



Australian Government



showcasing creativity

PROGRAMMING AND
PRESENTING FIRST NATIONS
PERFORMING ARTS

Showcasing Creativity Programming and presenting First Nations performing arts

September 2016

Readers should be aware that this report may contain references to and images of members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who have passed away.

The Australia Council for the Arts respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures. These lands and waters are the location of the longest continuing cultures and civilisations in the world. At the time of European arrival this place was and is home to some 500 distinct nations and each has their own name. Therefore we acknowledge the right of all peoples to claim, control and enhance their cultural inheritance and the names by which they are known.

Operating across these nations, the Australia Council uses the words 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably in this report to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, and their arts and cultures. We understand that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not comfortable with some of these words. The Australia Council means only respect when we use these words.

This report is based on research conducted by Jackie Bailey and Hung-Yen Yang, BYP Group, <http://bypgroup.com>

Additional analysis and writing by Mandy Whitford and Marija Vodjanoska from the Australia Council for the Arts.

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COVER: *Cut The Sky*, Marrugeku. Credit: Jon Green. BELOW: *So Long Suckers* Peter Docker, Emmanuel James Brown and Ian Wilkes, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. Credit: Simon Pynt





“ I thought it was too hard hitting a work for this community. I didn’t have the courage to do it. And I probably should have... It was such a strong, brave, fabulous work. ”

Research participant, *Showcasing Creativity*



FOREWORD

First Nations performing arts are diverse expressions of continuing living culture and of the narrative of Australia as a nation. They are a source of great pride to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a reflection of cultural strength, resilience, innovation and artistic excellence.

A culturally ambitious nation cherishes First Nations arts as an expression of the heart, the history, and the future of our evolving national identity.

Showcasing Creativity is the second of two deep-dive research pieces commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts, with the aim of providing an evidence base to underpin a strong First Nations arts ecology, and a rich and diverse art sector: a sector that builds audiences for First Nations arts; and showcases First Nations creativity, talent and stories.

Showcasing Creativity is a provocation to the arts sector. It asks for an examination of the assumptions on which programming and presenting decisions are made across the country. It provides the opportunity and an evidence base to inform an important cultural dialogue in the performing arts.

Knowledge is power, and the information contained in these reports is also intended for use by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts sector to increase opportunities to activate First Nations arts.

I sincerely thank those who participated for their frank contributions to this important research piece. There is a willingness within the sector to look critically at programming decisions, and to become leaders for a culturally ambitious nation that cherishes First Nations cultural expressions.

I invite the sector to continue to participate in the conversation about the difficult but necessary question of what equality, representation, and cultural and artistic leadership require of us. The performing arts have such a vital role to play in celebrating, reflecting and keeping our diverse cultures strong; sharing our stories; and connecting us all.

Lydia Miller

Executive Director

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts



The Shadow King 2013, Malthouse Theatre. Credit: Jeff Busby



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Table of contents	5
Key terms used in this report	6
Introduction	7
Key findings	9
Research approach	10
1. First Nations performing arts in Australia	12
Current level of programming	12
Who is presenting First Nations works	12
How presenters find First Nation works	14
Who is producing First Nations works	14
Creative representation and control	15
Where work is programmed	15
Types of works presented	16
2. Presenting First Nations works to audiences	18
Target audiences	18
Marketing messages	19
Case study: <i>Head Full of Love</i>	21
Overcoming preconceptions	23
How works are received by audiences	23
Marketing capacity	24
3. Decisions about programming	25
Why presenters program First Nations work	25
a. Audience development	25
b. Personal motivations and organisational leadership	29
c. Artistic excellence	30
d. The integrity of works	31
e. Exposure to works and relationships with artists	31
4. Perceived obstacles to programming	32
a. Financial risk	32
b. Tokenism in programming	34
c. Concerns about serious themes	35
d. Fear of 'doing work wrong'	38
e. Discrimination and racism	40
Footnotes	43

KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT



First Nations:

The Australia Council for the Arts uses the words 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably in this report to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, and their arts and cultures.

Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA):

The national peak body representing and supporting performing arts presenters across Australia.

First Nations performing arts works:

A broad definition was used for the purposes of mapping programming in this report. It includes performing art works with Indigenous creative involvement; cultural expression; or Indigenous social, political or historical content. This definition therefore captures a broader range of activity than works for which there is Indigenous creative control; however levels of Indigenous representation and creative control are also explored in the report.

Presenters:

Venues and festivals at which performing arts are presented. Presenters range from small independent performing arts venues in regional Australia, to state-based arts organisations and major festivals. This includes presenters who take financial risks on presenting work and/or present third party work. It excludes music venues like pubs or clubs.

Mainstream presenters refers to venues and festivals that present a range of works that represent people and communities from various cultural backgrounds; which are not controlled or managed solely by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and which are not solely presenting Indigenous arts. The programming and decision-making of mainstream presenters is the main focus of this report.

Indigenous presenters refers to Indigenous festivals, and Indigenous owned and managed venues that solely present Indigenous arts; who were also included in parts of the research.

Producers:

Those that make and sell, or represent First Nations arts to presenters. This may include producer/presenters. Producers and artist representatives not working in the First Nations arts ecology were out of scope for this project, as we were specifically interested in challenges in connecting audiences to First Nations arts.

Work:

For the purposes of mapping programming in this report, a work was defined as the showing of a performing art work by a single presenter. Multiple showings in a venue as part of a season were counted as one work. However, if five different presenters show the same work (for example in a tour), that was counted as five works.

INTRODUCTION

“Our theatres need to tell contemporary Australian stories and it’s incumbent upon us if we’re telling those contemporary Australian stories, to tell the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story.”

Research participant, *Showcasing Creativity*

First Nations performing arts are unique, contemporary and diverse expressions of the world’s longest continuously living cultures. They embody a proud tradition of telling stories to connect generations and communities.

The Australia Council’s national *Arts Participation Survey* found that nine in ten Australians (92%) believe that First Nations arts are an important part of Australia’s culture, and 64% have a strong or growing interest in First Nations arts. Yet only one in four (24%) attend, and less than half (46%) agree that First Nations arts are well represented in Australia.¹ These findings highlight an opportunity to further develop audiences for First Nations arts in Australia, including through ensuring that Australians have access to a variety of high quality First Nations arts experiences.

Showcasing Creativity is the latest study in a series commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts with the aim of supporting the sector to close the gap between interest and attendance; thereby connecting more Australians to First Nations arts experiences and increasing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

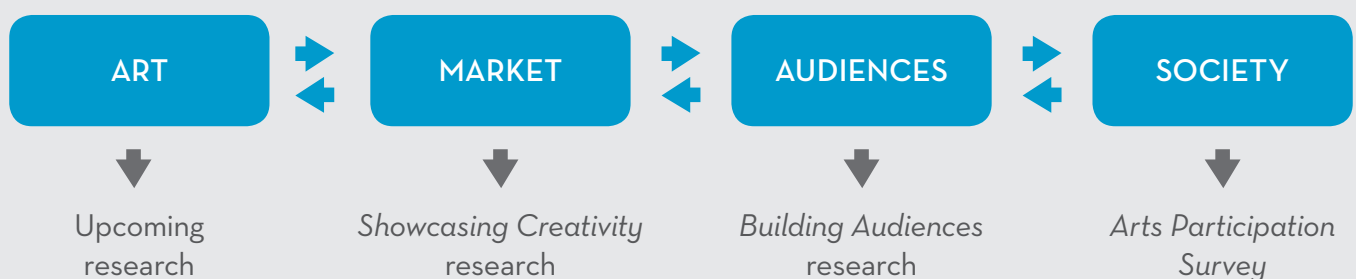
The previous study, *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*² explored this opportunity from the perspective of audiences, both existing and potential. *Showcasing Creativity: Programming and Presenting First Nations Arts* explores the gap from the perspective of those who facilitate works being made public and promoting works to audiences: presenters (venues and festivals) and producers (those that sell or represent First Nations arts to presenters).

The Australia Council will undertake a third study exploring the creation of artistic works. The national *Arts Participation Survey* will enable periodic tracking of Australians’ interests, attitudes and attendance, with the next edition fielded in late 2016 (Figure 1).

Figure One: The First Nations performing arts supply chain and Australia Council research

The two central research studies are complete.

The *Arts Participation Survey* is conducted at 3-4 year intervals.



This report interrogates and adds to the findings and strategies from *Building Audiences*. The *Building Audiences* research found that there are six key motivators for audiences to engage with First Nations art experiences: an attraction to stories, contemporary experiences, unique experiences, personal connections, and a desire for cultural insight and deeper understanding. Perceived barriers for audiences are uncertainty about how to engage, a lack of awareness or visibility of First Nations programming, and a 'serious' image.

The *Building Audiences* research also found that greater recognition of First Nations arts and more mainstream opportunities are sought. However, greater insight is needed to understand the challenges and opportunities within the distribution aspects of the ecology (or the 'market'); and to address the lack of previous research and insight about marketing First Nations arts.³

Showcasing Creativity is a report on the level and types of First Nations performing arts programming in Australia's mainstream venues and festivals (Chapter 1); the presenting of works to audiences (Chapter 2); and the motivations (Chapter 3) and obstacles (Chapter 4) for presenters and producers. It provides an opportunity and evidence base for the broader arts sector to examine decision making processes about programming, presenting and marketing First Nations works to Australian audiences. And it aims to promote and inform discussion about what is needed to achieve a culturally ambitious nation that cherishes First Nations arts.

SONG the story of a girl, a bird and a teapot - Waiata Telfer. Credit: Darren Thomas

