
para//elo CASE STUDY 2

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This case study examines para//elo, one of Australia's key cross-cultural theatre companies and its approach to audience and program development. The case study focuses on the initiation of the Novecento 1900 Project.

Summary of findings

Engagement and participation by community and audiences, and equal emphasis on contemporary and excellent work guarantees para//elo's maintenance and augmentation of audiences.

para//elo possibly has the most intact and professional audience development strategy available as a model for performance companies, especially those in the development of new theatre.

Key elements to para//elo's audience development:

- seeking original and flexible relevant material from which to create theatrical work
- extensive community and audience liaison through workshops, forums and communications
- full integration of future audiences in the fibre of the work
- creating product ownership among the audience by involving them in the process.

para//elo's ability to take the audience through a process, from the initiation of a program, to development and final presentation, secures loyalty and audiences well ahead of any product promotion or marketing effort.

para//elo's understanding of its consumer base as a company and for its individual products assists in determining which specific segments are appropriate in advance of the presentation of any program.

para//elo's audience and product development process ensures loyal and long-term audiences and seeks new ones.

The partnerships with arts and non-arts sectors aids para//elo's success in broadening the portfolio of work which seeks new audiences while not losing traditional ones.

para//elo has integrated publicity, promotions, and market research which underscores the para//elo audience development model.

The integration of community, art and real life in product development is a foundation in para//elo's operating rationale.

Competition with new digital art producers could be a future weakness, particularly where the competition may have more expertise or resources in new media. There is no real competition for para//elo in the context of Italian-Australian work thus the new approach does increase the understanding of new bicultural work.⁸⁶

Overview

para//elo invited communities in South Australia to provide stories of ship travel between their original home and Australia, to be woven into a performance.

The 1900 Project is based on Alessandro Baricco's Novecento, written at the turn of the 20th Century about Italian migration to the US.

The story, Novecento, revolves around an orphan found aboard a transatlantic liner who becomes a skilled jazz pianist but never sets foot on shore. para//elo, through a process of community liaison and networking, will present the program in 2004–05.

The inspiration for para//elo's work comes directly from community collaboration through interviews, workshops and feedback from community members. Their recent successful arts making practice was para//elo's contribution to the 2002 Adelaide Festival, Stories from the Market Place.

para//elo background

para//elo, funded through the Australia Council for the Arts Theatre Board, and Arts SA, creates theatre and performance art which connects with and reflects cultural and social diversity. para//elo began life as Doppio Teatro in 1984 as the first full-time professional contemporary Italian-Australian theatre company.⁸⁷

In 1997 Doppio Teatro changed name to para//elo reflecting the natural progression from purely Italian-Australian theatre, to developing as Teresa Crea suggests, 'the space to work more broadly from a bicultural platform to a cross-cultural platform'.⁸⁸

While para//elo has historical and cultural links to Italian-Australian theatre, the company is now involved in web-based exchanges, installations, workshops, photography, forums and multimedia performances. para//elo is an example of *Arts in a Multicultural Australia* policy in that, 'innovation is not mutually exclusive or oppositional to tradition. In fact, innovation can only be measured in relation to tradition'.⁸⁹

para//elo combines technology, performance, film, music and digital expression. A traditional core aim is to 'value and incorporate languages other than English'.⁹⁰

'For us, art is integrated into everyday life. It is viewed holistically, as a social, cultural, political and economic fabric that weaves our sense of identity, our sense of being and our sense of place. Over the years, our work has evolved from its bilingual and bicultural foundations to incorporate wider cultural landscapes. This change in artistic direction not only reflects generational shifts that have occurred in Australia but also handing over from our "historical" audience (many of whom were first generation migrants and their children) to those that embrace broader societal and cultural perspectives.'⁹¹

Peter Heydrich, company director and Teresa Crea drive para//elo. para//elo employs four core staff and other artists and cultural workers on a project by project basis. As Ms Crea suggests:

'As Australia's first professional bilingual and bicultural theatre company, we forged new ground in the production and presentation of works that incorporated languages other than English to mainstream and NESB audiences.'⁹²

Strong traditions underline para//elo such as, *Commedia dell'arte*.⁹³ Other evident modern influences include Italian playwright Dario Fo and Brazilian Augusto Boal.⁹⁴

1900 Project background

'I suppose you could say that Nineteenhundred didn't really exist, as far as the world was concerned: there was not a single city, parish, hospital, prison, baseball team that had any record of his name. He had no country, no date of birth, no family'⁹⁵, *Novecento* by Mr Baricco.

