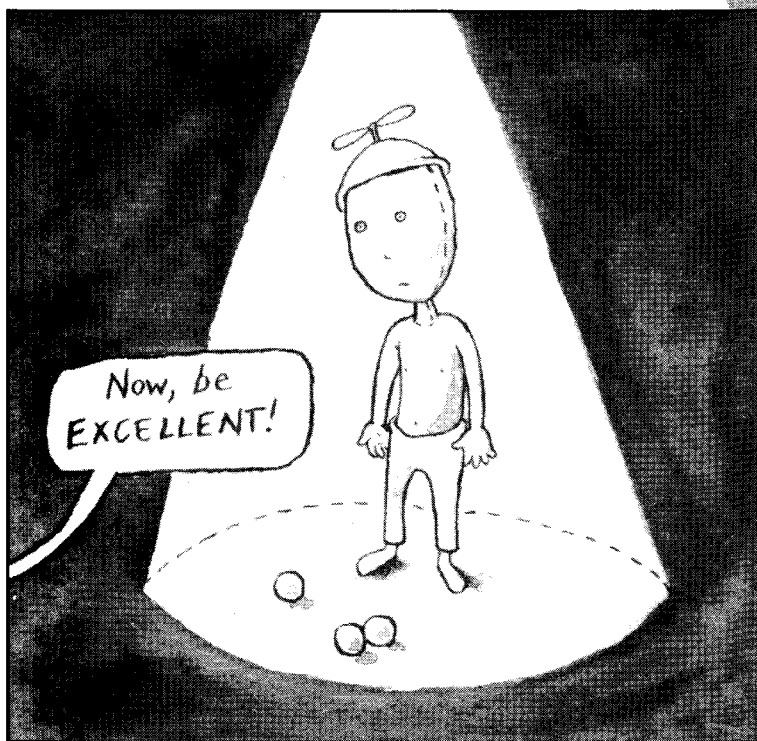


# Assessment & Excellence



**Some arts practitioners have expressed their concern over the last two years about the mechanisms by which taxpayers' funds are distributed to artists and companies. Allegations of grants providing indirect financial benefit to members of the Music Committee of Australia Council's Performing Arts Board were reported widely, and pursued in Senate Estimates hearings on two occasions.**

Another bombshell came in the form of a 1993 research project funded by the Office of Multicultural Affairs in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. One of its subsidiary reports into the performing arts found that: "Peer assessment and assessment in the name of excellence keeps art within the cultural norms of those peers and patrons. It positions gatekeepers in strategic positions and allows them to reproduce a vision which invariably embodies cultural contents as well as craft form."

In one controversial section the report attributed to Jane Westbrook, Executive Officer of the Performing Arts Board, the statement that "excellence is used by committees to disadvantage certain practitioners and their work, but that this happens on an unconscious level". Westbrook denies ever having said such a statement, and was "very distressed" to read it in both the OMA report and the subsequent publication, 'Culture, Difference and the Arts'.

In July 1994, the Australia Council reviewed its conflict of interest guidelines in response to a request from the Minister for the Arts and Communications and from the Chairman of Council. A month later Michael Lynch, the incoming

