ARC Linkage Project LP160100047
June 2019

Creative Convergence Midterm Industry Report (2017-18)

Rachel Fensham, Paul Rae and Jennifer Beckett
Project Introduction

With a focus on regional Victoria, this ARC-funded Linkage project aims to understand and enhance the personal, affective and social impact of contemporary theatre for youth audiences by developing knowledge networks and social media strategies.

In the regional arts ecology, where youth may be marginalised or lacking in creative opportunities, the project aims to involve theatre companies, a performing arts venue, and state government in research methodologies that harness the agency of young people, the live theatre experience, and their creative convergence with digital media.

Guided by partner priorities, this four-year project will build a complex, longitudinal study informed by international best practice in the area of theatre for young people. Alongside our partners, the project researchers aim to deliver new methods of evaluating theatre for young people and conceptualize and implement a creative and digital media strategy for enhanced audience engagement in dispersed locations over time.

Outcomes include academic and industry publications, collaborative networks delivering transferable knowledge about theatre impact to the national and international context, and better understanding of the social benefits of richer cultural participation in regional communities.
Aims and Outcomes
The Project aims have been given focus around three moments of convergence:

- Convergence in the Person: using interactive research workshops to explain how young people are affected by theatre, and what impact this has over time
- Convergence of Media: conceptualising and implementing a social media strategy that sustains and enhances the effects of regional live events over time
- Organizational Convergence: create a durable network of reflective theatre practitioners and other stakeholders working with young people across Victoria

- Project significance
  - A refined understanding of impact as distributed and longitudinal
  - New techniques for evaluating and articulating impact
  - New transmedia strategies for enhancing impact

- Industry Partner aims (at start of project)
  - Creative Victoria: provide strategies for expanding regional venues’ reach, community building, and developing cultural opportunities for young people, in order to ‘future-proof’ the state and support regional industry development
  - Arena: evaluate current programs in order to assist them to strengthen the role of theatre as a creative site to enable and/or enhance arts practices in regional schools
  - Hothouse/GPAC: understand impact across diverse groups in their regions, to help them improve their programming and overcome issues of distance and socio-economic disadvantage
  - ARTHUR: gain knowledge of models of practice from other organisations, and inform creation of a new interactive work
  - Bell: better analysis of Bell’s long history of Victorian touring, and more effective digital engagement to create ongoing dialogue around their work
  - TNA: dissemination and forging connections between industry and academy, particularly through socializing findings through a symposium or conference.
Researchers and Partners
At University of Melbourne:
- Professor Rachel Fensham (Culture and Communication and Digital Studio) – Chief Investigator
- Associate Professor Paul Rae (Culture and Communication) – Chief Investigator
- Dr Jennifer Beckett (Culture and Communication) – Chief Investigator
- Mr Jeremy Rice (Head of Education and Families, Melbourne Theatre Company) – Chief Investigator
- Ms Abbie Trott (PhD Candidate) – Graduate Researcher
- Dr Megan Upton/Mr Nat Cutter/Dr Lynne Kent (Research Assistant) – Project Manager

Partner Investigators:
- Christopher McDermott (Manager of Policy and Research, Creative Victoria) – Partner Investigator
- Christian Leavseley (Artistic Director, Arena Theatre Company) – Partner Investigator

Partner Organisations:
- ARTHUR: A Theatre Company – Partner Organisation
- Bell Shakespeare Company – Partner Organisation
- Geelong Performing Arts Centre – Partner Organisation
- Hothouse Theatre – Partner Organisation
- Regional Arts Victoria – Partner Organisation
- Theatre Network Australia – Partner Organisation

Project Timeline
- Phase 1 (Dec 2016-May 2017): Establish and interrogate existing knowledge
- Phase 2 (June-December 2017): Run initial workshops (Convergence in the Person)
- Phase 3a (January-December 2018): Analyse and disseminate initial findings and methodology, refine workshops (Convergence in the Person)
- Phase 3b (January-December 2019): Run refined workshops (Convergence in the Person), develop and expand social media strategy (Convergence of Media)
- Phase 4 (January-November 2020): Write book, run conference (Organizational Convergence)
Fieldwork to End 2018


- ARTHUR: *Bright World* website project. Performance documentation, performance analysis, interviews with creative team, filming of additional material for an online educational resource.

- Bell Shakespeare Company: *Regional Teacher Mentorship Program (RTMP)*. Interviews with teachers, pilot of *Instagram Macbeth* using digital and social media technologies to encourage creative responses to theatre in 5 schools including RTMP and non-RTMP students.

- Geelong Performing Arts Centre: *Take Over*. Observation of sessions and performances over two years and several follow-up workshops and interviews conducted with participating schools, students and teachers. Redesign of Impact Survey for 2019 roll out.

- HotHouse Theatre: *At The Hip* website project.

- Melbourne Theatre Company: Evaluation of *Melbourne Talam* and *Hungry Ghosts* education productions. Rehearsal observation, performance analysis, interviews with creative team, research workshops with students in five schools in regional Victoria.

- Theatre Network Australia: presentation and interaction with membership.

- All relevant partners: Capture and processing of touring and audience data, entering additional data as applicable into AusStage database, development of ‘Circuit’ mapping tool to visualise and analyse data

Other Research Activities to End 2018

- Appointment of RHD student, Abbie Trott, who has conducted significant fieldwork with GPAC and MTC, and whose candidature was confirmed in December 2017

- Three project newsletters to partners and four project meetings held with partners to inform them of progress and preliminary findings, and to conduct surveys on their attitudes to ‘impact’

- Establishment of project website and research database

- Two journal articles are in progress for submission in late 2018 and early 2019

- Two websites have been created for Partners ARTHUR and HotHouse providing online resources for schools and community to complement performances.

- Mapping tool ‘Circuit’ of touring productions for partner organisations has been developed and modified in consultation with partners. We have added partner production data to the AusStage database (905 events added or updated, 153 venues added or updated).

- Design of Dimensions of Impact Survey rolled out to students, drama teachers and project partners. This resulted in a presentation to Theatre Network Australia.

- 4 conference presentations, including an international presentation with Arena at IDIERI Auckland and presentations to the Australian Major Performing Arts Group Education Network.
This page left intentionally blank.
Report Executive Summary

This midterm report provides an overview of the research completed by the Creative Convergence team between 2017 and 2018. Mid-way through the project timeline, we have focussed largely on building relationships with the performing arts companies and their audiences of young people via discrete projects.

This report provides these interim findings to all our project partners for review and reflection, in order to build upon them in the final phases of the project. It serves to consolidate what has, to date, been a wide-ranging, multi-modal research enquiry.

At this stage the following general findings have emerged:

- Impact remains a slippery concept for use in evaluation as it is understood differently by theatre producers, young people and teachers.

- A wide variety of understandings and approaches exist to engagement with young people through theatre; these are discussed in more detail in each case study.

- Youth audiences are responding to complex works in correspondingly nuanced ways, and express high levels of interest in theatre participation: they like the opportunity to watch theatre, and they also enjoy talking about it in Q+As. They benefit from the enrichment of educational and workshop settings where they can work through their responses in practice.

- Digital media is increasingly integrated into how theatre companies communicate with audiences. When reaching young people more attention needs to be paid to the platforms used by young people and, importantly, how these platforms are used. This is particularly important for regional audiences where digital media is seen as a means of addressing some of the challenges of distance.

- The extent to which young people are engaged with social media as a creative and community building platform points to the need for more thinking on how theatre companies can provide opportunities for young people to actively participate in content creation.

- Activities and resources for access to theatre for young people are unevenly available to young people in schools, both in terms of geographical location, economic hardship and type of school attended. We are concerned about the lack of access to theatre through state secondary schools, in particular.

- Companies and researchers identify that it is difficult to research and access young people as audiences once they have left school. The 18-25 age cohort is not well catered for, and in regional Victoria, creative or cultural opportunities to engage with theatre seem limited.

- There is little sharing of knowledge, expertise and networks about young people, regional touring or regional advocates, between theatre companies and arts agencies dependent upon survival funding for their programs.

- Access to valuable ideas from scholarly literature about comparable companies or international evidence is diverse but there is growing interest in audiences as a field of research as well as studies of young people’s interactions with social media.
Arena Theatre Company

The delivery by Arena Theatre Company of the East Gippsland in-schools residency program is a unique and distinctive approach to theatre for young people in a relatively isolated region of Victoria. It delivers a high quality one-day interactive experience to students as the makers of theatre, constructing alternative realities, with the collaboration of professional theatre artists, producers and educators. Delivery of this program has required a major commitment on the part of Arena to an area of regional Victoria for work that could easily be invisible if measured by the criteria and peer review expectations of urban-centric funding or the theatre sector.

