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# EDITORIAL: REGIONAL THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA

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In August 2020, the Australian Minister for Communications, Paul Fletcher, initiated an inquiry by the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions. The inquiry came on the back of an effective shutdown of most work in the creative sector as a result of social distancing restrictions and lockdowns imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, and of extensive debate about the Australian Government's reluctance to offer a dedicated financial support package to an industry that, by the government's own estimates, contributed \$111.7 billion in 2016/17, or 6.4 per cent of GDP.<sup>1</sup> The terms of reference for the inquiry appeared accordingly broad: 'The Committee will inquire into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions including, but not limited to, Indigenous, regional,

rural and community based organisations'. At first glance, this seems like a pro-forma preamble to the more detailed list of areas of focus that followed, which focused on the benefits of the arts and culture, the impact of COVID-19, and mechanisms for improving policy translation and increasing access. A closer look, however, reveals a distinctive emphasis in the terms of reference, and a striking omission: 'Indigenous, regional, rural and community-based organisations' were at the heart of the inquiry, while cities were relegated to the catch-all phrase 'but not limited to'. This shows a shift away from the broad tendency, perhaps best exemplified by Richard Florida's influential work on creative cities and the creative class that is drawn to them,<sup>2</sup> to presume that large metropolitan areas are the centres of artistic innovation and drivers of the creative economy.

It is hard to know exactly what internal political deliberations guided this decision. We can say, however, that the emphasis on Indigenous, regional and community arts and creative industries did not come out of the blue, and might be seen to exemplify a development that was already underway, and that accelerated and intensified under the COVID-19 pandemic: a redistribution of creative energies and resources away from Australia's metropolitan centres and towards its regional, rural and remote areas, along with a corresponding nuancing of what those complex and highly differentiated areas actually consist of.

Perhaps the most widely discussed example of these changing priorities in 2020 came as a result of the uneven distribution of

COVID-19 infections in Australia, which clustered predominantly in the cities. More broadly, the frustrations of lockdown, a newfound capacity to work remotely, loss of income, and the more general reassessment of life choices and lifestyle that COVID-19 provoked all resulted in an unprecedented net population loss in Australia's big cities, with an October 2020 Ipsos poll finding that one in ten Melburnians were considering a move to regional Victoria.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, among the very limited federal stimulus offered to the arts in the early months of the pandemic was a \$27 million 'Targeted Support' package in April, which directed \$10 million to the music industry, \$7 million to Indigenous arts, and \$10 million 'to help regional artists and organisations develop new work and explore new delivery models'.<sup>4</sup>

In short, while COVID-19 has arguably reconfigured the Australian arts landscape, and the ways in which we understand where arts happens, it also made visible changes that were already occurring, particularly outside major metropolitan centres. In 2018, the Australian Government committed to a significant programme of decentralisation when it responded positively to the wide-ranging recommendations of its own Select Committee on the matter, contained in the report *Regions at the Ready: Investing in Australia's Future*. Recommendation 1 was that 'the Federal Government increase its investment in building enabling infrastructure to improve connectivity, key services and amenity through coordinated regional plans', while Recommendation 13 anticipated further work on 'the

cultivation of social, cultural and community capital'.<sup>5</sup> This initiative built in turn on existing trends. In 2017, the Australia Council reported that 'residents of regional Australia are as likely to creatively participate in the arts as residents of metropolitan Australia'.<sup>6</sup> Other significant shifts have followed at national and state levels to improve diversification in the performing arts sector. For instance, as a result of the Major Performing Arts Framework review, a national touring scan was initiated in 2020 that aimed to ensure 'better coordination and alignment of touring, both interstate and intrastate'.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, however, the focus for most of these policies and resources is no longer on centre–periphery relationships. As the content of this Focus Issue of *Australasian Drama Studies* makes clear, regional, rural and remote cultural activity often punches above its weight in finding new modes of expression, fostering community, and contributing to the local economy. This is not to say that challenges do not remain. The city remains a lure for ambitious young artists, who seek training and exposure that they may not readily find where they grow up. Australia's enormous size continues to present major practical challenges when it comes to touring on the one hand, or building and sustaining arts infrastructure on the other. Moreover, the high-profile shift in the funding narrative over 2020 towards the regions, as well as the obligatory pivot towards the digital environment, has not entirely done away with a metropolitan funding bias, which is most apparent in the fact that the city-based Major Performing Arts organisations receive a disproportionate amount of the federal funding pie.

