

Soggy biscuit

Invisible lives – or the emperor’s new social work?

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IN the first month of John Howard’s government, my then toddler son offered the new prime minister a soggy biscuit. That moment came early in my attempt to set up a savvy arts-based company that could experiment with cultural approaches to complex social problems. Without realising it at the time, the soggy encounter was the turning point in Big hART’s approach to Community Cultural Development (CCD).

There we were in the hallowed halls of Parliament House, about to introduce the PM to his best worst nightmare – a bunch of ex-juvenile offenders, reformed recidivists from Tasmania. Mr Howard came striding across the marble, media-scum stumbling and cursing behind him like some multi-limbed pot-bellied animatronic political spore, as he power-walked his way to the theatrette deep in the bowels of the building. History was working in our favour that day. Tasmania in early 1996 was momentarily flavour of the month, especially when it came to young offenders, and so the PM had agreed to meet us.

My young son in his blue polka-dot onesie, brandishing a rusk sucked to a dangerous point, stopped the whole posse. The security contingent blinked at the half-chewed weapon. Mr Howard’s eyebrows twitched like instinctual ‘bad-photo-op-antennae’, men in black talked into their cufflinks... *If it were*

just a baby that needed kissing, easy done, but this disarming offer of soggy communion, this subversive snack, the toddler table manners? Nobody was sure what to do. Cameras shifted their Cyclops gaze back and forth. Then, out of the mouth of a babe, a tremendous biscuit burp. Saved. The PM laughed, pinched Locky's Rubenesque cheek and swept triumphantly into the theatrette to meet the ex-recalcitrants, who, apparently, had been reformed by art. Not the sort of gig a PM from the Right would normally say yes to, but these were dark and desperate days as the spectre of US-style gun-barrel criminality threatened the peaceful backwater of Australia.

In the cock-a-hoop weeks following Mr Howard's election, things had been travelling nicely until the day Martin Bryant, that very ordinary but cashed-up dullard, slaughtered the innocent in a pathetic and morally disconnected ballistic spree on the same blood-soaked soil that once housed a decidedly brutal public policy solution for recidivists at Port Arthur. Martin Bryant was nothing special, like many other young people on the fringes – boring as batshit, jilted, disconnected. In fact, he was not unlike quite a few young people involved in Big hART's early arts-based projects dealing with society's invisible contemporary lepers: young offenders; women and children split open by fist and phallus; injecting young people at risk of HIV, scare-mongered underground by ponytailed advertising wunderkinds with big budgets and small brains; the rural poor; whatever.

This was the context prime minister Howard walked into when offered that rusk. A bunch of young people from the fringes of the law, lying in wait on stage, with hundreds of house bricks stacked and ready, about to perform some dangerous brick-throwing performance art for an unsuspecting PM.

A mashed-up experimental mix of Kronos and Nirvana met the PM's ears as, on stage, a brick set was torn apart. Choreographed masonry flew through the air with precision and was stacked faster than a bricklayer's apprentice could be bastardised in a portalo. Sitting there, the prime minister may have struggled with this set of slightly obtuse metaphors – *hmm, everything made of paper and bricks unravelling in this performance piece created in the pulp'n'paper mill town of Burnie, all the structures falling down, families breaking apart, crime on the rise... Economic and societal concepts, captured without a word in a sophisticated mash of mixed media pulp-non-fiction. It's fine at some G20 thing, to sit*

wearing funny shirts and watch a bit of culture, but not in our own backyard please – his fixed smile seemed to say. *Which newbie adviser got me into this mess? Sack ‘em.*

By the end, though, he knew from the pin-drop silence he was witnessing something special, and even if the dramaturgy of the art was difficult to decipher, what he couldn't deny was the dramaturgy of the independently evaluated stats we presented alongside the performance – one offence a week from the target group at the beginning of the project, one offence in ten months at the conclusion. You could see the PM's people doing the math, counting the beans, instead of watching the performance – excellent, just as we hoped, forget the art, this represented a saving of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the taxpayer.

More importantly however, here was a good-news story from Tasmania, and a moment to reinforce strong leadership after the Port Arthur Massacre – a new narrative for the decisive new track-suited action man. Golden opp. Bingo... 'I don't know much about cultural solutions but I like what I know. Quick, somebody draft a press release.'

Portrait from *GIRL*: A young woman who was feared by the police for her capacity for violence and physical strength was on the stage that day. She had been essentially locked indoors, away from interaction with the public, for much of her childhood and abused sexually and physically. The family suffered from intergenerational obesity and mental illness. She was the only young woman to have managed to escape from Risdon prison. She became central to our arts projects and toured a number of performance pieces with the company, spoke at public functions and went on to employment. Years later she rang late one night from an aged care facility where she was working. 'Guess what?' she said. 'They've left me in charge of the drugs cabinet!' At the time of the project, a picture of this kind was inconceivable, with her predicted future being framed by failure, danger to the community and incarceration.

