

ROCKHAMPTON  
ARTICULATE REGIONAL ARTS CONFERENCE  
23 August 2013

## **EXCELLENCE and ASPIRATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN ARTS**

First let me, as a visitor to this very beautiful part of the country, the traditional lands of the Darumbal nations, pay my respects to Elders past and present. And I'd like to thank Arts Queensland for inviting me to share my thoughts with you at this important gathering.

I'm here because of all the things I'm involved in - directing opera, international festivals (admittedly these are mostly city-based pursuits) - my engagement in regional Australia is undoubtedly the area of arts practice I care most passionately about. Yesterday I flew up from my office on Southbank in Brisbane, but my home for the last 10 years has been 80 acres of heaven in the locality of Yowrie, just outside the small town of Cobargo (pop. 400) near Bermagui on the far south coast of NSW, the traditional lands of the Yuin Nation, the nation of the Black Duck. Down there I'm Chair of South East Arts, one of the 14 NSW Regional Arts Boards overseen by the peak body Regional Arts NSW, upon whose board I also serve alongside colleagues from all over regional NSW. One of the things that appealed to me in taking on the role of AD at OperaQ last year was the opportunity of engaging with Queensland's regional landscape. By implementing some bold creative strategies we aim to make a lasting impact on the regional arts in Australia - and I'll return to that later.

The conversation about Excellence is one that keeps coming up for me and many of my colleagues in regional arts, so when I was asked to speak recently at the VC Awards for Excellence at Southern Cross University in Lismore, I thought it was a good opportunity to try the discussion on a new audience. It seemed to hit a chord there and I've since been approached to expand on it, so this Articulate Conference offers another opportunity to riff on an idea that's very close to my heart and, perhaps shared by some in this room. I hope it may stimulate some conversation.

Excellence: capital E. It's a wonderful word, an uncompromising word, an aspirational word, a noble, distinguished, reaching, shining, stretching, striving word. It's a word that's out and proud, a word to say with purpose and consequence. Unfortunately it's a word that has sometimes been sidelined to make way for more "democratic" language, and in the already limited area of public discourse set aside for regional arts in Australia, it seems to have been utterly banished.

### **Language and definitions - the McMaster report**

For those of us who are out-and-proud defenders of Excellence in the arts, the McMaster Review: *Supporting excellence in the arts - from measurement to Judgement*, written five years ago by former Edinburgh Festival director Sir Brian McMaster for the (then) UK Government, makes juicy reading.

"The time has come" said Britain's Head of Culture, receiving the Review, "to reclaim the word 'excellence' from its historic and elitist context, and to accept that the highest quality and the broadest audience can go hand-in-hand."

McMaster was well aware that the use of the E word in the title of his Review was a linguistic retro-shift with important cultural implications. Here's how he introduces his First

Chapter: Encouraging Excellence, Innovation and Risk-Taking. It's quite a long quote, so bear with me:

*"I want to address the vital question of language. (He says) There is a fundamental mismatch between the way we talk about culture and the values we attach to it. The language we use has become tainted and the terms we use – 'art for art's sake', 'the right to fail', 'risk', 'innovation', let alone 'excellence' – have all acquired accretions of meaning in recent years that have blunted or distorted what we want to say. Excellence itself is sometimes dismissed as an exclusive, canonical and 'heritage' approach to cultural activity. I refute this. We need to be clear from the outset what we mean when we say 'excellence', 'innovation' and 'risk-taking'.*

*Excellent culture takes and combines complex meanings, gives us new insights and new understandings of the world around us and is relevant to every single one of us. It is why culture is so important to societies that flourish. If culture is excellent it can help us make sense of our place in the world, ask questions we would not otherwise have asked, understand the answers in ways we couldn't otherwise have understood and appreciate things we have never before experienced. The greater its power to do these things the more excellent the cultural experience.*

*The best definition of excellence I have heard is that excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual. An excellent cultural experience goes to the root of living.*

*This idea may seem abstract, but in fact it is quite concrete. We have all been to performances which have been good technically but stopped short of being excellent. We can train artists to a degree of technical ability so that their work is of high quality. Excellence is another quality altogether."*

So what does a Report written in the UK have to do with Excellence in the Arts in Regional Australia?

