

Mackay Festival

community engagement through festival projects

who

Name of organisation:

Mackay Region Festival of the Arts

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Festival Producer David Gerrand (centre) with bobcat drivers Lester Boyle (L) and David Solli (R), photographer: Angela Chaplin

what & why

Brief description:

The Mackay Region Festival of the Arts is an annual festival with offerings in music, theatre, literature and the visual arts, as well as workshops, family activities and food and wine events.

Community engagement is a core component of festival planning and programming, providing local community members with high quality arts experiences and promoting an attitude that the arts are for everyone. This is particularly pertinent in a 'blue collar' community where some people perceive the arts to be elitist.

Some examples of community engagement projects in recent festivals include:

- *Bobcat Ballet* – a collaboration with bobcat drivers at the 2009, 2010 and 2011 festivals to produce a choreographed dance of bobcat machines and excavators to rock 'n' roll music
- *Hiromi Hotel* – a festival residency in 2009 which brought artist Hiromi Tango to Mackay to set up an arts space in a CBD shopfront, which became a floor-to-ceiling art work developed by the local community over five days, from 9am to 11pm each day
- *Crossroad Arts* collaborations – support for and integration of community engagement projects already underway by Crossroad Arts (a local arts organisation) into festival programming, such as *The Street of Teapots* play about refugees involving recent immigrants in 2010, and a multi-media project, *Synchronicity*, featuring the lives of local workers screened on split images on industrial buildings in 2009
- *Alice in Wonderland* – a Sensory Circus and a community production for the 2011 festival engaging both adults and children in a new interpretation of this classic tale
- *Prometheus Days* – a theatre production for the 2011 festival with students from North Mackay High School.

This case study focuses predominantly on the *Bobcat Ballet* project to demonstrate community engagement learnings.

where & when

Places and spaces:

The *Bobcat Ballet* helps take the festival out of traditional arts venues and into other community spaces. In its inaugural year it was staged in the rugby league grounds at the back of Queens Park and in 2010 it shifted to the showgrounds to enable a more ambitious production and increased crowd capacity.

Due to bad weather in 2011, the full production of *Bobcat Ballet* was unable to be staged at the showgrounds, with a smaller-scale version performed during the day without lights at Queens Park as part of the G&S Engineering Wine and Food Day.

Stages of implementation:

The *Bobcat Ballet* took approximately three months to produce, using an experienced theatre director. Key stages of implementation included:

- Recruitment of bobcat drivers as performers, via an advertisement in the local paper and visits by the Festival Producer to relevant workplaces to encourage participation
- Engagement of an experienced theatre director
- Artistic development via at least three rehearsals
- Development of technical crew, including new skills in workplace health and safety issues relating to heavy machinery
- Staging of the performance at the festival.

In subsequent years, a similar process of rehearsals and development has been instituted. In 2011, dancers were also introduced into the production to add a more 'human' element alongside the industrial. Audience members responded very positively to this new addition.

with

Program partners:

The Mackay Regional Council is the major supporter of the festival.

In 2010 and 2011, Bluescope Lysaght Steel contributed cash and in-kind sponsorship for the *Bobcat Ballet* including support for a WIN television advertisement. Pacific Brands also came on board as a new sponsor in 2011, assisting the festival to relocate the production to a different venue and timeslot due to bad weather.

Staffing:

The Festival Producer plays a key role in all community engagement projects, including concept development, programming and marketing.

For a project such as *Bobcat Ballet* commissioned specifically for the festival, additional staff include a director, stage manager and sound and lighting technicians.

Where the festival is supporting other projects already underway, for example with Crossroad Arts, the main festival resource is the Festival Producer who ensures integration with the broader program.



