Building audiences for Indigenous theatre: A case study of Kooemba Jdarra

Jennifer Radbourne
Queensland University of Technology

Janet Campbell
Marketing UP

Vera Ding
formerly Kooemba Jdarra

Keywords Indigenous theatre, audience development, market research, positioning.

Abstract This paper uses audience research data to examine the positioning of Indigenous theatre in the Australian theatre environment. Kooemba Jdarra is an Aboriginal theatre company in Brisbane, Australia, with a distinguished history of developing Aboriginal artists, writers and directors. However, it has struggled to maintain its positioning because of the perceived risks of participation by audiences who prefer to see Indigenous theatre within the program of the mainstream state theatre company. The paper concludes with strategies for decreasing risk for audiences and for greater advocacy by the company in positioning itself in the mainstream Australia theatre environment.

Biographies Associate Professor Jennifer Radbourne coordinates the arts management program at the Queensland University of Technology. Jennifer has a number of research publications in arts management and arts marketing, consults to the creative industries, and has held state, national and international directorships of arts boards.

Janet Campbell is Principal of Marketing UP and consults in non-profit and government marketing strategy. She also teaches arts and non-profit marketing for the Queensland University of Technology. Janet has an MBA from the University of Queensland.

Vera Ding worked as a professional actor in the UK before moving to Australia. She was the former manager of Kooemba Jdarra and is now the Manager, Program Operations at Arts Queensland. Vera holds a Masters in Arts and Entertainment

Introduction

Several factors impact on the development of non-profit performing arts organisations in Australia, including declining subvention for the arts, the discriminating demands of audiences for the performing arts, and a lack of marketing expertise in small performing arts organisations. The problem becomes critical when the organisation is an Indigenous performing arts company competing against large, financially well-supported state companies with strong mainstream audience appeal, whose work does not challenge Australian sensitivity to reconciliation and social justice. Australian performing arts organisations have, like most artists and arts and cultural organisations in this country, enjoyed government support at federal, state and local
levels for over forty years. This subvention has been steadily declining as governments push for more enterprising and sustainable activity by the arts organisations. At the same time the cultural consumer now wants more information and involvement in order to make the decision to become a patron of a theatre’s performances. Indigenous performing arts companies struggle to overcome a lack of marketing and business skills, and the ignorance and prejudice of potential audiences. They also struggle to balance the integrity of their rich culture with its exploitation for tourism and Australia’s quest for a national identity.

Primary research in 2002 and 2003 showed that potential audiences for Kooemba Jdarra, an Indigenous performing arts company in Brisbane, Australia, are mainstream theatre patrons, not a niche segment wanting niche Indigenous arts experiences. The company should not be viewed as a niche company, but as serving a national audience, and recognised by governments, sponsors and audiences as such. This paper hypothesises that Kooemba Jdarra can best serve contemporary audiences if Aboriginal or Indigenous theatre is positioned in the mainstream of theatre.

Background

Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company is dedicated to developing and producing contemporary performances that present the stories of Indigenous Australians throughout Australia and internationally. Since its incorporation in 1993 in Brisbane, the company has maintained a strong commitment to professionalism and excellence in the arts. It is a not-for-profit organisation receiving funding from federal, state and local funding bodies.

From its initial community origins, the company has evolved into a professional theatre company known for producing high-quality contemporary Indigenous theatre. In 2001 Kooemba Jdarra relocated to the new Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts and signified the development of a new corporate image and branding strategy. Kooemba Jdarra is now viewed as a major contributor to the wealth and importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts both in Queensland and nationally.

The core vision of Kooemba Jdarra’s artistic program is Contemporary Indigenous Theatre, resonating the uniqueness of the Indigenous Australian voice and culture. It is this vision which has seen the company produce over 20 new Indigenous Australian works, develop over 100 new Indigenous artists and tour nationally and internationally. Kooemba Jdarra is distinguished from other theatre companies by strong grass-roots support from the Indigenous community. Indigenous Australians own the company, they provide the voice. If the company does not have the respect, recognition and support of the Aboriginal community, it ceases to have a mandate for its existence. ‘Kooemba Jdarra provides an avenue for the continuity of indigenous communities’ storytelling traditions. The raw material of knowledge and culture (content) is transformed into a theatrical experience’ (Keane and Hartley 2001: 64). Kooemba Jdarra is engaged in developing a catalogue of new Indigenous texts, supported by documentation of the Indigenous performing arts industry.