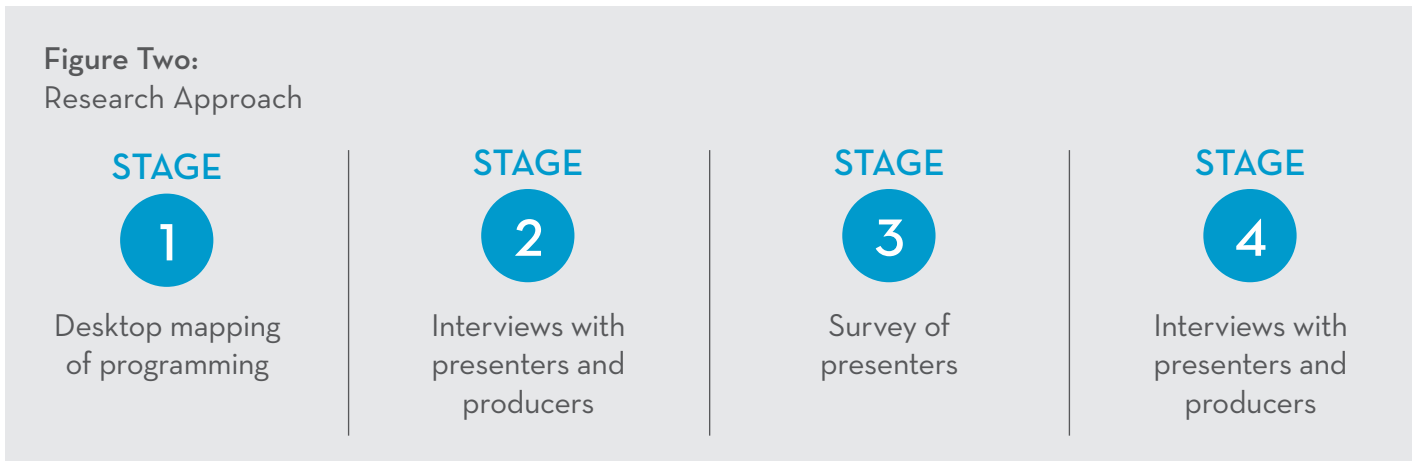


KEY FINDINGS

1. National mapping of the programs of 135 Australian presenters found that First Nations performing arts are under-represented in Australia's mainstream venues and festivals. They comprised around 2% of the almost 6000 works programmed in 2015 seasons.
2. Almost half of Australian presenters did not appear to program works with First Nations creative control, involvement or content in 2015, including major venues and festivals that presented over 100 works each.
3. Some presenters program a comparatively large number of First Nations works. Just 12 presenters (9%) were responsible for more than a third of all First Nations programming in 2015. Personal motivations, organisational leadership and exposure through peers are key motivations for programming.
4. *The Building Audiences* research found that audiences have a strong image of First Nations arts as 'traditional,' but that they are highly motivated to engage with 'contemporary' works.⁴ The national mapping showed that in 2015 more than eight in ten First Nations works were contemporary.
5. Over one third of works were small in scale with less than five performers. Presenters tend to select either accessible works with a known brand, or smaller works which are low cost to stage. Smaller works can enable presenters to show riskier content.
6. Presenters and producers interviewed said decision-makers can be tokenistic when considering First Nations works. Some lack the knowledge or interest to source small-to-medium works. Building sector capacity for First Nations creatives to connect to presenters through showcases and networks is critical to growing the presentation and programming of First-Nations works. Presenters called for long-term funding support for small, medium and large works, and First Nations companies.
7. According to presenters, audience satisfaction is high irrespective of box office. The artistic excellence or integrity of First Nations works are key motivations for programming. Shortfalls in box office are not about the likeability of works, but about marketing reach. There is a need to build marketing skills to reach new audiences.
8. Presenters who are motivated to challenge and build their audiences are more likely to program First Nations works. Opportunities for increased audiences lie in 'potential audiences,' 'risk-taking audiences' in metropolitan areas and the 'schools market'. Regional presenters could tour popular artists, whilst investing in long-term community engagement, and works with a local angle.
9. Presenters said that financial risk is the main deterrent to programming First Nations work. Available, brand-name First Nations works are often too expensive, whilst smaller works are considered financially risky because they lack brand recognition.
10. Concerns about serious themes are both an obstacle to programming and a marketing challenge for First Nations arts. Presenters called for more entertaining and accessible works as an entry point for audiences, and new or 'fresh' approaches to difficult content. Some presenters spoke of ways to engage non-Indigenous audiences in works with political content or a willingness to challenge audiences.
11. Many presenters are afraid that they will get the process of selecting, staging, presenting and marketing works to audiences 'wrong'. There is a need to build sector capacity for cross-cultural engagement both ways; between mainstream presenters, and First Nations artists and communities. E.g.,
 - marketing skills and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers
 - marketing and community engagement skills for presenters
 - increasing exposure and connections between presenters, creatives and communities
 - initiatives to build performing arts centres' understanding and confidence for programming First Nations work.
12. Presenters and producers stated that Australia's underlying race relations impact programming decisions, and are an obstacle to presenting First Nations works. Through this research, they called for:
 - proactive initiatives, long-term planning and support to build First Nations representation across the sector and in programming; and
 - personal, organisational and sector-wide leadership and commitment to an important two-way cultural conversation.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This project examines the programming and marketing of First Nations performing arts in Australia from multiple perspectives. A four stage mixed methods approach was used as illustrated in Figure 2. The approach draws on a range of data sources to map and quantify First Nations programming, and to explore challenges and opportunities for building audiences for First Nations arts from the perspective of presenters and producers. The research on which this report is based was undertaken by Jackie Bailey and Hung-Yen Yang of BYP Group.



STAGE ONE: MAPPING OF FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAMMING

Desktop research of publicly available programs from mainstream Australian performing arts venues and festivals was conducted to build an evidence base and benchmark for the level of First Nations performing arts representation across Australia. The mapping addressed questions such as: how much First Nations performing arts is currently presented across mainstream venues, what types and by whom?

Using the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA) membership list and Australia Council networks, 135 mainstream presenters were identified. Presenters ranged from small independent performing arts venues in regional Australia, to state-based arts organisations and major festivals. The aim was to capture information on the last full season, so the reference year was either 2015, or 2014-15, depending on the presenter's available program.

Works counted were part of the season brochure, subscription season, or otherwise included in official programming. Community outreach events such as community concerts or shows held off-site were included if they were referred to in a venue's official program. Workshops and seminars were not included. Multiple showings in a venue as part of a season were counted as one work. However, if five different presenters showed the same work (for example in a tour), that was counted as five works.

The definition of First Nations performing arts used for the count was broad. It included Indigenous creative involvement, cultural expression, or Indigenous social, political or historical content. This captured a broader range of activity than works for which there was Indigenous creative control. However, it should be noted that the methodology was susceptible to undercount if Indigenous creative involvement or content was not evident to the researchers based on the publicly available information. Furthermore, a complete year's program was not available for all presenters. The results therefore provide an indicative estimate rather than precise picture of First Nations performing arts representation.

STAGES TWO AND FOUR: INTERVIEWS WITH PRESENTERS AND PRODUCERS

The interviews with presenters and producers were conducted over two stages. Twenty preliminary interviews were undertaken before the survey (Stage Two), and 20 follow-up interviews after the survey (at Stage Four). Interviews were conducted by telephone for 45–60 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Overall, 40 interviews were conducted with:

- 25 presenters (venues and festivals)
- five presenter/producers (who sell or represent First Nations arts to presenters; and are also a presenter)
- 10 producers (who sell or represent First Nations arts to presenters).

Interviewees were selected to provide a representative sample across regional and metropolitan organisations; large and small organisations; and presenters and producers. Of the 40 interviewees, 33 had either produced or presented First Nations work in the previous 12 months and seven had not.

STAGE THREE: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PERFORMING ARTS SURVEY

The survey was distributed to approximately 200 presenters and producers, using APACA and Australia Council networks. A total of 61 complete responses were received, representing a response rate of 32%.

The respondents can be segmented as follows:

- 39 mainstream presenters who had programmed First Nations work in the last two years
- five presenters who had not programmed First Nations work in the last two years
- six Indigenous presenters (who solely present First Nations arts)
- 11 producers (who sell or represent First Nations arts to presenters).

Results for the six Indigenous presenters and the 11 producers have not been included in the quantitative analysis published in the current report, which focuses on programming, marketing and decision making by mainstream presenters who do not solely present First Nations arts.

The 44 mainstream presenters who responded to the survey included two festivals and three major performing arts organisations. Almost half (43%) of the 44 presenters surveyed were from regional or remote areas, which is representative of the national picture: 42% of the 135 mainstream presenters included in the mapping of presenters and programming nationally were from regional or remote Australia.

In the previous two years, 39 of the survey respondents (89%) had presented First Nations work. The survey results published in this report focus on the responses of these 39 mainstream presenters who had programmed First Nations work in the last two years, with the exception of Figure 14: Obstacles to presenting/presenting more First Nations work (page 32). Figure 14 includes responses for all 44 mainstream presenters surveyed.

1. FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA



CURRENT LEVEL OF PROGRAMMING

First Nations performing arts are under-represented in Australia's mainstream performing arts venues and festivals, comprising approximately 2% of the almost 6000 works programmed in 2015 seasons.⁵

Based on the available information, almost half of the 135 presenters whose programs were examined through this research did not appear to present any works with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander creative involvement or content in their 2015 season. This included major arts festivals and venues that presented over 100 works.

One third of Australian venues and festivals presented one work with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander creative involvement or content in 2015. This group also included a number of large presenters, for whom this one First Nations work represented 3% or less of their programming for the year.

Discussion

This provides both a benchmark, and an evidence base that confirms perceptions uncovered in previous research that there is a lack of First Nations work presented in Australia. Participants in the *Building Audiences* research spoke about their lack of awareness of First Nations programming in Australia.⁶ Whilst this could be due to a marketing short-fall, the data confirms that there is a programming shortfall.

Less than half (46%) of respondents to Australia Council's national *Arts Participation Survey* agreed that First Nations arts are well represented in Australia. Those with an interest in First Nations arts are more likely to believe that First Nations arts are not well represented.⁷ This indicates that there is potential to reach additional Australians who are interested in First Nations arts through increased programming.

WHO IS PRESENTING FIRST NATIONS WORKS

Results from the national mapping showed that a small number of presenters program a disproportionately high number of First Nations works. Just 12 presenters (9%) were responsible for more than a third of all First Nations performing arts programming in 2015. These were:

- Darwin Festival
- Footscray Community Arts Centre
- Carriageworks
- Orange Civic Theatre
- Sydney Festival
- Canberra Theatre Centre
- Illawarra Performing Arts Centre
- Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre (The Joan)
- Perth Theatre Trust
- Brisbane Powerhouse
- Melbourne International Comedy Festival
- Belvoir.

For Belvoir these works represented a quarter of their 2015 programming.

For a small number of mainly smaller presenters, First Nations work comprised almost a fifth of their total work programmed. These were:

- NORPA (Northern Rivers Performing Arts)
- City of Port Philip
- Canberra Theatre Centre
- Broome Civic Centre
- Campbelltown Arts Centre
- Goldfield Arts Centre.

Three of the presenters mentioned above are members of the Blak Lines consortium: Carriageworks, Orange Civic Theatre and NORPA. Established in July 2011, Blak Lines is a national performing arts touring initiative managed by Performing Lines. Its objectives include increased touring opportunities for First Nations works via a group of high functioning national Indigenous touring consortium presenters;⁸ development of meaningful relationships between presenters, audiences, producers/artists and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; increased impact of First Nations works through pro-active community engagement strategies; and a targeted presenter-specific approach to marketing. In 2015 Queensland Theatre Company's *Head Full of Love* was toured nationally by Performing Lines as part of the Blak Lines initiative. This was the most presented First Nations work in 2015.

Beautiful One Day, ILBIJERRI, Belvoir and Version 1.0. Credit: Ponch Hawkes



HOW PRESENTERS FIND FIRST NATIONS WORKS

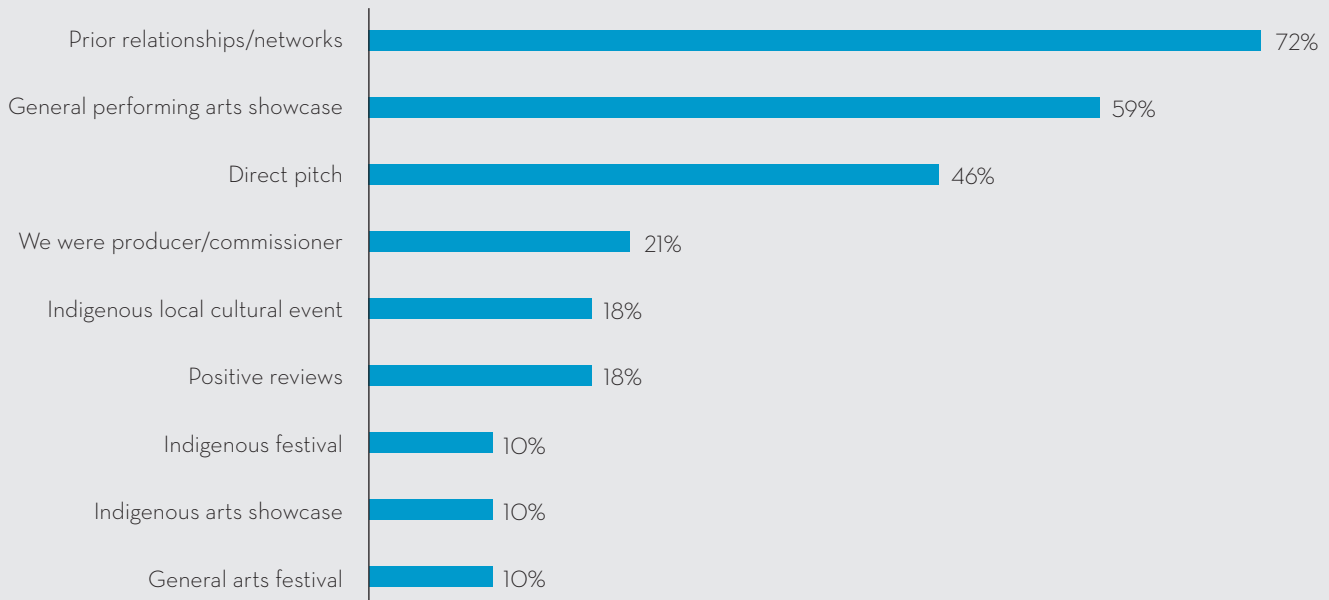
According to the survey, the most common ways in which presenters find out about First Nations works are:

- peer networks and prior relationships with artists, producers or community members (72%), including relationships with organisations like Blak Lines and Yirra Yaakin
- performing arts showcases, such as the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM), APACA's Performing Arts Exchange (PAX), Long Paddock or State-based showcases (59%) and Indigenous arts showcases (10%)
- direct pitches (46%) (Figure 3).

This highlights the importance of making connections and showcasing works, and building sector capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creatives to connect to presenters.