IF I WANTED to use the word 'beauty' here in a serious discussion of art and culture, people could well snigger – What is beauty, What does it mean?

What is its value in the context of the arts? However if I wanted to talk beauty in the context of sport – Ah yes, the beautiful game. We'd accept it without a second thought. We hear it regularly in the media. It may say more about the health of sport than the crises of meaning at the heart of the arts.

Football could be viewed as a very interesting integrated community development model – toddlers drawn to it from isolated houses in problem suburbs and put into teams, with coaches and mentors, a sense of belonging, colours, songs, discipline, volunteering, cake stalls, fitness, alertness, reward, end of season rituals, small shiny sculptures handed out, families who don't know each other bonding over a sausage sizzle. (Sure it has been stolen from the community by some of the world's largest global companies to flog alcohol through association with macho stereotypes of winning, heroism and steroids, and sure it's been infected to its core by the virus of gambling and cheating, but we seem to ignore that.)

Unlike artists, sports elites see themselves as mere heroes, whereas the arts quietly casts its best practitioners as messiahs leading society to a better place. The lingering scent leftover from enlightenment: the arts as a way to a higher self, a better world, a way to bring about change.

The idea that there could be solutions found through cultural activity is a genuinely interesting one. We have to be careful here, because the notion of 'wanting to bring about change' walks on the knife-edge of fanaticism. Roll the title 'Cultural Solutions' around in your mouth and it can reek of finality, of a dying pillow, of brutal change-ism. *Solution* sounds definitive, whereas *culture* is never final. Communities are never static. Answers are mirages. There is no neat utopia.

There is, however, something deep and worth exploring in this enveloping idea of culture, in which all our lives unfold.

Sport, like art, has sometimes been hijacked for social purposes. Sport could be used right now in this way. For instance, why, in the twenty-first century, do other countries agree to play sport against Australia – given our extraordinary expressions of malice and hatred against the most vulnerable in our community? No, not the current poster child of our café-self-flagellation, refugees, let's look closer to home. Right now, forty-six out of every hundred young people in the juvenile justice system are Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander. Where are the boycotts of the Ashes, or of the beautiful game, or AFL? Right now, at the same time as we are locking these young people in wicked proportions, footy scouts are out scouring the country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent, to pluck young gladiators out of obscurity for mass entertainment in beer-soaked arenas.

We lock up these boys to try and reduce crime rates. In this, as in many areas of high social need, punitive and legislative solutions do little more than create industries, waste taxpayers' money, break mothers' hearts, and perpetrate a cultural genocide on a generation. For what? To win scrappy, 'law and order' one-upmanship electoral skirmishes?

The arts have no more responsibility than any other sector to assist with solutions. Could we have a Real Estate Solution, or a Manufacturing Solution. The sports industry already does a lot of good work. All sectors can and do contribute to both problems and solutions.

BUT CULTURE IS worth a second look, because it envelops both problems and solutions. Culture is not a chapter in the story, it is the story, everything else sits within it, as it unfolds, and it is this 'unfolding' process that is so useful to this discussion.

What could 'cultural solutions' possibly be? Perhaps it's those well-designed, inexpensive, layered and effective, creatively infused community development projects – so often the targets for cheap shots for not being 'evidence based', or lacking longitudinal studies, too soft, the good works of bleeding hearts etc. It's all too easy to view complex approaches to complex problems dismissively from the sanctuary of the gated intellectual communities of the cloistered commentariat, their opinion-fingers tapping away after their morning metro swim, doing laps across the perfectly textured crema of their milky flat-white sea. Oh, for a caffeinated great white to leap from the deep dark double-shot depths and, in one gulp turn their Twitter-fingers into useless stumps. Half the country's print media would hit streets empty, screens blank. 'Write your own misplaced opinion here.'

It is right to be suspicious of 'solutions', it is a presumptive word. Solutions are simple and neat. Culture is complex and untidy. Can they work together? The best attempts to work with and in communities, to trigger

positive developments using cultural approaches, are messy, rambling, hard to define, and require real, diligent, personalised, one-on-one, values-in-action work, in the field, by people with integrity.

Culture is always part of the problem as well as the solution. It's a moveable feast of dodgy contradiction and mostly, success won't even look like a solution – not the kind of solution a stats-saint like Don Weatherburn would like anyway. It takes six years to train to become a doctor, it takes a decade to learn to work innovatively in a hard social and cultural context, on the job, and by then you're burnt out and bitter as a lemon. I know I am, thirty years on.