Our research demonstrates that Arena is the only one of the theatre companies in our study delivering theatre to young people in this region (2012-2018). It also seeks to develop some justifications for the approach they take to developing a long-term and collaborative model of theatre experience, and these include activation of creative capacity in the students own social lives, increased tolerance for difference and broader expectations for future careers. The impact on schools and the requirement of regional, arts and educational coordination to share support for such programs could have long-term benefits for isolated and regional communities to improve social outcomes.

Arena’s Activities

Arena is a youth theatre company of long-standing (founded 1966) which has changed its profile several times in response to changes in artistic leadership; changing values in relation to theatre for young people; and funding opportunities. While they develop, present and tour a range of original theatre productions that are devised by the company and associated artists, they also engage in a range of innovative programs that extend their interactions with young people more fully, such as participating in intensive youth workshops (SEDA arts development program) and building partnerships with schools. In terms of assessing impact, Arena identified their longer-term ‘in-school’ program with the students in East Gippsland schools as one that they wanted us to document and research.

Given the isolation of this region of Victoria from major metropolitan centres, and also the longitudinal nature of their commitment to ‘making theatre’ with these schools, this provided us with a unique case study. The East Gippsland project had been instigated by company member, Ali Macalister-Bills, who comes from the region and had attended Orbost High School herself as a student, in response to Creative Director Christian Leavesley’s goal of running a student program outside of capital cities. She was aware of the limited range of opportunities that students in that region have to access theatre and so they established a network of schools that would host Arena for a day, once a year for four years (2015-2018). Since travel to the region takes about five hours, the company commits at least a full week to the delivery of this in-school residency program, with preparations taking place well in advance of the tour.

East Gippsland Workshop Program: Demographics and Scope

East Gippsland is a region of designated regional disadvantage; with a median household weekly income of $950. It has low population density of 2.17 per Km2, and although predominantly Anglo-Australian, it has a relatively high percentage of indigenous residents (0.46%). Approximately 40% of the population is under 25. Of the theatre companies in this study, they are the only company that visits or tours to East Gippsland, and their nearest regional centre for theatre productions in a performing arts venue would probably be Sale (159 km), or the smaller Bairnsdale (92 km).

Arena’s work with schools in this area includes state schools Orbost Secondary College (OSC), Mallacoota P-12, Cann River P-12 and Swifts Creek P-12, in addition to several local state primary schools. At one of the primary schools, the principal writes a play once a year that involves all the students in the school. The two secondary colleges have bands and an annual theatre production.

The map below shows the range of Arena’s touring during the period of 2013-18 which shows how the commitment to East Gippsland extends the reach of their activities away from Melbourne and their new home in Bendigo (2018).
In-School Workshop

This workshop program offers a curated day of activities around a theme which does not require prior theatre knowledge, experience or interest on the part of students. Students are invited to collaborate with a team of actor-artists from Arena to investigate the theme which often requires them to collaboratively interact with their own realities using technologies or material objects. The commitment of the school principal to the program is essential as is the support of teachers to provide a dedicated rehearsal or workshop room and allow students to be fully involved for the whole day. Schools select those students who they feel may benefit from exposure to a professional theatre company and have created considerable trust in the outcomes. To date, the program has included approximately 462 students as participants and approximately another 1685 as audience members.

Creative Convergence and Arena

Arena Theatre Company (Arena) was one of the first companies that we partnered with in this research project, in advance of the grant submission, and it was the terminology of Artistic Director, Christian Leavesley, which gave us the title of the project. Christian may have been referring to a different sense of creative convergence, than the one we have given it, but certainly it was the idea that different conceptions of creativity can converge in the collaboration between young people and theatre companies that was a driver of this research enquiry. Christian is now a named CI on the Creative Convergence ARC project.

Arena project activities to date by the research project team, Dr Jennifer Beckett (CI) and Professor Rachel Fensham (CI), and Dr Meg Upton (RA, 2017) have included:

- Arena delivered its first East Gippsland workshop called Trapper (2014), and then Artificial Intelligence (2015) and once research funded, we were participant-observers at ‘in-school’ workshops at Orbost High School (2016-2018) on Artificial Intelligence (2016); Future Self (2017) and The Erl King (2018).
• Interviews with students, artists, teachers and a regional education consultant.
• Attendance at the performance of Trapper at Arts Centre Melbourne in 2017, with East Gippsland Schools in attendance. Trapper was an outcome of the 2015 workshop (the year before we attended).
• Collaborative drafting of a conference paper “A familiar distance: converged theatre-making in regional Victorian secondary schools” and financial support for Artistic Director Christian Leavesley and creative producer Alexandra McAlister-Bills, to attend the *Tyranny of Distance* conference of the International Drama in Education Research Institute in Auckland, New Zealand from 2-4 July 2018. Click here to view presentation.
• Team members’ attendance at *Artlands*, Regional Arts Conference, Bendigo on 13 October, and active participation in session delivered by Christian Leavesley on Arena’s working methods.
Preliminary Observations

School as habitus and place of practice

- Incursion mode (excursion is also incursion to some extent): Rather than bring students to the theatre, the ‘in-schools’ day-long program is a deep immersion in the school environment for the company. Arena do not deliver a production but facilitate the students to make a theatre work from their own resources during the day. They work with a selected group of students, who then show the work to their peers, other students, and teachers.

- The school is the student’s known environment, what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls a habitus, ‘a structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of localised practices.’ (Bourdieu, P. 1984: 170). Arena’s in-school visits participate in and must navigate this habitus, as guided by the students and teachers.

- Students were selected by the teachers by invitation with a letter; and participation was not compulsory nor was it a ‘drama’ activity. A year-long community leadership model operating at OSC involved a small group learning how to work on projects in partnership with external organisations. Four of these students were expected to support and lead other students in the Arena workshop. Other students were awkward and very shy, and certainly not the best students in the class. Some had a reputation for being the pranksters, although no background was necessarily given to Arena in advance. Notably, the visit coordination was led by a non-drama specialist, which meant that the teachers had limited expectations of the outcome, but were willing to support the students who they had identified needed it most. The researchers were struck by the fact that this model allows for a different mode of learning, not conditioned by drama content or teacher-student relations, to operate in the theatre workshop. We understand this ‘deterritorialisation’ of curriculum and authority as one of the generative conditions of Arena’s program.

- “Old fashioned” school/ideas of creativity/youth & teachers; partly as a result of the non-metropolitan identity of the schools, we observed what we regarded as an old-fashioned culture within the school of patriarchal authority, but also pastoral concern, and there is an intense sense of familiarity between teachers, the students and the town. Most of the teachers in the school had also attended the school as students, thus returning after higher education to the community they know well. Staff often interacted with students or their families out of hours and any unusual behaviour would be noted or shared. The school does not have a flourishing artistic environment and the town of Orbost is not identified as a creative hub.

- Distinct student and teacher narratives confirm the attachment that the teachers make to value and maintain the connection with Arena, and the curiosity-driven opportunities that the contact with Arena has given this group of students. Several of them express interest in creative careers.

Arena Theatre produces a ‘flipped model’ of youth engagement

- Arena do not make theatre for or by young people, but rather consider young people as collaborators in their own research and development of what makes exciting theatre. They begin with the questions they want to ask of a topic, and decide on what materials or tasks are going to enable the process of devising a new work of theatre. Thus they approach working with students as collaborators as much as they would a group of actors – and although the findings may or may not be delivered in the final production, the participatory research with students as an ensemble enables certain ideas and images, rhythms and textures to be examined and shared. “Some of the stuff we did was cool, like the team building. I think the first one we did was team building and then we did heaps of things and we had to work together as a team to do things, that’s probably helped me a bit. And then the last one, we just learned about the AI and that was pretty cool.” Tim, 2018

- Theatre is generated as an expression of the artists’ engagement with young people, not as a product to be consumed. Since these works develop theatre shaped by concepts, that are not identity driven. It has to be possible to explain the ideas of a work in a single sentence, as well as in a long paragraph, even though the concepts will be backed up by research, challenging theories and concerns Arena may have as a company e.g. the role of artificial intelligence in controlling identity.
● *Trapper* was a production about the dominance of social media, the internet and other online worlds in young people’s lives. It was a co-written script which comprised spoken word poetry, indirect speech, and physical actions using a set they needed to manipulate. With four actors, it lasts about 50 minutes and toured to Sydney as well as being presented in Melbourne. Students from Orbost were bussed to Melbourne to see the show, for a visit that included other city activities, and in the after-show work were critical spectators of the final production.

