

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

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

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT ESPERANCE
ON TUESDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2003**

SESSION 4

Members

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

[12.45 pm]

CLARKE, MR DEREK

President, Esperance Theatre Guild,

examined:

The CHAIRMAN: 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. Unless otherwise directed by the committee, witnesses' evidence is public and may be published, including on the Parliament web site immediately after correction. Have you read the notes about appearing as a witness before a standing committee?

Mr Clarke: I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you also read the witness information sheet?

Mr Clarke: I have.

The CHAIRMAN: This standing committee is conducting an inquiry into arts in regional Western Australia, which means that we are focusing on how arts outcomes are delivered in regional areas. We are keen to hear from you, as President of the Esperance Theatre Guild, about the scope of work of the guild in the region, the various issues that impact upon the guild's delivery of arts outcomes, and, with regard to our terms of reference, we are interested to know about the guild's contribution to the arts regionally. To start with can you provide us with an overview of the Esperance Theatre Guild?

Mr Clarke: In 1971 the Esperance Theatre Guild became an incorporated identity. In the 32 years since then we have been active within the community providing theatre entertainment and giving the opportunity to members of the community to try their hand at stage work either on stage or behind the scenes. Part of our constitution is to provide as much opportunity as possible for the youth of the town. However, earlier this year we were approached by the senior citizens because they felt that we were not giving them as much of a go because of our emphasis on youth. Therefore, in October we put on a variety show especially for the seniors, which was a huge smash-hit and they had such a great time doing it. Our mission is to provide for or to open performing arts to anybody within the community who wants to have a try. Over the past 32 years we have done between three and four shows on average a year. To date that means we have done around 115 shows. We place a very high emphasis on the standards of our performance. Although we acknowledge that we are an amateur troop, we still try to emulate professional standards as much as humanly possible. With that emphasis on standards, every second year we seek funding to get some professional support, which can be in a directing capacity. We have had musical directors and designers giving people hands-on experience from a professional - someone who has worked in the field for many years. We have had the likes of Jenny McNae and Geoff Gibbs down here - I know David is familiar with Jenny. Those two people have had a wealth of experience in theatre. Geoff Gibbs used to be the director of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts - WAAPA - and is a brilliant man from whom we have learnt so much. They were both very motivated to give their time at a grassroots level to us in Esperance and for that we are very grateful.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the main funding source to get those professionals here?

Mr Clarke: We have utilised Healthway. We have just secured \$6 750 worth of funding from ArtsWA through their short-term artist-in-residence scheme to get a professional director for our

first show next year. We have also utilised the Country Arts WA's Country CAPS - the community arts project scheme. We are fortunate that every time we have applied for some funding, we have received, if not all of that funding, part of it. The support that we get from those groups is tremendous and makes it, otherwise it would not be possible for us to have a director of a professional standing come down here. Although we make money through the box office, we would run at a loss if we had to pay professional fees on top of all the other standard costs associated with producing a performance.

The CHAIRMAN: That is a philosophy that the theatre guild has had in using professional talent to nurture new up and coming members of the guild. When somebody like Jenny McNae comes down to do a show, would she have any other community involvement while she is here?

Mr Clarke: Although we bring down the director specifically to do a particular show, after that show has been cast we then ask the director to run a series of workshops that are open to the rest of the community. People who were not cast in the play can then draw from the experience through those workshops. Jenny ran a series of five workshops for three age groups - children between the ages of 10 and 13, 14 to 16 and 16 and over. We try to utilise that as a tool so that nobody misses out.

The CHAIRMAN: So there is ongoing community benefit outside of the theatre.

Mr Clarke: Definitely, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned that you have been running for 32 years. What are your membership numbers?

Mr Clarke: Currently, we have 106 members. Some of those family memberships that are counted only as one but include parents and children. The number of individual members is hard to establish but we have 106 memberships.

The CHAIRMAN: And the guild also owns its own premises.

Mr Clarke: It does. The Bijou Theatre on Dempster Street was purchased early on in the guild's life back in the early 1970s, which, thankfully to the foresight of our founding members, has been tremendous for us. We can not only utilise that venue year round for our performances but also make it available to other community groups, such as dance groups or people who want to access the facilities for a meeting. This is the first theatre group that I have worked with, but I expect it would be very difficult if we had to work around the hiring of a venue. We are very fortunate to have a place in which we can store and use all our gear any time we please.

