The Regional Arts Network: beyond 50 years in the Bush

A defining moment in the history of regional arts development in NSW was in 1996 when the then Ministry of the Arts commissioned a Review of the sector and appointed Justin Macdonnell as its consultant. A state government committed to regional arts and a consultant sensitive and receptive to the challenges of working ‘in the bush’ were the perfect ingredients for what was to come - a Regional Arts model which, 15 years on, has proven to be an extraordinary success and arguably the most effective and sustainable model of arts infrastructure in this country.

Before the Review

In the decade prior to the Review, the Sydney-based Arts Council of NSW (now Regional Arts NSW) was not only delivering services to its membership of over 100 Arts Councils but also pioneering a decentralised model of delivering regional arts programs. This model involved Regional Arts Development Officers (RADOs) working with regional advisory committees comprised of representatives of participating local governments and the community to encourage participation in the arts. Most were legal entities jointly funded by State and Local Government with the Ministry for the Arts matching the gross contributions of participating local government councils in each region. By 1996 the Arts Council was the manager and employer of RADOs based in four regions of the state – South West, Eastern Riverina, Far West (Outback Arts) and Holiday (mid north) Coast – whilst Albury-Wodonga and Central West (Arts OutWest) were independently managed. In 1996 the North West and Southern Tablelands regions were established and the remote West Darling was in its embryonic stage.

Then came the Review . . .

“As a preface, it is important to note that the task of devising a regional arts policy for NSW has never been an easy one. While all States would claim themselves to be a special case, the distribution of NSW populations makes it particularly problematic. Each of Sydney, Western Sydney, the Newcastle/Wollongong axis, the rapidly growing coastal strip, the number of medium-sized inland cities and the far-flung rural hinterland present, in turn, a challenge in diversity for which no single response will ever be adequate nor sufficiently comprehensive.”

(Executive Summary, Review of Regional Arts Development in NSW, Justin Macdonnell, 1996)

The Review aimed to identify the most strategic and cost-effective approach to regional arts development in NSW so its scope included an examination of all variety of institutions, mechanisms, approaches and programs servicing regional populations. Out of Macdonnell’s extensive research and a plethora of recommendations, a key finding was that the decentralised model adopted by the Arts Council was one of the most significant initiatives in regional cultural development in the previous ten years and so the logical model on which to build and the best foundation for an expanded regional program. It just needed a strategic longer term vision plus some tidying up and tweaking!

Justin Macdonnell recognised that, although the RADO ‘program’ was in its infancy, it already had a track record of achievement. In particular he noted that a strategic approach involving regional responsibility and local control was instrumental in developing regional cooperation and effective partnerships amongst local government, local arts workers, artists and the community, a platform for expressing regional ‘distinctiveness’ and responding to local needs and an upsurge in cultural activity which invariably led to an injection of funds for more projects. He also recognised that this holistic, strategic and regionally-based model would ultimately be the best value for money and the

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1 ‘50 Years in the Bush’ by Justin Macdonnell is a history of the Arts Council Movement in NSW from its beginnings in 1946 to 1996.
best structure from which to promote the contribution of regional arts to our cultural landscape, hopefully reversing the assumption that all culture comes out of the city!

On the basis of this finding, Macdonnell recommended that the existing RADO program be maintained and strengthened as well as extended to other parts of the state over time so that ultimately all parts of regional NSW would be benefiting from a regional arts program. Its sustainability and success would rely on the ongoing partnerships between legally-constituted Regional Arts Boards with representation from the arts community and local councils, triennial funding agreements directly with the state government rather than through the Arts Council, continuing funding contributions from local government councils in the region and local responsibility for devising and managing a multi-year program and the staffing required to manage it.

Obviously any such changes would impact on the function of the Arts Council which, according to Macdonnell, ‘has always been an uneasy mix of central and local’ and had re-invented itself many times to ‘strike a balance between self-determination and community arts activity on the one hand and the need to manage an effective network on the other.’ He also recognised that regional responsibility could only flourish if the Arts Council relinquished its ‘mother’ role and focussed more on advocacy as well as rearing new Regional Arts Boards. This would also distinguish the Arts Council from other organisations servicing regional areas, hence promoting more integrated planning and diminishing the risk of duplication and imprecision in delivery across the regional arts sector. It would establish the Sydney-based Arts Council as the peak body to provide advocacy and support to the state-wide (but individually isolated) network.

The Regional Arts Network was born

The transition . . .

