

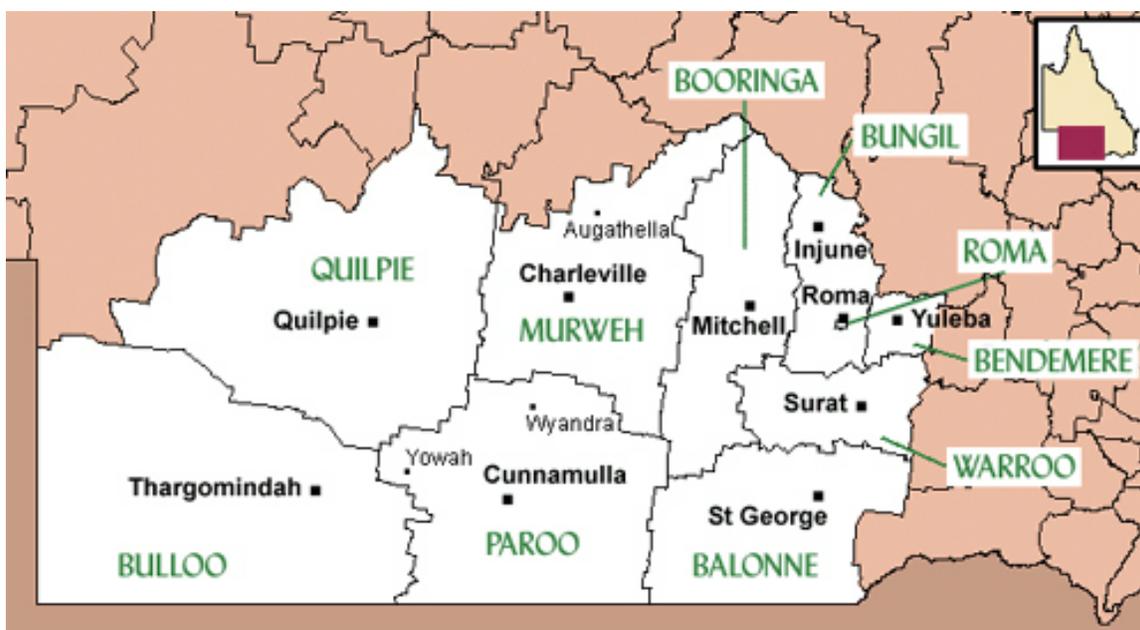
**An investigation into the Lower Balonne's interaction
with *The Doctor and Nurse* Wursey's Most Amazing
Hydrological Examination**

Report researched and assembled by

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**With the appreciated assistance of Dr Janet McDonald, Carley
Commens and the students staff of *Cultural Catchments* 2006. Part of
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Abstract

This report is a study into the agricultural communities of St. George, Surat and Dirranbandi to assess the reactions to *The Doctor and Nursesey Wursey's Most Amazing Hydrological Examination*. A project of this type has never been attempted before, making *Cultural Communities* a pioneering venture into exploring the artistic application on prevalent issues such as natural resource management and water conservation. Subsequently, it is necessary to examine the causes and effects that fuelled the reactions and responses this venture received so we can better understand and work in these communities for the 2007 strand of *Cultural Communities* projects.

Using induced research, an analysis, discussion and recommendations for further project work in this area stemming from these responses have been compiled into this report. Pre-show and post-show interviews and surveys were recorded from several prominent farming identities, teachers, parents, students and councillors which assisted in gaining a grasp upon the highly sensitive issue of water and its implications for the Lower Balonne communities. This report is my own original work and analysis (endorsed by Dr Janet McDonald from *Creative Communities*) based on the tour from 5th-8th December 2006. Although this report was initially compiled for the completion of the course THS 3003 (Special Theatre Study) it has been restructured as a report for archiving with partners QMDC & USQ.

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Introduction

“ Art is NOT a Mattel toy” (Scott Alderdice, 16/12/06)

So stated author and director Scott Alderdice in retaliation to an audience response that his show *The Doctor and Nursesey Wursey's Most Amazing Hydrological Examination* was too controversial and challenging for a theatrical production. To say that this response was a typical reaction during the week the show toured the Lower Balonne would be to give a form of general consensus to the participating audiences; general consensus and the Lower Balonne is in itself a contradiction in terms. Audience reactions to *The Hydrological Examination* have varied from praise and support to protest and indignant walk-outs and have sparked a myriad of heated conversations. There were nods of approval from representatives of government bodies as well as a cold shoulder response from some landholders. A response this diverse is testament to the divided opinions that surround the Lower Balonne's most pressing issue to date: water. So pressing is this issue for the region that this season landholders are bracing themselves for record-low production rates as the rivers remain bone dry. Yet the sense emanating from this area is not all negative as the figures would suggest, even to the point where some government bodies are stating the region is fine and is not facing any great concern. Parallel this with the views of people who had to walk out of the venue because the content was too painful and you have some very compelling responses worthy of interrogation. This report is an investigation into the responses to the show in an attempt to understand the turbulence of the water issue and the role of theatre in such a controversial climate.

