



Things I've Heard about Regional Artists

and what we can do about it

A research project examining how presenters, producers and other artists can better engage with regional artists, audience and communities.

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I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I work, the Wiradyuri peoples, who have been custodians of this land for millennia. I acknowledge their elders, their enduring culture and their rights to their land.

The Wiradyuri are the goanna totem and 'the people of the three rivers' – the Macquarie (traditionally known as the Wambool), the Lachlan (or Kalari) and the Murrumbidgee, which has retained its original name.

This project involved travel far across this continent, and I would like to acknowledge the 65,000 years of continuous custodianship of all First Nations cultures of this Country, to remember that this land was never ceded, and to recognise that this always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Knowing more of our history and its stories of displacement and dispossession fuels our responsibility to shape a future that redresses historic injustice to people, place and culture.

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Cover image: Kate Smith and Tanya Rodin in MIGHTY (2019) by Lingua Franca, co-produced by Local Stages at BMEC, Bathurst NSW. Photo: Phil Blatch.

Introduction

In 2019 I traveled regional Australia visiting a number of significant non-metropolitan cultural hubs, places where numerous professional regional performing artists make their homes and base their practice. In what was a Research Residency hosted by Sydney Festival, supported by the Australia Council of the Arts through a Career Development grant, the goal of this project was to learn more about how Festivals and metropolitan arts communities interact with regional artists and communities, and discover where the opportunities lay to promote deeper interaction between metro orgs and regional work.

I am a regional artist myself – I grew up in Darwin and started my artistic career in Bathurst in regional NSW, and have been a freelance, independent theatre maker based in the country for most of my working life, with the home of my practice staunchly situated in non-metro contexts. I came to this project with a weight of lived-experience and knowledge of the challenges and opportunities that an artistic practice outside the cities provides.

Despite all my own experience, travelling regional Australia provided more much more insight into the varied experiences of artist's experiences across the whole regional ecology than I anticipated, but also confirmed the common challenges faced by many regional practitioners across the country.

Meeting with other independent regional artists from outside my own context quickly proved to be the most interesting part of this research. These conversations revealed a complex national ecology of ambitious regional artists, with distinct voices and tenacious practices, all ready to be seen and heard, and hungry to be present and to participate in the wider sector. I spent hours across the country in conversation with rigorously reflective and self-aware practitioners that know the value and impact of their practice, who are deeply connected to their own communities, who understand the opportunities and limitations of their context. These were all artists who ultimately want to *work*, but often feel left out of the equation and misunderstood.

I was also able to have some honest, frank and blunt conversations with presenters, including festivals, venues and companies, both regional and metropolitan. In these remarkable chats, a number of significant cultural gatekeepers laid bare some of rarely articulated assumptions the wider sector makes about regional performing artists.

The following are the most striking things that I heard while visiting regional centers around Australia, things that were said about regional artists, and things that regional artists want to

say. I have synthesised these into a set of principles that can govern the way we, as a whole sector, can consider the way we collaborate between the regional-metro divide. I present these as a set of equally true contradictions, as a way to honour the complexity of the interconnected opportunities and challenges that practice outside the cities offer.

Lindy Hume, in her 2017 Platform paper “RESTLESS GIANT: Changing Cultural Values in Regional Australia” proposes the term ‘counter-urban’ in place of ‘regional’, as a way of positioning “*how and why we live in regional Australia, rather than where.*” This can serve as a useful shift in perspective to keep in mind when thinking about regional artists. *How and why* are more actively inquisitive, and help to interrogate the complexity of the realities of regional professional practice, in opposition to the descriptive *where*, which seems too often to lead to the assumptions that much of the sector makes about the regions and the artists that practice there. I’m also drawn to Hume’s decision to position her writing “*primarily from the personal perspective of an artist who chooses to live and work in regional Australia.*” I share this experience, and believe that more than a decade after beginning my artistic career in regional Australia, my experience living and working outside the cities provides a rich platform to speak to the abundance, excellence and tenacity that I have seen all over the country. My experience as a regional artist has created a perspective that has expanded my understanding not narrowed it, and one that I like so many regional artists deeply cherish and value.

