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Abstract

Public support for both Indigenous filmmaking and the live performing arts has a number of common features: at a national level the present schemes were introduced in the early 1990s, and both sets of schemes aim to improve the capacity of Indigenous practitioners to tell their stories to national and international audiences. Yet, in the late 2000s, Screen Australia’s support for filmmaking has contributed to well-known successes, whereas Australia Council support for performing arts has been withdrawn from two of the three state-based Indigenous companies. This article reviews the capacity-building strategies offered by the funding agencies to Indigenous filmmaking and performing arts. While the film policies appear to have been more successful than those in the performing arts, both sectors continue to experience obstacles to capacity-building for Indigenous practitioners and organisations.

The International Year of Indigenous People took place in 1983. It was also the year that saw a significant boost to Indigenous involvement in both the Australian performing arts sector and the film industry. In the performing arts, the Australia Council (in conjunction with the state funding agencies) funded three Indigenous theatre companies (in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth). In the film industry, the Australian Film Commission (AFC) established an Indigenous Branch. The theatre companies and the AFC’s Indigenous Branch shared a similar principal objective: to develop the skills of Indigenous practitioners and to provide opportunities for their work to be produced. The policies that facilitated these endeavours did not come out of the blue: they were the product of lobbying and negotiation by an earlier generation of artists, filmmakers, activists and academics who argued for the importance of Indigenous artistic self-representation.

Sixteen years on, the achievements of those policy initiatives are here subject to review, particularly in the light of the recent de-funding by the Australia Council of two of the three Indigenous theatre companies. By contrast, Indigenous participation in the film industry appears to be a largely successful policy project. Warwick Thornton’s 2009 feature film Samson and Delilah has been an unprecedented success, achieving both national and international acclaim. The 2009 Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival showcased more filmmaking talent with feature films, documentaries and shorts written and directed by Indigenous filmmakers. Many of these practitioners (such as Thornton, Ivan Sen and Richard Frankland) have been supported through the Indigenous Branch of the AFC (now Screen Building Capacity or Burning Out?
Supporting Indigenous Performing Artists and Filmmakers

Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson

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Australia) and its policy over many years to identify and fund talented individuals through the provision of professional development opportunities.

The project upon which this article reflects is a response to an earlier study in which we identified the success – and lack thereof – of the Indigenous live performing arts companies and the extent to which Commonwealth and state cultural policies met the needs of this sector (Glow and Johanson 2009a). Several of the performing arts practitioners to whom we spoke identified the absence of professional development opportunities as one of the impediments to a vibrant live performing arts sector. In the present project, we therefore examine how professional development opportunities are and have been provided by another, comparable industry, Indigenous film – particularly in light of that sector’s apparent success. We draw on interviews with live performing arts practitioners and policy-makers from both sectors.

Comparing the film and performing arts sectors is problematic. The specific historical, technological and industrial context within which each operates limits the extent to which a comparative analysis is useful. Hesmondhalgh (2007), for example, points out that while both sectors are centrally concerned with the ‘production of texts’, the film sector is defined by the industrial production context within which it operates, while the performing arts uses ‘semi-industrial or non-industrial’ methods to produce texts (2007: 13). Napoli (2008) argues that while cultural and media policy traditionally have been seen as distinct fields, there are advantages to considering them together, including ‘the cross-pollination of research findings, analytical approaches, expertise, and policy solutions’ (2008: 312). In this research, we show that the sectors share a similar history in the formulation of policies directed at the support of Indigenous practitioners. Furthermore, there is much crossover of personnel, including for example – in the current generation of practitioners – Wayne Blair, John Harvey, Richard Frankland, Leah Purcell, Deborah Mailman, Wesley Enoch and Rachael Maza-Long. This paper investigates the policy strategies that have seen the emergence of these and other Indigenous artists; we note the important work (in both theatre and film) produced by this generation of practitioners; and we ask questions about the current policy frameworks in terms of the critical issue of capacity-building for Indigenous artists.

