

## **Balancing the “Town and Gown”: The Risky Business of Creating Youth Theatre in Regional Queensland**

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### **Abstract**

QUE Theatre Inc. is a new youth theatre company in the rural Queensland town of Toowoomba that was established in March 2003 through a specific outcome of a regional partnership among the state theatre company, Queensland Theatre Company, the Department of Theatre at the University of Southern Queensland and the Empire Theatre which began in 2001. Although QUE Theatre Inc. receives generous advisory and in kind support from all three industry professionals, it is QUE’s relationship with a regional university (USQ) that has emerged as a key to the company’s success. The findings in this paper are a result of an audit of the programs and pedagogy at the heart of this regional youth theatre initiative.

### **Introduction**

The term “town and gown” refers to relationships that are created between universities (the “gown”) and the towns in which those institutions are located. Throughout Australia there are several regional towns that are host to universities and Toowoomba in southeast Queensland is one of these. Toowoomba is also the site of QUE Theatre Inc., a youth theatre initiative that provides numerous theatrical skill workshops for young people on the Darling Downs. Since 2001, QUE Theatre Inc. has produced an annual youth playbuilding theatre event (QUE Fest), creating over 25 new theatre works and 12 films (documentaries of processes) with approximately 90 participants (aged between 11 and 17), many of whom have returned to the project over the five years. QUE Theatre Inc. became incorporated in March 2003 and their core business still includes QUE Fest as well as a further five fee-paying pedagogical programs: QUE Able (intellectually disabled youth); QUE Fiish (indigenous youth); QUE Reach (rural youth); QUE Voce (helping teachers manage their voices); and QUE Tech (technical workshops). Although QUE has its own youthful Management Committee, it is largely patronised by University of Southern Queensland (USQ) students owing to the fact that QUE programs are facilitated by USQ Theatre staff and students so that they provide integral practical experiences and training of Theatre undergraduates who then mentor local young participants in QUE. There is a current Memorandum of Agreement (Regional Partnership) among USQ, Queensland Theatre Company and the Empire Theatre (ET) (the local theatre in Toowoomba) which aims to support and advise QUE Theatre Inc. USQ remains the key stakeholder in the partnership that no doubt drives the pedagogic orientation of programs.

It has been my brief since 2001, as the coordinator of QUE activities for the Department of Theatre at USQ, to build a sustainable profile for a youth theatre company in the region. Although I believe that the overall commitment of QUE

Theatre Inc. to developing regional youth theatre voices is positive, *albeit* somewhat chaotic and dynamic, the fact that QUE did not initially evolve organically ‘from the ground up’ raises some interesting questions about how the company might sustain itself over a long period of time. The emerging ‘town and gown’ relationship that this company has with USQ has provided a vital reassessment and exploration of ‘youth’ and ‘theatre’ in a regional Queensland.

### **The Town: Defining Regional Youth**

Anyone who has ever tried to establish a youth service in a rural/regional community would probably have come across the raised eyebrows and the concerned looks from community elders who envisage nihilism and vandalism as theatrical forms that might alienate the generations and drive a wedge further into the age divisions felt so strongly in country towns. Toowoomba is no exception; Toowoomba is, after all, a city of churches, gardens, educational centres and retirement villages. The view of youth as an unstable category goes without saying, perhaps because of the consistent exodus of young people from Toowoomba, as is the case in many regional centres.

In a regional location like Toowoomba, concepts of ‘youth’ have traditionally been at odds with the adult infused repertory theatre culture, and I believe that this has resulted in a kind of youth cultural cringe that ‘worries’ people about the ‘newness’ of the company. QUE struggles to be taken seriously by adult cultural gatekeepers in a town where cultural theatre products replicate mainstream ‘high’ cultural values through the Repertory Theatre, Philharmonic and Toowoomba Choral societies (Wilson, 2004).

