

QUE Theatre Inc.: Towards Sustaining Youth Culture in Regional Queensland

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This paper is the result of an “audit” of the current programs and products offered by QUE Theatre Inc. in Toowoomba, Queensland. As the coordinator of QUE activities for the Department of Theatre at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), it has been my brief since 2001 to build a sustainable profile for a youth theatre company in the region. Over the past four years, the company has developed some unique properties, some of which are strengthened by the unique industry partnerships that help to resource the company, and some of which are “accidental”; dictated by location and circumstance, and a lack of foresight and strategic planning in the initial stages of QUE’s beginnings. Either way, QUE (which only became an incorporated company in March 2003) is still in its embryonic growth stages, and I intend that the findings in this paper will impact upon the strategic planning that is currently being developed by QUE’s youthful management committee. QUE was not the first youth theatre to be established in Toowoomba, during the 1970s the Darling Downs Youth Theatre (DDYT) was established by Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) as part of their theatre-in-education program (which had been an Australia Council priority). Whilst it was based in Toowoomba, the leaders of the two projects produced by the DDYT were resident part-time and their overriding model was that of a grafted “production” company (McCart, 475). During its brief time it did not receive the pedagogical or professional industry support that QUE now relies upon, in other words, it was an imposed youth theatre model with good intentions but little agency for regional youth.

Regional Youth

Anyone who has ever tried to establish a youth service in a regional community would probably have come across the raised eyebrows and the concerned looks from community elders who envisage chaos and vandalism as the “new” expressive forms that might alienate the generations and drive a wedge further into the age divisions felt so strongly in country towns. Toowoomba is no exception; Toowoomba is, after all, a city of churches, gardens, educational centres (many boarding and regular

schools and a university), and retirement villages. The view of youth as an unstable category goes without saying perhaps because of the consistent exodus of young people from Toowoomba as is the case in many regional centres. Mary Ann Hunter's paper entitled "Contemporary Australian Youth-Specific Performance and The Negotiation of Change" describes well the problems of "generational discourses" that are rife within our greater cultural, social and political spheres. "...at one end of the spectrum, youth as a discursive category has been equated with newness and innovation [while] a representation of young people as a problem generation has become more prevalent..." (2000, 27). The anxiety she suggests is in regard to how institutions (including the theatre industry) might influence the shape and scope of youth culture by (perhaps unconsciously) using these discourses that locate "youth" in opposition to conservative beliefs of the "mature", older "gatekeepers" (2000, 27).

Youth, and especially teenagers are most popularly demonised as a group of "Calibans" who bite the hand that feeds them:

When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me ...
... and then I loved thee...
You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (Act One, Sc 2)

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban is adolescent in his taunting of the fatherly Prospero, yet full of dangerous adult-like potential as the energy and vitriol pours out of him. Caliban's power is in his opposition to the dominant patriarchal ideology on the island. Prospero's anxiety reveals that he believes that Caliban *could* wreak havoc because he has been given tools to do so. So too are adult discourses traditionally wary of youth culture, and programs that support or encourage youth to express their culture. As Susan Richer and Judith McLean also acknowledge, the aesthetics of youth culture are "politically bound up with notions of sex and class and generationalism" (4).

At last year's annual QUE Fest where 25 young people presented plays that they had built (with young facilitators from USQ's Theatre Studies cohort) over a four month period, some mature and experienced theatre patrons in Toowoomba told QUE Administrators that the production was "annoying" and "too much about teenage

angst”. What they saw disturbed them and made them impatient for these students to “hurry up and move out of this phase” of their development and were “dismissed as self-indulgent” (Hunter 2000, 32). Their generationalist discourse was shared by other community members as well, because the festival did not fit comfortably into a conventional paradigm regarding production values or professional actor technique. In a regional location like Toowoomba, concepts of “youth” have traditionally been at odds with the adult-infused repertory theatre culture, and I believe this has resulted in a kind of youth-cultural cringe that “worries” people about the “newness” of the company. QUE struggles to be taken seriously by adult cultural gatekeepers in a town where cultural theatre products replicate mainstream “high” cultural values through the Repertory Theatre, Philharmonic and Toowoomba Choral societies (Wilson, 2).

There is very little information about regional youth theatre in Australia. Most of my reading in this field comes from published material by Queensland arts associations such as Youth Arts Queensland (YAQ), Queensland Community Arts Network (QCAN), and the Theatre Arts Network Queensland (TANQ). In a 2001 TANQ publication (*Ignite Theatre Special Edition*) entitled “Playing Outside: People, Place, and Regional Performance,” many of the contributing authors discuss personal and ongoing anecdotes about their regional theatre experiences, although they do not deal specifically with youth theatre as a discrete endeavour. Overall, they suggest that regional areas are still realizing that they might provide artistically lucrative fodder for the creation of new theatre works. As John du Feu states in his paper “Listening for the Echo: Regional Theatre in the 21st” regional communities are a “rich source of anecdote and experience” for the creation of germane theatre processes and product that might have genuine efficacy and legitimacy for audiences in regional areas (13).

