

LOWDOWN

magazine



youth performing arts in australia

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In the wake of changes in Arts NSW funding arrangements for 2009, Phoebe Macrossan sets out to investigate the decisions affecting NSW companies, Arts NSW's direction for young people and the arts and the general feeling of the youth theatre sector in NSW.

NSW arts funding

Arts funding is never an easy or fun topic to handle. Whenever money is involved in the arts, the complaint is usually that there is never enough to go around. The reality is, governments fund transport, health and education before investing in the arts.

What is of importance is how the funding bodies allocate and administer those somewhat limited funds and how they support the arts organisations applying for them through other means.

In light of the recent changes to the Australia Council funding arrangements, the review of the NSW Cultural Grants Program in 2008 provided something else to worry about for theatre companies in New South Wales last year. Of concern was the delay in notification of the deadline for applications and delay in the release of the 2009 funding results until January 8, 2009.

The independent review of the NSW Cultural Grants Program was commissioned by then Arts Minister Frank Sartor in September 2007, the results released in March 2008 with the changes implemented and the guidelines for the new Arts Funding Program released on August 28, 2008.

At this time there was a change of hands at Arts NSW, as Nathan Rees became the new State Premier on September 5, 2008, taking over the arts ministry from Frank Sartor on September 8. Similarly, many staff within Arts NSW were changed and moved around within the Department of the Arts, Sport and Recreation.

Organisations then had six weeks to put together an application for funding before October 10, 2008. Arts NSW scheduled briefing sessions across the state about the new program, set up a dedicated phone line and email service, and provided a 'Frequently Asked Questions' webpage. Arts NSW maintained that it was the inquirers' responsibility to 'check the website for any new information'.¹

This brought up the first of many issues, as many arts workers were unhappy with the level of support and information that was available at these briefing sessions, particularly the answering of specific inquiries with a FAQs page.

'That's not a personalised response and I think the reason that people work in the arts is because they like contact with people... You know if we wanted to work in an industry that was about automation and about computers and fact sheets and "check the website" then I think we'd probably work in a bank,' says Lachlan Philpott.

This only further emphasises the industry concern with the perceived 'hands-off' attitude of Arts NSW during the changeover process and a lack of expertise and understanding resulting from the restructure of the department. 'The basic relationship that artistic directors or arts workers have with staff in an organisation like Arts NSW has been completely destroyed and the understanding of the company history and the sympathy or

empathy with a company and the difficulties of a particular place [are gone],' Mr Philpott argues.

This is also affecting regional companies like Outback Theatre for Young People who in the past have relied on the advice, enthusiasm and moral support of Arts NSW staff to keep them in the know about what's happening in the arts community, and to stave off feelings of isolation that come from geographical distance from major urban centres. Another concern for regional theatre companies is the competition for funding between all arts organisations, and the stringent criteria that any application must have a clear strategy to promote participation in and access to the arts. In the 2009 round there was only one twelve-page application form for Program Funding, regardless of the artform of the applicant. On the other hand a separate thirteen-page application form for Project Funding was necessary for each art form of the project in mind. All the applicants were in this pool together, there was no division between dance, theatre or music.



Above > Mammoth and Dinosaur (Joshua Consandine and Kathryn Puie) in Theatre of Image's *Lulie and the Iceberg*. Photo: Branco Gaica.

'What we do is develop skills and develop really great works, but we don't get massive audience numbers because there just isn't the population to support it. Where's the equity there?' asks acting chair and former artistic director of Outback, Amy Hardingham. Competing against professional theatre companies in urban areas with the capacity to earn income from box office and workshop sales, and therefore increase audience participation, means that Outback Theatre's funding has been cut this year.

When asked about this format Arts NSW media spokesperson argued that this 'shifted the focus to applications based on purpose... this approach was implemented to make the application process simpler, particularly for arts organisations operating across artform'.

However many companies found this all-in-one Program Funding application meant the form was confusing, repetitive, lengthy and extremely time-consuming, particularly for small to medium theatre companies with little time or resources to devote the many hours required to fill out the application.

In November 2008 companies were asked via a survey to offer feedback on the new application process. 'I suspect much of the feedback received was about the application form itself, and we hope that the 2010 process will run smoother,' says Tim McGarry of Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People.

An Arts NSW media spokesperson has confirmed that the information they received from the survey is 'being analysed to inform further improvements to the Arts Funding Program including the development of the 2010 funding guidelines'.

The most significant change in the program was the reduction of the Program Funding term to one year only, with no applications available for triennial funding. This means that companies who have received triennial funding in previous years are, for the moment, safe. But for companies who received only minimal amounts for 2009, there can be no long term security or plan until there is more support from Arts NSW.

