Indigenous performing arts and the problem of judging ‘excellence’: A discussion paper

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Excellence/access, instrumentalism, Indigenous performing arts, cultural policy

Abstract
In this paper we look at the persistent debate over notions of access and excellence and intrinsic and instrumentalist rationales for arts practice within cultural policy discussion. Recent research into the Indigenous performing arts in Australia underlines the particular difficulties faced by the sector in balancing the demands of community participation, social inclusion and high-quality aesthetic outcomes. The balancing act has proven unsustainable for some Indigenous performing arts companies and their viability is now in doubt. This suggests that a re-consideration of the question of the purpose and value of the Indigenous performing arts is timely.

Biography

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How can you create a culture of excellence when the funding bodies apparently wouldn't know it if they saw it?
Michael Billington, 2008
As Jennifer Craik (2007) has recently pointed out, in the field of cultural policy, it is hard to find a genuinely new idea. In the history of Australian cultural policy several ‘themes’ have proven to be nothing if not persistent: first, cultural policy–making has been significantly shaped by on-going anxieties about Australia’s cultural identity in an international context; secondly, cultural policy has been influenced by a changing understanding of the relationship between economic policies and cultural policy; thirdly the politics of cultural policy has been a matter of much debate – that is, the role and limitations of cultural policy according to our ideas about the mandate of government in a liberal democracy. This paper looks at a fourth persistent ‘theme’ – the dichotomy between the priorities of access and excellence. This issue has characterised much cultural policy discussion over thirty years of policy making, and appears to be freshly relevant in the light of our research into the viability of Indigenous performing arts (Glow & Johanson 2009).

In 2008 we conducted research with Indigenous performing artists and policy makers, in all states and territories except Tasmania. The research assessed the extent to which the work of Indigenous theatre artists have been shaped by cultural policy, and reviewed the significance and success of instrumentalism in Indigenous performing arts policies. The interviewees included independent artists and company employees, and policy makers from the Australia Council’s Theatre Board and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, and from state-based arts funding agencies. The platform paper that resulted from this research argued that the motives that had driven Indigenous performing arts companies and practitioners in the past are now not as clear-cut as they once appeared, and new forms of policy are necessary to respond to the range of motives that guide the performing arts (Glow & Johanson 2009). In the present paper, we examine how the tensions within the Indigenous performing arts sector currently contribute to a larger challenge to the notions of excellence and access that dominate debates about cultural policy.

Access and Excellence: Intrinsic and Instrumental

In Australian cultural policy the history of the tension between the goals of artistic excellence in the arts on the one hand, and democratic access to the arts as audiences or producers on the other has been well documented for over two decades. Rowse (1985), Hawkins (1993), Gibson (1998), Stevenson (2000) and Craik (2007) have all identified a tenacious belief in the possibility of objectively measured artistic excellence as a guiding influence in Australian cultural policy. Stevenson notes that in the early proposals for a national public arts funding agency in the late 1960s, which led to the formation of the Australia Council, the agency was seen as serving the interests of professional artists. She argues that there was ‘no suggestion of the existence of a broader obligation to the community of taxpayers; seemingly their interests are served by the fostering of “art”’ (2000: 49). Stevenson notes that this faith in the existence of artistic excellence gave credence to the system of peer-review that the Australia Council adopted: 'The unproblematic view that there is such a thing as “excellent art” that exists in its own right, irrespective of social and political factors, underscores the belief this excellence can be recognised by someone with expertise’ (2000: 49). More recently, Westbury argues that ‘the cultural funding and policy-making system is broken’ because its structure and aims are out of step with fast-evolving cultural and artistic forms. Westbury notes that: ‘Notions of excellence are often fixed while the expectations of audiences and creators evolve rapidly’ (2009: 36, 37).

In the 2000s, this debate can also be found in a slightly altered form in the tension between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumentalist’ purposes for the arts in academic debates over the purpose of cultural policy. According to this dichotomy, ‘intrinsic’ qualities are those which are seen to relate to the aesthetic outcomes of a work of art, and thus the highest goal of such policy is artistic excellence; instrumentalism refers to the perceived
benefits of arts to other areas of public policy concern – generally social or economic.

