

WHY WE TOUR

Yaron Lifschitz, Artistic Director of Circa

A recent review in The Courier Mail finished its glowing praise of a production by hoping it would have a (deserved) Australian tour. Having been the Artistic Director of a Queensland-based company that has toured extensively over the past two years, I heartily agree. Good things should tour. It may seem obvious but, in our State, increasingly focused on Queensland-based outcomes, touring the arts can too easily seem like a junket. I wanted to put the record straight.

Touring is not for everyone. It isn't even for the many. It is a privilege reserved for those whose work can truly cut it on a national or international stage. It requires years of research, investment and strategic focus for an organisation. In 2004 I advised my board and stakeholders that by 2006 we would be touring internationally. With the hard work of my performers and administrators we achieved this (somewhat fanciful) target.

Touring is hard. Even for a compliant, professional company like ours, touring involves long hours, sub-standard conditions, multi-tasking and resourcefulness. Sustained touring needs commitment, investment and risk. The cost blow-outs, particularly in international touring can be extreme and most small arts companies simply don't have the funds to cover shortfalls. Each tour could be our last. So why do it?

Touring, properly and strategically driven and realised, accrues massive benefits to the company, the state and the industry.

For the company, touring opens valuable new income streams. Most significant performing arts companies tour. Forsythe, Robert Wilson, Merce Cunningham, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, DV8 all tour. And one of the reasons is new, interesting work has limited market appeal in any single market. Why not go out, find new markets and audiences and sell more tickets?

It also vastly improves the cultural value of a company. My own company has recently been invited to perform at high profile events like the Sydney Festival, the World Swimming Titles and, closer to home, La Boite. This wasn't an accident. It was a direct result of the fact that we are touring internationally. This vastly increases the way we are valued. A ticket to a show can range from \$10 to well over \$100. The difference isn't production values or actual costs. It is perceived value. One cost-effective way to improve this value is, putting it bluntly, to get famous. And touring is the best way an arts organisation gets famous.

Touring also changes the nature of the company itself. It stops you being insular, parochial and satisfied. To play every night in a festival with awesome acts all around you (in Hungary we were followed by Fardo legend Misia while Radiohead thundered away on another stage) is good for your soul, your art and your work. One only has to look at the quality of Eastern European motor cars in the 1980s to realise getting out more is a great way to make you better. Contact with artists, ideas, people; in short, contact with the wider world is good for everyone. For an arts company in a globalised world it is the difference between being adequate to a local audience's perceptions and good in a robust, international framework.

For the state, touring not only improves export figures, it improves the cultural value of the landscape. Recently we sold out at the Sydney Opera House. The marketing (over which we had no control) did not mention that we were a Queensland-based company. Why? Because this would be seen as a liability. We want to change this. We want Queensland to be viewed as a cultural centre. This is many years (decades?) away. The way to do it is to present Queensland based work on national and international stages. Regularly. Good work, well realised. And to let it be known that this work is from Queensland.

As Richard Florida and others have pointed out, cultural capital is an extremely valuable commodity and having it enhanced will massively assist Queensland's growth. It attracts businesses, talent, energy. It overcomes insularity and monocultures. It promotes healthy corporate and civic lives. It completes us.

Prague is a city of around the same size as Brisbane. It has 28 theatre companies, world class opera, ballet and experimental theatre. It attracts students and cultural tourists. Brisbane could be this. But it needs to establish its reputation internationally. And the best, most cost-effective way to do this is to tour great work from here. Then to support this work to flourish locally. Writing policy papers about it won't do it. Deluding ourselves that our small to medium arts sector (the most vibrant part of our performing arts culture) is flourishing won't do it. But putting strategic policy into action, investing cleverly, promoting actively and having a grand vision of what our cultural life could be will go a long way to transforming our remarkable city and state into a place people talk about in cultural terms.

For the industry, touring brings valuable skills and expertise. We recently brought over two acrobats from Quebec. The skills exchange was fantastic. They wanted to be here because we are known internationally. What a company learns from touring, the connections and knowledge developed, stay in the industry. We can't be great on our own. We need connections. And international touring is the best way to get these.

No one questions why sports people tour. To show they are winners. To get new challenges. To re-invigorate sports at home. To build a city, state and nation behind their exploits. To increase local attendances. No one would suggest Grant Hackett or the Australian Cricket team should stay at home and produce local outcomes. And yet, Mr Hackett can (theoretically) swim exactly as fast in a local pool, for a local audience and the Gabba could host Mr Hayden as adequately as the Caribbean or Lords. But it wouldn't be cricket and staying at home, safe in our comfort zone, isn't the arts.

Earlier I suggested that touring was a privilege reserved for those whose work was good and who were focussed on it. Quality and focus need assistance (far less, mind you, than sports or, for that matter the sugar industry). The quality of work from Queensland is not especially good. Not from lack of effort but because of the harsh circumstances faced by the arts sector. Lack of funding, onerous reporting and compliance, spiraling costs and huge distances make it increasingly hard to get anything on stage, much less anything good.

I would like to imagine a future where Queensland work is seen on a world stage regularly. Where Queensland is acknowledged as an epicenter, rather than a far off place. Where funding agencies explicitly recognise and support local work to get good

enough to tour and then support that work to tour. In this vision everyone wins – the artists, the company, the industry and the state. To fail is to ensure that Robert Menzies’s maxim that ‘Queenslanders are different’ retains its pejorative sting. Let us be known for our weather, our lifestyle, our large millennial projects. But let us also be celebrated for innovation, cultural vibrancy and imagination. This is the sort of place I want my son to grow up in. It is the sort of place I want to help make. And this is why we tour.

Yaron Lifschitz is the Artistic Director of Circa. In 2006 Circa toured to 9 countries over 4 continents. This touring was assisted in part, by the Australia Council for the Arts, The Federal Government’s Arts Funding and Advisory Body, and by Arts Queensland.