Mr Baricco's *Novecento* was a commentary on Italian mass migration to North America at the turn of the 20th Century. A baby is abandoned on an ocean liner ferrying people between Italy and the US and the ship's musicians adopt the orphan naming it Novecento (Nineteenhundred), a reference to the year, the turn of the century and a new world environment dawning.

The orphan becomes a jazz musician who never leaves the ship making the ship his home, as thousands of immigrants come and go. The ship is a metaphor for inequity, migration and the loss of place. While traversing the oceans transporting immigrants from Italy to the US is a narrative focus for the monologue, the work is about Novecento's inability to find his place in the world.

para//elo 2002–03 selected activities

- Seta: Silk Threads
Seta is a collaboration between para//elo and Co.As.It the Italian Assistance Association in Victoria which is aimed at inter-generational programming which includes artists and community. A multi-artform exhibition presented at the Festa della Repubblica, Royal Exhibition Building (Melbourne) in June 2003.



Figure 1 ▲ 2003 Jason Sweeney, in *Ciao Mamma Ciao*
Photo Peter Heyrich

- **Ciao Mamma Ciao**
A cabaret performance which premiered at the Adelaide Cabaret Festival in 2001 and toured regionally in South Australia and Victoria in March and May 2003. The black comedy examines the mother-son relationship in the Italian-Australian cultural context.
- **Stories from the Market Place, Adelaide Festival 2002**
A free event, which included performance, sound, photography and visual installation in collaboration with UK sound artist Scanner, at the Adelaide Central Markets. It integrated oral histories.⁹⁶
- **Distance (working title)**
This ongoing program explores distance and memory. Phase 1 centred on the curating of a website that collected the digital exchanges between artists in Europe and Australia. Phase 2 will see the development of this material into a mix of music and performance at the Queen's Theatre, Adelaide in September.
- **Pulcinella at Lion Arts Centre 10th Birthday**
para//elo's lovable Pulcinella, a Commedia dell'arte roving troupe, entertained audiences at the Lion Arts Centre's (Adelaide) 10 year birthday party.
- **Kismet International Theatre Exchange**
Kismet, a theatre company from Bari (Italy) worked with para//elo to develop exchanges including performances and workshops in Adelaide and Ceduna in regional South Australia.⁹⁷

Research approach

The primary research on para//elo's audience strategies was qualitative. The research sought pattern matches of responses and reactions from select para//elo members, audience, staff and supporters.

The key approaches used were:

- focus group of key themes identified in consultation with para//elo

- documentation of the 1900 Project community showcase at the SA Maritime Museum in Port Adelaide
- a small survey of showcase attendees
- discussions with Ms Crea, Mr Heydrich and communications coordinator Paola Niscioli.

Secondary research consisted of para//elo annual general report and website, English language translation of Mr Baricco's *Nineteenthundred a Monologue*, relevant reports, articles, essays, and online material.

para//elo 1900 Project community showcase

A key in the 1900 Project is the integration of local stories of ship travel by people from immigrant communities. These personal stories are recorded, reconstructed and melded into para//elo's adaptation of Mr Baricco's work. The 1900 Project development process was launched through a community showcase at the South Australian Maritime Museum in Port Adelaide.

The showcase was a textbook not-for-profit marketing exercise. The process was a natural outcome of the company's traditional approach rather than a marketing methodology.

para//elo integrated primary audience research, product development and public relations all within a low cost event. Yet, this was not the core intention of para//elo. The company's historical



Figure 2 ▲ 1900 Project community showcase
Photo Peter Heyrich

knowledge, professionalism, its cultural and local knowledge make para//elo an expert cultural broker.