The initiative taken by the Queensland Murray Darling Committee (QMDC) to enter into a partnership with the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) with the purpose of invigorating environmentally-based cultural product into local

communities is a virgin project that has no real precedent in this area. This was confirmed when I conducted a literature search in the field a few weeks prior to commencing this report; I discovered that the Queensland Arts Councils toured regularly throughout the year on topics such as bullying, internet dating, dancing and reptiles yet nothing concentrated on natural resource awareness or cultural involvement. The most notable project that was currently underway when we arrived was *Special Forever*, a project started by the Murray-Darling Basin Committee (MDBC) that had been running for around sixteen years (I had been involved with this myself in 1994 as a primary school student at St. George State School). This project is currently facilitated in St. George by Colleen Dunn and previously by Margaret Poplawski and both ladies were involved in the research process for this report. *Special Forever* focuses on the Murray-Darling River and purports to create environmental awareness throughout the schools surrounding the river system (MDBC & PETA 7). The QMDC/USQ *Cultural Catchments* project has run separately from *Special Forever* as we have taken a separate emphasis on the Lower Balonne and associated community stories, however it was useful to have that background knowledge and appreciation for environmental content already established in some of the schools.

From the literature search, it is contended that the *Cultural Catchments* project is pioneering in its workshop methods and content emphasis which resulted in a show being written about water in a way that had never been done before in this region. This contention leads onto the problem statement for this report: a theatre and visual arts project that utilizes the stories, attitudes and characters concerning the Lower Balonne catchment has never been done before, making the reaction of the communities to the shows conservation-based content unpredictable, especially as attitudes towards water are a sensitive subject in the agricultural community.

I have chosen the agricultural community as the subject of this research because it is the community that is most directly affected by what the show has to say about water, as they sustain their lives on the utilization of this natural resource. It is here that I must acknowledge my bias on this topic as I come from a cotton-growing family from St. George and have grown up with exposure to certain opinions pertaining to water usage and allocation in the Lower Balonne region. This project has allowed me to be exposed to other sides of the water debate and I have subsequently broadened my view on natural resource management. However, a number of my research participants for this report have been members of my own family so it is important to state my position as one of loyalty to the Lower Balonne landholders. Fortunately, this report does not focus on the water debate but rather on how the landholders responded to the show's content. This in itself has been an issue of some conflict on a personal level to me as I also have loyalty to the *Cultural Catchments* project and there have been times when these two loyalties have conflicted. However, I do not believe that this conflict will negatively affect the accuracy of this report, but rather balance any biased influences from both ends of the spectrum.

The process of conducting this research has heavily relied on interviewing, surveying, observing and recording audience reactions to the show as well as talking with various landholders, natural resource management (NRM) organisations and local townspeople (the recorded notes from these interviews are available as appendices attached to this report). The print material available surrounding the current drought is largely scientifically based and for the purposes of measuring a community reaction is mostly unsuitable. There are of course exceptions, such as Ticky Fullerton's book *The Watershed*, the resources available from *Special Forever* and QMDC and publications surrounding Lower Balonne history. However the majority of the research for this report has been induced, which is reflective of the unprecedented nature of the *Cultural Catchments* project.

The agricultural climate

Doctor: This is Australia! This is one of
the most arid countries on earth.
There are no bubbling brooks all
hung over with willows and
flowers and pebbles that sing!

(Alderdice 6)

Before the responses of the audiences can be measured, it is important to grasp an understanding of the psyche that exists in the Lower Balonne agricultural community, and this itself is polarised with many juxtapositions and opposing parallels, making a 'summary' of the region near impossible. Subsequently I have chosen to focus on describing the aspects of the community which give reasons to the reception of the show and the opinions we received in the responses.

First and foremost, it is vital to understand the importance of river health to the Murray-Darling system. Ticky Fullerton states in her book *The Watershed* that 40% of agriculture and 90% of irrigated agriculture in Australia comes from the Basin; a river system that can cover the size of France and Spain put together (Fullerton 66). Particularly noting that the vast majority of irrigated agriculture is dependent on the Murray-Darling system, it is understandable why so many NRM organisations have been established to help protect and raise awareness for this integral national life-blood. The amount of water that can move down the Murray-Darling with good flows is astonishing, but with the last good flows recorded back in 1992, the system now lies in dire straits and the little water that is being held back by the dams and weirs is the subject of bitter 'water wars' that are surrounded by bureaucratic cobwebs and copious amounts of red tape. This is evident in an amount of water that was recently released from Mitchell down into St. George and the scramble was so great that the water sat for days

evaporating in the St. George weir before small portions were sold to the first in, best dressed.

