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22 October 2020

**To:** The House of Representatives Standing Committee Communications & the Arts, Parliament of Australia

**Re:** Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions, 2020

**From:** Dr Jennifer Beckett, Professor Rachel Fensham, Dr Lynne Kent, Associate Professor Paul Rae (University of Melbourne)

Dear Committee Members,

We make this submission to the Inquiry based on our decades of professional and academic engagement with the arts industry in Australia and internationally (UK and Singapore). In particular we submit this report informed by current research about the Theatre sector in Australia and its role in support for creative production, community engagement and transformative cultural experiences.

Working with industry partners from national organisations (Bell Shakespeare and Theatre Network Australia), to state-level (Creative Victoria, Regional Arts Victoria and Melbourne Theatre Company) to the specifically regional (HotHouse Theatre, Geelong Arts Centre, Arena Theatre Company and ARTHUR), we have been investigating the personal and social impact of theatre on youth audiences. We have been particularly interested in the opportunities that theatre provides to enhance community and social well-being.

So, while our research enables us to speak broadly across the full terms of reference of the Inquiry, the focus of our submission to the Committee is item two:

*The non-economic benefits that enhance community, social wellbeing and promoting Australia's national identity, and how to recognise, measure and grow them.*

We note that Australian theatre companies that create work specifically for and with young people and tour extensively into regional areas across the nation, have been severely affected by recent government funding cuts to the sector, the devastation of bushfires and most recently, the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural economy threatening their viability and their work with young people across the nation.

We are particularly concerned with the loss of funding for companies who work in non-traditional modes of theatre, and our research shows that these companies often work at the nexus of theatrical innovation and community outreach, addressing the concerns of young people in numerous ways. In addition, we have been alerted to the impact of COVID-19 on the viability of smaller regional touring networks that take performing

arts work into regional towns on a regular basis but that depend upon each other across a geographical area to remain viable.

It is clear that a more nuanced funding model and policy settings are required. Without this, the sector as a whole runs the very real risk of reinforcing out-dated and centralised arts models that do little to address the needs of regional Australia, or the growing expectations and opportunities for creativity in the lives of young people. This in turn will have negative economic impacts on regional Australia as a result of loss of income and employment through the touring ecology.

Our research has also included an evaluation of the terms “value” and “benefit” and an attempt to better understand how different measures are applied within cultural organisations and how they are understood by their audiences.

In the more detailed discussion below, we draw on the range of our research, which has taken a number of different approaches to understanding how the arts enhances community and social wellbeing. This includes the study of a wide range of touring practices and constraints and community building efforts in regional Victoria.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

A strong Australian cultural sector requires a carefully considered and strong policy foundation in which funding does not leave whole tranches of the sector at risk of simply disappearing. The sector is not simply a series of competing organisations, but rather a rich ecosystem of cultural organisations and supporting businesses and infrastructure. Any effective response needs to be attuned to this.

Our research suggests a number of important strategic challenges for the Federal Government and we would like to make the following recommendations that could be more fully fleshed out in a policy framework for the creative and cultural industries in Australia.

- 1. Funding models must recognise that ‘value’ and ‘benefit’ are not easily articulated in the performing arts and should avoid reductive metrics and instead recognise the complex and longer-term benefits that exposure to the arts generates. This involves everything from a lifetime of enjoyment to enhanced confidence; the creation of community support networks and the defining of alternative career paths.*
- 2. Policy settings need to take into consideration the non-economic and economic benefits of arts organisations’ capabilities in community building, particularly in regional areas. We recommend further investigation in this important area and how participation in the arts can enhance individual and community resilience and cohesion.*
- 3. Recognition that the creative and cultural industries exist in a complex hierarchy of small to medium to larger (or national) enterprises; and that diversity of scale is essential to provide the trialling, creating, producing and disseminating of cultural production.*

*We recommend that investment in the infrastructure of surrounding creative production across regional Australia should not be determined by a single enterprise tasked with great responsibility but must include networks that coordinate arts organisations, regional infrastructure, communication networks and technologies, as well as the venues and local government structures that will ensure high quality outcomes that serve local communities the best.*

- 4. Greater attention needs to be paid to equality of access. Current funding models both within the arts sector and the educational sector mean that students who attend public schools or who live in regional and remote Australia are already underserved. Policy must recognise that cultural capital also plays a*

