

ARATA Conference Keynote

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Enabling People with Disabilities to Participate in the Mainstream

Tutti: A Case Study

There is a struggle going on in Australia. It is happening in our cities and suburbs, in our regional centres and small towns. It goes to the heart of what we as Australians believe is a 'fair go' because it is a struggle between commitment and indifference, between inclusion and exclusion, between fairness and injustice and ultimately between right and wrong. It is moreover a one-sided affair in which the strugglers are for the most part invisible.

The strugglers I'm referring to are people with a disability and the causes of their struggle go back to the caution and discrimination we've traditionally been conditioned to feel when confronted by disability. If the social inclusion agenda of the Rudd Government and the idealism of Peter Garret's new national arts and disability strategy position paper are to be fulfilled we need as a sector to undergo a fundamental change in our thinking. One that plays down the medical and charity models that for so long have coloured the not for profit disability service industry. We must enable disabled artists to be seen and heard, we must renounce caution and invite disability to inform mainstream philosophy and culture and we must make it possible for disabled people to influence social policy and benefit from mainstream economics.

We have a few hurdles to jump along the way and we need to look overseas to find the models that have worked. I suggest that for anyone who didn't see CandoCo's brilliant Bus sequence in the handover to London during the Paralympics Closing Ceremony that you hop onto their website and take a look so you know what I am talking about.

Ever since integration took over from separatism in the early 1990's governments have been talking about de-institutionalisation and physically putting people into the community. More recently state governments have set up Social Inclusion Units to identify problems and dissolve barriers which marginalise disadvantaged people living in our communities.

While there are great examples of successful disabled artists living and working across the country (we have two living legends here in South Australia with Designer Gaelle Mellis and Visual artist Brian Tingey) the greatest challenge facing us is the lack of transition and post-school education, training and work opportunities in the creative arts for talented young people leaving school. Instead of the fair and equitable access to supported education or experiential training parents and disabled school leavers are faced with an overgrown jungle of State and Commonwealth services to fight their way through and make sense of. They have to organise Job Capacity Assessments, access Centrelink, meet endless documentation needs and somehow link in with a Disability Employment Network provider. No wonder many give up and no wonder year after year parents and schools ask why there can't be a one stop shop and all services

centralised? If I remember correctly one of the more familiar cries of the 20/20 summit was: 'Why do we need three tiers of government? "

It is therefore timely that in the 60th year since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 27 years after the International Year of Disabled Persons, the Australian Government has placed social inclusion issues at the forefront of its policy agenda and sought input from a wide range of people with physical or intellectual disability and/or experience of mental illness for its national arts and disability strategy. A key part of this strategy needs to be about ensuring Centrelink and Welfare to Work recognizes and value the arts as productive employment which they patently do not at present.

It is time Australia acknowledged that we are part of a global disability community and moving into an era where disabled artists have access to an increasing local and international Disability Arts and Culture audience. Quite apart from the spectacular opening and closing ceremonies of the Paralympics every four years, the number of international disability arts festivals is also increasing along with a growing trend in mainstream festivals to identify and present high quality work featuring disabled artists and informed by the experience of disability.

The kind of excellence which can be accepted and celebrated by the mainstream doesn't happen overnight, it is the product of years of training and development of minds, of bodies.

It all begins with education and more specifically, arts education. The recent **SACOSS Education, Training and Employment Pathways for people with a**

Disability Report - summarises the importance of post-school education and training and its shortcomings thus:

“The link between a sound educational base and greater success in obtaining suitable employment and accessing appropriate career paths and trajectories cannot be overemphasized. For students with disabilities, equity of access to education coupled with a wide range of support systems is vital to overcoming inequity and discrimination.” At present post-school students with disabilities are continuing to exist within a patently under-funded educational environment that is characterised by discrimination, lack of social and educational support, social isolation, bullying and victimisation.” (page 9)

The other great barrier to the development of training for aspiring musicians and other disabled artists is the present funding system which simply does not provide anything like enough places in arts related training programs. For people to succeed they need a milieu for that provides moral support and disabled students also need specific personal support. The constant cuts to Carer Support hours and woeful lack of understanding of the needs of disabled students in our higher education systems have meant many have dropped out. In addition, the ‘one size fits all’ mentality which fails to acknowledge the specialised training or employment needs of people with learning disabilities needs radical re-thinking.

