

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS THEATRE FORUM REPORT

CENTRE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS, CAIRNS

BACKGROUND

This report outlines the key outcomes of the National Indigenous Theatre Forum held in August 2010 as part of the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair (CIAF). The Forum was primarily about bringing together leading Indigenous theatre workers from around Australia for two days of discussions, provocations and celebrations.

Prior to the forum Arts Queensland and the Australia Council discussed possibilities for investment in contemporary Indigenous theatre-making with a view to developing successful, sustainable models of practice. The two agencies agreed that any successful models in contemporary Indigenous theatre would need to be driven by the sector at a national level. This approach would help develop more appropriate investments.

Over the past few years there have been a number of discussions centering on a National Indigenous Theatre Company. Many of the needs and priorities discussed at the Forum have been raised during these previous gatherings. The need to knit national and local strategies was a recurring theme.

The Forum was uniformly applauded for its consensus model of decision making and its ability to drive to tangible priorities and actions. The participants agreed that it's now time to act in a united way to better deliver for the Indigenous Theatre sector, including auditing existing support structures, cultural protocols, recruitment, producing, presenting and audience development strategies.

The Forum outcomes will be used by the delegates to inform planning and decision making for future investment and support of contemporary Indigenous Australian theatre. Some short to medium-term actions and priorities arising from the findings are described in the body of this report.

THE PEOPLE

Forum Facilitator: Wesley Enoch

Forum Participants: Paul Adams, Diat Alferink, Libby Antsis, Nancy Bamaga, John Baylis, Alex Ben-Mayor, Selena Brown, Lee-Ann Buckskin, Sam Cook, Nazaree Dickerson, Isaac Drandic, Vera Ding, Helene George, Fenn Gordon, Ben Graetz, Jermaine Hampton, John Harvey, Margaret Harvey, Roxanne McDonald, Suellen Maunder, Rachael Maza-Long, David Milroy, Kyle Morrison, Tim Mullooly, Paula Nazarski, David Page, Rhonda Purcell, Lily Shearer, Liza-Mare Syron, Lyn Wallis, Sam Watson & Alexis West

Forum Guests participating in some sessions: Warren Clements, Ernie Dingo, Avril Duck, Tony Grybowski, Simon Hapea, Debra Jefferies, Milos Miladinovic Lydia Miller, Marilyn Miller & Mark Stapleton

Forum documentation & support: Evelyn Golding & Fiona Winning

THE PROCESS

Wesley Enoch – Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company and long time writer and director with Kooemba Jdarra, Company B, Ilbjerri and other companies, facilitated the discussion. With the aim of optimizing participation and commitment of the sector, Wesley used the Open Space Technology¹ as a means of conducting an open discussion whereby participants identify and drive the agenda for discussion and collectively prioritise action.

Participants were invited to raise urgent questions/issues and to convene discussions around each area. Seventeen groups met for brief discussion after which Wesley met with delegates to endorse the division of the issues into four key areas:

- **Practice:** what is Indigenous theatre; protocols & processes; partnerships & collaborations; community based theatre; cross-racial casting; commissioning & support structures
- **Presentation:** venues; touring; audience development
- **Pathways:** youth participation; training; mentoring; diversifying skills; sustainable professional models; leadership & succession
- **National Function:** lobbying; funding & philanthropy; ecology; peak body/leadership; archiving/research; commissioning support structures

Progressing through the key areas, participants were invited to pose potential actions under each of these headings. These actions were listed and groups were convened to discuss and map out short to long-term strategies and who would take responsibility for pursuing each action.

These were reported to back to the group and remainder of the discussion focused on creating an action plan based on the democratically identified top five priorities.

RECURRING ISSUES

A summary of issues recurring through the weekend and that demonstrate where the priorities have come from.

