

SMALL, MEDIUM, LARGE: THEATRE COMPANIES AND ISSUES OF SCALE

A CASE STUDY OF A MEDIUM-SIZED COMPANY

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Abstract

‘Surviving but not thriving.’ That is the message about small to medium-sized companies that Ian McRae, Chair of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, has been delivering since 2003. In the Theatre Board Assessment Meeting Report of 2007, McRae strongly urged renewed financial support for this most important sector given the significant decrease over the last 10 years and the consequent decrease in new Australian works being produced. Without such support his prediction is that ‘considerable damage could be done to the creative infrastructure across Australia resulting in a loss of artistic vibrancy down the track that could be very difficult to recover’ (McRae, 2007:3).

This paper investigates one theatre company’s response to this unsettling scenario. How has the triennially-funded La Boite Theatre Company responded to this crisis? On the surviving to thriving continuum where does it see itself? What are key artistic and organisational strategies that have been developed to keep the company viable? Having completed a doctoral study in 2006 of the Company’s transformational journey from 1925 to 2003, I shall in this paper re-contextualise La Boite’s distinctive survival skills within the current reality of fast disappearing federally-funded support.



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Crisis in the Sector

Ian McRae in his Theatre Board Chair's Report on the Assessment Meeting in March 2007, writes that small- to medium-sized performing arts companies are 'surviving but not thriving'; that over the last 10 years 'funding has declined in real terms and the number of Australian new works being produced is declining significantly (down 21% from 2002 to 2005)'. He concludes: 'If we don't provide more support now, considerable damage could be done to the creative infrastructure of the arts across Australia resulting in a loss of artistic vibrancy down the track that could be very difficult to recover'.

This state of affairs is not new. Strong concern was expressed in the 2003 analysis of the triennially funded theatre organisations commissioned by the Theatre Board of the Australia Council for the period 1998 to 2002. This analysis detailed the importance of these companies, which make 'a very significant and demonstrable contribution to Australian culture':

- They create most of the new, innovative work for the Australian theatre.
- They are the biggest international exporters of Australian theatre.
- They feed the wider industry with creative talent, ideas and styles of production.
- They provide significant access for the public to the Australian theatre and have an audience largely different from the major theatre companies but of a similar size. (Australia Council, 2003:5-9)

Alarming, the Theatre Board's commissioned analysis also found that:

- the trend is that their costs will overtake their revenue within two years;
- they are increasingly reliant on non-core funding to finance their core business output — new innovative theatre; and
- their capacity to further increase earned and other income is limited. (*ibid.*)

La Boite Theatre Company is one of these thirty-five small- to medium-sized triennially funded Australian theatre companies — termed 'key organisations' by the Theatre Board — which now appear to be in a vulnerable position in regard to future viability. My recently completed doctoral study of La Boite's transformation from an amateur group to a flourishing professional company over seventy-eight years of uninterrupted activity highlights the distinctive cultural significance of this company to Australian theatre and, by implication, suggests that to lose such a company would be a tragedy (Comans, 2006). To 2003, La Boite's effective artistic and organisational leadership guided the company through crisis and change with success; in uncertain times, as these reports suggest, La Boite must be considered under threat. Or is it?

The latest Annual Report for this company would suggest otherwise and that *thriving* would be a more accurate description than merely *surviving*. In his Artistic Director's Report (La Boite Theatre Company Annual Report 2006:7), while Sean Mee agrees that 'the whole sector is experiencing one of the most testing fiscal environments in memory'. La Boite Theatre Company is, in his words, 'acknowledged as one of the most financially stable and creatively viable companies in the performing arts sector in Australia'. The focus of this paper is a reflection on how the Company has defied the odds within the current reality of fast disappearing federally-funded support and as played out within the context of La Boite's distinctive survival skills.

An Affordable Venue

This recent period of national crisis that McRae alludes to coincides with La Boite's move at the end of 2003 from its iconic purpose-built 200 seat theatre-in-the-round in Hale Street to its new purpose-built 400 seat theatre-in-the-round, The Roundhouse, at Kelvin Grove. The Roundhouse, now home of La Boite Theatre Company, is situated in the Creative Industries Precinct of QUT and forms part of the unique and experimental Kelvin Grove Urban Village development¹.