The Maritime Museum with its old ship hulls, mastheads and a range of maritime artefacts represented the history of migration and settlement in South Australia and the walking tour of Port Adelaide placed the event in context, authenticating the process. The community showcase was a curated event across all aspects, from the location, food, the focus of making guests comfortable, creating a stage for the actors and generating a sense of excitement. Generating excitement is a key element of the marketing. It is imperative for medium size non-profit arts organisations with limited marketing resources to strive to achieve this.

This showcase maintained audience loyalty, created new activity and sustained brand awareness. At the same time, it sought new audiences for future programming. The building of excitement for a new product, 18 months prior to presentation, is an excellent form of promotions for a medium performance company.

Through community showcases, personal interviews, research and workshops, the various stories are reconstructed and will be weaved into the 1900 Project performance.

para//elo audience development method

para//elo is a broker between communities, artists and patrons creating a new space for project and audience development. The para//elo method encompasses strong curatorial focus, community and cultural brokerage. It underlies the company's focus since Doppio Teatro in the 1980s. The Australia Council report, *The World is Your Audience* highlights para//elo's (then Doppio Teatro) audience development tradition:

'...[R]ealising that everyone in the potential audience had gone through the migration process was a great leveller of class, language and regional barriers amongst migrants. It realised that each community had specific experience and ways of operating and that work needed to be subtly tailored to engage with the unique experiences of each community.'⁹⁸

As Dr Kurin in his *Reflections of a Cultural Broker*, writes:

'The role of strategic broker necessitates the creation of settings in which problem-solvers and

problem-identifiers can work together without undue interference. The strategic broker is a facilitator and a coach—finding the people in both camps who can learn most from another.'⁹⁹

Participants from what Dr Kurin refers to as the 'relevant camps', groups, partners, from diverse backgrounds and areas, were brought together by para//elo through the 1900 Project community showcase at the South Australian Maritime Museum in Port Adelaide. Media, para//elo board members and artists, Italian and other community members, funding body representatives, current and future sponsors and local government representatives were invited to participate. The showcase was part of the development of the 1900 Project text, it assisted in promotions as liaison began to secure loyalty from the participants and guests.

The guests arrived by 6.30 pm and were welcomed by Ms Niscioli, who registered their details. They were then offered refreshments and diverse foods such Italian antipasto, Greek mezzes and Vietnamese spring rolls.¹⁰⁰ It was a subtle non-intrusive approach which allowed the guests to take time and examine the museum and consider the impact of ship travel and migration to Australia's development.

An historic walking tour of Port Adelaide was also organised. On return from the tour, Ms Crea introduced the 1900 Project, relaying the story and highlighted the necessity for community members to relate their stories of immigration. That was followed by readings from *Nineteenhundred a Monologue* by para//elo actors. At the completion of the readings, discussion began and participants provided examples of personal experiences of ship travel.

The themes emerging included expectations of the new world, relationships built during the journey and the reality of reaching Australia. One participant talked of the excitement and fear of waiting to see the person that was arranged for her to marry. Another talked of leaving home and his family, in those times there was no future in Italy. A Slovenian man talked of ship travel from Slovenia to Germany, then Australia. His motivation was the desire to own his own home. Others talked of the waiting to see a land of large cities and large houses with white staircases, of almost Hollywood proportions, only to be devastated to find a place of small houses with red tiled roofs.¹⁰¹

para//elo had succeeded in creating a space where people could tell their stories knowing they would end up as material in a new program.

As important, the media, board members, artists and patrons heard the stories, met the community and engaged on a personal level with community and audience.

Kotler's non-profit societal marketing approach, and Assel's strategy of multiple transactions and multiple relationships for non-profit organisations was reflected in para//elo's approach.¹⁰² The combination of multiple transactions and multiple relationships are a natural outcome of limited resources and vision or passion, rather than careful study of marketing techniques.

