

THAT VERY SPECIFIC PLACE: A REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN THEATRE CONVERSATION

ROS ABERCROMBIE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA (RA), PAUL MCPHAIL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, REGIONAL ARTS WA (PMP), ANTHONY PELUSO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COUNTRY ARTS SA (AP) AND JOE TOOHEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, REGIONAL ARTS VICTORIA (JT)

RA: Hello everybody and good morning. My name is Ros Abercrombie and I'm the Executive Director of Regional Arts Australia, Zooming in with my colleagues Joe, Anthony and Paul. I'm Zooming in from the Wurundjeri Lands of the people of the Kulin Nation, in lockdown Melbourne.

Regional Arts Australia is a not-for-profit peak body that is the national voice for arts in regional Australia. We work to

ensure that the arts are seen as essential in all policies and strategies across regional Australia.

AP: I'm Anthony Peluso. I'm the Chief Executive and Executive Director at Country Arts SA [South Australia] and I'm joining this conversation from Kaurna Country, in my house in Payneham in Adelaide. It's a pretty rare occurrence, actually, that we get the opportunity to go deeply into one part of our work.

JT: My name is Joe Toohey. I'm the Executive Director and CEO at Regional Arts Victoria, Zooming at you from Kulin Country in Victoria. Regional Arts Victoria is a not-for-profit organisation that works in areas that are given away by the name of the organisation – artistic programming in regional parts of the state of Victoria and all of the many, diverse ways in which that might play out.

PMP: I'm Paul McPhail. I'm the CEO of Regional Arts WA [Western Australia] and I'm speaking to you from Wadjuk Country on lands of the Noongar people. So Regional Arts WA does everything that everybody else does, except we stupidly try and do it for the entire state of Western Australia. One of the things we often struggled with is that people don't understand the enormity of the size of this state that we are in.

One of the questions that came up when I was talking to Chloe Flockhart, a young theatre-maker from regional

Western Australia, was that the resources in the town that she lives in aren't at a sufficient level. Even if you truck a whole lot of money in, and a whole lot of artists in, the language, the environment and just the understanding of what it is to mount a reasonably large-scale theatre show doesn't exist. She tends to spend half of her working life in that small town developing and conceiving work, and then goes elsewhere to get it produced.

Is that still considered regional theatre?

JT: This is one we tie ourselves in knots over, unnecessarily. The story itself, in any piece of theatre, that's the thing that is central; everything else should flow from that. If the story comes from a regional voice and is told by somebody from within that region, then it's a regional story regardless of whether the lighting design had to be imported in from elsewhere. The production itself could draw from a range of places.

Theatre-makers who are at a mature stage of their practice in regional Victoria have often struggled to shake that off. When they're talking about being a regional theatre-maker, the presumption is that all of their stories are going to be about the town or the community that they live in. A number of theatre-makers that we work with just want to make really great feminist theatre. That might be influenced by where they

live, but it's not necessarily about the place they live in. They are a regional practitioner and that work is extraordinarily important in that particular region, but it's not necessarily about the place they're in.

The story, and the centrality of the story and the person who is devising it, that being regional, is the thing that makes it a story in and of that place that it comes from.

AP: Using the adjective 'regional' allows us to talk about it in a particular way. There's no doubt that work that is made regionally or has its genesis in the regions can have a particular character, which will be quite distinct from any metropolitan setting.

In South Australia, a lot of the work that we do is about connecting up. The work that we make, or support the making of, needs to have a truth about it that has some regionality at its heart. A lot of the work that we do is about connecting regional stories, regional makers, communities and makers from across the state or wherever else, who are best placed to create that truth around that story.

RA: It comes back to that ever-present dichotomy that we work in, which talks about place-based work and regional/ not regional practice. Sometimes place-based practice is fundamental to a piece of theatre or to a story that's being developed. In other cases, artists just want to make a piece of contemporary

work that isn't necessarily about a place-based response or a response to bush fires or the drought.

There's some different things at play when we talk about a piece of theatre that's dramaturged by an original practitioner in an original venue. What are we wrapping around that language? What are we defining? When we start to look at that work being presented in another town or another state or another country, how does that translate? How do we make sure that we're supporting all aspects of that creative practice?

PMP: So how does this work, then, in a policy practice? I can't give money to someone to work in a metropolitan setting to develop that regional work that has been created or conceived in a region. Is that an issue?

