

# Is there a recipe for success in the business of presenting?

*Keynote presentation to the APACA Conference July 2014, Hobart, by David Fishel, Director, Positive Solutions*

The issue I have been asked to address is whether there is a recipe for success in the business of presenting and, in particular, whether the governance and management models of arts centres play a significant part in this – is there a ‘right’ model?

My view of successful arts venue management has been influenced by the arts centre movement in the UK. First, because that’s where my formative professional years were spent – including as Manager of Battersea Arts Centre. Secondly, because the arts centre movement developed as an alternative to traditional models of single art form theatres and galleries.

There were broadly two traditional theatre models – one where outer-London or regional theatres housed a producing company, and this company generated nearly all the work that took place in the building. It emerged from the regional repertory movement in the early twentieth century. The second was the receiving house where there was no resident producing company but a high proportion of touring product.

Over time both of these models showed their limitations. The producing theatre was too often a reflection of one individual’s cultural tastes – the Artistic Director; and the program was sometimes very narrow – which meant, in turn, that the audience was usually pretty narrow too. The receiving house was subject to the availability of good and appropriate product – and much of what toured had little or no connection with local communities. Both models also suffered from producing a low level of asset deployment, with the public only in the building for a few hours a day. And both of these models seemed to be predicated on the assumption that art – or more specifically theatre – is good for you, and that the limit of the theatre management’s responsibility was to make it available, at an affordable price.

The arts centre movement was a reaction against these models, and was intent on democratisation, in three respects: a broadening of the program, a broadening of the audiences reached by the program, and a broadening of the ways – other than as audience members – that the community could engage with the arts and with each other. That’s why Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of Southbank Centre, recently described the arts centre movement in the UK as a ‘political’ movement. Jude’s philosophy was itself born out of her experience in community theatre and community arts, and the philosophy travelled with her to the West Yorkshire Playhouse and now to the South Bank Centre London, Europe’s largest art centre. Her comments were made at a recent UK conference, which was examining, a little anxiously perhaps, the rationale for such centres.

At this conference, fifty arts centre leaders came together from across the country came together to ask if arts centres really are important to the cultural, artistic, social and economic life of their towns and cities, and to explore the challenges currently facing arts centre leaders and the opportunities for their future. The focus of the conversation was not on defining what an arts centre is but on exploring what defines a “good” arts centre. As Allegra Galvin from Folkestone Quarterhouse highlighted, arts centres are not intrinsically important – it is how they behave that is important: *Participation is at the centre of everything we do, and we are not constrained by artform at a time when these categorisations seem less and less relevant.*

Arts centres only work when they are at the centre of a community and matter to people, and they only make real difference when they bring artists into the centre of that relationship with

audiences. Arts centres are then able, as journalist Honour Bayes put it: “To make culture the beating heart of the community.”

I was asked to talk about the ingredients for success in presenting but – like a politician – I am answering a different question because arts centres are not just in the business of “presenting”. In fact, if presenting is all or even most of what they do they are failing to fulfil their destiny, and they will not be perceived as valuable by many members of their community.

I note, in passing, the provocation offered a year ago by Ricky Bryan of Canberra Theatre Centre in his blog:

*Australian Performing Arts Centres: How we failed and don't even realise it*

*“We have almost universally failed in our mission to be centres of creativity and culture for our respective communities and what's more, no one even realises this or even cares . . . you would be flat out finding a venue in the country that devoted any more than 15% of its activity to genuine community engagement programs - by this I mean the commissioning of local works, education programs, community outreach programs and the like. What should be the main game for Arts Centres has become the sideline, the thing we do when we have time and spare money.”*

Harsh words.

In the last couple of months I have interviewed a range of arts centre leaders in Australia and a couple in the UK, and explored the concept of a successful arts centre or performing arts venue, as well as examining the question of what they see as the leadership needs of such a venue.

Some very consistent messages came through about the characteristics of success.