The CHAIRMAN: In other regional visits we have explored the quality amateur theatre groups that exist there. Have you noticed whether that is an attractor of new people into the town and that sort of thing?

Mr Clarke: Yes and no. I suppose with any group there could be seen to be some clickiness. We try to separate ourselves from that as much as possible. When we conduct auditions for a show or workshops we try to publicise them as widely as possible and make everybody welcome. However, I suppose there is always an impression from people that there is a clickiness within a group. I feel that we are very open to everybody and welcome helpers with open arms. My wife, Michelle, works at the Esperance Volunteer Resource Centre and many new people coming to town will first approach her just to see what is available. She will check out their skills and their interests; for example, the other day she referred to us a Canadian who is in town for six months and has carpentry skills. He is now helping us to build our next set. That is one way in which we can utilise people who have just arrived in town and the Volunteer Resource Centre helps us out with that. Otherwise, people are not always sure how to access different groups or how to get in contact with them and things like that. That has been tremendous for us.

The CHAIRMAN: I suppose I was thinking along the lines that in some places people have said to us when they are considering applying for a position or job offer they also consider what sorts of infrastructure is in place when relocating their family. I suppose there are some teachers or government workers who might consider a move to Esperance. The theatre guild and the Bijou Theatre is seen as a cultural asset that -

Mr Clarke: Definitely, and a historical asset with the Bijou being 106 years old. We have a responsibility to maintain the historic value of the original building. However, it would be seen as an asset. The arts in this town is very strong. They are probably comparable with the sports movement in town, which a lot of community groups, particularly in regional and remote areas, rely on very heavily to provide some community cohesiveness, and I am glad that we are part of that.

The CHAIRMAN: Earlier you mentioned the youth aspect. The Bijou Theatre and the theatre guild have promoted getting young people involved in theatre. Have there been any examples of outcomes with, for example, at-risk kids who have been involved and because of that there have been positive spin-offs? One of our terms of reference addresses the social benefits of having good quality arts outcomes and infrastructure in a community.

Mr Clarke: The best example that I can provide that was also very satisfying for me happened after Jenny McNae came down at the beginning of 2002. We had completed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was walking down the street and a lady whom I did not know rushed up to me, introduced herself and said that she wanted to thank me so very much. Her daughter, whom I knew because she played my lover in the play, had really blossomed after taking part in the show. She had noticed that her daughter was doing things that she would not have done before. Her daughter gained self-esteem and a real confidence boost out of that. That is where theatre plays a big part; it helps people become more self-confident. They become more comfortable speaking in groups and in front of other people. In terms of self-esteem, that is very important with the at-risk group who tend to go down other self-destructive paths because they lack a sense of self-worth and value. I see the theatre group as providing that, which is why we place such an emphasis on youth and working with that age group. Phil Shelton works here as the youth arts coordinator and is very involved in the theatre. Wherever possible, he gets his group involved not just on stage but in building sets, making banners and things like that. We try to involve the kids who are looking for an outlet in any little way that we can, and, yes, that has a direct impact on what that child's future will be from the personal skills that they gain from that experience.

The CHAIRMAN: We sort of touched on the social benefit side of things. What sort of economic benefits does the guild, and, ultimately, the operation of the Bijou Theatre deliver locally?

Mr Clarke: In a number of instances we have donated part proceeds of a show to a worthwhile community benefactor, the RFDS is one example. Three years ago we made a donation to the hospital for some equipment. We like to put back into the community not only socially but also financially. About seven years ago a local lad called Lloyd Peart had cancer and the town rallied behind him. We did a special performance of *The Sound of Music* with Lloyd there and we donated all of the box office takings from that show straight to him so he could get some treatment he needed in Germany. The theatre guild provides moneys to the wider community. However, it is a very expensive operation to maintain our building. Most of our box office proceeds go straight back into maintaining the building, paying our rates and insurance premiums, which have taken a recent hike, and having some backing for us to go on with the next show.

[1.05 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: I suppose most of your resources, such as sets and equipment, are sourced locally, so there is a direct benefit.

Mr Clarke: Yes; all locally. I am pleased to say that our local businesses are always happy to support us. We support them and they do us a deal. It is tremendous. We need hardware and electrical services. The whole gamut of trades reaps some benefit from the work that we do.

The CHAIRMAN: The building itself is not yet heritage listed.

Mr Clarke: It is not listed, no.

