

make it new?

Communiqué 1 – October 2006



Welcome to the first communiqué in the *Make It New?* process.

Background

The Australia Council for the Arts' Theatre Board released a discussion paper entitled *Make It New?* in April this year.¹ The paper noted that the performing arts infrastructure in Australia has grown and diversified a great deal over the past 15 years, and suggested that the Theatre Board might take a greater role in assisting theatre artists make best use of the opportunities that exist.

Among other things, the paper proposed that the Theatre Board might invest a lesser proportion of its current resources in direct support for theatre companies and groups, and more in strategies for inflecting the existing infrastructure towards supporting innovative and diverse theatre work.

The paper attracted wide interest. Many welcomed it as an acknowledgement of the changed circumstances in the performing arts, while others cautioned that less direct support for artists could result in their further disempowerment.

Public forums were held around the country and the Board received nearly fifty submissions by the end of July.

The responses

Many of the responses were posted on the online forum set up on the Australia Council website.²

Amidst the diversity of responses there were a few key points:

- The current triennially-funded theatre companies of the Theatre Board are still under considerable pressure, confirming the continued relevance of the findings of the 2003 Ian Roberts report which outlined their collective contribution to Australian culture as well as the financial stresses facing them.³
- There was no consensus on the best model to support theatre work. The artistic director-driven model was robustly defended by many, while others argued for more curatorially-driven structures that could support a range of artistic visions within them.
- There is considerable frustration amongst younger companies (and their artists) at their inability to progress because of a perceived lock-up of Theatre Board resources in companies founded in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹ http://www.ozco.gov.au/make_it_new/

² http://www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/hot_topics/make_it_new_discussion_forum/

³ http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/theatre_triennial/

- The role of producers provoked a great deal of discussion. There were a variety of views on whether producers would create more opportunities or simply consume another slice of the shrinking funding pie. Some considered that producers would inevitably have a 'commercial' orientation – they would only be interested in work they could sell, and they would only invest in its presentation, not its development. Others had more trust that a rigorous assessment process would ensure that only those producers committed to quality and innovation would be funded.
- Despite these concerns, there was strong support for building structures that could take the pressure off artists needing to self-present and self-manage.
- The Theatre Board is (mostly) valued by artists and companies and is seen to have an influence beyond its budget in determining future directions within the artform and the industry. There is a strong expectation therefore that it should play a leadership role within the sector.

The Theatre Board's next steps

The Theatre Board considered the responses at its policy meeting on 4 September. The Board was particularly mindful of two things. Firstly, doing nothing is not a realistic option. There are changes happening within the performing arts which the Board is not driving but to which it must creatively respond. Secondly, the Australia Council is seeking more resources in its current negotiations with government, the outcome of which will be known in May next year and will strongly determine the Board's range of choices.

In this context, the Board decided to make no major changes at this stage, but to prepare the ground for a major revision of its funding categories to be decided next year and come into effect in 2008.

In particular, the Board will decide on a new basis for triennial funding taking into account such matters as:

- the number of key organisations it can effectively support
- the most effective way to coordinate with the States and Territories in supporting these organisations
- the special needs of national service organisations
- the role triennially-funded organisations can (and often do) play in supporting smaller companies and groups
- the readiness of newer companies to compete for triennial funding.

To prepare for these changes, the Board decided to bring all current Key Organisations Triennial Grant agreements to a close at the end of 2008. This means that most organisations applying successfully this year will receive a two-year agreement (2007-08), while those applying successfully next year will be offered funding for 2008 only.

The objective is to have an overview (at one point in time) as to which organisations should receive triennial funding. All organisations seeking triennial funding for 2009–11 will apply in 2008 under the new structure, and all will be assessed in competition with each other and with any new companies the Board invites to apply.

The Board is also considering its other grant categories with the aim of encouraging a richer ecology of artists, producers and presenters. Here are some of the options being considered:

- Funds in the New Work category may be focused more on the creative development and rehearsal process and less on covering the presentation costs, encouraging applicants to negotiate with producers and presenters for the presentation phase of their work.
- Complementing this, an annual (or even triennial) grant category may be created that offers support to present work. Eligible applicants may include venues, festivals, producing companies and independent producers, and they would be assessed on the basis of their skills, record and curatorial policies.
- A possible quick response fund for remount costs to assist companies to take advantage of touring opportunities (within Australia in particular).
- An initiative to link the smaller companies with companies funded through the Major Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council.

The Board will discuss these matters further at its March 2007 meeting and will release a **second discussion paper** in April outlining its direction. This paper will be circulated widely to give you the opportunity to comment on the specific changes the Board is considering.

The final decision will be made later in 2007 (after the Federal Budget) and the results will become part of the *2008 Support for the Arts Handbook*.

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