*role in people's educational and future employment outcomes.*

5. *Data collection between companies, venues and schools should be aggregated and made publicly available to ensure accountability for government expenditure. A cultural data research laboratory could be established to ensure that such data collection is not politically determined but utilised for the benefit of policy formation both by government and the creative industry sector.*
6. *In support of our partners in the project we endorse the call for the development of a cultural policy responsive to the changed conditions facing arts organisations. These include the rapid shifts in the digital environment in Australia, the growth of regional centres and the need for a better and more coordinated approach to creative innovation and infrastructure development. In addition, such a policy will need to address the issue of cultural exports and the place of Australia's creative economy in the region and the world. Let us not forget that our dynamic cultural producers are the face of Australia across the globe.*

## **Detailed Submission**

***1. Funding models must recognise that 'value' and 'benefit' are not easily articulated in the performing arts and should avoid reductive metrics and instead recognise the complex and longer-term benefits that exposure to the arts generates. This involves everything from a lifetime of enjoyment to enhanced confidence; the creation of community support networks and the defining of alternative career paths.***

Funding bodies and other stakeholders increasingly expect benefit to be quantified so they can be assured of value for money. This reporting has resulted in the use of impact metrics of sometimes intangible benefits that cannot properly capture the 'value' and 'benefit' that arts organisations have. In our research we have seen tensions between how metricised terms such as 'belonging' and 'challenge' hold different weight and meaning between audiences, theatre companies, and funding agencies indicating that such measurements not only fail to adequately capture the full scope of what arts organisations achieve but defy attempts to standardise and reduce benefit and value.

While most audience impact research focuses on immediate post-show responses (often using questionnaires), our research shows that theatre-makers can and do factor other benefit considerations into the development of their projects, in order to ensure that those performances resonate with audience members long after the event. In light of the Committee's desire to understand the "non-economic benefits" of the arts, and how to "recognise" them, we offer these observations:

- 'Benefit' is a core pre-occupation of theatre-makers at every stage of the creative process. They aim to enhance the quality of their audiences' lives by providing the most original and engaging communal experiences that they can. The audience experience underpins countless concrete and consequential decisions made day-in, day-out by artists and arts organisations which are easily overlooked because most happen 'behind the scenes.' The benefits, therefore, begin with the careful attention and skill that artists bring to the creation of the work. We have observed, for instance, that production logs record everything from when an audience laughs to when something breaks down on stage or on tour; in addition, we have found that schools workshops can enliven and deepen the quality of audience appreciation of the arts. In these instances, a metric of audience attendance is insufficient even though substantial impact has been recorded. Our work shows that policy and funding settings needs to take into account the fact that if 'non-economic benefits' are only measured after the fact, according to pre-determined criteria, understanding the fuller benefit of a production will be lost.
- Exposure to the arts also opens up the opportunity for broader thinking about career opportunities, this is especially impactful for young people who live in regional and remote areas of the country. It is not that young people necessarily want to become actors or work within the creative industries – but by hearing

about career trajectories in a field where there are few certain pathways to success, they are able to imagine futures for themselves they may not have previously considered or thought possible.

- Recognising non-economic benefits can be achieved, but it requires careful consideration of the art event throughout its life-cycle, and close attention to how its beneficiaries express its impacts upon them. Good art is nuanced and complex, and the majority of audiences recognise that. Young people in particular like to be challenged by encountering unexpected and inventive worlds where they can find something of themselves, and of those they share the experience with. Well-resourced arts organisations and supportive venues are central to ensuring that the benefits of individual events can be amplified and reinforced over time. In short, while it remains tempting to try to measure 'non-economic benefits' in the same way as 'economic benefits', such an approach arguably overlooks what is most important about how the arts – in this case, theatre – benefit individuals and their community.

***2. Policy settings need to take into consideration the non-economic and economic benefits of arts organisations' capabilities in community building, particularly in regional areas. We recommend further investigation in this important area and how participation in the arts can enhance individual and community resilience and cohesion.***

The sociologists David McMillan and David Chavis (1986) define what they call "Sense of Community" as "*a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith the members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.*" Community provides the building blocks for stronger economies, greater social cohesion and buoyant creative industries.

We have observed and talked with students in schools as well as students as audience-members exposed to theatre. The arts organisations we have worked with have not only generated a powerful feeling of 'belonging' between themselves and the young people they have worked with in the regions, but they have also provided opportunities for other people in the community to see how they matter, how other groups in the community matter and how they can work together. In effect, the arts provides an opportunity to generate that great Australian concept of 'mateship,' albeit in sometimes unexpected ways through what in diplomatic terms would be described as 'soft power' as a demonstration of 'non-economic benefit'.

Arts organisations work hand-in-glove with the communities that they serve, providing, amongst other things: a physical space for artistic expression; an opportunity for local stories to be told and shared; opportunities for personal growth, and opportunities to form new friendships and emotional connection, enhancing their sense of belonging (Anderson, 1986; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Importantly our research also shows that the arts have the ability to transport people into other people's worlds, providing opportunities for empathy and greater social cohesion.

