

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE ARTS  
IN REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT GERALDTON  
ON FRIDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2003**

**SESSION 5**

**Members**

**Mr D.A. Templeman (Chairman)  
Mr L. Graham (Deputy Chairman)  
Mr J.N. Hyde  
Mr A.P. O’Gorman  
Ms S.E. Walker**

[2.20 pm]

**ROBARTSON, MR BRIAN WILLIAM**  
**Local Government Manager/Venue Manager,**  
**Queens Park Theatre,**  
**examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Welcome. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the House itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form and do you understand the notes attached?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an "Information for Witnesses" briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, I did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you. We are conducting an inquiry into regional arts in Western Australia. I believe you have had an opportunity to read our terms of reference. Our scope is the economic, social and cultural elements, and the importance of those elements to the arts in regional WA. As part of our inquiry, we are visiting all regions of Western Australia. We are holding a series of hearings, of which this is one, to discuss with a variety of arts stakeholders in those communities issues relating to our terms of reference. We are very much interested in the sorts and quality of arts outcomes that are being delivered in regional WA and the interfaces that exist between government and funding agencies and those groups, organisations and arts individuals. This standing committee is required to prepare and present a report to Parliament by April 2004. That report will contain a series of recommendations. The minister will be required to respond to our report. That is the basic background.

To begin with, I will ask you to give us a brief overview of your role as the manager and what that entails, and then we will ask you a few questions about the operation of Queens Park Theatre and the arts in Geraldton and the region. Could you give us a bit of a run-down of your role?

**Mr Robartson:** As venue manager, I am responsible for the overall administration and budget of the theatre. That also involves entreprenuring, the buying-in of product and, of course, offering the venue for hire. I also manage the technical staff of the theatre, who are responsible for the back end of the venue - putting on the show. That is brief.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you designated as a council employee?

**Mr Robartson:** The theatre is owned and operated by the City of Geraldton. Its budget is derived from ratepayers.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** It was contracted out at one stage.

**Mr Robartson:** It has never been contracted out. The venue forms part of the overall city budget. It is running at a loss. It has never had a contract manager. It has always had a manager, whether he be on a contract - that is, a city employee -

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Sorry; I meant a consultant. You are an employee of the City of Geraldton.

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. The previous manager was on a contract drawn up by the city.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What budget does the city provide to operate the venue?

**Mr Robartson:** I should have checked that!

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Three executives gave evidence this morning, and they said to ask Brian. I thought that they would have been the ones who worked on the budget. If somebody could e-mail us -

**Mr Robartson:** I certainly would. I would probably give you the wrong figures. I know that our net operating deficit is in the vicinity of \$183 000. I will definitely give you the figures.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** It is in effect a subsidy.

**Mr Robartson:** I will e-mail Nici.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is your position full time?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, I am full time. I do other duties within the council. I am the city's administration manager, but the theatre reports to my position.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you responsible for the booking of shows and the entrepreneuring of shows?

**Mr Robartson:** I venue-manage the theatre. I am the venue manager. There are two full-time staff within the office. One is our marketing development officer, and there is an administration bookings officer.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** I want to talk about the entrepreneuring work. You obviously deal with Country Arts WA. We would like to know your experience of that. What funding is available? Does the system work? Could you talk about Lotterywest, ArtsWA or any other organisation you deal with to obtain capital funding or other sorts of funding?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. Queens Park Theatre is a member of CircuitWest. Country Arts WA is also a member. We have that access to state funding through Lotterywest's Gordon Reid Foundation funding. We receive in the vicinity of \$48 000 a year to assist us bring performing arts to our venue. It basically assists with performance fees. The \$48 000 goes towards offsetting the cost of a performance over the year. The city also receives a sum of \$2 000 from the Gordon Reid Foundation to assist in what we call a travel subsidy so that those in the outlying areas can access our venue. We can apply that \$2 000 towards the cost of a bus. For example, if we want a group of schoolkids in Kalbarri to come down to see one of our shows, we will put \$50 to \$100 towards the cost of the bus hire. That is \$2 000. We also have what we call a ticket subsidy. We apply for a further \$2 000 to reduce the cost of the average ticket price to something reasonable.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Is that stand-alone Lotterywest funding?

**Mr Robartson:** No, it is all through the Lotterywest's Gordon Reid Foundation, but it is broken up into brackets. Not all venues apply for that. We are a large mid west region, so we sought those two extras.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** I get down to the nitty-gritty of the entrepreneurial work. Country Arts WA has put out a you-beaut touring menu. You have received \$48 000 through the Gordon Reid Foundation and elsewhere. We put money into Country Arts WA to provide a touring menu. Is it any good for you? How much of that product will you use this year?

