

Theatre Network Australia

Australian Theatre Forum - The Future of Theatre in Australia

Discussion Paper, April 2018

BACKGROUND

The Australian Theatre Forum was initiated by the Australia Council in 2009, in response to Jackie Bailey's report *Love Your Work* (2008). Her paper identified two core industry problems: creative workforce succession and interconnections. The first ATF was held in Melbourne in May 2009, a week after Theatre Network Victoria (as it was then) started. After the event, TNA approached the Australia Council to take over the stewardship of the ATF, and has since produced the 2011 (Brisbane), 2013 (Canberra), 2015 (Sydney) and the 2017 (Adelaide) forums.

While creative workforce succession and interconnections have continued to be areas of focus, other issues in the arts have arisen as needing more urgent attention by the ATF. These have included: gender equity including getting more women in creative roles; environmental responsibility; diversifying our sector; career sustainability for independents; access for and inclusion of people with disabilities; youth theatre and theatre for young audiences; and supporting and increasing leadership by First Nations people. Creative workforce succession is inherent in many of the current emphases of the ATF, albeit with a greater need for more diverse succession, and interconnections remains a key goal of the ATF. This paper looks specifically at that in attendees (below).

Feedback from the 2017 ATF indicated a need to shift the format of the forum in order to continue to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse sector, and to ensure that the content and the delegate mix are well tailored to meeting those needs. The ATF's challenge is to create a program that can feed the interests and concerns of all those attending, provide a diversity of voices and yet tie all the threads together into a coherent sense of progress and development.

TNA engaged consultant Andrew Bleby in late 2017 to early 2018 to undertake an independent review, to help us to rethink and re-articulate the purpose, values, key elements, and priorities for 2019 – 2025.

Andrew prepared a report for the TNA staff and Board and a public 2-page overview (appendix 1). The TNA staff and board are now working with key stakeholders and members to restructure the forum accordingly. We are seeking input in a number of ways – meetings with key stakeholders, face to face discussions with members at key events around the country, and through feedback from this questionnaire. Nine questions are listed below, but feel free to add other thoughts.

Please send feedback to Nicole Beyer, Executive Director, via email: nicole@tna.org.au by COB Monday 21st May.

KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. ATTENDEES

Attendees to the ATF have included a very wide range of performing arts workers, from emerging independents to established practitioners, from tiny companies to the major theatre companies. TNA's strategy for independents - highly subsidised for 110 indies with travel and accommodation support sourced for over 50% of them - and our focus on attracting First Nations artists, those from diverse cultural backgrounds and those with disabilities is highly successful and has been applauded. The Review recommends continuing this work.

Multi artform and a new focus on Circus and Physical Theatre

In 2017, TNA entered into a new multi-year agreement with Creative Victoria to take on much of the work of the folded Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association. Future ATFs will ensure that this part of the sector has sessions that are specifically relevant to their needs, by working with our CaPT Advisory Group. TNA has always defined theatre as 'broad church' and includes members from dance, hybrid and interdisciplinary arts, youth theatre and theatre for young audiences, circus and physical theatre, as well as festivals and presenters, producers and industry development organisations. All of these attendees need to find relevance in the ATF's programming.

Addressing different levels of experience and scale

Feedback about 'having the same conversations' with new delegates who don't understand historical context, needs to be addressed. The review recommends that sessions should be targeted at the full spectrum of the industry including major theatre organisations as well as independent artists and small to medium companies.

TNA plans to continue to have categories of attendee from independents to majors and government representatives, with pricing accordingly scaled: the top category paying an unsubsidised rate of *total forum cost* divided by *number of attendees*, and the lower categories progressively subsidised by grant income.

To attract a range of attendees, TNA plans to develop a communications strategy that seeks (and addresses) input from all parts of the sector, and clearly outlines the specific goals and the program of each ATF to those different parts of the sector.

Recommendations

- Continue our efforts to ensure accessibility to and representation from the full diversity of the Australian theatre sector, with a central role for first nations practitioners.
- Develop ways to ensure that the Forum is compelling and relevant for the full spectrum of the industry including major theatre organisations as well as independent artists and small to medium companies.

Questions:

- 1) What mix of delegates do you think that a sector-wide forum needs to be relevant and purposeful? What are the areas that need most attention?
 - 2) What are the topics or areas of discussion which ATF might introduce to be relevant for delegates in your area of work, genre, scale of organisation etc.?
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B. CONTENT

Content streaming and increasing focus on practice and audience

Feedback indicates a need to curate sessions focussed on the practice of making theatre, and bringing it to audiences. Practice discussions could be thematic, or process oriented, or could be framed around the intended audiences, e.g. theatre for young audiences.