JT: It's a policy failing. If I'm speaking to some of the major institutions that are based in Melbourne, often the thing that I'm trying to emphasise is: don't try to export your programmes; you have to build your relationships. They don't necessarily want you to create a regional version of the programme that you've got now, they just want you; it's your skills and your expertise that is valuable. We often talk about this when talking about regional festivals: that circus-comes-to-town effect where something rolls in and rolls out and nothing is left behind. That is the reason that those skills and that experience

don't exist in that region at the moment. It's never going to be practical to have all of the skills that are needed in a small town all of the time, but it could exist in a wider region to make it practical there.

Much of the strategic work that we've been doing in the last couple of years has involved trying to come up with regional-level policy responses that are reflective of the needs of that particular area. It might not be confined to a particular local government; it might be a few different local government areas working in partnership together. If you bring them together, you've got a better chance of addressing all of those skills together. I think that the ambition for the policy response shouldn't be getting the story-maker to go to Perth to finish the work, but getting the support structures from Perth to be built into those regions. That has a greater chance of leading to a legacy outcome.

AP: Some of the ways we work, particularly with the major organisations in South Australia, are about creating that two-way exchange. It could be about skills and expertise going out to that regional area to work on the ground. It's also about how we support those artists to come into Adelaide and be in the home of those producers, to get that sense that you can only get when you're actually in that creating space with a professional company.

We also bring in that larger perspective and larger conversation from the local government and other important players in local communities. They are interested in building their communities in a deep way, sustaining makers to live in their towns and add that level of vibrancy and depth to the culture of the local community. We don't have a perfect solution for that at the moment, but we're actually happy with that, because it means we can be quite targeted in terms of what skills and experiences already rest in that local community. We are trying to create that equal exchange between the regional makers and stories and those in metro Adelaide. South Australia is in some ways different to other states, because Adelaide is where most of the makers in our state live. So trying to build those exchanges is important.

I think, in some ways, it really is about who makes the decisions. If the decisions are being led by regional creators, then that gives it the truth of being a regional story or a regionally related work.

RA: A piece of policy work that we're doing at the moment is to ask where the gaps are when we map the arts sector nationally. What cultural infrastructure is in existence? What cultural infrastructure needs to be replaced or repaired? What needs to be upgraded? What is sitting dark at the moment?

In terms of skills development and training, it is about looking at whether there might be regional hubs that have particular resources and facilities and asking how can they be part of an exchange across the country. A lot of thinking around touring comes into this space as well. Looking at how we can support artists to both develop and commission work, but also how that is presented and represented as it travels across the country. It's the right time to try to untangle and unravel some of those conversations so that we find a way to actually utilise artists, infrastructure and skills in a different way.

JT: Who is the audience for regional theatre work? Is it just the local community, or does it resonate more widely than that?

PMP: I'm wondering whether it has to resonate locally first? My feeling with art and theatre is that authenticity translates to any audience. If it is a local story particularly, then it almost has to have that resonance at a local level first for it to find its true voice. If it has that, then it will find an audience elsewhere. I would always argue that it should be given as much profile as possible, depending on how good the work is – but it does come down to how good the work is.

AP: That point about what stage a work is made for has to be thought about at the start of the conversation. It's a conversation that we have at Country Arts SA, because we manage

proscenium arch theatres with fly-towers, but we also develop touring for work for small halls. We have a great example at the moment of working with the State Theatre Company of South Australia, where we take a work that actually goes to both [kinds of] venues. At the start of the conversation with the creatives, we ensure that they're aware of where this work is going. That actually opens up a whole lot of creative opportunities. I find that a really interesting conversation: not only who the audience is that you're making the work for, but what the practicalities actually are around the technical requirements.

When we premiered Elena Carapetis's *The Gods of Strangers* in Port Pirie in 2018, I actually learnt more about the local audience than I ever have before, because in that auditorium there were regular theatre-goers who understood about theatre etiquette and then there were those for whom coming to the theatre is not a regular occurrence. The play was written in three languages – English, Italian and Greek. The community of Port Pirie has quite strong Italian and Greek communities and has had for many years. So there was the theatre-going audience. There were Italians. There were Greeks. And then there was also a Port Pirie audience. It was amazing to be in that space and see the reactions from those four different audiences all sitting side-by-side in that same space: people laughing and responding to completely

different things; people actually calling out and speaking back to the stage. It was an amazing experience.

What I learned was that no matter who you create the work for, you will potentially uncover new audiences and they add to the whole experience. We took that same work to Adelaide for a two-week season, and again there were new audiences that went to that theatre, mostly from the Italian and Greek communities who wouldn't normally go to theatre – especially a work by State Theatre. But they found their connection in that story. There were people in that space who had never been in the Playhouse before.

