

REGIONAL ARTS, ITS PLACE IN REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of my fellow Regional Arts Australia Directors, I would like to say how pleased I am to be able to talk to you today about Regional Arts Australia and the work it is undertaking to advocate for the arts, and to examine the issues that Regional Arts Australia believes are crucial to the future development to the arts and culture across regional Australia.

My name is Nicky Downer and I am the President of Regional Arts Australia.

ABOUT REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA

Regional Arts Australia is a peak national organisation for regional arts and cultural development in Australia.

Regional Arts Australia's aims are 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, programs 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; and
- develop strategic partnerships with appropriate national organisational to implement major arts initiatives designed to raise the profile and enhance the development of the arts in regional Australia.

As the principal providers of arts programs to country Australians, Regional Arts Australia members have a strong understanding of the needs and aspirations of regional communities within their state, not just in terms of the arts, but also of social, economic and technological issues that they face.

The work of Regional Arts Australia's member organisations touches the lives of the vast majority of the 6.7 million-plus Australians who live and work in non-metropolitan Australia.

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.

The members of Regional Arts Australia are:
Queensland Arts Council
Country Arts SA
Tasmanian Regional Arts
Arts NT
Regional Arts NSW
Regional Arts Victoria
Country Arts WA

By working with local government, community groups, business and funding bodies, Regional Arts Australia is well-placed 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.

REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA KEY PRIORITIES

Before considering in detail Regional Arts Australia's key priorities for the future, it is worth reflecting on the work that Regional Arts Australia has achieved to date.

- **Biennial National Conference**

In October 2002 Regional Arts Australia held its third National Conference in Albury/Wodonga. The Conference was an outstanding success with 570 delegates from across regional Australia in attendance.

This Conference built on the success of the previous National Conferences which were held in Mount Gambier in 1998 and Esperance in 2000..

Planning is now well under way for the 2004 National Conference *Meeting Place* which is to be held in Horsham in regional Victoria, .

'The Show' will be the main theme for **Meeting Place**, with the event to be centred in and around the historic Horsham showgrounds.

Meeting Place will be a unique and exciting arts conference with all the fun of a traditional country show and it will provide the opportunity to highlight a local, traditional "meeting place".

We have no doubt that this conference will build on past successes and we want you all to join us when Regional Arts Victoria will host the NEXT Regional Arts Australia national conference on the 21st – 24th October 2004.

- **Country Arts Promotion**

Regional Arts Australia is committed to increasing the profile and recognition of the arts in regional Australia. Several strategic initiatives that Regional Arts Australia has undertaken include:

- **The Great Yarn Event**

In 1998 Regional Arts Australia produced a high quality publication, the Great Yarn Event and other Art Stories from Regional Australia, which showcased 35 innovative regional arts projects.

This publication, which was jointly funded by Regional Arts Australia and the Australia Council, represented a watershed in profiling regional arts projects and has provided opportunities for considerable promotion and publicity for regional arts.

At the present time Regional Arts Australia is again working with the Australia Council on the development of a second publication of stories, which we anticipate will be distributed across Australia in 2004. We are now looking for the stories to make this publication even better than the Great Yarn Event.

- **National Networking**

Each year Regional Arts Australia convenes a national networking forum. At these meetings marketing and publicity staff from State and Federal Arts Ministries, the Australia Council, State based Regional Arts Agencies and National Associations with a strong interest in the arts in regional Australia discuss ways in which the profile of the arts in regional Australia can be improved

The network most recently met immediately prior to the recent National Conference and agreed that Regional Arts Australia should continue to promote regional arts nationally. In particular the members of the forum also supported Regional Arts Australia's push to ensure that regional arts become a high priority in the Australia Council's Promoting the Value of the Arts initiative.

- **Regional Arts On-Line www.regionalarts.com.au**

With the support of the Australia Council, Regional Arts Australia has established a national Regional Arts website. Launched at the Groundswell conference in 2002 the site is has been continually building and expanding since then.

Why not join our email list and we'll keep informed about any major news.

You can enter your own information concerning your regional arts projects and events on to the national "What's On" database

You can also put your own details into the contact book, to help us to create a national network of regional artists and arts organisations across Australia.