That this issue is a critical one is borne out by research into the performing arts sector, summarised below, which suggests there has been a decline in opportunities for Indigenous artists to develop the necessary skills to maintain careers in that sector. In the film industry, by comparison, Screen Australia’s Indigenous Branch appears to have been successful in capacity-building – that is, facilitating the increased involvement of skilled Indigenous filmmakers in the film production industry. However, the success of Screen Australia’s ‘few but roses’ approach needs to be seen in the light of the work of grassroots community media organisations, which have been crucial in skilling many practitioners and grounding their work in the concerns and stories of the communities. The question of how to create long-term and sustainable careers for Indigenous theatremakers is proving difficult to answer, and while Indigenous filmmakers appear to be cresting a wave at this time, the same concern about capacity-building for the long term deserves interrogation.
Capacity-building needs in Indigenous arts organisations

In reviewing potential and existing capacity-building strategies in the Indigenous live performing arts and film sectors, we first examine prior research in this field within the arts and cultural industries literature. The aim here is to identify the factors that commonly influence and/or constrain capacity-building for Indigenous participants across both the performing arts and film sectors.

Much of the scant literature on capacity-building for Indigenous economic activity is concerned with the capacity of communities, rather than individuals. In her article on Indigenous cultural heritage maintenance, Russell states that: ‘My view of capacity-building goes beyond the conventional perception of training and educational outcomes. The type of capacity-building I am referring to recognises that the social whole is more than the sum of its individual components.’ (Russell 2004: 27) The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs’ inquiry into capacity-building in Indigenous communities identified the need for three kinds: amongst individuals, within Indigenous organisations and within government agencies responsible for Indigenous issues (see Altman and Sanders 2002). In their submission to this inquiry, Altman and Sanders argue that the key targets for capacity-building should be government agencies and Indigenous organisations. Although they found that individuals often have ‘enormous capacities, acquired from past experience and training’, the authors note that such individuals often avoid ‘difficult organisational environments’ because they tend to cause burnout (2002: 4). As discussed below, ‘burnout’ – or the experience of workplace stress and exhaustion in jobs that are high-stress and poorly remunerated – is also a factor for Indigenous practitioners working in performing arts organisations.

So what are the capacities required of government agencies and Indigenous organisations? In their submission to the inquiry mentioned above, Altman and Sanders (2002) note that while many government agencies attempt to deal with shortfalls in their response to Indigenous needs, ‘experience and internal structures and personnel with a sufficiently high organisational profile are often lacking or are subject to high intra- and inter-departmental turnover’ (2002: 3). Meanwhile, Indigenous organisations struggle to manage the demands that result from their status as ‘hybrid’ organisations, ‘which have to try and balance and mediate Indigenous social norms of personal reciprocity and support with more impersonal bureaucratic norms emanating from the government funding context’ (2002: 3). The CAEPR recommended ‘a recognition that Indigenous organisations need skilled managers and staff and management boards will need governance education and training – otherwise state agency expectations are likely to see performance and accountability expectations exceed Indigenous organisational capacities’ (2002: 8–9). For the reasons mentioned here, then, capacity-building for Indigenous sectors requires a focus on communities or organisations rather than on individuals, and recognition of the pressures that such organisations need to manage. As this article goes on to show, funding programs to facilitate Indigenous involvement in the theatre and film sectors have been developed on the basis that enhanced participation of communities is an important part of capacity-building. However, where such capacity-building initiatives appear to have been most successful is in the support of individual filmmakers provided through Screen Australia. This
raises the question of whether cultural policies that underpin theatre and film funding are meeting the capacity-building needs of Indigenous communities, and adumbrates a further question about the extent to which capacity-building is (or should be) an appropriate concern of cultural policy.