It’s important to recognise that each regional community has its own character, with distinct challenges and different opportunities that create a context unique to that place, meaning there’s a definite danger in conflating the experience of all regional artists and communities. What I hope to offer though is insight into the perspectives and assumptions that create misunderstandings about regional professional performing arts practice, and to reveal the ambitions and aspirations of many of those practitioners I met, so we can create a richer and deeper understanding and appreciation for the contributions regional artists make to the national artistic ecology.

Part 1: Things People Say About Regional Artists

I have spoken with a diverse arrange of artists, presenters, festival programmers, venues and peak bodies, both regionally-based and metropolitan, across the spectrum of contemporary performance practice. From these many conversations, I have extracted just a few examples of some of things that people have said about regional artists and communities that construct our metro-centric attitudes towards performance making in Australia, and create narratives of regional areas as being in cultural deficit. Because of the context of this research project, many seem like they are perspectives that most people would not usually say to a regional artist directly, but that certainly many would say they regularly feel the impact of – a sadly vindicating experience as a regional artist to hear some of our leaders make these statements clearly and honestly. These statements are recorded here *verbatim* from interviews, from people that I will not name, as it is not useful. This is not about individual perspectives, but rather how these are underlying ideologies or assumptions that the sector has more broadly about regional work that create impactful misunderstandings about the regions.

“Why don’t we program regional work? Because we don’t think it’s good enough. And we don’t spend the resources to go and find out. Why? Because a lot of work in the regions doesn’t have that distinctiveness in form or content, and often is a pale repetition of what you can already find in the cities.”

I heard this from a Festival programmer, and the was first thing they said following my introduction to this project. This is the statement that perhaps best encapsulates the unarticulated attitude of many metro-centric contemporary performance makers in this country. It was a shocking statement to hear so clearly and so boldly.

This idea of distinctiveness is something that a number of Festival programmers mentioned in some form during our conversations. Many articulated that Festival’s need to be a site of discovery and surprise, providing audiences with access to work and ideas that perhaps they typically cannot outside of the Festival frame. Distinctiveness, in how the work is performed or the scale of the ideas it holds, is what makes work exciting they said, and is what keeps audiences coming back to Festivals. Festivals, it was said to me, care primarily about product, and are not overly concerned with process. The impact of the work needs to be in its

performative outcome, as commercial operations that owe their audiences vibrant and compelling experiences, and are not always sites of professional development for artists.

Similarly, a number of regional venue programmers said *“I can’t program local work because it is not good enough.”* They acknowledged an ambitious and tenacious local community of artists, but articulated a difficulty in being able to produce and sell a season of work that wasn’t up to the standard of the rest of the work that they programmed across the year. In one regional centre, I interviewed the local artistic director of one of the region’s professional venues who said that there wasn’t really a professional scene in the area and not many artists to invest in. Later that evening however, after doing some digging into the local community, I sat around a table at a local pub with a group of six regional theatre makers, all with various professional training, that spoke of the difficulty in getting access to space, support and visibility for their work and for the development of their practice.

A number of regional Australian organisations have broken through this attitude however. Dancenorth in Townsville (QLD), Back to Back in Geelong (VIC) and Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury-Wodonga (NSW/VIC) all have a history of regular presentation touring Australia and the globe. Each honour their regional home as empowering and fertile locations for practice, but make work that is universal in theme. Dancenorth refers to their regional home as *“a source of inspiration and creative energy”* while articulating an ambition to be nationally and internationally prolific. Former Dancenorth Artistic Director Cheryl Stock describes the company now as *“doing a really good job of looking in and looking out.”*, a key factor in the success of lot of regional organisations exporting their work out of their home region.

