

arts • access • excellence
conference 2010

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Paper Name:	Welcome Address		
Presenter Name:	Sancha Donald, CEO Accessible Arts		
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Thank you Gerard.

I wish to acknowledge the **Gadagal** people on whose land this exciting conference is taking place.

Minister Lynch, international guests, colleagues and delegates. A big welcome to all of you.

In some ways this conference with its title - **Arts, Access, Excellence** is a report card on the progress that has been made towards greater inclusion of People with Disability in the arts since we first held this conference three years ago.

The brief of arts and disability is very broad but hopefully the program that is before you represents what is being achieved in this space, at both the professional and community level; in audience development; for practitioners; in employment and with consideration for rural and regional areas as well as in the metropolitan context.

A moment of indulgence – A lot has occurred since our first conference.

- There has been the development and adoption of the National Arts and Disability Strategy
- We welcome the recent launch of the Disability Standards for Access to Premises, which for the first time has set the minimum access requirements for People with Disability to publicly accessible buildings

- An increased number of inclusive creative initiatives in a variety of arts forms now exist
- Research into the barriers inhibiting inclusion has been undertaken in a number of states and
- Training to improve all facets of access has been delivered to many arts organization and departments.

As a result - leaders and practitioners in both the arts and the disability sectors are much more aware that they **could, should or do provide** for people with disability in the arts.

Together - those who are relatively new to the field with those who have been working for a long time such as most of our speakers; individual arts workers; and my colleagues in other states have I believe reached a **critical mass** where I think we can say that arts and disability is now on the stage in Australia.

I would like to think that there is now a recognition that the arts is a viable, valuable and life long path for, by and about people with disability.

This has all happened because of you and you should be proud of the contribution that you have made.

That's it for self - congratulations.

Because – On the other hand we have the newly released report commissioned by The Australian Council for the Arts that identifies that 9 out of 10 Australians are engaged in the arts. Fantastic! – But in the next breath we learn that People with Disability have much lower levels of creative or receptive participation - if at all.

So really what have we achieved?

Let us look at our conference title of Arts, Access and Excellence – to see what is happening and what is to be done? And apologies that most of my examples are New South Wales based.

Firstly to the Arts

Since the last conference we have seen a number of creative opportunities develop –

- the mentorship of Ever after by Back to Back theatre,
- the rental by Studio Artes of unused council facilities as a gallery,
- expansion of the Merry Makers dance school model into several areas of NSW,
- the development of the Mixed Abilities ensemble based at Powerhouse Youth Theatre,
- the emergence of Sunnyfield Disability Services' sound creative program
- and the innovative community access program developed by the Historic Houses Trust.

It is vital that Creative potential is developed along with an ability to be an audience member. The opportunity to be a singer, dancer, writer or sound artist must be opened up to people with profound to mild disability. Ageing artists must be supported to carry on their work and the school system must ensure that full access to creative subjects is provided to all students.

Last year I had a very productive week in the United Kingdom looking and speaking to a range of people from directors of professional integrated arts companies to groups providing amazing work in the community. What was evident to me was that our creativity and expertise were on par - but without exception - the inclusive creative programs in the United Kingdom were always provided in accessible professional arts spaces. Other noticeable differences were that there was wide spread collaboration between the arts and disability sectors and commissions for art created by artists with a disability by main stream arts venues.

Over the past couple of years Accessible Arts has undertaken considerable community consultation into what is required to - improve the quality of work produced; to encourage People with Disability to pursue creative careers; and to support those who are professional artists with a disability.