Yet it's not solely the lack of water that is upsetting farmers; the fact that there is no rain is an accepted part of the cyclical nature of the Australian climate, a fact that was highlighted in *The Hydrological Examination*. What gets landholders off side is the ill-informed finger pointing and blaming that comes from urban figure heads. In response to these voices, including blame coming from environmental organisations, SmartRivers was established, under the banner of St. George and Dirranbandi irrigators, which vehemently defended the health of the Balonne River and called it "one of the healthiest in Australia" (SmartRivers 1). Alderdice sourced the majority of the information for his play from SmartRivers and upon reading the website myself, its tempting not to take the side of the authors and sum the Balonne Region up with the information they provide. However, upon further investigation and discussion with irrigators from St. George, I found out that SmartRivers in part sourced its funding from controversial Cubbie Station- the biggest collective property in Australia. This pulls the motives and loyalties of SmartRivers immediately into question when looking at the effect Cubbie Station has had on the Lower Balonne region, restricting only 20% of river flow that had passed St. George and cutting off the "gentle flows" across the surrounding flood plains (Fullerton 231).

Assessing the impact of politics gone wrong

The politics surrounding the establishment of Cubbie make it a volatile and sensitive subject, particularly to St. George farmers. This has seen many farmers become hostile to government bodies at work in the Balonne Region, particularly over issues like water licence allocation and water harvesting. One landholder raised the fact that he pays up to \$45, 000 per annum for up to 1000 mgs of unguaranteed water while Cubbie Station pays a total amount of \$3700 for up to 500, 000 mgs of water per annum. It is this kind of blatant injustice that contributes to the hostility surrounding the water issue.

I spoke to a member of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Colin Sheen¹ about the issue over the water licences and why they had allowed to be allocated in this way. He denied the over-allocation of licences and said that you can't compare the current state of affairs with what it was back in 1992 with the last rain, when there was plenty of water to fulfil the all the licences allocated. He continues to say that once the river flows to its full potential again, then there will be no issue with unfulfilled licences. This was contradicted by cotton grower Steve Townsend who said that not only were too many licences distributed with the full knowledge that the water levels were going to eventually recede, but that an astonishing amount of water was being pumped illegally out of the river daily and the NRM organisations were doing nothing to control it. This is an example of the contradictions between the government bodies and landholders, which suggests a growing distance between white and blue collar realities. Another is the way Sheen said that there were hardly any dust storms affecting the region anymore, while Woodstock said a few weeks ago she could hardly see the trees beyond the road outside her house for all the dust in the air.

Of course, the frustrations now being experienced between government departments and landholders are nothing new to the Lower Balonne region. The period from the late 80's through to the late 90's is infamously known as the time of the "Water Wars." Anyone who has endeavoured to study this period of time will understand the immense frustration and anger that was felt by the channel farmers, which continues today with no recognition or justification. Judith Green documents in her memoirs of this time, the frustration felt when an eleven million dollar off-stream storage project, which would have ensured resource security for the Lower Balonne channel farmers, was boycotted by government figures, who were tied to the rapidly developing Cubbie Station. She writes that the meetings and discussions that took place around this issue divided the community into "us" the channel farmers, and "them" the river irrigators, who had polar interests and

¹ Pseudonym

hopes riding on the completion or obstruction of the project. This split in community still exists strongly today, and I was able to detect this between the Dirranbandi and St. George audiences that we interacted with. For example, the students in the Dirranbandi School spoke highly of Cubbie as it provided them work and their families a living, while in St. George, the student's relayed anecdotes from their fathers on how Cubbie was "draining the farms dry." While the events of the "Water Wars" are fading into history, their legacy still remains very strongly in the Lower Balonne area, particularly in St. George which has meant that the topic is still highly sensitive. It is important to be educated about such history when working in this area, as many of the politicians and farmers that were involved directly with the issues remain in the same positions and jobs, despite many of them being forced to walk off the land in a combination of frustration and drought.

Working within this community

Independent researcher Sally Fielding has been working for the DPI on a research project for the past two years and works regularly with primary producers. She said that its important to retain a consciousness and respect for the emotional climate of the community when approaching them with NRM discussions, acknowledging the sensitivity many of them feel when confronted with issues over water. Fielding raised the fact that many landholders are no longer able to easily access government subsidy for things like soil tests and erosion prevention and the majority of NRM action has to come out of their own pocket, often very expensively. Both Fielding and Sheen acknowledged the Lower Balonne region as being very proactive with NRM solutions, which was supported by SmartRivers information and through discussions with the landholders. It is clear that while the issues surrounding the river and water usage are intensely sensitive, the action to preserve what little water there is are progressive.

