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Introduction

This essay explores the role of culture, art and community in our lives. It also examines the making of Australian theatre. What is it? What does it mean? How does it relate to artists, audiences and the public in general? What effect does our community of artists have on who we are as Australians and the culture of our place? It also examines the structural composition of artistic management, as we endeavour to make Australian art in a disparate and complex landscape, striving to make sense of the changes currently taking place in regional and global communities.

What is the culture of our place, of our backyard? How is Brisbane different from Melbourne and why is Melbourne different from Sydney? We are a diverse nation living in very diverse places and we make art, often in spite of where we live, that expresses the culture of our place. Reflecting ourselves, seeing how we are defined by where we come from, is one of the great joys of making art.

If it's not too much of a contradiction in terms, I believe that making an Australian theatre—theatre in

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the broadest sense, that is—has been almost by design a process of accidental anarchy. Historically, from the beginnings of the colony, it has been a larrikin anti-establishment form of expression generated by its place and local culture. From that time to the present—via Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and, much more recently, the Brisbane Festival production of David Malouf’s *Johnno*—we have responded to work which is about us, about who we are and where we live.

My work with Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA), then with the Queensland Music Festival (QMF) and last year with Brisbane Festival has led me, over the past fifteen years, on a journey of discovery, learning more and more about the strong links that bind people to ‘their places’. Every town and city, even every suburb, I have found, has not only its own history, but also its own individual culture. The opportunity to create work which reflects a local culture, the culture of particular places, has been a privilege and a most fascinating experience.

That journey began in December 1993, when at NORPA I adapted Peter Weir’s film of *The Cars that Ate Paris* as a large-scale, outdoor musical; and it succeeded because it reflected the feral culture which was so powerful around Lismore and Byron Bay at the time. It was staged against the wall of Lismore city hall and the street outside, where I directed stock cars and Mad-Max buggies to drive around the closed-off street. Other musicals followed. A decade later *Bob Cat Magic* and *Bob Cat Dancing* in Mt Isa celebrated the heavy machinery culture of that place, as did the

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heritage elements of *Charters Towers—The Musical*. These three pieces have been very successful with their audiences for the Queensland Music Festival.

The depth of local knowledge held by so many people has astonished me when putting together the program for Brisbane Festival 2006. Each suburb has its historical society and its stories of place. The outcome of this research contributed a surprisingly large body of work from a variety of communities. We made theatre pieces about the cultures of all those individual suburbs, about those places and the people who choose to live there.

The Brisbane suburb of Coorparoo has a skate park; used by skaters from all over Brisbane, it is well known throughout Australia as a meeting place for competitive skateboarders. After getting a feel for the suburb, talking with the local councillor and observing the activity in this terrific skate park, I decided to call our show *Coorparoo Sk8*. As a basis we used a script by playwright Janis Balodis, which had been performed by NORPA in 1999. *Coorparoo Sk8* employed the language and the form of hip hop, the physicality of break-dance, and the sounds of street culture.

Coorparoo Sk8 is the story of three aliens who land in Coorparoo in search of the quintessential Aussie. It is all about outsiders, people who don't quite fit the common notion or the system. Composer Shenton Gregory's score reflected the skate culture of the local suburban streets and included just about everything—rockabilly, reggae, stadium rock, punk, ska—except classical music. With a live band playing on an enormous two-level stage shaped like a ghetto