“If you’re a professional artist living outside the major cities we think that you’re hiding.”

This is the type of statement that many of the artists I spoke to have had said to them in some way, though perhaps not so bluntly. It speaks to the sense of invisibility that many regional makers feel in terms of their presence in the wider national conversation. Many regional artists, particularly in more remote areas, struggle with the ability to participate in the broader sector due to geographic distance and the prohibitive costs of travel. Consider an independent artist living in Darwin, where the nearest capital city is several thousand dollars round trip in travel costs away if you want to attend a Festival, conference in another state, or event just to see more work.

What is it though that a regional artist might be hiding from? Scrutiny of their work? A bad practice? An inability to 'make-it' in the city? It's statements like these that expose the metro-centric thinking that dominates attitudes to contemporary performance. This thinking centralises the city as the only place where excellence occurs, that unless work has a visibility in the city, or that artists are engaging with the work that happens in the city, they have something to conceal. Of course every artist should look at expanding their understanding of the sector by seeing as much work as possible from a diverse range of artists and practices, but it is the assumption that regional artists are insular, disinterested and uninformed that is the damaging thinking. In fact, many regional artists are *more* informed about the sector because they are, by necessity, more likely to travel to different places to engage with new work and new ideas, giving them a broader view of national practice. This assumption of regional ignorance is also symptomatic of wider cultural narratives of country Australia, but it is an assumption that devalues and erases the practice of many artists that have unique perspectives, distinct voices and thorough understanding.

My regional home is Bathurst in Central West NSW, which is only about 3 hours drive away from the heart of Sydney, and I'm grateful for the mobility that this affords me, and the access I have to the sector as a result. Despite this proximity to a major centre, I have had great and productive conversations with Sydney-based makers and presenters that have then suddenly ended with: ***"Your work sounds interesting, but I'm never coming to the country to see it. Let me know when you are able bring it to the city."*** While it is important to be able to situate your work in relation to broader contexts, it should not mean that regional work can only be valued if presented in a city context.

Julian Louis, artistic director of NORPA in Lismore, NSW, spoke of the balance he is working towards in terms of the audiences he makes for, with an aim to *"oscillate between different ambitions for different works."* NORPA has had great success inside the Northern Rivers region with a number of site-specific works that explore experiences and themes explicitly relevant to that region. *Dreamland* for example, takes the histories of the region and transforms local town halls in smaller villages in the region into spaces for contemporary physical theatre. With great reception from the local audience, Louis says that he is asking lately that if a work has

significance and success inside the region, why does it need to go elsewhere? Simultaneously though, NORPA is working with a cohort of many professional regional artists, and Louis says that the ambition for the work that they make is to tour, to *“show the rest of the world the excellence of the practice in this region. We make work that speaks to our own audiences directly, and we make work that speaks to audiences elsewhere, and they’re not necessarily mutually exclusive either.”*

“Sometimes you need an experienced artist to come from outside the community to really be able to tell the story of a particular region.”

This was said to me by a director of regional performing arts centre, in the context of a project they were conducting in collaboration with prolific city-based national organisation. This person is a great champion of regional practice and advocate for regional voices, and I trust that the intention of this particular project was to do just that – to support regional stories being told on more visible platforms, and the collaboration with the metro-based org was a mechanism to achieve this.

However, the damaging perspective here is the assumption that regional artists are unable to artistically interrogate and interpret the stories of their own region, that perhaps they are too close to it to be able to make strong work. However, don’t we actually greatly value artists as those in our community who are charged with the task of reflecting, challenging and confronting our times, to create bold visions of our world that help to shape and change the way we see our lives? Why then is the regional artist not trusted to perform the same role in their community?

My experience with regional artists has demonstrated that in fact they are more deeply connected to their immediate community than their metro counterparts. The success of a work in regional areas where audiences are smaller and tighter, is completely contingent on your ability to speak directly to your community. Regional artists are deeply invested in their homes, and are likely best positioned to be able to speak to the complex realities facing regional communities.

