RENAISSANCE IN THE REGIONS:
THE HOTHOUSE THEATRE ARTISTIC DIRECTORATE

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This paper is derived from research undertaken for an M.A. Preliminary Thesis completed in 2005. The thesis aimed to explore the restructuring of the Murray River Performing Group (M.R.P.G.) into HotHouse Theatre in 1997 with particular reference to the unique body that determines and oversees the artistic direction of HotHouse Theatre: the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate, a group of leading theatre workers from Sydney, Melbourne and elsewhere in the country that undertakes the planning, development, oversight and networking functions that would normally fall to the Artistic Director of a theatre company. The core data in the original thesis were a set of interviews with eighteen significant figures in the twenty-five year combined life of the M.R.P.G. and HotHouse Theatre, along with M.R.P.G./HotHouse Annual reports and company documents. This paper draws on interviews with eleven of these figures (whose collective experience with the company covers the period from the restructure to 2005) and also a selection of company documents.

This paper begins by briefly addressing the question of what were the factors leading to the establishment of the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate. It will then provide an overview of how the Artistic Directorate operates in the key areas of strategic planning and artistic oversight. The paper will quote some quantitative data to assess the success of the Artistic Directorate model and HotHouse Theatre. Finally the paper will touch on the contributions of other agents of change within HotHouse Theatre.

HotHouse Theatre is situated in Albury Wodonga on the New South Wales/Victorian border. The company was launched in 1997 but this event marked not so much the birth of a completely new theatre company as the radical transmutation of a previously existing company, the M.R.P.G. which, after seventeen years of productive and creative life, had reached a crisis point.

In October 1995 the Australia Council, having already placed the M.R.P.G. ‘Under Review’ since 1992, sent a letter to the company informing it that the funding body would no longer guarantee funding beyond the following year. The letter stated that the Australia Council’s Drama Committee believed that the M.R.P.G.’s recent work to be “under-developed and lacking in professional standards” and that “the company’s proposed program did not lead the Committee to believe that M.R.P.G. had
a clear vision of the future” (Australia Council Correspondence, October 1995). [Slide 1].

Partly in response to this and also as a result of burnout and stress the Artistic Director of the M.R.P.G., Susan McClements, decided to resign. The company advertised for a new artistic director but received a poor response. No applicants had the necessary combination of management, theatre direction and leadership skills. [Slide 2]. The crisis deepened as it became apparent that the M.R.P.G. would be heading into a difficult phase of operation without a leader.

The M.R.P.G. decided to thoroughly reassess its position as an arts organisation in the community and appointed Bill Robbins, senior lecturer in industrial relations at Charles Sturt University, to act as a consultant and carry out a planning review and S.W.O.T. (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of the company. Robbins review concludes with a list of “Recommended Actions”:

The M.R.P.G. should

1. Identify established productions with a track record of success which would appeal to the more traditional theatre audience;
2. Address the writing, design and performance of productions designed for school and younger audiences;
3. Improve its marketing, promotions and advertising efforts;
4. Improve the quality of productions such as the Cabaret shows;
5. Investigate the options for a more permanent performance space (Robbins 1996, 15).

The broad recommendations of the planning review, to some extent self-evident in terms of theatre company management, set the tone for a range of subsequent decisions that determined the future shape of the company.

At this point Susan McClements proposed that the company bring in two consultants, Chris Thomson and Chris Corbett, ex-colleagues of hers with wide experience as theatre-makers in a variety of companies, to try and develop some concrete strategies for dealing with the recommendations arising from the Planning Review and the pressing issue of leadership for the company. A weekend of discussion was scheduled between ‘the two Chrisses’ (as Thompson and Corbett came to be known) and the company: McClements, Fiona Barber (the remaining member of the acting ensemble), and Rob Scott, (production manager).

The venue for the meeting was a cabin overlooking Beechworth Gap some forty minutes drive from Albury. [Slide 3]. Before even arriving at the venue for the discussion Thompson and Corbett had pinpointed the most pressing issue for the M.R.P.G.:

In the M.R.P.G.’s latter years the company could only attract artistic director applicants of youth and energy but little experience, an ongoing problem for the previous six or seven years. Without an experienced A[d]irector, to take over from the incumbent, the M.R.P.G. kept taking a backward step (Chris Thompson, Personal Interview)

One of the weaknesses identified at the meeting was the increasing sense of isolation in the company from the broader theatre world. The concept of the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate emerged from a discussion of this particular weakness. The group undertook an exercise in lateral thinking to turn perceived weaknesses into strengths, so that rather than being ‘isolated’ the M.R.P.G. was redefined as being ‘poised between the two theatre hubs of the country’. “This led”, explains Chris Corbett

to the proposition that it would be great to draw on the skills available in these two cities
therefore why not set up an organisation to do this? (Personal Interview).