Young people in particular want to identify with the characters they see on stage, but that does not mean they are looking for characters 'like' them. On the contrary, they are drawn to characters who are different from them, but whose situations and dilemmas they can empathise with. Audiences are diverse in themselves, and such experiences also offer audience members an opportunity to identify with each other across their differences. In our observation, these moments of community formation are cemented when performances are framed by educational materials and pre- or post-show discussions with the artists.

A particularly good example of these 'non-economic' community benefits-from our own research comes from Arena Theatre Company. As a youth theatre company, Arena developed a longstanding relationship with schools in the East Gippsland region of Victoria where they visited each year to run workshops with Primary and High School aged children. From small schools with only two classrooms to Orbost High School, these workshops provided some of the only direct exposure these students had to professional theatre. But the workshops were not only of benefit to the students, their teachers and the local communities, but were further developed by the company into a new work that could be then toured back to the region and performed elsewhere, including at the Opera House in Sydney. Students who participated in the workshops

and who also saw the performance in the city, spoke of their pride in seeing and hearing their voices embedded within the final stage production.

Discussions with the company, teachers and participants painted a picture of impact that stretched beyond the time of workshop. In one school, the company was told that a student who they had previously engaged with had been skipping school - on learning that attendance at school was required for them to attend the next workshop, the student re-engaged. In another, students from the school's leadership program attended the workshop - many of whom had been identified from their work at previous workshops.

Students also noted that the workshop had positively affected their confidence, stating things like: "I can embrace who I really am. ... I always thought that I was the outcast, like I was just too strange and nobody really would accept that, but all productions and music and these workshops have really let me bring out my weirdness, as I call it. And whenever somebody calls me weird I literally take it as a compliment. Just more confident and I feel like I can have a lot more fun with people that I don't usually hang out with or anything." (F, Student)

The staff in these schools also noticed other benefits particularly because the workshops provided an opportunity for people to see "that smart aleck kid" as "someone who has got more behind them" (F, Teacher). This kind of connection can lead to students being given opportunities they might not otherwise receive because they're perceived as 'difficult' or 'stupid' improving their educational outcomes, which has knock-on effects into their adult years.

The map below shows the pattern of involvement that Arena has had with Mallacoota Secondary College over a four-year period, bearing in mind that Mallacoota is possibly the region that is furthest from a metropolitan or regional centre that supports theatre on a regular basis. Sadly, Arena no longer has the capacity to continue their work with young people in these bushfire affected areas (see Figure 1).

Aside from their work in the regions, Arena theatre also runs an internship program and has placed young people from their regional workshops in that program. Since their relocation to Bendigo, the company has actively worked with a range of schools in the region to enhance this school holiday internship program. At a recent visit to the company, the students involved spoke not only of the value they saw in the program, particularly with the amount of hands-on work they did, but also of "finding my tribe" (F, yr. 11), again pointing to the community forming aspects of the company's work.

For arts organisations embedded within their communities geographically it may be easier to see how connections form across the community and to understand the impact of the organisation from a community building standpoint. For those that tour into the regions, it can be harder to join these dots as companies have temporally displaced relationships – but the effects of these connections can often be greater. Forging community connections for both embedded and touring organisations requires an ongoing process of trust and relationship building and this in turn means both companies and communities need greater certainty. Current policy and funding settings make these longer- term valuable relationships harder to forge but removing this certainty - within our own 4-year study, every one of the smaller theatre companies we worked with lost their funding, with one company, ARTHUR, folding as a result.

**3. Recognition that the creative and cultural industries exist in a complex hierarchy of small to medium to larger (or national) enterprises; and that diversity of scale is essential to provide the trialling, creating, producing and disseminating of cultural production.**

***We recommend that investment in the infrastructure of surrounding creative production across regional Australia should not be determined by a single enterprise tasked with great responsibility but must include networks that coordinate arts organisations, regional infrastructure, communication networks and technologies, as well as the venues and local government structures that will ensure high quality outcomes that serve local communities the best.***

**CIRCUIT** <http://circuit.unimelb.edu.au/#!/map>

One of the key features of our research has been utilising data to produce a mapping tool that shows a number of important features of the theatre landscape across Australia in particular:

- mapping the diversity and volume of theatre activity across the nation (the map includes Australia-wide data) and its reach into regional areas;
- co-relating theatre activity in relation to local government areas with key social demographics such as population density, economic status, concentrations of young people and ethnic diversity (from Australian Bureau of Statistics);
- identifying how closely schools align with access to theatre whether through touring or at regional centres.