The *Cultural Catchments* project was well suited to working within schools about the river rather than the adult community, judging the previously highlighted example of issues surrounding water. Another issue that I encountered while surveying audiences was the negative perception research teams themselves hold within small regional communities. Sheen explained that farmers were wary of talking to strangers about water and the river because of the current water wars and the highly controversial nature of the topic. Scott Alderdice also noted that during his time out on one of the tour trips that the few farmers he talked too were very wary of being involved with an environmental study and thus held back a lot of information that could be personally damaging should the information they give be misrepresented. It turns out these fears are not unfounded. The recent ABC Television production of *Two Men and a Tinny* was a study into Australian river systems and was researched by talking to local townspeople and landholders. The series included an episode about St. George and featured an impressive shot of the Jack Taylor Weir where the camera panned across the water, giving an impression of vast amounts of water (when the weir is in fact a very large puddle that is rapidly decreasing). The next shot was of the other side of the weir which was very dry and empty, creating the impression that the town was restricting the flow of the Balonne River and the irrigators were gleefully soaking up this vast quantity of water. This created a great amount of consternation among the community, both town and agricultural, adding to the cautious atmosphere we started working in when we began workshops back in July 2006.

Sally Fielding spent some time discussing the number of NRM organisations there are and the astonishing amount of money that is tied up within these organisations. However at the grass roots level of the farmers, many landholders are failing to see the positive outcomes these organisations are producing. Steven Bradley said he didn't know what the good of having all the NRM organisations was and that he rarely saw any productive outcome. This adds to the signal of isolation that was emanating from the agricultural members I

interviewed. Fielding said that farmers like hard facts and figures that could produce results and not lengthy board-meeting discussion that spent government allocated dollars but didn't make up for the deficits farms were daily encountering.

All these factors contributed to the sensitive reception the show received when it toured during the first week of December. We went into the region performing a TIE show about water to audiences in the midst of the worst drought in recorded history, to farmers that had been dealing with the plethora of issues surrounding Cubbie Station and water licences, to a community soaked in natural resource management funding with no natural resource and spoke to a group of people that had been increasingly losing touch with each other. These factors all contribute to what I am calling a 'cultural climate.' This climate directly influences the kind of reception *The Hydrological Examination* received; it determined how receptive the audiences, both in school and public, would be to an NRM production; what issues would be most sensitively touched upon and who would be most directly affected by what was being said i.e. the landholders. This broke into a discussion over the purpose and role of theatre, in this region, about this topic, which I have continued in the following chapter.

Art as entertainment vs. utility of challenge

Nursey: Wasn't I just the river before?

Doctor: You were previously a river, yes.

Nursey: Well how come we're now in the river?

Doctor: That, Nursey, is the magic of theatre.

(Alderdice 20).

A prominent theme that arose during the interviews I conducted after the shows was the idea surrounding the purpose of theatre, particularly in a region where public interaction with theatre is scarce. *The Hydrological Examination* is a theatre-in-education (TIE) show that aimed to deliver to young primary students in an effort to educate and raise awareness about the river system and the effect of the drought. The purpose of TIE is in itself a separate theatrical identity; Jim Mirrione defines the primary motivation to 'engage and education students by presenting dramatic material that directly relates to their concerns and needs' (Mirrione 76). In this aspect, *Cultural Catchments* succeeded, despite speculation that the show did not directly relate the material we collected from the workshops back to the students. Throughout the six months of workshops, the student team collected stories and information from participants in the community about the river and their community and a continual theme that resounded through these workshops was the effect of the drought. Whether it affected being able to go swimming after school or how dad acted around the farm, the drought was a direct correlation from their daily lives. *The Hydrological Examination* dealt with the effect the drought was having on local communities as well as reflected some of the aesthetic values the students discussed in the workshops. In this way, it is evident that *Cultural Catchments* succeeded in creating a TIE show that directly dealt with the students concerns and from the feedback gathered after each performance, the educational value was *unquestionable* (appendix 3).

To the adult audiences however, the concept of TIE was not taken in the same light. While the show was addressed to children, I don't believe that this aspect was highlighted sufficiently in the public performances to the point where the adult audience members could distance themselves from the material with the view of watching it as a children's theatre-in-education performance. It was my own fault in questioning landholders after the performance as well by not highlighting the fact from the outset that this was a TIE production and in no way have we attempted to address the topic of water and the state of natural resources from an adult perspective. Scott Alderdice in a discussion over dinner while out on a visit spoke about the impossibility of this idea given the current state of the Lower Balonne.

This gave rise to questioning the purpose of theatre for this region with several interviewees expressing doubt over whether drama should challenge audiences with such sensitive subject matter or whether it should be an escape from the ordinary concerns they must engage in each day. Jenny Woodstock² stated that she doesn't want to go see a show that reminds her of the problems she has faced all day- she is already sufficiently aware of the state of the water crisis and would prefer a show to remove her from everyday worries. This is juxtaposed by Steven Bradley's view that theatre is meant to challenge and cause controversy and by confronting regional audiences with this highly relevant issue, theatre is serving an applicable and useful purpose. The opposing parallels on this topic were mutually supported throughout the interviews I conducted. Scott Alderdice responded to the former argument saying that regulating the artist to a 'bouncing puppy as a mere form of entertainment' makes the artist dispensable and therein makes art defunct as a potential unit for change (Alderdice 4).

