

Regional Arts New South Wales: Sustaining the gain

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THE BLOKE IN THE TOYOTA ACCIDENTALLY PULLS DOWN THE WHOLE FENCE AROUND THE Paddock WITH HIS TOW BAR. He says 'bugger'. We are all so familiar with him and there is a fondness for the pragmatic humour in rural Australia. Would it work if he were in a dinner suit? If he were painting a community mural? If he sang the words? For those who live in rural and regional NSW life in 'the bush' is as much about dynamic, socially rich and diverse cultures as it is about the ways we usually see it portrayed.

The word for today in rural and regional arts and cultural development is *sustainability*, just as it is for many organisations working at the developmental end of community. Working towards a sustainable future, through comprehensive arts and cultural contributions to rural and regional development has not been an easy path to follow. In a volatile political environment the inclination is to limit the vision to next year's funding round, rather than to identify and work towards a strong vision that builds on the rich cultural strengths of regional NSW. Images of rural Australia are used to sell beer and motor vehicles, promote communication systems and tourism and to stir up our collective national consciousness alongside those of the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge. But rarely are the stereotypes of rural Australian life questioned or challenged. In an environment where sustainability more likely refers to primary industry in rural areas, it is a hard task to promote the need for sustainable arts and cultural development. However, those in local government and in the tourism sector are increasingly aware that, after the stereotypes of rural life have run out of steam, it is the distinctiveness of diverse rural cultures associated with a particular place that sell tourism and bring national and international visitors to town. The cultural life of a town or inland city is much bigger than the 'big things' that are often represented on the postcards.

Regional Arts NSW is an organisation with a mission to promote sustainable regional distinctiveness and cultural development. Its restructure in 1998 incorporated a network of independent Regional Arts Boards that plan and deliver distinct regional and rural arts and cultural development programs based on local needs. Each Regional Arts Board (or in some cases, a Steering Committee) employs a Regional Arts Development Officer who co-ordinates a cultural program across a number of contributing local government areas.

The purpose of the restructure was to promote regional, not city based decision making. It changed the role of the Arts Council of NSW head office to that of a state secretariat with the Board of Directors of RANSW comprising a representative from each of the RABs. This flat structure devolves decisions about services, funding, planning and programming to a regional level, thereby ensuring that what is delivered, is what is needed and wanted. The structure accommodates a diverse range of needs across the state, that are unable to be accommodated through traditional organisational structures.

The new structure incorporates a partnership between:

- Regional Arts NSW, as the State Secretariat responsible for state-wide policy development assisting and co-ordinating the establishment of Regional Arts Boards and the recruitment of Regional Arts Development Officers, and also providing the management services that sustain and support them:
- the NSW Ministry for the Arts, as the primary funding authority that provides a substantial financial contribution to the core costs of the organisations, and,
- The Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW, that provide the initial contact and negotiation with the local governments that comprise a particular region, and assists with the establishment of processes by which local governments contribute to the costs of a Regional Arts Program.

Numbers count, and it is in the numbers that a real picture of the success of the RANSW structure can be seen:

Regional Arts Boards represent memberships comprising an average of around 41% local government with remaining members representing local arts and cultural groups, community, education, tourism and economic development. Currently, the Regional Arts Board network comprises 114 voluntary board members.

In New South Wales over 1,700,000 people are serviced, either directly or indirectly by Regional Arts Board programs. These programs, on a state-wide basis:

- are delivered across 661,210 square kilometers of rural and regional New South Wales,
- directly engage 107 local Arts Councils and around 300 arts and cultural groups,
- indirectly engage over 550 other local community groups that undertake arts programs,
- assist in attracting around \$3,500,000 from the state arts funding authority (the NSW Ministry for the Arts)
- attract around
 - \$1,400,000 from the Commonwealth Government,
 - \$1,230,000 from local government sources, and,
 - over \$2 million in project funding from sources other than state government arts funding,
- provide employment directly and indirectly for over 350 local artists and cultural workers per year on local projects.

Through ninety contributing Local Councils, the RADOs provide services and support for a broad range of arts and cultural development activities from cultural mapping and planning to children's arts workshops and performances, Indigenous and multicultural programs and public art projects. They provide advice to local councils on investment in the arts in local areas and on the ways in which the arts can enrich other council programs.

Regional Arts Boards are directly connected to Tourism Plans in most of the regions, and several of the RABs include Tourism representatives. Arts programs contribute to a great many regional tourism strategies and often form a locally distinctive foundation to the promotion of rural festivals, either as distinct arts festivals or in association with other rural festivals.

Regional Arts Development Officers have engaged dozens of local small businesses in arts and cultural festivals, workshop programs and film projects providing leading examples of the ways in which small business can benefit from investment in the arts. Mainstreet projects and public art projects provide a dynamic partnership between small business, the community and local government to realise the upgrading of streets through the use of locally distinctive artwork.

What kinds of project initiatives are the benchmarks for sustainability? Regional community cultural development programs run by RADOs have a high focus on rural youth. As a result, there have been significant initiatives born out of this focus that invest in the future of rural communities through their young constituents. Recent projects include:

- The work of *BIG hART* in the north and north west of NSW with Outback Arts and Arts North West has resulted in a film project that has changed the lives of the young people involved and won an AFI awards for the film, *Hurt*, into the bargain
- Partnership projects with Ausdance and the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association have focussed on skills development projects in dance and theatre that address Indigenous cultures and marginalised young people.
- *Shoot the West*, a community video and multimedia project based in the Central West utilised video as a creative tool for young people to focus on community issues, particularly young people with disabilities.

- A youth theatre project developed by the Upper Hunter Regional Arts Program in partnership with the Australian Theatre for Young People used improvisation to develop a theatre work that resulted in a public performance by the young participants.
- A partnership between Carrathool Shire Council and the Hillston Youth Council resulted in the development of the Hillston *Electronica* Festival – the first ever ‘rave’ party for under 18 year olds.
- Arts Mid North Coast have developed Youth Arts Camps funded through the Casino Benefit Fund for youth at risk. Therapeutic arts based workshops developed tools for advancement of self esteem, self confidence, and self awareness and addressed issues including child abuse, substance abuse, strained family relationships, sexuality, depression and suicide, unemployment and a lack of suitable housing, among others.

For Regional Arts NSW, sustaining these gains for rural and regional people is the future challenge. At the end of the day, they result in real growth at community level in rural and regional NSW: the growth of distinct cultural identity, of healthy communities, of ideas that generate positive, alternate solutions to community regeneration and sustainable social *and* economic benefits.

According to *Australians and the Arts*, a recently published report by the Australia Council and Satchi and Satchi, the arts suffer from the same promotion of stereotypes as do rural communities. It is the nexus between these two worlds that is the most reflective of rural cultural life at its best, and the arts at their best, that provides alternate views to promote life in ‘the bush’. And, the more diverse their representation, the more exciting the alternatives. ■

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