CIRCUIT is available to this Inquiry as a key tool that might be used to analyse your questions about how regional Australia benefits from theatre touring or theatre in local and regional centres. Our submission includes a number of maps that relate to key findings of our research, and we have included as an Appendix, a range of regional maps that relate to areas of concern for your Committee.

The CIRCUIT findings enable us to compare and contrast one company with another; one venue with another and one part of the country with another; and to ask questions about the kinds of resources that are required to produce a sustainable model of theatrical activity that can benefit the greatest number of Australians. They have enabled us to identify a number of discrete patterns in the provision of theatre across regional Victoria:

Strong regional centres with performing arts venues and companies can play a critical role in supporting a diversity of theatre production and audience participation. For instance, Hothouse Theatre in Wodonga has a long history of support for innovation in theatre and has toured and developed regionally specific shows. Sadly, in 2019 decided it could no longer afford to make work for young people. CIRCUIT reveals that their tours in 2015 went to tiny towns and villages along the River Murray and into the Snowy Mountains where no other theatre companies visit as well as sending a show interstate produced by the company in partnership with Playwriting Australia (this too has now been defunded). Innovation in this region was accompanied by national success as well as a unique audience reach.

An alternative arts model could involve regional centres as the hubs of a diverse kinds of performing arts concentration, that could be resourced in partnership with local or regional governments over an extended period of time. If these hubs were less constrained by the commercial considerations that prevent them from developing new work, they could develop and maintain educational or outreach programs as well as support local talent which in turn might generate a thriving and distinctive local arts scene (for instance, with diverse specialisms rather than being dependent on imported product). Examples here might be the evolution of a regional comedy festival, or a contemporary dance network, or a string orchestra season, that can curate original content as well as fund partnership programs. The non-economic benefits would be growth in tourism, employment opportunities, civic pride and night-life activities.

What is missing from the provision of theatre in regional Australia is a recognition that exposure to theatre over time produces many significant benefits not only to individuals, and to communities who may be exposed to it but also the nation as a whole through the interlocking mechanisms that the theatre sector supports and nurtures.

***4. Greater attention needs to be paid to equality of access. Current funding models both within the arts sector and the educational sector mean that students who attend public schools or who live in regional and remote Australia are already underserved. Policy must recognise that cultural capital also plays a role in people's educational and future employment outcomes, and that education providers are a key component of a cultural landscape.***

Other findings from our analysis of the data suggest that 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, which are in some instances consistent and long-standing and at other times non-existent.

In one regional Victorian town, we heard evidence that the high school principal did not think any of his students needed Shakespeare, while in other towns, and even more small schools, the Bell Shakespeare Company has been able to provide workshops on an annual basis and supported a teacher enrichment program. We have also found that in spite of government funding of the arts, that very often state-funded secondary school students are not taken to the theatre while the local private or religious schools attend regularly. The evidence is that there remains a significantly missed opportunity to provide all Australian young people with exposure to the performing arts even when our research, and the supporting international evidence, suggests that early and regular exposure to theatre fosters resilience and creativity in communities and in particular in young people.

***5. Data collection between companies, venues and schools should be aggregated and made publicly available to ensure accountability for government expenditure. A cultural data research laboratory could be established to ensure that such data collection is not politically determined but utilised for the benefit of policy formation both by government and the creative industry sector.***

The touring maps of CIRCUIT reveal a great diversity of performing arts activity across the regions, but it is by no means comprehensive. It lacks a wide range of potentially enriching data that might be held by regional performing arts centres in their programming files; or data about school attendances at theatre venues or shows; or data from small touring ensembles supported by local or regional arts investment. And greater availability of this data that exists would make CIRCUIT even more valuable to government, regional Australia and arts organisations.

What it does however reveal is that there is extensive overlap in touring schedules across the state with some areas well-served and others with surprisingly little contact even where there is population density. And it shows that over-time, say a few years, a variety of performing arts experiences are available. It also demonstrates the scale of touring that many small theatre companies undertake, such as the indigenous theatre company Ilbijerri, in reaching regional and remote settlements.

Our project has found that there is little or no sharing of knowledge, expertise and networks about young people, regional touring or regional advocates, or between theatre companies and arts agencies dependent upon survival funding for their programs. This represents a missed opportunity for increasing the benefits of even scant resources to enrich the understanding and access that communities might have to the arts in the widest sense - for pleasure, for entertainment, for edification, for education, for employment.

We would therefore advocate that resources could be allocated to art-form coordination and data-modelling such as CIRCUIT, that could enable better data coordination of efforts and application of resources from each performing arts organisation within a local ecology. This means thinking more carefully

about the function of networks, and economic connections between parts of the arts sector rather than thinking about the funding resources and programming requirements of individual component parts.

