

# Love your work: training, retaining and connecting artists in theatre

Paper for the Major Performing Arts Board  
and the Theatre Board

## **Love Your Work: Training, Retaining and Connecting Artists in Theatre**

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Author: Jackie Bailey

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## Introduction

The theatre sector in Australia is characterised by interconnection. Large and small companies draw on each other for inspiration and resources. The artform itself is inherently collaborative: practitioners come together to develop ideas and put on shows. People talk to each other. They know each other, and they try to see each other's work. It is a sector built on strong, personal relationships.

These connections across the sector exist despite the intensely competitive nature of obtaining funding and audiences, and despite the Australia Council's funding approach, which separates the larger companies from the small-to-medium sector, and divides companies within the small-to-medium sector between those receiving triennial, annual and project-based funding.

The future vibrancy and sustainability of the major performing arts (MPA) theatre companies depends on the ongoing health of the Australian theatre 'ecology' – independent theatre artists, small, medium and large companies, venues and festivals. The MPA companies are in a position of relative financial strength and recently received a funding injection to address artform and artist development. It is timely, then, for the major performing arts board (MPAB) and the MPA theatre companies to consider some of the key issues which will affect the sector's future viability. The research identifies these key issues as:

- Creative workforce succession: where are the directors, artistic directors, designers and other key creatives of the future going to come from and what can the sector do to support their development now?
- Interconnections: how can the theatre sector's connections be strengthened to support and manage risk-taking, address issues of talent development and succession, and provide benefit for both the small-to-medium and large companies?

The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues and identify recommendations for future action by Australian theatre companies and the MPAB.

## Background

In early 2007, the theatre board and the MPAB began working together to look at how to ensure the Australia Council's approach to the theatre sector supports the sector's natural interconnections. As a first step, the MPAB began to map the interconnections within the theatre sector. The aims of the research were to:

- understand where the administrative and artistic managers of major performing arts (MPA) companies come from, in order to ensure that there is a sufficient talent pool for the continued sustainability of the MPA sector; and
- understand the artistic connections between the major and small-to-medium theatre companies in order to support the continued artistic vibrancy of the MPA sector.

The research showed that, unlike the MPA dance, opera and music companies, there was a significant, quantifiable connection between the MPA and small-to-medium theatre companies. Six of the nine (67 per cent) MPA theatre company artistic directors had gained experience in the small-to-medium sector as an important element in their development into artistic professionals who are capable of managing MPA companies. Furthermore, of the 15 new Australian mainstage works presented by MPA companies in 2006, six (40 per cent) were co-productions with, or had in some way originated from, the small-to-medium sector. MPA companies were also found to regularly present existing Australian works in their education and mainstage programs which had originated in the small-to-medium sector.

The results indicated a strong level of connection of the MPA sector's artistic vibrancy to the small-to-medium sector as measured by the number of new works derived from that sector. They also indicated the dependence of the sustainability of the MPA companies' artistic workforce on the small-to-medium sector, as represented by the high degree of succession from the small-to-medium sector.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time as the above research was being carried out, the MPAB had commissioned *Anticipating Change in the Major Performing Arts Sector*, which identified the external trends which will affect the future sustainability of the MPA companies. One of the key issues identified in *Anticipating Change* was what one artistic director called an impending 'crisis' in the availability of directors who are capable of directing for the MPA mainstage.

The MPAB requested further, detailed research into the interconnections within the theatre sector, including the issue of creative workforce succession.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the sufficiency of creative expertise for the ongoing sustainability of the MPA theatre sector, and the interconnections between the MPA and small-to-medium theatre sector which are essential to the artistic vibrancy of Australian theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> The two initial pieces of interconnections research are included at Appendices 1 and 2.

## Methodology

Research was conducted via a literature review, quantitative data collection and a series of thirty interviews with theatre practitioners working in the MPA and small-to-medium sectors. Interviewees were drawn from a representative sample of companies funded by the Australia Council as 'major performing arts' (MPA) theatre companies, key organisations (KO)<sup>2</sup> theatre companies, and one-year or project funded companies. Interviewees were drawn from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, and included:

- Artistic directors
- General managers
- Artist development managers
- Production managers
- Freelance directors
- Academics

A full list of interviewees and the range of questions asked is included at Appendix 3.

The research findings were then tested with a small focus group of interviewees on 30 July 2008 before being presented to the wider sector for feedback.

Throughout the paper, quotes from interviewees have been used and are indicated with quotation marks.

## Definitions

A few key terms used throughout the paper include the following:

- 'Key organisations' (KO) theatre companies are those funded by the Australia Council (and in most instances, by State governments) on a three-yearly basis. KO theatre companies include companies from the Australian small-to-medium theatre sector. A full list of KO theatre companies at the time of data collection (January-August 2008) is included at Appendix 4.
- 'Major performing arts' (MPA) companies are those funded by the Federal and State governments via tripartite, rolling, triennial agreements. A full list is included at Appendix 4.
- 'Small-to-medium theatre sector' refers to the Australian not-for-profit theatre companies and practitioners not included in the MPA cohort. The sector includes the KOs as well as a large number of companies and individual practitioners not funded by government (or which may be funded from time to time on a project basis).
- 'The Australian theatre sector' in this paper refers to the not-for-profit theatre sector. See the next section for more details.

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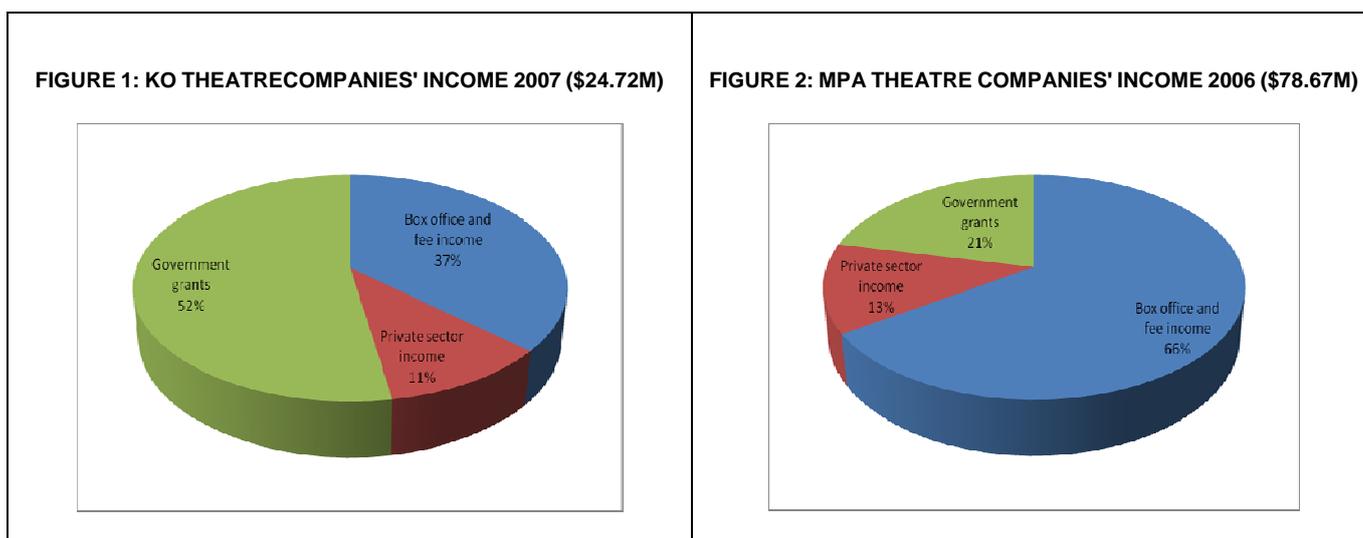
<sup>2</sup> Key organisations (KOs) at the time of data collection, January-August 2008, as listed at Appendix 4. The group of KOs funded by the Australia Council has since changed; for more information go to <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au>

## The Australian theatre sector

The Australian not-for-profit theatre sector is made up of large, medium and small companies and individual practitioners working on a project basis. The theatre workforce is highly contract-based and casual, with most shows in Australia being staged by cast and crew employed on a project-by-project basis.

The Australia Council currently provides triennial funding to nine major performing arts (MPA) theatre companies and twenty-seven KO performing arts companies (see Appendix 4 for the complete list)<sup>3</sup> which form part of the small-to-medium theatre sector.

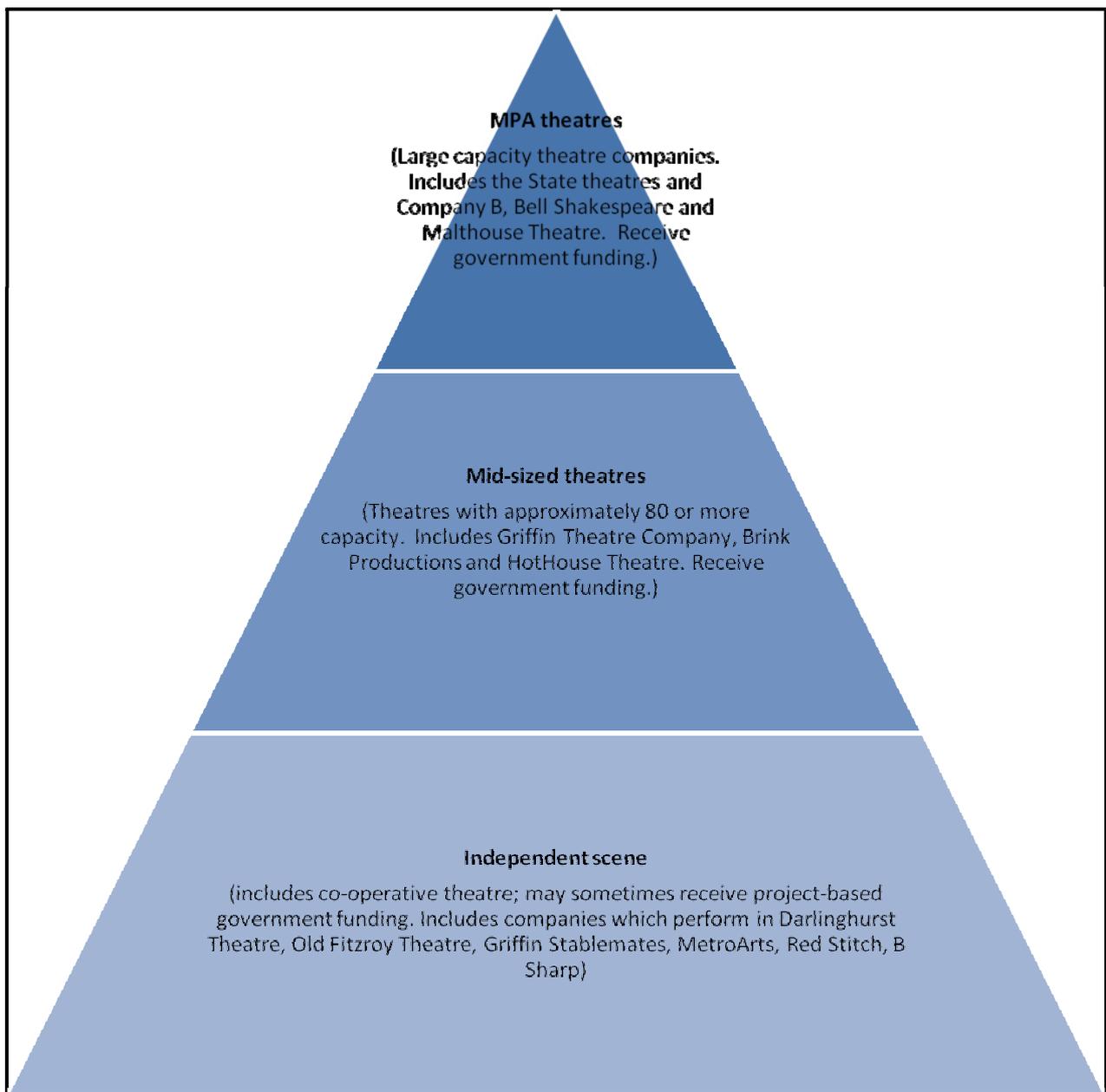
Total box office and fee income for the MPA and KO theatre companies in 2007 was \$60.75m, the majority of which was earned by the MPA companies, reflecting their box office-focused business models and scale of productions. MPA companies take box office risk on their shows, making the companies heavily reliant on subscriptions and ticket sales for financial sustainability. For KO theatre companies, government funding generally makes up a higher proportion of overall funding and companies generally do not take as much box office risk, nor do they have subscribers. They often sell shows to venues, festivals and larger companies, sometimes sharing the box office risk with a venue or larger company. This is reflected in the make-up of the sectors' income, as seen in Figures 1 and 2.