Julian Louis at NORPA, Lismore, talked of the importance of home-grown work and of:

- Establishing links into the community
- Remaining alert to accessibility
- Using and reflecting characters and stories in the region
- The local community's enjoyment of familiar spaces being played upon and reinvented through arts projects and performances

He also talked of the challenge of bringing an arts building to life:

*The venue is often a big, ugly square thing. How do you make it more vibrant? Pop up performance. Live music. Post show talks. Whole evening experience, wrapping around the central performance. We're trying to make the venue a destination. But you also have to break out and be in different places. We have to work on multiple fronts.*

David Lloyd at Bendigo emphasised ownership by the community, the arts centre's constituency. He explained that:

*Breakthroughs came when we integrated what we do with the larger organisation of the City of Greater Bendigo. Previously the arts centre sat outside the organisation as a whole – it railed against the bureaucracy, and tried to distinguish itself from the rest of the City structure. That prevented it securing permission to articulate what it does. So the first thing was this integration.*

Not surprisingly, David also stressed that funding was important, and acknowledged that his venue enjoyed higher investment from its local government than some others.

Simon Hinton at Illawarra Performing Arts Centre in Wollongong explained that the Centre was becoming clearer on what the keys were for being valued by the community:

*It is about relevance and impact, and the need to have a very clear vision of what the place can be. 'Relevance' is about giving a voice to our region - at its simplest telling local stories, reflecting issues of concern, as well as having a reputation for great shows. Starting to produce work changed our knowledge of the community greatly. For example, holding open readings attended by a sample of the subscribers – and securing early feedback.*

Simon explained that 90% of the program is made up of other peoples' work – but Merrigong Theatre, the resident company, is the venue's signature work; and that while some of the community-based work is linked to mainstage programming, other elements occur in the community and are not directly connected to the performance program. *These are not mutually exclusive – they're both part of the life of IPAC.*

Of course, I could quote many other venues around the country that are working hard and succeeding at broadening the ways in which the venue connects, and what this means for the range of activities which are organised – Bathurst, Frankston, Parramatta, Brisbane Powerhouse – and there will be others.

If there's great consistency in the ingredients for success factors that emerged there is also consistency in what it means for the role of the arts centre leader. Let me quote the perspectives of two leaders, Stephen Champion from Bathurst Memorial Arts Centre and Jim Beirne from Live Theatre in Newcastle in the UK.

What is notable about listening to Stephen talk about his role is how much emphasis he places on external linkages. Community engagement is at the heart of Bathurst's approach (see Appendix), and Stephen summarises the key factors in this as:

- Relationships with tertiary education. Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre has a Cultural Cooperation Agreement with the university (based on the Wagga Wagga model)
- Close relationships with Regional Arts Development Officers – being on the board of Regional Arts NSW it becomes very clear how lucky we are in NSW that our touring has devolved to the regions
- Cross-over between our programs so that they all feed into each other
- Giving the community strong networks that gives them opportunity to feel connected

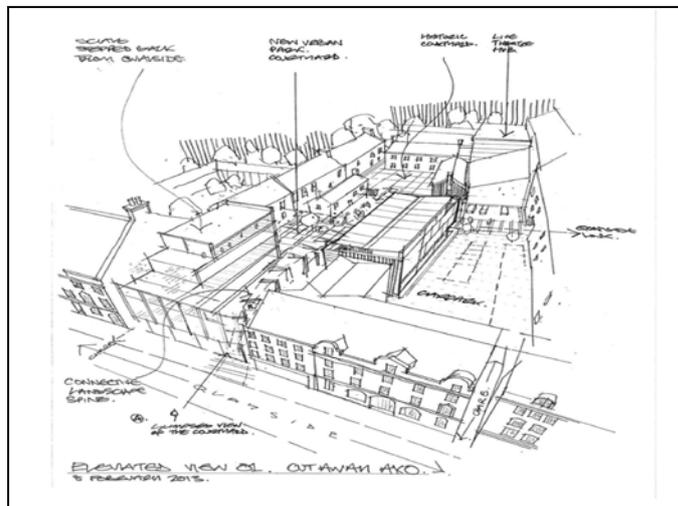
When I spoke with Rosemary Miller from Salamanca Arts Centre a few days ago she used almost identical words to these: vibrancy, connectedness and relevance to its community context, and avoiding silos.