Addressing the issue of content relevance for a great diversity of delegates could be achieved with streaming. This could be different days or half days, or parallel streams across the full three days. The Review recommends a strong, clear structure with streams of interest and experience, with substantial small group discussions feeding in to plenary sessions.

Stronger and more consistent facilitation

Strong facilitation is a key to good conversations. ATF facilitation, for most of the forums to date, has been inconsistent, with some excellent facilitation and some poor facilitation. The Review recommends a pro-active facilitation strategy. When attention and resources are focused, for example with the independents strategy or Deaf Access strategy, great outcomes are achieved. TNA is keen to invest in expert facilitators to ensure that the conversations are purposeful, relevant, interconnected, contextualised and safe.

Investing in inspirational speakers and evidenced based discussion

Delegates have indicated satisfaction with ATF's 'inspirational' speakers and would like to see more. Of course, what is inspiring is subjective, but speakers from outside our sector, who are experts in their field, are the most popular. Delegates also want to hear case studies, success stories and practice discussions from artists. TNA is keen to include more discussions based on evidence and research. Without developing into an academic conference, there is room to learn more from the rich, existing literature and critical thinking from Australia and beyond.

Opportunity to engage internationally with APAM

The ATF was included in the successful Creative Victoria APAM (Australian Performing Arts Market) proposal as a key national gathering point for the performing art sector. Creative Victoria proposed a new model of APAM to be held in Victoria from 2020 to 2026. How ATF and APAM work together is yet to be clarified, but we see the opportunity as timely and exciting. The ATF could be adapted to include greater international conversations and could look at ways to include themed work discussions and presentations.

Standout benefits would of course be to invite international presenters and producers to participate in ATF, to use the APAM programming as artistic conversation starters, and to use the ATF to profile Australian artistic content to visiting presenters and other international colleagues.

Recommendations:

- Focus on the practices and purposes of creating great theatre for a broad range of audiences.
- Create a strong, clear structure with streams of interest and experience to engage the diversity of attendees, with substantial small group discussions feeding in to plenary sessions.
- Seek out and attract a high level of inspirational speakers and provocateurs.
- Develop a facilitation strategy to enhance outcomes of value to the sector.
- Work with the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) to engage fully with issues which have an international dimension.

Questions:

- 3) How can practice sessions remain relevant for the wider group of delegates outside of artists?
- 4) How can streams of interest ensure that people feel adequately included, but can be as specific and productive as possible?
- 5) Are there particular speakers or provocateurs that you would love to hear from?
- 6) What do you consider the key connections between the ATF and APAM's international market development focus?

C. DELIVERY MODEL

Opening up the Curation model

The 2017 was the first time a co-curating model was used, and it was a highly successful arrangement: bringing a greater mix of experiences and skills to the task, and allowing a strong rapport to be built between the co-curators. The review recommends that more options are explored, including a (paid) curatorial panel of around five people.

In-house producing and refining all role descriptions

While site specific producing means greater understanding of local networks and issues, a balance needs to be struck to ensure that TNA maintains control of logistics. The review recommends that the producing position moves in-house, while the curating role/s can remain local to the event (or national as needed).

For all curatorial and executive roles, the Review recommends further refining the role descriptions, to ensure that the overall strategic goals of Theatre Network Australia are imbedded and clearly articulated, and that the particular aims of each ATF event are clear and contextualised. For any model, TNA commits to maintaining our focus on First Nations and diverse leadership.

Venue selection

Issues around venue and catering are specific to each event, but TNA needs to work on ensuring consistency, maintaining excellent access for people with disabilities and being clear about what is provided in terms of access, access services - and of course catering!

Recommendations:

- Develop a formal curatorial panel to set directions, introduce ideas and approve programs.
- Locate key executive roles in-house with TNA.
- Continue to refine our curatorial and executive role descriptions.
- Use venues and suppliers that provide excellent facilities, including access for people with disabilities.

Questions:

- 7) How should TNA continue to enhance the Curatorial leadership of the ATF? How might a paid panel of curators bring benefits, and how might it be a problem?
- 8) What other models of curation and producing are you aware of which the ATF can learn from?
- 9) Are there other pressing venue and logistics issues that the ATF needs to address?

Please send feedback to Nicole Beyer, Executive Director, via email: nicole@tna.org.au by COB Monday 14th May.