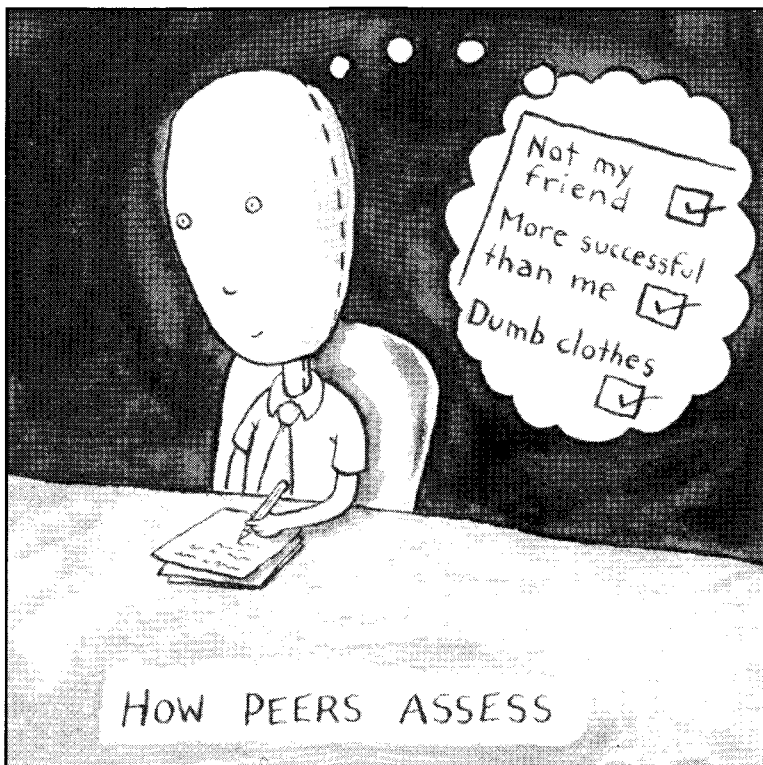
General Manager of the Australia Council, announced a review of the Australia Council's peer assessment processes. The working group set up to review these processes developed several options which were presented to the Council in February. By the time of publication of this article these options should be available to the general public in the form of a discussion paper for public consultation.

In the light of this debate 'Lowdown' contacted a large number of individuals and representatives of companies involved in youth performing arts in order to gauge what kind of satisfaction the industry had with the present State and Federal systems. In both interviews and written responses, practitioners gave their views on various aspects of peer assessment, as well as the knotty problem of defining excellence.

### Selection and induction

Members of peer decision-making Committees are appointed by the Australia Council on the recommendation of the various Boards. Councillors are appointed by the Governor-General, and Board members are appointed by the Minister based on recommendations seeking a balance of membership in terms of the characteristics of demography, knowledge, public credibility and cross-fertilisation with other relevant areas of Australian society. State and Territory systems vary markedly, with some appointments seeming to come solely under the control of a particular arts officer or minister. Although some respondents acknowledged that these systems are potentially open to abuse through "stacking" of committees with people who have similar beliefs to the officer or minister, regard for committee members in general is high. Chris Thompson, from St Martins' Youth Theatre, captures a view expressed by most respondents who had sat on committees - "on the whole, the level of commitment is encouraging, and the care for the industry shown by most committee members is impressive."

The first taste of committee life is often a shock for those used to



sitting on the other side of the application table. As Jane Haley from the Queensland Theatre Company states: "... nothing prepares assessment panel members for the overwhelming amount of work they are required to do in preparation for meetings nor for the impossible gap between the number of worthy applications and the amount of funds available."

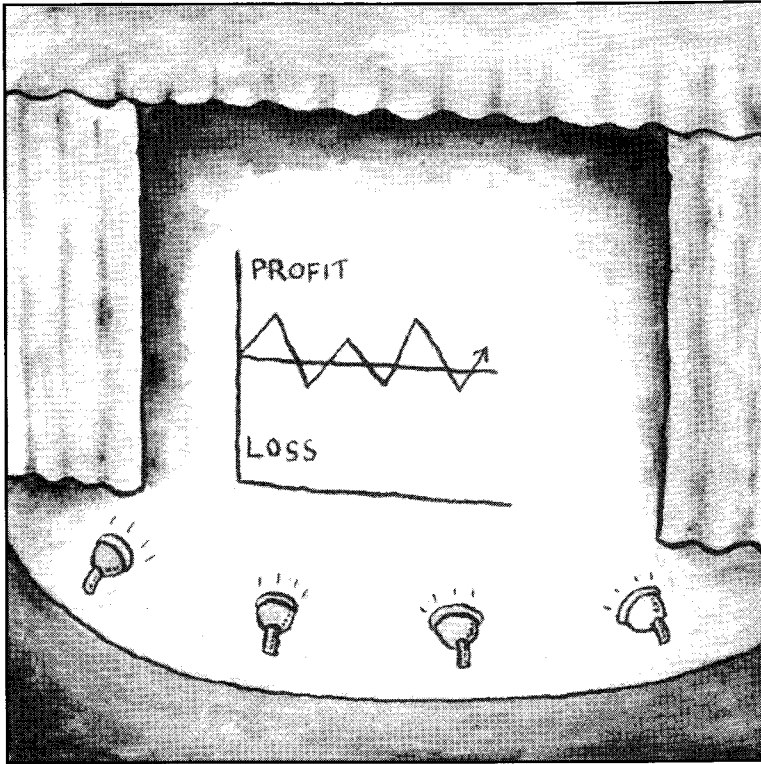
As with selection, the induction procedures vary. Adequate information does not seem to be a general problem. Zane Trow, Artistic Director of Next Wave, sums up the feeling of a number of current and former committee members with the comment, "On joining a peer committee one is inundated with papers concerning legal and conduct issues." The new Artistic Director of Unley Youth Theatre, Jansis O'Hanlon, points out though that "we have to assume that peer panel members read all of the information" - indeed, the problem may be that some members get so much information that they need help in comprehending their legal and moral responsibilities. Legalistic definitions of direct or indirect pecuniary interest or conflict of