Yet the fact cannot be denied that the show's content is very sensitive to a region that is facing record-low yields from already struggling crops. Beth Orange, a well-known teacher and community figure-head stated that the potential action

² Pseudonym of interview subjects used throughout report (except for USQ staff)

the show could evoke falls on deaf ears when delivered to people who already know the facts and are taking as much action as possible (i.e. the landholders) making this show much more suited to people beyond the Lower Balonne area, notably in urban regions in the south-east corner. This is then juxtaposed by another St. George school teacher, Anne Biggs claiming that the play portrayed the people of the Lower Balonne to be 'too proactive' in their efforts with natural resource management, and not everyone is as environmentally aware as the show would suggest, therefore making it a worthwhile message to maintain in this region.

Politics in theatre: to be or not to be?

The argument over the role of theatre is continued when looking at the role of politics in theatre. One farmer walked out of the show and later claimed that the content was unnecessarily political and put an unfair bias on environmental issues. Alderdice responded by saying that the notion of making theatre apolitical is "naïve and ill-informed" and that children are highly capable of grasping underpinning tensions in their living environment and that this play merely picked up on the tensions that farmers spoke in relation to the current government system (Alderdice 3). One lady was visibly upset after a performance and called the show manipulative and that theatre-in-education should be informative and contain facts that have not been misinformed. Despite the Lower Balonne region having little exposure to theatre, there is a strong grasp over what theatre should contain and how it should be delivered.

A recently toured show that went throughout the south-west area was *Way Out West* by Margery and Michael Forde, directed by Scott Mee. This show is an example of an aesthetically pleasing depiction of the regional area told through the stories and characters the Forde's collected by talking to the people from several towns, including St. George, Dirranbandi and Mitchell (Forde & Forde 15). Contrast this show, which was entertaining and enjoyable with *The Hydrological Examination* and observe the vast difference in reaction. The people I

interviewed could recall “something” about *Way Out West* but as Beth Orange noted, “your show sparked discussion...it got people talking.” That result is ultimately more successful, despite the “controversy” it might cause in the process. I believe it is for this reason that an entertaining experience that allowed escapism and aesthetic value is nowhere near as valuable as a controversial TIE show that fuelled as much upset and it did interest.

The split opinions and decisions over this show have not provided any answers to the age-old question of the purpose of art and theatre but rather raised new questions over the value of reflecting a current situation to the very people who are experiencing it and the risk of including a political slant when writing for children, running the risk of being labelled ‘manipulative and deceitful’ (Interviewee 6/12/06). However, it must be remembered that the political influence inside children’s theatre is unquestionable; one would only have to refer to half-a-dozen Disney films to see clear socio-political agenda through racial and class profiling (Giroux 62).

As a theatre studies student, I know that in much of the plays studied in the Department of Theatre, USQ are selected for their significant, daring or revolutionary conventions that set them apart from the status quo. It is because of this that as tertiary students, we are trained to seek out and create challenging theatre as a way of discovering and furthering theatrical appreciation and engagement (for example we study and are influenced by the work of Augusto Boal who champions the use of theatre as a political weapon to incite change (Boal 122). I believe that we still carried this attitude out to the Lower Balonne with us, which is why we did not brace ourselves for the possible onslaught of opinions that could potentially sweep *The Hydrological Examination* that claimed theatre should be used for recreational purposes. Yet as I have discussed previously, we should have expected these reactions from an audience that have appreciated theatre for its entertainment and escapism. If there had been a good

rain fall, a successful harvest and great prices, then our audiences would have been more receptive to being challenged and questioned.

As a result of this particular strand of research, theatre itself has been scrutinized over the role it should play within the Lower Balonne region. QMDC took the risk of investing in a theatrical project; a risk not undertaken by any other NRM organisation in an effort to reach its target market within schools. If theatre is indeed a new way forward for NRM awareness, then it is important to be able to withstand the scrutiny a show like that would attract, particularly in a region where the topic is as volatile as it is.

The process and reception

Old Lady: Oh! Another jumped up know-it-all from a city university come to tell us country bumpkins how to suck eggs.

(Alderdice 22)

Before I begin analysing the reaction to *The Hydrological Examination*, it is important to understand the intentions and process behind putting the show together. The process that was employed to create *The Hydrological Examination* relied heavily on group work, community interaction and observation during our work in schools throughout the second semester of 2006. Interviewing and conversing with members of the town and rural communities provided valuable insight into how the environment is interacted with, whether it be utilitarian or recreational. This allowed Scott to write a play which reflected several views and opinions surrounding natural resource management which exist in the Lower Balonne region. Workshops within the schools ranged from being thirty to seventy minutes, and saw the students working both in small focus groups and also in whole class activities that interrogated their ideas and stories around the Balonne River, their lifestyles and their environment. Project manager Janet McDonald believes that these workshops worked very well because the emphasis was on the *process* and not on the product (McDonald 2). This is an important notion to embrace, especially as this is the first year of this project, much of which we had to pioneer through with no previous example to tell us what does work and what doesn't. What the students gave us from the workshops were not narrative stories with a beginning, middle and an end but rather a valuable insight into the local psyche and dialogue that surrounds the river, which served a greater purpose in creating a play that spoke about NRM from a ground-level database.

