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.

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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.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Self as participant/observer

At mid-life, I take stock and realise that my life has been shaped by at least two major factors. I am a product of an education system which valorised the liberal humanist project of scientific rationalism and modernity; I am also the product of a provincial life. As a young person I thought I would lead a city life; that I would permanently escape from what I then perceived to be the dreary monotony of life in a regional town in New South Wales. I spent four years at a new metropolitan university (consciously choosing the modern and new rather than the sandstone of older universities). The student cohort was drawn in equal numbers from two distinct suburban divisions of Sydney – the northern and western suburbs. As the (probably) only country student, there being no on-campus accommodation in those early days, I was an outsider, watching with bemusement the palpable social tensions between the northshoreites and the westies.

My degree in English (1972) was a direct descendent of the Cambridge Leavisite model with canonical texts to the fore. Australian literature was a barely tolerated elective and drama was read as literature with no thought of praxis. As a newly graduated teacher and under a bond to the state education system, I had no choice but go where I was sent – a small rural town in southern New South Wales. I told myself that this was temporary, that one day I would return to the city. At the end of my first year of teaching English I found I had also become the school librarian and a drama teacher in charge of the school production. Lacking qualifications for either task, I improvised my way through, attended a couple of drama workshops for teachers, joined the local theatre group and developed a (recreational) life in (community) theatre.

Over thirty years later, I accept that my four years of city living were an aberration in the pattern of my life. I have moved across Australia from one regional centre to another and have spent the past twenty-four years in Bunbury, Western Australia. In each of these communities, apart from my regular paid work in secondary and tertiary education, I have led an active recreational life within the realm of the performing arts. I have variously acted in and directed plays for the amateur theatres in each of these
towns; I have served on committees and working parties; organised events; promoted the performing arts to young people; coordinated a youth theatre group for seven years; and currently serve as a member of the board of management of the local regional entertainment centre. These community performing arts groups were highly organised with formal committee structures and loyal memberships. They usually owned and maintained their own theatre spaces, were mostly self-funded, and were well-accepted as part of the civic life of the towns.

Through my participation in performing arts projects I have observed the small life-changing moments that they have provided for the participants. The truisms, such as raising self-esteem, working as a team, moving out of one’s comfort zone, forming inter-generational friendships or realising new skills, can be seen in process. Yet viewed from the academy, such things are often overlooked. Regional communities are not ‘sexy’ unless research funding is attached or there are particular ‘issues’ such as ethnicity or economic deprivation which bear investigation. The often ‘conservative’ tastes of regional performing arts groups do not meet the criteria of ‘innovation’ set by metropolitan-based funding bodies. The open, friendly nature of young people from regional communities is somehow unfashionable amongst the prevailing discourse of adolescent ‘cool’ represented at metropolitan fringe theatre events.

It is the taken-for-grantedness of the presence of and participation in the performing arts in a community such as Bunbury that I wish to interrogate in this study.

**Bunbury, Western Australia**

[Y]ou will be very glad to know Bunbury. (Wilde, 1895)

A funny little city … An old people’s city … A city full of basketball and football clubs … A city near the sea. A little city. (Ricks, 1997)

I arrived in Bunbury in 1981 knowing only that it was the biggest regional centre outside the Perth metropolitan area. Familiar with the cities and towns of regional New South Wales, with their geometric town planning, wide streets and substantial 19th century buildings, I expected something similar. However, I was unprepared for its industrial port origins and the rather small population of the town.(Appendix C
I was puzzled by its city status. Its main street seemed rather unloved and unsure of its identity. There was little left of any 19th century buildings and the few rather promising art deco buildings seemed to be trying to hide their origins behind commercial facades. At the centre of the town were the symbols of industry: large grain silos, railway marshalling yards and across the inlet, enormous piles of wood chips awaiting export. (Appendix C Photograph 2). The shape of the town was dictated by the coastline and waterways and the major roads were more like the spokes of a wheel, the centre of which was the small shopping precinct squeezed between the open beach and the inlet. The town spread to the east and south of this point. (Appendix C Photograph 1)

Bunbury is the name of Algernon Moncrieff’s fictitious invalid friend in Oscar Wilde’s play *The importance of being Earnest* and operates as an alibi “in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose” and, no doubt, indulge in whatever laddish behaviour upper class young men subscribed to in late Victorian England. It is nice to speculate that Irish-born Wilde may have named this character because of some personal connection with the Anglo-Irish Bunbury family. It was a member of this family, Lieutenant Henry William St Pierre Bunbury, who developed an inland road to the port, now known as Bunbury, Western Australia. To me, the name signifies ‘Britishness’ and, like Wilde’s play, demonstrates the reach and influence of British imperialism and symbolises some aspects of my (performing) life in this town.

*The importance of being Earnest* is a classic of the English stage and is enshrined within the amateur theatre tradition where Australian actors mimic upper-class British behaviours. In the 100 year history of amateur performance in Bunbury, however, I only know of one production of this particular play. This was a Bunbury Repertory Club production in 1984, directed by Jenny McNae, a professional director-in-residence. The references to Bunburying created great mirth in the audience. In *The importance of being Earnest*, the euphemistic, non-existent character, Bunbury, allows for certain judgements about provincial or regional life to be made: that one can ‘drop one’s standards’, that country life is intellectually stifling, or that country life offers bucolic bliss and sexual licence. This thesis will argue that some of these stereotypical modes of thinking still permeate the metropolitan view of regional life and limit the opportunities for regional (success) stories to be told.
When I first arrived in Bunbury I was curious to see what the local repertory club had to offer so responded to an advertisement for a performance titled *Still life with nudes*. As it was being staged at the Little Theatre, the home of the Bunbury Repertory Club, I assumed that it was a performance by the club’s members. I did not read the fine print until later. Prior to coming to Bunbury I belonged to a very active amateur theatre group in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory where we prided ourselves on our contemporary approach to theatre. I was hoping that Bunbury was similarly ‘advanced’. Nevertheless, I was astounded, when *Still life with nudes* turned out to be exactly that, a stage full of ‘artist’s models’ who moved about on an under-lit stage in various stages of undress. It did in fact have a fin-de-siècle air of which Wilde and his male contemporaries may well have approved. I cannot recall a spoken script and believe it was a movement piece that culminated in the entire cast, nude, dancing on stage and inviting members of the audience to join them. Not only that, but when I left the auditorium and was standing at the bar, one of the actors, still mostly nude, stood beside me and ordered a drink (1996, p. 175). I was stunned – what exciting, cutting-edge group had I stumbled upon? What a broad-minded community that allowed such displays on its stage! In 1975 Western Australian police had closed down a performance of Peter Schaffer’s *Equus* in Geraldton, another Western Australian regional town, although it had played in Perth (Hough, 2003, pp. 43-44). What miracle had happened in the interim?

When I read the fine-print I discovered that this was a performance, and a very self-indulgent one at that, by a group of university students from Perth travelling under the auspices of the Perth Festival who had hired the Little Theatre for this one-off event. What astounded me further was that no one in Bunbury ever mentioned seeing this event: there were no letters to the editor and, when I became a member of the Bunbury Repertory Club, it was as if it had never happened. About fifteen years later, in conversation with a local journalist, I discovered that she too had seen this performance and, like me, had started to think that perhaps she had dreamt it. It was reassuring for both of us to find that our recovered memories were in fact accurate.

Wilde’s young male characters convey a certain fashionable ennui and a horror of becoming like their parents. Although a jump in socio-historical circumstances, youthful alienation in a Bunbury setting was represented by a young local writer, James
Ricks, in his ‘grunge’ novel *Eleven months in Bunbury* (1997). This text was a brave attempt to look at the lives of working class young men who feel alienated and trapped by the demands of family, school, work and sport in a small regional community. The text barely disguises local identities, workplaces and other locations so it created some consternation for local readers who were shocked by its bleak view of the city. Some civic leaders were outraged, particularly those involved in the tourist industry which was trying to reinvent Bunbury as a tourist destination: *Bunbury – country living, city style*. However, like *Still life with nudes*, where one expected letters of complaint to the editor or, alternatively some celebration of the young author’s success (the book was runner-up in a prestigious literary prize for writers under 35 and was subsequently published by a mainstream publisher), very little public notice was taken of the book and it is now, unfortunately, out of print.

When I have introduced Ricks’ novel to students, most of whom are ‘locals’, whilst not necessarily agreeing with the author’s representations, they are stimulated and encouraged to know that it is possible to express a counter-view to the preferred touristic image of the town.

Youth participation in the performing arts in Bunbury is of particular interest to me. All of my community involvement, paid or unpaid, has youth participation as a major focus. As a secondary school teacher I have directed and coordinated numerous school productions; I coordinated the City of Bunbury Youth Drama Festival for several years; I coordinated MESH Youth Theatre for seven years; and currently chair the Youth and Community Development committee of the Board of Management, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Along with most drama educators, I share a belief in the value to young people of active participation in performance and in particular, the way in which theatre and drama offer them socially acceptable ways to express identity and difference. I will document some of these processes in this thesis. Ironically, my increased workload in academic teaching, administration and research in recent years, has impacted upon my involvement, to the point where, regrettably, I was unable to sustain my voluntary coordination of MESH Youth Theatre. It has not been active since 2003.
Bunbury in 2004 is almost unrecognisable from what I encountered in 1981. Commercialisation and gentrification have proceeded apace (Ambrosius, 2001). Population statistics show that the city has a population of 30,673. However, most of the suburban expansion has occurred within the surrounding shires of Harvey, Dardanup and Capel. This increases the population of the greater Bunbury area to 66,037. (Australian Bureau of Statistics: Local government area populations for each state and territory, 2002). A substantial mining industry has provided the employment to sustain its current status as one of the most rapidly growing population areas in Australia (Spagnolo, 2004a).

In the mid eighties, the new Western Australian Labor government implemented policies of regional development and established development authorities in regional centres across the state. The South West Development Authority (later South West Development Commission) was set up, appropriately enough, in the new, conspicuously modern(ist) office block, officially named the Bunbury Tower (but given numerous epithets by residents). (Appendix C Photographs 1 and 4). From these lofty heights, bureaucrats and town planners could, God-like, look down upon the industrial urban landscape and plan urban renewal and community development.

The vital decision to move the railway marshalling yards – which had been mooted for a quarter of a century – was accomplished in one evening in a Lebanese restaurant that commanded an elevated view of the harbour and the intervening tracts of rail and rolling stock. Invited along with other Ministers by Manea to contemplate both the view and the potential for improvement, Burke [State Premier] at once seized a telephone and called the railway authorities in Perth to insist that the yards would have to go. (Beeson cited in Barker & Laurie, 1992, p. 355)

The passenger and freight rail services were relocated to the perimeter of the town. This opened up great expanses of prime waterfront land for redevelopment. (Appendix C Photograph 1). The first impulse was to create public open spaces whilst retaining some heritage elements, such as the railway station (now a tourist centre and bus station) and some silos. Half of the silos were demolished, a spectacular event at the time, and the remainder wait for their long-promised reincarnation as a hotel development. (Appendix C Photograph 2). The opening up of inner city public land for redevelopment coincided with a long-expressed wish by certain citizens for a large theatre or entertainment centre. The remarkable push to achieve this facility, its physical location in the new
urban plan and its success, I will document within this thesis as evidence of the “networks of civic engagement” (Putnam, 1993) in this community. (Appendix C Photographs 3 and 4)

Bunbury is itself enacting or performing its (relatively) recent role as ‘city’. This performance is often in advance of what its local audience can absorb or respond to. Since the mid-80s its spectacular ‘re-imagineering’ (Crang, 1998, p. 116) of space, some of which has been ephemeral, has generated variously enthusiasm, criticism or envy. A recent front-page headline in the *South Western Times* “City no longer ‘spoilt’” indicates the political nature of much of this development – then, and now:

> Bunbury, once despised by regional centres across WA for having millions of dollars thrown at it by political parties trying to win government is no longer the State’s most spoilt regional city, figures have revealed.

Geraldton and Albany MPs Shane Hill and Peter Watson this week gloated about the hefty pay cheques dished out to their marginal electorates by the Gallop Government since Labor came to power three years ago, saying the days of Bunbury being “spoilt rotten” appeared to have come to an end. (Spagnolo, 2004b)

The above comment demonstrates the extent to which regional communities are constructed as being in competition with each other. I make no claims that Bunbury is either representative of or greatly different to many other regional communities in Australia or elsewhere. After all, many of its innovations have been appropriated, adapted, or revived from theories and practices of urban and community development throughout the world. Most of its changes are imposed by market forces with government regulators trying to match the pace of development. However, as in all development, these changes have to engage with place and people. These processes of engagement are significant in their own way and have led to some specifically local outcomes.

**Context**

The time-frame for this thesis has been, by necessity, a fluid one. Although drawing upon my involvement within the Bunbury community since 1981, it was always my intention to focus upon the period dating from the opening in 1990 of the Bunbury
Regional Entertainment Centre. Where relevant, historical information is given, particularly in regard to established community theatre groups and the long history of attempts to achieve a large theatre for the town. The discussion is also situated within the history of amateur and community performing arts in Australia and overseas. I am not, however, attempting to write a history of performing arts in the community. This thesis is a highly selective interrogation based on my observations of and engagement with certain aspects of the performing arts. It focuses on drama and theatre and includes music and dance where appropriate, and does not claim to adequately represent the variety and depth of all areas of the performing arts within the community.

From my observations of the Bunbury community, many people want to perform or want their children to perform. They want to participate in or be associated with live events and are prepared to devote time, money and energy to this. In an established community such as Bunbury performance is often mainstream and aspirational. Originality or contemporaneity are not of prime concern. Nor are notions of excellence or high art. This is not to say that excellence is not achieved, it is just that it is not the sole criteria for a successful project. Most performance and choices of repertoire would be regarded by the participants and audiences as apolitical and uncontroversial, often ignoring the ideologies present in or shaping the text or performance. The staging of the popular musical South Pacific at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in 2001 to an enthusiastic audience without acknowledging the problematic postcolonial implications of the text in either the direction or programme notes is typical of this approach.

In Australia the performing arts are frequently supported by government and private sponsorship but a degree of regulation accompanies such support. Community theatre organisations enable social and cultural capital to be acquired and are incorporated into the everyday life of the community. Thus they also serve as a source of identity and belonging for individuals who may feel marginalised within the broader community because of gender, ethnicity, transience, or cultural interests. However, because of the incorporation of the organisation into the mainstream or everyday, certain groups within the wider community may feel excluded because of age, gender, race or class.

1Though owned and part-funded by the City of Bunbury, the Entertainment Centre attracts performers and audiences from the south west region.
I contextualise the discussion about the performing arts by referring to policy development at all levels of government, both in Australia and overseas. I refer to performing arts movements from Australia and abroad, often to point out how Bunbury somehow ‘missed out’ on joining the ranks of the avant garde, the ‘cutting edge’, the ‘politically correct’ or any of the other movements in the performing arts with which certain metropolitan circles are familiar. But, rather than seeing this as a deficiency, I have theorised the Bunbury experience in a way that gives value to the consistent, sometimes conservative, engagement that this community has with the performing arts. This consistency and commitment, particularly as demonstrated by the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, has achieved for Bunbury a regional leadership role in the provision of access to, and education and training in, the performing arts.

**Theoretical frames**

My thesis aims to find a way of reflecting on and writing about the performing arts in a regional community such as Bunbury that is both celebratory and critical. In Part One I examine the variety of theoretical discourses available to discuss performance, art and culture, regionality and community. Traditional standards and judgements of what constitutes high art or excellence are as inappropriate as are some versions of what constitutes ‘cutting edge’ contemporary performance when documenting the lively, but ‘conservative’ Bunbury experience of the performing arts. Hence, I needed to examine traditional definitions of performance, art and culture, as well as consider contemporary attitudes.

It seems to me that Bunbury provides the organisation and infrastructure for a very active performing arts scene, yet it was difficult to find a forum for discussing this within the various discourses related to the performing arts. Academic discourses privileged historical surveys, drama as literature and the avant garde; or applied fields such as education, health sciences or social work. Government arts agencies focussed on professional organisations or, on arts as community development. Bunbury somehow seemed not to fit any one category. Its record of independent, self-funded performing arts organisations places it outside funding categories which tend to prefer the metropolitan, innovation and/or community development in areas of disadvantage (gender, ethnicity, age or region). For many years in Australia amateur theatre had “derogatory connotations” (Litson, 1997a, p. 45). The academy, professional bodies,
and arts agencies, did not appear to offer opportunities to discuss the performing arts in regional areas.

However, during the period covered by this thesis, the discourses appeared to shift, perhaps due to the more conservative political climate in the late-1990s\(^1\). During this period increased attention has been 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 has stimulated interest in and development of the arts in regional communities. National government-funded programs, such as Festivals Australia and Playing Australia, have assisted in the growth of interest in touring professional performances to regional Australia and the burgeoning festival industry across the country. The changes in attitude are largely pragmatic, however, and link to an economic base. Declining populations in some rural communities and the expression of this through the ballot box, have led governments at federal, state and local levels to look for economic solutions via community and cultural development planning, which I discuss in detail in Part One. More recently, discourses around the notion of the civil society, with an emphasis on the ways through which social and cultural capital can be acquired and transferred, have stimulated interest in the economic and social functions of the voluntary sector of Australian society.

In searching for a ‘way in’ to my discussion of the performing arts in regional communities certain discourses proved valuable. I can now see the trajectory covered by my research. Initially, I thought of my project as one based around theatre and the community, and read accordingly. Feeling that the material I found was too focussed on the avant garde, the historical or the innovative, I came upon studies that enquired into the ‘everyday’ or ‘quotidian’ function of culture and performance. This seemed to validate my choice of Bunbury as my point of focus, and I no longer felt the need to make my study a comparative one. There was no need to measure my community against some real or imagined standard.

A discussion that helped me think more broadly about the nature of performance, was to do with ‘liveness’ (Auslander, 1999) and the way in which performance provides this

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\(^1\) The Liberal and National Party coalition was elected to Australian federal government in 1996.
psychological and social need. This line of investigation led me into the emerging discussions about ‘space’ and ‘place’ that cultural geographers, in particular, were grappling with in the mid 1990s, particularly the social, cultural and economic construction of ‘place’ and ‘region’ in relation to identity and regulation (Crang, 1998; Duncan & Ley, 1993; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1993; Soja & Hooper, 1993). This gave me a theoretical underpinning for my observations about the relation of the performing arts to the rapidly changing landscape of Bunbury and the southwest region.

For me the most problematic concept was ‘community’ because of the ideological purposes served by the term. It is often used to universalise, essentialise or normalise the experiences of various demographic groupings. Like ‘democracy’ or ‘civil society’, ‘community’ is so often taken-for-granted, but at every point one needs to ask which community is being invoked within the particular usage. In terms of the performing arts, I had particular problems with the use of the term ‘community theatre’ or ‘community arts’ during the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s (Hawkins, 1993), as it seems to valorise the experiences of certain groups within society on the basis of disadvantage, thus creating a hierarchy of ‘community’ experiences. The activities of traditional performing arts groups within regional communities were overlooked, particularly in terms of funding opportunities. Yet, as I argue later, these groups, because of their stability and longevity, have provided opportunities for many individuals to acquire social and cultural capital.

The recent revival of interest in the nature of a ‘civil society’ (Cox, 1995, 2000; Frankel, 1994, 2001; Mouffe, 1993; Vasta, 2000a, 2000b; Warby, 1996) and the contribution made by not-for-profit organisations and volunteerism (Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2001) gave me the validation I needed to pursue my argument about the role and function of the performing arts within regional communities. Though recognising the danger of being associated with discourses that may seem to have a nostalgic take on the past (particularly the 1950s) or with theories of economic rationalism that only give value to the arts if some economic benefit can be seen to be derived, I feel that the combination of altruism and pragmatism that seems to merge in discussions about social and cultural capital is a useful and constructive frame through which to read the performing arts in Bunbury and its regions.
In Part Two of this thesis I consider the history and current status of performance in Bunbury in terms of the ‘community theatre’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s as documented by Hawkins and others (Hawkins, 1993; O. Kelly, 1984; Kershaw, 1992; McKinnon, 1993; Petersen, 1991; Watt, 1995). I propose that the Bunbury performance groups were never really included in this movement but rather remained in the tradition of amateur or repertory theatre in Australia. And I argue that the Bunbury performance groups are perhaps more representative of the ‘community’ than other ‘one-off’ funded projects.

I consider the function and role of the volunteer/amateur in community performance and the strong sense of group belonging and ownership of theatre spaces that are evoked in participants. This will also be linked with the discussion in Part Three of the role of volunteers in the creation and maintenance of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, together with an analysis of the relationship between volunteer organisations, and regulatory bodies such as local government or arts funding bodies.

Theories of the banal or popular (Read, 1995) and their function within the everyday life of the community prove useful to a consideration of questions of genre, repertoire and performance standards in terms of who makes these choices and what they might represent. I suggest that criteria used by arts funding organisations are often irrelevant to the actual practices of regional performing arts groups.

As examples of the commitment of individuals to performance and the local community I provide two profiles: firstly a local playwright and active community theatre participant; and secondly, a local teacher and director, and the performing arts group she helped establish that is committed to exploring place and identity through original works and productions of contemporary Australian texts.

The past and current state of youth performance forms the basis for two chapters in Part Two. I briefly survey the breadth of performance experiences available to young people within the community, particularly the growth, development and control of performing arts within the school curriculum. I consider training provided by private teachers and the impact on the lives of young people in terms of skills development and formation of
attitudes towards the performing arts. I examine discourses about young people that circulate within the education, health and social work professions and how these shape the expectations of government agencies and funding bodies in terms of youth involvement in the performing arts. I argue that these expectations tend to shape the outcome of projects and can contribute to cynicism amongst young performers about the meaning of their work. I consider the ethical implications of some of these processes, and provide case studies to support this discussion.

In Part Three I consider the origins, siting and management of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in terms of the strong community affiliations that have been generated through its comparatively short history and the urban landscape in which it is situated. I also investigate the relationship of the Entertainment Centre with national networking and touring structures and situate this in a discussion about funding for the arts and regional access to heavily subsidised national ‘flagship’ companies. I examine the relationship between professional and volunteer labour, providing case studies of community co-productions that have provided a major boost to training and skills development in the performing arts in the region.

Throughout the thesis, I note the considerable social and cultural capital generated through the active involvement of many citizens at many levels of the performing arts in a regional community. Although for most, the involvement is voluntary and recreational, it has direct economic outcomes in terms of employment opportunities for an increasing number of locals in fields such as arts and cultural development, media, marketing, arts administration, education and hospitality. Young people can express their individuality and creativity in socially acceptable ways through the performing arts because of the tolerance traditionally accorded by society to art and culture. Moreover, the social and cultural capital that they acquire has made, and will continue to make, a significant contribution to cultural leadership in Bunbury and its surrounds, and subsequently, to much needed cultural infrastructure. However, cultural development is, of necessity, long term, longer than the term of an aspiring politician or public servant. It results from the hard work of the not-for-profit organisations, and benefits the social and economic well being of the region.
PART ONE: Changing discourses
Chapter 2: Performance

Contemporary academic interest in performance represents a broadening of the base on which the formal study of the theatrical and dramatic arts is grounded. Performance studies enable conversations between the many disciplines that have been invoked in recent theorising about performance, theatre and drama. The academic study of drama as literature and the history of theatre can be combined with praxis and theories of praxis. The range of social theories deriving from Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, de Saussure and Raymond Williams have permeated the disciplines traditionally designated the ‘humanities’ or the ‘arts’ and have led to interdisciplinary dialogues and a recognition of qualitative research, the subjective presence of the researcher, and an interest in, and sometimes critique of, the quotidian or everyday. Various cultures have permeated the disciplines traditionally designated the ‘humanities’ or the ‘arts’ and have led to interdisciplinary dialogues and a recognition of qualitative research, the subjective presence of the researcher, and an interest in, and sometimes critique of, the quotidian or everyday.

Variously labelled cultural studies, critical theory, poststructuralism or postmodernism, contemporary theorising is fluid and sometimes ephemeral. It is thus somewhat like performance, whose theorists are mostly agreed on one thing, that it exists in the ‘here and now’ (Connor, 1989, p. 141). “Performance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

A point of contact between performance and theories of human society and culture is the extent to which theorists have used tropes derived from performance and theatre to describe the human condition. It is of course a tradition that draws upon the earliest theorising about the nature of performance by Aristotle and his contemporaries that has been given considerable status by Shakespeare’s frequent use of the theatrical conceit or trope in, for example, *Hamlet*, *As you like it* and *Henry V*, to represent the performative nature of human existence, and given immediacy by the presence of the live audience at the live performance within the ‘rounded O’ of the Globe. Sociology, anthropology, ethnography and history have all drawn upon performance and theatrical metaphors to theorise roles we play within society and, as recent cultural theories, including geography, have noted, place, and the way we position ourselves within it borrows considerably from the theatre. See studies of contemporary phenomenon such as the shopping mall, the design of urban spaces or youth sub-cultures (Gibson & Watson, 1994; Goss, 1993; Lewis, 1991; Morris, 1993; Willis, 1990; Zukin, 1991). The health sciences such as health education, psychology, counselling and social work have
variously used strategies and therapies derived from performance to facilitate their work. As Blau (1982, p. xvii) notes, “the ‘human sciences’ … appropriated theatricality as a method and gave it back to the theatre as a matrix, through the ideological exchanges after the sixties”; for example, the various uses made of Forum theatre techniques documented by Boal (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994), or the funding of performance projects that convey a ‘health message’. It is not unusual to find standard drama techniques and exercises used in the burgeoning industry of self-improvement, goal setting and team building within the corporate world. And of course, techniques of performance and theatre have been well-known and utilised to achieve political ends, as acknowledged by Juvenal and Machiavelli, thus ensuring the continuation of the ‘bread and circuses’ tradition of which in Australia, the 2000 Sydney Olympics gave us spectacular confirmation; or the alternative strategies of agit prop.

Performance as a concept is heavily endowed with “clichés and mystifications” (Auslander, 1999, p. 2). A legacy of anthropological studies of ritual in early (‘primitive’) societies has been the tendency to accept uncritically “live performance’s ostensible curative powers”, as Auslander notes (1999). This is often valorised in discussions about the relationship between performers and spectators, and in theories of performance, particularly by some practitioners (see Artaud, Brook, Boal). Auslander’s concern was earlier stated by Blau:

Since I look at our recent devotion to ritual occasions with a skeptical eye, I am somewhat reluctant to speak in the old mythic and hierophantic terms about the theatre being reborn at such disjunctures. (1982, p. xvii)

Studies of ritual form a key part of the development of an alternative and community theatre movement from the 1960s to the 1980s, and are part of recent theorising about ‘physical theatre’ that draws upon performance techniques from a range of cultures, such as Butoh, a physically demanding performance genre developed in Japan. This discourse can become essentialist in tone and has been critiqued by those postmodern theories that concern themselves with subaltern studies, such as feminism and postcolonialism.

Auslander suggests that “it may not be possible, within Western culture, to think ‘performance’ without thinking ‘theatre’, so deeply engrained is the idea of theatre in
both performance and discourse about performance” (1997, pp. 3-4). Equally, ‘drama’ is subsumed under the rubric of performance. “Postmodern theories of drama have laid great stress upon this contingency of performance” (Connor, 1989, p. 134). The characteristics of performance that appear to be agreed upon are cultural specificity, “liveness” (Auslander, 1999), immediacy, a focus on the body, non-reproducibility, ephemerality, and an actor/spectator dialectic created by the establishment of an agreed upon performance space or stage. Theorists, practitioners and spectators assert the specificity of performance in its defence against an increasingly mediatized environment in contemporary (western) culture and possible claims that anything live performance can do can be bettered or exceeded in the media. Auslander asks “[i]f live performance cannot be shown to be economically independent of, immune from contamination by, and ontologically different from mediatized forms, in what sense can liveness function as a site of cultural and ideological resistance” (Auslander, 1999, p. 7)? He shows the extent to which mediatized representations have appropriated theatrical conventions and, conversely, the extent to which ‘live’ performance is mediatized. His most obvious examples are drawn from the realm of the rock concert where the ‘live’ event is watched by many in the audience as a simulacrum on large screens, and the music is heard via electronic sources.

Auslander suggests that it is through simultaneously foregrounding and frustrating “the desire for community” that live performance still retains its value “in a way [that] mediatized representations, which never hold out the promise of unity, do not” (1999, p. 57). He also notes the symbolic capital attributable to being physically present at particular events which, because of their evanescence, have acquired value. The symbolic capital may have nothing to do with the actual quality of the experience itself. He draws his examples from events such as Woodstock, where it is sufficient to say that you attended; whether you heard or saw any of the performances is immaterial (Auslander, 1999, p. 57). In Australia attendance at events such as the Big Day Out, an annual nation-wide series of contemporary music concerts, acquires similar value.

McAuley, at the National symposium on research in the performing arts held in Melbourne in 1997, reminds her audience that by “taking performance as the central object of study, it’s simply not cultural performance, aesthetic performance, but performance more broadly which is why Mardi Gras or a football final or Question
Time in Parliament is performance” (cited in Adler, 1997, p. 41). The concept of performance gives permission for a broader discussion than was previously possible within theatre and drama studies. However, questions of cultural value still sit uneasily in the minds of many practitioners as, at the same symposium, the musician/composer and academic Simone de Haan, betrays a nervousness about what might be included within performing arts:

[I]t is all too easy to label our practice and outcomes as simply another form of professional practice, or even as superficial entertainment. Unfortunately, if this view of arts as entertainment becomes dominant in our society’s general thinking, we will inevitably cut out the most important body of work, which is the work which will break down the existing barriers and open up new ground, which therefore often plays to small committed audiences and is largely self-produced. (de Haan, 1997, p. 22)

de Haan articulates the modernist position of high art as experimental and of, or for, a specific, knowing, audience. In postmodern terms this position perpetuates the notions of elitism associated with high-art that sees itself as superior to mediatized, popular culture.

Blau attributes theatre with ‘the thought of performance” which he sees as a power to “de-realize or dematerialize the world, though the most powerful thought of theatre, what drives the theatre mad, is that the world only lets it go so far” (Blau, 1982, p. xiii). The tension within performance of being part of the commercial economy yet wanting simultaneously to float free of it is, of course, largely unresolvable. More recent discussions, conscious of the need for theatre to prove its relevance and to justify itself within the arts economy, and realising that political theatre such as feminist and alternative theatre of the 1960s to 1980s, no longer necessarily occupies the high moral and/or didactic ground; look for other ways to justify its existence (and funding). This may be found in a renewed academic interest in communitarian, civic virtues which will be examined in Chapter Five. Reinelt believes:

theater may offer one of the last, live, civic spaces of dialogue in our ‘overscreened’ societies, a space in which imaginative possibilities can be explored and enacted, a space where a consensual, if necessarily conflictual, democratic process can be reaffirmed. (cited in Colleran & Spencer, 1998, pp. 9-10)
From this perspective, de Haan’s nervousness about performance as ‘entertainment’ is perhaps unnecessarily dismissive. Realistically, careers in ‘entertainment’ are probably the vocational outcomes for many graduates of performing arts programs. Dyer (1993) perceives a fundamental need within contemporary Western society for entertainment:

It is important, I think, to stress the cultural and historical specificity of entertainment. The kinds of performance produced by professional entertainment are different in audience, performers and above all intention from the kinds of performance produced in tribal, feudal or socialist societies … entertainment is a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the ‘public’) by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure….

Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as ‘escape’ and as ‘wish fulfilment’, point to its central thrust, namely utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of ‘something’ better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. (Dyer, 1993, p. 272)

Reinelt, however, sees “staging nostalgia” as a right wing political strategy “in the name of a moral majority culture” which is in defiance of “politically committed and engaged theatres [that] have staged race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as foci for social struggles and possible community in the midst of difference” (Reinelt, 1998, p. 285).

Anthropological studies of human cultures and societies throughout the world suggest that “[t]he primary method by which people construct their personal and social identities in every culture of the world is ritual” (O'Farrell, 1996, p. 127). Associated with this, part of the “fan of referents” identified by Turner and Schechner that derive from performance (Schechner & Schuman, 1976, p. 1), is ‘play’. “A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviours which in humans continue undiminished throughout life” (Schechner, 1993, p. 26). Rasmussen, drawing upon Turner, asserts that ‘human play plays a serious role” as “people need to learn by breaking the rules”. Play, via performance, is a socially sanctioned liminal state through which this may be achieved (Rasmussen, 1996, pp. 131-5).

Lefebvre suggests that play counters the boredom of the capitalist, bureaucratised city:
[It is] a term which must be understood here in its broadest and deepest meaning. Sport is play and so is theatre, in a way more involving than the cinema. Fairs, collective games of all sorts, survive at the interfaces of an organized consumer society, in the holes of a serious society which perceives itself as structured and systematical and which claims to be technical. (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 171)

Two characteristics of play in modern, complex societies, according to Turner (in Rasmussen, 1996, pp.131-5) are that it “is separated from work” and that it is “voluntary, not a valued imperative as it is seen in pre-modern times”. The voluntary nature of performance as recreation or leisure in a community such as Bunbury is one of the themes of this thesis, although interestingly enough, the forms that it takes and the processes through which it is achieved are modelled on traditional, professional work practices.

Boal, in the tradition of writing about praxis, both romanticises and essentialises the originating idea of theatre—an ur-theatre.

In the beginning, actor and spectator coexister in the same person, the point at which they were separated, when some specialised as actors and others as spectators, marks the birth of the theatrical forms we know today. Also born at this time were ‘theatres’, architectural constructions intended to make sacred this division, this specialisation. (Boal, 1995, p. 14)

Boal calls this division, the liminal zone which separates actor from spectator, the “aesthetic space”. The platform or stage is an arbitrary place situated within the larger audience space. The aesthetic space is dichotomous; thus actors become spectators and spectators become, vicariously, actors. Brook famously stated “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage” but as Read points out, “The problem is that those responsible for theatre have rarely acknowledged that there is no such thing as an ‘empty space’. They have been surprised, mystified and sometimes dismissive when people who inhabit that space have a point of view concerning the theatre’s arrival” (1995, p. 13). This is something visiting directors of community theatre projects would do well to remember (and given satirical point in The Japanese affair, a play by Bunbury playwright Norm Flynn, profiled in Chapter Seven).

Theatre, for Boal, takes place “in the subjectivity of those who practise it, at the moment when they practise it”. He dismisses the “objectivity of bricks and mortar, sets and
costumes” (1995, p. 19). For cultural theorists, however, the material circumstances of the performance are also part of the ‘experience’ promoted as theatre. Connor states that “more than any other cultural form, the theatre encompasses the extremes of high and low culture; ... the inescapable physical and commercial pressures on the theatre as a social and economic institution” (1989, p.133). Thus the framing of the event through advertising, venue selection, pre- and post-performance ambience, merchandising and so on, shapes audience experience as well as the staged performance itself. No matter how the subjective moment of performance in the ‘aesthetic space’ is fetishised as the ideal of theatre, it can never be separated from the materiality of its production and reception (Blau, 1992).

The use of the terms ‘performance’ and ‘performance studies’ in academic discourse enables a broader discussion than was possible within ‘theatre’ or ‘drama’ studies. Where earlier definitions of drama required action and conflict, thus requiring at least two performers, the wider field can incorporate discussions about single-performer events such as dance or performance art; or mixed genre or media performances. “We are now far more aware than we used to be of other traditions of theatre in which the drama is minimal or (nearly) absent” (Blau, 1982, p. xiii). The interest of cultural theorists in the performative nature of the everyday, the gaze of the spectator or the representation of the body can be subsumed within performance studies. Nevertheless, as cited earlier, Auslander reminds us that in western culture the idea of theatre “haunts all performance”, with the separation of performers from the audience by the imagined fourth wall, the real or imagined curtain and the lit space still prevailing.

Not all theatres have a curtain, but all theatre remembers that it was there. It also remembers—in various repressed and involuted ways—when it wasn’t there, the possibility of closure, of which the curtain is emblematic and, even when not there, still momentary in the mind. (Blau, 1982, p. xv)

And Dolan concurs:

In the illusionist tradition that dominates American theatre practice, performers and spectators are separated by a curtain of light that helps maintain the fictitious fourth wall. Performers facing the audience are blinded by the workings of the apparatus that frames them … The spectators’ individuality is subsumed under an assumption of commonality; their differences from each other are disguised by anonymity. (Dolan, 1998, p. 288)
It is this idea of theatre which prevails in a community such as Bunbury and is so entrenched in the minds of performers and audiences that they have difficulty imagining other possibilities, apart from those drawn from the realm of television and the cinema. Or, for some young people, there is, perhaps, no idea of theatre. A significant number of young people have had little or no experience of live performance within a traditional theatre space, which I will consider in subsequent chapters that deal with the marketing of live performance and education in the performing arts. No doubt “new technologies and virtual realities [which change] the way people engage in spectatorship, performance, even subjectivity itself” as Reinelt states (1998, p. 285) contribute to this.

In his discussion about alternative theatre praxis in the 1980s, Gooch states that for theatre to occur it does not require special buildings or professional performers, but he acknowledges that “the larger part of theatre production does take place in buildings, involves several human performers, assumes professional standards and at the very least implies an audience, even if no one turns up” (1984, p. 16). This also means that theatre is less innovatory in form than other art forms “which must be due in large part to its production being more socially complex to organise” (p.16). Reinelt points to changes in American theatre audiences where “due, in part, to a proliferation of local communities—most medium cities have a wide variety of performance venues, from regional repertory and touring sites to community centers, equity waiver houses, university and school productions, and small clubs and ‘off-spaces’” (1998, p. 285). This could also be said of Australia, and Bunbury in particular. Reinelt implies in her discussion that this activity is conservative in nature; that politically engaged theatre has lost its hold on theatre practice. Yet, as she admits, there is a thriving theatre practice ‘out there’. Performance holds a powerful attraction for many people and, as a voluntary leisure activity, occupies a significant position in community arts practice in Australia. But the increased separation of spectator from performer in theatre since the 17th century may mean that theatre does not provide “for many a sense of group (or tribal) social interaction or catharsis” (Lancaster, 1997, p. 77). Lancaster suggests that this has led to the development of performance-entertainments which enable the spectators to participate and to “break out of restrictive social roles” (p. 77). The examples he gives are karaoke, participatory theatre or role playing games. He concludes that “a traditional play production with one set of values and beliefs conflicts with a multi-ethnic, multi-classed and multi-valued audience” (p. 86).
Contemporary weddings, for example, seem to illustrate the desire for participation in theatricalised and mediatized performance, the ceremony itself in many cases being overshadowed by the pre- and post-ceremonial activities with artfully constructed photo and video opportunities in ‘unusual’ locations. It could be argued that as theatre no longer satisfies a popular need for spectatorship, interaction or performance other activities such as ‘live’ outdoor concerts, sports matches, themed leisure activities, role plays, festivals, street performance such as juggling or fire twirling, costume parties, weddings, dance and music events all supply a “sense of the group (or tribal) social interaction or catharsis” (Reinelt, 1998, p. 285). Nevertheless, the appeal of theatre-based productions remains strong in a community such as Bunbury, although obtaining an audience for this always represents a challenge.

Theories of performance allow for a discussion of a broad range of cultural processes in a regional community such as Bunbury as they are not restricted to what happens on stage. Through this it is also possible to demonstrate the ways in which theatre is tied to the larger cultural infrastructure of a place and to validate the resilience and strength of the amateur theatre tradition in Bunbury which is, this thesis argues, a more representative community theatre than previous theoretical models. The remaining chapters in Part One will discuss the way in which performance, theatre and drama are situated within the discourses surrounding the arts and culture industry within Australia; how notions of regionality and place affect our perceptions of the performing arts in communities; and how ideas of ‘community’ are invoked in discussions about performance.
Chapter 3: Art and culture

Art(s)

A legacy of the 18th and 19th centuries was the narrowing of the meaning of ‘art’. The skills and craft of the artist, rather than being learnt and practised, became instead ‘gifts’ and ‘inspiration’. This represents, in Kelly’s view, an appropriation by the “metropolitan ruling class” whereby an appreciation of the arts became a “class specific subdivision of pleasure” (O. Kelly, 1984, p. 55). Certain of the ‘arts’ were elevated to ‘high-art’ status: poetry, opera, drama, fine-arts (painting and sculpture), ‘classical’ music or ballet; whilst others were relegated to the popular or banal: craft, musical theatre, other forms of dance, or new media such as film and television. High arts became endowed with esoteric properties that those with sufficient cultural capital were able to read or perceive. This perception survives still as this federal coalition-government document reveals:

Art is central to an enlightened and questioning society … Art is about excellence, expression, beauty, ideas, controversy, communication and humanity. It inspires, uplifts, confronts. (cited in Biztrac & Research, 1997, p. 8)

The promulgation of high art became part of the European imperial project, with colonised nations expected to mimic their imperial betters. Education for the middle, working and subaltern classes was modelled on Arnoldian beliefs in the power of the arts to improve and cultivate. To this end the study of Shakespeare was central, both at home and abroad. Thus Australia has, as a publicly funded ‘flagship’ theatre company, the Bell Shakespeare Company, which, with prompting from its benefactors via the Playing Australia Fund, finally made it to Bunbury in 2000.

Mercer notes the process through which the western Romantic tradition developed a language of ‘aesthetics’ to talk about art and the term ‘creativity’ to attach “to the unique powers of an individual in the production of specific works which are classified, in turn, into genres and then, for policy and funding purposes, into ‘art forms’”(1998, p. 13). Mercer cites anthropologist Clifford Geertz with a reference to ‘art as a cultural system’, in which “creativity … has become a major marker” (p. 23).
Peters and Cherbo, in a study of the ‘unincorporated’ arts in America, quote from “an essay by Balfe and Peters, commissioned for the ninety-second American Assembly:

Traditional conceptualizations of the arts were built upon related dichotomies, going back to the classical Greek distinction between ‘the beautiful’ and ‘the useful’ imbedded [sic] in Western culture as a religious distinction between ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’. In America (and elsewhere) during the last century, the arts and their respective disciplinary forms have been institutionalized as either ‘fine art’ or ‘entertainment’; as ‘non-profit’ or ‘commercial’, as being ‘elite’ or ‘popular’ or having ‘mass’ appeal’. (1998, p. 8)

These dichotomies were upheld throughout the modernist period and certain artists and works acquired canonical status. However, late twentieth century postmodernist trends have opened up the previously narrow definition of ‘art’ and have revealed its ideological construction. Kelly, in his early critique of community arts published in 1984, states that “as with the term community, we must use the term art in a dynamic way, recognising that if it describes anything useful at all it is a set of social relationships, and the social practices that result from them” (1984, p. 56). In a discussion about the position of the arts in post-apartheid South Africa, van Graan states “precisely because the arts may serve—whether consciously or unconsciously—the hegemonic interests of various social forces and political players, they are themselves the site and subject of ideological contestation” (1998, p. 2). Shirato considers that the arts continue to be of value for governments and power elites. He states “they are predicated, by and large, on notions of political disinterestedness; and, as a corollary, they offer, in an overt sense, no serious challenge to the status quo of the field of power” (1996, p. 1). Gough calls this the “Faustian bargain” where “[i]n the modern period the rulers of states have generally not been connoisseurs of the arts, but they have been more determined and more systematic than their predecessors in exploiting the capacity of art and literature to shape public opinion … the arts should create images of officially approved morality and political duty” (1995, p. 159). He notes the development of arts bureaucracies and claims that “Australia now has four times as many arts administrators on the federal payroll as the United States” (p.165). In Bunbury’s case there are probably at least twenty arts administration positions that did not exist prior to the 1990s. These are associated with the Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, the City of Bunbury and the Regional Arts Development Office.
Bianchini believes that the traditional dichotomy within the arts is still maintained. In his study of urban renewal projects in several European cities, he found that “the ‘pre-electronic arts’ and the ‘contemporary media’ elements of urban cultural policies are often not adequately integrated” (1991, p. 25). He laments the “failure to exploit considerable possible synergies” (p. 25). By broadening out the discussion to one of cultural policy, the statement of Australian national cultural policy prepared for the Labor government of the time includes discussion about film, television and multimedia (Creative nation: Commonwealth cultural policy, 1994). In a recent Western Australian arts and cultural policy statement prepared for ArtsVoice, the following activities are listed:

Visual arts including painting, drawing, sculpture and architecture; material arts and crafts such as ceramics, design, carving and fibre arts; performing arts such as theatre, dance and music; literature such as fiction, poetry and drama; media arts such as photography, video and film; and interdisciplinary arts. (Strickland, 2000)

However, in a study titled Public attitudes to the arts, Australia conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australia Council (Skinner & Seares, 1998), when participants were asked what they would include in the ‘arts’ the questionnaire provided the following list:

- plays, ballet, opera
- architecture, design
- painting, drawing, sculpture
- photography
- literature, books, poetry
- sport
- music (concerts, orchestra, singing)
- craft, pottery, weaving
- none of the above
- don’t know

(Skinner & Seares, 1998, p. 41)

Film, television and multimedia arts were not included in the study, a curious omission given that the Creative Nation document had signalled government interest in these areas four years earlier. Skinner and Seares report that “Australians held differing views about the range of activities included in the arts: 80.9% included plays, ballet and opera;
79.7% music (concerts, orchestra and singing); 77.2% painting, drawing and sculpture; 61.6% literature, books and poetry; 53.9% craft, pottery and weaving; 53.5% photography; 35.2% architecture and design; and 9.1% sport” (p.1). They note that “younger and middle age groups included a wider range of activities in the arts than older age groups” (p. 1).

Yet studies conducted in the early 1980s show that Australians “see the arts in the very broad sense and as including the crafts as well as music, painting, writing and theatre. Participation is important and improves the quality of life, but is for pleasure and entertainment” (Tolhurst, 1980, p. 14). An Australia Council report (The arts: some Australian data, 1989, p.54) cites an earlier study from 1982:

The majority of people perceive the existence of general community benefit from the arts and do not support the idea that the arts are of value only to a small section of the population, even when arts are fairly narrowly defined. (The arts: some Australian data, 1989, p. 54)

Thus it would appear that Australians have had a fairly broad view of what constitutes the arts for some time, and when the types of arts activities in a regional community like Bunbury are considered it becomes apparent that participation in the arts is a feature of many people’s lives, although it may not necessarily be named as such. Typical arts activities in the region are dance (ballet, contemporary, ballroom, bush and ethnic), theatre (amateur and professional), music (concert bands, contemporary, choirs, musical theatre, folk, blues), crafts (patchwork and quilting, embroidery, pottery, fine woodcraft, decorative arts), fine art (painting, sculpture), bookclubs, writing (poetry, fiction, oral history, theatre and film), film-making, photography, and digital and graphic design.

The Australia Council commissioned another major study, Australians and the Arts (Costantoura, 2001) from market research company Saatchi and Saatchi to “determine how Australians see the arts today and how they would like to see the arts tomorrow” (Costantoura, 2001). This report confirmed that “the arts appear to form a part of the routine lives of most Australians” (Costantoura, 2000, p. 36) but that:

some members of the public hold out-of-date perceptions of what constitute ‘the arts’ and what the arts can mean to them personally and nationally. On the other hand, some people in the arts sector apparently hold out-of-date perceptions of who
constitutes the Australian public, what motivates them and how to deal with them.
(p. 8)

The report’s advice to the Australia Council was to develop better strategies to communicate with the general population and “to become better integrated with the evolving interests, hopes and desires of all Australians” (p. 8).

Arturs’ and Hodsell’s discussion about the role of the arts sector in American civic and economic life, states:

“Few audience members or arts consumers care very much whether a particular product of the arts sector does or does not make money, or whether it is produced by ‘professionals’ or not. What matters to most consumers of art and participants in the arts is whether the art form satisfies a need—private or public—of identity and value, quality of life and growth, education and awareness, and creativity and entertainment … the public purposes of art. (1998, p. 1)

The size of the arts sector in America “is enormous”, hence the growing interest in arts management (Peters & Cherbo, 1998; Wyszomirski, 1999). Regardless of whether the arts are “commercial, not-for-profit, or unincorporated” they are characterised by high levels of financial risk: “very few arts products make money or break even … Most not-for-profit organisations have to raise more than half their budgets through grants and gifts. Most unincorporated activities rely largely on the in-kind and volunteer contributions of community members” (Arturs & Hodsoll, 1998, p. 2). The National inquiry into arts and the community conducted in Britain in 1992 indicated that local arts organisations “alone were responsible for tens of thousands of events a year” (Arts and communities: The report of the national inquiry into arts and the community, 1992, p. 1), a fact that early discussions of community arts often overlooked because the nature of many of these events did not promote prevailing left wing or liberationist ideologies. For this reason many Australian communities were ‘left out’ of aspects of the community arts movements of the 1970s and 1980s, including funding. A community such as Bunbury is typical of this and this thesis aims to explore some of the reasons why. Despite a thriving performing arts scene in Bunbury, criteria of ‘excellence’ (Castles & Kalantzis, 1994) or ‘innovation and sophistication’ (Nugent, 1999) or ‘inspiration’ or ‘liberation’ (The arts: some Australian data, 1989, p. 54), impose unrealistic goals and good ideas tend to founder on such high aspirations.
Typically state arts funding bodies require detailed applications which include concepts, details of personnel and other possible sources of funding up to twelve months before the commencement of the project. For a largely volunteer organisation the formality of this process, the high level of artistic and financial commitment required and the agendas of the funding organisations can be impediments. Many opt to proceed, as they always have, by a more conservative choice of production with popular appeal which will cover its production costs and is answerable only to the organisation and not multiple funding bodies. With young people, planning for an event six to twelve months in advance can seem like forever. The project loses its immediacy and it is difficult for a young person to make a definite commitment when her/his life could take a different direction in the intervening months.

Yet, by not participating in state funding schemes, there is a tendency for such organisations to be overlooked and ignored. Rather than being identified and celebrated for their independence, they miss potential opportunities by not being included on data bases through which relevant information is circulated. This will be examined in Part Two in relation to community performance organisations in Bunbury.