The Australian not-for-profit theatre sector could be represented as in Figure 3.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2. This includes circus, physical theatre and puppet theatre. Please note that for the purposes of this paper, the circus and puppetry artforms have not been included in the research.

FIGURE 3: AUSTRALIAN NOT-FOR-PROFIT THEATRE SECTOR



### The theatre artform

Theatre companies in Australia cover the spectrum of theatre practice, ranging from devised work to text-based work and narrative to non-narrative work.

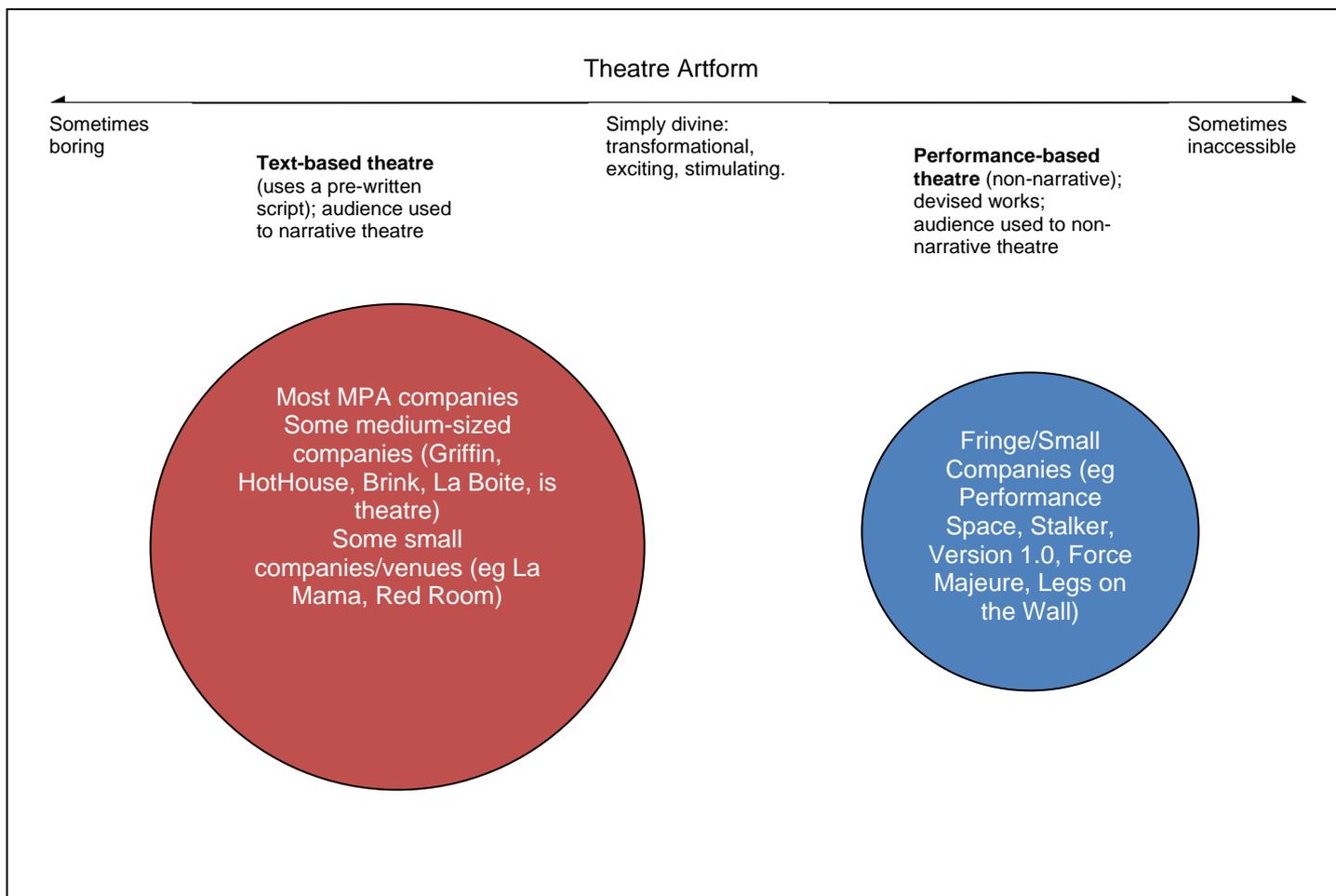
The MPA theatre companies tend to focus on text-based work, whereas the small-to-medium sector includes companies which create non-narrative, performance and movement-based works which are 'devised.' Examples of such companies include Force Majeure, Urban Theatre Projects and Version 1.0. The small-to-medium sector also includes companies which stage text-based works, for example, Griffin Theatre Company (Sydney), La Boite (Brisbane) and istheatre (Hobart).<sup>4</sup> 'Devised work' may involve a writer but often does not. The work is not based on a script at the outset. MPA companies rarely stage this type of work on the mainstage

<sup>4</sup> Note: This company has since been replaced by the Tasmanian Theatre Company.

(with the exception of Malthouse Theatre). However, they may, at times, include devised works in their artform development arms; Sydney Theatre Company (STC), for example, includes occasional works of this nature in its Wharf2Loud program, such as *Guilt Frame*.

One interviewee from the performance-based theatre sector illustrated the distinction in Figure 4:

FIGURE 4: THE THEATRE ARTFORM



The 2005 report by Mary Vallentine AM into the state of Australia’s MPA theatre companies described the situation for freelance directors and designers as ‘critical.’ That report noted a decline in the number of opportunities for directors and designers in the non-profit theatre sector, opera, commercial theatre and the film and television industry. According to Vallentine, only a handful of directors can sustain a full-time career. Furthermore, fees for directors had not increased to any significant level, and had not changed since 1996.<sup>5</sup>

Since that report, the MPA companies received an ongoing base funding increase through the second Review of the Funding Model in 2006/07. This was provided by governments to address issues surrounding artist and artform development. The impact of this funding is yet to be measured.

<sup>5</sup> Vallentine, Mary, *National Survey Report of Theatre Companies*, commissioned by the Australian Major Performing Arts Group, 2005, p.10.

Interviewees for this paper agreed that the additional funding would assist MPA companies to continue or re-commence artist development programs which had been adversely affected by financial pressures. However, all interviewees agreed that there continue to be significant barriers to directors sustaining careers and becoming sufficiently experienced to direct for the MPA mainstage. Difficulties in relation to the available talent pool of directors, designers and other creatives for the MPA sector, and the sustainability of their careers, are deeply ingrained and endemic to the sector, and will require targeted attention by companies and the Australia Council to find long-term solutions.

## Creative workforce succession: directors

The theatre artistic workforce is almost completely casualised and contract-based. A theatre company will generally employ a director, designer and actors on a show-by-show basis. Directors who have full-time employment with theatre companies are artistic directors and, in some companies, associate artistic directors. The remaining directors are hired as freelancers.

The career of a theatre director has changed markedly over the last twenty years. In the past, freelance directors such as Michael Gow, Richard Wherrett and Neil Armfield made sustainable livings directing for non-profit theatre, commercial drama and opera. Even ten years ago, theatre directors could moonlight in the Australian television industry to support their work.

In the current environment, there are fewer opportunities for directors; barriers prevent the transition to the MPA mainstage; and it is extremely difficult to earn a sufficient income to remain in the industry once a director has made the leap to the MPA sector. The issues affecting the available talent succession pool of directors for MPA theatre companies include:

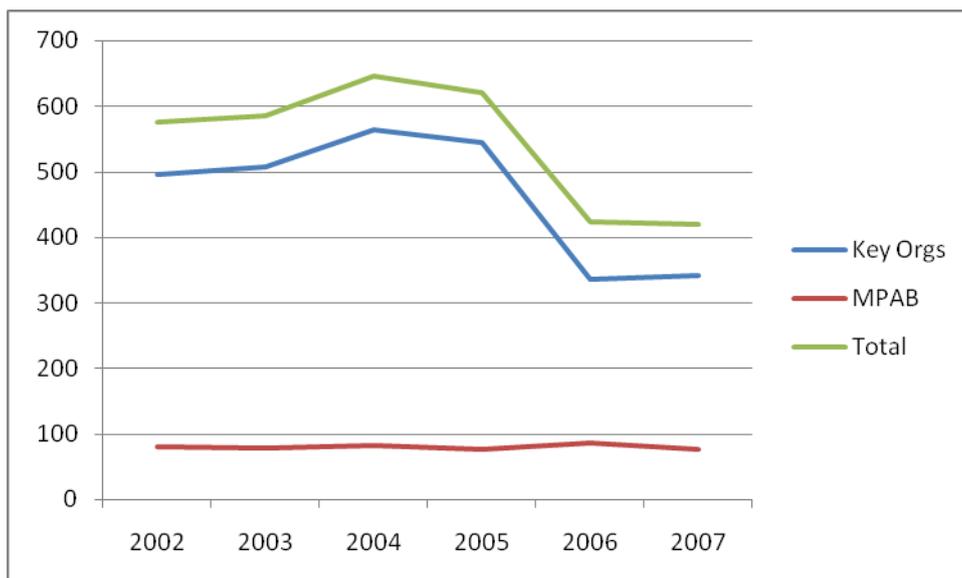
- the limited number of opportunities to direct for MPA companies and mid-sized theatre companies;
- low wages for theatre directors;
- barriers to transitioning to the MPA mainstage;
- the quality of tertiary studies in directing in Australia; and
- the level of MPA companies' willingness to take risks on new directors.

### Limited opportunities

There are now fewer opportunities to direct for non-profit theatre, as demonstrated by the decline in the total number of works performed by KO and MPA theatre companies from 576 in 2002 to 419 in 2007 (see Figure 5).

Interviewees approximate that there are between twenty to thirty established directors in Australia who are constantly drawn upon by the MPA companies and manage to sustain 'careers' as theatre directors. A number of these are on the staff of MPA or mid-sized theatre companies as associate artistic directors or artistic directors. The rest are freelance directors, who might obtain occasional work in other sectors or professions (academia, television) to sustain their theatre work.