Historically, the above mentioned theatre “societies” are likely to be administered by retired people who may have had some speech and drama training—AMEB (Australian Music Examinations Board including Speech and Drama) or Trinity—and who are most likely to have “earned their stripes” as thespians by participating in annual eisteddfod competitions. The cultural products that are presented in the above arenas are almost always scripted, well published, well known crowd-pleaser plays and musicals where the production values may be glorified in order to hide inconsistent performances. The repertory theatre may provide some contemporary work, but seasons are generally decided upon without too many

performance risks being taken. These theatres are very often supported by a conservative (and adult) regional public who are wary of anything too “different”. (McDonald 14).

In Sue Benner’s groundbreaking research into the status of amateur theatre in Queensland, she says that most amateur theatre folk “have little desire to be professional theatre workers, their participation is based on creative needs and personal growth” (16). Her research suggests that there has been a distinct and significant shift, in amateur theatre, from performing scripted plays to working collaboratively with a playwright or theatre instructor to create new works (16). She goes on to suggest that this could be an emergent new community cultural development model that blends aspects of amateur theatre with community theatre techniques; and this is organically central to QUE Theatre Inc’s framework. Steve Capelin, in his revealing publication *Challenging the Centre: Two Decades of Political Theatre* defines community theatre as having “critical and celebratory voice of the ordinary people”: indeed it is its very nature to dispel theatre as an elusive “high art” as this should aid in audience development for regional cultural products (55). In Eve Stafford’s article entitled “Creating Waves”, she suggests that “conversations to exchange experiences, human scale storytelling and values-sharing” is the key to creating “good” regional theatre (11). Du Feu states that regional communities seeking to create their own theatre product should remember, “regional communities are not simply smaller versions of the capital cities” (13).

Indeed QUE Theatre’s vision (QUE 04 Program Flyer) states that QUE aims to “create dynamic and contemporary theatre for young people by young people” with a mission to “equip, educate and empower regional youth with genuine development opportunities through participation in all facets of theatre production” (1). These statements are very similar to many other youth theatre organisation throughout Australia, yet QUE does aim to mark out its territory clearly by specifying the training of “regional” youth. Throughout the audit and research of this company I have come to understand that it is too early in QUE’s cultural life to ascertain whether or not they have succeeded in their mission. However, perhaps as a hallmark of “youth” (often frowned upon by older cultural “gatekeepers” and accountants) is embodied in QUE: the dynamism of change is inevitable and is embraced informally by the company. To my knowledge, the above vision, mission and corresponding objectives for the

company are under review and development in 2004 as the company begins to articulate itself in a strategic plan.

With close to 150 young people either members or participating in QUE programs in 2004 alone, I would say that this company has opened the aperture on theatre for youth in Toowoomba, especially youth who are also indigenous, disabled, and rural. QUE Theatre Inc. may well be an emerging site for the contestation of institutional generationality as it is a youth-specific site of cultural production (Hunter 2000, 25). This emerging potential has interestingly been one that is largely unplanned and accidental. What is *not* accidental, however, are the ways in which Queensland Theatre Company (and the Theatre Department at USQ) has especially helped QUE to not only network with but develop meaningful mentoring from “young” and emerging theatre industry professionals from Brisbane. Practising theatre artists such as Jamie Dawson, Sandro Colarelli, Leticia Caceras, and Chris Pye have all spent a considerable amount of time with QUE youth in order to affect meaningful theatre-making within educational programs.

In providing so many theatre-skill workshops and programs (see Appendix #1), the company has found itself emphasising and promoting the theatre-making process, and not necessarily production aspects or values. This became an issue—especially for the large adult/parent audience—at the 2004 annual QUE Fest because the productions did not give the audience access to the process that was so important to the growth of the productions. Youth theatre and playbuilding mentor, Chris Pye, suggested that to increase the unique-ness of QUE Fest as a cultural site for youth expression, the company needed to reveal the process in order to celebrate and also allow critical evaluation of the ways in which young people do negotiate meaning in the dramatic space; by hiding it, the company risked replicating conventional “adult” theatre company models. It would seem that without an honest documentation and inclusion of the process in QUE Fest, the generationalist discourse “accidentally” enabled the negative comparison of the festival to other adult or mainstream products. In 2004, aspects of the processes of playbuilding are currently being filmed throughout QUE Fest playbuilding sessions. These will be edited and presented at the festival by a theatre/media student who is also a member of QUE.