According to one respectable member of the Toowoomba community, what QUE offers is maverick and unprestigious; he positions youth theatrical activity as “risky”, “angst-ridden”, “self-indulgent” and most damningly “unprofitable”. There is no doubt that the theatrical products by young people vary in their production values, aesthetic qualities, fictional content and analysis of themselves. But the pedagogical intent of all QUE programs (including Fest) are not focused on an end product, rather, they are about the process of cultural awakening undertaken by the young people using theatre as their vehicle for expression, although this might not always get bums on seats. The implications about the aesthetics and quality control of the end products are of more concern to the ‘adult’ partners interested in a return on their generous in kind investment in QUE Theatre Inc. For these reasons, I see the theatrical projects offered by QUE Fest as being most definitely in opposition to mainstream theatrical ideas produced by adult cultural gatekeepers in the Toowoomba. QUE’s obvious links with USQ also promotes suspicion amongst the ‘town’ because it is a central locus of youth in Toowoomba, which does not always feel comfortable with the perception that it is a ‘university town’.

Wyn and White (1997, p. 11) suggest that youthfulness is a state of ‘becoming’ (with the ‘arrival’ being adult) and therefore in flux. The idealism associated with youth is also often negated as fleeting and somehow suspicious by adult gatekeepers, and yet it is this potential for innovation and ‘thinking outside the box’ that Richard Florida (2005, p. 295) defines as a necessary ingredient in building a creative community or class. Similarly, recently published research entitled *Innovation in Rural Queensland: Why Some Towns Thrive While Others Languish* (Plowman, Ashkanasy, Gardner & Letts, 2003) reports that towns which demonstrate the ‘least innovation’ were linked

to institutionalised generationalism – what Florida calls a “cultural hardening of the arteries” (2005, p. 303), whereby towns and their existing cultural practices are trapped by their past. The report strongly suggests that developing cultural capital is a hallmark of an innovative and sustainable community and that Queensland rural towns should explore “all avenues to make their towns attractive to young people” (Plowman, Ashkanasy, Gardner & Letts, 2003, pp. 4-5).

Indeed, QUE Theatre Inc.’s vision (University of Southern Queensland, 2004) states that it aims to “create dynamic and contemporary theatre for young people by young people” with a mission to “equip, educate and empower regional youth with genuine development opportunities through participation in all facets of theatre production” (p. 1). These statements are not dissimilar to many other youth theatre organisations throughout Australia, yet QUE aims to mark out its territory clearly by specifying the training of ‘regional’ youth in a regional town. The ‘town’ in the QUE Regional Partnership is represented by the ET, which is underwritten by the Toowoomba City Council. The administrative office of QUE has been situated ‘downtown’ at the ET, which has generously provided the space, computer, etc. since 2003. The ET has provided spaces for workshops and QUE Fest performances, as well as financial support and mentoring of the administrator (as set down in the Memorandum of Agreement).

Yet the generous support of QUE by the ET is not without anxieties and suspicions. The Youth Foundation and other youth-related musical events offered by the ET are not yet connected to QUE programming while QUE Theatre Inc. (QUE Fest only) activities have only recently been referred to on the ET website. However, some brief information about QUE was discussed in the General Manager’s Report for the 2005 annual review, and QUE programs were advertised in the ET’s schools (package brochure (Empire Theatre, n.d.)). The ET is careful about developing closer ties to QUE, mainly because of QUE’s close association with USQ. An ET representative at the most recent QUE Partners meeting on 24 November 2005 stated that the ET was unlikely to support QUE (after the current Memorandum of Agreement ends in 2006) if the perception of QUE as an outlet for USQ Theatre students and their assessment was to remain. These sentiments were revealed earlier on 25 February 2005 by the Chair of the ET, who asked the partners why QUE should continue to be supported by the ET when other local youth projects were not. The ‘town’s’ perception of USQ as having pedagogical agendas (and perhaps deep financial pockets) has definitely impacted upon the way that QUE is perceived by cultural powerbrokers in Toowoomba.