**Mr Robartson:** I will be honest with you. Venue managers went to Perth on 18 September to look at the Country Arts WA touring guide. It is poor quality. This is backed up by a few other venue managers. I selected two products from that guide. Both of them are children's shows. One, *Mice - a cheesy little musical*, will probably hit our doors sometime from July 2004. The other children's product, *His Majesty's New Clothes*, will not appear here until 2005. That program is subject to Playing Australia funding, which I will talk about later. The whole guide is very poor in quality. It

is a recipe for us venue managers to take on something to prop up a touring show or musical developed in Perth, and we lose money. We know that our audience here will not come and see it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Who helps you to determine the sort of shows that you believe will succeed here?

**Mr Robartson:** I talk to a management committee of the City of Geraldton about a product I am intending to buy or express interest in. The committee comprises three elected councillors and four community representatives.

[2.30 pm]

They are members of the community who have an interest in the venue and arts. I therefore report to that committee with a list of products that are recommended for purchase and a budget and so forth. That is how that is selected. However, we short-track it by networking as well, because our meetings are every two months. It is just a matter of communicating with somebody who approaches me to buy a show; however, it goes on experience as well.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** You know what works in this town.

**Mr Robartson:** I know what works in the town. Geraldton is very big on country music. Tomorrow night at the theatre 660 people are coming to see Adam Harvey and Beccy Cole; that is the maximum.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** It is sold out?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, we do not have one seat left. That show sells generally; it sold within three weeks of going on sale. Geraldton is very big on country music. There are comedy, plays, musicals and bands. The people are big on tributes and comedy, but plays generally are hard to sell unless they comprise a well-known cast that has been on TV, soapies and that type of thing.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Why then does the Country Arts WA menu not meet those attributes that you clearly want? Are most of the shows small in cast?

**Mr Robartson:** Small in cast and not a well-known cast are the biggest problems. However, Country Arts does not just represent Geraldton and the mid west; it represents the whole State as far as Wyndham.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Certainly when we were up there the Country Arts products appeared to suit a number of Kimberley communities beautifully.

**Mr Robartson:** Exactly.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** In 1982 the then Government built QPT. It has fly towers and a similar cross-arch to that of His Majesty's Theatre, so that the ballet, the WASO and all WA's theatre companies can come straight from a show in Perth and use that facility.

**Mr Robartson:** And they do.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** How do they do that with funding? I know that the Government has put extra funding into them directly to tour.

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. The \$48 000 figure I mentioned comprises a high-cost-show grant of \$10 000, which is applied to the likes of what you just said: the WASO, Oz Opera and the ballet. Every three years one of those comes to Geraldton; I therefore apply for it on an annual basis.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Every three years you have an opera?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And WASO?

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** No, the opera or WASO. Once in three years our flagship companies come to Geraldton.

**Mr Robartson:** That is right. The theatre was built purposely back in 1982 to bring them here. Before that they used the art gallery.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Further on that, how does the local community input into the sorts of events that come to Geraldton? Is the community basically represented by the board and that is where they have input into the types of shows? However, if the show is not a comedy, a musical or country music then the community is at risk, is it not?

**Mr Robartson:** All shows that are offered to us for purchase are a risk. You never get a show that is very good; you get a buyer. Adam Harvey, for instance, hires.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Given that information, how do you keep the lights on? Is the building just a place for hire or is that what it could ultimately become - just a hire space?

**Mr Robartson:** I know what you are saying, but the City of Geraldton has a commitment. We built the venue and we know that it will always run at a substantial loss. It is there for the people of Geraldton. The budget that we put up is, therefore, an operating deficit each year. My charter is to keep chipping away to reduce that deficit by bringing in new initiatives and sponsorship from the local community.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Does the extra \$10 000 government grant make ballet viable?

**Mr Robartson:** No. We know every time we put on the ballet, and those other two, that we will lose \$15 000 to 18 000.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you get capacity crowds?

**Mr Robartson:** No. The performance fee to bring those shows here is \$20 000 to \$25 000, which is not negotiable. On top of that we must add extensive marketing, the wages cost of the show and the rental that the theatre pays to the City of Geraldton. We pay fees for every show that is put on.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** The subsidy must be for a minority for whom you feel you have to put them on for some reason.