THE EARLY BIG hART performance in Parliament House could have been defined as a cultural solution, but not because we were using 'the arts' as part of a reformist agenda. Rather, it could have been defined that way because it was working as part of a complex system. We were trying to understand, and speak to the many different layers of our audience – the political dramaturgy as well as the theatrical one. The prime minister only played a small part in this long and complex cultural project, but these young people who were telling their story, controlled the moment and placed many different aspects of their emerging solution on show, artfully, in a place of power. The complexity was not so much in the content of what was on stage, but in the long-term processes used to create it, and then to place it in front of these multiple audiences. Not one critic, patron, subscriber, agent or arts funding person was in the room or even knew of this very targeted use of high-end performance work for these very specialist audiences, it was a new expression of dramaturgy.

Naively, from then on we claimed Parliament House as our own theatre, and for the rest of Howard's eleven years in office, it was very useful, for many of our agendas, but not all, to be able to write 'Launched by the Prime Minister, The Honourable John Howard MP', when we were struggling to get traction on an issue. It opened doors. No funds had to be slipped into party coffers, no old boy networks used, just the capacity of narrative (told with authenticity by those experiencing the issue) to illuminate and hold the attention of busy people, who mostly want good things to happen from spending the taxpayer's dollar, but didn't know where to find it.

Politicians come and go, but from that exercise we learned many things. We learned about multiple audiences and how to speak to them simultaneously; about avoiding funding ghettos; about how change *unfolds*; about the serious business of assisting change that is happening all the time in difficult social settings; about how the arts are largely irrelevant in Canberra; about how the business end of the public service has hardly heard of a tiny arts agency like the Australia Council; about remaining cleanskin as an organisation; about how many, many of the people working within the public service are trying to bring about solutions to social problems and are working incredibly hard; about how to spot a dud public servant and shut down a meeting; about how to know when you are being fobbed off and to keep that steel-capped iconic artisan shoe in the door; about how public servants rarely get out into the field and how many aspects of the stories they are trying to deal with are new and emerging and almost invisible to them; about how little departmental corporate memory there really is; about how the loudest blowfly buzzwords in grant applications ‘sustainability, capacity building, best practice’, are mostly just boxes in search of ticks, in an infinite loop, vital tips for making ‘experimental, complex, outsider art, with communities’. Gulp, I mean making ‘cultural solutions’.

Perhaps one of the most important things learned early on in Big hART’s life was that on the whole, groups of people get hurt in our community not because we’re a brutal, uncaring society, but because they are invisible. Sure, sometimes people get vilified in story for political and social gain. Sure, we are currently tossing life jackets at toddlers in the water rather than pulling them to safety, and shooting across the bows of boats full of refugees, and intruding into Indonesian waters. . . *whoops, oh is that what a GPS is for?* Sure, we might’ve done the same thing years ago to Vietnamese refugees, but now we love our delicious rice-paper rolls and other introduced delights, and the narrative moves on. Most of the damage we do is when people are invisible and their stories unheard – excluded from the unfolding cultural narrative.

Sometimes stories are the most valuable thing these groups of ‘outsiders’ have left. One person’s story can become a ‘protective story’ for a whole group of citizens, to shine a light on something hidden, and bring it to the attention of many. They can also be valuable more broadly, like a ‘canary

in the coalmine’ to indicate the dangerous moral atmosphere that we may inadvertently permit to build up, like some deadly toxin, because we may have been unaware or blind to an issue. In this context, an authentic story, if mentored and not stolen, if fanned to flame, if made highly visible, can have great currency for those who own it.

We have to be careful here with thoughts of ‘cultural solutions’. These issues and stories are important. They can be volatile and have far-reaching consequences. Culture and the arts subsist in a scarcity culture. Any idea that can potentially attract funding is seen as fair game – whether a company has experience in the area or not. Sponsors require logos, but communities require process and long-term commitment, dexterity, listening, a complex expertise.

Major performing arts companies, for instance – who do a great job of creating seasons of work to sell tickets and help fill hotel beds in our major cities – sometimes raise their gaze and come lumbering towards high-needs communities, jumping in, thinking it is just a question of telling the story that desperately needs to be told. This of course could be a fantastic addition to the national discourse, especially if put together, through a rigorous and careful process, in such a way as to be part of a cultural solution...or not.

AROUND THE GLOBE, this practice of Community Cultural Development – or what we are calling Cultural Solutions – is a rapidly expanding field. It is a deeply engaging and satisfying place to apply a suite of creative skills as an artist, arts worker or producer. It is an approach that looks forward into the twenty-first century, rather than back into the nineteenth, and it needs more attention, more productions, films, impact, distribution, critique, discussion, evaluation and funding. It needs more participation from high-end companies and institutions, and this will involve more learning opportunities.

Communities are global as well as local, and cultural solutions must focus globally as well as locally. Big hART now works across a range of issues and continents and stories. We produce documentaries, digital interactive comics, seminars, online content, short films, concerts, and some theatre – the form follows the fight – the environment, prisons, domestic violence, mental illness, language loss, slavery, first nations, poverty, housing, food quality, honouring the elderly, cosmopolitanism, the value of life. We have to say *no*

to most requests. We say *yes* to projects that burn brightly, that can speak to a broader audience in the community and beyond it. We say *yes* to new projects when narrative and form combine in an iconic way, around invisible stories, in high-needs communities that are begging to be told.

