



Give nature a chance

LOCKIE MACDONALD

Inmates at Albany's high security prison – personal and group skills development has broken new ground for this new community of writers. Poem entitled 'Ghost'. Photo: Perdita Phillips.

Through his experience working with regional communities, more recently in Western Australia with the SALT project, Lockie MacDonald explores the issues involved with working with regional communities and what is or is not left behind.

The bush is burning. Country Australia is not an innocent static landscape, locked in the fifties. Our soils are parched, saline, dying, our people cling like limpids, to fewer and fewer jobs, or surrender their country identity and move to the metropolis. Despite the rhetoric of federal and state governments of all political persuasions, little is changing. Instead of growing regional infrastructure, services continue to centralise. And it's no different in the arts. The political activism of the seventies is slumbering. How many regional arts organisations in the nation are actually head-quartered in a regional centre?

In some states there are in excess of fifty peak government-funded agencies, all professing to service regional arts practice. The majority are based in state capital cities with limited on-the-ground presence, or understanding of country reality. A minority of those working for these organisations have lived and worked in regional settings for any length of time. I heard a local in Kununarra years ago refer to them as the city Seagulls, 'they fly in, shit on you, and fly out'. Peak organisations flourish while bush-based services have not increased, or worse have decreased.

Now he nervously shakes as we rattle his stage
But he's happy to be stuck back in his halcyon days

Now we're trying hard to reconcile our history of shame
But he reinforced the barriers that keep it the same
If you treat me like a dog
And keep me locked in a cage
I'm not relaxed or comfortable
I'm aggravation and shame.
Like a dog.

Powderfinger – Album: Odyssey Number Five, published by Egg The Nest Music 2000.

There is an assumed innocence in the country. It is evident in the television series, *Sea Change*. Pearl Bay is place of romance and retreat from the heartache of city life. Perception is driven from a historical understanding.

At the end of childhood I began to live in a city, and became aware of the other great conflict in our history, namely of town against country ... The bush is our source of innocence – the home of eccentrics, the nursery of hurt minds; the town is where man's adversary, the devil, prowls around seeking whom he may devour. That is one of the sources of division in Australia, one of the factors that can turn a person into a Merlin – half innocent child, half devil. All those who have something to say are

deeply divided, and therefore tormented men or women – that is, they are both innocent children and devils.

Manning Clark *1976 Boyer Lectures*

If you are based in the country you are considered to be innocent. There was little evil attributed to life in the Pearl Bay of *Sea Change*.

Try waking up in the Northern Territory after a pension night. I guarantee you will not be innocent. Watch twelve-year-olds chrome glue into their lungs in any main street of a country town on Saturday night, witness men and women rot in our country jails and your innocence will evaporate like the moisture sucked up by the summer sun. Today country Australia is not innocent it is all aggravation and shame.

It's not all bleak. Remember the mini series *Sea Change*.

A sea change has occurred in Australian regional arts practice in the last ten or so years.

Historically arts councils comprised mainly the country elite and provided a service for the top end of the ladder. After two decades of hard work regional arts councils are making the shift to a more democratic model of inclusion.

But how do you transform a predominantly volunteer-based regional service into a professional fully funded, full-time industry. I would argue we still have a long way to travel on the white line in the centre of the road before we arrive at anything close to a democratic destination. The big end of the city arts market has received huge funding increases in recent years, and good on them. Let's not be suckered into the 'us' versus 'them' argument. It's dead. What we need is sustainable funding for ongoing regional cultural development.

I heard a local in Kununurra years ago refer to them as the city Seagulls: 'they fly in, shit on you, and fly out'.

The Big Bang – a universe is born

Since the late seventies community artists predominantly from cities have visited country communities, imparting skills as well as a process promoting inclusion and cultural self-determination. While working with Ran Dan Club in the nineties, and before that, Street Arts in Queensland in the eighties, we came to call these six-week tours 'The Big Bang Projects'. It is like the beginning of a universe. One big project can generate many more, smaller ongoing projects. Six-week wonders have a place. Let us not forget such projects gave us institutions such as the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. But a six-week project is limited unless someone is left behind with the resources to continue developing skills and the community's culture. Unfortunately we also were we cultural seagulls.

The routine of the six-week big bang project resembles the following process. A group of artists arrive in a town with resources, do workshops in a variety of artforms. At the end of six weeks of relentless work, a spectacle with a cast of hundreds is produced. After a five or six years, thanks to works of Joseph Campbell, some of us developed a neat narrative formula to fit all genres: dance, parades, fire shows, cabaret, circus or puppetry. It was a slick formula, delivering a quality product as well as a quality process. The community controlled the process and the product was also polished. Something a community can be proud of.

The Black Hole – the aftermath

After the carnival is over and the tent comes down we leave town. But without infrastructure, without ongoing support, a community cannot sustain what they have experienced and often feel let down. As a result little work continues without an experienced person on the ground driving it.