FIGURE 5: TOTAL NUMBER OF WORKS, MPA AND KO THEATRE COMPANIES (COMBINED), 2002-2007



Currently there are approximately 86 opportunities for freelance directors to direct for MPA and mid-sized theatres in Australia per year, of which approximately half (44 works) are MPA mainstage works, 19 are MPA artform development or education works, 12 are mid-sized theatre mainstage works and the remaining 11 works are mid-sized theatre artform development or education works (see Figures 5 and 6 below).<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 6: ESTIMATED NUMBER OF DIRECTOR OPPORTUNITIES, MPA AND MID-SIZED THEATRES, 2008<sup>7</sup>

	MAINSTAGE				ARTFORM DEVELOPMENT/EDUCATION			
	Total no. of shows	No. Directed by artistic director	No. Directed by associate director	No. Directed by freelance directors	Total no. Of shows	No. Directed by artistic director	No. Directed by associate director	No. Directed by freelance directors
MPA	69	15	10	44	31	2	6	19
Mid-sized	17	2	3	12	13	1	1	11
Total	86	17	13	56	44	3	7	30
		20%	15%	65%		7%	16%	68%

<sup>6</sup> These figures are approximations for the sector, based on data collected from the following companies: Bell Shakespeare, Black Swan Theatre Company, Company B, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Sydney Theatre Company, Griffin Theatre Company, La Boite Theatre and HotHouse Theatre.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

FIGURE 7: ESTIMATED FREELANCE DIRECTOR OPPORTUNITIES, MPA AND MID-SIZED THEATRES, 2008

Freelance director opportunities	86
MPA theatres mainstage	51%
Mid-sized theatres mainstage	14%
MPA theatres artform development and education programs	22%
Mid-sized theatres artform development and education programs	13%

An 'emerging' director is defined in this paper as someone who has gained experience in the small, independent theatre sector, possibly also the mid-sized theatre sector and the MPA artform development programs, and is seeking to work for the MPA mainstage. For such a director, there are approximately 42 works per year which they might be qualified to direct (MPA and mid-sized theatre artform, education and development programs and mid-sized theatre mainstage works). To obtain this work, an emerging director would also be competing, not only with other emerging directors, but also with established directors making a living from working in both the MPA and mid-sized theatres. It is likely that at the most, between ten and fifteen 'emerging' freelance directors would gain the opportunity to direct one of these 42 shows, supporting themselves with casual work in other industries and probably also paying to stage shows in the independent sector at the same time.

An 'established', mid-career freelance director is defined as someone who has directed for the MPA and mid-sized theatre mainstage, and may have also been a company Associate Director, but is not yet an artistic director of a company. Established directors would compete for the mid-sized theatre mainstage shows, and the artform and education program shows which are not taken by emerging directors, as well as competing with each other for the 44 MPA mainstage shows directed by freelancers per year. Assuming that all established directors each do approximately four shows per year, this means that approximately 18-20 established directors can make \$40,000 a year working in the Australian theatre industry, working at full capacity. artistic directors of the companies direct approximately 17 mainstage works per year; if they did not direct any works at all, or reduced the number, another three to four established freelance directors might find work per year.

It is clear that a simple, obvious barrier to succession planning amongst directors (and by extrapolation, the other key members of creative teams) is the limited number of opportunities for both emerging and established directors in Australia. The MPA and mid-sized theatre industry can currently provide work for approximately 18-20 freelance, mid-career directors, and can foster between ten and fifteen emerging directors, in any given year. All of these directors would need to supplement their income with work in other industries.

## Wages

A major issue facing the theatre sector is the departure of established, mid-career directors from the sector. A main reason for their departure is the wage and career structure for theatre directing.

Established freelance theatre directors will move between the small-to-medium theatre companies and the MPA theatre companies to secure sufficient directing work and artistic variance. A director will typically receive approximately \$10,000 for a production, and sometimes, a small proportion (around 2 per cent) of the box office takings. A theatre director, at the top of his/her game, will earn, at most, approximately \$40,000 per year from directing for

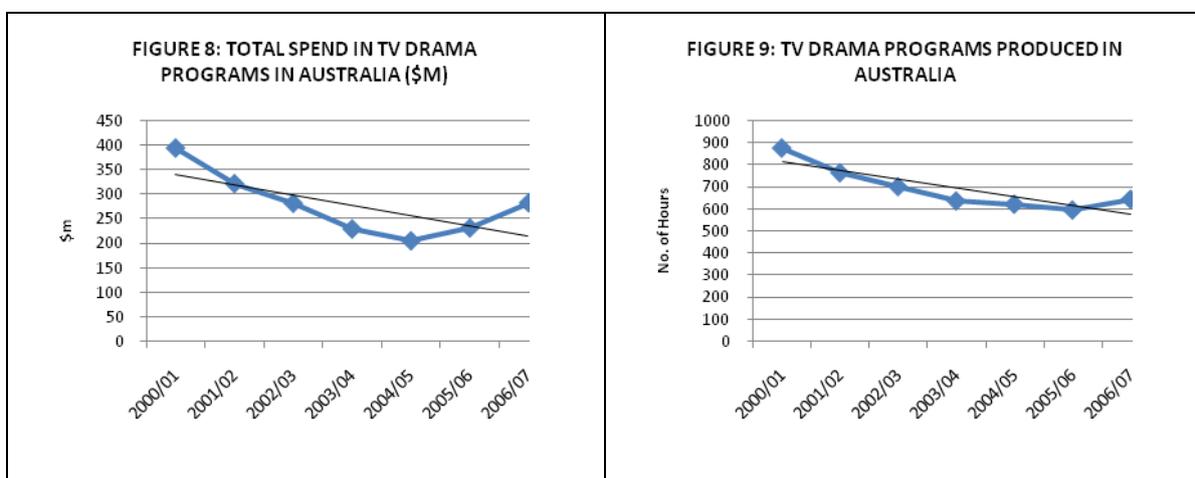
theatre. This would be based on directing four shows in a year. Almost all interviewees agreed that this was already too many shows for a director to do in a year, sometimes leading to overwork and compromised artistic standards, but that directors were forced to take on too much work in order to sustain a living.

Most theatre directors, including established directors who have directed for the mainstage of an MPA company, cannot sustain a full-time theatre directing career. Many directors will obtain work in other areas in which they might have skills – one MPA company's Associate Director makes models for film sets to enable him to work in theatre. Others will do casual work in ticketing and hospitality – one of MPA theatre's 'hottest' young directors was, until last year, making a living from working in the box office of the MPA theatre in which he had directed mainstage performances.

*'Once you're established, where do you go? The artistic director in Australia structure really needs to be re-considered; people stay in those roles too long.'*

The structure of a director's career also means that they need to move around the country to do enough shows to make a living. Experienced directors and designers leave the theatre sector around the age of 35-45, at the time when one interviewee noted that 'mortgages and families' begin to take precedence.

Some directors and designers do manage to combine their theatre work with other jobs, such as academic work and acting. The decline in the Australian TV industry has significantly affected the ability of directors and designers to manage this. The total number of TV drama productions in Australia declined by 26 per cent from 876 in 2000/2001, to 645 in 2006/07, and total budgets declined by 28 per cent, from \$393m to \$282m (see Figures 8 and 9).



In a small industry like Australia, the removal of one drama production can negatively impact the sustainability of many theatre directors. For example, *Blue Heelers* used to be produced in Melbourne and offered a training program so theatre directors could learn how to direct for television. As this production no longer exists, the transition is not so easy and the opportunities in television are no longer there. In Brisbane, fifteen years ago, theatre practitioners could survive by making money on the Gold Coast in the film and television industry, but the decline in production has forced theatre practitioners out of the sector. There are also fewer commercial

stage drama opportunities in Australia; whilst there are commercial musicals, they are often franchised and bring a director from overseas.

Working overseas is one way that a handful of Australian directors sustain a living – Benedict Andrews, for example, works almost half the year in Germany, making it possible for him to work exclusively in theatre. Directors make these opportunities for themselves – there is no ‘pathway’ overseas as such.

As digital distribution of the live performance emerges as a potential business area for MPA companies, there may also be scope to train directors to film live performance in opera, dance and even theatre for digital distribution. This may emerge as another area in which theatre directors could supplement their theatre income.<sup>8</sup>

One artistic director believed that one of the main problems facing mid-career freelance directors is that they have nowhere to go ‘upwards,’ because artistic directors of Australian theatre companies ‘hold on to their tenure for too long.’ He pointed to Julian Meyrick’s proposed model of an independent venue which, every three years, changes hands to a new independent theatre company.<sup>9</sup> Another example of a way to keep artistic direction vibrant and to train emerging artistic directors is the HotHouse Theatre model. HotHouse is managed by an artistic directorate of seven including an artistic manager, as a way to train artistic directors and ensure artistic relevance and vibrancy for the company.

### The ideal pathway

There is no secret formula to create the perfect theatre director for the MPA mainstage. However, interviewees generally agreed that there were several key elements required if a director were to ‘make it’ to the MPA level:

- A solid theoretical framework for their understanding of theatre and the society in which theatre operates. This could be gained through tertiary studies, life experience and time overseas.
- A body of work which demonstrates commitment, vision, daring and the potential to fill a space bigger than a mid-sized theatre. Ideally, a director has had the opportunity to direct and experiment with classics *and* contemporary drama. Opportunities can be gained in the independent sector but more ideally are gained in theatres which expose the director to artistic rigour and more experienced directors whom they can learn from.
- A director who is looking to work in the MPA sector should be seeking work in mid-sized theatres and

*‘The crunch time is mid-career. People leave and this has an effect on the quality of theatre output.’*

*‘Directors and designers take as much work as they can to make ends meet, and this negatively affects artistic standards.’*

<sup>8</sup> Australia Council for the Arts, *Don’t Panic: The Impacts of Digital Technology on the Major Performing Arts Industry*, Discussion Paper, May 2008.

