



APACA 21ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE REPORT Written by Hamish McDonald

The 21st Annual APACA Conference was held in Launceston on 19 & 20 September 2007 and was attended by 150 delegates.

The conference was moderated by **Genevieve Picot** and was made possible by the generosity of our sponsors **tickets.com**, **Australia Council**, **Theatre North**, **Arts Tasmania** and the **City of Launceston**.

There was much networking and socialising, as well as serious issues to consider.

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

Lindy Hume, opera and theatre director and former Director of the Perth International Arts Festival, began her talk by lamenting the cultural despondency that has developed over the life of the Howard government. Funding has increased, good work has been produced, but it was clear that the arts did not inform the world view of the government. There was an odd mixture of generosity and meanness, which she likened to trying to dance in a straight jacket.

Many factors went into creating the mood of cultural despondency: incidents like the Tampa affair and the intervention in indigenous communities in the NT; and in the arts this had led to conjoining microcosms of mediocrity. The Australian Opera, for example, was now concentrating on musicals and Gilbert and Sullivan in search of box office returns.

With the coming election, she felt the mood was changing; people want spiritual nourishment, a sense of connection to heart and spirit, and to renew the sense that beauty can be subversive. Her experience has taught her that Festivals can play a part in this, and that performing arts centres should be able to do the same.

The discussion afterwards centered on her experience of producing community events at the Perth Festival. She recalled bringing in Richard Gill to conduct a big community choir performance, and creating an indigenous voice in the Festival. Ticket sales increased markedly. It did take her a few years to break down the existing culture of the organization to the point where it could achieve what she wanted it to.

Andrew Upton Form followed theme in this challenging and delightful keynote address: the mode of exposition in drama was fragmentary, he said, held together by unseen threads and continuities – and so it was with his speech. Beginning with a quote from Jung about collective human consciousness and meaning in life, and speculation about the creation of the first images in cave art (why do we create art, or theatre, at all?), we ended in the foyers of the Sydney Theatre Company and the question of how to create more involvement in our theatrical culture – lively post-show discussions in the foyers involving actors and audience being one suggestion. The magic of theatre was our one viable asset: through this a dialogue about society (our collective being) could be fostered. Theatre thrived in an atmosphere of freedom and flourishing debate – indeed, such debate often leads to the creation of theatre. On a more individual level, theatre could raise questions about the nature of identity and consciousness – are they just illusions created through the connections made by the audience? Mainstream theatre needed the lifeblood of a lively fringe scene. Independent producers were now veering towards the mainstream and we were becoming averse to risk and failure. Big risks needed to be taken and there had to be room for failure; the alternative was laziness and mediocrity. Criticism needed to be challenging and invigorating and artists should not shy away from it. And, yes, foyers were important because they should be welcoming and a place where people could stay and discuss and re-live the experience of the play in a social atmosphere rather than scurrying away to their isolated lives. Performing arts centres could play a vital role in this by enlivening their foyers.

PLENARY SESSIONS

Getting To Know You

Libby Anstis, Annette Downs, Pamela Foulkes, Robert Love, Teena Munn

This session explored the relationships between producers and presenters, and concentrated on increasing understanding between the two, largely by opening up the world of producers and how they work. The distinction between a director and a producer was teased out, as well as the inner workings of a company, such as who has control of the budget (the General Manager). Robert Love noted that the distinction between producers and presenters was becoming blurred; Parramatta Riverside Theatre had decided to produce in order to build audiences and because appropriate product was not available to them. He would like to see more risk-sharing arrangements between producers and presenters, with money from presenters going in to pre-production. Pamela Foulkes cited the problem of lack of professional development for staff in venues – sometimes this could lead to a lack of confidence in the ability venues to deliver the service required for presenting a production. Producers and presenters should commence their dialogue very early in the touring process, and producers needed to think about touring before production; indeed, feedback from presenters on potential touring shows would be useful for producers. The question of how to make the big companies commit to touring was also raised. Libby Anstis noted that this could be difficult: in the case of QTC they were governed by an Act of Parliament which imposed obligations to Queensland audiences which needed to be fulfilled before interstate touring could be contemplated. Robert Love propounded in 21 points for venues and producers which proved very popular amongst the audience.