**6. In support of our partners in the project we endorse the call for the development of a cultural policy responsive to the changed conditions facing arts organisations. These include the rapid shifts in the digital environment in Australia, the growth of regional centres and the need for a better and more coordinated approach to creative innovation and infrastructure development. In addition, such a policy will need to address the issue of cultural exports and the place of Australia's creative economy in the region and the world. Let us not forget that our dynamic cultural producers are the face of Australia across the globe.**

A strong Australian cultural sector requires a carefully considered and strong policy foundation in which funding does not leave whole tranches of the sector at risk of simply disappearing. Our significant body of current research in the performing arts landscape across Australia shows that a robust cultural and creative sector is not simply a series of competing organisations, but rather a rich ecosystem of cultural organisations and supporting businesses and infrastructure. Any effective response, needs to be attuned to this to strengthen peak bodies, align regional and touring networks, and we ask that these organisations have more space to create free from a constant need to compete and report.

### **Credentials**

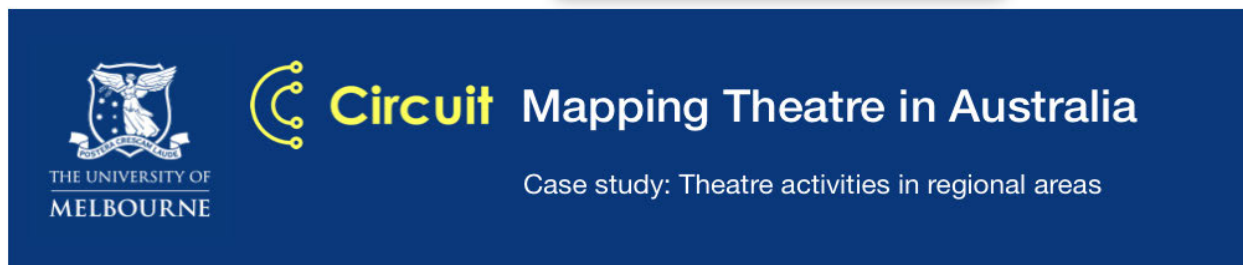
**Jennifer Beckett** is Lecturer in Media and Communications, School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Australia. Her areas of research online community management and public and community engagement. She has 20 years of experience working in marketing and communications roles, including in the music industry, as well as in digital communications and community management. She is a member of Australian Community Managers and regularly delivers presentations and workshops to industry around community management practice.

**Rachel Fensham** is Director of the Digital Studio, and a Professor of Dance and Theatre (Melbourne). As a senior arts and educational administrator, she has managed theatre companies, written arts policy for the Western Australian government and produced national training reports for the Arts Industry and Local Government. She has published widely on theatre audiences, including *To Watch Theatre* (2008), community arts, and edits the *New World Choreographies* (Palgrave) international book series. More recently with a track record in curating Performing Arts archives and databases, she established the Theatre and Dance Platform and developed CIRCUIT: a mapping tool for the Creative Convergence ARC project.

**Lynne Kent** is a theatre practitioner with a significant body of creative work and a scholarly voice on puppetry, intercultural performance practices and visual theatre. Internationally recognized for her work creating innovative projects involving imagery and audience interaction, she has collaborated with Circus Oz, Terrapin Puppet Theatre, The Royal Society of Victoria, The Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, ArtPlay and the City of Melbourne, and The Arts Centre Melbourne. In 2018 Kent travelled to Jordan to create a children's theatre production with the Haya Cultural Centre and Terrapin Puppet Theatre Tasmania funded through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Paul Rae** is Associate Professor in Theatre Studies, and Head of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He is author of *Theatre & Human Rights* (2009) and *Real Theatre: Essays in Experience* (2019), and from 2015-18 was Senior Editor of the journal *Theatre Research International*. He has published widely on contemporary theatre and performance, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

APPENDIX: CIRCUIT MAPS



**What story does the data tell?**

There are many buttons and tools to be explored in CIRCUIT and using them can help to tell a story about your company and its reach across the state, or across Australia. We have also included data that shows how your programming decisions relate to venues and funding resources. We hope you can use CIRCUIT data, maps and graphs to tell stories about your history, your current activity and your impact on audiences.

These examples provide sample snapshots and a guide to how CIRCUIT can be used to support theatre activities in Australia.

**A: Venues**

CIRCUIT shows venues where theatre productions toured. Different types of venues are represented by dots of different colours.

**B: Event details**

CIRCUIT shows the event details for the venue. Selecting a venue shows all the events in this venue.

**C: Population density and diversity**

CIRCUIT includes details on the population density and ethnic diversity of each local government area. In combination with information about events at your venue, this is helpful in identifying the extent that venue-company productions have reached local areas.