The founding director, Wesley Enoch, held a strategic vision that it was possible to convince audiences that Aboriginal culture is not a museum piece…and that a broader community can learn from the Aboriginal perspective which might even find a new way theatrically (Radbourne in Rentschler 1999:167). This was supported by Katherine Brisbane, the Australian theatre critic, who wrote:

Aborigines will soon emerge as our culture’s greatest asset, and the theatre ignores this at its peril...The real strength behind the work of our Aboriginal artists is not polemic, nor the scars our nation has inflicted. It is the life force; the irrepressible humour, the capacity to survive (Brisbane 1994:12).
Despite this media acknowledgement and community support, Kooemba Jdarra was attracting enthusiastic but moderate audiences from all sectors of the wider community. There was inadequate recognition and understanding of Indigenous theatre in Australia by audiences and by funding bodies. In ‘mid-1995, the company was attracting a regular audience of only about 1000 people. It was not reaching a broad audience’ (Radbourne 1999:170). By 2001 the audience level for Kooemba Jdarra’s productions had risen to 1600 (Australia Council Statistical Acquittal Information). The perception in the company was that prior to 2000, this area of growth was to be found largely within the Indigenous community. However, lack of any significant research meant that there was no accurate information with which to qualify this perception.

A group of postgraduate arts management students from the Queensland University of Technology researched audience development for Kooemba Jdarra in 1995. These students undertook primary research in order to develop a marketing plan for the company. The study was linear and took into account environmental, cultural and organisational analysis, which in turn produced a set of marketing objectives for the company, together with an action plan. This marketing plan was a positive step forward because it identified a strong potential audience for the company. It was, however, ineffective because the financial and human resources required to implement the action plans were not available at that time.

By November 2000, Kooemba Jdarra made a major change to its strategic plan, and decided to reduce its program output in order to fund the employment of a part-time marketing manager. From March 2001 the company conducted exit surveys for all productions, as a rudimentary means of tracking and measuring audience composition and factors which provoked attendance at a production. This information provided the first real attempt at direct quantitative and qualitative research on audience development for contemporary Indigenous theatre prior to the more substantive research undertaken in 2002 and 2003, which is discussed in this paper.

A study carried out by the Creative Industries Research and Application Centre at QUT and the Brisbane City Council into the status of Indigenous creative industries in Brisbane determined that ‘Kooemba Jdarra is still in the early part of consolidating its identity and the role it plays in the national Indigenous and artistic community. The company sees itself as a significant influence on the evolution of mainstream Australian culture through the performing arts’ (Keane and Hartley 2001:63).

**Arts Marketing**

Much of the literature in arts marketing focuses on understanding the arts product and matching it with identified audience segments (Kotler and Scheff 1997; Kolb 2000; Hill; O’Sullivan & O’Sullivan 1995). However these are not the key factors for audience development in an Indigenous performing arts company. Bell’s 1997 research report on the Queensland Indigenous cultural industry concluded that ‘Contemporary Indigenous artforms are dynamic and are integral to the performance arts of mainstream Australia’ (Bell 1997: 54). The key issue in marketing Indigenous performing arts is positioning in the mainstream of both the industry and the audience. This is frustrated by industry fragmentation and the threat of substitutes, alongside reducing the consumers’ psychological, social and experience risks. ‘An industry is said to be fragmented if competitors are small yet numerous, if barriers blocking their entry into the industry are weak, and if buyers or suppliers have control over companies within the industry ‘(Colbert 2001: 64). The performing arts in Australia is a fragmented industry with many small company start-ups, artists working with passion and low wages to survive, and dependence on government funding acting as a supplier control.

There are currently in Australia two Indigenous full-time theatre companies in Perth and Brisbane, and a part-time company in Melbourne. They are dependent on funding support from government for their development and the maintenance of cultural ownership of culture, songs, dance, music and stories presented from an Indigenous perspective.
Mainstream theatre companies with experienced marketing departments are able to research and satisfy audience needs and values, and build marketing campaigns to ensure loyalty and high levels of audience satisfaction. However, ‘Market solutions will do nothing to address...problems of diversity and survival of art forms without large markets (DiMaggio 1986 in Chong 2002: 96). Consumer risk is most likely the major barrier in attracting audiences to Indigenous theatre. Price, promotion and place strategies can be readily developed to motivate the consumer to attend, but when audience self-image requires an understanding and experience of Aboriginal culture to overcome concerns of ‘how will I feel’ and ‘what will others think of me' then marketing strategies are complex and costly.