Those first young people we began working with twenty-two years ago taught us a lot. They formed a foundation. On the one hand they were worthless to society in terms of productivity, on the other they were the million-dollar kids. They cost the community a fortune – from the time they were first bashed and came to the attention of various government departments, to the time they were spat from the system, they had triggered millions of extra dollars to be spent on those who worked with them, the programs they joined, the shelters they lived in, the health issues they coped with, the prisons they frequented, the police who collected them, the counsellors who listened to them, the community arts musicians who recorded their shithouse raps and on and on.

At the same time, they saved political arse by being easy targets who gave good media for shock jocks, to while away the long early morning hours on ‘talk-shit’ radio for depressed insomniacs, filling the airwaves between ads for cheap car detailers and outdoor patio detergents. Every few years there is a new crop of these valuable young people, a new generation delivering dollars and entering our communities. They survive on car-park blowjobs for a six-pack in every town and city in the country.

Big hART started working with them in the quiet town of Burnie – nothing ever happened there, ‘there’s no homelessness here,’ the council used to say – yet kids would scull those six-packs under the steps at the town hall to numb the winter cold, and the STDs.

Young people are used and abused by our system in decent Australia, surprise, surprise. Yet I’ve heard judges from childrens’ courts defending these kids. Imploring policymakers to look at them more closely, to understand their stories, to recognise that statistically teenagers are amongst the most law-abiding citizens. They are not insider-traders, white-colour crims, tax cheats, property fraudsters, there are not many perpetrators of domestic violence amongst them. Sure, they sometimes skateboard on footpaths, engage in petty theft, and some random acts of rage. But overwhelmingly

they are the victims of crime, not the perpetrators. The real criminal behaviour comes from those who use them as the poster children for law and order re-election, and to sell newspapers and buy ratings. There is not a lot of moral difference between being fucked over in some deserted carpark, and fucked over on air.

Portrait from *GIRL*: An agoraphobic, obese, highly intelligent, socially isolated, bearded young woman had every reason to feel rejected and angry. She initially began coming to workshops after the other participants had left. She would help with the cleaning up. After a few weeks she started arriving while the workshops were in progress. She would cope by sitting under a table and watching. It became clear that she enjoyed confined spaces and as it turned out, although large, she was extremely flexible. This socially isolated young woman ended up having the main speaking part in a large touring experimental stage production. She would begin the show onstage, from well before the audience entered, inside a seemingly small packing crate, which would burst open later during the show and she would roll out. This confined space seemed to give her confidence and calm her nerves. She went on to contribute in many valuable ways.

IN ROEBOURNE, WHERE Big hART has been working on the Yijala Yala Project for three years, twenty-two of the young people we work with were arrested for nicking a bike at Christmas 2012. The bike shouldn't have been stolen. But which is worse: the structural/policy crime of that authoritarian over-reaction and under-training for jock police, or pinching a pushy? On the one hand in these communities, jail is not such a bad thing, kids quite like it – air-conditioned in the Pilbara heat, regular food, less abuse maybe, perhaps some schooling, scabies gets treated. On the other hand, a perfect place for advanced schooling in crime and crime networks, and cultural dissolution.

One young man from that same group, a repeat offender, was recently sentenced by a judge to Big hART, to make art, music, digital comics and

theatre. To tour, with his elders as part of a performance piece created with his community to national arts festivals, and to make a short documentary of his efforts to bring back to court – sentenced to a cultural solution. Interesting. There were many partners in this strategy, a circle of elders, old Nannas and Aunties, government, big business, other young people, the Australia Council, arts festivals, local organisations, high-end professional artists, producers.

This young man performed the story of his community, straight from stage to policy wonks, politicians, community elders, critics and peers on one of the best stages in the country. He had never experienced a moment of success and appreciation like it. He had never been useful. He had never felt the currency and value of his story, his culture, his knowledge. He had never felt himself being appreciated. He shook the hand of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard. He flirted with her. Boasted...and went home and offended again.

The re-offending is expected – solutions *unfold*, they come after a series of steps back – there's no easy salvation. It's a process coming back from the edge, of despair, of self-harm, of criminality, of addiction, of numbness, of death, of costing the community a fortune – to participating and contributing a fortune.

His peers, friends who hang out on the bottom rung with him as part of the same project, were in Korea recently at an international comic conference, teaching high-achieving Korean kids Photoshop techniques they'd learned in Big hART workshops. High achievers, made possible by complex partnerships between unlikely groups – elders, Woodside, government, arts workers, festivals – and realised by hardcore work on the ground. These are internationally award-winning young people. They also stole a bike.

