

Submission Number: 62  
Date Received: 17/02/2014



Centre of  
Contemporary Arts  
96 Abbott Street  
Cairns QLD 4870  
T 07 4050 9444  
info@jute.com.au  
www.jute.com.au

# Envisioning Theatre's Role in the Future of Northern Australia

---

A Submission to the Northern Australia White Paper

Commissioned by:

**JUTE Theatre Company**

Centre of Contemporary Arts  
96 Abbott Street  
Cairns Qld 4870

**Author: Dr S. Jane Modric**

February 2014

## Executive Summary

*Art is not the cherry on the cake, it is the yeast*

(Mallika Sarabhai, 2009)

A focus on the development of a thriving arts industry is critical to any thinking about the future of Northern Australia. A society's arts sector should not be seen as an entertaining consequence of a developing community but instead as the litmus test for the quality, maturity and liveability of that society. This paper argues that the arts, and in particular here, theatre, provides both societal and economic benefits far beyond a night's entertainment, as well as contributing substantially to the kind of society which will attract highly skilled and diverse populations to the area.

Cairns' JUTE Theatre Company, with a twenty-one year history of producing new work from the diverse voices of far north Queensland, has established a national reputation for quality work. The Company, a creative hub with partnerships stretching across regional Australia and into PNG is well placed to develop further as a conduit for the, as yet, untold stories of the far northern regions of Australia, and as a training centre for the aspiring theatre makers of those regions.

There is unarguable global interest in the Cairns region as a tourist destination; for our abundant natural attractions, our climate and lifestyle, and the culture and history of our population including the unique culture of the north's Indigenous population. Focused investment in the further development of JUTE Theatre Company will deliver an arts scene attractive to established artists and designers from around the world, and the increasing quality and growing reputation of the work produced will in turn attract visitors, encourage longer stays in the area and enhance the quality of life in the region for residents and potential new populations.

Finally this submission echoes Alan Dale (2013) in envisioning a more unified northern Australia, which for JUTE means a vision of partnerships with new and existing theatre companies across the Northern region resulting in inspired and fruitful artistic collaborations. Further, the establishment of a strong touring network amongst these partners will facilitate the development of a northern artistic identity, broaden the reach of isolated theatre companies and create professional pathways for northern artists, combating the trend of our artists to move to southern urban centres to find sustainable work. Developing JUTE as not only a producer of theatre but as a much needed centre for theatre training has potential to not only train northern artists but to attract students from the south of Australia, and throughout Asia.

## **How the arts benefit a society**

The importance of the arts and culture to a society is well documented and investment in the sector reaps multiple benefits for a community. In an article discussing the impact of the arts in the city of Philadelphia, for example, Schleter writes,

*Investment in the arts and cultural resources can benefit local and state economies by supporting job growth, stimulating commerce and sustaining neighborhoods by stabilizing property values (2013).*

The arts are ‘powerful engines to support the growth and development of healthy and economically viable communities’ (Christie and Guadagno, 2011), are successful tools for neighbourhood renewal (Shaw 2003), and provide intrinsic benefits to the individual such as pleasure, ‘enhanced empathy’ and understanding of the world, which can have ‘a public spillover component in that they cultivate the kinds of citizens desired in a pluralistic society’ (RAND 2005).

In today’s digital age, where it is possible for many highly skilled professionals to work from any desired location, improving the liveability of the northern regions is integral, and a further developed JUTE Theatre Company can play a significant role in this enhancement.

## **The magic (benefits) of theatre for a new narrative of northern Australia**

The theatre experience is live, immediate and ephemeral. Unlike film and television or music, it cannot be downloaded to a home screen, it must be dressed for, travelled to, participated in. If you are not there you miss it. A play on the page hardly has the same impact. Once out, theatre goers will dine, dance, drink, and seek out further entertainment such as live music. A quality Northern Australian theatre company with a national and potentially international reputation uniquely placed geographically to tap into a rich cultural heritage, as JUTE Theatre Company is, cannot be underestimated or ignored in any discussion about the future of Northern Australia.

