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**SYMPOSIUM ON CULTURAL VITALITY
PRESENTED BY REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA**

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It is my job today to wrap up this session and to place in context the presentations of the previous five speakers, but firstly, I would like to spend a few moments telling you about Regional Arts Australia and the ways in which we work to contribute to the cultural vitality of regional, rural and remote areas of Australia.

Regional Arts Australia is the peak body for the Australia-wide network of regional arts organisations delivering arts programs in regional Australia. Regional Arts Australia acts on behalf of the communities and artists of regional rural and remote Australia in representing and resolving, at a national level, the issues, concerns and resource needs pivotal to the development and maintenance of a viable arts industry and vibrant cultural life.

Regional Arts Australia aims to :-

- Advocate at local, state and federal level to ensure that the arts in regional Australia are appropriately recognised and resourced
- Lead the development of national policies and projects that foster and encourage the development of the arts and the contribution of the arts to community development in rural and remote Australia
- Plan, develop and manage national regional arts conferences, seminars, workshops and forums
- Develop strategic partnerships with appropriate national organisations to implement major arts initiatives designed to raise the profile and enhance the development of arts in regional Australia.

Regional Arts Australia works with, and through, its members who are the state based organisations –

- Arts NT
- Country Arts SA
- Country Arts WA
- Queensland Arts Council
- Regional Arts NSW
- Regional Arts Victoria
- Tasmanian Regional Arts

As the principal providers of arts programs to country Australians our members have a strong understanding of the needs and aspirations of the 6.7 million plus residents who live and work in non- metropolitan Australia, not just in terms of the arts but also of the social, economic and technological issues that they face.

This is achieved through



- The development and implementation of community inspired arts initiatives
- The management of touring performances and exhibitions
- The staging of special events and festivals, and
- The direct participation of members' staff and volunteers in myriad community projects.

Through its state bodies Regional Arts Australia works with local government, community groups, business and funding bodies to respond to the special needs of rural and remote communities, to support national development initiatives and to advise on policy and planning for the future of regional arts in Australia.

Strategic Priorities

In December 2004 Regional Arts Australia reviewed its achievements over the past three years and began a planning process to ensure that it is well equipped to address the future needs, challenges and opportunities of its principal stakeholders. The following important themes were identified to help shape priorities for the future.

- Community capacity building
- Encouraging strong regional centres
- Indigenous people and communities
- Young people's engagement
- The environment
- Cultural tourism

Following our own review, by our members, we then undertook a major community consultation, through a national survey, responded to by over 830 people, and twelve half day seminars in regional and remote locations across the country. More than 400 people took part. Participants represented

- 300 arts organisations
- individual artists
- local councillors, state and federal members of parliament
- cultural and community development managers and arts officers from local councils and regional arts programs
- indigenous arts workers and artists
- arts council representatives
- gallery owners, venue operators
- theatre directors
- presenters of major events and local events
- art teachers, university lecturers
- representatives from disability arts groups
- youth workers
- tourism operators

Outcomes

People in regional Australia are resolute in building strong and vibrant communities through their own efforts and seek support that will empower them to achieve their aspirations.



Participants in the consultations spoke passionately and with pride about the successes and progress made in the arts and cultural life of their communities. They shared stories of the events, festivals and arts programs that flourish in these communities and bring people together and the day to day enthusiasm of volunteers and arts networks in making sure that arts and culture has a place in rural communities.

Some achievements considered important by the communities included:-

- **Talent of local arts and cultural community** – the talent energy and commitment of local artists were acknowledged as one of the most important contributions to the regional arts scene.
- **Community building** – the impact of arts programs in bringing together local communities was seen as a major success in many communities
- **Government Support** – participants acknowledged the critical assistance provided by the federal, state and local government were seen as vital to an energetic arts scene
- **Facilities** – in particular places participants spoke with great pride about their arts facilities and of the essential support of governments in funding arts infrastructure development. The facilities open up possibilities for a wider range of artistic endeavour and build community morale and identity. In other areas the lack of arts facilities was identified as an area of urgent need.
- **Young people** – there are communities where progress is being made and celebrated, however the engagement of young people in the artistic and cultural life of the communities was identified as an area of great need.