● In addition to the interviews, we have substantial photo and video documentation of this work and its processes that are yet to be fully analysed.

### Theatre and intimate distance; a concept under development

The International Drama In Education Research Institute (IDIERI) conference paper in New Zealand, presented by the Arena artistic team and funded by the project, elaborated upon the methodology developed for these workshops and the co-production of theatre as one of ‘intimate distance’. Arena’s activities in the school generate and work across this notion whereby distance becomes relative to the community within which people live and interact. Distance is not therefore defined by distance from a metropolitan centre, but rather is a model of spatial relations that can co-exist with feelings of alienation or intimacy.

While the students often spoke of their sense of an alienated reality at school or in the community, perhaps as a product of too-much, or an intense, familiarity, the workshops with the actors enabled familiar places and people to be experienced in a different way. We propose that this ‘intimate distance’ might replace the assumed values of the cosmopolitan that is associated with the heterotopic spaces of cities and its openness to ideas and diversity. This intimate distance can therefore transform the regional locus of the school to that of an alternative centre. The productive re-imagination of space and identity becomes an expanded possibility for young people’s self-invention through the theatre.

We are preparing a version of this argument and case study for journal publication in 2019.

### High level of social media and online creativity amongst cohort

● In addition to the interviews, we conducted a workshop on social media use at OSC in November 2017, which indicated that students were engaged with social media up to 6 hours a day. This was confirmed by the teacher interviews, who expressed concern that adaptive pedagogies to this absorption with social media were not always successful nor were outright bans. They were confused about its impact on the School but contrasted this with the value of the Arena program for the students, who seemed to reveal themselves within a safe environment.

● During the workshop, we were surprised with the extent to which students were willing to share intimate details with us, and with each other, although they admitted that there were different channels for different kinds of content sharing.

### Challenges: Arena Theatre

1. The preparation of this tour has required a major commitment on the part of Arena to resourcing an area of regional Victoria and the delivery of a process-based theatre outcome that may seem outside more conventional theatre production schedules.

2. A loss of funding during the research period led to major changes in their plans, and a relocation to another city in regional Victoria and further staff changes.

3. The loss of the key protagonist for the connection to East Gippsland raises questions about the sustainability of this commitment. The question then being what can be learnt from this four-year program for other work?
Challenges: Project Research

In attempting to work with Arena and the East Gippsland program, we faced the following challenges:

1. Making the commitment to the travel arrangements in advance and being able to participate in meaningful documentation. We felt this was best achieved in our second year when we were also able to offer an additional workshop and conduct interviews.
2. Being included in follow-up activities, such as rehearsals or touring schedules, that may have given us better insight into their perception and use of materials and content that can engage theatre audiences in the same way as their immersive workshops.

Recommendations

The project recommends that Arena focus on the following areas;

1. Maintaining a commitment to immersive, day-long programs with selected schools
2. Prioritising state-funded schools that have less opportunity to travel and access regional or metropolitan centres.
3. Extending the partnerships with young people beyond the life of a schools residency, possibly in the online environment.
4. Resourcing teachers more fully so that they can become longer-term advocates for theatre and the prospects of creativity within the social life-worlds of their students.
ARThUR Productions is a small independent theatre company comprising artistic director Paige Rattray and producer Belinda Kelly founded in Sydney in 2011. They have produced small-scale independent productions that met with critical acclaim and extensive exposure. Their most recent performance, Bright World (2016), was on the VCE Theatre Studies playlist, and received considerable critical attention. The Creative Convergence team began working with Arthur ahead of the Linkage Project coming on-stream, using a University of Melbourne Engagement Grant.

After commencement of the Creative Convergence project, Rattray took up a position as Associate Director at Sydney Theatre Company, and Belinda Kelly as Executive Producer with Terrapin Puppet Theatre in Hobart, Tasmania so the company effectively ceased operations. As an independent company, they represent a significant part of the ecosystem of youth theatre organisations in Australia, so we remain interested in their profile in this research.

Arthur’s Activities

Bright World was commissioned by TheatreWorks in St Kilda and featured on the VCE Theatre Studies playlist. A planned regional tour produced by Critical Stages was unable to proceed because it fell one performance short of the minimum number required to make it viable. In addition, venues were interested in performances at different times of the year, in order to tie in with specific seasons or programs. These difficulties point to some of the practical challenges in building regional tours on limited resources. At the same time, Rattray’s and Kelly’s career trajectories from small independent company to more established institutions show evidence of what can be enabled by such endeavours.

![Figure 1: Screenshot of Circuit map showing spread of Arthur activities in Victoria 2012-17](image-url)
Creative Convergence and Arthur

Paul Rae worked with the company to produce a website that documented Bright World, and provided educational materials focusing on different aspects of the creation of the work.

Fig 1: Landing page of the Bright World website.

The site gives an overview of the work, and then features five separate ‘units’, each of which features a key scene from the production, alongside two interviews with the playwrights and performers: one interview explores the scene in detail, while the other looks at the ‘bigger picture’, behind the scene.

Figs 2: Screenshots showing different pages on the website
Preliminary Observations

The website was created in order to work out the best ways of creating an online complement to a live performance, particularly one that would tour regionally, and featured on a VCE playlist. Material for the website was trialled with Paul’s students in his second-year undergraduate subject, ‘The Theatre Experience.’ Had the regional tour gone ahead, further opportunities for research with student users would have been possible.

One of the most distinctive questions to be asked about such projects is what the relationship should be between the source performance, and the website: is the website an archive of the live event, or can it have its own status as a resource in its own right? If so, how should the relationship to the performance be managed within the site, and what information do users require to benefit from the site? In order to create a website that had its own integrity, we initially aimed to make a site that could exist more or less independently of the show – meaning, a user didn’t have to have watched the entire performance to engage with the site. Talking with young theatre enthusiasts in regional Victoria, however, changed our attitudes: simply put, they want to watch performances, and appreciate as much variety as possible.

Recommendations

Arthur is currently on a break at the moment, therefore, we have no recommendations at this time.
Bell Shakespeare

Over the past two years, the Creative Convergence Project has been working with Bell Shakespeare (Bell), looking at the ways in which we can visually represent their work in Regional Victoria via our Circuit Map as well as looking at how the company can begin to use Social Media in their work with and outreach to young audiences.

This report looks at the current position of the company in terms of its work with regional young people; outlines the core challenges facing the company that impact on their work with young audiences; and, finally makes recommendations for future focus.

The key findings of this report include the perception that Shakespeare is no longer ‘relevant’ that appears to pervade regional government schools in particular; the decreasing access that regional youth, in particular those who attend government schools have to Bell programs and performances, and, finally; the increasing need to better articulate the ways in which Shakespeare translates into the lived experiences of regional young people if they are to remain engaged with the company. This final finding relates also to the fact that theatre programs are under increasing threat from funding cuts at both the company and schools funding level. Without proper articulation of the impact of theatre in young lives in regional Victoria Bell’s programs are facing greater levels of precarity in Regional Victoria, where Shakespeare is not a compulsory part of the school curriculum.

The authors particularly recommend increasing donor activity in the Sharing Shakespeare initiative and working to actively reach out to government teachers and schools, and preference access funding to these schools.

Bell’s Activities

Bell Shakespeare has a comprehensive ecosystem of youth outreach through their education programs. With a strong focus on diversity in casting and initiatives, such as the Hearts in a Row program to assist less wealthy schools, in particular regional schools, to access their performances, the company clearly lives up to their value of inclusion. Currently education accounts of 50% of Bell’s output.

Within Victoria itself, Bell has been able to reach students across the state, travelling further than any other touring company in the project. Over the past few years, this travel has been curtailed by financial constraints, most notably ever decreasing government funding at the state level, particularly in the area of education and outreach.

Importantly, Bell adds value through teacher training and mentoring programs which have an impact not only the students taught by the teachers who go through these programs, but, it could be argued, across the school in general. In the past six months, the Creative Convergence Project has run workshops in Bell Schools around Macbeth and our researchers have seen the passion that Bell teachers bring to the classroom.