Research in 1995 of target markets for Kooemba Jdarra reported the following:

The survey findings showed a considerable lack of awareness of Kooemba Jdarra, but a very strong interest in a ‘new theatre company’ and in indigenous culture. Only 15 per cent of the surveyed Brisbane theatre-going audience had heard of Kooemba Jdarra and 80 per cent of people surveyed indicated they would like more information on the organisation and its activities. Financial reasons were not the major factor preventing indigenous people and the Brisbane theatre-going population from becoming members of Kooemba Jdarra. The major barrier was again lack of information. Almost all (90 per cent) of the indigenous people surveyed wanted more information about the company. This curiosity level is not surprising, but a stronger marketing mix (not just promotion) was identified as necessary to stimulate interest from general Brisbane audiences (Radbourne in Rentschler 1990: 173).

The new consumers want to be informed and involved. They make purchase decisions individually and independently of mass communication messages (Lewis and Bridger 2001). ‘Of all the consumer variables product involvement is by far the most important’ (Colbert: 83). Colbert describes this involvement as a feeling of importance or personal interest in the product, and Lewis and Bridger go further and describe involvement as the quest for authenticity and the resolving difference between the real self and the ideal self.

Segmentation defines who the likely customers of a product are – mainly for the benefit of marketeers. But traditional market segmentation does not allow us to understand the New Consumers fully. This is because it makes assumptions about consumer’s behaviour that often ignore subtle or unexpected patterns of purchasing (Lewis & Bridger 2001: 89).

Primary research with audiences for Indigenous theatre is scarce, which further contributes to the underdeveloped marketing strategies of Indigenous companies.

Research Summary

The research for this paper involved secondary research of reports, existing data and documents within the organisation; a telephone survey of residents in selected postcode areas; four focus groups of theatre patrons with differing attendance patterns; and data analysis and interpretation.

Kooemba Jdarra was part of a cluster group of five Brisbane-based arts organisations who commissioned an audience development survey early in 2002. The ‘cluster group' had common goals for questions on patterns of arts attendance, venue and arts organisation awareness, arts information sources, values and attitudes surrounding the arts and respondent demographics, such that a common survey with some organisation-specific questions was deemed possible.

Primary research through interview and secondary research through examination of existing data and reports, and viewing videos/performances/brochures, enabled a deep definition of each organisation’s needs in audience development research. The arts
sector of each organisation was also analysed through secondary data and summarised in conjunction with previous primary research. Utilising this primary and secondary data on the organisations, the logistics and operation of telephone surveying, and the purpose of the research, the survey was designed, approved by each organisation, tested in pilot and implemented. One hundred and fifty residents in selected postcode areas were involved. The telephone survey was conducted over four days by trained interviewing staff using professional (CATI) telephone interviewing facilities and formal quality-control procedures. The respondents were equally divided male and female; 38% aged 18–29 years, 38% aged 30–49 years, and 24% over 50 years; 75% employed and 11% retired or in home duties; most from a European background; 58% renting and 40% owning their dwelling. None were employed or volunteering in a Brisbane-based performing arts group.

Theatre had the highest attendance by the respondents in the telephone survey of all the performing art forms in the cluster group, with 17% attending once in the last twelve months. Forty-seven per cent had attended a rock/pop music concert and 40% attended theatre. This is significant over the other performing arts (classical music, ballet, opera, jazz, contemporary dance and folk music concerts). However, it must be noted that those who attended in the last twelve months had also attended opera and classical music. Attendees were more likely to be females than males and in the older age group (40+), and own their own home. Very few had attended more than six times per year, yet higher frequency of attendance correlated with an Anglo-Australian background rather than a recent immigrant background.

The most frequent barriers to attendance were cited as ‘too busy’ and ‘too expensive’. These are typical responses by people who do not have attendance at the performing arts as a priority in leisure activity and spending. However the ‘too busy’ response at 44% was high for theatre attendees compared to other performing arts forms, and ‘too expensive’ was lowest for theatre attendees (28%). These responses therefore may be more accurate for genuine theatre attendees, for whom ticket price is not a barrier, and competing demands on time are a barrier. Most theatre audiences get their information about the arts from Saturday’s Courier-Mail, rather than from the smaller localised City News or Quest, and then from friends or family. Given that the daily Courier-Mail had a fairly high ranking, this data reflects the fact that theatre attendees read newspapers, and probably seek information to make decisions and plan leisure time and spending.