There is a comprehensive and current list of media contacts from across Australia on the site.

We expect this and other opportunities we are pursuing, including working with the ABC online, to create new opportunities for media exposure for arts projects and events.

- **National Arts and Museums Volunteers Skills Development**

As I am sure you are aware, across regional Australia there are relatively very few regionally based, professional organisations and arts workers. Communities throughout regional Australia therefore depend on volunteers to keep a huge number of organisations and activities afloat. This is particularly so in the case of the arts, cultural heritage and museums. Nearly all regional museums, galleries, theatre groups, writers support groups, heritage sites, sculpture parks, historic walking trails and the like are managed and run by volunteers.

There is no doubt there has been a significant increase in the level and complexity of regional arts activities, notably the development of significant festivals and events and increased performing arts and visual arts touring opportunities. Regional Arts Australia felt its highest priority was to develop a national skills development project which specifically targeted regionally based volunteers.

It is estimated that there are over 600,000 volunteers in the arts and museums sectors across Australia.

Regional Arts Australia strongly believes that, if the regional arts sector is to grow and develop, this enormous resource needs to be given the opportunity to take part

in formalised skills development programs which in turn will enable them to work smarter in the ongoing development of the arts.

In early 2001 Regional Arts Australia successfully sought national funding support from the Commonwealth Government to develop and deliver skills based workshops to regionally based volunteers across Australia.

This involved the development of a new curriculum within the Vocational Education Training Framework for a special needs group, making it the first nationally recognised and coordinated training program for volunteers in the cultural sectors in regional Australia.

The entire course is made up of six self-contained one-day workshops. People can choose to complete the whole course or any workshop of their choice

Creative Volunteering workshops have been designed especially for community organisations where volunteers do much or all of the work. Although the workshop content is geared towards cultural organisations, volunteers working in all community-based organisations are not excluded from attending and stand to gain the same skills and knowledge from attending the program.

This map shows many of the towns and regional communities where workshops are running. The course is now being delivered across the country with a full schedule of delivery available on the Regional Arts Australia website. People can also download enrolment forms from the website.

This is an extremely exciting and challenging project for Regional Arts Australia and the workshops are proving extremely valuable to all those who are involved.

- **Regional Arts Fund**

The Commonwealth Government established the Regional Arts Fund in 1997 with an annual allocation of \$2.5 million. This allocation has remained unchanged since the Fund's establishment.

The Regional Arts Fund is, under the current triennial funding arrangements, principally devolved through Regional Arts Australia's State based member organisations.

Over the 2001/2002 financial year Regional Arts Australia's State based organisations supported over 400 grants from the Regional Arts Fund. The total value of the projects supported was over \$8 million and represented over \$4 being raised for each \$1 applied from the Regional Arts Fund.

Importantly, over 500,000 regional Australians participated in these projects and over 1,000 artists gained employment through these projects.

The broad objectives for the Regional Arts Fund across Australia are:

- Encourage and support cultural development in communities: with an emphasis on sustainability of cultural development in regional centres, rather than "one-off" events.
- Encourage the formation of partnerships with local government, community groups, the library sector and others: with partnerships preferably involving financial contributions or resources in-kind.
- Increase access to information regarding professional arts development skills and opportunities for people in isolated areas.

- Increase skills development initiatives (including mentoring schemes), both for individuals and organisations.
- Emphasise development through the arts for isolated Indigenous communities, and to
- Have a strong impact in smaller communities.

I would like to tell you about some regional arts projects that I have found particularly exciting. The first is the National Limestone Coast Symposium which was held in January to March this year in South Australia.

This major new event was developed by Country Arts SA in partnership with the City of Mount Gambier. The Symposium was a professional development opportunity for all attending, an opportunity for critical debate, development of new skills and networking. Local and regional people witnessed the creation of limestone sculptures, engaged with working sculptors and developed a more knowledgeable interest in the work of arts practitioners generally; and in Mount Gambier limestone in particular.

Some of Australia's leading sculptors featured at the first National Limestone Sculpture Symposium. They include Adelaide artists Tony Bishop and Sylvio Apponyi and South East artists James Darling and Ivo Tadic along with sculptors from all over Australia who were invited to be one of the 30 selected artists to work alongside some of South Australia's best.