All the key personnel involved with the project claimed that the establishment of communicative pathways between *Creative Communities*, QMDC and the local communities was the central achievement of the 2006 project. Joint principal researcher Associate Professor Robyn Stewart championed the use of focus groups as an effective way to further these pathways, which built a subsequent trust between researcher and subject that allows a greater creative relationship to develop (Stewart 1). This is reflective of the process-over-product attitude that this project adopted in creating the play and exhibition.

Project intentions

Additional project intentions that I have selected that uphold this attitude are as follows:

- ◆ To test the theory of arts and environmental practice in working together to achieve new goals and reach new audiences.
- ◆ Consultation with schools, young people and community people about the issue of natural resource management and arts practice
- ◆ To develop a program within at least three communities of the Lower Balonne and border river areas
- ◆ Develop an arts exhibition and performance with environmental issues/themes prominent
- ◆ Build a sustainable relationship with communities to continue in 2007

(Commens 1)

The visit out to the communities on the 18th of September is one I can identify as having a lot of direct implications onto the play as this was the trip that Scott Alderdice attended and saw the Lower Balonne region for the first time. While he got most of the facts and figures used in the play from secondary research pages on the internet, this visit allowed him to be exposed to the region and its people “point blank” and I can see the impact this had on the work. For example, the

reactions that the character “Barry the Farmer” (and also the Old Lady to some extent) had towards the Doctor’s accusations stemmed from the reactions Alderdice picked up from when speaking to members of the farming community (we visited a farming couple that lived on a section of the “natural” Balonne river that was completely bone dry). Scott listed his first driving aim for this project was to deliver a professional standard arts product in answer to the initiative taken by QMDC and *Creative Communities*, which led him to address issues such as riparian and micro ecological systems; water quality and water flow; sustainable practices in agriculture and of course, the drought (Alderdice 3).

While the original intentions of the project were not necessarily to produce a TIE show on natural resource management, I believe that *The Hydrological Examination* successfully employed much of the data that was gathered throughout the workshops and focus groups: the way characters address and converse with each other; the presentation of opinions over the issues the play raises; the facts that are discussed and the arguments that the play presents, particularly that Australia is a semi-arid country, and when it doesn’t rain, the simple result is that there is no water (this was heralded by several audience members as being a good point to stress and highlight). These were all raised through the plethora of data that was collected, in both the hard-copy and digital recordings. We would not have done justice to this project’s potential if we had simply created a play which reflected the narrative’s and fables of the Lower Balonne region. The fact that the workshops produced material that was capable of creating a challenging, controversial and interrogating play is testament to the success of the process we undertook which resulted in producing meaningful and compelling material.

The reception and reaction

As the previous chapter outlined, bringing a water conservation show out into the Lower Balonne region was going to cause controversy simply because of the amount of party interests involved. This issue is not two-dimensional; there is

always something there that is either unknown, unheard of or not being told and I encountered this when I was doing my own research. I would find out a set of facts from one person, only to then look for a second opinion and be told a whole set of contradictory facts. There is a serious lack of communication between the government bodies and the landholders and then in between the landholders themselves. This is evident in what I was told by the DPI to what I heard from the channel farmers and what the river irrigators would say about the graziers etc. So instead of being able to report on a communal reception to *The Hydrological Examination*, I will instead describe the main opinions that circulated around during the interviews I conducted in the follow-up week.

The basic surveys we conducted with the adult audience members after the show revealed that the concept of *Cultural Catchments* was received positively and that up to 75% of surveyed audience members were supportive of a touring TIE production about water. This tells us that the community was initially positive to action being taken in schools to raise awareness. Many people felt the initiative taken by QMDC with this project was a brave move; some people hadn't heard of QMDC at all and were impressed with how they interacted with the school kids in this project. As for the factual content in the play, an average of 73% found the information comprehensive and informative for a children's theatre show. An impressive result is that only 13% felt that this play left out attitudes and voices from this region that should have been included in a play about water: this tells us that the vast majority felt that the play gave a balanced portrayal of this sensitive issue, which means that the show has risen above the hurt felt by productions like "Two Men in a Tinny."