**D: Household income**

CIRCUIT also includes the household income in each local government area. In combination with information about events at venues, this is helpful in identifying areas with economic disadvantages and opportunities for equity.

**E: Young people and schools**

CIRCUIT includes data on the percentage of young people in each local government area. In combination with information about schools in the region, this is helpful in identifying market opportunities.

This case study was compiled by Lynne Kent and Xiaofang

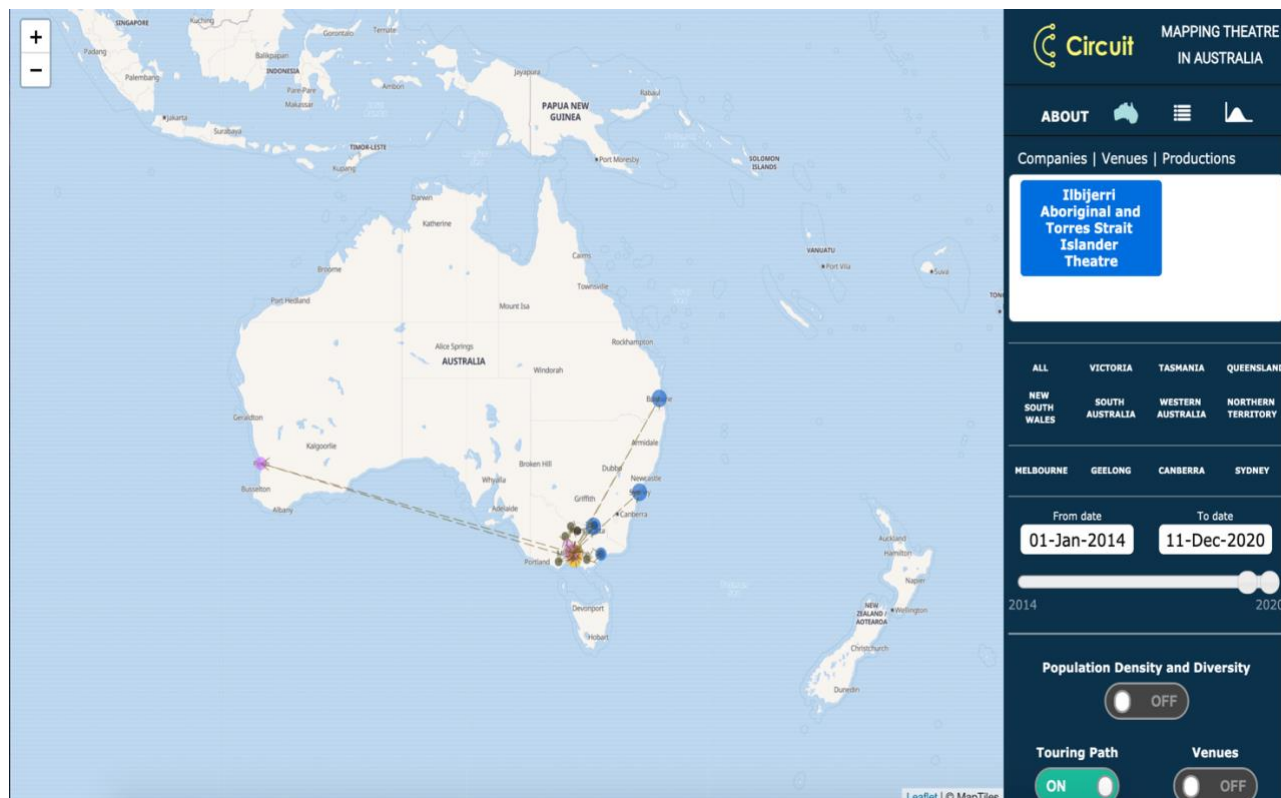
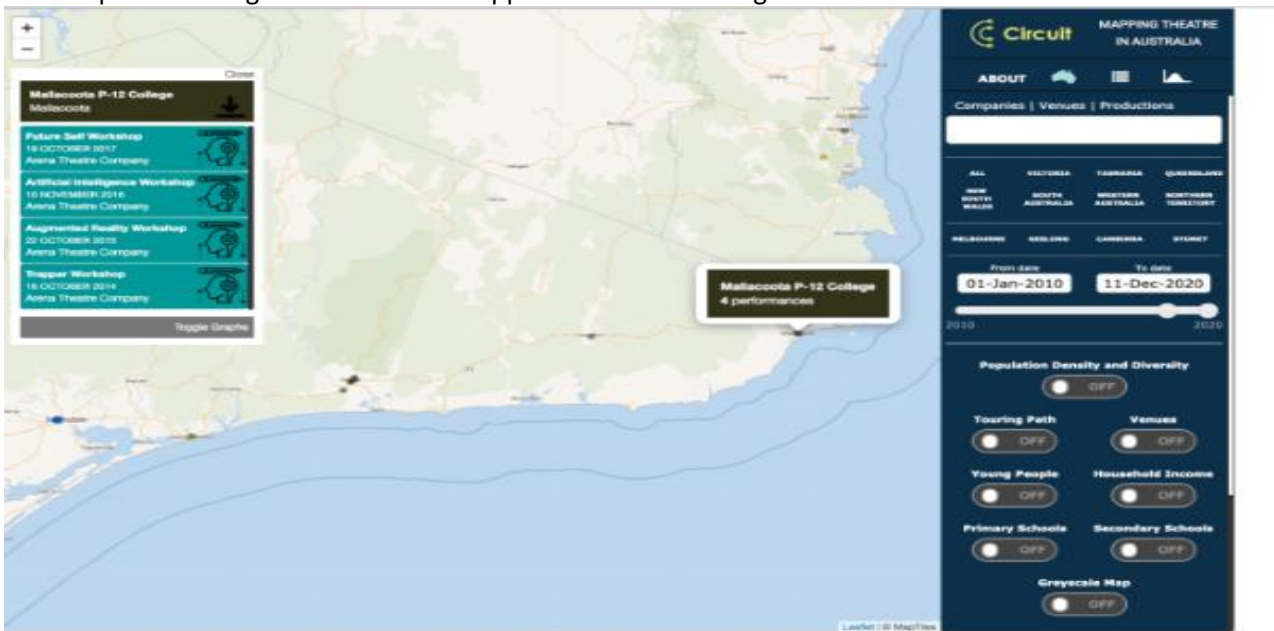
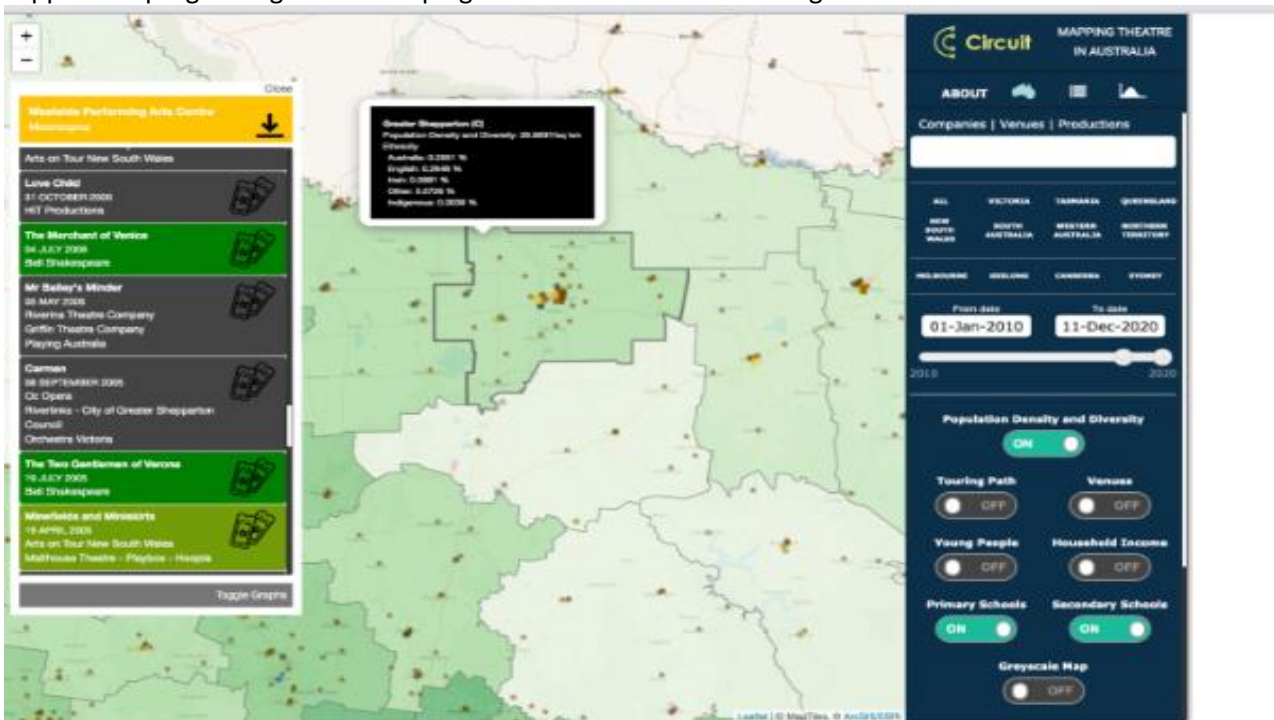


Figure 1: The map below shows the pattern of involvement that Arena has had with Mallacoota Secondary College over a four-year period, bearing in mind that Mallacoota is possibly the region that is furthest from a metropolitan or regional centre that supports theatre on a regular basis.