Festivals, cultural events and reviews are also ways presenters find out about First Nations works. One fifth of presenters surveyed had produced or commissioned works themselves (Figure 3).

Figure Three:
Ways of finding First Nations work – survey data (%)



WHO IS PRODUCING FIRST NATIONS WORKS

The national mapping found that seven companies were responsible for producing over a third of the programmed First Nations works in 2015. These companies toured work and were frequently supported by festivals as well as venues. These seven companies and example works were:

- Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) (with support from co-producers): *Head Full of Love* and *Black Diggers*
- Bangarra: *Kinship* and *Lore*
- Belvoir: *Beautiful One Day*, *Radiance* and *Kill the Messenger*
- Marrugeku: *Cut the Sky*
- ILBIJERRI: *Beautiful One Day*
- Malthouse: *Blak Cabaret*
- Sydney Theatre Company: *Battle of Waterloo*.

Other lead producers of First Nations works in 2015 were Brown Cab and Yirra Yaakin.

CREATIVE REPRESENTATION AND CONTROL

The available information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement is limited, particularly about designers, dramaturgs, directors and choreographers. Based on the available information, the national mapping found high levels of creative involvement in First Nations works as performers, with at least nine in ten of the unique First Nations works involving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander performers. Creative involvement as producers is much lower. At least one quarter, and potentially as many as two thirds of the unique First Nations works appeared not to involve an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander producer.⁹

The interviewed producers and presenters described the work required to create more opportunities for First Nations creative control:

- “When they [programmers] include Aboriginal works, it’s all on their terms. We have almost no opportunities for Aboriginal producers here. When we do have opportunities, they’ve been created by non-Aboriginal people, and non-Aboriginal organisations’ needs. Not necessarily ours as artists, or as an industry... We need to actually **invest in bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programmers in, so that we’re programming the kind of works that we want to show audiences.** That are created by us, not what other people would like to see us create and present.”
- “I think there’s a huge piece of work to do on a number of different levels; there isn’t a silver bullet for this, but a really concerted effort to create pathways not only that **strengthen Indigenous artists to create their own work** that’s completely free of white organisations, **but also to find a way that we can comfortably work together** where the Indigenous sector goes, “We’re in control of this, we’re really comfortable.”

WHERE WORK IS PROGRAMMED

The national mapping found that although more than half of First Nations programming takes place in major cities (59%), this work comprised only 2% of the total works presented in major cities in 2015. First Nations work made up 3% of all programming in regional Australia; and 7% of programming in remote Australia.

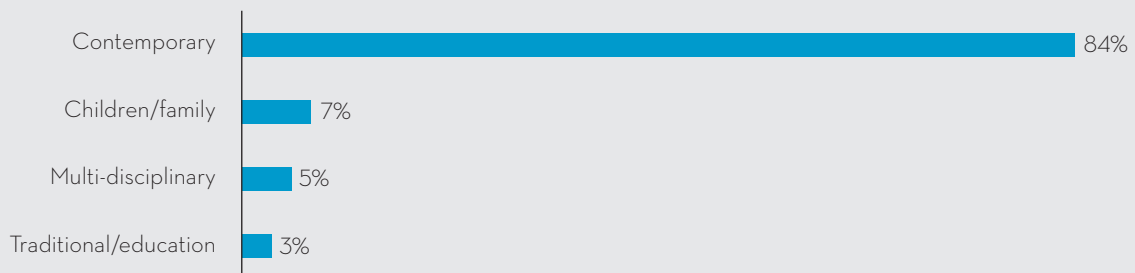
The slightly higher representation in regional areas is in spite of interviewees views that the challenges of racial differences are more significant in regional areas:

- “In the cities... people are excited about seeing it. But I think in the regional areas there’s still a little bit of reservation about going to see an Indigenous work. Are you going to be preached at and made to feel guilty? There’s still a lot of racism about that you’re fighting.”

TYPES OF WORKS PRESENTED

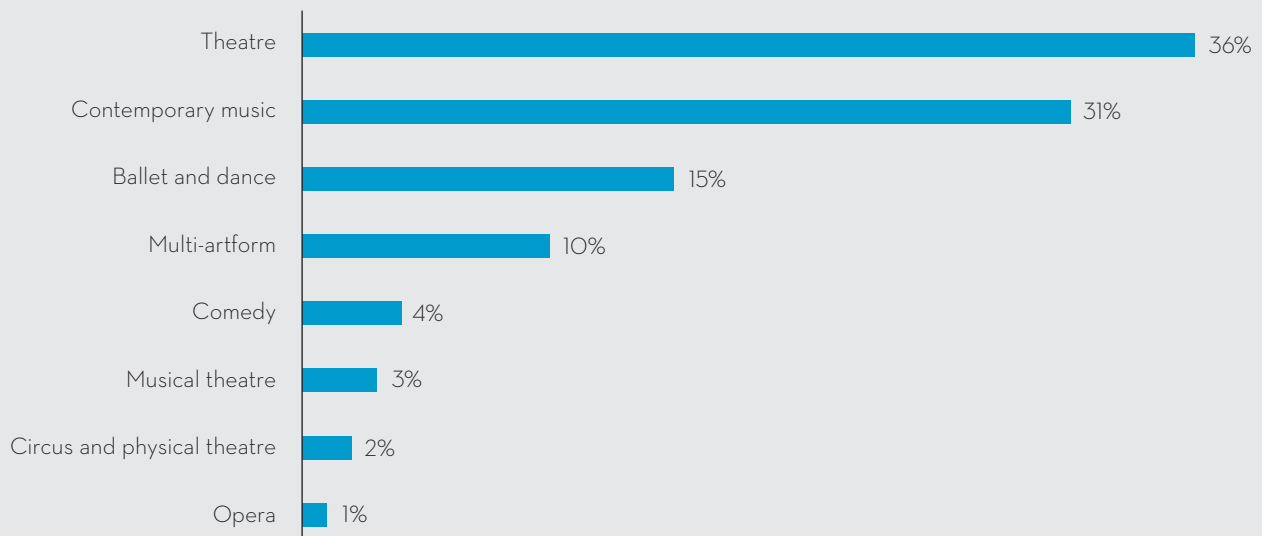
Building Audiences found that audiences have a strong image of First Nations arts as ‘traditional,’ but that audiences are highly motivated to engage with what they perceive as contemporary First Nations arts.¹⁰ The national mapping data showed that this is what is predominantly on offer, with more than eight in ten First Nations performing arts works regarded as contemporary (Figure 4). There is a mismatch between audience perceptions of First Nations arts and the presented performing arts works.

Figure Four:
First Nations works by genre - national mapping data (%)



Theatre and contemporary music are the most frequently presented art forms. Combined, these art forms represented around two thirds of presented works in 2015 (Figure 5).

Figure Five:
First Nations works by art form - national mapping data (%)



A handful of works comprised almost a third of all programmed First Nations performing art works in 2015. These were:

- *Head Full of Love* (QTC, toured by Blak Lines)
- *Kinship* (Bangarra)
- *Black Diggers* (QTC)
- *Cut the Sky* (Marrugeku)
- *Beautiful One Day* (ILBIJERRI, Belvoir and Version 1.0).

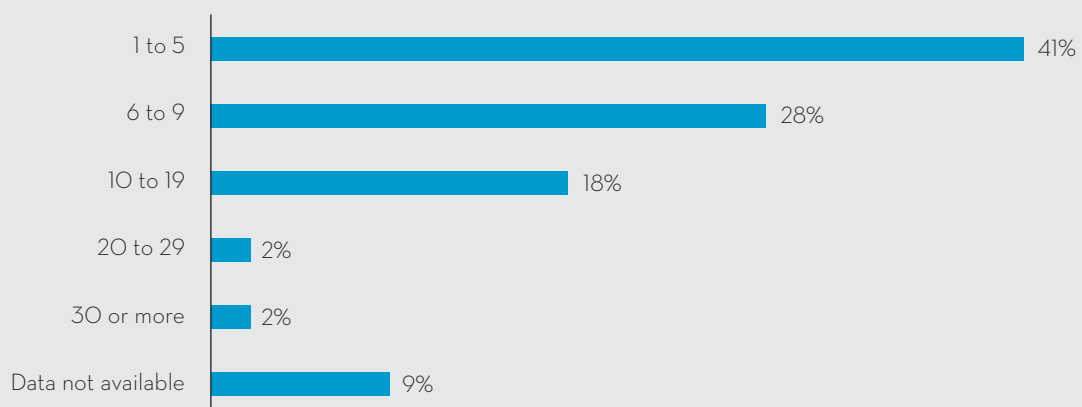
These works were typically marketed using messages about artistic excellence, the importance of the work, the work’s uniqueness, or the heart-warming nature of the work. Importantly, these works came from companies with known brands. For example, Bangarra has built strong awareness with audiences for more than 25 years, and when they tour through mainstage venues the company works closely with the in-house marketing team.¹¹

More than one third of the First Nations works programmed are small in scale, with fewer than five performers (Figure 6). Presenters tend to select big ‘shiny’ works with a known brand such as Bangarra; or works that are low-cost to stage, such as contemporary music or one- or two-handers. The latter were said to be the only affordable option for many presenters:

☞ *If I’ve got a show with more than two people in it, I know I’m not going to be able to afford it immediately.* ☞

☞ *I think that if funding was made available to encourage **small scale Aboriginal theatre works**, or performing works, it would really provide a lot more opportunity for small, far reaching, outlying venues like ours to be able to program them.* ☞

Figure Six:
First Nations works by scale (count of performers) – national mapping data (%)



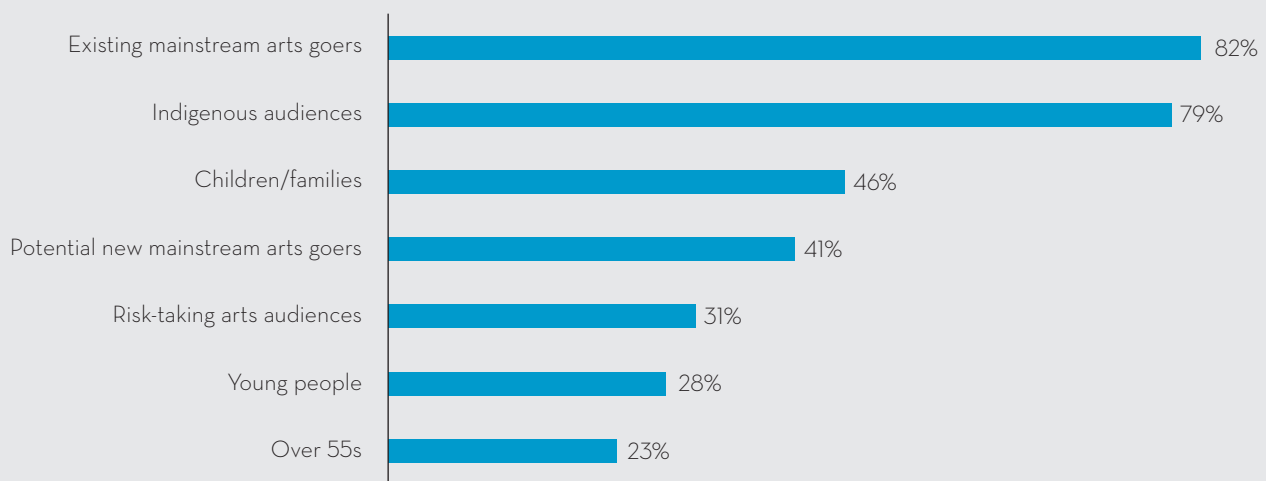
2. PRESENTING FIRST NATIONS WORKS TO AUDIENCES

Participants in the *Building Audiences* research said that they found it difficult to see First Nations work amongst the broad range of arts marketing. One said: 'You can't see something if you never know about it.'¹² The previous section confirms that there is a programming shortfall that contributes to this perception. This section looks at whether there is also a marketing shortfall and how well presenters know Australian audiences.

TARGET AUDIENCES

Presenters surveyed were asked who their target audiences were for their most recent First Nations work. Presenters typically target existing mainstream audiences; which may perpetuate predominantly traditional, risk-averse programming (Figure 7).