Each of the four invited South Australian artists was required to:

- Give a presentation of work e.g. Seminar slides for approximately 1 hour.
- Be part of a mentoring program involving 2 assistants / artists
- Conduct a 4 hour workshop for 10 participants
- Create a work of art from supplied Limestone. - Time Frame 8-14 days

The works created by the 30 sculptors attending the Symposium were available for viewing prior to an official function after which they were available for sale to the public with eighteen works being sold at the time.

Another project I particularly like, is the "A Good Night Out" Project currently taking place here in Queensland.

The Queensland Arts Council has employed a strategic facilitator to work with Local Arts Councils, Local Government and regional communities on a community and cultural development initiative called "A Good Night Out". The project is designed to match regional audiences' desire for a good night out to stimulating and relevant arts product, and then to identify the relevant skills and financial support needed to deliver that product.

This two-stage project involves up to fifteen regional and rural communities in planning for "good nights out" over a two year period. The actual event or venture could be anything from a dinner dance or an afternoon Masterclass to a locally produced theatre production or special entertainment event. The nature of each event is determined through research, community consultation and consideration of resources. The project encourages wide community support and involvement in planning and delivering arts and cultural events and is designed to be a significant contributing factor in the culturally led revitalisation of Queensland's regional communities.

There is no doubt that regional communities have, through the Regional Arts Fund, been given significantly enhanced opportunities to participate in the arts. In an environment where the arts are playing an increasing role in building community pride and confidence and in supporting communities in their endeavours to provide both social and economic capital, Regional Arts Australia believes that it is crucial the arts continue to grow and develop in regional Australia.

- **Playing Australia**

Playing Australia is a Commonwealth Government program which was first established in 1992.

The Playing Australia program supports regional (and metropolitan) communities to access the best Performing Arts programs produced in Australia. Playing Australia has partner programs, Visions Australia (which supports visual arts touring) and Festivals Australia (which supports festivals and events).

Playing Australia is managed by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA). For the 2002/2003 financial year \$3.6 million has been allocated for Playing Australia. This amount has remained unchanged since 1996.

Since its introduction Playing Australia has:

- Significantly increased regional audience participation and attendance at arts events;
- Increased access to outstanding arts events and performances for audiences often disadvantaged by isolation;
- Increased local employment and economic activity surrounding tours; and
- Established a network of professional and volunteer presenters across regional Australia which in turn has increased regional skills and community capacity

There is no doubt that the introduction of Playing Australia support for touring companies has had an enormous impact on the arts choices available to regional communities in Australia. In a number of instances regional communities have been able to access Australia's best performers and companies on a regular basis for the first time.

The model of delivery is 'end user' or venue-driven. All Playing Australia applications require written venue confirmation. This has the effect of securing on-the-ground support and ensuring that touring programs have the best chance of success in individual communities.

Moreover, as the Playing Australia programs have become established both producing companies and local presenters have worked "smarter" to ensure better programming and touring decisions.

Demand from regional Australia, for high quality performing arts touring product continues to grow. New venues and regional presenters want to gain access to the outstanding performance and talent available. Producers are creating product with touring in mind and small casts, flexible production needs, to suit a wide variety of venues, are being factored in, as part of the production process.

Regional Arts Australia's member organisations are also involved in two other important programs where regional communities can benefit. These Commonwealth Government cultural grant programs are,

Visions of Australia aims to make exhibitions of cultural material accessible to more Australians. It provides grants to cultural and community organisations to develop and tour exhibitions of historical and scientific material, visual arts and craft, multimedia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture throughout Australia. Exhibitions should have a predominantly Australian source or theme. Through the program, more Australians have the chance to enjoy our diverse culture and organisations can tour exhibitions interstate to major centres as well as regional and remote areas.

Festivals Australia provides assistance to regional and community Australian festivals to add a really new or special sort of cultural activity that has never been done before and could not be afforded.

Regional Arts Australia National Strategic Framework

There is no doubt that in an era of increasing competition for scarce resources it is essential that the various arts and cultural agencies operating across regional Australia, work together towards common and complimentary goals.