interest are not usually framed in an arts context.

For the Queensland Arts Advisory Committee and Artform Assessment Panels, an induction meeting before each grant assessment round seeks to minimise confusion. New members of the Australia Council have an officer responsible for their induction, which includes the provision of a handbook and discussion of the systems and procedures of the Council. Jane Westbrook also indicated that the Council was considering producing a video to assist induction of members.

### Possible abuses

Practitioners responded to some fairly contentious questions regarding the possibility of abuse of peer assessment procedures. These included whether peer assessment committees had ever used funding decisions to "punish" companies, whether members should absent themselves from discussion concerning companies with whom they compete for marketshare of an audience, or whether some people go on peer assessment committees for the



wrong reasons - that is, the promotion of themselves or their companies.

No respondent in the youth performing arts industry professed to be aware of a situation where a peer assessment committee "punished" a company. One controversial decision in the dance area, however, was perceived by some media commentators and supporters of the Australian Dance Theatre as being punitive. When the Board of the Australian Dance Theatre terminated Leigh Warren's contract in favour of Meryl Tankard, they quickly found that an enormous slice of their budget was cut from their company by the Dance Panel of the Performing Arts Board, and a remarkably similar amount was given to Leigh Warren to start a new company, Leigh Warren and Dancers. Rightly or wrongly, many Board members of performing arts companies took this as an infringement into their area of responsibility.

Rainer Jozepe, former Administrator of the ADT and currently Manager of Corporate Development at the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust, agrees that "there was a perception

that it was punitive." He stresses that the Dance Panel stated over and over again that it was not their intention to punish, but believes their high regard for Warren as an artist and a colleague may have blinded them to legitimate concerns of the Board: "I believe they were doing things scrupulously, but I was worried about their capacity to be objective... It was a very difficult situation."

The use of membership of a peer assessment committee for self-promotion was regarded by most respondents with experience on committees as a kind of fool's paradise - as Jane Haley states: "Any person who joins a committee to promote themselves or their company is seriously deluded. The workload is too great, the pressure in terms of conflict of interest is increasing and the capacity for personal promotion very limited."

Indeed, respondents such as as Graham Gavin, Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre, expressed the view that membership of such committees can be a disadvantage. Certainly the tightening of Australia Council guidelines specifying that Council, Board and Committee members

cannot be major beneficiaries of any application made by a third party to the body on which they sit, makes a conflict between the artistic and peer assessment activities of committee members more likely. Westbrook feels that the new guidelines have "a particular impact on the capacity of individual or freelance artists to participate in the process of peer assessment." The Performing Arts Board acknowledges this, and is approaching individual and freelance artists to sit on committees for one year rather than three, in order to minimise the disruption to the potential income of those artists.