THIS IS DIFFICULT. There is so much hubris in the community art sector: hotheads mouthing off, renaming failures as successes, avoiding scrutiny, evaluation and critique. So much of the art made under this label is deeply compromised by mediocrity. It is something of a haven for broken artists as much as for broken people participating in a project. And it can be dispiriting.

There are of course, passionately argued reasons why work made through community processes – though it may be poor in quality – should be critiqued in different, more conciliatory ways, how these stories belong to

others beyond the artist and how the process matters. This is mostly bullshit: Worthy, but bullshit. This is just artists failing the community groups they are working with. Bringing an intransigent and blocked creative practice to new settings. Jaded, hard-working community artists can be our own worst enemy. Other areas of the more refined and better-funded arts practice look on rightly with condescending smirks at our efforts.

Yet there are so many unique and important skills in CCD disciplines, new mentoring skills, empathetic skills, authenticity and flexibility, applied art techniques, community diplomacy, lobbying, insights learnt from time spent living in hard-bitten communities, having the capacity to learn from them, ignoring the government pleas to maintain the client/professional relationship and becoming friends. It contains potential new creative languages beyond the jaded offerings and creative slurry often pouring wastefully from mainstream practice – ‘great, yet another young gun taking a shot at a Seagull in a Sydney subsidised theatre and shooting himself in the foot.’ What we need are new influences and disciplines, new commitments to both virtuosity and authenticity. What seems promising is a return to a deeper practice, more centred in the whole of life, well-funded and alongside the well-established and worthwhile models of art-making based on commodity, manufacturing and tourism.

Community arts practice is frequently encountering communities with very serious survival issues, a very low skills-base, and is attempting to achieve very big goals for multiple stakeholders, with tiny amounts of money and very little infrastructure. The arts disciplines needed are intensely difficult. They require thousands of hours of practice, and a deep pool of ‘inter- and intrapersonal skills’ to work in contexts where these serious and sometimes dangerous issues are played out. We often build in failure to the structures of this practice.

In this context, artists working in communities often feel defensive, behave myopically and sprout dogma. People are often so burnt out and struggling with such important issues that new approaches fall on deaf ears. Ranks close. At national regional arts conferences there is an intense interest in drinking, but less interest in high-end professional development, it’s hangovers and then heads down just trying to survive.

The idea of community should be inherently collegiate and yet it is such a fraught practice, defined by scarcity, defence and dogma, and the ‘right way’ of doing the work, even if that is badly. This intense and taxing creative discipline and the resulting practice is hardly even recognised as more than a sheltered workshop for artists who don’t cut it in the mainstream. Why would anyone want to work in this sector? Why would governments fund it? Yet, more and more it is coming into focus – cultural solutions are flexible, effective and cheap.

STORY, WHEN CREATED with outsiders in our society, and told well with a deep authenticity, and placed in the right forums, can be a powerful tool for triggering new thinking. Unique benefits can be found in both the process of making, and the experience of consuming the story. If the process is deep, long, and partnership-based; if the artistry is strong; the work made with such finesse and authenticity that a shift, an illumination, an understanding is created in key audiences – portfolios, electorates, media, opinion leaders – then new, once hidden stories can be released into the narratives around which individuals, communities and the nation form. It may even be plausible to talk of cultural solutions. This has been Big hART’s decades-long exploration and experiment and a times failure.

Big hART was running a large project across regional NSW in 2000. As premier Bob Carr was to be in Armidale he agreed to launch a film strategy as part of the project. He was invited to participate in filming part of the story by disadvantaged young people as ‘an extra’ in a pub, having a beer, with well-known actress Deborah Mailman tarted up behind the bar. Ironically, Bob Carr isn’t a drinker, but he has a sense of humour and he agreed. There was much running around from his staffers and strict instructions about how little time he’d have and how carefully it had to roll out. In the end the premier loved the young people in the camera crew and stayed for many takes, leaving late and in a fine mood, and who knows, perhaps even slightly pissed.

As a result, some months later, he flew to Adelaide to see a large and unusual performance piece staged in a car park that included ‘his film’ as part of Robyn Archer’s Adelaide Festival. (Although admittedly he was noticed nodding off at one point – hopefully the mark of a busy man, not bad art.)

Big hART then requested a meeting with him to present a proposal for cross-departmental, multi-year core funding – something that had never happened. Humble organisations like ours do not usually get anywhere near busy premiers. Our pitch, a combination of public service efficiency, shared target groups and cost-saving solutions, seemed to catch his slightly ‘Aspergerish eye’. And so with a boardroom full of unnerved public servants and advisors, the highly rehearsed presentation commenced – initially, and somewhat unexpectedly with the premier and his chief of staff speaking to each other in German – I think about Mahler – although it could’ve been *‘How the hell are we going to get rid of these pesky artists without giving them cash?’* *‘Well I’m not sure Bob, perhaps you could try paying less attention to these so-called cultural solutions, and leave this work to those Elite NGO contractors who so generously attend our fundraising dinners.’* I sat there looking slightly embarrassed. About three minutes into my erudite presentation the premier stood up and said something like, ‘Hmm, an efficient public service, cross-portfolio co-operation? Outrageously audacious. I’ll leave you with these gentlemen. I want this to happen.’

