

BEMAC 1996 PRESIDENT'S REPORT – Mark Dunbar

'The most important form of arts subsidy in this country, at the base level, is the Department of Social Security. Private sponsorship comes from the taxi companies and restaurants that employ artists between projects. It is a ludicrously inadequate way of nurturing talent and developing new work. No great culture can grow in such barren soil but, given that we seem to have abandoned any aim to become a great culture, then we should at least try to keep a few flowers growing.'

John McCallum, The Australian 11/11/1996

It is rare indeed amongst the hype of the arts and entertainment pages to read such a succinctly accurate description of the realities of artistic production in Australia today. The average salary of arts practitioners is below \$15,000 per annum, and much of that comes from the DSS. Approximately 90% of actors are unemployed at any one time. Very few artists will ever experience permanent employment.

For the newly arrived migrant musician the choices are clear enough. Forget practicing your profession and get a real job, (if you can) in a factory or on a bus. Of course this is Australia's loss also. Our notions of diversity rest almost entirely on the ability of communities to develop modes of expression here in Australia. Because Australia largely prohibits artists from migrant communities from earning a living from their practice, it is little wonder our notions of diversity so easily retreat into tokenism, or something worse, (as witnessed in the recent upsurge of racism in Australia).

BEMAC is one small organisation that exists among the larger Australian arts industry.

It is an organisation that seeks to foster and develop a culturally diverse arts practice. It is an organisation that more often than not is the first point of contact for newly arrived artists seeking to explore the possibilities of continuing their profession here in Australia. It is an organisation with which a small, but growing group of freelance artists working within a culturally diverse aesthetic, seek to develop ideas and work professionally. It is a very important organisation combatting tokenism and racism.

1996 has been a crucial year for BEMAC. It has been a year in which we have sought to define our core business through our strategic plan. We identified two crucial areas of work. The first is the professional development of artists working within a culturally diverse arts practice. The second is the deepening of links with Brisbane's migrant communities through community cultural development projects. These have been the twin planks upon which the 1997 program has been constructed. Time and again when reading the draft strategic plan these two notions inform the argument. We feel proud that we have been able to develop a program that encourages artists to work and recognises the value of that work.

In 1996 BEMAC began an overhaul of its internal decision making structures. There are many factors that limit the ability of migrant artists to access organisations like our own. Factors such as language, economics, history and even location make it imperative that we get it right when we are approached. There might not be a second chance. We believe open and clear decision making structures are the most effective way an organisation like ours can both service existing artists and remain accessible to new practitioners. It is imperative that artists feel they can get professional support for their work at BEMAC. It must be clear both what work we want to support and how an idea progresses through an organisation. Much of our work this year has begun to develop strategies and structures that facilitate this clarity and openness. Our review of our human resources in 1996 resulted in the creation both an artist development officer and a community cultural development officer. Both these positions aim to inform and clarify BEMAC's objectives among our client groups. We have established structures within BEMAC that we hope will build a more decentralised and democratic decision making framework. The most important of these are the conflict of interest working party, the members and artists' forum, and the programming subcommittee. There is plenty of work still to be done in this area in the coming year, but we believe we have established a sound foundation upon which to build our commitment to an open and transparent decision-making structure.

The progress we have made in 1996 was built upon the very sound financial and management base we inherited. Sound financial management has also been one of the keys to the successful implementation of our program this year. It is especially pleasing that Arts Queensland, our major funding body, recognised our vision and our good management with an increase of \$13,000 for 1997 in a climate of increasing uncertainty for arts organisations.

I would like to thank the members of BEMAC who have demonstrated enormous support for the organisation in 1996. I would like to thank Libby and the staff who really are the bones upon which good artistic work can be hung. Finally, I would like to thank my committee, who we should remember give their time, energy and expertise voluntarily because they believe in BEMAC, its vision and the work it does.

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In many ways BEMAC does the work of two distinct organisations. It functions as both a production house and a resource centre. In arts organisations of our size this is highly unusual. It creates tensions and contradictions in our work, while placing considerable strain on paid staff and unpaid committee members.