The Stirring Pot

Jean Kittson, Fotis Kapetopoulos, Shahin Shafaei, Marion Potts, Josephine Ridge

With its theme of multiculturalism in the arts, 'The Stirring Pot' was a hypothetical which looked at two scenarios – the Sydney Festival production of a version of *Othello* in which Othello is to be a Muslim and Desdemona converts to Islam and wears a veil; and a production of *The Men from Snowy Mountain* which looked at the building of the Snowy Mountain Scheme and which was to cast actors from the appropriate ethnic backgrounds. Both productions would have national tours and would attract interest from schools.

Much of the discussion addressed the question of authenticity in casting: was it necessary to cast a Muslim actor as Othello, and was it necessary to cast actors from the correct ethnic background to play the men from Snowy Mountain? While some, such as Marion Potts, the director of both hypothetical productions, thought it was necessary to do so because the authentic experience of someone from that background would be apparent in their performance, others wondered whether casting a Muslim would pander to contemporary negative images of Islam and may validate the stereotyping from which Muslims already suffer. Some suggested casting an aboriginal actor, while others pointed out that Othello had been successfully played by non-black and non-Muslim actors very successfully in the past. In the case of *The Men from Snowy Mountain*, some felt that rooting the production in the community could be a good thing; in some cases it was an ethical question of who could tell the story. Josephine Ridge argued that casting a Muslim could be good for publicity purposes, while Fotis Kapetopoulos argued that making a rap version and setting it in the horn of Africa and casting someone from a TV show (such as *Fat Pizza*) would make the production a hit. Casting was of paramount importance for marketing he said, but the director demurred. However, there were concerns that a middle-class white audience might be scared away from such productions – particularly in a town like Cooma, where *The Men from Snowy Mountain* was to have its premiere. Some of the subsequent discussion looked at the question of hirers from particular ethnic or religious backgrounds making discriminatory demands of venues, for example demanding segregation of men and women in the audience. The general consensus was that this was permissible and that it was a question of giving the client what they wanted. Others found the discussion on casting disappointing, and asked what had happened to the notion of colourblind casting.

New Trends In Ticketing

David Borg, Tim Roberts, Craig Thurmer

This session concentrated on the phenomenon of marketing to the emerging 'generation y' market, characterised as being discerning and skeptical, having conservative tastes, and being well versed in new media, such as the internet. Despite the knowledge and use of the internet, they sought human interaction in their experiences and were wary of traditional marketing techniques – marketing needed to concentrate on the emotional experience rather than traditional persuasive techniques, and selling an idea rather than a particular product, or show, was often effective. They tended not to like being on lists and didn't like filling out forms. Suggestions for marketing to GenY included setting up a Facebook or MySpace site for your organization, and putting podcasts of shows on your website. E-mail needs to come from a trusted source or else it is regarded as spam. It was also important to be able to respond to feedback and trends quickly, for example to change your pricing structure in response to demand. Finding 'initiators' was also important. These are people who will take the lead in organizing social events for groups; if they are found and given appropriate information early enough, they can bring their groups into the theatre.

An Indigenous Voice

Sam Cook, Tom E Lewis, Susan Moylan-Coombs

Three indigenous producers related their experiences of trying to bring indigenous work to Australia's stages and communities. Susan Moylan-Coombs began by talking about the 'Deadly Yarns' initiative, which gave indigenous people a platform for telling their stories in the film and broadcast media, and her experience of bringing people together in the Ku-ring-gai Festival. Tom E Lewis had fire in his belly as he exhorted the audience to be brave, take risks and eschew political correctness. Theatre was a medicine that could help in healing and it must be enjoyed and understood by both cultures – there were dreamtime stories in Shakespeare, he said. He felt that whitefellas still needed to explore the bush – some country and western singers had done so, but not the mainstream. The campfire is open, he said, for you to come. Sam Cooke related some of the difficulties of getting the work of Yirra Yaakin to tour – often it was more welcome overseas, and she had been successful in getting funding from the US to mount work when it was not forthcoming here. *Windmill Baby* had been popular in regional areas, but not so in metropolitan ones. Audiences should see aboriginal experience and history as not just recent, but as going back 60,000 years.