### **Our language is limiting us**

It's about language. I share McMaster's concern about arts language having acquired accretions of meaning that have blunted or distorted what we want to say. And I've noticed in the ten years I've lived in regional Australia that there's a troubling disconnect in terminology between metropolitan arts and regional arts; that aspirational words like "excellent" "global" and "elite" are used far too infrequently in the narrative surrounding regional arts. So I want to sound a tiny alarm - we urgently need to challenge the numbingly benign, feel-good, bland language that's habitually used to describe cultural, intellectual and creative life in regional Australia, because it's a product of a national mindset that either can't see, or underestimates, our dynamism and our potential impact on the national cultural landscape.

How can soft language be limiting, or even undermining regional arts? Here's an example.

The Federal Government's National Cultural Policy: "Creative Australia – a ten year vision for the arts in Australia" doesn't look like it will have the chance to see out its first year, which is a shame because we all had such hopes for it and indeed there are many terrific initiatives, exciting new directions and inspiring ideas in Creative Australia. When it came out I was excited to read it, and to feel part of a new national vision for the arts.

But there was something about this document that immediately troubled me, and it was a language thing. Scanning through the policy for what it said specifically about the arts in regional Australia, not only was I disappointed that that section started on page 102 of a 121 page document, and that no new money was injected into this spectacularly underfunded-yet-over-delivering sector. It seemed to me that the language became softer and less aspirational the further one travelled toward the back of the document, toward the section called REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL DIVIDENDS THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED ARTS AND CULTURAL PROGRAMS.

Now throughout the Creative Australia document, the word "Excellence" is used liberally, indeed up to five times on some pages. GOAL THREE of the 5 Policy Goals is to "*Support excellence and the special role of artists and their creative collaborators as the source of original work and ideas, including telling Australian stories*". And I'm looking forward to OperaQ competing for the new, specially-created "Excellence Pool" of funding for the 28 MPA companies. Excellence is cited as an aspiration for Creative Industries, and Training and all sorts of directions that intersect with the work we do in regional Australia. But in the section that specifically talked about regional arts, I'm sad to say, the word "Excellence" is not used once.

And the language has changed notably. Suddenly we're talking about the arts making regional communities "resilient, inclusive, cohesive and positive, linking and unifying people from different backgrounds and circumstances, fostering understanding and building a common sense of purpose." Which they do, of course, but can't they also be excellent?

Examples are given of projects that sound terrific - "community choirs working with professional musicians, singing locally composed songs", of "young Australians benefitting from participating in youth theatre groups where they gain the opportunities to write and perform stories relevant to their peers" of "people using their artistic talent to build the confidence of others, such as textile artists working with refugee women to explore and make sense of their migration stories."

Now I've been up to my neck in community arts for the last 10 years – it's truly one of the joys of my life. Community projects in Perth, Sydney, Adelaide and at home in the South Coast have been highlights of my career as an artist and artistic director. And some of my most amazing experiences as an audience member have been at art events in community environments.

So I'm pretty miffed that there is NO suggestion in Creative Australia, our NCP document, that this kind of work and regional artists can also produce good, excellent or even great art? Why is there such lack of faith in this possibility? Why is high artistic aspiration expected in metropolitan centres but seemingly not in Rockhampton? Where's the "Excellence Pool" for regional activity?

I had a quick scan of Arts Qld's Regional Arts Development Fund guidelines handbook, which in 30 pages also shows zero use of the word excellence (or excellent) and only once is the word quality used, in the foreword. The word quality is used, albeit very sparingly, in the Qld Govt's Artbeat Regional Arts and Culture Strategy 2010-2014, and the phrase artistic excellence is used twice, in relation to the fine regional work done by QMF. There are all sorts of other lovely words: rich, diverse, innovative, vibrant, meaningful. But they're not the same thing as quality and excellence, and I'm starting to get the feeling that regional artists are being talked down to, that less is expected of this sector.

