

4TH NATIONAL INDIGENOUS THEATRE FORUM 17-19 SEPTEMBER 2015, BRISBANE SUMMARY REPORT

BACKGROUND

This report summarises the key outcomes of the 4th National Indigenous Theatre Forum (NITF), an industry development forum that took place on the 17, 18, 19 September 2015 at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts as part of the 2015 Brisbane Festival.

The NITF is a meeting of Australia's First Nations Theatre Practitioners. It first met in Cairns in 2010 attended by over 50 sector representatives (including funding bodies as observers) and met twice again in 2011 and 2012 to create a national approach to the advancement of the Indigenous theatre sector in Australia. An Interim Steering Committee was then organised by Arts Queensland to meet in February 2014 with the following objectives in mind:

1. To identify the purpose and objectives for the Forum into the future
2. To identify a structure to organise the Forum outside government
3. To produce recommendations for broader consultation and determine in that consultation issue of representation and mandate

The 4th NITF set out to continue the discussions on practice and sector issues from previous forums, open up the discussions held by the Interim Steering Committee to the rest of the industry, and channel them into a final day of strategic planning and decision making to establish a structure for an independent body to work on behalf of the sector's needs.

THE PEOPLE

Steering Committee:

Lee-Ann Buckskin (SA), Ben Graetz (NT), Rachael Maza (VIC), Wesley Enoch (Qld), Lily Shearer (NSW), Kyle Morrison (WA), Jim Everett & Nathan Maynard (Tas) – NB: Jim Everett could not attend for health reasons and requested that Nathan Maynard take his place on the steering committee prior to the NITF 2015. Wesley Enoch indicated that there was mismatched expectation of his role on the steering committee.

Co-Producers:

Merindah Donnelly & Alison Murphy-Oates

Delegates:

Alexis West, Bain Stewart, Billy McPherson, Bobby Whybrow, Colin Kinchela, Davey Thompson, Denise Wilson, Deon Hastie, Diat Alferink, Erica McCalman, Ernie Dingo, Eva Grace Mullaley, Frederick Copperwaite, Isaac Drandic, Jacob Boehme, Jada Alberts, Jane Harrison, Jason De Santis, Juanita Duncan, Kamahi King, Kamarra Bell-Wykes, Katherine Beckett, Kylie Coolwell, Lara Croydon, Lisa Maza, Louana Sainsbury, Lydia Miller, Lynette Narkle, Mark Sheppard, Mitch King, Nadine McDonald-Dowd, Shakara Walley, Shari Sebbens, Sonny Dallas Law, Tammy Anderson, Teila Watson, Tom E Lewis, Yvette Walker, Waiata Telfer, Warraba Weatherall

ACPA students joining some sessions:

Sean Dow and peers.

International guests:

Cole Alvis, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (Canada), Miria George & Hone Kouka, Tawata Productions (Aotearoa), Jamie McCaskill, Tikapa Productions (Aotearoa), Devinda De Silva & Gavin Porter, National Theatre Wales (Wales), Faustin Linyekula (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Non-Indigenous guests, participating or presenting in some sessions:

Britt Guy (Artback NT), Collette Brennan (Australia Council for the Arts), Gennifer Gorzula (Arts Qld), Marion Potts (Australia Council for the Arts), Nicole Beyer (Theatre Networks Victoria), Ruth Hodgeman (Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts), Sam Creyton (Arts Qld), Vera Ding (BEMAC)

Forum documentation & support:

Leanne De Souza (Scribe, Thurs & Fri), Erica McCalman (Scribe, Sat), Fiona Winning (Scribe, Sat), Mick Richards (Photography), Will Taylor (Film – Australia Council), Eben Love (Audio & AV), Jermaine Beezley (Project Management – Judith Wright Centre)

A full list of forum delegates and guests and their areas of practice is attached at **TAB A**.

THE PROCESS

The Co-Producers in consultation with the Steering Committee developed the forum's objectives and schedule of activities, with some changes made from the format of previous years' forums. The forum was held in partnership with the Brisbane Festival, to allow for delegates to attend various Brisbane Festival events and shows while in Brisbane. It was agreed that with the exception of some contributors to the event, only Indigenous theatre practitioners would participate in the forum. Rather than employ the Open Space technique for forum discussion throughout the three days, the format would be two days of panel discussions and presentations to set the context and direction for a third day of discussion and collective decision making. It was also agreed that rather than one or two individuals act as hosts and facilitators, the duties would be shared amongst the Steering Committee members and other leaders in the industry.

