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Venues Simulcast from a Major Performing Arts Centre

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The Distribution of Knowledge as Cultural Content: A Case Study Pilot to Live Audiences in Six Regional Venues Simulcast from a Major Performing Arts Centre

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Abstract: This paper discusses the 2011 pilot simulcast of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra from the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. The substance of the paper is based on the author's interviews with David Sabel and his experiences in introducing simulcasts at the National Theatre in London; with Robert Marshall, foundation producer at Heritage Theatre documenting many of the Royal Shakespeare productions at the Globe Theatre and John Kotzas, CEO of Queensland Performing Arts Centre. This discussion is framed within the context of four major research reports published in 2011, all of which were engaged in investigations into the impact of digital technologies on the performing arts. These were the two reports from the National Theatre in London: NT Live, and Beyond Live, and two Australian reports: the AMPAG (Australian Major Performing Arts Group) Digital Scoping paper, and the sub-section report into 'Audiences' for the Australian Research Council's project 'Sustaining Culture'.

Keywords: Multi-cam Training, Simulcast, Performing Arts, Digital Technologies

Introduction

The research within this paper confirms that this emerging development in the performing arts provides for the creation of archival digitized heritage that is of benefit both economically and culturally to the community. The policy settings enhancing these innovations in the cultural marketplace are part of the digital distribution of cultural content via simulcast, and they are framed within the historical formation over the first decade of broadband in Australia, as described in Marion Jacka's *Tales from the Frontier: Broadband in Australia* (2001) and ACMA's *Broken Concepts* (2011).

What follows is the background to, and discussion of, a 2011 case study of "policy-informed" creative practice, supported by an innovative initiative in a pilot collaboration with the higher education sector. Experimentation and risk-taking requires strong leadership in arts organization and this leadership relies on a supportive management structure and supportive funding bodies. The higher education sector can provide evidence-based research to underpin funding policy and to buttress institutional support for new initiatives. Performing arts organizations typically have tight budgets. The support of government funding departments as well as in-kind support from the higher education sector was embedded for the 2011 pilot to regional Queensland and so assisted in reducing the resourcing barrier.

As with any research and development activity, there are significant risks associated with trialing the delivery of a completely new product into a new market. Policy support has been critical in facilitating the development of the live pilot simulcast in the creative arts sector, specifically the performing arts. The pilot simulcast in 2011 involved collaboration with the higher education sector. This two-step collaboration could, in niche arenas, be part of a broader intersection between IT and the arts.

In the 2011 pilot simulcast of a major live performing arts event to live audiences in regional Queensland, students enrolled in multi-camera courses at Griffith University were engaged in the documentation of the event at the South Bank Venue as well as in the studio production and post-production of a Masterclass TV interview with the producer and director of the simulcast. This

experience introduced those students to a potentially expanding industry production process in the filming for a simulcast. The experience of sitting in the OB Van, more often currently used for sport rather than the arts, was a vehicle for alerting students to a cultural product in a marketplace that is still in development.

Sustaining the introduction of a new cultural product in a cultural marketplace requires an understanding of what precisely is triggering the market, in this case the regional audience, to respond. To this end, audience research has been an important part of the roll-out of the simulcast from 2011 and 2012 and will inform the delivery of the offering in 2013. There have also been opportunities to bring analytical frameworks to support this innovation in the creative industries. A market transformation strategy away from the capital to the regional centres is necessarily going to involve the identification and the removal of the barriers to the development of these new cultural marketplaces and audiences, and modes of delivery.

One of the barriers to the delivery of the 2011 pilot simulcast to regional Queensland was the lack of suitably qualified technical staff in the local market to stage the project. For the pilot, this factor increased the cost of delivery. This example of a barrier then provided an opportunity and a clear role for higher education training facilities to address that market barrier, by providing support crew wherever appropriate that were skilled in this new communication technology. In providing this paper, a case-study of the use of multi-cam techniques in covering the performing arts at Griffith University has been used. This was done with a view to the integration of such techniques into the curriculum of higher education providers specializing in screen production techniques.

The View from London

As we near the end of the second season, we have become more confident in seeing NT Live as an experience on its own. No, it is not the same as being in the theatre and never could be. But we have seen that it can be an experience of artistic merit, and it can honour the integrity of the work and have a significant connection with audiences – it is not second-class, but a different experience. (David Sabel, Head of Digital Media at NT Live, South Bank, London).