Targeting the appropriate segments is the key to non-profit arts marketing. Budget limitations restrict the capacity for medium sized not for profit organisations to pay for extensive research, paid advertising, incentives and rewards. Loyalty, passion, support, civic duty and appreciation are the things that are of value in the transaction process.

The overriding intention by para//elo was not public relations, even though a sophisticated understanding of them was evident, rather it was the development of a new program which integrated the experiences of culturally diverse communities through their stories of ship travel and migration.

The 1900 showcase targeted key community segments while maintaining the core of para//elo's audiences. para//elo engage communities as product, as participants and as audiences.

This process is unique in respect to other community development programs as para//elo's focus on product. The process is not the core aim. The strategies adopted by para//elo integrate community, communications and production values.

para//elo's audience development allows for the involvement of communities from the outset of the project in sourcing material and audiences for the future.

para//elo are adept at maintaining relationships across audiences, communities, business, board, government and patrons. They exercise a full range of what Assel et al describe as 'multiple exchanges of resources in dealing with donor and clients'.¹⁰³

para//elo integrated the use of the Maritime Museum as a venue, used the skills of company board members for public relations, provided interesting food and put on a small presentation. In doing so they created great atmosphere, gave

something to their patrons and future audiences and generated expectation for the future presentation of the 1900 Project. As part of the process, they created partnerships with the tourism authorities to present historic walking tours of Port Adelaide highlighting the integral nature of migration to Australia.

The experience exemplified for all board members, staff and sponsors the importance and excellence of the para//elo brand. The Artistic Overview in *para//elo's Annual Report 2002* describes the philosophy underpinning the organisation:

'Our work has always tended to blur the line between community involvement, cultural and artistic development. As an extension of this principle, we continued to experiment with intimate grass roots activities designed to involve community in projects from concept to implementation.'¹⁰⁴

Ms Crea believes that art and culture are meshed with everyday life; it is part of a social, cultural, political and economic fabric that nurtures our sense of identity and our sense of place.¹⁰⁵

para//elo programs where the line is blurred between theatre, installation, performance, media and audience, have used audience development traditions founded in Doppio Teatro to secure audiences for what are at times difficult contemporary art programs.

As Saatchi & Saatchi suggest, 'the buck stops with the arts sector' when it comes to communicating difficult arts.¹⁰⁶ Blaming the consumers, or creating divisions between mass, popular, commercial, innovative and traditional arts, limits the producer's responsibility to audiences. para//elo has taken on this responsibility and seems to communicate with a range of audiences, regardless of the complexity of the arts product.

para//elo branding position

The 1900 Project community showcase is a classic example of brand building through public relations and cultural and community brokerage. It was an effective way to test new work, carry out more research, maintain patron and client relationships, secure long-term media support, and build excitement for the 1900 Project in advance of the presentation.

para//elo's method is a low cost and effective way of sustaining brand awareness and developing new audiences.

The company presents professional, contemporary programs which reflect community process but are arts focused. Branding is maintained through strong values in presentation, imaging and conceptual development. As important, para//elo has extended its brand by developing partnerships nationally and internationally.

Each program is carefully crafted and tested, so by the time it is presented, it has reached a level of maturity which makes it easier to adapt to touring and re-presentation in diverse contexts. Through the process of development, long-term audience and community liaison, para//elo projects generate media profile, audience loyalty and partnerships across institutions, businesses and communities.

Conclusion

para//elo exhibit confidence and knowledge based on a successful history of product and brand development. The 1900 Project suggests an awareness by para//elo of the need to maintain a balance between tradition and change.

The difference between para//elo and other community-based theatre and arts programs is the company's adherence to best practice in research, communications, production and presentation.

The process is not an end in itself, participants in the 1900 Project showcase, be they communities, individuals, artists or non-traditional attendees, become fellow travellers. At the end of the process, they are transformed into audiences experiencing a worthwhile performance in which they share ownership.