### **Young People Encouraging Chaos or Transformation?**

The voices of young people attending and participating in QUE Theatre Inc. workshops and performances have been collected since 2001. In the words of one USQ student facilitator, QUE Fest especially provides:

...a place where the socially unacceptable and tiresome elements of ‘teen-hood’ can be explored and even celebrated...[A]s a facilitator of playbuilding processes, to create an environment where risks are outlawed is to create a sterile space. And the chance is that if bacteria can’t be grown in the playbuilding space, then nothing else will be either. (James; cited in McDonald & James, 2005)

One young participant stated, “[I]t’s a time when we’re changing a lot. We’re becoming adults and we want more rights and freedoms. QUE Fest does that for me”. These young people tend to reject the negative connotations of them as angst-ridden teens because they generally do not see why this stage of life is less important than any other. Instead, they choose to embrace it with all of its angst in comical and confusing ways. Willis (1990) tells us that young people reposition the relationship between arts and culture in ways which aim to disrupt and reclaim art from the “hyperinstitutionalisation” of art (the dissociation of art from its living contexts) and to place it in the realm of “living common culture” (pp. 1-3). “Where art excludes, culture includes. Arts has been cut short of meanings, where culture has not.” What the students’ evaluations tell us is that QUE Fest provides an outlet for anchoring their emerging voices; many participants discover that QUE programs have become a consistent part of their cultural lives in the region (QUE Fest evaluation sin 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004).

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that in late modernity subjective feelings of risk are a significant feature of young people’s lives and they posit that perceptions of risk are therefore culturally constructed and may create a “mismatch” between the objective (what I should do, the adult “voice”) and the subjective (what I feel that I want to do, the youth “voice”) dimensions of risk, which heightens a *sense* of risk and insecurity for young people (p. 7). As one participant states:

I’m more comfortable at theatre, because there’s people that love the same stuff that I do and at home it’s hard because they just see it as a form of entertainment – they don’t see it as anything deeper than that, and that frustrates me....But when I was up there [on stage] I had this great feeling of this is what I want to do and it’s something that I can aim for but...it’s hard to say. (participant interview, 28 August 2005)

Queensland youth theatre research team McLean and McLean (2003) warn that young people’s exposure to youth specific programs or products does not necessarily equate with an understanding of art making and aesthetic literacy. They argue that it is not simply osmosis that creates effective or meaningful youth theatre experiences, but the nurturing and sustenance of a *desire* in young people to articulate and be critical of what they want and how they want it. Otherwise they cannot become advocates for a utilitarian theatre culture in their town: “[a]udiences do not return to theatre when they have not connected with the work” (p. 4). Therefore I believe that where there is a desire by young people to repeat participatory experiences in QUE programs there is also a sense of community being built that is a building block towards efficacy and transformation.

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) perceive the navigation of complex changes undertaken by today’s youth as an indication of the multiple cultural and social literacies that young people are capable of and adept at engaging in together (p. 1). Giddens (cited in Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) states that living in a risk society means having an attitude that is “open to possibilities of action, positive or negative” (p. 5) as part of the continuous negotiation of meaning in contemporary society. With over 150 young people participating in QUE programs in 2004 alone, I would say that QUE Theatre Inc. has opened the aperture on theatre for youth in Toowoomba, especially youth who are also Indigenous, disabled and/or rural. QUE Theatre Inc. contests the institutional generationalism that is alive inside regional theatres. However, this

emerging potential has been largely unplanned and accidental and QUE needs a strategy to harness this for the meaningful development of relations with theatre professionals in order to capitalise on their contributions and to reduce the accidental nature and the potential loss of learning opportunities for rural young people. The largely USQ and youthful representation on the management committee of QUE continue to wrestle with the nature of its/their emerging 'voice'. These Theatre and ex-Theatre students are not only negotiating what it means to run a company but also struggling to find an aesthetic unity about what they believe that theatre actually is: "...there are problems associated mainly with our lack of experience and expertise....[E]verything we learn, we learn on the run....[F]rom my point of view, this is a defining characteristic of the company thus far" (Wilson, 2004, p. 1).

### **The Gown: Imposition or Emancipation?**

As the caretaker of the original impulse to create QUE Theatre Inc., I can say that the impetus came from a hunch that USQ Theatre had about what young people might 'need' in Toowoomba. USQ, as well as the Queensland Theatre Company and the ET, therefore 'imposed' the initial youth playbuilding program (QUE Fest) on the community like a carrot on a stick; it was a pilot for investigating how we might go about creating a youth theatre company. QUE Fest proved to be a popular program and continues to be the 'flagship' of all QUE initiatives with young people in the region. This initial hunch placed USQ as the driver of the pedagogy at the heart of the programs since, without this, QUE would never have emerged.