Figure Seven:
Audience segments targeted by presenters - survey data (%)



A high proportion of presenters surveyed reported targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences (79%). Interviewees said that they need specialist marketing for this to succeed. For example: employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander marketing staff; using word of mouth and engaging face-to-face with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members; community engagement activities for long-term relationship building; and sharing ownership of works and spaces.¹³ Potential new audiences are targeted by less than half of presenters (41%), and less than a third of presenters target risk-taking audiences (31%) or young people (28%). Over 55s are the least targeted segment (23%) (Figure 7).

Discussion

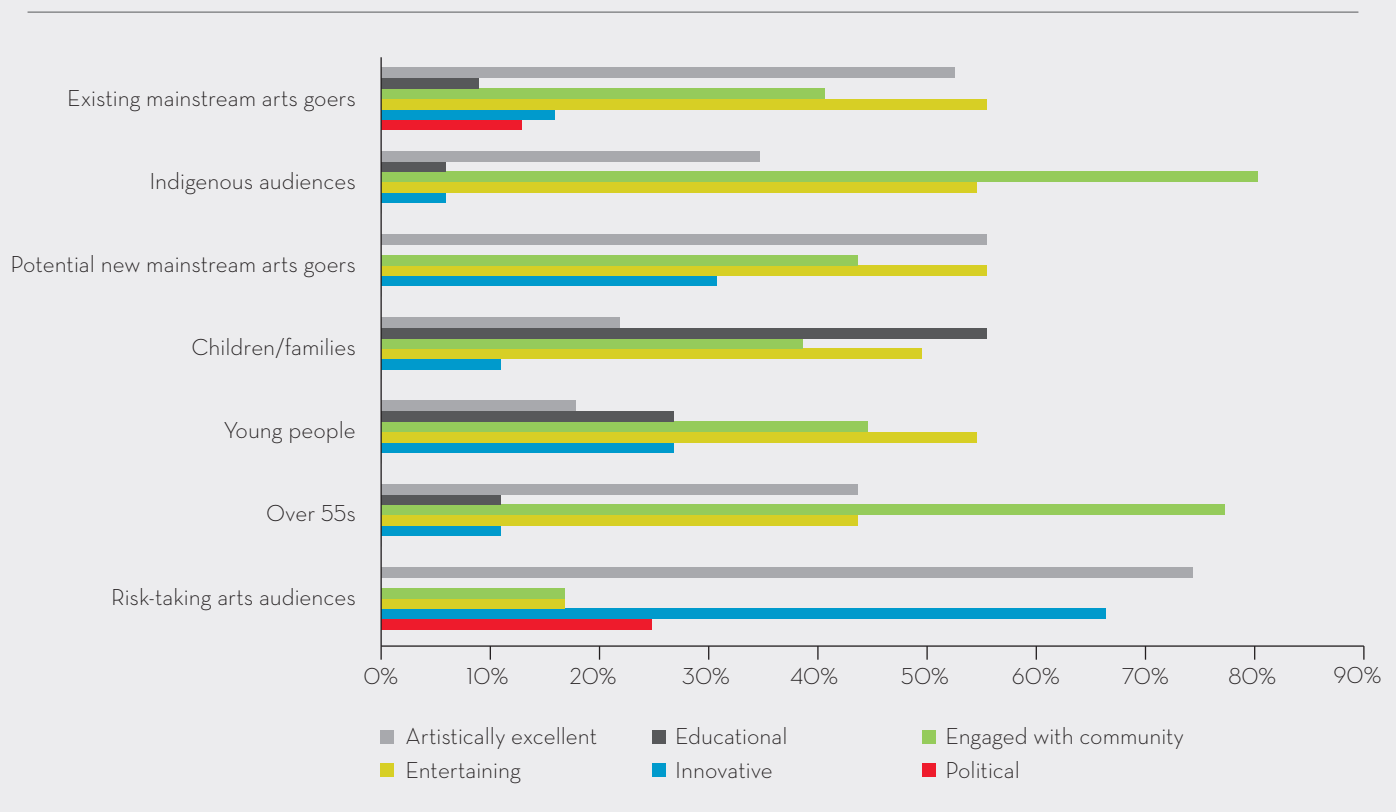
The Australia Council’s national *Arts Participation Survey* confirmed that the assumption that people aged over 55 are the least likely to attend First Nations arts is correct. One in five people aged over 55 had attended First Nations arts in 2013, compared to one in four people under 55. However, the survey also found that young people under 30 are at least as likely to attend First Nations arts as people aged 31–54,¹⁴ and that there are more people that are potential new audiences than there are existing audiences.¹⁵ This suggests that there is an opportunity to further target young people and new audiences. Responses to the interviews suggest there are also further opportunities in the schools market, and among risk-taking arts audiences in metropolitan areas, where there is an appetite for more challenging work.

MARKETING MESSAGES

Based on the *Showcasing Creativity* research, there does not appear to be a significant difference in marketing based on the indigeneity of the work. The marketing messages vary according to the target market, rather than the work itself (Figure 8). The marketing choices are unsurprising; for example:

- Educational messages are most used for children.
- Political and innovative messages are used for the risk-taking audiences.
- Entertainment messages are used regularly for everyone except the risk-takers.
- Excellence is a strong message for all audiences except children.
- Engagement with community is emphasised when marketing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences and audiences over 55. In the interviews, presenters stated that community engagement is also used with schools and remote communities.

Figure Eight:
Marketing messages by audience segment - survey data (%)





Blood on the Dance Floor, ILBIJERRI. Credit: Dorine Blaise

Interviewees and survey respondents listed a number of specific marketing activities that had worked well, including:

- television and sponsored social media campaigns
- holding workshops, Q&As and offering other forms of context and connection
- featuring a recognisable cast member in marketing materials
- linking to special days, such as during NAIDOC week
- promoting the 'local angle' e.g. a cast member from their area, or a story about their area
- word of mouth through social media and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks
- liaising with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contacts in other organisations, e.g. the Aboriginal Liaison Officer in the local council
- grass-roots marketing combined with community engagement.

A regional presenter spoke of the power of community engagement as a marketing tool:

☞ *That's the biggest selling point for us to have [the people] who were behind the story who then personally talked to the groups and things like that, they were the biggest marketing tool for us.* ☞

Presenters stated that marketing to non-Indigenous audiences must be inclusive. Presenters have different strategies for achieving this: some market the content as unique First Nations work, with universal, global and local appeal; or as a universally Australian story. Some recommend marketing works on their merits and to avoid labeling work as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.'

CASE STUDY: HEAD FULL OF LOVE

An example of different marketing strategies can be seen by analysing the online marketing of *Head Full of Love* (QTC) by different presenting venues. *Head Full of Love* was the most programmed First Nations work in 2015, and was toured by Blak Lines. *Head Full of Love* was commissioned and first produced by Darwin Festival in 2010.

Metropolitan marketing

When QTC presented *Head Full of Love* in Brisbane in 2012, the marketing messages used on QTC's website emphasised entertainment, excellence, and a universal story about friendship, whilst hinting at serious themes: *'It is a story that tells us so much about where we are and what we need to do about it'* (Figure 9).¹⁶ Presenters interviewed for *Showcasing Creativity* stated that metropolitan audiences are more open to challenging content. QTC's online marketing of the 2015 Blak Lines tour further mentioned serious themes: *'Touches on the contentious issue of black-white relations with agility, sensitivity and courage.'*¹⁷

Figure Nine:
Metropolitan marketing¹⁶



Outer-metropolitan marketing

Messages used on the website for The Joan, a venue in outer-metropolitan Sydney, similarly marketed the show's excellence and entertainment, and included an emphasis on storytelling: *'Head Full of Love is the most beautiful, vibrant, straightforward storytelling you will experience all year'* (Figure 10). *Building Audiences* found that the storytelling quality of First Nations arts attracts both engaged and potential audiences.¹⁸

The Joan's webpage included many bright, fun images. It was only within a video of stills from the show that a sense of serious themes emerged, with messages such as: *'This is a community conversation that is long overdue'*; and *'One of the most important current works in the country'*.¹⁹

Regional marketing

For the regional tour of *Head Full of Love*, a Performing Lines poster was used (Figure 11),²⁰ along with community engagement activities supported through the Blak Lines initiative. These activities included a touring beanie exhibition, and a pre-show *'hat chat,'* bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the community together to knit and chat about the themes behind the play. Interviewees stated that community engagement activities such as these work well, particularly in regional areas, and that regional touring creates opportunity for community engagement. Whilst Performing Lines found that community engagement activities used with the *Head Full of Love* tour did not equate to more ticket sales in all locations, the presenters felt that the engagement activities were well received, and feedback suggested that they would help create a sustainable and growing community involvement in future productions.²¹

Figure Ten:
Outer metropolitan marketing¹⁹

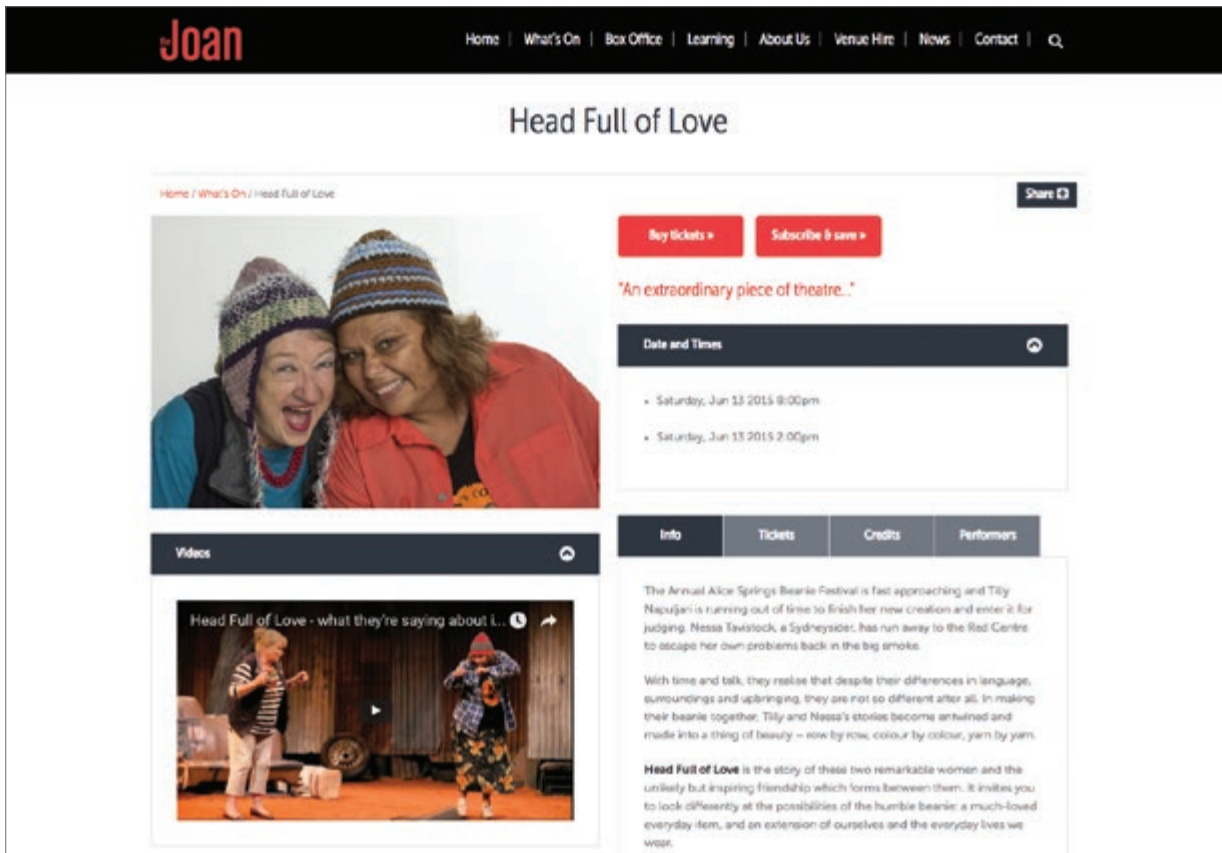
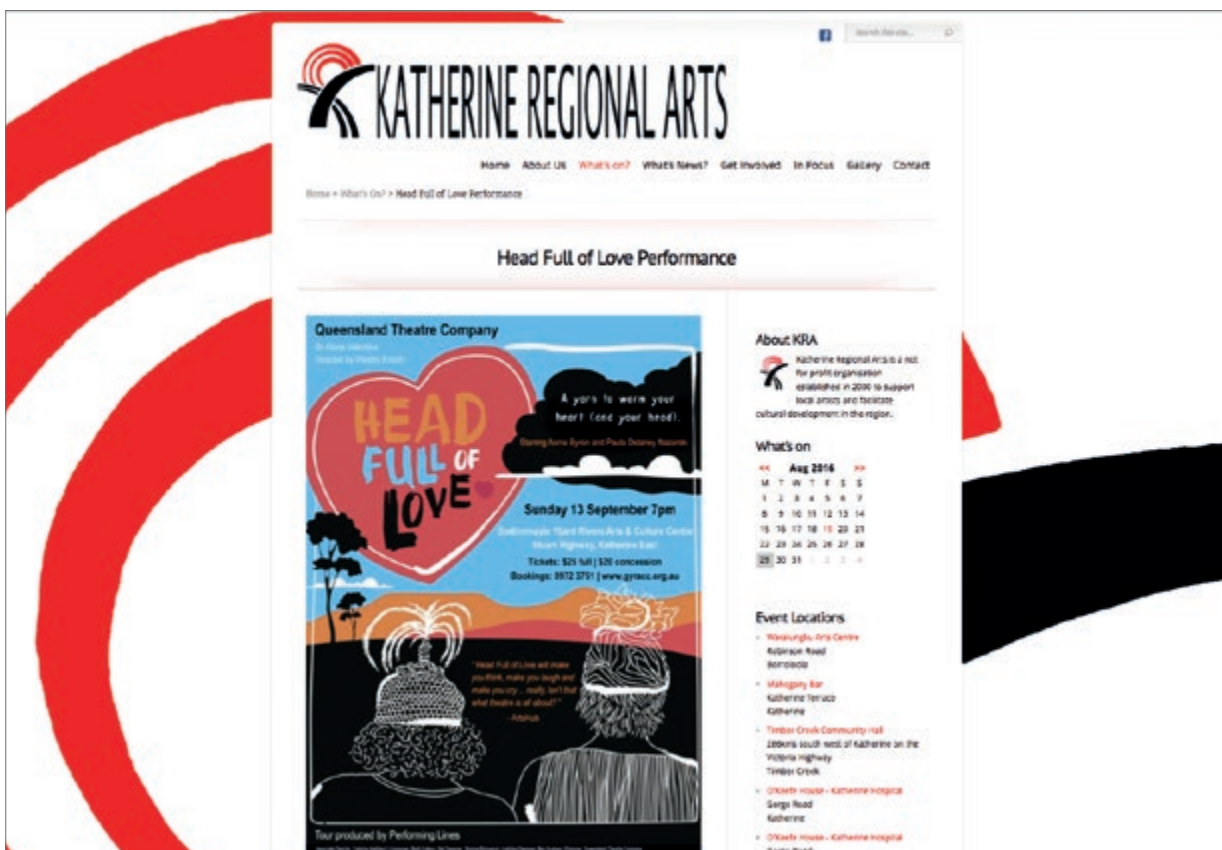