With this in mind, Regional Arts Australia hosted a National Regional Arts Forum in February 2002. With this forum Regional Arts Australia aimed to provide an opportunity for organisations active or interested in regional cultural practice and development to find new ways to work together to advance common interests and opportunities.

As a follow up to the national Forum, Regional Arts Australia member organisations initiated State based consultations with arts, culture and heritage practitioners and organisations. The purpose of these State based consultations was to pursue the articulation of the importance, benefits and future growth of regional arts activities in each State and to explore the potential for creating a common agenda.

As a consequence of these consultations seven goals for achievement were identified. These goals are:

- **Building the Alliance and Providing Leadership**

It is imperative that a strong alliance between the arts and collections sectors be established for the benefit of regional Australia. It is considered that this alliance would provide a stronger and broader leadership, which in turn would improve the recognition and valuing of the contribution made to Australian cultural, social and economic life.

- **Sustaining Regional Cultural Activity**

It is crucial to support and encourage cultural activity that contributes to the development of sustainable communities in regional Australia.

Important priorities within this are programs which:

- provide opportunities for local communities to build local pride and confidence;
- develop regional arts and cultural leadership;
- ensure there are appropriate physical infrastructure resources to support the arts and culture in regional Australia;
- ensure there is parity across States and Territories and across artistic endeavours; and
- provide ongoing support for regional arts and cultural volunteers.

- **Progressing Training and Development**

The provision of access to sustainable industry-relevant training and professional development is absolutely crucial to the ongoing development of regional arts and culture sector.

In particular, Regional Arts Australia believes that training and development programs should, wherever possible be:
delivered regionally;
tailor-made to suit the individual communities' employment and development opportunities;
designed to meet the needs of both volunteers and professional arts workers; and
designed to raise the professionalism of the regional arts and cultural sector.

- **Supporting Creative Processes and People**

It is crucial that an environment in regional Australia is established which nurtures and maintains workers for whom arts and culture is their life's work whether they want or are able to sustain themselves financially through this activity.

In working to achieve this goal it is considered important that new networks for regionally based artists, volunteers and arts workers be established which will in turn provide new opportunities for critical analysis, peer feedback, encouragement and nurturing.

- **Fostering Connections**

Regional Arts Australia is committed to providing opportunities for regional communities to present their culture to urban Australia, and to bring into these communities cultural product from other parts of Australia and overseas.

To enable regional communities to feel more connected to the main stream arts and cultural industry, Regional Arts Australia believes it will be necessary to ensure that work created by regional communities is acknowledged for its quality and uniqueness, and that differences between regional communities be recognised and valued.

- **Image Making: Identity, Measuring and Marketing**

The regional arts and cultural sector must develop a cohesive identity that encapsulates its diversity and presents a single, recognisable and marketable sector which will be valued by regional Australia, and by funding bodies for its contribution to regional Australia.

In considering what is essentially the development of a brand for regional arts and culture it is important that the community at large understand and accept:

- the value of the regional arts and cultural sector;
- that the arts and cultural sector are a part of everyday life; and
- that the arts and cultural sector is not merely a product but is an industry based around people, their personal identities and their sense of belonging.

- **Developing Partnerships and Resources**

It is imperative that a broad range of new partnerships is developed which build relationships and networks and in turn, support arts and cultural activities within regional communities.

In particular, it is considered important that relationships with local government be improved and that a broader base for opportunities for funding, principally outside of the established art sector be examined.

You may be aware that Regional Arts Australia, Museums Australia, the Federation of Australian Historical Societies, the Australia Council of National Trusts and the Australia Library Information Association, have agreed to form a national Regional Cultural Alliance.

I have no doubt that in the months to come this new cultural alliance will work much more strategically to build an improved regional arts and museums sector for Australia.

As you can see, there are numerous challenges ahead for the regional arts and cultural sector when considering priorities for the future most notably in the areas of:

- national coordination
- quality and consistency,
- recognition of professional isolation, and respecting diversity, and
- professional development.

I look forward to the future with considerable enthusiasm and anticipation.

Nicola Downer
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Regional Arts Australia