Elsewhere, the authors have discussed how Indigenous performing arts companies have responded to and challenged the paradigms and trends in arts policy over the past five decades, particularly the shifting policy emphasis on ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ benefits of the arts (Glow and Johanson, 2009b). Here, our focus is strictly on policy that aims to achieve capacity-building. In research on the arts and cultural sector, it is often noted that the professional and managerial needs of those in the sector have changed significantly over the past 20 to 30 years. Cultural production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is often referred to as the ‘corporate professional’ or ‘complex professional’ era (CPE) (Williams, 1981; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Characterised by increased commodification of cultural production, the CPE is thought to have both advantageous and adverse implications for artists and workers in the cultural industries (Davis and Scase, 2000). The adverse implications include poor skills development and under-employment. Hesmondhalgh asks cultural industry researchers to regard these implications not as a ‘natural phenomenon’ but as the result ‘of specific economic and cultural conditions’ that undermine capacity-building efforts, particularly the failure of creative workers to ‘come together to defend their interests’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 72). Bilton argues that, contrary to the ‘myth of the self-sufficient creative genius and the ideology of neo-liberal management’, more managerial intervention is required in the creative production process than commonly takes place, in order to motivate workers; however, Bilton acknowledges that the challenge for managers is knowing ‘when to intervene’ (2006: 86). In 2003, Dewey identified five kinds of capacities required of the cultural administrator or arts manager in the contemporary artistic and political environment, as a result of the CPE: managing international cultural interactions; representing cultural identity; promoting innovative methods of audience development; exercising effective strategic leadership; and fostering a sustainable mixed funding system (Dewey, 2003). Dewey argued that these capacities added to rather than replaced the traditional capacities required.

The Australia Council’s *Making Solid Ground* report investigated what was needed to make a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture sector, by consulting with 181 ‘stakeholders’ throughout Australia. Published in 2008, the report identified ten ‘platforms’ for sustainable infrastructure (Fieldworx, 2008). The most relevant of these for the present study are: improved investment in people; practising culture and passing knowledge on to subsequent generations; celebration, recognition and identity; artistic and cultural vibrancy; access to funding and resources; infrastructure for all arts; and a ‘networked infrastructure’. Addressing these sequentially, the report first acknowledges a concern about the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in a range of positions, including administrative and senior management, and identifies a need for training and professional development opportunities in such occupations. It acknowledges the importance of passing culture and knowledge through the generations and for recognition of Indigenous cultures nationally and internationally. In order to achieve artistic and cultural vibrancy, the report notes the need to support dynamic contemporary artistic practice, including greater support for non-visual
arts, particularly in the areas of performing arts and literature. It reports concerns about funding – particularly a lack of coordination between federal and state government funding distribution – and notes that while visual arts currently enjoy a relatively large degree of government assistance, more infrastructure is required in music, dance, theatre and new media. Finally, it recommends the building of a networked infrastructure that would create relationships and partnerships across art forms and arts organisations (Fieldworx, 2008).

Many of the capacity-building requirements noted by Dewey and by the *Making Solid Ground* report are reflected in the research conducted by the two current authors into the Indigenous performing arts sector in Australia.

The development of cultural policies for Indigenous arts

In retrospect, we might see the 1990s as a decade that was formative for public policies relating to Indigenous issues. Early in the decade came the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1990) and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1991); the Royal Commission’s report into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the High Court’s *Mabo* judgment (1992). In 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1997) was released, which recommended an official national apology to the victims of the stolen generations. Several of these events gave rise to specific cultural policy developments for Indigenous artists and communities. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s *Bringing Them Home* report and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) both recommended that the arts and culture were important public investments in the well-being of Indigenous communities, because cultural participation was significant to the health and economies of these communities.

In the same period, statistical data indicated that the Indigenous arts were significant to Australia’s identity and economy. From 1980 to 1991, the number of Aboriginal arts organisations grew faster than the number of all cultural organisations, from 2 per cent of cultural organisations in 1980 to 4.1 per cent of cultural organisations in 1991 (Australia Council, 2000: 8). The economic significance to tourism of Indigenous visual arts in particular was especially apparent. In 1990, an Australia Council survey established that 49 per cent of visitors to Australia were interested in Aboriginal arts and culture (quoted in Fourmile, 1994: 81). In a period in which the cultural sector was seen as having the potential to strengthen Australia’s culture and economy (DCA, 1994), Indigenous arts and culture attracted political and public interest. The Keating government’s cultural policy statement, *Creative Nation*, declared that ‘recognition of the importance of Indigenous arts and cultural traditions to the whole of Australia’ was ‘a significant step in the reconciliation process’ and that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are assuming increasing significance for Australia, in tourism and the projection of Australian culture overseas’ (DCA, 1994: 21). From the early 1990s onwards, state governments emphasised the importance of enhancing Indigenous cultural practices to economic and social well-being. The Cultural Ministers Council’s 2006 *A Framework for National Cooperation in the Arts and Culture* made Indigenous arts and culture one of its four priority areas...
for national cooperation over the following decade. It continued the view that Indigenous arts have the ‘potential to strengthen both Indigenous identity and Australia’s broader identity in the world’ (CMC, 2006: 4).