The ideal outcomes of instrumentalist policies are those that provide access to the broadest range and number of people. Gibson (2008) argues in defence of instrumentalism, pointing out that harmony frequently exists between the objectives of policy and the objectives of art: if art aims to enrich lives, then it is appropriate for government policy to assist it to do so.

In contrast, Belfiore and Bennett (2007), Gray (2002, 2007) and Miles (2007) regard the present manifestations of instrumentalism in cultural policy–making as ineffective or undesirable. In policy areas, such as education, other scholars are also critical of instrumentalist rationales. As we have argued elsewhere (Glow & Johanson, forthcoming), criticisms of instrumentalism focus on both its conceptual limitations and its consequences. As an example of the former, Belfiore and Bennett (2007) argue that the trait of ascribing value to the arts in contemporary cultural policy-making for their ‘civilising, humanising, healing, educational powers’ shows ‘little sign of the complexity and richness’ that is evident in historical discussions of the value of the arts, beginning with Plato’s Republic. In particular, they argue that our ‘commonly accepted notions of the positive impacts of the arts’ are based on a ‘misleading simplification of a rich and diverse body of intellectual elaborations’ (Belfiore and Bennett 2007, p. 140).

Gray (2007) attributes what he describes as the ‘drift’ away from cultural and aesthetic rationales for arts funding since the 1970s towards what were previously considered secondary and non-cultural rationales, to the ‘commodification’ trend in cultural policy. In this trend, conceptions of value at the heart of the perceived function of public policy have moved from ‘use-value’ to ‘exchange value’ (2007, p. 210).

In the case of Australian policy-making, the existence of both instrumentalist and intrinsic rationales for arts policy and funding can be seen in the remarkably persistent debate over the place of the goals of excellence and access. Craik argues that since the 1960s the move away from the ruling principle of excellence to ideas of access and equity has not been entirely successful. Within the high arts, organizations resist or give mere lip-service to the government’s concern for greater levels of accessibility for audiences. The scenario is problematic, Craik argues, because it leads to a sector which is closed off to new or non-traditional entrants while funding remains locked in for elite organizations and institutions. In defending their continued support for the arts, governments have come to rely on instrumentalist rationales which ‘leverage broader social outcomes in other more demonstrably “needy” … portfolios such as arts programs in hospitals, prisons or for the mentally ill’ (p. 50). Gray also argues that attempts “to utilise “culture” in the pursuit of policy goals (whether these goals are “cultural” or not) is fraught with difficulties for government (Gray 2007). Craik’s portrait of the current and defining dilemmas for the arts and cultural policy suggests that despite changes to the whole of government policy since the 1960s, the current arts sector is not substantially different from the old arts sector with its elitism and self-referentiality.

The recent McMaster report from the UK takes the opposite position, arguing that excellence should drive cultural policy, not as a mark of elitism but of innovation. The report, Supporting excellence in the arts released in January 2008, was commissioned by the UK department for Culture, Media and Sport. McMaster notes the need for understanding the ‘profound value’ of art and culture to society, and argues that it is excellence in the arts that needs to be nurtured by government funding agencies. His assessment of how to encourage excellence in the arts marks a significant change from how it is currently funded and managed. Rather than measuring success through targets and ‘box-ticking’, McMaster advocates more judgment, more self-assessment and more input from artists themselves. In addition to a range of recommendations such as the importance of internationalism, diversity, innovation and the provision of professional development opportunities for artists, McMaster’s chief concern is to insist
on the importance of excellence as a guiding principle of arts and cultural policy. He refutes the notion that excellence means ‘an exclusive [or] canonical ... approach to cultural activity’ (2008: 9). Rather, he sees the achievement of excellence in arts and cultural practices as a key to complexity and insight and relevance. McMaster goes on to assert the value of innovation and risk-taking as part of the push towards excellence. Indeed, he recommends that government arts policy make innovation and risk-taking at the centre of funding and assessment frameworks (2008: 10).