The period following the Review and adoption of its recommendations by the state government fed into a period of transition and adjustment to change, a period that is generally accompanied by confusion and trepidation – particularly from those accustomed to working under the previous system. The change of role for the Arts Council from direct service delivery to advocate for, representative of and provider of support to a growing network of Regional Arts Boards was a significant shift. It re-defined relationships with its constituents and stakeholders that needed to be reflected in its structure and operations. The strengthening of the RADO program also led to the Ministry for the Arts increasing funding to the Regional Arts Boards but decreasing the operational funding to the Arts Council, hence leading to a downsizing and streamlining of the organisation and a rationalisation of its operations and activities. A restructure was formally adopted in November 1998 and a new Strategic Plan developed. The organisation retained its legal entity as a company limited by guarantee but the constitution was revised to make the members of the company the delegates (generally the Chair) from each of the regional arts boards and Directors on the RANSW Board.

A name change to the Arts Council was first mooted in 1996 and finally came to fruition in 2000 when the Arts Council of NSW began trading as Regional Arts NSW (officially changed in 2004). In the same year, six new staff were employed; a CEO, Finance Manager, Communications Officer, Regional Indigenous Cultural Officer, Audience Development Officer and Administration Officer with the main funding sources being the NSW Ministry for the Arts and the Australia Council. Regional Arts NSW (RANSW) continued to support individual Regional Arts Boards with the management of their financial services and fleet management but its focus shifted more towards maintaining the network, establishing new Regional Arts Boards and planning for the National Conference ‘Groundswell’ which was held in Albury in 2002.
The growth . . .
By 2004 four new Regional Arts Boards had been established - South East Arts, Arts Northern Rivers, Orana Arts and Arts Upper Hunter - bringing the total to 13 across regional NSW and covering most of the state except the Illawarra-Shoalhaven and Western Riverina areas. With the relinquishing of RANSW’s management of financial services by 2006, all RABs were now completely autonomous. This allowed them to respond more easily to regional needs, priorities, opportunities and resources and to apply for funding for specific projects and initiatives that supplemented the core funding received from the NSW government and local councils. The result has been a number of different journeys towards arts and cultural development across RABs in regional NSW and bears testament to Macdonnell’s premis relating to the diversity of this state and the futility and inadequacy of a ‘single response’.

The decentralised model of autonomous Regional Arts Boards but within a network model that links like-organisations and provides advocacy at a higher level has proved to be effective in coping with the ever-present challenges in the external environment and the isolation of working in small organisations in regional communities. On all fronts, the network continued to grow and prosper. With the establishment of Western Riverina Arts in 2011, a regional arts program exists in all regions of the state except the Illawarra Shoalhaven. Within the network itself, RABs have responded to the needs in their local area and sourced other funding to assist the development of other areas particularly in Aboriginal Arts but also in arts and health, touring and youth.

With the growth in the number of Regional Arts Boards, governance by a Board that had representation from all Regional Arts Boards became unwieldy and in 2009, the Constitution of Regional Arts NSW was extensively revised to reflect a new structure. It shifted from a representative to a skills-based Board with five regional members and four co-opted positions to ensure a spread of the required skill. Representatives from each of the Regional Arts Boards are still able to provide strategic direction to the organisation through an Advisory Council which meets annually.

Where are we now?
15 years on from the Review of Regional Arts Development in NSW, the arts and cultural sector in NSW can be thankful that its recommendations were embraced by the NSW state government and that the Arts Council of NSW/ Regional Arts NSW set about conscientiously implementing them. It was timely, it built on work that was already having good results, it committed financial support from state and local government and it established a structure that has been crucial to the growth of the entire sector. Of course there is no room for complacency and we continue to encounter challenges from many directions but we are confident that this model of infrastructure is the most conducive to continuing growth.

A snapshot of where we have come over the past 15 years . . .
The achievements of the Regional Arts network over the past fifteen years are outstanding and the consolidation and maturity of the network is such that it can contribute even more significantly to NSW’s future growth. The network has, individually and collectively, formed and nurtured partnerships where there were none, formed and refined a collective voice on behalf of regional communities and delivered strong, cohesive and comprehensive programs that shape our cultural identity and impact on government policies and programs at local, state and national levels.
14 Regional Arts Boards (RABs) are now delivering arts and cultural programs across all regional areas of our diverse state (except the Illawarra/Shoalhaven - see map above). RABs differ in size and complexity, servicing between three and thirteen local government areas in each region, with populations ranging from 30,500 to 272,000 and in areas from 14,417km² to 177,249km². Regional Arts Development Officers (RADO) travel extensively and in 2012 collectively ‘clocked up’ almost 500,000 kilometres. Collectively they also leverage as much funding for projects as is received in core funding from the state government.