(p56 SACOSS Report) Add to this the legacy of the John Howards’ Welfare to Work legislation which refuses to even recognise the arts as legitimate work and you have some idea of the job ahead of us.

Despite this there are amazing success stories. A few enterprising arts companies and organisations across the country have found ways to support and develop the talent of young people at the critical post school stage of their lives. Back to Back Theatre in Geelong, Rawcus in Melbourne and Restless Dance, No Strings Attached and Tutti in Adelaide contribute well above their weight to Australia's local and international profile.

1 -Tutti's ***Between the Worlds*** played to standing ovations at Mixed Blood Theatre Minneapolis in November 2007

2 -Geelong's Back to Back theatre toured their critically acclaimed ***Small Metal Objects*** throughout Europe in 2007 and recently performed it at the Walker Center in Minneapolis.

3 -Tutti's award winning international collaboration with Interact Center Minneapolis, ***Northern Lights, Southern Cross***, has a four week season at the Guthrie Theatre Minneapolis in October 2009

The positive value of this to the individuals involved, their families and wider community is inestimable. Again, one has only to think of the UK's contribution to the closing ceremony of the Beijing Paralympics to understand the potential for such artistry to reach the world.

To summarise the problems

1) Mainstream educational institutions are overstretched and Support hours have been cut.

2) Discriminatory assumptions are rife in learning institutions and unfortunately these reflect those of the community at large. These compound feelings of alienation and disempowerment which contributes to the high drop out rate.

3) Mainstream teachers, employers and employment service workers need more knowledge of disability than they currently have.

What are the answers?

Instead of trying to stuff a doona (the overwhelming need) into a matchbox (the existing infrastructure) - it is time to rethink the present funding system which limits the choices of school leavers and to support different approaches to training and work opportunities available for disabled school leavers and young adults with a passion for and talent in the arts. I should say here that the problem solving, team work and higher order creative thinking and art-form skills gained in arts programs are eminently transferable and of value throughout the whole of life.

But back to the answers - What might this alternative model look like and what might the outcomes for individuals, their families and the wider community be?

This is a question I asked myself in 2003 when the Tutti Choir suddenly attracted a whole group of young people, many of whom were extremely talented and wanted access to a career in the performing arts.

I found the most promising models in the UK where predominantly dance companies challenged conventional attitudes about disability and showed international leadership in training and employment for disabled artists. The main companies I looked at were CandoCo Dance Company, Graeae Theatre

Company (a disabled-led theatre company dedicated to developing and profiling the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments), and AMICI Dance Theatre Company which like CandoCo also integrated disabled and non-disabled artists and performers. While such companies did not describe themselves as training institutions they offered a holistic, deeply educational experience which developed artistic skills and transformed lives. In 2003 I also researched the work of the Chickenshed which had begun as the UK's first inclusive theatre in the early 1970's and was the first to offer performance pathways to disabled people. I was particularly interested in Chickenshed at that stage of my research because like Tutti, before we began Tutti Arts, they embraced people of all ages and ethnicities, disabled and non-disabled.

What all these companies had in common were strong identities, skilled and confident performers and bodies of passionate, energetic and politically reflective work inspired by the international Disability Arts and Culture Movement, (DACM) which began in the UK in the mid 1970's and spread to Europe and North America over the next decade.