What is a production house? This is an organisation that primarily employs artists to create work. What is a resource organisation? When an area of the arts is viable enough to consistently employ a body of artists working within a

similar aesthetic, inevitably these artists see the logic of forming an organisation to support their work. Queensland Community Arts Network (QCAN) is a good example.

What do resource organisations do? They service the needs of their artists. They lobby on their behalf, they assist in generating funding, they create databases, and they create forums for communication, exchange of ideas and skills development. The bedrock of all successful resource organisations is a significant group of artists that can reasonably expect to gain employment within their chosen field.

QCAN exists because there is a significant group of employed artists working within a community cultural development context. This is the case because there is a federal arts funding body entirely devoted to supporting community arts through the allocation of millions of dollars. This is the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council.

Artists working within the area of cultural diversity are not so lucky. There is no Cultural Diversity Fund directly supporting these artists and their work. The resulting marginalisation of cultural diversity has placed organisations like ours under enormous strain over the years and raises questions about our future.

Is it wise to continue to function as a production house and a resource organisation? If not, should we give priority to one aspect of these two distinct functions?

Within BEMAC there has been considerable circling of this debate over the last three years. As we have defined our core business and our client group and as our financial position has tightened, the contradictions between the two areas of work become more acute.

The World Music Café is a good example with which to illustrate these contradictions. On the one hand, the Café is our most enduring production house platform. Most people know about BEMAC through the Café. It also takes up considerable organisational resources to run the Café. However, for artists seeking employment to sustain their work, the Café is one of the least useful structures in which to find substantial employment. It would be unusual for any single artist to receive more than three engagements a year earning a total of \$500 from these performances. This is an insignificant amount of anyone's annual income.

Yet our strategic plan argues that to promote a culturally diverse arts industry we need to support employment of artists to create their work. Therefore the contradiction is that we devote considerable time and energy producing the Café, which is a very inefficient means of income generation for artists. The Café does employ a lot of artists, but there is a significant difference between 16 weeks full-time work on a project and a number of one-off performances at the Café. The former provides a platform for building an arts-related career, the latter forces artists inevitably to seek work outside the industry to survive.

So who are we employing and why? Does the Café significantly improve the lot of those artists working within a culturally diverse context?

I don't think so. Yet the Café is our high profile event, and that is the dilemma. Not only do we function as a production house and resource centre, but also much of our production house work is marginal to a lot of our primary client group.

Should we then move towards being a resource centre and end our 'production house' activities?

As mentioned earlier, successful resource organisations are built around a body of professional artists who can expect to gain substantial employment in their field. Their artistic work is their primary professional activity, their means of making a living.

If we are to focus on our resource centre activities, that decision should come from the artists with an established career within a culturally diverse aesthetic. The problem is that there are not many of them, and most are struggling merely to create work consistently.

And that's the rub. Cultural diversity as an aesthetic is still in its infancy as a legitimate artistic pursuit in 1998. I would estimate that there are fewer than twenty people in Brisbane who are presently attempting to build a career in the arts working within a culturally diverse (non-commercial) framework. They are funded sporadically and across all the different 'legitimate' categories funding bodies create, accept and perpetuate. Most of these artists would earn less than \$15,000 per year from their artistic work. Most would grapple daily with a sense of isolation from the mainstream. Many are the children of migrants to this country. Few would argue that these are the people BEMAC should primarily seek to support.

In fact, this small group of people I believe should be our absolute first priority. If we are to build a culturally diverse aesthetic we must support the few artists brave enough to attempt to etch out a living in that area. They are our primary client group!

How do we best support this group of artists? The key word at this stage is employment. I believe we will best contribute to building a culturally diverse aesthetic by assisting in providing employment. In other words, by maximising the amount of money we allocate to creating work.

As I am retiring as president this year, I would like to thank BEMAC members and staff for their support. I would especially like to express my gratitude to those people who have served beside me on the management committee over the past three years.