**Culture**

Where ‘arts’ exclude, ‘culture’ includes. (Willis, 1990, p. 2)

In some dark recess of my mind I recall an ironic phrase that circulated during the 1970s when Australia was undergoing one of its regular ‘coming-of-age’ celebrations: ‘ya gotta get kultcha’. We were rather self-consciously glorying in Australian working class and middle class ‘kultcha’ as satirically but lovingly recreated in theatre and film. The apotheosis of this ironic, self-mocking but celebratory representation of Australian culture may have been represented in the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. In a display of spectacle and excess our ‘culture’ was performed by thousands and scripted and directed by those suburban kids who now are the movers and shakers in the Australian arts industry: Meryl Tankard, Lex Marinos, Ric Birch, David Atkins, Reg Mombasa, Sue Broadway, Stephen Page, Rhoda Roberts, Nigel Triffitt, Dein Perry and Richard Wherrett (Carr, 2000). Among the names we recognise the links to the alternative and community arts scene of the 1970s and 1980s when Circus Oz, Flying Fruitfly Circus, Tap Dogs, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Dance Company or the surfing label Mambo had their origins. Ironically, and probably fittingly, the largest and most successful arts event in Australia’s history was made possible through a sporting competition.

“Culture is ordinary” declared Raymond Williams (1989, p. 4) as, in defiance of the Oxbridge elite who worshipped at the altar of aesthetics and high art, he sought to validate working class cultures and tastes in post-war Britain. Williams noted the complexity of meanings associated with the word ‘culture’, but identified three broad modern categories of usage. Firstly, culture describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; secondly, it indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group; and thirdly, it indicates the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (R. Williams, 1981, pp. 10-11).

It was the view of culture as intellectual and artistic activity (Hawkins, 1993; Mercer, 1998) that Williams identifies as the first of the modern usages of the term ‘culture’ that informed past policy making by Arts Councils (Hawkins, 1993; Mercer, 1998). Frankel, in his work on Australian political cultures, however, argues that “the notion of ‘culture’ should not be perceived as something narrowly associated with ‘the arts’” (Frankel, 1992, p. 7). Willis concurs. In his study of the everyday cultures of the young he states:

The institutions and practices, genres and terms of high art are currently categories of exclusion more than of inclusion. They have no real connection with most young people or their lives. … The official existence of the ‘arts’ in institutions seems to exhaust everything else of its artistic contents. If some things count as ‘art’, the rest must be ‘non-art’. (Willis, 1990, p. 1)

This is not art was the title of a series of media/arts events in Newcastle, New South Wales in October, 2000. It incorporated Electrofringe, the ‘Student Media Conference’, the Independent Radio Conference, the National Young Writers Festival and the National Independent Electronic Labels Conference. A brief glance at the major sponsors reveals the Australia Council for the Arts, the City of Newcastle, the University of Newcastle, the NSW ministry for the arts, Octapod and FTO. Where the word ‘arts’ appears in the logos of both government agencies it is in a smaller, unbolded font or with a lower-case ‘a’. A ‘non-art’ arts event is thus located in a regional city which has self-consciously developed and exploited its working class image,
particularly its youth culture. In the past two decades many arts ‘products’ have emerged from Newcastle such as Blackrock (Enright, 1996), Aftershocks (Brown, 1993), the Castanet Club and the numerous ‘personalities’ who went on to solo careers on stage, radio or television; or Tap Dogs who have given tap dance an Aussie working bloke dynamic.

Rentschler notes the development in Australia from 1994 onwards of “the dominance of a new pattern of beliefs about the role of culture in society: the dominance of the entertainment and leisure industries; and an orientation to information, leisure and consumption that promotes audience growth and diversity” (1998, p. 5). She cites the Creative Nation document as broadly defining culture “to mean a whole way of life, not a detached domain for elite players” (p.5). The ‘whole way of life’ notion of ‘culture’ draws from anthropological studies of culture(s). Frow reminds us that “it refers to a social group seen as other, or to my own group’s ways and customs as seen by another group; it is always ‘an idea of the Other (even when I re-assume it for myself)” (1995, p. 2). However, culture is attributed (burdened?) with “enormous power [that's] value lies in its knitting together of peoples and nations. Without it there is no community” (D. Mills, 1997, p. 18). Just as the “culture as individual accomplishment”, the “classic liberalist position”, (Hawkins, 1993, p. 17) posed problems of exclusion; the “culture as whole way of life” can be equally problematic. Whose culture and which way of life? These are some of the vexing questions that have faced community and cultural policy makers, funding bodies, and communities during the past decade as they have grappled with questions of authenticity, ownership, indigeneity, ethnicity, gender, place and age. As Petersen states:

Both Hawkins in Australia and Owen Kelly in Britain have highlighted the role of the state funding body in constructing community arts according to this vague and evasive meaning and thereby constraining its radical theoretical development [Hawkins 1990; Kelly 1984]. By emphasising social, that is the contextual, rather than aesthetic (textual) criteria for arts support community arts has been vulnerable to being dismissed on the basis that they may produce fun but they certainly do not produce art. (1991, p. 4)

In handbooks designed to assist recent attempts at cultural planning, culture is represented unproblematically as authentic, celebratory and life-affirming: “it is about
participation, celebration, identity, belonging to a community and having a sense of place” (Grogan, Mercer, & Engwicht, 1995, p. 12). Frankel, however, argues that:

the political economy of everyday life is inseparably related to culture … Australian public spheres are shaped by the way particular state institutions, private businesses and a whole range of political, religious, media, union, cultural and other community organizations interact with one another. I say ‘spheres’ because in Australia we have numerous local and regional public spheres based on particular towns or States. (1992, pp. 12, 16)

Frankel shows how important consideration of specific local and regional practices is in gaining understanding of national public spheres. This thesis examines the way in which the cultural and social economy of Bunbury and region is shaped by numerous interactions between individuals and institutions as described by Frankel above. These are often as much pragmatic, as visionary or altruistic, and from them a considerable cultural infrastructure has been achieved.

Tulloch, drawing upon Fiske, Hodge and Turner, states that “culture grows out of the divisions of society, not its unity. ‘It has to work to construct any unity that it has, rather than simply celebrate an achieved or natural harmony’” (1993, p. vii). The performing arts often strive to construct a harmonic or aesthetic unit which the audience perceives. However, this is achieved only after considerable work. Performers and other personnel come from all levels of society and in a community production the challenge (and the triumph) is to put aside difference and work towards harmony and unity.

**Cultural studies**

The academic discourses currently designated cultural studies document, promote and critique contemporary notions of ‘culture’. This is a merging of traditional textual criticism formerly undertaken in literature departments; with sociological approaches to the study of mass media; anthropological and ethnological studies of culture; and other related humanities areas such as philosophy, psychology, politics, history and geography. As such, cultural studies has proved a productive interdisciplinary meeting point where knowledge can be shared. Its hybrid nature has caused concerns about validity, but its current vitality seems to denote a need for such a dialogue to exist. Underpinning ‘cultural studies’ is the emphasis on the study of contemporary culture, although it shares its methods with parallel academic discourses referred to as cultural
materialism or new historicism, which also draw upon Raymond Williams’ original theorising about society and culture. Cultural materialism/new historicism has proved particularly useful in examining the place of theatre in its community, with, amongst others, significant studies of Renaissance theatre and its relationship to the circulation of power within renaissance society and culture (see Greenblatt, Drakakis et al). Similarly, the highly social nature of performance and theatre in contemporary Australian culture seems to lend itself to an examination through a cultural studies approach. During states that “cultural studies has been … most interested in how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products—in fun, in resistance, or to develop their own identity” (1993a, p. 7).

For comprehensive overviews of the development of ‘cultural studies’ see Hebdige (1993), Mulhern (2000), Cunningham (1992) or During (1993a). Frow and Morris (1993) provide a useful perspective on the way in which Australian cultural studies may have taken a different direction:

Australian cultural studies has not only been a response to the political and social movements of the past three decades (this can be said of cultural studies as a project in general), but has also derived many of its themes, its research priorities, its polemics and, in some ways, its theoretical emphases and privileged working methods, from an engagement with those movements—and the ‘worldly, historical frames’ (to borrow a phrase from Said and Perera) in which they operate. (Frow & Morris, 1993, p. xv)

They continue:

The first set of determinations that we want to posit as acting on Australian cultural studies then, has to do with its involvement in and its confrontation with the intensities of a ‘national’ culture and a ‘national’ politics. A second set of determinations—although this separation is no more than a conceptual artifice—has to do with the emergent logic of the discipline (or the antidiscipline) of cultural studies itself, as it struggles to define its object, the form of its relation to its object, and the theoretical stakes of its practice. (Frow & Morris, 1993, p. xv)

The peculiarly Australian interest in a national culture noted by Frow and Morris has been extended into discussions of region and place, to be pursued in Chapter Four. Much cultural policy and planning has focussed on determining particular community identities as if these are something fixed.
In 1986, Frow stated:

To suggest that, unlike the pseudo-unitary nation, local community groups are truly homogeneous and not themselves subject to the strains of economic, political, and ideological divisions, is to run the risk of thereby reinforcing inequalities within these groups, and in particular of assisting in the formation or consolidation of ‘local’ elites. (Frow, 1986, p. 125)

The challenges of definition posed by concepts of ‘community’ will be explored in the final section of this chapter but Grossberg highlights the problems facing the cultural analyst:

[T]he very possibility or reasonableness of trying to identify and isolate audience fractions, communities, or taste cultures, seems increasingly problematic … The cultural analyst must confront the problematic status, not only of audience interpretations and reports, but of his or her own interpretations … There are no ‘taste cultures’; I doubt that there are two people who watch exactly the same constellation of programs. There are only multiple, mobile and contradictory subjects constantly moving through, proliferating and transforming temporary alliances and formations. (1988, p. 21)

However, the imperative that consistently overrides aesthetic and social considerations is cash (Frow, 1986, p. 118). This has led to the rise of arts bureaucracies and the development of policies for the administration of those funds and the multiplicity of demands made upon them. Thus cultural policy and cultural planning have become part of the discourses associated with art and culture in Australia during the last decade of the twentieth century.

**Cultural policy**

Several writers note the politicization of culture that has occurred over the last three decades. Bianchini sees a relationship to the “rise of the post-1968 urban social movements: feminism, youth revolts, environmentalism, community action, gay and ethnic/racial minority activism” (1991, p. 5). In Europe, he argues, this has resulted in the abandonment of the traditional distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms and the adoption of a “very broad definition of ‘culture”. However:

[T]he 1970s emphasis on personal and community development, participation, egalitarianism, the democratisation of urban space and the revitalisation of public social life was replaced by a language which highlighted the positive contribution
cultural policy could offer to urban economic and physical regeneration. The language of ‘subsidy’ was gradually replaced by the language of ‘investment’, and issues around community access, popular creativity and grassroot participation became progressively less important than the role of prestigious cultural projects and initiatives in promoting a city’s positive image, or the development of sector strategies aimed at maximising the economic potential of local cultural industries. (p. 8)

Beale notes a similar pattern in Australia. She states that:

implicit in the 1980s model of cultural industries was a perception of culture as part of the leisure industry. The split between work and leisure, and public and private, has been part of the traditional gendering of social and cultural life. Creative Nation was an administrative and marketing document, not a critical analysis of Australian culture, and it shifted the concept of culture from a way of life to a commodified product. (Beale & Van Den Bosch, 1998, p. 13)

Mercer cites “the report of the Prime Minister’s Urban Design Task Force (1994, p.28), Urban design in Australia [where] cultural development is described as a ‘post-industrial mode of wealth creation’” (1998, p. 9).

Meyrick also locates the beginning of cultural policy in the 1970s through the then “demands for a more substantial subsidized performing arts sector, and advocates of the time frequently justified aesthetic production along social engineering lines” (1997, p.3). The acceptance of policy driven arts practice led to greater bureaucratization of the arts and cultural industries with a subsequent boom in the employment of arts and cultural administrators. A report by Arts Training Australia states:

The arts and cultural industries are strong contributors to Australia’s social and economic well being. The cultural industries are sunrise industries because they are in the business of information and ideas, design and innovation. (Arts training Australia: Education and training for the cultural industries: New directions: Workbook, 1996)

Meyrick’s critique of the rise of the arts administration industry states that “[a]lthough administration is not in itself a fabricated profession, it is both a symptom of and a response to the contradictions of cultural subvention, an attempt to penetrate the arts by government, and means of defense [sic] by the arts community” (1997, p. 13).
Central to cultural policy in the 1990s has been ‘cultural planning’. Biancini notes that “[i]n the USA ‘cultural planning’ is one of the key concepts associated with the increased importance of the arts for urban and regional policy makers. Grogan, in a 1997 guide to cultural planning, defines it, in terms that would appear to fit the ‘social engineering’ label suggested by Meyrick, as “the process of identification and charting of cultural resources in the local area, with a view to modifying negative elements and enhancing positive elements in order to improve quality of life through economic, social and community development” (Grogan et al., 1995). Beale notes that the definitions of culture provided for or used by local government cultural planning processes are often very limited. Also “the entrenched organisational practices of local government and the territoriality and conflicting agendas of those involved in traditional arts and cultural practice” are part of the constraints (Beale & Van Den Bosch, 1998, p. 17). Bianchini argues that:

There is a danger in cultural policy-led urban regeneration that the (social, economic, environmental, symbolic) spin-offs of the strategy are more important than its actual impact on the quality of cultural production … [and] … a related danger concerns the traditional function of the arts as a critical force, able to question the status quo, and to raise awareness of possible alternatives to it. (1991, p. 23)

Local government cultural planning processes have been formalised within the City of Bunbury since the appointment of a social planner in 2001 and the subsequent establishment of the City Life program. The relationship between cultural planning and community development is examined in Chapter Five then further developed in Chapter Eleven where community and cultural development is discussed in detail in relation to planning processes used by local government and arts agencies.

This chapter has argued that for many Australians appreciation of and participation in ‘the arts’ is subsumed within the everyday and popular culture. Rather than reifying any particular art form, members of a community such as Bunbury are enthusiastic about many different forms of artistic practice as practitioners and audiences. However, as suggested by the various reports and surveys of Australians and the arts detailed in this chapter, they may not necessarily name their practice as such because of the social and cultural capital still invested in ‘high arts’ and, by implication, not associated with the popular or everyday.
Chapter 4: Regionality

Space

A routine exercise for actors is to ‘get to know the space’ in which they are working. Drama workshops are typically held in ‘empty’ spaces that allow for large groups and energetic physical movement. Participants are asked to ‘explore’ the space by moving about, making contact with surfaces, stretching upwards, or flattening themselves to the floor. Through structured exercises the actors are encouraged to endow the space with attributes of place.

Space walk and space shaping exercises … are ways of perceiving/sensing/experiencing the environment (space) around us as an actual dimension in which all can enter, communicate, live and be free. Each player becomes a receiving/sending instrument capable of reaching out beyond the physical self and the immediate environment. (Spolin, 1999, p. 261)

A popular drama exercise with young people is ‘space jump’, where two or more actors improvise sequences of action and dialogue, thus endowing the space with characters and setting. This is then disrupted by the entry of a new actor who, through action and words, changes the scene into another ‘place’ entirely. The skill for the actors is to respond quickly to the new ‘place’, in particular, the changing set of relationships between the characters, and demands imposed by the new place—the politics of place. When the actors are having difficulty with the politics of the place, this is often the cue for the new actor to join the scene and to make them an offer of a new place to inhabit, albeit imaginatively.

Spolin and other practitioners of her generation valorised space as representing creative freedom yet, as Read reminds us, “space is a socially constructed phenomenon” (1995, p. 161) and “location, place and the economics of spatiality are important reminders that theatre does not occur in a never-never land, and never will” (p. 175). Read draws upon the recent work of cultural geographers to support his argument, in particular: Lefebvre; the journal Antipode; radical feminist geography; David Harvey; and Edward Soja (p. 158).
The idea of the empty space as representative of artistic freedom is associated with modernism and the preoccupation of the avant garde with time and space. The minimalist white on white artworks of the abstract expressionists or Beckett’s pared-down scripts seem emblematic of this. Indeed, Massey et al. suggest that postmodernism is preoccupied with space and place (1993, p. 14). This has led to “a whole range of spatial metaphors … position, location, situation, mapping, geometrics of domination, centre-margin, open-closed, inside-outside, global-local; liminal space; third space; not-space; impossible space; the city” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 1). The ‘empty space’ so prized by experimental theatre practitioners of the mid 20th century proves as problematic a term as the 18th century conceit of *terra nullius*, which, it is suggested, was glib rationale for dispossession and oppression.

In her study of regulations governing land-use in urban planning and the form of power they represent in everyday life, Huxley cites Foucault’s statement “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1994, p. 150). Entrikin (1989), in his overview of the changing relationship between geography and sociology in the 20th century, also considers the growth of bureaucracy and its impact on local government and regional areas. Hebdige, drawing on Foucault and cited by Soja and Hooper, states that:

> spatial relations are seen to be no less complex and contradictory than historical processes, and space itself refigured as inhabited and heterogeneous, as a moving cluster of points of intersection for manifold axes of power which cannot be reduced to a unified plane or organized into a single narrative. (1993, p. 196)

The current interest in “the spatial vogue” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 2) suggests “a sense in which the geographical is being used to provide a secure grounding in the increasingly uncertain world of social and cultural theory” (p. 6). Soja and Hooper provide an overview of the transition from modern geography to ‘postmodern geographies’ and pose questions such as:

> Everyone involved might now agree that ‘geography matters’ and that ‘space makes a difference’ in theory, culture and politics; but does this agreement mask conflicting perspectives on the ‘spaces that difference makes’ and hence on the new cultural politics? (1993, p. 197)
However, they concede that:

to create too great a gap between geographers and non-geographers is politically unwise and would obscure the exciting cross-fertilization that is currently taking place among those convinced of the political, theoretical and discursive significance of the spatiality of human life. (p. 197)

Soja sees this as a “more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies” (1993, p. 137). Entrikin states approvingly that “they [geographers] are taking seriously the cultural significance of everyday life” (1989, p. 40).

As suggested by Keith and others, the current interest in the politics of space has raised issues of representation. Duncan points to the frequent use of metaphors drawn from theatre, spectacle and text to represent landscape (Duncan & Ley, 1993, p. 14). As noted in the discussion of performance in Chapter Two, tropes drawn from theatre and performance recur through the social sciences. “For years geographers have been using the terms ‘theatre’ and ‘text’ in a casual way, referring to spatial conduct as ‘role-playing’ or likening landscape interpretation to ‘reading’ a written document” (p. 14). Giddens earlier indicated a preference for the term ‘locale’ rather than ‘place’ because “it carries the connotation of space used as a setting for interaction” (1979, p. 207). The following statement by Harvey foregrounds performance and text:

Geopolitical conflicts invariably imply a certain aestheticization of politics in which appeal to the mythology of place and person has a strong role to play. (1990, p. 209)

For a study of the performing arts in a regional community such as Bunbury the strong metaphorical links between theatre and everyday life and their current use by the “exciting cross-fertilization” (Soja & Hooper, 1993, p. 197) of disciplines provides a useful method of approach. The centrality of space to performance and its elevation by practitioner/theorists such as Brook (‘the empty space’) and Boal (‘the aesthetic space’) to principles of performance; or the gender-based critiques of theories of performance and performance spaces; are equally productive for such a study.
Harvey notes that space:

> gets treated as a fact of nature, ‘naturalized’ through the assignment of common-sense everyday meanings. In some ways more complex than time—it has direction, area, shape, pattern and volume as key attributes, as well as distance—we typically treat it as an objective attribute of things which can be measured and pinned down (D. Harvey, 1990, p. 203).

This ‘naturalized’ view of space has been heavily critiqued, particularly by post-colonial, feminist and environmental theorists who point to the exclusions and marginalisation associated with this view.

**Place**

Equally, the concept of ‘place’ has proved problematic, though it is currently a more favoured term than Gidden’s use of ‘locale’ to indicate “the physical settings in which social relations are constituted” (Agnew, 1993, p. 261). Agnew (1993) and Chaney (1994) both document the engagement of theorists with the metaphors of space and place in relation to society and culture. Agnew draws on Williams to state “place is also more than an ‘object’. Concrete, everyday practices give rise to a cultural mediation or ‘structure of feeling’ to use Williams’ (1977) phrase” (p. 263); as does Chaney:

> Places are culturally formulated ways of imbuing environments with meaning, but rather than just being a form of engagement, as social space is, a place also constrains interpretation by pre-existing as representation. (1994, p. 153)

Agnew suggests that there are two “interpretive communities” within social science in regard to the relationship between ‘space, scale and culture’. One views space:

> in terms of a national-state unit of historical study in which a ‘modern’ national culture increasingly displaces ‘traditional’ or residual local ones … A second interpretive community view space as structural. From this point of view, the spatial effects of particular units such as nodes, districts or regions are fixed and constant due to their relationships with one another. (1993, pp. 251-252)

Agnew prefers the ‘concept of place’, comprising three major elements:
locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted ... location, the effects upon locales of social and economic processes operating at wider scales: and sense of place, the local 'structure of feeling'. [Italics added] (p. 263)

He warns, however, that sociological discourse often assimilates the “concept of place as context for social relations” into the concept of ‘community’ (p. 261). This is seen in some cultural or town planning processes, urban renewal and gentrification schemes, community art projects or shopping centres, where the myth of community is evoked via appeals to nostalgia, folksy charm or civic virtues. For example, Bunbury is not unique in having a Forum shopping centre and a new office/restaurant complex named the Agora; both names having classical republican resonances, at least to the developers one presumes.

‘Placemaking’ is a term used by cultural and community development planners to describe the process of identifying the importance of place in “developing, expressing and evidencing cultural identity” (Petitdemange, 1998, p. 58). Crang states that “spaces become places as they become ‘time-thickened’” (Crang, 1998, p. 102). Clark suggests to planners that:

[c]ommunity consideration should be given to the attachment of meaning (through the interaction of people and place) recognising that ‘place’ is not only physical but also experiential and is conceived of as having an essential character, identity and ‘spirit’. Often ‘places’ will have different meanings for different individuals or groups. The primary experience of place (that is, the immediate emotional and unreflective response) may often lead to the more reflective processes and then to attachment. (1998, p. 112)

Both Crang and Clark alert us to the multiplicities of meanings associated with ‘place’ both diachronic and synchronic and the discussion of the changing urban landscape of Bunbury which follows exemplifies this. The relationship of place and the performing arts in Bunbury is examined in Part Three of this thesis which concerns the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre and its central ‘emplacement’ within the redesigned urban landscape of the city, its symbolic and practical functions within the community of Bunbury and, significantly, the wider region.
Landscape

A major urban development project is currently transforming “land on the fringe of the Bunbury CBD from derelict industrial land into a thriving and lively area of residential, retail and commercial premises” (“Building a new Bunbury,” 2000, p. 4). Citizens are assured via *Intersector: official magazine of the Western Australian public sector* that “the development is one that has appeal to a cross-section of the community … The lifestyle that can be enjoyed there is not just for the so-called yuppies” (p.3). The development has won LandCorp, the state housing authority, a “prestigious Urban Development Institute of Australia award” (“Building a new Bunbury,” 2000, p. 2). The Marlston Hill ‘lifestyle development’ makes a feature of high density living, which once would have been the antithesis of the ‘Australian dream’ of owning a single dwelling on a quarter acre block.

Zukin, in her studies of inner-urban gentrification and the commodification of landscapes, offers this definition of place: “[it] expresses how a spatially connected group of people mediate the demands of cultural identity, state power and capital accumulation” (1991, p. 12). In the case of the Marlston Hill development, the “spatially connected group of people” who have purchased building lots and constructed homes and businesses have in fact flexed their ‘community’ muscles by protesting about a tavern built next to the children’s playground in the “renewed Jetty Baths Park” (“Building a new Bunbury,” 2000, p. 5). Ironically, the emerging ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘community’ of Marlston Hill has not entirely accepted the ‘vision’ (“Building a new Bunbury,” 2000, p. 4) of the developers.

Crang talks about “an industry that sets out to ‘imagineer’ places, to create ‘uniqueness’ in order to attract attention, visitors, and, in the end, money” (1998, p. 116). The Marlston Hill project coordinators evoke myths of tradition and community by establishing links between the settler landscape and its current transformation, although the landscape of the indigenous peoples is not part of the particular set of myths drawn upon at this particular stage of the development. Mills remarks that “the city, and the inner city, are thus made the subject of myths” (C. Mills, 1993, p. 151). She suggests that “gentrifiers do ‘cultural work’ with symbols of working class culture” (C. Mills, 1993, p. 158) as the following shows:
In creating an award-winning development, history has not been overlooked …. We decided to keep the old names, so tradition - and community recognition - was part of the development.

As we were putting in the infrastructure, we were also able to add to the history. Our contractors unearthed a set of soldiers’ dog tags at Guppy Park. During the first World War soldiers would camp there before embarking for Europe. ("Building a new Bunbury," 2000, p. 5)

The ‘new’ Guppy Park is a circular garden set amongst newly constructed business premises with art deco resonances; presumably because the few public buildings of historic significance that were not demolished during an earlier period of modernisation in Bunbury were art deco in style. The original Guppy Park was the site of a regular fun fair in Bunbury during the summer holidays. The site was close to the beach and the then centre of town. The ‘new’ Guppy Park is a small affair with some potential for open air performance although the landscaping would not cope with heavy traffic usage. It does, however, compete with the numerous other open-air public access spaces that have been created as part of Bunbury’s urban redevelopment. Bunbury has promenades, squares, traffic calmed streets which can be closed to traffic for events, a newly constructed sound shell, parks, and a division of local government attempting to define, regulate and encourage their use. Its contemporary preoccupation with outdoor performances and events seems to be a nostalgic yearning for an ‘idea of street life’ when:

the street was a type of stage upon which performers paraded, others admired and entertainers sought audiences for drinks, songs or tricks. (This idea of street life has of course not disappeared but it is more likely to be preserved now in traffic-free enclaves, in pedestrian only zones where social life is in a sense thematised as an entertainment object in a theme park.). (Chaney, 1994, p. 162)

Warren talks about the proliferation in North America of “landscapes of leisure and entertainment” … [they] permeate virtually all landscapes and hence are inseparable from daily life” (1993, p. 173). Zukin states that “[d]eindustrialization and gentrification are two sides of the same process of landscape formation: a distancing from basic production spaces and a movement towards spaces of consumption” (1991, p. 269). “What were once landscapes of labour become landscapes of leisure; former docks and factory sites become arts centres, are renovated for accommodation or for the sites for new festivals” (Crang, 1998, pp. 128-130). In Bunbury the original railway station is
now the tourist bureau; a cold store has become a craft outlet; the remaining grain silos are to be converted to residential apartments as part of a hotel complex; a railway goods shed has become a furniture store and a convent school building is the art gallery. This creates an ‘identity’ for the town that simultaneously differentiates it from its neighbours, yet at the same time creates a homogeneity in terms of the global trends in urban renewal and landscape ‘imagineering’. We recognise the strategies: docklands renewal, canal developments, streetscaping, public open space, new facades for old buildings and old facades for new buildings. (Appendix C Photographs 1 and 2)

Landscapes are major cultural products, argues Zukin. “A landscape mediates, both symbolically and materially, between the socio-spatial differentiation of capital implied by market and the socio-spatial homogeneity of labor suggested by place” (1991, p. 16). Contemporary landscapes and streetscapes in regional growth areas such as Bunbury are ‘designed for living’ and appearance has come to be central. Developers divide semi-rural land into ‘lifestyle developments’ with the first visible sign being the ‘entry statement’, the symbolic gateway through which the would-be resident passes thus participating in the performance of the ‘art of living’ (Chaney, 1994, p. 166). Developers, states Lefebvre, “no longer sell housing or buildings, but planning” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 84). In Bunbury’s case the notion of the concept plan preceding the actual development is hardly new as it is enshrined in the history of European settlement in Western Australia. The adjacent township of Australind is named after a land speculation conceived in London in 1840 and used to entice settlers to Western Australia. Described as “parchment plans for a major city” the project failed, but not before 160 immigrants had invested their savings in this illusion (Barker & Laurie, 1992, pp. 13-23).

The rapidly changing landscape of Bunbury and region is a frequent topic for discussion among its citizens who find themselves now situated within a region designated as one of the major growth areas of Australia (Spagnolo, 2004a).

**Local**

“Are you a local”? This is a question sometimes asked in regional and rural communities. What to answer? How many years of living in a community qualifies one
as a local? After a lifetime of living in regional communities I have accepted that I will never be a ‘local’, although I may participate at all levels within the community. However, my affiliation will be ‘local’ and for the purposes of most questioners this is enough. Agnew suggests that ‘locals’ are “people whose interests and definition of life are locally oriented … When in a locale, so to speak, they follow the routines and rituals of that locale”. He also suggests that ‘cosmopolitans’ are those people with a wider orientation who adapt to whatever locale they happen to find themselves in (1993, p. 262). Douglass and Friedmann quote Castells who argues that “elites are cosmopolitan, people are local (Douglass & Friedmann, 1998, p. 1). Cosmopolitans form the basis for the global elites who dominate the “wealth and power of the new global economy” (p. 1). However, Douglass and Friedmann argue that the local is not closed off from global influences but is “the effective terrain for engagement in civic life beyond the household and in relation to the state and the corporate economy” (p. 1).

Regional communities in Australia are very familiar with the processes of marginalisation whereby the local is interpreted as parochial by the metropolis. As Hawkins states “[i]n the interminable struggles to pin down national identity or to regulate import culture, the pleasures of the local have been dismissed as purely parochial (Hawkins, 1993, p. xxiv). Dempsey shows how small communities often invert this stereotyping to their advantage:

One set of ‘notions and stereotypes’ whose propagation helps maintain community solidarity caricatures rural life as superior and city life as inferior … The practice of the community’s leaders doing battle with external ‘enemies’—usually from the city—whose actions threaten to diminish the quality of Smalltown life also contributes to community cohesion. (Dempsey, 1990, p. 4)

One favourite joke told against visiting bureaucrats from Perth is that they insist the drive from Perth to Bunbury is a greater distance than that from Bunbury to Perth. It is more arduous for them to travel to Bunbury than for their Bunbury counterparts to travel to Perth.

The idea of the ‘local’ associated with nostalgic or romanticised notions of ‘community’, is critiqued by Thornton as a “postmodern cult”. He uses the term “glocalization’ - a word that tellingly has its roots in Japanese commercial strategy …
[which] erases the line between universalism and particularism, modernity and tradition” (2000, p. 81). The effects of ‘glocalization’ are seen in the gentrification of locales, the development of tourism with packaged ‘local’ experiences that draw on myths of nostalgia, the environment, indigeneity or lifestyles. “Precisely because it is on the edge of extinction, the local as a discrete category of analysis lives on in postmodern discourse as a mythic antipode” (p. 82). Mercer argues:

Rather than postulating some pure and pristine community which is then ‘invaded’ by unwelcome external forces … it is much more useful to consider the ways in which ‘external influences’ … are taken up, negotiated, and become part of the complex patterns of ‘symbolic creativity’ at the local level. That is, an informed approach to cultural industries policy needs to work with a complex rather than simple idea of ‘community’ and ‘locality’ and what people are doing at those sites on a daily basis. (1998, p. 24)

Mercer credits communities with sufficient agency to negotiate and appropriate what is useful to them from external global trends. A detailed discussion about ideas of ‘community’ will follow in Chapter Five.

Region

Regional Australia is an idea of place projected onto arrangements of particular geographic units across the continent. It exists as the other to the metropolitan centres of economic and political power. It can variously be mythologised as troublesome, heroic, dangerous, parochial, boring, the backbone of the nation, lacking initiative, or conservative.

Since the Second World War governments have attempted to regulate regional planning in Australia “not only because of the emergencies which the war had created, but also because it was realised that Australia would be faced in the post-war years with the responsibility of developing its unused resources and planning for full employment and the general welfare of the Australian people” (Harris & Dixon, 1978, p. 15). Ultimately regional planning was left to the initiatives of individual state governments (p. 17). In New South Wales and Victoria ‘decentralisation’ and ‘regional growth centres’ were key terms in this process during the 1960s and beyond. Growth centres such as Bathurst-Orange (NSW) and Albury-Wodonga (NSW/VIC) were early candidates for regional development programs during the 1960s. In Western Australia, it took until the
mid 1980s for similar programs to be implemented via the establishment of development authorities in several key regions, with the South West Development Authority (later South West Development Commission) encompassing Bunbury and region.

An analysis of income distribution in Australia by the National Centre for Social and Economic modelling (Lloyd, 2000) shows that Australia still has:

- a highly urbanised population and there is a continuing slow drift from the country to the cities. In 1996 just over 60 per cent of Australians lived in capital cities and their surrounding areas, and almost 6 per cent lived in major urban areas defined as non-capital cities with populations of more than 100,000.

- Another 20 per cent of the population lived in regional towns (with populations ranging from 1000 to 99,999). Another 2 percent lived in rural towns (small towns with populations of 200 - 999), and just over 11 per cent lived in other rural areas. (Lloyd, 2000, p. 1)

By the population classification figures used by Lloyd, Bunbury is regarded as a regional town, being well short of the population mark of 100,000 of non-capital cities such as Newcastle, Geelong, Townsville or Wollongong. Bunbury, however, achieved official city status in 1979 and the former mayor and chairperson of the South West Development Authority, Dr Manea, made the following statement in a television interview in 2000:

> Bunbury has grown up in that the infrastructure, or the requirements that people expect which are to have the theatre, an art gallery, a university. That has been achieved and so my estimate of a town growing up is when you don’t have to leave the town to do anything that you want to do. (2000)

Dr Manea’s passionate commitment to the growth and development of Bunbury sees him take a leadership role in community life. Widely-travelled because of his professional (medicine) and community (local government and harness racing,) interests, Manea drew upon this knowledge to advance the cause of Bunbury and region at all levels of government and commerce and industry. The fact that he nominated three places traditionally associated with the arts as markers of city status perhaps put him occasionally at odds with the electorate and political and economic spheres, which may have had different priorities, but he was able to ‘carry the day’ in terms of
negotiating space and finance to achieve each of these civic goals. Manea’s style is perhaps more akin to 19th century patriarchal benevolence, and there was always the danger of creating inappropriate ‘white elephants’, but his skill in galvanising community support seems to have generated a sense of ownership for each of these institutions that appears to have consolidated over their relatively brief lives (less than 20 years). This discussion will be continued in Part Three which focuses on the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, which is ‘the theatre’ Manea was determined to have.

Lloyd reports that Western Australia and Queensland are the only two states where there has been strong population and income growth during the 1990s and where the difference of the average household income between metropolitan and other areas was much smaller. “The highest growth in state household incomes occurred in Western Australia” (Lloyd, 2000, pp. 2-3). The economic development and change that Bunbury and the south west is currently experiencing is not, therefore, typical of all ‘Regional Australia’.

Frankel points out that:

in Australia we have numerous local and regional public spheres based on particular towns or States—for example, the local public sphere of Rockhampton or the regional sphere of Tasmania. The particular historical role of local and regional media, religious institutions, parties, business and farm lobbies, influential individuals, groups and networks have done much to form the character of those public spheres … Overlaid on all these local and regional spheres is a national public sphere which has historically become more and more influential in recent decades. (Frankel, 1992, p. 16)

In terms of performing arts and regional communities, all levels of government are actively involved in policy making and program funding. The federal government has developed Playing Australia, Festivals Australia and the Contemporary Music Touring Program to promote regional touring by (mainly) metropolitan performance companies and the development of festivals and public events. Federal and state governments have created separate departments for regional arts, and local government is subject to pressure from federal and state funding bodies to undertake cultural planning. Hull states that “local government spends $463 million annually on arts, cultural and related activities” (1998, p. 32).
Many major festivals take place in regional areas where often the entire town or community is the site for the festival. The local festival is “one of the most visible contributions to cultural tourism” (Druett, 1998, p. 133). Local examples are the Bridgetown Blues Festival, the Denmark Clowning Convention, the Nannup Music Festival or the Boyup Brook Country Music Festival. The use of outdoor sites for prestigious performances such as the annual concert at Leeuwin Estate (a winery) or for spectacular community events such as those directed by Neil Cameron at locations such as Katherine Gorge and Darwin’s Mindil Beach in the Northern Territory, has become commonplace. With small communities as the sites of such events, it is possible to take advantage of the “short distance in time-space separations … [where it] is not just physical presence in immediate interaction which matters in ‘small-scale’ interaction: it is the temporal and spatial availability of others in a locale” (Giddens, 1979, p. 207). A small community can be galvanised into action in a relatively short time by a skilled, knowledgeable organiser. The ability to short-circuit impediments, such as lack of funding or bureaucratic regulations, through local initiative and ‘can do’ attitudes led to the original success of many such projects. It is the ability of the community to sustain these projects as annual or biannual events, when they often have outgrown their original intentions, that is more in doubt.

Regionality has been a troubling issue for arts practitioners and critics. Within literary circles, writing which located itself self-consciously within a regional location was often viewed as provincial: “‘copying down funny phrases’ type regionalism” (McGuane cited in Watzke, 1992, p. 28). McKernan states:

there must be a balance between the promotion of diversity in literature which is the chief value of regionalism, and the temptation to seek a kind of conformity in the peculiarly regional … regionalism should not be a prescription for writers, a demand that they perform within certain regional subjects and styles but an attempt to keep options open for writers who do not fit within the accepted classifications. (in Watzke, 1992, pp. 22-23)

Fotheringham cites Cote and others, stating that “qualifiers like ‘regional’, ‘national’ or ‘international’ are a means to pass value judgements by pretending to deal with geography” (Fotheringham, 1996, p. 16). He points out that “when regional theatre does extend beyond its geographical boundaries, not only does it cease to be regional in both the sense of place and in terms of its place in the hierarchy of value, but it often ceases
to be called regional” (Fotheringham, 1996, p. 14). Fotheringham’s example is *Aftershocks* (Brown, 1993), a play based on verbatim reports by survivors of the Newcastle earthquake. “The contributions of the local company and writer who devised it have been backgrounded to favour the more famous Sydney and Melbourne actors and directors who have now worked on it” and the published version has the word “Sydney” on the cover rather than “Newcastle” (Fotheringham, 1996, p. 15). Thus, regionality is appropriated by the metropolis or cosmopolitan.

A theatrical production which mimicked and parodied the processes of appropriation both by and from the margins is *Bran Nue Dae* (Chi & Kuckles, 1990), the musical which evolved from the songs and experiences of Jimmy Chi and fellow collaborators in Broome, Western Australia. The production demonstrated how ‘external influences’ can be “taken up, negotiated and become part of the complex patterns of ‘symbolic creativity’ at the local level (Mercer, 1998, p. 24).

Watzke cites Bennett and then Moorhouse on regionalism. Bennett offers a view of regionalism which:

offers difference and diversity and a ‘centre’ which is constantly displaced and shifting in significance. One critique is that such a view still involves the privileging of a centre, without which it seems such regions could not exist or come into being. It is this concern which Frank Moorhouse addresses by distinguishing between provincialism, as in ‘reaction to the centre’ and regionalism as ‘growing out of the special conditions surrounding or forming the imagination’”. (Watzke, 1992, p. 22)

One of the ironies of the local is its expression of the ‘cultural cringe’ in that it is not until our creative artists, writers and performers have their work subjected to the processes of the city (such as training, exhibitions, performances, publication or screening) that we are prepared to acknowledge their status as practitioners. We seek experts from outside our community, often forgetting to check whether there is a local who could do the job equally well. Yet regionality and distance from the centre are no barriers to artists and performers within the not-for-profit community arts organisations. Indeed it could be suggested that a regional community is particularly conducive to arts production especially when a group project requires access to resources such as transport, materials, space, equipment and labour. These are readily accessed through
established social networks. However, as the built-environment of Bunbury is changing rapidly with concomitant population growth, the cultural infrastructure will be pushed to incorporate these changes and the existing networks of voluntary associations may feel the strain.

The notion of placemaking enables me to provide a cultural ‘map’ of the performing arts in Bunbury and their relationship to the social fabric of the community. This local map is then situated within the regional, state and national ‘landscape’ of government policies and cultural trends to show where we have come from and where we might be going.
Chapter 5: Community

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (R. Williams, 1976, p. 76)

Perhaps “one of the most overly conceptualized areas in the social sciences” is how ‘community’ is described, perhaps in exasperation, by Barr in her study of modern theatre (1998, p. 20). There seems to be agreement from many academics that the discourse of community contains a long association with idealised and nostalgic representations of imagined ‘traditional’ communities which in the early twentieth century drew upon the work of Tonnies and other German theorists and which informed the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (Featherstone, 1995; Putnam, 1993). The Australian playwright John Romeril invokes something of this in his reported comment that “one of the most alarming effects of the culture of deregulation and privatisation is the collapse of a traditional sense of community” (Davidson, 1994, p. 90).

Turn of the century urban theorists (such as Tonnies and Simmel) contrasted city life with a sense of village community (called Gemeinschaft in German) where everyone knows everyone else—their job, their history and their character—and the world is relatively predictable … The city is a constant series of contacts with people about whom very little is known, and who know little of you. Such is a shift to urban society (called Gesellschaft in German). (Crang, 1998, p. 53)

Contrary to Tonnies’ model Putnam found in his study of regional communities in Italy that the ‘traditional’ communities of southern Italy did not necessarily provide a strong sense of community and civic responsibility; that some of the northern industrialized regions in fact provided a more open and responsible civic life for their citizens.

The most civic regions of Italy—the communities where citizens feel empowered to engage in collective deliberation about public choices and where those choices are translated most fully into effective public policies—include some of the most modern towns and cities of the peninsula. Modernization need not signal the demise of the civic community. (Putnam, 1993, p. 115)
Sandercock is also sceptical. He argues that a “reified and romanticized” notion of ‘community’ forms the basis for the “writing of most radical planners” (1998, p. 179). As early as 1976, Turner expressed his scepticism about the use of terms such as ‘community’ or ‘society’ because they seemed to convey “static, atemporal models” (1976, p. 98). Revill suggests that “during the late 1960s and 1970s, academic sociologists seem to have dismissed the idea of community” (1993, p. 126), but this was also the period when theories of community development and community arts began to evolve and by the 1980s, these had become widely documented and practised. However, the 1990s saw a renewed scepticism about the ‘ideal of community’. One explanation of this trend is that attempts to construct communities founded on common interests or homogeneity, such as feminist groups, have generated “borders, dichotomies, and exclusions” (Young, 1990, p. 301). Though “an understandable dream”, Young proposes that “the desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand, and political sectarianism on the other” (D. Harvey, 1993, p.55; Reinelt, 1998, p.285; Young, 1990, p.301).

The National inquiry into the arts and the community proposes that:

A community is a number of people who have important aspects of their lives in common. The most obvious and most influential factor is often the locality where they live, and the life-sustaining activities that take place there. Other bases for community may be ethnicity, gender, age or any shared interest. People can be members of several communities, and a locality may contain many at different levels. Despite all the variations and complexities, shared social concerns and shared local conditions remain the most frequent basis for people’s sense of community. (Arts and communities: The report of the national inquiry into arts and the community, 1992)

Recent academic discussion about ‘community’ has focussed on the many communities with which individuals may identify in the course of their routine lives; the function of locality, region or nation in this identification; the quotidian or everyday and the experience of communality or ‘liveness’ (Auslander, 1999). Many of these discussions are now conducted in terms of ‘the civil society’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘social capital’ through which there is a re-evaluation of the role and function of “social organisations, associations and institutions that exist beyond the sphere of direct supervision and control by the state” (Friedmann, 1998, p. 21). Douglass claims that “oppositional social
movements … for all the seriousness of their intent, persist not so much by the intensity of their claiming, but by the joy people experience when they link arms, acting together, and by the moral support they give to each other … the mutual pleasures of sharing and celebrating a life in community, however transient this might be” (Douglass & Friedmann, 1998, p. 6). Thus such groups serve the same social function as any other community organisation.

Morris prefers to think of communities as ‘publics’ which “aren’t stable, homogenous entities”. She takes as her texts the designs of shopping-centres which attempt to evoke ‘community’ that “illustrate very well … the argument that you can’t treat a public at a cultural event as directly expressive of social groups and classes, or their supposed sensibility” (1993, p. 304).

Lewis also considers the example of shopping centres or malls:

Malls can, and do, lure and assemble collectivities and crowds of shoppers, but these groups seldom share the common ties and engage in the sort of social interactions necessary to forge a sense of “we-ness” … from the raw social material of a crowd. (1991, p. 122)

Mall developers, asserts Lewis, attempt to create an image of “strong community commitment and consciousness”, often contacting local groups “to find out the community’s wants and needs”. But he argues that they have limited success in forging a sense of “we-ness” out of the crowds who visit them because they emphasise locale rather than “commonalities and interaction”. He cites Bender in defining community as “characterized by close, usually face to face relationships” (p. 123).

Whitt and Slack are not so dismissive of the ‘other than human’ in the concept of “community” (1994, p. 7). They assert that “geographical and ecological features of community are rarely incidental to political and cultural struggle: they contextualize - enable and constrain - relations of power”. However, they point out that cultural studies “has assumed a curious posture with respect to the concept of community” in that:

direct mention of the term is rare. More commonly, cultural theorists have taken as their objects of study groups and group processes—defined, for example, by state,
nation, society, gender, race, class, ethnicity or subculture—without explicitly invoking or exploring the concept of community. (p. 7)

Rose, in her discussion about spatial organization and community arts projects, offers a useful history of cultural studies and its critique of the discourse of ‘community’:

‘Community’ has been analysed by several of the contributors to the ‘spatial-cultural discourse’ as a regressive understanding of place. According to them, ‘community’ provides a structure for senses of identity which desire to be stable and harmonious, uniform within and hostile to what is positioned as without. (1997, p. 2)

She cites Massey and Hall as seeing “such bounded, exclusionary forms of ‘community’ as an ‘expensive and sometimes violent and dangerous illusion’” (p. 3) and therefore ‘community’ disappears from their discussion. However, states Rose, other cultural theorists are “more reluctant to abandon the term ‘community’, perhaps because, as Williams (1976, p. 66) points out, no other term of social organization carries such positive connotations of collective solidarity” (p. 3). Problematic as it may be for all the reasons stated, ‘community’ is really the only term available for such wide-ranging discussions.

... and community development

In Small towns and small towners: a framework for survival and growth (Swanson, Cohen, & Swanson, 1979) the authors describe the then current vogue for community action and renewal. Professional ‘community developers’ identify local ‘initiative and leadership’ and attempt to involve all sections of the community in ‘problem-solving processes’ in order to identify community needs and to provide solutions. However, the authors suggest that:

Despite their resiliency, many community involvement campaigns come to naught. Much energy is spent and time donated, with at best uneven results. No one really knows how many community programs have gone nowhere. Citizens and professionals have watched innumerable efforts stumble and stagnate, or just miss the target. Many small town betterment programs have been misadventures, well intended but short on achieved objectives and long on unwanted consequences (1979, p. 27).
Ask any long-serving community leader in a community such as Bunbury and you will find that over the past two decades, s/he has participated in many of the community development exercises described by Swanson and others. Whenever a consultation process is announced, the same faces gather around the whiteboards and ‘butcher’s’ paper and are carefully stage-managed through the whole or half-day proceedings. Whether the topic is ‘youth’, ‘culture’, ‘education’, ‘the environment’ or ‘tourism’, the process grinds its inexorable way. The facilitator, a metropolitan expert or a local administrator, gathers these instant opinions around a pre-determined agenda and repackages them at some subsequent date as a report based on in-depth community consultation. The report makes its way to the various agencies which have some vested interest in the outcomes where it is dutifully filed, rarely read and even more rarely, implemented. When the topic is revived months or years later, the process begins again. Newcomers to this consultative process are usually unaware of its tortuous history. The leaders and facilitators may change, but the volunteer participants do not and resignedly forgo a day’s work time or an evening of family time, to repeat the process. In the interim, within their own volunteer not-for-profit organisations, they have made decisions, achieved major projects and involved large groups of interested others without recourse to professional leadership or substantial grants. Their skill and efficiency in mobilising sections of the community are rarely acknowledged in “community development processes” particularly if their contributions fall outside the guidelines of the consultation process.

In a discussion about theatre and the everyday based on his experiences working with communities in London, Read states:

> the term community is now redolent with implications of ‘ministry’ or ‘social engineering’, and is useless when applied to the multiplicity of voices discussed here. Further, it underestimates the very forceful role many of these people held within the local neighbourhood. (1995, p. 25)

Concern about the role of the state in community and cultural development has been articulated by several commentators (Bianchini, 1991; Meyrick, 1997). The term ‘social engineering’ is used by Putnam and others to account for the “high failure rate” of “local organizations ‘implanted’ from the outside” (Putnam, 1993, p. 91). Putnam’s
studies of regional Italy suggest that “the most successful local organizations represent indigenous, participatory initiatives in relatively cohesive local communities” (p. 91).

In 1984, Kelly pointed to the “dependency created by the ‘free’ services offered to voluntary groups by the state [which] lease workers, or services, to groups at the cost of their tacit agreement to the overall aims of the agency organising the leasing” (O. Kelly, 1984, p. 102). He suggests that the idea of ‘community control’ which was the theory underpinning much community development work in the 1980s, especially in the arts, was based on “a view of ‘community’ as a simple and static statistical unit”. Community groups receiving grants were expected to be accountable to “this fictitious community [and as] a result, the group’s activities, the management, will always be inquorate, and always open to the charge that they are unrepresentative” (p. 103). Similarly, grant applications, which require expressions of community support, result in formulaic letters of support often hastily supplied by the administrator of one organisation to another in the expectation that the favour will be reciprocated at a later date. The support is usually ‘in principle’, whether it actually materialises if the project succeeds in attracting its funding is another matter, because it is often predicated on the basis of the labour of volunteers who may have no idea that their labour has been promised in advance.