Clearly, QUE needs to continue to harness and plan for the meaningful development of relations with theatre professionals in order to capitalise on their contributions and reduce the accidental nature of these learning opportunities. Richer

and McLean warn in their article “Theatre for Young People In Australia” that young people’s exposure to youth-specific programs or products does not necessarily equate with an understanding of art making and aesthetic literacy. They argue that it is not simply osmosis that creates effective or meaningful youth theatre experiences, but the nurturing and sustenance of a *desire* in young people to articulate and be critical of what they want and how they want it, otherwise they cannot become advocates for a utilitarian theatre culture in their town, “[a]udiences do not return to theatre when they have not connected with the work” (Richer and McLean, 4).

In the immediate future, a key here to promoting the longevity of the company and to how it deals with issues and perceptions of generationalism is to maintain “youth” discourses in the planning, development, and production of programs and theatrical products in QUE. As much “off-the-record” remarks suggests, the large youth membership and majority youthful representation on the Management Committee of QUE continues to wrestle with the nature of its/their emerging “voice”. Currently, the offices of President, Secretary and previously Treasurer are all USQ Theatre students who are not only negotiating what it means to run a company, but also struggling to find an aesthetic unity about what they believe theatre actually is. “...there are problems associated mainly with our lack of experience and expertise....everything we learn, we learn on the run....from my point of view, this is a defining characteristic of the company thus far” (Wilson, 1).

Sustainability: If We Build it, Will They Come?

Although I believe that the overall commitment of QUE Theatre Inc. to developing regional youth-theatre voices is positive, albeit embryonic, the fact that QUE did not initially evolve organically “from the ground up” raises some interesting questions about how the company might sustain itself over a long period of time. The very first program offered by QUE was a playbuilding set of workshops that were developed, rehearsed, and presented into a festival of new youth-performances entitled QUE Fest. This was begun as part of a regional partnership between Queensland Theatre Company, USQ Department of Theatre, and The Empire Theatre which was launched the then Arts Minister, Matt Foley in March 2001 (QUE is an acronym of the first letters of the names of each partner). As the coordinator of this original impulse, I can honestly say that it was an informed hunch about what young people “needed” in Toowoomba. We imposed this theatre-making product out in the community like a

carrot on a stick; it was a pilot for investigating how we might go about creating a youth theatre company. QUE Fest proved to be a popular program and continues to be the “flagship” of all QUE initiatives with young people, purely based on the fact that approximately 60 young people have created no less than 10 original theatre productions since 2001. This “hunch” directly led to the establishment of QUE Theatre Inc. as its own company in 2003. We built the company and the participants did come, however, they did not necessarily come up with idea or the “need” themselves.

QUE Fest created a need—it is a cultural conduit—for young people interested in making their own theatrical products and exploring dramatic and theatrical cultures in the region. The fact that 10 of the 14 students undertaking QUE Fest in 2004 are returning to the program from previous years is an indication that there is a “Fest” culture emerging inside QUE Theatre Inc. What the QUE Administrator (Kathryn Silcox) refers to as “cross-programming” has also emerged as a by-product of offering a large number of programs; several participants who started in QUE Labs in 2001 have continued on through QUE Fest into QUE Act in 2004. Programs are designed to support other programs by building upon skills and encouraging participants to socialise together. “...I learnt to work together in a group and to contribute to everything ...one of the main reasons why I am committed to this project [QUE Fest] is because of the cool/friendly people – QUE Staff and other QUE people – like myself” (QUE Fest 2003 Evaluations).

According to the minutes from QUE Management Committee meetings (October 20, 2003; December 4, 2003; and December 17, 2003) throughout 2003 there was vocalised concern and some opposition to continuing the practice of creating pilot programs based on “hunches”. Indeed these measures may seem unsophisticated and even “cheap” in that formal “market research” was not undertaken to prove the need. But the hunches are not uninformed, and most of the programs offered have their genesis in an enquiry from the public or a perceived “hole” in Toowoomba’s cultural makeup that Silcox became aware of because of her connections with theatre and youth-arts practitioners in the town. QUE Able, QUE Reach, QUE Act, and QUE Fiish were all begun in this way and all of the programs currently rival QUE Fest for the amount of participating youth. This kind of community connection and interpretation of local trends has been a vital attribute in the QUE Administrator and young Management Committee members of QUE.