Live Theatre in Newcastle has a fascinating 40 year history. On the banks of the River Tyne it is one of a handful of England's leading new writing venues. It originally started as a theatre producing only new work, but it now has a multi-faceted life as an arts centre, with an extraordinary diversity of activities, spaces, financing sources and partnerships.

www.beaplaywright.com was launched in November 2010 and now has an active online community of over 100 budding playwrights from around the world learning the craft of playwriting. The philosophy of the course is not to provide a 'how-to' of playwriting, rather a stimulating environment where students are asked to think about their art and craft in a more

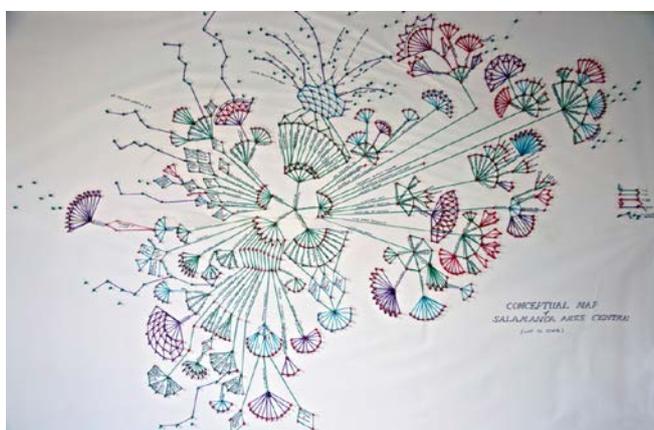
intense way, to help writers find their own voice. Students on the solo version of the course which costs £95, work through the online modules, whereas students pay £495 for the interactive version of the course, which also offers fortnightly online discussions and practical feedback from experts at Live Theatre including a detailed critique of their final play. Over three years the program is expected to turn a profit of over £100,000.

The Broad Chare is a partnership between Live Theatre and the 21 Hospitality Group investing a proportion of its turnover back into the work of Live Theatre. Opened in May 2011, The Broad Chare is “a proper pub serving proper beer and proper food” and was recently awarded a Michelin Guide Bib Gourmand. This hospitality offer is well above and beyond the traditional theatre bar. The Broad Chare contributes visibly to the ambience of the venue, as well as contributing financially.



The Schoolhouse, located behind Live Theatre in Trinity Court houses new office spaces for creative businesses, forming part of a creative hub led by Live Theatre. Five office units across three floors are available for small creative and digital businesses to rent. As a social enterprise income from renting the property will be channelled back into the mission of Live Theatre, supporting its artistic and educational work.

I have selected three initiatives beyond the performance program. Jim Beirne, the CEO at Live Theatre, spends a great deal of time networking in the creative, business and political communities – and parading his good ideas in front of them. He sets himself personal targets for new face to face contacts. At a conference last year in Manchester I listened to Jim describe the pervasiveness, messiness and unpredictability of his networking efforts. You never know, he says, where each new contact is going to lead you, or what opportunities it might open up. Jim subscribes to the Jackson Pollock school of networking. Here’s the image he used to describe his networking process:



For another interesting example of the networks and connections that an organisation can, and need to, make, look at this image from Salamanca Arts Centre. A couple of years ago Positive Solutions undertook a “positioning review” of Salamanca, to quantify its impact across a range of dimensions – cultural, educational, economic, personal. As part of this project Neil Cameron interviewed a range of artists, retailers, educators and others to identify their links, and to illustrate the wider network that forms Salamanca’s

constituency. This image isn’t a diagram – it’s a photograph of a wall – with the pins and coloured string making physical the emotional and practical ties of the Salamanca ecology.

Influencers and decision-makers were invited to come and inspect this room-sized image, which conveys its message more powerfully than a table of stats could possibly do.

Now, there are a couple of implications for the venue leader who is going to be active in partnership building and securing new resources and opportunities for their venue and their community. All the basic organisational functions have got to be properly covered. If your administrative, financial, HR, planning and technical house is not in order you can't spend all your time out and about, the organisational will collapse around you. This implies proper support, ideally a trusted and capable Number 2 – but in the absence of that a capable staff team who can carry the load while the leader is out exploring new frontiers. Effective leadership cannot be delivered as a solo effort.