According to Rob Scott the seed of the Artistic Directorate lay in a discussion that agreed that for the company to cope with its current crisis it would need the best Artistic Director around to take over; for example someone such as Roger Hodgman or Marion Potts. [Slide 4] Initially the discussion concerned bringing in these experts as short term consultants but by the end of the weekend the concept of the Artistic Directorate had solidified: a permanent body of expert volunteers deciding the artistic program of the company.


The ten recommendations open with the proposal that reflects the idea of a regional ‘hothouse’ where artists from around the country are brought together to create high quality work in a non-metropolitan environment. [Slide 5]. The second recommendation sketches the proposed model for the Artistic Directorate.

The M.R.P.G. Board accepted all ten recommendations and the company began a process of restructuring, lead by Thompson and Corbett with input from McClements, Scott and Barber. [Slide 6]. The company also began approaching prospective Artistic Directorate members at this point. [Slide 7]. In late 1996 Fiona Barber and Charles Parkinson were appointed to oversee the setting up of the initial Artistic Directorate, although Parkinson frankly states he was initially sceptical:

I’m on record as saying the Artistic Directorate would never work because it was unpaid . . . [Later on] I was astonished that nearly everyone approached had accepted (Charles Parkinson, Personal Interview).

Originally Barber and Parkinson intended to leave Albury at the end of this process in early 1997. In the event they were invited by the Board of the company to form a management partnership that at first drove the restructure process and then went on to expand the operations of the new company with a high degree of administrative and business skill over the next eight years.

The inaugural meeting of the M.R.P.G./HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate occurred in January, 1997. The first Artistic Directorate comprised twelve individuals, four from Sydney, four from Melbourne and four from the Albury Wodonga region to fulfil a range of duties. [Slide 8].

The initial Directorate [Slide 9] was a voluntary body. Travel and accommodation expenses for interstate members were provided but no fees were paid for attendance at meetings and other advocacy and representation work. Later this would change as the Directorate itself was restructured in 2002. What attracted these high profile theatre practitioners from Sydney and Melbourne to serve in an as yet untried model?

Wiggy Brennan (artistic Directorate member 2000 to 2006) believes that altruism is part of the answer:

[t]here is also a certain type of theatre-worker who is prepared to go on the Artistic Directorate because they have a genuine commitment to theatre in Australia as a whole . . . even though they are often busy. This of course makes them good for the Directorate (Wiggy Brennan, Personal Interview).

Another original member of the Artistic Directorate, Roger Hodgman (then Artistic Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company) had an interest in both the M.R.P.G. and in regional theatre in general
Despite being unsure of his role initially, Hodgman came to realise that one of his major contributions was as a high profile arts figure who “could be wheeled out” to meet arts ministers, the press and local councillors at lobbying meetings and media events. This element of “artistic clout” is seen by Fiona Barber as one of the fundamental strengths that the new model provided for a company that was struggling to attract artists of significant standing.

If the Artistic Directorate hadn’t been of the calibre it was, we wouldn’t have been so successful early on. The Artistic Directorate taps us into a whole lot of networks that we wouldn’t otherwise be a part of (Personal Interview).

In 2002, after a review of its operations by a sub-committee, the Artistic Directorate was restructured into a seven member body with two members appointed from Sydney, two from Melbourne and two from elsewhere (which could include Sydney or Melbourne). The Artistic Manager of the company was also given a place on the Directorate. Essentially the streamlining was undertaken to facilitate payment of Directorate members and to increase the sense of responsibility and commitment.

A significant point in the restructure to a seven member body was the elimination of the compulsory four local members of the Artistic Directorate. The appointment of Charles Parkinson, Artistic Manager of the company, with his broad knowledge of the community and well-established local connections, was seen as a means of ensuring that the regional perspective was maintained.

This paper now turns to the question of how the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate operates to fulfil its core responsibility of determining “the artistic vision and program within the framework of the company’s mission”. In answering this question I will look at two broad fields: firstly the strategic planning and management functions of the Artistic Directorate and secondly the oversight of specific artistic projects.

The internal company document “Policy and Procedures of the Hothouse Theatre Artistic Directorate” lays down a detailed process for strategic management, the core of which is an annual four meeting cycle. Each meeting in the cycle has specific aims to develop program, to facilitate the funding application process and to maintain sound company administration. Between these meetings there is an equally significant cycle of information dissemination and follow-up by the Artistic Manager and General Manager of the company to deal with issues such as selection of subscription season productions, budgeting, grant submission, sourcing of artists, contract negotiations and general company management.