**Mr Robartson:** We understand that the venue was built back in 1982 for those groups to come here and we have an obligation because there is an audience here - 400 people will come to see WASO and 380 will come to see the ballet; the auditorium therefore is reasonably full. However, we understand that it is a commitment. Those figures are shared with the all the other major regional centres that have to take them; however, we understand that we are in for a loss of \$15 000 but we allow for it in our budget.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can I ask you about staffing? I recall visiting Geraldton a few years back when you had a friends group. Is it still operating?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, they are volunteers called Friends of the Theatre. Volunteers who like theatre and have an interest in it are synonymous with all venues. This group is involved through an incorporated, fund-raising body. The only advantage it gets is a small discount on the ticket price.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What do those people actually do in the operation, say, of a play?

**Mr Robartson:** At Geraldton, zero, nothing. Occasionally they have helped out at our summer cinema and in the amphitheatre they have acted as ushers. However, we pay all our ushers; whereas Bunbury is different. Its venue operates with ushers who are all "friends".

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** What about usage by community organisations. Do any community-based organisations use the Queens Park Theatre; and, if so, what do they pay to use it?

**Mr Robartson:** The theatre is the mid west cultural venue. We have seminars and conferences there. A cultural seminar put on only last month was run by one of the Aboriginal corporations. However, it is used by all our local dance studios. We have a four-tiered structure for fees and charges. We have professional charges for the big hires that come through.

[2.40 pm]

We have local professionals. An example of a local professional is the dance studio down the road that teaches classical dancing. It puts on a Christmas concert but it does not use the venue. We also have local amateurs, such as the theatre group who were here earlier. If they were to use the venue, they would be charged. There are also community charity groups. The group that used the venue yesterday in the amphitheatre for Artrageous gets charged at the bottom of the scale. QPT is the only venue in Geraldton at present that can host large-scale and small-scale conferences. It is well used by the schools, which hold their graduation ceremonies there. Two or three high schools use it for their drama productions. It is well used.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are they charged at the local amateur or community rate?

**Mr Robartson:** They are charged at the community rate.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Just for interest's sake, what fee would a community charity group pay to hire the venue for one night?

**Mr Robartson:** Exclusive use of the auditorium for eight hours for a community charity would cost around \$450 or \$500. At the top of the scale it would cost \$2 200 for professional hire plus wages.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Can you give us the lowdown on Playing Australia? What are its strengths and what are its weaknesses?

**Mr Robartson:** I have just written a letter to Wilson Tuckey - although I probably wrote it too late because now he is on the backbench.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** We are still here.

**Mr Robartson:** I can e-mail members a copy of the letter. All the other venue managers who attended a conference a couple of weeks ago have some concerns about Playing Australia. Basically, the fund is \$6.2 million. The amount of funding has not changed since it was introduced in 1992. The letter I wrote to Wilson Tuckey and to the respective representatives of other venue managers talks about how that fund has not been increased. A difficulty we have in Western Australia is the vastness of the State compared with South Australia and Victoria, for example. Do committee members know how Playing Australia works?

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Yes.

**Mr Robartson:** Basically, if four products with the potential to tour Western Australia are presented to Playing Australia, the likelihood is that one will be selected. If we present eight, we could expect two to be selected.

The selection process depends on how much of the bucket of money is left and the equity involved with productions travelling from the east to Western Australia. It costs a lot for those productions to travel here and to perform on the regional circuits.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Is Country Arts WA supposed to coordinate or subsidise those programs?

**Mr Robartson:** Country Arts WA coordinates all our venue submissions for products in which we express an interest. Jenny Simpson from Country Arts WA is our local tour coordinator. They have a group called -

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Where is she based?

**Mr Robartson:** She is based in Perth. Do you know Jenny?

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** No. I am just interested in the people who are based in Perth.

**Mr Robartson:** Andy Farrin is the manager. Blue Heeler Australia is the name of the organisation that picks up Playing Australia. All the applications for expressed interest are looked after by the group called Blue Heeler. They have representatives in each State. I do not know why it is called

Blue Heeler, but it is. Jenny Simpson, who is the Western Australian touring coordinator, sits on a panel of representatives from New South Wales, Brisbane and everywhere else. They showcase the products. All the products go through Sydney.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Do all the big venue managers in Western Australia, such as those for the Walkington and Camel Lane Theatres do this only through Country Arts? Do you not look at Playing Australia products to be staged in just the bigger theatres?