However, perhaps one way of marking this shift that is more immediate to us, the authors, as researchers, lies in the shape of the Australian Research Council Linkage Project out of which this journal issue has emerged. *Creative Convergence* has its roots in an approach from some metropolitan theatre companies who create work for young people and were seeking our assistance in helping them to understand the impact of their regional touring activity – something that they were under increasing pressure from their funders and other stakeholders to do. This metro-centric perspective – taking mainstage productions ‘out beyond’ the cities – has manifest limitations by comparison with the broad and highly variegated conception of the regional theatre activity that has come to prominence in the past five years. Indeed, even controlling for the particularities of the relatively small state of Victoria in which we are located, our research study might be said to have presented something of a microcosm of such changes, with the resulting picture being informative if rather mixed. We have seen independent companies struggle to put together the complex jigsaw puzzle of a regional tour, with key personnel departing to work in more established organisations; we have witnessed the continuing erosion of federal support for theatre for young people, which has trumped the regional location of some companies and left them facing existential challenges as they strive to reconceptualise their mission and their relationship to their communities. We have also seen how a reliance on regional schools to support education-related touring and to double up as community hubs can be a great boon,

but leave companies vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the curriculum and the attitudes of individual teachers and principals. We have been concerned that the resources of public schools are often stretched providing basic educational needs for students so that socio-economic disadvantage becomes reinforced, although there is much innovation in localised arts-coordination by venues, such as our Partner Organisation (PO), Geelong Performing Arts Centre (now GAC), or touring schedules by companies, such as PO Bell Shakespeare, that engage with more diverse populations in prisons and community workshops.

In a more dramatic shift, we have seen how another of our POs, Arena Theatre Company, has managed a successful and innovative move from Melbourne to the regional city of Bendigo, creating award-winning work, building local and national audiences, and fostering new skills among local creative workers. We have been inspired by the nuanced and sensitive understanding of ‘regional’ diversity articulated within our PO Regional Arts Victoria. We have been challenged to understand how live performance events fit into the lived experience of young people whose use of digital media is a particular boon when living at some distance from each other, and fascinated by our POs’ exploration of new models of content delivery, including Melbourne Theatre Company’s work on distance learning with Virtual School Victoria. Perhaps most of all, we have been privileged and delighted to engage with youth theatre-makers and audiences across the state, who have articulated in such vivid and varied ways what the theatre they are participating in means to them, now and into the future.

Inevitably, the more we have discovered, the more fully we have become aware of aspects of this rich and complex area of theatrical activity that have escaped our attention, and by gathering together the contributions to this issue of *ADS*, we hope to go some way towards recognising this expanded domain. We therefore open the issue with a series of articles that powerfully evoke the histories and specificities of theatre as a defining regionality – whereby the scenario, the immersive dimensions of staging, and the fictive imaginaries of dramatic narratives arise from, and for, the conjunction of regional geographies, economies and social formations – and hence, as a position from which to encounter a wider world.

In ‘Passionate, Not Parochial’, Asher Warren and Jane Woollard reflect on their experience of being ‘outsiders’ living and working in a committed theatre community, the city of Launceston in the Apple Isle of Tasmania. Rather than reduce the debate to one of local values competing with more professional interests in theatre culture, they develop, and extend, the notion of a theatre ecology by using the concept of ‘scenario,’ as articulated by Diana Taylor, to explore the multiple stories that can be told about the repertoire and production choices made by amateur and professional companies alike as they share the city’s various stages. Setting the scene, they map both the topology and history of Launceston’s ‘passion’ for theatre, and debate the stakes in what is conventionally maligned as a ‘parochial’ view of performing universal or local dramatic narratives such as *1984* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Importantly, in this detailed account, the authors also interrogate

the significance of ‘talent’ to the generation of passionate actors and audiences in producing that sense of local pride.

Having established the complexity of localised myths in Launceston, this issue then takes us back 170 years as our next author, Ailsa Brackley du Bois, shares her excavation of ‘Flexible Theatrics in Early Goldfields Ballarat’. With a focus on the region’s volatile theatricality, this article explores three key themes: the temporary and fragile nature of theatre venues, erected in what was largely a tent city; the dramatic repertoires that were both imported and locally written and improvised; and the ragtag mix of actor-managers and theatrical entrepreneurs seeking to make a trade in entertainment from the rapid influx of migrants. Making excellent use of contemporary newspaper accounts and other primary documents from the time, her lively discussion contributes to histories of popular entertainment in Australia, such as those produced by Veronica Kelly and Richard Waterhouse, by localising the theatrical experience as part of the place-making of regional towns. With venues appearing and disappearing overnight, and theatrical fortunes and despair as fickle as alluvial deposits, Brackley du Bois reminds us that the goldfields were sites of diverse, multi-ethnic, cultural practices and entanglements, and that their theatrical variety was every bit as rich as the ‘immersive’ theatrical experiences of the present.