The CHAIRMAN: There are obviously obligations for maintenance and whatever. Have you applied to funding bodies for some of the restoration or ongoing work that may be needed to ensure it is kept to a certain standard?

Mr Clarke: Yes. We did a major renovation in 1998, which involved restoring the facade of the building and adding a function room at the side - the Petit Bijou Room you went through yesterday. That in itself was funded through the council via one of its low-rate loans. We did not get any direct grants for that, such as money in hand. We were glad to be able to utilise that service that the council provided for us. That got us through and we are only two payments away from finalising that amount. Aside from that, we have not accessed any other grants for the building itself. As I mentioned, we access grants for professional services for the productions, but we do not do that for the building or the maintenance of the building per se. I point out that when we were looking at doing this major renovation, we approached the Heritage Council for funds. However, when the committee reviewed its proposal, we found that if it were to give us money, it would be directing us too much about the way we were to do things, so we declined its offer and sourced our own funds. We have since paid that off with the proceeds of our box office takings.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the guild get involved in community events or activities; and, if so, to what extent?

Mr Clarke: We certainly do. We talked yesterday about the Festival of the Wind. The theatre guild gets involved with that when it is on. We get involved by performing and also as a support by providing resources such as the use of our venue, our props and any other equipment that might be needed. We are also in the Christmas pageant every year. We generally get people dressed in costumes from the latest show and get behind the community spirit of the Christmas pageant. If it is asked of us, we will be part of the entertainment for an opening or a special event, like the cinema opening or an open day. Generally, the cloggers and some people from the music club will play music, and there will be some singers and performers from the Bijou. The theatre guild certainly contributes to wider community events via those different means.

The CHAIRMAN: How about volunteers? We have heard from various groups in not only Esperance but also other regions we have visited about the increasing demand on volunteers, the burnout rates and some of the issues that are impacting on volunteers. Ultimately, because those issues impact on volunteers, they impact on the organisation themselves. Do you have any comments about the issue of volunteers?

Mr Clarke: Certainly. The Esperance Theatre Guild is 100 per cent volunteers. We have absolutely no paid staff. Everything is done by people in their spare time. The pressures of work and family can limit some people and the amount that they can contribute towards the organisation. That tends to lead to a small group of people taking the main burden of running the operation. Something that I notice about being on a committee of management is the legalities surrounding the personal liability. Even in an incorporated body, there is still some reluctance and, I suppose, fear by some people involved on a committee of management that they will be held personally liable if something goes wrong. If there is a gross act of negligence, that is fair enough, but I think a lot of people would approach being on a committee with some trepidation because of the legalities behind it.

The CHAIRMAN: They are quite happy to help out and be involved but not necessarily to put themselves up as a committee member.

Mr Clarke: Exactly, especially because of the insurance situation, accountability and governance. There is a lot to learn about being the management front of an organisation. Fortunately, a lot of great training opportunities are available. Recently Country Arts WA ran a series of workshops about things ranging from financial management to - it did not impact on us as much - how to hold an exhibition and things like that. Six or so different training workshops were accessed throughout the State, including in regional areas. That kind of thing is critical because when you have that training and knowledge you feel more empowered and not as fearful of the personal responsibilities of being a part of a management committee. I think a lot of people find that daunting and, as you say, have some reluctance to step forward and put their hand up to be on a committee.

The CHAIRMAN: What about accessing funding and making applications? Are there any problems with the complexity of forms and the time that takes, the accountability or the acquittal process? Would you like to highlight any issues to us?

Mr Clarke: Certainly. I have only ever done arts applications, so I do not know it varies in different sectors. Applying for any grant associated with the arts is a very laborious process. The applications have to be extremely detailed. The involvement of someone with a very high standard of literacy and education is necessary for the grant application to be successful. We approached ArtsWA about our latest funding. We did not find out about the particular grant until 11 days before the due date, and I rang the officer in charge of the grant to find out a bit more about it and how we would go about making an application. He said straight out to me that the quality of the applications and the demand was so high that I should not bother because there was no way I could get together an application in 11 days. That was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Two of us stayed up to one or two o'clock every night for a week and a bit. We got the application in and were successful. That put a lot of strain on me and the person who was helping me. That then affects everything else in your day. I still have to work full-time and be nice to the wife! That was a lot of pressure. It was just unfortunate that we did not find out about it sooner. This officer said not to worry about it because there were such high-quality applications that there was no way I could come up with something like that. That type of attitude could frighten off another group that perhaps had no experience in putting together an application.