Whether that's the case, or the concept of excellence is seen as somehow threatening, or unrealistic, or too high-falutin' or elitist, it's clear to me that there's something amiss with the narrative around community arts and the Arts in regional Australia in this area. This reticence to talk up our artistic ambitions, to reach higher, to demand the best of ourselves and others is eerily familiar. It reminds me strangely of the reticence that many women feel about demanding their rightful place in the boardroom or executive office. And the warm and fuzzy vernacular around the narrative suggests and reinforces a lack of sector dynamism and rigor that as an artist working in this area, I find inaccurate and annoying.

I strongly believe that regional artists should, and could, be claiming a larger slice of the funding pie, more corporate and philanthropic support, claiming more kudos and inspiring bigger audiences for our work. But until we assert our strengths and seize a more central place – our rightful place, in my opinion - in the national cultural narrative, we will continue to play the poor cousin to the “excellent”, “elite” metropolitan arts sector. So how do we seize the narrative?

Obviously you can't claim excellence if the work isn't, and in the regions as in the city, there's a lot of mediocrity out there. Not everyone aspires to excellence, and for many projects there are other more important priorities. But surely there must be a space in the narrative, in our use of language in policy and our own discourse, that's reserved for at least the potential for excellence, the aspiration to excellence.

### **Creating the conditions for excellence to flourish**

Unsurprisingly, given his 14 years running Welsh National Opera and 14 years running the Edinburgh Festival, one of the great things about McMaster's Supporting Excellence report was its practicality, that in order to propagate excellence we must examine ways to create the conditions where Excellence can flourish. To continue the gardening analogy: if excellence is properly nurtured it will respond to the soil and nutrients of different landscapes. As an artist and artistic director living in regional Australia I find abundant inspiration for excellence in the physical beauty and power of the natural world that surrounds me, but I'm also inspired by my connection with other artists around the world who choose to live and work outside of big cities, for exactly this reason.

There are countless examples of artists whose excellence flows as a creative response to the region they love: composers like Benjamin Britten, who so loved the wild coastline and people of Suffolk that his operas were suffused with regional atmosphere, to Tan Dun, born in a small village in the Hunan province of China. As a child he was fascinated by the role of the shaman in his village, who conducted rituals and ceremonies and made music with organic objects such as rocks and water. Tan Dun still creates music made with rocks and water, only now he does it in the concert halls of Berlin, New York or Sydney.

### **Cornwall's Kneehigh - regional dynamism seducing the world**

When I was directing Sydney Festival, I spent hours on ferries talking about this with Mike Shepherd, the Founder and Joint Artistic Director of Kneehigh Theatre, one of my favourite theatre companies in the world. Kneehigh certainly makes excellent theatre. Their shows are acclaimed around the world from New York to the West End of London – they've been nominated for multiple Tony Awards, they've appeared in the most prestigious festivals on the planet, this year they clock up their 30th year with an Australian tour of Brief

Encounter, a stunning stage adaptation of the classic film, which the notorious Ben Brantley of the New York Times called "A delicate, whimsical creation, Exquisite".

Best of all, the very excellent Kneehigh Theatre is based in Mike's home town of Truro in Cornwall, a town about a third the size of Rockhampton. I love the way Mike describes the relationship between Kneehigh's work and the place they make it, I love their spirit of adventure, of intrepid global travel and outlook. Again it's quite a substantial quote:

*"We are based in a collection of barns on the south Cornish coast, at the top of a hill where the road ends and a vast horizon stretches far beyond Dodman Point. By their very nature the barns let the weather in and out again. A large multi-fuel burner needs to be stoked and fed for rehearsals; there is barely any mobile phone reception and nowhere to pop out for a quick cappuccino.*

*The isolation of the barns and the need to cook and keep warm provides a real and natural focus for our flights of imagination. This is not a conceit; it is a radical choice that informs all aspects of our work. Although much of our work is now co-produced with larger theatres, we always try to start the creative process at these barns, to be inspired by our environment and where we work. These elemental and charged spaces add a physical and vocal robustness to our performance style.*