We were actually discussing this at our last board meeting and I think the general consensus was that we don't want to merely fill gaps in the market. I believe we have the potential to provide the market with products they didn't even know they wanted, but when they see them, they'll want more. (Wilson, 2)

These hunches have proven to increase the income for the company which, in turn, spends this on developing further pilot ideas.

McLean and Richer suggest that another important provocation for discussion about theatre for young people should be the consideration of how to reconceptualise the relationship "between artmakers, arts educators, and young people as partners in creating and learning cultures to assist arts practise" (5). QUE has encouraged an open dialogue between its three partners and all of the programs offered by QUE are taught by their respective program managers, most of whom are graduates from USQ Theatre Studies and acting majors. They are what Abbs refers to as "co-artists" and without them, these programs could not have a youth focus at its core.

...the teacher of an arts discipline becomes, in some measure, a practitioner. ...there is a further related, more subtle aspect to the notion of co-artist; it is a function of the arts-teacher not only to initiate aesthetic activity but also enter it directly as creative agent, to develop it and deepen it. (1988, 39-40)

These managers are mostly under the age of 30 and they impart a unique kind of richness to QUE as a theatre company populated and facilitated by young people who have industry experience. This immersive, "youth-mentoring-youth" pedagogy is unique to QUE because of the company's close ties with a university that mixes practice and theory in its theatre degree programs. The pedagogy is based on a "natural" mentoring model where "...a student/teacher may develop into a relationship between peers after the student has graduated, the more experienced person counselling the less experienced and introducing them to new opportunities, rather than just motivating, supporting and teaching them ..." (Hunter, 2002 1). There is an all-encompassing "top down" flow effect regarding the mentoring in QUE as the large youth representation on the company's Management Committee are mentored in business and meeting protocols by the three representatives from the QUE's industry partners (QTC, USQ and The Empire Theatre).

For example, as the coordinator of QUE at USQ, I also mentor current students who also sit on the Management Committee as well as graduates (who are paid) to teach into QUE programs (particularly QUE Act, QUE Reach, QUE Labs, QUE Fest, and QUE Able) in the same way that is described in the above quote. Students enrolled in practical theatre courses also participate in QUE programs for free, but with assessable outcomes. In turn, these graduates and current students mentor the young participants in QUE programs who then become advocates for QUE in their community and who might also, one day, become program or production leaders for QUE. Many of these young mentors themselves are regional /rural students (Roma, Dalby, Gatton, Laidley, Nanango, Oakey, Boonah) around Queensland and they are an intricate part of the “investment” that QUE holds as one of its values. What is clear is the consistently high praise given to the teachers/mentors of many QUE programs by participants. They list the rapport, the positive attitudes, the lack of authoritarian stances, and professionalism as some of the most important aspects of their QUE experiences (QUE Fest 2001/2002/2003 Evaluations; QUE Able 2004 Evaluations; QUE Act 2003/2004 Evaluations; QUE Lab 2002/2003/2004 Evaluations).

In reviewing and auditing all the documentation generated by or about QUE, it would seem that a key to regional sustainability is its links to a regional university. The programs are implemented by young theatre artists trained in university theatre courses and so they are able to intervene in the drama making workshops as co-artists; the motivation for the intervention can renew the source of invention in the participants (Abbs, 2007). It would probably be fair to suggest that this mentoring model for QUE promotes the strategy of “making work with and for young people that demonstrates an understanding of artmaking and aesthetic literacy” which is the number one priority for McLean and Richer’s research into sustaining significant arts/theatre practice with young people (4). This feeds directly into one of the reasons why the state theatre company (QTC) supports QUE Theatre Inc. as part of its regional partnership program; they desire to help develop theatre projects “that are generated from within the community, using the wealth of talent that already exists and up-skilling local artists so they will be able to grow within their communities and help develop others” (Queensland Theatre Company).

For QUE, at this time, there is an educational discourse used to describe its “position” as a site for youth-specific drama/theatre programs. All management

committee members agree that the largest current drawback for the company is that it does not have an arts discourse to balance the successful educational programs. Peter Abbs suggest that the tension between these two often slackens when one side is chosen at the expense of the other (208). If QUE is to develop a poetics or clear aesthetic manifesto for itself, then its artistic “muscle” must be exercised to hold an equal status with the skill development and training programs. QUE Fest with its annual celebration of youth playbuilding is currently the only public performance/s undertaken by the company.