Priorities for the future

What we have learned from the consultations has provided us with some guiding principles for our future actions:-

1. **Local Identity and ownership of the arts and culture** – Arts and cultural programs should be generated out of the community and owned by the community
2. **Valuing the arts in regional Australia** – There is limited recognition given to the arts by society in general and government at all levels
3. **Sustaining Arts and Cultural Activity** – the energy, effort and resources required to ensure ongoing development of arts and cultural programs and initiatives is scarce
4. **Inclusion and community building through arts** – It is in the interest of the whole country that there continue to be strong and vibrant communities that are able to take care of themselves as well as contributing to the economy of the nation
5. **Facilities to Support communities** – Communities place enormous value on their local cultural facilities, whether they are large regional cultural centres, galleries or local community halls.

Regional Arts Australia will continue to advocate to all spheres of government for an ongoing commitment that recognises the value of regional communities to the nation and the role that the arts and cultural development play in nurturing and enriching these communities.

Advocacy takes many forms. Regional Arts Australia works closely with the Australian Government, particularly through building relationships with the Minister for the Arts and the Department of Communications and the Arts.

The Regional Arts Fund, is an Australian Government initiative which was established in 1996, and now stands at \$16.1 million over four years from 2004 – 2008 is devolved to state



regional arts agencies and territory arts departments. This Program's vision is to provide funding for *creative and innovative regional remote and very remote/isolated communities in which participation in and access to cultural activities contributes to the sustainable cultural, social and economic capacity and well being of individuals and communities.*

Playing Australia is an Australian Government program supports both regional and metropolitan communities to access the best performing arts programs produced in Australia. Regional arts Australia's lobbying has assisted in building this fund to enhance touring opportunities to many regional and remote communities.

Creative Volunteering – no limits. Regional Arts Australia's national skills development program began in 2001 with Australian government funding of \$1.2 million provided through the Department of Communications Technology and the Arts and the Department of Family and Community Services. The program has been continued through the Regional Arts Fund 2004-2008.

This program currently has six one day workshops for volunteers and two more are being developed. These are

- Business Planning
- Network with communities
- Marketing
- Develop Funds and Resources
- Work with collections
- Plan and Program Events

Plus

- Organisation governance
- Productive relationships and your organisation

The first six module have resulted in 511 workshops in 123 different towns across Australia with almost 5,000 enrolments, and a consistent participant satisfaction rate of 97%

Regional Arts Publications - Regional Arts Australia has published two major works. The first was published in 1998 and entitled *The Great Yarn Event – and other stories from Regional Australia*. The second, *Heartwork, great arts stories from regional Australia* was launched in Canberra in 2004. Both publications feature stories that celebrate the best in artistic programs and events that are happening in the regions, beyond metropolitan Australia.

Regional Arts Promoters Network. After convening national networking forums in 2000 and 2004, Regional Arts Australia signed off on a three year agreement with the Australia Council for the Arts to support a Regional Arts Promoters Network (RAPN). All states and territories are represented in this network of marketing and audience development experts. In Darwin in August 2005 the RAPN Group began work on developing a networked strategy for promoting the arts in regional Australia.

Collaboration with the Australia Council for the Arts. Regional Arts Australia has become a significant partner with the Australia Council in developing and delivering special programs for the benefit of regional, rural and remote artists, arts workers and communities. The following objectives are particularly relevant to the partnership

- To increase the strength and sustainability of the cultural life of regional, rural and remote communities across Australia
- To promote and advocate for regional arts development to ensure key national regional arts objectives



- To develop a broad range of partnerships, relationships and networks that support arts and cultural activities within regional communities
- To communicate effectively and strategically with stakeholders in regional rural and remote Australia

The partnership gives a significant boost to the arts in regional Australia and ensures that the regional arts sector will continue to have an ongoing profile through national advocacy by Regional Arts Australia.