By way of a twist upon Australia’s regional atmospherics, Miles O’Neil in ‘The Suitcase Royale’ evocatively turns to the notion of the Australian uncanny, identified as a trope of the fictive

imagination by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs nearly thirty years ago. Since then, as O'Neil recounts, there have been many films, novels and plays that have drawn upon the idea that the Australian landscape is somehow haunted, and that, in particular, regional towns are home to eerie characters and threatening mysterious crimes. Having built a successful theatrical career himself as part of a touring ensemble producing musical theatre shows inspired by such Gothic romances, he recounts his slow but critically important realisation that not only were the kindly audiences in the regional towns humoring these urban fantasies, they were also making and possessing their own musical genres, popular songs and karaoke, that were responsive to local ecologies of nature and persons. Moreover, O'Neil argues that today's country town is far less bleak and dark than any Gothic imaginary, even in so far as its residents, and we, need to recognise that any remaining horror resides not in white fear but in the damage done to Indigenous communities. When examined from the perspective of the regional town, it becomes the city and its monstrosities that represent the haunting remains of colonial violence.

We then interrupt our usual academic programming to bring you a series of reports from the coalface of performing arts practice in several different Australian locations. Curated by Joe Toohey, CEO of Regional Arts Victoria (a Partner Organisation on the *Creative Convergence* Linkage Project), three dialogues between Joe and two Regional Arts Australia (RAA) colleagues with performance-makers working, respectively, in Western Australia (WA), South Australia

(SA) and Victoria, elaborate on the relationship between practice and place. In ‘A Community of Producers’, Paul McPhail of Regional Arts WA hears from inter-disciplinary artist Chloe Flockhart. The dialogue touches on many aspects of making community performance in the Central Wheatbelt of WA, including the challenges of finding resources and sustaining momentum, not least when there is the weather, the agricultural calendar and other priorities to think of. What is particularly fascinating is the complexity of Flockhart’s own professional life, which toggles between community practice and personal development in the Wheatbelt, professional engagements in Perth (an eight-hour round-trip away), and international residencies and commissions. Flockhart’s experiences serve to underline how thoroughly integrated a ‘regional’ arts practice can be – sometimes must be, for practical purposes – to different kinds of environments and professional networks.

In ‘A Gym for Empathy’, Anthony Peluso, Executive Director of Country Arts SA, revisits *The Gods of Strangers*, a major project undertaken in 2018 by the State Theatre Company of South Australia, largely in the coastal town of Port Pirie, and driven by actor, director and playwright Elena Carapetis. The production was based on the experiences of Carapetis’s family and community, who migrated from Greece and Cyprus in the course of the twentieth century, alongside arrivals to Port Pirie from Molfetta, in Italy. Carapetis recounts the research process, which included delving into local history, as well as trips to Greece and Italy, and provides a par-

ticularly vivid tale of how the community was transformed when the production premiered, and it saw its experiences reflected back at it from the stage. The dialogue offers a case study in both the complex social composition of a specific town in SA, as well as an example of how a state theatre company can meet its obligations *to* that state by engaging in a sustained and original way with communities beyond the confines of the state capital.

Lastly, in ‘The Anchor, the Centre, the Shelter, the Dwelling’, Joe Toohey talks to Jude Anderson, Artistic Director of Punctum, a live arts organisation based in Castlemaine, Victoria. Anderson traces her background training and practicing overseas, the considerations that led her to establish Punctum in Castlemaine, near where she grew up, and the complex relation to place that has developed through her work since. As with the other artists featured in these dialogues, Anderson understands her location relationally, and explains that while it offers an important opportunity for registering belonging and keying her into the rhythms and needs of the environment, it is not all-encompassing. Indeed, what emerges in the course of the dialogue is a keen sense of how performing arts practice serves to bring to light the tensions inherent in place, particularly in a nation like Australia, where any claim to locatedness is coloured by a history of violent expropriation from Indigenous peoples, the legacy of the racist White Australia Policy which lasted for most of the last century, and ongoing debates over sovereignty, national identity, and the resettlement of asylum-seekers and refugees. Anderson ably unpacks what

these systemic factors mean for an artist today, and outlines how her practice registers these complexities without imposing its own claims upon them.