Some of the discussion suggested that indigenous work had a wider acceptance than perhaps was realized by the panel. Wendy Blacklock talked of the highly successful tours of Jack Davis's plays in the 1980s that she had undertaken. However, it was pointed out that now the companies were indigenous-based, which they weren't in the '80s. The issues of indigenous companies moving between nations while on tour was also raised, and Yirra Yaakin said that they had developed specific protocols to deal with this.

The session finished with a chant, led by Tom E Lewis, which had all the delegates on foot and singing!

BREAK OUT SESSIONS

Managing Up – Merryn Carter

The theme of 'Managing Up' was how to influence those around you. Merryn Crawford admitted that she was trying to cram too much information into a 90 minute time-slot, so it was a fast-paced session. The attendees were invited to look at the people whom they needed to influence. This could range from boards and council aldermen down to staff and audience. The session focused on building relationships so that ideas could be positively promoted, and typical negative reactions (such as fear, resistance to change, and 'what's in it for me') could be overcome. A three-stage model for promoting influence was proposed: i) prepare, ii) conduct, and iii) conclude. Various strategies could be used, particularly engaging and persuading. These strategies used varying techniques including involving, motivating, reasoning and asserting.

Community Partnerships

Evol McLeod and Luisa Pauletto

from the Tuggeranong Arts Centre in Canberra, gave delegates an overview of her Centre and the strategies and programs it had used for community engagement in the years since it opened in 1998. One core element of its success was securing funding from sources other than arts funding bodies: these included education, heritage, multicultural affairs and health. Community engagement included running courses, a specific youth-at-risk program, a contemporary dance program, a very active gallery space and a digital storytelling program. They had begun by identifying the demographic in which they worked and continued by responding to the needs of that demographic. A key part of their strategy was an outreach program which meant going out into the community. They had also invested heavily in converting their Centre so that it suited their needs, in particular the creation of studio spaces.

Ethical Business Practices

Dr Anna Alomes, Robyn Ayres, Ian McDonald

This session brought together lawyers and ethicists to discuss various issues with which venue managers often have to grapple. The discussion tended to revolve around specific issues: e.g. copyright, ownership of data, the position of venues when hirers had done something potentially illegal or unethical. In many cases, giving general legal opinions on these issues was impossible because a precise judgement would depend on the particular facts of the case. The ethicist pointed out that often an ethical approach could be taken by looking at the question of the rights of the individuals and organizations involved. Venues could often manage these issues through their contractual arrangements (e.g. indemnities) or through clear policies emphasized through adequate signage around the venue: for example, making it clear that cameras would be confiscated and the relevant images deleted if pictures were taken during a performance. It was often appropriate that venues take an ethical lead on these issues by informing the groups using their venues of the legal situation and taking appropriate action against questionable practices.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Cocktail Party hosted by Arts Tasmania

The Design Centre of Tasmania provided the glorious setting for this function to welcome delegates to Tasmania, and the islands premier professional company, Tasdance, provided some unforgettable human sculptures.

Cocktail Party hosted by the City of Launceston

The historic Princess Theatre, built in 1911, had become familiar to many of the delegates as the host venue for Long Paddock, held immediately prior to the Conference. However, in a twist, the reception was held on stage with the speeches being delivered from the dress circle. This gave delegates a unique opportunity to view the wonderfully decorative auditorium, innovatively lit for the occasion, from a perspective which they rarely get. Alison Farrow provided background vocals, and Cheryl Wheatley, in her guise as Lois from Flinders Island got delegates laughing.

Drover Awards Dinner

The Grand Ballroom at the Launceston Grand Chancellor Hotel was the venue for this much anticipated annual Awards Dinner. Fine food, excellent wine, lively music by local band Arauco Libre and spirited conversation ensured a great evening. The Drover Awards were presented by the 2006 Touring Legend **Jacki Weaver** and all the winners were on hand to accept. A very fitting way to end a full conference week.

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Debrief Breakfast on Friday morning saw 28 delegates dreaming up ideas and discussing plans for the 2008 conference over a hearty breakfast.

Coach Trip to Hobart and tour of the Theatre Royal

The coach departed Launceston with 21 delegates bound for Hobart town. After a lunch break in Hobart, they commenced the tour of the oldest working theatre in the country. CEO Tim Munro conducted the tour and he led them into nooks, crannies and tunnels not often seen, and certainly not on the standard tour of the Theatre. Little wonder this building is known as one of Australia's most beautiful treasures.