



make it new?

some proposals for the future of theatre funding

a discussion paper of the
Theatre Board of the Australia Council for the Arts

April 2006

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Introduction

This paper proposes some new approaches to the funding of theatre in Australia. Some of these proposals are variations on current practices. Others are quite different and, if acted on, would fundamentally change the relationship between the Theatre Board and those who apply to it.

They are offered as ideas at this stage – serious ideas that may indeed guide our future actions, but ideas to be debated, challenged, revised or discarded.

The Australia Council invests almost \$17 million in Australian theatre through its various programs. Almost half of this comes through the Theatre Board. While this is a significant amount of money, it is not sufficient to do the job as the Board would wish and we are continuing to seek new government investment in theatre. While the financial pressure is certainly encouraging us to consider new ways of doing things (there is more on this in the appendix), it is not the only factor. We also want to think about what the best use of *new* funds might be, should we be successful in gaining more funds.

The proposals below do not represent a master plan. Indeed, some contradict each other. There is however an underlying theme. The infrastructure of the performing arts has grown and diversified a great deal over the last fifteen years, but in so growing it has become increasingly complex. There are more opportunities out there but it is not immediately apparent to many artists where they are. There are few perches from which to see the whole landscape. We need pathways, linkages, connectors. What would such things look like? And should developing these be the role of the Theatre Board, with its national overview?

Much of what follows is therefore about the infrastructure that supports theatre artists and the best ways for a national body to support it. We acknowledge that artists are the foundation on which the whole of the arts infrastructure (including funding bodies) is built, and it is no secret that their contribution and their remuneration rarely match up. We want to help artists break out of the poverty trap of working independently with little support or within under-resourced small companies. We want to create an environment in which there are a variety of pathways for artists to realise their work. We want to find ways for our money to create (or reveal) more resources for the theatre community.

While change may be inevitable, our response to it is not. This paper is an opportunity to think about change, and about shaping that change to create the best strategies to allow great performances to happen.

These proposals are only the starting points for a discussion and we want to involve you and our funding partners in the states and territories in this debate. If these propositions are not the answer then let us explore further, and together design a funding system that acknowledges the realities of today and helps realise the possibilities of tomorrow.

1. The role of the Theatre Board

The Theatre Board has always had a wide brief, although over the years it has become more focused. In the past, its responsibilities included dance, hybrid arts and the major theatre companies. Progressively over the last twenty years, new funding structures were created to handle some of these areas – these currently include the Dance Board, the Major Performing Arts Board and the Inter-Arts Office.

Yet the brief remains broad, however you dissect it – whether by performance practice, organisation type, demographic target or geographical range. We have been open and responsive, allowing ourselves to be guided predominantly by artistic vibrancy and creative energy.

There are obvious strengths in this approach. One of the defining features of good art is that it gives shape to things that we did not know that we knew until the artist made it. Shelley called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”, and one could extend this to all artists. There is value therefore in a funding body taking its lead from the artists themselves and training itself to be exquisitely responsive to emerging energies.

But there are also limitations to this approach. Artists, especially in the performing arts, need infrastructure to perfect their craft and make their art. This infrastructure takes time to build. Ensuring it is in place means imagining the needs of the future, not just responding to the energies of today. Our challenge is therefore to balance these two imperatives, and to ensure that the infrastructure we build has flexibility and responsiveness embedded in its very design. But more on infrastructure later...

Another limitation is that responding to today’s vibrancy reduces our ability to respond to tomorrow’s energy, if the current response means making commitments that tie up funds into the future. The current triennially-funded companies of the Theatre Board achieved their status by doing exciting work at a time when we had funds to support them. Most, of course, are still doing good work. But what happens to those newer companies and groups that are vibrant now, when much of our money is tied up? But more on triennial funding later...

What then should be the Theatre Board’s role? Our budget is finite and our current brief is wide. Where is our money of *most* value? What do we do *particularly* well, and where is our contribution less valuable?