**Indigenous performing arts: Highs and lows**

The Indigenous performing arts sector received unprecedented political and financial support from government in the early 1990s. Three Indigenous theatre companies came into existence: Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative in Victoria, Kooemba Jdarra in Queensland and Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre in Western Australia.

The companies each staged productions that gained national and sometimes international acclaim. One of the most significant productions to emerge from Ilbijerri was *Stolen* (1996/98), which was developed in response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. Playwright Jane Harrison drew on these accounts to inform the play that was co-produced in 1998 by Ilbijerri and Melbourne’s (then) Playbox Theatre, and subsequently it toured Australia and then internationally to great acclaim. One of the key works to emerge from Kooemba Jdarra in Queensland was *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1995/96), a one-woman show co-written by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman. Delivered directly to the audience, the play merges individual stories of grief and loss with public grieving for outrages against Aboriginal people since colonisation. It premiered in 1995 and then toured nationally and internationally, and is still performed to this day. Yirra Yaakin produces work for and about the Noongar people in south-west Western Australia, and one of this company’s most celebrated plays, *Windmill Baby* (2003), written by David Milroy, is a one-woman show based on oral histories from the Pilbara and Kimberley regions. The play has toured nationally and internationally to the United Kingdom, Canada and France, and in 2004 it won the Patrick White Playwright’s Award.

Despite such successes and the achievements of many practitioners, when we interviewed some of the key people working in the performing arts sector almost two decades later, it was evident that the companies had experienced several of the capacity-building difficulties that Altman and Sanders describe (above). One of the tensions in the performing arts is the extent to which practitioners and the companies should use their practice to fulfil the interests of their communities, or should work towards artistic innovation. Kylie Belling, former Artistic Director of Ilbijerri, explains her goals in relation to Ilbijerri: ‘It was always about taking the show to our mob first and foremost. That was the whole purpose of setting up Ilbijerri in the first place.’ (Belling interview, 2008) While the Australia Council also acknowledges the importance of community-based arts, the Theatre Board is critically concerned to direct funds to ‘companies that are demonstrating a high level of artistic quality’ (Australia Council, 2008). There is difficulty in reconciling the community-building aims of many performing arts practitioners with the artistic goals of the Theatre Board. In many cases, the expectation that arts companies consult with or involve Indigenous communities is driven by funding agencies, rather than the companies themselves – a fact that exacerbates the pressures Altman and Sanders (2002) describe between Indigenous social norms and bureaucratic
norms. Rhoda Roberts, Artistic Director of the Dreaming Festival, points out that community consultation is not always the best way to produce artistic work, with elders providing important advice on protocols but not always able to provide informed advice on the artistic objectives of the work (Roberts, 2008). As Altman and Sanders might pre-empt, the theatre companies function as organisations with two potentially conflicting goals: meeting the needs of their communities while also addressing the aesthetic expectations of the artistic community and audiences.

Another priority of the companies has been to nurture Indigenous writers. Belling argues that providing opportunities for Aboriginal writers to have their work developed is a critical activity because ‘they are our voice; they are the ones who tell the rest of the world what we as a people are concerned about, who we are’ (Belling, 2008). Related to this issue is the need to provide roles for Indigenous performers: many of the artistic directors and artists interviewed (such as Belling, Wesley Enoch, Rachael Maza Long and Rhoda Roberts) began their professional lives as actors. Part of the project of the Indigenous theatre companies is to make it possible for Aboriginal performers to act in roles written by Indigenous writers. These priorities mark out the function of the companies as principally focused on empowerment, the affirmation of cultural practices and self-determination. However, while a number of writers have been nurtured through the Indigenous theatre companies, there is still, after sixteen years, a dearth of Indigenous practitioners in a range of technical roles such as stage design, lighting and stage management, as well as production and business management.