Most companies and corporations would find it disquieting, to say the least, to have a business rival involved in making funding decisions concerning their future. In the youth performing arts however, a more genteel ethic prevails where the concentration seems to be more on common artistic denominators rather than competition for an increasingly tough market. Zane Trow states the majority view: "People leaving the room if they happen to be operating in the same demographic as people they are assessing is ridiculous. They would not be peers if they did not operate in relative competition with other agencies and individuals; let's face it the audience (population) in Australia is extremely small. Social responsibility should override this problem, but often it does not."

Westbrook too believes that this is unworkable, with greater intrastate and interstate touring rendering virtually the whole country a shared market and potential source of conflicting interest. It should be mentioned, though, that two respondents did mention their extreme unease at having their applications to become a grant company being assessed (in part) by an artistic director of a grant company they felt they had outperformed in both business and artistic terms while on project grants.

### **Excellence**

Questions regarding the use of excellence as a criteria attracted the greatest range of responses.

For Graham Gavin, the subjectivity of excellence is at the heart of why we have peer assessment committees: "Excellence is a personal value judgement which we ask peers to respond to as peers... It will vary from project to project and is dependent on the circumstances surrounding these projects."

While most respondents feel that context defines excellence, not all feel that this is recognised in practice. Youth theatre companies were particularly vocal with regard to the use of excellence as a way of discriminating against some types of cultural expression. Barney Langford, of 2 Til 5 Youth Theatre, explains: "I suspect that there is an inherent and unspoken (unanalysed) acceptance by many people of the existence of an objective standard by which excellence can be judged. Moreover this 'understanding' privileges elite cultural forms when compared to their more popular equivalents. So that one is more likely to find the term excellent applied to an opera company or a symphony orchestra (viz Keating's plans for the SSO) than say a garage band."

Roland Manderson, Canberra

Youth Theatre's Artistic Director, feels the problem for youth theatres is that the criteria of excellence needs to be applied to the creative process, environment and social effect as well as the product. This, he stresses, is not an attempt to devalue the importance of a quality product, rather to get "all of the ingredients" in perspective.

But many companies complain of the problem of just getting members of assessment committees to performances, much less anything else. Responses, interviews and private conversations reveal time and again a deep dissatisfaction in this area. While directors and administrators understand that their peers on assessment committees have only a limited number of hours in the day, they feel that their work should be seen, and question the infrequent use of external assessors. For some companies, the written assessment submitted to both the company and funding body is one of the few times they get an objective, informed opinion of their work. Kris

Jones, formerly of Woolly Jumpers, feels that a lack of awareness of a company's work puts an enormous pressure on its applications and the performance of its personnel at round table conferences. In this environment, "the personalities and communication skills of the participants are vital."

Robert Tuppini, of Gambit Youth Theatre, believes that all youth theatre in Australia suffers when it comes to funding: "I don't believe funding bodies have really come to terms with youth theatre as an artform... They don't seem to know where to pigeonhole what it does. At the moment we feel like a little yapping dog being thrown a bone... We want them to understand what we're doing - if they can support us to the same extent as other artforms we can surpass much of what is offered to young people."

### Summary

Overall, most respondents feel peer assessment is functioning effectively in distributing inadequate funding. However, practically every statement made by a respondent supporting peer assessment begins with a qualification such as "generally," or "on the whole," indicating that there are times when peer assessment may not function as intended.

Responses gathered for this article clearly indicate a problem in assessment criteria for youth theatres. Other problems referred to in responses are more nebulous, and pertain to the difficulty of knowing for certain the motivations a person may have in making a decision or taking an action. They include accusations of some "machiavellian" public servants running their own agenda, or of some committees "lacking the guts" to take hard but necessary decisions.

Recommendations for minimising problems or abuse include the regular rotation of committee members, all industry members keeping informed and continual examination of assessment procedures. Ultimately though, the effectiveness of peer assessment still lies with adherence to the principles of ethical conduct - integrity, objectivity and independence.

**Tony Mack**

Cartoons by Andrew Joyner

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Backstares Theatre Inc gratefully acknowledge the assistance of: the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, The South Australian Youth Arts Board, the City of Noarlunga and Foundation SA