Hunches about which programs to create have continued to be used as a way for QUE's management committee to pilot ideas in the community. According to their minutes (of 20 October 2003, 4 December 2003 and 17 December 2003), there was vocalised concern (as well as from partners) about and some opposition to continuing this practice. Hunches seem unsophisticated and even 'cheap', in that formal market research is not necessarily undertaken; this of course feeds the perception of youth initiatives (run by a young management committee) as inherently unstable and chaotic. Yet, as the initiator of the first hunch to establish QUE, I have seen these hunches take root and come to fruition; what I have observed is that the youthful management committee's hunches are neither uninformed nor without a genuine suggestion from the young participants in QUE programs. QUE Reach, Able and Fiish are all programs that began as hunches about the lack of theatre activities for these communities in Toowoomba. To this end, the germane community connection with and interpretation of local cultural trends undertaken informally by USQ students who 'drive' QUE Theatre Inc. is vital attributes of youth that has paid big dividends:

We were actually discussing this at our last board meeting and I think the general consensus was that we don't want to merely fill gaps in the market. I believe we have the potential to provide the market with products they didn't even know they wanted, but when they see them, they'll want more. (Wilson, 2004, p. 2)

The USQ Department of Theatre wants to provide learning experiences that are valued, different from its main competitors and promotional of its regional position in the state. The 2004 Department of Theatre brochure states that QUE is a "fully functional community youth theatre [that] provides 'hands-on' best practice experience for Theatre Studies students in all facets of operating a professional community arts organisation" (University of Southern Queensland, 2004, p. 5). QUE



provides significant pedagogical and experiential opportunities for Theatre Studies and Bachelor of Drama Bachelor of Education (BDED) students to mentor and be mentored in playbuilding projects with young people. The QUE program is a requirement for obtaining group work and collaborative skills in the seven required practical courses of the Theatre Studies and BDED degree programs. There is a symbiosis here that has given QUE its particular youth flavour. McLean and Richer (2003) suggest that theatre for young people should be the consideration of how to reconceptualise the relationship “between artmakers, arts educators, and young people as partners in creating and learning cultures to assist arts practise” (p. 5). The USQ students who teach and drive the QUE program are all under the age of 30 and are significantly mentored themselves by both USQ Theatre staff and theatre industry professionals. This immersive, ‘youth-mentoring-youth’ pedagogy is based on a ‘natural’ mentoring model where “...a student/teacher may develop into a relationship between peers after the student has graduated, the more experienced person counselling the less experienced and introducing them to new opportunities, rather than just motivating, supporting and teaching them...” (Hunter, 2002, p. 1).

There is an all encompassing, ‘top-down’ flow effect regarding the mentoring in QUE and many of these young mentors themselves have come from regional areas in Queensland and northern New South Wales. Their impact is palpable in the feedback taken from QUE participants who list the rapport, the positive attitudes, the lack of authoritarian stances and the professionalism as some of the most important aspects of their QUE experiences (QUE Able evaluations in 2004; QUE Act evaluations in 2003 and 2004; QUE Fest evaluations in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004; QUE Lab evaluations in 2002, 2003 and 2004). They are what Abbs (1989) refers to as “co-artists” and without them these programs could not have a youth focus at its core:

...the teacher of an arts discipline becomes, in some measure, a practitioner.  
....[T]here is a further related, more subtle aspect to the notion of co-artist; it is a function of the arts-teacher not only to initiate aesthetic activity but also [to] enter it directly as creative agent, to develop it and deepen it. (pp. 39-40)

### **Precariously Balancing the Town and Gown**

What began as the ‘imposition’ of a hunch about youth theatre culture on the town of Toowoomba has indeed transformed. However, QUE Theatre Inc. is less about youth theatre and more about pedagogy and cultural brokerage; the centrality of the USQ Department of Theatre has ensured this orientation. The ‘gown’ promotes the importance of youthful mentoring in sustaining QUEs reputation as a cultural ‘broker’ in the region, yet QUE’s impact on the ‘town’ (as an ‘adult’ business) has been less successful; its heavy pedagogical investment means that QUE does not yet have a strong artistic/aesthetic practice or a community ‘bang’ for the region. This has precarious implications for youth theatre practice in general; QUE is currently a theatre without a building or artistic director and its fee-paying programs define its cultural territory as more pedagogical than artistic.