My doctoral study found that the buying of real estate in the 1950s and 1960s and the building and ownership of Australia's only purpose-built theatre-in-the-round made a significant contribution to La Boite's capacity to develop and was profoundly important to its ongoing existence in the face of life-threatening crises in the early 1980s and 1990s. Without the collateral of real estate to place on the table of arts funding bodies during times of financial crisis, it is doubtful whether La Boite would have sustained its long existence as a pro-am theatre or been able to make the transition to professional status or managed the costly move to The Roundhouse.

In 2007, the Company still finds itself in an enviable position property-wise although no longer a property owner. In 2003, the Hale Street building was sold for \$1 million, half of which was paid to the Queensland State Government as a contribution towards the building of The Roundhouse. La Boite Theatre Company Inc. does not own the building but it has a pre-paid 25 year lease on it. In return, the Company is responsible for the theatre's maintenance. As the Artistic Director Sean Mee said, in response to my question to him about how he accounted for the Company's current prosperity:

From La Boite's point of view, we have a venue. Most theatre companies don't. We have a venue which we can afford. At the moment, because we have paid essentially 25 years of pre-paid rent, we are in a very good position, notwithstanding that the building still costs us quite a lot of money to keep open. (Mee, Interview, 2007)

Besides the obvious financial and artistic benefits of a company having its own venue, performance space, rehearsal space, administration offices, foyer and bar, there is the additional benefit of having a venue for hire.

Programming Plays that tell Queensland Stories

Within the context of La Boite's creative work, its current success can be largely contributed to its decision to exclusively program a certain kind of play which has found a new audience for the Company. Since 1925, La Boite has endeavored to foster Australian writing and include Australian if not Queensland plays in its seasons. Queensland writer George Landen Dann is an early example². This focus became particularly sharp under

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1. Kelvin Grove Urban Village exemplifies the Queensland Government's Smart State agenda in action. A major partnership development between the Queensland Government and the Queensland University of Technology, the project combines educational facilities with retail, commercial, cultural and residential buildings. Queensland Premier, the Honourable Peter Beattie MP, describes it as 'an inclusive and sustainable community where people can live, learn, work and play within one diverse and accessible neighbourhood' (Klaebe, 2006:7).
 2. Plays by Landen Dann produced by Brisbane Repertory Theatre (later La Boite) included: *In Beauty it is Finished* (1931); *The Day of Roses* (1934); *No Incense Rising* (1938); *A Second Moses* (1939); *Caroline Chisholm* (1946); *Fountains Beyond* (1947).

Sue Rider's directorship between 1993 and 2000. Her championing of new works by Queensland playwrights was unprecedented in the State's cultural history. Rider's determination that Brisbane's second major professional company was to become a hothouse for developing new work resulted in an impressive thirteen productions of new works commissioned by her between 1994 and 2000, the most successful of which were *Long Gone Lonesome Cowgirls* by Philip Dean, *X-Stacy* by Marjory Forde, *A Beautiful Life* by Michael Futcher and Helen Howard, *After January* by Philip Dean (adapted from the novel by Nick Earls), *Georgia* by Jill Shearer, *48 Shades of Brown* by Philip Dean, and *Milo's Wake* by Marjory Forde and Michael Forde — all Queensland playwrights, some of whom now enjoy national and international recognition for their work. Under Rider's influence La Boite's strong identification with this kind of new Queensland work gave the company a market-enhancing profile that contributed substantially to its capacity to move forward as a professional operation.

Sean Mee has taken this one step further. While Rider's programming favoured Queensland playwrights, there were plenty of non-Queensland plays represented in her seasons. Since 2004, Mee's seasons have consisted exclusively of new or extant Queensland works (if you count David Williamson as a Queenslander now that he resides permanently at Noosa). And the new works have all been commissioned by the Company and undergone at least 18 months development. In the period 2004 to 2006, Queensland stories on La Boite's stage have been seen by over 85,000 people and have grossed for the Company over \$2 million (La Boite Programming Comparison document, 2007).

Stage Adaptations of Novels are Box Office Winners

Significantly, of all the new works commissioned between 2004 and 2006, those that have been commissioned adaptations of novels have proved the most popular with audiences and the most successful in building this new audience, accounting for 49% of gross box office (La Boite Programming Comparison document, 2007). The stand-out example is Nick Earls' *Zigzag Street*, adapted for the stage by Philip Dean, which grossed over \$1 million in its two Brisbane seasons and regional and national tours and was seen by 45,000 people (*ibid.*). Other adaptations that did very good business for the company were Nick Earls' *Perfect Skin* adapted by Janis Balodis; Errol O'Neill's *Mayne Inheritance* inspired by Rosamond Siemon's novel; Andrew McGahan's *Last Drinks* adapted by Shaun Charles; Rebecca Sparrow's *The Year Nick McGowan Came to Stay* adapted by Sean Mee; and David Malouf's *Johnno* adapted by Stephen Edwards (*ibid.*). For the same period, the next most successful category at the box office was commissioned plays at 30% followed by extant plays at 21% of the box office³.