Respondents rated the ‘type of show’ as very important when attending an arts event. This was the highest rated factor for theatre attendees and suggested further exploration in focus groups. Ease of obtaining tickets was also very important, as was ticket price. The availability of food and drinks was not at all important, nor were the familiar venue and transport.

Respondents were proud of the achievements of Australian artists and 93% believed that the arts make people think about social issues. They also believed that businesses benefit commercially from sponsorship, with local businesses making a favourable impression from the sponsorship of local arts groups. Interestingly, theatre attendees were almost equally divided on their belief that entertainment is the most important role for the arts. Other than rock/pop and comedy/entertainment attendees, this was not highly valued by other performing arts attendees.

Awareness of Kooroomba Jdarra was relatively low (28% of respondents) after La Boite Theatre (73%), Rock ‘n’ Roll Circus (61%), Expressions Dance Company (48%) and Brisbane Ethnic Music and Arts Centre (33%). Specific questions relating to attendance at Indigenous theatre revealed that over one-third of respondents to the telephone survey had attended a theatrical production featuring Aboriginal performers in the previous three years. Further, when planning a trip to the theatre, three-quarters of respondents indicated that they would be interested in experiencing Indigenous theatre or theatrical productions featuring Aboriginal performers.
Researchers also sought the reasons for respondents expressing an interest in experiencing Indigenous theatre or theatrical productions featuring Aboriginal performers. These respondents expressed a strong interest in learning more about Aboriginal culture and heritage together with both general interest and a range of other reasons that reflected an appreciation of contemporary issues related to Australia’s Indigenous people and culture.

Figure 1: Reasons given by respondents with an interest in experiencing Indigenous theatre or theatrical productions featuring Aboriginal performers

As a follow-on, Kooemba Jdarra had a number of particular research aims that were better explored via a series of focus groups.

These research aims related to non-Indigenous audience development and included:
1. identifying the views of Brisbane residents about Indigenous performing arts
2. identifying the expectations of Brisbane residents about Indigenous performing arts
3. identifying what might attract non-Indigenous audiences to attend performances offered by an Indigenous performing arts group
4. identifying the barriers to attracting non-Indigenous audiences and views about sponsorship of an Indigenous theatre company.

It was agreed that four focus groups would be required. These consisted of:

- **Group 1** People who are theatre-goers (have attended at least two performances in the past twelve months), but have not attended any Indigenous performances. These people were approached through The Circle, a membership service of the Queensland Performing Arts Trust.

- **Group 2 and 3** People who have attended at least two Kooemba Jdarra performances in the past three years. These people were sourced from Kooemba Jdarra exit surveys and recruited by the Kooemba Jdarra marketing officer. Initially, it was proposed that Group 3 represent people over 35 years who have not attended any theatrical performances in past three years – a group that might be broadly described as ‘older conservatives’. However the project team reviewed this intention and decided that better value would be obtained in working further with Kooemba Jdarra patrons.
Group 4 People who are under 35 years, progressive in outlook and prepared to try new experiences. Group 4 participants were drawn from QUT postgraduate business students who responded to an invitation to participate in arts-related audience development research.

The groups were asked ten questions on why they attend or would attend theatre, why theatre is important to each person, reasons why Australians want to know more about Aboriginal culture, examples of Aboriginal artists and productions, expectations about attending a performance by an Aboriginal theatre company, awareness of Kooemba Jdarra, ideas to attract non-Indigenous audiences to Indigenous theatre, barriers to attendance, the meaning of ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ Aboriginal theatre, and likely sponsors for Kooemba Jdarra. Participants were also invited to make a ‘final statement’ at the end of each focus group.

Each group was informed that the outcomes of the focus group discussions would be used for the further development of Indigenous performing arts in Australia. The focus groups were tape recorded and then transcribed. The responses were analysed and the researchers proposed marketing strategies from the findings. The findings clearly supported the hypothesis of this paper.