QUE’s pedagogical connection to USQ, however, has not necessarily translated into successes with local high schools. One hunch that schools would provide a steady flow of students and promote QUE programs as extensions to their own drama programs has not yet become a reality. The assumption was that drama teachers might be looking for local activities and would support QUE because of its ties with the university theatre programs. Instead, what has emerged is an implication that USQ’s

influence may be an issue to those teachers who trained in Brisbane and remain loyal to their university (it should be stated that teachers at two schools who do consistently promote QUE programs have either taught or studied at USQ). This youth cultural cringe against local process/products provided by QUE might be an aspect of Toowoomba's 90 minute driving proximity to Brisbane, yet many drama teachers prefer to promote Brisbane workshops and performances as they are uncertain of QUE's 'reputation' as a cultural provider and are dubious about USQ's theatre productions, which are limited in choice compared with the variety of theatre offered in the 'big smoke' of Brisbane (McDonald, 2002, p. 14).

This perception by the 'town' of the 'gown' as represented by QUE is not unlike that expressed earlier by the ET, yet connections between universities and youth theatre are not uncommon in Australia. A review in 2003 via the Youth Performing Arts Australia website (Young Performing Arts Australia, n.d.) of some of the regional youth theatres such as Karratha Youth Theatre (Western Australia), Corrugated Iron Youth Arts (the Northern Territory), Riverland Youth Theatre (South Australia), Outback Youth Theatre (southwest New South Wales), LaLuna Youth Arts (North Queensland) and Goulburn Lieder Youth Theatre (western New South Wales) indicates that they all describe mentoring and industry or university partnerships that have supported their growth. What is also revealed is the frequency with which these youth theatres have continued to re-invent themselves in consultation with arts/theatre industry (including universities); this seems part of the ongoing narrative of this field in Australia at this time.

## Conclusion

One of the indelible issues of QUE for the management committee and partners is how it wrestles with the perceptions of the 'town and gown' in Toowoomba. For many of the participants in QUE programs, there is a sense that QUE offers a cultural alternative in the regional town: "I find it...difficult [living here] sometimes; Toowoomba does have quite a bit of potential if it just got off its arse." QUE might genuinely provide different points of departure for young people to engage new cultural literacies and to "...get up and do whatever I want to do [to express myself]...and not be ridiculed, but only receive constructive criticism" (participant interview, 21 August 2005).

Clar Doyle (1993) articulates an aesthetic that drama teachers have long understood and taken for granted: that the nature of drama is about change and that drama pedagogy is by its very nature transformational because it *expects* change. The very choice of creating a company such as QUE Theatre Inc. in a town like Toowoomba is an interrogation of and for change. Genuine agency is about stirring young people to ask questions of established cultural 'norms'. With the growth of new pedagogical programs, the development and refinement of new memoranda of agreement with new local partners has become a vital part of QUE's growth. Local care groups such as Anglicare have sought to formalise their financial and in kind involvement with QUE Able; Bluecare, Disability Services and Endeavour have also expressed interest in providing drama workshops for their clients. Similarly, QUE Fiish has developed strategies for involving Indigenous groups through local elders and the Community Justice Group, as well as supplying tutors for other Indigenous youth activities such as Croc Fest. QUE Reach aims to address the lack of school support for QUE by aiming to gain a profile and presence in rural schools. So far, QUE's presence in Nanango

(2002), Dalby (2004) and Oakey (2005) has placed USQ Theatre mentors in schools by replicating the mentoring relationship that has developed between QUE and USQ. I believe that QUE is developing its agency within Toowoomba, and is therefore developing a profile as a cultural conduit that can put these schools and other cultural service providers in direct contact with other regional artist networks and theatrical resources of benefit to drama teachers and practitioners in the community. In this way, the most recent programs offered by QUE are beginning to represent more fully the 'town' and they continue to develop its independent identity from the 'gown'.

## Note

Aspects of this research appear in McDonald (2005).

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