The young people working into QUE Fest are the paying participants of the playbuilding program (most usually high school students) who are, most often, *not* members of QUE Theatre Inc. Perhaps with the demise of dramatic productions at schools (most high schools on the Downs produce an annual musical rather than a “school play”) coupled with the increasing popularity of Drama as a subject and discrete artistic-discipline in schools, suggests that the paying participants’ are comfortable with process-orientated programs offered by QUE. The feedback gathered from Fest participants since 2002 indicates that they are not concerned with the lack of performances/productions offered by QUE. It would seem that the common cultural understanding of the theatre that these paying participants bring with them to QUE is largely about pedagogy and this is complimented by the process orientated educational discourse that drives the very strong “youth-mentoring-youth” model of the company.

Prior to the 1990s, professional “theatre for young people” in Australia had often been product-orientated involving youth as audience where the play is developed along “current conventions of ‘good’ [meaning ‘adult’] mainstream theatre” (Hunter 2000, 29). Hunter goes on to suggest that youth-specific theatre *performance* is often aligned with guiding young people towards embracing the “processes of interpreting the dominant aesthetic conventions of the parent culture”(29). QUE may risk repeating this pattern due to the fact that its current lack of theatrical production lies in the divided constituency: paying participants who are not members, and the USQ-heavy membership. Currently the “youngest” participants pay to partake of the company’s process-orientated educational programs (of which QUE Fest is the most popular) while it is the “older” youth who are members and looking to create theatrical performances. These members of the company are mostly USQ Theatre students and are anxious that their theatre company does not yet

publicly perform plays for a paying audience. These members are currently working on a new initiative called QUE Blast which will aim to provide late-night theatre alternatives for Toowoomba residents.

As the development of QUE's artistic muscle remains to be seen (and whether it might replicate adult or mainstream conservatism) it should be noted that the processes that QUE currently offers do not appeal to all youth in Toowoomba or the Darling Downs. Youth cultural diversity is vast and QUE can only resource programs that utilise leaders with specific theatrical skills, although programs have successfully involved more marginalised youth from the region (specifically QUE Fiish and QUE Able). Yet these participants also remain disconnected to the membership of the company, resulting in a lack of advocacy for the reflection of true theatrical "need" in Toowoomba. Alternative youth cultural performances such as skateboarding or hip-hop have not yet found their way into QUE's artistic or educational vision, yet if the company believes that its power as a youth cultural provider lies with its ability to embrace and work towards change, then it is inevitable that new processes and products should be considered as the need arises. The sustainability of a company such as QUE must work towards strengthening its membership and representation of their needs and wants for their theatre company.

Precarious Partnerships

Youth theatre research undertaken by Richer and McLean indicates that one of the most effective tools for meeting cultural and artistic needs of young people is strategic partnerships "for efficacious lifelong learning/arts practice, [youth theatre] companies need to work with arts education specialists, target audiences, schools, teachers, young people and children"(5). There is no doubt that the very strong support for QUE from three of Queensland's key industry professionals: Queensland Theatre Company, USQ Department of Theatre (regional) and The Empire Theatre (regional), has given the company a solid grounding from which to depart. As Chief Executive Officer of The Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Ian Perkins states "I can't imagine that too many youth theatre companies have the support that's available to QUE" (Perkins, 1). The flagship arts enterprise in Queensland, QTC boast that their regional partnerships (in which QUE Theatre Inc is deemed a success) are a unique intra-state program and a "first for Australian arts. No other state theatre company in the country is undertaking this type of initiative" (Queensland Theatre Company).

Although this partnership is largely in regard to the exchange of “in-kind” resources QUE is strategically positioned and supported in ways that are unique to this region.

In 2001 when the partnership was first launched as QUE Fest, QTC’s then General Manager, Sue Hunt saw the partners’ role as providing a “curatorial model” where they provide much the same job as a gallery curator who “assembles” theatre workshops, discussions, brings in experts, etc., and who, in this case, endeavours to provide a custodial or guardianship to the encouraging of new regional youth-specific theatre. As mentioned previously, this did impose a prescriptive sense of what young people might want in their region at the very start, and yet the curatorial model has quickly evolved into the youth-mentoring-youth model outlined in the previous section of this paper. The success of this obviously spilled over into the Mission Statement and Vision of the newly created QUE Theatre Inc. where the first value exonerates the importance of teamwork in the company (QUE Brochure, 1).