National Strategic Framework. Regional Arts Australia hosted a National Regional Arts Forum in Adelaide in February 2002. The aim of the Forum was to provide opportunities for organisations, active and interested in regional cultural practice and development to work together to advance common interests.

Regional Cultural Alliance. In October 2002 Regional Arts Australia, Museums Australia, the Federation of Historical Societies, the Australian Council of National Trusts and the Australian Library and Information Association held a two day planning session in Canberra. At this meeting Regional Arts Australia's National Strategic Framework was discussed, and its principal recommendation concerning the establishment of a nations regional cultural alliance was considered in detail.

The Regional Cultural Alliance has provided a National Strategic Framework document "*Cultural Partnerships in Regional Australia – Creating a Common Agenda*" which has identified a series of important priorities which are all aimed at further developing regional arts and culture.

National Conferences - Regional Arts Australia convenes Biennial national conferences that bring together arts professionals, arts workers, funding bodies and speakers of renown. The fourth conference – *Meeting Place* was held in Horsham in 2004. Almost 600 people attended the conference, which was billed as "*part conference, part festival, all art* " The conference was enormously successful in bringing together the largest regional arts event in the calendar of events. The next conference – *the Pacific Edge* will be held in Mackay in September 2006, followed by *Art at the Heart* – the sixth national conference, to be held in Alice Springs in September 2008.

Today you have seen some examples of the ways in which our state and regional organisations are putting the national principles of regional arts development into action and are reaching out to their communities in very effective ways.

From New South Wales you have heard about the state government's initiative to have local governments formulate and implement structured Cultural Plans. You have heard from the CEO of Regional Arts NSW about how that will be happening, and from one of our Regional Arts Development Officers, located in the Southern Highlands of NSW, about how she has worked with communities to develop Cultural Plans and how she has been able to engage young people in the process.

South Australia has provided some wonderful examples of how a partnership between Country Arts South Australia and the Port Augusta Council has led to other partnerships, and how the role of the Regional Arts Officer has been used to combine with the Council's Strategic Planning and Social Visioning Unit to create ways of engendering and sustaining cultural vitality in the Port Augusta area and how her work with indigenous communities has been instrumental in engaging Aboriginal people and, through self expression, has facilitated much needed engagement through improvements to self esteem and cultural pride.

The Victorian segment of the presentation has given you an insight into the aims and objectives of Regional Arts Victoria and how it operates. The CEO of Regional Arts Victoria and the Regional Arts Development Officer at Swan Hill have used examples of how a



partnership with Swan Hill Council has been developed to use arts programs and activities to address issues of isolation, discrimination and marginalisation.

The other states too, are working in innovative ways to celebrate the arts and to use arts related projects to create cultural vitality and social capital. We could give you many wonderful examples, if time permitted. I refer you to the Regional Arts Australia website, and to our publication *Heartwork*, for further bench marking projects.

The examples you have been given show how the arts can be used to involve and engage specific marginalised or troubled groups within regional communities. We could have used many examples where cultural and community involvement by arts practitioners and volunteer groups provide a firm basis for social cohesion and a rich cultural life in the mainstream, as well as for groups with special needs. This is a community services conference, but I know that our goals are the same as community services practitioners, we are all here to discuss and learn what we can do to enrich the lives of people in our communities, and I am sure we are all doing that in our own special ways.

John Hawkes, in his book *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, argues that a rich cultural life is essential for communities to survive, and along with social, environmental and economic indicators, create sustainability and community development. From my own perspective, living and working in regional New South Wales, I strongly support that view. Cultural vitality and sustainable communities go together. Viable communities are those where, people feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, where there is a sense of inclusion, trust and openness, tolerance of diversity and healthy self expression.

Regional Arts Australia, through its advocacy and the programs delivered through its state agencies will continue to work for regional, rural and remote communities to enhance the quality of life and community well being that involvement in the arts can provide so well.

Thank you.