In twenty-two years of practice this has proved Big hART’s most productive and innovative funding model. It has generated more than three dollars for every one provided by the state government for over a decade for disadvantaged communities. It stemmed from exploring simultaneous narratives and including different kinds of audiences in a project – and thinking dramaturgically about how often those in public positions long for contact with something real. Often when they see a solution in action, they see value for money, and they respond. (And yes, evaluations, stats, massaging the relationship are all part of the equation.)

ONE OF THE basic principles of Big hART’s work is that a person’s story can act as a protective mechanism, or a restraint from the clumsy damage society can unwittingly inflict on some groups through a lack of understanding. For instance, if young people know more of the story of older people in a small country town, older people are likely to feel an increased sense of safety and protection. Most people are very tolerant and supportive of their neighbours when there is shared story or circumstance – this is often experienced

in times of natural disaster, when people are involved in a common ‘story’ and have a common set of tasks to achieve.

A Big hART project in Tasmania called *This Is Living* worked in four rural towns across the state for a year in the lead up to the Ten Days on the Island festival, with four hundred people contributing to the process. It was designed to train young people in literacy and communication skills, to capture the stories of older people in the towns, document them and to value their contribution to society. These older people are often invisible to the young. The symbolic pairing became skateboarders and the elderly. Initially this seemed like an uneasy combination of opposites, however by the end of the process, four large shows were staged and at the end of the performances older members of the community – some using walking frames – were being thrown aloft by skanky young people in a mosh pit during the credits, to some metal number. A new visibility had been created between groups, and with it came an increased sense of protection and security.

The more pressing the issue, the deeper the invisibility – and therefore the more people’s stories can be manipulated by others – the more critical it is for important stories to be broadly and deeply seen, heard or experienced beyond theatre and arts circles, so as to help bring the protection of narrative visibility. These protective processes can be supercharged by knowing the different audiences for your work, using the media, involving decision-makers, softening key hearts, wedging a response from people and this requires being strategic in the dissemination of story. This is a form of social impact, and when trying to scale up cultural solutions through these projects from local to global, stronger impact requires its own producer.

Nations feel as though they are lasting entities, but they are transient, and ephemeral, a series of ‘narrations’. A set of ideas wrapped up in a story that comes from the past, rewritten in the present as a way of imagining what the future may be. There are dominant stories – you see them in all their glory on Australia Day. There are stories that no longer have currency and stories that are not really that big or important but are growing in stature – think Gallipoli. There are stories that are deliberately excluded – the way we dishonour our elderly and let them languish in dispiriting nursing homes because we are too scared to face our own mortality.

And there are these invisible stories. This is where Big hART focuses its work.

The discussion of all these unfolding stories happens in a multitude of forums and forms, through song, science, dance, theology, media, sport, arts, with all kinds of different entry points, for different ages, literacy and demographics. Edward Said calls this *discussion culture*. It is the essence of each of our waking hours; whether we contemplate it or not, we are all involved in this story-making. The narrative litmus test for the nation's health is the empathy and inclusivity of its self-narration. And it is here that community cultural development has its place.

EMPATHY IS DIFFERENT to sympathy. From the Greek *empathia* (in) and *pathos* (feeling), empathy is deep, to enter into the life of another. Sympathy, from the Greek *sympathia* (together with) and *pathos*, is not so deep. It is still valuable, but it is experienced alongside, rather than empathy, which enters into the experience. This empathetic response, of including others in our narrative, can help end invisibility and provide protection for those in the community who have found themselves excluded.

No community is ever static; rather, they are developing all the time. The storyteller using all media – music, text, kinetic, digital – will never be out of work in this ever-changing context. That is not to say that somehow art is always about portraits of people and situations. Story in this context is the unwrapping of an idea. Revealing the unknown in the previously known, the poetics of it, the sublime, the non-linear, the synergies as well as the analysis.

Big hART's large-scale project, *Knot@HOME*, examined homelessness in many different forms through the eyes of about two hundred people. There were a number of outputs ranging from festival performances to an eight-part television series and a website. Near the conclusion of the project, the hybrid-media performance piece involving fifteen young people was invited to the Great Hall in Parliament House to perform as the centrepiece of a national awards ceremony for Centrelink. The award recipients were the best-performing desk workers, who may have taken a large number of young people off benefits because they breached the conditions of their welfare payment. Here, then, was the opportunity for some of the most disengaged young people

in the country to describe how they became homeless, unemployed, out of school, welfare dependent and frequently breached – to workers, policymakers, ministerial advisers and the relevant minister, in ways that were highly polished, evocative and supported by strong arts resources.