In his discussion paper, *Governance challenges for Northern Australia*, Dale points to the discontent expressed by northerners with southern governing. He writes,

*. . . the nation needs a bolder and united north Australian narrative that takes us from being the post-colonial backwater of three separate governments to a more northern-driven but nationally integrated governance system. It is about Australian and State/Territory Governments radically and collectively reconfiguring their current fragmented and geographically distant approach, to one that negotiates big policy decisions in the north and that manages government policy and programs in radically different ways.*

A more autonomous arts sector can play a definitive part in such a narrative. The further future development of a northern theatre industry, which is currently

consistently juxtaposed and benchmarked against an established and remote southern model, requires radical rethinking of current policy if the golden opportunity which exists in the true uniqueness and diversity of northern voices and their potential for theatre making is not to be missed.

### **A cultural cringe?**

*What do I dislike? Cultural cringe. You know, gentrification, trying to be respectable in some way or another. We keep missing our chance to be something rather better, which is ourselves. Trying to catch up to some ideal of people who aren't looking anyway (Les Murray 2006).*

It's not so long since a move to Europe was de rigour for any aspiring Australian artist. Likewise, in 2014, a northern artist feels the same compulsion to move south. It is a desire for, as Murray says above, respectability in some way or another. Murray's sentiment is a timely one for northern Australian artists. Possibly, in the drive for southern recognition, we are missing our chance to be something rather better; ourselves. It is possible that southern governance of northern arts goes some way towards perpetuating the cultural cringe which currently exists. As we scramble to catch up to the ideals of people who aren't looking anyway, we lose sight of what is unique about our own stories; place, history, culture. In the process too, our regions lose the individuals that make up the creative heart of any community.

### **Getting things right: A conclusion**

The proposed white paper on the future of northern Australia is an opportunity to get things right; to create pluralistic vibrant and prosperous communities across a unified north which will attract visitors, investment and new populations. It is an opportunity to let go of outdated systems and write a new narrative, to unify, create new partnerships and encourage innovation for the benefit of all Australians.

This submission has proposed that a key factor in maximising this opportunity will be a focused investment in the future of northern Australian arts, and in particular has presented JUTE Theatre Company as an already established creative hub with much potential to enhance the liveability of Northern Australia, to participate in the creation of a new narrative for the north, and to forge all important partnerships which will help drive the creation of a new and prosperous identity.

Getting things right for the northern arts industry means a focused investment in the development of a *northern* industry; dispelling the cringe, creating an industry which will provide sustainable work for our artists, and in the process retaining a critical resource – our most creative and innovative minds. For JUTE Theatre Company, a future vision means the ability to 'chart' its own destiny in some way (Dale 2013), a destiny less dependent on southern benchmarking, one which allows the creative space to fully

explore what indeed it means to be, as Murray urges, 'ourselves' as theatre makers in Northern Australia.

## References

- Christie, C. and Guadagno, K. (2011) *Benefits of the arts*, State of New Jersey, Department of State, [http://nj.gov/state/njsca/dos\\_njsca\\_benefits.html](http://nj.gov/state/njsca/dos_njsca_benefits.html) , viewed February 16 2014.
- Dale, A. (2013) *Governance challenges for northern Australia*. Cairns: James Cook University.
- Murray, L. (2006) Reflective thoughts with Les Murray, *The 7.30 report*, TV Program Transcript, Australian Broadcasting Network, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1610581.htm> , viewed 16 February 2014.
- RAND Corporation (2005) *Reframing the debate about the value of the arts: Research brief*, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9106/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9106/index1.html) , viewed 16 February 2014.
- Sarabhai, M. (2009) *Dance to change the world*, TEDIndia, [http://www.ted.com/talks/mallika\\_sarabhai.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mallika_sarabhai.html) , viewed 16 February 2014.
- Schleter, B. M. (October 13 2011), Measuring the social, economic benefits of arts and culture, *Penn Current*, <http://www.upenn.edu/pennnews/current/2011-10-13/features/measuring-social-economic-benefits-art-and-culture> , viewed 16 February 2014.
- Shaw, P. (2003) *What's art got to do with it? Briefing paper on the role of the arts in neighbourhood renewal*, Arts Council, England, <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/publications/801.pdf> , viewed 16 February 2014.