Bobcat Ballet 2010. Photographer: Jay Dee

the wins & what next

Vital statistics:

The success of *Bobcat Ballet* is evident from the attendance figures. In the first year the production attracted 300 attendees, which increased markedly to 2000 attendees in 2010, resulting in a sold-out show. Even with a smaller-scale, daytime production at a changed venue in 2011 as a result of bad weather, the performance attracted a large audience of 1500 people, demonstrating the strong community support for the event.

In particular, the production has attracted families and workers who might otherwise not engage with the festival and has exposed people to new arts and cultural experiences by presenting other acts alongside *Bobcat Ballet* such as an Indigenous dance troupe, a community cabaret, a Fijian choir, a gospel choir, an amateur theatre group, comedy acts and pyrotechnics. By drawing in substantial crowds, the *Bobcat Ballet* has been responsible for increasing exposure of other festival acts to new audiences.

While a formal evaluation of *Bobcat Ballet* itself has not been undertaken, the fact bobcat drivers continue their involvement each year demonstrates the experience has been well received. Anecdotal feedback from the bobcat drivers has been very positive, including surprise that such a high quality production was possible, a sense of pride in the opportunity to display their skills to the community, enjoyment of the discipline required and appreciation of their involvement in narrative development.

Feedback forms at the 2009 and 2010 Festival of Arts showed a 95% approval rating of the events presented, with 80% of respondents indicating that they would recommend the festival to friends and visitors. As community engagement is a core component of offerings, this broad support for the festival suggests that initiatives such as *Bobcat Ballet* are well received by festival goers.

Critical success factors:

Some of the key factors contributing to the success of *Bobcat Ballet* and other community engagement activities undertaken by Mackay Festival have been:

- Starting small, testing the idea, taking time to develop community performers and technical crew and growing the initiative in a staged way
- Thinking about the community and their interests as the starting point for developing a concept – for example, *Bobcat Ballet* took something bobcat drivers were already engaging in (inventing tricks with their machines) and transformed it into a creative performance



Hiromi Tango and artist Autumn Skuthorpe, Hiromi Hotel project 2009. Photo: Fiona Bishop, RADF Liaison Officer for Mackay Regional Council

- Engaging a skilled director to ensure community performers feel adequately supported and experience a high quality arts process, which is likely to influence their future engagement
- Encouraging collaborative development of ideas between professionals and community members – for example, *Bobcat Ballet* performers were directly involved in the development of the narrative for the production and over time built confidence to suggest their own choreographic ideas
- Making community engagement processes more accessible to the general public by hosting them in non-art settings – for example, by locating the *Hiromi Hotel* project in a shopfront, a greater diversity of community members participated, from craft enthusiasts to daytime shoppers to young men out for a night on the town
- Being flexible to encourage broader engagement – for example, *Hiromi Hotel* was ‘open’ during nights and *Bobcat Ballet* rehearsals were scheduled to accommodate workers’ rosters
- Being able to respond to challenges as they arise and reshape plans accordingly – for example, in 2011 the *Bobcat Ballet* production had to be reconfigured to accommodate a daytime performance without lighting in a changed venue
- Recognising the opportunities a festival structure presents to support and highlight community arts engagement already underway locally – for example, the Mackay Festival provided support to Crossroad Arts for an existing film project engaging five local workers, resulting in additional funds for the project from Festivals Australia, greater promotion of the production and more screening opportunities across the region
- Accepting that community engagement projects require significantly more time to be invested compared with ‘buying in’ existing product, but recognising the importance of such projects to building local ownership of the festival and local participation in it.

Lessons learned:

For a production such as *Bobcat Ballet* which uses industrial machines in a performance context, significant technical challenges were encountered in relation to sound, lighting and workplace health and safety. This required new skills to be developed by the technical team, which had to be factored into the project development.

Perhaps the biggest lesson learnt was that providing resources and expertise allowed the building of local capacity to entertain on a large scale. With significant audiences attending the *Bobcat Ballet*, the local media and tourist industry are able to promote the festival from a unique angle – that the *Bobcat Ballet* is Mackay’s event.

