

Martin Mitchell - The Sustainability of Community Performance in Australia.

Firstly a brief Intro to The Association of Community Theatre. In its 22nd year (in 2015) the Assn was created to provide *Training, Insurance* and *Advertising* for its members. We have 181 Members (mostly in NSW & ACT) plus 9 Corporate Members.

Insurance: We provide Public Liability, VWPA, Money and Management Liability insurance cover to 538 groups around Australia.

Advertising: We produce 20,000, 'What's On' brochures each year. In our first year this was one folded A4 page printed on both sides. Last year it was a 28 page brochure. All these shows are also listed on our web site.

Training: We hold a 'Stagecraft' Conference at NIDA every second year. The Next Conference at NIDA will be on the October long weekend in 2016. The Conference runs over 2 days – on Saturday morning we have a general information section which covers introductions, a Guest Speaker – last year was John Frost and in past years we have had Bud Tingwell, Simon Gallaher, Nancye Hayes who is our patron, John Wood, Amanda Muggleton, Peter Cousins, Stuart Wagstaff and many more – then there are 4 classes in 8 sessions on Saturday afternoon and Sunday. There is a Saturday night dinner when we induct 2 or 3 persons to the Hall of Fame. These persons are nominated by their group and the award is for 10 or more years of service in off stage involvement. E.g. Joel Beskin. Conferences also enable members of different groups to meet informally and discuss common issues.

My involvement over many years has been with Community Theatre and therefore my focus is on that segment of Community Activity. No doubt my comments will 'ring a bell' with other Community projects.

In 2005 it was estimated that Community Theatre in Australia entertained more than 2 million people every year.

These figures, 2M people and 538 groups, tend to indicate that sustainability is assured but one cannot be complacent because so many factors affect each group and sometimes difficulties or even closure will occur in spite of all efforts made by the Committee. Two Sydney Metro groups have closed down recently for quite different reasons.

One performed in Western Suburbs of Sydney and had been operating for 25 years in Parramatta. Parramatta is expanding constantly as the second biggest city in NSW. There are a lot of professional productions there as well as several other Community Groups competing for audience and theatre space.

The other is the only community group in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. A church based group they have performed in the church hall for 56 years. The church has expanded and has taken over the hall for their Sunday Services. There is no other theatre in the area and no Town Halls making it difficult to continue. Both groups are also experiencing difficulty getting people to run the shows – plenty want to perform but not work!

Some of the questions Community Theatre Groups must address are:

1. How do we sustain Community Performances in an increasingly challenging, competitive and financially expensive social and economic environment.
2. How do we embrace change?
3. How do we encourage our youth to be involved in administration?
4. How do we create innovation on small budgets?
5. How do we encourage/get funding?
6. How to ensure we do the shows that will attract an audience?

There are many ways groups can protect themselves from some problems:

- Encourage youth to join the committee. Train them to understand the business of the group and learn that the group **is** a business.
- Learn the demographics of their area.
- Learn to budget correctly, to stick with the budget when set and not change it without the full committee involvement. Make sure everyone in the Production team knows what their budget is (Lighting, Sound, Music, Scenery, Props etc.).
- Run the group in a business-like manner. Still have fun but take responsibilities seriously.
- The committee must maintain some control, especially financial control, over the production team, presuming they are two different groups.
- Use younger members, who show interest, as Assistant Directors, Assistant Stage Managers etc. who will then be able to take the lead at some time in the future.

Many wonderful persons volunteer in various roles and the group must make sure that someone, preferably on the committee but at least someone who knows the ropes, is charged with instructing the volunteers, (politely and with fun if the situation allows), how/when/where they are expected to carry out their appointed tasks.