By 2004 I'd also spent time in Canada and the US where a number of productive visual arts centres had been established. I'd seen a remarkable work "*Madame Josette's Nothing is Sacred Cabaret*" created and performed by US disabled artists from Interact Center Minneapolis for Canada's inaugural KickstART Festival in Vancouver and been inspired by the disabled artists leading S4 DAC (Society for Disability Arts and Culture) who created that festival. I'd met New

Zealand disabled performer and activist Philip Patston - a proudly gay vegetarian, sit-down comedian with piercings in strange places who held hundreds in the palm of his hand with a comedy act that was sharp, pithy and completely unsentimental. In his one man show Patston turned the charity model completely on its head and wound disabled and no-disabled audiences up to a point where they screamed for revolution. He described Disability Arts as *“The creative expression by disabled people of what it is to be a disabled person and ultimately about creating social and political change.”*

DACM

It is important in this paper to acknowledge the major impact of DACM on the employment and career opportunities available to disabled artists in the UK because the strength and solidarity of that movement did a great deal to enable disabled people to access training in the arts, have mainstream impact and put disability culture on the national agenda.

DACM paralleled the UK Disability Rights Movement (DRM) in the 70's and developed from disability-led grassroots organisations. It emerged from the work of a small number of arts organisations involving disabled people and the work of an equally small number of disabled artists whose work reflected their experiences of feeling more disabled by the attitudes and barriers society placed in their way than by their disability. Both DACM and DRM included a strong element of political activism which helped excellent and accessible training courses to become available to disabled people from the early 80's and it was at

that time that dozens of disability arts companies were also established, Graeae Theatre Company, CandoCo, Carousel, Company Amici and the Orpheus Centre to name but a few. The politicisation of disability in the UK led to the establishment of Britain's very effective Disability Discrimination Act and also saw the social model of disability become widely accepted as the theoretical benchmark for government policy. What was important about this is that the DDA enabled the establishment of a disabled-led arts and cultural practice which was supported by appropriate policy and funding which valued the strength and vitality of disability culture.

However, by the time Tutti Arts was gestating in my mind the political focus in the UK had shifted from separatism to inclusion. Not that this meant 'integration' as it had here in the 90's. Inclusion in the UK means barrier free equal participation that values the diverse experience a disabled person brings to the table. Anything less is not inclusion and it is fair to say that Arts Council England continues to take the international lead in this debate for theirs is a strong tradition of disability led performances and high profile exhibitions by disabled arts practitioners. Moreover through their Cultural Leadership Program, Arts Council England supports disabled artists to travel internationally, encouraging mentorship, collaborations and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Tutti: A Case Study

In 2003 knowing relatively little about the post-school disability minefield in Australia, I decided to create an arts program for school leavers in the Tutti Choir

classified as having moderate to high support needs. It would be initially be a performing arts program in which they could grow creatively and intellectually in a stimulating environment and know that the larger choral community of Tutti supported them.

A Snapshot of Tutti

Tutti is a musical term meaning 'perform together'. What is now a large multi-level community arts organisation began as a small singing group at Minda Inc in August 1997. The group of nine grew quite rapidly into a large, inclusive community choir and in July 2001 before heading to Vancouver to open the KickstART Festival incorporated to become the Tutti Ensemble. Tutti's mission was 'unlocking creativity' and 'building human potential.' By that time the choir numbered over 80 people and over half identified with a disability and that is still the case. In 2002 Tutti became the first community organization to partner with a flagship company (State Theatre) to produce a major original work (My Life, My Love) in the Adelaide Festival. This Helpmann nominated production set the benchmark for the rest of the country to follow. Today with several entry levels and a strong artistic track record Tutti has become a Key Producer with the Australia Council and in June this year won a Play for Life National Music in Communities Award giving widespread recognition to the fact that Tutti is now a cultural catalyst in the lives of around 230 disadvantaged South Australians aged 2 – 84.

The judges comments for the National Music in Communities Awards say it all:

“Tutti is a kind of under-the-radar national treasure, using music making and performance opportunities to break down barriers. It is social inclusion and artistic excellence combined – a truly tremendous mix!”