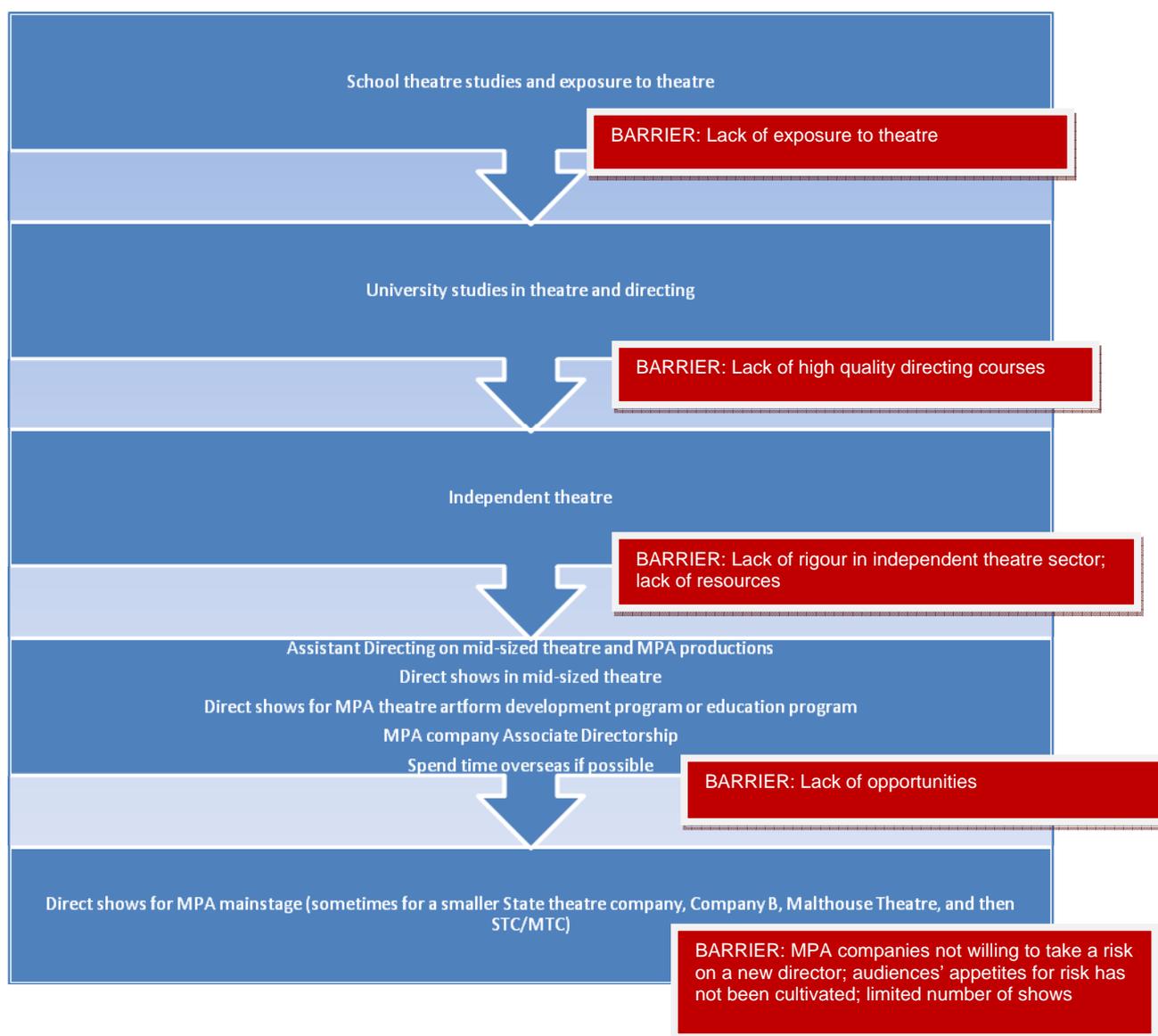
<sup>9</sup> “Trapped by the past,” *Platform Papers*, No.3, January 2005.

MPA artform development programs, starting off as assistant directors and doing their own productions in the independent sector, and working their way up to the MPA mainstage.

As many interviewees stated, there is no substitute for ‘putting on a show’ for teaching a director the craft. To develop the skills and attributes of a good director, a person needs time, space, collaboration, mentorship and encouragement. In responding to the question, ‘is there a failsafe way for ‘growing’ artists?’ one interviewee responded that yes, there is: enabling directors to work with and watch their seniors. The interviewee pointed to the Jim Sharman’s Lighthouse Company in Adelaide, which existed for two years in the early 1980s: the company’s young artists included Neil Armfield, Geoffrey Rush, Gillian Jones, Stephen Sewell, Alan John and others who are now Australian theatre’s senior artists.

The ideal path for a director to the MPA mainstage could look something like this:

FIGURE 10: ‘IDEAL’ DIRECTOR PATHWAY TO MPA SECTOR



### **Barriers: schools education**

A good director will have benefited from early exposure to theatre at a young age; cultural experiences which inspire, such as international festival programs or theatre visits beyond the realm of the routine theatre-in-education programs.

Interviewees noted the passion and commitment of many school theatre teachers, ensuring that their students are exposed to theatre shows. However, this is not consistent across schools or States.

### **Barriers: tertiary education**

One theatre director noted that ‘great directors in Australia are being made by exception, not the rule, as a result of the education system.’

Interviewees all agreed that the tertiary education in Australia for directing was falling short of its potential. Flinders University (SA) was identified by several interviewees as providing the best offering for directors, with an undergraduate course that gives practical and theoretical training in directing, ensuring that graduates have a sound understanding of the theatre tradition and society in which they operate. The one-year course in directing at the National Institute for Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in NSW was viewed by many interviewees as inadequate, providing insufficient opportunities for students to direct throughout the year and not giving them a chance to work with experienced actors. The Victorian College of Arts (VCA) course in directing was viewed as more focused, but again, too short a program to really develop directors.

Graduate directors’ theatre ‘literacy’ was perceived as a key gap in skills which institutions are not addressing. One interviewee put it this way: ‘If they don’t study the history of ideas, theatre history, and dramaturgy, then we can’t ‘talk’ to them; we are speaking different languages.’

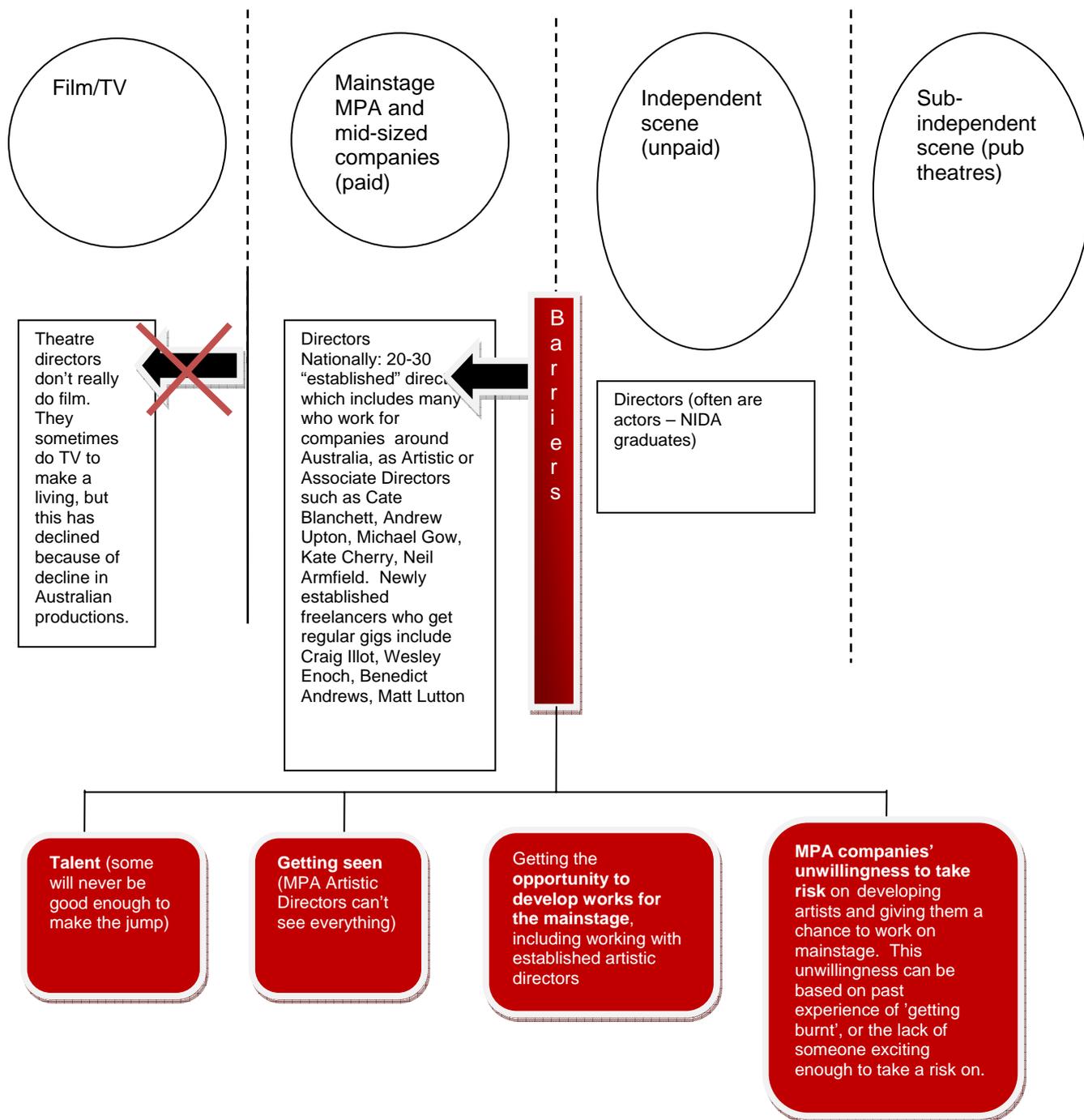
### **Barriers: independent theatre**

One of the most significant barriers to theatre directors becoming experienced enough to transition to the MPA mainstage is the kind of experience gained in the independent theatre scene, and the scarcity of opportunities to move up from this sector. One interviewee described the Sydney independent scene as a ‘large, undifferentiated sprawl of companies, spaces, artists and values which has grown out of a mix of determination and self-interest over the last decade.’ A theatre director described the independent sector and the tertiary training offered for directors as cultivating a ‘pro-am’ culture in theatre over the last ten years. Directors and actors stage works, bearing the box office risk themselves, in order to get work and experience. In addition to the lack of resources for independent theatre, one of the main problems identified by interviewees regarding the independent scene is the potential lack of artistic and critical ‘rigour’ – the possibility of working in the independent sector for years without actually ‘growing’ as an artist, because of a lack of working with one’s ‘betters’.

One interviewee described the Sydney theatre scene in Figure 11:

*‘The education system is not producing directors who either want to be, or are capable of, challenging and innovating.’*

FIGURE 11: THE SYDNEY THEATRE SCENE



**Barriers: opportunities in mid-sized theatre, MPA artform development programs and assistant directorships**

Interviewees noted the 'shrinkage' of the mid-sized theatre and theatre-in-education sector in Australia as one of the main contributing factors to the decline in the opportunities for directors to obtain the experience needed to ultimately work for the MPA sector. Interviewees pointed to the decline in the number of mid-sized theatre companies (such as Melbourne's Anthill) and the closure of regional theatre companies. Interviewees also noted that many of the smaller venues, hothouses of talent in Australia, have also declined, some no longer able to offer wages and, as

a result, becoming increasingly pro-am in nature. At the other end of the scale, MPA company productions are becoming larger in scale and vision, and the level of skill and experience required to direct for the MPA sector is increasing, contributing to the widening gap between the small-to-medium sector and the 'big' end of town.

Whilst some interviewees would have liked to see increased support for more mid-sized theatre companies, most interviewees generally agreed that the answer was not to attempt to re-open mid-sized theatres, but to focus on the existing theatre infrastructure to support directors to gain the skills and work they need. As one interviewee put it, 'The middle-sized theatres collapsed for a reason, and artists have not chosen to set them up again or to set up replacements.' The only true mid-sized companies remaining could be said to be La Boite (Brisbane), Griffin Theatre Company (Sydney), HotHouse Theatre (Albury-Wodonga) and Brink Productions (Adelaide).