Assessing the community attitudes

An interesting result was the question on whether this show represented community attitudes towards water; this question is important as the *Cultural Catchments* project was aimed at double-stitching local community product back into itself, so it was important for the students to be able to recognise their own

lifestyles and attitudes on stage. 40% of audience members felt the portrayal of attitudes was accurate, with some interesting comments like “Not everyone is as diligent with their water as you say” and “There was a lot left out about water that evaporates” (Appendix 3). When we asked whether this play would be well received by the wider agricultural community, 68% of participants said the reaction would be positive but that we needed to keep in mind it was a children’s show, so they would be positive to the concept but not necessarily the content. Up to 20% said the reaction would be negative because the show encroached on ground that should not “be made light of” as the show was perceived to do, with its use of humour and clowning.

Most of the surveyed audience members felt that the show was better suited to a middle school audience (grades 7-10) and being an observer of the audiences myself, I would agree with this. The younger primary students got bored about twenty minutes into the show simply because of the length, while the older students were able to have their attention held with the show’s subtle jokes and dialogue. Local teacher Beth Orange affirmed this and said that for young students the play was too wordy and a lot of the show went over their heads. Scott Alderdice said in defence that children are able to grasp the idea of metaphors extremely well, if not better than adults and so the show’s basic mechanics worked well for a younger audience.

Barry takes the spotlight

There was a lot of debate over “Barry the Texan Farmer” and whether it was a good idea to have him played with an American accent. Quite a few landholders and personnel from QMDC felt that this portrayed Americans as being more water conscious than Australian farmers and that it was an unfair assumption to believe that Americans cared more for natural resource management. This was not Alderdice’s intention with Barry, who was instead a representation of the American cotton farmers which first settled around Wee Waa in the 60’s and did much to pioneer the Queensland cotton industry. I still found it interesting the

way that regional farmers felt this was a judgement against them rather than a portrayal of them. Unfortunately this closed many of them off from the fact that Barry was a big defence for the agricultural community, particularly with lines like:

Barry: You want us to cut back on water- you cut back
on what you wanna buy!

Barry: We spend millions of our own dollars on drip irrigation

(Alderdice 31).

The metaphors worked more effectively within the school audiences, as the adult community gave comments about how they felt some of the characters made light of the seriousness of the situation. A major fact the play included that was praised however was the consistent message of Australia being a semi-arid country and that the rain was cyclical; this hit home for audiences that there is simply just NO water because there is NO rain. This simple fact is often overlooked and the blame is misguided onto the primary resource users.

Murray takes a bow

One metaphor that had some audience members off side was “Murray the Cod” and his tale of woe about the state of the rivers. I had thought that out of all the characters, Murray would cause the most ‘controversy’ as he blatantly talks about the poor state of the river and how the amount of sediment and soil in the water is the result of mismanagement (keeping in mind the vehement defence from the people at SmartRivers). While Murray was a popular character for his theatrics, surely enough several farmers spoke to me about the real state of river wildlife. They said that like the rain, the amount of wildlife is seasonal, and during the seasons we conducted the workshops, they are often scattered among the ring tanks and dams in different regions. Steve Townsend said that on any day you could go up to his dam and see any were from one hundred and fifty brolgas

around his dam. Jenny Woodstock said (during an informal conversation) that if it wasn't for the massive storages around St. George and Dirranbandi, in the weirs, dams and lagoons, there would be no water at all during a dry season as it would all drain away to further down the Basin. The wildlife that is around is there because of the held back water, and yet these simple facts are often over looked by the environmental assessors. The Special Forever project would probably not run as effectively should the water in storages not have been around for the wildlife to be observed.

The fact that the play was balanced made a positive impact on the agricultural community. Paul and Judith Green who had been growing cotton for forty years and had been through their fair share of NRM plans and environmental-vandal accusations, said they felt the play was very balanced and gave equal voice to both sides of the argument; a rare thing to find in a play written from within a city university. Most of the farmers I spoke to said they felt the play toed the line on many occasions about salinity, soil erosion, river health and water usage but then justified its position later on in the play.

Steve Townsend made the interesting comment that the play tended to lay full responsibility for action on the regional population when he said the play had a good opportunity to share the work load for water conservation around. As a farmer, he employs the use of crop rotations, leaving 35% of his farm to native vegetation, fences of any land surrounding the river, measures the amount of water that is extracted and recently installed a trickle irrigation system close to half a million dollars. He said that while the play did acknowledge that farmers pay for their own soil tests and trickle irrigation etc. would the city population be willing to pay more for their food, electricity and fuel in order to compensate for some of these environmental measures. He felt that this would have been an interesting question to include in the play, especially if the play continues to show in the south-east corner. He said that often with these productions, the problem is highlighted very sufficiently and the action is urged to be taken, but to people

who already have the mindset to act. He posed the possibility of touring this show directed towards the urban population and observing their reaction if they are asked to pay the same amount as farmers for their water.