The difficulty of balancing the competing imperatives for Indigenous performing arts to deliver outcomes on both community-based and artistic fronts has led to career burnout, and underlines an urgent need for the professional development of Indigenous practitioners in a diversity of roles, and for the retention of students in training institutions where they often feel estranged (Glow and Johanson, 2009a). The kind of burnout that Altman and Sanders identify was described to us by the current Artistic Director of Ilbijerri Theatre Company as a factor affecting the company’s work:

My experience here in this company in the last two months reminds me of going into a veggie garden that hasn’t been watered enough, no fertiliser and too much wind, and it is just struggling and trying to survive … And then you put on one play and then what? What does everyone do for the next nine months? There is nothing to sustain those people. We have two stage managers, one of them has gone off and is doing something else, and the other one is burnt out and about to throw it in. There are no set designers, no lighting designers, and only a handful of actors, because most of them are doing office jobs … There are a few emerging Indigenous artists that get all the work but they burn out … and then they change careers … The garden hasn’t flourished yet. We haven’t even got to the point where it has created an eco-system. (Maza Long, 2008)

Other practitioners confirmed Altman and Sanders’ (2000) point that the companies’ status as ‘hybrid’ organisations compounded the tendency to burnout. In 2008, this was evidenced in the performing arts by the perceived failure of Kooemba Jdarra to achieve aesthetic goals, and the company’s consequent defunding by the Australia Council’s Theatre Board. 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 theatre-makers [and] a stronger network of presenting companies to take new works into production’ (Australia Council, 2007). 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 16 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 Kooemba 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 ‘Make It New’ policy was informed by widespread consultation with theatremakers, and its aims are consistent with the kind of changes called for by critics such as Westbury (2009). But in the case of Indigenous theatre, one of its consequences may be to exacerbate practitioners’ sense that instability of funding discourages experimentation and compounds a cycle of burnout and attrition (Glow and Johanson, 2009a).

History of Indigenous film policy

The AFC established an Indigenous department in July 1993 in response to a 1992 report by McPherson and Pope, Promoting Indigenous Involvement in the Film and Video Industry, which recommended such a development (AFC, 1994). The Aboriginal Unit was renamed the Indigenous Branch in October 1993 (AFC, 1994). Previously, AFC policy had not specifically been targeted to Indigenous filmmakers – unlike the Australia Council’s Aboriginal Arts Board, which had already been in existence since the 1970s. McPherson and Pope point out that until 1993, ‘Aboriginal advice on the formulation of Australian Film Commission objectives, policies and strategies has in practice been very limited and, over the past three years, non-existent. The Commission has never engaged Aboriginal staff, and input into decision-making on Aboriginal film projects has been limited to seeking assessment by Aboriginal script readers on an irregular basis.’ (McPherson and Pope, 1992)

The McPherson and Pope report recommended that the AFC formalise its existing objective to provide funding to Indigenous artists and projects. It established that the unit’s objectives should include reviewing and developing policies, guidelines and strategies regarding Indigenous access to AFC funding in order to: develop film production and related skills among Indigenous people; facilitate effective participation by Indigenous practitioners in all areas of the Australian and international film industries; promote the quality and diversity of Indigenous films so that competitive standards are maintained or improved; and assist in the development of wider audiences for films that are written, directed or produced by Indigenous filmmakers (McPherson and Pope, 1992: xvi).

These objectives have continued to inform the work of the Indigenous Branch, which is now a department of the recently formed mega-screen agency Screen Australia. In particular, the current focus of the branch is ‘to work with the Indigenous filmmaking community in developing strategies for enhancing...
employment and professional development opportunities, and the creation of a
vibrant screen sector for Indigenous filmmakers’ (Screen Australia, 2009). It does
this by providing funding for a range of activities, including script development for
drama, documentary and digital media; production investment in targeted initiatives;
and internships and mentorship programs with more experienced practitioners.

