

Performance Superhighway – Touring the North

Tri-Regional Performing Arts Touring Forum, Port Macquarie, August 2001

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Touring any kind of product through regional areas always has its challenges! However, when that product is a 'performing arts product', often with a cast and crew, operating on a shoestring budget, working with volunteer presenter groups, these challenges are seriously magnified.

Hey! Some of the stories arising out of touring a performing arts products in NSW would provide great inspiration for a farce or comedy; Hilarious when viewing the situation in hindsight but maniacally chaotic and stressful when the pressure's on.

These challenges facing both the providers of touring arts products, and the regional presenter groups, were the subject of a two-day forum held in Port Macquarie on the 10th and 11th of August.

The development of the forum was a collaborative initiative between the Regional Arts Programs associated with the Mid North Coast, Upper Hunter and North West regions of NSW. Regional Arts Development Officers Richard Holloway, Jack Ritchie and Andrew Parker developed the concept in order to identify and address the issues related to 'touring' across the three regions and to strengthen the associated touring pathways.

Specifically, the aim of the forum was to provide an avenue for organizations touring performing arts products in regional areas, to meet with community presenters to undertake the following:

- Define organisational roles;
- Become acquainted with current trends;
- Identify issues for both providers and presenters;
- Examine current infrastructure needs;
- Develop strategies to meet the identified issues;
- Develop a more informed and co-ordinated performing arts touring network;
- Identify avenues for ongoing support and access to funds.

The first day of the forum involved a number of presentations focusing on an overview of the three regions involved, the level of performing arts related infrastructure development that has occurred and the Regional Arts Development Officer's perspectives of the issues in their individual regions.

This was followed by representatives from the NSW Ministry for the Arts, Arts-On-Tour, The Railway Street Theatre Company, Musica Viva and Performing Lines providing an overview of their organizations, services offered and an identification of the associated touring issues from their perspectives.

A big thanks to Jan Irvine (NSW Ministry for the Arts); Bronwyn Edinger (formally the CEO of Arts-On-Tour); Dallas Lewis (Railway Street Theatre Company); Kirsten Siddle (Musica Viva); and Wendy Blacklock (Performing Lines) for their enlightening presentations and their obvious commitment to performing arts touring in regional areas.

The forum was held at the beautiful 'Old Royal Hotel' a wonderful heritage building on the waterfront in Port Macquarie. During the breaks, delegates were able to network on the veranda in an environment that was conducive to establishing and developing relationships and discussing the content and associated issues of the previous sessions.

This was followed up by an evening meal at the same venue, complete with entertainment provided by Victoria Christie (on cello) and Karin Braidwood (on classical guitar). In this social context, with the added assistance of red wine as a social lubricant, delegates were able to quickly get to know one another, establishing the perfect climate for the interactive workshops that were facilitated the following day.

The following day, participants were split into four groups and asked to identify the issues associated with touring in regional areas from the local presenter perspectives. In order to get the cross fertilisation of ideas between the 'providers' and 'presenters', the individuals listed previously from the touring companies were asked to facilitate each group.

The second workshop involved a similar process, however, the focus was on the development of strategies to meet the identified issues. At the end of these workshops, each group reported back the outcomes of their discussions, and from these outcomes a raft of recommendations have been generated.

The following were the issues, strategies and recommendations that were documented as part of the final report produced as a result of the discussions. They have been broken down into three main categories: Communications, Infrastructure and Resources and Skilling/Professional Development:

Communications

Issues:

- Consistent quality of touring product
- Competition from other forms of entertainment
- Need for earlier access to product choice and availability
- Need to build partnerships between providers and presenters

Strategies

- Regional & State: Development of innovative web sites for training, discussion and information sharing
- Regional: Utilize existing community calendars or develop effective new mechanisms to avoid clashing dates
- Regional: Identify similarities across the regions in order to build compatible and viable networks ie small, medium, large venues – festival interests

Infrastructure & Resources

Funding

Issues

- Reduction in Guarantee Against Loss for one off performances through CASP effecting access to larger shows for isolated areas and for Musica Viva concerts
- Need to explore mechanism to pay for some volunteer presenter expertise in order to maintain resource
- Differential pricing for weekend and week day performances
- Better co-ordination of funding rounds and announcements (NSW Ministry for the Arts)
- Need to develop revenue raising activity – ie popcorn machine, novelty venues, add on events such as suppers etc.

Strategies

- Regional & State: Explore alternative funding possibilities such as – sponsorship, encouraging local government assistance (LGSA policy area?)
- Regional: Funding for 2 forums per annum to develop stronger network of presenters and product and to plan co-operative circuiting of touring product – include local products

Product Development & Availability

Issues

- Availability of culturally relevant products
- Access to product for youth market / development of youth generated product
- DET – Performance Art Unit – Requires quality control and development
- Schools market problematic – Difficult to co-ordinate / conflict with other activities

Infrastructure

Issues

- Need to develop infrastructure to match population growth and maintenance of existing infrastructure
- Access to case studies re appropriate venue renovation

Strategy

- Audit of venues to include indoor and outdoor performance spaces

Volunteer Presenters

Issues

- Volunteer burnout
- Ageing of volunteer presenters
- Need to develop young presenter volunteers

Strategies

- State: To provide professional support for volunteer presenters through existing organisations such as Arts On Tour and Musica Viva
- Regional: Develop projects that encourage youth involvement in managing and presenting touring products.

Skilling/Professional Development

Issues

- Access to training for volunteer presenters in events management, marketing etc
- Access to training for volunteers in areas of technical equipment – ie sound and lighting
- Emphasis on training for young people in above areas
- Need for realistic budgeting – to calculate audience required to break even.

Strategies

- State & Regional: Utilise existing resources eg. Volunteer Presenters Handbook – from Arts On Tour to develop presenter skills
- Regional: Implementation of relevant professional development training for volunteer groups at no cost or at least at an affordable cost.

Recommendations arising from the Regional Performing Arts Touring Forum

Recommendation 1: Support Material for Volunteer Presenters

That a comprehensive package of support material be developed, maintained and distributed to regionally based presenter groups that complements existing kits.

Recommendation 2: Resources

▪ Local

- That the Country Arts Support Program (CASP) be increased significantly in recognition of:
- its history in providing access to financial support for regionally based presenter groups; and
 - the increased costs associated with presenting touring products in regional areas

▪ Regional

That a Regional Guarantee Against Loss Fund be established to provide each Regional Arts Board with a yearly contribution of \$5,000 GAL, to be distributed to local presenter groups on a 'quick turnaround' basis.

That this fund be sourced through a new Treasury allocation to the current NSW Ministry budget.

That consideration is given to funding similar Touring Performing Arts Forums in other strategic areas of the State.

▪ State

That consideration be given to the funding of positions within state based Touring Organisations that focus on the provision of support to regionally based presenter groups.

Recommendation 3: NSW Ministry

That Regional Arts Boards be encouraged to forward regional touring information to the Program Manager, Performing Arts Touring Program at the NSW Ministry for the Arts.

That the NSW Ministry be encouraged to develop a shorter turnaround on touring fund announcements.

4. Showcases/Forums

▪ Regional

That Annual Touring Forums be developed in partnership with neighbouring Regional Arts Boards and implemented in strategic locations around the state.

▪ State

That a co-ordinated, state based showcase of touring products be developed on an annual basis, for access by regionally based presenter groups. Input to be sought from

5. State Based Touring Bodies

That a joint annual touring package be developed, including input from Arts on Tour, Railway Street Theatre, Performing Lines, Musica Viva, and other relevant/related organisations and independent producers. ■