The final roundtable, ‘That Very Specific Place’, brings together the interlocutors of the three dialogues with Executive Director of RAA, Ros Abercrombie. There, the participants draw out the patterns of activity that run across their conversations with artists, and place them in the broader context of national conditions, and federal policy settings. In particular, the dialogue tussles with the perennial discussion of what is meant by ‘regional’ in the phrase ‘regional theatre’: where it remains useful, what it obscures, and how it might be deployed more dynamically and strategically in some circumstances, more circumspectly and sparingly in others. Moreover, as the dialogue makes clear, this not simply an abstract matter of nomenclature: it has major implications for who qualifies for what kinds of support; how practitioners and audiences think about themselves and their relation to place; and how artist development and resource distribution should be thought about in the future.

The second tranche of academic articles have been crafted by researchers whose understandings of contemporary theatre practices draw out the implications of funding models, theatre design, touring and audience reception by theorising their sense of place and purpose. Together, they accumulate a nuanced picture of the creative opportunities identified by, and the pressures exerted upon, theatre-mak-

ers and companies who are either situated in or engage closely with regional and remote Australia.

Anna Loewendahl's article 'The Economic Aesthetics of Three Regional, Unpaid-Led Theatre Producing Companies' provides an important discussion on the value of volunteer labour in regional theatres that might otherwise be called 'amateur'. Centring her discussion on three detailed case studies, she introduces the term 'unpaid-led' to describe the decision-making and functions of leadership in these companies. By foregrounding the economically and creatively valuable labour of volunteers in this sector that contributes so much to regional economies, she makes a compelling link to Arlie Hochschild's work on emotional labour, arguing that the realities of emotion management in these roles creates an 'economic aesthetics' that shapes both the management of these organisations and their creative output.

Bringing us back to the modern-day goldfields town of Ballarat, the collaborative perspectives of Angela Campbell, Tanja Beer, Richard Chew and Kim Durban in their article '*Ariel Songs: Performing Cultural Ecologies of Ballarat*' explore how a student production of *The Tempest* can feed into regional 'place-making' activities. Their multi-art form discussion of the Federation University project, *Ariel Songs*, in the town examines how artistic and design elements intersect with place and community aesthetically, co-operatively and environmentally. Sensitive to the heritage history of Ballarat and its legacy of conservative creativity, their approach

generated a theatre piece that was responsive not only to its Botanical Gardens staging site, but also to the ‘accidental’ audience of the annual Begonia Festival participants. The article raises important questions about the contribution of students to creative remaking of settler, migration and indigenous histories for regional centres.

Following on from the ‘accidental’ young audiences in the Ballarat project, Abbie Victoria Trott’s study engages specifically with youth audiences. Focusing her gaze on three touring productions of Melbourne Theatre Company Education plays, she examines the differences between audience reception in the regions and metropolitan Melbourne. To do so, she uses the rich data produced by MTC stage manager Lisette Drew’s Show Reports, augmented by observations of the works on tour by Trott and her discussion with Drew. Her detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of these reports brings up important questions around access and the attendant cultural literacy for regional youth audiences, but also draws attention to an often overlooked source of audience research material.

Finally, notions of place-making, situated theatre and audience reception come together in Sarah Woodland and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet’s work on ‘Desert Stages’, that examines the place of theatre in the remote Barkly Region of the Northern Territory. Their article draws attention to the unique challenges of staging theatre across a large and sparsely populated part of Australia, as well as the need for more critical thinking by policy-makers about how to best serve the region. The article brings to light a vibrant arts sector in the Barkly

and examines theatre's part in the cultural ecosystem. Importantly the article engages with the notion of 'remote' in the Australian policy vernacular, entreating us to reconsider its conception, asking: 'remote from what?'

Perhaps the most important repositioning of 'remote' is conducted from the position of Indigenous artists whose relationship to Country is embedded in ancestral lineages, Dreaming stories, and language survival. We are privileged to include 'Dreaming, It Is Like Breathing Air', an interview by Dalisa Pigram Ross with the poet and visual artist Edwin Lee Mulligan – both of them based in far north-western Australia, and dancer-members of the Marrugeku dance theatre company. Mulligan fishes from a jetty as he explains how his art-making draws its meaning from the seasons, and every element of his lived environment. As a younger Walmajarri artist, he explains not only how he learns from his Elders, but also the responsibility he has to share that knowledge of his Country with audiences, who may not understand how such stories and concepts shape him and his peoples.