David Sabel has been in his position as Head of Digital Media at the National Theatre in London since 2008; and in the summer of 2009 he co-ordinated a two-month feasibility pilot season of multi-camera coverage of “Phaedra” with Helen Mirren; “All’s Well that Ends Well”; followed by a third pilot featuring Pratchett’s “Nation” in 2010. A multiple camera mode of production, or multi-cam, is employed when several cameras are directed to simultaneously record or broadcast an event.

In an interview with the author in London, June 2011, Sabel emphasised his appreciation for the support of NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) as crucial to the success of these pilots (Pers. Comm. June, 2011). NESTA is an independent body with a mission to make the UK more innovative, and the body’s endowment status means that it operate at no cost to the UK taxpayer. Investing in early-stage companies, and delivering practical programs that inspire others to solve the future challenges of audience outreach sets the platform informing policy that is evidence-based. NESTA has partnerships with innovators, policymakers, community organizations, educators and other investors, and worked on the initial pilot season of NT Live in 2009 with additional top-up funding from the UK Arts Council. While the National Theatre in London had previously been developing a range of digital initiatives, NT Live suddenly created a new and significant audience that could only engage remotely, but which now could actually see and hear whole productions at the same time the content was being performed in London. David Sabel argues that if arts organizations are to be innovative, both in

terms of the art form itself, and the means by which audiences can access the work, they must be able to experiment (Sabel, 2011).

NESTA overcame one of the most fundamental barriers to innovation and that is access to “venture capital” which provides the means to experiment to provide proof of concept. The outcome of these experimental innovations for NT Live in 2009-2010 was measured by audience attendance as well as “vox pops” with audience members as they exited the theatre. Based on the success of this pilot, and prospective opportunities, NT Live then made the decision to form a dedicated digital media department that continues to strive to increase this community outreach, and to deepen engagement with the National Theatre’s work across an ever-widening range of platforms and channels.

In the Australian context, the live broadcast of performing arts to regional cinema venues has only been explored recently. The major innovations have arisen in Western Australia and Queensland largely because of their distinctively regional nature covering vast distances. Just as the Arts Council in England was able to access significant funding support to be able to jumpstart the research and development of NT Live in the UK, the DIISR (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research) funding programs and the ongoing support of the Australia Council have been crucial to the introduction of innovative recording and simulcast capability at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. On October 3, 2011 the Queensland Performing Arts Centre co-ordinated a pilot simulcast of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra to six regional centres across Queensland. These were Cairns, Gladstone, Mackay, Bundaberg, Townsville and Mt Isa. With Arts Queensland’s support for the cost of screens and projectors, QPAC provided the staff who liaised with regional arts centres in the organizing of satellite dishes and decoder boxes in each of the regional centers.

This was a cutting-edge policy-informed pilot project delivered as a simulcast to six regional centres. In part it was funded within the Australian Government’s overall contribution to the \$2.4 million Opera Australia’s funding model. Additional project funding was secured through Arts Queensland’s Flexible Touring Grants program to support the costs of screens and projectors in the regional venues. The project was staffed by a team from QPAC, a freelance team of 11 (including a producer, director, score reader and camera operators), a crew from Global TV (outside broadcast facilities) and Astralinks (satellite uplink). Work on the project began in May 2011 when QPAC staff first visited the proposed regional venues; by June/July 2011 QPAC technicians visited each region to meet with local crews and assess the specific requirements of each centre. In addition to QPAC technical support, a specialist company was engaged to install the necessary infrastructure, including satellite dishes, in each venue.

Throughout the six-month lead up, QPAC marketing staff worked with the marketing team in each venue to develop materials so that final delivery would be based on specific requirements for each town. In August, the project leader and members of the QPAC Executive Team visited each regional centre to meet with the staff as well as local mayors and council representatives.

Delivering to the Audience

In the pre-production stage, there were two full camera rehearsals with the camera operators and stage director in consultation, to decide for example, where the fixed camera positions were designated so as not to disrupt the audience viewing experience. Where this may have been a cause of concern, or a barrier to recording a live performance, audience research has confirmed that “once the audiences are informed that they are attending a performance that will be simulcast, this is often perceived as a bonus” (Sabel, 2011).