In addition to this, Bell has the most comprehensive teaching resources of all our partners, including a partnership with ABC Splash. This is potentially a result of their position as a national company, though is also a testament to the strength of their education program headed up by Joanne Erskine. In 2019, Bell is innovating its education structures once more, integrating them into the broader creative direction of the company rather than having them as a stand-alone unit. This is a novel approach among the theatre company partners in the project and is worth investigating over 2019 to determine the impact this has on decision making and the strength of the program overall.

Touring and in-school productions

Bell Shakespeare has a strong history of regional touring in the country, as can be seen by the spread of their performances within Creative Convergence’s Circuit map (see Figure 1 below). During the period covered by the map Bell reached 6,208 regional students through their in-school performances, while 6,015 students from 136 regional schools attended touring productions in Melbourne.

In 2017, Mainstage show Macbeth was performed in capital city hubs, such as the Arts Centre in Melbourne, with student attending. In addition to the in-theatre audience, over 1,500 regional students watched livestream performances of the production. Bell also toured The Merchant of Venice (MoV) to 4 regional Victorian Centres where it was well attended, with a large number of schools also booking the regional workshop around the performance. Additional funding for disadvantaged schools for attendance at these performances was given via the Sharing Shakespeare program at Bell, in particular the Hearts in a Row initiative.
Learning programs

Bell’s learning programs reached an impressive 3,457 students in Victoria in 2017 a 42% increase over 2016 figures. Of these three were regionally based.

Teacher training and mentoring

Bell’s teacher forums have reached a significant number of regional teachers, although there are still more Urban schools attending. Attendance between government schools and independent/Catholic schools at Teacher forums during the period 201/2017 was evenly split, which is encouraging.

Over the five years from 2012 to 2017, 13 of Bell’s regional mentorships were undertaken by Victorian teachers. In 2017/18 this included teachers from Phillip Island, Colac, Traralgon, Girgarre, Warrnambool, Mildura and Echucha. The majority of the mentored teachers in the 2012-2016 period came from Government schools, though it should be noted that since 2017 this trend has reversed with all secondary school mentees coming from the Independent or Catholic sector, while the two primary school mentees were government school employees. According to Bell this is largely a result of the shift towards school principals making funding decisions and the ongoing lack of applicants from the state.

Juvenile Justice

Bell expanded its Juvenile Justice program into Victoria for the first time in 2017 to include the Melbourne Youth Justice Centre in Parkville. While this Centre is technically not regional, it is the largest facility of only three in the state. The other two - Grevillea Unit (temporary) at Barwon Prison and Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre (considered regional) - are both just over one hour’s drive from the capital. Parkville is currently the only centre for males 14 and under and the only custodial centre for females (Grover, 2017, p3).

Given that a recent Victorian Parliament Inquiry also found that regional youth were far more likely to end up in detention due to a lack of resources for diversion programs (Grover, 2017, p 13), the upshot of this is that while this program might not directly target regional youth, given the demographic make-up of the centres there is a strong likelihood that the program is indirectly reaching and having an impact on regional youth. More research will have to be done into recidivism rates and future life outcomes among those youths who attend a Bell Workshop while in detention to identify any on-going impact.
Creative Convergence and Bell

Over the past two years, the Creative Convergence project has focused strongly on providing Bell with a visual map of its touring and in-school production (see Figure 1) through our Circuit Map reported under Creative Victoria.

In 2018, following conversations with Joanne Erskine and creative director James Evans, project investigators Professor Rachel Fensham and Dr Jennifer Beckett began to explore ways to engage students around the play *Macbeth*, using Instagram as a tool. The result of this was the Workshop ‘Insta-Macbeth’, in which students were invited to consider the central themes of the play and to wonder what a version of the play set in their school with students as characters might look like.

![Figure 2: Sample of tribes, places and actions in the school environment that could escalate tensions in Macbeth, Act IV - Marymede Secondary College, South Morang.](image)

They were then asked to create a visual story using Instagram’s carousel function based on lines from individual acts. Four Schools were chosen to cover the 5 Acts (we visited Newhaven College twice) and Schools with teachers who had undertaken Bell Teacher Mentoring were preferenced (3 of the 4). Prior to the workshop Bell Educational materials were sent to the school to assist teachers in preparing students for the activity.

The results of the workshop were telling, with students strongly engaging with the task. Teachers commented on higher than usual student engagement and one student at Newhaven College went so far as to say they were “honoured” to be given a chance to work with Bell materials in this fashion. The images produced by the students were striking and perhaps gave away more than the students’ might have thought about the ways in which they see their own roles within the school and how a schoolyard drama is often Shakespearian in nature (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

We were excited by the capacity that the workshop and Instagram format had to generate theatrical engagement very quickly from even less-engaged students. We particularly liked the capacity they had to work with Shakespeare’s language in these short phrases and use them contextually, thus not losing any sense of their role within a dramatic situation. In 2019, Bell and the project have discussed embedding this workshop into teacher materials sent to all Bell Schools and will be focusing on delivering the workshop in the first half of the year.
Preliminary Observations
Challenges: Company

After conversations with Joanne Erskine and others at Bell, along with conversations with teachers in regional schools (not limited to Bell schools) and with practitioners, Bell faces three key challenges:

1. Declining government funding, particularly for educational programs and youth outreach. This is exacerbated in the Victorian context due to the way funding is allocated;
2. The loss of significant corporate donors, decreasing the reach of touring productions;
3. Increasing push back as to the ‘relevance of Shakespeare’, particularly in government schools;
4. The need to increase the interactivity of their education programs and performances so that young audiences continue to feel connected to the work and to the company, especially after direct interaction with the company;
5. An aging audience and donor base, and;
6. The ability to adequately express the impact of their work on young lives and in a more general cultural conversation.
Challenges: Regional Victoria

While the company faces several challenges as a whole, these are often exacerbated in regional areas. Overall, however, access is the primary concern in this area. This is particularly problematic for students enrolled in Government schools and it can be seen in the decreasing number of regional Government Schools accessing Bell programs over the last few years. Access can be understood in two categories:

1. Financial – a simple lack of funding to pay for workshops or to attend performances, and;

2. Lack of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) – Bourdieu’s concept can be understood more simply as having no ‘in’ to the cultural work being discussed or performed. This can be educational but it can also come down to not having parents who value cultural artefacts as important (so no-one takes you to the theatre or to the gallery). The declining representation of regional Government Schools accessing arts programs is therefore, concerning. Of particular concern to Bell is the fact that some principals in regional Victorian schools seem to be particularly of the mind that Shakespeare is no longer relevant. This could be a result of the fact that, unlike in NSW, Shakespeare is not a compulsory part of the English curriculum at VCE level.

Challenges: Project Research

In attempting to set up work with Bell Schools, we faced the following challenges:

1. Difficulty in setting up times with schools – in the case of one school the workshop was cancelled all four times we attempted to go, and at the last minute;

2. Difficulty in getting teachers to talk to us formally about their experience in the mentoring program, despite repeated tries, and;

3. Inability to work with students outside of the independent/Catholic system.

Recommendations

The project recommends that Bell focus on the following areas:

1. Increasing buy-in from regional schools into programs by expanding the Sharing Shakespeare initiative and bring a special focus onto disadvantaged schools (perhaps seeking additional donor funding);

2. Work to provide new avenues of access to young audiences, either through additional work on social media, provision of more activities that promote the creation of Shakespeare related content that young audiences see as relevant to their lives;

3. Gain a better understanding of how young audiences use social media and what they expect from social interactions (which Creative Convergence will assist with), and;

4. Continue working with Creative Convergence to better understand how to talk about their work in ways that increase the likelihood of funding through better articulation of the impact the work has on young audiences, in particular regional youth.
Creative Victoria

The development of Circuit has offered us new insights into the scale and diversity of regional theatre activity in Victoria that can and could inform government policy formation. It has prompted interesting conversations with our partner organisations, many of which will be beneficial as we continue to explore theatre’s impact on regional young people. We hope to continue to develop it into the future.

Circuit is available at https://circuit.unimelb.edu.au (optimised for Chrome).

Creative Victoria’s Activities

Creative Victoria is the government body dedicated to supporting, championing and growing the state’s creative industries, spanning arts, culture, screen and design. Centred on $115 million Creative State strategy, which is designed to grow Victoria’s $23 billion creative and cultural economy, turbocharge local creative enterprises, create new jobs and employment opportunities, and bring social and cultural benefits to Victorians.