MPA development programs can include initiatives as varied as Company B's support for a 'high-end independent sector' in B Sharp, Assistant Director roles on every mainstage production at State Theatre Company of South Australia (STCSA), or the Blueprints and, more recently, the Wharf2Loud program at STC. Such initiatives were identified as excellent vehicles for the development of artists. For example, Benedict Andrews noted that his assistant directorships at STCSA meant that he could 'get paid and do interesting art.' Interviewees noted that these programs need to be directly linked to measurable outcomes; the success of a program should be measured in terms of the transition of artists to the MPA mainstage, and the program should be continually monitored and modified based on this critical outcome. Assistant directorships, to be successful, needed to be more than glorified 'errand'-running; one interviewee who had been an assistant director noted that the experience, whilst useful in terms of forming relationships, could have been far more beneficial if the director had involved the assistant director in a more creative, hands-on role and regularly debriefed with the assistant director on the creative decision-making process.

#### **Case study: Benedict Andrews, freelance director**

Benedict Andrews is now an 'established' director in the Australian theatre scene. He studied at Flinders University, South Australia, directing for University shows during his time there. He then worked as an Assistant Director on shows for STCSA, before being given the responsibility for the then Magpie theatre-in-education company which he transformed into a theatre for youth company. The company eventually closed, but in the process, Andrews had the opportunity to take artistic risks and develop his craft to the point where he was noticed and picked up into the artist development branch of STC as an associate artistic director, with Wesley Enoch, managing the Wharf2Loud program and directing occasional shows for the STC mainstage. During this period, Andrews was resourced and 'allowed to fail,' something which all interviewees agree is critical to a director's development.

Until recently, Andrews had to complement his theatrical work with casual box office work. He now works overseas for approximately half of the year in Germany.

## Barriers: directing shows for the MPA mainstage

The KO theatre companies (such as HotHouse Theatre, Arena Theatre) and smaller MPA companies such as the STCSA did not report difficulties sourcing directors for their shows, which may indicate the difference in experience required for these companies and their willingness to take risks on untried directors (see the Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) case study below). By contrast, Company B and STC indicated that they are already struggling to find directors for their mainstage programs. In the 2008 season, Company B employed three directors who had not directed for the MPA mainstage before, indicating their willingness to take risks if a director was deemed to have the potential to work on the mainstage, as well as the Company's artistic vision being deeply linked with experimentation.

By and large, the MPA State theatre companies are more risk averse than smaller companies because of their reliance on subscriptions and the box office for financial sustainability. Several interviewees noted that Sydney and Melbourne State theatre companies, in particular, do not currently cultivate their audience's appetite for risk. When risk is taken by these companies, it is on the script or production rather than on the director. In Queensland and South Australia, by contrast, State theatre companies take 'calculated risks' on freelance directors in the mainstage program, in order to cultivate local talent and in response to a more limited available talent pool.

*'There is a hunger at State theatre companies for directors who can work with actors and make great theatre.'*

STC and Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) are currently the least likely MPA companies to employ a freelance director with no previous MPA mainstage experience, although they will often be willing to take on a director who has proven their ability on another MPA mainstage (such as Company B or STCSA) and in their own artform development programs – Wesley Enoch and Benedict Andrews worked as Associate artistic directors at STC on the Wharf2Loud program as well as directing for the STC mainstage, after already having demonstrated their potential in smaller MPA companies and the mid-sized theatres. Company B, STCSA and Black Swan Theatre Company (BSTC) are all more likely to take risks on directors who have demonstrated their potential solely in the small and mid-sized theatre sector.

In this way there appears to be a mini-path within the MPA sector: directors who first prove themselves in the smaller MPA companies may then be picked up in the STC artform development or education programs, or as an Associate Director for MTC or STC, and may 'graduate' to the MTC or STC mainstage. This could be due to the larger pool of experienced directors available to MTC and STC in the Melbourne and Sydney markets as well as the limited number of opportunities to direct for the MTC and STC mainstage and the greater box office exposure of these companies.

### **Case study: QTC**

In Queensland, there is no clear 'pathway' for directors. Queensland tertiary institutions do not offer a directing course, and Brisbane has MetroArts but no other genuine equivalents to the Sydney or Melbourne small theatre scene (such as the Old Fitz Theatre and the Darlinghurst Theatre in Sydney or La Mama and Red Stitch in Melbourne).

QTC sees itself as playing a mix of roles because of the lack of small and mid-level opportunities. The difference between QTC and other State theatre companies could be described as one of attitude and need: as a result of a limited talent pool in Brisbane, coupled with a sense of responsibility to cultivate Queensland artists, QTC takes an attitude of scouting for talent and cultivating it. The company looks well beyond the independent theatre scene in Brisbane for its emerging talent, scouting the music scene and the visual arts for theatre potentials. QTC has 'creative assistant' roles which are used to place directors or designers with identified potential within an experienced team to take an observational role in a step-up from a secondment. In production management, the company looks at the casuals it has on staff and identifies who could be pushed towards getting more experience and giving more to the company. As the problem of a limited available talent pool spreads to other States, we are beginning to see other State theatre companies similarly taking on the development roles previously filled by the mid-sized sector.

### **Artistic director succession**

Interviewees agreed that artistic director succession was a major issue for the sector for all sized theatres. The artistic director role requires a special combination of artistic vision and management, and to be capable of this role, artists need specific mentoring and experience in an organisational context. MPA company and small-to-medium company artistic directors interviewed for the research noted the issue of artistic directors, often unprompted by interview questions, indicating that it is front-of-mind for many wondering where their successors will come from.

La Boite's artistic director noted that another conundrum in the future of artistic director succession is the emergence of the 'creative producer' and the idea of theatres as 'artistic hubs,' which is the approach championed in the Australia Council's 'Make it new' re-framing of theatre KOs. This idea gives rise to the artistic director who, rather than having a single artistic vision, can broker artistic collaborations and cultivate an audience's openness and appetite for a broader program unified by a curatorial rather than artistic vision. Finding such artistic directors will be a new challenge for theatre companies committed to the idea of theatres as 'artistic hubs'. Effective creative producers exist, but not so much in the traditional theatre artistic director roles as in the festivals.

*'I can't see anyone out there who is on a path to becoming capable of being this company's artistic director in five, ten or fifteen years time.'*

## Creative workforce succession: other key creatives

### Designers

Almost all interviewees, including those from the mid-sized theatres, indicated that designers were difficult to source. Several interviewees indicated that they have, if anything, more difficulty with sourcing designers for the MPA mainstage than they do directors. Interviewees almost unanimously agreed that the training institutions for design were not giving designers sufficient training in using design software. One production manager noted that the company 'ends up hiring the best draughtsmen but that doesn't make them the best designers.' However, she added, without the basic skills, a designer cannot work for an MPA company. Interviewees also noted that designers coming out of the training institutions did not have skills in time management and collaboration, which are essential to working on a theatre production as part of a team. One operations manager was at the point that he no longer wanted to take on emerging designers, seeing their inability to work in teams as a serious obstacle to the company gaining any benefit in taking them on.

Another observation was that many *new* designers do not have a sufficient knowledge of their artform; it's almost as if they 'haven't seen enough photos of the work of the world's major contemporary theatre designers or looked closely enough at the work of their Australian seniors.'

Transitioning from a small theatre to a larger one is an issue for designers just as it is for directors. Some companies, like STCSA, are employing a design associate position to try to assist this transition. QTC similarly has 'creative assistant' positions which enable the company to bring on assistant directors and designers or other creatives on shows throughout the year.

The low wage issue also affects designers: a set designer working at the top of his/her game would do four shows for four major companies in a year and would earn approximately \$50,000 per year. Many experienced designers begin to leave the sector around the 35-45 year old mark, for the same reasons as directors.

Cities like Brisbane have the additional problems that senior designers leave for Sydney or Melbourne, or leave the industry altogether to go into academic or other roles. La Boite is actively grooming people to become designers to address this gap.

*'In the past, designers trained as technicians and members of a team; nowadays everyone wants to be the lead artist and they miss the point of theatre as collaboration.'*

## Stage managers

Stage management appears to be the one creative workforce discipline in theatre where there is a sufficiency of talent. It is worthwhile noting that stage managers in both mid-sized and MPA companies appear generally to have come from secondments as assistant stage managers in the theatre company whilst still at university. An emerging issue is the labour mobility of stage managers, moving overseas to large events and in and out of the commercial sector where the fees are higher. Stage managers also tend to leave the sector by the age of 35-45. However this is not viewed as problematic, as it is in the other creative skill areas, because there is a sufficiency of upcoming stage managers to fill the roles and a fairly well established training and mentoring path from university to secondment, to assistant stage manager, to stage manager.

## Production managers

There is a gap in production manager succession in Australia. Production management is a highly specialised area and MPA companies are beginning to look overseas to recruit, whilst smaller theatre companies are already struggling to recruit into the role. Some interviewees believe part of the problem is related to a training gap in the tertiary institutions, which are producing skilled technicians and stage managers, but not people who can straddle both roles.

## Actors

Interviewees all agreed that there were probably too many actors rather than too few, except in the 35-45 year old bracket (and particularly male actors in this age bracket); it is difficult to keep experienced actors once they have reached this age bracket, as it is for directors, designers and stage managers. Interviewees also noted that the pool of highly skilled actors from diverse cultural backgrounds needs to be developed if MPA theatre is to become more representative of the Australian population.

Problems with actor training for theatre were identified as:

- vocal training
- difficulty in casting older roles
- too many, unaccredited acting courses
- a lack of understanding of the history and contemporary world of their artform
- an undeveloped sense of dramaturgy

## Craft skills

There is a little discussed but significant issue emerging in theatre artisan succession. Several MPA theatres are facing critical succession issues regarding tailors and wig-makers with specific theatre training. Companies will need to offer fully-paid positions to attract candidates who will then receive on-the-job training. QTC, in need of a wig-maker, noted that if this type of position were seed funded by government it would be attractive to a sponsor or philanthropist.

## Playwrights

Chris Mead of Playwriting Australia noted that an equally important issue is that of writers. Playwriting Australia posits that, of the 1200 'new' Australian productions during the period 2001 to 2006, MPA companies accounted for just 10 to 15 per cent of total activity.<sup>10</sup> According to Mead, writers along with directors lack the pathway up to the MPA sector, once they have achieved success at the independent theatre level.

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<sup>10</sup> Dow, Steve, "Local playwrights consigned to small end of town," *The Age*, 6/6/08.

## What companies are doing?

The MPA and mid-sized theatre companies recognise that succession is a real problem needing attention. Griffin Theatre Company is considering sponsoring a NIDA Masters in directing position (separate to the NIDA one-year course) which will be linked to working in repertoire selection, literary management and an attachment to two shows to understand how a theatre company works. MTC hopes that, with its new studio space in the new Sumner theatre, it will be able to have an artform development arm; at the moment, MTC takes 'risk' on plays rather than directors, generally employing directors who have proven themselves on other MPA mainstages. Company B is changing its approach to the B Sharp program, providing more critical rigour to the shows staged there in an attempt to provide the kind of mentoring environment which emerging directors require.

*'What kind of artist can work between worlds?'*

These efforts indicate MPA and mid-sized companies' willingness to ensure the future succession pool for their sectors. However, the issue of creative workforce succession is one which the research shows requires far more targeted and concerted, sector-wide attention to ensure that Australian theatre companies have the talented directors, designers and other creatives they need into the future.

## Working across the theatre artform

Working across the artform may also emerge as a way to sustain a career as a theatre practitioner. At the moment, there are only a handful of directors who work in both narrative and performance-based, devised theatre forms. However, this may be a way forward, not just in terms of career sustainability, but also for continuous regeneration in the theatre artform. The next section of this paper deals with the possibility for supporting theatre innovation through connection, not only between like-minded companies, but also between artists working across the spectrum of theatre practice.