Indigenous film: Few but roses

To some extent, the success of Screen Australia’s policies in relation to the
development of the Indigenous film sector can be seen in the high-profile successes
of Rachel Perkins’ 2010 feature film Bran Nue Dae and Warwick Thornton’s debut
feature film Samson and Delilah in 2009. Thornton’s film was not only highly
praised by critics, but was further profiled as a result of winning the Camera D’or
at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. Thornton, along with Ivan Sen (whose 2002
debut feature Beneath Clouds achieved recognition at the Berlin Film Festival),
Richard Frankland, Rachel Perkins and others have been the recipients of targeted
funding by the Indigenous Branch. The focus of the Branch on script development,
and on targeted support for identified individuals, has been key to its success in
meeting its policy objectives. As Sally Riley, Director of the Indigenous Branch,
commented after Thornton’s award was announced: ‘Indigenous filmmakers in
my view are leading the success of the Australian film industry. We’ve proven
that with Samson and Delilah in cinemas at the moment, it’s the highest grossing
[independent] Australian film.’ (Riley, July 2009)

The emphasis of the Indigenous Branch has long been on identifying talented
filmmakers and providing them with high-level professional development. Riley
describes this policy approach: ‘It hasn’t been open-slather, a democratic approach
that says, “Let’s support as many people as we can and hope we get some good
ones”. It’s actually identifying talented people and saying, “We are going to invest
in their careers”.’ (Robinson 2009) While the Indigenous theatre companies are
more likely to conform to the characteristics described by Russell, Altman and
Sanders, film production is not, in the sense that the system of film production and
the policies that help to shape it are focused very much on individual filmmakers.
Sally Riley identifies this as the source of the Branch’s success: ‘We focus on the
needs of the individual in terms of what the filmmaker needs, what their history
is – where they’ve come from, whether they’ve done any work in film before –
and we focus on them as individuals, but then we also focus on their project and
what the vision is for the project.’ (Riley, 2009)

The Indigenous Branch focuses on ‘bringing professionalism to the industry’
– so, argues Riley:

We focus on the higher end. The films we fund give the filmmakers a calling
card so they can make their next film, and their next film. We do also work
with community-focused organisations but we try and get the state agencies
to support that grassroots funding. Our big thing is actually spotting talent
and the only way you can do that is to give people opportunities to make
things. (Riley, 2009)

However, the high-profile achievements of the Indigenous film sector are
underpinned by the training activities of a number of community-based media
organisations, which provide many filmmakers with their starting point. These media organisations, such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), Warlpiri and Imparja Media in the Northern Territory and Goolari Media in Western Australia, are largely self-funded, locally controlled, owned and operated, and designed to suit the cultural practices and geographic conditions of remote Indigenous communities (Rennie and Featherstone, 2008). They also provide cross-media training in multiple roles (editing, camera operating, writing, directing). Such training allows people from remote communities to develop skills, and also provides opportunities for filmmakers to connect with communities and their cultures (Gonzalez, 2009). Their aim is clearly to build the capacity of Indigenous communities. Filmmaker Rachel Perkins recently described her experience of training: ‘CAAMA wasn’t just any place where you learned to make television and film; we were very much given the understanding that we were being trained for a certain reason, and that was to be a conduit for our people’s voice. It wasn’t, “Oh, I want to go to film school and express myself as an artist”.’ (quoted in Bodey, 2009: 15)

Like the performing arts sector, film production lacks professionally trained Indigenous crew in a range of areas, particularly technical roles. This is partly a result of the historical emphasis in funding agencies on cultural maintenance and storytelling. Riley says: ‘We’ll take responsibility for part of that because our focus has been on writers and directors, and in the last year, producers.’ Riley adds that it would be nearly impossible to crew a feature film with an entirely Indigenous crew: ‘I think *Samson and Delilah* did a really good job, they had 14 crew and I think 10 or 12 of them were Indigenous because they crewed-up locally and they had a really small crew anyway.’ Furthermore, Riley points out that an all-Indigenous crew may not necessarily be desirable from the point of view of the creative production: ‘On high budget projects we’re taking a major risk and our focus is on giving the director the best experience they can have so they can go into their next film. We’re not going to improve an experienced crew. We’d love to get to the stage where we can do that, but our focus has been on directors and writers.’ (Riley, 2009) Here, the artistic goals of the production overshadow the community-building goal of employment creation.