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Australian Theatre Forum - The Future of Theatre in Australia

WHAT WE DO AND WHY

The Australian Theatre Forum brings together, on a biennial basis, professional theatre practitioners, artists, presenters, producers, managers, policy-makers and academics from across the country and from large, medium, small and independent sectors in order to:

- Be inspired by new ideas, practices, research and achievements
- Strengthen relationships across different sectors of art form, culture, function and scale
- Feed the development of new work and purpose through discussion of the current social, political and philosophical environment in which Australian theatre practitioners are working
- Focus on the practices of creating theatre and engaging audiences with it
- Allow for new or marginalised voices to be heard in all the above discussions

OUR VISION

The Australian Theatre Forum is a landmark meeting place for Australian theatre industry professionals. Held in different locations around the country, this biennial event strengthens theatre as an art form by addressing current issues regarding policy and practice, sharing knowledge and view points, and cultivating fresh ideas that will, in turn, enrich Australian art, culture and society.

OUR VALUES

The Australian Theatre Forum underpins its work with these values:

- The work of independent artists and of small, medium and large organisations is interdependent in a flourishing Australian theatre landscape.

- The views of diverse, emerging or marginalised practitioners and of experienced elders within the theatre community are all to be heeded and regarded.
- The Australian theatre industry and community takes responsibility for leadership in the areas of social and cultural inclusion, accessibility, freedom of expression and environmental responsibility.

WHO ATTENDS THE ATF?

Professional theatre makers of all kinds and across all sectors are invited to attend, along with producers, presenters, managers, funders, policy makers, theatre journalists and academics.

Special care is taken to ensure that the Forum is accessible to independent artists, small companies and diverse cultures, including First Nations so that the full breadth of Australian theatre cultures and styles is represented and so new and marginalised voices are clearly heard alongside those of our theatrical elders and established practitioners.

The ATF also has a commitment to ensuring that art form sectors and diverse scales of work are represented, including members of the Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG).

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN THEATRE FORUM

The ATF aims to focus on the ideas and issues that will demonstrably strengthen the Australian theatre sector across the board. As the forum grows and matures, its format will aim to provide inspiration and stimulation to everyone who attends, regardless of their experience, sector, art form, scale or style.

It will focus on ways of creating theatre and taking it to audiences; the factors that influence what new work is about and what theatre can achieve; and strengthen networks across the sector while bringing new voices into the discussion.

To achieve this it will engage inspirational speakers and innovative practitioners and thinkers as well as highly skilled facilitators in a program that will include plenary sessions; parallel sessions across various fields of interest or experience; and small break-out groups.

ATF is developing a Facilitation Strategy aimed not only at encouraging fruitful discussions but also at documenting the ideas, issues and outcomes that emerge from the Forum so they can be shared amongst the performing arts sector and the wider community.

HOW IS THE ATF DELIVERED?

The Australian Theatre Forum is produced biennially by Theatre Network Australia (TNA), the country's leading industry development organisation for the performing arts, prioritising independent artists and small to medium companies.

TNA, overseen by an industry-based board, engages experienced professionals to shape and deliver the Forum. Forum management is based in TNA's Melbourne office working with Executive Director Nicole Beyer, and a Curatorial Panel oversees the event's thematic development and invited speakers and artists.

OUR KEY PRIORITIES 2019 – 2025

After every biennial forum, Theatre Network Australia examines attendance and survey data, listens to feedback and considers how the forum can be further improved to become the most anticipated, enriching and productive stimulus for theatre-makers across Australia. Some key issues identified for special attention over the next five years include:

Our Attendees:

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- Develop ways to ensure that the Forum is compelling and relevant for the full spectrum of the industry including major theatre organisations as well as independent artists and small to medium companies.

Our Content:

- Focus on the practices and purposes of creating great theatre for a broad range of audiences.
- Create a strong, clear structure with streams of interest and experience to engage the diversity of attendees, with substantial small group discussions feeding in to plenary sessions.
- Seek out and attract a high level of inspirational speakers and provocateurs.
- Develop a facilitation strategy to enhance outcomes of value to the sector.
- Work with the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) to engage fully with issues which have an international dimension.

Our Delivery Model:

- Develop a formal curatorial panel to set directions, introduce ideas and approve programs.
- Locate key executive roles in-house with TNA.
- Continue to refine our curatorial and executive role descriptions
- Use venues and suppliers that provide excellent facilities, including access for people with disabilities.

Andrew Bleby
April 2018
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