**Mr Robartson:** We do. Playing Australia runs Long Paddock, which is a forum to look at the showcase. The initial part of it is called Cyberpaddock, where all the products that are available for potential touring in Western Australia go on to the Cyberpaddock Internet site. The presenters look at the products and express interest in them by submitting an application. There is a second step. If it looks like it might be produced, the presenters will ask for a venue budget to be submitted. That helps them in their submission to get it up and running.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Do your managers or just Jenny go to Cyberpaddock?

**Mr Robartson:** There are managers from Bunbury - Graham Harvey goes. I am available to go but I have not been yet. Generally two or three managers represent the CircuitWest venues.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Is it effective? Is there a better way that government can enable regional communities to have access to icon productions?

**Mr Robartson:** It all comes down to dollars. It has improved the way we present submissions for Playing Australia. It helps touring companies tour. Unfortunately, it all boils down to the amount of money available to get their product out of there to tour. If a company does not get its show up and supported by Playing Australia, it does a second round. That is where it may come down to a venue manager such as me to see whether we can pick up a tour and network among ourselves to share the costs.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** What was the last Playing Australia production that performed?

**Mr Robartson:** The last one this year? Do you want the name of our show?

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Yes.

**Mr Robartson:** I believe it was a Bell Shakespeare production.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** How did that go?

**Mr Robartson:** It had a select audience. About 400 people attended it. Geraldton is very big on Bell Shakespeare; it promotes it among the schools. We have two very good drama schools here. The production was *The Servant of Two Masters*. We lost just under \$4 000, and that was after applying \$4 500 of Gordon Read money to it.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** *Puppetry of the Penis* toured in September. Who produced that and did it sell?

**Mr Robartson:** No. The Ross Mollison group is a promoter from the eastern States.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** From the private sector?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. Ross Mollison hired a venue in March last year and we made an absolute killing. We were happy to have made money from hiring the venue. Two shows were held on the same night. Just over 1 300 people saw it. It was held here two weeks ago and 510 people saw it. I think the mystique about the show -

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Did 510 people attend the two shows?

[2.50 pm]

**Mr Robartson:** No, we had one show on. We had two shows one night previously, but we had one show that did book two that cancelled the second and we went with the one show. That is another hire.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** That cost you nothing less, just a straight out private contractor.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** You made something?

**Mr Robartson:** We made money. We charged \$2.20 a ticket. With our booking fee and hire fee, I think I did a flat fee of \$1 700, so I made about \$2 800 on the whole deal. It attracted a lot of interest in Geraldton back in March when we had our first show because of the type of show.

**The CHAIRMAN:** There is nothing like a bit of controversy to promote a show.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Of course, Geraldton is famous. When Robert van Mackelenberg was pulled off stage at the town hall in *Equus* a woman in the front row - I will not mention her name - complained to the police because there was a kind of a semi-nude scene with a horse and an older gentleman. Robert, one of our greatest actors, spent several hours in the lock-up in Geraldton. That is part of our history.

**Mr Robartson:** That was brought up by members when “Puppetry of the Penis” was booked in. The only difficulty people had with that was the close proximity of our venue to schools and the church across the road.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Why; because the applause might damage the sandstone?

**Mr Robartson:** No, my marketing. I had a 9 x 1 metre banner -

**The CHAIRMAN:** I am glad you said “banner”!

**Mr Robartson:** - painted in a soft pink tone with black writing that said, “Puppetry of the Penis” on one side and “Vagina Monologues” on the other side. The two shows appeared at once; so incorrect messages were being sent there but it did the trick.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So, it is a fallacy! But things do not work twice! I want to get back to the community aspect. You said that part of the City of Geraldton’s mission is obviously delivering quality entertainment to the people of Geraldton.

**Mr Robartson:** Does the committee have our business plan and so on?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, we have. What I am getting at is how Queens Park Theatre is seen by the City of Geraldton in its whole cultural planning and direction. Is it a pivotal part of its contribution to the arts?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. That is why it will always be there for the community. It was built with a budget knowing that it would never be in front, but it is there for the people.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have an in-house production group, or anything like that?

**Mr Robartson:** No. We tried to get the Theatre ‘8’ people to be our resident amateur group but they are quite comfortable where they are. Not this year, but in the previous two years we had a group of people put together two productions of their own and do a season.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would that have been a hire with them taking the risk?

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, but we looked after them with the fees. We have four dance studios that hire the venue in their own right and put on productions and two high schools, Nagle Catholic College and the secondary, that also do their productions.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In the principal activities plan of the City of Geraldton, maintenance and those things are ongoing, because it is a public or council asset obviously. Are there any future plans for major works on the theatre?