The CHAIRMAN: Turn it off.

Mr Clarke: Exactly.

The CHAIRMAN: What about the acquittal process? After you have spent the grant and delivered the outcomes, you have to report on it. Are there any issues there?

Mr Clarke: Again, it is a very laborious process and you have to be accountable, particularly in highlighting the publicity that you have achieved for the organisation that has provided you with the grant. We must do that both through our printed materials - programs, posters and fliers - and the media. The local paper is a great help to us. One of our members is a journalist for that paper. She gets calls all the time from groups that need some publicity to meet the requirements of their acquittal. Those groups feel that if they do not get that publicity, their grant will not be accessible to them again.

Mr L. GRAHAM: Do the grant funding guidelines include a budgetary component for publicity?

Mr Clarke: When you are putting together a budget for an application, you have to make an allocation for absolutely everything - pens, papers, publicity -

Mr L. GRAHAM: The funding agency requires that you get publicity. Does it pay for it?

Mr Clarke: If that is in the application and you make allowances for that, it would pay for it indirectly. Of course, we want that grant money to go towards our project, not -

Mr L. GRAHAM: Yes. What I am getting at is that the funding agency wants the publicity, but is it paying for it?

Mr Clarke: Essentially no.

The CHAIRMAN: I give an example. You arranged for Jenny McNae to come down here, and it cost \$6 500. You have to acquit that. To make that seem worthwhile to the agency, must you make sure that there are a couple of photos of her in the local paper working with a couple of students?

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Mr L. GRAHAM: You have to get free publicity for a government agency.

Mr Clarke: Basically yes. Healthway has very strict guidelines regarding its publicity. It sends a pack comprising all the different banners and promotional materials it wants you to have in place for the performance. We do not mind doing that kind of thing. It is not hard to put up a banner or to say at the beginning of a performance that it is sponsored by Healthway. We feel that it is part of giving it something back for helping us out. However, when it comes to newspaper publicity, we must try to coerce journalists to give you as much publicity as they can. All the time we try to say that the performance is sponsored by Healthway, but when we see the article we think "Oh my god" because it does not mention Healthway.

The CHAIRMAN: It is an added issue that can have an impact.

Mr Clarke: Definitely.

The CHAIRMAN: I am aware of the time, and you need to be away. Are there any key points or issues you would like to raise or highlight to us before we conclude this session?

Mr Clarke: Yes. I touch again on the grants and the applications for the grants. I feel that our organisation is fortunate to have some people who have experience in writing grant applications. That is why we have access to the funds when they are required. I think other groups and people would not be able to access those funds because they do not have that level of skill, or when the application form lands on their desk or is e-mailed to their computer are put off straight away by the wording of the questions and type of detail that must be included in the application. I know that it is difficult in a competitive area in which there is a lot of demand for funding, but I think smaller groups who do not have access to people who write brilliant grants submissions still need to be able to access that money. We rely on grant money as little as we can because I think it is important that we are, to the greatest extent we can possibly manage, self-funded. We have the ability to generate our own income through our box office takings. Other arts groups do not have that ability and they need that grant support to operate and meet their day-to-day running costs. I think there needs to be an investigation into whether the application for grants could be somewhat streamlined or simplified so that those groups and bodies can get that money to keep them going so they do not just fall in a hole and fold. We have targets and need a certain amount of money every year. We must formalise a budget every year because we need to make \$15 000 a year in profit just to keep our doors open. In a lot of ways that is motivating and it gets people moving. We use that as a way to generate some interest and enthusiasm, but smaller groups would not have that ability. That needs to be looked at.

The CHAIRMAN: Derek, thank you again for your contribution and for last night. The committee visited the Bijou Theatre and witnessed one of your current shows in action.

Mr Clarke: Thank you for coming.

The CHAIRMAN: Please pass on our thanks to your members and thespians who were on show last night.

Mr Clarke: I shall indeed.

The CHAIRMAN: We appreciated their welcome and hospitality.

The transcript from this session will be available to you from Hansard to peruse. Our report is expected to be presented in the middle of next year and contributions such as yours and those of

other witnesses are very important in helping us to put together our report. It will be tabled in Parliament. The Minister for Culture and the Arts of the day is required by statute to respond to the recommendations that come from that report. Thank you again. I wish you, your committee members and your membership all the very best. Congratulations on the contribution you are making to the arts in Esperance.

Mr Clarke: Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Proceedings suspended from 1.23 to 2.05 pm