Connecting with a New Audience

Successive La Boite seasons that have told Queensland stories (some of which have toured regionally and nationally) have worked extremely well for the company. Since 2004, gross box office has totalled well over \$2 million. For Mee, this is proof that he has

3. Commissioned plays for the 2004 to 2006 seasons included *Urban Dingoes* by Norman Price; *Crèche and Burn* by Elise Grieg; *The Drowning Bride* by Michael Futcher and Helen Howard; and *Dance of Jeremiah* by Matthew Ryan. Extant plays included *Amigos* by David Williamson; *Operator* by David Williamson; and *Long Gone Lonesome Cowgirls* by Philip Dean.

found an audience which previously did not go to the theatre. As he explained in his interview with me, his programming is successfully drawing in ‘a middle ground’ where he believes ‘the audience lives’. With the move from the 200 seat Hale Street venue to the 400 seat Roundhouse came the decision, or rather the necessity, . . .

. . . to establish a new audience . . . not just address audiences who were theatre lovers or theatre goers but we had to engage with and build a loyalty over time with the large disinterested audience who are generally upwardly mobile — theatre is one part of their life but not the big one — and who will go to theatre if they find a connection to it or if they find what is being done is immediately appealing. That is who we have engaged with and in all our programming we have tried to engage a diversity of approach . . . to not only engage with the theatre lovers and theatre goers but also with the disinterested.

He estimates that in Brisbane that disinterested market is around about 20,000 per show compared with the theatre-goer market which has been steady at around 3,000 per show since 1998. ‘In order for this venue to work, we had to address those 20,000’ and he seems to have succeeded. This year, over 7,500 people saw *The Narcissist* by Stephen Carleton (La Boite Programming Comparison document, 2007) and he estimates up to 9000 will have seen *The Year Nick McGowan Came to Stay* at the conclusion of its extended season. ‘Effectively when we do something like *Nick McGowan* we will double the audience capacity’. He concluded that, ‘In terms of the financial health of the company that’s why it purely comes down to programming’.

In explaining the great success of the adaptation of the Queensland novel, Mee points to the easy media coverage that comes their way from a well known and popular novel, and the attractiveness to this new audience of seeing a much loved novel come alive on the stage. Importantly, he believes that for his new audience ‘the work is not intimidating because the audience have prior knowledge of the work’. In our interview he told me that:

. . . It’s largely about the media, they get into it. We are doing *The Mayne Inheritance*, well cool, says the media, there’s a story, we can do a story about the Mayne Inheritance. So we get better profile, we get better editorials. You can create an event around it. Nick Earls, for example, he releases a new book, people already have an emotional connection, they love Nick Earls, they are interested in coming to see a stage adaptation of the book . . . They are coming along to re-engage with that idea in a new context and perhaps learn something new, to see how we did it.

Focus on Financial Self-Sufficiency

For a company which now relies on State and Federal funding for only 28% of its revenue, getting the programming right is paramount — there is no room for box office failures. In 2006, Arts Queensland granted \$587,687 and Australia Council \$148,335 (La Boite Theatre Inc. Financial Statements, 2006:11). This funding total of \$736,022 was well under its 2006 box office revenue of \$794,870. While government funding remains important, the Company is making itself increasingly more self-sufficient, not only through box office and touring but by aggressively pursuing with a deal of success, corporate partnerships, creative collaborations, co-production opportunities, sponsorships and donations, and services such as the lucrative venue hire.

The rumour that emerged over the last couple of years that La Boite had no money and was a sinking ship is patently wrong and probably sprang from several years of managed deficits as the Company was obliged to pour money of its own into the new venue and come to terms with operational costs (Mee, Letter to Members, 5 April 2007). In 2006, the Board closed the door on any more deficit years, a directive to which the company has successfully responded through a review of all financial activity and a restructure of staff requirements. The result, in Mee's words, is 'a leaner, meaner organisation that can run more efficiently and can respond more effectively to revenue opportunities into the future' (*ibid.*).

The current financial security of the Company has enabled the commissioning of an enormous amount of work. Mee claims that La Boite is the biggest single commissioner of new work in Australia at the moment and has currently 12 works under commission to go into 2009 (Mee, Interview, 2007). And it is enabling a more strategic approach to branding of the company, essential for its corporate development and marketing.