**Mr Robartson:** There is - carpets. We have a five-year capital equipment replacement plan that has been put in place and is in its second year this financial year. We keep renewing it, but there are large items of maintenance that need doing. The building is 20 years old and still has its original carpet in some areas. Carpet is a major thing that needs to be replaced.



**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Are the seats the originals?

**Mr Robartson:** The seats are the original but they are in remarkable condition because they have been looked after. We just had maintenance done on them last January in the off season. We went through and replaced and fixed up all the washers so that they do not squeak and rattle around.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What about the costs?

**Mr Robartson:** Airconditioning is another one; that is the big, major one.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But has there been any application, outside of council's own resources, for funding for some of the ongoing maintenance of future capital replacement?

**Mr Robartson:** No, to my knowledge there has not been any application for funding. However, I am aware of a new one - I think it is the cultural cities fund - that has been developed. So, I have my eye on that when that happens.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Tell us about it because it is interesting. A number of people seem to have different ideas of it. My understanding is that it will be similar to the CSRFF - the community sporting and recreation facilities fund.

**Mr Robartson:** That is what I think it is. Not much information has been put out on it. I went on to the web site of ArtsWA and there was not much there.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Has ArtsWA contacted you?

**Mr Robartson:** At our conference a couple of week back there were a couple of reps who touched on it. They said to refer to the web site, so I did and it said it was in its embryo stage. Basically it is for a new venue to be built in Perth at Joondalup and the refurbishment of the Perth Concert Hall etc. It went on to refer to regional areas - applicable to theatres, art galleries, museums etc - and there would be capital funding available on application. I am assuming it will be along the lines of putting in an application like we do with all the other grants. Geraldton certainly has things pending. Our biggest thing is disabilities, which is an item that appears on our capital plan. If you are familiar with the facilities, you will know that our box office is located upstairs on the circle level, so any disabled person has a problem. We have set aside in our reserves at council a sum of money to fund a venue management report to look at the venue and to consider whether the box office could go downstairs, and an extension to the side of it to house smaller conferences and break out areas.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** There is not even a ramp for disabled people to get around the amphitheatre at the top, is there?

**Mr Robartson:** No, there is not; someone has to push a wheelchair up the steps.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Yes, back in 1982 we did that.

**Mr Robartson:** Yes, even the railings inside at the balconies and the staircases are round. They are, as I say, on the plan for replacement when funds are available in the reserve. That is one of the big problems we have. We have disabled access for wheelchairs just inside the auditorium. We put that in "O" row so that they are on the same landing but down the side. However, disabled people must get their tickets over the telephone or get someone to send a runner in for them.

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** The community facilities for the arts were mooted to run in the same way as the CSRFF. The CSRFF is run by volunteer sporting groups putting up a third of the cost, either in kind or cash, the council doing the same and the rest coming from the State Government by way of the CSRFF grant. Will it be a problem, if the funding is identical to that, for you to access that money because you do not have a clear volunteer group operating out of the QPT?

**Mr Robartson:** There should not be, no.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** I think council will pick up the two-thirds or it will be on a 50-50 basis.

**Mr Robartson:** I am aware of how that runs, because we have projects running now. However, in relation to our arts, no, there should not be a problem if that were the criteria.

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** I am just concerned that it might be an impediment to councils such as Geraldton picking up that funding when they do not do that now. A number of community groups run out of the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre but you do not appear to have that.

[3.00 pm]

**Mr Robartson:** No, we are fortunate; we have our reserves that we have established, looking after all the city's buildings, operations and assets, so we have a reserve for the theatre that we put away money every year.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much for coming along to the hearing and for your contribution today. For your information, a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings will be made available to you so that you can have a look at it. If there is something that is not correct or you need to highlight for Hansard, you are most welcome to do that. As I said earlier, a report is due to be presented to Parliament in April next year. From that, it goes to the minister for a response.

**Mr Robartson:** Have you visited other regional centres?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, we have been to the Kimberley, the Pilbara, the mid west and the Peel region. We have yet to visit the wheatbelt -

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Kalgoorlie and Albany.

**The CHAIRMAN:** - the great southern and south west regions. We are about half way through.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Of course, we have realised that we have not scheduled Bunbury. As Bunbury has a theatre and other things, we are about to have a meeting tonight to slot that in.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Basically, we are covering the regional centres because of the nature of the inquiry. Also, we wanted to cover all the centres because there are, I suppose, various peculiarities about each region that differ between regions.