“Beyond Live” is the NESTA report compiled from an in-depth research study on the two National Theatre Live pilots that were broadcast in 2010. These were “Phèdre” with Helen Mirren on 25th June, 2010, broadcast live to 280 venues, and “All’s Well That Ends Well” broadcast live to cinemas across UK on October 1, 2009. Audiences numbered to 11,000.

Research shows that it is this innovation that has allowed the National Theatre in London to reach new audiences for theatre, not least by drawing on established relationships between cinemas and their patrons in regional centres all over the country (Beyond Live, 2011).

The NESTA research shows that “cinema audiences report even higher levels of emotional engagement with the production than audiences at the theatre. They also claim that they are now more likely to visit the theatre in the future, suggesting that there may be positive spill-overs on the wider sector” (Beyond Live, 2011). This is a significant factor in audience reception and one of the questions that the QPAC survey sought to address regarding the potential level of “emotional engagement” in the cinematic rendition of the live performance. To follow-up on the audience research already conducted for the British pilots, audience surveys were developed and circulated to all Queensland regional centres to capture feedback on the night of the event. Centres and mayors were encouraged to host functions before and after the event to celebrate the occasion. Technical testing was conducted in the month leading up to the event including satellite tests of previously recorded orchestral concerts. On the evening of the performance, all technical crews and stage management across the state remained in constant contact.

Rebecca Lamoin, Manager of Strategy and Planning at QPAC reported that surveys taken on the night indicate that the simulcast audience reception was on par with the Concert Hall audience at QPAC in terms of the degree of emotional response, the sense of being uplifted, and the degree to which they were absorbed in the performance (Lamoin, 2012). On the subject of feeling a sense of belonging or connectedness with the rest of the audience, the live simulcast audience scored higher than the Concert Hall audience, with approximately 60 per cent of the audience responding 4 or 5 out of 5 (with 5 indicating the highest level of “sense of belonging” or “connectedness”), compared to 54 per cent of the Concert Hall audience (Lamoin, 2012).

Interestingly, 82 per cent of the simulcast audience reported it was very important to them that the performance was live rather than recorded for DVD or later broadcast. This result suggests that watching the performance in “real time” was an important factor in influencing the overall positive experience of the audience. The vast majority of the simulcast audience (89 per cent) said they would recommend attending a live simulcast to others.

Mark Fawcett from the Queensland Local Government Arts and Culture Advisory Committee commented that he was surprised at the deep satisfaction of the regional audience experience and the manner in which it was based on its “shared live” with the audience at the Concert Hall in Brisbane that same evening (Lamoin, 2012).

The Executive Summary of ‘Beyond Live’ (Sabel, 2011) similarly responds: “All this suggests an appetite for cultural experiences that are live, going against the prevailing logic of ‘consumption on demand’, where individuals are free to choose the place and time where they access content, but do so detached from the unique circumstances where it was produced in the first place”.

The importance of the shared public venue is also contained within the scoping paper prepared by Bailey, Yang and Donnelly (2011) for AMPAG (the umbrella body for Australia’s 28 major performing arts companies). It is a practical scoping of current practice within the major performing arts groups in Australia with view to how these companies are dealing with the impact of digital technologies. One of the key interview participants for this scoping paper was Robert Marshall, Heritage Theatre (UK). Marshall established Heritage Theatre in 1999 with the goal of recording live performances of theatre. At that time the public broadcasters in London were only recording opera and ballet. Since 1999 Heritage Theatre has been recording Royal Shakespeare productions as live recordings of performances at the Globe Theatre. Robert Marshall produced the QPAC pilot simulcast in 2011, and he argues that the challenge for the next decade is to look at the way the broadcast market is changing with the expansion of simulcasts and to seize the opportunities that these emerging technologies provide, in order to address potential performing arts audiences.

This community-outreach approach to regional delivery of the best of the performing arts has enormous benefits. Until the use of these new communication technologies to deliver the very best quality performances, the delivery of Shakespearean theatre performances was restricted by “what could fit in the back of a van”, or in the Queensland context “what could fit on the back of a red truck”. In Queensland for decades, from 1960s – 1990s, the Grin and Tonic Theatre Company toured regional Queensland performing Shakespeare plays sourced from props and costumes packed under a tarpaulin on the back of a red truck.