From the perspective of professional community and cultural planners there is a real dilemma when using approved community consultation techniques when the outcomes do not coincide with the planners’ preferred options or, as Hillier queries, once subjects are encouraged “to participate freely in procedurally just communicative processes of decision making, will important decisions ever get taken” (Hillier, 1998)? It is difficult to (stage)manage the community consultation process within the timeline set by the originators of the project. The time allowance for and the methods of advertising consultative processes are often highly political, with federal, state and local government agendas driving or delaying them. Consultative processes within Bunbury which did not reach the ‘desired’ result were Local Area Education Planning (1999-2000), the Back Beach development (2000) and proposed resiting of the Bunbury City Council offices (2002) where community opposition altered or overturned the original proposals. Once galvanised, these oppositional forces swiftly operated with a high degree of political competance.
... and performance

Theorists and practitioners of the performing arts have valorised the communal aspects of theatre and performance. To Auslander, this has devolved into “clichés and mystifications”. The conventional argument, he suggests, “is that the experience of live performance builds community” (1999, p. 55). His rejoinder is that “the reality of our cultural economy is that the communal bond unifying such an audience is most likely to be little more than the common consumption of a particular performance commodity”. The fact that it is ‘live’ is not central to the creation of the ‘social space’ and community feel, he argues. Other audience-generating media such as film or large-screen simulcasts, can evoke similar feelings of solidarity and communality. For example the Australian expatriate writer Clive James chose to watch the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney Olympics as simulcasts in central city hotels and on public concourses rather than take up his option of a seat at the ‘live’ performance:

But did I really want to watch the opening ceremony from a box full of blasé journos sneaking sideways looks at the size of each other’s modems? Or did I want to watch it in the city, surrounded by the best party on the planet? (2000, pp. 24-5)

Auslander argues that:

communality is not a function of liveness. The sense of community arises from being part of an audience, and the quality of the experience of community derives from the specific audience situation, not from the spectacle for which that audience has gathered. (1999, p. 56)

Similarly, Auslander critiques claims “that live performance brings performers and spectators together in a community” (p. 56). Citing Blau, he reiterates that while live theatre provokes a desire for community, because it is based on the gap between performer and audience, this desire will continually be frustrated (p. 57).

For performers themselves, the process of working together to achieve a performance has been claimed to be a demonstration of community at work. Lohrey, in a reflection on the revived popularity of community singing and choirs in Australia, uses an example from the British film Distant voices, still lives to assert the redemptive power of community singing.
Singing in the pub is one of the few times the family is free of physical and emotional violence. This is its moment of peace, of expressing unconditional love, of being free from resentment and recrimination, from the burdens of history or anxieties about the future; of being, simply, and for the moment, free. (Lohrey, 1997, p. 181)

Lohrey however, does not acknowledge other aspects of this communal scene that may have more bearing on the apparent harmony of the occasion. It may simply be the social prohibitions about ‘airing one’s dirty linen in public’ which result in this “moment of peace”. Later in her discussion about the origins of a community choir, the politics of running a community performing arts organisation come to the fore. There is a tension between those who want to have fun and those who want to be serious musicians, thus the choice of repertoire and conductor, and the degree of commitment choir members are required to make, become highly fraught questions:

It’s a wonderful idea but a hell of a lot of work. To start with it created a lot of stress; people began to feel it was becoming too much like work and not enough like fun. We had to have a meeting and sort out our priorities. But somehow it always works out. That’s the interesting thing about the choir as an entity, the way in which the whole is greater than its parts. (cited in Lohrey, 1997, pp. 234-5)

The performers in Lohrey’s account of a typical community choir are drawn from many communities and seek a communal experience through their participation. However the singing itself is not sufficient to create and sustain this, for in order for the group to function, certain individuals have to take on roles whereby they make decisions in the community’s ‘best interests’. In the case of the choir, this would involve choice of conductor, repertoire, performance schedules, rehearsal times and so on. This ‘work’ often is the point at which the group divides and certain individuals take on these roles, whilst others plead circumstances which would prevent them doing so. The organisers in such a group may come to be regarded as bureaucratic and putting impediments in the way of other performers’ creative energies.

Some community performance organisations are the inspiration of an individual, or a small group of individuals. According to McKenzie:

The culture of the protagonists promoting pioneering activities is egocentric. That is the founding person’s personality provides the identity and energy in the activities [sic] behaviour in the community. The activities of the group represent a
way of attaining the aspirations of the founder, and very little social responsibility is evident, unless that too is an aspiration of the founder. (McKenzie, 2000, p. 9)

While the founding person’s energy and commitment remain high, the group will usually remain relatively intact and enthusiastic. But such energy is usually only able to be sustained over a certain time and if the group is dependent on the charismatic leader, then once she or he leaves, the group often cannot sustain its momentum. There is a tendency in such groups for all work to be left to the leader and this is often what destroys it. Others in the group resist taking on the work, especially if the leader takes most of the praise or rewards.

Although claims that community performance and theatre create a shared communality and ‘well-being’ may be critiqued, nevertheless as Barr points out, “modern theater, and indeed theater itself, is always about community because performance always involves communal dynamics” (Barr, 1998, p. 3). But she says, in both modern drama and modern social theory there is “a movement from concepts of community conceived in terms of homogeneity to concepts deriving from heterogeneity, from community based on commonality to community dependent on difference” (p. 2).

… and arts

In her history of the Community Arts Program of the Australia Council, from Nimbin to Mardi Gras: constructing community arts, Hawkins (1993, p. xviii) notes that “[i]n the late 1960s and early 1970s the category ‘community’ spread like a virus through many areas of public administration”. Its spread continued well into the 1980s and 1990s as more far-flung or recalcitrant regions and community organisations of Australia grappled with its implications, long after policy changes redefined funding categories (See also Meyrick, 1997, p. 3). In 1993, Hawkins asked “is community arts a cultural program whose moment has passed” (1993, p. xxv)?

The National inquiry into arts and the community (1992) signalled the refashioning of ‘community’ and the place of the arts within it as “strengthen[ing] the democratic process through developing more articulate citizens” (Arts and communities: The report of the national inquiry into arts and the community, 1992, p. 7). Barrett notes that this rhetoric signals a return to 19th century “didactic notions about generating a cultured,
educated and intelligent population, signifying a developed nation” (1998, p. 147). In Putnam’s recent study of American community life he exhorts:

America’s artists, the leaders and founders of our cultural institutions, as well as ordinary Americans: Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 significantly more Americans will participate in (not merely consume or “appreciate”) cultural activities from group dancing to songfests to community theater to rap festivals. Let us discover new ways to use the arts as a vehicle for convening diverse groups of fellow citizens. (2000, p. 411)

At the 2nd National conference of Regional Arts Australia held in October, 2000, McKenzie, a community development practitioner, issued a ‘clarion call’ to community/regional arts:

If the learning activities of a community are poorly developed the community will be continually pushed around by its environment and will not understand why. The Arts can be an important learning activity in any community and can contribute much to overcoming this deficiency. (2000, p. 6)

Community and regional arts organisations, with limited funds and run by volunteers, are, apparently, to lead national civic revival by topping up social capital deficits when and where they appear in the national social and cultural accounts.

… and cultural development

As noted in Chapter Three ‘cultural planning’ has been central to cultural policy in the 1990s. In Western Australia the amended Local Government Act (1995) handed to local authorities the role of devising cultural development strategies through consultation with their communities, using similar methods to those described earlier in the discussion about community development. This was supported by a policy statement titled “Regional cultural planning: a partnership with local government” which included funding provisions for cultural planning in rural municipalities (Department for the Arts Annual Report, 1994, p. 11; Kaino, 2001). There is a tendency to locate the responsibility for such planning with junior officers who have limited powers and resources to fulfil the role, or to contract the work to outside agencies. Grogan, Mercer and Engwich (1995, p. 17), in a handbook designed to guide such developmental processes, claim “a cultural development strategy is the sign of a community inventing its own future - a creative act”. They later state that “local government is the form of
government which is closest to people’s everyday lives and experiences” (p. 20). The desire of local governments to develop a cultural policy varies significantly, so some localities have well-established policies which are used to inform future planning; others for a variety of reasons, still do not have policies in place or clear ideas about how such planning should proceed. This may be the result of a lack of resources as in the case of many shire councils in Western Australia, where the shire population is extremely small, although the area administered may be large. Or that local government staff lack understanding of and training in cultural development, or their elected councils do not set a high priority on such planning:

in the eyes of government instrumentalities in the South West, the concepts of culture, cultural policy and cultural industries invariably present questions which cannot readily be answered and are thus relegated to the ‘too hard’ basket. This dilemma is epitomised in the cultural policies begun in the Margaret River and Bunbury shires six or more years ago that have yet to be completed. They represent what is perhaps a trend, whereby policy development is inordinately long and the actual implementation time comparatively short. (Kaino, 2001, p. 12)

... and the everyday

To acknowledge the everyday, the ordinary lived experience of individuals in the community as the central part of cultural policy seems to challenge many planners and participants in planning processes, so entrenched is the idea of culture as other, exotic or imported. Culture is what comes to us in the form of touring exhibitions and performances and is what we send our children off to the metropolis to acquire. However, as During suggests “groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products—in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity” (1993b, p. 7). Read describes the everyday as “that which escapes everything which is specialised, the ill-defined remainder to everything in life thought worthy of writing and record” (1995, p. 17). Everyday life, suggests During (1993b, p. 151), “takes place in the gaps of larger power structures” and de Certeau’s urban walker (flâneur) is a metaphor for the individual’s response to contemporary urban and social change (de Certeau, 1984). The everyday is a concept which Lefebvre asserts is “a sole surviving common sense referent and point of reference” which assists in decoding the complexities of the modern world (1987, p. 9).
This is perhaps why the routine activities of performing arts groups within a community such as Bunbury do not attract the attention of arts development and funding bodies. That is, their efficient, constant participation within the annual round of events and their independence are taken for granted within the local community and are overlooked by arts funding bodies; points to be discussed in the following chapters of this thesis.

... and voluntary organisations

Participation in performing arts in Bunbury is almost entirely a voluntary activity and the function of voluntary organisations within communities forms part of current discourses around the notion of civil society and the creation of social capital. Dempsey, in his study Smalltown (1990), noted that “community sociologists are sometimes criticized for giving a great deal of attention to voluntary associations”, possibly because of the duality he later notes where voluntary organisations “can serve as vehicles for the practice of both social exclusiveness and of egalitarianism, and because they have the potential for solidifying class boundaries or for eroding them” (p. 188). However, Dempsey argues that they attract interest because of much wider functions:

First, they provide socially approved space and time for those continuing conversations out of which consensus about the local and the external world emerges. In these conversations, for instance, the ideology of localism is shaped and assimilated by community members … Second, although voluntary organizations are frequently viewed as contexts for secondary relationships, they can be important contexts for the expression of primary relationships … In these organizations friendship activity is common and the need for companionship and acceptance are [sic] often met. Third, as mentioned earlier, specific interest groups can facilitate sentiments of attachment that diffuse to the community generally … Finally, voluntary organizations are of interest here because they provide data that allows us to look at the extent to which geographical and demographic factors have a bearing on social relationships. (p. 188)

The perceived conservative nature of local, voluntary associations has often posed a conceptual difficulty for social and cultural theorists, with the result that such associations have often been excluded from community development practices which have instead projected a “fictitious community” (O. Kelly, 1984, p. 103) that may be constructed around class, gender, age, ethnicity or disability. However, the resilience of local voluntary associations in the face of change is now being re-examined through discussions about community, citizenship and civil society which have developed since the mid-1990s in Australia.
Citizenship and civil society

The “deification of civil society as the latest of intellectual fashions” is Douglass’s and Friedmann’s (1998, p. 5) warning to planners about current discourses about civil society and citizenship. Invoked in these debates are ideologies that can be traced back to ideas of the republic and the public sphere debated by Aristotle (Mouffe, 1993), Machiavelli (Putnam, 1993), de Toqueville (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Douglass & Friedmann, 1998; Friedmann, 1998; Putnam, 1993), Adam Smith (Abu-Lughod, 1998), Hegel (Friedmann, 1998) and Habermas (Calhoun, 1996; Mouffe, 1993).

In Australia the discourse was heightened by the prominence accorded to the Boyer Lectures by Eva Cox (1995) although Farrar suggested in 1996 that “the idea of civil society is so unfamiliar in Australia that to suggest it is at the heart of any social tensions may seem more than a little far fetched” (p. vii). Driving this interest, he suggests, are concerns about the size and nature of government in the United States and in Eastern Europe. In Australia it has been invoked in discussions around public administration (Farrar & Inglis, 1996, p. ix).

Friedmann offers a definition of civil society as “those social organisations, associations and institutions that exist beyond the sphere of direct supervision and control by the state” (1998, p. 21) or as Cox states “the area between the state and the family” (1996, p. 53). Cox, however, prefers a broader definition:

A civil society, in my terms, accepts and respects diversity, maintains principles for the common good, shares the resources equitably and does not allow any group sufficient power to oppress others. (1997, p. 6)

Nearly all discussions about civil society centre around the idea of an active, participatory citizenry, who through their voluntary associations, demonstrate local empowerment (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Such organisations are “horizontally structured” suggests Putnam:

If horizontal networks of civic engagement help participants solve dilemmas of collective action, then the more horizontally structured an organization, the more it should foster institutional success in the broader community. (1993, p. 175)
Horizontal relations depend upon reciprocity and cooperation, unlike vertical structures which depend upon authority and dependency (p.88). Putnam acknowledges that involvement in such organisations is not altruistic but is in fact based on “enlightened self interest” (1993, p. 88). However, the capital base for the transactions is social, not economic.

Cox notes that the emphasis on voluntary associations is a particularly American preoccupation which reflects “certain aspects of their ethos and history”, in particular the influence of de Toqueville’s 19th century interpretation of American democracy (Cox, 1999). However, unlike earlier definitions, the notion of cultural difference and multiple positions is part of recent theorising: a desire for heterogeneity, not homogeneity. “How should we understand citizenship when our goal is a radical and plural democracy?” asks Mouffe (1993, p. 60).

Criticism of discourses associated with civil society seems to focus on the bourgeois ideologies contained within them. It is not value free suggests Abu-Lughod (1998, pp. 227,232). There is the potential for subordinate groups to be silenced by the manipulation of language around the idea of the “common good” (Fraser, 1995, pp. 286-293) and a problem is posed for planners whose “professional judgement” may be subordinated to an “unqualified” community board (Friedmann, 1998, p. 30; Hillier, 1998). Also there is the danger that governments will increasingly try to evade responsibility by an increasing reliance on the voluntary sector and non-government organisations to take up welfare and planning activities (Cox, 1999, p. 78).

**Social capital**

In his study *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American society* Putnam traces the history of the term ‘social capital’ which “turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties” (2000, p. 19):

The first known use of the concept was not by some cloistered theoretician, but by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era—L.J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia. Writing in 1916 to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools, Hanifan invoked the idea of “social capital” to explain why … the same idea was independently rediscovered in the 1950s by
Canadian sociologists to characterize the club memberships of arriviste suburbanites, in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborliness in the modern metropolis, in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury to analyze the social legacy of slavery, and in the 1980s by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and by German economist Ekkehart Schlicht to underline the social and economic resources embodied in social networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman put the term firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the late 1980s, using it (as Hanifan had originally done) to highlight the social context of education. (p. 19)

The usage generally adopted within cultural studies is that advanced by both Bourdieu and Schlicht as stated by Putnam above. Social capital can be simultaneously a “private good” and a “public good” (p. 20) as some of the benefit from the transaction goes to the individual making the transaction and some goes to the larger group or community. For example, a performer in an amateur theatrical performance gains gratification through being seen and hearing applause. S/he may also benefit personally from the networking opportunities that arise through meeting with a group of community members on a regular basis. The public goods obtained are the social benefits which flow from the group’s performances such as audience satisfaction, charity fundraising or the continued viability of the group and its theatre space.

Putnam argues that these transactions are based on an expectation of reciprocity, either specific or generalised:

> Sometimes, … reciprocity is *specific*: I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* reciprocity: I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone will do something for me down the road. (pp. 20-1)

He warns however that “‘social capital’, like its conceptual cousin ‘community’, sounds warm and cuddly” (p. 21). But it “can be directed towards malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital” (p. 22). (See also Cox, 1999, p. 78).

Cox drew extensively on Putnam in her lecture “Raising social capital” from the 1995 Boyer Lectures. Social capital, she states, “refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit”. Williams critiques Cox’s notion of social capital as “the old 19th century positivist dream of a wholly transparent, itemisable ‘society’ in which all values could be translated into an ethical Esperanto” (B. Williams, 1997, p. 34). And like most
Utopias he suggests, it could turn out to be “closed, rigid and stiflingly monolithic” (p. 35).

Cox redefined social capital in 1999:

As there has been some confusion about what is and is not social capital, it is necessary to clarify what social capital is not. It is not: being good; doing something nice for someone else; doing something for nothing; participating in some group; working with others; belonging to organisations; or trusting people you know well.

All of these actions and processes may play a part in the production of social capital; but no single one will necessarily produce social capital. Social capital is not a definable and separable product one can deliberately create but rather it is a measure of some dimensions of the ways we do what we do. (1999, p. 76)

As with all discussions around the other “conceptual cousins” ‘community’, ‘civil society’ and ‘citizenship’, there exists a tension between the warmly positive concept of ‘social capital’ and a more sceptical view which is critical of the ‘social engineering’ connotations of the term and its potential to be viewed in economic rationalist terms. In strictly practical terms it is difficult to engage community discussions around these concepts without sounding evangelistic and possibly naïve, or manipulative, as one attempts to force existing community processes into the latest fashionable discourse.

However, the discussions around civil society and social capital provide useful tools for an analysis of the place of performance and theatre in a regional community such as Bunbury. Valorisation of community associations and volunteers enables a broader and more positive discussion than perhaps one drawn only from theorising about performance or art and culture where the performance modes of many community theatre activities may be dismissed as boring, ineffectual or politically conservative. The longevity and persistence of community theatre groups cannot be ignored and the functions they provide may be more complex than realised, something that Putnam at least seems to acknowledge in his work drawn from Italian and American regional communities. This thesis takes up these themes in Part Two which focuses on the history and current status of the performing arts in Bunbury. This is illustrated with case studies of practitioners, processes and projects. Central to this section is the discussion of young people and participation in the performing arts. In Part Three, I examine the
role and place of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in terms of local, state and national trends, its volunteer-base, community outreach, and its provision of training in the performing arts.

Part One has provided a ‘way in’ to a critical examination of the role and function of the performing arts in Bunbury and region. It has identified ways of viewing and speaking about cultural production that acknowledge performance across a range of genres drawn from the popular, heritage and ‘high’ arts; its spatial engagement with the changing regional landscape; and, its democratic outreach and civic engagement. Through this activity social and cultural capital is generated and circulated through, this thesis suggests, increasingly wider networks.

This interdisciplinary critical examination will be advanced through active engagement with both historical and contemporary data drawn from a range of formal and informal sources. As stated in the Introduction, I insert my own experience as witness and informant where relevant, believing that my own participation in and observations of the processes I document has given me perspectives unavailable to the external researcher because of the longitudinal nature of such a project. Data has been sourced from national, state and regional government arts agencies and policy-making bodies; in part from documents and oral history archives related specifically to community performance in Bunbury and concerns the regulation, funding, networking, administration, volunteer participation, artistic policy-making, programming and governance of community performance.
PART TWO: Community performance
Chapter 6: Did we miss something?

Gay Hawkins’s investigation of the history of the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council (1993) poses the question “is community arts a cultural program whose moment has passed” (1993, p. xxv)? We may well ask whether for many cities, towns and suburbs in Australia the community arts movement that appeared to have its flowering in the late 1970s and 1980s, ever really tapped into the pre-existing well-established organisations such as the amateur theatres and art societies which form part of the social fabric of the community and which, this thesis will argue, are a primary source of cultural and social capital, the virtues of which are being extolled by the current generation of social and cultural planners.

In a community such as Bunbury the performing arts network of organisations and individuals is a virtual palimpsest of the history of Western theatre since the late nineteenth century. Two traditions, the little theatre movement and the repertory system, are combined in the oldest amateur theatre group in the community. The Bunbury Repertory Club has been in existence for over 60 years and its home is the Little Theatre, an intimate theatre created from a World War Two army hut transported to the site.

Bunbury Repertory Club produces six productions each year and two junior repertory performances. The club’s origins date back to the late 1920s but the Bunbury Repertory Club has been established in the Little Theatre in Molloy Street since 1946. (Community advertisement in the Bunbury Mail, 3 March 2003)

The second amateur group, formed in 1960, is devoted to the musical, a largely American genre, but with links to the Music Hall and variety entertainments in the British tradition, and is known as the Bunbury Musical Comedy Group. It has its own theatre called the New Lyric Theatre. Significant stakeholders in both organisations in Bunbury are former British immigrants. Some performers belong to both groups and move between the two, depending on the performance opportunities being offered. The two theatre spaces reflect theatre design of the late nineteenth century and production styles are dominated by the proscenium arch and box set.
The long history of these two organisations in the community has seen many generations of young people move through their ranks. Family links are important and there would be many children who, because both parents were involved, have grown up within the theatre and participate once they reach a suitable age for the mainly adult repertoire.

Responding to a lack of performing arts opportunities for young people, a youth theatre group was established in the mid 1980s. Known as MESH Youth Theatre (also SCM MESH Youth Theatre), it was formed by staff and students from local secondary schools to provide theatre activities for young people. It attracted sponsorship from local industries, in particular SCM Chemicals, and quickly developed ambitious touring plans for various musical productions, some of which toured interstate and overseas. MESH maintained this focus for several years, supported by substantial funding from local industries during the 1980s. The 1990s saw changes and funding became more difficult to obtain. The administration of the organisation took its toll on its largely volunteer adult supporters. This, combined with the difficulty of obtaining suitably qualified youth theatre leaders, meant that the group changed its focus and during the last half of the 1990s concentrated mainly on smaller, original productions based around regular drama workshops. The group did not have its own theatre space, but had access to facilities at Edith Cowan University from 1996.

The most recent theatre group in the community is Stark Raven Theatre Company. A loose coalition of drama and English teachers and other performers and writers, this group has a commitment to shared decision making, original or contemporary Australian work and the use of varied performance spaces. A storeroom at the rear of a local hotel was converted into a performance space for its first production of *Cosi* by Louis Nowra in 1997 and the bar itself was used for a production of *Barmaids* by Katherine Thompson in 1998. The group has developed street theatre performances for local events and has premiered original works by local playwright, Norm Flynn. Stark Raven has not sought to obtain a permanent home, believing this would distract the group from its performance objectives.

A permanent space is obviously a wonderful asset for a theatre group and contributes, no doubt, to a strong sense of ownership and place for its members. However, it also
means that a considerable amount of capital (economic and human) is required to maintain that space. A large part of the annual expenditure is for the maintenance and upkeep of the building itself and for paying rates on what is increasingly valuable land. This ongoing responsibility then tends to steer programming towards safe choices that will return a surplus, most of which is used for capital items rather than artistic development. These groups are also able to obtain funding assistance for capital items via state government agencies such as Healthways and the Lotteries Commission and, while this improves the theatre’s facilities, it means that the theatre continues to opt for safe programming choices because the funding bodies require evidence of community use of the facility. Both MESH Youth Theatre and Stark Raven Theatre Company chose to use existing spaces rather than devote time and energy to the task of obtaining a permanent home. Many of the members of these two groups were also members of the older groups and felt a permanent theatre space was a burden that impacted on the ability of the group to take a flexible approach to performance and an inventory of performing arts spaces in Bunbury reveals a surprising amount of choice. Three government high schools and one private school have dedicated performing arts complexes with flexible, workshop style spaces. There are two intimate theatres owned by the two older groups previously mentioned. There is also a major 800 seat theatre at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, a recently constructed ‘sound shell’, an amphitheatre, a 170 seat lecture theatre at the university campus and numerous community halls and public open access areas suitable for street and festival type performance.

The organisation of the performance of music within the community follows a similar pattern to that of the theatre groups and reflects the changing performance genres throughout the decades, as documented by Farrant in her survey of the history of musical performance in Western Australia (2003). The oldest groups are the Bunbury City Band which has existed since the nineteenth century (Barker & Laurie, 1992, p. 169) and the South West Music Guild, formed in 1970 and dedicated to showcasing local and visiting performers. The Bunbury Youth Chorale was formed in 1984 by a dedicated group of music teachers and parents as detailed in this recent news item:

The Bunbury Youth Chorale has got more to sing about than usual. The group will celebrate its 20th anniversary this year. Daisy Harries has been the choir’s accompanist since its inception. ("Choir planning reunion," 2004)
Largely comprising primary school age children, the group is regarded as a major youth arts contributor, although it struggles with the perennial problem for youth arts companies of finding suitable adults prepared to undertake the task of musical director.

Encouraged by the opening of the Entertainment Centre in 1990, several groups emerged, each specializing in varying modes of musical performance. These groups tend to form around one or two people with professional training who both teach and direct productions, using amateur performers. At least two of these groups have offered productions from light opera and musical theatre. Others have developed choirs such as the Bunbury Men of Song formed in 1997 (Heal, 2004), or developed one-off performances for a variety of venues. Many musicians and singers circulate between these groups choosing to work on productions that offer them a chance to showcase their particular skills.

Dance is almost totally developed within private dance schools or within the secondary school curriculum. Dedicated dance showcases tend to be in-house, such as end-of-year concerts. Otherwise dancers are called on to perform in musical theatre productions or for community variety concerts showcasing local talent. There are small but enthusiastic groups participating in ethnic dance forms such as belly-dancing and Spanish dance.

As Bunbury expands its tourist and leisure activities so the demand for live contemporary music has grown. Although not yet the site for a dedicated music festival, there are several major music festivals held annually within a 100 kilometre radius of Bunbury such as Fairbridge Festival, Bridgetown Blues Festival and Nannup Music Festival. Many of the state and interstate bands that appear at such events also include Bunbury on their touring schedules. Local bands have developed particularly youth bands such as Four Disorder who are profiled in Chapter Eight.

There is very little interaction between the performance genres pursued so enthusiastically within the community although, as noted earlier, one performer may belong to more than one group. The theatre companies make very little use of contemporary music or dance performers unless for musical theatre where musicians are required for the orchestra or dancers are required for a dance sequence. But this
participation tends to be limited to that of support for the actors with little input into the overall production. The Bunbury Regional Art Gallery has supported musicians and dancers by using performers at exhibition openings and open days and by allowing performance groups to access rehearsal spaces at low cost.

**Community theatre**

A profusion of terms has been invoked at various points in time to name the types of performance that have flourished in communities throughout Australia for most of the twentieth century: little theatre, repertory theatre, independent theatre, drama societies, community theatre, regional theatre. These terms are often used in ways which are contradictory or which do not concur with their original use. For example, repertory was used in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe the structure and methods of small, professional theatres throughout the country that were “based on new, committed writing and an intelligent approach to the classics. It also prided itself on a local identity, on short runs and a changing program, and on a resident ensemble company with no stars” (Thornber, 1980, p. 166). In Australia, professional actors enthusiastic about the repertory theatre’s commitment to ‘serious’ theatre enlisted the support of amateur actors and groups to realise their aims. This is where the term repertory came to take on a different meaning. “While the repertory movement in Britain was wholly professional the Australian ‘repertory’ society was amateur. Australian amateurs typically played in seasons of plays, not in round repertoire” (Brisbane, 1995, p. 38).

Amateur theatricals or entertainments came with British settlement of Australia as they were “popular in England among the aristocracy and middle classes, who performed mainly romantic comedy for charity or for their own amusement” (Brisbane, 1995, p. 38). Hough notes that the “isolation and tyranny of distance often discerned in Western Australian history” has encouraged “independence and self-reliance” which he sees evidenced through “diversity” as well as “parochialism” in local theatre groups (2003, p.10). This independence is still evidenced today by the strong allegiances each of the performing arts groups in Bunbury have to their own organisations and the often difficult task of bringing them together to determine shared objectives (Blee, 2004).
In Bunbury, newspaper accounts show that “grand amateur dramatic entertainment[s]” took place in the 1880s (Murray, 1996, p. 8). Murray notes the involvement of various churches in these organised entertainments. She also notes:

In the days between the two World Wars there were many active local theatrical groups. Among these were the Thespians and the Optimists to which many of the original members of the Bunbury Repertory belonged. In addition, there were many purpose-formed groups who came together for a particular play, or musical event. (p. 11)

It appears that the Bunbury Repertory Club may have formally come into being in 1935 although there are accounts of Repertory Club performances as early as 1932 (p. 13). Perth Repertory Club was formed in 1919 and “became more serious in the 1930s” (Brisbane, 1995, p. 42). The term ‘repertory’, stemming from its adoption in England in the 1880s to describe both an ideological and a practical approach to performance, is appropriated and reinterpreted by the time it is adopted in Perth in 1919, and later, in Bunbury in 1932, by which time it has come to mean a performance by amateurs. Craig documents the debate that developed in the Perth Repertory Club during the twenties and thirties about the direction that amateur theatre should take. “While the progressives saw it as a moral and educative medium, the conservatives took the opposite point of view ” (Craig, 1990, p. 114). The small amount of radical theatre that took place in Perth came to a halt in 1939 and amateur performance during the war both in Perth and Bunbury revolved around light entertainment such as the musical *Merrie England* performed by Bunbury Repertory Club in 1941 (Murray, 1996, p. 15).

A parallel movement to the repertory movement in Britain was the little theatre movement “that began in the USA beyond New York City about 1910 as a protest against the domination of Broadway. It called itself ‘little theatre’ to distinguish it from the pastime of amateur performance” (Brisbane, 1995, p. 40). Ironically, as is clear from Brisbane’s account, both the repertory and little theatre movements tried to distance themselves from metropolitan mainstream performance and amateur theatricals. However, in Australia these movements were forced to rely on amateur performers although initially they may have used a professional director. Ultimately they were appropriated by the amateur theatre companies. In the case of Bunbury Repertory Club the term ‘Little Theatre’ is used as the name of its theatre, apparently named as such by the architect and club president Charles Hall when it opened in 1946. “Henrietta Drake-
Brockman came down \textit{from Perth} with a film crew to make a film of the hall because Bunbury Repertory was the only one with its own theatre at that time” (Hillman cited in Murray, 1996, p. 29). One can only speculate whether Hall’s naming of the building as the Little Theatre was merely a realistic description of its size, or whether it was a reference to the American theatre movement described by Brisbane above. Brisbane states that:

\begin{quote}
The high point of ‘little theatre’ activity was from the 1920s to the 1940s, when the professional legitimate theatre was at its lowest ebb. Necessity drew the amateur and the professional much closer together than either would have preferred in other circumstances. Amateur theatres began to assume the role filled by professional repertory theatres in other countries. Actors could train on the public platforms only in amateur theatre until the National Institute of Dramatic Art was founded in 1958. (1995, p. 40)
\end{quote}

Brisbane demonstrates the power and prestige of amateur theatres in the first half of the twentieth century, a time when amateurism in sport was equally highly regarded and membership of such organisations conveyed significant social capital. Hough credits the “healthy state of the Little Theatre Movement” as being central to the history of theatre development in Western Australia (2003, p. 55).

Thus amateur theatre organisations such as Bunbury Repertory Club once commanded a status and influence within their communities that perhaps is overlooked today. The following extracts from the Bunbury Repertory Club’s constitution demonstrate the high-minded and all-encompassing roles undertaken by the Club.

\begin{quote}
To provide a social Club for persons interested in the study of dramatic art, pictorial art, literature and music, and to provide and maintain a Club Room, Library and other accommodation and conveniences for the use of members of the Club.

To promote, extend, develop, cultivate and foster the art and science of drama and histrionic production, pictorial art, literature and music in all its branches. (Murray, 1996, p. 29)
\end{quote}

The social function of the Club is emphasised and becoming a member of the Club was a formal procedure of being nominated and having one’s nomination accepted by the members, who included many of the community’s “leading citizens”. For one couple,
immigrants from post-war Europe, their membership of the Repertory Club symbolised their acceptance by the Bunbury community.

Among those who became involved during the early 50s were Shura and Wlodek Wojciechowski (Alex) … She and Wlodek were the first migrants to become involved in the Little Theatre … In the early times of the Club, to become a member you had to be sponsored and appear before the committee. It was not a simple matter of paying your fees as it is now. The Wojciechowskis had been involved in the Club for a number of years before they officially became members. (Murray, 1996, p. 46)

A reflection of social attitudes of the times is the use of the word ‘migrant’ to denote someone other than of British descent, since amateur theatre groups like the Bunbury Repertory Club are popular with British immigrants and presumably did not make their British nominees wait quite as long for their membership to be approved as appears to have been the case for the Wojciechowskis. As a remarkable sign of loyalty and dedication, Wlodek Wojciechowski has been the treasurer of the Bunbury Repertory Club and licensee of the Little Theatre continuously since 1969.

Bunbury Repertory Club offers its members both a place and a shared set of interests, fundamental elements of a community. Collectively, organisations such as Bunbury Repertory Club were referred to as ‘amateur theatre’, the ‘amateur theatre movement’ or ‘independent theatres’. When professional training institutions and professional organisations such as Actors’ Equity developed in the late 1950s, separation between amateur and professional theatre emerged. Once acting became a more secure profession in Australia, the influence of amateur theatre “upon the direction of dramatic taste and thought” waned (Brisbane, 1995, p. 45). The term “amateur” acquired derogatory connotations (Litson, 1997a, p. 10) and Brisbane states that it “has taken on a pejorative implication of light entertainment for personal enjoyment” (1995, p.38). This separation between professional and amateur theatre meant that the influence and work of amateur theatres was often overlooked or dismissed by funding bodies, professional organisations or sponsors. They were seen perhaps as relics of the past, conservative in nature, often fiercely independent and suspicious of new ideas. However, this is a misleading impression that does not reflect the current situation. Despite the alternative theatre movements developed over the past thirty years, amateur theatre still flourishes in Australia, although not necessarily under that title.
It has been noted that amateur theatre attracts large numbers of participants and audience members throughout Australia. Litson states:

the non-professional theatre scene is booming: audiences are swelling and budgets for some amateur musicals are topping $100,000 while umbrella organisations, such as the Association of Community Theatre in NSW, the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria and the Independent Theatre Association of Western Australia, are uniting in their efforts to provide infrastructural support for their members. (1997b)

She further states that “the audience figure for non-professional theatre [is estimated] at more than 2 million a year” (1997a, p. 10).

Drawing upon figures provided by copyright agents, Spicer notes that in 1995:

they issued rights for more than 1000 production seasons. (The figure doubles if school productions are included.) A typical amateur group puts on about six performances of a show, with an audience reach of anything from one to 10,000. At a conservative estimate the total audience in Australia is well over 2 million a year. (1996, p. 73)

The chairperson of the Rockhampton Little Theatre (Queensland) asks and answers the question:

But where do groups such as ours fit into the overall scheme of things? Outside our area we probably count for very little at all, but it is groups such as ours who are bringing theatre to the populace. People in this town do not get the chance to go to Brisbane or Sydney to see theatre very often, and expense is very much a limiting factor. We provide them with an opportunity to see theatre, maybe without the glitz and sophistication, maybe not the most trendy, but it is quality theatre nonetheless, and theatre which is accessible and affordable. (Galley, 1997, p. 92)

Litson argues that despite variation in standards, “at its best, amateur theatre … is professional in every sense except that the performers don’t get paid” (1997a, p. 10). She agrees with Galley that affordability is a reason for its popularity with audiences, although she notes the rapidly increasing costs of mounting big productions, even for amateur groups, such as performing rights and insurance. “For participants the attraction is twofold: fun for those who view it as a hobby and a terrific training ground for those who are aiming at a professional career” (1997a, p. 10).
Spicer notes that “[i]n N[ew] S[outh] W[ales] a new Association of Community Theatre has been formed to try to capitalise on the marketing potential of the state’s 150 drama and musical societies” (1996, pp. 73-74). This organisation is affiliated with interstate and international umbrella organisations, such as the Independent Theatre Association of Western Australia. These organisations maintain websites and newsletters that create state and national communities of people with similar interests. Veronica Kelly’s account of Australian theatre in the 1990s represents this move as an unwarranted appropriation of a term:

In a national situation where the term ‘community theatre’ has been appropriated, American-style, by the powerful interstate associations of amateur groups who mount ambitious contemporary scripts with $100,000 budgets … the future for radical community work remains optimistic but the direction of its next transformations is at best uncertain. (1998, p. 17)

However, with their long histories within particular communities throughout Australia, it is worth asking why it has taken so long for the label ‘community theatre’ to be claimed by the amateur or independent theatre movements. How has it been that groups so obviously embedded in their communities were excluded from the community theatre and community arts movements in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s?

**Community arts**

The ‘community arts movement’ began in the late 1960s and has been variously celebrated and vilified since. Just as the original repertory and little theatre movements were reactions to the conservatism of mainstream theatre in Britain and the United States half a century before, so the community arts and community theatre movements were responses to the perceived conservatism of ‘the arts’, in particular, the failure of so-called ‘high art’ to engage with working class and popular culture. “It aimed primarily to stimulate involvement in the arts among people in disadvantaged conditions, seeing in the arts a vehicle for expressing political and social concerns as well as creativity” (*Arts and communities: The report of the national inquiry into arts and the community*, 1992, p. 3). By the early 1980s community arts in Australia was well-established as a significant element in cultural production in the community and had been accorded its own funding processes within the Australia Council. However, by the end of the decade, much of what had been achieved had become incorporated into
standard arts and bureaucratic practices, and the radical, political nature of the movement no longer existed. As outlined by Watt in a discussion about the community theatre movement, the original community artists either burned out or moved on, often into training institutions, where they trained the second and third generation of community arts workers who now regarded work in community theatre as a career option, rather than as emancipatory or radical activity (1992). Copeland also speculates that “a lot of those forms and issues and a lot of the content of what we used to call community arts is now … in the mainstream” (1999).

The postcolonial history of theatre arts and arts policy in Australia demonstrates an, at times, slavish imitation of British practice. This also holds true for radical community arts/theatre practice. O’Neill stated in 1984 that “[one] can’t avoid the observation that much of our community theatre practice in Australia is directly or indirectly based on the British model” (p. 91). As Kelly outlines, this model “began as one strand of activism, among many during the late 1960s” but by 1984 Kelly suggests it had moved away from its “political, social and cultural goals” and was becoming a part of the welfare state (p. 1). One of the early radical theatre groups in Britain was the then ironically named Welfare State. Its founder, Baz Kershaw, documented much of this early history and, in the manner described by Watts above, accounts such as these became the basis for training in community arts for new generations of community arts workers. The work of another British writer and director, John McGrath, particularly the 7:84 company that he set up in Scotland in 1971, was also influential in the development of the community arts/theatre movement in Australian in the 1970s and 1980s. McGrath’s use of non-traditional performance spaces for *The Cheviot, the stag and the black, black oil* (1973) (Lathan, 2002) for its tour around Scotland opened up possibilities for community performance in Australia. Lack of access to a traditional theatre space no longer was a problem for emerging theatre companies; in fact, non-traditional performance spaces became the order of the day.

Hawkins’s account of community arts in Australia suggests that it arose out of so-called counter-culture movements such as the Nimbin Aquarius Festivals of the early 1970s and political action movements such as Gay Rights, which led to the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. However, community arts in Australia were very quickly incorporated into government policy, so much so, she argues, that they were “a creation of government
policy, an official invention” (1993, p. xviii). Watt points out that Hawkins “has offered a fairly controversial version of the policy shifts which have characterised the change in role and status of community arts funding within the Australia Council” (1992, p. 7). Graham Pitts, a community theatre practitioner for many years, was affronted by her claim.

The book is not only disappointing but also a virtual insult to the intelligence and experience, ‘the inside knowledge’ if you like, of a great many artists and community artworkers. (1994, p. 13).

In a more recent discussion, Pitts grapples with the many competing claims on the term ‘community theatre’ and seems to claim some sort of moral imperative to use it to describe his particular form of professional theatre.

You also run into the problem that in some countries, and in some states of Australia, ‘community theatre’ means amateur theatre. Whereas we—you and I—would take ‘community theatre’; as meaning an activity that’s wholly or in part very professional. This doesn’t prevent people in so-called ‘mainstream’ theatre using it as a derogatory term. Or speaking of it as something which has, un lamented, passed away. (Foster, 2000, p. 57)

Pitts’ play Emma – Celebrazione (1994), based on the life story of Emma Ciccotosto, a first generation Italian immigrant to Western Australia, was first performed in Fremantle by Deckchair Theatre in 1993. It was performed in Bunbury in 1999 by the Stark Raven Theatre Company with an amateur cast and director. The availability of the script, published by Currency Press, Australia’s leading performing arts publisher, means that it can be performed in communities other than its originating community of Fremantle, Western Australia (despite the fact that the play also drew on Emma’s life in Harvey, 20 kilometres from Bunbury). An ultimate incorporation into the mainstream is, arguably, for a text to be set as part of a syllabus for study in secondary schools. An extract from Emma - Celebrazione was included as an unseen script for comment by Year 12 Drama students in the Tertiary Entrance Examination in Western Australia in 1999. Thus a community theatre project is subsumed by the professional and commercial realm in a similar process to that described by Fotheringham (1996, p. 14) in relation to Aftershocks (Brown, 1993).
Chaney states that “professionals can be characterised by their ability to control social space in important ways” (1994, p. 140). By the mid 1980s National Community Theatre Conferences were being held and amongst other things developed guidelines “for the assessment by funding bodies” (Burvill, 1986, p. 86; see also Watt, 1995, p.155). In her reports from the first Victorian Community Theatres’ Conference in June 1983 and the first National Community Theatres Conference in November, 1983, Laurie lists these guidelines:

1. It is the nature of community theatre to perform for and with the communities they serve.

2. When assessing community theatre using the criteria of Australian content, quality and access, the following should be taken into account:
   
a) The community is the primary source of content, and therefore critical assessment by the participants, including audience, should be a criterion of assessment.

b) By its nature, community theatre embraces a diversity of models and styles, which may vary from project to project. This process involves innovation, exploration and change.

c) A diversity of performance venue is a positive characteristic of community theatre. Assessment of performance value in community theatre should take into account the imagination and skill with which the location of the performance is utilised to transmit a sense of theatre occasion.

d) Each community theatre project will have a specific set of objectives and criteria of assessment should take cognisance of these objectives. For example, process and participation can play as valuable a part in community theatre as final performance values.

e) Community theatre offers many avenues of access to members of the communities in which it operate. (1984, pp. 84-85)

Laurie was a foundation member of Circus Oz and subsequently a trainer with the Flying Fruitfly Circus, the young people’s circus based in Albury/Wodonga. Whilst Circus Oz developed from a ‘grass-roots’ or community base; in the decades since, it has become a flagship professional company with extensive national and international touring schedules. Laurie further states that “community theatre is political. Community theatre aims to become the theatre of our culture, the culture of the majority” (p. 85).
These aspirations inspired a generation of theatre workers who moved out into the wider community and used processes of creating community theatre as outlined by Fotheringham who defines ‘community’ as “a particular sub-group of people who are assumed to have interests in common” (1992, p. 20). The process is then that:

[t]his community approaches, or is approached by, a group of professional theatre workers. Together the community and the artists devise a performance project with the intention, not only of entertaining, but also of saying something about the community’s life experiences, memories of the past, and hopes and fears for the future” (p. 20).

The process outlined by Fotheringham and others has an egalitarian tone to it. And certainly there are many stories of individuals and groups who have been empowered by this process, some of whom have subsequently ‘turned professional’. However, several questions are also raised. Do all communities want to hear their own stories or issues? If left to their own devices would they choose, or continue to choose, repertoire from the mainstream and popular traditions, such as musicals and farces? Milne, in his survey of professional regional theatres in the eastern states of Australia, states that “audiences wanted to see more orthodox theatre than the kinds of community theatre they’d grown tired of” (2003, p. 284). In a radio interview, an interviewee from King Island in the Bass Strait firmly states - “we’ve never attempted a local story and I think if I did I’d probably be run out of town” (Cathcart, 2000). The speaker said that her community buys-in professional expertise to run drama workshops throughout the year but for their annual production they pride themselves that it is an all-island affair with a cast and crew numbering up to 120 (a musical production) and over 50% of the island’s population either in it, or as members of the audience.

Mienczakowski, in the same radio program, comments that:

I would assume with [those] fantastic participation rates that King Island is a community that’s fairly secure in its own local identity - I mean the act of 120 persons putting on a production is the community speaking and mixing; they may not be talking about themselves but they are talking to each other. They don’t need to reify who they are or what they are to each other, they know that, but in transient communities I think the location and local identity and culture are very important. And theatre is often a way of defining reflection [sic] upon your local needs and experiences (Cathcart, 2000).
For those community theatres who choose not to talk about themselves, perhaps finding it too solipsistic or confronting, Mienczakowski at least dignifies their work, something that professional community theatre practitioners and arts funding bodies have often chosen not to do by marginalising them on the grounds that their work is not politically engaged, is not original, is not ‘different’, and so on.

Another national radio talkback program that asked the question “What is the state of contemporary theatre and what does it tell us about ourselves?” elicited responses from participants and audience members from regional community theatres who stressed liveness, entertainment and affordability rather than Australian or contemporary themes. Some of these responses were as follows:

I have my city theatre fix by subscribing to Canberra and Adelaide theatres. But that’s city theatre. I’ve also enjoyed local theatre .... As to relevance, I’m not looking for that, I’m looking for pleasure and admiration at the huge variety of skills that go to make a night at the theatre … Australian themes aren’t the only thing that makes Australian theatre. (Meg in McCutcheon, 2004)

Live theatre in a town like ours is a rarity and the local response answers your question—yes, live theatre is relevant in Australia, especially when it’s successful and affordable. We charged a price of eleven dollars a ticket—comparisons are irrelevant and odious I know but I paid eighty two dollars for my ticket to Dance of death in Sydney and that’s another non-Australian play. (June William Smith in McCutcheon, 2004)

The list of titles staged by Bunbury community theatre groups for the eleven year period 1994 – 2004 is provided in Appendix A. An average of twelve titles per year are staged, the majority of which are British or American. The highest number of productions was in 1998 when sixteen were staged, two of which were by Australian playwrights, two by Bunbury playwrights and two group-devised productions.

In the desire of professional community theatre practitioners to create significant, politically engaged theatre, the projects that have come closest to those aims are those that are recorded in the literature, thus creating a database of ‘successful’ or ‘canonical’ projects that then forms the community theatre tradition and shapes policy and practice. Those community theatres that have chosen to generate performance from within their own ranks and have eschewed political engagement for more mainstream and popular choices of repertoire were denied the term ‘community theatre’ until more recently,
when their own representative organisations have laid claim to it at a state, national and international level.

This has led to a crisis of nomenclature amongst the professional community theatre workers such as Pitts and Foster:

Foster: We’ve indicated dissatisfaction with ‘community theatre’ (the label) and its problematics. If we can’t call it that, what is a suitable umbrella that we can use instead?

Pitts: ‘Action Theatre’? ‘Creative Theatre’? ‘Real Theatre’? ‘True Theatre’? You want a term that can’t be appropriated but at the same time doesn’t bloody limit the practice. ‘Magic Theatre’” No, that sounds wussy, doesn’t it” “Carnival’” Or the term I’ve heard you use, ‘grass-roots’ theatre’? …

Foster: Does ‘Group Theatre’ do anything?

Pitts: Maybe ‘Shared Theatre’? I’ll tell you what I would hate about the loss of the word ‘community’: it sounds like ‘communion’, the sharing of something between people. And every time, in any of my good plays or in better playwright’s work, when theatre is really working you get a huge shared experience. Communion. And I’ve always liked ‘community’ because it’s like that, it’s like …

Foster: Communitas. (Foster, 2000, p. 70)

In a radio discussion, another practitioner, Jackson, suggests that:

In the future we are just going to see so many forms and so when we use the term, to me, community theatre we are harping [sic] back to a time in the 70s and early 80s and I think it is interesting to make reference to those words but we are still looking for a new term and maybe we need another five new terms to be coined to be able to deal with the different groups we have got making theatre in the community at the end of 1999. (Copeland, 1999)

Pitts laments the disappearance of “a huge corpus of history … every time we go to a forum or conference we hear the wheel being reinvented” (Foster, 2000, p. 65). He is didactic about his vision of community theatre. It is about “the nature of the relationship with the audience” and “the function of the work” (p.60). Somehow the work “must still remain political” yet not suffer from the “occupational disease of community theatre [that is] an over-dose of proselytising politics” (p.61). Pitts claims the authority of the professional but at the same time states that the practice of community arts must be grounded “in the lived experience of the communities we work with” (p. 67). In this transaction one wonders where the power lies. To an extent it smacks of ‘having one’s
cake and eating it too’: retaining the heroic status of the politically committed community worker yet also wanting the accolades of professionalism such as a wage, an impressive curriculum vitae and a body of work, preferably in the form of a publishable script that becomes part of the canon of Australian dramatic works. Where is the community placed in this?

More recently, Pitts, in his role as editor of the on-line account of the … such fertile ground … an Australian Centenary of Federation art project facilitated in several regional locations in Victoria in 2001, reworks definitions of community arts. “It is possible that in the end the community art is not a form of art but rather a variety of processes. These ways of creating art in a community context can perhaps best be exemplified by the prepositions ‘in’, ‘for’, ‘with’ and ‘of’ and ‘by’” (2002, p. 3). He considers the implications of each of these prepositional processes then concludes:

Art ‘by’ a community implies or even dictates that no artist is involved (or at least no artist from outside that community is involved.) The community is in total control. The power of deciding everything in what should be selected or made and presented is made by the community. The final work is presented by the community and it is aimed at, or attended by, only that community. Ipso facto, artists (or at least artists from outside) have no role to play. Such artwork is “in”, “for”, “with”, “of” and now in a very pure sense completely “by” the community … art has become a commonplace part of everyday life. “(2002, p. 4)

Thus such a community would become “like Bali where the ‘artists’ are virtually indistinguishable from the members of the community” (p. 4) he argues. Given his previous claims to professional community theatre worker status, this seems too sudden a shift. Perhaps by the idealised reference to Bali where “until the coming of white artists … there was no word in the island languages for ‘artist’” (p. 1) and to ‘purity’ Pitts indicates that he has no real belief that arts practices in Australian communities meet this criteria and that there will be an ongoing role for artists who work ‘for’ and ‘with’ communities.