**Mr Robartson:** I have just remembered something about what John was just saying. You mentioned the Country Arts touring guide. My view, and it will probably be shared by the other managers when you catch up with them, is that I think that guide, particularly in the past two or three years, has turned more to focus on community organisations - the small coordinators that look after the small towns, like Jurien Bay, as you come up the coast. As I said, they have got poor quality shows that should not necessarily go into a large venue like mine. Jurien Bay down the road would pack out 300 people in its hall for something, because they are starved of the product. It does not matter how good it is; it is a night out for them. When I put them on in my venue, I pay more to put them on. They get it at a community rate, apart from a professional venue. I think that is where Country Arts have really turned. They have got out there to prop up the smaller venues which could only be 100 kilometres apart, because they get up to Dongara. They do it at Dongara as well.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** In the early days of the big venues, you did your own and you got the money directly and decided what to do.

**Mr Robartson:** We buy whoever we want. We do not have to go to Playing Australia. We get promoters to come to us all the time.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** I guess we went through a stage in the arts of thinking, "Let's combine that with the old patio and create this body called Country Arts." It is something the committee is going to have to look at seriously, if a membership driven group like Country Arts, which does have to service the little places - Dumbleyung, Jurien and so on - whether that is as effective having the big, more professional venues the same, and whether we have to go back to looking at the old model of

just having a quarantine patio that looks at product for those little ones and you guys get back to yourselves.

**Mr Robartson:** That is it.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** If there is a submission from the big theatres or venues on that issue to us, it would be welcome.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, we would certainly welcome any written submission as well. Many of the groups, individuals or organisations that have appeared before us have, as an afterthought, if you like, put in writing some of their key points as well. You are most welcome to do that.

**Mr Robartson:** I am pretty confident that my views would be shared by other managers - our chair of our circuit west, Graham Harvey at Bunbury Circuit West. He has a philosophy, which I do not agree with. For example, with your Circuit West, your Country Arts touring guide and your Playing Australia menu, he virtually ticks everything. I say, "Why do you do that?" It is because you put in as much as you can, because, as I said, that ratio of one to four. I said, "Mate, if there is nothing on there, I am not going to tick, because I am throwing money away." That is the mentality of some of the thinking of the managers, because you have to go the distance. Geraldton misses out on getting product that will tour Perth, because of our distance. The air flight schedule has a lot to do with that. They can do another show in Mandurah or Bunbury, because it is getting in a car for two hours, but to come up to Geraldton is half a day.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** The crazy thing to me is that you have smaller groups - like Effie Crump - and maybe even the some Black Swan and Perth Theatre Company product that is commercial and would work up here -

**Mr Robartson:** Black Swan and Yirra Yaakin. We have had them up here but our problem is getting indigenous people in the venue. We would look at some other form of audience development with them to probably take them to a different venue, and putting it down at Willaguthra or Bundiyarra - putting it into some other hall that they are familiar with, because you will get those people in. It does not matter how hard you try to get them inside our venue. It is just the stigma about going to our venue. So you buy no shows from Black Swan or Yirra Yaakin, because they are not cheap. You put them on and -

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** It is an interesting aside, because 1982 was the Charlie Court Government and QPT was built. Sir Charles played cornet on His Majesty's great venue. It is almost that iconic arts - having your symphony orchestra and the boxes and the gods and that. Of course, if you were building a theatre now, it would probably be more like Matt Dann or something in the round where you can change the shape, but Geraldton has inherited, and you have been left to deal with, that structure.

**Mr Robartson:** Yes. I am led to believe our venue is one of the best for design work for the theatre.

**Mr J.N. HYDE:** Yes. You could bring a show from London with the fly tower getting in on a container ship from Southampton and, bang, it can go straight in.

**Mr Robartson:** We had two international shows in three weeks. We had the Siberian Cossacks, which you probably heard about. We did two shows - sell outs - on the same day, and we could have done two others, but it was the timetable. After the 8.30 show finished at 10, they were on a Greyhound bus heading down to Bunbury, so they had not time. But you are talking about the fly towers and the presidium arch. I had the National Youth Choir of Great Britain. I had 115 people on stage in a choir, and the acoustics of the building are marvellous.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Okay, Brian. Again, on behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance this afternoon. Best wishes to you and the staff in terms of your delivery of quality outcomes for arts through the theatre.

**Mr Robartson:** I hope I have been of use.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you.

**Proceedings suspended from 3.08 to 3.23 pm**