As the evening unfolded and the young people performed, first the chatter quietened, the cutlery stilled, then pin-drop silence came over Great Hall for forty minutes – broken only by the sound of tears from the audience of award winners, followed by a standing ovation. This then created the opportunity for an incisive six-minute policy statement from Big hART that clearly articulated the predicament faced by these young people and the cost to government. (This policy statement was carefully prepared through mentoring with public servant friends.)

The result was an opportunity to meet the minister and discuss the invisibility of this client group and the structural issues that usually prevented them changing their trajectory.

The stories of these young people, in this context, were as valuable as that of the \$10,000-a-day political lobbyist, which was what they were delivering – policy lobbying of the highest order. The years of work across a vast geography, with a large group of people in a range of communities formed the iceberg of this cultural solution – the performance piece was the tantalising tip.

When these stories are illuminated well, and perhaps placed in ‘high value’ forums, and when they are created in collaboration with gifted artists, they are highly valued and the response can be profound, and appreciation cathartically expressed.

These stories are ‘expressions of self’, and one of the strong foundations of Big hART’s work is returning an audience’s appreciation of this, directly to those who are experiencing the issues, and who have expressed it through their story. This in turn can create intense moments that trigger strong self-appraisal and often new choices about who they are in the face of the issues they have experienced; their new found visibility, a sense of now being included and having a worthwhile contribution to make. If this process is mentored, these participants in Big hART projects will often begin to make different choices about changing their social trajectory.

This is not some therapeutic magic pill, it is, I think, a direct and natural consequence. It is harnessing one of those moments in life when we instinctively have permission to re-evaluate aspects of our identity. This re-evaluation can in turn be expressed by making different decisions about the direction our lives are heading.

COMPLEX PROBLEMS REQUIRE complex layered solutions. This can sound too simple. In reality, the processes required to bring multi-layered solutions to help change the complex problems faced by many people in our community will almost always take many years. They will demand relationships with key workers with integrity, they will require low ratios of workers with participants, and they will involve a partnering of the many organisations delivering the services to the various areas of need the individual is facing.

Because Big hART was set up to look at issues of disadvantage and the invisibility that often accompanies it, the participants sharing in these projects are most often experiencing the effects of many different levels of disadvantage and they are facing complex problems. These complex problems require complex layered solutions – many of the layers are not institutional, but familial and individual.

It is very difficult for politicians and governments to have a conversation with the electorate about complexity and so, paradoxically, the most complex solutions are usually addressed in the most simplistic terms. Victims are blamed for the problems that plague them. They are used and punished in rhetoric and this makes the problems they face more acute. They are then blamed more. In response problems seem intractable, money is wasted on one-dimensional approaches and government calls for ‘evidence-based solutions’. The terms of reference are defined too narrowly and are risk averse so as to avoid public criticism of the minister, and the spiral downward continues. The suggested solutions are again more simplistic, and the problems perpetuate.

Those that have entered high office and have a responsibility to protect the vulnerable in the community, are often using vulnerable people as fodder. It is these kinds of complex problems where Big hART traditionally

experiments with approaches that honour that complexity. These projects unapologetically use ‘culture’ as their foundation, because it is one area where complexity is the norm. Culture embraces the many layers of complexity in the way individuals, families, communities and societies operate. Therefore it is a solid starting point for talking about and confronting these kinds of layered problems. The problem is, when arts institutions and artists look at contributing to cultural solutions, they are more likely to be thinking ‘cultural content’ rather than ‘cultural processes,’ because content is what we do.

Governments and state agencies are suspicious of the ‘soft’ cultural approach, because they are used to thinking in ‘hard’ punitive or legislative terms. The legislative response – although important – is a ‘stick’. The cultural response is more of a ‘carrot’. It can create desire. It can lure people to new places. It can slowly shift the individual as well as the community to create longer-term sustainable change. However, the cultural response to complex issues faced by our community requires other important elements such as time. And time is the enemy of governments focused on electoral and media cycles.

The complexity of these layered projects – designed to respond to complex layers of disadvantage – means that complex projects will need to operate on much longer timeframes than funding bodies expect. Because of the dumbed down delivery of social programs to fit both political rhetoric and siloed government departmental approaches, projects will be required to define how they will be delivered, acquitted and measured in weeks, when years would be a more likely indicator of possible success.

For years this has put workers in these cultural and social sectors at risk, by chronically underfunding projects – dangerous projects, where the needs, and the risks of workers being harmed are high. These agencies are exposing their ministers to potential criticism, because of the naivety of siloed funding approaches, timeframes and cycles. It will be interesting to see if this is addressed in the next phase of the Australia Council’s life, or whether it will be more of the same cobbled-together policy.