## Interconnections

The theatre sector is built on relationships. MPA companies and small-to-medium sized companies enter into formal co-production deals, as well as informal relationships such as lending props, making space available at 'mates' rates' and seeing each others' shows. These relationships are vital to the sector's continued health and vibrancy, facilitating the cross-fertilisation of ideas, both artistic and managerial. The MPA and small-to-medium sector companies rely on each other as equally critical elements of the theatre landscape, each company furthering the artform in different ways, and each company serving a different element of the theatre-going audience.

The Interconnections research which preceded this paper found a quantifiable connection between the artistic vibrancy of the MPA and small-to-medium sector (see Appendix 2): as noted previously, of the 15 new Australian mainstage works presented by MPA companies in 2006, six (40 per cent) were co-productions with, or had in some way originated from, the small-to-medium sector.

The research for this paper found an extensive network of relationships and interconnections between companies, as well as areas where connections could be supported and developed to advance artistic vibrancy for small and large companies.

### Formal connections

MPA companies reported varying degrees of formal connections with small-to-medium companies and each other. Malthouse Theatre has an extensive web of connections with the small-to-medium sector. It does not differentiate between its artform development and mainstage productions but includes riskier works in its subscription season in a deliberate attempt to cultivate audience appetite for risk and expose developing artists to the mainstage MPA company environment. Malthouse brands smaller companies' works within the Malthouse season, seeking to support the smaller sector as the engine for daring, vibrant engagement with, and advancement of, the theatre artform.

Company B hosts and programs a ground-up season of independent companies. The company seeks to interact with independent artists and their work at an early stage, thereby assisting with the artists' and the work's development and providing an environment of artistic rigour.

Other MPA companies engage in formal relationships with the small-to-medium sector, with a perceivable pattern of decline in the depth and number of formal connections as the company increases in size. QTC engages in a number of co-productions, including with Griffin Theatre Company, JUTE, Bell Shakespeare and STCSA. STC brokers relationships with the smaller sector almost exclusively through its education and artform development programs, with occasional co-productions or remounts of shows which were successful in the mid-sized theatre sector. By comparison with the rest of the MPA sector, MTC rarely enters into co-productions with the smaller sector.

*'It's important not to fixate on the size of a company as an indicator of its value.'*

*'Collaborations happen through personal relationships and excitement about each others' work.'*

The mid-sized theatre companies see collaborations with the larger companies as essential to their business and to fulfilling their mandate as 'pathway theatres'. Griffin Theatre Company's artistic director sees the ideal path of a new Australian work as initially staged at Griffin and its mid-sized theatre counterparts, potentially as a co-commission or co-production, then picked up by a larger company, in this way providing a pathway for a work and its creative team of director, designer and writer. HotHouse Theatre sees co-productions and co-commissions as essential to staying connected with the national theatre scene, and as a way to boost the production values of a show. HotHouse has co-produced with QTC, MTC and STC, co-presented with Malthouse, had co-commissions with STC and BSTC and reports excellent company links with MTC.

*'I would love to be able to get on the phone to the Artistic Director of Company B or STC and get occasional advice!'*

The benefits of formal co-productions and co-commissions for MPA companies include:

- access to new talent
- shared costs of the production
- increased touring opportunities
- access to new works and new artistic ideas

Another benefit to MPA companies for developing closer relationships with some of the smaller companies relates to diversity and relevance. Chris Mead of Playwriting Australia noted that the MPA theatre companies are presently failing to represent the true diversity of the Australian experience, rarely staging the work of Australia's non-English speaking writers.<sup>11</sup> Meaningful connections with the small-to-medium sector could better connect the MPA companies with the diversity of Australian experience, audience and artists. For example, Urban Theatre Projects, a small company in western Sydney, works with groups from varied cultural backgrounds and MPA companies could develop meaningful relationships with this company and through it, its artist and audience constituencies.

Co-productions sometimes favour the MPA company in terms of creative decision-making, indicating that co-commissions may be a more equal way to ensure the creative control is shared. Co-productions can cost small-to-medium companies far more than they would normally invest in a show. However, companies report that the benefits outweigh the costs. The benefits to small-to-medium companies include:

- increased production value of the show
- increased audience reach
- exposing the creative team to a larger company's working processes
- deeper relationship with the larger company

Several interviewees noted that collaborations must be meaningful: MPA companies must not enter into collaborations simply as an act of facilitation, nor as an act of exploitation or simply badging a small-to-medium sector company's work. For the real benefits to flow, companies

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<sup>11</sup> Mead, Chris, "What is an Australian play? Have we failed our ethnic writers?" *Platform Papers*, No. 17, July 2008.

should be equal creative partners in a work, sharing a freshness of approach and an interchange of ideas which gets the collaborators excited about the work.

Another key connection is at board level, when MPA company executives are members of smaller companies' boards. For example, Richard Evans (now CEO of the Sydney Opera House) was on Lucy Guerin's board, and Jo Dyer, previously chair of Sydney Dance Company, is now on Force Majeure's board (a small performance-based dance theatre company).

### **Informal connections**

There are innumerable informal connections between companies, based largely on relationships which have developed as a result of a formal relationship such as a co-production. Some artistic directors of smaller companies reported as invaluable their ability to call up the artistic director of one of the larger companies, simply to ask a question or run an idea past them. This sense of collegiality almost always has its basis in a previous co-production or commission, and exposure to each others' work.

The artistic directors all expressed the importance of meaningful networking opportunities, such as provided by the Australian Performing Arts Market, Long Paddock and the National Play Festival. These forums provide artistic directors with an opportunity to meet and 'get excited' about each others' work, which is, everyone agreed, the essential ingredient to a successful co-production or commission. The communication and relationships between the second-tier company artistic staff (literary managers, artistic associates and associate directors) at these and other forums are often as, or more, vital to the connections between companies and the success of cross-sector initiatives and resolution of issues. However, the theatre sector does not have a single professional association and artistic directors and directors do not regularly meet or communicate, nor is there a central industry publication to support communication about new works.

### **Connections across the artform**

The connections between the text-based theatre companies and the performance-based theatre companies are weak. Malthouse Theatre is the only MPA company with regular links to the performance-based, devised-work end of the theatre artform spectrum, whilst STC also incorporates one 'movement' work into its artform development program. The potential benefits to MPA companies of greater collaboration include:

- a freshness of approach
- access to a range of artists from diverse artform and culturally diverse backgrounds which MPA companies may not normally have contact with

The smaller, devised-work companies would potentially gain:

- MPA companies' marketing reach
- MPA companies' technical expertise
- benefits from MPA companies' story-telling approach

*'Theatre people think that performance is poor theatre; performance people think that theatre could do with more performance.'*

As one artistic director said, ‘the idea of potential cross-over is exciting, but the worlds are very different’. Malthouse Theatre’s *Moving Target* and STC’s *Guilt Frame* were seen as steps into the cross-artform, cross-sector territory, and collaborations of this type could be further encouraged.

Connections between the traditionally text-based theatre companies and the small, devised-work companies would also be of benefit to the theatre artform. The majority of new Australian works occur in the small-to-medium sector, and the smaller companies, flexible in nature and less reliant on box office for financial sustainability, are seen by many as the ‘hothouse’ of new, innovative theatre in Australia. Greater connection, and artists crossing between the forms, could infuse both ends of the theatre spectrum with innovation – with audacity, experimentation and transformation. Such connection could also develop theatre practitioners who can work across the artform, providing yet another means to support creative workforce sustainability.

### **Connections with tertiary institutions**

MPA companies appeared to have the strongest relationships with tertiary institutions in the area of stage management. Almost every company interviewed had a program of stage management secondments and a strong history of transition from secondments into employment at the company. This type of relationship was far weaker in the areas of directing and design. Secondments and attachments often exist in these disciplines, but the benefits ultimately derived by the company were unclear. Secondments in design and directing did not clearly form the basis of a relationship with the secondee beyond the secondment. The secondment often did not provide maximum benefit to the secondee – the secondee was often relegated to errand running, rather than working as a creative ‘equal’ or at least as a meaningfully mentored, junior member of the team. MPA company artistic directors noted that they attended the final year shows of the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) and National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) graduates, but that often the graduate directors were unable to demonstrate their potential because they were not working with experienced (or even third-year) actors.

Teachers in the training institutions regularly work for the companies, often in arts management roles. However, MPA companies do not have any clear role in the institutions’ curriculum development. Thus, despite informal connection, there is a disconnect between institutions and the professional theatres, with little emphasis in the training programs on responding to the skills gaps identified by the companies.

*‘It’s not whether it is considered ‘dance’ or ‘theatre;’ it’s whether it’s relevant.’*

## Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has highlighted some of the issues facing the Australian theatre sector in ensuring that the sector retains talented directors and other key creatives, and develops key creatives for the future. It has also described a theatre sector in Australia characterised by deep connections amongst extremely committed individuals passionate about the artform.

The theatre practitioners interviewed in the course of this research agreed that the solutions to these issues must come from the theatre sector itself, from concerted effort to ensure that the sector has the people it needs to keep it vibrant and alive. The Australia Council can support the sector's activities, but ultimately it is theatre practitioners who can best act to support the sector's future.

The following are suggestions which theatre companies, freelance directors and other creatives, the MPAB and theatre board could consider in taking concerted action for the sector's sustainability and artistic vibrancy.

### Creative workforce succession for the theatre industry

The Australian theatre sector, both small and large companies, needs to target collaborative attention on the issue of creative workforce succession. The following are recommendations for the sector and the Australia Council for future action. [*Please note: the MPAB has incorporated the recommendations for MPAB action into its Business Plan 2008-2010.*]

1. Develop pathways for key creatives' succession, and address gaps and barriers, particularly at the point of *transition* from the small to MPA sector and at the point of *retention* of mid-career artists.

Do this by:

- Artistic directors from small-to-medium and MPA companies meeting at a Theatre Forum in 2009 to discuss the issues affecting the theatre sector and agreeing on a *Theatre Sector Action Plan* for the Australian theatre sector that addresses:
  - the future of theatre in Australia
  - innovation and connection across the theatre sector
  - key creatives' succession, including the issues of freelance director wages, training, tertiary institution courses
  - the artistic director structure of Australian theatre
  - creative workforce development and creative workforce retention.

The theatre sector, supported by the Australia Council, to convene a small working group of theatre sector representatives to drive the 2009 Forum agenda and development of an *Action Plan*.

- Key creatives, in particular theatre directors, consider forming a professional association or an informal network of their own, to address and advocate on issues affecting their profession, such as career planning, wage structures and

training needs. Such networks could be in conjunction with associations such as the Australian Screen Directors Association, or be established as separate entities with a specific theatre focus.

- MPAB to measure the success of artist and artform development programs in terms of the number of directors and other key creatives who *transition* to the MPA mainstage (rather than simply in terms of the number of artists supported), and the *retention* and career progression of mid-career creatives.
- MPAB to conduct regular surveys to inform the sector about the state of the creative workforce.
- The Australia Council to support an annual Theatre Forum, inviting the artistic directors of the MPA and small-to-medium companies, representatives of freelance creative workers (directors, designers, production managers) and the heads of training institutions.