Other interviewees described dimensions of leadership beyond external networking and partnership building:

- Everyone has to come along, so the leader needs to build collaboration
- You need to communicate, and build a compelling story
- There needs to be a bold vision of what you can do, think big
- We need to be clear about what is special, distinctive about what happens in this building
- You need to make decisions that are beyond what the audience knows what it wants
- I take seriously my role as advocate for the art and artist
- We must speak passionately about what we do, and therefore influence, then people take us seriously

Incidentally, I have not mentioned the importance of an effective board of management, or savvy senior officers, when identifying ingredients for success for arts centres. They merit a chapter of their own – on another occasion.

## APACA Survey

In preparation for addressing the question as to whether there is an ideal governance or organisational model for an arts centre, and whether this was one of the ingredients for success, Positive Solutions carried out a survey of APACA members at the beginning of 2014. 47 organisations participated. The survey explored mission, programs, income patterns, asset management processes, perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as asking a number of questions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of corporate structure arrangements.

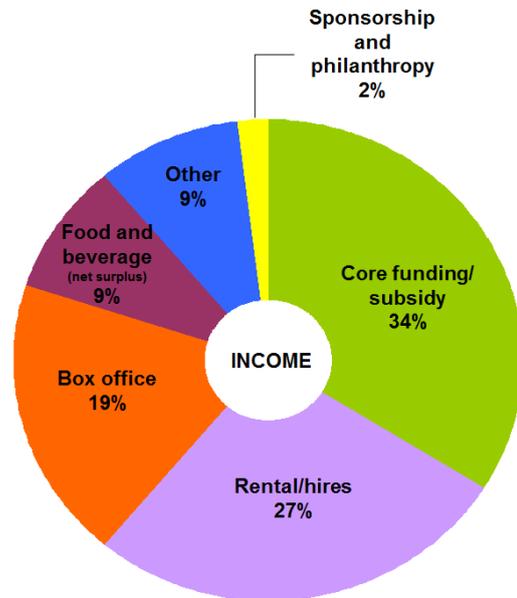
A full analysis of the survey is available from the Positive Solutions website ([www.positive-solutions.com.au](http://www.positive-solutions.com.au)) or from APACA (<http://www.apaca.com.au/>). Here, a very brief selection of the issues covered is presented, focusing on those which link most closely to the theme of leadership and success.

To set the scene, survey respondents were asked to provide a rough breakdown of their main income streams for the last financial year (2013), indicating each as a percentage of total income.

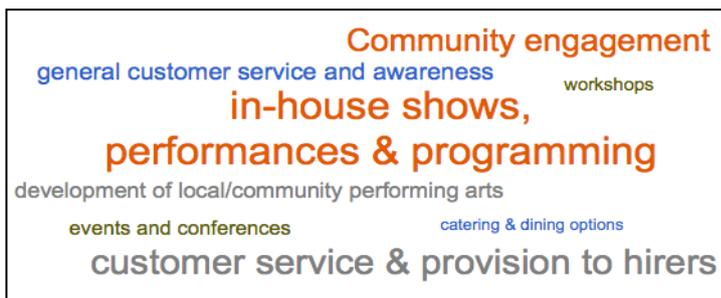
The very small proportion of income secured from sponsorship and philanthropy included many venues which recorded 0%.

Just over half the respondents indicated that their income patterns were changing, with increased revenue having to come from sources other than core funding/ subsidy.

*Slowly the government subvention is lowering and we have to become more commercial.*



Respondents were asked to list up to four services that their venue currently does well. A large number of respondents nominated their annual season or program as a strength, with many commenting on the diversity of their programming.



Asked to list up to four programs/ services they currently provide that could be improved, respondents gave a variety of responses. The most common responses related to marketing and fundraising:



The largest percentage of centres were local government operated (62%). One fifth were operated by independent non-profit organisations, 11% were companies limited by guarantee and 11% were incorporated associations.

Asked to describe the key strengths of their corporate structure, local government venues nominated financial support, in particular having Council underwrite financial loss and provide predictability of cash flow. Other strengths included:

- Employment security
- Management/ strategic support from internal corporate services/ parent organisation, e.g. IT, finance, training and human resources
- Building maintenance/ capital works
- Strong support from Director/ CEO (within Council)

Independently-operated venues reported their major strengths as dynamism and professionalism, as well as the freedom to manage their own organisation.