Inevitably, this raises the issue of federal and state government responsibilities. All states and territories have their own arts funding programs, and these are often very similar to ours. So why do we duplicate these programs? Would anything be lost if we devolved all our funds to the states and territories? If so, what?

Let’s look at some of the defining qualities of the Theatre Board:

- We are part of the Australia Council, and therefore our decision-making has a degree of independence from immediate political imperatives.
- We are national, which means we can intervene everywhere yet have responsibility for no place in particular.
- We inhabit a space of intersecting relationships and can connect ideas, artists and initiatives across internal borders.
- We take part in the Australia Council’s international strategies, and are well placed to develop this role further in the future.

And a few questions as to what a more focused role for the Theatre Board might be:

- Should we take a particular responsibility for innovation in theatre practice?
- Should our funds be more for strategic interventions than for ongoing support: interventions that provide a significant opportunity for a company or artist to develop their practice or business, and which complement but do not replicate other funding sources?
- Should we take ongoing responsibility only for national organisations and initiatives?
- Should we develop stronger international connections, moving beyond touring support and into the area of international collaborations and partnerships?

*What should be the role of a **national** theatre funding body?*

2. The role of triennial funding

The Theatre Board currently funds 32 organisations on a triennial basis, and this commitment represents just over 50% of our budget.

In the absence of new funds, we are faced with a stark choice. We can continue to maintain a similar number of triennial organisations with no substantial increase in funding level, or fund less in order to allow a fewer number to flourish.

But even with new funds, should we retain the status quo and give the current companies more funds? Or should we look again at who we fund triennially and why?

Let's consider three different approaches to deciding which organisations should receive triennial funding from the Theatre Board.

A **first** approach would be to consider what type of organisation *needs* three-year planning. Above all, triennial funding provides some security of funding to an organisation for a period of three years, and hence the ability for that organisation to plan and commit resources in advance. Of course, most companies and artists would like such security but what criteria should we use to decide who needs it the most?

Here are some possible criteria:

- The organisation needs to contract artists more than a year in advance or has an ongoing ensemble of artists under contract.
- Touring is a key part of its operations and such tours require advance commitment beyond a 12-month period.
- It presents an annual program to a core audience who commit for the season (through subscriptions and other mechanisms) and in any given annual season it needs to plan and market the next.
- It commissions work years in advance or its development of new work regularly extends beyond a year.
- It has physical real estate (e.g. a venue) which entails long-term financial obligations.

It is unclear whether the above criteria apply to current group of triennially-funded organisations and whether triennial funding is actually the most appropriate mechanism for them. The fact that they have received triennial funding may be via a historical process, moving steadily “upwards” from project to annual to triennial funding.

A **second** approach might be to decide that triennial funding should be for those organisations that are the “infrastructure” of the artform. Infrastructure in the wider world is the facilitator of economic activity – our roads, bridges, transportation networks, data cables, etc. The obvious equivalent in the arts is the network of venues, regional hubs, as well as touring and service organisations. It would be easy to call organisations doing “heritage repertoire” the infrastructure, but this is not the case with the smaller theatre companies – they are widely agreed and lauded as being the sector of the new and the innovative. So how do we define infrastructure in our context?

A case could be made for the infrastructure of the sector to be labelled as those organisations that provide continued employment and development opportunities for artists, and that attract, maintain and develop audiences or memberships. Perhaps the definition of infrastructure for this sector is a combination of the two – the facilitators (such as the producing venues, touring facilitators and independent producers) and those organisations providing the ongoing opportunities to artists and audiences mentioned above.

A **third** approach could be for the Board to define a national role for itself (as discussed in the last section) and to enter into long-term commitments only with those organisations that fall within that new brief. Depending on how this role is defined, this might include organisations with a national role, or a strong international focus, or those acknowledged to be centres of innovation.

On what basis should the Theatre Board enter into long-term funding agreements with organisations?

3. The ‘small-to-medium’ theatre company

The small theatre company has been a major vehicle for the creation of new work, and is the main recipient of Theatre Board funding.