**Parallels and differences between Indigenous theatre and film**

There are a number of direct parallels between the performing arts and film sectors: Indigenous practitioners and organisations are usually funded through a mix of federal funding and state-based support schemes. In both sectors, state agencies often fund production activity along with professional development opportunities such as mentoring programs. In both sectors, there is a dominance of practitioners in key creative roles (writing, directing and acting) and a dearth of trained technical people (for example, designers and stage managers in the theatre; editors, production and sound designers in film). In the theatre, the narrow skills base of practitioners is a problem, as it is in film where the concern is often to engage a fully Indigenous crew. Indeed, Gonzalez suggests that ‘the issue of building a community of Indigenous filmmakers who can fill out all crew roles is soon to hit critical mass’ (2009: 35). There is a perception by filmmakers that funding cuts may threaten professional development programs provided by state and federal agencies, and that the state agencies (with the exception of Western
Australia’s ScreenWest) have not employed Indigenous project officers to facilitate and develop the programs being offered (Gonzalez, 2009: 18).

Yet, while the Indigenous film sector seems to be flourishing internationally as well as locally, the performing arts appear to be floundering. It is arguable whether this perception is entirely accurate: the de-funding of the theatre companies is made publicly visible as an event worthy of media attention (Gruber, 2008; Usher, 2008; Schwartzkoff, 2008), whereas an unsuccessful grant application by a prominent Indigenous filmmaker is unlikely to receive media attention. Furthermore, the success of film is both evidenced and publicised by such events as Thornton’s Cannes success; such international commendations (in the form of awards and prizes) are not readily available to theatre companies. We are inclined instead to judge success by the receipt of public funding, which is not necessarily an appropriate measure. However, in the case of Koorooja Jdarra and Yirra Yaakin, the withdrawal of Australia Council funding appears to be the result of a sense that the companies are failing to produce sufficient high-quality productions to warrant public funding rather than, for example, an increased capacity for financial self-sufficiency.

The success of film is the success of individual filmmakers rather than companies. This is not to say that filmmakers are less inclined than theatremakers to work within communities. Riley says:

They do want to get it right and they do consult with their communities. Most of the stories are very personal so they do have access to people. But what we’re seeing is that there’s a lot more freedom for filmmakers to tell the stories that they want to tell. In the early days it felt like there were some things that might be off limits, but now we have Samson and Delilah talking about petrol sniffing … We hadn’t done it before, in the early days we didn’t know how to do it. But now [for] the filmmakers, in terms of issues that they’re talking about and stories that they’re telling, there’s an enormous amount of freedom and I think that the filmmakers can talk about anything. (Riley, 2009)

As Napoli (2008) points out, both media and cultural policies share a number of parallel normative principles, including that both are committed to the principles of diversity, access and quality (2008: 322). Linking these principles across both sectors is the issue of professional development for practitioners, and in relation to Indigenous film and theatre this issue is particularly vexed. In both the film and performing arts sectors, professional development for Indigenous practitioners is seen as a key concern for both filmmakers and performing artists, and is an explicit goal for policy and funding agencies. However, where career-building appears to be a relatively successful project of the Indigenous Branch of Screen Australia, Indigenous practitioners in the performing arts are reporting dissatisfaction with their professional development as artists, finding their careers are limited, if not foreshortened, by the competing demands placed upon them.

In the film sector, where professional development appears to have been linked to the targeting of talented individuals, Indigenous participation seems to be flourishing. This suggests that the ‘few but roses’ approach has been an effective capacity-building strategy. This raises a question about the extent to which the successful careers of Indigenous practitioners (filmmakers and theatremakers) are dependent on arts funding agencies being able to identify and target support
to talented individuals. Such individualist policy-making, however, might be seen to be at odds with the community-focused priorities of the performing arts.

