

Margaret Smith talk for Future Feminist Archive Symposium/Workshop at BRAG 18 JULY 2015

(Symposium and Workshop on how to use Design and Art Australia Online)

The establishment of the organisation that morphed into Arts OutWest with a focus on creating a platform for art projects such as Full Flight and the Regional Caravan.

Back into the mists of antiquity but it's worth looking back to where we came from because it was a time so radically different, hard to imagine how very different. The arts and their part in our lives were seen as peripheral, only a hobby, the so-called higher arts 'only for the silvertails'; local government still tended to see their role as being just for 'rates, roads and rubbish'.

It's worth mentioning also the attitudes to women working in other than traditionally "acceptable" areas such as teaching, nursing or secretarial.

The road to the establishment of what is now Arts OutWest as a stable continuing organisation was an evolving, challenging and, at times, draining process, affected by funding policies at national, state and local government levels. The input and support from the region was the great strength throughout.

With the establishment of the Australian Council for the Arts [^] and the great increase in funding for the arts with the Whitlam Government, came the possibility of great changes in attitudes to, development of and accessibility to the arts.

In this region, the Central West, the Regional Advisory Council, an instrumentality of the Department of Decentralisation and Development, applied to the then Australian Council for the Arts, for funding for a six week position for a Field Officer to find out whether "some degree of communication and co-operation would be of assistance to the arts in the region". The RAC was also campaigning for the establishment of a branch of the Conservatorium of Music.

Before this, in regional areas, the arts were mainly activity groups in the community. There were Arts Council performing arts tours, ABC concerts in the larger centres, festivals such as the Orange Festival of Arts, the start of some development such as the art gallery society in Bathurst, but there were no professionally employed people in the arts to work to the community.

In 1975 the BODC was established and this provided another development avenue.

This is the background to the establishment of the organisation now known as Arts OutWest. From this early start, there were three strands that built and strengthened the organisation that supported and supports arts development in the Central West – these were:

- the regional community
- the employment of arts personnel, both ongoing or short-term for particular projects, working to the community
- the evolution of a supporting regional organisation.

Without taking up too much time on what was quite a long process, a bit of information on these three strands.

Establishing good regional communication was essential. This enabled local groups to share resources and to know what was going on in nearby centres. This meant they could engage artists to run workshops in particular arts areas. It had previously been difficult and often impossible for groups to attract sufficient numbers to run workshops to increase skills. It also meant we could work together to achieve things that would otherwise have not happened.

Side by side with these went projects involving artists in the community such as workshops, with Festivals such as the Orange Festival of Arts, the Condobolin Festival, music camps short term workshops in particular fields; then there were extensions of visits to the region by performing arts groups who might do community as well as schools performances and workshops with local groups.

Another aspect was longer term residencies such as the Westwind Ensemble, directors working with the Central West Drama Association; and on the permanent front, the staffing of what was then known as the Central West Music Centre, now the Con, employment of directors of the regional galleries in Bathurst and Orange, building and staffing of the Orange Civic Centre and, later, BMEC.

Finally with the supporting organisation, the changes were:

- changes in funding – the Australia Council decided to cease funding field officerstoo many areas wanted one.....but the region felt strongly that the project should continue so this went to the Australia Council as a doubtful possibility but was ultimately funded as a regional community arts officer.
- The State Government eventually became involved in funding; administrative support came from the Department D & D until.....the State Government decided to close down regional advisory councils.
- So began the process to find a home and support for the project and there were several possibilities but finally it was housed at the then Mitchell College, now CSU, still with some state government in kind support such as access to the government printer.
- On the funding front, local government became involved. At that stage there were 23 local government councils in the region, subsequently amalgamated to 14, of varying sizes and approaches. We were anxious that their input be an equitable one so that no area be disadvantaged and so they were asked to contribute on a per capita basis – and, when the annual requests went in, this tended to result in considerable very public discussion in some areas.
- We had also to establish an organisation that was representative of the region so there was a representative from each local government area, either a member of the council or a member of the arts community nominated by council who had the responsibility of reporting back to council and their community. Regional directors of appropriate state government departments and, of course, the Principal of the

College were also members. This membership gave the organisation great strength and reach. An executive dealt with matters between meetings of the full organisation.

With the many changes in policy and funding at National and State level, a regional organisation had to be established if the project were to continue. It was always important that the project be answerable to the region. This was quite a process but it worked well and the project was able to weather the continuing storms that attacked the funding from time to time with, at all times, very strong support from the region.

Funding and in kind support for projects and for artists resident in the community increased over the years. Full Flight, a project that was to have Vivienne Binns as the 'core' artist in residence in the region, with other artists working on particular aspects such as dance with Margaret Walker, drama with Gordon Beattie. When we looked at setting up me Full Flight, the matter of accommodation around the region came up and Viv suggested a caravan. Fund raising acquired the caravan and the mechanics of moving it from one place to the next was in kind support from the local government council to whose area it was going. The caravan was subsequently used by other artists in the region such as directors working with the Central West Drama Association and later on sold when no longer needed.

Without the project being regional, sharing resources, increasing experiences of artists in the community, art projects such as Full Flight would have been unlikely to happen, the work of artists understood, the development of the arts through working with artists, having artists living and working in the community much slower and less satisfying.

This is a brief gallop through the establishment of the organisation which now, 41 years after the start of the project, is still going strong and continuing in the support and development of the arts in the region, with more established ongoing financial support. Without the operation being on a regional basis, arts support and development would have been much more difficult.