

**Four years ago a one
Despite the success of this, and
butcher show, *Meat*,
many touring shows since, many
was devoured by
presenters in regional and rural
hundreds of culturally
New South Wales are starting to
starved outback
believe the challenges of touring
residents as it toured
are outweighing the benefits.
across western NSW.**

by MERRYN SPENCER

INCREASED COSTS AND THE STRUGGLE TO GET 'BUMS ON SEATS' has made touring regional NSW a bitter-sweet experience for many presenter groups, who are increasingly concerned by the failure of ticket revenue to meet increased production costs.

Whilst the Guarantees against Loss (or 'GAL') grants from the NSW Ministry for the Arts and Arts on Tour can help, the presenter groups – usually the local arts council, all volunteers – still have to find ways to cover artists' fees and venue hire.

Cost sharing across regions is one way to overcome this. "Touring acts as an effective way to see quality productions in areas at a reduced price," says Penny Miles, General Manager of Arts on Tour, "and the longer the tour, the cheaper the presentation fees and better finances for all."

Sponsorship or fundraising can also help ease the finances, and perhaps more specific grants are needed where audience numbers may struggle initially.

Getting access to good theatre not only offers support for regional semi-professional theatre practitioners and has a positive impact on quality of life in the bush, it is also an important part of any child's education to see works on the school syllabus performed.

"Seeing a performance brings the text alive and allows students the opportunity to view from it different perspective," says Kylie Moppett, Regional Arts Development Officer for Orana Arts.

Jack Ritchie, Regional Arts Development Officer for Arts North West, suggests touring networks can look at cost-sharing with locally produced performing arts, which "can compliment and act as a catalyst for a more diverse range of programming."

However, with toughened public liability and specific venue requirements limiting the number of technically appropriate

shows available to tour, most presenters agree, it is time to explore all the alternatives. Touring performing arts must be diverse enough to suit all kinds of venues – from the woolshed to the professional theatre.

But often it's a matter of those 'on the ground' taking their concerns directly to the source. As Jan Irvine, Program Manager for Education and Touring at the Ministry for the Arts, points out, "The more active community groups are, the more feedback we get, we can look at changing guidelines and policy to what people require."

Audience development takes time in communities that have been deprived of theatre. It is through obtaining touring theatre more often that regional audiences develop appreciation. "There's a need for patience and support for those communities as well as engaging for the long term." Jack Ritchie says.

Why... How?



The Western NSW tour of the *Babies' Proms* by the Sydney Opera House was sponsored by Country Energy. Photo: Kim Goldsmith

The right communication technique is also vital, as Michelle Leonard, Artistic Director of Leichhardt Espresso Chorus has learnt. "You are hunting down contacts, realising that schools do not use the internet and mostly communicate by telephone and fax. You have to dedicate an enormous amount of time to the key stakeholders."

It is through long-term commitment, bringing theatre to the areas that need it most, and the right communication between schools, arts councils, Regional Arts Boards and state support services that we can ensure the future of regional touring in NSW.

Merryn Spencer is the Project and Promotions Officer at Orana Arts, based in Coonamble.



December

16 – 17 December

Festival of the Sun (FOTSUN)
A two-day music festival featuring an all-Australian line-up at Sundowner Breakwall Tourist Park, **PORT MACQUARIE**
Website www.fotsun.com.au

16 January – 21 January

Palette & Pot Graduating arts students from Bega TAFE. **BEGA** Valley Regional Gallery Tel 02 6499 2187

17 December

Dunedoo Christmas Lions Parade
The annual **DUNEDOO** Christmas parade, features street floats, prizes, carnival activities and carols. Tel 02 6375 1633

17 December

IDPWD Nymagee Outback Music Festival in association with the CWA and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. Music performances by local artists.
Contact: Jay Dunne Tel 02 6837 3667
Email nymageefestival@bigpond.com