Most of the Board’s 32 triennial companies were founded over twenty years ago. The youngest began in 1993. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was very little infrastructure to assist if you were working outside the more traditional genres. For example, performing arts centres were mostly halls for hire, and it was rare for the work of smaller companies or independent artists to be presented in Australia’s major festivals until the mid-1990s.

Artists wanting to make work and sustain an artistic practice over time therefore had to create their own platforms for presenting their work. Most of the resulting companies eventually adopted the model of a company with board, artistic director, general manager, and extra support staff according to their circumstances.

The collective contribution to Australia’s theatre culture of the artists working through this model has been fundamental. As Ian Roberts noted in the report commissioned by the Theatre Board in 2003:

The triennially-funded organisations of the Theatre Board are distinctively Australian. Their productions tell almost exclusively Australian stories and reflect images of the land of Australia and its people, in recognisable and distinctive styles which are nonetheless different from each other. The production processes used are innovative and diverse. They range from commissioning individual artists to drawing ideas from local communities after extensive consultation, workshopping and mobilisation of participants, talent and resources. [They] are the major source of new and innovative Australian theatre.¹

We acknowledge the success of this model for developing the artform and there is no doubt that there will continue to be a major role for such companies. However, it is significant that some more recent companies have avoided this model and have produced their work by focusing on interacting with existing infrastructure rather than building their own production houses. In a time of tight funding, they have not just survived but grown, and have been able to present sophisticated work at high profile events and venues.

In contrast, many of the current triennial companies struggle to find the resources to make new work. Maintaining their structures consumes at least the first \$150,000 of any core funding, and yet many can still only provide poor salaries and working conditions for their full-time staff.

This raises the issue of whether maintaining so many poorly resourced companies is the best model for the future. One response was canvassed in section two: fund fewer, but fund them better.

Another complementary strategy could be to start putting increased resources into building more flexible structures that would allow theatre artists to develop and produce work without the need to create their own company. These structures could support a range of artistic visions, broker opportunities with other organisations such as festivals and performing arts centres, and expand and contract quickly according to need.

Do we need a greater variety of structures and mechanisms for artists to realise their work, and if so what would they look like?

4. The role of producers

The word ‘producer’ has a number of meanings. For example, it has often been used to describe the art-makers (individuals or companies) as opposed to the presenters (venues, festivals etc).

This is not the sense in which we use it here. By producers, we mean those people who work closely with artists in bringing a project together, who access the necessary resources to take it forward, and who keep one eye on future possibilities for the resulting work. They may work independently, although in Australia they are more likely to be associated with a venue or festival. They rarely have a role in the rehearsal room, but may be a creative partner in the conception of the work, and may have indeed chosen the artistic team. Importantly, they take some or all of the financial responsibility for a project.

¹ p. 17 *An Analysis of the Triennially-Funded Theatre Organisations of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council*, a report prepared for the Australia Council by I.D. Roberts Pty Ltd December 2003
http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/theatre_triennial/

Some of the Theatre Board's current triennial companies operate as producers to some extent. Performing Lines, La Mama and the Blue Room are obvious examples, but quite a few others take on this role for at least part of their activities by taking the work of independent artists into their annual programs.

There has been a blossoming of venue-based producers in recent years. A few of them have the resources to commission new works, others can fully present work (i.e. take all the risk and pay the artists a fixed fee), while most offer a variety of deals. Many of them have well-developed curatorial policies and related selection processes, while some function on a more ad-hoc basis. What distinguishes them from pure presenters is that they usually have a commitment to supporting artists (to a greater or lesser extent) beyond their intermittent use of the space, and they are usually identified with particular types of artists or performance practices.

There are also a number of smaller festivals around the country that play a similar role – Next Wave and Artrage, to name just two.

Finally, there are independent producers who are not attached to any particular venue or event. They often work within for-profit corporate structures and cross-subsidise the aspects of their businesses that they value with the income from more commercial work. There has been a growing recognition in recent years of the value of independent producers, and of the need to encourage more to emerge.² We are currently trialling a new initiative to test the proposition that independent producers can increase the opportunities for artists to realise their work – details are on the Australia Council website.³

Producers can relieve artists of many of the administrative burdens that accompany theatre making. They can absorb some or all of the financial risk. They can raise funds. And they can be looking out for future opportunities for a new work from its very beginning.