I suggest that in Bunbury, when community arts projects have employed professionals from outside the community and relied upon the ‘authority’ or ‘reputation’ of these people, that these projects have had difficulty ‘selling themselves’ to local participants, although the works developed succeeded according to their criteria. In a regional community, the fact that the ‘professional’ artist has status elsewhere can mean very
little if the groundwork has not been done within the community prior to the project’s commencement. Cameron notes that:

A community might invite theatre workers to come into their community but may not be aware of what is likely to happen. This ‘invitation’ is a delicate business because the person or group of people doing the inviting might not in any way represent the community. (1993, p. 47)

In Bunbury the use of professional artists to develop original community artworks has mainly been confined to the visual arts. Most professional theatreworkers have been used to direct existing scripts. To my knowledge the only local performance group to use professional theatre workers to devise original works is MESH Youth Theatre and arguably these were in-house productions, rather than recruiting widely for participants. However, Stark Raven Theatre Company, have used professional dramaturgs and directors to work with local playwright, Norm Flynn, on two of his own scripts. (This process will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven). Where professional directors have been engaged it is for specific projects that the community theatre group has determined in advance and then approached recommended directors. This means that the project already has considerable support from within the group which will then extend to the wider community through established networks.

Milne laments the decline in the 1990s of the “professional theatre companies that emerged out of or took up residence in regional cities in Australia (especially in Victoria and NSW) during the 1970s and 1980s” and which he calls ‘regional theatres’ (Milne, 2003, p. 271). In Western Australia however, and I suspect a fair proportion of regional Australia, our regional theatres are our community/amateur theatres and/or our regional performing arts centres and their contribution to the economic, social and cultural fabric of Australian society is often ignored or dismissed. This thesis demonstrates the longevity and interconnectedness of the performing arts in a community such as Bunbury.
Chapter 7: Profiles

This chapter profiles two individuals who contribute to community theatre at all levels. Both have chosen to pursue a recreational life in theatre but achieve project outcomes that would usually be associated with professional, funded projects. They have chosen to retain amateur/volunteer status, despite their obvious accomplishments and achievements. One good reason for this may well be to remain independent of the qualifications and guidelines often attached to subsidised productions; other, perhaps more pragmatic reasons are that they have chosen to live in a regional community where opportunities for professional performance are few and that they need a dependable income, something not always achievable in the professional performing arts.

Norm Flynn: playwright, director, producer, oral historian, set builder, actor, mentor

Flynn’s professional career was in the banking industry from which he took early retirement. His parallel, recreational ‘careers’ are variously playwright, director, producer, oral historian, set builder and occasional actor. Although most productions manage to pay a small honorarium to amateur directors and costs incurred are reimbursed, the hours devoted to rehearsals or other tasks associated with a production are unpaid:

[W]orking on one production a year I would have to say that about three months of the year would be devoted, every spare minute of that three months [to] working on the production. (2001)

Originally from Perth, Flynn’s banking career took him to live in many regional towns. If a performing arts group did not already exist, Flynn started one. For small towns he scripted themed musical shows that incorporated references to local events, places and personalities. Funds raised went to local projects and local groups collaborated on all aspects of the show. As such they were very effective community development projects, especially since they were self-funding and profit-making.

Flynn has been associated with Bunbury performing arts groups for over twenty years. He brought to Bunbury a passion for Western Australian stories and had obviously already discovered in theatre a perfect vehicle for this interest.
Before I came to Bunbury, way back, I was going to Green Room [events] up in Perth run by professional groups and … my interest started when I was with the Kuljak Playwrights’ Group and we used to fund workshops from professionals. I remember Aarne Neeme and people like that directing moved readings of our scripts. (2001)

As discussed in previous chapters, during the 1960s and 1970s Australian theatre had a renewal of interest in Australian stories and culture. Younger directors like Aarne Neeme, Andrew Ross (later of Black Swan Theatre Company, Perth) or John Bell (founder of Nimrod Theatre, Sydney and Bell Shakespeare Company) obtained funding through the newly-emerging Australia Council, Arts Councils and other organisations, to conduct workshops such as that mentioned by Flynn. This developmental work still resonates decades later, long after the key personnel have gone on to careers in state-funded theatres. The participants of those early workshops, like Flynn and myself (I attended workshops conducted by John Bell and other Nimrod Theatre luminaries in Sydney in the early 1970s) used these strategies and techniques in our regional communities.

Flynn’s commitment to Australian theatre was not an easy one to pursue in Bunbury with the existing theatre groups. “As far as influence goes, I suppose my claim to fame is pushing the barrow of the Australian works, which is not always popular” (2001). He was frustrated by what he saw as the predominance of light English farces in the repertoire of the Bunbury Repertory Club. Convincing the club to stage Australian plays was always difficult. Objections would be raised to the language or subject matter; it would be claimed that they did not make money or that audiences were not interested. In the face of this opposition Flynn would look for other ways to stage productions, often taking them to a new audience in alternative performance spaces. His production of Emma - Celebrazione (Pitts, 1994) in 1999 did just this. Flynn’s knowledge of regional communities meant that he had already targeted potential audiences; in this case, members of the Italian community from Bunbury and the nearby regional towns of Harvey and Waroona, many of whom knew Emma Ciccotosto, the subject of the play.

Well, as a marked example, when I directed Emma I had no trouble getting funding from the Multicultural Office and the Year of the Older Person, because it was all appropriate and so I said I would like to fund a couple of bus loads to come from Harvey. Well the first two nights were full houses. And that was not at all difficult to arrange. I put that suggestion of that play to the other group and they couldn’t understand why I wanted to do it in the Italian Club. It beat them a bit. They
couldn’t quite see that Italians would probably go to the Italian Club and they’d never been known to go to the Little Theatre in their lives. (2001)

Although frustrated by the lack of responsiveness of the established theatre groups to Australian and new works, Flynn still managed to get many Australian plays staged at Bunbury Repertory Club. He was associated with productions of *The club* (Williamson), *The front room boys* (Buzo), *Reedy River* (Diamond), *The legend of King O’Malley* (Boddy & Ellis), *On our selection* (Whaley), *The perfectionist* (Williamson), *Travelling north* (Williamson) and *The floating world* (Romeril).

Flynn’s interest in local stories has seen expression through his (recreational) work as a writer. He has written four full-length performance works, each of which has had a successful production. He is an experienced oral historian and has worked for the Bunbury Oral History Group in obtaining and editing personal histories for its collection. Most recently he edited and published the diaries of a local farmer, George Fee (Flynn, 2003).

Flynn’s most recent dramatic work is *A Japanese affair* (2002), staged by Stark Raven Theatre Company in Bunbury in 2002. Some of the distinctive features of this project were its historical sources, the dramaturgical processes implemented by Flynn, the themes that both critique and celebrate regionality, its audience appeal and its community theatre production. The central narrative is about a local woman accused of spying for the Japanese because of her liaison with a Japanese man in Western Australia prior to World War Two. This comes directly from his research for the Bunbury Oral History Group of stories told by older Bunbury residents of how their lives were affected by the events of World War Two. Bunbury, as a seaport, saw movements of troops and supplies, so was strategically important. Flynn’s research took him to military archives where he found files relating to the surveillance and detention of the woman during the war. Flynn was interested in comparing this narrative with some of the attitudes of returned soldiers, the experiences of a local family whose mother was a Japanese war-bride who came to live in Bunbury in the 1950s, and contemporary attitudes to Japan, including a sister city relationship between Bunbury and Setagaya, Japan.
The challenge for Flynn was in selecting and crafting a playscript from such rich and complex material, made more so because some of the key figures are still alive. Flynn effectively set up a dramaturgical relationship with professional actor/director Andy King, funded by small grants from state funding bodies, and made this a public process whereby local actors were invited to participate in workshopped readings of the developing script. Community theatre group, Stark Raven Theatre Company, was the host organisation and, in keeping with their philosophy of using non-traditional theatre spaces, negotiated with a local hotel to convert a large rear bar area into an intimate theatre space.

Flynn first experienced dramaturgy at work in the 1980s after the production of his first play *Johnny Gavin* (1981) at the Bunbury Repertory Club when “the Arts council rang me and said would you like to go to the Playwright’s Conference and I nearly fell over backwards”. Records of the Australian National Playwrights’ Conference state that:

> The Australian National Playwrights’ Conference was established in 1972. The Conference aims to promote and develop script writing by Australian writers, to produce such plays by professional companies to offer critical and practical theatrical assistance to playwrights and rehearsed readings of selected playscripts. *(Records of the National Australia Playwright's Conference, 2004)*

From this Flynn learnt to take a ‘professional’ approach to his writing by being open to input from other skilled theatre practitioners. What modest funding Flynn has sought he has put to work on script development.

> I’ve had grants to seed workshops; the play *Coming back* (Flynn, 1998), Ingle Knight was funded to come down and workshop it; so it’s sort of “knock and the door opens”. You’ve got to work at it, but it’s there. *(2001)*

Flynn is currently working on a screen adaptation of *The Japanese affair* and using the state-funded film bodies to acquire new skills through consultation and feedback.

Flynn regards himself as having had ‘a pretty fair go’ in terms of arts funding and has not sought to make a professional income from his work in theatre, nor has he sought publication of his dramatic scripts. As such, he is an example of a very effective, skilled writer for the theatre, whose works have all been taken through to successful
productions but who is not documented in the literature because the work was largely self-funded and performed by amateurs.

The volunteer and mentor roles performed by Flynn over twenty years of activity in the community cannot be overlooked. He has worked with virtually every performing arts organisation in the town on one project or another, often in backstage or production roles. He has used his accounting skills to assist groups with grant applications or with budgets; he designs and constructs sets in his home workshop with donated materials, thus bringing production costs down; he participates in arts development and planning activities; and, in particular, he has introduced many people to the stage through persuading them to take on acting or production roles within the plays he writes or directs. Flynn has also mentored many young people by offering them opportunities to achieve at all levels of the performing arts. He offered a sixteen year old MESH Youth Theatre member the task of stage managing his production of *Emma – Celebrazione*, and three years later this young man was confidently working as stage manager on large cast adult productions at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Flynn’s contribution to the social and cultural capital of the community is considerable yet, like most volunteers, he is self-effacing about this, preferring instead to look ahead to the next project.

Flynn has used his voluntary, amateur status to achieve creative freedom as a writer and director. Community performance groups with which he is associated trust his judgement and organisational skills to know that a project he proposes will achieve its objectives in terms of originality, good roles for performers, entertainment and financial viability.

**Leanne McLaughlin : teacher and artistic director**

Leanne McLaughlin is a secondary school history and English teacher with some training in radio and the performing arts. She moved into drama-in-education because of her interest in the power of drama to communicate with young people and because of the lack of trained drama teachers within the Western Australian education system, when drama was introduced as a discrete subject in the mid 1980s. Like myself, many teachers of drama originally were teachers of English accustomed to programming
drama within the English curriculum, and who found themselves attracted to drama-in-education as an effective way of working with young people. McLaughlin comments that “it just cannot be stressed enough how much it gives to kids. People often just don’t value how much the kids can get from the arts in whatever form” (2001).

McLaughlin has been a drama teacher at Newton Moore Senior High School for over ten years and knows the challenges of promoting drama and the arts within the school and the community.

People expect some big showcase, some big performance. People have no idea that any drama teacher who takes that on is a candidate for a nervous breakdown. And all her teaching will suffer, it’s inevitable that your classes will suffer. So people expect the big production and I have never done that. I guess that might be something of a disappointment to them that it doesn’t happen. I’d rather do things like Youth on Health which take me one term which gets the kids to His Majesty’s [Theatre, Perth] and get them working on a twenty minute piece which is much more manageable than a two hour piece. (2001)

Arguably, the development of the drama syllabus for Western Australian secondary schools may have meant both the demise of the large all-school production and a drama-in-education experience for all students. Typically all students experience drama at year eight, but after that limits on subject choices mean that some students who enjoy or who would benefit from drama, do not select it as an option, sometimes because of parent or peer group pressure. “I’ve had situations where a boy wants to enrol in performing arts but Dad says ‘no, you have to do tech drawing’” (2001). McLaughlin reports that, typically, about one third of her drama classes are boys.

Drama teachers have a challenging curriculum to cover, particularly since the availability of drama as a tertiary entrance subject (TEE) in 1999. The requirements that students work on group and individual devised work for assessment means that considerable energy goes into organising performance opportunities for this work. As McLaughlin notes above, to undertake a large production with after-hours rehearsals and the huge costs involved, creates workloads beyond the limits of what could be expected of individual teachers and leads to teacher burn-out. Successful large productions create expectations among students that this will be maintained and, as in the case of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge efforts of Bunbury Senior High School (discussed in Chapter Eight), students commenced planning the next year’s entry on the
bus returning from the finals in Perth. Ultimately the only way for a teacher to call a stop to these expectations is to leave the school.

McLaughlin looks for opportunities for drama students such as the Youth on Health Festival (see also Chapter Eight). The emphasis on group-devised work in this competition fits within the expectations of the drama curriculum. For regional competitors, however, there are still the additional organisational tasks of transporting students and equipment to the event. Other outlets for student work are the community festivals that are expanding in number and size within the region. McLaughlin has successfully negotiated with festival organisers to allocate developmental funds to enable groups of young people to devise performance work suitable for outdoor festivals. However, for this work to be incorporated into the curriculum, McLaughlin believes that teachers require sufficient notice.

This is the thing – you have to have 12 months notice. You write your programs at the start of the year and I know that Alison will want something for Capel [town south of Bunbury] at the end of Term 1. I just suggested to a teacher from Withers [suburban primary school] yesterday – he said “Lee, who do you know who does kitemaking?” And I said “Look if your kids are making kites all term one why don’t you give them the option, if they want, to go to Capel and fly them”. (2001)

**Stark Raven Theatre Company**

In 1996 McLaughlin was frustrated that contemporary Australian or classical theatre was not being performed by the existing theatre groups in Bunbury nor being presented at the Entertainment Centre. Her classroom preparation had introduced her to the history of La Mama theatre in Melbourne:

and that is what inspired me most at the time because it was two women, one of whom was a teacher who had set up a company with no money that had such a big impact on the possibilities for Australian performing arts and that it was experimental and that it was each time different – the space itself used differently. (2001)

As an experiment with non-traditional performance spaces McLaughlin decided to stage a production of *Lysistrata* (Aristophanes) that year in a room of a local hotel. “It was taking theatre out more to the people; taking it to a venue where people are more likely to go – a lot of the community are more likely to go to a pub than an elitist venue that’s going to cost them lots of money” (2001). This production used young actors, many of
whom were McLaughlin’s current or former drama students. Its success led McLaughlin and other performers to think that there was room for another theatre company in the town. She hoped that a more contemporary approach to theatre might attract younger actors, such as graduates of the upper school drama programs offered in local schools. This would also support the secondary English and drama programs, enabling teachers and students to see contemporary Australian works. “I wanted to see a diversity of theatre in this town. I wanted to see things people weren’t expecting and venues people weren’t expecting” (2001).

Stark Raven Theatre Company formed in Bunbury in 1997 with the object of producing mainly Australian works with as much professional input as could be arranged. It is, however, an amateur community theatre group but periodically engages a professional director for specific productions. McLaughlin is the group’s artistic director. Her insistence on skills development and whole group participation in decision making and artistic direction “was something of a shock to most of the people who had come along to Stark Raven”(2001). Many members of the group had been members of other community theatre groups and were not accustomed to the notion of the collective. The group tried to maintain its concept of it being a loose coalition of people without the requirements of incorporation as a community group. However, the realities of funding applications and insurance policies soon brought about formalisation of the group’s organisation.

The company performs in many locations and believes in putting its efforts into producing contemporary works rather than concerning itself with theatre buildings. McLaughlin’s aim to achieve a diversity of performance styles has largely been adhered to. The company’s first production was Cosi (Nowra) in 1997, performed in a large room (a storeroom) at the rear of yet another hotel in Bunbury. This sense of an in-between space with the slightly claustrophobic feel of a storage facility contributed greatly to the mood of the play.

When I read Cosi I thought “well, it seems to me that there’s a gap in this town and why don’t I ring a few people and make a proposal that if we put in $50.00 each we can cover the cost of the copyright” and we had a space … that we could use for free so we could actually do it at a minimal cost. And my initial idea was that each person in the cast was responsible for selling 30-40 tickets each, which was too unfamiliar for people. They didn’t take it that seriously at all, they just didn’t do it;
but word of mouth got round and in the end the last couple of nights were sell outs. (2001)

McLaughlin realised that the group needed to provide some training in improvisation and physical theatre to attract potential performers. Thus Theatresports training was organised with accredited trainers and two competitive seasons were held in 1997-8. Meanwhile McLaughlin found an opportunity to access funding to develop a 15 minute street theatre performance *Makin’ Moves*. The performers enacted a ‘game of life’ on a gigantic chess board whilst totally encased in flexible airconditioning ducting tubes (dubbed ‘slinkies’ by the performers).

The people that were involved in *Cosi* were all the wrong shape to fit in the ‘slinkies’ so I had to actually look for thin people and work with thin people inside – each project requires different people which is a bit of a shame for if you’ve got some great people it would be nice to keep them involved but you can’t – each script requires – then came *Barmaids* – we only needed two people and they had to be able to sing. So it’s not like I can have a stable group of performers. (2001)

The challenge for Stark Raven is to keep its core membership loyal even if there are not always performance roles for all members. However, since its inception in 1997 the group has managed to produce at least one major production each year. This includes two new works by Norm Flynn, *Coming back* (1998) and *The Japanese affair* (2003) and four Australian plays, Louis Nowra’s *Cosi* (1997), Katherine Thomson’s *Barmaids* (1998), Graham Pitts’s *Emma – Celebrazione* (1999) and Dorothy Hewitt’s *The Man from Mukinupin* (2000). *The Man from Mukinupin* was the first production staged by the group at Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. It resulted from a community co-production arrangement between the Entertainment Centre and Stark Raven. In a co-production arrangement the Entertainment Centre underwrites the cost of the production and works in partnership with the group on all production matters. The Entertainment Centre undertakes all marketing and ticket sales. *Mukinupin* was directed by professional Perth director, Andy King, and the larger scale of the production enabled the group to achieve high production standards, especially in lighting and design.

In 1998 McLaughlin used long service leave from the Education Department to undertake a cultural exchange with United Kingdom performance group Horse and Bamboo Theatre. She became interested in the potential of puppetry and other approaches to theatre. In 2001 she was introduced to the work of Michael Lindsay
Simpson, a director from Sydney, who had trained in puppetry with Philippe Genty in Paris and with the Muppet Artists at Humbolt University, UCLA. Through negotiation with Simpson, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, MESH Youth Theatre and Stark Raven, a production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was proposed for 2002. A discussion of this successful production is undertaken in Part Three as an example of a community co-production project that would have been beyond the resources of any one of the participating groups.

McLaughlin’s perseverance and dedication are remarkable. She is frustrated that in terms of arts funding policies her paid work in drama-in-education experience is often discounted as professional experience although her unpaid work as artistic director is acknowledged. “If I apply for funding my school work is not acknowledged. What I’ve done with Stark Raven is acknowledged and credited. I can’t say I’ve done ten years teaching; I can say I’ve done six years as artistic director” (2001).

She is passionate about introducing new audiences to live theatre and her drama-in-education and community theatre work has made a significant contribution to the participation in and reception of performance in the community.

It’s more about the possibilities for art and theatre and the need for theatre to be kept alive. I perceive that it’s dying a little bit, in some respects where music and dance – audiences are comfortable with music and dance, they know how to respond. They’re not all that comfortable with theatre because it’s not been part of their everyday world at all. They switch on [television] and they see *Rage*; they see some people dancing, that part of our culture is well and truly alive but to me theatre is not – people don’t know what to expect; audiences don’t know how to react – they have no theatre etiquette. (2001)

Flynn and McLaughlin typify the commitment of many volunteers in the not-for-profit performing arts throughout the broader community. Publications of state-funded arts organisations, such as, Country Arts WA or Regional Arts Australia frequently profile individuals who are making similar contributions in the not-for-profit arts industry across Australia. Because of this massive volunteer involvement and the increasing requirements for coordination and development of the industry, an expanding workforce of policy and arts development officers and coordinators has developed. The general not-for-profit sector in Australia:
contributes a staggering amount to Australia’s economy and social wellbeing. The economic contribution at least is measurable. Nearly 7% of the Australian workforce, that’s about 600,000 people have jobs in the not-for-profit sector. And the turnover created by these people and the 4 and a half million volunteers is about $21-billion a year. (Keen, 2004)

According to figures provided by the Australia Council in 1997 there were 361,000 persons in unpaid work within the music and performing arts industries and the figure approaches 500,000 if those persons involved in the organisation of festivals is included (Some Australian Arts statistics, 2003, p. 2). The profiles of Flynn and McLaughlin provided here give substance to these figures. Although they might not conform to the definitions of community theatre practitioners as defined by Watt (1992; Watt, 1995), Milne (2003) or Pitts (Foster, 2000), I would argue that by helping build up a vibrant local ‘map’ of cultural production which is intergenerational and outward-looking, their work facilitates, coordinates and extends regional performing arts.
Chapter 8: Youth performance

The following two chapters attempt to survey the variety and scope of performance available to young people in Bunbury, and provide case studies that explore some of the issues raised. As youth performance has been central to my own involvement in the performing arts in Bunbury during the past ten years, I am conscious of both the partiality of this account and the extent of research and successful models of youth performance available both nationally and internationally. Whilst acknowledging this, I am unable to include a full discussion of the history and work of theatre-in-education, drama-in-education, youth theatre and theatre for young people in Australia, and the development of creative arts syllabi in Australian schools. This warrants detailed documentation that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Performers, not spectators

Young people are active in the performing arts in Bunbury and the community supports them in this, to a point. Past and existing models tend to emphasise product or outcome rather than process, and sometimes access to the performing arts as spectators, not participants has been regarded as sufficient participation. In terms of numbers of participants, dance and music education, both within the formal education curriculum and the extra-curricula private dance and music schools, would account for the greatest numbers of participants. The majority of participants are girls and the only genre that attracts and retains boys throughout adolescence is contemporary music, although media production may be emerging as an attraction to boys. Typically, many children would be enrolled by their parents in private dance and/or music schools during their primary school years and participate until entering secondary school when young people tend to base their decision on whether to continue with their extra-curricula dance or music education on peer group attitudes. The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that:

In April 2000, the ABS conducted a survey of the culture and leisure activities that children participated in during their free time. The survey measured children’s participation in four organised cultural activities: playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing and drama ... An adult’s interests and preferences are often formed in childhood, so it is particularly instructive to understand the structure and dynamics of children’s cultural participation.
In the 12 months to April 2000, 777,000 Australian children (29%) aged 5 to 14 years were involved in at least one of the selected organised cultural activities outside of school hours. About twice as many girls as boys participated in at least one of these cultural activities (40% compared with 20%, respectively). (*Some Australian Arts statistics*, 2003)

Playing a musical instrument (473,900) and dancing (274,100) have the highest levels of participation. This would reflect the long-established tradition of private teachers of music and dance throughout suburban and regional Australia. These teachers are supported by accreditation through bodies such as the Australian Music Examination Board and Commonwealth Society of Teachers of Dance. Private music and dance education is therefore readily available, albeit expensive, in suburban and regional Australia and there is a ready acceptance of this by parents. Statistics cited by Pitman show that in terms of participation in music activities by 12 – 24 year olds in 1997, 72% have played a musical instrument though only 27% participate on a regular basis.

The most popular musical instruments played were the guitar (37%), piano (30%), drums/percussion (14%) and the synthesiser/electronic keyboard (11%). Young women were more likely to play the piano or the flute whereas young men are more likely to play the guitar or drums/percussion instruments. (2003)

As noted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (*Some Australian Arts statistics*, 2003) in Australia singing (124,000 participants) and drama (121,800 participants) involve far fewer young people aged 5 – 14 years compared to music and dance. One explanation may be that they tend to be accessed through community-based youth arts organisations that rely upon adults to volunteer as organisers or artistic directors, rather than on commercial providers. Three private music ‘schools’ have been established in Bunbury in recent years to provide training in popular music performance skills with one specialising in singing and the others also providing training in playing rock instruments. They also encourage group participation. Out-of-school drama in Bunbury has been provided by community-based organisations such as MESH Youth Theatre and Bunbury Repertory Club.

Drama and theatre arts activities for children of primary school age are not universally available to all children. Drama within primary schools relies upon individual teacher or school initiative, interest and expertise. Many primary teachers do not feel qualified to teach or coordinate drama or other performing arts, and the few drama specialists tend
to be used for specific projects. Milne, cited in the 2003 Australia Council *Review of theatre for young people in Australia*, suggests that “the killing off of teacher training in this country since 1987 … has also cut off the supply of graduates trained in both education and drama” (*Review of theatre for young people in Australia*, 2003). In one Bunbury primary school, some parents were so concerned about the lack of access to participation in the performing arts for their children that they convinced the school’s parent organisation and the school executive to allocate funds for whole school performing arts projects such as circus workshops and performances, or devising and producing a whole school play (J. O’Dea, personal communication, 2003). The funding was allocated to buying in expertise.

The lack of performing arts activities for primary age children was recognised in 2002 by the Creative and Talented Students (CATS) program developed by the Department of Education and Adam Road Primary School for children from all government schools within the region. This program can only be entered by audition and successful students required parents to transport them to the school once a week during school hours, from up to 40 kilometres away, an enormous effort for parent and child alike. Year Six or Seven students can apply for entry into courses in visual arts, singing, drama, dance or music. In the first year, 80 applications were received for the drama course alone for 30 places. In its second year approximately 120 applications were received for the drama course for 15 places. I participated in the selection process for the drama course and saw demonstrated the unmet demand for performance within this age range.

Families who cannot afford private dance or music tuition rely on the education system to cater to their children’s talents or interests in the performing arts. In the area of music, particularly learning an instrument, many primary age children are offered this opportunity through a system of visiting specialist teachers. Children with instrumental music skills are encouraged to continue these in secondary school through well-established and resourced music programs and concert bands, particularly in the two largest government schools, Newton Moore Senior High School and Australind Senior High School. Bunbury Senior High School, a smaller school, has developed a contemporary music emphasis, partly because it was unable to offer a full instrumental music program, and thus, talented students were not electing to pursue their musical interests. The government schools music program has been very successful in providing
music education and opportunities for many young people, some of whom move into music-related training and careers.

All government secondary schools offer dance (usually located in Physical Education departments), drama and music programs which are available in lower school as electives and, in upper school as subjects for tertiary entrance (music and drama) or as non-tertiary entrance subjects (dance, music and drama). As noted previously, by secondary school the majority of performing arts participants are girls. Boys very quickly pick up the message that it is not cool to be involved in the traditional performing arts. Although government secondary schools started to offer drama as a subject separate to English in the late 1980s, it took a further ten years for all schools to acquire purpose-built performing arts centres that incorporate a workshop theatre space and music rehearsal rooms.

The community run groups that offer regular low-cost performing arts participation for primary school age students are the Bunbury Youth Chorale and Bunbury Repertory Club, which has aimed to produce two junior repertory productions a year. An after school-hours country music program operates out of Adam Road Primary School and its members travel to country music festivals to perform. All three of the above programs rely on a small group of committed adults who are passionate about providing children with these opportunities ("Choir planning reunion," 2004).

**Youth arts**

Just as the term ‘community’ has proved to be a slippery term within arts discourses, so the term ‘youth’ is similarly contested. Government arts organisations have youth arts policies, to which funding guidelines are linked. Furlong and Cartmel in their study of young people and social change in Britain define youth as:

> a period of semi-dependency which young people pass through prior to the granting of adult status … [it] is historically and socially variable because the attainment of independent adulthood is conditioned by social norms, economic circumstances and social policies. (1997, p. 42)

They distinguish between ‘adolescence’ as a term used mainly in a psychological context and ‘youth’ which is used in a sociological context. “Whereas adolescence is
seen as covering a limited time span, the term youth covers a much broader period of
time; extending today from the mid-teens to the mid-twenties” (Springhall cited in
Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 42). The Australia Council acknowledges that “broad
definitions of ‘youth’ span the ages from birth to 26 years” (The Australia Council
framework for youth and the arts, 1999) but differentiates between children and young
people. “Other organisations use more specific definitions of youth such as 15-24 years
for certain government ‘youth’ benefits (The Australia Council framework for youth
and the arts, 1999). The Profile of young Australians published by The Foundation for
Young Australians in 2003, focuses on the age range of 12 to 25, the target group for
the Foundation. However the Foundation’s report problematises age-based
categorisation and emphasises its arbitrary nature depending upon “historical,
geographical and cultural contexts” (Pitman, 2003, p. 2). It points to significant
differences between indigenous and non-indigenous people of the same age in terms of
life experiences.

These differences raise questions about the appropriateness of using 15 years as a
lower-cut-off for youth, which is common practice in survey and census data. The
upper cut-off age is also a contentious issue; some researchers suggest that the age
range encompassing ‘youth’ is likely to expand to include people up to 30. This
could relate to a combination of factors such as prolonged dependency of young
people on their families, later marriage or partnership formation and the pattern of
leaving home later due to economic necessity and extended education. (Pitman,
2003)

A survey of youth theatres in Australia shows that the upper age limit for membership is
26 with many offering activities for children from three years of age upwards.
Bunbury’s MESH Youth Theatre extended its membership age from 18 to 25 years in
order that it could use the skills of older members in leadership and teaching roles. It is
worth noting that the upper age limit for a major Australian literary award for new
writers, the Australian/Vogel Award, is 35. Furlong and Cartmel note the “enforced
lengthening of dependence in youth” (1997). In a radio discussion in 2001 a number of
young Australian artists discussed the category ‘Youth Arts’ ("Youth Arts," 2001).
Some were concerned that it pigeon-holed young artists as “one homogenised group”
and that it can “give less credence to the work”. “I’m kind of used to Youth Arts being
seen as stale – a boring term, I mean, it’s 2001 and we’ve got such a wide blanket of
variety of what Australian youths are doing” ("Youth Arts," 2001). Others conceded its
limitations but suggested that it is:
nothing more than quarantining a bit of funding so that the usual suspects can’t get it … [and] that there is actually a genuine need for young people who are involved in any form of creative endeavour whatsoever to have opportunities to get together with other people and show their work”. ("Youth Arts," 2001)

Youth Arts, as defined by the Australia Council in 1999, “is the specific practice in which young people are the unpaid makers and managers of work” (The Australia Council framework for youth and the arts, 1999).

In its 1999 report, The Australia Council framework for youth and the arts, the Council offers a useful framework through which to consider the relationship between young people and the arts. It suggests that young people encounter the arts through one or more of the following ways:

1. As creators, presenters and managers.
2. As emerging artists and artworkers.
3. As audiences.
4. As ‘students’.

Building on this report, in 2003 the Australia Council issued its Young people and the arts policy. The four categories of relationships young people have with the arts documented in the 1999 framework have been expanded into eight policy objectives:

1. Supporting and promoting the artforms and practices of young people.
2. Improving our understanding of the practices and processes of young artists and artworkers, engaging with them in direct and accessible language and using their preferred methods of communication.
3. Encouraging young artists/artworkers and youth artworkers to access professional development opportunities.
4. Providing resources to help young artists and artworkers realise their potential and achieve excellence in their artforms.
5. Making new connections and strengthening existing ones between work by, for and with young people and the broader arts industry.
7. Strengthening opportunities for young people to experience the arts as audiences.
8. Expanding the important links between arts and education.

(Young people and the arts, 2003)

These objectives appear to be heavily weighted towards supporting young people as emerging artists and artworkers (objectives 2 – 5). They emphasise communication (more young people on boards, peer registers, knowledge of emerging artsforms); professional development (mentoring, fellowships, partnerships); resources (information and advice); and industry connections (networking, partnerships, collaborations). This emphasis on career development means that the bulk of the Australia Council’s youth arts policy is directed at the post-compulsory education sector, and even post-tertiary sector. Arguably most young people able to access these forms of assistance are 18 or over. If they have completed a tertiary qualification then they are over 21. This emphasis on professional skills development accords with recent ‘re-badgeing’ of the ‘arts’ as ‘creative industries’ and on-going attempts to quantify the contribution of the creative industries to economic development. This is also expressed in the language used in a document issued by the Western Australian Ministry for Culture and the Arts titled Building community through the arts: an eight year strategy 2001-2004 (2000):

Much of the excitement in the Western Australian arts and culture scene is generated out of the activity, creativity and innovation of young people … A survey of clients has been completed and a discussion paper has been developed to provide a starting point for further industry consultation …. Examples of ways in which industry groups endeavour to harvest and grow the creativity of Western Australian young people [italics added] can be seen in the following examples. (Building community through the arts, 2000)

This attitude to young people as resources to be harvested is unfortunate. It implies that young people themselves are not the chief beneficiaries of this nurturing process and reflects the discourse of economic rationalism.

CREATE Australia is “the national education and training advisory body for the cultural industries [and] develops quality vocational education and training for the cultural industries” (CREATE Australia, 2004). Its Performing arts scoping study (2003) defines the scope of the performing arts industry, identifies vocational education and training opportunities, identifies new and emerging employment opportunities and surveys education and training available in each Australian state.
In terms of Western Australia, the study surveys the “existing and potential training and assessment pathways” (2003, p. 30). Training for actors is provided by the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) which “is a highly competitive course and only limited numbers are enrolled each year”; and dancers, who “will have been trained to a high level of proficiency usually from a very early age” (2003, p. 30). It notes that there may be demand for training in circus, comedy, puppetry or running a small company, but warns that they are relatively small areas of performing arts in Western Australia and are not necessarily suited to “wholly institutionalised training”.

Young people from regional Western Australia wishing to undertake professional post-secondary performance training as actors, musicians, singers or dancers, compete through audition for places within the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, located at a metropolitan campus. As noted above, the highly competitive nature of the course and its limited intake means that very few school leavers gain places. Yet, many young people in Bunbury harbour a desire to ‘get into the Academy’, often with no clear idea what this might mean and what skills and knowledge might be required. This ‘all or nothing’ approach to developing careers in the performing arts means that some young people delay acquiring other qualifications on the assumption that if they do not succeed in their first attempt, they will in following attempts. While they may remain active in community performing arts, this may not necessarily be developing the types of skills that the Academy is looking for. In Bunbury there is no formal post-secondary training in any of the performing arts, whereas visual art is offered at both VET and university level. At Edith Cowan University’s Faculty of Regional Professional Studies located in Bunbury, the Bachelor of Creative Industries (commenced 2003) offers streams in visual arts, digital media, writing, media, text and performance. The three units in performance link theory with practice and students are encouraged to relate their studies to existing or potential community performance projects. However, these units do not in themselves provide formal training in performance.

Creators, presenters and managers

The Australia Council offers several definitions of youth arts. In the glossary to the 1999 *Youth and the arts framework* youth arts is simply defined as “the specific practice
in which young people are the unpaid makers and managers of work” (p. 61). A more expansive definition is offered earlier in the document as that which:

involves skilled and unskilled young people who work, usually voluntarily, as creators, presenters and managers. Youth people make their own art both independently and as members of groups and may be involved in several ways:

- as the participants (where an organisation has initiated the project);
- as the initiators but not the managers of the work (where the work is managed by professionals); and
- as the initiators and managers of the work. (The Australia Council framework for youth and the arts, 1999)

These processes can be seen in the work of youth theatre and dance companies, youth orchestras and choirs in Australia but “the degree of control and input that young people have over and can make to the work” varies considerably. The report implies that the Australia Council particularly encourages those projects that “empower the young people involved in the activity” (The Australia Council framework for youth and the arts, 1999). In the Young people and the arts policy (Young people and the arts, 2003) the Australia Council also states that:

In youth arts the creative development phase, or process of working collectively, is considered to be just as important as the outcome. (Young people and the arts, 2003, p. 29)

In Bunbury the organisations that sit within this framework have been the two dedicated community-run youth performing arts organisations: MESH Youth Theatre; and Bunbury Youth Chorale. The youth programs offered by the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre partly conform to this framework and the development and expansion of a youth arts program is part of the strategic planning for the Entertainment Centre Board of Management. (The Entertainment Centre’s planning for expanded youth involvement will be discussed in Part Three of this thesis). Other community performing arts organisations frequently involve young people in their productions, either in mixed casts of adults and young people, or, more rarely, in young people-only casts, such as the plays performed by the junior repertory group that is part of Bunbury Repertory Club. However, most of the activity to date in Bunbury has involved young people as participants where an organisation has initiated the project. (The attempts by MESH Youth Theatre to give its members a greater degree of control and input will be
documented as a case study in Chapter Nine.) The high degree of adult involvement in youth performing arts in the city is, from the point of view of discussions around cultural and social capital, and civil society, an exemplary thing as young people are supported and guided by adult mentors and role models. In mixed-age productions such as musicals, young people work as part of a team with adults of all ages, thus breaking down communication barriers that might be expected to exist.

In 1998 I directed *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat* (Rice & Lloyd-Webber) as a co-production between Bunbury Musical Comedy Group and MESH Youth Theatre. It had a cast of about 50 comprising in almost equal parts a children’s choir aged 10-12, young people aged 13-18 who undertook most of the major roles and a chorus of adults whose ages ranged up to 60 plus. Production tasks were undertaken by adults who were assisted by a young person. The musical director and pianist were adult; the remaining members of the small orchestra were young people. Obviously, the dynamics of any production create problems. Some adult members of the cast were challenged by, what, to them, appeared to be my tolerance of youthful exuberance and ‘lack of discipline’ and were prone to occasionally taking it upon themselves to ‘discipline’ the younger actors. Often it was the oldest of the adults who were the most tolerant and who developed mentor-like relationships with the younger people. The least tolerant were the young adults (25–35) whose memories of their own recent youth seemed to have escaped them. I suspect their frustration was that they had thought they should have had first claim to the major roles.

As part of the structure of the production I requested two parents to act as mediators and advocates for the young people in the production so that their voices would be heard. The young people seemed quite happy to work closely with adults. Any interpersonal issues for them were within their own peer group. An interesting aspect of the production was the way in which the boys in the cast who played the major roles of Joseph’s eleven brothers, despite their initial misgivings and reluctance, became so committed to the production that they would be waiting on the doorstep for rehearsals to begin and their enthusiasm for their roles so engaged the audience that word-of-mouth ensured that it played to full houses. Thus, a large group of young people participated in a highly successful project over an extended period of time (4 months). It enabled them to develop skills in performance or production and to be creative; it fostered the forming
of relationships with their peers and with adults; and it fostered leadership skills for some. The young actors were from a range of schools and backgrounds. Some were supported by their parents (transport, costs, costuming); others had parents who were not particularly supportive (failure to provide transport, difficulty in obtaining money to pay costs). In retrospect, I realise that some young actors were at the beginning of the long road of coming to terms with their sexuality and I hope that their involvement in theatre provided them with a non-threatening environment in which they could express their personalities.

In 1998 this production of *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat* would not have met the criteria for government arts funding as either a youth or community theatre production because it was not an original work, it was not an all-youth production, nor did it employ a professional director. The production attracted modest sponsorship from Healthways, the state-funded health promotion organisation, because it involved young people who fitted the demographic for which their health messages were targeted and for whom the participatory element of an ‘at risk’ age group is more important than artistic process or aesthetic outcome. In fact, I suspect that the motivation for inviting MESH Youth Theatre to be involved in the production by the Bunbury Musical Comedy Group may have been because of the potential for this sponsorship and, as both the MESH coordinator and the artistic director of the production, I used this as a lever to ensure that young people were foregrounded in the production. But the fact that the production used both young people and adults meant that youth-specific funding could not be accessed.

Community performing arts groups frequently find themselves falling between the guidelines of the various funding agencies for these reasons and sometimes claim that a production involves young people even though such participation is tokenistic. It is interesting to observe, therefore, that the discourse about youth-involvement in the arts now includes concepts such as ‘mentoring’ and ‘partnerships’ between young people and adults. “Youth participation” is, according to The Australian Youth Foundation, “about the development of partnerships between young people and adults across all areas of life so that young people may take a valued position and role in our society and so that the community as a whole (as well as young people) can benefit from their contribution, ideas and energies” (Bennett). The Australia Council now acknowledges:
Young people’s engagement with arts and cultural activities can depend on the interest, commitment or permission of people older than themselves. The Australia Council recognises that many parents, guardians, teachers, artists and artsworkers make great efforts to provide opportunities for young people and children to develop and express their creativity. (Young people and the arts, 2003, p. 7)

Within the policy objective of “supporting young people and children’s active participation in the arts and cultural development” the Australia Council states:

We will actively support cross-community partnerships that deliver artistic and creative opportunities for young people. This acknowledges that broad community support may be necessary for young people and the arts practice to flourish, for example, in outer metropolitan, regional and remote areas. [Italics added] (Young people and the arts, 2003, p. 18)

For me, this is acknowledgement of my particular experience as the volunteer coordinator of MESH Youth Theatre. When, in 2003, I found myself unable to continue the coordination role, effectively the group folded because of the lack of broad community support, not because of a lack of potential members. Some of these issues arising from the closure of MESH will be addressed in Chapter Nine, using MESH as a case study.

However, community support can perpetuate traditional notions of youth performing arts by both initiating and managing the performance project, thus reducing the role of the young people involved to simply that of participants which the Australia Council acknowledged in its Framework for youth and the arts (1999a, p. 30). The framework document thus emphasises young people as both initiators and managers.

This laudable aim presents the greatest challenges for community and youth performing arts and, arguably, only a few projects have been achieved in Bunbury that meet these criteria in all ways. Performance projects are usually group works so young people with ideas have to convey their vision to others, both peers and adults, in order to move beyond what seems a good idea, to implementation. Young people's lives are constantly changing and ideas need to be implemented quickly to retain interest. The requirements of funding bodies, school authorities or community groups take time to negotiate and this can seem an eternity to a young person wanting action ‘now’. Often the creative idea becomes too ‘big’ and initial enthusiasm wanes as the realities of bringing the
project to completion become apparent. This was the case with a recent attempt by a group of young adults (20 – 25 age range) to research and script a play which addressed youth suicide issues. This was at a time when the community was trying to cope with a number of deaths of young people. The project quickly gained support from several community groups but seemed to come unstuck, possibly because of the weight of expectations placed on the project and a lack of experience in structuring these playbuilding processes.

Some examples of Bunbury-based performance projects that involve young people as creators, presenters and managers are presented below.

**Rock Eisteddfod Challenge**

The *Rock Eisteddfod Challenge* is a national “dance, drama and design spectacular”:

> Over 200 schools and 25,000 students compete in 40 Rock Eisteddfod Challenge shows across Australia annually. Teams of 140 students from each school plan an eight minute performance incorporating a theme of their choice, set to contemporary commercially available music. (Foundation, 2003)

During the mid-1990s three Bunbury secondary schools participated in this event, and one school, Bunbury Senior High School, won many awards. As the *Rock Eisteddfod Challenge* website states:

> [s]tudents, teachers, parents and communities work together helping to prepare the school’s eight minute performance. After many hours of rehearsals and hard work they present their performance to thousands of screaming audience members in some of Australia’s top venues. (Foundation, 2003)

At Bunbury Senior High School the project was coordinated by the dance teacher located in the physical education department. Planning and implementing the *Rock Eisteddfod Challenge* entry became the project of students in the Year Twelve dance class, which these students then ‘lived and breathed’ for most of the year. They developed the concept, sound track, choreography and design then conducted auditions throughout the whole school and, with a cast of about 80, rehearsed for about eight months. As dance was the focus, there were just a few key roles for actors and almost no participation by musicians, because the competition used “pre-recorded
commercially available music” (Foundation, 2003). Visual arts and design and technology students assisted with the design and construction of sets and a team of students worked on production tasks.

In terms of young people as the creators, presenters and managers of the project, the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge certainly provided these opportunities and the Year Twelve dance students (mostly girls) developed creative and organisation skills in abundance. The students who worked on design and construction had to achieve affordable creative solutions to the design limitations imposed by the Eisteddfod organisers. With the experience of several years to draw on, the students aimed high, knowing the aspects of the performance that were likely to gain extra points from judges. Thus within the eight minute performance all dancers made three costume changes and sets changed before the audience’s eyes. However, the project could not have been achieved without the financial support of the school and the community (through sponsorship); the organisational support of the school administration and staff; and the volunteer labour of many parents and teachers. It was inevitable that such an intensive level of school involvement could not be sustained indefinitely. The key personnel moved on and their replacements identified other priorities for the school community. Rock Eisteddfod Challenge, despite cost limits imposed by the competition organisers, still did not come cheaply, especially to a regional school that, in addition to the cost of costumes and sets, incurred the costs of transporting the students and their equipment to Perth for both the heats and finals.

**YOH Fest**

YOH Fest involves the participation of over fifty schools, involving young people, teachers & parents from across Western Australia. The Festival uses drama to develop adolescent knowledge of health related issues, enhance interpersonal skills and develop social awareness … young people from 12 to 18 [are invited] to write, choreograph and perform 15-20 minute plays on a designated health issue. ([http://www.youthonhealth.com.au/](http://www.youthonhealth.com.au/))

The origins of YOH Fest seem to parallel those of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge, which may in fact have been its model. Both grew out of local initiatives by organisations promoting the health and welfare of young people. YOH Fest has developed within Western Australia and originated in 1998 in Mandurah, a coastal city situated between Bunbury and Perth. YOH Fest encourages school or youth drama
groups to devise short performances around a theme set by the organisers for that year. The themes are health related, such as HIV Aids, bullying or youth suicide. Students are expected to research this theme, devise a script and perform it before judges. Some drama teachers use the YOH Fest as an opportunity for a term-length class project. The investment in terms of time, commitment and money for the students, parents and school, is not quite as demanding as that required for Rock Eisteddfod participation.

**Contemporary band: Four Disorder**

*Four Disorder* is a group of four young men who have used their school-based training in contemporary popular music and their own creative endeavours to develop a successful, award-winning band:

> We did one in Freo [Fremantle], we won the one in Freo, that was in Year 10 and we got our first demo recorded and our first video clip as well. That was one of the prizes there along with bit of advertising in Perth magazines that we didn’t actually use, because we were a bit young and we didn’t have a lot of material – that was when we were in Year 10 and we did the Slamfest, and we won the Slamfest in Year 11 and we did *The Next Big Thing* in Margaret River and we came a close second, we almost made it to the final in that. And then there was Busselton Beach Festival – that was about a year ago now – part of the prize for winning that was to come back and headline it again this year. We headlined it in January and then recently we did Battle of the Bands at Odyssey where we made it to the semi-finals – we came third in the semi-finals so we missed out by one, but part of that was that the lady at Odyssey, Nell, she liked us so she gave us a gig for April 30th. (R. Best & Ellis, 2004)

Having completed high school in 2003, the four musicians are working their way through the rites of passage of the contemporary music industry. Rather than being overwhelmed or daunted, they see a clear trajectory for themselves. They have weekly business meetings. “We get together and discuss the things we need to discuss, like at the moment we’re putting together a web site and getting ready to put together our new demo CD, hopefully, and that’s going to be self-funded from the gigs we’ve been doing” (R. Best & Ellis, 2004). Through the support of their school music teacher and through family and community connections, they have taken any opportunity to, not only develop their musicianship, but also their technical knowledge. Now looking further than the local community they have joined the West Australian Music Industry Association (WAMI), “a non-profit organization whose aim is to promote and support West Australian original music talent (Association, 2004). Their WAMI membership is “pretty much to get support slots with other WAMI bands” (R. Best & Ellis, 2004) and
they have already been selected to “go on the WAMI CD [which] gets airplay on Triple J” (R. Best & Ellis, 2004).

The band members interviewed agreed with the suggestion that they were creators, presenters and managers. “We sort of walked into high school, saw guitars, went ‘that’s it, that’s all I want to play’” (R. Best & Ellis, 2004). They chose not to pursue a theoretical music education via the TEE Music program and saw a clear distinction between ‘self-taught’ musicians such as themselves and people who had studied theory and ‘classical music’. They saw it as the difference between technical excellence and passion, a point made to them by professional guitarist Bob Brozman, at the 2004 Fairbridge Festival: “players who are self-taught have a lot more passion and are a lot more experimental. They try different things … they are more natural on stage” (R. Best & Ellis, 2004). They were enthusiastic about the contemporary music program at their high school but it was the teacher’s role as a mentor through their high school years that they saw as the most influential.

RB: Not so much the school music program, mainly Hugh Ryder. He’s a brilliant man and he always supported us, even though he didn’t like our music too much.

SE: He was all for supporting us.

RB: He’s always been there for us and always lent us gear when we didn’t have it and he’s got us a few gigs.

Ryder encouraged the band’s lyricist to develop his song writing skills and the band now has a substantial repertoire of original material.

These young men and their experience of the contemporary music industry to date seem to exemplify several of the Australia Council’s objectives as stated in its Young People and the Arts policy (Young people and the arts, 2003) particularly in relation to emerging artists and artworkers. By working as a small, focussed team they can support each other through this process in an industry which does encourage creativity and entrepreneurship without demanding high levels of training or formal qualifications.

In contrast, a young woman from the same peer group as the young men, expressed her frustration that as an actor and dancer keen to obtain further experience in Bunbury in her first year after leaving high school, she feels a lack of guidance and support, in
contrast to the busy performing year she had in her final year of school. She feels dependent on adult run organisations to initiate and manage projects in which she can participate. She does not feel empowered to do this herself or know what community resources might be available. This is despite the existence of a Regional Arts Development Officer, a cultural development officer and a youth officer employed by the City of Bunbury, and an active program of youth workshops at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Although Four Disorder has shown independent management skills, the members of the band and this young woman would benefit from the coordination of information and resources for young people wanting to continue their performing arts interests post-school. Assumptions are made that these young people are certain to ‘move to Perth’ or, because of their talent and training, are resourceful enough to look after their own interests. It seems that more energy is perhaps put into developing programs for youth deemed to be ‘at risk’ often with minimal outcomes in terms of performance.