Figure Eleven:
Regional marketing²⁰



OVERCOMING PRECONCEPTIONS

Some interviewees were concerned that their audiences would perceive First Nations works to be too ‘hard’, and telling the same stories in the same way:

“I think particularly when it comes to Indigenous people trying to tell their story, **there might be a sense among audiences of “I’ve heard that story before.”**”

One presenter stated:

“The best marketing is spelling out what it is, i.e. **First Nations art... and selling the fun, entertaining aspects of the work...** often we have faced poor sales due to the unknown, or the assumption that “Aboriginal Work” has a sense of the “worthy” and must be taken seriously.”

Discussion

Similar messages about audience perceptions of seriousness and sameness came from the *Building Audiences* research. Whilst First Nations arts are incredibly diverse, potential audiences generally do not perceive diversity. But they do see it as a strong motivator for engagement. Communicating to audiences what makes a work new and unique is a key marketing challenge in developing audiences.

Building Audiences found that even engaged audiences can be put off by the perceived ‘seriousness’ of First Nations works, so marketing messages need to take this into account to achieve cut through with audiences. It found that bringing ‘fun and humour’ to engagement strategies is important for the marketing image of First Nations arts.²²

HOW WORKS ARE RECEIVED BY AUDIENCES

Almost one third of presenters surveyed reported that their most recent First Nations work filled more than 75% of house capacity on average. Overall, expectations of audience capacity were either met or exceeded for two thirds of presenters’ most recent First Nations work. However, some had low expectations and about half of presenters reported filling less than 50% of the house capacity with their most recent First Nations work.

A third of survey respondents reported that the First Nations works presented in the last two years disappointed their box office expectations. Almost all of these respondents reported less than 25% capacity for the most recently presented work. But audience satisfaction was high, even when box office was low.

Interviewees typically felt that the First Nations works they had presented were great successes in terms of artistic excellence, connection and engagement for those who did attend. This suggests that problems with filling house capacity may be about the marketing of the work rather than the quality of the work or its likeability with audiences, and that there is a need to build marketing skills to reach new audiences.

MARKETING CAPACITY

Several presenters stated that the marketing materials produced by the artists themselves need to be stronger, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists need support in communicating with non-Indigenous decision-makers, for example through pitching bundles:

“I think that we’ve got heaps of amazing work out there, but it’s just not being picked up because some of the bundles just don’t look as good as the work is. Even though it’s phenomenal... Our artists are crazy good, but it’s that missing link between artists and getting it put on. It’s all of that kind of, for lack of better terminology, all those white system stuff that you have to go through to get a work up. All of that paperwork, all of that kind of pitching material that you need.”

Discussion

The *Building Audiences* research pointed to a need for opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be trained in mainstream marketing frameworks such as market segmentation, target marketing, branding and market communication. Marketing is largely led by non-Indigenous people who may understand these frameworks but not First Nations art. There is a need for skills development and increased capability both ways.

Audiences look for signposts of trust and legitimacy, which are best communicated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art workers. A desire for deeper understanding through personal connections with artists is a strong motivator for audiences to see First Nations arts. Cultural sharers who can assist audiences to navigate First Nations experiences are a powerful tool to help overcome audience uncertainty.²³

Brothers Wreck, Belvoir. Credit: Brett Boardman



3. DECISIONS ABOUT PROGRAMMING

WHY PRESENTERS PROGRAM FIRST NATIONS WORK

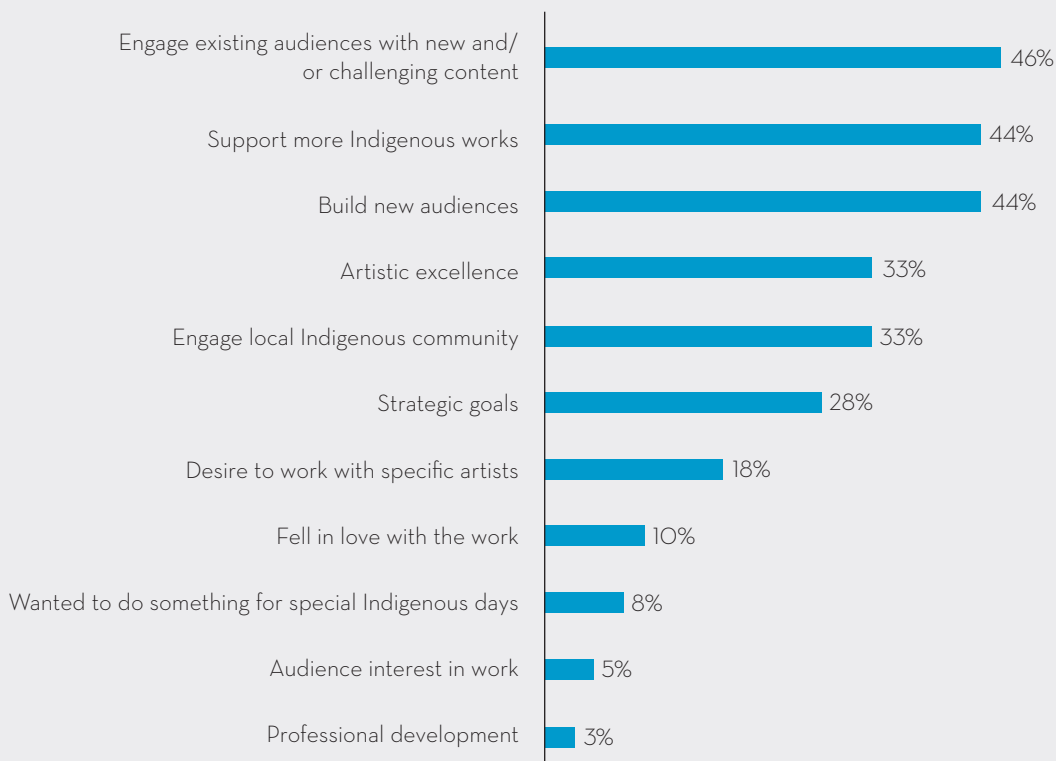
The survey and interviews found that the key reasons presenters program First Nations work are:

- A. audience development
- B. personal motivations and organisational leadership
- C. artistic excellence
- D. the integrity of the work
- E. exposure to works and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

A. AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

Presenters who are motivated to challenge and build their audiences are more likely to program First Nations works. The survey found that the most frequently cited reason given for programming First Nations work was to engage or challenge existing audiences with new content (46%), and 44% said that they program to build new audiences (Figure 12). The potential to build new audiences is supported by previous research findings that two thirds of Australians have a strong or growing interest in First Nations arts but only 24% attend.²⁴

Figure Twelve:
Top three reasons for programming First Nations work – survey data (%)



Opportunities for developing audiences for First Nations performing arts varied by geographic location.

Metropolitan

Interviewees said that metropolitan audiences with a greater openness to 'heavy' or 'risky' content present an opportunity to develop as audiences for contemporary First Nations works:

“I mean, let’s generalise, the kind of [metropolitan] audience that is likely to go to the theatre in the first place, to see theatre or dance or whatever – there is a strong interest in understanding ourselves better for which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories play a key part... I don’t see obvious challenges, I mainly see opportunity. **There is a real appetite, a real thirst for it.**”

“There is more and more interest being shown and less barrier towards presenting Indigenous work here at the moment... I think this community is really responding to seeing that work more often and being more intrigued about what it is. So I think there is a sense that **Indigenous work is becoming more mainstream.**”



Kylie Doomadgee, *Beautiful One Day*, ILBIJERRI, Belvoir and Version 1.0.
Credit: Heidrum Lohr

Regional

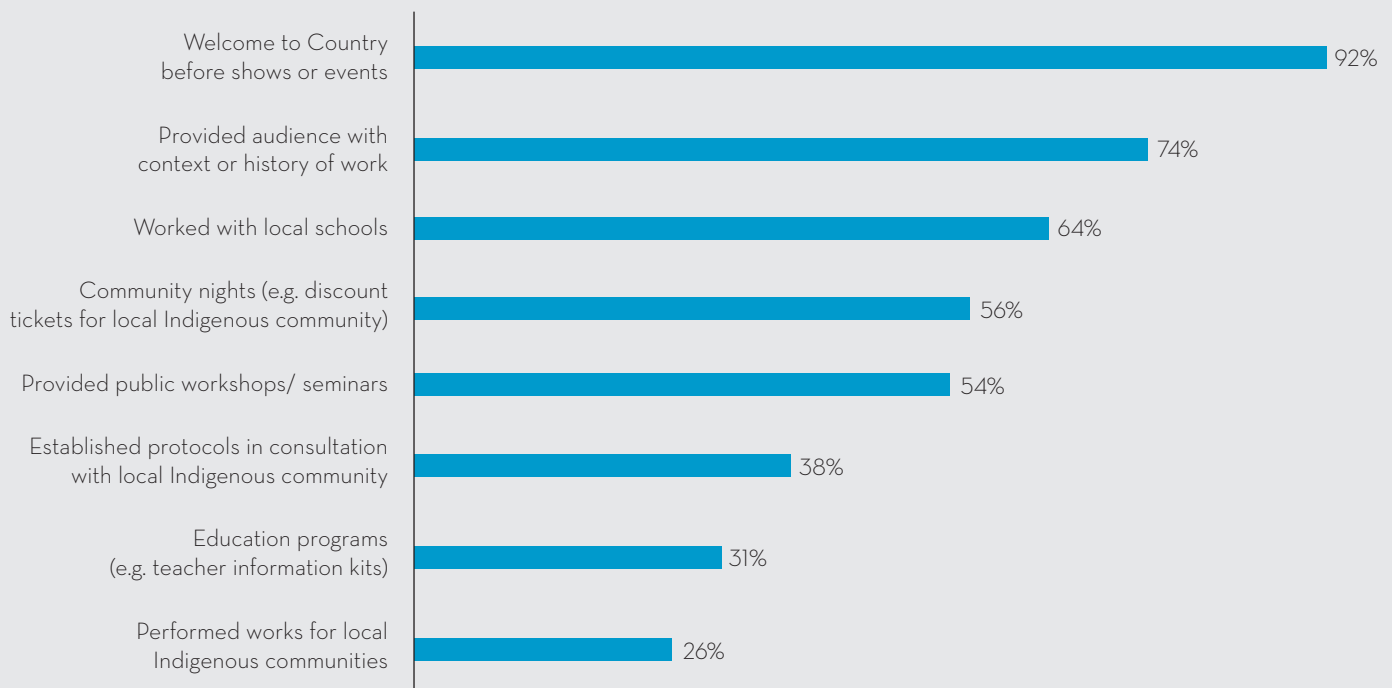
Regional presenters could develop audiences by touring popular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, whilst investing in long-term community engagement and works with a local angle. A number of community engagement activities used by presenters are shown in Figure 13. Many regional programmers see First Nations works as a vehicle for community engagement with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Programmers were positive about the success of First Nations performing arts in this context. However, they observed that community engagement takes time, resources and commitment:

“Rather than looking around nationally at what’s available and what’s coming through, I think [our performing arts centre] needs a longer term strategy, probably a three to five year strategy, that is well resourced and has some steps in terms of developing an Indigenous audience, in terms of education, in terms of reaching into Indigenous community, together with then working with our broader mainstream audience in terms of how they appreciate and access Indigenous content or work at our centre.”