British cultural policy analyst, John Holden, also contributes to this debate. In his 2008 Demos paper, Holden promotes the notion of cultural democracy, arguing that ‘culture should be something that we all own and make, not something that is “given”, “offered” or “delivered” by one section of “us” to another’ (2008: 32). As part of his concern for the promulgation of the ideals of cultural democracy, Holden argues that while the notion of ‘excellence’ should not necessarily imply exclusivity, we need ‘to be aware that appeals to “excellence” and “quality” can be used as a cover for maintaining social superiority’ (2008: 14).

**Indigenous Performing Arts**

The issue of whether excellence or access – intrinsic or instrumentalist rationales – should drive funding for the arts appears to be as healthy now as it was at the Australia Council thirty years ago. For the two current authors, this debate related to questions we asked in relation to our present field of research: the Indigenous performing arts in Australia. Practitioners and policy makers expressed a diversity of views about the purpose and reach of the Indigenous performing arts, however a key tension arises over the need for Indigenous performing arts to produce outcomes which are both instrumentalist (often in the form of tangible community benefits) and intrinsic (focused on aesthetic qualities for their own sake) (Glow & Johanson 2009).

The contemporary Indigenous performing arts sector in Australia developed from a community-based and politically inspired movement from the 1960s. Alongside the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, Indigenous activists adopted performance as a means of political communication. At this time there were few opportunities for training or funding to develop Indigenous theatre as a profession. Aesthetic aims were subsumed by the more immediate political and social motives. With the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1975 (now the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board) of the Australia Council and the Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission in 1993 (now Screen Australia), as well as education policies that funded post-secondary education for Indigenous students, such opportunities grew. In the late 1980s Bangarra Dance Theatre was established as a national dance company, blending Indigenous and western dance traditions. Three state-based Indigenous theatre companies were established in the early 1990s: Ilbijerri Indigenous Theatre in Victoria, Kooemba Jdarra in Queensland, and Yirra Yaakin in Western Australia. The three theatre companies were established with the primary objective of using theatre to share stories within their communities and to provide production opportunities for Indigenous actors, directors and writers (Glow & Johanson 2009).

Practitioners now appeal to a range of audiences. Some artists maintain the community-based and political aims of Indigenous theatre. Kylie Belling, artistic director of Ilbijerri Theatre until 2008, explained that her approach was ‘about teaching our young ones our history’ (Belling interview 2008). Others seek to develop work which appeals to national and international audiences and advances aesthetic innovation by maximising opportunities for professional development. Rhoda Roberts, Artistic Director of the Dreaming Festival commented that: ‘The [artists working] in the mainstream are very confident, comfortable – they realise that that is their market, because they have the money because they know blackfellas aren’t going to pay’ (Roberts interview 2008).
Some artists acknowledged that at least two kinds of work existed simultaneously, because Indigenous audiences brought more knowledge and different expectations to the work than other Australian or international audiences. Rachael Maza-Long, current Artistic Director of Ilbijerri, described the play *Shrunken Iris*, in this way: ‘No way would you get tourists going to see that, nor would you even get Aussies coming in and see a play like that’ (Maza-Long interview 2008).

Since cultural participation is significant to the social and economic well-being of Indigenous communities, the arts and culture have been important public investments, and current policy rationales for supporting Indigenous performing arts are premised on the notion that Indigenous arts are an important form of cultural capital for Indigenous communities and the nation, and a source of income for artists and communities (Cultural Ministers Council 2006: 4). Despite such policy goals, many Indigenous performing artists and organisations reported serious concerns about their capacity to deliver. Some respondents argued that the requirement for performing arts companies to meet a wide range of needs from the Indigenous communities – such as providing employment, and education about health and social issues – is now so central to the criteria by which public funding is allocated that it can act as an impediment to the professional artistic development of companies and artists. The findings highlighted the urgent need for the professional development of Indigenous directors, designers and arts managers, and for the retention of students in training institutions where they often feel estranged.