This chapter has indicated the range of performing arts activities available for young people in the Bunbury community through educational, private and community providers. It has identified some of the challenges that are still to be met, particularly those relating to young people as creators, presenters and managers of their own work. The following chapter offers two case studies as examples of some of the issues raised in the above discussion. A detailed examination of the developmental work being done by the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in youth performance will be undertaken in Part Three of the thesis. The foregrounding of youth and community development in strategic planning for the Entertainment Centre for the period 2004 – 2009 will perhaps address the gap left by the demise of MESH Youth Theatre and may assist with developing integrated youth performing arts programs across the community.
Chapter 9: Youth performance: case studies

In this chapter I offer two case studies as examples of the involvement of young people in and their reception of the performing arts in Bunbury. Case study one considers MESH Youth Theatre in order to reflect on some of the challenges facing contemporary youth theatre in a regional community where city-based funding models and assumptions about youth ‘alienation’ are not necessarily the most appropriate. Case study two is an account of a local production of *Blackrock* (1996) by Australian playwright, Nick Enright, with a particular focus on audience response.

**Case study 1: MESH Youth Theatre**

In July 2001 I attended the 4th World Congress for Drama/Theatre and Education in Bergen, Norway, my first experience of an international conference. I was not a presenter, merely hoping to absorb as much as I could. During the conference I participated in the special interest group “Theatre and young people – theatre, education or in between?” Its focus was to be:

> the diverse practices that are embraced by two broad terms: theatre with, by and for young people, such as Young People’s Theatre (YPT) and the emerging field of “Applied Theatre”, including Theatre in Education (TIE), theatre in the criminal justice system, and theatre in non-traditional settings. (Programme, 2001)

I was familiar with theatre-in-education and drama-in-education practices from the 1970s and 1980s in Australia; the drama curriculum that was introduced into Western Australian secondary schools in the 1990s; theatre for young people such as Perth-based professional companies Barking Gecko and Spare Parts; and community youth theatre as practised in Bunbury. What surprised me was the range of definitions of and approaches to drama/theatre and education from around the world. For many European participants, youth theatre was interpreted as professional performance by adults for children and young people and for British participants, youth theatre more closely represented drama-in-education or theatre-in-education. I discovered that Australian schools are considered to be pioneers in the inclusion of performing arts subjects in the school curriculum. Australian research in drama and theatre and education was highly regarded by many conference participants, particularly the publications of *Drama*
Australia – the National Association for Drama Education; developments in drama education at Queensland University of Technology; and *The Arts: Western Australia Curriculum Framework*.

The ‘theatre and young people’ special interest group at Bergen further divided into smaller groups, until I found myself with six others discussing ‘youth theatre by young people’, because this seemed to address the type of involvement I was having with young people as coordinator of MESH Youth Theatre. All other special interest group participants (the majority) seemed to be concerned with theatre for young people as performers or as audience, or as therapy. In our large group discussions questions were raised about:

- power relationships
- audience
- quality – how to assess this
- social change – whose ideologies prevail?
- content
- funding – often short-term or with limitations
- sponsorship – relationship between sponsor and target group
- censorship – explicit and implicit
- ownership of personal stories
- technology

From our small group discussion we further defined youth theatre by young people as “performance work by young people facilitated by adults”, as all of us were in the position of being the adult facilitator for groups of young people who were being encouraged to develop original work. We posed (but did not answer) the following questions:

- Who owns the work?
- To what extent should the project ‘belong’ to the participants?
- To what extent should the facilitator intervene?
- How can the facilitator give artistic depth to the work?
- How can the facilitator give depth to content by accepting student offers and presenting alternatives?
• How can the facilitator move work from dramatic process to theatrical product?
• How can the participants’ growth towards aesthetic and technical excellence be facilitated?
• What is the impact of audience involvement for audiences and for participants?
• How can the work build the participants’ personal or theatrical skill base?
• If the work uses participants’ experiences, interests and influences, how are they protected?
• Should/can the facilitator move the work beyond the personal into theatre? (therapy versus aesthetics)
• How can we fulfil sponsors’ expectations without compromising the project?

These discussions around the initiation, development and ownership of original works by young people identified many of the issues I had grappled with during my involvement with MESH Youth Theatre. I have found, however, that it is difficult to shift the thinking of organisations with a vested interest in youth performance, such as the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre or the community theatre groups to incorporate these youth-centred perspectives.

My involvement with MESH Youth Theatre commenced in 1994 as a parent of a child who was interested in performance and who wished to join the group. It was not long before I found myself coordinating the group. This is a familiar experience for many parents involved in volunteer organisations, and it is not unusual for this involvement to continue beyond the original reason for joining, that is, after one’s child has long since graduated from the activity.

As stated earlier, in 1994 MESH Youth Theatre had been in existence for nine years and was known as SCM MESH Youth Theatre because of sponsorship received from SCM Chemicals, a local company. The first chairperson, John McLeod, outlined the early history of MESH:

SCM MESH Youth Theatre had its origins during and after Newton Moore Senior High School’s production of Grease in 1985, which toured the Murchison area. The range and extent of student learning experiences during the tour, and the level
of excellence reached, provided the spur for an even more ambitious programme involving schools and students within the South-West region, and touring overseas. By April 1986 a production team had been gathered together, a programme developed, auditions held, and a company formed. (McLeod, 1988)

This new youth organisation obviously met a huge need within the regional community and quickly had an enrolment of over one hundred in the Bunbury-Collie area alone. A major attraction to young people was the possibility of being in a large-cast musical that was going to tour. Few schools had drama programs and there were no other dedicated youth organisations offering this type of activity. This ambitious program attracted community and corporate sponsorship and as a result the MESH Youth Theatre production of *The sentimental bloke* was produced:

> [It] had a season of eight performances in Bunbury in August, followed by a two-week tour of Malaysia and Singapore of eleven performances. The total touring party consisted of a student cast, crew, and orchestra of fifty-six, with sixteen adults making a total touring party of seventy–two.

> The budget amounted to well over $120,000, and was made up of profits from the sell-out Bunbury season, local fund-raising from an energetic parent committee, and sponsorship from a wide variety of sponsors. (McLeod, 1988)

What is noticeable from this early account is the dedication of several key adults none of whom were professional theatre practitioners; some of whom were teachers, though not necessarily drama teachers; but all of whom had a passion for young people and providing opportunities for them. However, such momentum proved difficult to sustain. By the late 1980s, due to the changing economic climate, corporate sponsorship was less available. The community turned its attention to the major fund-raising project required to build a new performing arts centre for the city and, most significantly, the key adult personnel in the organisation were no longer able to coordinate the group for a range of personal reasons, including serious illness. Drama started to be introduced as a subject in secondary schools and new events such as *Rock Eisteddfod Challenge* emerged within several schools. Thus young people had major theatre projects within their own schools requiring rehearsals after school hours.

Older MESH members, parents and other interested adults kept the group going, but as members moved on into their adult lives so the parental support slipped away. The touring program could not be sustained as this had required huge feats of organisation.
By 1994 the group was being kept alive by the efforts of a few older MESH members who had strong personal affiliations with the group. For a few years the SCM sponsorship had enabled the group to employ a part-time administrator but by 1994 funding was no longer available. The group met regularly for drama workshops; however, the logistics of mounting major productions were beyond the capacity of the existing members because of their other commitments and lack of experience. Most of the MESH youth experience had been in scripted musicals requiring significant resources. The group had very little experience of drama and original work.

The group was tending to rely on friendship networks to supply members and was not doing any consistent recruiting of younger members. Workshops were boisterous affairs, hugely enjoyed by all but, as a parent of a younger child, I had some reservations about the provision of supervision, so tended to ‘hang around’ as unobtrusively as possible to provide adult support. I had not revealed to the group my own background in community theatre and drama education as I did not want to be seen to be ‘taking-over’ a group that had strong attachments to the ethos of the early years. Yet, at the same time I could see that the group was struggling and that older members probably wished to ‘move on’. By 1996 this had largely happened and younger members had joined. I was prepared to coordinate the group but, with limits on my time proposed that we aim towards smaller, more achievable projects. In 1996 the committee stated that it was committed to the following:

a) recruiting young people aged 12 – 16 in the belief that this is the age group in most need of youth theatre activities in the community;

b) emphasising the development of original material that is based on the needs and aspirations of the group’s members. As we have many female members, this includes developing interesting/challenging roles for them; and

c) building links with other community organisations involved with youth and the performing arts. These would include local schools, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, Bunbury Campus of Edith Cowan University and amateur groups, such as South West Opera Company, Bunbury Musical Comedy Group, Bunbury Repertory Club. (McCarron, 1996)

Between 1996 and 2002 the annual programming revolved around:

- weekly drama skills workshops during school terms
• rehearsals
• one or two performance projects
• special workshops with professional practitioners
• film and video production
• participation in performance events coordinated by other organisations
• leadership training
• mentoring and partnership arrangements with other organisations
• camps and excursions

As coordinator and director, it appeared to me that the best use of my time was in working directly with the young people. Time put into fundraising through grant applications, sponsorships, promotion and ticket sales, into maintaining equipment or venues, or recruiting volunteers would take away from my ability to offer regular activities. Thus we operated on a smaller scale than that of the first few years of MESH’s existence.

Rather than attempt to obtain a permanent home for the group we negotiated with Edith Cowan University to use a large open-area space and the attached lecture theatres at weekends, when this venue was not being used. In return, we participated in university events such as Springfest (later Unifest) and provided actors for student film projects.

For some years MESH had been able to store its sets and costumes in an unused classroom at a local primary school. However, in our scaled-down form, we found that we rarely used these and eventually, when the education department claimed back this space, we gave away or disposed of most of these items. Although sad to see items of the group’s history consigned to rubbish bins, it did relieve the group of the physical and emotional burden of being responsible for this storage space. Equipment such as lights and audio we located at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, on the understanding that the Entertainment Centre could use these items for community performances and that they would still be available to MESH. Having no venue or significant assets freed us to achieve other projects and aims.

For seven years we managed to sustain weekly drama workshops during term times. These utilized standard drama exercises drawing on the improvisation techniques of Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone and others. Workshop numbers tended to average fifteen
to twenty participants and realistically, given the difficulty of recruiting volunteers with youth theatre skills, that was as many as we could manage. Recruiting tended to be by word-of-mouth with occasional publicity campaigns. However it proved easier to incorporate new members if they arrived on an ad hoc basis, rather than several new people arriving at once, which tended to upset the dynamics established within the group. By focussing on cooperation rather than on competition and by insisting on whole group participation, the group tended to manage interpersonal relationships very well and were comfortable in each other’s presence and generous to newcomers. Membership was open to all with no audition required. No targeted recruiting was done for specific groups such as disabled or indigenous youth however membership fees were kept low, much lower, many parents pointed out, than the sporting clubs to which their children also belonged. Although the number of boys was usually (but not always) less than girls, many of the boys who joined became our most loyal members and undertook leadership roles. After a number of years it became apparent that the interpersonal and leadership skills developed within the group had complemented other areas of the members’ lives and a remarkable number of these young people were elected to leadership positions on their school executives, a point also made by Leanne McLaughlin about the young people who participate in drama at Newton Moore Senior High School.

When funds permitted, we engaged drama specialists to conduct specific workshops in drama, circus skills, play-building, Shakespeare and video; or subsidised members to attend drama workshops and camps in Perth.

Regular MESH members developed strong and supportive friendships despite gender, age, family or education background and regularly socialised as a group. It was apparent that MESH had become a ‘safe space’ that provided a point of affiliation and loyalty during adolescence. The emphasis on drama as process did not suit some young people who wanted to participate in major performances. This was particularly so for young people with singing and dancing skills who preferred to look towards the private dance and music schools or the existing adult community theatre groups for roles in musicals and spectaculars. Young people who were keen musicians found that their time was taken up with school and community band rehearsals and performances so could not fit the additional drama activities into already busy lives. One noticeable feature of most of
the young people I worked with was the ‘busyness’ of their lives. Somehow they would manage to fit in school work, school activities that required after hours commitment such as rehearsals, sports, socialising, family activities and community participation. They were on the whole cheerful, optimistic and enthusiastic, an ethos that MESH seemed to maintain, and which in turn contributed to and drew from community networks.

The prevailing discourses around youth arts during this period tended to encourage issues-based projects. Funding was often tied to proving that the project addressed issues such as youth unemployment, indigeneity, gender and families-in-crisis. As director of the group I felt uncomfortable about pre-empting these topics. As our group had young people aged twelve to seventeen who preferred to work on a single project, some of these issues were outside the experience of the group or were not their preferred choice of topic. The extent to which issue-based projects often relied on self-disclosure to generate material raised concerns for me when the audiences our group would perform to would include the members’ families and peers. In a relatively small community such as Bunbury even using the device of fiction to disguise the origins of an idea was often not enough to achieve this. To construct projects around funding criteria would have meant significant changes to the structure and dynamics of the group, difficult to contemplate given our limited resources. The processes of devising and performing the plays Today (1994, 1996) and Ben (2000) discussed below, illustrate some of the challenges posed by funded projects.

**Today (1994, 1996)**

In 1994, prior to my involvement with MESH Youth Theatre, the group’s administrator applied for funding to employ a professional playwright/director to work with MESH members to devise a play addressing the theme of ‘unemployment’. The amount of funding ultimately received was sufficient only to pay for the script development and this part of the project proceeded. The playwright, Jansis O’Hanlon, worked with the group members to develop script ideas and used a variety of devices to achieve this, including a series of character monologues, each written by an individual MESH member which, although fictional, tended to reflect the age, gender and interests of that member. By the time this project was in process, I was assisting with the group and facilitated a weekend camp which enabled the bulk of the script development to be
achieved. A significant challenge was that the selected topic ‘unemployment’ meant very little to the majority of the participants, who were either still at school or had not experienced this within their family. However, the funding guidelines prevailed and O’Hanlon managed to pull the ideas of the group into a powerful script titled *Today*.

*Today* was not performed by the group until 1996 as O’Hanlon was not available to direct the production and funding opportunities were missed. The group was undergoing its leadership change during this process and older members who had been involved in the script development left the group. Rather than seeing the script languish, I proposed that I direct it, albeit in a more modest production than that originally proposed. However, I had to cast the roles with younger actors, some of whom had not participated in the script development process, so had no sense of ownership and struggled to identify with their characters who were a couple of years older than themselves. Since the script discussed depression and an implied suicide attempt, this was challenging for the younger cast.

This script would have made a more successful production if the original funding application had enabled the two parts of the project to be completed as one. The much higher level of ownership of the original cast would have energised the performance. However, I would also suggest that the imposition of a theme, merely to satisfy funding criteria, meant that the playwright had to first ‘sell’ this idea to the original participants thus losing valuable creative time with the group. The difficulty of dealing with an imposed theme was apparent when the script was performed by a cast who had little understanding of and commitment to the script concept. As discussed earlier, to retain the interest of young people, funding bodies need to respond quickly to funding youth arts projects, something that has been recognised more recently by Country Arts WA through schemes such as Quick Response Grants Program and 100% Country Control Youth Arts Funding and Development Program (*Country Arts WA Annual Report*, 2003).

**Ben (2000)**

In 1999 MESH Youth Theatre was invited to participate in the Australian Youth Theatre Pilot Project (AYTS). This project originated in Perth and aimed to encourage youth theatre groups and drama students to develop short original performance pieces
12 minutes in length. Each group was allowed a maximum number of participants (seven) one of whom was to be the director/facilitator. The age group was also specified: 15-17 years of age. The project aimed to provide a professional dramaturg/director for each group. The dramaturg/director would meet the group on three occasions and would provide feedback and suggestions but not actual direction. This project was attractive to MESH members because it apparently already had a structure and, importantly, funding. The project was to conclude with a week of rehearsals and performances at Hayman Theatre, Curtin University.

The seven MESH members who devised the play Ben determined that they did not want to do a ‘message’ play. They decided to take a simple narrative structure, a day in the life of a 16 year old boy, and devised several linked scenes using different performance styles for each scene. They used various improvisations to develop these scenes, some of which borrowed from techniques developed in theatresports, including the use of mime techniques to represent stage furniture and props. They also defined a tight performance space which they marked out on stage and the cast remained within this space throughout the piece. Ben was simple in structure but quirkily humorous, something the MESH group excelled at. The completed script did convey themes about peer pressure and relationships, however this had not been the conscious aim of the group, who wanted their piece to be above all, entertaining.

The AYTS structure proved useful to MESH. However as a whole, the project did not really succeed in its ambitious objectives:

The aim was to encourage young people aged between 15 and 17 to become involved in creating their own works for the theatre. The long-term aim of the Australasian Youth Theatre Showcase is to create works of quality that can be toured overseas from a base in WA. ("Arts today," 2000)

Failing to obtain all the funding it had requested, the AYTS project did not deliver on all its promised features, including publicity, adequate coordination and, of particular concern to MESH, the only regional group participating, no consideration was given of the arrangements our participants needed in order to be in Perth for a week. Particularly disappointing to the MESH group was the fact that the metropolitan groups participating had been recruited from schools but had not been thoroughly briefed on
the requirements of the project. Subsequently they did not have their performance pieces to the same standard that MESH had achieved, so the cast of Ben found themselves waiting around for rehearsal time with the professional mentors who found themselves having to spend most time with the under-prepared metropolitan groups.

| Extract from Ben an original play by MESH Youth Theatre, 1999 |
|---|---|
| **Scene 8** Lunch |
| Mark and Rhys storm on. |
| Mark: Hello lovely ladies, mind if I join you? |
| Rhys: Don’t mind if I do! |
| Mark: So have any of you gals seen Ben? |
| Lauren: Um, yeah, he’s gone off to think about the girl. He doesn’t reckon she likes him but it’s so obvious. |
| Tarryn: SO obvious. |
| Mark: Yeah, she’s a BABE! |
| Lauren: I wonder what she sees in him. |
| Rhys: Maybe its his … you know … his … mind? |
| Ben: *(to audience)* I don’t know what’s up with everyone today. They’re all so weird sometimes. And everyday they say the same things. |
| The other 4 enter and circle Ben, repeating a sequence of dialogue. |
| Mark: Oi! Dick! |
| Tarryn: Hey Ben, where’s the girl? |
| Rhys: She must be saving herself for Ben tonight. |
| Lauren: Why are you so quiet? |
| *This is repeated a couple of times.* |
| Ben: For fuck’s sake, would you guys cut this stuff … I mean, so what if she likes me, maybe I’m not even interested, maybe it’s not your business anyway … so would you all just piss off!? |
| *They are shocked by this and start to back off, looking apologetic.* |
| Rhys: Not interested. HA! |
| *They’re offstage now.* |

Feedback from the MESH participants indicates their appreciation of the project aims and the mentor concept, but is critical of the actual organization.

MESH Youth Theatre believes in creating original theatre and working in an inclusive, non-competitive manner. The AYTS concept coincides with MESH Youth Theatre’s values. (Philippa, director, age 17)

I thought that overall the project was a good concept. It helped us to meet and interact with people we wouldn’t usually and I suppose it helped us with our teamwork skills and leadership. (Rhys, cast member, age 16)
We were very impressed with our mentor, Sally Richardson, and the mentoring process of three workshops before the workshop week. Sally lent a sympathetic and professional ear to us, acting as a facilitator for us to do our own problem solving … I feel the mentoring process was the most valuable part of the AYTS project. (Philippa)

We liked the fact that it was mentoring, not directing. (Cast member)

The last-minute timetable changes and cancellation of speakers were frustrating. There was a difference in expectation between the city participants and us. The city participants had not committed to attendance for the full week, whereas the MESH cast had (taking time off work, holidays with families etc). Therefore the MESH cast were expecting something more like an intensive camp with all participants attending. We were disappointed that we didn’t see all the groups’ performances either in rehearsal or in performance. (McCarron, 2000b)

*Ben* proved to be a very successful play that was performed on a variety of occasions after the original performance in Perth.

MESH Youth Theatre won the youth section of the One Act Drama Festival in Bunbury at the weekend. The winning play, *Ben*, was an original production with the script created through a group effort from the members of MESH. ("One-act drama winners," 2000)

The adjudicator, Jenny McNae, identified and praised the performance choices that the group had made.

The constricted acting area added to the intensity of the play … Your teamwork was most impressive. The stylised movements lifted ‘ordinary’ situations into fine, entertaining theatre. (McNae, 2000)

*Ben* became the centrepiece of a longer performance *Going round the Ben* that MESH performed at the Edith Cowan University’s *UniFest* 2000 (September) and at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s 10th anniversary open day (October). This enabled younger members of the group to devise short scenes around the theme of teenage friendships and we were joined in this project by members of the Bunbury Youth Chorale so were able to incorporate singing and dancing into the production.

As indicated in the above discussion, many of MESH’s projects were achieved through partnerships with other organisations. We looked for community events that had a guaranteed audience, such as those noted above to perform our devised productions.
This meant that although it might be a single performance, it was usually to an enthusiastic full house with no admission charge, thus saving weeks of work on promotion and ticket sales, the promotion being taken care of by the host organisation. However, this also created an expectation that MESH could perform at other community events; in particular, street theatre at local festivals. Often these invitations had to be refused because they did not fit in with our planned program or called for skills that our young members still had not acquired. Street theatre is a specialised performance skill and can put young people in vulnerable situations in a crowd. It also uses up many creative ideas and, with the number of requests we had, the local festival audiences would have tired of repeated routines. As the festival culture started to develop in the south west, a number of community performance groups were expected to perform for no charge. More recently, festival organisers have recognised that community performance groups require funding to develop suitable performances and some have incorporated this into their festival budgets.

MESH members enjoyed working on short film projects for Edith Cowan University South West Campus film students, and appearing in videos to promote the *Show us your shorts* short film competition. The MESH leadership group was also requested to conduct ‘breaking the ice’ games for the sixty youth delegates at the Australian Sister City Conference in Bunbury in 2001. Our most successful partnerships were at the local level where the key players were known to all. Over the years we occasionally participated in metropolitan youth arts events such as the AYTS project discussed earlier, and Artrage, an annual ‘fringe’ festival. These partnerships were less successful in that the partnership never seemed to be on equal terms. The only year MESH was invited to participate in Artrage or even received any publicity about it, was when Artrage had received funds specifically for regional youth participation. We distinctly felt that we were being used in a fairly cynical way to meet the terms of the grant.

MESH’s most ambitious partnerships were the productions of *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat* (1999) and *Macbeth* (2002). (The production of *Joseph* has been previously discussed in Chapter Eight, and *Macbeth*, a co-production between Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, Stark Raven Theatre and MESH Youth Theatre, is discussed in Part Three of this thesis.)
By working with other community performing arts organisations, MESH was able to extend its members’ skills in all areas of stage performance and production. The partnering organisations provided the things that we did not have: funds, fully-equipped performance spaces, administration and marketing. MESH brought to these infrastructures energetic young performers and production workers, adults with experience in working with young people, an interest in innovation and access to youth funding agencies and sponsors.

Leadership

Older members of MESH Youth Theatre, usually aged fifteen to eighteen, were referred to as the Leadership Group. This group shared the tasks of conducting workshops and planning projects. As role models for younger members they were hugely successful. They seemed to enjoy working with younger teenagers and always achieved enthusiastic responses to their energetic participation. Tasks that the Leadership Group struggled with were those that involved longer term planning such as programming activities, budgeting or developing future projects. For most of the young leaders, it seemed inevitable that they would move to Perth within twelve months of leaving school. Interestingly, although most of this group have moved into post-secondary education in the creative industries, only one or two have undertaken tertiary theatre courses. The emphasis in MESH on the wider enjoyment of all aspects of performance and an ensemble approach to our projects, gave the members a more realistic view than one just focussed on a performing career and auditioning for ‘the Academy’. Past MESH members are cultural development officers, theatre and stage managers, musicians, teachers, social workers, florists, childcare workers, radio and television journalists, and digital media, marketing and public relations workers, occupations for which their teamwork, performance and leadership skills are highly suited. This is a demonstration of the ways in which the performing arts contribute to the social and cultural economy.

Voluntary adult leadership for the group is difficult to obtain. Realistically, a youth theatre group requires adult leaders who have some experience in education, youth theatre or youth work, especially with the increasingly demanding health, safety, insurance and child protection policies that are starting to affect community groups. In my experience very few adult volunteers are keen to take on the task of supervising
young people. My hope that students from the education and creative industries courses at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University might be interested in gaining experience in working with young people on creative projects has not, to date, been fulfilled. As most students need to combine paid work with their university studies there is very little time left for voluntary work.

The people in the community with drama-in-education experience are, of course, busy teaching in schools, where they already spend extra-curricula hours with student rehearsals. Not surprisingly, they are not interested in taking on a community youth theatre, although several of these teachers are active members of Stark Raven Theatre Company where they can perform themselves, and indirectly, mentor the younger members of the group.

Where to now?

The above discussion begs the question of why MESH Youth Theatre did not seek funding and other support to employ professional staff. Ironically, by stepping in and keeping MESH going at a manageable level without the need for high levels of funding, I have perhaps missed opportunities for the expansion of the group. However, the negotiations and work involved in this required a highly motivated and informed group of supporters and most people with these skills have been active in the community with many other arts activities, including the building and development of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. It is my hope that by 2005 the Entertainment Centre will act in an auspicing role to re-establish a youth theatre in the community or, if that particular model no longer appears appropriate, assist in integrating the existing youth performing arts activities so that young people can readily identify pathways into the performing arts in the community. This and other questions of community access are discussed in Part Three of this thesis which examines the origins, development and impact of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre.
Case study 2: Community responses to Blackrock

This case study reflects on the context of and responses to a production of Nick Enright’s Blackrock (1996) staged in the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in March 1998, with a cast of local teenagers and adults. The production was widely promoted and the target audience was young people aged 15 and over. Local schools promoted the play through their English and theatre arts programs and the play was used as a text for study in a drama unit offered at the local campus of Edith Cowan University.

Blackrock examines responses to a violent and shocking event; that is, the rape and murder of a young female at a beach party; and is based on reported experiences within a particular community. The gender, class and moral issues raised make it an unsettling and provoking dramatic experience. In particular, the content of the play raises the question of how to reaffirm positive gender roles in the light of, as noted by Di Johnson in a review of the script in 1996, “the double standards surrounding perceptions of male and female sexuality” (Johnson, 1996, p. 116) as represented in the play.

Whilst this production could be easily filed away as ‘amateur theatre’, ‘regional theatre’ or ‘youth theatre’, it did stir the complacency of the community, albeit briefly, and for me represented some themes and issues that have particular resonance for young people in the community and those who work and socialize with them. The confusions and tensions associated with masculinity as represented in Blackrock are contiguous with similar representations in works by writers with close associations with Bunbury and the South West of Western Australia.

Susan Bennett in Theatre Audiences (1997) advocates the study of audiences as a cultural phenomenon. She notes that:

Outside the larger urban centres, limited access to theatre will undoubtedly change an audience’s sense of the theatrical event ... the idea of the theatrical event is clearly different from that available in the urban centre. (p. 110)

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1 Nick Enright, Australian director and playwright. Died 2003. Blackrock was based on events that occurred in Newcastle, New South Wales in the 1990s.
Whilst not necessarily agreeing with Bennett’s conclusions about regional audiences, her acknowledgement that the theatrical event may have a different cultural construction is valid.

Whilst Bunbury is located in a growing region with considerable economic development and has been sheltered from the pressures felt by other regional areas in Australia, there is a darker side as experienced by some young people. As mentioned in Chapter One, in 1996 a young local writer named James Ricks entered a manuscript in the Vogel/Australian Young Writer Award. It was shortlisted and subsequently published in 1997. Titled *11 months in Bunbury* and, written in a ‘dirty realist’ or ‘grunge’ style, it documents the parallel lives of two young men who work in a local timber processing plant. The landscape and identities described in the book are familiar to ‘Bunburyites’. Nelson, one of the protagonists, describes the city thus:

He lived in the heart of Carey Park, suburb of Abos, dole bludgers and single mothers. A panorama of crappy fibro houses owned by the government.

A funny little city. An old people’s city. A city filled with people who almost made it to the Olympics, who almost made it to the AFL. A city filled with successful businessmen who are arseholes, and sit on the Bunbury Council. A city full of basketball and football clubs.

A city near the sea.

A little city (Ricks, 1997, p. 12).

The book received a strangely muted response from Bunbury residents, as previously noted (Chapter One). Apart from a review in the local paper and a couple of radio interviews, there was little other coverage except from the chairperson of the Chamber of Commerce, who, not surprisingly, roundly condemned the book. There was, of course, the vicarious thrill for its mainly young readers of identifying the characters and locations and speculating whether some of the more outrageous episodes were based on fact.

Two successful Western Australian authors have strong links with the south west of Western Australia and both have consciously written for the teenage fiction market with
particular attention to male readers. Both Tim Winton, through his popular Lockie Leonard series and Glyn Parry, author of *Monster Man* (1994), *Radical Take-Offs* (1995) *Mosh* (1996) and *Sad Boys* (1998), use youth sub-cultures and rites of passage to connect with their readers. Parry has often, in various public forums, vigorously and provocatively talked of his concern for boys and the pressures they face in contemporary Australian culture. The suburban setting for the opening scenes of *Monster Man* would be recognisable to most Bunbury residents and it is disturbing to find it the location for a fictional abduction of a teenage girl by an older man. Encouragingly, Parry does empower the girl who, through physical and mental toughness, not only survives her ordeal but also makes a statement about the depiction of females in popular culture by trashing her local video store.

In 2004 another local young writer, Nathan Hobby, has drawn on his school and university experiences as the basis for his novel, *The fur* (Hobby, 2004). The novel’s male protagonist “comes of age on the eve of the new millennium in a small country town in the fur-ravaged western third of Australia”. Like Ricks, Hobby has not disguised locations and sections of the novel are labelled ‘Collie’ and ‘Bunbury’. The schools attended by the protagonist are also given their real names. The protagonist is alienated from his peers because of his intellectual curiosity, introspection and sensitivity:

> The rest of the year twelves did not share his urgency. Parties became more frequent, where the beautiful people drank beer and bush rum until they spewed or passed out and then groggily fornicated with each other, each week throwing up new intriguing combinations, an ever-twisting kaleidoscope of pairings that Michael was forced to look through again and again. (p. 171)

The Bunbury represented by Hobby is a “ruined townscape. The wildcats running through the ruined shops. The fur bursting through the roof of the once fine restaurant” (p. 118).

The theme of youth entrapment and alienation was also explored in the script *Today* discussed previously. One of the characters saw the physical work of building silos, a job available to the unskilled, as symbolic of his life choices:
STUART

I don’t want to work at silos till I’m old and grey so I suppose I’ll have to do something else—although I’ve no idea what.

Not that there is anywhere with any vacancies. I reckon I’ll have to stay making silos forever. Pays the bills but—even leaves a bit for piss money if you’re really lucky. But the crap you’ve got to put up with is bullshit.

The fact that the fumes from the solastic can’t kill you is not much consolation when your head is floating ten feet off your shoulders and the only thing you can see is the steel wall surrounding you.

Then the lunch siren goes. You’re halfway through getting the bottom ring finished. Everyone forgets and runs out to the lunch van to eat. Leaving me stuck in the friggin’ silo till they’ve finished. It sucks. There must be something better (O’Hanlon & MESH, 1996, Scene 5).

And this theme of entrapment in a dead-end job is what scares Jim, one of the two protagonists in *11 months in Bunbury* (Ricks, 1997). Jim is a keen observer of the class structures of the society around him and is appalled by, but powerless to do anything about, the strident sexism and racism of his fellow workers in the mill. Like Jared, the male protagonist of Nick Enright’s *Blackrock*, these young, troubled males retreat into isolation where the real threat of suicide is present. Jared sits on the rocks at the beach staring out to sea; Jim climbs the Rotary Lookout Tower, a prominent Bunbury landmark, whisky bottle in hand, staring out across the harbour. The other central male characters in each text, Ricko in *Blackrock* and Nelson in *11 months in Bunbury* are so brutalised by their upbringing that violence, co-dependency in destructive relationships and ultimately death, are the result.

The decision to stage a production of *Blackrock* in Bunbury was strategic in several ways. The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre had, in conjunction with community performing arts organisations such as the Bunbury Musical Comedy Group and the South West Opera, staged several highly successful musical productions. *Blackrock* was a different proposition, however, to reruns of feel-good musicals from another generation. The proposal for the Entertainment Centre to stage Enright’s play came from a local amateur director, Allan Hughes. Hughes’s productions for the local theatre groups are well-known and highly regarded. He has a preference for realist scripts often with strong emotional and/or moral themes. He responded to the intensity of the *Blackrock* script and the parallels between Newcastle and Bunbury’s geographic location, industrial history and social structures were apparent to him. *Blackrock* was
based on events in Newcastle, NSW where in the particular community represented in
the script there is a strong surfing youth culture and significant social and economic
tensions which are exacerbated by strong class, gender and peer allegiances. Enright’s
setting notes state that “the play takes place in the present day, between late November
of one year and early January of the next, in an Australian industrial city and its
beachside suburb of Blackrock” (Enright, 1996, p. x). Allan was confident that with the
increasing numbers of young people involved in performance activities in schools and
community groups he would be able to cast the play with actors with sufficient skills.
Like Steve Vidler, director of the film Blackrock, he wished to cast close to the age of
the characters in the script and was largely able to do this.

The decision for the production to proceed rested with the management and board of the
Entertainment Centre. This would be the first production undertaken without the
resources of another established group. While the director and producer were
volunteering their services, the technical, design and marketing services would all come
at a cost and it was uncertain whether the 800 seat venue could be filled for such a
production. The production was ideal for the target audience the Entertainment Centre
most wanted to reach; fifteen to twenty-five year olds, but as there had been no history
of attendance at the venue by this group, it wanted to ensure maximum exposure. The
participation of schools was seen as crucial. However, the nature of the play was such
that we could not be certain that schools and parents would willingly promote it.

Promotion was achieved, however. English and Drama teachers were given notice that
the production was planned and it was discussed at meetings of the South West English
Teachers’ Association (SWETA). All schools were given ample advance notice so that
a study of the text could be included in the curriculum, and a detailed study kit.
Strategies were developed for dealing with parental complaints including a clear
warning that the language and themes may offend. All promotional material associated
with the play clearly indicated that the play was contemporary and dealt with serious
issues.

A two-night season was planned which meant that there were 1,600 available seats. As
these were for consecutive nights the Entertainment Centre could not rely on word-of-
mouth and so a television/newspaper campaign was planned which was the major cost
associated with the production. Approximately 1200 seats were sold and the production covered all costs (including all the infra-structure costs of the venue). In these terms it could be judged highly successful.

The audience was structured in certain ways. The opening Friday night was a full-house as this was the night chosen by schools to bring their class groups. Thus the foyer was full of young people, a dynamic that had not been experienced in the venue for some time. It became a major social occasion for these young people and the buzz was palpable. Adults in the audience that night were in the minority and were mainly teachers, university students, parents and some guests of one of the venue’s sponsors. One of the latter, a woman, stated: I didn’t know what the play was going to be about and felt by interval that I didn’t want to see more, but found the second half really engrossing, emotionally engaging” (C. Ellis, personal communication, March, 1998).

The second night audience, half a house, was a more equal mix of adults and young people.

The opening night audience audibly gasped at the blunt colloquialisms of the first scenes; an unusual response when one considers that it is commonplace language amongst many young people and is widely used in popular media such as videos, youth radio, young adult fiction and journalism. Indeed, many in the audience would have already seen the video of *Blackrock* (Vidler, 1997). But an audience unfamiliar with attending live theatre, and possibly with preconceptions about what was allowable in a theatre, had to adjust their frame of reference. Other significant, immediate responses were laughter at moments of high, emotional tension and a loud cheer from the female members of the audience when the central male character was stopped from making unwanted sexual advances to his girlfriend by a swift knee in the groin. As the cheer went up several male voices began to boo, then, as if realising that by doing this they were aligning themselves with the male violence so heavily critiqued by the play, the booing rapidly faded. The first night audience loudly applauded and whistled the curtain calls.

The response of the second night audience was more muted because of the smaller numbers and the mix of adult/young adult. This reflects Bennett’s observation that “[t]he percentage of seats occupied will inevitably affect reception, both through its
effect on the quality of the actor’s performances and through inter-spectator relations” (1997, p. 140). Cast members, particularly the actor who played Jared, found the first night audience’s response challenging and slightly distracting, especially when building the emotional tension required for the final scenes. This actor felt that he could control his pace and emotional build-up more easily on the second night when he had an audience who conformed to conventions of respectful silence (D. Pitts, 1998). For the director and many in the audience, however, the response of the first night audience was an affirmation of the power of Enright’s script. Enright’s tight, succinct dialogue and short scenes led inexorably to both the crime itself and the playing out of a community’s responses, where all were somehow complicit in the ideologies of class and gender at the base of the society being depicted.

Audience response was noted informally in a number of ways. As the audience spilled out into the carparks and café-strip, small group conversations could be heard with female voices predominating. It was both ironic and coincidental that the weekend chosen for the production was International Women’s Day and the same café-strip was to be the centre for a range of activities associated with this. Many women were disturbed and confronted by what they had seen. One woman wrote to the local paper about her concerns:

What concerns me is that a large percentage of people, young and old, are living just as Blackrock portrays.

The death rate for young men between 15 and 25 years of age is I believe five times that of the rest of the population through youth suicide, drinking and driving and misadventure.

Reports of rape in the South West are alarmingly regular.

I am concerned that the young school students who were bussed to see the play, and indeed the actors and actresses too, have some debriefing.

As adults in the community we surely owe it to the young to offer them some hope. (J. Salom, 1998, p. 13)

Another correspondent in the same paper had another view:

The reality of the ‘young culture’ was graphically portrayed with disturbing conviction, which was fully appreciated by the packed audience. (Whitely, 1998, p. 13)
Di Johnson, in her review of the script and performance of *Blackrock* in 1996, found it profoundly disturbing. “I spent much of the play fielding one uncomfortable position after another as Enright scraped painfully along a series of raw nerves while exposing a much flawed society” (Johnson, 1996, p. 116). She also called for an alternative model, some “redemption”. One of my undergraduate students, a mother of teenagers, found it within the script. She found the grief and rage expressed by the characters Cherie and Rachel; the ultimate rebellion by Tiffany, a young woman much abused and exploited by the males in her life; and the fortitude of the mother, Diane, as symbolic of “personal growth” and “hope for change” (E. Saunders, personal communication, March, 1998).

Adults who attended the play reported that it provided an opportunity for a more open dialogue with their teenagers. In one case it led to a mother discovering that the daughter with whom she thought she had a close relationship was in fact implicated in some fairly serious drug issues within her community. Some reported a negative or dismissive response with the phrase ‘too try-hard’ attached to the young person’s reading of the performance. I assume this implies scepticism about the possibly didactic nature of the play and an implication that the script was an adult’s view of the teenage world. This view was also put by a younger male undergraduate student who was concerned by the “heavy stereotypes to portray the play’s characters and present its issues. Whether these are intentional or not is irrelevant. It is the fact that he may be alienating some of his audience through this stereotypical characterization that is of some concern” (H. Gibson, personal communication, March, 1998).

Young women reported to me that the play was vigorously discussed amongst peers at school. Males in the age range fifteen to sixteen in these discussions were most engaged with the issue of ‘loyalty to mates’ and ‘dobbing’. They did not tend to engage with, in the view of the women, the larger issue of male violence against women. This observation was corroborated by a teacher of my acquaintance who found that in subsequent class discussions the boys were vocal on the issues of mateship and fully empathised with the moral dilemma of Jared. When the discussion turned to violence against women they tended, in her words, “to look out the window” (C. Fielder, personal communication, March 1998). This response was interpreted by my female informants, not so much as a lack of sensitivity, but more that the young men did not have the language and communicative skills to discuss the issue. Perhaps they also felt
that anything they might say would somehow implicate them by association with the sexual violence represented in the text. The girls were quite vocal. “Great play, this stuff can really happen—we’ve seen it at parties we go to” said one girl.

The Blackrock production certainly raises questions about the protocols of representing violence to broad audiences. Enright indicates that he was concerned with this issue from his first involvement in the project but felt it important for the community to look at issues of peer pressure and why “any group of boys abuse any girl and how they come to do it” (Enright, 1996, p. vii). One result of representing violence can be that it becomes cultish. (Texts such as Trainspotting come to mind). Another is that the message within the text can be overly didactic and rejected as ‘too try-hard’ by its target audience. Theatre-in-education and youth theatre have grappled with these issues for years, of course. Furthermore, the availability of funding for projects such as these is usually tied to the requirement to promote health and equity messages.

The Bunbury community’s experience of Blackrock was powerful. Statistically, approximately one in thirty people in the community saw the production, 70% of whom were young adults. (Estimation only). Bennett notes that in regional theatre the performance product “is just as likely to involve members of that community. Therefore, unlike its urban theatrical equivalent, the event of community theatre is able to act as social affirmation of a particular group of people” (Bennett, 1997). Young people in Bunbury who attended the production were affirmed by having the resources of a professional venue made available and seeing their peers perform. There was no condescension about the quality of the production. The themes of the play are more problematic. It may have just been a ‘big night out’ as far as the young people were concerned. But it may have achieved more.

This chapter has provided examples of some theoretical and practical concerns associated with theatre by and for young people in a regional community. Within this discussion the ambivalent responses of young actors and audiences to ‘issues-based’ projects are identified. Issues-based theatre may work when the issue is located outside of the community, thus enabling actors and audiences to identify with the issue and not the perpetrators. Funding bodies who impose health and welfare themes on performance
projects may find this to be counterproductive if young people feel too exposed within their own communities.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges identified within this discussion, the participation of young people in the performing arts in the community is vigorous and extensive. Young people are active in all areas of community performing arts, not just youth performing arts organisations, which helps affirm identity and provides a level of social and cultural capital with which to move out into the wider national and international community, as many choose to do. For those who choose to remain they form the basis for the ongoing viability of the performing arts in this regional community.
PART THREE: The communities’ theatre?
Chapter 10: A city needs a theatre

Australian theatre historian Geoffrey Milne states that “[t]hroughout the 1970s and 1980s, regional cities all over Australia embarked upon a massive program of theatre and performing arts centre building” (2003, p. 283). Milne attributes to these centres the decline of regional (professional) theatre companies and the consolidation of metropolitan producers as sole providers of touring product. However, Milne is describing, as he acknowledges, an eastern states’ view of regional theatre. Theatre groups in regional communities in Western Australia are almost entirely amateur organisations although may on occasions employ professional directors or other skilled personnel. The regional performing arts centres in Western Australia (Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Mandurah, Bunbury, Karratha, Merredin, Albany, Margaret River, Esperance) are all located in communities smaller and more remote from Perth than Bunbury or Mandurah, and many are joint-use facilities shared with education and/or community organisations. In Part Three I demonstrate that Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre has achieved a level of community ownership and participation that perhaps makes it unique in Australia. Although it is an active participant in the “vigorous networking” of regional performing arts centres that Milne describes (2003, p. 285), I do not agree that in the case of Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre this has resulted in a centre which is a regional branch of a city-based head office (p. 285).

The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre opened in 1990. I joined the Board of Management in 1997, the mid point of the Entertainment Centre’s 14 year history. Prior to this, I had followed the fortunes of the Entertainment Centre as an interested customer, grateful for the chance to see touring shows that had not formerly come to Bunbury and for the opportunities it gave local performers, particularly young people. However I started to reflect on the impact of the Entertainment Centre in the local and wider community and was somewhat sceptical about this. I noted that its choice of program was conservative and I felt this was reflected in the experience of attending the theatre where the volunteer Friends of the Theatre performed all-front-of-house duties and I had the feeling in the foyer that one was under inspection for inappropriate dress or behaviour. Unlike the experience of attending live events in a large city where anonymity is often assured, one’s attendance at the Entertainment Centre is very public and social. There is no avoiding comment if one chooses to attend something ‘different’
such as *Puppetry of the penis* or the *Vagina monologues* (both staged within weeks of each other at Entertainment Centre in 2002). However, I was certainly aware of the very effective fund raising program that enabled the Entertainment Centre to be built in a comparatively short period of time and that many individuals and businesses throughout the area had donated to this.

My motivation for applying for membership of the Board of Management was mixed. From an external point of view it appeared to me that the board membership was mainly prominent middle-aged local business men, several of whom had participated in the original fund-raising campaign. I wondered what knowledge board members had of the performing arts industry, contemporary performance, government arts policies, primary, secondary and tertiary education or community theatre.

I felt that the Entertainment Centre needed to be more than a place for hire and wondered whether it could be more proactive in cultural development. At the time I stated that I felt I had strengths in the following areas:

- theatre direction
- theatrical knowledge including what is new and contemporary
- knowledge of the local amateur theatres
- knowledge of youth theatre
- strong links with secondary schools and the university
- an understanding of Federal and State Government Arts policies
- a research interest in performing arts and regional areas (McCarron, 1998).

I am not sure that any of the listed reasons were particularly what the board saw as priorities; realistically, there is not a rush of applicants for committee positions in the community, and I found myself a board member. The actual experience of board membership was, of course, more complex than the superficial impressions I had formed.

**Origins story**

The narrative of the origins of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is central to the ongoing management and community perceptions of the Entertainment Centre. Regional Australian cities and towns have long regarded the establishment of a
performing arts centre as one of the markers of city status and cultural achievement. In fact, Bunbury was rather later than most, a point made vigorously by Dr Ern Manea, former Mayor of Bunbury (1966-1972; 1988-1997) and Director of the South West Development Authority (1983-1988); who, in an attempt to dramatise what he saw as the city’s tardiness, pointed out that there was a 100 year history of attempts to achieve a large, purpose-built performance space for the city. Surely its time had come, he argued. Prior to this, the choice of venues for touring companies was between the community theatres: Bunbury Repertory’s Little Theatre, the Paisley Centre (a converted primary school hall) and used for a number of years by the Bunbury Musical Comedy Group until they built the New Lyric Theatre (a converted commercial warehouse), each of which seated 200 or less; or the Italian Club, a large flat floor function hall with a stage, capable of seating a larger number of people but in less than ideal conditions, such as, no raised seating and inadequate technical facilities. Despite the best efforts of the local arts council and others, people in the region were missing opportunities to see touring performers. There tended to be an assumption that Bunbury’s relative proximity to Perth meant that if you really wanted to see a performance you would travel to Perth to do so. Bunbury’s only surviving cinema was a small, single-screen cinema located adjacent to a former drive-in cinema some distance from the centre of town and nowhere near restaurants, cafes or transport. The town’s older cinema buildings had long since been converted to commercial retail premises. The provision of a cinema for Bunbury also came to be included in the continuing narrative of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, as did the perceived need for large scale convention facilities.

As documented in the social and political history of Bunbury Excellent connections: Bunbury 1836-1990 (Barker & Laurie, 1992), commissioned and published by the City of Bunbury, the 1980s saw unprecedented levels of state government funding directed to Bunbury, which occupies two key marginal state electorates:

By late 1985 the West Australian was telling its readers that no fewer than eighty government funded projects focused on Bunbury had been started in the past two and a half years. Although some of these projects may have been small, by this time Bunbury was on the way to having its first high rise buildings, the eleven-storey office tower in Victoria Street and the luxury Lord Forrest Hotel … the marshalling yards of the government railways had been shifted to Picton on the fringe of the city to clear a seven-hectare site that had been both eyesore and barrier to development between the inner city area and the harbour foreshore; and
the Bunbury Institute of Advanced Education [later Edith Cowan University] had been opened on the outer ring road next to the existing South-West Technical College. (Barker & Laurie, 1992, p. 352)

Bunbury citizens, despite a healthy scepticism about the ‘pork-barrelling’ nature of many of the promises, came to accept the rapid changes to the city and even to suggest further projects, such as the provision of a performing arts centre. Local business people and government workers who had travelled to national and international conferences could see the benefits of corporate tourism and urged local and state government to consider incorporating convention facilities with a performing arts centre. Certainly tourism had been identified as having “the capacity for significant expansion” (Barker & Laurie, 1992, p.360) and, although Bunbury called itself “the gateway” to the South West, in 1983 a report by Ian Alexander showed that:

Tourists tended to bypass it on the way to more attractive destinations such as Busselton. As Bunbury grew bigger, reinforcing its image as an industrial and commercial centre, they would do so even more. (Cited in Barker & Laurie, 1992, p. 360)

There was also recognition that if the city wanted to attract larger industries to the region then the city needed to provide an attractive lifestyle package for potential employees. One failure of the 1980s for the state government and Bunbury had been the proposed relocation of 400 state public servants from Perth to Bunbury. By 1986 this proposal “had been scrapped in the face of opposition from the Civil Service Association” (Barker & Laurie, 1992, p. 356). The failure of this proposal highlighted the need to acquire the accoutrements of a city which, as Dr Manea frequently told us, included a university, an art gallery and a theatre. All three were achieved in the five year period 1985-1990. (See also discussion in Chapter Four). And, indeed, I am the direct beneficiary of Manea’s cultural aspirations: I am employed by one, on the board of another and a frequent visitor to the third. My partner is employed at one of the major mines in the region. We are, no doubt, examples of the type of new residents that the policies of the 1980s had attempted to attract. However as Barker and Laurie conclude:

[H]owever much and laudably an Ern Manea may talk about improved lifestyle and a more educated workforce, large parts of Bunbury have always been traditional working class …. While Councils have sold land to middle-class buyers in its beachside areas to fund important community cultural projects, the bulk of its population lives and expands in inland suburbs such as Carey Park, originally
developed by the SHC [State Housing Commission] and still administered by its successor, Homewest. (1992, p. 371)

This observation is key to the subsequent history of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in terms of its relationship with the City of Bunbury. It is, however, worth noting that the suburbs mentioned by Barker and Laurie above are, fourteen years later, undergoing gentrification themselves through streetscaping, public art in parks and on traffic roundabouts, new schools and “[t]he process of refurbishment and sale of public stock” (Ambrosius, 2001, p. 5).