Research Findings

Focus group participants identified a range of reasons for their enjoyment of theatre, including the entertainment it offers; the stimulation of the learning experiences and new ideas; and escapism, particularly when audience members find themselves completely engrossed in a production. Of particular note was the live nature of theatre, the associated elements of surprise, immediacy and emotional engagement and the pleasure of sharing the experience with others in the audience.

Overall, the focus group participants accepted the proposition that Australians are taking a greater interest in Aboriginal culture. Reasons offered included the increasing recognition of Aboriginal culture in school curricula and growing concern for social justice amongst many Australians. A popular view also suggested that the role of international tourists and art dealers in learning about Aboriginal culture and acquiring their art has contributed to an increased level of interest and pride in this important component of Australia’s cultural heritage.

As a result, Aboriginal actors are developing a stronger profile particularly in Australian television productions. This was reflected in the focus group participants’ ability to identify Aboriginal artists, performers and cultural production organisations. Also named was the Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games which featured Aboriginal dancers and high-profile organisations such as the Bangarra Dance Company and Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park.

However, the positive endorsement of the focus group participants for this trend contrasted with their views when their expectations about attending a performance by an ‘Aboriginal theatre company’ were explored.

Two major themes were identified. One was based on an expectation of traditional Aboriginal productions featuring their spirituality and mythology, that is, ‘Dreaming’ style performances similar to those featured in the Olympic Opening Ceremony and by the Tjapukai dancers.

Expectations of Aboriginal or Indigenous theatrical themes were also substantially associated with past and present injustices and social problems. Past issues include the ‘stolen generation’ a term used about the mid-twentieth century practice of removing Aboriginal children from their parents to be brought up by white families or government institutions. Contemporary issues include ongoing concerns with land...
rights and the economic disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal families and associated social problems, including disease, alcoholism and domestic violence. Recent Australian films such as Australian Rules and Rabbit Proof Fence also serve to reinforce this impression.

The focus group perceived this expectation as being a significant barrier to non-Indigenous audience development in Australia. Whilst acknowledging the importance of recognising such issues as being a significant element of contemporary Australian culture, it was also felt that themes of injustice and social problems could alienate or turn away prospective theatre audiences seeking to be entertained, as in the following focus group response:

“If I’m going to go somewhere I want to make sure I am going to be entertained. I don’t want to have something rammed down my throat. I don’t want to be really sad like this horrible person who perpetrated evil against these people. It’s really nothing I’ve done” (Focus Group 4, 9 September 2002).

However, it was widely acknowledged amongst the focus group participants that ‘white Australia’ continues to lack information and understanding about Aboriginal people and culture and that theatre provides a valuable opportunity, at least for theatre audiences, to gain such insights. Yet this lack of information and understanding, and the inherently conservative attitude of mainstream theatre audiences who do not want to risk leaving their comfort zones also acts as a barrier to audience development. The following participant final statements explain this.

“I do not know a single Aboriginal person. I know people from lots of other countries, but not a single Aboriginal person. So what would I know about Aboriginal art… It’s alright if it gets explained to me by somebody who knows it” (Focus Group 1, 2 September 2002).

“… unfortunately Indigenous art has not been promoted sufficiently strongly enough… This combined with our lack of understanding and lack of knowledge and the fear that we will be challenged by something that we don’t know anything about means that people aren’t drawn to go along and to listen to it or see it” (Focus Group 1, 2 September 2002).

Specifically, other identified barriers to audience development for Kooemba Jdarra included the lack of public funding, which constrained marketing activities, and the company’s name, which currently has little meaning for non-Indigenous audiences who may also be concerned about its pronunciation. The statements that follow are a final statement from a Kooemba Jdarra patron, and a contribution from a non-attendant.

“The name Kooemba Jdarra could also be a barrier. I like it, but it does not give clear idea and it’s difficult to say and spell. Yet for foreigners it is the real McCoy” (Focus Group 3, 18 November 2002).

“The name, what’s it about. And then you’ll be afraid of pronouncing it right either. It does seem terrible but if the attraction is for non Indigenous people well maybe it needs to be something like ‘Yarnin’Up’ and then like a sub-title. It’s not the language we speak so we don’t know what it means. I think that might be one of the barriers that subconsciously just makes it too hard” (Focus Group 4, 9 September 2002).

