

Heartwork



Great arts stories from regional Australia

Heartwork

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This book follows a similar publication in 1998, *The Great Yarn Event and Other Arts Stories from Regional Australia*.
Cover image: Mallacoota's Easter Festival 1997, *Sunset Ritual*, Betka Beach Lagoon, artist: Catherine Larkins, photo: Lindy Bartholomew.



Heartwork

Great arts stories from regional Australia

Foreword Nicola Downer

President, Regional Arts Australia



Regional Australia is a vast and diverse landscape of people and communities with many stories to tell. The arts in regional Australia play an important role in telling these stories.

Heartwork: great arts stories from regional Australia showcases 35 arts projects from

across regional Australia, highlighting the quality and scope of artistic activity occurring beyond the major metropolitan centres.

This is Regional Arts Australia's second publication in partnership with the Australia Council. Its predecessor was published in 1998, *The Great Yarn Event and Other Arts Stories from Regional Australia*, which was a huge success in raising the awareness of the arts in regional communities.

Since 1998 many changes have taken place in the arts across regional Australia, including changes to funding arrangements so that more people are receiving arts funding that is delivered and administered at a local level.

There is a new enthusiasm for projects that revitalise communities through collaborative processes and celebrations. More projects/programs have greater emphasis on leaving skills and resources in communities so they can further their own arts activities. Many of the projects occurring now are larger in scale, involve more people, draw on new audiences and have specific outcomes for the participants.

Regional communities have used their respective strengths, most notably committed and passionate local arts volunteers, to ensure collaborative and cooperative approaches to the development of projects and the community recognition of these arts projects.

Regional Arts Australia works tirelessly to promote opportunities for regional communities to access and participate in the arts. We recognise how crucial the arts are to community development generally and the role that the arts plays in building community pride and regional distinctiveness.

During my tenure as president I have always been impressed by what can and what has been achieved when local communities share their vision and build arts projects and programs, which not only make them proud, but leave skills in the community for the benefit of future generations. The publication *Heartwork* clearly demonstrates the importance of the arts in regional Australia for communities

working together to build confidence, and develop new opportunities for themselves.

I commend *Heartwork* to you. I have no doubt that you will be both impressed and inspired by the commitment and energy of regional communities across Australia in demonstrating to us all that the arts can and do make a difference.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nicola Downer".

Nicola Downer
President, Regional Arts Australia

Foreword Jennifer Bott

CEO, Australia Council



This publication is proof that the cultural landscape of regional Australia is now even richer since *The Great Yarn Event* was published in 1998.

Heartwork celebrates and profiles the great talent and achievements of regional and remote artists in Australia. Regional creators are pursuing

more complex, challenging and sophisticated projects. Partnerships, multiple artforms, Internet technology and complex organisation over distances and time are all part of the mix. The dialogue includes city and rural exchange—going both ways—and a heartening involvement of young people, who often face difficult challenges as the regional economy changes. And the range here is from the backyard to, in some instances, the international stage.

Heartwork is aimed at a broad audience. It is intended to provide models, inspiration and ideas. It sends a clear message that artists can thrive in regional Australia. For audiences: there is no lack of excellent art out there, and you can be a spectator, or better still, you can participate too. And I'm sure city dwellers who read this publication will find a new motivation for packing their bags and heading to the country—they will be rewarded by a cultural experience probably unlike any they have had before.

Volunteers, community groups, local governments and many others have worked for years to create a rich cultural life in regional Australia, with or without government funding. The Australia Council has continued to pursue its regional arts development policy and has been pleased to join forces with Regional Arts Australia to achieve our common goals. Undoubtedly a vital factor driving the growth of regional arts over recent years has been the increased funding and strategic focus that government agencies have given to regional arts.

However, this is not the time to rest. Ensuring a sustainable future for regional and remote artists remains a challenge. The Australia Council recognises the tremendous efforts that organisations, governments and individuals have

already made. We will continue to push for all levels of government to work together and support the arts right across Australia. Regional and remote communities are reaping the benefits of a rich cultural life and they should continue to do so.

A handwritten signature in gold ink that reads "Jennifer Bott". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Jennifer Bott
CEO, Australia Council

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Preface

'If we don't design the future someone or something else will design it for us.'

Edward De Bono

It could be said that the older and more mature a society, the more the collective interests of that society seem to focus away from avarice and acquisition, towards spirituality and culture. Truly great nations that have had the opportunity to mature for, say, 60,000 years on great island chunks of a broken Gondwanaland, and to absorb recent events such as the Ice Age and the arrival of high-tech wind powered vessels, tend to determine their future through these twin preoccupations. This commitment to country and story used to seem naive to me. Now I can see its maturity.