- The sector needs urgent action and wants to lead that action
- Indigenous Theatre companies are few and far between and have enormous and competing agendas (eg, community/social agendas, artmaking and audience development agendas, touring and venue management etc)
- There are few opportunities for touring Indigenous theatre beyond the cities the work is made – between cities, rural and remote areas
- There are few opportunities for training and pathways for career development of Indigenous artworkers – managers, producers, designers, technical and production staff
- Indigenous-specific infrastructure is needed in some areas as well as extending the Indigenous remit within existing non-Indigenous infrastructure
- Cultural training is needed for artworkers and funders around protocols for all organisations working with Indigenous communities
- With limited resources, no peak body and no regular conference/national forum, the sector is fragile
- New money is needed from government and non-government sources – including philanthropic money

¹ Wesley referenced this website www.openspaceworkshop.com/ and his own experience at the National Theatre Forum www.australiantheatreforum.com.au/ that used Open Space Technology led by Nick Sweeting of Improbable Theatre, UK

THE OUTCOMES – THE CAIRNS CONSENSUS

On August 21-22 2010, a significant gathering of key individuals, representing the national interests of Australia's Indigenous theatre community, convened in Cairns, on Yidindji Gimuy Walubara Country, to coincide with the second Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.

The Cairns Consensus recognises that Indigenous theatre is integral to our cultural identity and plays an important role to the broader artistic vibrancy of Australia. The forum agreed to progress a national approach to the development of the Indigenous theatre sector. Within this, is a collective request to the State, Territory and Commonwealth governments, to work collaboratively and undertake a rigorous audit to be completed by 2011. This would be inclusive of infrastructure and a broader funding ecology to support the aspirations of the sector. The audit could inform a national framework within the context of an overarching Indigenous theatre policy.

The Cairns Consensus builds on the legacy of our storytellers, practitioners and Elders, past and present, and views this forum as a platform to secure the future of National Indigenous theatre.

The following priorities are an indication of the avenues of review for further action.

PRIORITY 1. AUDIT OF EXISTING & POTENTIAL PRESENTERS FOR NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TOURING CIRCUIT

Market development and mentoring/training of Indigenous touring producers

Short term:

- Invite Ozco Market Development to partner
- Research which presenters are interested in Indigenous Theatre – in capital cities, regional and remote areas
- Develop a circuit with a Memorandum of Understanding

Medium Term:

- Build in key principles of mentoring/training as the Circuit is activated
- Do a tour and evaluate circuit

Long Term:

- Establish Blak Lines – Indigenous identified producing and touring body (national & international)

WHO: Indigenous Delegates from each state/territory co-ordinated by Rachel Maza-Long (Lily Shearer, Kyle Morrison, Ben Graetz, Roxanne McDonald, Nazaree Dickerson); Australia Council Market Development; Performing Lines – John Baylis; State & Territory Arts Funding bodies (co-ordinated by Arts Qld – Vera Ding)

PRIORITY 2. DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL INDIGENOUS PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE / INDIGENOUS PRACTICES CONFERENCE

A regular annual or bi-annual conference to deal with the issues and support development of practice is needed – with documentation from the Conference to be circulated and archived.

Short Term:

- David Milroy talks to the Playwriting Australia about piggybacking a national Indigenous playwrights workshop on the back of the conference
- Draw up a statement of recommendations for the new government

Medium Term: Focus a series of national forums on a topic (Vera Ding suggests Arts Queensland support a forum at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair every two years)

Long Term: A National Theatre Conference bringing together the industry and playwrights

Who: Mooghalin Theatre (NSW)

PRIORITY 3. INVESTIGATE AND NETWORK NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PHILANTHROPY OPPORTUNITIES

Build more capacity by developing a new stream of income to the sector

Short Term: Resurrect the conversation about philanthropy

Medium Term: Create the opportunity

Long Term: Secure new income stream to the sector

Who: Sam Cook

PRIORITY 4. DOCUMENTATION & DISTRIBUTION OF PROTOCOLS

Revise and update protocols for working with Indigenous communities

Short Term:

- Audit of current Funding guidelines/structures to do with working with Indigenous communities
- Develop a document on Cultural Practices/Protocols/Principles

Medium Term: Develop and deliver cultural training on practice/collaboration with Indigenous communities for non-indigenous companies and funding bodies

WHO: Kyle Morrison & Tony Grybowski

PRIORITY 5. SCOPING STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITMENT OF YOUNG ARTISTS

Partner with FOGS (Former Origin Greats) to create a program to inspire and recruit young Indigenous artists

Short Term: Negotiate partnership between ACPA, DET and Arts Qld to pilot the program in regional Queensland (North and South East)

Medium Term: Roll out strategy in schools across Queensland

Long Term: Review effectiveness, redesign program and roll it out nationally

Who: Milos Miladinovic & Paula Nazarski