NSW Shadow Minister for Volunteering and the Arts, Anthony Roberts, was emphatic when asked about his opinion on the reduction of the funding term: 'It is crazy—how can you plan?' he asks. Similarly he was concerned about the 'state of depression' in NSW and the importance of valuing the artistic community. 'The arts have been neglected for such a long time that if we don't inject capital...and that means not only funding, but also providing a level of respect and a level of acknowledgement that it's the arts that really make us, then we will see the flow on effect in ten to fifteen years time,' Roberts says.

For Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD), who did not receive funding from the Australia Council this year, and experienced a more than 50 per cent cut in their Program Funding from Arts NSW from \$125,000 in 2008 to \$60,000 in 2009, the current funding process was and is a frustration.

'It's made it hard to plan for our future...as we can't employ an artistic director this year on a full time basis. And we can't do creative development on any projects,' says ATOD's general manager Shauna Wolfson. 'We are able to continue our schools program this year, but we wouldn't be able to do that if we didn't have the money in the bank, from our savings,' she says.

Receiving a funding cut has forced ATOD's board to re-think its artistic model, to look at ways of restructuring what they do and how they deliver it. Additionally Wolfson was concerned about the difficulty in receiving detailed feedback from Arts NSW on the outcomes of her application.

'I understand that it is time consuming but it is a worthwhile investment of their [Arts NSW] time,' she says. 'What we are after is feedback that isn't censored in any way. That is straightforward and honest. It might be hard for the companies to hear. [But] as much detail and honesty as possible is going to only benefit the companies,' Wolfson argues.

Another major concern of many professionals within the youth arts sector is the lack of consistency between levels of funding for youth theatre companies in NSW and other states, given that NSW has the highest number of children and young people in Australia.

'It's impossible for a NSW funded company to compete in any way, shape or form with interstate companies. I dread using the word 'compete' but we cannot possibly be compared in terms of the money we receive for staging and production values—we just don't have that kind of funding,' says McGarry.

The difficulty in researching this article, in getting companies and individuals to comment on the issue, as well as a month of emails and phone calls to Arts NSW to obtain a comment for this story, is testimony to the uncertainty and difficulty the youth arts sector in this state is facing at the moment. We asked Arts NSW why the position of youth arts project officer was cut and were not given a clear response. Director of arts development, Hugo Leschen, was also contacted but did not comment directly. Instead a media spokesperson for Arts NSW wrote that:

'Arts NSW maintains a strong commitment to helping young people realise their artistic and creative potential...the highly successful ConnectEd Program will continue to support access to the arts for disadvantaged schools across NSW and Indent continues to provide opportunities for young people to access and participate in drug and alcohol free events and develop skills through staging events.

Arts NSW will also continue to work with other Government organisations and the arts and cultural sector to meet its commitments to youth arts and arts education, including the directions in the NSW Youth Action Plan.'

So what now? As the community braces itself for more changes in 2010, the youth arts sector should remain united, remain positive and ensure that full checks and balances are in place, and the maximum amount of community consultation is explored in any restructure of Arts NSW Funding Program for the future.

The most positive outlook to come out of this investigation was ironically from a NSW arts worker who wished to remain anonymous: 'There are some really amazing artists in this state and some really amazing stories in this state that only the arts can tell, and I believe that will prevail.' ✪

Phoebe Macrossan is a freelance arts and film writer living in Sydney. Originally from Brisbane, Phoebe is very passionate about the arts in Australia and about accountability, communication, service and support in government!

YPAA Official Comment

Arts NSW conducted a cultural grants review in 2008 and a new funding system is being implemented in 2009, however this is considered a transition year. YPAA has expressed our concern to Arts NSW about the lack of sector consultation in this review process. YPAA also sees that with staff and funding structures changing at Arts NSW, the sector is left in an uncertain and difficult environment, including the loss of a dedicated youth arts position. We encourage YPAA members to contact Arts NSW during this transition year, as now is our time to lobby for any changes to the suggested model of funding.

We encourage Arts NSW to develop a clearer and articulated direction for Youth Arts development across NSW and engage our sector in developing this vision.

We support Arts NSW to have greater transparency around the priorities and processes used behind decision making and strongly request expediency and clarity in regards to funding decisions. This allows companies and individuals to operate in a more certain environment. We are also aware that no official communication with the sector has occurred around the ConnectEd review and we will be arranging for a meeting in the near future to begin the sector briefing process.

References

- 1 Arts NSW Funding Program 2009- Program Application Form, 2008, p2.