Of relevance to this project CV manages:

- Agencies and Infrastructure: Oversight of state-owned creative assets, including GPAC, and St Martins Youth Arts Centre.
- Arts Sector Investment: Funding programs for development and access in arts and culture, such as Bendigo’s Capitol Theatre.
- Current major regional projects include $38.5 million to redevelop GPAC and development of Regional Centre for Culture program.
Creative Convergence and Creative Victoria

Christopher McDermott (Senior Manager, Policy and Research) is a Chief Investigator on this project, and we have had active support from Bria Baker (Policy and Research) in planning meetings. In terms of our support for Creative Victoria, we have thus far focused on the digital mapping of regional theatre activities via Circuit; and its potential for informing policy.

Circuit: Mapping Touring Theatre in Victoria

Bell Shakespeare alerted us to their long history of touring regional Victoria when they joined the project and wanted to better understand the impact this may have had, as well as their strategy of working with teachers in schools. As a result we proposed to use data provided by the database of AusStage to build a touring map of our partner theatre companies in Victoria.

In order to do this, we partnered with Septi Tombe, a Masters of Information Technology student at the University, as well as the Social and Cultural Informatics Platform and the Digital Studio, to build and develop Circuit, a mapping tool that visualises mainstage and education shows, workshops and residencies presented by theatre companies in Victoria.

This web-based tool draws from the AusStage database, with expanded and corrected data gathered directly from our partners, to visually represent a wide variety of theatre-based activities and programs delivered across Victoria. Through our efforts, the partners have more comprehensive and reliable data about their productions in this research database and in addition, we have worked with AusStage to include a wider range of activities, such as workshops and talks.

In addition to the data on performances and public activities supplied through AusStage, Circuit additionally supports uploading of audience data gathered from partner ticketing information. This data can be filtered by date, company, show, school, location, and by council-area demographics for average household income and percentage of people under 18. With input from AURIN, a national geospatial mapping platform, the tool also includes census data for population density and cultural identity. Circuit updates frequently and can be accessed by anyone who has its URL.

Two presentations have been given on Circuit:

- Australian Major Performing Arts Groups Education Sector annual meeting in November 2018, when Circuit was presented as one of their five minute provocations to an audience of 60 arts leaders from around Australia.
- To the International Data Curation Conference, February 2019, in a panel on cultural data collection and curation.

Preliminary Observations

Developing Circuit has proved to be a valuable venture into the use of big data and visualisation, and has provoked valuable discussion with our partners and with creative industry providers. Some observations include:

- that each of our partners has a different regional distribution, and that they cluster their performances around larger regional hubs – Geelong, Bendigo, Ballarat, Shepparton, Wangaratta and Albury-Wodonga.
- designated Education shows travel more widely and into smaller towns than general productions, and Education workshops often penetrate even further, suggesting that education programs drive regional presence.
- the state-wide picture shows that some areas have limited exposure to theatre, whereas others have singular (from one company) or concentrated opportunities.
- Hothouse’s shift from frequent regional touring in the early 2000s to a more venue-based program;
- Bell’s extensive education program;
- MTC’s shrinking education touring schedule.
- remote areas like East Gippsland and much of south- and north-western Victoria are often served by education workshops, while opportunities to attend non-school-based shows require audiences to travel hours to Mildura, Bendigo, Ballarat or Shepparton to see touring productions.
• differences in the number of venues performed in by each company, compared with the number of shows, which gives us a broad indication of theatre ‘density’ in regional areas.

• the range of schools that have attended performances, which is improving our picture of the distance students travel to see theatre, and the differences in access between independent, catholic systemic and public schools.

Challenges: Project Research

The data we gather from Circuit is necessarily incomplete – it only concerns our partners, in Victoria, based on the data provided.

Many theatre companies do not maintain detailed information on their audiences, or such information is in an archaic format that is difficult to organise and analyse.

It would be and is possible for more to be done in ensuring that aggregated data is delivered by companies and by government to AusStage and thus to be linked to Circuit. AusStage remains the single most developed database of Australian performing arts activity with an interoperability to the National Library and other links. Its policy capacity is as yet under-utilised.

The visualisation provided by Circuit is also limited – a single dot might encompass one performance or workshop, or a thousand (though the connection lines do indicate density to an extent).

Recommendations

For Creative Victoria, we recommend:

• Further development of digital mapping of regional theatre activities via Circuit, and;
• the potential for Circuit to inform policy formation be tested on policy stakeholders.
Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC)

GPAC is the only regional performing arts venue to partner with the Creative Convergence project. As a result it provides a unique site to examine regional convergence as it often hosts works by our other partner organisations, in particular the Melbourne Theatre Company. Importantly, GPAC also operates as a regional creative hub bringing young people together in complex ways as both audiences and creators of artistic works. Over the past two years, researchers from the Creative Convergence team - Dr Jennifer Beckett, Dr Megan Upton (2017) and Abbie Trott - have primarily been investigating GPAC’s TakeOver program. More recently we have begun to focus on rolling out our Impact metrics survey using GPAC as a test site.

They key finding of this report point to the ongoing success of the TakeOver project but again points to issues attracting government schools into the program.

GPAC’s Activities

GPAC hosts a number of youth-centred activities throughout the year ranging from Prep to VCE level student activities. These include hosting school-based shows, running a range of theatre-based workshops, including those focused on issues around youth mental health, and school holiday programs. In the past two years an increasing focus has also been placed on Indigenous Youth programs. For the most part these activities have been led by Kelly Clifford, the venue’s education manager. One of the key components of this program is the annual TakeOver program.

TakeOver

Students engage in workshops at GPAC as part of Stage 3 of TakeOver
TakeOver is a long-term project run by Kelly Clifford and built around an annual theme. Its aim is to bring high school students to GPAC, where they “are encouraged to act, write, direct, stage-manage, design, and operate lighting and sound in this unique Youth Festival.” The event is staged in five distinct parts:

1. A conceptual and creative workshop run as an incursion at the participating schools by Kelly and a creative artist in which the theme of the year is explored;
2. In classroom development of work led by students in collaboration with their teacher;
3. Theatre visit and feedback session. At this session GPAC technical staff show students the lighting that is available to them, the mechanics of the space in terms of entrances, exits and the shape of the stage. Students are then given the chance to run through part of their show in the theatre space and receive feedback from the creative artist and fellow participants.
4. A technical rehearsal which occurs in the week before the festival. Students are given an opportunity for a full dress rehearsal and run through of their finished piece. This includes all technical aspects including lighting, sound and video cues. If students are undertaking technical roles such as lighting, video, sound, or stage management, they will have a practice at their roles and run their tech in the rehearsal.
5. The final stage is an evening performance which family members and friends are encouraged to attend. The even is spread over two days to accommodate the number of schools.

The 2018 creative artist was sound artist and producer James Milsom; this is the second year that TakeOver has engaged with sound artists. This decision was made as a strategy to complement the theatre-making skills Kelly brings to the process.

Creative Convergence and Geelong Performing Arts Centre

The Creative Convergence project’s key project with Geelong has been an investigation into the impact of the TakeOver program. Research commenced in 2017 with observation of the excursion portions of the program and a focus group with the year 12 students at Lara State High School who had participated in the show. Overall the students we spoke to expressed a great connection to TakeOver, many of them having taken part since Year 9.

After discussions with Kelly Gifford and the Creative Convergence team it was decided that the 2018 theme of the show would include a digital/media focus. The result was the theme “A Digital World” in which students were asked to examine how the digital world was affecting their lives or the world. As with 2017 members of the project attended the workshops and the performance and greater engagement with the young people themselves was sought. This included pre-performance interviews undertaken and school workshops at Geelong High School and Geelong Lutheran College after the program had ended.

Although there are a number of local public schools who could take part in the project data over the past few years as pointed to a decrease in public school participation. In 2018 Kelly actively sought to redress this balance, still during our observation only one state high school, Geelong High, was observed with the remaining performances coming from three private schools; Geelong Lutheran College – a more regional school where there were 7 students from years 9 – 12, and a composite year 10 class from Saint Joseph’s College and Sacred Heart College. Interview before performance.

Currently we are examining attendance and other data around the TakeOver program from 2012-present to investigate attendance patterns, and sentiment towards the program.

Along with post-performance vox pops and conversations with the students who had taken part in the performance and the audience, the project also distributed a version of the impact survey, which included additional questions about social media use to all participants and audience members. In 2019, a refined version of this survey will be rolled out to all GPAC performances allowing the organisation to get a picture of its engagement and impact on all youth audiences, irrespective of school involvement.

