

Gr8 ParT! R U Coming?

Local councils, listen up! Tweed Shire Council is so proud of its latest cultural project, it's produced a documentary about it. Cultural Development Officer, Lesley Buckley, says she wants to encourage more councils to look at the arts and cultural development as a way of promoting a better quality of life in the regions.

by LESLEY BUCKLEY

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Tweed Shire's Multi Arts Performance Project (MAP) was conceived as a means to extend and expand on some of the outcomes generated by two years of interactive and multi-disciplinary programs that were part of the Shire's award winning 5th City of the Arts DisAbility Arts Program. The project was the result of a unique partnership between Council, Tweed Valley Respite Services and NORPA Dance Action, and it provides a tangible example of how a Local Government Authority can actively foster and partner inclusive and accessible cultural experiences.

With the support of a New Initiatives grant from the Regional Arts Fund (NSW) in 2006, the MAP set out to deliver a contemporary and educational theatre production that would inspire community awareness of issues surrounding people with disabilities — particularly amongst school-aged children. What transpired far surpassed all expectations. The project succeeded in many ways and at many levels.

Titled *Gr8 ParT! R U Coming?* and starring the Barefoot Bunch, the production took eight months to produce, and was co-directed by Emma Newman and Gabrielle Griffin from NORPA's Dance Action. As creative directors, Emma and Gabrielle worked with a cast of twelve performers with a range of abilities and disabilities to choreograph and weave together a stunning production. Using puppetry, dance and video projection, the performance explored the delights and dilemmas of technological communications and what happens when someone's 'party invitation' is lost, leaving them feeling excluded and left out.



The production crew. Clockwise from left: Maggie Groff, Lisa Pratt, Kerry Jarvis, Wendy McPherson, Len McPherson, Emma Newman, Lesley Buckley and Gabrielle Griffin.

Gr8 ParT! R U Coming? premiered at the Murwillumbah Civic Centre on 31 May and 1 June, and it captivated audiences both young and old with its innovative imagery and dynamic physicality. The cast were absolutely inspirational and their enthusiasm and energy over the three sell-out performances was simply infectious.


As co-directors, Emma and Gabrielle brought to the project a sense of magic, and built a solid working relationship with participants during the months of rehearsals and workshops. "We had a wonderful time working with the performers, each exploring

October — November

11 October — 18 November

 *Strange Cargo: contemporary art as a state of encounter* A Newcastle Region Art Gallery touring exhibition of engaging and bewildering art Tweed River Art Gallery
MURWILLUMBAH Tel 02 6670 2790
www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery

12 — 13 October

 *Back Home* Enter the volatile world of men's business in this hit of the Sydney Festival by Urban Theatre Projects.
LISMORE Conservatorium Grounds.
Presented by NORPA Tel 13 000 66772
www.norpa.org.au

12 — 15 October

 Griffith Festival of Gardens Giant citrus sculpture display. Ten different gardens ranging from town gardens to impressive large acre gardens. **GRIFFITH**
Tel 1800 641 141

13 October — 10 November

 *Echoes of Home* A travelling exhibition of works by 14 Asian artists who have made their home in Australia.
GOULBURN Tel 02 4823 4443

technology, and our love / hate / confused relationships with it," they said. "The target audience [aged 8-14] kept us playful and colourful, and we chose to focus on the universal feeling of wanting to belong. We discovered that we all feel 'left out' sometimes, no matter what our abilities."

The directors explored the themes with the cast to hear their stories and bring out their movements, instead of pre-deciding the action. "We also wanted to express a story with minimal words, and the challenge of incorporating both dance and puppetry was too tasty to resist!" they said. "It has been a huge learning curve for some who have never been on a stage before, and the most precious gift of all has been the trust we've grown within the "Barefoot Bunch".

Inspiration for the project also came from Kat Worth, ex-Director of Adelaide's Restless Dance. Kat visited the Tweed in the developmental phase of the project to facilitate a series of creative workshops and continued as mentor throughout the process. The acclaimed puppetry group, Krinkl Theatre also worked with the group to create and rehearse a giant 'computer' puppet.

All the performers had participated in programs conducted by Tweed Valley Respite Services (TVRS). TVRS is a community-based organisation that has worked with people with disabilities of all ages and their families for over 20 years. It provides a range of services including skills development, social and recreational activities, respite and community participation. As leaders in the field, TVRS has embraced creative arts and cultural programs, focusing on people's strengths and abilities and their rights as community members to fully participate in and contribute to community life.

TVRS Assistant Manager, Lisa Pratt quotes some of the participants' on the project: "It's brilliant!", "I can't wait to get on the stage," "Can we do more shows?" and "I am really excited," are just some of the comments made. "For me personally seeing the individuals come together over the weeks, developing and evolving into a unifying and professional unit that exuberated a commitment, skill, enthusiasm and natural flair has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have been involved in," Lisa said. "Tweed Valley Respite Service is really proud to be a part of this very special partnership."

At the management and administrative level, the MAP was brought to life and guided to completion by the skills, expertise and dedication of a team which included members of the project steering committee; TVRS program staff and carers; Tweed Shire Council's community and cultural services workers, Maggie Groff and Pamela Veness; project administrator, Milena Morrow and production and technical crew, Len and Wendy McPherson.

Apart from coordinating the meetings, workshops, rehearsals and performances, administrator Milena Morrow produced superb graphics and an excellent educational kit for teachers to extend the experience to the class room.

Maggie Groff, Council's Community Worker Aged and Disability said, "I would do this again in a heartbeat. The MAP project was



Gabe Minnards, Alex Bruce & Leanne Kennedy with the computer puppet.

a smart project as it was able to utilise and embrace the diverse skills of an established disability service provider; professional Council staff in several disciplines, professional artists from an important regional theatre company and members of the Tweed disability community". It also produced performance.

Gr8 ParT! R U Coming? will be staged again in December as part of International Day of People with a Disability and plans are afoot to tour the production to other North Coast theatres in 2008.

The Multi-Arts Performance Project is a ground-breaking example of what can be achieved by a local government authority using community cultural development (CCD) processes. ■

A short documentary film on the making of the MAP project has just been completed by Tweed Shire Council in collaboration with local filmmaker Soolaba Doyle. A MAP Project DVD and a City of the Arts DisAbility Arts DVD are both available from Council.

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The Regional Arts Fund is an Australian Government initiative to support the arts in regional, remote and isolated Australia.

**Australian Government
Regional Arts Fund**

October

14 October

👁 **HILL END** Open Day. Applications for the four week Artists in Residence Program at Haefligers or Murrays Cottage in 2008-9 close on 7 Dec. Contact Bathurst Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6333 6555 or www.hillendart.com

17 – 28 October

👁 Warrumbungles Art and Craft Exhibition A quality exhibition with a range of arts and crafts from local and regional artists
COONABARABRAN Tel 02 6842 8746

19 – 28 October

👂 Orange Wine Festival Wine tastings, art shows, live music, and produce markets.
ORANGE Tel 02 63601 990

20 October

👂 **HARDEN** Kite Festival Watch the experts fly their kites of all shapes and sizes. Bring your own or buy one there and enjoy a day of kite flying Tel 02 6386 4161