It seems counter-intuitive to suggest that we can best support artists not by funding them directly, but rather by funding the producer. By funding the artist directly, are we not empowering the source of artistic creativity rather than the mere means?

But perhaps this is wrong. Artists too often have little choice other than to self-produce. While they are generally quite good at this, it is often not their main skill and can leach away their creative energies. Perhaps the best way to assist theatre artists is to provide a robust network of producers with whom they can negotiate a deal, then get on with their theatre-making.

Moreover, drawing too thick a line between artists and producers ignores the fact that many producers themselves come from an artistic background, and many current artistic directors function to a greater or lesser extent as producers. Perhaps there are some current triennially-funded companies that would jump at the chance to reposition themselves as production hubs.

² see *The Creative Producer* in *RealTime*, October/November 05 at this link: <http://www.realtimearts.net/>

³ The initiative is called *Developing Independent Producers, and the link is:* http://www.ozco.gov.au/grants/other_support_theatre/developing_independent_producers/.

What would be the effect of the Theatre Board investing more of its resources in producers?

5. Deciding which artists to support

If the Theatre Board did decide to invest more of its resources in supporting producers, it would, in effect, be devolving some of its decision-making to them regarding which artists and projects to develop and present.

Would this be a good thing?

Many of these producers are well placed to spot the most promising young artists and to give them precisely the support they need at an early stage. They can find the right mentors and create the appropriate contexts for these artists to flourish. They can also support mature artists through the various stages of their careers, matching them with the most appropriate opportunities for presenting their work. They have the flexibility to offer a range of responses to artists' proposals – residencies, mentorships, short creative development workshops, full productions, tours, or any combination thereof.

By contrast, our project funding programs generally offer only two responses – yes or no.

There may also be advantages to encouraging artists to forge bonds with producers that can provide the basis of career-long supportive relationships, rather than with a government funding body which, with the best will in the world, will always be somewhat impersonal and bound by processes.

There are risks as well. The Theatre Board's New Work category is open to everyone, while not all locations and genres are served by local producers. Moreover, as producers make their choices, those missing out on opportunities may feel aggrieved, and may prefer having access to an open and transparent (albeit distant) process.

This raises the question of the public value of peer assessment. What are the relative merits of a decision-making process that is slow and somewhat inflexible, but publicly accountable, as opposed to processes that are less open to scrutiny but (potentially) more responsive?

Certainly, if we went in this direction, there would need to be safeguards. Producers seeking our support would be assessed as rigorously and competitively as current applicants. And we would take into account both their record of achievement in finding and supporting the best artists and work, and the way in which they interact with the field in general. There would still need to be accountability.

Sitting behind all this is the bigger question raised in the first section – which decisions are best made by a *national* funding body, and which are better off being made by others?

Should the Theatre Board devolve more decision-making to those more directly connected to the work being made, and if so, who would they be?

6. New work

How much new work is enough? This is a fraught question. Many artists make new work because that is why they became artists, and they will make work regardless of funding, audience demand or financial reward. This does not prevent them also interacting shrewdly with the market to position their work, but it does suggest that simple supply-and-demand notions are never going to explain or confine artistic production.

Much of the new work that is made either has one outing to a modest audience and is never seen again, or (in the case of scripts) never even has that first chance. Some of this is how it should be. Not all work meets the expectations of its makers, backers or audience and is best abandoned. But it is clear that much work that should reach more people, simply doesn't.

The Theatre Board must accept some responsibility for this situation. Our funding categories and criteria have to date greatly favoured new work.

An abundance of new work is an obvious sign of a healthy theatre culture. But it is arguable that we are failing artists and abusing their commitment if we are not also supporting the means for that work to have a longer life. The remounting of work or the production of extant work could also be considered valuable opportunities for theatre artists to gain employment and practise their craft, even if this work is not "new".