Regional presenters described the benefits of having a local angle to the content, and local ambassadors for the work:

“The best thing for us (and we found it particularly with the [Indigenous work X] back in 2010) was them [the audience] having that **local connection to the work** and connecting with the people who were behind the story or were a part of the story, because it was written by [Indigenous writer Y] who came from the local area. **It was a story about [people] who all came from the area** so that went really well, them having that connection to the piece of work and being able to relate to it...”

Figure Thirteen:
Context and community engagement activities used - survey data (%)



Schools

Interviewees said that primary and secondary schools are a potentially significant market for First Nations performing arts, across all locations. Almost two thirds of presenters surveyed had worked with local schools when presenting First Nations works, and around one third had used education activities or resources (Figure 13). Several interviewees described unmet existing demand and urged content producers to make work for school engagement. They also saw school engagement as a valuable step in reconciliation and developing audiences of the future:

- 🗨️ *Primary schools seem to have the greatest appetite for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre and seem to be super keen to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, stories and performances. 🗨️*
- 🗨️ *The audiences at this particular venue are not as interested in Indigenous stories as an inner city audience might be... **In an education context, it's actually the opposite. Schools are absolutely looking for that material for their students.** Whether it's the littlies or the big ones. So there you have an audience that really want and needs those stories and are very receptive to them. **We really would like some more works for the primary schools in the Indigenous area.** I've been calling all the companies, asking, 'Are not any of you making a kids show?' 🗨️*



Djuki Mala
Credit: Sean Young

Accessible works and ‘fresh’ content

Interviewees in both regional and metropolitan settings talked about the potential for ‘entertaining’ or ‘fresh’ content as a way of building new audiences’ openness to First Nations works, and as a way of overcoming the perception of sameness among experienced audiences.

Interviewed presenters urged makers to develop more ‘accessible’ First Nations works; for example ‘fun’ or ‘easy’ works, such as Djuki Mala or contemporary music:

☞ *And in terms of this mainstream contemporary music, like Archie Roach and Dan Sultan and people like that, well, it’s all smiles. It’s easy...* ☞

Presenters said that introducing audiences to accessible First Nations works provides an opportunity to grow audiences over time, slowly introducing more challenging works. Presenters felt that works which dealt with difficult topics could still attract audiences if they present a ‘fresh’ take on the matter; and this is needed to attract audience members deterred by a perception of the sameness of First Nations works and topics:

☞ *I would say that I have seen a lot of work, say pitched at an arts market, whereby an Indigenous work can seem ‘samey’ - kind of like, “It’s a similar tragic story of disempowerment” (which is the factual history of this country). Sometimes, you’re looking for a unique angle.* ☞

Discussion

As mentioned previously, the *Building Audiences* research found that the diversity of First Nations works is not always perceived by audiences, but is a strong motivator to engage. For potential theatre audiences with little experience of First Nations work, a perception of uniqueness is a strong motivator and represents the opportunity to develop new risk-taking audiences:

☞ *I love experimenting with new things... I would enjoy it because, with other shows you anticipate something, but with this one, it’s going to be something fresh, something very different.*²⁵ ☞

B. PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS AND ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The survey found that commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation is a strong motivation for presenters programming First Nations work (44%), as is delivering on the presenting organisation's core mission and strategic goals (28%) (Figure 12).

Presenters who program a greater number of First Nations arts embody these motivations. Their organisations regularly have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming as a core, resourced part of their mission and strategy. These organisations have an understanding and commitment to long-term community engagement and a broader reconciliation agenda.

Several interviewees explained that organisational leadership is critical to long-term community engagement:

“The reason that we’ve been able to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audience is that we have **a multi-year Aboriginal arts strategy that’s about building our Indigenous programming**. And so there’s a whole lot of intersections around that, in terms of how we work with the Aboriginal community and how we work with Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal companies... **So you can’t just dip in and out of Indigenous programming, it has to be a whole of organisation, or a, you know, that’s our core business; it’s one of the key platforms in terms of building our institution, is that program.**”

Interviewees also provided insight into their personal motivations:

“Our theatres need to tell **contemporary Australian stories** and it’s incumbent upon us if we’re telling those contemporary Australian stories, to tell the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story.”

Cut The Sky, Marrugeku. Credit: Heidrun Lohr



C. ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

Several survey respondents (33%, Figure 12) and interviewees emphasised the fundamental importance of artistic excellence in their decision to program and the success of works:

- “Ensuring the work has integrity – i.e. **key artists are Indigenous and the work is given the support to be the best artistic product it can be.**”
- “Sometimes the Indigenous product is so good, I mean an example is Albert Namatjira... Albert Namatjira is one of the best known Indigenous artists who ever lived, and the show is packaged with a touring exhibition of work by his descendants, so the product was so good it could stand on its own... **It was a fabulous play, excellent production value, it was about somebody very well known, and a national treasure. And, even the marketing was fantastic because it was part of an exhibition.**”

They pointed out the importance of avoiding ‘tokenism’:

- “**Artistic excellence is the key.** There is too much presentation of Indigenous content which is not artistically excellent but the expectation is that it will thrive just because it is Indigenous content.”

Of the presenters surveyed that had presented First Nations work in the last two years, around three quarters said the work met their expectations in terms of artistic excellence, and 24% said their expectations were ‘somewhat met.’

Some interviewees explained that First Nations work needed significant support from programmers and funders to get it stage-ready:

- “Not a lot of stuff has come to me locally that I could just program. Most of it’s where I assist them with development and then get into sort of development on to stage. **So it’s a partnership with the people that want to put the work together on stage.** I’ve never had a piece of work come to me locally that’s ready for me to just program as in pay a performance fee and put it on stage. **We are teaching people how to do theatre up here.**”

Challenges and opportunities to do with the creation of First Nations works will be explored in the next research project.

D. THE INTEGRITY OF WORKS

The important role of Indigenous producers, and the authenticity and integrity of the work, were mentioned as important factors in programming First Nations works. An Indigenous producer interviewed spoke of their motivations to showcase the talent and diversity of living culture:

“For me it’s about... showing community **the talent and the innovation and breadth of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing artists are doing now, to inspire them; but it’s also about showing the local non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that we’re not just, you know, sticks and dot paintings, but there’s more to us and to Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is a living culture, it’s ever-evolving and there’s real talent there.**”

Several survey respondents and interviewees described how they offered opportunities for audiences to connect deeply with the content; offering one-on-one experiences, collaborative works and Q&As. They described the power of inviting the people ‘behind’ the stories to share their perspective with the audience:

“**[The character’s real] mum started telling stories and the audience, especially the tourists, the whole audience was in rapture. It was like sitting around in someone’s lounge room and the Elder was just telling stories in this forum. People came out of that show, just like, “That was amazing and I think I got something really special and unique. There was an Elder telling us these stories. We’ve just seen the stories and dances and then we actually had the Elder telling us the stories afterwards.”**”

“**Portrayal of Indigenous historical context was well received by majority of audiences. Immediately after each show, our Q&A found audiences were keen to learn more of our Indigenous shared history i.e. blackbirding era, native police, Stolen Generation etc.**”

Discussion

The need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation to ensure authenticity, and provide audiences with signposts for trustworthiness and legitimacy, was also a key finding from *Building Audiences*. Across art forms, audiences have a desire to expand and deepen their understanding of First Nations arts, and seek opportunities for greater engagement with practitioners.²⁶

E. EXPOSURE TO WORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH ARTISTS

Other reasons for presenting First Nations works include engaging with the local Indigenous community (33%), or working with specific artists (18%) or works (10%) (Figure 12). Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, or exposure to First Nations work through trusted peers and showcases, are both motivators for programming and ways of finding works.²⁷

4. PERCEIVED OBSTACLES TO PROGRAMMING

Presenters were surveyed about the obstacles to programming First Nations works. When interviewed, additional issues emerged from both producers and presenters, including obstacles from other decision-makers who are part of the market. These decision-makers include regional showcases, major festivals, and programming decision-makers in performing arts organisations.

Survey respondents and interviewees reported that there are a number of issues which disadvantage First Nations work at the decision-making stage. These include:

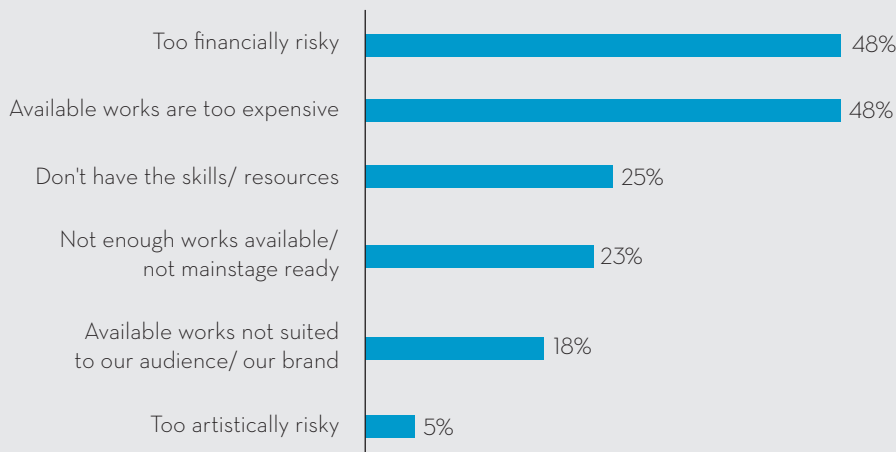
- A. financial risk
- B. tokenistic decisions and finding suitable works
- C. concerns about serious themes
- D. fear of 'doing First Nations work wrong'
- E. Australia's underlying race issues.

A. FINANCIAL RISK

Both presenters and producers reported that financial risk is the main deterrent to programming First Nations work. Financial risk was an obstacle selected by almost half of survey respondents, as was the expense of the available works (Figure 14).

Figure Fourteen:

Obstacles to presenting/presenting more First Nations work, top three reasons – survey data (%)



Presenters interviewed said that available, brand-name First Nations works are often too expensive, whilst smaller works are financially risky because they lack brand recognition:

“We wanted something **“big and shiny,”** something that was going to be an easier pitch to sell.”

“...we have a commitment to programming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work. But, yeah **there’s plenty of times that I see work and after some financial failures, I now think twice about it or I don’t program a work because I am concerned that it won’t work.**”

Some presenters said that First Nations works cost too much for their potential box office return. For example because their tours are not long enough to allow for price efficiency:

“**I just can’t actually afford it.** I would definitely like to program more touring work but the cost is a major consideration.”

Discussion

The performing arts in Australia face a number of financial challenges. These include the cost of touring, a small domestic market, and declines in audience attendances as venues compete with digital media and global content. These issues are even more pronounced in regional Australia, where the majority of Australia’s performing arts centres are located.