Sweet and sour project

After nearly fifteen years servicing regional communities from Lajamanu to Launceston, Kununurra to Cairns I arrived, in 1995, with Ran Dan Club, a team of community artists, on Christmas

The bush is burning. Our soils are parched, saline, dying, our people cling like leeches, to fewer and fewer jobs

Island. Sadly Christmas Island (CI) has become well known due to the events surrounding the arrival of people desperately seeking refuge from the horrors of war, persecution and poverty. In fact it is also a place of great cultural diversity and staggering natural beauty. Malay, Chinese and Euro Australians all live and work together in a zoological wonderland – only to be rivalled in its natural diversity by the Galapagos Islands.

We visited the magical CI for two years for six weeks at a time, working with the community to produce shows, a festival, parades and a multicultural kids' circus to die for. It was intoxicating working in such a community with such a 'can-do' group of people. I remember writing in my journal: 'I love this, slipping under the skin of the community, inoculating against apathy, empowering people to use the latent talent that lies in every soul – the ability to create, to explain their particular complex pocket of human existence'.

Ran Dan Sweetland – a Christmas Island journal

But after that we left. Without infrastructural support and skills these developments slowly dried up. It was crushing.

It was a pivotal moment. After the Big Bang a community needs sustainable long-term development. This means a series of projects over a period of years to develop local skills within the community. The artist needs to live in, be part of the community. Belong. This cannot happen overnight.

Projects or programs?

In 1998 my small family and I moved to Albany on the south-western edge of this dry chunk of continent. We intended to stay a year, but due to unanticipated



Albany Community Release Program, SALT (Silenced Authors Lavish Tales).
Photo: Perdita Phillips

opportunities to work with a number of diverse communities and groups which have included, youth theatre, festivals with the disabled community, the Afghan community, a partnership with a group of South African artists, and a group of prisoners, we stayed. We have been here for five years.

Grow a program like compost

The SALT Writers' Project has been the blue electricity of my working life for the past two-and-a-half years. 'Silenced Authors Lavish Tales' (SALT) Writers is a group of prisoners who write screenplays, novels, poetry and musicals in Albany Maximum Security Prison in Western Australia. Most of our numbers have been convicted for murder, one or two for other serious offences, such as armed robbery or serious assaults. During a scriptwriting workshop last year one writer pulled me up. I had attempted to finalise the project and bring it to a closure, as I had been working with SALT for a year and the grant money was about to expire. Time to produce the work. In retrospect I realise that I had been mentally bound by a perceived limitation imposed by the funding of the initial project.

He explained:

As a kid on the farm, my dad would get me to shovel up cow dung for the compost. His instructions were clear: I was to scoop off only the top of the poop to put in the compost. This way

you don't get any weed seeds. They are usually down the bottom of the dung in the soil.

When I was twelve he taught me to drive a bobcat. I waited for him to go to town and then I dug up as much shit as I could with the scoop but a load of soil. I dumped it on the compost.

When he came home from town he saw the pile of compost. With a huge load of dung, far too big to have been collected by hand and shovel, it was easy to spot my attempted shortcut.

After he'd flogged me, he grabbed me by the collar and took me to another compost bin. He lifted his hand out laden in rich black moist soil. 'Do you know what this is? It is life. It is life because nature has been given a chance to do its work. Don't rush nature.'

Now Lockie for fuck sake will you give nature a chance. Give this story of ours time to come to life.

He sat down and smiled. We wrote the script for another year, which made it a two-and-a-half year project. The result is a script called *Revelation* which has been described as remarkable.

In his seminal work *Stephen King On Writing*, popular novelist Stephen King says:

I believe stories are found things like fossils in the ground ... Stories aren't souvenir t-shirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world.

No matter how good you are, no matter how much experience you have, it's probably impossible to get the entire fossil out of the ground without a few breaks and losses.

I believe a good community project is no different from a good story. A project with long-term cultural development dividends is an ancient pre-existing relic. Only time, care, dedication, skill and a love of the craft that is community art, are the things that will excavate a project with minimal damage. It is just as easy to inflict damage as it is to bring it to life.

We need two main tools to successfully excavate a long-term worthwhile project – time and skills. Community artists need hands-on training in regional Australia by people who specialise in working in the country. Time means community artists need to source funding beyond the constraints of one funding body, so that long-term development can take place to enable the soil to be enriched properly. In my career it has taken a concerted effort on the part of a dedicated group of people for at least two years to give birth to anything decent with long-term outcomes. You can't make compost overnight – you need dung, soil, rotting matter, experience, skill, knowledge and lots of time.

So why rush? Why don't we give nature a chance? ■

From the steamy tropics of North Queensland to the cold wet winters of the south west, Lockie McDonald has designed and implemented arts projects. His work has included the visual arts, theatre, circus, large outdoor events, dance, cabarets, community theatre and community writing. He has just finished producing a play, Revelation, as a member of the SALT (Silenced Authors Lavish Tales) Writers' Project in Albany Regional Prison. He lives with his family in Albany WA.

Lockie recently completed a two-year fellowship from the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council for the Arts. Earlier this year he co-directed, Shishka-Car, the smash hit of the Adelaide Festival 2002.