. . . You only have to look at Company B (Belvoir Street). I think they could put on anything and the brand of the company will bring the audience in. They believe in the brand of the company. They are fairly eclectic but the brand of the company is so strong. And I think that is what La Boite needs . . . a more strategic approach to getting that base audience up is not about doing better shows and selling the shows better, it's actually about making the *brand* of the company stronger.

Playing with the Big Kids: The International Agenda

Another ambitious strategy the Company is pursuing for long term viability is international partnerships leading to the exchange of artistic product. In 2006, La Boite in partnership with Brisbane Festival and England's Derby Playhouse produced the critically acclaimed *Johnno* at The Powerhouse Theatre in Brisbane. In 2007, this production was reprised at the Derby Playhouse, again to critical acclaim. This project was funded by the Australia Council's New Australian Stories project funding. When I asked Sean why he was pursuing international recognition with such a small company and in such trying times, he replied:

We need no longer be perceived as this little company in Brisbane. This company is a \$1.9 million dollar turnover company and everyone thinks it's still this tiny little company! . . . We have to . . . puff ourselves up to the size we are and then puff ourselves up to the size we are not yet . . . If your aspirations are only small, if your aspirations are only to do nice plays well, for a fixed pool of people, then that's exactly where you stay.

He believes that the kudos gained from the Company's artistic partnership with Derby was invaluable and recalled how 'the Premier of Queensland, Peter Beattie, summoned us to London and we had a photo opportunity with the Premier in Queensland House saying "here I am in London with the cast of *Johnno*, aren't we fabulous!" And there is La Boite's name there'.

I kept a close eye on the critical response to the play in England which was generally very positive. Here is an example from Steve Orme's review for *The British Theatre Guide*:

Possibly the last thing you would expect from a theatre that's had recurring financial problems is a play that few people have heard of. But Derby Playhouse have taken the bold decision to put on the European premiere of an adaptation of a seminal Australian novel. The result is absolutely stunning.

NJ, 31;1, 2007

There's been so much hype about Stephen Edward's stage version of *Johnno* that some theatregoers must think either that it can't be true or that it's little recommendation coming from Australians who aren't exactly world leaders in exporting culture.

For instance, *Time Off* magazine stated that this production 'achieved the unlikely if not the seemingly impossible' in bringing Malouf's words to the stage. Praise indeed for a work which has a cherished place in the hearts of many people down under. Yet on the strength of the performance in Derby, *Johnno* is superb. Any superlative you can use to describe it is probably justified.. (Orme, 2007)

At what cost? It depends who you ask

There has been a down-side to this success however — the alienation of part of its former constituency. My doctoral study found that constituency strength, support and loyalty was an enduring feature of the company. Until its first foray into professionalism in 1992, its constituency of paid up members, active participants, audiences both local and regional, theatre critics, theatre supporters and the theatre industry were a formidable body at various turning points in La Boite's history. It demanded a voice in times of financial crises and proposed status changes; it loyally rose to the challenge when called upon to publicly advocate for the Theatre when outside forces threatened its existence, such as Artistic Director Malcolm Blaylock's 'call to arms' when funding was withdrawn in 1981. Since its transformation into a professional company, parts of this constituency have become increasingly disempowered as the company became more and more like a business and less and less like the community theatre it used to be.

Significant remnants of that constituency have frequently voiced their disquiet over the last few years, particularly in relation to the company's artistic programming, considering it too lightweight, saddened at the lack of more serious works, of its abandonment of its former more alternative, more political and riskier orientation. Perhaps they remember nostalgically a time when Katharine Brisbane described La Boite as the place to go to see 'the red meat of theatre'.

This disquiet came to a head at this year's Annual General Meeting (23 April 2007). That evening, a respected Brisbane director and actor, representing the views of those who believe La Boite has lost its relationship with the community from so many years ago, expressed genuine concern about some aspects of the running of the Company. He expressed a desire for the company to re-engage with the community, a yearning for that former sense of community ownership, a concern that artists' voices on the Board are in the minority and a disappointment that there is no mechanism for debate about the Company's artistic agenda and direction, about which, there is no doubt, some in the artistic community have strong reservations.