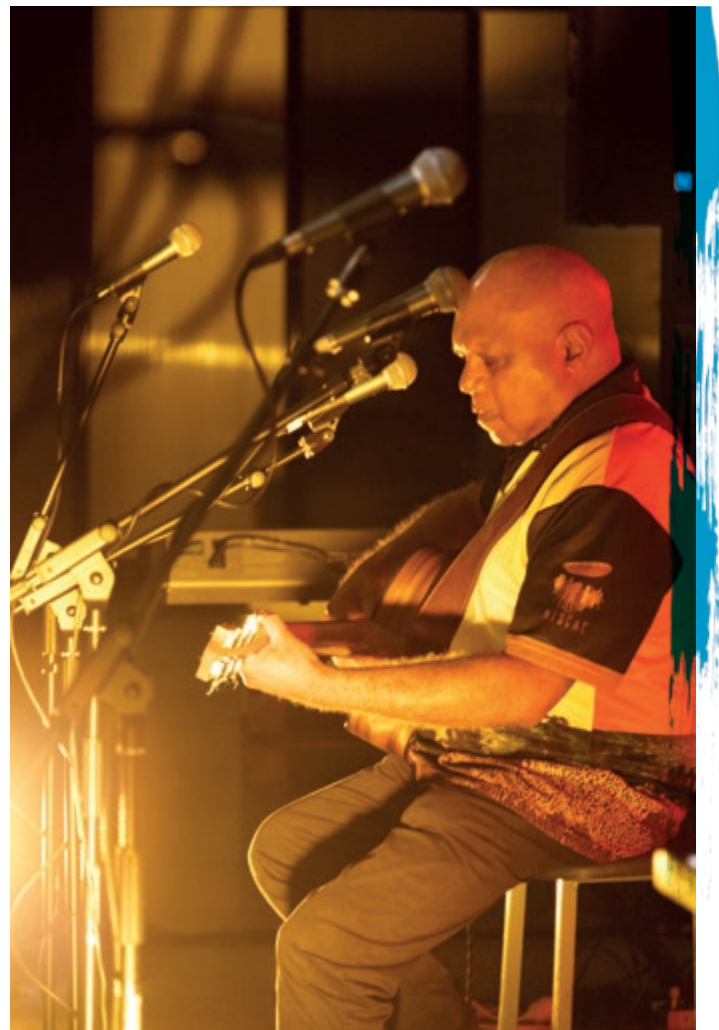
Programmers with budgetary pressures tend to program to avoid risk, choosing well-known brands or conservative works. For any arts company, building audiences and brand is usually a slow process.

Presenters believe that they would program more First Nations works if they:

- could find and afford financially ‘safe’ First Nations works
- could develop their existing, paying audiences’ appetite for new work, and build new paying audiences
- had more resources for marketing.

They said that financially ‘safe’ First Nations works could include:

- works by known brands
- works with star appeal
- smaller scale works
- works which are perceived to align with mainstream audience tastes
- works with large enough tours to bring the costs down for individual presenters.



Archie Roach AM, Cairns 2015

B. TOKENISM IN PROGRAMMING

Presenters and producers reported that decision-makers could be too tokenistic when considering First Nations works. For example, several interviewees described decision-makers picking their 'one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work for the season.' This was reflected in the mapping data, with around one third of mainstream presenters in Australia programming one First Nations work in their 2015 season. Interviewees said that some works are 'rushed' through which need more development:

“**Sometimes the enthusiasm of programming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work, it overtakes actually spending the time to let somebody develop their artistic voice before you put it on a main stage.** I have seen some works pop out in festival environments or in main stage environments which probably could have used a bit more time making, but they've kind of been rushed out there because they need to take that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spot. ”

Several programmers explained that sometimes a policy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming forced them to be 'tokenistic,' based on what is available:

“**It's very complex why you don't have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander show, even though it is part of your policy... [B]ecause of what we can afford and the number of shows people will come to, the marketing problems, we sometimes just take what we can get and so on.** ”

Presenters stated that the type of content is critical to developing audiences, and one in five of those surveyed said the available First Nations works are not suited to their audience's preferences or their organisation's brand:

“**There is never a great deal of Indigenous content that's available to us to present.** And we have to bear in mind who our audience is, we're well aware of who that audience is and we don't really have an Indigenous audience as such here. So **it needs to be a work that is very accessible to the audience.** We have found a few over the last few years, **but it's not something we can find each and every year, simply because it's not available every year.** ”

Almost a quarter of presenters surveyed said that there are not enough available works that are mainstage ready (Figure 14). The next research project on the creation of works will examine the available supply of works.

Discussion

Many interviewees speculated that decision-makers do not have the knowledge, or perhaps the interest, to seek out the vibrant First Nations work coming from the small-to-medium sector. As a result, major companies or artists tend to remain in the spotlight, leaving little room for the small-to-medium sector to flourish:

“**And that lack of understanding, they [major programmers] just don't have people who understand and who will go out there and seek the Indigenous work, because a lot of the Indigenous work in Australia is really that smaller stuff.** You know, the best work is. So they prefer to go with...those brands that people know...you buy a ticket regardless of how crappy the work is, they'll go and buy it because it's such a strong brand, and in the past they have presented amazing work. ”

Interviewees also described how work is 'pigeon-holed' as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and therefore 'cultural,' rather than innovative, interesting artistic work in its own right:

“So often Aboriginal arts get pigeon-holed as just something cultural, but I want to show that... it is evolving and **there is innovation and there's really exciting and talented artists that are producing fabulous work.**”

Some presenters said that paternalistic responses to First Nations work are a barrier to the critical development of First Nations work, and that the solution lies in critical engagement to support excellence:

“Instead of waiting on their [programmers'] arses for it [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work] to get good and going, “It's not good, I'm not programming it because it's not good,” [programmers needs to ask themselves], “If it's not good why is that? Is it because we don't give proper critical feedback to people who are making Indigenous work?” I say to the city people who just wet their pants and go, isn't it wonderful? And I say, “No actually it was a piece of sh**.” **There needs to be real critical engagement.**”

C. CONCERNS ABOUT SERIOUS THEMES

Presenters regularly reported seeing First Nations works which are of high quality, but which they do not program because the content is too 'heavy' or 'preachy':

“Living in a very European community it is hard to get audiences to engage with Indigenous work. People see it is as **earnest, preachy and not fun.**”

“There are some barriers around, you know worthiness and worrying about dealing you know, sort of the **Western, middle class guilt** and things like that.”

“But people, they don't wanna go, “Oh my god, I'm going to pay money **and I'm going to get there and I'm going to be told how guilty I should be for being white.**” Nobody wants to do that. That's not a fun night out!”

Presenters described the conservative nature of their main audience segments, particularly in regional Australian centres:

“**It's an audience that doesn't come to challenging works**, and when I say challenging, I mean work where the content is a bit bleak at all. They have a much stronger desire to be entertained. They also are quite conservative in the recognition factor, so **they need to know the performer, know the piece, know the company.**”

Presenters urged First Nations makers to create lighter works so as to 'take their audiences on a journey,' gradually developing their openness to more 'difficult' content:

“That's why I'm excited about the Djuki Mala thing. They're just going to go gangbusters... **People know them already and they're fun, they're enjoyable, there's a sense that they're accessible and they're kind of irreverent and people just love them.**”

Discussion

Concerns that audiences perceive First Nations arts to be too difficult or serious are well-founded based on the previous research. *Building Audiences* found that First Nations arts:

“...engender a high degree of respect from engaged audiences, **but also create an image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art that is very serious... Even for audiences interested in educational experiences, they may not be interested in such experiences all the time.**”²⁸

Programmers tend to try to program ‘entertaining’ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander work, or works with a big enough brand name to attract mainstream audiences regardless of the ‘seriousness’ of the content.

The most presented works in 2015 contained serious themes, but were by companies with known brands. Themes included:

- race relations and reconciliation (*Head Full of Love*, QTC)
- spirituality and identity (*Kinship*, Bangarra)
- a story of Indigenous servicemen that challenges the ANZAC myth (*Black Diggers*, QTC)
- mining, land rights and protest (*Cut the Sky*, Marrugeku)
- death in custody on Palm Island (*Beautiful One Day*, ILBIJERRI, Belvoir and Version 1.0).

These works were typically marketed using messages about artistic excellence, the importance of the work, the work’s uniqueness, or the heart-warming nature of the work.

Programmers said that there is not a sufficient or affordable supply of work with a strong enough brand to overcome concerns about serious themes:

“You know, there’s got to be a really strong hook for us to get a good audience... **Yeah, if ILBIJERRI did *Cats*, I’m sure they would come along!**”

Even lighter First Nations content faces a marketing hurdle. The *Building Audiences* research showed that mainstream audiences may perceive entertaining First Nations works as ‘serious’ even when they are not, simply because they are seen as ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ arts.²⁹ However, those audiences that see First Nations works are impressed regardless of the scale of the work or its themes.

Strategies

Whilst many presenters called for more entertaining and accessible works as an entry point for audiences, some presenters spoke of ways to engage non-Indigenous audiences and communities in works with political content:

“An issue that Indigenous theatre makers are currently struggling with is that it’s very challenging, so **political messages are delivered in a way that allows non-Indigenous audiences to side with what is being represented on the stage rather than them being challenged or provoked, and I think that’s added to the increased audience. It feels like a safe space, people are fellow travellers, if you like.**”

Smaller scale works sometimes allow presenters to manage the risk of political content:

“I think every excerpt that I have seen of theirs [Aboriginal artist X], it seemed very compelling, but **the content is hard to sell in many of those shows because it comes with protest. If it was a good, inexpensive production featuring one actor, and therefore easy to tour, inexpensive to mount, then we could take it.** But you know, a large production featuring six or seven actors and then touring, makes it far too expensive to be able to afford for the audience that one is able to attract.”

Some presenters expressed a willingness to challenge their audiences:

“I think we have a **greater responsibility to give people a bit of a whack as well and so I’ve changed attitudinally too.** So we’re presenting [Indigenous work X] in 2017. Which is... quite difficult for a European audience to look at and recognise themselves in.”

Establishing quotas for First Nations programming was a common suggestion as a means of getting more First Nations work on mainstages. This could include works by major performing art companies, in major mainstream festivals, regional showcases and performing arts centres:

“You know it would be so easy to have a requirement that at least a portion of that [government funding] had to go towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander companies to help build that sector. **I do think it’s something where major companies should be encouraged to do more and by a quota system if need be.**”

There was also acknowledgement of the drawbacks to quotas. For example, quotas may exacerbate tokenism or alienate non-Indigenous presenters; and quotas would need to be supported by significant investment in the development of First Nations works, audience development and marketing.

Regardless of quotas, interviewees frequently observed that First Nations performing arts needs substantial, long-term investment to be sustainable. This would include support for both small works and works of scale, tour readiness, the development of the small-to-medium sector, support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers, and major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts companies:

“I would say within the wider industry... and... you only need to look at [X or X theatre companies’] most recent programs... to see that again, it really is still very, very, very, whitewashed – the main stages in particular. I think that the blocks... are one or two key larger organisations... or certain artists who will keep getting work. **But the middle ground [of makers and talent] is really missing in the arts ecology for Indigenous work.**”

“Ideally I would like to have an **all-Indigenous company making work to put on stage...** It’s actually about having enough Indigenous people that have enough experience to actually go the whole way with making works to be able to get them to stage.”

“[In five years’ time, I hope that] **one or two Indigenous companies are resident companies of this [performing arts] centre,** so we’d be making work with them for this place and giving them a home base from which to work outwards.”

D. FEAR OF ‘DOING WORK WRONG’

There are very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in programming and decision-making roles. This affects the level of programming. Many of the non-Indigenous programmers have positive intentions and a desire to promote more First Nations work. However, they are sometimes afraid that they will get the process of selecting, staging, presenting and marketing works to audiences ‘wrong’. One quarter of survey respondents said that they do not have the specialised skill-set to present First Nations performing arts (Figure 14), and this was reflected by interviewees:

“I think there’s certainly a fear that you’ll get it wrong. And I think that **there are a lot of people who are worried about not doing the right thing**, if you’re talking about, you know, white people programming, which predominantly you are if you’re talking about Australian theatre - which is also another problem in Australia itself.”