2. Ensure that artist development programs are as extensive and meaningful as possible, including assistant director and associate artistic director positions wherever possible.

Do this by:

- Within each company, the artistic director (or the relevant mentor) to agree with each secondee/mentee on a clear mentorship plan for each secondment, residency or other artist development engagement, which stipulates the goals for the period and incorporates regular debriefing sessions with the mentor director/key creative. The success of secondment programs and their ongoing funding should be measured in terms of the number of secondees who transition to work with the company or the sector.<sup>12</sup>
  - MPAB to support a program of creative residencies, scholarships and grants for overseas exchanges and study, and facilitation of placements with companies for *mid-career* artists. The program would be open to the full range of the creative workforce (wig-makers, costumiers, directors, designers, production managers) wherever a company demonstrates a need and, where appropriate, obtains a funding partner for the placement/residency. For directors and designers, these placements should be linked to opportunities to direct and design for the mainstage.
    - These residencies could also be used to bring in experienced artists from a devised-work theatre company into an MPA company to advance the cross-pollination of theatre practice and provide a career pathway across the sector that does not currently exist.
  - MPAB to measure the success of artist development programs such as residencies and mentorships in terms of transition and retention of key creatives and the key creatives' next career steps.
3. Take action to train and retain key creatives in design, production management and essential theatre craft areas (e.g. carpentry, wig-making).

Do this by:

- Each company and the sector as a whole to identify the upcoming gaps in skills and begin now to fund training positions in these areas.
- MPAB to provide seed funding where appropriate for traineeships.

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<sup>12</sup> A useful publication is *Getting Connected – Making Your Mentorship Work*, [www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research)

4. Take action to retain talented directors in the theatre sector.

Do this by:

- Artistic directors and freelance directors' representatives meet to review the existing artistic director model and freelance director wage structure to explore ways that mid-career directors could be better supported in their careers (see Theatre Forum above).
- Artistic directors to broker relationships with international artistic directors to help directors gain work overseas.
- MPAB and the theatre board to support exchanges of international artistic directors and bring international dramaturgs and playwrights to work as residents in Australian theatres as a means of building individual relationships between directors as the foundation of future work.
- MPAB, the theatre board and the companies' artistic directors to work with the Australian film and television industry, including the Australian Screen Authority and the Australian Film Television and Radio School, to support training for directors in television and the filming of live performance for digital distribution.

5. Develop closer relationships with tertiary institutions to ensure that companies are getting what they need in terms of skills and make directing secondments more meaningful for the students and the companies as the basis of future relationships.

Do this by:

- Artistic directors to meet with the heads of training institutions to discuss the quality of courses and the gaps in skills, as the beginning of a formal, ongoing dialogue with the training institutions (see above).
- MPAB and the theatre board to consider commissioning research into the adequacy of creative workforce training in Australia.
- Tertiary institutions and theatre companies to explore the use of digital technology to create a digital archive of Australian works which directing, design and other theatre students can access, giving them a sense of history and evolution of the artform to which they are contributing.
  - MPAB to support such efforts with research and development funding where appropriate.
- MPAB and the theatre board to support a Theatre Forum (as above).

- Companies, together with tertiary institutions, to devise a small number of meaningful theatre attachments for advanced-level students of production management, directing and design, which are linked to future work with the company (both directly and in terms of how the attachment program's success is evaluated).
6. Support artistic director succession through mentorships and training for aspirant and new artistic directors.

Do this by:

- MPAB and the theatre board to invest in mentorships and training for new and emerging artistic directors.

## Interconnections

Connections between artists working across the diversity of theatre practice are essential to the vitality of theatre in Australia. The relationships across the sector must be better supported to ensure deep and rich connections which lead to meaningful collaborations across the sector and across the artform. The following are recommendations for the sector and the Australia Council.

MPA companies could:

1. Actively develop deeper relationships with the rest of the sector as a means of advancing the artform, taking advantage of fresh approaches and connecting with a greater diversity of Australian artists and audiences.

Do this by:

- MPA artistic directors meeting with the artistic directors of the small-to-medium sector regularly, and investing in cross-sector communication tools such as a publication or e-newsletter which includes reviews of companies' works, information on upcoming works and other sector news.
- MPAB and the theatre board to support a Theatre Forum (as above).
- MPAB and the theatre board to support a program of co-commissions and innovative collaborations between MPA and small-to-medium theatre companies on a research and development basis. Collaborations would need to be *meaningful* and ensure creative equality between those involved.
- MPAB and the theatre board support cross-sector communication tools which keep companies informed of each others' work (including circulation of reviews, online videos of performances).

2. Expose MPA company audiences to greater risk-taking through collaborations as part of the subscription season could also be a gradual process – a company may first engage innovative artists in the development of works as part of a long-term strategy towards including riskier works in the subscriptions season which would support both artform and artist development.

Do this by:

- Artistic directors incorporating a gradual approach to cultivating audience's appetite for risk in their artistic plans for the company, which includes collaborations between performance-based and text-based companies and large and small theatre companies.

3. Ensure that artistic directors are seeing small-to-medium companies' work.

Do this by:

- MPA companies to resource their artistic directors to see the work of the smaller sector, including works outside of the 'norm'.
- MPAB and the theatre board to support communication tools which keep companies informed of each others' work (see above).

4. MPAB to distribute the paper to the broader sector for feedback and action.

### Further research

This paper has identified a number of issues in the theatre sector for action. However, there is vast and rich scope for further exploration of the sector, which this paper has barely touched upon, such as artistic vibrancy and innovation in theatre and diversity in theatre. Areas which were beyond the scope of this paper include physical theatre, theatre-in-education and youth theatre. These topics would benefit from further research and dialogue.

## Appendix 1: Interconnections research June 2007

The Major Performing Arts Board (MPAB) of the Australia Council requested an assessment of current interconnections between the 29 MPAB companies and the broader subsidised dance, music and theatre sectors (referred to as the small-to-medium sector).

The research addresses the following questions:

1. Do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from the small-to-medium sector?
2. If not, where do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from?

Information was sourced from publicly available CVs and direct requests to organisations.

The research was also intended to examine the process of artist development. An initial scope demonstrated that the necessary information on artist movements between companies is not easily available and would likely require a series of surveys and interviews with artists in the sector beyond the current focus of the MPAB research program.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### 1. Do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from the small-to-medium sector?

The majority (81 per cent) of MPAB company CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators do not come from the small-to-medium performing arts sector.

The exception is the theatre artform. Sixty-seven per cent of theatre artistic directors gained experience in the small-to-medium sector before coming into the MPAB sector.

Table: Do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from the small-to-medium sector?

	CEOS			ARTISTIC DIRECTORS			ARTISTIC ADMINISTRATORS			TOTAL <sup>13</sup>		
	Y <sup>14</sup>	N <sup>15</sup>	ALL	Y	N	ALL	Y	N	ALL	Y	N	ALL
<b>DANCE</b>	1	4	5	1	4	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	8	10
<b>MUSIC</b>	0	10	10	0	10	10	1	7	8	1	27	28
<b>OPERA</b>	1	3	4	0	2	2	0	5	5	1	10	11
<b>THEATRE</b>	3	6	9	6	3	9	N/A	N/A	N/A	9	9	18
<b>ALL</b>	5	23	28	7	19	26	1	12	13	13	54	67
<b>%</b>	18	82		27	73		8	92		19	81	

<sup>13</sup> AOBO was not included in the research as it is a wholly owned subsidiary of OA and does not have a separate executive structure.

<sup>14</sup> "Y"= Yes, have had experience in the small-to-medium sector.

<sup>15</sup> "N"= No, have not had experience in small-to-medium sector.

## 2. If they do not come from the small-to-medium sector, where do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from?

The majority of MPAB company CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from within the Australian large-scale arts sector – from other MPA companies, elite training institutions, major arts festivals and major venues.

For the MPAB CEO, artistic director and administrator labour force as a whole, there is an insignificant labour force trend towards international recruitment (20 per cent overall). No MPAB CEOs and no theatre artistic directors were recruited internationally.

However when the data is broken down, a substantial trend towards international recruitment can be seen amongst the artistic director and artistic administrator workforce in all artforms other than theatre. Positions recruited internationally are as follows:

- 100 per cent of MPAB symphony orchestra chief conductors (six of six);
- 38 per cent of MPAB symphony orchestra artistic administrators (three of eight);
- 50 per cent of MPAB opera artistic directors (one of two); and
- 40 per cent of MPAB dance company artistic directors (two of five).

Table: If not from the small-to-medium sector, where do MPAB CEOs, artistic directors and artistic administrators come from?

	CEOS				ARTISTIC DIRECTORS				ARTISTIC ADMINISTRATORS				TOTAL <sup>16</sup>			
	S2M <sup>17</sup>	LS <sup>18</sup>	NA <sup>19</sup>	INT <sup>20</sup>	S2M	LS	NA	INT	S2M	LS	NA	INT	S2M	LS	NA	INT
<b>DANCE</b>	1	3	1	0	1	2	N/A	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	5	1	2
<b>MUSIC</b>	0	8	2	0	0	4	N/A	6	1	4	N/A	3	1	16	2	9
<b>OPERA</b>	1	2	1	0	0	1	N/A	1	0	4	N/A	1	1	7	1	2
<b>THEATRE</b>	3	4	2	0	6	3	N/A	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	9	7	2	0
<b>ALL</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>

<sup>16</sup> AOBO was not included in the research as it is a wholly owned subsidiary of OA and does not have a separate executive structure.

<sup>17</sup> "s2m" refers to the small-to-medium sector.

<sup>18</sup> "LS" refers to the large-scale arts sector: major performing arts companies, major venues, elite training institutions and major festivals.

<sup>19</sup> "NA" refers to the non-arts sectors.

<sup>20</sup> "Int" refers to those internationally recruited.

## MPAB COMPANY CEOS

Information was collected from 28 CEOs of the MPAB companies.<sup>21</sup>

### 1. Do MPAB CEOs come from the small-to-medium sector?

Only five (18 per cent) of the 28 CEOs surveyed had previously spent time in management in the small-to-medium performing arts sector.

### 2. If they do not come from the small-to-medium sector, where do MPAB CEOs come from?

The majority (18) of the CEOs have spent their careers in the large-scale arts sector, which covers the major performing arts sector, festivals and large venues. Six (21 per cent) came into their roles from non-arts sectors.

All of the MPAB company CEOs have been recruited domestically.

MPAB CEOs – ALL ARTFORMS	NUMBER	%
<b>TOTAL SURVEYED: 28 FROM 28 COMPANIES</b>		
MPAB CEOs with small-to-medium sector management experience	5	18%
Of these:		
MPAB CEOs in theatre/circus	3	
MPAB CEOs in opera	1	
MPAB CEOs in dance	1	
MPAB CEOs in music	0	
MPAB CEOs from large-scale arts sector	18	61%
MPAB CEOs from non-arts sector	6	21%

## MPABCOMPANY ARTISTIC DIRECTORS AND ARTISTIC ADMINISTRATORS

Information was collected regarding artistic directors and orchestra and opera companies' artistic administrators. Artistic administrators were included because of their senior artistic role in the relevant companies. Thirty-nine artistic directors and administrators were surveyed from 27 companies<sup>22</sup> (26 artistic directors and 13 artistic administrators).