In 1988 the *South Western Times* reported that the City of Bunbury had “agreed to a plan and site for the [entertainment] centre” and was engaged in discussion with the state government about financing the centre, the estimated cost of which was reported as $5.9 million. However these early plans also included a tavern, restaurant, conference centre and outside amphitheatre, none of which survived in the final plan. The same report quotes the then Minister for the South West, Julian Grill, as placing the bulk of the responsibility for funding the “grander style building than first envisaged” with the city council (“Concert hall funding still to be resolved,” 1988). The site recommended by the Council’s Entertainment Centre committee and accepted by Council in May 1988 was next to the renovated Bunbury Arts Complex and went against the recommendations of the consultants, who had proposed another estuary-front site, Queens Gardens. In the event, neither site was selected, although an estuary view won out over the Council’s idea of an integrated arts precinct midway between the estuary and the ocean beach.

The push for a performing arts centre for Bunbury began in earnest in 1989 after a public meeting proposed that a fund-raising committee be formed. The committee, formed on 23 May, 1989 and chaired by businessperson Ross Ransom, took the dramatic step of proposing that an interstate professional fundraising organisation be contracted to orchestrate a short, intense major fund-raising appeal. The City of Bunbury would also contribute by using funds raised by the sale of endowment lands, which, according to Barker and Laurie, it had more of than most local authorities (p. 367). The community fundraising project raised $2.2 million, some of it in in-kind donations of materials and labour from local construction companies. This was an
outstanding achievement considering that the ‘boom years’ of the 1980s were over. Faced with such community commitment, both local and state governments ‘came to the party’, with the City of Bunbury contributing $3.2 million and the state government $1.2 million. Thus the community funds were matched in a two for one arrangement. The substantive local commitment was matched by an insistence that local companies be used as far as possible in the design and construction, and then-local architect, Sasha Ivanovich, headed the design team in conjunction with metropolitan architects Hames Sharley. Ivanovich was known locally for his ‘unusual’ designs so there was significant interest in seeing what he would ‘come up with’.

Thus the foundations for a strong sense of community ownership of the Entertainment Centre were laid. The project obviously captured the popular imagination as the total project, funding and construction, was achieved within eighteen months.

Unlike the art gallery, which was located in a former convent school building, and the university campus which, although a new building, was sited on the southern edge of the city in a bushland site and not visible to the passer-by, the Entertainment Centre design was certain to attract notice as the site provided by the city was on the former railway land, described as “industrial wasteland” (Lightfoot, 1996), at the northern end of the inner city and adjacent to the estuary. The city skyline was already dominated by the eleven storey Bunbury Tower completed in 1986 and dubbed the ‘milk carton’ by Bunbury residents many of whom felt its height and design were inappropriate to the city’s built heritage (Appendix C Photographs 1 and 3). As the Bunbury Tower would be the backdrop for the Entertainment Centre, the design team had a challenging task ahead of them. Original concept drawings included flat-floor conference space adjacent to the main theatre building but the budget dictated the final specifications which were an 800 seat auditorium, stage, foyer, rehearsal room, green room, dressing rooms and technical facilities appropriate for a theatre of this size. (See www.bunburyentertainment.com for a ‘virtual’ tour of the building).

Late in the design process it was realised that no administration office space had been included in the design and subsequently a narrow corridor was provided on the southern side of the building.
The external design for the building did not follow the modernist concrete and glass aesthetic of the Bunbury Tower and Lord Forrest Hotel (Appendix C Photographs 3 and 4). The front of the building has a curved colonnaded façade in brick. It conveys something of the feel of a Roman rotunda but with art deco references. Thus the building does link to the built heritage of the city as there are significant art deco buildings in the main street directly behind the Entertainment Centre. Although effectively a two-storey building to allow for an upstairs gallery seating 200, and a tall flytower at the rear, the overall external impression is not of height. However, the foyer makes use of the height, and although not overly generous in floor space, it is large and airy with expansive views of the estuary (Appendix C Photograph 5).

The rapid changes of the urban landscape in Bunbury in the past two decades have meant that there have been a few ‘false starts’. A tourist bureau was constructed adjacent to a new shopping complex but then abandoned when the heritage railway station building was converted to a bus station and required other tenants to make it viable. Thus the tourist bureau was relocated. The older city centre was gentrified and a lively ‘café strip’ developed during the 1990s that complemented the entertainment precinct which included the Entertainment Centre. However the Marlston Hill developments at the northernmost end of the city have meant that the focus has yet again shifted. The university, firstly named the Bunbury Institute of Advanced Education (1986), became the Western Australian College of Advanced Education (1990) and then Edith Cowan University (1991) (and for a short period of time, it almost became Murdoch University after a take-over bid from that institution). Therefore, the fact that the Entertainment Centre had not one, but two official openings, seems somehow in keeping with this need for flexibility in response from a bemused public.

The first opening had long been planned as a community Gala Night on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1990. However, the state government announced that a visit from British royalty was imminent and, no doubt searching for a suitable public project with which to associate the guest, suggested that the Entertainment Centre opening could be performed by His Royal Highness, Prince Philip. The date decided upon was November 30\textsuperscript{th}, and the royal visitor, prompted probably by some local advisor (one suspects the Mayor, Dr Manea) announced that as Bunbury was a centre for both the arts and the environment, a
Festival of Arts and Nature would be a good idea. Barker and Laurie (1992, p.360) note that Manea, “no soft-centred ‘greenie” had seen the need to link environmental protection with the tourism industry. This festival by royal decree which was sponsored by Bunnings, Western Australia’s leading timber-milling company, (Kaino, 1996) is an example of arts projects that are imposed on a community and the two festivals that were subsequently held formed part of a number of festivals that Bunbury has attempted, but which have never caught the popular imagination sufficiently to become a regular event. They are perhaps further examples of the ‘false starts’ mentioned above.

The opening Gala Night featured many local performers, with a particular emphasis on young people, including the Bunbury Youth Chorale. A frequently reiterated theme at this time by Manea and others, was the impetus the new building would give to local performance, especially that by young people. The enthusiasm expressed at the building’s opening did not account for the harsher realities of managing a performing arts centre because ultimately, it was meant to pay its way and not become a burden to ratepayers. This thesis examines this claim.

The inaugural manager of the Entertainment Centre, John Young, was ‘head-hunted’ from the eastern states as it was felt that someone with extensive experience in theatre management was required. He arrived in time to make late adjustments to the building design such as the lack of staff office space. Based on previous experience, Young proposed that a Friends of the Theatre group be formed and that among its aims should be the provision of volunteers to undertake all front-of-house duties for the Entertainment Centre. Although running the risk of setting up a very cumbersome administrative structure, this proposal was enthusiastically taken up by many in the community and the Friends of the Theatre, since ‘rebadged’ as the BREC Club, is the singular success story of the Entertainment Centre. The strengths and challenges of this volunteer structure will be discussed later in this chapter.

Any perception of the function of the new centre as a citadel of high arts was tempered by Young in his ultimately successful proposal that the building be named firstly, after the city in which it was located rather than as, for example, the South West Performing Arts Centre; and secondly, that it should be termed an entertainment centre rather than a theatre or a performing arts centre. Young’s knowledge of the entertainment industry
meant that he recognised that to survive the Entertainment Centre would have to be open to all sorts of business opportunities, not necessarily only that associated with ‘theatre’ or ‘arts’. He famously suggested, having come from central Queensland, that if he could hire out the venue to conduct bull sales, he would. His rationale for using the name Bunbury in the title was that when negotiating with interstate and overseas entertainment agents, it aided immediate identification of the theatre’s location. The practicality of Young’s advice was accepted, and this also forestalled any suggestions that the building be named in honour of a local dignitary, past or present. Bunbury people were familiar with the Perth Entertainment Centre, a vast circular space used for spectaculars and rock concerts, so there was an acceptance of the concept although this may have created false hopes in terms of the type of events that might be staged.

The proscenium arch stage design and 800 seat auditorium of the Bunbury Entertainment Centre was neither a big enough nor flexible enough space for either spectaculars or rock concerts. This was evidenced by the production of Cats (Lloyd Webber) that toured regional Australia in 2000 in a purpose-built tent. The lack of large venues for concerts became an opportunity exploited by south west wineries such as Leeuwin Estate in Margaret River, that constructed arena-type gardens that could be used for large-scale outdoor events, and smaller towns such as Bridgetown that were prepared to turn over the town for a weekend blues festival.

A dilemma caused by the naming of the centre as the Bunbury Entertainment Centre (BEC) was that this seemed a ‘slap in the face’ to the regional communities who had contributed substantially to the building. Subsequently the regional shires left the responsibility for the funding of the Entertainment Centre to the City of Bunbury and this was not rectified until 1997 when the building was renamed the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre (BREC) and a campaign was conducted by the Board of Management to regain the support of the surrounding shires. The city and region dynamic and the importance of regional participation will be examined in Chapter Eleven.

The ownership of the Entertainment Centre is vested in the City of Bunbury and thus it is the City’s building on land owned by the City. This ownership includes “all the theatre equipment, lighting, audio, staging, foyer furnishings and floor coverings”
(Rumball, 2003). The Entertainment Centre is operated on behalf of the City by Bunbury Regional Theatre Incorporated and this body comprises a Board of Management that operates under an agreement with the City. John Young resigned in January 1992 and the Board appointed Malcolm Calder. Calder resigned in September 1992 and in January 1993 Greg McGrath was appointed and remained till his resignation in 1998. However Calder and McGrath encountered changing economic and political times that emphasized economic rationalism. The cost of administering and maintaining the Entertainment Centre came to be regarded in a different light by Council and by 1996 relations between the Council executive and the Entertainment Centre management had cooled considerably. Thus, Manea’s cultural aspirations for the city came to be seen as luxuries that some city councillors and executive felt should be user-paid.

**Crisis**

The inaugural Board of Management was immediately faced with the serious question of how to make the Entertainment Centre financially viable. Once the first operating budgets were prepared for the Bunbury Entertainment Centre it was apparent that it would require annual operational and capital funding of $250,000 per annum to deliver a regular theatre arts program of touring and local product. As there was no cinema in central Bunbury the board purchased a cinema projector and screen and, until 1996, operated film screenings around the scheduled live events. The cinema income contributed substantially to the financial viability of the Entertainment Centre for that period. In 1993 the Board put a proposal to the city to extend the venue by adding a three screen cinema complex to it. The city did not see its role as operating commercial businesses and ultimately awarded a contract to a commercial cinema chain to build such a cinema adjacent to the Entertainment Centre, despite the Entertainment Centre having tendered for the contract. Once the private cinema complex opened, film distributors would no longer supply the Entertainment Centre with first release films and this source of income was effectively removed. By late 1996 the Entertainment Centre faced a financial crisis and the Board looked to the state government for support.

Bunbury Entertainment Centre management has asked the State Government for operational funds of $90,000 annually for the next five years and $150,000 for capital works. (Lightfoot, 1996)
As Bunbury had been the object of Labor government largesse in the 1980s, so other regions of the state were similarly supported by the Liberal-National Party government of the 1990s. This government fully funded performing arts centres in both Mandurah and Kalgoorlie. This situation was seized upon by BEC Board chairperson, Ross Ranson, as evidence that “Bunbury had been treated unfairly” and “on this basis it was reasonable to expect that Bunbury Entertainment Centre would now receive Government funding” (Lightfoot, 1996).

A submission was prepared by the City of Bunbury after meetings with the Minister of the Arts, Peter Foss, Councillors, Bunbury Entertainment Centre Board members and regional parliamentarians.

This Submission is supported by the Bunbury City Council, further [sic] the South West Local Government Association, an organisation of twelve Local Governments within the South West Region also endorsed this submission unanimously at its meeting in October 1996 in recognition of the importance of the Bunbury Entertainment Centre to the region. (Castrilli, 1997)

It was also accompanied by a public petition coordinated by the Entertainment Centre with assistance from the Friends of the Theatre. This petition stresses both the community support for the Entertainment Centre as evidenced by the original fundraising campaign and the extent to which the Centre serves the region.

We, the undersigned, regard the Bunbury Entertainment Centre as a cultural facility built with community support and managed to provide for a large area of the south west of Western Australia. We suggest that the extent to which the Centre draws its audience and provides services far exceeds any one Local Government boundary. ("Petition," 1997)

The submission was also backed with data obtained from benchmarking with other similar sized performing arts centres in regional Australia that showed that in 1994/5 the Entertainment Centre was achieving higher than average results against criteria such as venue occupancy, gross theatre occupancy, income per capita rate paying area, number of productions and voluntary labour usage. However, it received half the level of annual subsidy of other theatres its size ($166,000 compared to an average of $308,828). But the comparative data also shows that it operated out of a much smaller local government rate base, as the then rate base of the City of Bunbury was 13,500 compared to the
average for other regional Australian centres of 35,000 rate payers ("APACA Benchmark Study 1994/5," 1997).

The 1994/95 national benchmark study of thirteen regional performing arts centres in Australia demonstrated that the BEC is one of the nation’s best performing venues … BEC rated second only to Geelong in total revenue per paid staff member, rated first (almost double) in entrepreneurial revenue per paid staff member and first in terms of the contribution by volunteer labour. (Ranson, 1997)

No financial assistance was forthcoming as advised by the Western Australian Premier in September 1997 (Court, 1997). The Entertainment Centre was advised to approach the Lotteries Commission and the Government for potential funding for capital works. The Premier also advised that the Department for Commerce and Trade might be able to assist with funds for the Entertainment Centre to develop a business plan. Despite annual representations by BREC to state governments since for capital works funding, none has been received. Successive state governments have placed the Entertainment Centre’s claim within an ongoing review of the needs of the performing arts in Western Australia and the need for a suitable theatre in Perth (Policy development plan: Arts and culture 2002/2003, 2002). As Hough states:

The Western Australian Theatre Company was liquidated in 1991 as part of a scheme to join forces with the Hole in the Wall to form the short-lived State Theatre Company of Western Australia. From the start, the new entity was under-resourced. The anticipated joint state-federal funding of $1.2 million did not materialise. A new minister in a newly elected Liberal-National Party administration refused the company a lifeline, and the company’s board of management darkened the theatre in 1993. Western Australia is now the only state not to have a state theatre company or a cultural complex worthy of the name in which to house it. (Hough, 2003, p. 47)

In this climate it was unlikely that Bunbury, a regional city, would succeed in its claim, when no similar amount had been delivered to the state theatre company in the capital city.

One useful result of the information and support gathering exercise that the Entertainment Centre had conducted was the realisation of the value of statistical and other evidence to back up claims of regional and community support and to weave this into the ongoing narrative of the growth and development of the Entertainment Centre.
Meanwhile, the City of Bunbury prepared to shoulder the additional subsidy needed to keep the Entertainment Centre operating.

The council agreed last week to try to find $210,000 in its 1997-8 Budget, an increase of more than $50,000 on this year’s operating subsidy. (Rechichi, 1997)

However, this decision came after considerable community debate around the subject of ratepayer subsidy of community-run commercial assets, although this debate ultimately focussed on the Entertainment Centre and access to the arts. The debate was initiated by newly elected councillor Wayne Major. His electorate, West Ward, includes many private home owner/ratepayers and a major state housing development established in the 1970s. West Ward also includes another council-subsidised community facility, Hay Park, which is the home of numerous sporting organisations that have purpose built sports fields and club facilities, and also a recreation centre including swimming pools and indoor sports facilities. Major did not include Hay Park in his critique of council-subsidised enterprises, however. He proposed that the City of Bunbury should consider privatising both the Entertainment Centre and the city’s airport, in line with state and national government moves to privatise state enterprises such as transport and health services. Major also queried the need for the City of Bunbury to shoulder the whole burden of the Entertainment Centre’s subsidy, suggesting that surrounding regional councils should be contributing to its operation (Major, 1997).

In 1997, as Manea’s mayoral term was ending and his retirement from public office imminent, a remaining task was to shore up financial support for the Entertainment Centre in the face of the challenges posed by Major. Major’s stand had popular appeal for those ratepayers who had not seen themselves as beneficiaries of the Entertainment Centre perhaps because of the cost of attending performances, or a perception that it catered for an elitist audience. Prior to the opening of the Entertainment Centre, most performance events in the community were those provided at low cost by community performing arts organisations. Some people would not have been familiar with standard ticket prices charged by metropolitan performing arts organisations nor realised that ticket prices for touring shows were usually less expensive at Bunbury than at metropolitan venues. However, community productions staged at the Entertainment Centre were significantly more expensive to attend than if staged in smaller community
venues, even with the discounted venue charges charged by the Entertainment Centre for local users, an on-going complaint by local performing arts companies.

Manea and the Board of Management sought to counter these perceptions by drumming up support from the community and the performing arts industry. Their most powerful instrument turned out to be the volunteer base of the organisation, and the inaugural manager’s suggestion of a Friends of the Theatre organisation turned out to be inspired. By 1997 the Friends numbered 643 members of whom approximately 300 were active volunteers. By no means an elitist organisation, members included those who had been original donors to the building fund, those who had been involved in community performing arts most of their lives, and many semi-retired or retired people who enjoyed the social and performance opportunities volunteering at the theatre provided. They were more than prepared to provide testimonials to the current management of the Entertainment Centre.

My interest is in BEC, not only as a donor towards the $2.2 million subscribed by the public, but as a Friend of the Theatre and volunteer worker for the past six and a half years. I see enjoyment people get from watching the various performances and also the joy of those who have the chance to perform at the big theatre on the big stage. I believe the Bunbury City Council has a responsibility to the community to provide such facilities. (T. Salom, 1997)

As the debate continued for the remainder of 1997 it was fortuitous that the Friends of the Theatre were the Western Australian winners of the National Australia Bank Community Link Awards (“Minutes, Friends of the Theatre, Executive Committee Meeting,” 1997), further evidence of a community facility that enjoyed the practical support of a significant section of the community.

The difficult message for the community to accept was that, as Malcolm Moore, General Manager of Perth’s Black Swan Theatre Company contends:

It is a fallacy to imagine that privatisation of management brings instant profits. There is not a centre in Australia that runs at a profit whether run by a local council or through a management agency (1997).

Moore argued that facilities like the Entertainment Centre are community assets providing services to the community and, if privatised, the diverse programming
possible in a subsidised community-owned and managed facility, would tend towards “product which is totally ‘safe’ and caters for the lowest common artistic denominator” (1997).

Council approved the funding but it came with caveats as stated by the CEO, Gary Brennan:

One of the tasks which I have been set by Council during the twelve (12) month period ending June 30, 1998 is to review Council’s involvement in non-core activities and submit recommendations for alternative arrangements. The Entertainment Centre is one of those areas I will be reviewing for this purpose. I hasten to add this does not mean selling the centre, it does mean examining alternative arrangements and the role of the City either directly or indirectly in the operation of the centre and other facilities within the City. (Brennan, 1997)

I had joined the Board in mid-1997 barely aware of the seriousness of the situation. I found myself with fellow Board members thrown into an 18 month period of intensive strategic planning, lobbying and negotiating on behalf of the Entertainment Centre. During this period two key staff, the marketing officer and the general manager, resigned. This meant that the Board played a more ‘hands-on’ role than would normally be expected of a Board of Management. The City of Bunbury arranged advisory visits by arts management professionals such as John Thornton, Manager of the Regal Theatre, Subiaco, who “advised [that] his discussion to the Board would be on the basis as if the Bunbury Entertainment Centre was his building” ("Notes of an informal meeting of the Bunbury Entertainment Centre Board 3 December," 1997). Thornton’s advice included contracting out most of the labour such as box office, electrical, technical operators, cleaning and publicity. He suggested that the Entertainment Centre may be able to be jointly managed with other regional theatres to enable joint programming and operation of facilities. “Quite simply, private enterprise did it better”.

Despite the fact that the majority of Board members were from private enterprise themselves, the suggestion that most aspects of the Entertainment Centre’s operation be outsourced did not sit well with them as they were fully aware of the strength of the community commitment to the Entertainment Centre. The Board felt the prospect of the Entertainment Centre as just a venue for hire with contracted casual labour would relegate community participation almost solely to that of audience and lead to “many
dark nights at the theatre” (McCarron, 1999b, p. 3) and thus a less attractive proposition to market. Trusting its judgement that the community-focus of the Bunbury Entertainment Centre was paramount, the Board advertised for a Theatre Manager in June, 1998 emphasising that the successful applicant “must have a real interest in community activities” ("Theatre Manager," 1998).

By July 1999 the management team headed by Graham Harvey, appointed as General Manager in 1998, had managed to “turn the corner” (Hoare, 1999). Added to this the active lobbying of surrounding shire councils was successful, with most councils agreeing to direct a modest allocation of funds to the Entertainment Centre. The City of Bunbury acknowledged that the Entertainment Centre had worked hard to meet the City’s requirements through developing strategic plans with linked business and marketing plans. The demonstrated support from other shires answered the criticism from some councillors that Bunbury shouldered the financial burden of what are, in fact, regional facilities or ‘the communities’ theatre’.

The challenges posed during this period have resulted in a much stronger and more confident Entertainment Centre. Effectively every area of the Entertainment Centre’s operations has been examined and operational policies developed. It has learnt the value of:

- clear documentation of all areas of the Entertainment Centre’s operations in order that any queries from stakeholders can be answered with confidence;
- a clear narrative of the Entertainment Centre’s history that celebrates the community-centred focus of its operations and the iconic status of the building;
- strong community links built through donors, volunteers and sponsors;
- outreach to the region through policies and activities that address regional needs. This was formalised 1999 by a slight name change to the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre;
- expansion and broadening of program offered;
- youth and community development;
- developing new audiences;
- community use of building – local hirers; and
• benchmarking with industry peers.

Consistent emphasis on community partnerships firmly situates the Entertainment Centre within the regional cultural map. The following chapters will examine some of the above strategies in detail giving examples of these policies at work.

Volunteerism

The discourse around the function of volunteering in communities started to shift during the 1990s. Dempsey (1990), as previously noted in Chapter Five, states that prior to this sociologists doing community studies were discouraged from placing too much reliance on voluntary community organisations as sources (p. 188). The policies of economic rationalism of the 1990s and the discourses of community development meant that many community and volunteer organisations started to calculate not only the economic worth of their labour, but also the social capital generated. This is now being done at a national level through the Australian Bureau of Statistics social capital project. (See *Measuring social capital*, 2002). The Australian Bureau of Statistics “conducted two surveys on Voluntary Work in 1995 and 2000” (Forte & Paull, 2001) and the Western Australian trends and patterns are noted in the report by Forte and Paull prepared for Volunteering WA. The first significant statistic identified by this report is that “[i]n 2000, Western Australia had the highest volunteer rate in Australia for ex-metropolitan regions of 44.6%”. The role of volunteers in the arts in regional Western Australia is acknowledged by Country Arts WA as follows:

It is a feature of the arts in regional Western Australia that an overwhelming majority of the activities are undertaken, managed and delivered by volunteers. It is important that their role, value and needs are met. Currently, they are not being met in a diverse manner. It must be understood that the use of volunteers has an effect on arts activity, its quality, its quantity and its diversity (*Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant, General Manager, Country Arts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, Country Arts WA*, 2004, p. 5)

The performing arts in Bunbury and the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre are examples of this.

Formal volunteering is defined by Volunteering Australia as:
an activity which takes place in not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- of the volunteer’s own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only. (Forte & Paull, 2001, p. 3)

Described as “passionate personnel” by one venue manager at the Australian Performing Arts Centre Conference held in Bunbury in 2002, volunteers are used in many ways within the performing arts industry. In a speech delivered at this conference, the head of ArtsWA, Alannnah Lucas, reported that at the conference, Theatre in Western Australia—patrician, popular or provocative, held three months earlier in Perth ‘volunteers’ were one of the most common topics for discussion. The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre uses volunteers through the following: Board of Management; BREC Club (formerly Friends of the Theatre); community co-productions; and community events.

**Board of Management**

The Board of Management has nine positions for members from the wider community and one position for a councillor from the City of Bunbury.

As the term of half of the members of the board finishes each year, there is an advertisement for expressions of interest. A committee comprising a board representative, a community representative and an industry representative talks to these people and makes a recommendation to the council, and it makes the final decision on board members. (*Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Graham John Harvey, Manager, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, 2004*)

Board members serve a two year term and may reapply. They come from a range of backgrounds including the arts, business, law, accounting, marketing, architecture and education, and most have managerial experience. Entertainment Centre Board members are volunteers though they occasionally receive complimentary tickets to performances and films. They are expected to be regular in their attendance at monthly board meetings held outside normal work hours, to read board papers in advance of the meeting, to participate in at least one sub-committee and to attend other events deemed to be in the interest of the Entertainment Centre, such as meetings with city councillors and politicians. They are also expected to exert their influence in the community in
terms of promoting the Entertainment Centre and identifying potential sponsors. Most board members serve more than one term and at least three, myself included, have been on the board since the 1997 crisis.

One board member is funded to attend the annual conference of the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA), not the usual practice of other participating organisations, who are mainly represented by their managers. This exposure to the industry at a national level is invaluable to board members who may have had limited knowledge of this industry prior to joining the board. It alerts board members to the range of management structures in performing arts centres across the country, including the fact that in centres owned by state governments, legislation requires that board members are paid sitting fees. This cost is saved at Bunbury.

As noted by Putnam (2000) and Cox (1995) transactions are based on assumptions of reciprocity or mutual benefit. Board membership of a community organisation like the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre generates social capital for individual board members who can use the networking opportunities to advantage in their professional and personal lives. This is sometimes formally recognised by employers. For example, the university encourages academic staff to allocate time for community service which is documented and used to advantage by the individual in applications for tenure or promotion or by the university in quality assurance audits. Applications for board positions are often received from people new to the community who have managerial positions with large organisations that encourage staff to be actively engaged in community life. Reasons frequently cited for wanting to become a board member are:

- relevant skills – management, strategic planning, business planning, policy development, engineering, marketing, legal
- community knowledge and involvement
- interest in the arts
- enjoyment of the facility
- experience in the arts as a practitioner, administrator or educator

A number of male applicants employed in local industries and organisations that are not connected with the arts state that they have formal arts training. This formal training is
generally in instrumental music and the prospective board members welcome the chance to link their professional and recreational interests in the service of the Entertainment Centre. However, board selection processes both formal and informal tend to give more weight to business and management skills rather than performing arts involvement and the majority of board applicants and members continue to be middle-aged and male. There are currently three female board members, all from the education sector.

Fishel states that:

Being a board member of an arts organisation has always been a combination of pleasure and responsibility. The pleasure comes from associating with an organisation or individual whose work you admire and enjoy, and from helping to sustain and develop that work. The responsibility comes from meeting legal compliance requirements, and from ensuring that organisational performance meets the expectations of the public and key stakeholders. (2003, p. 5)

Kearns, in a study of “effective nonprofit board members as seen by executives and board chairs” (1995, p. 337) lists the following desired attributes of board members: access/availability; commitment to vision; special talents and skills; attendance; constructive problem solving; understanding of the organisation’s niche; flexibility; resource developer; understanding of policy and management principles; selflessness; rapport with staff; representation/empathy; leadership; worker-bee; and problem framing (pp. 346-353). This comprehensive and somewhat daunting list describes some of the challenges board members encounter, and may offer explanation of why it is sometimes difficult to attract potential board members.

The work of a board of management is often not clear to the public and can lead to perceptions of remoteness or elitism, particularly in the area of the performing arts where this perception is one of the most enduring, despite evidence to the contrary. Board members who hold fixed ideas about the nature of the performing arts, drawing upon their own culturally specific experiences, can be a liability in board discussions as opportunities for development in alternative areas of performance are often lost, particularly in relation to young people and the arts. The challenge for the board is to be open to all possibilities and to communicate effectively with key stakeholders: the BREC Club members, the management and administration of Bunbury Regional
Entertainment Centre, donors and sponsors, the City of Bunbury and the regional community.

**BREC Club**

The BREC Club is the operating name of the incorporated association known as the Friends of Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc. Until 2001 the association was known as the Friends of the Theatre (also known as FOTT or ‘The Friends’) but agreed to a name change in line with marketing strategies that aimed to develop a larger membership list that could be used as a database for various marketing campaigns, including an extensive discount scheme for members. This promotional scheme aimed to double the membership of the organisation. Patrons become members of the BREC Club by paying an annual membership fee that immediately gains them substantial discounts on all theatre tickets. The amount expended on the fee is very quickly recouped through the discounts available. The membership fee is retained by the BREC Club which uses this and other monies raised to pursue the objectives of their association. In broad terms these are “to promote the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre” ("Constitution," 2000). The activities of the BREC Club are conducted on behalf of the members through an executive committee. In 2003 the BREC Club president reported a total membership base of 1,750 members of whom approximately 350 were volunteers:

> Our members come from 65 shires in addition to Bunbury and immediate surrounds … Our member age statistics show that we are heavily weighted in the 40 to 55 and 56+ age groups; with approximately 700 in each grouping. In the 25 to 39 age group there are approximately 160. It is pleasing to see younger members in the 18 to 24 year age bracket. We have 25 members in this grouping …

> During 2002 the BREC Club provided volunteer staff for 183 live performances, 146 movie screenings, the Eisteddfod catering and mail out teams.

> It is estimated that there were over 2000 volunteer positions. (Hawker, 2003)

It is estimated by the general manager that this volunteer labour represents a cost saving to the Entertainment Centre of $250,000 - $300,000 per annum (G. Harvey, 2004a). There is no automatic expectation that members of the BREC Club will participate as volunteers. From the figures above it is clear that about 80% of members only use their membership to access discounts and information about Entertainment Centre programs.
They do however form a large potential support network for the Entertainment Centre and this has been used to considerable effect when public support requires demonstration to other stakeholders, such as the City of Bunbury or potential sponsors. However, all new members are invited to participate as volunteers if they wish, and 20% do so.

Although many arts institutions operate ‘Friends’ organisations, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is the only venue in Australia with a totally volunteer front-of-house team (G. Harvey, 2004a). Effectively BREC Club volunteers perform all front-of-house duties (ushering, bar and coffee service, merchandise sales) for all Entertainment Centre performances, screenings and events. A full-house performance can require up to 22 volunteers. The front-of-house coordinator liaises with team leaders who each have lists of about 40 volunteers who can be called upon. It is the responsibility of the BREC Club to supply this workforce. The management simply supplies the list of events to be covered. The volunteers, depending upon their area of responsibility, attend training in safety and evacuation procedures, first aid and hospitality. They are required to adhere to a dress code, items of which they themselves supply.

As indicated by Hawker above, 80% of the BREC Club membership are aged 40 or above and this would also be the case for the BREC Club volunteers. Many are semi-retired or retired from their professions, businesses and trades. Some are donors to the original building fund. It is quite common to find a retired surgeon serving at the bar or to have your ticket taken at the door by the deputy principal of a local high school. All have attended the required training and adhere to the policies and procedures determined by the Entertainment Centre as necessary for the high level of service it aims to provide.

What tangible rewards are offered? Volunteers receive a limited number of complimentary tickets throughout the year. Depending on the audience size and the particular task they have been assigned, volunteers may see all or part of the show they are working on; however, they cannot request to work on specific shows. Once or twice a year, the BREC Club has a volunteers-only social function to say “thank you” for their efforts. The contribution of the BREC volunteers is noted on all formal BREC communications and occasions, including signage preceding all film screenings.
The fact that the public face of the Entertainment Centre is through its volunteer workforce, who effectively meet and greet all patrons entering the auditorium, poses some unique human resources questions for BREC management and the BREC Club. How does one tactfully tell a volunteer that he or she is not meeting the dress standards expected of front-of-house staff, or, because of their advancing age, that they might not be able to meet the safety regulations requiring a certain level of fitness to participate in an emergency evacuation? Or that they might convey a conservative, middle-class image that ‘puts-off’ potential younger audiences. The manager is often asked by the front-of-house manager to arbitrate on what constitutes ‘appropriate behaviour’ from audience members. Should a patron be allowed in without shoes? Should food or beverages be allowed into the auditorium? Over-zealous volunteer staff have sometimes taken it upon themselves to police these activities because they do not conform to their own view of ‘acceptable’ theatre behaviour. The community attitudes reflected by the volunteers tend to be mainstream and in the early days of the Entertainment Centre may have conveyed an elitist view of the performing arts that required a certain standard of behaviour. However BREC Club volunteers are increasingly being drawn from a wider age group, with the pleasing news that young people aged 18 – 25 have recently volunteered for front-of-house duties. The wide range of performance genres now staged in the Entertainment Centre mean that a much wider social demographic is attending and front-of-house staff are more relaxed about audience dress and behaviour.

Those volunteers who, because of age or disability, are unable to participate in front-of-house activities form a team that assembles the bi-monthly mail-out to all BREC Club members which includes a newsletter, forthcoming program and sponsors’ advertising materials. In addition to all of the above, BREC Club volunteers conduct additional fundraising activities such as catering during the three week long Bunbury Eisteddfod. Through the combination of membership fees and additional fundraising the Club has an annual income in the region of $25,000, a substantial proportion of which is returned to the theatre itself through donations of items of equipment such as a data projection system, audio system for the hard-of-hearing or electronic signage for the exterior of the building. Like many volunteer organisations the BREC Club tends to select projects that appear to be of universal benefit and is more cautious about allocating funds to individuals or groups. Although it has sometimes been proposed by individual committee members that the BREC Club might sponsor certain performing arts
projects, this tends not to have happened, presumably because it might be perceived as favouring certain individuals or groups within the local performing arts community. And in fact, many of the BREC Club volunteers and executive committee are also active in local community theatre groups. Sometimes, however, the adherence to principles of even-handedness can mean that organisations miss opportunities to ‘capture a wave’ and participate in projects that have the potential to develop into something exciting and new, thus bringing new performers and audiences into the Entertainment Centre. (In a new development as of July 2004 it should be noted that the BREC Club has allocated $3,000 to underwrite a community production at the Entertainment Centre in 2005).

**Community productions**

Within the Entertainment Centre a policy has evolved to stage at least two ‘community productions’ each year, where possible, as a co-production with other community performance groups. These productions are underwritten by the Entertainment Centre and any surplus is split with the participating performance groups, or retained by the Entertainment Centre if no other group is involved. These two productions are not the only community productions that take place within the theatre. Other groups perform in the Entertainment Centre on a hire basis and sustain whatever profits or losses are made. (See Appendices A and B for lists of community productions).

The Board of Management considers the community productions important to the Entertainment Centre because, firstly, they are a public demonstration of community participation and support. Secondly, they usually attract large audiences and, since all production costs including staff salaries and capital costs are factored into the budget for each production, they are significant factors in keeping the Entertainment Centre funded and open. Thirdly, they offer amateur actors and actants (Barr, 1998, p. 11) the chance to perform within a prestigious venue to large appreciative audiences and with professional technical support.

The attraction of the Entertainment Centre is such that auditions for these productions are well attended, attracting a range of volunteers whose formal training in performance can range from none at all to high levels of professional training. There is a general understanding that actors will not be financially rewarded for their labour although other
key personnel such as directors, designers, producers and musicians are usually paid a fee either in acknowledgement of their professional skills or the extraordinary amounts of time spent on the overall coordination of the project. The technical staff of the Entertainment Centre are paid their usual salaries. Occasionally a professional director or (very rarely) a professional performer is used. In these cases award wages and conditions would be met.

Whilst the payment of salaries to Entertainment Centre staff is generally accepted by the volunteer cast and crew, the payment of fees to certain of their number can be misinterpreted. Though regular amateur performers are accustomed to the long hours of rehearsal, the strain placed on relationships at home and work, and the discipline involved, new performers have no idea about the costs and time involved in putting together such productions. They wonder where all the money goes and who benefits from it. As they are exhorted to try harder and to aim for a ‘professional’ performance they may also resent being taken for granted as an unpaid labour force.

Many volunteers do not understand arts funding processes and the limitations on the expenditure of the funds. For example, an Entertainment Centre production of *No sugar* by Jack Davis attracted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) funding which was to be used to offset certain pre-arranged production costs. Some of the indigenous participants found it difficult to accept that these funds could not be more generally distributed, and, in fact, found the whole voluntary nature of the process difficult to accept when the project more closely represented work and not recreation.

Much of this misunderstanding can be prevented if all participants in a project are given an initial briefing on the way in which the project is structured and funded, including an overview of the function of the Entertainment Centre as a community resource. Staff at the Entertainment Centre have grappled with the dynamics of the community productions which place demands on the Entertainment Centre quite unlike those experienced when it is simply a hire-only facility to external users. Staff have noted decision making is difficult when there is a lack of broadly based knowledge about the functions of a professional venue and a lack of experience in budgeting for large productions. Further, used to working to deadlines and to the conventions of the theatre, staff are sometimes bemused by what they perceive as a ‘lack of self’-discipline’ in
backstage behaviour or interactions between actors, crew and director. They find themselves having to mediate in emotional situations that they would normally consider outside their professional brief. But the reality is that these occasional situations are well-known with amateur theatre as weary volunteers are pushed to their limits.

The use of the term ‘professional’ as a marker of quality rather than as a descriptor of organisational or industrial practice is common within amateur performance and reception. One hears amongst audience members comments such as “it’s really professional isn’t it”? On the other hand, some, clearly not understanding the community basis of these projects, comment on their lack of ‘professionalism’. The word usually inserts itself into local press reviews. Casts are exhorted to ‘be professional’ or individuals may be subject to censure because they behaved ‘unprofessionally’. The irony is that they never can be professional as the conditions of their labour are entirely different to that of an actor or actant who makes a living from theatre work. For many amateurs the experience is as much social as it is about performance.

The level of expectation for a ‘professional’ production has increased with each community production. As the projects become more ambitious with larger casts and technical requirements, the costs increase and are reflected in ticket prices. The question has to be asked. Can the Entertainment Centre reasonably expect the public to pay ‘professional’ prices for amateur performance? If yes, how can the Entertainment Centre maintain ‘quality control’ when the whole project is based on voluntary labour? What rewards can be offered for ‘excellence’? And how much can you expect of volunteers in terms of number and frequency of performances? Are the thrill of performance, the citation on a curriculum vitae and an after show party reward enough? Given the fact that these productions have always managed to achieve the large casts required, perhaps it is. However, the dynamics of the arrangement need to be carefully managed to ensure that the ‘feel good’ factor remains sufficient reward for labour for, as soon as actors and actants suspect they are being taken for granted, then cracks in the operation may appear.

Kiernander (1997, p. 14) discusses the community development role of activities such as community productions where “communal forms of theatre, dance and music blend,
integrate themselves into the fabric; and become a predominant binding force”. The communal nature of the community production is the reward for the amateur/volunteer participant. Apart from participating in a sporting team or being part of a voluntary organisation such as an emergency service, amateur or community theatre is one of the few occasions where individuals in our increasingly privatised, technological society can gain a powerful sense of belonging and community identity. That this is acknowledged by a prestige venue such as the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre through the staging of community productions is highly desirable. However, the voluntary contribution by the individual must not be taken for granted by boards or management.

Management

The following statement is taken from the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s Strategic plan 2004-2009 and outlines the operating structure of the Entertainment Centre:

The building is owned by the City of Bunbury, who [sic], as the major stakeholder, has contributed around $280,000 per year in operational funding for each of the past 6 years. The management of the Centre, through a Management Agreement, is vested in Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc., an organisation that represents the community and manages the Centre on behalf of the City. BRT Inc., through the Board of Management, employs a small staff to undertake day-to-day management and operation of the Centre. The BREC Club (Friends of Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc.), an independent and autonomous organisation, provides invaluable volunteer support in ‘Front of House’ and other roles. (Strategic plan: Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc. 2004 - 2009, 2004)

Crucial to the ongoing success of the Entertainment Centre is the three-part relationship indicated above. The Board of Management, the BREC Club and the staff of the Entertainment Centre work together according to well-developed policies and protocols. Though both the Board and the BREC Club are autonomous, regular communication between the two is ensured by reports delivered by a representative of each group to each other’s monthly meetings and the presence of the General Manager at these meetings. Board members are expected to be members of the BREC Club and to attend BREC Club activities such as the Annual General Meeting and social events. BREC Club members may have input into Board of Management deliberations through the
BREC Club executive, or, as individuals, at the Annual General Meeting of the Board of Management, or by direct approach to the Board.

The Board of Management has the following sub-committees: Finance and Executive, Building and Development, Sponsorship, and Youth and Community Development. The Finance and Executive Committee monitors the financial management of the Entertainment Centre in relation to Board objectives and the business plan budget; assists with preparation of the three year business plan and future capital funding requirements; and liaises with the City of Bunbury. The Building and Development Committee develops long term plans in conjunction with the City of Bunbury.

We need to ensure that not only can the current building satisfy future and changing needs, but also that as the city grows and changes, the Centre can be actively involved in the development of the cultural wellbeing of the city and the region. (Annual report 2002-2003, 2003)

The Sponsorship Committee aims to support the work of the marketing staff of the Entertainment Centre by identifying potential partnering opportunities within the regional business community. “The partnership with the business community has allowed the Entertainment Centre to provide many of the youth and community development programs, specific events, on-going operations, marketing and promotion of the Centre and cultural events” (Annual report 2002-2003, 2003).

The Youth and Community Development Committee encourages and supports the work of the Entertainment Centre in identifying opportunities for greater community involvement in all aspects of the venue, and has a particular focus on the participation of young people. The aims and objectives of the committee, which I chair, have expanded considerably in the past five years and Chapter Twelve will provide a detailed discussion of the youth and community development policies and projects developed by the Entertainment Centre and their impact within the community.

The Entertainment Centre’s management team has the considerable challenge of running an entertainment business with the daily challenges this poses whilst at the same time being mindful of the complex community agendas the Entertainment Centre must address. The entertainment industry can fluctuate greatly in terms of supply and
demand and, as noted previously by Moore, “[t]here is not a centre in Australia that runs at a profit whether run by a local council or through a management agency” (1997). This harsh fact of life comes as somewhat of a shock to new board members, especially those from a business background, who are understandably nervous about the entrepreneurial risks the Entertainment Centre must take if purchasing or underwriting shows, both touring and local.

In addition to the operating grant from the City of Bunbury, funding comes from corporate sponsorship, grants, and contributions from other local governments in the region, “but the rest of it comes from our operations and entrepreneurial activity and selling tickets and hopefully turning a profit, and hiring the building to commercial and local users” (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Graham John Harvey, Manager, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, 2004).

It is a matter of some pride to the Board of Management that the Entertainment Centre has returned balanced budgets for the past six years and has not requested an increase in its operating budget during that time. “It is noted that had CPI [Cost Price Index] been applied on an annual cumulative basis since 1998, the annual funding would have been $342,200 in 2004-5. In real terms, the 2004-5 level of operational funding therefore indicates a significant decrease in core funding when linked to CPI over the 7-year period” (Strategic plan: Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc. 2004 - 2009, 2004).

The staff of the Entertainment Centre is a mix of full-time and casual employees involved in a range of duties which include general and financial management, box office, marketing and promotion as well as technical roles (Strategic plan: Bunbury Regional Theatre Inc. 2004 - 2009, 2004). There are few staff changes and most staff have been at the Entertainment Centre for several years. The Production Manager, Colin Best, who has fulfilled that role at the Entertainment Centre for almost fourteen years, states:

BREC is still regarded by our peers as one of the best [r]egional venues in its application of production techniques, skilled production staff, with a very good attitude to safety procedures and applications, and an attitude of its staff to presenting the best to all our clients (C. Best, 2004)
Staff recognise the community’s interest in the Entertainment Centre which may impose expectations of service and commitment beyond that which would perhaps be expected in a privately owned business. They are accustomed to working closely with volunteers.

‘Product’ for the Entertainment Centre is obtained as outlined by the General Manager:

People hire the building; they elect to come to Bunbury and are looking for a venue, and we provide it. In some instances we actually produce product in-house, and that has generally been one major community production per year … The product that we buy in comes from a variety of sources. Sometimes it is simply an individual producer calling up and saying, “Hey, I’ve got this show; will you buy it?” That is done through the Long Paddock and Cyber Paddock process, which is a national arrangement through the state touring coordinators, which is another source of knowing what is happening and what is available. Another source is the touring menu from Country Arts WA. They would be the major sources of gaining knowledge of the product that is coming onto the market. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Graham John Harvey, Manager, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, 2004)

This means that the Entertainment Centre must be able to respond quickly to opportunities as they arise. Whilst a community production or event may be known well in advance, commercial hirers may require the Entertainment Centre at short notice. A subsidised community event such as the three week Bunbury Eisteddfod can mean that the Entertainment Centre may have to turn away a more profitable commercial hirer during this period. However, there is a very clear community expectation that the Entertainment Centre will be available for local performers. The issue of community access will be developed further in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen through examples of community productions and the processes involved.

The range and variety of performances offered by the Entertainment Centre is indicated in Appendix B: Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre performances (touring and local) 1997 – 2003. The list indicates that popular music concerts by touring performers dominate the annual performance menu, ranging from ten in 1997 up to a phenomenal 25 (at the time of writing) in 2004. Almost all this touring product is provided by commercial presenters. All other categories of performance (drama, children/youth, classical concerts, comedy, dance) have fewer than half this number of productions. These categories are more dependent on availability of the product and the degree to which it is subsidized through government agencies or by the Entertainment Centre.
itself. The Entertainment Centre programs two three-week International Film Festivals and a once-a-month International Sunday Cinema. The category with least touring product staged at the Entertainment Centre is drama and, apart from 1997 when eight productions were staged, in successive years the maximum number of touring productions of drama staged is four. Drama consistently plays to small houses unless it is attractive to schools (Bell Shakespeare Company productions) or has well-known actors in the cast such as *Secret bridesmaid’s business* (Coleman, 1999). In addition to the touring product, local amateur productions (drama, musical theatre and concerts) average about eight per year. This does not include the Eisteddfod (with 6,084 performers in 2004) and the private dance schools who hold their annual concerts in the Entertainment Centre in November/December.

This chapter has examined the nexus between the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre and the community in which it is placed. It reflects upon four key topics: the origins of the Entertainment Centre, the 1997 funding crisis, the central role of volunteers in the Entertainment Centre’s operations and the management structure. An on-going challenge for the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is the extent to which it can be the ‘communities’ theatre’ as signaled by the question posed at the beginning of Part Three of this thesis. The theatre serves many communities that can be defined by various demographics such as age, gender, interests, class, ethnicity and region. At various points in its history it has been the Entertainment Centre’s regional role that has provoked most discussion. This chapter has argued that the community sense of ownership of the Entertainment Centre is exceptional and is expressed through the voluntary labour of hundreds of people from Bunbury and its region: as front of house workers, members of the Board or of the BREC Club executive, and as participants in community productions. This situates it firmly within the social and cultural fabric of the wider regional community, an enviable position for a regional performing arts centre.

Chapter Eleven will examine the position of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre within its regional, state and national communities and the extent to which it engages with policies and ideas from these sources.
Chapter 11: City, region and nation

The changing city in its region

A national business magazine’s claims earlier this month that Bunbury was one of the top five “boom towns” of Australia showed the city was now being showcased on a national stage. (Trevaskis cited in Spagnolo, 2004a, p. 1)

As noted in Chapter Two we often reach for theatrical metaphors to explain aspects of the everyday (see also Schechner, 2002) and it is not surprising that the City of Bunbury chief executive officer reached for one to respond to the recent news that Bunbury is a “rapid growth city” (Spagnolo, 2004a, p. 1). Since the urban redevelopment of Bunbury commenced in the 1980s the city has grappled with the demands of a rapidly growing regional city. This has required a broadening of vision as to what is the responsibility of local government, which now extends far beyond roads, rates and rubbish. This chapter considers relationships of space, place and the performing arts in Bunbury through the ‘emplacement’ of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre at the centre of the “reimagineered” (Crang, 1998, p. 116) urban landscape of the city. The Entertainment Centre has both symbolic and practical functions within the community of Bunbury and the wider region, linking Bunbury and region to intra- and interstate networks within the arts and culture industries. It has the potential to act as a cultural broker for the region, not only through its in-house programming but through outreach and collaborative programs that supply expertise and knowledge.

City Life: festivals and outdoor performance

As previously noted the location of the Entertainment Centre is dramatic, with the city as backdrop and the Leschenault Inlet and open public space as an extended forecourt. (Appendix C Photograph One). It is a stand-alone edifice at present but the continuing urban development of the city requires land for new public buildings such as a regional museum, public library and council offices, as well as on-going large-scale commercial development including hotels and convention facilities. Two entertainment venues have been built near the Entertainment Centre since it opened in 1990. The first is the commercial cinema complex, the impact of which on the Entertainment Centre’s budget was discussed in the previous chapter. The second is the Graham Bricknell Memorial Sound Shell, built through community fundraising. Bricknell was a civic leader,
businessman and musician and it was envisioned that the sound shell would provide a venue for regular Bunbury City Band concerts and other community performances. This project is another example of the community’s ability to work together to achieve a large project. However, like the Entertainment Centre, the shell represents an idealised and rather old-fashioned idea of a public performance space.

The vogue for outdoor sound shells in Australia is even older than that for performing arts complexes and entertainment centres of the 1960s (see Hull, 1998, p. 24). As the Sound Shell was a community fund-raising project with emotive connotations for the family, friends and colleagues of Bricknell, the city accepted the gift even if there was the potential for it to become a ‘white elephant’. Free open-access to the sound shell was emphasised by the fund-raising committee, perhaps a pointed comment on the disappointment felt by some community performing arts groups that the Entertainment Centre is a costly venue to hire, even at subsidised community rates. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, the City of Bunbury found itself with two performing arts venues to maintain and utilise; one of which could, if necessary, be turned over to commercial management; the other, as it has no capacity to raise revenue because it is located on public open space and bordered on two sides by busy roads, required to be integrated into the planning and maintenance schedules of the City of Bunbury.

Not for the first time, the City of Bunbury found itself in the role of venue and performing arts promoter.