*Not bound by Council policy, so more agile as an organisation with decisions being made quicker.*

Asked to list up to four weaknesses of their corporate structure, local government venues nominated having to follow Council protocol and processes. Other weaknesses include:

- Inability to undertake own branding and marketing
- Counteracting negative or outdated images of Council
- Lack of flexibility and speed in decision making
- High degree of intervention
- Politics

*The Arts centre does not always fit into the procedures and planning of Council system.*

*Council branding undermines market position.*

*Likely to be a higher degree of political intervention on day to day operations.*

For independently operated venues the reliance on internal organisational capacity and the lack of established resources were potential weaknesses.

*Structure is largely reliant on a quality CEO and Chair. Get this wrong and its game over.*

Asked if their current corporate structure is the best for their arts centre, 78% of respondents replied positively, and 22% negatively. Of course this could be a case of 'better the devil you know'; and it is also possible that the different operating structures attract individuals who are temperamentally suited to that system.

The majority of respondents felt that the ideal model would vary depending on the type of organisation, its size, its art form, location and other factors.

In 1993 (yes, really) Positive Solutions undertook a study for the UK government examining the management effectiveness of local government owned venues – including those operated directly, those operated by non-profit entities, and those few managed by commercial operators. The conclusion was that no one form of management was inherently better than the others - the same as the message that appeared to emerge from our recent APACA survey. Nevertheless, for reasons which were faintly glimpsed in some survey responses I think the current dominant model of venues which are local government owned and operated – within direct line management procedures – may decline over the next few years or so. Why?

I think there will be a continuing trend towards small government and a rising pressure to generate resources from third parties and new business streams – the trail blazed by entrepreneurs like Jim Beirne at Live Theatre, and by several of those I've mentioned in Australia. In the not-for-profit sector new forms of financing are being explored, an increasing attention to strong balance sheets and retained reserves is in evidence, and slowly but surely boards are becoming more professional, more strategic and more commercially capable. There may even be new legal mechanisms established which provide greater flexibility such as the ability to pay dividends to investors in not-for-profits and social enterprises – initial steps in this direction have been taken in the US. And, of course, fundraising is becoming a normal part of the income mix for many arts organisations, despite the small percentage indicated by our survey respondents.

The current local government model makes many of these income and business opportunities more difficult to access. For this reason, there is likely to be increasing pressure for venues to be operated at arm's length – perhaps through controlled subsidiaries (like Gold Coast Arts Centre and Brisbane Powerhouse) or completely independently.

This issue of entrepreneurship and flexibility brings me back to the ingredients for success.

I have emphasised that a successful venue will be advancing on many fronts, not only in relation to the product on the stage – and that we have to make our rhetoric about community impact and relevance real, it has to be visible and evident in where we spend our time and money.

I have asserted that the successful venue leader will be spending a great deal of her or his time outside the venue, making connections and garnering resources; and that a precondition is that there is a trusted No 2 or a senior team who has the capacity to manage the many routine/hygiene factors that keep a building-based venue operating efficiently -- the fundamental industry skills – asset management, HR, technical support, financial planning and control, marketing, and so on.



Now I want to wrap up with some New Age soppiness. A further ingredient for success is not just respect, but *affection*: for the team around you, the team reporting to you, and even those to whom you report. The high-performing teams and leaders I've known are not only positive, they like each other's company. Where fear or disrespect rule you cannot, for long, have a successful venue. The venue leader is not solely responsible for this, but without their encouragement and example, without leading from the front, and taking some personal risk this supportive culture is unlikely to develop.

You have to stick out your neck and take risks, exposing yourself, as an artist does, every day.

Perhaps to do this we have to preserve or rediscover the inner child in us. Let me retell an anecdote from one of the world's experts on arts education, Professor Ken Robinson.

Professor Robinson describes a scene in a primary school. The class of six-year-olds has been set the task of drawing something, anything, of their choosing. The teacher is walking the classroom asking questions and giving encouragement. She stops at the desk of one little girl, and asks her what she's drawing. The young artist explains that she is drawing a picture of

God. The teacher smiles and says “but nobody really knows what God looks like,” to which the little girl replies:

*They will in a minute.*

Children will have a go – they are not afraid of being wrong – and we shouldn’t be either. No risk, no reward.