*Kneehigh are an ever-changing ensemble, a kind of strange family, many of whom come from, or have chosen to live in, Cornwall: the extreme South West tip of the British Isles - outsiders, left-handers - engaging with the world with a sense of community and identity. As King Mark says in Tristan & Yseult, "We don't look inland there's not much point. No, outward, outward lies the way! Inland there's little to write home about and much less to say!"*

*Cornwall is our physical and spiritual home. We draw inspiration from the landscapes, history, people and culture. I returned home to Cornwall 30 years ago to make theatre. It was a place where you could make things happen."*

Kneehigh's deep connection to Cornwall and their global perspective defines them. The fact that they're grounded in an authentic culture yet utterly equipped for the zeitgeist, speaking with a confident, broadly accented voice within the national and international discourse. This makes Kneehigh hugely desirable for festivals and presenters.

When I visited Kneehigh, I experienced their fabulous show The Red Shoes in the company's (then) brand new 650-seat dome-tent called The Asylum in the middle of a paddock on a farm just outside Truro. It's hard to imagine a more authentic "regional" experience. The zipper doors were open to the sunset and at one point some of the farmer's cows strolled over to have a look inside. In The Asylum, with the local audience, I drank excellent local wine, ate delicious local bread, pate and cheese, and saw a fantastic local show. I felt so welcome, and it's an experience I'll never forget - of course I promptly invited them to Sydney Festival.

I know there's a potential Kneehigh Theatre in any number of Australian regional centres, but how many share their sense of self-belief that the work they make for local audiences is good enough for the world?

**Local/global thinking in Australia**

More and more Australian regional artists ARE thinking globally - this is very much a way forward, a way of shifting the narrative. Down on the South Coast of NSW I'm involved with Bermagui's Four Winds Festival, a bi-annual Easter outdoor chamber music festival which is now co-commissioning music with one of the UK's finest music festivals, the Aldeburgh Festival. Inspired by the vast skies and moody seas of the Suffolk coast, composer Benjamin Britten founded the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948. In Bermagui's Four Winds, they have a natural partner. Both coastlines are rugged and uncompromising in winter and in summertime, both fishing hamlets are old-fashioned tourist towns. And they both have festivals and communities who care about the experience of excellent music-making.

For this reason, Four Winds under Chair Sheena Boughen is undergoing a radical transformation. After 20 years of putting up with a charmingly shabby temporary bushland venue with a torn canopy, no power, water or even a permanent stage for performers, the Four Winds team decided that it just wasn't good enough for their artists or their audiences - if they were making the effort to come to listen to world class musicians, Four Winds needed a world class venue. The music deserves it, they declared, the artists deserve it, the community deserves it. This is the working-class community of Bermagui, population 1500, with an average yearly wage of \$35,000 (plus a growing number of tree-changers, temporary dwellers and people from Sydney and Melbourne with holiday homes, many of whom are arts lovers).

At the 2010 festival Sheena announced to the audience that 4W was fundraising to realise their vision of a truly world class venue. Within an hour, a music lover had donated \$50,000. To cut a long and incredibly inspiring story short, the new Four Winds Sound Shell, a state-of-the-art \$800,000 stage and amphitheatre designed by celebrated architect Philip Cox, (also a local and a music fan) complete with outdoor acoustic technology, was erected in time for the two thousand guests and perfect weather at the Easter 2012 festival. By this time they had become even more ambitious and were working on Phase 2.

Nearly \$3 million of local and targeted fundraising later, including another \$1m in pro-bono donations, and painstaking grant-writing to secure Arts NSW backing and a \$1.7million Regional Development Fund, in good time for the 2014 Festival, the Four Winds precinct will be open to the community. It will now include Nature's Concert Hall, a purpose-built, acoustically engineered rehearsal and recital pavilion for 160 nestled into the landscape, surrounded by spotted gums and overlooking the new Sound Shell and the rolling hills beyond. When its not in use for the festival, this stunning new solar-powered building will be used by the community for yoga classes, Indigenous culture workshops, conferences, theatre groups and music of all kinds from indie pop to ACO. One of the most exciting developments for me as Chair of South East Arts is that the new performance environment is not only a resource for our whole region but connects us digitally to the world and is absolutely up there with the most beautiful places anywhere in the world to play music.