THE FORUM

The original forum schedule is attached at **TAB B**.

Wednesday 16 September 2015

A small function, hosted by Brisbane Festival at the festival gardens and sponsored by Performing Lines, was held to welcome the international guests to Brisbane and introduce them to the Steering Committee, Brisbane Festival staff, and other industry guests. Guests and delegates also attended a performance of *Le Cargo* by Faustin Linyekula at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, courtesy of Brisbane Festival.

Thursday 17 September 2015

The Forum began with a smoking ceremony from Danny Doyle, followed by a dance performance from students of the Aboriginal Centre of Performing Arts (ACPA), in the foyer of the Judith Wright Centre. International guests from Aoteroa and Turtle Island both responded with song and gifts to our elders. Delegates then moved to the Theatre

Rehearsal Room for introductions facilitated by Ben Graetz. A second Welcome to Country was given by Uncle Uncle Des Sandy.

Protocols and Practice panel: This panel responded to the provocation "One of the current 'hot' issues within Indigenous Theatre in Australia is of cultural authority. Who has the right to tell Indigenous stories and how is the protocol framework established when working in collaboration? What is Indigenous theatre practice?" The panel participants were Wesley Enoch (Queensland Theatre Company, Sydney Festival), Rachael Maza (IlbijierrriTheatre), Kyle Morrison (Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company), Jada Alberts (Playwright & Actor), and Lily Shearer (Moogahlin Performing Arts), facilitated by Isaac Drandic (Director, Dramaturg). Key topics of conversation were the emerging independent Indigenous scenes in Perth and far north Queensland; how unfunded structures allow more artistic freedom, but create concerns for longevity in the sector; the broad responsibilities our three 'state-based' companies face for representation and regional outreach; how theatre can connect practitioners to their culture and whether that is still happening in our creative processes; the importance of the Yellamundie National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Playwriting Festival has for growing the sector and what the future of the festival may be; and the need for an advocacy body to guide and support independents working in the mainstream sector, and to talk on behalf of the sector on a national level.

Footage of the full panel discussion can be found at <https://vimeo.com/140258638>

"There's this idea of needing to claim this space of creative control and authority over our work... let's name it, let's claim it. Because that is what then opens the door to the ways of working. If we are in creative control of our work and have authority over our stories and our image, then follows on from that is the protocols and the different ways of working as blackfullas in terms of how we might create work. I think it's absolutely very poignant for us to be having that conversation here in this forum."

- Rachel Maza

"When I was first starting out there was a real emphasis on process and that culture. Culture was a huge part of the process and it was a kind of space when creating a theatre piece where you'd learn about your culture and you'd learn about your environment and you'd learn about your community and there was such an emphasis on that cultural process. That's something that I'm missing a bit in that process now."

- Isaac Drandic

"The decade or more of discussions that we've just had at these National Indigenous Theatre Forums, are now leading to us saying to the Australia Council - maybe it's now the Minsitry for the Arts - to say it is now time for a national inquiry to look into the longevity and future of Indigenous/Blackfulla/Aboriginal arts in this country... we're lacking that level of overview, and that's the way to argue for resources."

- Wesley Enoch

"It's a good time for us to look at what's actually working right. Not to get bogged down on trying to fix problems but actually seeing where we're actually progressing and where we're really flowing and what we can do to keep that going as opposed to what's not working, how do we fix this this... how do we propogate what is successful and working. That's something that I would like to talk about."

- Kyle Morrison

International panel: This panel invited international First Peoples theatre makers and community theatre makers to talk about their work, companies, audiences, regions and global context. Panellists included Devinda De Silva and Gavin Porter (National Theatre Wales), Miria George and Hone Kouka (Tawata Productions, New Zealand), Jamie McCaskill (Tikapa Productions, New Zealand), Cole Alvis (Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, Canada) and Faustin Linkekula (Studios Kabako, The Democratic Republic of the Congo), facilitated by Kyle Morrison (Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company).

Key topics of conversation were the decentralisation of their practices and companies to work outside of traditional theatre spaces; prioritising local community as the artistic driver; making work for mainstream audiences; developing and maintaining models of Indigenous self determination within the performing arts sector.

Footage of the full panel discussion can be found at <https://vimeo.com/143101550>

Key quotes

Historical Black Theatre panel: This panel asked elders who were delegates to reflect on their careers and learnings, particularly their experience of the National Black Theatre and origins of Indigenous theatre in Australia. The panel consisted of actors Lynette Narkle and Ernie Dingo and Lydia Miller from Australia Council for the Arts, with Lily Shearer from Moogahlin Performing Arts facilitating.