This idea that regional artists cannot author the stories of their own region fails to trust their rigour and their ability to artistically examine their context. We expect that the artist’s enterprise is to ask vital questions of our world, so we need to have confidence in regional artists, as experts on their communities, to do just that.

“The regions are a really good place to cut your teeth and develop, and a great place to test work.”

The idea that the regions are a safe space for city artists to explore, grow and perhaps fail more invisibly, is an idea that has been around for decades, supported by years of regional ‘retreat’ style residencies and the ways in which a few of major performing arts companies tour regionally.

A number of regional centres offer residencies that support artists to immerse themselves in the benefits of regional Australia to make work. The extraordinary and inspiring physical environment, the localised resources, the peace and quiet and remoteness that allows an artist to deeply focus on their practice are often referred to when discussing the great benefits of retreat to country. This is all true, and all available in abundance, and is why regional practice is so compelling for so many.

However, it is these same qualities that are valued by city artists in relation to their own practice that are sometimes used as mechanisms to degrade the work of regional artists. The assumption, at its worst, is that the city artist brings the full weight of their practice to the regional area in deficit, that the location is otherwise artistically lacking in some way. This isn’t of course universally true, with a number of regional residencies promoting true collaboration between visiting and regional artists (although just running a workshop for the locals during your residency doesn’t quite count as collaboration), with Hothouse Theatre’s *A Month in the Country* being a strong example.

During conversations with regional artists around the country I also had pointed out to me the way in which a number of our larger organisations tour their work to regional areas. In several examples the performers and creative teams are not made up of the companies core ensemble, but are young and emerging artists, sometimes even students. Of course emerging artists deserve to have their work toured and seen by audiences across the country, but this sends a message that regional areas and audiences don’t deserve the best, established work of these organisations, and that regional audiences should be grateful for any work at all! There’s also a practice of major institutions using regional audiences to test their works, previewing their work at regional venues but premiering the production in a major city, which again contributes to this idea that regional centres are hidden retreats for metro artists.

Regional audiences deserve to be respected as intelligent and artistically literate citizens, meaning that the work that tours regionally needs to meet them. The regions are vibrant and alive complex ecologies in their own right, and not just sites of development for city-based artists.

Part 2: Things Regional Artists Say

In my interviews with regional artists from across the country common themes of ambition, invisibility and readiness emerged. In many of the communities I visited, there existed a dedicated group of local, professional artists who work tirelessly to promote the value of locally made work, who were thoroughly embedded in the cultural life of their home, and who had great ambition for not only their own but the wider artistic voice for their community. What they communicated however was a common desire to be more visible and respected as valued professional cultural contributors inside their own communities and also more widely by the sector. Alongside this, they were able to articulate the circumstances inside their context that contributed to this experience of feeling muted. The below statements are the most common experiences identified by these independent regional artists as great hurdles in their practice.

“Independent regional artists don’t get a seat at the table. My visibility in the wider sector is completely contingent on my local venue programmer or Artistic Director.”

It is a reality that most of the discourse and advocacy around regional arts in Australia is dominated by regional organisations, venues and people that lead them. While there are many effective, articulated and excellent advocates that this includes, what many independent artists articulated was the difficulty and frustration that they feel being on the outside of those organisations, particularly when they have a unique voice or needs that aren’t represented. Support for making their work is entirely contingent on their relationship to these organisations, and many expressed the challenges in building and maintaining these partnerships

It would be naïve though to think this is unique to regional practice, as this is true of the wider sector in any community, town or city across the country. What does make it more difficult in regional communities though is the options for independent artists in where they secure support from can be extraordinarily limited. Consider that in many regional centres, it’s quite likely there is only one theatre or venue, and then, how often do they support the development or presentation of new work? What happens when your work isn’t aligned with the venue’s goals? For whatever reason it is, what if they are just not interested? Where do you go? How do you secure further support or put up a compelling grant application without the packing of

the local org? In many regional areas, there simply isn't anywhere else to go. Linked to this idea, many regional artists also noted:

“There are limited resources in my community to fully realise the ambition of my work.”