---

1 TakeOver information sheet 2016. GPAC:Ed.
2 In 2018, this excursion into the theatre took place 3 weeks before the performance.
Preliminary Observations

Take Over

- Seeing the development of other schools’ shows was as important as seeing their performances and having a wider community in the audience.
- The technical layer was very important to the outcome of the performance, including having a student in the tech box who knew the show.
- Participating in TakeOver changed their experience of watching theatre as they gained a deeper understanding of what goes into it.
- Students we spoke to at Lara expressed a desire for the program to continue post-high school, giving them an opportunity to take part in more creative work outside of school learning or VCE activity;

Digital World

- The student’s conceptualisation of the ‘digital world’ was very binary (positive and negative).
- Thinking about the theme changed through the research process, but not through watching other students’ performance.
- When asked to examine how their performance might be realised as an ‘online’ version they were very creative but found it hard to abstract a ‘live’ performance into an ‘online’ entity. They were more interested in either having interaction with pre-recorded ‘online’ elements within the live performance or presenting parts of their performance filmed and uploaded to watch online before the show.

Challenges: Project Research

Outside of the space of the theatre it was difficult to arrange for school participation. In addition, it is difficult to address some of the longitudinal aims of the research as school groups change over time and we are often not speaking to the same students. To fix this we are aiming to follow up with students who have previously participated in the program and to attempt to follow students who may move onto VCE level drama or theatre courses.

Challenges: GPAC

While GPAC is a regional hub for performing arts, it has been difficult for them to get a handle on the impact that their work has on regional youth. Much of what the information they have is in the form of hard-copy feedback - surveys and letters - and it is difficult for them to paint a strong picture of the work they do.

As with Bell, access to venue workshops by students in the public system is becoming harder, largely as a result of funding issues. As a regional venue, they potentially service the greatest range of social needs within the Geelong community. The issue of access may serve to entrench issues of privilege and lack of cultural capital, so care must be taken to find ways to increase participation from schools outside of the private and Catholic sectors.

Recommendations

We recommend the following:

- GPAC continues to work with the project, and in particular Abbie Trott on a longitudinal survey of TakeOver;
- Attention is paid to ensuring diversity of access to its programs, and;
- Work be put into creating a cohesive story of the venue’s youth engagement and impact with the project.
**HotHouse Theatre**

HotHouse is an important partner in our project for two reasons. First, it is a long-established, regionally located company. Second, it has a track record of making theatre both for and with young people. In recent years, HotHouse has been undergoing a process of adaptation to the changing funding landscape, which has seen support move away from theatre for young people. HotHouse is increasingly focusing on local artist development, with some of those artists emerging out of their young people’s programmes. Creative Convergence has worked with HotHouse to develop a website that documents and archives material generated in the course of the creation of *At the Hip* (2016). The research component resides in how this site can be used both as a local community resource, and as a way of giving the performance an afterlife in other regions.

**HotHouse’s Activities**

As a critical national incubator of distinctive Australian works, HotHouse’s investment in artists, audiences and community engages locally and impacts nationally. Currently, through responsive artist development programs and a well-established subscription model HotHouse Theatre:

- Collaborates with other significant organisations to co-commission and co-produce contemporary Australian theatre of the highest standard;
- Partners with Australia’s boldest and brightest independent artists and companies.
- Supports artists to develop new work year-round through our unique Month in the Country residency program;
- Presents resonant and culturally relevant touring productions.

![Figure 1: Screenshot showing spread of HotHouse activities in Victoria, NSW & South Australia 2012-17, incl. participating schools.](image_url)
Creative Convergence and HotHouse

At the Hip website

Working in collaboration with Dr Asher Warren (University of Tasmania), project CI Paul Rae developed a pilot website for *At the Hip*, a performance created by the Studio Ensemble and directed by Rosalyn Oades in 2016. *At the Hip* was a verbatim performance that drew on interviews with people of all ages and life experiences from Albury-Wodonga. The performance took Gough Whitlam’s 1970s project of joining the two towns ‘at the hip’ as a way of building a new inland city as its starting point, focusing on the theme of ‘big dreams’. After conducting and editing the interviews into a montage, the youth ensemble performed the work by listening to the footage through earpieces, and reproducing the voices and mannerisms of the interviewees. The result was a popular community event that appealed to audience members of all ages.

Landing page of the At the Hip website, using an image that features on a projection in the performance

The aim of the website is to find ways of archiving this footage, documenting the performance, and making the information and perspectives that the performance communicated available to the community as an online resource. Visitors to the website are able to access performance footage, and to compare specific sections with the original interviews: they can listen to how the actors interpreted their interviewees’ voices and see where the material was edited by comparing it with full transcript of the original interview. This information is placed alongside further contextualising information about the Albury-Wodonga corporation, and about HotHouse theatre itself.

Screenshots from the website showing the different ways of accessing the material (l), and contextualising info (r)
Circuit mapping

In 2018 the project was able to send Nat Cutter to HotHouse HQ in Albury-Wodonga in order to collate information for upload into OzStage. This enabled the project to then draw on this information to include HotHouse in the circuit project.

With this visit, Nat was able to collect a significant volume of audience data specific to geographic location, which meant we could begin to add individual level data about audiences to Circuit. Decisions had to be made as to whether or not this would be useful. And we decided to focus particularly on the distance that schools would travel to see theatre as a result of this visit.

At the time, executive director, Michael Huxley advised the Project that HotHouse would be discontinuing its youth programs as a result of loss of funding. These changes and decisions confirm the volatility of the youth arts sector more generally.

As can be seen from the map below, HotHouse has ceased touring (their last tour was in 2015) and has instead shifted their focus to having a greater impact closer to home, reaching a wide range of schools in the region.

Preliminary Research Observations:

HotHouse is a distinct Partner Organisation because it is a regionally-located company whose youth participation sits within a larger community orientation. Since its inception, the company has taken on a number of different forms and priorities in order to attract and sustain a connection with its audience. The Circuit map shows that it services a wide region of northern Victoria in which there may be little other youth theatre activity.

The use of a website is one way of strengthening aspects of that connection, and providing an ‘afterlife’ to a performance. While there is a strong community feeling around the company, and therefore good institutional memory generally, reflective performance documentation may be of particular value in the case of projects involving young people, because they are the most mobile, with many moving away from Albury-Wodonga, and losing contact with the company.

Challenges: Company

HotHouse itself has identified the following challenges facing its continued work in the regions:

- Limitations of the regional setting, particularly in the balance between presenting mainstage work and non-professional, smaller independent local productions. The company hopes that its Celsius program will help to bridge this gap.
- Significant changes in leadership
- Loss of funding, leading to a limitation on the activity that can be done and cutting of youth programs.

Challenges: Project Research

The key research challenge for the project has arisen from the significant changes in management and focus that HotHouse has been navigating in recent years, particularly as this has seen a re-focusing of the company’s energies away from youth theatre and towards local artist development.

Recommendations

Given the fact that HotHouse is undergoing a period of significant change in terms of how it positions itself in relation to the community, and delivers its programs, it is not appropriate for us to make specific recommendations at this stage. Having said this, our research on At the Hip points to the fact that online content, as well as subsidies for in-school activities and workshops could be of great benefit to the strengthening of theatre experiences. At the moment, however, our greater task is to monitor the company’s new developments.
Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC)

MTC is a key partner in the Creative Convergence project with Education director Jeremy Rice listed as a CI on the project. As such MTC has been a strong centre of focus for the project since its commencement. In particular work has been done with the company on tracking student reception of the plays *Melbourne Talam* (2017) and *Hungry Ghosts* (2018) by project CI Associate Professor Paul Rae and graduate researcher Abbie Trott. In addition, a side project was undertaken with the company to address some of its concerns around attracting youth audiences to its performance with CI Dr Jennifer Beckett through her subject *Integrated Marketing Communications*.

**MTC’s Activities**

As one of the major state theatre companies, MTC offers a range of different youth focused programs. Most of its activities are focused on in-house productions at its Southbank Theatre, but significant thought is given to touring productions to regional venues around Victoria. In particular the Education and Family Engagement unit of the company develops annual performances around the VCE curriculum that are specifically designed with touring in mind. The majority of these performances are held in regional venues, with ticketing and promotions largely done out-of-home by external agents. Our Circuit Map, below, shows the extent of MTCs touring over the period 2012-17.

As well as this the company also provides internship and work experience opportunities for regional youth who are interested in a career in the theatre or creative arts sector. Similarly the company has a well-established Youth Ambassador program designed to give selected Year 11 students extended exposure to the work of the company, both on-stage and in production.