Future plans:

Over time the intention is for *Bobcat Ballet* to become an iconic event of the festival that Mackay is known for. While touring the production would be a great opportunity for the performers and the festival itself, this brings with it a whole set of logistical challenges considering the large-scale machinery involved.

reflections

David Gerrand, Festival Producer, offered the following reflections on some questions posed by Arts Queensland:

Q: How did you work with the non-arts sector as part of the project? What was this experience like? What were the learnings about how to do this in the future?

A: The great joy for me was to involve a significant section of the Mackay community who wouldn't normally attend an arts event. Working with the bobcat drivers needed no extra skills or change of communication as compared to talking to an artist or a community group. The key to any successful partnership is to have open communication, respect and a sense of fun and purpose. The bobcat drivers and car club members were very pleased to be given an opportunity to display their skills and their machines to a wider audience. They enjoyed being given a structure – the rehearsal process and working with a director and a technical team to provide the sound and lights. Initial communication was via an article in the local paper followed up by email and phone calls. Once the group were assembled, it was very easy to make everyone feel part of the project as the Director clearly stated that she wanted them to look great.

Once rehearsals started, the drivers responded with enthusiasm to being able to have a strong input into the choreography after the Director outlined the basic narrative behind it and how it related to the music. It was the drivers who requested more rehearsals so that they could be even better.

It has always been a great experience and has been built on each year. It has only gotten better. At the first rehearsal of *Bobcat Ballet* for 2011 not all drivers could attend, but those who didn't sent emails and those who were there were so excited it was infectious. We even had four new drivers.

We can continue to build the *Bobcat Ballet* each year due to the fact that the process has been built on a tried-and-true successful arts practice. Firstly, plan the event with the principal artists and team involved; in this case the Producer, Director and Stage Manager. The initial meeting was to look at all solutions to how to mount such a show. The main technical problem was how can the drivers hear stage directions over the noise of their machines? This was solved by using wireless earpieces for each driver.

By giving everyone clear roles and responsibilities all other problems were easily solved. Once the Director had chosen the music and worked out a narrative for it, she involved the drivers. They know their machines better than anyone and were given the opportunity to work in a structure where they can contribute to the outcome.

Q: Did you attract new audiences through this project? How did you achieve this?

A: In the first year we had an audience of about 300; in the next year we had over 2000. We were confident of achieving this as the big buzz in the 2009 Festival was the *Bobcat Ballet* which was part of a Community Cabaret. Mackay had never seen one before and it created a lot of media interest.

In 2010, I expanded the program, hired a larger venue and invested in providing a larger sound and light budget to lift the production values. I was also able to use many local groups to make up the community cabaret part and put them alongside interstate and intrastate artists thereby creating a show which was much larger than its parts. But it was the *Bobcat Ballet* which was the main attraction.

The bobcat drivers certainly want to continue in the future. The audience response to the reduced format of the *Bobcat Ballet* in 2011 indicates that there will be future shows. The sponsors have indicated that they want to continue to support this event too.

Q: To what extent did your project engage diverse sectors of the community? What did you need to do to make sure your project was responsive to the needs of diverse community members?

A: Mackay is a rev-head town. Motor sports attract very large crowds whether it is at the Speedway, Drag Track or Monster Trucks at the Showgrounds. I wanted this audience to attend an arts event. So that is why I constructed a community cabaret to celebrate the various skills and expertise of the bobcat drivers and put them alongside the Sugar City Rock 'N' Rollers, Bungalong Kunjeil (an Aboriginal dance group), The Mackay North State High School Marching Band, Sensory Circus (fire twirlers), Stephen Rosenberg (a musician who plays a conch shell), the Ford Mustang Club and the Pyrophone Juggernaut (an extraordinary fire breathing organ and percussion instrument).

So by creating a 'cabaret' involving all these different performers it was clear to the audience that each act was as important as the others.



Bobcat Ballet 2010. Photographer: Jay Dee