In response, to deliver these complex projects with integrity in the field, it becomes necessary to go ‘around’ governments. To use the silos to advantage to lengthen the possible delivery time by establishing multiple funding partners, coming on line sequentially, and achieving interrelated goals in one

overall project. This is actually closer to how government should operate. However, it is almost impossible to overcome the silos, and get departments to talk to each other to achieve it. Organisations have to disguise many sequential funding arrangements and tread the fine line between ‘sustainability’ (tick) and ‘double-dipping’ (cross).

Experience in the field indicates that many government projects contribute in a negative way to the issues they are trying to fix because of these two simple things – siloed approaches to funding complex issues, and stupidly short timeframes – twenty-six weeks, or forty-two.

Multiple contracts require multiple reports. Four funding partners can mean sixteen reports a year, each with a different language and focus, for different departments. Organisations in the field are aware of this but say little, rolling their eyes as they smile compliantly and oblige at the behest of naive young public servants who have never been in the field.

Big hART’s approach to high-need community cultural development projects is that they have to operate on four levels: with individuals experiencing the issue; within the community in which they live; with policymakers across different levels of government; and with key arts infrastructure and fora.

This inevitably increases the staff numbers and the timeframes needed for the project to be effective. Our experience indicates the ideal is one staff member to every four participants involved in hardcore personal and community change, and working for a minimum of three years. No department is going to fund that. Funding will be offered at minimal levels and as a result the wellbeing of workers and participants will be endangered. As a result, organisations trick funding bodies into layered partnerships, shuffle the money, and hope public servants are either too busy to notice, or have been around long enough to know the truth of the situation out in the field.

BIG HART IS an arts company and the work being made in and with these community groups and individuals must stand on its own merits in the cultural context, or the whole thing is just the emperor’s new social work. It needs to find its own authentic language and dramaturgy for it to be noticed and given the attention good art attracts and deserves. Without this authentic

audience response, the rest of the project may well contribute positively, but the art will be part of the problem, eliciting a patronising response that continues to prop up the ghetto of invisibility for the groups involved.

Twenty-two years on, Big hART remains an anomaly, bending with the winds and whims of arts language and administrative fads – some good, some not so. Cultural policy and funding at a state and federal level in Australia began its love affair with administration, management, risk aversion and structural self-preservation when Big hART was focusing its funding strategies away from the cultural sector. It has been amusing to watch as the language of arts administration came to resemble that of manufacturing... before manufacturing went offshore. Perhaps cultural manufacturing will follow. Wait a second, what is it we are importing in with most of our festivals again, where did I put that Sydney Festival brochure...?

Like naughty children, small arts organisations are lectured about how they should be administered, with governance and accountability the buzzwords. There's been little creative thinking involved as the arts push themselves into an 'industry' mould in the hope of gaining some funding clout with governments obsessed with old-fashioned notions of productivity. Obsessive associations are pushed between 'art' and 'activities' that can legitimise it – box office, tourism, number of hotel beds sold, education, health and wellbeing...hmm, cultural solutions – solutions, now there's a word government will like.

When working in this area, everyone is an expert. Be careful who you listen to. When we first started, Big hART was fortunate to meet a very elderly semi-retired local lawyer who offered to do the work pro bono to set us up. He was beautifully Dickensian, his name was Crisp and he was wizened, skinny, with a leathery face, suited in double-breasted navy pinstripe, with enormous cabbage ears and deaf as a post. A swish of his thin silver hair and a cloud of dandruff would waft across the room. Mr Crisp yelled with the rasping whisper of a man who knew each gasp had been assigned a number. But he was cheap and, as it turned out, wise. He agreed to do the legal work for us on three conditions: first, our board would be as small as possible; second, it would meet as infrequently as was legal; and third, our constitution was to be minimal, and we had to promise never to read it.

Big hART finalised its constitution and incorporation early in 1996, along the lines he required and we have been grateful ever since.

We are now in a phase where all and sundry are being asked to knock at the philanthropic door and the corporate door, more than the government door...one hand out, the other hand knocking. Let the market work out the solutions. A creative industry think tank – ‘What about...some well-known artists, working (briefly) in a prison with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees... I know, doing Shakespeare. Sponsored by a European car manufacturer... Are there market synergies there?’ Bingo, sponsor.

If we really think this is the model for the way forward in cultural solutions, let’s pop on a pinnie, start singing ‘Amazing Grace’ and march backwards into the nineteenth century.

Scott Rankin is the creative director of Big hART. He writes and directs large-scale, long-term projects in diverse social settings – currently in the Pilbara, Tasmania, NSW, ACT, NT, SA, Rotterdam and the UK. Scott and his collaborators continue to win national and international awards and Big hART is cited as an exemplar for projects including *Namatjira*, *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, *Hipbone Sticking Out*, *Neomad*, *Stickybricks*, *Museum of the Long Weekend* and *The Blue Angel Project*. His essay ‘Tasmanian Utopias’ featured in *Griffith REVIEW* 39.