It is no accident that the CEO of QPAC John Kotzas pays tribute to the Grin and Tonic Touring Theatre Company in his address to the QUT Creative Arts Faculty Graduates in 2012. As a young man growing up in regional Queensland, Kotzas says he “was given an unparalleled arts apprenticeship grounded in the idea that art only matters or finds relevance when it speaks to its community” (Kotzas, 2012).

As part of the ARC funded Sustaining Cultures project, Griffith University media studies scholar Wendy Keys compiled a report that concurs with this commitment to the ‘social context’ of audience reception.

When given a choice, participants expressed a greater preference to watching live performing arts rather than telecast programs on TV or at the cinema. Many stated their preferences for the live performance for its potential to become a transcendent, inspiring or empowering experience... The pleasures people attach to their performing arts experience can yield much in the way of determining motivations for attendance. The desire to speak of one’s experience suggests the importance of a social context around the performing arts show (Keys, *Audiences*, 2012).

This focus on the “importance of the social context around the performing arts” is re-iterated in David Sabel’s report “Beyond Live” for NT Live. With this approach to the importance of the “collective reception” of the digital data, the National Theatre made the choice not to edit delayed broadcasts, but to present audiences with all of the live presentation, the introductions and the supplementary material as seen in the simultaneous broadcasts. The intention was to preserve ‘a sense of event’ so that the “collective experience” of the performance should remain consistent for all audiences.

This desire for a sense of event and a collective experience becomes the drivers of the audience’s engagement with the performance. Engaging with cultural content of significance is a consideration in both the ARC Sustaining Cultures report (Keys, 2012) and in the NT Live (Sabel, 2011) report regarding the “collective experience” of the audience. This desire for a sense of an event, and for a collective experience, has implications for the rollout of the QPAC simulcasts of the future. At the point of reception, in the differing regional and rural cinemas in which the performances are to be screened, there needs to be a sense of a significant “collective experience”. Documenting the event as part of a combined coverage via photos and potential podcasts is one attempt to enhance this sense of a ‘collective experience’ of a unique performance.

In building up audience interest, presenting organizations could also use digital media to open up the process, for instance live streaming technical rehearsals to give potential audiences a wider range of access points to the work. Skype could also be used as a tool for post-show chats with select groups, for instance as conversations between the cast and a school group.

Keys’ conclusions are again consistent with the NT Live report with this observation: “In the second season, NT Live added some repeat screenings when demand exceeded the capacity for the live screenings. Anecdotal feedback in non-live territories and for such repeat screenings has shown that the knowledge that was originally broadcast live seems to be a factor in its appeal, more than if it had been distributed solely as a pre-recorded or edited version” (Sabel, 2010).

Returning to the first key finding of the ARC Sustaining Culture report, and the qualifier, “When given a choice”, this is the kernel of the importance of the QPAC pilot project. For many

in regional and rural Australia there is no choice between seeing the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in a simulcast cinematic experience, or choosing to see it as a live performance.

Given this background, the challenge is to go to the heart of the third key finding of the ARC report – the “social context”. The QPAC pilot project team, mindful of the importance of the social context, initiated an experimental engagement with the community via a project documenting aspects of the pilot project for delivery back to the audiences involved; the documentary was compiled by students enrolled in Screen Production at Griffith University School of Humanities. The documentation provided for an understanding of ‘social context’ by giving a view of the audience demographic and the public spaces they were engaging in for the simulcast. Once these were documented and recorded by local participants then the social context of these regional audiences could be reconsidered for the next roll-out of the simulcasts which happened in October 2012 to six different regional centers.

Case Study

In 2011 the higher education sector in Screen Production as it sits within the Humanities engaged in the trialing of a documentation of the simulcast to a live audience as a multi-authored collaboration. Within this creative practice research, the students engaged in a collaboration with documentarians in the regional centres. The result was the production of a narrated documentary compilation of the seven different audiences all recorded on the same evening in Brisbane as in the six regional centres.

The day after the simulcast, students enrolled in a final year Multi-Cam course also worked on the studio production of a Masterclass with Kevin Firkins, the multi-camera director, and Robert Marshall, the producer of the simulcast. The author conducted the interview with detailed discussion of the working methodology associated with the challenges of coverage for a simulcast. This interview was then edited to include the production scripts for the evening’s performance, and Firkin’s detailed notes on directing the coverage, thus providing for a structured class discussion.