## Appendix: BMEC Case Study

BMEC has recently been acknowledged for its leadership in the Australian performing arts sector through PowerPAC, a report into the role that regional performing arts centres can play as hubs of performing arts development. The report, commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA), identified BMEC's Local Stages Program as a national example of best practice. Extract from PowerPAC below:

Local Stages at BMEC nurtures the development of the performing arts in Bathurst and more broadly the Central West Region.

Local Stages employs a full time Creative Producer to coordinate an annual program which supports local performing artists, technicians, designers, writers and directors. It also provides assistance for young people aspiring to engage in the arts.

Activities include: support for individual theatre, dance and music projects; local cabarets; open mic nights; workshops and masterclasses; residencies and exchanges involving leading national artists and companies; commissions; and professional development.

Increasingly the lines of separation between the BMEC annual season, Local Stages and other BMEC programs are deliberately blurred and the development of local performing arts practice is a guiding principle behind many programming decisions. This lack of demarcation extends to: Catapult, the national youth circus and physical theatre festival; The Inland Sea of Sound world music festival; and the BMEC Aboriginal Performing Arts Program which all benefit from Local Stages engagement<sup>1</sup>.

The BMEC Local Stages program, running since 2007, aims to develop local work and engage the community in the theatre's activities. The program has now secured three-year funding from the Australia Council for the Arts for the second time (a rare feat for a regional venue) in addition to state funds from Arts NSW and significant support from Bathurst Regional Council. Other programs continue to grow and overlap with the annual season including the 5th biennial Catapult Festival of youth circus and physical theatre (March 2014), the two-year youth focussed Smashed Arts program which runs to the end of June and the Aboriginal Performing Arts Program.

"BMEC is a substantial contributor to the lifestyle and liveability of Bathurst," said Bathurst Mayor Cr Gary Rush. "This contribution, and indeed that of all cultural facilities, is becoming more and more recognised by all levels of government. The added opportunities cultural activities provide are being measured by competitive advantage, particularly as regional communities strive to attract new residents and business."

One of BMEC's most important community engagement programs is the **Creative Learning Project**, which has been running for two years. This is an ambitious program which aims to embed the performing arts in the lives of 4-8 year olds and is a partnership between BMEC and Patch Theatre (target audience is 4-8). For this project, BMEC also partnered with the University of Texas, Austin, which has a drama based instruction program within the Department of Theatre and Dance, and Charles Sturt University.

The idea is to engage with smaller schools in Bathurst (last year focused on larger schools) to involve young people in creative processes that lead to performance outcomes. This is achieved by providing different elements that kids can connect with (for example, art/ craft workshops that focus on the same themes or production elements as the performance which is then displayed in the foyer when the kids come to the performance, etc.).

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<sup>1</sup> PowerPAC Report, March 2013

BMEC would like to share this model with other performing arts centres.

It is important to note that none of the programs are separate, they all overlap. "As much as possible," says BMEC Manager Stephen Champion, "we try not to create new things but develop existing programs. A lot of really successful community projects have been kick-started by others" – for example:

- Aboriginal Performing Arts Program – 50 local Aboriginal young people who've been working with Stalker – has been kept going by Smashed Arts for the last two years
- Central West Short Play Festival – developed through Local Stages in association with Arts Out West and Bathurst Theatre Company (local amateur theatre company). Has a broad reach, workshops have been held in Dubbo, Nudgee, etc.
- Roadwork and Black Lines other examples of successful community programs that have emerged from other programs and taken on their own life

To summarise, the most important factors in community engagement according to Champion are:

- Relationships with tertiary/ education are very important. BMEC has a Cultural Cooperation Agreement with the university (based on Wagga model)
- Close relationships with RADOs– being on the board of Regional Arts NSW it becomes very clear how lucky we are in NSW that our touring has devolved to the regions; we really need to work very closely with the regional arts board but cherish the fact that we're separate. Working very closely with Arts Out West makes a huge difference
- Cross-over between programs so that they all feed into each other and a strong community network develops, that branches out nationally and internationally
- Giving the community strong networks that gives them opportunity to feel connected and to see career development pathways

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