I'm sure many (if not every) artist anywhere has had this thought before, that if only they had more time / money / people / space to realise the full potential of their ideas! Again though, practicing in a regional context amplifies this a great deal. There are limited avenues for presentation, less opportunities for focused development, fewer larger companies to support the work, and not as many other artists to collaborate with. Entrepreneurial regional artists can more often quickly exhaust their options within their immediate context, creating a more significant pressure on them as independent practitioners than their metro counterparts.

There are so many examples of industrious and enterprising independent regional artists and companies that have strong networks inside and outside of their communities, but for many the challenge remains on how to develop diverse and rich networks that enable their practice. For many artists, and particularly emerging artists in the regions, this lack of mechanisms for support in their own communities is a difficult challenge to overcome.

“I feel like I will have to leave this region to be taken seriously and or even survive as an artist.”

This was a common sentiment amongst *all* the artists I spoke with. This experience is a direct impact of the metro-centric attitude towards artistic practice in this country, and is deeply impactful on all regional artists I know. Artist's told me about how they constantly asked “When are you going to move to **insert any capital city here**”, “When are you going to leave and give it a real go?”, and “Why are you still here?”, hearing these questions from both people in their town and from those from the cities.

Cultural cringe about local work is alive and well in regional Australia, and many artists spoke about how they feel their work undervalued by local audiences and presenters, particular in favour of outside touring work.

The impact of this is significantly detrimental to an artists practice. Overtime, these kind of statements create doubt about the value of your own work and undermine the deep connection a regional artist might have to place, community and audiences. At worst, this can drive an artist away from their home, with regional communities losing the artists best placed to make resonant, relevant work.

For many artists, it is also a reality that full-time practice is not practical in their community. There is quite literally *less work* in many regional areas, giving necessity for artists to leave their community to find means to support themselves.

Regional artists deserve to be able to make their work in the place they have made their home. I've seen many artists overcome both of these experiences, mostly by making great work that respects their community and in projects that makes use of the existing resources. Also, many prolific regional makers navigate the challenges by being increasingly mobile, putting down deep roots in to a community, but also ensuring they stay connected to the wider sector.

The best answer I heard to the question why don't you leave, though: *"Why would I? I've worked hard so I don't need to."*

Part 3: Regional Collaboration Principles

The great problem with the way that we think or talk about regional practice, whether it is the perspective of the regional artists or those that are about them, is that at the core, there is something present that is both of great value and in great need. Like any part of the arts ecology, there exists in regional arts practice examples of pure excellence and but also in great deficit. Any advocacy around professional regional arts practice needs to acknowledge that the landscape is complex – that regional artists need both a new narrative that recognises their significant achievements, and also need stronger, more apt mechanisms that elevate regional practice to be able fully reach its ambition and its potential.

This is work that both regional artists and the metropolitan performing arts ecology need to do. Both need to acknowledge excellence *where, why* and *how* it exists in regional arts practice, and both need to provide and/or accept greater support where it is actually needed.

Following are four pairs of perspectives, both equally true but often encountered in opposition. Articulated as a set of principles to guide the collaboration with regional artists and communities, they need be understood in tandem to work towards a shifted narrative around the realities of regional practice, and better processes for working with regional artists and audiences.

With each is a set of positions that can be applied in order to work towards achieving this, and, where relevant, specific examples of programs and projects that have done some good work already.

Principle 1: Support Regional Excellence

Professional Regional Artists frequently demonstrate rigorous, exciting and excellent practice, and have great ambitions for their work, which needs to be recognised in its own right.

And...

