

**Sustainable arts
and cultural
development in
regional New South
Wales is impossible
without good
foundations.**
by ANNETTE EASSIE

LET'S LOOK AHEAD TEN YEARS FROM NOW: ARTS AND CULTURAL organisations are thriving in regional New South Wales, with people engaged in a multitude of opportunities for creative expression. Groups are not folding. Volunteers are not burning out. Support for arts and cultural development is one of government's priorities. Cultural expression is evident everywhere.

Does this sound too good to be true? What needs to happen for the arts to flourish and be recognised as an integral and crucial element of Australian contemporary society?

In his address at the 'How are we going' forum organised by Regional Arts NSW at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival last year, Economics Professor David Throsby cited evidence of a shift in the debate about the value of the arts from their economic and social benefits to their intrinsic value to cultural wellbeing. He has called for a "national conversation" on the arts and an invigoration of local arts groups and collectives. He cites the cultural policy of the UK and its move towards "good design, fostering education in the arts and culture, facilitating the role of the arts" ('Does Australia need a Cultural Policy?' Platform Papers 7, Currency House, Jan 2006).

So what does facilitate the role of the arts? How can we invigorate local arts groups? How can we support and sustain these groups so that they become part of a strong cultural infrastructure in our State?

After many years as a practitioner with community arts and cultural projects and now as the manager of community cultural development grants programs, I am concerned that whilst we persist with the mindset that cultural activity happens with a little bit of money and a whole lot of dedication and good-will, we will never develop a sustainable cultural infrastructure that underwrites cultural expression and fosters the remarkable creativity that exists in this country.

Perhaps this could be better explained using the example of three projects that received Regional Arts Fund grants in NSW in 2005. Each makes a considerable contribution to its community's cultural activity but each struggles to sustain themselves, despite their recognised and valued place in community life.

After 4 years, the **Bago Magic Performance Group** in Wauchope is at the crossroads. Having grown out of the agency Leisure Link and currently under the auspice of the Wauchope Arts Council, this group has been described as "the most genuine and innovative community cultural development project to come out of the Hastings area in the last decade... driven by dedicated, passionate and skillful people who really have achieved magic in terms of both their creative output and the genuine empowerment of group members" (Janet Cohen, then Cultural Planner at Hastings Council, quoted in the grant acquittal). In 2005 a RAF grant allowed the group to experience the benefits of staging a more ambitious community production

Gaps in the The 'other' infra



Clockwise from top: The spectacle of the Lismore Lantern Parade (on again this 17 June – see 'What's On'); the Light'n'Up workshop; Bago Magic's Island Dance show (see also inside front cover).

developed over a longer period of time and involving the employment of skilled artists.


A \$17,000 investment through the grant led to at least that amount again provided in-kind and the benefits to its participants

June

9 June

 *Clan* by Bangarra Dance Theatre, on tour from Sydney. GRIFFITH Regional Theatre Tel 02 6962 7466

9 –12 June

 Conflux 3 – Science fiction and pop culture convention. National Museum of Australia, **CANBERRA** Tel 02 9948 7941

10 June

 15/15 Film Festival Finalists from the 2005 competition. Venue TBC. **WAGGA WAGGA** Tel 0400 472 172

10 – 11 June

 Scarecrow Festival – Demonstrations, street theatre and rides across **MILTON**. Tel 02 4454 5652

and community which are priceless. Behind the scenes, however, lies the reality that the Bago Magic cannot be sustained in its current form – with no office base, no funds to cover establishing or ongoing administration expenses, no resources to write proposals or submit grants, and declining energies amongst its dedicated, passionate and skillful volunteers.

The **Lismore Lantern Parade** (now LightnUp Australia) was first held in 1994 in response to community concerns about antisocial behaviour and economic decline in Lismore's CBD. Twelve years later it is a flagship event attracting 20,000 people with a staff of five who each work up to 40 hours a week for \$150 a week. Last year the majority of LightnUp's \$250,000 turnover was earned through the group's work at other festivals in regional NSW and Queensland and is currently the only way the Lantern Parade can survive. This year up to \$60,000 in cash is expected to be earned with \$90,000 from in-kind support and, at best, only \$2,000 from arts grants. Throughout its history, this group has been proactive

with such a complex and risky event. In 2006 however, despite its wide-spread recognition, the group does not have a secure home, demand is still outstripping the capacity of the organisation and the support that allows the freedom of working a 'proper' wage for a sustained period of time does not exist.

Passion, dedication and belief in the outcomes are common driving forces in arts and cultural activities but unfortunately they can be fragile in the face of setbacks and perceived lack of support. **The Young Drums Percussion Orchestra** has been operating for over 15 years. It is recognised as Australia's most exciting and innovative young percussion and performance ensemble. It has performed in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane in front of 80,000 people at the World Masters Games (televised to 47 countries) and across regional NSW and Victoria. In Scotland in 1998, the group performed at the Aberdeen International Youth Festival and earned the distinctions of the first 'sell-out' in the 26 year history of the Festival and the only group to develop a fan-following. Ironically, it is the professionalism and profile of the group that has precluded it from accessing the funding support needed to fulfill its logistical needs. This has also been a huge personal cost to its highly-acclaimed director who has financed a great proportion of the operation and undertaken most of the required roles. Recently, when commercial rent was required for their previously rent-free premises, the demise of this unique group was virtually sealed.

These are just three of nineteen projects funded in one year of one funding program in regional NSW and there are no doubt many more similar scenarios. Their struggles are common.

If we are serious about supporting our cultural development, we need to strengthen the groups that produce it. This means supporting the means by which organisations remain strong and viable and finding ways to address their management and developmental needs, whether it be purchase and upgrading of equipment or operating costs such as wages, administration, assistance with training or strategic planning.

This aspiration should be neither too difficult nor beyond the realms of possibility or affordability. Queensland has a cultural infrastructure fund for precisely these purposes and in WA, Lotterywest funds buildings, equipment, training, strategy development, management, communications, technology, fundraising plans, purchase of resources – anything that supports organisational development and increases the capacity of groups to carry out their invaluable work. There is no shortage of cultural activity in our communities. Let's not impede its progress. Let's nurture and support its growth. ■

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scenery structure issue



in addressing threats to its survival. In 2000, with the advent of GST, the rising costs of insurance and the ever-increasing demands of this successful event, it recognised the need to develop a business-like structure to streamline its efforts and enable it to more adequately fulfill the responsibilities associated

June

10 – 12 June

👁️ Pacific Palms Art Festival 14th annual exhibition and sale. **PACIFIC PALMS** Community Centre
Tel 02 6554 0249

10 – 12 June

📣 Mid Winter Festival Events celebrating winter in **GLEN INNES**
Tel 02 6733 3222

13 – 18 June

🎬 SNOWYfest International Film Festival Features, seminars and shorts. **THREDBO** Alpine Hotel
Website www.snowyfest.com

15 June – 22 July

👁️ Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award Biennial JADA award. Coffs City Gallery, **COFFS HARBOUR**
Tel 02 6648 4861