The dance curator Angela Conquet, in her review essay 'Shared Bodies', extends the Pigram Ross–Mulligan dialogue with an insightful positioning of Rachael Swain's book *Dance in Contested Land: New Intercultural Dramaturgies* (Palgrave, 2020) in the global context of contemporary dance theory and practice. Swain advances a rigorous reflection upon 'the choreographic processes and dramaturgies at play (and at work)' in two dance theatre works of Marrugeku,

*Gudirr Gudirr* and *Cut the Sky*, which Conquet suggests have implications for the macro-political reconfiguration of contemporary dance curation. For Conquet, Swain's book models a local choreo-political capable of generating 'new methodologies of authorship, spectatorship and participation'. To learn about such methods, through Swain, will involve a reimagining of indigenous–settler relations that begins with respect for different ontologies and epistemologies – Aboriginal, white, European, Maori – as well as a transformation of the situation, time, and relationality we commit to the creative conditions of performance and arts practice more generally. As the world becomes increasingly homogenous, Conquet argues that Swain's book provides a guide to the work required to develop a localised accountability for other ways of seeing as 'presenter, creator and viewer'.

In conclusion, let us acknowledge that there are many different editorials that could have been written for this journal issue, and indeed many different versions of this issue. An historical one might have traced the dynamic relation between performance and place-making over multiple timespans; a geographical one might have given a more distributed focus to theatre's role in shaping and interpreting the discursive formation of the regional, along with related terms, such as rural, remote, Country, bush, outback and, conversely, city, metropolis and suburb; the view from a specific region or practice may have emphasised theatre as a vehicle for community formation and as a means of addressing diverse social conditions. The editorial presented here reflects the specific considerations that have come

to the fore in the course of 2020, as well as our perspective on the topic as it arises from our own location, research, and reading of the material to follow. To say that this is not the last word on the matter should be obvious.

Let us end instead with the perspective of Lindy Hume, Artistic Director of the Ten Days on the Island Festival, which is based in the town of Burnie (population 20,000), in northwest Tasmania. Invited to give the keynote presentation at the 2019 Australasian Drama Studies Association conference in Launceston, Hume's title of 'Radicalising the Regional: Swimming Against the Tide of the Mega-Urban Festival' made her agenda unambiguously clear. There, she stated:

These days I use the more assertive term 'counter-urban' over 'regional'. As the term suggests, 'counter-urbanism' is an active alternative force to the powerful force of urbanism. But counter-urbanism is not anti-urbanism. Rather it describes a flow of conscious activity, enterprise and thinking in different directions, away from major cities. In fact, counter-urbanism is a complementary force to urbanism.<sup>8</sup>

Hume articulates a discourse that parallels (though is by no means reducible to) the Federal Government's decentralisation agenda. But what is most important about her perspective – and the social, artistic and economic considerations that follow on from it – is its relevance

not only to ‘regional’ performance-makers, but to artists, audiences and scholars nationwide. The future landscape of the performing arts is not simply one in which the centre of gravity shifts from the metropolitan to the regional, but one in which the ‘counter-urban’, of more simplistic distinctions are dissolved by ever more complex networks, relations and creative practices that speak to the differentiated and dispersed nature of cultural life in Australia and beyond.

## NOTES

- 1 See <https://www.communications.gov.au/departamental-news/economic-value-cultural-and-creative-activity>.
- 2 Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 3 See Shane Wright and Jennifer Duke, ‘Australians Flee Cities for Refuge in Regional Retreats’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 2020, online: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australians-flee-cities-for-refuge-in-regional-retreats-20201102-p56ard.html>. Also Jewel Topsfield, ‘Melbournians Eying Life Outside the City, Poll Shows’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 2020, online: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/victoria/melburnians-eyeing-life-outside-the-city-poll-shows-20201027-p5694y.html>.
- 4 See <https://paca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MR-9.4.2020.pdf>.
- 5 Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, ‘Australian Government Response to *Regions at the Ready*’, online: [https://www.regional.gov.au/regional/publications/australian\\_government\\_response\\_regions\\_at\\_the\\_ready](https://www.regional.gov.au/regional/publications/australian_government_response_regions_at_the_ready).
- 6 Australia Council, ‘The Arts in Regional Australia: A Research Summary’, 29 November 2017, online: <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/research/regional-arts-summary/>.
- 7 Australia Council for the Arts, ‘National Performing Arts Touring Scan’, online: <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/programs-and-resources/National-Performing-Arts-Touring-Scan/>.
- 8 Lindy Hume, ‘Radicalising the Regional: Swimming Against the Tide of the Mega-Urban Festival’, Unpublished aspx.

keynote speech from  
ADSA 2019: Festivals  
and Performance,  
University of Tasmania,  
Launceston, Friday 28  
June 2019. The authors  
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