Our research tells us that we need:

- Arts programs to be delivered by arts workers 100% of the time not 60 % of the time
- Diverse artform experiences that go beyond traditional craft or repetitive programming
- Integrated opportunities in the broader arts community
- Accessible spaces for practising and showcasing work

- Advice and education regarding pathways for emerging artists with disability from school to adulthood
- Physical and/or professional assistance with preparatory work in practice, documentation and showcasing
- Outreach and public programmes including mobile, touring and venue specific initiatives particularly in remote and regional areas - and
- Accessible residencies, mentorships and scholarships to gain professional pathways and experience

Now to Access

Since the last conference Access to arts venues **has** taken a leap forward and here in Sydney of particular note are a couple of new lifts. I have begun to realize that I have a very exciting job – I go to the opening of lifts! What is pleasing about the lift at the Sydney Opera House and the in-progress lift at the Sydney Theatre Company is that they have overcome the often blanket rebuff of “Its heritage so we cannot make any adjustment”. These lifts have moved forward in undeniable heritage buildings with money - **but more importantly** with attitudinal access shown by the management of both organisations and the understanding that economically the lifts were an imperative.

Other examples of access are - the Pilot Touch Tour run by Sculpture by the Sea, the high take up of the Companion Card by Arts organisations, disability awareness training for staff of the National Portrait gallery prior to opening and the acquisition by the Parramatta Riverside Theatres of a new assistive listening system to benefit people who are blind or have low vision.

Cultural democracy is a right – but we do recognise that the ability of arts administrators to lead their organizations to provide comprehensive access is limited by resources, skills and knowledge. Given that arts projects and venues are heavily funded by government and philanthropic bodies these bodies have a vital role to play in 1) funding access and 2) ensuring that access is delivered as part of that funding.

Excellence

In talking to my colleagues about excellence and the arts, it is clear that this is a fraught concept. However, if the process, outcome and quality of the creative work is the determinant of excellence then work in any art form produced by

People with Disability can and must be judged by the same criteria if the work is to be accepted alongside art created by artists without a disability.

Recently a colleague mentioned that she had seen an inclusive art exhibition in the local council chambers. She commented that while she thought it was nice that the work was exhibited she would not have purchased any of it – where was the quality control? – she said.

As it turns out, the exhibition was curated by the curator of the local regional gallery, so one might say that the process was excellent. Other important factors such as advocacy and increased self-esteem would have been met. However it is vital to understand that art produced by People with Disability must meet high artistic standards if it is to be accepted and supported over the long term.

Last year we saw the inclusion of celebrity Gerrard Gossens, a long distance runner in Dancing with the Stars. The inclusion raised a number of issues. Clearly the judges could do with some disability awareness training. But that aside Gossens was not a great dancer but when Scott McKinney said “frankly that was appalling” – that comment drew misplaced condemnation from many quarters – the comment was true - and it needed to be said. People with Disability can take and should take criticism.

If you persevered with “dancing with the stars” you would know that in the last episode Gerrard was allowed to dance with his sighted wife. They were in a spin - he attempts the lift - we hope that it is perfect - but they crash. In rehearsals it was perfect. Whilst this was not an excellent performance, the program director allowed the opportunity for a Person with Disability to fail. An artist with a disability must be allowed to fail the same as any artist. This is part of the process of working towards excellence.

Fortunately, examples of excellence have emerged e.g. Gurrumul Yunupingu, the blind Aboriginal singer, Susan Boyle the United Kingdom based singer with a mild intellectual disability, and the break dancers included in the opening ceremony of the recent Paralympic Games. These artists with a disability are role models for the next generation of artists with or without a disability who will inspire us all.

I hope I have presented a canvas of progress, unsolved barriers and questions that we hope will be debated over the next two days.

Finally, I must acknowledged - Aging, Disability and Home Care of the Department of Human Services, New South Wales, the Motor Accidents Authority, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Red Bee Media for their financial support for the conference.

I would like to acknowledge our board of directors, and in particular our Chair, Maryanne Ireland who is sitting – here - please introduce yourself to Maryanne – she is always eager to hear how Accessible Arts can better work towards our vision of a society in which people with disabilities can contribute to and fully experience the arts and cultural life.

And lastly, but certainly not least my thanks to all the staff of Accessible Arts and in particular our conference convener Jane Pollard for developing a conference that I hope you will find inspirational, informative and wide ranging.