering Group members will propose names for this position and make the final selection from the pool. The Position needs to be filled by someone who has a working knowledge and set of relationships with theatre sector.

It was agreed a **Calendar** of date availability for the next Forum should be created which will be done through AQ in consultation with the Steering Group.

In relation to the **planning of the 2015 Forum** the following points were raised:

- The Forum needs to be over 3 days – 2 days of practice conversation and 1 day to finalise the structure of the NITF entity, including voting for members of the ongoing steering group/board/committee (whatever best serves the structure).
- Key Agenda Item - Formalisation of the new structure for NITF activities into the future (with annual Forums at the heart) informed by the final wrap up report from steering group meeting
- Key Agenda Item- “Practice Protocols” undertake desk research on existing draft and finalised protocol resources – in consultation with Steering Committee.
- Key Agenda Item – what will be structure for NITF entity into the future? To deliver on the February 2014 Steering Group meeting recommendations and present this to the next Forum for endorsement.
- Arts Queensland to coordinate and be auspice for application to the Australia Council ATSIA for support to document and publish outcomes from the next forum both written and filmed – Application closes in July – ensure steering group nominates who should be identified to do this in the application
- Australia Council to explore the possibility of providing a scan of all programs (nationally) that support creation of Indigenous work (AQ to provide initial scan developed in 2011)
- Application to be made to the Australia Council for triennial strategic funding to support this NITF entity into the future, building on the wrap up of this planning day.