Currently Artistic Directorate members receive an annual fee which reflects their attendance at the four weekend meetings and a notional one day per month of other duties such as meeting preparation, script reading, advocacy and networking for the company.

It is also expected that Artistic Directorate members take an active role in the annual artistic program of HotHouse, in the same way that a solo Artistic Director will direct some of the productions in other organisations’ programs. The Artistic Directorate’s diverse constituency means that its members have taken on not only directing duties but also writing, costume design and festival direction roles. A system for the Artistic Direction of any HotHouse production has been carefully defined in the “Policy and Procedures of the Hothouse Theatre Artistic Directorate”.

A Project Artistic Director (P.A.D.) is appointed from the Artistic Directorate, and this is a paid position. A “Pit Crew” of two other Directorate members including the company’s Artistic Manager is appointed to assist the Project Artistic Director should any issues arise. The Pit Crew is unpaid. In addition the Project will have a Director, who may be a member of the Artistic Directorate (paid a separate fee to
their sitting fee) or who may be a guest artist. [Slide 15].

The specific duties and period of employment for a Project Artistic Director vary according to whether the particular project he or she is working on is a “major project”, such as a full production or co-production by the company, or a “minor project” where the company is “buying in” a production or a touring performance as part of its subscription season. In the case of a major project the P.A.D. is expected to work for three weeks spread over the pre-production period, the rehearsal period and production week. In this time the P.A.D. takes on leadership, communication, monitoring and problem-solving duties to ensure that the company’s requirements are given the highest priority. For minor projects the P.A.D. is expected to work for one week and to be physically present for the day of artists’ arrival, bump in day, technical/dress rehearsal and opening night. Where major issues do arise the P.A.D. will refer first to his or her Pit Crew, then to the Artistic Manager, General Manager or full Directorate as required. At the completion of any project the P.A.D. has a range of debriefing and reporting duties to fulfil for use in grant acquittals and internal assessment.

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So has the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate been a success? The following statistical data derived from HotHouse Theatre internal documents (Barber, 2004)\(^2\) give some quantitative indications.

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\text{Chart 1}
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It can be seen from this chart that under the HotHouse Artistic Directorate audience numbers have risen in comparison to the M.R.P.G.’s pre-Directorate figures. The anomalous spikes in 1993, 1994 and 1996 reflect the programming of three children’s theatre pieces (*The Twits* in 1993, *The Giraffe, The Pelly and Me* in 1994 and *The Incredible Adventures of Jackpot Jessie* in 1996) that played to large audiences of mainly school-children in Albury and on a tour of Queensland. Since its launch in 1997 HotHouse’s audience numbers increased from just under 4000 to just under 16000 in 2004.
Under the Artistic Directorate the number of performances in Albury/Wodonga and on regional and national tours has increased from about 40 in 1997 to about 140 in 2004.

In broad terms these graphs build a picture of consistent and significant growth both in production activity, as evidenced by number of performances, and also in audience development, as evidenced by increasing total audience numbers and rising touring activity.

In financial terms HotHouse Theatre’s annual turnover increased by one hundred per cent between 1997 and 2004.
Some significant other indicators can be seen in a comparison between the years 1997 and 2003:

**Chart 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Source</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance income</td>
<td>$48,735</td>
<td>$578,024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration income</td>
<td>$5,694</td>
<td>$335,729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>$400,000</td>
<td>$615,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants and subsidies</td>
<td>$140,000</td>
<td>$53,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$536,729</td>
<td>$1,236,841</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the period 1997 to 2003 the company’s performance income, measured by total box office receipts, has risen by 590%. In the same period administration income, derived from activities such as management fees for the Butter Factory Theatre and acting as an agent in sourcing artists for groups and organisations seeking theatrical expertise, has risen by 2,360%. The level of sponsorship and donations to the company has risen by 173% over the same seven years. Finally, income from total government and non-government grants and subsidies has risen by 31%.

From a business standpoint HotHouse Theatre is clearly now generating substantially more income across all sources than in 1997.

Finally, referring to Chart 5, there has been a 67% increase in total core funding from federal and state bodies in the period 1997 to 2004.

**Chart 5**

This increase indicates, in broad terms, the continued support of the three major funding bodies for HotHouse’s activities and programming.
The preceding figures paint a picture of a company that is clearly thriving under the Artistic Directorate and there is a general consensus amongst all the interviewees concerned with the transition to the Artistic Directorate at HotHouse Theatre that the model has been a success. It should be noted, however, that the setting up and operation of the Artistic Directorate is only one facet of a larger restructuring process that included the HotHouse Theatre Board and the “permanent company” under the management of Fiona Barber and Charles Parkinson. [Slide 16]. All the interviewees acknowledged the significant roles that Barber, as General Manager, and Parkinson, as Artistic Manager, have played. Campion Decent, for example, comments,

[c]learly the people who have driven change are Charlie and Fiona. They are key to the company’s success . . . Their enthusiasm is the hidden subsidy which keeps the company going (Personal Interview).