There are networks of presenters who regularly buy and present proven work, and there are complementary touring programs run by the states, territories and the Australian Government. We have no desire to replicate what they do, but carefully targeted funding can ensure that there are touring circuits available for work that is innovative and diverse. Mobile States is an example on one such investment that we have made.⁴

In a tight funding environment, providing more support for remounting and touring can only happen through *less* support for the creation of new work.

What would be the effect of the Board focusing less of its funding on the creation of new work and more on creating opportunities for existing work to have a longer life?

7. Innovation

The Theatre Board has long had a commitment to innovation, and it is a criterion in most of our funding programs. It is a tricky word. Innovation has become such a valued attribute in contemporary society that it often acts as a synonym for *good*. When Ezra Pound enjoined artists to 'make it new' in 1934, he could not have imagined that his phrase would become the ubiquitous mantra of consumer culture.

We have tried to give some guidance to the use of the term in the *Support for the Arts Handbook*:

⁴ Mobile States is a touring consortium coordinated by Performing Lines and comprising Brisbane Powerhouse, Arts House (Melbourne), Performance Space (Sydney), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art and Salamanca Arts Centre (Hobart). For more information, see www.performinglines.org.au/mobilestates.php

To the Theatre Board, innovation means being intensely attuned to contemporary life to the extent that it affects the work that you make and the way that you make the work. It means not relying on established ideas and forms. It means investigating, testing and taking artistic risks. Innovation also implies an awareness of current contemporary developments, both in theatre and in culture and society in general. Innovation depends on context, and can be in the form of the work, its process, the way it is presented, and the ways it imagines and seeks its audience.

We are at an interesting time in the history of human culture. The Enlightenment saw the emergence of a belief in progress and human perfectibility which the events of the last century have undermined somewhat. Is it naïve still to maintain that innovation is an unmixed good? Too much faith in innovation as the deliverer may not in fact be the most creative approach, whether the issue is the arts or the natural environment or some other field of human activity.

Perhaps it is the word itself that has become stale. Our definition above suggests that we will favour art that is in dynamic dialogue with the present, the ‘real’, rather than art that is mostly in dialogue with other art. In this sense, there are no inherently innovative genres. All are capable of connecting with life as it is lived, and all are capable of becoming trapped in their own conventions and theory. Perhaps it is time to drop the word *innovation* and concentrate our attention on how we define *quality*. But that is another discussion...

Having acknowledged the problematic nature of *innovation*, there still remains the fact that new types of theatre practice are constantly emerging. Some will offer little in themselves but will perhaps provoke more fruitful explorations later. Some will illuminate aspects of being human for a short time then vanish. Others will go on to become rich genres of theatre practice in the future. It is difficult to judge their ultimate value at the early stages, but it is essential that someone takes responsibility for investing in the development of the artform.

Should nurturing these practices become a particular, or even exclusive, focus for the Theatre Board?

8. Connecting the smaller and larger theatre companies

Nine of the main theatre companies in Australia receive their funding through the Major Performing Arts Board rather than the Theatre Board⁵. Each Board has very different processes and objectives. There are historical reasons for this that need not concern us here, but one result has been that an overall approach to theatre as an artform has been missing within the Australia Council since the mid-1990s. Steps are now being taken to change this, and this could open up new opportunities for collaborations.

Of course, the reality is that this disjunction within the Australia Council was never reflected in artistic practice. Many artists have always flowed between the larger and smaller companies, the career paths of managers have taken them through a wide range of

⁵ They are: Sydney Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of SA, Company B Belvoir, Malthouse Theatre, Black Swan Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare Company and Circus Oz.

organisations, and theatre work often transfers (or is co-produced) between companies and artists funded by both Boards.

How can the Theatre Board engage with the major companies to increase the opportunities for high quality, innovative (both provisional terms!) and diverse theatre work to happen?