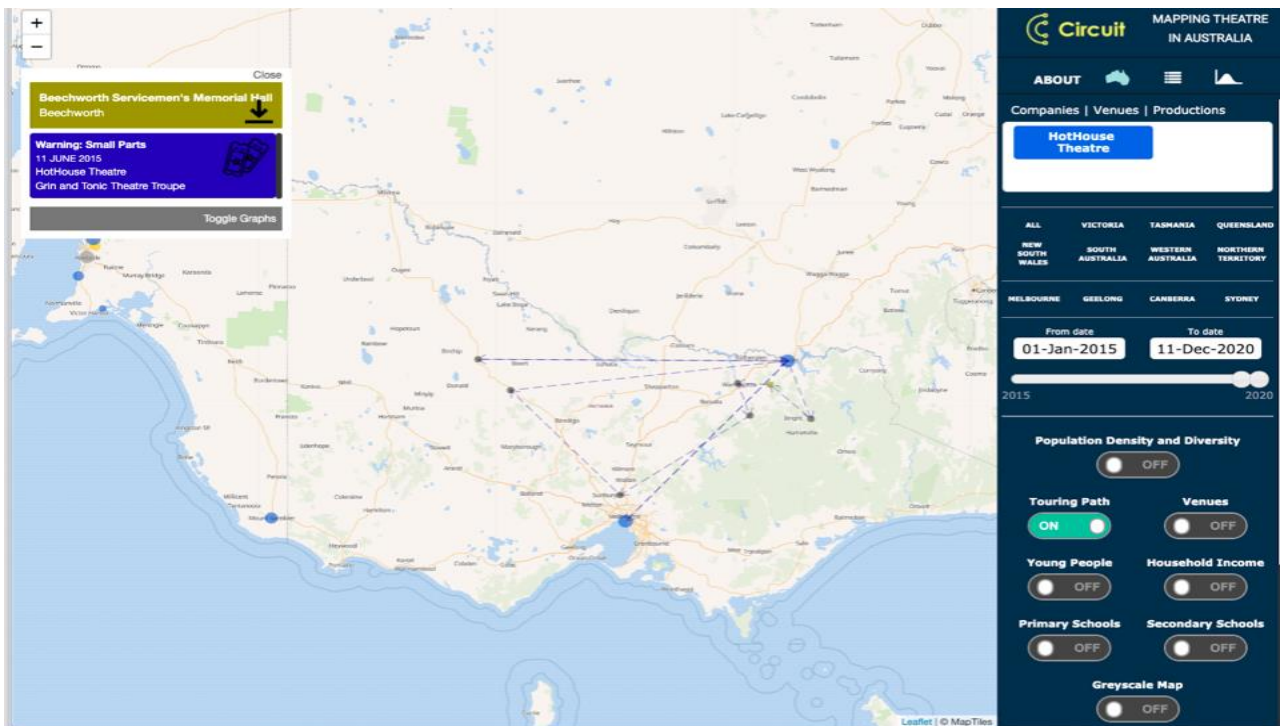
Mallacoota - Bushfire affected area  
ATC had multiple events at a local college, remote region in Victoria, low population density, low household income, low proportion of young people

Figure 2:-The picture below shows that the Westside theatre in Mooroopna has presented a wide range of theatre at its venue over time, with frequent visits by Bell Shakespeare and that it lies within a regional network of schools that could be given greater support to attend that venue with specially targeted schools workshops and programs that enrich their engagement with the arts. The venue could be given preferential support for programing and developing collaborations across the region.



Shepparton in Victoria  
Bell had several events at Westside Performing Arts Centre, large population density, average household income, high proportion of young people, possible to reach schools

Figure 3: CIRCUIT reveals that Hothouse tours in 2015 went to tiny towns and villages along the River Murray and into the Snowy Mountains where no other theatre companies visit



This touring path shows theatre activity between northern Victoria and in and out of Melbourne, but including small venues for HotHouse Theatre's tour *Warning: Small Parts* to Beechworth Servicemen's Memorial Hall.

Figure 4: CIRCUIt also reveals the distances that theatre companies such as the indigenous company, Ilbjerri travel to reach regional and remote communities.



**Snapshot 5: Port Hedland in WA**

Ilbjerri Theatre Company had several events at Matt Dann Cultural Centre, a venue in an area with a low population density, high household income and high proportion of young people.