In order to further engage the regions, MTC has committed to creating digital and online content in-house to compensate for its limited touring capacity outside of the education program. This includes online access to archival recordings of shows as well as some, but limited, streaming of live performance, along with educational (secondary level) and professional development resources.

*Figure 1: Screenshot showing spread of MTC activities in Victoria 2012-17, incl. participating schools.*
Creative Convergence and MTC

For the most part our research with the MTC has concerned with ‘Impact Tracking’. In particular, we have been interested in finding out what forms something that might be described as ‘impact’ takes at various points in the creation and response to a work. This has involved taking a mixed-methods research approach to I Call My Brothers (pilot, 2015), Melbourne Talam (2017) and Hungry Ghosts (2018), including the following:

- Rehearsal observation during development weeks, main rehearsal and ‘bump-in’ periods.
- Analysis of performances presented in Melbourne, and on tour.
- Semi-structured interviews with the cast and director one week before opening night, and with the cast later in the tour.
- Participatory workshops with students at schools in regional Victoria who have seen the performance. In order to explore what the audience members remembered of the experience, and what meanings they had made from it, the workshops were conducted up to 100 days after the performance, and consisted of the following activities:
  - A warm-up.
  - Group reconstruction from memory of key scenes.
  - Individual ‘curation’ of still images from the production, and an explanation of the rationale for the image selection.
  - A writing exercise
  - A wrap-up discussion.
  - Completion of a 30-second impact survey that involved circling the three most important words from a selection of ‘impact criteria’ drawn from diverse impact assessment documents.
  - Analysis of collateral materials generated by the production, including publicity and Stage Manager’s show reports.

The research workshops were conducted at the following schools:

- May 2015 – Mount Clear College, Ballarat (I Call My Brothers)
- April 2017 – Bellarine SC, Drysdale (Melbourne Talam)
- August 2017 – Marymede SC (Melbourne Talam)
- September 2017 – Galen Catholic College (Melbourne Talam)
- August 2018 – North Geelong Secondary College (Hungry Ghosts)

We have discussed our findings in the following contexts:

- March 2018 – Conference presentation at iNARPA Melbourne by Paul Rae, Jeremy Rice and Abbie Trott
- May 2018 – Short presentation at Victorian Theatre Forum
- August 2018 – Talk at Melbourne Theatre Company HQ for members of the company
Marketing Theatre to Young Audiences

During Semester 2, 2018 the MTC was also given the opportunity to act as a client for project CI Dr Jennifer Beckett’s subject Integrated Marketing Communications. The aim of this was to help address a side issue that all of the companies had expressed an interest in solving: the lack of youth engagement with theatre. A compulsory subject in the Master of Marketing Communications, this subject is designed to give students an opportunity to work with a live client and devise a communications plan for them. Dr Beckett worked with MTC Marketing and Communications Director, Vanessa Rowsthorn to develop a client brief that focused on attracting youth audiences. One of the key findings of the teams was that the MTC was not effectively using their social media channels to reach younger audiences and that a greater emphasis on interactivity and channel/audience fit needed to be adopted. MTC Executive Director Virginia Lovett and Vanessa Rowsthorn attended the final pitch session and offered excellent feedback to the students as well as indicating that some of the student findings would be addressed going forward.

Preliminary Observations:

The following observations were made at the conclusion of a research presentation given to MTC in August 2018:

- **Publicity and collaterals are important both for artists and audiences in establishing expectations.** They can be seen as forming the basis of a relationship between actors and audience members, and, particularly in the context of minority representation, serve an important role in establishing the actors’ relationship to the work and presenting organization.

- **A particular skill-set is required on the part of the creative team to meet the requirements of creating a new touring production for young people.** Collaboration, curiosity and versatility must be joined by critical intelligence, in-performance resourcefulness, and the ability to talk articulately and persuasively about the production (see notes on Q+As, below).

- **Good actors develop a series of strategies for adapting to each new audience: but they need strong, complex material in order to do so.** (As one actor put it, material with ‘substance’)

- **Young people respond powerfully to powerful performances.** However, it is hard to predict exactly what an audience will find most powerful, and it may be the hallmark of a good production that this varies from performance to performance.

- **Meaning is important, but does not necessarily equate with narrative and character.**

- **Youth audiences are looking to identify with the work, and are creative and open-minded in finding opportunities for doing so.** They are not fazed by difference, as long as they find some imaginative point of connection.

- **There can be a gap** between what adults (including the creative team) expect of youth audiences, and what those audience members themselves feel is most important.

- **Groups appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to relive – and debate – the shared experience of theatre**
• VCE and other formal frameworks create a high degree of audience reflexivity around how a work is being presented and what kind of response is expected.
Youth audiences meet this with their own experiences of theatre, and are keen to compare and contrast

• Regional audiences are distinctively diverse and assimilated, and it is risky to make assumptions about them.
They will vary from location to location. But the composition of each audience may also vary more widely than in the city, ranging from theatre nuts who visit Melbourne regularly for performances and training, to those with a much more limited experience of theatre and of the city

• Audience members are interested in the actors and their careers

Recommendations

The program recommends further research on the following developments:

• Monitoring of Instagram Q&A as they provide a forum for collective enquiry into the meanings and effects of the work. Depending on the work, they provide an opportunity to empower individual audience members within their community context.
• Better understanding of the media ecosystem as it relates to young audiences is required.
• Greater attention needs to be paid to equity of access by schools. As with Bell and GPAC we note a dropping off of participation from government schools.
• The MTC continue to diversify its touring productions to encourage more diversity in its audience cohort.
• The MTC find ways to develop touring productions for young people that are not only linked to inclusion on the VCE playlist.
Regional Arts Victoria (RAV)

Regional Arts Victoria is the peak body for regional artists and arts organisations, and the leading organisation for regional creative practice in Victoria. They advise and impact on decision-making across multiple portfolios and levels of government.

We anticipate in 2020 working closely with RAV to embed the findings of this research in local and regional networks and to advance sharing of ideas about better resourcing of theatre for young people.

RAV Activities

Regional Arts Victoria’s current scope encompasses all artforms, all creative practices, and all modes of artistic experience. Vibrant, comprehensive programs such as Education & Families, Cultural Partnerships and Performing Arts Touring create valuable learning, development and presentation opportunities for hundreds of thousands of people each year.

As well as an annual Creative Leadership Program, a significant, long-term, state-wide artistic project focuses on creative facilitation and advocacy, and they support touring services, an annual Artlands Conference as well as professional development for regional arts producers. RAV’s organisational remit is regional Victoria but they are also linked to the regional arts networks functioning across other Australian states, which serve as peak bodies for advice to government.

Growing the representation and involvement of young people in regional arts activity has been a RAV priority and they have developed initiatives to support creative entrepreneurship at local and regional levels. We would like to better understand to what extent theatre companies can participate in and support those programs. Key People in RAV include Joe Toohey (CEO); Liz Zito (Director of Partnerships) and Pippin Davies (Arts and Education Manager).

Creative Convergence and Regional Arts Victoria

CI Jeremy Rice from MTC initiated a meeting with RAV in mid-2018 to discuss shared interests that this project may have in building a better understanding of the convergence between touring theatre and theatre activity already located within the regions, whether through groups, communities, venues and organisations.

Two team members attended Artlands, Regional Arts Conference, Bendigo on 13 October 2018, and were able to listen to the inspiring youth panel and meet and hear from other theatre companies, such as Outback Theatre for Young People, working in regional and remote communities.

We realise that knowledge of regional theatre development has not been well-documented nor theorised, and so have decided to make that the focus of one of our academic outputs. We have agreed with them upon a Call for Papers for a special issue on the Australasian Drama Studies journal on “Theatre in Regional Australia” (2020).

From further conversations and the team’s participation in the Artlands conference in October 2018, we invited RAV to become an endorsed Partner Organisation, and this was confirmed officially at the beginning of 2019. Our discussions with them are therefore at an early stage.

Preliminary Observations

Four preliminary observations arising from our discussion and participation at Artlands are:

- RAV supports theatre groups and organisations at the local/regional level that have their own youth audiences e.g. comedy ensembles, small theatre companies, music venues; and which could be further developed within a converged landscape or better understood as young people move from country or home to city and home, and back again.
- Digital tools and analysis: - they have begun utilising mapping tools to better understand and communicate the impact of arts investment across the state. To assess impact they consider level and kind of resourcing over time against value of participation, and this data could be usefully applied to other settings if integrated into other forms of data curation.
- RAV has recently developed significant capacities to diversity its membership and networks in the regions, and in addition, these demographic changes coincides with areas that are expanding with population outflows from metropolitan areas, and themselves becoming more cosmopolitan.
They know better than us what areas are most isolated and suffer social, cultural and economic disadvantage and how the arts can resource these regions.