Some ideas:

- Support for residencies of artists within larger companies,
- Encouragement of more co-presenting and co-producing arrangements between larger companies and smaller companies or independent artists,
- Support for mentorship relationships between the managerial and production staff of smaller and larger companies, and
- The development of a single argument on the challenges and opportunities facing the whole theatre community, rather than splitting it into 'major' and 'small-to-medium' sectors.

How can we support fruitful relationships between the major theatre companies and those artists and companies who rely on Theatre Board support?

HOW TO RESPOND

We invite you to consider and respond to the above proposals and questions. While some change in Theatre Board funding is likely, we are not intending to do anything suddenly. Any changes will be made only after taking your views into account, and after consultation with our state and territory funding partners.

We have set up a web forum for responses to this paper, and we encourage you to consider sharing your views publicly through it. You may include your name, or you can post anonymously – it's up to you. The website address is:

www.ozco.gov.au/make_it_new/

If you would prefer to respond to the Australia Council alone, email this address: makeitnew@ozco.gov.au All responses to this address will be treated confidentially.

We will also be holding public forums and meetings in major Australian cities. If you are interested in finding out more, email: makeitnew@ozco.gov.au

Of course, letters and written comments are also welcome. Please send to:

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Please lodge your responses by 14 July 2006

APPENDIX

Financial Background

The Theatre Board's budget has not kept up with inflation for quite a number of years. For example, despite rising costs, the average triennial grant to theatre companies was the same in 2005 as it was in 1998 – effectively a cut of 24%. In 2002 we commissioned research from Ian Roberts and associates which showed the effect of this on the Board's triennially-funded companies. The resulting report warned of a possible 'spiral of decline' amongst these companies if no action was taken:

If present trends continue, companies will have to cut expenditure...if production numbers and/or quality decrease, audience numbers will also decline. Sponsorship, philanthropic giving and other government funding is likely to follow the trend, with a real risk of negative publicity and a further deepening of the decline.⁶

Such warnings echo even louder in the wake of the recent report commissioned by the Australian Major Performing Arts Group into the Major Performing Arts Board (MPAB) theatre companies, which proposes that such a "spiral of decline" is already taking effect in that sector⁷, and there have been similar messages in research conducted by the Dance Board⁸ and the Cultural Ministers Council⁹.

The Australia Council has been actively advocating for more support for the smaller arts organisations; i.e. those not funded through the MPAB. The Theatre Board has implemented as many of the Roberts report's recommendations as it could afford, including the *Theatre Biz* initiative last year to assist selected triennial companies to increase their earned income. The Australia Council also decided last year that it would use its own funds to provide full indexation to all the non-MPAB triennial companies, and hence these companies are protected for the next three years from the eroding effects of inflation. Indexation beyond this point will depend on a review of these first three years. In the meantime, the Council is also actively working to strengthen the sector through the establishment of its new Key Organisations Unit, and will put the case for greater funding support for this sector as part of its own triennial funding bid to the Australian Government for 2007 – 2010.

The reality for now is that we do not currently have the funds to restore the value of grants to the level of a decade ago, and we are unable to index our other grant categories. Companies, groups and artists dependent on program or project funding are therefore under ever greater pressure. While our support for triennial companies has not kept pace with inflation, our New Work budget has actually fallen over the same period.

The Australia Council is still vigorously pursuing all options for garnering more government investment in the arts, but we need to be able to go forward regardless of the result of these efforts.

⁶ p 10 *An Analysis of the Triennially-Funded Theatre Organisations of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council*

⁷ See the AMPAG website for a copy of this report:
<http://www.ampag.com.au/data/mrattachments/Theatre%20Survey%20Report.doc>

⁸ *Resourcing Dance: An analysis of the subsidised Australian dance sector* a report prepared for the Australia Council by Positive Solutions February 2004 http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/resourcing_dance/

⁹ *Report on an examination of the small to medium performing arts sector* prepared by a Working Party of Cultural Ministers Council Standing Committee March 2002
http://www.dcita.gov.au/arts/councils/cultural_ministers_council/media_releases_and_publications