This Masterclass also provides the reference notes for this class discussion on camera set-up and direction. The sequences in the Masterclass for example, detail the skills of marking-up the score for performance as described by Firkins in the working relationship with the D.A. (Director’s Assistant) or Script Supervisor in the production of a shooting script. The Masterclass also includes screen shots of the “camera cards” as they were used for recording the performance. These “camera cards” edited in at post-production provide for further in-depth analysis as part of an extended class discussion on the role of the cinematographer.

John Hetherington, as course convenor for this 2011 offering, had collaborated with his graduating students the previous year on multi-camera coverage for the “Concert for Timor” (2010), featuring the use of five cameras. This concert was held in the University Conservatorium of Music theatre showcasing professional performers in a two-hour live concert (with only one tech rehearsal). The finished product was then made available on DVD to participants and registered audience members.

The 2011 multi-cam students then also worked on a “five-camera” coverage of “First Ritual”, a collaborative dance performance between Expressions Dance Company and the China based, XAN dance group. Within Dr Hetherington’s graduating year course at the University of Southern Queensland in 2011, students also trained in Outside Broadcast (OB) technique, completing a live “five-camera” coverage of a three hour music concert (“The Healing”) held at the Warwick Town Hall as part of the biennial Warwick Peace Festival. These university-based experiences are an example of how the higher education sector can put industry-based techniques and innovations into practice through collaboration with the performing arts sector.

Importantly, students in these situations were able to adopt similar methodology as that proposed by the Heritage theatre producers in their coverage of the Vienna Philharmonic

simulcast. Notwithstanding the lack of professional negotiation a student group may have when piggy-backing onto a pre-arranged theatre/concert/performance, especially in regard to scheduling enough rehearsal time, the students' learning is palpably heightened by the opportunity to work alongside professional artistic companies/groups. The resultant work demonstrates a professional-ready standard of camera work and direction, and the students were able to show highly competent and demonstrable production-process knowledge, enthusiasm for a new medium, collaborative working skills and the self-confidence to pursue these abilities in any future job applications.

At Griffith Film School (GFS), students are provided with a strong foundation in the multi-cam form and modules include magazine, drama and music video production styles, all taught in the television studio. Developmentally, the Outside Broadcast component in the final year builds on these competencies and offers the graduating student alternative skills to the Single Camera style. It is therefore well suited to the emerging convergent industries of content delivery on multiple platforms, and these innovative industry practices.

The means of distribution of product via mobile, Internet and satellite platforms has allowed new markets to appear, as has the decline in the power of television networks to single handedly control the distribution of production material. In particular, material produced by arts organizations is increasingly recognized as product they can control and distribute for their own benefit (AMPAG, 2011). This is also happening within sporting arenas where the officiating authority, on behalf of sporting clubs is negotiating better deals with broadcasters, resulting in improved control and revenue to the sports person. The opportunity for the revival of television/multi-cam production techniques offers film schools and screen production students a very real alternative for growth, as evidenced by the AMPAG report and the case-study of the students' involvement in the QPAC simulcast.

This issue of multi-platform distribution of digital content becomes pivotal in the move away from public broadcasters to the performance companies themselves engaging in the recording process. Around 2003-2006 a cultural shift saw broadcasters edged out of the production/distribution line, as the performing organizations themselves took on the role of producer/distributor of recordings of live performances, hiring in facilities and staff as required. Policy-informed creative practice research, and consistently positive responses from regional audiences, combined with a willingness towards innovation in the performing arts industry provides a model for the future. This case-study was also trialing a collaboration in which higher education providers of screen production could engage their students in a meaningful participation of cutting-edge audio visual practice as part of an innovative technological training opportunity.

These innovations in the digital distribution of cultural content at QPAC were fostered by the CEO, John Kotzas, because "even when we use technology to share the experience, like our regional simulcasts, what's at the heart of every performance is that people come together to celebrate, to interrogate and to be together to consider life's possibilities through art" (Kotzas, 2012).

Marion Jacka argued in 2001 in *Tales from the Frontier* that the new communication technologies allowed for the creative industries to form strategic alliances and develop new business models with ongoing government support for innovations in content production and distribution. The game-changer of the simulcast of major performing arts events in 2011 is providing for another opportunity to form strategic alliances between the creators of cultural content and those responsible for its digital distribution to regional audiences.

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