

TOWARDS AN AUSTRALIAN THEATRE FORUM 2011

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Speaking Notes

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Overview of ATF 2009 – How it worked, numbers, scope, committee

In 2007 the Major Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council initiated a research process which included investigations about the known interconnections between the major and small-to-medium theatre. In 2008, this culminated in a research paper called "Love Your Work: training, retaining and connecting artists in theatre."

The idea for a national theatre forum had been kicking around for a while but this became formalized in the report.

The report recommendations included:

That the Australia Council should support an annual Theatre Forum, inviting the artistic directors of the major performing arts Board and small-to-medium companies, freelance creative workers (directors, designers, production managers) and the heads of training institutions.

It recommended a 2009 Theatre Forum to discuss issues affecting the theatre sector and to agree on a *Theatre Sector Action Plan* responding to some very specific issues (for example, creative workforce succession).

It recommended that the theatre sector, supported by the Australia Council, should convene a working group to drive a 2009 Forum agenda and the development of an *Action Plan*.

The last meeting of Australian theatre makers – which wasn't that big – had been in 1985.

In September 2008, Andrew Upton of the Sydney Theatre Company and I were approached by the Australia Council to Co-Chair an initial meeting to consider bringing these recommendations into being. We worked with the Australia Council to identify a larger Steering Committee from across Australia to consider taking on the mandate to develop a 2009 Forum.

The Steering Committee convened in mid-October 2008. We decided:

- To hold an inaugural forum - focused on ideas - positioned as the beginning of a series of conversations, an outcome of which might be a decision about whether the conversation continues and whether a Peak Theatre Body might be needed.
- To appoint a Curator to create, manage and run the forum, with support from Australia Council.
- To appoint a Sub-Committee -Andrew Upton, Wesley Enoch, Tom Gutteridge and Alice Nash - to write a brief for and appoint the Curator, and to sign-off on key decisions. The broader Steering Committee of 15 people thus became a Reference Committee and signed off on the Curatorial brief.
- To limit the size of the event and thus, we decided that attendance would be by invitation. We also decided that each invited delegate could invite an independent theatre worker of their choice.
- That fees would be payable on a sliding scale (based on turnover) for all representatives from Major Performing Arts Board theatre companies and Theatre Board Key Organisations and that fees would therefore be waived for invited independent artists and project-based companies.
- That the Australia Council, which had already some confirmed financial support for the Forum, would seek to increase budget available by approaching a relevant state agency and the Theatre and Major Performing Arts Boards

(We did not – perhaps to the chagrin of the Australia Council? – take on a specific mandate to develop a Theatre Sector Action Plan.)

Thus began the Curatorial brief that we subsequently developed:

"The task is to curate a provocative three days of engagement for the theatre community; the broad aims of the Forum being to bring a range of practitioners together, to map with an impartial eye the landscape of theatre in Australia now and to stimulate thoughts and visions for the future. We would hope to trigger new ways of thinking about theatre in Australia, about audiences, about education, about national culture, about the past.

Our hopes would even be to extend the scope of the discussion to include issues as seemingly non-theatrical and diverse as the environment, sustainability, globalisation and generational change.

The Curator should design the three days as a whole experience. As such it might involve input and engagement from disparate and unexpected sources. The program should feel highly personal and singular, whilst the gathering of practitioners around it should represent a realistic cross-section of the sector.

Permission and encouragement is given to structure the content, time and physical environment as freely as the Curator wishes. Simple ambitions are to provoke, engage, stimulate,...illuminate and co-ordinate the theatre community ... provocatively and without letting the tone drop. We don't want a series of short-term practical outcomes trickling out of a number of narrowly focussed theatre gripe fora. We don't want a conservative and mind-numbingly dull conference-style event. We want to think big, talk big and shake the tree.

There are a number of recurring issues for the theatre community that need to be approached (a peak body, for example) [...] but the Curator should not feel compelled to address all these issues or think that solutions need to be found for them. They are [provided] as reference points for the Curator to develop ideas from. Ideally this would be done in a left-field and stimulating way.

We hope this Forum would be the first in a series of such events and that no two would be the same in form or content."

In late 2008 we appointed Angharad Wynne Jones to the role of Curator. Angharad worked passionately and tirelessly in collaboration with Australia Council staff to create the event.

A few other useful things to know:

- The Forum took place over 3 days in May 2009 at the City of Melbourne's ArtsHouse Meatmarket
- There were 239 formally registered delegates and quite a few unregistered one too
- We tried to ensure that a wide range practitioners attended the forum, but there were inevitably some gaps and oversights.
- The forum had support from the Australia Council, Arts Victoria, the British Council, the Goethe Institute and the City of Melbourne.

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