Fundamental to the organisation’s philosophy is the belief that education of both disadvantaged people and the wider community is essential if social inclusion is to be achieved. This meant that along the way we had diversified according to the needs of the community.

Club Tutti, formed in May 2003, offers older people with learning disability the opportunity to enjoy choral singing and confidence building in a smaller choir.

In October 2003 the first groups for what was to become the Big Country Choir began in Clare, the Barossa and Wallaroo. Today with another group in Mt Barker modeled on Tutti there are over 100 people in regional SA regularly involved in singing and music-theatre and we all get together for major gigs.

In 2004 Tutti Arts was established to meet the needs of young disabled adults and in 2006 Tutti kids - our early intervention music and drama program for children with a disability began. This year Tutti partnered with Novita Children’s Services to expand this program and Tutti Kids currently offers weekly workshops to four different age group programs for children aged 2-15.

Tutti Arts

In early 2004 seven young people in the Tutti Choir, several in their last year of school were facing an uncertain future. As Minda clients they would either be

placed in packaging, in the laundry, in catering, grounds or maintenance. If offered Moving On funding they could choose a Day Options program.

The talent, enthusiasm and commitment of those seven led to Tutti approaching Minda with the idea of creating a program which would build performance skills and confidence and enhance the life-skills of all involved. This was timely for Tutti. Such a program would benefit the cultural development of the whole organization in that it would inform new work and ensure our ongoing capacity to perform at the level our audiences expected. Ian Thompson, then Director of Client Services at Minda Inc was a great help to me. He understood my desire to have a talented smaller ensemble working on a daily basis. He saw that these young disabled artists would have an unprecedented opportunity to develop the skills and confidence to take on increasingly major roles in productions and concerts. He recognized that this would place disabled artists firmly in the public eye and challenge public thinking about disability.

Tutti Arts opened for business in October 2004 offering music, singing, movement and drama. In October 2005 we added a visual arts program and in mid 2007 Digitech began. Since Day 1 we have had a Tutti volunteer working on literacy with artists in the program. Despite the fact that in disability jargon Tutti Arts is still described as a Day Options program for people with moderate to high support needs Tutti Arts is overwhelmingly regarded as a work program where people gain valuable artistic, team and social skills, all of which are transferable. This is most clearly seen in Digitech where the storytelling which is part of

creating theatre and song is used in storyboarding for film; where observational drawings created in visual arts are providing inspiration and impetus for animated characters and objects and where musical ideas find their way into digital compositions and recording. In addition to Digitech, design principles understood in Visual Arts are beginning to influence professional set design, construction and costuming for Tutti's major works. Skills gained in singing and music workshops are now shared with groups of school children and educators. Young Artists used to taking lead roles in shows are taking on leadership responsibilities in other situations, especially 'train the trainer workshops'. The overwhelming desire to take part in script readings has led two young adults who left school illiterate to learn how to read. In 2008 with two award winning productions and a growing vibrant visual arts and film and animation program to its credit, Tutti Arts is now gaining increasing international recognition in its own right and has confirmed my belief that one of the greatest challenges facing the disability sector is the lack of high end programs which stimulate a desire to grow intellectually and learn.

From the outset the aims of the program were:

- 1) To create a space where disabled artists could create work informed by experience of disability
- 2) To challenge existing preconceptions about intellectual disability.
- 3) To create work that has a place in mainstream festivals and exhibitions and is sought after by disability arts and cultural events.
- 4) To create work that can be toured or exhibited locally, interstate and overseas.

- 5) To add to the body of local and international work performable by other artists with a disability and companies involving performers with experience of disability
- 6) To provide artists with opportunities to earn income

What were the obstacles?

- 1) Tutti had not met Service Excellence Framework requirements.

Without Minda we could not have started or sustained this program.

- 2) Funding of potential participants.