An explosion of membership from 20 to 200 made voting at the AGM for new La Boite Board members not only a lengthy process but one tinged with some suspense. If it was the wish of this group to have several members from the artistic community voted onto the Board, they were to be disappointed. The membership of the Board, for many years heavily weighted with people from the corporate and business world with minority representation from the theatre industry, remained intact at the end of the evening. As Mee emphasised in a recent letter to La Boite members:

Modern Boards require now high levels of legal advice, governance, marketing, corporate development and financial expertise. All funding bodies make this mandatory and their level of support is predicated in the authority and expertise of Board members in these key areas . . . I firmly believe that the Company's success can be attributed to the quality, experience and commitment that the Board possessed during these last few, very challenging, years. (Mee, April 5, 2007)

La Boite has always had a strong sense of pride in its own history. My doctoral study found however, that this company has managed to survive for over 80 years because leaders consistently emerged who, whilst respecting and celebrating the Company's past, had a vision for a different kind of future. Leaders such as Jennifer Blocksidge, Rick Billingham, Philip Pike and Sue Rider had the tenacity and courage to compel the Company into the future, often against the kind of stiff resistance seen in that meeting. The Board Chair Kent Maddox concluded his 2006 Annual Report with these tough words, 'the company has had to harden its resolve to be as businesslike as possible . . . There is no way for La Boite Theatre Company to return to the style and place it occupied 10 years ago . . . we will continue to make extraordinary contributions but will need to continue to change in order to do it' (La Boite Annual Report 2006: 6).

Yet, as has always been the case, La Boite ignores its history (and its members) at its peril — the Company immediately re-instated its Industry Forum in May 2007 from which came two practical outcomes:

- The establishment of a working party to look at complementary programs
- The re-establishment of the Creative Reference Group

In reality though, this may well be little more than a band-aid measure. As Sean Mee said in interview:

. . . the Company has moved to a completely different model which is a production house model — we produce work. There is no access point and there is no capacity within the staffing duty statements to deal with issues of access and outreach. It's as simple as that . . . we are not going to be an all things to all people any more, we can't afford it.

And, in responding to the criticism about his programming, Mee said that when the question is asked 'where is the gravitas in what we do, where is the cutting edge, where is the art that truly astounds, the amazing theatre, where is that?' his response is, 'But that's not what we are on about right now!' and indeed believes that this view of his programming is not entirely true, pointing to thematically and creatively weighty and adventurous productions such as *Drowning Bride*, *Last Drinks* and *Johnno*.

Conclusion

For the time being, there seems no reason why La Boite would back away from its recipe for success and its vision for its future, encapsulated in its mission statement:

La Boite Theatre Company will be a national leader in the creation and production of high quality new Australian theatre, which is relevant and accessible to audiences locally, nationally and internationally.

La Boite Theatre Company is committed to the development, presentation and promotion of Australian Theatre as an essential part of Australian cultural life. Our purpose is to create theatre that speaks to and on behalf of our community through telling stories that can contextualise and comment upon our lived experience.

(La Boite Theatre Company Annual Report, 2007:3)

La Boite's latest co-production (July 19 - 4 August, 2007) seems to epitomize its stated objectives and, it could be argued, brings into question the labelling of the Company's work as light-weight. *Red Cap* is a music-theatre production about the Mount Isa mining dispute of 1964 and its anti-hero Pat Mackie who led the miners against the company, the police and even their own union — 'a tale of community triumph over rampant authoritarianism' (*Red Cap* publicity flyer, 2007). Commissioned by the Queensland Music Festival, written by Janis Balodis and directed by Sean Mee, it is a co-production between La Boite Theatre Company, Queensland Music Festival and Mount Isa City Council. Relevant, accessible and entertaining theatre? Yes, certainly for La Boite's new audience. As Rosemary Sorensen wrote in her review:

La Boite Theatre Company's Sean Mee, who directed *Red Cap*, has mastered the technique of audience-boosting by targeting groups within the community for whom new works have particular relevance. No one can say if a unionist enticed into a theatre to watch a play about a union dispute will go on to become a participant in other theatre events but, if we needed to make a case for theatre's ability to be relevant as well as entertaining, *Red Cap* has strong credentials. (Sorensen, 2007)

The key strategies of supporting new work and programming for a new audience is working for La Boite. The hard data of annual reports and financial statements show that La Boite's new audience loves to see Queensland stories on stage at The Roundhouse and is voting with its feet. The old audience of avid theatre goers is barely visible in the new crowd — the last time I went to La Boite I scanned the audience and recognised only a handful of people I knew, a most unusual experience and, frankly, a heartening indication of La Boite's future viability despite the crisis in the sector.

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