I wish Justine Saunders and so many others were all standing here to witness the delivery of their dream. At the first black playwrights conference there as a statement by Uncle Jack Davies "*one day we will have our own production companies. One day we'll have our own film companies. One day we will tell our own stories and the world will hear us*". It was a dream.

Ego was shelved, we knew everyone around us. to see all of you here, the realization of that vision and the tiny bit we contributed. Every production you are in you are creating hope for our nation. I know you may think there are not enough resources - but how far we have come is profound. Aboriginal writing is the most regarded writing in the country today. Lydia Miller

Ernie - writing is so important. the greatest sense of learning is watching everyone else. if you read someone's stuff, learn a little bit about who they are. Storytellers are there just waiting for writers, to take them by the hand and write it. Ernie Dingo

Lynette - write the way you speak, write what you know. Don't worry about the queen's english. It's ours, it's entirely different - it's contemporary. Write the way you speak. Lynette Narkle

Footage of the full panel discussion can be found at <https://vimeo.com/143212104>

The day concluded with delegates attending the opening night performance and post-show party of *Hot Brown Honey* by Black Honey Company at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts.

Friday 18 September 2015

The day began with a session summarising the conversations and outcomes of the last three National Indigenous Theatre Forums, led by Rachel Maza and Lee-Ann Buckskin. This was then followed by a brain storming session identifying the key purpose of a national peak body for Indigenous theatre:

- Advocacy
- Support: Emerging artists, community, legal, cultural, administration, grant advice.
Communication - information exchange - calendars, social media
- Protocol - develops best practice models, formulating, monitoring, cracks the whip on the "allies" engagement with Indigenous artists, sector
- Gathering - every year
- Indigenous lead touring model - charge presenters for access
- Political function - visibility, playing the long game , respond to cultural policy agenda
Community Engagement - going to reach out for gatherings, not always capital cities and recognise our gatherings are vulnerable to funding cuts
- Industry Event - establish an Indigenous performing arts market in partnership with NZ, Canada etc
- Audience Development
Strategies Research - cultural mapping Yellamundie
- Leadership - programs and development, career pathways and retention

Guest presentations: The forum then broke from the proposed schedule, and rather than holding concurrently run presentations from guest speakers in neighbouring rooms over three time slots, each guest presented once to the entire cohort.

Robyn Ayres from Arts Law discussed the various legal structures a new peak service body could take on and the steps and responsibilities required of that work.

Nicole Beyer from Theatre Network Victoria gave an overview of how TNV was established and what the organisation does as a service provider for theatre practitioners in Victoria, and as the coordinator of the Australian Theatre Forum. More information about TNV, now known as Theatre Network Australia, can be found at www.tnv.net.au

Cole Alvis spoke about the **Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance** in Canada. Footage of his presentation can be found at vimeo.com/143691854

Gavin Porter and Devinda De Silva spoke in more detail about National Theatre Wales and their company structure. Footage of their presentation can be found at <https://vimeo.com/143312888>

Amanda Coombes from Australia Council presented the latest research on audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts. The full report titled 'Building Audiences – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art' can be found [here](#).

Producer panel: This panel, facilitated by Collette Brennan and featuring Ben Graetz, Sonny Dallas, Erica McCalman, and Merindah Donnelly, was an opportunity to highlight the success of the Emerging Indigenous Producers mentorship program, one of the major outcomes of the previous forums. Key topics of conversation were the need to continue to resource Indigenous producers especially to work for Indigenous organisations or independent Indigenous artists.

Footage of the full panel discussion can be found at <https://vimeo.com/143937366>

Conclusion: The day concluded with a short wrap up from Ben Graetz, Lee-Ann Buckskin, and Rachel Maza. Delegates then had the option to attend several Brisbane Festival shows using discounted and complimentary tickets provided by the Festival.

Saturday 19 September

Breaking from the proposed schedule, the day commenced with Tammy Anderson performing an excerpt of her critically acclaimed one-woman show *I Don't Wanna Play House*, followed by an in conversation session between Tammy and Lee-Ann Buckskin. A short interview between Tammy and Ben Graetz, filmed after the session, can be found at <https://vimeo.com/143937301>

Led by Sonny Dallas Law, Mark Sheppard, and Ali Murphy-Oates, the cohort of producers then asked to speak to the forum delegates. Collectively, they offered to take on the responsibility of forming a new peak body to serve and represent Aboriginal and Torres performing arts in Australia. Speaking directly to the elders in the room, they gave thanks for all of the work done to develop our industry to date, and that the producers would now take on the responsibility to continue their legacy.