Day Options are funded by the state and the Vermont Assessment is used to determine eligibility. The tendency of parents and teachers to underestimate support needs resulted in many young people being assessed as low support and ineligible for Moving On or Day Options funding. We ended up fighting for re-assessment of border-line people on the grounds that the support required to participate in a high end program like Tutti Arts was significantly greater than for a less demanding program. We had some success but it confirmed my thinking that too few parents and teachers are sufficiently well-informed when it comes to understanding the impact of that one assessment on the future of their son or daughter.

- 3) The entrenched perception that arts programs are therapeutic rather than professional and did therefore did not require professional artists to run them.

Factors central to the success of the model

1) An established artistic community.

Tutti Arts grew out of a successful existing model of social inclusion. Community members who had been in the choir for years had personally experienced the transformative energy of singing and the depth of the teamwork required for major productions and they'd had the opportunity to observe its effect on disabled singers. Everyone had experienced the empowerment of being part of performances which challenged public perception about disability and there was a strong desire to support young people who had come into the choir as a result of these performances. Since Tutti Arts began, Tutti community members have volunteered to ease the administration workload, run literacy programs, fund-raise and support travel to and from gigs and rehearsals. In return the young artists continue to participate in the Tutti Choir and our performances have taken on new meaning. Artistic outcomes are important, as are high profile performances and this requires the ongoing and energetic supportive of the community at every level of the organisation

2) A solid and supportive partnership.

Partnerships in the disability service sector do not emerge overnight. It is fortunate that Minda trusted that Tutti Arts would eventually cover its own costs. Tutti Arts is intensive and expensive to run and it is fair to say that after four years, and with the number of artists in the program growing, that viability of the program in its own right may soon be possible. However, Day Options funding

alone could never fully support this program and its high quality tutors. Arts funding remains vital to the presentation and production of work.

3) The choice of experienced professional artists as tutors.

Our philosophy is 'work with the best because they will excite and thrill you with their skills'. Good artists also help attract funding and the media attention your program needs. It cannot be stressed enough that in order to maintain momentum tutors must be experienced professional artists first and support workers second. Emerging artists deserve access to experienced professional artists both as role models and to learn techniques. Passion is not enough, technique is critical for good results.

The use of professional artists as tutors establishes a work ethic and a critical thinking process that engages and stretches participants. Good artists really get to know the people they are working with and understand how to extend them. The better the projects and outcomes, the happier and more confident are the artists. Working with professionals also has a 'spin off' when it comes to ideas for new projects and this keeps everyone interested and 'alive'.

Although professional artists increase the running costs of the success and effectiveness of the program is attracting more participants. We are also able to justify individual funding more easily because people do require more support to work at the level required by the program. Extra rehearsal hours and performance time are often on top of the normal working week which in itself

requires further commitment and funding. Having experienced artists as tutors also means these extended hours of work become valid working time – extending and developing the skills and self reliance of all the participants.

What are some of the outcomes?

1) Identity and commitment.

First and foremost every person in the program sees themselves as an artist '*creatively expressing what it is to be a disabled person*'. All are incredibly committed. Apart from days spent at Tutti Arts, all are involved in either the Tutti Choir or Club Tutti, and some soloists can have up to two extra gigs each week. Others volunteer as assistant tutors for Tutti Kids music and drama programs.

2) Understanding of process

The program mirrors professional practice in that it operates in intensive blocks. These involve everyone in the creative process from generating the seed of an idea and its development right through to eventual production or exhibition. Having now been involved in the creation of *Between the Worlds*, *Mouth Music*, *Northern Lights Southern Cross*, *The Little Blue Parcel*, *Second Sight* and currently *Doghhouse* - many artists have been through this process enough times to know when something is not working and fix it.

3) Recognition of personal goals.