**Is arts funding failing or is it the arts that fail?**

Since 2008 two of the three Indigenous theatre companies - Kooroomba Jdarra in Queensland and Yirra Yaakin in Western Australian – have had their funding from the Australia Council cut. While reports of the funding cuts have not explicitly stated the reasons for these particular decisions, the 2008 funding round reflected changes to priorities in accordance with the ‘Make it New’ policy which is directed to providing ‘increased support for emerging theatremakers [and] a stronger network of presenting companies to take new works into production’ (Australia Council 2008a). So, for instance, it introduced a grant system for ‘emerging key organisations’ (Australia Council 2007: 2). The cuts to the Indigenous theatre companies, then, are presumably based on a negative assessment of the companies’ ability to produce new and innovative work. The ‘Make it New’ approach suggests that the Australia Council’s Theatre Board believes that after fifteen years of receiving public funding it is now time for other, newer companies and projects to receive the public’s financial support. In the year that Kooroomba Jdarra was de-funded, for example, the Theatre Board allocated $159,000 to new Indigenous theatre initiatives in Queensland (Australia Council 2007-08).

The Theatre Board’s decision resulted from the ‘Make it New’ policy which was informed by widespread consultation with theatre makers, and its aims are consistent with the kind of changes called for by critics such as Westbury (2009). But one of its consequences, no doubt unintended, was to exacerbate practitioners’ pre-existing sense that instability of funding discouraged experimentation and compounded a cycle of burn-out and attrition amongst practitioners.

This is not necessarily a criticism of the Theatre Board’s decision. The two Indigenous theatre companies might be all but extinguished (or will continue on much reduced project funding provided by state government grants), and the Australia Council will have made funding available for other, possibly more innovative companies or projects. This is indeed as the McMaster report would recommend. But has the system by which funding is allocated in this instance failed to consider the long-term effect of defunding the companies on the strength of the artists and the sector?
On the other hand, perhaps it is the art that has failed, rather than the funding system. The Indigenous performing arts have proven to be an important part of the arts sector. As noted by scholars writing about the performing arts, Indigenous artists have made significant contributions to the art form by bringing innovative approaches to storytelling and to the representation of Australia for both Australian and international audiences (Brisbane 1995, Gilbert 1998, Casey 2004, Mead 2008). Over the past twenty years Indigenous performing arts practitioners have distinguished themselves in terms of providing audiences with distinctive, memorable and culturally significant work such as: Jimmy Chi’s Bran Nue Day, the Jack Davis Trilogy, Stolen, 7 Stages of Grieving, Windmill Baby, Boxing the Pony, Ningalli, The Sapphires, and Ngapartji Ngapartji.

Yet the excellence of Indigenous theatre is not guaranteed. Several Indigenous artists have called for critical debate about the quality of some Indigenous work. Performer and festival director Rhoda Roberts has noted, for example, that poor standards of writing, directing and performance have often been in evidence: ‘The audience is there – they’re crying, clapping, laughing, [showing] raw emotion, but the direction has been so poor that if the STC had done it, [it] would have been trampled on by the critics … no other artist would be allowed to get away with a production like this. Oh, but it is Aboriginal, so you know they only do it like that, so it is okay’ (Roberts interview 2008). When asked why this is the case, interviewees responded that poor standards of production reflected a combination of a lack of critical dialogue between artists, audiences and reviewers, and insufficient training and resourcing of artists and companies (Glow & Johanson 2009). Roberts suggested that it reflects the expectations of audiences from Indigenous work: the audience expects ‘raw emotion’ so companies try to please the audience; production standards may then be secondary. As the above quotation reveals, interviewees also felt that non-Indigenous theatre reviewers appear to be reluctant to subject Indigenous theatre work to rigorous critical scrutiny. In judging ‘excellence’, theatre critics hesitate in the face of what they may feel is either a lack of specific cultural knowledge, or a sense that the political ‘message’ is more important than production standards (Glow & Johanson 2009). Art critic Nicolas Rothwell has noticed a similar problem within the visual arts where critics tend to see Indigenous artists as ‘politically bold and exciting provocateurs’ and therefore ‘the cause alone is enough to justify blanket praise’. The result of such an approach is that ‘the reader or gallery-goer, and ultimately the artist too, is short-changed’ (Rothwell 2008).