A funding agency discussion was held as a parallel session to discuss a coordinated national approach to funding the Blackfulla Performing arts alliance. This was facilitated by Sandra Fields.

For the final session at the Judith Wright Centre, forum delegates were split into two groups. One group, comprised mostly of the Producers and joined by Robyn Ayres of Arts Law, met to discuss actions and responsibilities for developing the new peak body. The other group met to discuss a collective response on behalf of the forum to the recent funding cuts to the arts made by the Australian Government. The outcomes of these discussions are outlined in the next section of this report.

Closing ceremony and party: to close the Forum, the Brisbane Powerhouse hosted a closing ceremony and party for Forum delegates and invited guests from the wider non Indigenous Brisbane performing arts industry. Closing statements were made by the Steering Committee, as well as Ernie Dingo, Shari Sebbens, Jason De Santis, and Billy McPherson. Gifts created by local artists Bimbi Love were exchanged with the international guests. Koori and Murri delegates performed Garrininaymi to welcome all into the space then farewell them again, and the Maori guests responded with a haka. Noongar and Yamatji delegates also gave a farewell song privately to the international guests before the conclusion of the event.

*"There's so much potential for Indigenous structures and Indigenous leadership to really inform what will this look like, in what ways will this group come together to advocate for its members, for its community."
- Cole Alvis*

*"We need to have more networks... We need to have a peak body, an organisation to map out the next five years. Because that's what's happening in the mainstream and we need to have that for ourselves."
- Kylie Coolwell*

THE OUTCOMES

New Steering Committee Members

Delegates voted on a new Steering Committee to oversee the NITF outcomes. The new Steering Committee is Tammy Anderson, Eva Grace Mullaley, Nathan Maynard, Lily Shearer, Ben Graetz, Lee-Ann Buckskin, Rachael Maza, Wesley Enoch. Kyle Morrison stepped off the Steering Committee and Jim Everett has been officially replaced by Nathan Maynard.

NITF response to funding cuts to the arts

A working party assisted by Nicole Beyer of Theatre Network Victoria formed to co-write a letter to the new Prime Minister of Australia in response to recent funding cuts to the arts made by the Australian Government. The final letter was then sent to all delegates for response, and submitted to the Prime Minister's with all delegates as signatories. See attached at **TAB C**.

Consensus on a national peak body

All NITF delegates agreed on the need for the establishment of a new peak body to serve and represent the interests of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts sector on a national level. It was agreed that the NITF Steering Committee would oversee the work as an outcome of the NITF, and several working groups were formed to carry it out.

Immediate tasks identified include:

- A draft budget and financial strategy
- An investigation into partnering or combining with BlakDance – the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary dance
- Further consultation on legal status and development of a constitution
- Further consultation and development of a membership model
- Establish schedule of meetings for Steering Committee, Secretariat, and Working Groups
- Develop a Strategic Plan, including Mission, Vision and Values Statements, and cultural governance and protocols
- Develop a communications Strategy, including developing a website, social media, and e-communications

The working title for the new peak body is the Blackfulla Performing Arts Alliance (BPAA).

The working groups for developing the BPAA are as follows:

- Constitution – Sonny Dallas Law, Mark Sheppard, Alison Murphy Oates, Louana Sainsbury with Robyn Ayres
- BlakDance Merger – Mark Sheppard, Deon Hastie, Teila Watson, Davey Thompson, Mitch King
- Cultural Governance and Protocols – Diat Alferink, Teila Watson, Nathan Maynard, Bobby, Shakara Walley, Louana Sainsbury
- Membership – Eva Mullaley, Secretariat
- Fundraising – Nathan Maynard, Diat Alferink, Darcy, Telia Watson
- Online Presence – Alison Murphy Oates, Eva Mullaley, Kamarra Bell Wykes

The Secretariat responsible for the coordination of these working groups and administration for the new peak body are Erica McCalman, Alison Murphy Oates, Merindah Donnelly, Eva Mullaley, Kamarra Bell Wykes and Mark Sheppard.

Australia Council has agreed to provide teleconferencing facilities for the working groups to meet. Robyn Ayres of Arts Law has committed to working with the Steering Committee, Secretariat, and Working Groups towards developing the legal structure, constitution, and legal support for the new peak body.