



FESTIVALS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Richard Bladel

This session is intended as an opportunity to develop a dialogue around the role of festivals in reflecting and strengthening community cultural engagement. How do we design festivals so that they represent the communities they celebrate?

Arts festivals are great, aren't they? An opportunity to go large and unusual and to see and do some stuff we wouldn't get the chance to usually, a coming together, a celebration and a sharing of spirit... I love them. But on the other hand, at their worst, major arts festivals are economically driven, top end of town affairs, exhibiting mostly a collection of art already happening anyway, curated to suit some individual or committee's idea of what art should be. They are so often detrimental to local arts practitioners, hoovering up scant resources and using local productions to pad out programs headlined by glossy imports. Their prime connection is with a market rather than a community.

I'm here to talk to you about The Works, a ccd arts festival that Kickstart Arts and Glenorchy City Council co-produced in Tasmania in 2000 and 2003. Over the two festivals, we employed 121 artists who made all sorts of art with 4,700 community participants seen by an audience of over 16,500 people. We raised a total budget of \$402,853.00. All this in a city of 45,000 people. But much more important than the numbers, when we are talking about cultural sustainability, it represents a seven year partnership that has left the cultural life of the place richer and more vital. The Works was cheeky, chaotic and imaginative, it managed to terrify the right people in the bureaucracy just enough, and to excite enough people outside the bureaucracy too much. After seven years it is now entering a new phase where its own community is taking it on and running it, The Works has been voted on by Aldermen, and is now officially on the books.

The Works was one of the few near fully commissioned arts festivals in the country. A core team of artistic director of the first two Festivals, Ian Pidd, myself, the Glenorchy City Council's Community Development officers, artists and community members worked together to produce 90% of the art from scratch specifically for the two events. And every event was free for everyone. I want to explain how we went about producing The Works because when we are thinking about how a festival might strengthen community engagement, the model and process we used as much as the mistakes we made might make a contribution.

Glenorchy is a working class city a little north of Hobart with an economic focus in traditional manufacturing industries. It is full of large factories and warehouses. And, like everywhere else, these industries are struggling to cope with global market forces. This has real impact on real people. Glenorchy continues to have more social problems than its richer neighbouring city, Hobart. It is a city of 45,000 people, with one small community arts centre, a library, a private museum, no live theatre venues at all and relatively little in the way of regular live music, even in pubs. Apart from Symphony under the Stars there's very little in the way of major arts events. It's a place where you don't even get big crowds at the footy anymore. So judging by its lack of infrastructure, it is a city seemingly uninterested in art, so how do you fascinate people in a community level arts festival that asks them to not just come and look at art, but actually participate in new, unfamiliar and slightly strange activities?

The development of the first Works festival began with the idea of using art making to connect with people's experiences of work. We started with an easily identifiable theme rooted in the daily life of community members as a starting point, as an idea that could create some energy. This sounds like it might make for a very dry and boring arts festival, a reaching back to the old Art and Working Life Days of the 70s.

But it wasn't. We used the theme of work often very loosely as a starting point to produce some startling arts projects on the main road, in shops, in people's homes, community centres, churches, schools, factories, parks, on buses and all sorts of workplaces. In the beginning, in order to gather support for the idea of the festival, Kickstart and the Council Community Development Officers focused on a community partnership building. We directly targeted Glenorchy Council's strategic plan as a means to get them as a whole organisation involved in the idea of the festival. If we could create a process that fulfilled some of Council's strategic community, social, youth, tourism, and even, dare I say it, economic development needs as well as cultural ones then they would be much more likely to jump in with both feet. And they did. Council invested \$20,000 initially – and this is a large sum for a small council. This was used as seeding investment to pull in more funding. The festival enjoyed direct involvement from many departments other than just community development – for example, the Environmental Health Department (responsible for waste, etc) with the Rescene exhibition, which involved partner waste management and resource recovery organisations paying for artists and community members to make sculptures from recycled & reused materials.

But there are dangers in this sort of process. All too often appealing to the strategic becomes an upstairs deal, captive of a performance indicator-led reality. For a whole raft of reasons, it gets in the way of the real practical concerns, interests and needs

of the communities in a place. You can make too many promises to too many sectors, try to achieve too many things in your desire to get things moving. The festival can be seen as merely a marketing opportunity for a council, and the thing can get lost in bureaucracy. It can dissipate your focus and energy. The key question became could we address these strategic needs by designing a series of inspiring and inclusive arts projects and still connect with what the community really wanted? Connecting with where they were really at?

The festival began also as a response to community consultation processes run by Council as part of their cultural and social planning process. During these meetings, community members stated that they wanted a major festival or community event for Glenorchy. But only people who are interested in being corralled into butcher's paper-led checklists attend these meetings, and local government consultation processes can be notoriously pragmatic affairs, surely. We've all been there. What made the festival connect with the many sectors of the community that it did, was that this progressive Council are really serious about trying to involve the community in things. Glenorchy Council has a system of community representation based around local precinct committees that they put a lot of energy into. While not perfect, this was one mechanism that we used to encourage participation from all over the city.

We also ran our own consultation processes for The Works. This entailed countless weeks spent meeting with groups of people in workplaces, schools, community halls, parks, churches, etc. This is where the project based model of funding really sucks. The lack of initial funding to support detailed community consultation at the beginning of the process made it challenging to work slowly from the ground up, building from what was already going on culturally in the place.

The Works was not perfect, it failed to involve the middle section of the Glenorchy community, the decidedly no thanks to art mob, and the key street parade and art installation events held on Sundays were not as well attended as they might have been. We spent too little on promotion, too much on the art. But we seemed to succeed in convincing the ones with the performance indicators that this is a process, that it takes time to challenge behaviour and attitudes built up over decades.

The major public event of the festival in 2000 was held over one Sunday with a parade and the entire CBD of Glenorchy transformed into a huge art gallery, movie theatre and concert venue – after months of lead-up work making the art together. But we were murdered by a below zero snap westerly that drenched everything and then blew it away.

The festival in 2003 was larger than the first, and was held over nine days, with an ultimate event again on a Sunday, unfortunately also Mothers Day. But it was a beginning. A really inspirational beginning. In the typically clinical language used in such reports, independent evaluator Julie Roach, in her evaluation report on the 2003 Festival stated:

'The evaluation materials depict a picture of positive participation experiences at most activities. Respondent feedback was generally positive and overwhelmingly respondents would like to see the festival continued. The opportunity to see and experience art in the local community was positively received. There have been seven major flow-on projects that are running independently after the festival that were initially conceived or inspired by The Works. As this was an important aim for the Festival, this must be seen as a success.'

The key partnership between Kickstart Arts and Glenorchy City Council began in early 1998 and is now, almost seven years on, entering a phase where the Council have taken over prime responsibility for its production. In other words, both as a partnership and piece of community cultural development it has come full circle.

Planning meetings, consultation and a revisioning process are now under way for the 2006 Festival, with Glenorchy Council firmly in the driver's seat. Kickstart is still involved, but in a very different capacity. Despite the best of intentions, and with all due respect to my good Council partners, local government as a political animal is usually about managing risk rather than taking risks, and it is this sense of risk taking that must continue. We need to preserve the energy, chaos and excitement of ideas that made the first festivals a success creatively. Now that's going to be an interesting challenge.

Richard Bladel is Artistic Director of Kickstart Arts, a dynamic community arts organisation based in Hobart. Kickstart is a multi artform arts company with a total focus on community cultural development. It produces bold and challenging community focused arts projects that link art/cultural issues with other sectors such as industry, welfare, health, education and tourism.