One recent idea for enhancing Indigenous participation in the performing arts is the current proposal by a group of Indigenous performing artists to form a National Indigenous Theatre organisation. The objectives of such an organisation are to provide ‘our own space’ for Indigenous theatremakers and to address issues around professional development for mid-career practitioners (Usher, 2009). The proposal, led by Indigenous theatre-maker Wesley Enoch, is concerned to see that Indigenous work is produced for and on the main stage; that it reaches wide audiences nationally and internationally; and that it is funded by a mix of both government and non-government sources (Enoch, 2008). Such a proposal reflects the state of current debates and tensions within the sector, and it represents a new focus on the professional development and artistic goals of artists at mid-career. It also represents a move away from thinking about Indigenous performing arts in terms of community and social justice goals, and focuses instead on aesthetic and political-professional outcomes. The proposal is generating some interest within the Indigenous performing arts sector; however, the issue is not without controversy and does not necessarily have the support of all stakeholders.

Such a proposal carries with it similar tensions to those that have emerged around the work of National Indigenous Television (NITV), a centralised, government-funded broadcasting operation that focuses on high-quality content and serves ‘urban Indigenous populations and mainstream Australian audiences, not just remote communities’ (Rennie and Featherstone, 2008). As Rennie and Featherstone point out, the imposition of a ‘public service broadcasting model’ over existing ‘and by most accounts innovative grassroots sector’ caused ‘significant tension with the … sector’ (2008: 62).

Conclusion

Despite the many defining differences between the film and performing arts sectors in Australia, there are some significant similarities around Indigenous participation. Film and arts policies have a shared historical concern for providing opportunities for Indigenous practitioners to develop skills and tell stories. In the 16 or so years since funding for Indigenous film and performing arts began, Indigenous practitioners have tended to take on key creative roles in writing, directing and acting. Across both sectors, however, there is a dearth of trained Indigenous practitioners in technical roles.

Through its Indigenous Branch, Screen Australia has addressed the issue of the professional development of Indigenous filmmakers through an explicit policy of identifying and nurturing individual ‘talent’. In the performing arts, the professional development of practitioners has tended to be located around the activities of the funded Indigenous organisations, which historically have been concerned with community-building and cultural maintenance. Our research suggests that the professional development of Indigenous performing artists has been under-developed – a view that is borne out by the de-funding of two of the three Indigenous theatre companies by the Australia Council on the grounds that the work being produced was not sufficiently innovative.

In a previous publication, we argued that policies for Indigenous performing arts should include three areas of responsibility: community-based arts that
aim to strengthen Indigenous communities; professional training and mentoring opportunities for mid-career artists; and strategies to allow talented individuals to work with autonomy (Glow and Johanson, 2009a). In relation to capacity-building, the experience of the film sector suggests that live performing arts practitioners might benefit from the kind of targeted development of skilled individuals or companies that underpins Screen Australia’s approach. The distinction in responsibility for film between the community-based media organisations and Screen Australia has arguably meant that Indigenous filmmakers are better able to avoid the extremes of burnout and the difficulty of appealing to multiple policy and audience needs that is experienced by live performing artists. A similar demarcation between the approach taken by the Theatre Board and regionally based funding organisations, or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Board of the Australia Council, may help bring into being an environment that relieves arts practitioners of some of the responsibility for mediating bureaucratically driven demands for community approval or participation, and helps develop the capacities that Dewey (2003) identifies as necessary for arts company success in the complex professional era.

The prospect of such reforms presents many difficulties. Aside from the problem for the Theatre Board of defining ‘talent’, there is also here a problem of benchmarking ‘success’. Nor would we want to under-estimate the difficulty that companies may have in distinguishing their aims as primarily aesthetic or community-based. But while experienced practitioners like Rachael Maza Long continue to feel bleak about the prospect of developing a sustainable career as an Indigenous performing artist, there is still work to be done.

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