Nations are narrations, and narration comes in many forms of story—literary, kinetic, statistical, musical, academic, political, philosophical. Stories are the way we discuss the future. This future is nothing more than an idea in the present, which we invent, detail and mull over. These ideas come to us packaged in story that we unwrap, in a discussion of ideas we call culture.

Although the arts is only one form of story used in this discussion, it's important in a young society because it is the one avenue where subjective, unsubstantiated and

maverick story making is legitimised as self-expression, alongside academic, statistical, empirical or political-based discussions. In our national narration, if you are a different colour, or a minority, or in prison, or if you live in locations or demographics that are seen as unimportant, then self-expression—your discussion of ideas—can be a very powerful act in re-designing a better future for you and your community.

Queen Victoria said, 'Beware of artists, because they mix with all classes and are therefore dangerous'. This is because the act of self-expression involves imagining the future, and this cannot be easily controlled by social policy.

We tend to let the media, politicians and the makers of social policy, among others, have the most influence in inventing our future, and as artists it is easy to abdicate our responsibility, and allow art to be viewed as merely recreational.

With social policy being mostly dispensed from the top down, with few opportunities for people to influence the discussion from the community up, the arts can work as a conduit for individuals and communities to have input into that discussion, through mentored self-expression and participation. Participation in excellent story making, when coupled with savvy use of the media, can spread through marginalised communities and marginal electorates. These stories can then be used to influence policy, to reduce marginalisation, and help invent a new future with a more inclusive narration.

In creating our future story, the media has its place, and so do politics and academia. And art is important too. However it would be a mistake to see the arts as either more important than other forms of 'story', or to miss its significance altogether.

The arts bring nuance, the arts act as a canary in the coalmine, the arts allow for the maverick vision, the arts ignore committee, the arts don't 'stay on message'; all vital for keeping the 'discussion of the future' inclusive. When participatory processes are used in making art, and it is facilitated by our best artists through strong craft, the work becomes potent and vital.

This publication documents a range of projects from communities that can play a vital role in remaking the national narrative. Our collective responsibility is to make sure our work enters the discussion, to keep making good art, to seek critique and to think long term. Geography, population, access, resource and infrastructure all affect the process of making art and inventing the future. Whether we live and work in a regional or metropolitan setting, some opportunities make it easier and some circumstances hinder it.

Congratulations to the story makers and those who make the story making possible.

Scott Rankin
National Artistic Director and co-founder, BIG hART Inc.

Scott has won two Premier's Awards for literature, a human rights award, the 2002 Ros Bower Award and is currently the recipient of an Australia Council Fellowship.

BIG hART is a multi-artform organisation established to make art with people or groups experiencing the effects of marginalisation in a rural, regional or isolated context. It was established by Scott Rankin and John Bakes in 1992 and was incorporated and registered as a tax-deductible charity in 1996. It is staffed by mid-career artists, trains young artists and mentors emerging artists.

Big hART has won an AFI Award, five CHOGM Awards, a Law Foundation Award, ATOM Award and been included in many film and arts festivals including Melbourne International Arts Festival, Adelaide Arts Festival and Ten Days on the Island.

Who, what and why

Information about the projects and programs profiled in this publication were supplied by their project coordinators or administering body. A reference advisory group of representatives from Regional Arts Australia and the Australia Council invited submissions from across Australia and chose 35 stories from 96 submissions. In this selection the aim was to present a broad range of arts activities from across regional Australia. However, this book is not a comprehensive collection of significant activities in regional Australia. Rather, it is a snapshot of a very complex and progressive cultural landscape.

All of the projects in this publication have accomplished the outcomes they set out to achieve. They have employed new ways of presenting, occurred in new locations or reached new audiences. A common thread linking them all is the great capacity of regional arts organisations and artists for innovation and responsiveness to change.

These stories explain what motivated the projects, and the key issues, processes and resources used to complete them. The publication also highlights the elements which contribute to successful arts practice, as well as the challenges.

The stories are categorised under six headings, each describing major themes or contexts for the arts in regional Australia.

- 1. Artists and communities**
working together to develop and present quality art
- 2. A springboard for young people**
providing new skills, life opportunities and a sense of self
- 3. Celebrating place and history**
promoting a distinctive regional identity
- 4. Sustaining arts practice**
enabling artists to develop skills and promote themselves
- 5. Creativity and diversity**
projects that draw on many Australian stories
- 6. Art out there**
providing art in remote areas or in new ways

Many of the projects could be placed under more than one heading. In the context of this publication, they are sorted by their most significant characteristics.