

Art is
The endurance and strength required
a great equaliser.
for sporting prowess leaves most of us
mere mortals wanting ... and the realm
of corporate success seems to be
reserved for movers and shakers
with wits sharper than a brand new
2B pencil ...

by NATALIE KENT



Working away from 2D mediums in the classroom, Cowra sculptor Ken Hutchinson introduced six members of the Central West Brain Injury Action Group to his love of letting dust fly. In a tin shed in Canowindra he gave his 'friends' four large slabs of hebel, a set of tools each and the choice of what they would like to create. Their answer? A big brain. Several installation workshops, a lot of mess and elbow grease later and a 900mm x 600mm x 600mm Big Brain was carved.

After hearing their stories and watching them draw on their inner strength, to hack into this light grey mass during the last workshop was an uplifting experience.

Using tools for the first time since a debilitating car accident, former carpenter Peter Thurn says after clearing the swelling emotion in his voice that the opportunity to use his hands to create something with his friends made him "feel alive again".

Herding together all the artworks created in the Celebrate Ability workshops, as well as others submitted by regional artists living with disability, Arts OutWest embarked on a landmark journey

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BUT THE ARTS ARE DIFFERENT. IN THE ARTS THERE'S NO WINNER or loser, there's no hierarchy to scale and at the end of the day there's no yard stick to measure your results by.

Early last year Arts OutWest set out to celebrate the ability of people living with disabilities in central west NSW by taking full advantage of the unique vehicle of the arts.

Participants across the region, some who had never even held a paint brush before, had the opportunity to express themselves in workshops without so much as a hint of fear of failure.

Blayney artist, Gamilaroi woman, Nyree Reynold's voice quickens with excitement as she recalls one poignant memory from facilitating a workshop in Weigelli, an Indigenous Rehabilitation Centre in Cowra: "It wasn't just about teaching people to splash paint around on a canvas," she says. "Once they got over their initial butterflies and their imagination kicked in they were filled with a sense of accomplishment — and a new sense of self."

"One man said to me after he finished his very first artwork, 'I've been a drunk all my life but now I'm no longer a drunk ... I'm an artist.'"

The therapeutic effects of the workshops, however, by no means overshadowed the quality of the artwork created. Demonstrating a fresh take on composition and colour, mixed in with a considerable dollop of creativity, some of the paintings were intriguing, others jolting and a few simply mesmerising.



June


21 June – 12 August

 *Privately Collecting Works* from Ken Hinds Australian cultural heritage collection. Tweed River Art Gallery, **MURWILLUMBAH** Tel 02 6670 2790 Website www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery

23 – 24 June

 *Lismore Lantern Festival* Lanterns, giant illuminated puppets, fine art and pyrotechnics, bands, dancers and stalls, **LISMORE**. Tel 02 6622 6333 Website www.lismorelanternparade.com.au

27 June

 *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch* Children's entertainment, featuring live music, puppets, written by Graeme Base. \$13.50 APAC, **ALBURY** Tel 02 6051 3051

28 June

 *Take Two!* Judi Conneli and Suzanne Johnston return to the cabaret genre with a brilliant new show. \$33/\$28 IPAC, **WOLLONGONG** Tel 02 4226 3366 Website www.ipac.org.au

to give these budding artists a public platform to stand on, on a par with their able-bodied counterparts.

For the first time Arts OutWest compiled an exhibition for Australia's only regional arts disability, the Awakenings Festival in Horsham, Victoria (13 — 22 October 2006).

While the project's creative process flowed quite naturally, the administration side seemed strangled by a shoestring budget and a lack of staffing resources. Despite communication challenges and a heavy reliance on volunteer efforts by a whole battalion of staff and supporters, creative solutions ensured all thirty seven artworks by twenty seven artists — and the Big Brain — were loaded on a truck just in time for the festival.

Hiccups continued to plague the Create Ability exhibition in Horsham with transport delays but when the works were eventually hung in the gallery no one could deny how they shone.

Wanting to give the participants the chance for them to see their works on display locally, Arts OutWest also went the extra mile and organised exhibitions as a part of community celebrations

for International Day of People with a Disability on 3 December 2006 in Bathurst and Blayney.

People came from all corners of the region to take part in painting workshops and to admire the art on display, while letting their ears savour the smooth sounds of musicians living with disabilities, pianist Garry Cooley and guitarist Matthew Williamson.

Despite the attendance numbers being lower than Arts OutWest had hoped, the puffed chests of the artists and the impressed faces of the people who had travelled hundreds of kilometres to see their loved ones' work hanging in the exhibition made all the sweat and tears of Celebrate Ability worth it.

Now the dust has settled on the project, a time normally for critiquing, Arts OutWest has instead taken a leaf out of the arts' book. Celebrate Ability won't be measured by the end result but appreciated for the journey it provided — a challenging, rewarding and transforming experience for all. ■

Natalie Kent was, until recently, the Communications Officer for Arts OutWest, the Regional Arts Board in the Central West.

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Top: The Celebrate Ability exhibition, Makers Gallery, Horsham.
Lef: pianist Garry Cooley at the IDPWD Celebrations in Bathurst.

Celebrate Ability was made possible with funding from The Regional Arts Fund, an Australian Government Initiative to support the arts in regional, remote and isolated Australia.



See the full journey of Celebrate Ability in an online photo essay at www.artsoutwest.org.au/projects/celebrateability2006.htm

June — July

29 — 30 June

🎭 *Macbeth* One of Shakespeare's most compelling works, produced by Bell Shakespeare. \$15 - \$40 **LISMORE** City Hall
Tel 02 6622 0300
Website www.norpa.org.au

30 June — 6 July

🎧 Re:generate Youth Festival A diverse range of performances, films and videos, music and workshops.
Across **WAGGA WAGGA**
Tel 02 6926 9196

4 July

🎭 *Cosentino Evolution* Magic, illusions, dance and mime by one of the world's most unique and talented illusionists. \$12 - \$27
APAC, **ALBURY** Tel 02 6051 3051

4 — 7 July

🎭 *The Page to Stage* Short plays by local high school students, directed by professional theatre artists. Riverina Playhouse, **WAGGA WAGGA**
Tel 02 6926 9688