We have a music shell, which is another investment the city has made. That $200,000 investment is on the foreshore. It is an under-utilised facility. We have tried to create opportunities for young people and others who have an artistic performing arts bent to use that facility for free. We have developed a program called Summer in the Shell, which means that we provide the sound equipment and the lighting, and we do all the marketing and promotion, and we provide them with a stage that they can perform on, which they would not normally get. That has a double benefit. Our facility is used—people understand what it is there for—and it is a platform for emerging artists to show their wares. (*Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury, 2004*)

The City’s other involvement in organising performance events is its ongoing experiments with community-based festivals. Since the redevelopment of the city centre commenced in the mid 1980s and large expanses of public open space were created on
the inlet waterfront, there have been many attempts to create festival-type events which link the central shopping precinct with the open-spaces and the waterfront. Some examples are the Festival of Arts and Nature, Aqua Spectacular, Three Waters Festival, Peoplefest, Christmas Lights Festival, Waterfront Festival and the Australia Day Event. Arguably the only festivals that have caught the popular imagination and may now be incorporated into the annual calendar are the Australia Day celebrations and the Christmas Lights Festival. The Australia Day event culminates in a large firework display, perhaps the only spectacular capable of having an impact in the large expanse of the inlet and open-space areas. The sheer scale of the location has tended to dwarf other attempts to stage spectaculars. There have been attempts over the years to use the inlet for dramatic effects such as dragon-boat racing (Aqua Spectacular), fire sculptures, or the arrival of Adam and Eve in the Mysteries and Miracles play cycle (Festival of Arts and Nature, 1993). None have captured the public imagination sufficiently to become a regular event. All required large numbers of volunteers and the challenge of coordinating these events was prohibitive.

Blee, the City Life Executive Officer, states that:

> We have a significant financial commitment to festivals. We have three major events during the year … festival special events are human resource hungry things. That does not include staff time but is the direct financial commitment … We previously tried to run them from within the City Life team, but they are just so time consuming. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury, 2004, p. 5)

The Australia Day event and Christmas Lights Festival are family-oriented events. They are held at either end of the summer holiday period when local families are looking for diversion. The Christmas Lights Festival uses the enclosed space of the ‘main street’, shops are encouraged to stay open and street stalls offer Christmas merchandise. The third major event the City is still trying to develop is the Three Waters Festival, which the City Life team is “attempting to turn into our flagship cultural festival” (p. 5). Blee notes that “[w]e have tried to give it a water-based sporting aspect, but that is not really where it is heading. I think it is heading more towards a cultural event” (p. 5).

The coordination of large festivals and spectaculars has become the province of professional events managers, several of whom are former arts development officers.
from the regional community. Soliciting volunteer and local participants as performers and workers is more difficult when they are designed as a ‘tourist hook’, as Farrant states below:

[T]he thinking behind festivals is being slightly misused nowadays because they are seen as ways of attracting visitors, and they become a tourist hook. As an arts organisation, you absolutely have to be really clear about what you are doing it for. Are you doing it as a local celebration for the people of the town, or are you doing it for the tourists, and making it a local chamber of commerce activity? Often people go into these things trying to do all of that. Often there is burnout of volunteers because of all the opportunities. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant, General Manager, Country Arts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, Country Arts WA, 2004)

The former marketing manager of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, Jo O’Dea, now works independently as an arts event coordinator. O’Dea is experienced at working with volunteers, gained through her work with the BREC Club and on community co-productions. However she also notes “in the short time I have been working independently what I have recognized is that volunteer burnout is really serious now” (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Ms Jo Marie O’Dea, Arts Event Coordinator, 2004, p. 7).

Two examples of small-scale festivals which had limited success for a few years were the International Women’s Day event, and the Multicultural Fair. The achievements of the International Women’s Day included the development of street performances and the incorporation of many community groups, most but not all of which had female-only memberships. However the event was resisted as being ‘divisive’ by some local businesses and the City Council and financial and planning support became increasingly difficult to obtain. In the face of this the volunteer committee disbanded. The Multicultural Fair was coordinated by the Migrant Resource Group and featured displays by different ‘ethnic’ communities. Its early success was due to its setting in the small, enclosed park adjacent to the City Council Chambers. The confined area meant that it looked busy and colourful, even if the numbers attending were modest, and the proximity to the City Council gave it prestige and acceptance.

The Multicultural Fair was incorporated into the City Life’s attempts to create events for the Bricknell Sound Shell so was rebranded as PeopleFest. It immediately lost some
of its distinctiveness, becoming just one more variety concert. As Blee outlines, the City Life program is now withdrawing support for smaller events such as PeopleFest:

because it did not do what we were trying to do with the City Life program, which was to bring everyone together and celebrate the community in a holistic sense. Rather than have an event for this and an event for that, we would prefer everybody to be in the events we do. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury, 2004, p. 6)

The Australia Day event traverses much the same ground with volunteer-run breakfasts, a civic ceremony with citizen-of-the-year awards, concerts featuring local performers, plus sideshows, street theatre, professional bands, and ultimately fireworks. And the complications of ethnic diversity can be neatly sidestepped by claiming Australia Day as the ‘natural’ occasion to celebrate national identity.

In line with the political climate the celebration of diversity has firmly been placed within the mainstream. The City of Bunbury conducts well-attended citizenship ceremonies for immigrants, both recent and long-term. The ceremony takes place within the council chambers and the new citizens and their guests are greeted warmly by councillors and council staff, and entertainment and food is provided.

The Entertainment Centre to date has not been requested to coordinate festival events although it does attempt to find shows that complement festival themes. For example when the International Women’s Day event was held, the Entertainment Centre screened short-films by female directors. In 2000, Bunbury’s 25th anniversary of being granted city status coincided with the Entertainment Centre’s tenth anniversary. The outdoor event was instigated by the City of Bunbury as the Bunbury Waterfront Festival. Concurrently the Entertainment Centre had an open day. This meant that visitors to the Waterfront Festival could explore the Entertainment Centre, including the stage and back-stage areas. The auditorium itself was closed, and instead, the stage was used for both performers and audience. Displays and performances took place all day and audiences could come and go as they wished. This formula had first been tried in 1995 for the fifth anniversary of the Entertainment Centre and proved extremely successful, attracting families and other visitors, many of whom had never entered the
building previously. It also provided performance opportunities to many local performance groups.

**City Life: community and cultural development**

As noted in Chapter Five, the amended Local Government Act (1995) handed to local authorities the role of devising cultural development strategies through consultation with their communities. Some local authorities led the way in this area, but many were recalcitrant, as council staff lacked the knowledge and expertise to facilitate such consultations and planning. Bunbury’s rapid growth meant that local government was more concerned with business and urban planning, and looked to staff trained in business administration rather than community and cultural development. When such planning could be avoided no longer, external consultants were used and later staff, first at a junior level, were engaged. A report commissioned by the City of Bunbury in 1999 notes:

> Council has not played a major role in community development in recent years and Council’s organisation is structured in such a way as to allow for purchasers or providers. Community cultural development and nurturing and supporting community groups or local effort has had little place in this structure. However, with the shifting focus of Council this is likely to change, a recent example being Council’s funding and support which has made the employment of a regional arts position possible. (*Living in Bunbury: yesterday, today and tomorrow: final report*, 1999)

By 2001 the City had appointed a social planner who aimed to formulate a social and cultural planning strategy and, as Blee acknowledges below, this has resulted in the City Life program operating within the structure of the City of Bunbury with an executive manager, social planner, cultural development officer, youth development officer and curator.

Four years ago it was a relatively adventurous and ambitious way to structure an element of the organisation that has its own budget, staff and director or executive manager, as we are called, to oversee all those sorts of non-traditional local government roles. It is fair to say that it probably went further than we had the capacity to absorb at the time and included statutory planning and a whole lot of other things like that. However, we have changed it slightly over the four years to focus more on the economic, community, and social and cultural development aspects. (*Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury*, 2004, p. 3)
The City Life program is now talking about collaboration and partnership across the arts and between volunteer and professional artists. Blee states that:

there needs to be a coming together of all those groups so that we are marketing the arts, not just regional arts or the performing arts, and we are marketing professionals and giving opportunities to grassroots people within that environment.  *(Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury, 2004, p. 5)*

This recent, active support of the City of Bunbury has raised the profile of the city in terms of the region and state. This is acknowledged by the general manager of Country Arts WA, Andy Farrant:

For instance, there is a diversity of approach that responds to the development of arts in the south west region and in a town such as Bunbury, which has the greatest concentration of regional arts in the State. There are some extremely skilled people living in the city of Bunbury and there is an awful lot of infrastructure there. *(Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant, General Manager, Country Arts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, Country Arts WA, 2004, p. 8)*

What once seemed fragmented and underappreciated is now receiving wider recognition. The public art program instituted through the City of Bunbury engineering department has resulted in a sizable collection of sculptures by prominent Western Australian artists in highly visible locations. The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s youth workshops are allowing young people throughout the region to access professional training in theatre arts. The National Gallery of Australia’s (NGA) touring exhibition of Sidney Nolan’s *Ned Kelly* paintings at the Bunbury Regional Art Gallery in 2003 provided opportunities for collaboration between Bunbury Regional Art Gallery (BRAG) and Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre (BREC) via the staging of *Ned Kelly: The musical* (Livermore and Flynn) as a community production.

Bunbury was the only venue in WA to hold this exhibition from the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). Over a four week period we received over 7,000 visitors. People drove from Perth and as far afield as Esperance specially to see the exhibition. The whole city got behind the show, largely due to excellent marketing by BREC for *Ned Kelly: The musical* and inevitably this led to a spin off for local tourism operators. As a result of the exhibition, BRAG has been offered more exhibitions of this calibre by the NGA, provided we can find funds to cover transport costs from the eastern states. *(de Bussy, 2004)*
The production of *Ned Kelly: The musical* enabled the young adult cast to work with a professional director and music director from whom they learnt valuable skills in contemporary music performance. Many of these collaborative projects have been achieved without funding from state and national arts bodies who are only now giving credit to Bunbury for these developments.

**Regional participation**

As previously discussed, Bunbury is the service city for the south west region of Western Australia and the immediate surrounding shires (Harvey, Dardanup and Capel). Each contains large suburban developments that have changed the shires’ demographic profiles from rural to suburban. Their relationship with Bunbury is necessarily close and often collegiate, but also fractious, especially concerning access to resources. Shires that are more distant (Collie, Busselton, Margaret River-Augusta, Donnybrook, Balingup-Bridgtown, Manjimup) each have a substantial town at their centre and thus are more secure in their identity and do not require the same links with Bunbury. However, many residents of the South West travel to Bunbury to access services and entertainment.

One important development for the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre following the 1997 crisis with the City of Bunbury was the successful appeal to south west shires to provide financial support to the Entertainment Centre on the basis of the audience numbers of residents from those shires. Any financial support from the shires, it was promised, would go towards youth and community development. Subsequently, the shires of Capel, Harvey, Dardanup and Collie make an annual contribution and the pooled funds (approximately $35,000) are designated the ‘Entrepreneurial Fund’ and are used to underwrite programming within the following areas: community, youth, ‘flagship’, Western Australian or Australian plays, children or other (such as audience development). From these funds the City of Bunbury Eisteddfod is the greatest beneficiary ($7,000 per annum) and the remaining funds are distributed according to the formula above. Thus within the 2002-3 funding period the following were supported:

- City of Bunbury Concert Band performance.
- BREC Youth Program.
- Eisteddfod 2003.
• Visits by WA Ballet, Australian String Quartet, Ali Wood, *HMS Pinafore, Noel and Gertie, Memories of the Theatre Royal*.

• Australian and WA Drama – *X stacy, Black and Tran*.

• Children’s Theatre – *The Deep, The cat who ran, Worry warts, The sound garden*.

• *Over the fence film festival*.

Community productions *Macbeth* (2002) and *Ned Kelly* (2003), although initially being allocated Entrepreneurial Funds, covered their costs, so the funds were then reallocated to other projects. The Entrepreneurial Fund allows the Entertainment Centre to cover some of the financial risk it takes when buying in product that caters to a certain audience sector, particularly the traditional ‘high’ arts such as classical music, drama and ballet. Contributing shires receive annual reports detailing the specific projects supported by those funds, and the regional participation rates as audiences, in community productions, at workshops or as members of the BREC Club. Shires are also invited to comment during the Entertainment Centre’s strategic planning processes. One such response from the Shire of Harvey:

> seeks consideration in the Plan for greater partnerships with district events and facilities with a view to: i) providing reciprocal promotions and support of events; ii) providing links to entertainment opportunities that are not compatible with the regional facility; and iii) local groups using the centre at a cost effective rate. (Parker, 2004)

Shires such as Harvey have venues such as the Gibbs Pool Amphitheatre, Stirling Cottage Gardens, local halls and recreation centres. It is interesting that, like the City of Bunbury, they are looking to create entertainment events that utilise these venues and create tourism and other opportunities, a function that would not have been seen as the province of local government a decade ago. Equally interesting is that they look to the Entertainment Centre as a source of expertise in project development and management. Until recently, the board and management of the Entertainment Centre felt that the prime function of the Centre was to develop and manage events within the Entertainment Centre with no mandate to undertake events management within the City of Bunbury or elsewhere. The closer collaboration with the City of Bunbury through the City Life program; the outreach already begun with the youth workshops programs, many of which are delivered off-site in schools throughout the region; and the recent
recognition by state and national funding bodies of the Entertainment Centre’s regional role; may see an expanded role develop for the Centre thus extending its symbolic role beyond the venue. However, the resource implications for this are considerable, particularly in terms of human resources, and the Entertainment Centre may feel that this puts its core activities at risk.

Entertainment Centre marketing staff have visited towns in the region promoting the BREC Club, the BREC program and the Youth Workshops. They have established links with youth development officers and schools throughout the southwest and facilitated access to the bus subsidy scheme available from the Gordon Reid Fund for young people to travel to Bunbury to see performances at the Entertainment Centre. One result of these initiatives was a group booking for young people from Pemberton, two hours drive from Bunbury, for the touring production of *X Stacy*, organised by local youth workers.

**State and national networks: what’s in it for us?**

Community performing arts organisations link in various formal and informal ways to wider networks at regional, state and national levels which are outlined in Tables 1 and 2 (see overleaf). In the case of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre these networks are the commercial entertainment industry, government and peak performing arts organisations and other related organisations covering insurance, information technology, health and safety, copyright, legal and industrial matters. Table 1 is an attempt to indicate the complexity of these networks and the potential and real uses made of them. Community performing arts groups have a more restricted network and tend to function mostly at the local level as indicated in Table 2. The remainder of this chapter is a discussion of selected performing arts organisations at regional, state and national level that appear to have the most impact on Bunbury based performing arts organisations, in particular the Entertainment Centre, thus demonstrating levels of engagement beyond the local.
Table 1  BREC: Local, state and national relationships (existing and potential)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Type of relationship</th>
<th>Actual use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>Annual operating grant</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Capital works funding</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Life program</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supporting grants (regional shires)</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local sponsors</td>
<td>Financial or in-kind sponsorship</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial clients</td>
<td>Venue hire or product purchase</td>
<td>Core business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South West Development Commission</td>
<td>Networking/lobbying</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisations: Chamber of Commerce, Tourism, Bunbury Regional Art Gallery</td>
<td>Mutual interest in promoting the links between arts, tourism, business</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Country Arts WA</td>
<td>Regional Performing Venue membership (touring show selection and promotion)</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>No recent use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ArtsWA</td>
<td>Policy/Advisory/Lobbying</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>No previous use but 1st project grant awarded for 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Department of Culture and the Arts</td>
<td>Policy/Advisory/Lobbying</td>
<td>Ongoing lobbying to achieve capital funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healthways</td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lotterywest</td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>Annual grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circuitwest</td>
<td>Peak organisation for performing arts centres: advisory, lobbying, purchasing, tour liaison</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Arts Network (CANWA)</td>
<td>Community &amp; cultural development training; Community arts project funding</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dep’t of Education</td>
<td>Creative Arts curriculum</td>
<td>Ongoing liaison with schools, students as audiences and participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dep’t of Health</td>
<td>Health promotion project funding</td>
<td>Potential collaborative partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dep’t of Training &amp; Employment</td>
<td>Arts industry training</td>
<td>Ongoing liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other gov’t dep’ts</td>
<td>Liaison, potential project partners, advisory</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edith Cowan University</td>
<td>Faculty of Regional Professional Studies (South West)</td>
<td>Liaison, student professional placements, project partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>WAAPA</td>
<td>Liaison, source of professional skills for youth workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial clients</td>
<td>Venue hire or product purchase</td>
<td>Core business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Dept for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Represented by peak organisations: APACA, Regional Arts Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advisory/Lobbying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia Council</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>1st successful grant in 2002 for audience development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional Arts Australia</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Via Country ArtsWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advisory/Lobbying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peak organisation for regional arts practitioners and volunteers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Biannual conference</td>
<td>Conference representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Type of relationship</td>
<td>Actual use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Playing Australia</td>
<td>National touring; coordination and funding Funds APG</td>
<td>Annual use – accessed via APG, Blue Heelers, APACA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(cont.)</td>
<td>APG (Aust. Presenters’ Group)</td>
<td>National touring coordination</td>
<td>Regular use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blue Heelers</td>
<td>National touring coordination</td>
<td>Regular use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APACA (Aust. Performing Arts Centre Association)</td>
<td>Peak organisation for performing arts centres: advisory, lobbying, benchmarking.</td>
<td>Regular use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Festivals Australia</td>
<td>Advisory</td>
<td>Not used to date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial clients</td>
<td>Venue hire or product purchase</td>
<td>Core business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Community performing arts organisations: Local, state and national relationships (existing and potential)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Type of relationship</th>
<th>Actual use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>Advisory</td>
<td>Variable Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local sponsors</td>
<td>Financial or in-kind sponsorship</td>
<td>Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Country Arts WA</td>
<td>Project funding Volunteer training</td>
<td>Varies according to organisation; greater use in communities with Arts Councils. Some conference attendance and participation in volunteer training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ArtsWA</td>
<td>Policy/Advisory/Lobbying Project funding</td>
<td>Limited Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Department of Culture and the Arts</td>
<td>Policy/Advisory/Lobbying Project funding</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healthways</td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lotterywest</td>
<td>Project funding</td>
<td>Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent Theatre Association</td>
<td>Peak organisation: advice, lobbying, purchasing (insurance)</td>
<td>Some groups are members Use of insurance policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Arts Network (CANWA)</td>
<td>Community &amp; cultural development training; Community arts project funding</td>
<td>Occasional Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Dept for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts</td>
<td>Policy Advisory/Lobby Project funding</td>
<td>Very little contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia Council</td>
<td>Policy Information Project funding</td>
<td>Very little contact Rarely accessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional Arts Australia</td>
<td>Policy Advisory/Lobby Project funding</td>
<td>Varies according to organisation; greater use in communities with Arts Councils. Some conference attendance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Festivals Australia</td>
<td>Advisory Project funding</td>
<td>Accessed by community festivals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Theatre Association</td>
<td>Peak organisation: advice, lobbying.</td>
<td>Some groups are members via ITA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regional arts development

Prior to 1990, when the Entertainment Centre opened, the community performing arts organisations in the region were largely self-sufficient. Their link to the wider Australian performing arts scene was through the Arts Council of Australia, “the peak national regional arts organisation for over 30 years” (Country Arts WA Annual Report, 2003; Parsons & Chance, 1997). Most regional towns throughout the country had an Arts Council committee, volunteers who worked together to promote the visual, literary and theatrical arts in their community by sponsoring visits of performances, artists or writers working under contract to the Arts Council of Australia. Arts Council committees would organise venues and accommodation for the tours and entertain the artists. In many towns these occasions were a social highlight. In the south west of Western Australia, Arts Councils in Bunbury, Busselton, Margaret River, Nannup, Warren, Denmark, Mandurah-Murray, Waroona and Rockingham demonstrated the strength of the volunteer arts network throughout the region. The Arts Council of Bunbury was very active during the mid-1980s; too successful apparently, as some of their lobbied-for achievements, a regional arts officer and an art gallery and theatre for the city, assumed many of the functions formerly performed by the Arts Council. Thus by the early 1990s the Arts Council in Bunbury had disbanded.

Regional Arts Australia/Country Arts WA

In 1996 regional arts at both the state and national levels underwent a major restructure. In Western Australia the responsibility for regional arts and cultural development was transferred from the then Department for the Arts to the newly formed Country Arts WA which incorporated the existing Arts Council functions of liaising with and providing touring product to the arts councils throughout the state. Farrant outlines some of the benefits of the new structure below:

Country Arts WA, as an independent, non-government organisation, has the advantage over government, in that we are able to move flexibly and be very responsive and fast moving. That is because we are not constrained by some of the things demanded of State or federal Governments. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant, General Manager, Country Arts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, Country Arts WA, 2004, p. 12)

At the national level:
the Arts Council of Australia decided that it needed to re-assess its organisation and to reconsider its long term goals and objectives. (*Country Arts WA Annual report, 1997*)

The strategic planning process conducted by the Arts Council of Australia resulted in the formation of a new national agency, Regional Arts Australia. The goals of the new body were:

To provide opportunities to enhance the work of the state-based regional arts organisations and regional communities by:

- Providing opportunities for networking.
- Undertaking lobbying at the Local, State, and Federal level to ensure that the arts in regional Australia are appropriately resourced.

To ensure that the State organisations support the network of volunteer arts groups and other similar organisations by coordinating and facilitating touring activities and supporting cultural development initiatives. (*Country Arts WA Annual report, 1997, p. 21*)

Regional Arts Australia and its state counterpart, Country Arts WA, have attempted to retain and build on the volunteer networks in the arts across regional Australia. Through regional arts development officers and regional youth development officers, arts organisations and individuals are supported through training, funding, and networking. The state and national conferences are major events with participants travelling across the country, often at their own expense, to attend. These conferences enable the host towns (Regional Arts Australia Conferences: Mt Gambier SA 1998, Esperance WA 2000, Albury/Wodonga NSW 2002 and Horsham Vic 2004) to showcase professional and volunteer arts from their region. They are a meeting place for arts volunteers, arts policy makers, politicians, arts development officers, related government agencies, local government, peak organisations, professional artists, training providers and arts researchers. I have attended Regional Arts Australia conferences in Esperance and Albury/Wodonga and the overall impression created is of the incredible breadth and depth of regional arts practice across the country.

Bunbury’s arts community has taken longer to participate in the networks set up via Country Arts WA and Regional Arts Australia, possibly due to the fact that it no longer has an active Arts Council. The professional organisations such as the Art Gallery,
Entertainment Centre and City of Bunbury tend to forget to tell their volunteer organisations about opportunities such as the state and national conferences and because of Bunbury’s well-developed ‘go-it-alone’ mentality, have sometimes not seen a need to send their own arts officers to such events. However, the Regional Arts Australia conference in Albury/Wodonga in 2002 was attended by four Bunbury arts workers: the education officer from the Art Gallery, the marketing officer from the Entertainment Centre, an artist, and myself (as both an arts researcher and volunteer). Although all four had made individual decisions to attend, we decided to ‘report back’ to the community at a small forum in an attempt to raise the profile of the national networking opportunities available to the Bunbury community through Regional Arts Australia.

One Regional Arts Australia initiative is a federally funded volunteer training program, Creative Volunteering – no limits and is coordinated in Western Australia by Country Arts WA. In its first year, 2003, it “delivered 30 one-day workshops across six key learning areas for regionally based volunteers living in 16 different locations in Western Australia” (Country Arts WA Annual Report, 2003, p. 23). Farrant outlines below the partnerships between service providers in the state that have been instituted to enable these workshops to proceed:

These training sessions are managed by Regional Arts Australia, our national body, and there is a contract between Regional Arts Australia and the service provider for the training. In Western Australia that service provider is the Western Australian Council of Social Service, in partnership with Community Arts Network, the registered training organisation—it is nationally accredited training—and Edith Cowan University, which also plays a role in the delivery of the training. (Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant, General Manager, Country Arts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, Country Arts WA, 2004, p. 5)

This begs the question why volunteers in the arts require training? As previously argued, community theatre organisations have decades of experience in coordinating complex performance events. However, where the voluntary organisation operates alongside or within a professional organisation and provides services to the public; or, employs professionals; there are heightened expectations of what this voluntary duty might entail as was demonstrated in the discussion of the role of volunteers at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in Chapter Ten. The increasing demands of insurance companies in terms of public liability, occupational health and safety
regulations, and the possible requirement of a police clearance if working with young people, are straining voluntary organisations. The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is increasingly taking on a training role: as well as providing training for its front of house volunteers, it has offered training in skills such as film projection for the volunteer projectionists of the newly established Margaret River community film club.

**Regional Arts Development Officer (RADO)**

In 2000 after ten years of lobbying by the Bunbury arts community a Regional Arts Development Officer position was created by Country Arts WA to serve the South West region. Initially it was hoped that the position would be a Bunbury-specific one as the City of Bunbury had reneged on an earlier commitment to create such a position within its own organisation. O’Dea, the former marketing officer of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, documents the complex negotiations and structures that had to be coordinated to achieve this position:

> It all came about because we were constantly inundated with requests from people who were looking for performers. They wanted to get in touch with artists or wanted activities to work in with their events. It was obvious to us that someone needed to be there to cover the bigger picture and be a conduit for all arts organisations. They needed someone from whom they could get advice, support and professional development, and who could promote activities. It was specifically for the arts community. ([Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Ms Jo Marie O’Dea, Arts Event Coordinator, 2004, p. 2](#))

Although the original idea was that the position should be for the greater Bunbury area, the funding body required the position to serve the South West. As Farrant notes, in Western Australia, the nature of a regional arts officer’s job varies depending upon the region and the community s/he serves.

> Although the original idea was that the position should be for the greater Bunbury area, the funding body required the position to serve the South West. As Farrant notes, in Western Australia, the nature of a regional arts officer’s job varies depending upon the region and the community s/he serves.

At the moment there are five regionally based positions that Country Arts WA supports through the Commonwealth regional arts fund. They are based in Port Hedland, at the Courthouse Gallery; in Esperance there is a youth field officer; in Geraldton there is a young people’s program; at the Ngaanyatjarra Shire in Warburton there is an arts officer; and in Bunbury a regional arts development officer works across the south west region. Although each of these is delivering a successful program and a number of activities in their respective towns, this group is not networked. Therefore, it is not sustainable in the long-term. Many have limited or non-existent travel budgets and limited training and other support budgets. Each has a different role and management structure and is modelled on the different needs and stage of development of the host community and region. ([Inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia: Mr Andrew Graham Farrant,](#))
The establishment of a regional arts officer based in Bunbury meant that, since it was a Bunbury initiative, other South West towns needed to be persuaded that this position was relevant to their varied needs. However, since 2000 the City of Bunbury has expanded its City Life program to include a cultural development officer.

In terms of community performing arts, the impact of two arts/cultural development officers in the town is not immediately apparent. Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre engages in direct negotiations with both the City of Bunbury and with arts agencies. For community performing arts groups the regional arts officer position is a source of information about potential project funding and is able to promote performances and events through a regional arts calendar and newsletter. The cultural development officer employed by the City of Bunbury, is able to apply for grants in collaboration with specific community groups as long as these projects conform to City Life initiatives, such as street fairs and festivals. Thus, Stark Raven Theatre Company was funded to conduct workshops in writing for performance to support a City Life proposal to conduct a ‘spoken word’ event featuring poetry, drama, story telling or song writing in and around the café precinct and the Entertainment Centre.

**National networks**

Once an audit is taken of the local, state and national organisations with which the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre has a real or potential relationship the complexity of its business becomes apparent. (See Table 1). It was certainly the hope of the community that having a ‘world class’ theatre would mean that touring shows, both national and international, would find their way to Bunbury. This has proved to be the case, and venue users’ surveys, conducted with tour managers, record high levels of satisfaction with the venue. These commercial relationships are core business for the Entertainment Centre and have first priority for the Board and management.

What was not recognized by many Board members was the degree to which a community arts facility is linked to state and national government and peak organisations either directly or indirectly related to the arts. When I joined the Board in
1997 there was some nervousness about the demands on the manager’s time through membership of Country Arts WA, Circuitwest and the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA). These memberships have necessitated regular travel for the managers to meetings and conferences. Some Board members felt that these were a distraction from income-earning and that membership of national organisations was a luxury the Entertainment Centre could not afford. Once it was demonstrated that membership of a state or national body such as APACA could achieve practical assistance through joint purchasing, information sharing, training or benchmarking, Board members became more open to the idea that Bunbury could link to the rest of Australia through the networks available to it. Social capital is gained through the willingness of the Entertainment Centre to take a leadership role and the decision of APACA to hold its 2002 national conference in Bunbury neatly transferred both social and economic capital into the community.

**Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA)**

The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s main link to the performing arts scene across Australia is through its membership of the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA).

The Australian Performing Arts Centres Association exists as a network of professional arts and venue managers dedicated to developing, training and supporting its membership, profiling the association and furthering the development of the performing arts throughout Australia. *(Australian Performing Arts Centres Association Annual Report, 2003, p. 1)*

APACA is the peak national body for performing arts centres and represents 71 venues, 43 of which are in regional cities and towns. (See Table 3 overleaf).
Table 3  APACA performing arts venues by location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total venues</th>
<th>Regional</th>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figures derived from *Australian Performing Arts Centres Association Annual Report*, 2003, p. 2) * Note: One city member organisation may manage more than one venue.

Table 3 shows the high regional membership of APACA in Queensland and Western Australia. APACA is now designated by the Australia Council as a National Service Organisation. It has regular meetings with the federal minister for the arts and is part of the Australian Presenters’ Group (APG), an informal consortium that provides Playing Australia “with a dependable touring mechanism resulting in the touring of major drama productions” (G. Harvey, 2004c, p. 1). The other member of APG is Blue Heelers which is made up of the “principal state touring co-ordinators who operate as a voluntary group to improve the way national touring occurs”(G. Harvey, 2004c, p. 1). The national touring referred to is of specifically Australian product that is eligible for Playing Australia funding. The Australian Presenters’ Group ensures the touring program is a “presenter-driven model” and appropriates Australian droving vernacular to name its operations, thus emphasizing the key role of regional venues in the touring process, whilst at the same time reproducing myths of a non-urban regional Australia. Coordinated by the Blue Heelers, producers register their interest via Cyber Paddock and are invited to make a ‘pitch’ at the twice yearly Long Paddock. The Blue Heelers “coordinate the voting and expressions of interest from presenters; then determine which of the productions are likely to have enough interest to create a viable tour” (G. Harvey, 2004c, p. 3). These tour proposals are forwarded by the APG to Playing Australia for potential funding. Commercial presenters also attend Long Paddock and may select product to tour on a strictly commercial basis.

The 2003 APG application presents the most ambitious to date. It includes 5 major productions; *Midsummer Night’s Dream* by Bell Shakespeare Company, *Cooking*

The application proposes 73 touring weeks, 299 performances at 54 different venues nationally. *(Australian Performing Arts Centres Association Annual Report, 2003, p. 9)*

Whilst the list for 2003 contains five new works it is restricted to drama and is derived from metropolitan groups. In 2004 the Sydney Dance Company made a long overdue visit to Perth and regional Western Australia, the first opportunity many Western Australians have had to experience this major, subsidised contemporary dance company. Interestingly the single performance in Bunbury was a sell-out and reflects the developmental work done through the promotion of contemporary dance through schools, private dance schools and the Entertainment Centre. Audience development strategies across a range of performance genres have increased demand for a wider variety of touring product. However, classical music and contemporary drama still draw small audiences. (See Appendix B).

The national networks outlined above have a strong regional focus although the product they source is largely metropolitan in origin. However, the regional producers have a well-coordinated presence and this then informs the processes of Playing Australia.

**Playing Australia**

Playing Australia is the Commonwealth Government’s National Performing Arts Touring program administered by the Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts and described by the Minister for the Arts, Senator Kemp as “the most successful and popular funding program in my portfolio” (Kemp, 2003, p.1). It was set up in 1992 to provide “assistance for the touring of the performing arts across State/Territory boundaries where this is currently not commercially viable and there is a demonstrated public demand” *(Playing Australia: Information for applicants, 1994)*. In 1994 $3 million was allocated to the fund. After lobbying by APACA and other state and national organisations funding has been increased by $2 million per annum:

“This takes the Playing Australia base funding to around $5.8 million per annum and gives all Australians, wherever they live, better access to some of the country’s
best performing arts,” the Minister for the Arts and Sport, Senator Kemp said. ("Additional funding for Playing Australia," 2004)

Senator Kemp, in an address to the 2003 APACA Annual Conference suggests that:

Playing Australia is in one way a victim of its own success. Over the years tours have become more and more successful and audiences across the country have grown. People now expect high quality theatre, music and dance to be presented in venues near their homes – wherever they live in Australia. (Kemp, 2003, p. 3)

Pollock suggests that the APG presenter-driven selection process for touring shows “means that only a handful of people are really deciding what gets seen around the country. And these people are, naturally, most interested in shows that will guarantee full houses” (2000, p. 102). One venue manager outlines the dilemma he faces when selecting product: “performing arts as a vehicle for social change – escapism or challenge – what do audiences want” (Finkelstein, 2002)?

For many years the subsidised state or ‘flagship’ companies evaded their responsibilities for regional touring. Regional audiences were understandably aggrieved at the high levels of funding accorded to Sydney and Melbourne based companies, when there was no hope of ever seeing the work of these companies in regional areas. The high level of regional representation in the APG/Playing Australia processes goes some way to correcting the imbalance as long as the metropolitan-based companies have product suitable for touring. Graham Harvey, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre manager, states that most product comes from smaller organisations with “big groups having absolutely no commitment to regional touring” (2004b). One notable exception is the Bell Shakespeare Company, established in 1990, the same year as the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, that has dedicated itself to regional touring and has been a frequent recipient of Playing Australia funding:

Ten years down the track we are playing, annually, to over two hundred thousand, of whom roughly a third are under the age of thirty. The initial artistic vision is undiluted. Our productions and education programmes play every state and territory – metropolitan, regional and the outback. (John Bell cited in Midsummer Night's dream: programme, 2000, p. 18)
Bell Shakespeare has also nurtured relationships with local venue presenters (Cox cited in *Midsummer Night's dream: programme*, 2000, p. 1) so, when its proposed 2004 tour of Midsummer Night’s Dream to regional Western Australia was not funded by Playing Australia, alternative funding was found to bring it to Bunbury. The Entertainment Centre manager, Graham Harvey, notes that the Bell Shakespeare “is the most committed and organised of all the groups” (2004b) applying for Playing Australia or other touring sponsorship. Bell Shakespeare tours two separate productions each year; one, ‘Big Bell’ involving a large cast of about eighteen, the other, ‘Little Bell’ with a cast of about eight. ‘Little Bell’ is designed for touring to regional areas.

Despite the time and effort put into the APG process by promoters and presenters, the Playing Australia fund can only support a proportion of what is presented. Funding was applied for twelve separate productions to tour Western Australia in 2004. Ultimately only two were funded, Oz Opera’s *La Bohème* and the Sydney Dance Company.

More product is thus becoming available for selection for potential funding by Playing Australia which means that regional touring is being taken more seriously by a greater number of metropolitan-based companies. However, as the funds are limited, only a certain number of the shows will actually tour. Presumably for most, their regional touring is contingent upon a successful Playing Australia application or, less-likely, the willingness of the APACA venues to support a tour purely on a commercial basis. Harvey feels that the value of Long Paddock is seeing what is in the marketplace especially in terms of quality. It is not as simple as picking and choosing shows suitable to one’s own venue. For a tour to be viable it needs to be picked up by as many Western Australian venues as possible; thus venue managers work though their umbrella organisation, CircuitWest, to negotiate and develop a suitable tour package. Country Arts also supports interstate touring, usually by working in conjunction with Playing Australia (G. Harvey, 2004b).

**Australia Council**

As the Federal Government’s arts funding and advisory body since its establishment by act of Parliament in 1975, the Australia Council is required:

1. to promote excellence in the arts;
2. to provide, and encourage the provision of, opportunities for persons to practise the arts;

3. to promote the appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of the arts;

4. to promote the general application of the arts in the community;

5. to foster the expression of a national identity by means of the arts;

6. to uphold and promote the right of persons to freedom in the practice of the arts;

7. to promote knowledge and appreciation of Australian arts by persons in other countries;

8. to promote incentives for, and recognition of, achievement in the practice of the arts; and

9. to encourage the support of the arts by the States, local governing bodies and other persons and organisations. (Support for the arts handbook, 2002, p. 2)

Yet the impact of the Australia Council on a regional community such as Bunbury is difficult to quantify. The only recent examples of direct contact with the Australia Council that I am aware of are firstly, the ‘roundtable discussion’ held in Bunbury in August, 2001 titled “Education and the arts: Implementing a strategy to promote the value of the arts to all Australians” to which a ‘specialist group’ from the local arts community were invited. Secondly, in 2002, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre successfully applied to the Australia Council for a New Audiences grant to support the *Macbeth* project. And in fact, these two apparently unconnected interventions are both initiatives of the Audience and Market Development Division of the Australia Council which, in response to the major study commissioned by the Australia Council in 2001, *Australians and the Arts*, (Costantoura) that identifies gaps in the perceptions held by Australians of the arts, has established a program designated “Promoting the value of the arts”. Through this program greater emphasis is being placed on ‘branding’, education and ‘life-long learning’, media relations and involvement of the arts sector (Support for the arts handbook, 2002, p. 131).
The roles and funding programs of the nine boards of the Australia Council (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, Community Cultural Development, Dance, Literature, Major Performing Arts, Music, New Media Arts, Theatre, Visual Arts/Craft) are not well known by community performance groups in the immediate Bunbury region. However, in 2001, the Margaret River Arts Council obtained a grant of $47,135 from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board to underwrite the salaries of indigenous performers for the community production of *Dead water chant* by Margaret River playwright, Margot Edwards. Margaret River is a much smaller regional community than Bunbury, however, it has an active Arts Council. The executive officer of the Arts Council at the time, Heather Locke, had formerly worked in a voluntary capacity for the organisation and had been a regional representative on the Country ArtsWA Board of Management. Both Locke and Edwards have extensive expertise in arts projects and arts grants submissions. This expertise, combined with an original and timely idea, led to a successful outcome in their case. Now that Bunbury is in transition from a performing arts community administered by volunteers to one that has arts/cultural development officers and other professional staff situated at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre and the City of Bunbury the responsibility for originating performance projects that might attract state or national arts funding is unclear, and if arts development officers do not come from a performing arts background then opportunities are sometimes overlooked, or even misdirected.

A regional community such as Bunbury benefits from policies and programs of the Australia Council in less obvious ways and I would propose that this is largely unrecognised by the regional community, and underutilised. The Australia Council defines this sector as its “indirect clients” who are:

people in the broader arts community including audiences, clients and/or buyers of arts products, overseas exhibitors, the general community benefiting from arts and cultural development, and the business and corporate sector. (*Support for the arts handbook*, 2002, p. 144)

In terms of the performing arts in Bunbury the influence of the Australia Council can, arguably, be seen in the following ways:

- touring productions of performance projects part-funded by one of the Boards of the Australia Council;
• links with other stakeholders such as Playing Australia, APACA, ArtsWA or Country Arts WA; and
• policies and research that have influenced stakeholders in community and cultural development such as local government, education, health and welfare.

As I have argued elsewhere, community performing arts projects developed in Bunbury often did not meet Australia Council funding criteria at the time. Such projects, whilst successful in terms of participation and audience, would not have met criteria such as innovation, originality, Australian content, use of professional directors/community facilitators, excellence, target groups based on age, gender, race or ethnicity, or diversity. To achieve these probably would have required the formation of a new performing arts group in a community that already has several established community theatre organisations. The recognition of processes such as partnering, collaborations and mentoring in recent Australia Council policies may offer more scope for regional arts development as this recognises community interactions that are already well-established in regional communities.

This chapter has discussed the complex networks of local, state and national bodies that in some way impact upon the delivery of performing arts in a regional community. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, there are others that, although of lesser impact, nevertheless impinge upon regional arts and cultural organisations. This discussion has focussed on those that have been most proactive and successful in working with regional communities, although, as Milne suggests, this is often by delivering metropolitan touring product to regional doorsteps (Milne, 2003). The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, through its physical location and influence, has become more than just a passive recipient of touring product. It aims, and is increasingly expected to do so, to take a leading role in the development of the performing arts in the regional community, the boundaries of which are increasingly widening to include state and national players.
Chapter 12: Youth and community development

At the time that I joined the Board of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre in 1997, intensive strategic planning was underway to identify ways to increase use of the venue. Several of these plans noted the need to increase youth and community use but the recommendations tended to be given lip service by the board and management as they grappled with what appeared to be the more pressing need to increase commercial hire of the venue. Youth participation was often defined as young people as audiences or as performers in adult-organised events, such as dance and music concerts, eisteddfodau or school concerts. Community performing arts organisations were given reduced local hirer rates for the venue and the board tended to view this as sufficient encouragement for community participation.

In 1995 the first community co-production, *Les Misérables*, was staged. This was a joint production between the South West Opera Company (see Chapter Thirteen) and the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, with the Entertainment Centre underwriting the cost of the production. The success of this community co-production meant that between 1996 and 2002 there was at least one co-production each year with a several community performing arts groups. (See Appendix A: Bunbury community performances 1994 - 2004).

Occasionally, misunderstandings arose with some community groups involved in a co-production. Dissatisfied with the small surplus returned after the production costs were met, some groups queried the Entertainment Centre’s budget processes. The Board therefore proposed that a board member sit on each production committee as a mediator to ensure that all concerned were satisfied with the processes. This mediation or liaison function was combined with the broader function of community development when it was decided that the contributions made by regional local governments to the Entertainment Centre be pooled in an ‘Entrepreneurial Fund’ with clear guidelines for its use.

By 1999 it became apparent that the Entertainment Centre also required a youth development policy that considered young people as creators and participants as well as
audiences. As the youth policy proposed by management only included young people as performers and audiences, I suggested that this should be expanded as follows:

1. **Creative development**

   Activities which include significant youth input at a creative, originating level. This could include original productions, theatre workshops and social activities. Such activities would involve persons with experience/training in youth theatre in key coordinating roles. The productions would address issues, themes, etc of interest to young people. Such activities should encourage initiative and leadership. They should emphasise group participation and cooperation.

2. **Training in performance**

   Activities which include young people gaining training and experience through onstage and backstage work in projects which are chosen and directed by adults. This would include musicals, drama, school activities, eisteddfod etc. Although young people are involved in these productions and may even be showcased by them, much of the content and programming is determined by adults.

3. **Attendance**

   Activities which are designed to attract a youth audience. (McCarron, 1999a)

The area of creative development outlined above was the most challenging for the Entertainment Centre as it potentially required specialised staff to develop such projects. At the time the Board was nervous about any proposal that had resource implications, such as salaries or use of venue space for smaller scale activities that would prevent the Entertainment Centre being used for commercial purposes. The committee proposed a gradual shift to activities such as workshops, youth-specific productions and social events organised with or by young people. Not all the activities needed to be located in the theatre although this would be desirable. Workshops could be funded in conjunction with a sponsor and could be held off-site. Partnerships could be entered into with other organisations such as Edith Cowan University, youth theatre groups, schools, eisteddfod, Country Arts WA and metropolitan-based organisations, such as the Festival of Perth or Artrage.

Above all, I felt, creative development should emphasise contemporaneity. The activities should tap into current and future youth culture in order to generate
excitement and ideas (1999a). Most of what the Entertainment Centre had done to date with young people was based on a traditional view of the performing arts.

I proposed that the liaison, community and youth development functions be combined in one sub-committee of the Board as:

> [t]his would enable the committee to develop proactive policies that are integrated with the strategic plan and which identify and develop community links. Youth development would be a priority in such planning. In this way we can demonstrate to interested stakeholders particularly local government sponsors, the way in which community participation in the Centre has been advanced. (Youth and community development committee, 1999)

It seemed to me that the Entertainment Centre would be able to access a broader range of youth and community funding opportunities if we could demonstrate clear policies with linked strategic planning. Thus a set of aims and objectives were developed by the committee which the Board subsequently approved:

- to develop policies which identify and develop community projects which are integrated with the Business Plan;
- to prioritise youth development in such planning;
- to apply Funding Guidelines for the use of dedicated funds from local government (known as the Entrepreneurial Fund);
- to act in a liaison and mediating role for BREC community projects;
- to prepare an annual Youth and Community Development plan with accompanying budget allocation from Entrepreneurial Fund;
- to identify additional funding sources for community projects;
- to work in conjunction with other stakeholders such as the City of Bunbury, Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, Tourist Board, Edith Cowan University, Education Department and community performing arts organisations;
- to provide an annual report to the Board of Management for presentation to the Annual General Meeting, local government, sponsors and FOTT;
- to meet monthly with minutes from such meetings to be tabled at monthly Board Meetings; and
• to investigate the possible employment of a community development officer (full or part time) for the Centre. ("Aims and objectives: Youth and Community Development Committee," 1999)

I have discussed the distribution of the Entrepreneurial Funds in relation to regional local government participation in Chapter Eleven. The Board of Management accepted the model proposed by the Youth and Community Development committee in 2000 and the funds have since been distributed according to this formula. However, the Board requested that the committee examine the relationship between the City of Bunbury Eisteddfod and the Entertainment Centre, as it seemed to be based on precedent rather than on any clearly defined policy, and involved the Entertainment Centre directly and indirectly subsidising the Eisteddfod with no input into the financial management of the Eisteddfod (see also Chapter Thirteen). Whilst mindful of its obligations to community performing arts organisations, the Board felt that some organisations appeared to have been given a more privileged status and access to the Entertainment Centre when the Centre opened than others and wished these relationships to be more clearly defined.

By 2000 the management and Youth and Community Development committee felt that perhaps there was an automatic expectation that the community co-production would be a musical and that other genres and audiences were being overlooked. The committee proposed that we consider the rationale for the co-productions, especially in regard to musical theatre productions, as it could be argued that the existing organisations and individuals in the local community had developed skills in staging such productions in the Entertainment Centre on a venue-hire basis and that the co-productions could be used to nurture other areas of performance (McCarron, 2000a).

The high cost of performance rights for popular musicals meant that production budgets were being stretched and for the participating community group it was becoming less likely that there would be a surplus generated by the production. For example, *The Sound of Music* cost approximately $80,000 to stage in 2000 and, although successful, the level of risk meant that both the Entertainment Centre and the community organisation felt somewhat exposed. It was decided that in 2001, the Entertainment Centre would call for expressions of interest from groups and individuals with ideas for community co-productions and try to work with different groups each year. The committee also wanted to link these productions more closely with schools and had
sought advice from the South West English Teachers’ Association (SWETA) regarding the genres and subject matter most likely to attract schools’ participation. In 2004 the total enrolment in government and private secondary schools in the South West region is about 10,000 students, with 6,354 enrolled in schools within the greater Bunbury area. As English is compulsory throughout the five years of secondary schooling these teachers are in touch with all students in the region. Drama education is a separate syllabus but only available as an elective, thus not all students are reached by teachers of drama (or music).

The SWETA discussions in 2000 noted that it is difficult to find a common text which is within the scope of a commissioned Entertainment Centre production. Factors such as cost, size of production or audience appeal mean that classic or ‘heritage’ set texts, such as *Othello* or *Hedda Gabler* may not be viable. Likewise, it is very rare that such productions are available on tour, although Bell Shakespeare has since toured three productions to Bunbury. The teachers suggested that if a production of a set text was to be commissioned then it would need to be decided by SWETA what that text would be, focus on it at the annual SWETA Year 12 English seminar at Edith Cowan University and link it to the production. This procedure was largely followed for the 2002 production of *Macbeth* when schools were given twelve months notice of the production.

Teachers felt that if BREC were to commission a production to appeal to a wide range of teenagers that it should be an original, contemporary work with an upbeat, humorous style possibly based on a rock musical format. ‘Issue-based’ or ‘health message’ plays can be a ‘turn-off’ they advised. It was suggested that BREC could investigate ways in which young people from a range of schools can be involved and get academic credit for their participation. For example schools could nominate writers, actors, visual artists, musicians, dancers and technicians to participate. Teachers also felt that mixed genre presentations of dance, music, drama and film from more than one school with an accent on enjoyment and participation, not competition, would work well (*Meeting with South West English Teachers’ Association, 2000*).

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1 Figures obtained from school websites.
Discussions in 2002 with a focus group of young people aged 16 – 25 who were perceived to be active in the broader performing arts community, revealed that for young people as audiences there was a perception of the Entertainment Centre as ‘adult’ or ‘highbrow’. The assumption that there were certain dress standards required at the theatre ‘put young people off’. The foyer space was more like an ‘office’ and some young people felt conspicuous and uncomfortable. They proposed that foyer displays relevant to young people, such as artwork, would help younger audience members feel ‘less on display’ and give them something to look at whilst waiting for their friends. Those who had participated in performances at the Entertainment Centre were very enthusiastic about the backstage entry, past the wall of performers’ autographs and other memorabilia (Appendix C Photograph 6). They suggested that young people would love to enter the theatre in such a way. Those who had attended the fifth or tenth birthday celebrations, where the building was open to the general public for the day and backstage tours were possible, cited this as a great experience. Although they welcomed any chance for young bands to perform at the Entertainment Centre they felt that the auditorium was too formal with its fixed seating and limited space for dancing. They proposed strategies such as taking out several rows of front seats or performances in the foyer (Think tank meeting, 2002).

Young people also felt that cost was a major factor in preventing them from attending Entertainment Centre performances, even community co-productions where every attempt is made to minimise ticket prices. They compared the cost of an Entertainment Centre ticket unfavourably with prices at the smaller community theatres and the cinema. They also suggested that any activity for young people at the theatre such as workshops needs to have the cost clearly displayed on the advertising material because, as most young people have to request the price of a ticket from parents, they need this information in advance so families can budget for it (Think tank meeting, 2002).

Workshops were endorsed in principle by the young people consulted. However they felt that although the use of professionals to run these workshops was good, the workshops had to be carefully advertised so as to sound informal and ‘unstructured’. If the advertising made the workshop sound too ‘professional’ some young people were put off. There was general agreement that local youth-devised work such as the local ‘Show us your shorts’ film competition appealed to young people. Several of the young
people in the discussion groups were familiar with performing at the Entertainment Centre through the eisteddfod, schools performances or community productions. They felt that a youth theatre group affiliated with the Entertainment Centre would be attractive to young people because of the prestige associated with the venue (Think tank meeting, 2002).