There exists need for greater opportunities for presentation and professional development for regional artists, to elevate their work to achieve their ambitions.

So...

- **Employ regional artists**, valuing the unique perspective they can bring to your work, organisations or program.
- **Develop programs** that activate the existing skills of regional artists to augment the practice of others in their own, or in your own, community.
- **Value collaboration** with artists in the regions as equal, capable and robust partners.
- **Design specific, targeted programs** and workshops in consultation with regional communities, and not assume a uniform design will suit any regional context.
- **Investigate regional areas**, discover who is already working in the region, and talk with the independent artists practicing in the region, not just the major venues.

Principle 2: Create Critical Cultures

There needs to be increased visibility, viability and sustainability for regional artists inside their own communities, and contemporary regional work needs to be celebrated and championed by local leaders, peers and audiences.

And...

More robust critical cultures need to be developed in many regional centres that create space for rigorous conversation about work and that nurtures the development of local artists.

So....

- **Develop deep and consistent relationships** with regional artists through having frank, open and honest conversations about their work.
- **See the work of regional artists**, but do so with a knowledge about the local ecology, and how the artists are situated within it.
- **Create networks of artists** inside the regions, to provide opportunities for peers to share work with each other, creating dialogue among artists.
- **Provide opportunities for artists** to apply critical feedback. Seasons in regional areas are often short and work is often not remounted, so create structures that allow for experimentation following critical response.
- **Invest in training** for local critics so that the work can be properly reviewed within its own context.

Example: Browns Mart Theatre and Darwin Festival's [Front Row](#) program, that see's the professional development of numerous local critics and reviewers across the Festival program.

Principle 3: Understand Where Regional Artists Practice

Regional artists need to be mobile and seek out various, unexpected and spontaneous inputs into their practice, through means such as travel and engaging with visiting artists.

And...

Regional performing artists have a right to practice their work in their own communities without having to abandon the regions in order to obtain recognition and respect for their work, including the respect of those inside their own communities.

So...

- **Create opportunities** for regional artists to collaborate with visiting artists as professionals, not just as workshop participants.
- **Promote exchanges** between artists as *peers*, with the skills and experience of regional artists acknowledged.
- **Program the work of regional artists**, to tour to your Festival/venue, but consider partnering with regional artists and venues to present work to premiere in their own region.
- **Deliver programs** that invite regional artists into other spaces where their skills and experience are activated and valued.
- **Value the successes** of regional artists that occur within their own communities.

Example: Arts Outwest's [Prepare to Exchange Program](#) (2013), which saw 13 Central West artists explore the intersections of their practices in their own region with artists from Derbyshire, UK, both in New South Wales and through travel to the UK, over a 2 year period. Work by Australian artists was presenting in the UK and Derbyshire artists visited regional New South Wales to collaborate.

Principle 4: Respect Local Regional Audiences

All audiences deserve access to the best work that tours the country, with regional presenting venues having an important role to play by creating diverse and vibrant programs of touring work for regional communities.

And...

Regional, local artists need to have access to the resources present inside their own communities at these venues, and to have investment in their practice to elevate their work.

So...

- **Invest in long term projects** by regional independent artists, supporting them through development and presentation.
- **Program the work of regional artists** at significant venues in their own communities.
- **Leverage your networks** in support of regional artists, creating broader opportunities for them to access more diverse resources and support.
- **Promote collaboration** between local regional artists and those outside the region.
- **Tour your best work** and artists to the regions, giving regional audiences access to the strongest examples of contemporary work, and giving regional artists access to networks with great artists and work from around the nation.

Example: New South Wales Regional venues like [Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre](#), [NORPA](#) and [Merrigong Theatre](#) have rich, diverse annual seasons filled with contemporary Australian work, but also features the work of professional artists and companies from their regions alongside that work. This aligns locally made work with that of the national touring companies, creating opportunities to build audiences for regional work and increases local audience confidence in local artists.