RA: I was listening to your conversation and wishing that I was in a theatre and having an experience where people call out.

The production of *Sunshine Supergirl* that's in rehearsal at the moment offers an interesting model and interesting conversation: who is the audience and does it resonate more widely? Country Arts SA is one of the co-commissioners and it's about to open in Griffith in New South Wales. There are eight co-commissioning Performing Arts Centres or bodies across different states and territories. Some 50 per cent are metro and 50 per cent regional. All have seen value in this piece of work and have contributed either financially or in another sense, seeing that it is relevant to their audience and

to their community, and also that it is then travelling across the country. I get excited about this co-commissioning model. It isn't about regional or metro; it's about who believes in this work, and how we then present that to our respective audiences.

AP: What I've observed in the touring landscape is a real desire to diversify what we present in our regional centres. A few years back, the conversation was about works that were pushing the boundaries in dance and theatre and how they might be perceived as risky for an audience. Increasingly and importantly, the conversations have got to a point where what we deemed risky five years ago is just part of how we programme now. Now the new frontiers are about presenting authentic First Nations stories and authentic regional stories. Not just presenting them to our regional audiences, but creating work that has resonance more broadly. Even metropolitan centres are wanting to diversify what they have on their stages and find new audiences.

Sunshine Supergirl is a great example. That particular work has another interesting factor, which lies in the way that it's presented. It's being created for a traverse stage; it's like you're at the tennis, with two audiences sitting opposite each other watching across the tennis court. We're thinking of presenting it back in Port Pirie because the art centre that we have there

is partially built on what used to be a tennis court.

In June, we undertook the first screening of a work that we created and got good audiences across the country. It's interesting to see a work made locally, which resonated in Adelaide, but then streams out across the country getting audiences. For us, it's the multiple layers of legacy. How do we use this process to build the industry? To build the sector locally and across the state?

PMP: There's that spectrum, isn't there? Where people are creating work because they just so strongly have to say something, right down to the notion of community development, which is all about building the sense of community and belonging by the participation in or the watching of a presentation of work. We probably tend to be more on the community development spectrum side of things. That is more to do with some of the programmes that we run and the amounts of money that we have to give out. If somebody wants to build a piece of work, they tend to need many more resources than we can give them, so they're going for bigger pots of money elsewhere. So we're most often involved in the conception of that sort of work and then involved in the presentation and production of work that is much more rooted in communities. We are trying to build better senses of communities for the artists and the sector in that local geographical area. That's our basic ethos.

JT: You respond differently based on where a particular community is at, where a particular story-teller is at, the options that you have in front of you. Philosophically, when we're talking about regional stories or about theatre-making in regional Victoria, the underpinning is challenging the conflation of 'commonality' with 'centrality' – the idea that because something is the most common experience, it is also a central experience. When I live outside of the city, my experience is described as 'marginal' because that's not the majority view, but that's the centre of my whole world there. That story is my own story, my own experience, and the different ways that I might think of myself in terms of identity. I'm at the centre of that story. Your experience of living in the city is actually the marginal one, not the central one. You can apply a similar lens to other stories that might be pushed to the margins.

The best pieces of music or books that I've read, or the pieces of theatre that I've seen that have changed my life, the driving force behind them is that opportunity to both tell it and to experience it and see yourself in that story. It should be a universal right and something that people are universally able to access. It's about bringing the experiences of people who might not feel central, just because theirs is not the most common experience, to a central position, [and] to feel like their experiences are reflected and heard, and that they are

able to speak as well as be spoken to. We don't achieve all of those lofty goals every time, all the time. Some of the projects are just there because they're fun. But they're all part of the multiplicity of ways of talking about who we are, and how we are, and where we live, and how we live, across different parts of the country.

RA: Whether we are creating or supporting work, it always comes down to advocating for the arts as being essential. They are essential in all communities, and if we support a practitioner or artists to develop work, we support audiences to go and see work, and we support communities to participate in work: that is essential in the fabric and creative ecology of regional communities, of towns and cities. If we keep saying that they are such an important part of how we live, and how we socialise, and how we connect, then there'll be a story that is relevant to different parts of those communities. There was a quote in an article I read recently that was something like 'we're not making regional theatre; we're making theatre in places where most of us live'.

AP: That's it. We're not making regional theatre. What is that? We're making theatre of the place, whatever that happens to be, that very specific place. That's at the core of it for me.