It's a huge success story, a triumph for our plucky community, and a fantastic example of regional aspiration in action. Whether people attend the festival or not, Four Winds presence and its insistence on excellence absolutely plays into a growing sense that ours is a community that sees itself, notwithstanding its fishing, farming, forestry DNA and largely working class demographic, as progressive, creative, adapting to and interested in the world around us. Obviously Four Winds is aware of its cultural tourism appeal, so the work closely with Sapphire Coast Tourism.

Not every community is a chamber music town, but every area has its creative strengths and big, ambitious ideas, and I hope that other communities who dream of great things will

take heart from Bermi's example. Let me clarify, that in using these examples, I'm not suggesting that you need to do a huge fundraising or building campaign like Four Winds, or work out of a windy barn on a cliff like Kneehigh. What connects them is a mindset, more compelling use of language. I completely share Sheena's straightforward approach: *"I don't know why you wouldn't go for extraordinary over ordinary! We can be inclusive AND excellent, accessible AND brilliant, clever AND community."*

### **At OperaQ we're extremely serious about regional excellence.**

In our New Strategic Plan our focus on regional activity has an absolutely equal value to our activity in Metropolitan Brisbane and our new Open Stage community and education programs. These 3 areas overlap and interconnect, and the best possible example of this is Project Puccini, a hugely ambitious 2 year, state-wide community chorus project which will see OperaQ auditioning and rehearsing 7 community choirs (8 if you count Brisbane) of 36 adults and 12 children in GC, Toowoomba, Maryborough, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Mt Isa. In each town we'll contract a local chorus director and rehearsal coordinator, with whom our team will work to ensure the chorusses have all the support they need to sing and act in the chorus of our new production of Puccini's *La boheme*.

Each participant will have expert choral and music coaching by OperaQ's music staff, Italian language coaching, staging rehearsals with the assistant director and where possible drama workshops with Helpmann Award-winning director Craig Ilott (incidentally, one of several Rockhampton-born artists taking the theatre scene by storm) they'll have a costume designed for them, and most importantly, they'll have the extraordinary opportunity to rehearse and perform with renowned conductor Richard Gill, some of OperaQ's finest principal singers and musicians from QSO. All in their home town.

Last month OperaQ worked with the very excellent Townsville-based Dancenorth on a project called ABANDON, fusing baroque opera arias by Handel with contemporary physical theatre. 5 dancers and 4 singers led by the amazing Scottish classical accordionist James Crabb and Dutch cellist Teije Hylkema. This very special project began its process not in Townsville or Brisbane but in Paris, where Raewyn Hill the choreographer travelled in January to work with dancer France Herve. Reversing the normal flow of regional touring, ABANDON had its premiere in Townsville a few weeks ago, but next year it will be seen in Brisbane and there's already interest from international festivals. How exciting to be taking work created in regional Queensland to the world!

### **Conclusion**

Like Mike Shepherd from Kneehigh, I see my home in regional NSW as a place where I, as an artist can make things happen for local audiences AND the world stage. As Artistic Director of OperaQ I want our regional audiences to experience the most excellent work and be inspired by working alongside extraordinary artists and musicians. I share Brian McMaster's view that the highest quality and the broadest audience can go hand-in-hand. And I'm optimistic that in time our collective voice can influence a proportional rebalance of the resources allocated to regional and metropolitan arts, local/global thinking will have gathered momentum and we'll be reading reclaimed words like "excellent" will as ambitious but appropriate descriptors for the work that's being created in our communities.

No doubt this will continue to be work that helps make communities *"resilient, inclusive, cohesive and positive, linking and unifying people from different backgrounds and*

*circumstances, fostering understanding and building a common sense of purpose.”* But it will also be work that aspires to excellence.

Regional arts is my passion. Regional Australia is my home. With much love and respect, I say this to all who share my belief in the extraordinary potential of our ideas, our imagination and our vast network of artists and audiences: As thinkers, creators, leaders, policy-makers, we know the power of language to influence, to inspire and challenge. Let's aim higher, re-examine our lexicon. The next part of the narrative is ours to write.

Thank you.