Since the completion of the original thesis in 2005, Fiona Barber has moved on to take up the position of General Manager of The Flying Fruit Fly Circus. Parkinson remains as HotHouse Theatre’s Artistic Manager but dealing with eventual loss of both is identified by the Directorate as a crucial issue. [Slide 17].

The succession issue that was a critical factor in the demise of the M.R.P.G. and its eventual rebirth as HotHouse Theatre will inevitably re-emerge as the significant challenge for the Artistic Directorate. [Slide 18]. The difference between the M.R.P.G. in 1995 and HotHouse Theatre in 2006, however, is the Artistic Directorate itself. The company now has a pool of twenty-six current and ex-Artistic Directorate members who have developed an understanding of the needs of the company and familiarity with the Albury/Wodonga region and its community. The networks that HotHouse Theatre is now connected to are vastly wider than the M.R.P.G.’s in 1995. The profile of the company on the national scene is much higher. The connections of two metropolitan theatre industries to HotHouse and its region are far deeper. Bearing all of this in mind it is reasonable to predict that, when the company does face the issue of replacing its guiding executive officers, it will do so from a position of confidence in its identity, security in its resources and faith in its vision.

Update: November, 2007. Charles Parkinson left the company in July 2007. He has been replaced as Artistic Manager by Campion Decent, Artistic Directorate member 2003 to 2007.

Notes

1. Please refer to the powerpoint presentation downloadable from the abstract page for this article.

2. The specific document to which I am referring here is a 2004 submission to Arts Victoria. According to the current General Manager of HotHouse Theatre, Bernadette Haldane:

[a]ll Arts Victoria statistics were prepared in 2004 by Fiona Barber (General Manager) based on box office records of the company and point of sales surveys of both subscribers and single ticket buyers. It is a requirement by Arts Victoria that these box office records and demographic data (are) collected at the time of sale as a reporting measure against the ‘Arts Victoria Industry checklist”—a legal requirement for funding acquittals.
Our non financial figures are observed by the (company’s) auditor in reference to subscribers and prices through our box office reconciliation sheets but are not specifically targeted for auditing (Personal Correspondence).

3. “Core funding” represents the total amount of money granted to the company from the federal and state arts funding bodies in the form of annual or triennial grants in support of the company’s yearly program. It can be distinguished from “non-core funding”, consisting of grants which are attached to specific projects, such as The Biting Dog Youth Theatre Festival or touring activity for particular productions, made by government and non-government organisations. Such bodies include the Victorian Government’s health promotion foundation, VicHealth and the Victorian Government’s Department of Education as well as various private philanthropic trusts. The total of core and non-core funding for 1997 and 2003 is represented in the Chart 4 bar line, “Grants and Subsidies”.

References
Australia Council
   —1993 “Australia Council/M.R.P.G. Correspondence to Garry Bryant, Murray River Performing Group” HotHouse Theatre Archives.

Australia Council, Jane Westbrook 1994 “Australia Council/M.R.P.G. Correspondence Ref: 59086 to Garry Bryant, Murray River Performing Group” HotHouse Theatre Archives.


Barber, Fiona 2004 “Hothouse Theatre Submission to Arts Victoria: Statistical Information” Hot House Theatre Archives.

Hothouse Theatre


Thompson, Chris, Roger Hodgman, Mark Selkrig, Wiggy Brennan 2001 ”Recommendations for a Future Artistic Directorate Model” HotHouse Theatre Archives.
Guy Hooper recently left La Trobe University, where he was Associate Lecturer in Theatre and Drama at the University’s Wodonga campus, to live and work in Tasmania. He has worked as an actor, devisor and director for over twenty years with companies such as Death Defying Theatre, Circus Oz, The Murray River Performing Group, Back to Back, Elston, Hocking and Woods, La Mama, Playbox, Zeal and HotHouse. He also works in the area of community cultural development; teaching and creating performance with marginalised groups and directing community festivals. His research interests are regional theatre, physical performance and Shakespeare in performance.

This paper is based on Guy’s M.A. Prelim. Thesis, Second Childhood: A Regional Rebirth, which examined the development of the HotHouse Theatre Artistic Directorate focusing on interviews with key players in the establishment of Australia’s leading regional theatre company.