And yet, the partnerships present new challenges for the fledgling theatre company. According to a recent audit of youth theatres in the United States, 56% of them reported affiliations with industry theatres and tertiary educational institutions (Regan, 29). There is no data about the state of Australian youth theatres; however partnerships with more experienced companies are a common method of support for youth companies to make a start. The 2003-2006 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between QUE’s three partners list as specific initiatives to: “develop initiatives for building youth audiences for theatre”, “contribute to strategic and financial/business planning”, “develop professionalism of QUE Theatre Inc.”, as well as overall mentoring and facilitation of all pedagogic and artistic aspects of QUE. Although I helped put together this MOA and encouraged all partners to honestly state their objectives, as a youth-theatre advocate I am aware of the adult “tone” of this document. The overall emphasis is on helping the youth of QUE to build and maintain a transparent, financially stable business; the MOA does, after all, seek to manage a notoriously unstable youth cultural enterprise. These objectives are of course very important to the growth of any theatre company, but they could endanger the development of a true “youth” agency for QUE. The Management Committee will need to safeguard the company’s youth orientation and articulation of its regional youth cultural “position” otherwise QUE could be subsumed into the replication of adult theatre values. The partnership might become precarious if the objectives of the

partners' MOA blurs too much into the "organic" needs and desires of the youthful QUE Management Committee.

The struggle between a desire for professional business practice and an environment in which young people can learn and fail ...about both drama and business practice has been the cause of a great deal of pressure upon young members of the Committee...[they] feel an expectation to perform at a level similar to that of business professionals as well as provide the organisation with an artistic direction. It is the stepping stones and guideposts between this level of expectation and the inexperience of committee members that are currently missing and is needed desperately. (James, 2)

Although the industry partners are not "parent" companies to QUE, they are at risk of positioning QUE as "answerable to the economic priorities and performance indicators" that they themselves use to "measure" their own success (Hunter 2001, 74). This can use a "generationalist" discourse to impose a frame of reference or a means of comparison to other youth and adult theatre companies. The biggest danger of this is the "accidental" way in which the discourse has evolved for QUE, because the "adult" partners are genuinely interested in supporting the company, but also in helping them to increase youth audiences, develop career paths for their own artists, and invite favourable commendations from the community. And yet, this generationalism seems to appear at the overarching partnership level, while the activities and projects of QUE Theatre Inc. are populated with young mentors and industry professionals from these three partners who work at the coalface with the youth participants. There is a definite distinction here between the collective "adult" tone of the partners and the youthful, colloquial "know-how" of the Administrator and Management Committee members who are using hunches and personal network connections to build QUE. This can certainly create tension between the goals and the actual daily achievements of the company and deserves greater exploration by all interested parties.

As previously mentioned, USQ has the largest stake in ensuring that QUE Theatre Inc. evolves as a meaningful theatrical enterprise in the region. The Department of Theatre desires to provide learning experiences that are valued, different to its main competitors (Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University in Brisbane) and promotional of its regional position in the state. The

2004 Department of Theatre brochure states that QUE is a “fully functional community youth theatre [that] provides ‘hands-on’ best practice experience for Theatre Studies students in all facets of operating a professional community arts organisation” (5). QUE already provides significant pedagogic opportunities for Theatre Studies and the Bachelor of Drama Bachelor of Education (BDED) students mentor and be mentored in playbuilding projects with young people, so much so that QUE has become a compulsory requirement for the obtaining of groupwork and collaborative skills in the seven required practical courses of the Theatre Studies and BDED degree programs. There is a symbiosis here that has so far positively reinforced QUE’s presence in Toowoomba, and yet the ideological paradigm that USQ provides may be eschewing the growth of the company as one that has “bubbled-up” from the needs to Toowoomba’s young people. Nonetheless, without the pedagogic input from USQ (via Department of Theatre staff), the company would never have emerged, and it must be reiterated that one of the keys to sustaining the company is to continue to align itself and makes its presence a necessary part of the pedagogic enterprises of a regional university theatre department whose charter is to motivate and conduct community outreach.

QUE’s connection to USQ, however, has not necessarily translated into successes with local high schools. One “hunch” that schools would provide a steady flow of students and promote QUE programs as extensions to their own drama programs has not yet been forthcoming. The assumption was that drama teachers might be looking for local activities would support QUE because of its ties with the university theatre programs. Instead, what has emerged is an implication that USQ’s influence may be an issue to those teachers who trained in Brisbane and remain loyal to their university (it should be stated that teachers at two schools who do consistently promote QUE programs have either taught or studied at USQ). This youth-cultural cringe against local process/products provided by QUE might be an aspect of Toowoomba’s 90-minute (driving) proximity to Brisbane, yet many Drama teachers prefer to promote Brisbane workshops and performances as they are uncertain of QUE’s “reputation” as a cultural provider and are dubious towards USQ’s theatre productions which are limited in choice compared to the variety of theatre offered in Brisbane (McDonald, 14).

