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Seminars for Arts Professionals

MAY 2010 SEMINAR SUMMARY

A conversation about artistic vibrancy

Monday 31 May 2010

Australia Council: 372 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills

Chair

Kevin Golding - Finance and Business Analyst Arts Organisations Division, Australia Council for the Arts

Panel

Jackie Bailey - researcher, project manager and policy adviser. Her recent work has included research and program design for the Australia Council for the Arts, the Creative Industries Innovation Centre and the Australian Major Performing Arts Group.

Geordie Brookman - Associate Director, State Theatre Company of South Australia, co-Artistic Director of nowyesnow, and Deputy Chair of World Interplay.

What does artistic 'vibrancy' mean to you? And to your organisation?

To assist arts organisations answer this question, the Australia Council has developed a self-assessment tool, the *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool*. Australia is the first country to develop a tool to measure artistic vibrancy.

The Australia Council has asked the State Theatre Company of South Australia and the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra to test the tool during 2010. The outcomes of the testing process and other feedback, will be used to improve the tool and develop templates and case studies that will be released as a package at the end of the year. While the tool has been developed primarily for performing arts organisations, it will be expanded to cover all art forms. In addition, the Australia Council has commissioned three opinion pieces which will be published shortly to promote a broader discussion about artistic vibrancy.

Development of the *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool* began 18 months ago when the Major Performing Arts Board decided that, having successfully worked with the major performing arts companies to address sustainability issues (finances and audience numbers), it was time to look at how performance in other areas, such as the quality of work and community engagement, could be measured and communicated.

So what is "artistic vibrancy"? Based on input from performing arts companies and the available research on performance measurement in the arts, five criteria to describe "artistic vibrancy" were identified: artistic excellence, audience stimulation, innovation, development of artists and community relevance.

Sydney Arts Management Advisory Group **E** info@samag.org **T** (02) 8250 5722 **W** www.samag.org **P** PO Box 18, Leichhardt NSW 2040



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In addition, the Australia Council has identified a range of processes or methods that organisations can use to help them determine if their organisation is artistically vibrant e.g. expert panels, surveys, focus groups.

Geordie Brookman, Associate Director, State Theatre Company of South Australia, joined the discussion to talk about the State Theatre Company of South Australia's experience of using the *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool*. So far, the Company has identified five methods that it will use to assess its artistic vibrancy. These are currently being developed and include the establishment of an artistic panel to participate in a moderated discussion on excellence and quality, an artist's survey which everyone involved in a production (e.g. lighting technicians, actors, stage managers) will be asked to complete on closing night, an audience survey, staff feedback, and a community survey. The results will be fed back to the Board and form part of the Company's business planning Process. They will also be used to inform programming, not just what goes into the program but how it's constructed. Kevin asked Geordie if he's noticed a difference since the Company had started to use the tool, Geordie responded that it's made him think about his work from a wider perspective and to consider what the company needs to do to remain relevant. He also said that using the tool provides an opportunity to do an artistic audit and can help an organisation to formalise what its doing. For the State Theatre Company of South Australia it has also led to a refinement of its Mission Statement. On a personal note, Geordie described the experience of using the tool as a "wonderful thing to do". For Geordie artistic vibrancy has come to mean "artistic health, reach and relevance."

Asked about the potential of the self-assessment process to lead the Board to micro-manage the artistic program, Geordie commented that it's actually good for the Artistic Director to have to respond to the Board to discuss issues that often get pushed aside, such as why a production wasn't successful.

Geordie was then asked whether Boards will now be expected to become experts on artistic vibrancy. He respond that the processes developed to conduct the self-assessment, such as convening the expert panel, provide the expertise. And, the *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool* actually provides a common language and framework for discussions about artistic vibrancy. Jackie commented that because they now have a shared language Boards may no longer be scared to have "conversations" with their Artistic Director, as they may have been in the past.

An audience member asked how you would approach the self-assessment task if the priorities of your funding body tend to favour one artistic vibrancy criteria over the others (e.g. community relevance) and this leads to programming works that are likely to be popular, rather than works of artistic excellence. Geordie advised looking at the mix of work and events programmed over a year as a whole. He also noted that staging a popular production can attract people who've never been to the theatre before and may lead to them coming to other performances and events. In addition, the organisation could survey these audiences to find out how they could improve their relevance to them. Another audience member added "you have to make sure you belong to them (the community)".

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Talking further about community relevance, Geordie noted that even though some people rarely, if ever, see a State Theatre Company of South Australia production the Company is still relevant to them. Jackie noted that a community can feel like they own an organisation and it wants you to exist, so very often there is already the potential for better engagement. She gave the example of a one-person dance studio in New York where the artist decided to open her doors and install a drink machine so she could interact with her community.

As another example, the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra has decided to benchmark itself against other symphony orchestras operating in similar environments. By beginning this benchmarking process they have made a connection with Norway's most northerly orchestra and they are now sharing experiences and gathering new ideas. The *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool* has the potential to foster new networks and partnerships.

Another audience member asked: Is there a danger that organisations will be measured against each other? Geordie commented: "I don't think you come out with a figure. It's more of an internal dialogue that occurs as part of the planning process". Jackie noted that the Council wants it to be a meaningful exercise, not just a matter of the "ticking the boxes". Kevin commented that from the point of view of the Australia Council its use won't be prescriptive. He added that as one of the people responsible for reviewing business plans for the Australia Council, he sees many organisations struggle to describe what they do and he sees the *Artistic vibrancy: self-reflection tool* as a very valuable resource that will help organisations articulate, communicate and measure their artistic vibrancy.

It was suggested that the Australia Council should monitor the resources required to undertake the process and consider the limited resources available to many arts organisations. Jackie commented that through the testing process templates and other resources will be developed to assist organisations. Arts Victoria is trialing the tool with a smaller company and their experience will feed into the future development of the tool. Kevin added that will be a matter of taking "baby steps" such as asking artists about their experiences working with the organisation, and finding other ways to start a "conversation" with artists, audiences and the community. It was also suggested that it is possible to use simple tools such as online survey e.g. SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>).

So, to check the "artistic health, reach and relevance" of your organisation try using the draft tool, participate in the discussion on the opinion pieces that will shortly be released by the Australia Council, and look out for the revised self-assessment tool, templates and case studies that will be available at the end of the year.

To access a copy of the draft tool visit:

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/data/assets/word_doc/0006/68811/Artistic_vibrancy_self-reflection_tool.doc

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To access other artistic vibrancy resources, including a summary of the available research on performance measurement in the arts can be reviewed in the separate paper *Meaningful measurement: a review of the literature about measuring artistic vibrancy* visit visit:

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/music/reports_and_publications/artistic_vibrancy_resources

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