Performing arts and regional communities:  
The case of Bunbury, Western Australia

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

…………………………………………
Robyn Janelle McCarron
Abstract

In Australia during the 1990s increased attention was paid to regional, rural and remote communities and, in terms of arts and culture, the establishment of regional arts umbrella organisations, at both national and state levels, stimulated interest in, and development of, the arts in those communities. Discourses around the notion of the civil society and the ways in which social and cultural capital can be acquired and transferred, have led to renewed interest in the economic and social functions of the voluntary, not-for-profit sector of Australian society.

This thesis aims to advance the critical study of regional cultural development. It examines the role and function of the performing arts within regional communities through a case study of the city of Bunbury, Western Australia. Regional performing arts are often trivialised or marginalised by metropolitan practitioners, critics and academics, particularly as they are almost entirely, in Australia, a volunteer/amateur pursuit. However volunteer performing arts groups provide physical and social spaces that encourage networks of civil engagement that have implications for the functioning of the broader community; and, in the case of Bunbury, a degree of independence from the bureaucratic requirements of arts funding bodies. The thesis proposes that volunteer, not-for-profit (amateur) theatre has a stronger claim on the title ‘community theatre’ than the state-funded community theatre movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

The thesis also examines the strong community affiliations that have been generated by the community-owned, professionally-managed Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. It situates this discussion in the context of the rapidly changing urban landscape in which the Entertainment Centre is placed and its affiliations with local, regional, state and national funding, networking and touring structures. It argues that considerable social and cultural capital is generated through the active involvement of citizens at many levels of the performing arts in a regional community such as Bunbury. Although for most, the involvement is voluntary and recreational, it also has direct economic outcomes in terms of the developing creative industries of the region.
A major contribution of the thesis is the provision of a model for the function and impact of regional community performing arts as it theorises the tensions between governmental (funding) models and self-generated regional arts practices through case study and detailed analysis. In doing so the thesis contributes to key debates in two significant ways, firstly by providing an important historical/cultural document and secondly, by highlighting new ways of thinking and speaking about the role of the performing arts in regional communities.
Contents

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................... i

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................... iii

Contents ............................................................................................................................................... v

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................. vii

List of tables ........................................................................................................................................ viii

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

Self as participant/observer .............................................................................................................. 1
Bunbury, Western Australia ............................................................................................................... 2
Context ............................................................................................................................................. 7
Theoretical frames ............................................................................................................................ 9

PART ONE: CHANGING DISCOURSES ......................................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Performance ....................................................................................................................... 17

Chapter 3: Art and culture ................................................................................................................... 26
Art(s) ............................................................................................................................................... 26
Culture ........................................................................................................................................... 31
Cultural studies ............................................................................................................................... 34
Cultural policy ................................................................................................................................. 36

Chapter 4: Regionality ........................................................................................................................... 39
Space .............................................................................................................................................. 39
Place .............................................................................................................................................. 42
Landscape ...................................................................................................................................... 44
Local ............................................................................................................................................. 46
Region ........................................................................................................................................... 48

Chapter 5: Community ......................................................................................................................... 54
... and community development .................................................................................................... 57
... and performance ....................................................................................................................... 60
... and arts ..................................................................................................................................... 62
... and cultural development ......................................................................................................... 63
... and the everyday ....................................................................................................................... 64
... and voluntary organisations ....................................................................................................... 65
Citizenship and civil society .......................................................................................................... 66
Social capital ................................................................................................................................ 67

PART TWO: COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE ......................................................................... 71

Chapter 6: Did we miss something? ................................................................................................. 73
Community theatre ........................................................................................................................... 77
Community arts ............................................................................................................................... 82

Chapter 7: Profiles .............................................................................................................................. 91
Norm Flynn: playwright, director, producer, oral historian, set builder, actor, mentor .......... 91
Leanne McLaughlin : teacher and artistic director ..................................................................... 95

Chapter 8: Youth performance .......................................................................................................... 102
Performers, not spectators .............................................................................................................. 102
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**List of tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>BREC: Local, state and national relationships (existing and potential)</td>
<td>pp. 188-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Community performing arts organisations: Local, state and national relationships (existing and potential)</td>
<td>p. 189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>APACA performing arts venues by location</td>
<td>p. 196</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>