Recommendations

- Invite Joe Toohey to be on the editorial committee for the special journal issue, and begin planning for an event in Bendigo or Geelong with our two partners, ideally networked across the state.
Theatre Network Australia (TNA)

TNA is a key partner in this project for our engagement with the theatre industry and sector as a whole. We will be partnering with them in 2019 on the delivery of a symposium that will build on the themes of this research project, and include project partners, other theatre companies and artists as well as academics working on similar themes and topics.

TNA’s Activities

TNA undertakes industry development and hosts forums for theatre-makers and small to medium theatre companies. It works with hybrid and interdisciplinary work, dance, physical theatre and circus as well as standard theatre, and hosts the Australian ASSITEJ office. It provides regular advocacy, research and advice to the theatre sector, and provides regular e-resources and news to industry on work, new initiatives and policy changes. It has been particularly active in hosting industry forums such as the Australian Theatre Forum, and training workshops as well as partnering with researchers such as the CC team to develop evidence-based, values driven cultural policy.

Executive Director, Nicole Beyer, and the General Manager Simone Schinkel have been active contributors to the Creative Convergence project and its development.

Creative Convergence and TNA

In April 2018, Paul Rae presented details of the Creative Convergence project to the participants of In the Zone: Theatre Network Victoria’s Victorian Theatre Forum at Arts Centre Melbourne.

Since then we have been in discussion about plans for the TNA symposium to be convened in October 2019 at the Abbotsford Convent. This will be an exciting opportunity for all members of the project to share their knowledge of the research and to learn from others in the sector who have developed other wonderful and different responses to the engagement of young people as theatre audiences, with and through technology.

Preliminary Observations

Budget cuts to TNA and the cancellation of the Australian Theatre Forum for 2020 have led to a rethinking of our shared symposium. The plan is now to a symposium with a focus on the themes and issues of Creative Convergence in October 2019. This has presented us all with a terrific opportunity to engage with the industry and share with them the thinking and outcomes of the project.
Proposed Plans for Creative Convergence 2019-2020

Arena

Arena has been at the forefront of experimentation with the question of digital technologies used in the generation of performance, hence a pilot project exploring uses of Virtual Reality (VR) technologies for theatre, will be developed with them and be given a particular focus on its use in regional and distance learning contexts. This collaboration with Arena Theatre Company (based in Bendigo), will include sound and VR artists Darius Kedros, who worked on the MTC productions of *Melbourne Talam* and *Hungry Ghosts* as well as VR experts and resources at the University. Preliminary findings from this pilot project will be presented at an event organised in collaboration with Theatre Network Australia at Abbotsford Convent in October 2019.

Arthur

In Semester 2, 2019, the website will be used by Paul’s students in ‘The Theatre Experience’, and a follow-up survey will be conducted with student users. A report on the process of creating the site and user responses will be presented at the TNA symposium in 2019.

Bell

Bell has been pushing forward with the idea of co-creation with young audiences on social media. In 2019 the company is running a short film project using Instagram as the platform. Cl Beckett will continue to investigate Bell’s activities in this space. Findings from the InstaMacbeth project will be discussed at the upcoming TNA conference in October 2019. We will examine an opportunity to roll out the InstaMacbeth project through their school’s educational materials.

Creative Victoria

Circuit has offered us new insights, and prompted interesting conversations with all our partner organisations, many of which will be beneficial as we continue to explore theatre’s impact on regional young people. Further development of Circuit would include continuing to aggregate data delivered to AusStage and thus maintaining the reliability of Circuit for project partners. The most beneficial method for this to happen is for company administrators to become registered contributors to AusStage and regularly update their own production details. This has multiple benefits of ensuring that all that data is available on an ongoing basis to researchers, policy-makers and the general community through the National Library.

The visualisation provided by Circuit is limited – a single dot might encompass one performance or workshop, or a thousand (though the connection lines do indicate density to an extent). In partnership with Regional Arts Victoria, we intend to add smaller scale regional theatre production data to Circuit, and to refine the style and presentation of Circuit as a resource able to provide theatre data to government, such as via the Australia Council or Creative Victoria.

HotHouse

The *At the Hip* website was created alongside a website for ARTHUR’s *Bright World*. We intend to develop a document for developing theatre web resources, that outlines some of the main considerations for companies and designers. Currently (June 2019), the website is at an advanced stage of development, with work to be done on copyright for public viewing and user testing in the community.

Hothouse was interested in the future destinations of its young Studio Ensemble members, and this is something we would be keen to pursue. Such a research project would enable us to investigate the longitudinal impact of theatre engagement with a post-school leaver community. It would involve meeting with the *At the Hip* cast members to see what they are doing now, and this information could be added to the website, since it coincides with the show’s theme of ‘big dreams’.

Hothouse has been undergoing a period of transition, particularly around its provision of youth programmes. A new Artistic Director has recently been recruited, once there is greater clarity on any new directions, we plan further engagement with the company to discuss how Creative Convergence might contribute.
GPAC
Through our RHD student, Abbie Trott, we will maintain the same research methodology as 2018, and observe TakeOver in 2019 from the incursion stage as well as some of the development phase in 2–3 schools. We have plans to revisit at least one of the schools from 2017 or 2018, and possibly research with Belmont High School who have participated in TakeOver for a long time or with the Lutheran College who have successfully integrated TakeOver into their drama curriculum. We are also engaging with all the students who have participated in TakeOver 2019 through an online survey and speak with past participants of TakeOver. We will try and integrate the research more fully into the program and set up post performance workshops in the following school year.

MTC
In 2019, the Creative Convergence team will explore how the preliminary findings can inform current practice at MTC. The focus will be on the 2019 touring education production The Violent Outburst That Drew Me To You (production March-May 2019, Melbourne season May 2019, regional tour May-June 2019), and may include other MTC productions featured on the VCE Theatre Studies play list.

The team will work with MTC Education to plan the Violent Outburst Q+A, and generate follow-up materials for the Q&A that audiences can access post-show. Further information about careers in theatre, across creative, production and management roles will be provided.

RAV
In terms of academic outputs, the project is planning to curate a 2020 journal issue on theatre in regional Australia for the journal of Australasian Drama Studies (see attached call for papers). This publication is likely to be accompanied by a workshop convened with and by Regional Arts Victoria in Geelong or Bendigo in 2020.

Consideration is being given to the development of a larger social networking project that we are calling a ‘day in the life of…’ theatre in regional Victoria.

TNAs
With project partner Theatre Network Australia, we will plan and deliver a symposium in October 2019, in which the Convergence themes of the research will be addressed under the headings of ‘audiences, technologies and networks’. This conference to be held at Abbotsford Convent will provide the primary opportunity for reporting and reflection upon the research findings and will involve workshops from our partners as well as other invited theatre groups and presenters.
Future Research Directions

During 2019 and 2020, we are seeking to draw the strands together to clarify what we have learnt. We will also be focusing on ways of communicating our discoveries to our Partners, to the industry more broadly, and to other researchers.

In addition to work with individual Partners, this will take the form of smaller industry reports and academic publications, as well as the symposium with Theatre Network Australia (October 2019), and another smaller scale event in regional Victoria (2020). Since our POs are diverse, we will also be working with ‘clusters’ of POs to focus on areas of shared interest, such as the use of Virtual and Augmented Reality or social media interactions.

Across all its activities, the project team is still asking the primary questions of this research project:

- How do young people in regional Victoria engage with theatre?
- What can we learn from different models of delivery for theatre to young people in regional Victoria?
- How does social media enhance or converge with young people’s interactions with theatre in regional Victoria?
- What does ‘impact’ mean in the context of theatre for young people? In the context of theatre in regional Victoria?
- Can people, media and organisations ‘converge’ to better engage with young people in their experience of theatre in regional Victoria? What examples do we have of this that we can learn from?
- How do understandings of convergence revealed by this project shape decisions for theatre companies, advocacy organisations and government?

We look forward to refining our work in 2019 with our partners.
This page left intentionally blank.
Author/s:  
Fensham, R; Rae, P; Beckett, J

Title:  
Creative Convergence Midterm Industry Report (2017-18)

Date:  
2019

Citation:  

Persistent Link:  
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/227422

File Description:  
Published version