RABs are instrumental in the development of regional cultural infrastructure which is key to increasing audiences and visitation, making regional communities more liveable and encouraging relocation of businesses and professionals from metropolitan centres. Each RADO works closely with their local councils to increase and improve arts facilities, promote investment in cultural infrastructure, develop cultural and public art policies and strategic plans, support the development of cultural precincts and provide councils with a regional advocacy voice for arts and cultural development. Working collaboratively with other professionally managed organisations in their regions, RADOs also assist with the housing of collections (museums), display of art exhibitions (galleries), engagement with performing arts and management of tours to areas where there are no professionally managed arts centres or film projects to areas that have no cinema.

The RABs are leading the way in Aboriginal arts development in NSW and contributing significantly to the NSW Government’s vision ‘to foster a vibrant Aboriginal arts and cultural sector that affords Aboriginal people greater opportunities to participate in, share and strengthen their culture through arts practice and develop careers and businesses in the arts and cultural sector’ (NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy, 2010). Within the Regional Arts network there are currently 12 Aboriginal Arts Officers employed by eight Regional Arts Boards. These
positions have emerged in response to the identified needs for Aboriginal arts development in the region and have a broad role to identify artists, to provide opportunities to nurture their work, to build capacity to better compete artistically and commercially, to develop arts and cultural practices, to overcome the barriers to individual and community development and to set up networks and exchanges that will assist in the promotion and showcasing of work. With the employment of an Aboriginal Arts Development Officer at Regional Arts NSW and the subsequent development of relationships with Sydney-based organisations, the scope for regional NSW Aboriginal artists has been even further extended.

- The RABs are also leading the way in **Creative Industries** which is a vibrant growth area for regional economies throughout Australia. The Northern Rivers region has the highest creative industry employment growth in NSW, more than double the growth rate of Sydney and the highest ‘density’ of creative workers per capita outside Sydney (*NSW Creative Industry: Economic Fundamentals*, February 2009). Arts Northern Rivers is part of a Consortium which has developed a comprehensive **Northern Rivers Arts and Creative Industries Strategy** and is active in facilitating access to professional arts industry expertise, providing support and advice on establishing micro-businesses and brokering partnerships with other government agencies to undertake research that informs strategic planning for the development of creative industries at a regional level. Considerable work and research on creative industries has also been conducted by Regional Arts Boards in Mid North Coast, Central West and the West Darling identifying the challenges as well as the economic and employment opportunities in this sector across a large proportion of our state.

- RABs are instrumental in the delivery of groundbreaking **Arts and Health** programs, three of which have been recognised with prestigious International awards by Arts and Health Australia. Arts OutWest based in Bathurst and covering 12 LGAs in the Central West won the Award for ‘Arts and Health in Regional and Rural Australia’ in 2011 for their **Partnership in Practice** initiative and again in 2012 for their Alzheimer’s program. West Darling Arts, based in Broken Hill won the award for **Medical Humanities and Education**, an innovative partnership with the Sydney University Department of Rural Health in Broken Hill. This project integrates Art courses into health education of undergraduate health science students in rural and remote Australia.

- RABs assist in the administration of the very popular and successful **small grants program**, the Country Arts Support Program (CASP), which funds approximately 150 arts and cultural projects across the state every year. CASP is a devolved funding program through Arts NSW and is managed by Regional Arts NSW with the assessments of applications for projects made at a regional level by regional members aware of the needs and priorities of its region and the capacities of its applicants. This is a most valuable service provided by the RABs and there are many instances of small projects funded through CASP that have subsequently developed into major ongoing programs.

- The increasing amount of arts and creative activity in the regions has led to an increasing number of Communications Officers employed by RABs to tell **regional stories** and to promote local arts events through a range of media. The Communications Officer at Regional Arts NSW supports this network and is the conduit through which outstanding regional stories can be told, artists can be promoted and information can be disseminated both to the most isolated areas in our state and from these areas to the state and national arena.

- The networking of the Regional Arts Development Officers, Aboriginal Arts Officers and Communications Officers is facilitated by Regional Arts NSW and is an invaluable source of support and professional development which is crucial to retaining good staff in small organisations in regional communities. In particular they value the support of fellow colleagues and a comment by one of the RADOs after the last Networking meetings says it all – ‘Fantastic once again. So glad to have this network’.