Everyone has their own personal assessment plan to enable them to get where they want to go (within the limits of the program and budget). In between major projects everyone concentrates on their personal goals. These include everything from improving literacy, learning to download and manipulate images and using digital animation and music programs. For others it is writing songs, expanding repertoire, improving speech/elocution, or in some cases learning an instrument.

Significant improvements:

Since 2004 artists in the program have shown significant improvements in the following areas.:

- 1) Language, literacy and social skills
- 2) Mental and physical wellness and recognition of how to maintain those.
- 3) Behaviour - positive attitudes to problem solving are becoming the norm.
- 4) Capacity to concentrate, set tasks, and achieve goals.
- 5) Progress towards self-care and independence
- 6) Willingness to publicly contribute to the community

Measurable public recognition

- 1) The number of artists being invited to perform and present at conferences and events
- 2) Individual artists being sought overseas as soloists.
- 3) Individual artists being nominated for awards.
- 4) Visual artists being offered places in mainstream exhibitions.

5) Visual artists winning awards.

6) The number of hits their original work is attracting on You Tube.

What is the relationship like now between Tutti Arts and the Tutti Choir?

Four years after the program began Tutti Arts has become integral to the whole of Tutti. Participation in the visual or performing arts program even two or three days a week has knitted these young adults into the wider Tutti community and completely by-passed the fragmentation and loss of support networks that often accompanies leaving school.

The program itself has become a creative crucible for young disabled artists as well as a springboard for new work and launch pad for individual careers.

Thanks to the strength and positivity of Tutti's community culture there is also a safety net if health issues associated with an artist's disability prevent them from achieving their goals.

It is a stimulating workplace for professional artists tutoring in the program and a hub for families and the wider community who offer support as volunteers and participants.

Conclusion

The education and empowerment of disadvantaged people is fundamental to successful social inclusion and participation in the mainstream. We cannot afford to offer a second rate service to aspiring artists with a learning disability. Talent must be recognised and rewarded by post-school funding, especially when opportunities are opening up all over the world.

It is time to:

- 1) Address the need for accessible vocation training for young disabled people and ensure they and their outcomes are sustainable
- 2) Increase professional opportunities for disabled artists
- 3) Create opportunities for disabled arts practitioners to contribute to policy debate.

A New Model

The major recommendation of this paper is to cease dividing talented young people with a disability into Day Options or Supported Employment via their Vermont Assessment and offer a combined Federal/State package for a six year informal training option. This could be extendable to ten years and create maximum opportunity for potential artists to develop both the skills and self discipline required to succeed in their artistic discipline. The skills learned will unlock their potential to become a productive part of the community and earn income in supported or even open employment without having to attend TAFE.. While in the short term the cost may be greater to the government, the savings over an individual's lifetime to the disability and health sectors are likely to be significant because not only are many of the skills they are learning higher order, they are transferable.

It is likely with the growth of the creative industries in western economies and the growing awareness of human rights for disabled people in developing countries that within a decade a whole new tier of employment will exist for competent artists with a disability. The increasing professionalization of the disability arts

sector in the northern hemisphere has already led to many more professional employment opportunities for actors, singers, musicians and exhibiting visual artists and this is going to increase.

It is time for the strong leadership and wherever possible disability led leadership in this area to be given the opportunity and recognition to develop, flourish and build upon the already established foundations. Our young disabled artists, especially those with learning or sensory disabilities should no longer struggle with rejection or be out aside to stagnate. Australia can do better than this.

As British actor Bob Hoskins says of Chickenshed,

“You know all those ideals that don’t work for disabled people in mainstream institutions – things like equal opportunities, and looking after your mates and team work? Well let me tell you they do work in arts organisations and while they are at it they also act as very powerful creative and social forces.”

Now is the time Minister Garret, together with leaders in the state disability service and arts sectors: Now is the time for Australia to step up to the mark for Art and the people who make it are such a powerful force for good in society. Let us at long last seize the day and truly embrace change.

Pat Rix

Artistic Director: Tutti Ensemble Inc