**What might excellence mean and what value do we give it?**

Theatre practitioners assert the need to find new ways of thinking about the value of their work which are not solely constrained by notions of community accessibility or by western definitions of excellence. The examples of exceptional theatre we mention above are important works not just because they toured the country and the world, or made good box office, or (in the case of Stolen) because they addressed the political zeitgeist. They are outstanding works because they emerged from a sector which is as much driven by the priorities of access, community participation and consultation as it is by the desire to create aesthetic excellence. The views of community elders about protocols and matters of representation figure prominently in the accounts that Indigenous artists give of their work and its *raison d’etre*. John Harvey, the General Manager of Ilbijerri, discusses the importance for the work of the theatre company, that it remains closely tied to the stories of the community. The theatre, Harvey says, ‘is providing a place to nurture stories from the community…we find that we have got loads of stories in the community but not a lot of scripts... For us, it is about empowering the voice of Indigenous people through theatre, and also providing professional development opportunities for artists and arts workers’ (Harvey interview, 2008).
Arguably, the removal of the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council took with it the notion that community development goals were as significant as measures of aesthetic quality in determining funding decisions. Many Indigenous companies receive project funding from state departments responsible for health, on the grounds that the companies’ work often shares the departments’ interest in promoting the health, education and wellbeing of Indigenous communities. But where does this distinction between arts funding and community development funding leave the strata of Indigenous works that sit somewhere between a western concept of aesthetic excellence and the aim of appealing to and advancing the interests of Indigenous communities? Is there another interpretation of excellence by which we might value, and judge, the Indigenous performing arts?

There are important examples of community-based arts entities that successfully demonstrate a commitment to both community/access goals and aesthetic excellence and innovation. At Big hART professional artists work with small communities (usually those experiencing the effects of marginalisation) to produce high-quality and high-profile work which is often showcased in national and international festivals. Such activities, as illustrated in projects like Big hART’s production of Ngapartji Ngapartji, simultaneously achieve goals of social inclusion, build skills in communities, assist regional development, and produce artistic or culturally significant work (Big hART 2009). This suggests, perhaps, that a new, more reflexive, reading of the access–excellence dichotomy is necessary and timely.

**What is the future of the Indigenous performing arts?**

At the very least, the changes to the Indigenous performing arts sector brought about by changes to funding provide an opportunity to think about the purpose of the Indigenous performing arts, and the aims that policy might have in addressing them. A significant contributing factor to the difficulty faced by Indigenous theatre is that its various purposes are ill-defined. Indigenous performing artists and theatre workers, communities, and a range of audiences should be fundamental to shaping a set of Indigenous cultural policies that define the purposes of Indigenous arts. A deliberate and visionary set of policies for assisting Indigenous performing arts companies and artists to achieve a particular set of well-defined aims has the potential to prevent many of the problems described in this paper. These debates would focus on how excellence might be redefined to be pertinent to the aims of Indigenous companies, practitioners and their audiences, just as McMaster aims to redefine excellence in relation to the arts generally. A redefined notion of excellence would need to find new ways to address practitioners’ sense of responsibility to community interests, as well as the aesthetic aims that drive the production of their work.

**Conclusion**

In 2006, David Throsby argued that Australia needed a cultural policy. The apparent dearth of progressive cultural policy allowed him to put forward his own vision for a ‘bottom-up’ approach to cultural policy development. Such an approach emphasises community consultation, debate, diversity and inclusion. The collapse of much of the infrastructural funding for the Indigenous performing arts in recent times suggests that such debate is now needed. Such debate needs to re-look at the excellence–access and intrinsic-instrumentalist dichotomy in order to find new ways of thinking about the value of the Indigenous performing arts. While we may not agree with the Guardian newspaper theatre critic, Michael Billington, that the problem lies with funding agencies which don’t recognise excellence when they see it, the point remains that the cultural objectives of policy-makers and artists needs to find a common ground if Indigenous performing arts are to survive into the next decade.
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