From the beginning, The Empire Theatre partnership was interested in encouraging younger theatre audiences for their own products, however, there is little

indication that this has occurred as a direct consequence of QUE. I am heartened by what Eve Stafford writes in her paper: that audiences for new regional theatre initiatives are not created in a year or less, rather by “undoing the hierarchy between high art, community art and popular culture...”(11). I believe part of this “undoing” of hierarchies is for cultural organisations to provide, promote and enact on their own youth policies. The Empire is attempting to raise its youth profile by creating the Empire Theatres Foundation which states that it aims to provide “performing arts opportunities to further the cultural experiences and professional development of young people in Toowoomba and district”(The Empire Theatre) as a key objective. However, at this time, the Foundation only provides Youth Bursaries for six different theatrical workshop activities and summer schools (offered in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne), with no current links to QUE Theatre Inc. or its local training programs.

I would say that QUE still has a way to go before the youth-cultural cringe (an aspect of generationalist discourse) abates, and it therefore must begin to make new alliances with business and other regional cultural/social service providers that organically evolve. It seems this is already happening through two pilot programs offered in 2004: QUE Able and QUE Reach. Recently Anglicare in Toowoomba have taken particular interest in QUE Able, a pilot program providing theatrical skill-based workshops for intellectually disabled locals. After the success of classes offered in April this year, Anglicare offered the use of their own spaces and personnel to help promote and conduct further workshops in August. Although these are informal “partnerships” it is one that has developed from a hunch, yet it is an organic partnership of needs in the community. QUE Reach aims to address the lack of school support for QUE by aiming to gain a profile/presence in particularly rural schools. So far, Nanango (2002) and Dalby State High Schools have been providing a new kind of partnership to QUE via QUE Reach which not only places youth theatre mentors in schools but also replicates the mentoring relationship that has developed between USQ and QUE. QUE, then has the potential to be a cultural conduit that can put these schools and other cultural/service providers in direct contact with other regional artist networks and theatrical resources of benefit to Drama teachers and practitioners in the community.

Evaluation Issues

From the inception of QUE, QTC strongly voiced its support for the company to develop a solid aesthetic and artistic process that would consolidate the products created by QUE Fest as “art” and differ distinctly from school drama assessments or “skits”. Sue Hunt was adamant that the company develop as an artistic endeavour as well as a workshop provider and it was decided by members of the partnerships that Australian Theatre for Young People’s Professional Practice model would be a place to start building the new theatre company (Partnership Meeting, 2002). Yet it is only now, in the fourth year of QUE activities that this concept can begin to be taken seriously and an important part of developing its profile not only in the region it serves but also within the community of youth theatre companies in Queensland and Australia.

As QUE is about to embark upon balancing up the pedagogic activities with more theatrical production work, it is timely to consider that its uniqueness must also begin to stem from its artistic/aesthetic choices for theatrical performance. As Mick McEvoy states in his research entitled “Evaluating Youth Theatre” published in the June 2003 issue of *Lowdown*, there is a lack of material gathered by youth theatres to substantiate the claims that “youth arts can make a difference” (16). Unfortunately, our field of youth theatre is rampant with many an altruistic goal and excellent artistic/pedagogic intentions, yet how these actually take place and what steps are needed to guide a theatre in such deeds is woefully neglected because anecdotal reporting is favoured over the very time-consuming yet vital gathering of authentic analytical data from all participants in the company (16). It is one thing to create detailed strategic plans, mission and values statements to guide the provision of delivering of theatrical products and pedagogic programs, but the only way to perceive how all these tools are working is to consistently gather data at regular intervals and spend time following up with participants after the completion of projects. This is the only authentic and valid way to truly measure the success of a company in its community.

A preference of qualitative research methods (particularly ethnographic or phenomenological) in gathering this data will emphasise the investigation of affects on people through discovering their stories about their participation. QUE can and should continue to crunch box-office and participation numbers, but this quantitative method will reveal very little about whether or not the mission statement is being

fulfilled. QUE already asks all participants to write their evaluations about programs, but the questions are not linked to the company's mission or values, and they are notoriously recorded at the end of the program and sometimes forgotten altogether. Qualitative data more succinctly seeks out the relative truths about a company in its particular place and time, it also signifies the company's concern for how its programs and projects are perceived by the locals. For QUE, this means truly opening up to the community so that the data is not so heavily influenced by USQ Theatre students and the outcomes might well prove to obtain grant resources that it requires and deserves. The reality is that funding bodies do demand more definitive and specific illustration of outcomes, and the anecdotal stories of "individual lives being changed through art" are in danger of being completely ignored without being placed in a context of greater descriptive evidence (16).