Well-meaning non-Indigenous presenters sometimes felt that they could not engage with First Nations performing arts because they lacked the cultural knowledge or authority to do so:

“...I think **there is some fear around protocols of dealing with Aboriginal stories, of dealing with Aboriginal artists** and there is this kind of almost, not reluctance to, but just a bit of **fear of doing the wrong thing**, and that greater cultural awareness training is needed across the board - from my perspective anyway. **There is so much heat in the topic that it can scare people away from wanting to get involved.**”

Presenters said that at times, this feeling is reinforced by criticisms from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Discussion

The *Building Audiences* research uncovered similar fears amongst audiences, who also reported feeling uncertain about how to engage with First Nations arts.³⁰ This fear is a sign of respect among both audiences and presenters, and indicates the need to build capability and confidence for cross-cultural engagement.

Strategies

Several interviewees suggested a performing arts centre ‘familiarisation’ program, to build capability in dealing with sensitivities, engaging with communities, and the ‘fear of getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts wrong’. It was suggested that this would involve:

- engagement with contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, arts and culture
- peer-to-peer learning amongst performing arts centres
- the development of protocols in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and artists
- a respected authority to broker between Indigenous communities and the performing arts sector.

Several interviewees described how they had developed or worked with protocols alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collaborators, mentioning organisations such as the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA). Over a third of presenters surveyed said that they had established protocols in consultation with the local Indigenous community, with varying degrees of satisfaction, suggesting some guidance in this area would be helpful.³¹

Another frequently raised suggestion for increasing cultural awareness and the integrity and authenticity of the presentation of First Nations performing arts is to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers across the spectrum of arts and cultural roles. These include performers, makers, technical and administrative staff. The need for training and professional development was a commonly mentioned issue among producers and presenters:

- “...What we also need is some training specifically for Indigenous production people and event managers. We’ve got plenty of Indigenous people who want to be artists, but we don’t necessarily have very many who have the light bulb go under their head and go, “Oh, I want to be a stage manager, or, “I want to be a production manager, or, “I want to be the person who makes the sound happen.” **It’d be great if places like EORA College, which has a tech certificate in performing, also had a tech certificate in entertainment technology or production crewing and that was actually presented as a career path.** ●
- “You’ve got ACPA which is great, and NAISDA is brilliant. I think Victoria and South Australia are screaming out for something like [those institutions] - **an Indigenous performing arts college - VCA for black fellas, which has all those different [specialisation] streams...** There are a lot of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] artists that don’t make it just because they don’t have that knowledge and that preparation. I’d like to see more [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts schools] - one in WA, one in the Northern Territory, one in Victoria. I think that would be really exciting. Or even if they were more developed, like the Wilin Centre. ●
- “The pool of experienced, senior male Indigenous actors is quite small, and those that there are, often have particular loyalties to particular companies. I think there was a real challenge in holding on to artists from one stage [of the work] to another... because of the large number of similar productions happening at the time, and the relatively low number of artists who could fulfil those roles... **The paucity of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] actors is an issue that needs to be addressed, the limited number of people who can play a particular role within the Indigenous acting community. But the standards of those actors [who are available] is extraordinarily high.** ●

Interviewees talked about the need for First Nations work to be made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- “**The roles need to be written by Aboriginal people** because I’ve been in too many roles where the roles have been written by someone else who’s not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and so you get in there and just go, “This is a sh**-fight, this will never bloody work.” ●

Presenters and producers recommended a number of proactive initiatives to deal with barriers to entry, and to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making roles. Interviewees suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors, creatives and arts workers should be part of performing arts works across the spectrum.

Discussion

Building Audiences also highlighted the need to build capacity, career development, First Nations representation, and opportunities for authentic cross-cultural connections in the arts sector.³² Challenges and opportunities at the creation stage, including artist development, will be explored further in the next research project.

E. DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM

Many interviewees reported experiences of underlying systemic discrimination impacting on programming decisions. Specifically, decision-makers consciously or unconsciously made decisions within the dominant Western cultural paradigm.

Presenters and producers described instances of both overt and systemic racism amongst venue staff, suppliers, audiences and programmers. These issues appeared to arise more frequently in regional areas:

“Racial issues have happened a couple of times with accommodation suppliers, either not wanting to take a booking or making the artist feel uncomfortable when they’re on their premises. We made a point of letting them know that the comfort of our touring artist is paramount, we were very unimpressed with their attitude and we wouldn’t be using their services for any further tours.”

Many interviewees stated that Australia’s underlying race relations are at the heart of obstacles to programming First Nations work:

“I think that the real value that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities bring to Australia is not really recognised widely, broadly. And I think that is the main barrier. But particularly, on a whole, I think that Australia would have preferred that the whole mob had been killed off. And we’ve got a long, long way to go before our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is really treated with the respect and honour that it deserves.”

These underlying issues manifest in systemic discrimination against First Nations work. Systemic discrimination can be difficult to identify, as there are many reasons to choose or not choose a particular work. The key sign that systemic discrimination is at play is if a programmer’s choice of works is based on an unexamined assumption that non-Indigenous work aligns better with the culture of the organisation and its audiences, or that First Nations works do not. The programmer him/herself may not be ‘racist,’ but may be complying sub-consciously with the dominant culture in which s/he lives and works. A programmer may also not be aware that they are operating within a cultural paradigm which is affecting their decision-making, and affecting their perceptions of works and audiences.

Presenters may have preconceptions about the content and nature of First Nations work. For example, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists do not want their work presented primarily as a form of community engagement. They may wish to perform their works in a mainstage context. Their works might not meet the community engagement goals of the programmer, yet programmers may expect them to achieve these goals. One presenter/producer articulated an example of mis-matched cultural perceptions and expectations:

“I think an important thing is being clear about presenter and audience expectations when you take an Aboriginal artist to a non-Aboriginal audience. The first time my predecessor toured a remotely-based Aboriginal band, she had a community group that had planned to have different band members demonstrating different things - some teaching boomerang throwing, some teaching didgeridoo... She needed to explain that whilst they may choose to talk about or demonstrate some cultural practices if they felt comfortable, as musicians, the workshop they were offering were music based.”

Systemic discrimination can also be present in the ways minority groups are expected to communicate in the dominant language and cultural paradigm. Several interviewees made the point that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists need support in communicating with non-Indigenous decision-makers:

☞ *[the major programmers] need to recognise the culture they live in and understand [it is] a Western, white, Christian-based society and that is the ruling thing. And then what they need to do is actually understand it's [about] cultural diversity... **But what does it actually mean, to be someone who is, thinks in another language and has a value system that is not white and Western?** What does that actually mean and how do you engage with that and have space with that? There's some critical thinking here that needs to be done. It's not like colour-blind casting or pointing to the Chinese person in the staff room and going, "We're culturally diverse."... **Basically if you can walk white, talk white, you're OK. If you can't and you don't, your opportunities are not there.** ☞*

Sometimes, interviewees felt that they could not choose First Nations work because of their audience's conservatism, preferences or racism. However they articulated a desire to challenge both themselves and audiences in the future:

☞ ***I think it's important that we change as well, you know, I've attitudinally changed a bit as well...** I've come at programming very much from a market driven point of view and that's not necessarily everybody's approach of course and some people want to challenge audience and hope that they catch up. So it's fair to say... I have certainly been in the past a relatively safe programmer... ☞*

☞ *I thought it [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work X] was too hard hitting a work for this community. **I didn't have the courage to do it. And I probably should have.** It probably would have been taken out of my hands because we would have been the only centre in [the State] presenting it. But it was such a strong, brave, fabulous work. I really did want to present it, and didn't. ☞*

☞ *This town is very much segregated, not just segregated within the Indigenous community, but amongst the whites and the Indigenous [people]. So when there's any sort of plays that come up that have a lot of content with confronting issues, I tend to choose not to look at something like that. I'm even a little bit worried – I mean we do have this Aboriginal [arts company X] that I'm looking at booking... and I'm already a little bit worried about some of the conversations that they have and how people are going to react to the conversations. **But at the end of the day I think, look, that's the whole thing about the arts, it's to breed conversation and to have people thinking and talking about things.** ☞*

Discussion and strategies

The *Building Audiences* research found that the desire to learn more about Indigenous culture, history and stories is a strong motivator for non-Indigenous audiences and that 'art is an accessible way for people to understand Aboriginal culture and understand Aboriginal history in a meaningful way.'³³ In the *Showcasing Creativity* research, some presenters articulated the need for a conversation and commitment to embed the performing arts within a reconciliation agenda:

☞ *Look, we've gotta get off our arses and go. When a piece is on we've got to more effectively engage with the companies...[We need to have] conversations, rather than a transaction where they [the artists] come in and sell an idea to us, and we put our hands up, or not. I think that is not going to work because **it's about a conversation.** I think it's about **developing an audience through consistent programming and making sure that it's good and making sure that it's a story our audience is willing to hear.** ☞*

“I think that we need a more sophisticated understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that is not just a question of a welcome to country as Uncle [X] comes in. But it should be an understanding that when he comes here, he is coming into a country and a people who are active in their own culture and understanding of their own culture. And that he can bring his gift and that they can give a gift back to him. **And we’ve got a long, long way to go** before I can even start to articulate that properly, before our community can really stand up and say, “OK, we’ve got all this baggage behind us, but this is who we are in this contemporary Australian culture of now, this is who we are as individuals, who we are as a people, as a first people of this country, in this country...” **In the meantime we are just presenting shows. Whereas what we should be doing is swapping language, and swapping culture and making a richer country as a result.**”

Performing arts venues and organisations could program strategically to support increased First Nations programming. Many of the Australian presenters and producers involved in this research have demonstrated genuine desire to present more First Nations stories and make a culturally ambitious nation a reality in the performing arts.

The Fever and the Fret Irma Wood, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. Credit: Simon Pynt



Footnotes

1. Australia Council (2014), *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts*, Sydney.
2. K. Bridson, M. Clarke, J. Evans, B. Martin, R. Rentschler and T. White (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
3. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (detailed report), p.18, 26.
4. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
5. To capture information on the last full season, the reference year was either 2015, or 2014-15, depending on the presenter's program.
6. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
7. Australia Council (2014), *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts*.
8. For the full list of Blak Lines consortium venues, see <http://www.performinglines.org.au/touring-initiatives/> viewed 25 July 2016.
9. For some works it was not possible tell based on publicly available information whether the producer was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
10. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
11. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (Summary report), p.20.
12. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (Detailed report), p13.
13. For examples and an evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement activities see Wilson, D and Williams, T, (2016), *Performing Lines Indigenous Community Engagement Coordinator: National Pilot Evaluation*.
14. Attendance at First Nations arts for those aged 30 or under was 27% compared to 25% for those over 30, but these differences are not significant due to the sample size.
15. Almost two thirds of Australians are interested in First Nations arts (64%) but only one in four attend (24%). Australia Council 2014, *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts*.
16. From Internet Archive of QTC's website Feb 6 2012: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120224032619/http://www.queenslandtheatre.com.au/what-is-on/mainstage/head-full-of-love/>, viewed 2 August 2016.
17. From QTC's website: <http://www.queenslandtheatre.com.au/Touring/Head-Full-of-Love>, viewed 15 July 2016.
18. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
19. From The Joan's website: <http://thejoan.com.au/whats-on/head-full-love>, viewed 15 July 2016.
20. See for example, Katherine Regional Arts website: <http://katherineregionalarts.org.au/whats-on/head-full-of-love-performance/>, viewed July 15 2016.
21. Wilson, D and Williams, T, (2016), *Performing Lines Indigenous Community Engagement Coordinator: National Pilot Evaluation*.
22. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
23. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (Summary report), p.15-16.
24. Australia Council (2014), *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts*, Sydney.
25. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (Summary report), p.10.
26. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
27. This is explored further in the section on *How presenters find First Nations works*.
28. K. Bridson et al. (2015) *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, (Summary report) p.14.
29. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
30. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
31. Terri Janke recently published a book of case studies that are based around the Australia Council for the Arts Indigenous Protocols. See Janke, T. (2016), *Indigenous Cultural Protocols and the Arts*.
32. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
33. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney (Summary report), p.11.

For more information contact:

Australia Council for the Arts
372 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010
PO Box 788, Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

T +61 9215 9000
Toll free 1800 226 912
NRS 1800 555 677

australiacouncil.gov.au