In 2000 the Entertainment Centre obtained sponsorship from Iluka Resources, a local mining company, for a series of workshops mainly aimed at youth but some also available to the general public. Now in its fifth year, the workshop program, BRECCY Community and Youth Workshops:

have been designed to complement the performing arts activity in the South-West region. The aim of these workshops is to provide expertise by industry professionals to schools, community theatre and performing arts groups. (BRECCY Community and Youth Workshops, 2004)

For the first time in 2004 the workshops will build towards an end-of-year performance called the Big Play Out. Schools and other community groups are being encouraged to form teams. These teams will participate in workshops during the year, in particular the workshops on group-devised work and script development. For the Big Play Out, each team will perform a ten minute play of its own devising. Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre has been successful in obtaining a $10,000 grant from the Western Australian Department of the Arts for its 2005 BRECCY Workshops.

This level of activity has created a demand for qualified professionals. Of the twelve workshop leaders engaged for 2004 at least half live within the region and the other half have been recruited from Perth. This has resulted in a boost for regional performing arts practitioners with professional training. Many live in the region for reasons of lifestyle or family and prior to the workshops had few opportunities to apply their skills. Margot Edwards, playwright, storyteller and theatre artist, who resides in Margaret River, has been able to work professionally as a playwright-in-residence and conducting script-writing workshops in local schools through the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s facilitation. A major script-writing project undertaken by Edwards was for Margaret River Arts Council and resulted in the play Dead water chant (2001). This examined an aspect of the region’s contact history between French explorers and the
Noongar people of the lower south west. This production was supported by the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre through the provision of technical assistance and the theatre for a Bunbury performance of the play. (See also Chapter Eleven).

The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s professional administration structure means that it can be a broker for community outreach programs, especially as a conduit for grants from sponsors and funding organisations. It means that these programs can be professionally promoted and standards can be monitored. It effectively becomes a one-stop shop for industry professionals who can be referred to other performing arts organisations or schools requiring certain skills development programs. The industry knowledge of the Entertainment Centre regarding contracts and health and safety standards means that contracts can be negotiated appropriately. For many community organisations wishing to engage professional personnel this is often a difficult process and can create a difference in expectations between the parties.

The extent to which the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is able to maintain and extend its youth and community development programs rests upon demand and support from the wider community expressed through regional performing arts, youth, local government and education organisations, and the continuing commitment of the Board and Management to support this through dedicated funding. Such projects require personnel who can work collaboratively and empathetically with volunteers and professionals. Unresolved issues to date are firstly, whether the Entertainment Centre should establish an in-house youth theatre group, and secondly, whether hire-rates for local not-for-profit organisations should be lowered. The following chapter offers case studies of community performing arts organisations or events reliant on access to and support of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre.
Chapter 13: Case studies

This chapter considers the use made of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre by three community performing arts organisations or projects. Firstly, the City of Bunbury Eisteddfod is an event that existed under another name for many years prior to the building of the Entertainment Centre but has used the Entertainment Centre as its venue ever since. Secondly, the South West Opera Company (SWOC) regards itself as a natural community partner of the Entertainment Centre. Both these organisations, as independent incorporated entities, see their objectives as aligned with those of the Entertainment Centre; however, the practicalities of this relationship have occasionally caused some tensions as will be outlined below. The third case study is of the 
Macbeth co-production, a community project staged in 2002, which attempted to model cultural development processes within the framework of a major production.

City of Bunbury Eisteddfod

Bunbury is one of many Australian towns and suburbs that conducts an annual eisteddfod, thus linking it to a performance tradition that arrived in Australia with Welsh immigrants who settled the goldfields in Victoria in the mid-19th century (Hughes, 2004).

In Australia it had its beginnings in the literary societies that were an early feature of the Welsh cultural scene in Ballarat in the mid-1850s…. By 1863 these proceedings had evolved into a fully fledged Eisteddfod to which, the Australydd [Welsh language magazine] tells us, the Welsh of Victoria flocked. (Hughes, 2004)

The early eisteddfodau were conducted in the Welsh language, however, by the 1870s “the rapid assimilation and secularisation of the Welsh in the Australian colonies” (2004) meant that it became an English language event. Filmer-Davis (2001) in her study of the eisteddfod tradition in Australia notes that these early events had as much a moral welfare objective as a “desire to promulgate Welsh language and culture in the colony” and were arranged by “men who enjoyed a status and authority in mainstream society as well as among the Welsh” (p. 56).
Hough notes an eisteddfod was held at Boulder, on the Western Australian goldfields, in 1902 (Farrant, 2003, p. 118) though the history of the arts in Western Australia edited by Bolton, Rossiter and Ryan (2003) does not include any discussion of eisteddfodau in relation to performing arts in this state. Filmer-Davis was not able to document existing eisteddfodau in Western Australia noting that:

informally I was told that there are still regional eisteddfodau in that State, especially at Bunbury. It might be a disadvantage of distance in Australia that has kept details of the western events from being disseminated in the east. (2001, p. 129)

A web search indicates the regional towns of Bunbury, Narrogin, Merredin and Northam conduct or have conducted eisteddfodau as well as suburban and metropolitan events in Kalamunda, Joondalup, Fremantle and Perth (Browne-Cooper, Leman, & Thorpe, 2003). Costantoura states that Australia-wide:

Over the course of an average year, 130,000 competitors of all ages present more than 100,000 items as part of the competitions organised and adjudicated by 3,500 volunteers with the 55 member organisations of the Association of Eisteddfod Societies of Australia for an estimated combined audience in excess of 325,000. (2000, p. 73)

The 46th City of Bunbury Eisteddfod was held in 2004. Formerly known as the Bunbury Music Festival, it claims to be the biggest performing arts event in regional WA with 6,084 performers appearing during a three week season. The City of Bunbury Eisteddfod is allocated a proportion of its funding by the City of Bunbury and is also supported via the Entrepreneurial Fund of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Since the Entertainment Centre’s opening in 1990 the Eisteddfod has utilised the theatre for all performances regardless of audience size. Similarly to other eisteddfodau in Australia it is largely a competitive event for amateur performers, showcasing, in the main, musical and dance performances. It has sections for all ages and the majority of performers are of school age. Filmer-Davis argues that eisteddfodau for decades have consistently provided training for young people, not only in performance skills but also appropriate behaviours regarding interacting with other performers, adjudicators, officials and audiences. Part of this may still be an ongoing moral function Filmer-Davis suggests was associated with the very early eisteddfodau in Australia that aimed
to encourage young men to engage in improving activities, rather than succumb to the ‘demon drink’.

Just as the influence and work of amateur theatre in Australia were often overlooked or dismissed by funding bodies and arts agencies (see Chapter Six), the contribution of eisteddfodau is similarly overlooked. As Filmer-Davis points out the justification given by funding organisations is that the competitive nature of eisteddfodau puts them in conflict with policies regarding inclusiveness, participation and equity. On reflection I can see that my own resistance to the idea of competition has meant that I have tended to overlook the undeniable strength of the eisteddfod in a community such as Bunbury. I presume that my own attitudes were formed by the child-centred drama-in-education and theatre-in-education philosophies of the 1970s that were inimical to the idea of competitive performance events. Yet, demonstrably, many young people are motivated enough to enter (or be entered by teachers or parents) the eisteddfod undaunted by the fact that they will be publicly adjudicated and ranked.

The competitive performance event has a long history through eisteddfodau, talent contests, drama and dance competitions. Its most recent electronic forms, popstar quests such as Australian Idol and dance competitions such as Strictly dancing, are hardly new but hugely popular with young people, and this has been turned to commercial advantage by the telecommunications and music industries. The Rock Eisteddfod Challenge (see Chapter Eight) has very successfully combined competition with performance to involve huge numbers of young people in promoting healthy lifestyle messages. Costantoura suggests that:

Competitions in general, and in their association with festivals, appear to be underutilised in the landscape of the arts in Australia. Australians are well-known for their competitive spirit, either through their own participation or by supporting others. Consequently, there would appear to be scope for better satisfying this spirit in the context of the arts.

Competitions are also valued by Australians because they are felt to be a great ‘leveller’. No matter who you are or what your background is, a competition allows anyone to prove themselves against others. This is an integral part of the Australian sporting psyche. However, it is not so readily part of the view of the arts. (2000, p. 73)
Recent debate about competitive arts events has occurred in Australia after comments made by Michael Kieran Harvey, a prominent composer and performer, about the Eighth Sydney International Piano Competition (2004):

For Harvey, competition ‘squeezes the value’ out of a whole art form; the fundamentals of music are being ignored for the sake of technique… while competitions provide one of the few ways performers could make a living, they are hardly environments where a genuinely thinking artist might be produced. (Cooper, 2004, p. 47)

Kieran Harvey, himself a winner of an international piano competition, feels that such events bolster the careers of arts bureaucrats and music teachers but for students give a false sense of “something to do rather than something to think about” (Nicolson, 2004). Certainly, the City of Bunbury Eisteddfod is a showcase for the teachers of music and dance in the community.

Whilst government arts departments baulk at funding competitive performance events such as eisteddfodau, their health departments have no such qualms. Healthways, the Western Australian community funding arm of the Department of Health, is a sponsor of the City of Bunbury Eisteddfod. Corporate sponsors also support the Eisteddfod as it has a high community profile and participation rates, and is particularly focussed on youth. It also manages to bring together the various providers of training in performance: government and private schools at primary and secondary level; private dance and music schools; and community performing arts groups. The eisteddfod attracts entries from the wider south-west region as well as from Perth thus contributing economic capital to the city.

Mandy Groom is a London-based opera singer and music teacher originally from Bunbury. Her career was shaped from an early age via the traditional paths of private music lessons, eisteddfodau and similar competitions, and performance in several community musical theatre groups. Her post-secondary training in Perth and London involved completing a Diploma of Performance and Bachelor of Music at the Conservatorium in Perth (now West Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University) and a post-graduate qualification at the Royal Academy in London. She states that “the Eisteddfod is vital to the development of a singer/musician as you
can judge your own progress from how you handle your nerves and performance preparation through to learning new repertoire and having to work it to a certain standard” (Groom, 2004). Groom is grateful for the practical support offered to her by the performing arts community in Bunbury that included contributions to an Eisteddfod scholarship fund to enable her to study in London. In turn, on her regular trips ‘home’, Groom offers classes and performance opportunities for local singers through workshops and concerts. She acknowledges that Bunbury “wants to know the good, exciting news of young people’s talents. They are pleased, supportive and want to know, but I think that is as far as it goes” (Groom, 2004). What is not acknowledged by the community is the long, hard road for any performer to establish a career within the performing arts industry, especially as, for regional performers in Australia, it means moving to the city, inter-state, or overseas. Keiran Harvey states “I feel sorry for young Australian musicians. They have a double-whammy. Not are they not respected overseas, they are not respected here” (Nicolson, 2004).

The City of Bunbury Eisteddfod is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation that relies on a team of dedicated volunteers, both from their own organisation, and from the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s BREC Club. The volunteers are motivated by the feeling that they are doing something worthwhile for the community, in particular, young people. In a review of the relationship between the Entertainment Centre and the Eisteddfod conducted in 2000, the financial relationship between the two organisations was defined as an agreed-upon amount rather than the more open-ended arrangement that had previously existed; and, in fact, the level of subsidy from the Entertainment Centre’s Entrepreneurial Fund was reduced to free up funds for other projects, without apparent detriment to the Eisteddfod. The Entertainment Centre’s suggestion that some of the Eisteddfod events that draw small audience numbers could be held in other venues was rejected by the Eisteddfod committee who recognise the attraction for Eisteddfod competitors of appearing on-stage in a major, professionalised theatre which may be one of the key attractions for metropolitan entrants. Any suggestion that the Eisteddfod was being sidelined would not sit well with its other major sponsor, the City of Bunbury, or with the community at large.
South West Opera Company

Until 1998, all community productions produced by the Entertainment Centre were done in conjunction with an existing performing arts group in the community. However in 1998, after being approached by an individual director, the Entertainment Centre undertook a production of its own. There have been several since. This has been of benefit to directors who can now approach the Entertainment Centre with proposals for projects rather than having to persuade one of the existing groups to undertake the project. This has resulted in some innovative proposals that are a departure from the tradition of musicals and light opera. Through these independent productions the Entertainment Centre has developed expertise in production and a greater interest in projects that introduce new skills and performance styles. However, the Entertainment Centre is still committed to co-productions with established and new community performance groups, who are required to submit project proposals in response to a general call, via advertisement, for expressions of interest in doing a co-production. The Entertainment Centre selects one or two of these projects annually according to criteria such as innovation, involvement of young people, genre and budget.

Community performance groups have always been able to hire the Entertainment Centre to stage their own productions at reduced local hirer rates. As shown in the table of Bunbury community theatre performances in Appendix A, during the period 1997-2004 there have been nineteen community productions at the Entertainment Centre, eleven of which were co-productions underwritten by the Entertainment Centre and the remainder produced by community groups themselves. Of the total of nineteen productions, fourteen were musicals or light opera. The oldest musical theatre group, the Bunbury Musical Comedy Group, which owns a 200 seat theatre, has only staged two productions at the Entertainment Centre. The South West Opera Company staged seven productions between 1994-2000. A new community group, Sundance Productions, formed in 2001 and staged three musicals in two years.

The emergence of new organisations staging musical theatre in the years 2001-2 and the Entertainment Centre’s own independent productions of large-cast productions in 2002-2003 (Macbeth and Ned Kelly: The musical) meant that the established groups feel that they are now competing with a centre which can afford to mount glossier, ‘more professional’ productions. The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre may be seen as
a de facto performing arts group in competition with other community theatre organisations, thus eroding their traditional support base. An alternative view would however suggest that the increased activity generally raises the participation rates in and standards of performance in the community.

Formed in 1986, the South West Opera Company (SWOC) aims “to provide Opera, Musical Theatre and high quality choral works to South West audiences” (*Gilbert & Sullivan's* "The Gondoliers": programme, 2000). Prior to the opening of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, the company rehearsed and performed in various venues such as the Paisley Centre, the Railway Institute and the South West Italian Club. Members of the company were active in the fundraising campaign for the Entertainment Centre and the company was one of the first local community performance groups to stage a full production in the Entertainment Centre in its foundation year of 1990. This was the opera *The Merry Widow*. The company was fortunate to obtain the amateur rights to *Les Misérables* when these were first released in Australia in 1995 and had great success with this production, with ten performances, a record number for a community group in an 800 seat venue such as the Entertainment Centre. (The Bunbury Musical Comedy Group stages its productions for a similar length season but in a theatre seating 200). After this success the company attracted many performers hoping to be involved in similarly successful productions. Many young performers joined the group and the momentum was sustained for a period of five years. However, the need to also fulfil their charter to perform choral or operatic works from the nineteenth century repertoire (*The Gondoliers* and *Orpheus in the underworld*) meant that audiences were smaller and younger performers tended to look for groups doing more recent musical theatre material.

By 2003 most of the ‘big name’ musicals for which amateur rights were available had been performed within the previous ten years by one of the several organisations that had emerged and it was also apparent that the less well-known Broadway musicals were unable to ‘pull a crowd’ in a venue the size of the Entertainment Centre. Thus significantly the South West Opera Company has not staged a production at the Entertainment Centre since 2000 and claim that “the cost of mounting a full production at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre is too prohibitive for the South West Opera Company and other community performing arts groups” (Monagle, 2004). The
musical director, Marguerite Monagle, states that the South West Opera Company reached a crisis point a couple of years ago with group members aging and difficulty in recruiting younger members. The company has since undertaken strategic planning with particular emphasis on getting young people involved but note that “young people like to do the bigger shows at the Entertainment Centre but are less keen to do smaller shows” (2004). Thus there is the direct implication that by being prevented from accessing the Entertainment Centre due to cost and changes in Entertainment Centre policies regarding community co-productions, the Opera Company feels it is unable to keep its membership at viable levels.

The suggestion that the South West Opera Company or any other community performing arts group (such as MESH Youth Theatre) which does not have its own performance space should be given resident status at the Entertainment Centre has been resisted to date by the Board of Management of the Entertainment Centre. Aware of the sensitivities of the performing arts organisations and the regional communities, the Board has wished to appear even-handed in its approach to all groups. It has also made it clear that as there is an expectation from the City of Bunbury that the Entertainment Centre should ‘pay its way’, local groups can only be subsidised up to a point by creating a reduced scale of charges.

The Opera Company’s response is to point to the contribution the South West Opera Company has made to both the City of Bunbury and the region though its willingness to participate in city-organised community events and its extensive regional touring program. The company’s regional outreach marks a significant difference between this group and the other musical performance groups in Bunbury. From 1988 to 2004, the company “has toured the South West extensively from Fremantle to Albany, showcasing affordable, quality theatre” (Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Gondoliers": programme, 2000). Its 2004 Summer Season included concerts at outdoor venues at Cowaramup, the Harvey Amphitheatre, Mandalay Holiday Resort and Bunbury Regional Art Gallery. Some of these venues such as Mandalay have gone to the extent of building outdoor venues because of the success of these concerts. The Opera Company have also fostered collaborations with other community performing arts groups such as the Sol y Sombre Spanish dance company and other dance schools. Arguably, as I also suggested in my discussion of MESH Youth Theatre (Chapter Nine),
the lack of a purpose-built performance space can prompt creative solutions from a performance group and encourage interesting collaborations and use of non-traditional venues, something that contemporary audiences may indeed prefer (Costantoura, 2000, p. 74).

The South West Opera Company also believes that the Entertainment Centre is able to attract significant funding and sponsorship because it has the staffing and resources to pursue this. It perceives that the community performing arts groups are therefore in competition with the Entertainment Centre for funding and sponsorship and, with the exception of Healthways, the funding bodies are attracted by the image that the Entertainment Centre provides. This claim needs further analysis as the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, as discussed previously, has had very little direct funding from state or federal arts organisations. It has however received long term support from the state community funding bodies, Healthways and LotteryWest. But many other community organisations also receive support from these bodies, including most of the local community performance groups. Larger local corporate sponsors may tend to prefer the Entertainment Centre because of the exposure it provides them through its marketing strategies, however, these companies tend to distinguish between corporate sponsorship and support for community not-for-profit organisations and will allocate funds to such organisations as community development. Therefore it may not necessarily be the case that the larger professional organisation absorbs the ‘funding dollar’. An alternative argument could be that the Entertainment Centre has created audiences for the performing arts where none existed before and is thus stimulating an expanding market for live performance which other groups can exploit.

Macbeth

In August, 2002, after an eighteen month planning process, a co-production of Macbeth was staged at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. The production agreement for the participating organisations, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, Stark Raven Theatre and MESH Youth Theatre set out the following objectives:

- professional direction;
- high production standards;
- innovation;
• development of skills of local performing art practitioners;
• youth participation at all levels of the production including mentoring in selected areas; and
• active liaison with schools, TAFE and university.

The suggestion of a joint project to introduce new skills to local performing arts practitioners came from Leanne McLaughlin, artistic director of Stark Raven Theatre who was interested in the innovative use of puppetry in theatrical performances. (See profile in Chapter Six). Hearing of similar work by Sydney-based director Michael Lindsey Simpson of Evolve Productions, she proposed an intensive three-month project that would bring Lindsey Simpson to Bunbury for seven weeks, arranged over three fortnightly blocks, two of which coincided with school vacations. All performers (volunteers) had to be available for daily rehearsals during these fortnights. This was an incredibly high demand for a community project but such was the enthusiasm for the project from regional performers they managed to do it, many taking leave from their work to do so.

The choice of script was ultimately pragmatic. Shakespeare’s Macbeth was suitable for the proposed artistic approach and could be promoted to schools and the community as a ‘worthy’ project. However, such a big project would not come cheaply, and appeals for sponsorship stressed the innovative aspects of the production for Bunbury:

This production of Macbeth aims to be inventive and creative through the combination of live actors, puppetry, lighting design and original music, something that has not been attempted on this scale in Bunbury before. (McCarron, 2002).

Fortuitously the proposed production coincided with the desire of the Bunbury campus of Edith Cowan University to find suitable projects to allocate funding associated with the centenary of the birth of Edith Cowan. The university agreed to become the major sponsor which effectively clinched the decision to go ahead with the production. A subsequent stroke of luck was a successful application to the Australia Council for a New Audiences grant under the auspices of the newly established Audience and Market Development Division. (See Chapter Eleven). This grant underwrote the extensive workshop program undertaken by Lindsay-Simpson, plus an innovative advertising campaign with striking signage, including large posters on local buses.
Both the university sponsorship and my own involvement were predicated on the promise that there would be a high youth involvement in the project. As coordinator of MESH Youth Theatre I wanted significant involvement for our members. Final figures showed that 70% of the 32 member cast and 15 member crew were under the age of 25. Nine teachers were involved with the production as actors, coordinators, assistant director, costume production, musical director and art coordinators.

Lindsey Simpson’s techniques were new to most of the local performers and required high levels of discipline and creativity. Lindsey Simpson used twelve young performers as a Chorus which worked as a team to create the sets and special effects during the performance. The sets were formed from two sheets of black industrial plastic each of which covered half the stage. The black-clad Chorus members moulded this material into landscape forms and interior scenes. This meant that they were present on stage, often under the plastic, for the duration of the play. This was a tremendous physical effort for the young actors. The shapes, movements and sound effects provided by the Chorus had been devised through intensive workshops where the young people were encouraged to explore their responses to the text, which they were expected to have read and understood. Although not seen by the audience for most of the performance because of their black costumes, the Chorus set the mood and tone of the production.

Ten young actors had speaking roles within the production of the twenty two available. Two were graduates of courses conducted by the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Five of the young actors studied drama at three local high schools. A third year student from the Arts Program of Edith Cowan University, Bunbury assisted the director as a professional placement. The key backstage functions of stage manager, assistant stage manager and properties were undertaken by three young people aged 18 who were mentored by the staff of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Five young make-up artists were mentored by a professional make-up artist. Young musicians were used by the musical director to help create the original sound track for the performance.

In a discussion about community theatre Tuttle (1992) distinguishes between the “community show” which is concerned with process and the “company show” which is concerned with product. The company show “is one that is produced and performed by
professionals only”, he suggests (p.41). The ‘process versus product’ debate has also been central to discussions about drama and theatre by and for young people. This creative tension exists for projects selected by the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre as community co-productions. The Entertainment Centre wishes to achieve production standards required from a professional venue charging commercial prices (as detailed in the discussion in Chapter Ten on volunteers in community productions). However, to achieve its youth and community development aims, since it is from this pool of funds and potential sponsors that it underwrites the production, it also needs to emphasise ‘process’.

The *Macbeth* project came close to managing the potential tension between these two desired outcomes. However, strains were inevitably felt. A professional director will ultimately be judged by the performances themselves and there is an understandable pressure to achieve an excellent product that will be judged so by industry peers. The limits of the rehearsal schedule for this project were extremely tight because Lindsey Simpson travelled from interstate for each rehearsal block and was occupied with other projects in the intervening weeks. Whilst in Bunbury it was essential to maximise his time which, as stated earlier, not only included rehearsals for *Macbeth* but also numerous workshops for young people which were held throughout the region. Effectively the hours required of the actors for rehearsals were what would be expected of professional actors: to be available five days a week. For those with amateur/community theatre experience, this was both exciting and taxing. A large part of my youth coordination role on the project was spent negotiating between the young people themselves, their parents, the adult cast and crew, and the director as the rehearsal weeks stretched out and the realities of what they had undertaken became obvious.

The process used by Lindsay Simpson, despite its challenges, was hugely respected by the cast as, within a disciplined structure of physical exercises, text analysis and discussion, improvisation and voice work, he slowly built the production integrating many of the ideas generated through this process. To the teachers amongst us who were observing the process, the high expectations he had of the cast in terms of their engagement with the text and the way in which the cast mostly met these expectations, was revelatory. This was the only amateur/community production I have participated in
where there was no anxiety about the learning of lines. Lindsey Simpson’s process had somehow physicalised the text and no rehearsal time was lost because individual cast members did not know their lines. Lindsay Simpson also maintained the original rehearsal schedule he had set so that by the beginning of the final week of rehearsal the play had been run in its entirety more than once so, in the transition from the rehearsal room to the stage, the actors were sustained during the long technical rehearsals by their knowledge of the overall structure.

The production met its target audience numbers with 1,646 people attending three performances of which approximately 800 were young people (eight percent of the total secondary school population of 10,000 in the South West region). The aim of the marketing was to create a ‘buzz’ in the community that this production was a ‘must see’, not only because of the production itself but also the ‘vibe’ associated with it. In terms of new audiences the project attracted a number of young men who were attracted by the television and other advertising which had a ‘gothic’ feel to it. There was considerable interest in the use of make-up in the production and the foyer displays featured this. The Entertainment Centre ran a costume-design competition in conjunction with the production and these designs were also on display. Lindsay Simpson asked the cast to keep production diaries and these and other creative artefacts from the rehearsal process were displayed, along with responses from workshop participants. The entertainment started before the audience entered the building with a group of young people doing a fire-twirling demonstration on the forecourt. The large windows of the Entertainment Centre had been screened with black plastic with the show’s logo cut out creating a striking lighting effect. Young people in ‘gothic’ makeup sold programs in the foyer.

The production was hailed by local reviewers and many attendees as a great success, however it did not win all hearts and minds. A salutary reminder of the challenges facing live performance when compared with its electronic competitors is the following written comment by a teenage boy who obviously had been coerced into attending and was not prepared to suspend disbelief at all:

With a rough understanding of the play Macbeth I wandered into a smoke filled auditorium with eerie sounds all around. The start of the play drew nigh and an old
stinky man sat next to me. The play began and as I watched the rest of the play I found myself hating it more and more. The music quality was worse than an SBS indipendant [sic] flick which involves so much porn you forget that it’s actually quite corny. And the acting was wet and un-exciting so much that I was actually worried if my dad would wait around to pick me up if it went overtime. The background disappeared before your eyes making it a whole waste of time in creating a background to begin with. (Anon.)

* * * * *

The brief case studies provided above illustrate both the achievements of and the occasional tensions in the relationship between the Entertainment Centre and its community partners. Sensitive to this, the Board of the Entertainment Centre has required a review of community hire charges to be undertaken as a priority within the 2004 - 2009 Strategic Plan, and, negotiations are currently underway to see if a proposed co-production between the Entertainment Centre and the South West Opera Company will be viable for 2005. The challenge of operating a community-owned, professionally-run venue as both a commercial business and a community facility continues to exercise the management, Board and volunteers of the Entertainment Centre, but with some notable successes to date.

It is worth noting that these three case studies document processes and projects that were almost entirely driven by not-for-profit, voluntary organisations working in conjunction with the professional management of the Entertainment Centre. These projects contribute cultural capital to the region through the employment of professional adjudicators and directors, the performances of major works from the traditional repertoire and the education of young actors, actants and audiences. Social capital is acquired at the local, regional, state and perhaps, national level through the perception of these organisations and projects as contributing to the arts and tourism economy and the extensive networks of people and organisations that they draw upon and to which they contribute. They are examples of an active and participatory citizenry “who through their voluntary associations, demonstrate local empowerment”, key features of a civil society as noted by Putnam (1993) and Flyvbjerg (1998).
Chapter 14: Conclusion

A high-powered taskforce has been formed in Bunbury to make the city one of Australia's premier regional centres by generating projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars. (Spagnolo, 2004c)

It's good fellowship…. We hold the Bunbury City Band in our hearts. (Muirhead, 2004)

Although the choir has become well known for their [sic] outstanding performances, the management committee last year decided to test the feasibility of having a theme song – a high-impact song which would identify the choir, its diversity and place within the region [italics added]. (Heal, 2004)

Do you want an arts week in Bunbury? (Poster distributed by Cultural Development Officer, City of Bunbury, 13 September, 2004)

The above quotations are from the South Western Times, Thursday 9 September, 2004, with the exception of the poster advertisement, which was also distributed within the same week. They coincide with the need to conclude this discussion and, somewhat emblematically, represent the lively and continuous performing arts scene that will experience and, hopefully adapt to, the economic changes signaled by Spagnolo above.

In the same edition, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre’s full-page, full-colour advertisement lists two new Australian plays, one from interstate, the other from Perth, both supported by state arts funding; a regional touring production from the Australian Opera, also supported by government arts funding; an international film festival sponsored by local businesses; a concert featuring local concert bands; and, the end-of-year showcase of the BRECCY Community and Youth Workshops. In addition to the sponsorship of state arts organisations and local businesses, some of these productions also receive support from the Entrepreneurial Fund of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, which is funded by regional local governments. The South Western Times also carries an advertisement for a production of Carousel (Rodgers and Hammerstein) that will be performed by the South West Opera Company in the theatre owned by the Bunbury Musical Theatre Group, and sponsored by state health-promotion funding.
The events listed above demonstrate the interconnectedness of the performing arts within the community mainly through the sharing of financial, human and physical community resources. Whether the live event is a touring professional production or a local volunteer-based production, its performance in Bunbury has been made possible not through audience demand alone but through direct or indirect involvement by local volunteers.

The availability of professional productions of new Australian material or classical/heritage arts to our region is highly dependant upon state and national arts funding, with the exception of popular music that is toured by commercial organisations. The economic and political climate at national and state levels will continue to determine the availability of such support in the future. Local corporate funding for the performing arts will also be linked to the economic development of the region. While Bunbury continues its current expansion it can be expected that local industries and businesses will see investment in the arts and the community as evidence of good corporate citizenship as the discourses associated with social capital and civil society are incorporated into the commercial sphere. The larger national and state agendas also tend to drive change at the local government level, so community and cultural planning processes continue to be required of local government and the management of this in Bunbury will be crucial here. Biancini (1991), Meyrick (1997), Beale and Van Den Bosch (1998) note the tendencies for arts and cultural/community bureaucracies to flourish at the expense of community-initiated arts development.

This thesis argues that the level of activity in and engagement with the performing arts in Bunbury remains high despite some early predictions that an oversupply of entertainment product and venues would see the demise of traditional community performing arts groups. It also supports Putnam’s claim that “modernization need not signal the demise of the civic community” (1993, p. 115). Initiatives driven by the City of Bunbury such as the City Vision Taskforce (Spagnolo, 2004c), and the Arts Week consultation both mentioned above, have sought community representation via public advertisement, and are presumably open to comment and feedback. A cynical view would be that such community representation is tokenistic and can be stage-managed in certain preferred ways. A more optimistic reading would be to see this as civil society at work and capable of contributing to public good (Putnam, 2000, p. 20).
The blend of altruism and pragmatism that seems possible in discussions about social and cultural capital, has contributed to this analysis of the performing arts in Bunbury and the surrounding region. Both Fotheringham (1996) and Milne (2003) note the financial perils and demise of some semi-professional and professional alternative, community or regional theatres across Australia. However, the amateur or not-for-profit performing arts organisations, with their volunteer workforces, continue to be significant providers of live entertainment in regional (and suburban) communities as demonstrated by the case studies this thesis has provided. While this in itself is an important community function, the benefits are greater. The organisations create civic spaces where participants, often at little or no cost apart from time, can work towards shared group outcomes, create social networks, express their creativity, develop skills, and reach outwards to the wider community. They largely welcome all-comers regardless of gender, age, ethnicity or educational level. Enthusiasm and commitment are the qualities most prized by the groups. This exemplifies the “horizontal structures” that depend upon reciprocity and cooperation that Putnam sees as characteristic of community groups (1993, p. 175).

I have dedicated a considerable portion of this thesis to discussing young people and their interest in and access to the performing arts. Despite some of the practical problems that this poses to organisations with a vested interest, these are usually overcome in various creative ways. The community provides a high level of opportunities for young people to be involved in the performing arts through a network of providers or facilitators: the education system, private teachers, community performing arts organisations, local government, the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre, commercial operators and state and national funding programs. This thesis has examined the extent to which young people in Bunbury are the creators, presenters and managers of their own work and found that this has not been the usual involvement of young people in the performing arts in Bunbury. Rather much of the activity has been originated and managed by adults for young people or, as is often the case, as mixed-age productions where young people work as part of a team with adults of all ages. The role of adult mentors has been recognised, belatedly I suggest, in the rhetoric of arts funding organisations.
Conscious of the need to conclude this thesis and thus in a state of ‘heightened
awareness’ where almost any conversation or observation seems significant, I recently
attended the youth section of the 25th annual South West One-Act Drama Festival,
coordinated by the Bunbury Repertory Club ("Program," 2004). I coordinated this
festival for four years in the mid 1980s. And in some ways nothing had changed; but
why should it? A number of adult volunteers cheerfully provided the infrastructure for
approximately 50 young people to perform scripts, some of which were original. The
young people appeared very comfortable in the theatre space, both on-stage, backstage
and in the auditorium and green room. Judging from cast lists and appearance the
participants came from a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds and schools. I heard one
volunteer explain to a friend that she preferred amateur theatre to professional because
of cost, variety, content and empathy with the local performers. From another overheard
conversation between a teenage boy and his mother, I deduced that they were from ‘out
of town’ as the young man was describing to his mother with some enthusiasm the (to
him) amazing level of theatrical opportunities available to young people in Bunbury.
Two young people who had participated in the 2002 Macbeth production came to speak
to me at interval and (without my prompting) enthused about the opportunities that that
production and MESH Youth Theatre had provided them, both in terms of performance
and in feeling more secure about themselves and their ability to move forward with their
lives. One of the plays performed by a primary school group was a self-devised piece.
Their director is a teacher who conducts an after-hours drama club for those kids who
love it and for “boys who don’t like football”. She was particularly thrilled with the
performance of one child who has a disability.

The Festival overall had 15 theatre groups participating: eight from Perth and suburbs;
four from other regional towns including one from Karratha (over 1500 kilometres from
Bunbury); and three local groups. This level of activity supports Hough’s conclusion in
his overview of theatre in Western Australia that “the backbone of theatre development
in Western Australia has been the vitality and energy of enterprising people, and the
healthy state of the Little Theatre movement” (2003, p. 55).

The challenge for the performing arts in Bunbury is to retain the best features of
amateur or not-for-profit organisations such as independence, inclusiveness,
voluntarism, enthusiasm, commitment, a broad skills-base, and human and economic
resources, whilst at the same time adapting to changing community needs that may include an increased engagement with community and cultural development officers. If the existing community infrastructure were to be dismantled by, for example, closure of older theatre spaces, or disbanding of organisations such as MESH Youth Theatre, with the promise of replacement by professional programs conducted by arts administrators, a real danger is that a sense of community ownership and commitment may fade away and these programs will look more like commercial services, subject to supply and demand. The ‘work’ performed by volunteers is actually ‘play’ as it is how they choose to fill their leisure and the example of the Macbeth production demonstrates the extent of this. Through their association with the performing arts, volunteers experience both spontaneous and normative ‘communitas’ as defined by Turner (1982). If arts administrators do not understand and empathise with this then they should not be surprised if volunteers in the performing arts resist incorporation into cultural development projects devised by city planners, even if this means foregoing funding opportunities.

The Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre as a model of a community-owned, professionally-managed venue that has consistently attempted to reconcile the professional/volunteer, commercial/community, city/region binaries forms a significant part of this discussion. Data drawn from the Entertainment Centre’s records is used to demonstrate the quantity and variety of performance product staged. The strength of the volunteer and community engagement with the Entertainment Centre complements the outward-looking policies and practices that connect it, and therefore the community, with the larger national and international performing arts scene as documented in the Centre’s publicly available records and the policies of government arts agencies. The community has consistently reiterated its sense of ownership of the Centre at every level of the Centre’s management and through active participation in most of its processes and events.

As a participant-observer in and of the many structures, processes and interactions detailed in this thesis I have inserted my own experience into the analysis. As noted in Chapter One, this has been “a highly selective interrogation based on my observations and engagement”. However at all times I attempt to document and support these observations with data drawn from a variety of formal and informal sources, and indeed,
much of this data has been sourced because of my local knowledge and involvement. Any process of selection, inclusion and omission will raise as many questions as it resolves, however, I hope that this thesis provides sufficient spaces for divergent arguments. I am aware that at times the case studies and data presented could be more fully developed and there is scope for further research projects here. At the risk of appearing superficial, I wished to convey the ‘busy-ness’ of the performing arts in this community, both diachronically and synchronically, and to foreground the networks that exist. Likewise, the persons profiled in this thesis were selected not only for their significant contributions to community performing arts but also because of their self-reflexivity based on years of active participation. Because of my acknowledged partiality, I chose to support my observations with publicly available documents and material community practices rather than numerous interviews. Aware of the limitations of time and space, I also felt I could not do justice to the individual narratives of the many volunteers within community performing arts and sought to move beyond a historical narrative of development.

The issues discussed in this thesis are ongoing. The thesis has demonstrated that community performance is a contested theoretical and critical field, and it provides a basis for further research and discussion. It also emphasizes a consistent finding in the interviews and sources from community performing arts organisations that the processes, work, networks and performativities are often more important than the actual work they produce.

The main contribution of this thesis lies in its detailed examination of the quotidian and often overlooked features of performing arts in a regional community, and the reclamation of the descriptor ‘community theatre’ as an accurate representation of this work. I hope that in time this thesis will be read within the community by those who may be surprised that there was so much to say about community processes that are accepted as everyday. The document will hopefully contribute to on-going community and cultural planning at the local level. The research has informed the Creative Industries program (established in 2003) in the Faculty of Regional Professional Studies at Edith Cowan University (South West Campus) and undergraduate units have been developed in Region and Culture, and Performance and Community. Students are being encouraged to re-evaluate the place in which they live and its cultural development
through research and creative projects. At a wider level, the thesis provides an important historical/cultural document for Western Australian and Australian performance studies, and offers new ways of thinking about the performing arts in regional communities.

In so doing, the thesis emphasizes the crucial role of volunteers in generating the social capital that is produced through community performance. It argues that this contribution has often been overlooked by arts agencies and theorists, and cautions that the role of volunteers must receive due recognition.

Bunbury, Western Australia is a city-in-performance as it redesigns its urban landscape and stages its versions of the city, from “Country Soul – City Style” to “Living the Vision”. Whilst acknowledging the sometimes conservative nature of the volunteer performing arts in the community, their resilience, longevity and community affiliation are to be celebrated and documented, as indeed this thesis has done. Rather than being upstaged or backstaged in ongoing academic and policy-making discussions about the role and function of the performing arts in the wider national community they should be accorded a significant role in the continuum of performing arts in the Australian community. Without their continuous presence, the visibility and viability of the live performing arts in contemporary society may be considerably diminished.
## Appendix A: Bunbury community theatre performances 1994 – 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bunbury Repertory Club</th>
<th>Bunbury Musical Comedy Group</th>
<th>South West Opera Company</th>
<th>Stark Raven Theatre</th>
<th>MESH Youth Theatre</th>
<th>BREC</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>• See how they run</td>
<td>• Brigadoon</td>
<td>• Die Fledermäus</td>
<td>Not established till 1997</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Varney the vampire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• No sex please, we’re British</td>
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<td>• The Miserable Ghost</td>
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<td>• Circus times</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sir Knicketty Knox and the dragon</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Six foolish fishermen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Snow white and the seven used car salesmen</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>• A streetcar named Desire</td>
<td>• Grease</td>
<td>• Les Misérables #</td>
<td>Not established till 1997</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Busy body</td>
<td>• My fair lady</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Continental quilt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Steel magnolias</td>
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<td>• Snow white and the seven used car salesmen</td>
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Not established till 1997
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bunbury Repertory Club</th>
<th>Bunbury Musical Comedy Group</th>
<th>South West Opera Company</th>
<th>Stark Raven Theatre</th>
<th>MESH Youth Theatre</th>
<th>BREC</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>• Amadeus &lt;br&gt; • Don’t just lie there, say something &lt;br&gt; • Beyond a joke &lt;br&gt; • Confusions &lt;br&gt; • The first Mrs Fraser &lt;br&gt; • One Act Drama Festival Senior rep. &lt;br&gt; • The rad red roo &lt;br&gt; • The gumnut babes &lt;br&gt; • The girl’s gang</td>
<td>• Babes in arms &lt;br&gt; • A Broadway revue</td>
<td>• Carmen #</td>
<td>Not established till 1997</td>
<td>• Today (O’Hanlon &amp; MESH) &lt;br&gt; • Urbaneyes (ASHS)</td>
<td>• Carmen #</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>• Romeo and Juliet &lt;br&gt; • One day of the year (Seymour) &lt;br&gt; • Out of order &lt;br&gt; • Who walks in the dark &lt;br&gt; • One Act Drama Festival &lt;br&gt; • Ma Baker’s tonic</td>
<td>• Jesus Christ superstar &lt;br&gt; • Singin’ in the rain &lt;br&gt; • West Side Story</td>
<td>• The pirates of Penzance</td>
<td>• Cosi (Nowra) &lt;br&gt; • Theatre sports</td>
<td>• Woman in a wallet (Kooperman &amp; MESH)</td>
<td>• The pirates of Penzance &lt;br&gt; • West Side Story</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>• Fringe benefits &lt;br&gt; • Natural causes &lt;br&gt; • Wife begins at... &lt;br&gt; • Bitte spirit &lt;br&gt; • One Act Drama Festival &lt;br&gt; • House of Frankenstein</td>
<td>• Joseph and the amazing Technicolor dreamcoat &lt;br&gt; • That’s jazz &lt;br&gt; • The umpire strikes back</td>
<td>• Makin Moves (original) &lt;br&gt; • Barmaids (Thomson) &lt;br&gt; • Coming back (Flynn) &lt;br&gt; • Krapps last tape (Beckett) &lt;br&gt; • Theatre sports</td>
<td>• Joseph and the amazing Technicolor dreamcoat (Rice and Lloyd Webber) &lt;br&gt; • Shades of grey (Edwards and MESH) &lt;br&gt; • Camp Nikemare (Edwards and MESH)</td>
<td>• Blackrock (Enright)</td>
<td>• Song of Mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Bunbury Repertory Club</td>
<td>Bunbury Musical Comedy Group</td>
<td>South West Opera Company</td>
<td>Stark Raven Theatre</td>
<td>MESH Youth Theatre</td>
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</table>
| 1999 | • Pink string and sealing wax  
• Boeing Boeing  
• Key for two  
• They came from Mars  
• The late Edwina Black  
• One Act Drama Festival  
• Oliver  
• Robin the Hood  
• Fiddler on the roof #  
• Orpheus in the Underworld  
• Emma – Celebrazione (Pitts) | • Them (Edwards and MESH)  
• Tiramisu (Film)  
• Bloody Mafia (Film)  
• Lionell the lion (Film)  
• No sugar (Davis)  
• Sound of music | | | | | |
| 2000 | • Nasty neighbours  
• Not now darling  
• Don’t dress for dinner  
• Dead man’s hand  
• Brides of March  
• One Act Drama Festival  
• The Fantasticks  
• Something’s afoot  
• South Pacific #  
• The gondoliers # | • Man from Mukanupin (Hewett)  
• Going round the Ben (MESH)  
• Man from Mukanupin (Hewett)  
• The gondoliers # | • South Pacific # (MET productions) | | | | |
| 2001 | • Move over Mrs Markham  
• Wanted one body  
• Jake’s women  
• The man most likely to  
• Lend me a tenner  
• One Act Drama Festival  
• Best little whorehouse in Texas  
• Viva Mexico  
• Bessie and her traveling players (original)  
• You’re a good man, Charlie Brown #  
• Into the woods | • You’re a good man, Charlie Brown #  
• Into the woods | • Into the woods # (MET productions)  
• You’re a good man, Charlie Brown # (Sundance) | | | | |
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bunbury Repertory Club</th>
<th>Bunbury Musical Comedy Group</th>
<th>South West Opera Company</th>
<th>Stark Raven Theatre</th>
<th>MESH Youth Theatre</th>
<th>BREC</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 2002 | • A chorus of disapproval  
• Cash on delivery  
• Scrubbers  
• Popcorn  
• **Blackrock** (Enright)  
• One Act Drama Festival | • Lock up your daughters  
• Jungle juice  
• The curious savage  
• A swell party | • **The secret garden**  
• **Macbeth #**  
• **The Japanese affair** (Flynn) | • **Macbeth #** | • **Macbeth #** | • The wizard of Oz (Sundance) |
| 2003 | • Gingerbread lady  
• Sweet revenge  
• Caught on the hop  
• 2004  
• Caravan  
• Run for your wife  
• One Act Drama Festival | • **Jesus Christ superstar**  
• The best of Broadway | • **Broadway blitz** | | | • Ned Kelly – the musical (Livermore)  
• Waiting for Godot (SWETA) |
| 2004 | • Love’s a luxury  
• Dead on nine  
• Butterflies are free  
• The weekend  
• One Act Drama Festival | • **A night to remember**  
• Old Tyme Music Hall  
• **Cabaret & Carmen**  
• **Carousel** | • **Speaking in tongues** (Bovell) | | | • The Big Play Out |

**Key**

Australian texts **highlighted**

# Co-production
### Appendix B: Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre performances (touring and local) 1997 – 2003

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total tours</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Drama</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Run for your wife (TNT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Siren (PTC/CAWA)</td>
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<td>Tiger country (Deckchair/CAWA)</td>
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<td>The club (STC/SA)</td>
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<td>Same time another year (TNTC)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children &amp; Youth</strong></td>
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<td>Kaos World (KT)</td>
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<td>Wake Baby (Companions/Skylark/CAWA)</td>
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<td>Grasshopper’s journey</td>
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<td>Blinky Bill &amp; the extraordinary moon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noddy &amp; the magician’s bag</td>
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<td>Bugalugs the bum thief (SP/CAWA)</td>
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<td>Spot the dog, Elmo &amp; Flower Pot</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Blinky Bill, Tabalunga &amp; Skippy</td>
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<td>Snow white and the seven dwarfs</td>
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<td>Circus Quirkus 2003 Tour</td>
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<td>Wind in the willows</td>
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<td>1997</td>
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<td>Dionne Warwick, Aust. Army Big Band, Mary Duff, Freddie &amp; the dreamers, John Williamson, Anthony Peebles, John McNally, Sappho sings the blues, The fureys, Tommy Emmanuel, Eric Bogle. <strong>Total:</strong> 11, <strong>41%</strong></td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>The song company, Blind boys of Alabama, Gerry &amp; the pacemakers, Deltone, Foster &amp; Allen, John McNally, Daniel O'Donnell, Wendy Matthews, Kate Ceberano, Beatlemania, Stars of the phantom of the opera, Blue rinse ensemble, Weddings, parties anything, Gallow glass, Hair to here – John Waters, Graeme Connors. <strong>Total:</strong> 16, <strong>42%</strong></td>
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<td>Drifers, Blue rinse ensemble, Anthony Peebles, Dutch College Swing Band, Elvis to the Max, Girl Power, Graeme Connors, Las Vegas legends, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Elvis across America, Wendy Matthews, Elvis across America. <strong>Total:</strong> 12, <strong>34%</strong></td>
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<td>Neil Murray &amp; Kavisha Mazzella, Flook, The singer or the song, To dance on the moon, The Furey Bros, The Four Kinsmen, Foster &amp; Allen, ABBA – thanks for the music 2001, The four kinsmen, Paul Kelly, Gina Jeffreys, Marion Martin, Elvis to the Max, Jade Hurley. <strong>Total:</strong> 12, <strong>35%</strong></td>
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<td>Three Irish tenors, Drifers, All in love is fair, Buddy’s back, Unforgettable, Foster &amp; Allen, John Williamson, Adam Brand – Built for speed tour 2002, Gene Pitney 2002, Memories of the Theatre Royal. <strong>Total:</strong> 11, <strong>32%</strong></td>
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<td>Soweto Gospel Choir, Kasey Chambers, Stayin Alive – the BeeGee's story, Roy Orbison Tribute, Paul Kelly Tour 2003, Queen – it’s a kind of magic, Lee Kernaghan, Waifs, James Reyne &amp; Darryl Braithwaite, Peter Allen songbook, Marion Martin, ABBA Thanks for the music, Adam Harvey &amp; Beccey Cole, Billy Thorpe. <strong>Total:</strong> 14, <strong>37%</strong></td>
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<td>• Coppelia (WABC/CAWA)</td>
<td>• <em>Swan Lake - St Petersburg Ballet</em></td>
<td>• <em>Una historia del tango</em></td>
<td>• Red Army Choir &amp; Dance Ensemble</td>
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ACHPER  Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation
BSC     Bell Shakespeare Company, Sydney
BSTC    Black Swan Theatre Company, Perth
BDT     Buzz Dance Theatre, Perth
CAWA    Country Arts WA
DT      Deckchair Theatre, Fremantle
EF      Effie Crump Theatre, Perth
KT      Kaos Theatre, Perth
PTC     Perth Theatre Company
RT      Regal Theatre, Perth
SP      Spare Parts Puppet Theatre, Fremantle
STC/SA  State Theatre Company, South Australia
TNTC    Twelfth Night Theatre Company, Brisbane
WABC    Western Australian Ballet Company
WAO     Western Australian Opera
WASO    Western Australian Symphony Orchestra
#       Co-production or Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre funding
Appendix C: Photographs

Photograph 1
Aerial view of inner-city Bunbury including Bicentennial Square, Bunbury Tower and Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. Leschenault Estuary lower right; ocean at top of photograph. Photograph courtesy Jeff Henderson Photographics.

Photograph 2
Bunbury. View from Marlston Hill lookout facing east. Background: Bunbury Port. Foreground: Recent urban redevelopment for commercial, recreational and residential use. Koombana Bay to left; Leschenault Estuary to the right.
Photograph 3
Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre: Front (Weary, 2004)

Photograph 4
Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre with Bunbury Tower behind. (Weary, 2004)
Photograph 5
Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre Foyer

(Weary, 2004)

Photograph 6
Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre Backstage graffiti wall

(Weary, 2004)
Photograph 7
Graham Bricknell Music Shell, Bicentennial Square, Bunbury

Photograph 8
Graham Bricknell Music Shell, Bicentennial Square, Bunbury – view through to Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre.
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Monagle, Peter (telephone)
Palfrey-Jones, Gary

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Mr Andrew John Farrant, General Manager, CountryArts WA and Ms Rosalind Brown, Arts Worker, CountryArts WA
Mr Anthony Philip Blee, Executive Officer, City Life, City of Bunbury
Mr Graham John Harvey, Manager, Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre
Ms Jo Marie O’Dea, Arts Event Coordinator
Ms Robyn McCarron, Creative Industries Program, Faculty of Regional Professional Studies, Edith Cowan University

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Bunbury Herald
Bunbury Mail
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The Australian
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Websites: Bunbury

www.bunburyentertainment.com