McEvoy's article outlines some research frameworks that community arts organisations can use and also discusses how he investigated a pilot drama program for teenage boys at the Melbourne Juvenile Justice Centre in 2003. What these all emphasise is "measuring achievements against previously determined objectives", such as a mission and values/goals statements produced by a company. While QUE's key documents are still in flux and undergoing alterations, this will continue to contribute to the lack of data gathering being done by the company. McEvoy suggests some key qualitative data gathering methods as, a) delineating clear project aims and objectives by project leaders; b) surveys, questionnaires, follow-up interviews gathered during and after projects; and c) informal group discussions with participants. I would also suggest that the involvement of QUE members in these data gathering stages, so that all interested parties have a stake in the evaluation of their company. Any rigorous evaluation of QUE must be continuous and systematically gathered, reviewed frequently, and carefully archived for retrieval and reportage. For QUE to be truly unique it should aim to be a model how to document the benefits of their regional youth arts practice as an integral part of their theatre "business".

There is no doubt that gathering evaluative data can be a frustrating and time draining enterprise, but I do believe it is a key to the longevity of QUE as a sustainable cultural provider in the region. Ian Perkins from The Empire Theatre states that QUE needs to achieve "acceptance and support from the wider community, not just members. We must ensure that our outcomes are respected by the key

stakeholders; young people” (1). Comprehensive collection of authentic anecdotal evidence through interviews, may also help QUE to question and quell any generationalist discourse that might demand policy making and strategy that demand information that “proves theatre for youth ‘works’” (Saldana and Wright 116). This kind of evaluation is not about finding answers, rather about preparing to ask better questions of the company; and this audit is an attempt to begin this reflection.

Conclusion

After investigating the work done by Y3P Footscray People’s Performing Project, Karratha Youth Theatre, Corrugated Iron Youth, Southern Youth Theatre Ensemble, PACT Youth Theatre, Australian Theatre for Young People, and Carclew Youth Arts, Kathryn Silcox discovered that, like QUE, these all emphasised mentoring, industry / university partnerships, and input from industry professionals with varying frequency (Youth Performing Arts Australia). She also noticed that many other youth theatres in Australia have continued to re-invent themselves – some successfully, some not so – but that change is a common hallmark of youth theatres that believe in youth participating in all aspects of it’s company. Making changes that amend mistakes and address organisational problems that plague fledgling youth theatres is part of the ongoing “narrative” of this field in Australia at this time; and should be embraced as a very real strategy in the further planning of QUE (Silcox 14).

This paper began with an interest in articulating a model of QUE Theatre Inc. for dissemination, discussion and review, however the pursuit of a “model” has revealed the very complex issues that currently impact in a variety of ways on the assumptions, perceptions, and the day to day running of this regional youth enterprise. From this research, I suggest that the key to longevity for QUE is to recognise and try to maintain a balance between the many complexities associated with the following necessary aspects: youth, mentoring, partnering, pedagogy, product, and critical evaluation. There is much more strategic planning and time needed before QUE can offer up a model of youth theatre practice, however it is unique in many ways, and Silcox summed it up in her initial hunches about why this company might be unique in the field:

...the defining element that sets QUE apart, what makes it unique is the combination of pedagogy and industry contacts, the personal and professional development of its employees and board members, and

the emphasis on developing a regional youth theatre organisation that serves the needs of the local community... (Silcox 13)

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Appendix #1

QUE Theatre Inc. Programs 2004

- QUE Fest:** (began 2001) 6 month long playbuilding project with local youth (12-18 year olds) and 3rd Year Theatre Studies students. Festival to be held on 15th/16th of October.
- QUE Labs:** (began 2000) 5 Saturday mornings in S1 and 2 for upper primary/lower secondary students, taught by 2nd Year Theatre Studies students
- QUE Able:** (Pilot 2004) 6 Tuesday afternoons in S1 and 2 for intellectually handicapped people of all ages.
- QUE Reach:** (Pilot 2004) 4 afternoon workshops throughout S1 with rural high school students, to prepare them for playbuilding (which may be featured at this year's QUE Fest).
- QUE Fiish:** (began 2003) 5 Wednesday afternoon workshops in S1 for local indigenous (high school) youth, taught by two indigenous theatre professionals. They might also create a performance to be included in QUE Fest.
- QUE Act:** (began 2003) 6 Tuesday evening workshops in S1 devoted to screen acting skills and writing scripts for film for all ages.

Program Ideas for 2005

- QUE Ed:** Brecht and other curriculum support workshops for local high school Drama classes
- QUE Summer:** Shakespearean classes and training for primary and secondary students – to help with USQs Shakespeare Festival
- QUE Voce:** Voice training for local teachers
- QUE Clown:** Physical theatre training for young people
- QUE Blast** Production program