### 1. Do the MPAB artistic directors and artistic administrators come from the small-to-medium sector?

Only eight (21 per cent) of the 29 MPA artistic directors and artistic administrators surveyed have come into their roles with previous small-to-medium performing arts sector experience, as follows:

- six are artistic directors in the MPAB theatre artform (comprising 67 per cent of all MPAB theatre artistic directors)
- one is an MPAB dance artistic director; and
- one is an artistic administrator for an MPAB symphony orchestra.

<sup>21</sup> AOBO was not included in the research: see footnote 1.

<sup>22</sup> AOBO was not included (see footnote 1). SOSA was not included as it does not have an artistic director or artistic administrator. The CEO has a dual management and artistic role.

### 3. If they do not come from the small-to-medium sector, where do MPAB artistic directors and artistic administrators come from?

Approximately half (46 per cent) of all surveyed MPAB artistic directors and administrators have come from within the MPAB sector.

International recruitment also represents a substantial labour force trend across the MPA artistic director and administrator cohort surveyed with 13 (33 per cent) of the 39 recruited from overseas. International recruitment has occurred in the music, opera and dance artforms and can be broken down as follows:

- six chief conductors (which represents all of the symphony orchestra chief conductors) and three (38 per cent) of the eight orchestra administrators;
- two (40 per cent) of the five dance artistic directors;
- one (50 per cent) of the two opera artistic directors and one (20 per cent) of the five opera artistic administrators.

By contrast, none of the theatre artistic directors have been recruited internationally. The following table sets out a summary of results.

<b>MPAB ARTISTIC DIRECTORS/ADMINISTRATORS<sup>23</sup> – ALL ARTFORMS</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>TOTAL SURVEYED: 43 FROM 27 COMPANIES<sup>24</sup></b>		
MPAB artistic directors/administrators with small-to-medium sector management experience	8	21%
Of these:		
MPAB theatre/circus	6	
MPAB opera	0	
MPAB dance	1	
MPAB music	1	
Total MPAB artistic directors/administrators from the MPAB sector	18	46%
Total MPAB artistic directors/administrators recruited from overseas	13	33%

#### **ISSUES**

Issues which may require further exploration in conjunction with other areas of the Australia Council are outlined below.

#### **CEOs**

Given that most senior management tends to come from other Australian major performing arts companies or similar large-scale arts sector fields such as festivals and venues, the main issue is that of succession planning, i.e. whether the talent pool's size and growth is sufficient to ensure future recruitment to senior positions in the MPA companies.

<sup>23</sup> Includes artistic directors, chief conductors and opera and orchestra artistic administrators.

<sup>24</sup> AOBO was not included (see footnote 1). SOSA was not included (see footnote 16).

### Artistic directors and artistic administrators

Issues include:

- How to provide ongoing support for theatre artistic directors' small-to-medium sector to major performing arts sector career path; and
- Whether the low rate of succession to the MPA dance, music and opera companies from the small-to-medium sector has implications for the MPA and small-to-medium sectors.

These issues are also relevant to other areas of the Australia Council, including the dance board and the key organisations division.

The identified trend to recruit internationally in the opera, music and dance artistic director and administrator workforce does not, of itself, represent a negative trend in the industry. However, this could be further explored by incorporating the issue into current succession planning work.

#### *Other areas of interconnection*

The research indicated that there is an overall low amount of succession from the small-to-medium sector to the MPA sector's senior management and artistic positions (with the exception of the theatre artform). However, it may be that genuine interconnection occurs more at the level of artistic experimentation or works. This may be an area that MPAB staff can explore with other areas of the Council.

## Appendix 2: Interconnections research September 2007

This paper addresses the following research question:

- As a measure of the connection of the MPA theatre companies' artistic vibrancy to the small-to-medium sector, what proportion of the new works staged in 2006 by MPA theatre companies originated in the small-to-medium sector?

Information was sourced from annual report and *Securing the Future 2006*.

### KEY FINDING

There is significant connection between the MPA theatre sector and the small-to-medium sector at the level of new works. Six of the 16, or 37 per cent of the new Australian works presented as part of the MPA theatre companies' mainstage seasons in 2006 originated either from the small-to-medium sector or involved collaborations with the small-to-medium sector. The number increases when the MPA companies' non-mainstage seasons are considered (eight of the 19 new works, or 41 per cent).

### COMMENTS

This indicates a strong level of connection of the MPA sector's artistic vibrancy to the small-to-medium sector as measured by the number of new works derived from that sector.

Other elements which indicate a strong connection between the artistic vibrancy of the MPA and small-to-medium sectors include:

- Regular presentations by MPA companies of existing Australian works which originated in the small-to-medium sector: for example, *Afternoon of the Elves* (STC presentation of a Windmill production); *Lily Can't Sleep* (QTC co-production with deBASE), *Away* (QTC co-production with Griffin Theatre Company)
- MPA companies' education programs which regularly present works originating in the small-to-medium sector (for example: *Drovers' Wives*, BSTC and Steamworks; *Two Weeks with the Queen*, STCSA and Windmill; *Australia v South Africa*, STC and Zeal Theatre)
- The careers of theatre practitioners which cross the MPA and small-to-medium sectors eg playwrights, dramaturges and other key creative staff, who regularly work in both MPA and small-to-medium sector companies.

The June 2007 interconnections research highlighted a significant level of interconnection within the theatre sector at the level of artistic director succession. When viewed in conjunction with the above result regarding new works, the interconnection research creates an overall picture of the Australian theatre sector as one based on extensive connection and collaboration between small, medium and MPA companies.

The implications for the MPA theatre companies are as follows:

- Artistic vibrancy, as measured by the number of new works, in the MPA theatre sector is supported by the artistic vibrancy of the small-to-medium sector

- Artistic director succession into the MPA companies is supported by theatre practitioners' work in the small-to-medium sector

The small-to-medium sector also benefits from the interconnection. For example:

- There is evidence of a two-way flow of the theatre workforce between MPA and small-to-medium sized theatre companies at the level of actors, directors, playwrights, dramaturges, lighting designers and other key creatives.
- The uptake and collaboration on new works with MPA companies also stimulates the artistic vibrancy of the smaller sector.

### **FURTHER ACTION**

In light of the benefits to the MPA companies of collaboration and interconnection with the small-to-medium sector, it is recommended that the MPAB take actions to actively support these connections.

Options include:

- Support for independent theatre practitioners operating across the two sectors to gain the expertise required to work on MPA company commissions and to work at more senior artistic levels in the small-to-medium sector. For example, resident dramaturg positions in MPA companies who then build the skills and have the opportunity to direct in small-to-medium companies.
- Financial support for co-productions and the development of new works by MPA companies working with the small-to-medium companies (successful applicants for the 2000-2003 'Australia Council Strategic Partnership Initiatives' were largely co-productions of this kind).
- Two-way artistic residencies, workshops, secondments and/or mentorships between the MPA and the small-to-medium sector.
- Supporting ongoing connections amongst theatre directors, e.g. through regular group networking sessions or strengthening existing communication.

The MPAB executive director proposes to discuss the above options for further actions with the MPA companies, looking at:

- How the funding model review funding increase can be used to support greater connections with the small-to-medium sector; and
- Additional actions MPAB can take to support beneficial interconnections, drawing on the suggestions outlined above.

MPAB staff will also consult with the Australia Council's executive director, arts development and a select group of small-to-medium companies.

### Appendix 3: Interviewees

Chris Mead	Artistic Director, Playwriting Australia, Sydney
Nick Marchand	Artistic Director, Griffin Theatre Company, Sydney
Charlie Parkinson	Artistic Director, is theatre, Tasmania
Alicia Talbot	Artistic Director, Urban Theatre Projects, Sydney
Regina Heilmann	Artistic Director, PACT Youth Theatre, Sydney
Karen Therese	Community Cultural Development Artist, PACT Youth Theatre, Sydney
Matt Leslie	General Manager, PACT Youth Theatre, Sydney
Eamon Flack	Artistic Associate, Company B, Sydney
Campion Decent	Artistic Manager, HotHouse Theatre, Albury-Wodonga
Rob Brookman	General Manager, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney
Andrew Upton	Artistic Director, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney
Stephen Armstrong	Executive Producer, Malthouse Theatre, Sydney
Ann Tonks	General Manager, Melbourne Theatre Company, Melbourne
Margaret Burke	Production Manager, Melbourne Theatre Company, Melbourne
Shelley Lush	Artform Development Manager, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide
Noelene Buddle	General Manager, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide
Sean Mee	Artistic Director, La Boite Theatre, Brisbane
Nicole Lauder	General Manager, La Boite Theatre, Brisbane
Michael Gow	Artistic Director, Queensland Theatre Company, Brisbane
Libby Anstis	General Manager, Queensland Theatre Company, Brisbane
Michael Kaempff	Production Manager, Queensland Theatre Company, Brisbane
Delia O'Hara	Artist Development Manager, Queensland Theatre Company, Brisbane
Benedict Andrews	Freelance Director
Julian Meyrick	La Trobe University, Victoria
David Williams	Artistic Director, Version Onepointzero, Sydney
Erin Milne	General Manager, Arena Theatre, Melbourne
Kate Champion	Artistic Director, Force Majeure
Kate Miller	General Manager, Barking Gecko Theatre Company, Perth
Marion Potts	Associate Artistic Director, Bell Shakespeare Company
John Baylis	Director, Theatre Board, Australia Council for the Arts

Interviewees were asked the following questions:

- What are your views of theatre education in Australia?
- What is the training required to work as a key creative (directors, production managers, lighting designers etc) for your company?
- Are the training opportunities adequate?
- What are the gaps (if any) in theatre education and professional development for theatre key creatives?
- Is there a pathway for artists up to the MPA companies?
- What are your views of the connections between and across the performing arts sector, between the small-to-medium and larger companies?

## Appendix 4: MPA and KO theatre companies

### MAJOR PERFORMING ARTS THEATRE COMPANIES

*Bell Shakespeare Company*  
*Black Swan Theatre Company*  
*Circus Oz*  
*Company B*  
*Malthouse Theatre*  
*Melbourne Theatre Company*  
*Queensland Theatre Company*  
*State Theatre Company of South Australia*  
*Sydney Theatre Company*

### KEY ORGANISATION THEATRE COMPANIES<sup>25</sup>

*Arena Theatre Company*  
*Australian Theatre for Young People*  
*Back to Back Theatre*  
*Barking Gecko Theatre Company*  
*Carclew Youth Arts Centre*  
*Circa*  
*Flying Fruit Fly Foundation*  
*Griffin Theatre Company*  
*HotHouse Theatre*  
*La Boite Theatre Company*  
*La Mama*  
*Legs on the Wall*  
*Melbourne Workers Theatre*  
*PACT Youth Theatre*  
*Patch Theatre Company*  
*Performing Arts Centre Society*  
*Performing Lines*  
*PlayWriting Australia*  
*Polyglot Puppet Theatre*

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<sup>25</sup> Key Organisations at the time of data collection: January – August 2008. This group has since changed: see <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au> for more information.

*Sidetrack Performance Group*  
*Snuff Puppets*  
*Spare Parts Puppet Theatre*  
*Tasmanian Theatre Company*  
*Terrapin Puppet Theatre*  
*Urban Myth Theatre of Youth*  
*Urban Theatre Projects*  
*Vitalstatistix Theatre Company*  
*Yirra Yaakin Aboriginal Corporation*

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