My background engaged in questioning

It was about half way through the tour when I began to question how I felt about this project in itself. It had been easy to slip into the role of the tertiary student and distance myself from the emotions of the region and be analytical with figures and what people were saying. It wasn't until some of the more in-depth responses began to come back to the research team that I realised that we were dealing with people's emotions about a topic with such sensitivity that we hadn't begun to realise. There was one farmer for example who would normally be planting around two thousand acres of cotton who was now reduced to planting roughly one hundred acres because of the complete lack of water. Yes, it was painful subject matter, but we weren't there to rub salt into the wound, but rather educate students as to some of the reasons why the river was in the state it is in. The arguments that art should be confronting and challenging are valid within a tertiary essay but what place do they have in a drought stricken region that faces its own plight everyday?

Rather than being able to give a blanket statement on whether audiences responded to the play negatively or positively, I instead found that the majority of people found the play interesting but were keen to discuss it and voice their opinion on what they did or didn't like. I also found that my ties to the community from growing up there allowed me a rare chance to get some honest responses, from family, friends and people who I had grown up around. There was an element of trust that wouldn't have been found from a "foreign" researcher and this turned out to be a double edged sword. While I did gain valuable insights into opinions, stories and concerns that circulated around the time of the tour, I also copped the anger from audience members who were offended or upset by the play and felt that they could raise these concerns with me because they knew

who I was and where I came from. I didn't think this was a negative situation to be in however, but rather enhanced the accuracy of this report with the glimpses I gained of people's honest reactions, that were sometimes uncensored or protected by etiquette. This has provided a good incentive for me to return out to this region in 2007 and continue working with the communities, using the ties we have made to the schools and communities to further this exploration of this mode of theatre.

Recommendations

Murray: You'd do all that for me? An old scaly fish?

(Alderdice 35)

The following recommendations are the result of assessing the responses I collected from the audiences. They are a summary of the opinions, discussions and suggestions made throughout this report by various people involved with this process.

- Take the show to a more urban audience. The regional audiences are already aware of the drought and its effect and the efforts made by the farmers to date are not acknowledged enough. This show would have much greater effect in a south-east region.
- Perform to a middle-school audience. Many teachers who agreed to a survey after the show conceded that the lower primary kids were too young to enjoy the in-text subtleties and humour that was able to be grasped by the older students (grades 7-10).
- Reduce the length of the show; fifty seven minutes was too long for a TIE and resulted in the attention of most students to be lost at some stage during the performance.
- Include more audience interaction; a theatre event is rare out in the south-west corner, so exploit the opportunity by involving the audience with more questions, activities etc.
- The visual art exhibition was excellent and the kids could see their involvement with the project clearly. Allowing the kids to be interactive doubles their enjoyment of a production.
- Explain clearly from the outset that this is a children's show, designed and written for children to avoid any confusion about the intended audience for

the show. Creating a justified adult play about the water debate would be impossible, and its important to make audiences realise that we did not attempt to do this.

Conclusion

Doctor: If we're all working towards the same thing- if we're all working to keep the river- eventually- there's got to be more clean water than algae

Nursey: Doctor, that's an excellent diagnosis.

(Alderdice 37)

Ticky Fullerton finishes her book by saying that Australia has to understand its fundamental shift from water being plentiful and free to being scarce and valuable (Fullerton 328). I believe that *The Hydrological Examination* is an excellent way to do this, as it continuously purports to highlight the scarcity and importance of Australia's water. It dismantles the European mentality of bubbling, crystal clear brooks and replaces it with the realistic and manageable attitude of the dry Australian river bed. It acknowledges that the environment changed when white civilization arrived and gives respect to the Indigenous owners of the Lower Balonne and what they endured during the settlement of the towns and agriculture. At the same time, the play lists the benefits of having European settlement in this area and covers a wide range of characters and issues around the present day river. If there ever was a play to raise awareness over attitudes and issues surrounding water for children's education, I believe this is the play to present.

However, there are the questions over the suitability of the target audience when presenting this play; the way to go about portraying issues in the actual subject area, whether its productive to push sensitive issues or whether the content would be more useful to an outside audience. This calls into question the debate over theatrical purpose- whether it is to entertain or challenge. Our project team

may hold the opinion to challenge because we plan to make careers in theatre, but does this mean we need to be ignorant of the needs of a community?

The amount of opinions and stories that exist in this region surrounding this issue have been fascinating and I myself didn't predict the response that this play would raise. I have lived out of the St. George region for about seven years though so it has been engaging for me to get back in touch with the attitudes and issues circulating around the Lower Balonne. It was disappointing not to get more people along to the Surat and Dirranbandi shows, however I maintain that the information I collected from the surveys and interviews have provided a holistic reception of this play as I have covered attitudes from school teachers, government departments, land holders, students, the research team and members of my own farming family. The qualitative nature of this research has meant that I have been able to continue the pioneering venture of the 'Cultural Catchments' project and helped to piece together the plethora of pieces that surround the Murray-Darling System puzzle. Yet as Steve Townsend left as a comment on the evaluation canvas after the Riversands show: "The show raised all the right issues and said all the right facts but it was missing one vital thing: the solution. Once you figure out what that is, tell us won't ya?"

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