When challenged to identify ways to attract non-Indigenous audiences to Indigenous theatre, the focus group participants identified the need for more information about Kooemba Jdarra, its productions and its contribution to the development of local performers as a means of generating both interest and pride in this local theatre company. The following responses are two from theatre attendees (not Kooemba Jdarra), and the third is a final statement from a Kooemba Jdarra patron (‘friend’).
‘... I think a contemporary Australian Indigenous arts (company) that is starting has to be very bold and just go right out and say we’re excellent, we’re up there with absolutely everything else in contemporary arts. We’re cutting edge, we’re fabulous and just be super bold’ (Focus Group 1, 2 September 2002).

‘You’ve got to know their name, they need to be branded. (They need) a few high profile things. Next time there is a big parade in town or a performance in the mall or at Southbank when there are fireworks on...I get sent heaps of junk mail from theatre groups and I am on a few subscribing lists. I’ve never seen their name come up’ (Focus Group 4, 9 September 2002).

‘To be a friend (of Kooemba Jdarra) you need to subscribe ten tickets and be an advocate. If you are a friend you tell other people about it. You make a bigger commitment when you speak to other people’ (Focus Group 2, 16 September 2002).

Most focus group participants again emphasised the importance of providing an entertaining, as opposed to a negative or pessimistic, experience in addition to offering insight into Aboriginal culture. This is not to suggest that they shared an expectation for lightweight entertainment. As with non-Indigenous theatre companies and productions, many audience members appreciated being challenged and occasionally confronted, and having the chance to consider other views. Their views suggest that Kooemba Jdarra should focus both on the theatrical experience itself, and their vision of presenting ‘the uniqueness of the Indigenous Australian voice and culture’, which also complements the interests of many of the telephone survey respondents and clearly suggests the direction for Kooemba Jdarra’s future strategic positioning.

Recommendations

The findings of the research showed that theatre patrons and risk-takers were more likely to attend performances by Kooemba Jdarra if they had more information about the company and the production, and particularly if they believed that they would be entertained and engaged in a learning experience by the performance. Their needs and values were similar to those of all theatre patrons. Therefore it was recommended that Kooemba Jdarra adopt a market segmentation strategy that targets behavioural and lifestyle characteristics of segments where needs and values are measured, not just demographics and geographic sources of audiences. Information flow about the company should be increased, and a branding statement used as a subtext to the name to explain the company and avoid mispronunciation. This branding and positioning statement should espouse Kooemba Jdarra’s values, goals and uniqueness. In response to audience product preferences and the need to develop audiences, it was recommended that the company program plays that both challenge and entertain, and avoid presenting content that may be perceived as attempting to generate a sense of assumed guilt among non-Indigenous audiences about Aboriginal issues.

In the short term Kooemba Jdarra should aim for inclusion in the state company’s program or at the state-owned performing arts venue, and for the presentation of product from other Indigenous companies under Kooemba Jdarra’s banner. The company should promote to identified mainstream theatre audiences and risk-taker audiences who, research indicates, want this new learning experience but do not currently have sufficient information to attend.

The company should aim to reduce consumer risk through the provision of additional information and opportunities to discuss content that may confront, for example, the use of pre- or post-performance discussion opportunities with the director and actors, program notes and journalist briefings. The goal for the company should be to package Kooemba Jdarra performances to maximise their audience satisfaction of learning, curiosity, pride, enjoyment, engagement and loyalty.
Conclusion

In 2004 Koorrii Jdarra chose to adapt Vivien Clevens’ David Unaipon award-winning novel *Bitin’ Back* into a performance text. The novel was chosen for its broad appeal to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences and its use of comedy to address any challenging subject matter. Koorrii Jdarra capitalised on the potential broad appeal of the production by partnering with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) to present the work in a mainstream theatre venue within the QPAC complex. The partnership with QPAC also provided Koorrii Jdarra with access to QPAC’s database for the promotion of the production. The play was presented in 2005 to an appreciative audience and received many positive reviews.

Such strategic alliances with mainstream performing arts companies and venues address both the social and political implications identified by audiences in this research. Socially, audiences can confront their inhibitions in the comfort of a familiar venue with the guarantees that venue offers in terms of content and quality. Politically, the risks of audience concerns about guilt and reconciliation are distributed into companies and performing arts venues with established profiles and larger budgets. As Indigenous theatre enjoys ‘an unparalleled growth and success with international and national tours’ (Enoch 2002) the temptation for non-Indigenous companies to stage Indigenous work grows. These companies utilise their established profile and much larger budgets than their Indigenous counterparts to contribute in their own way to the development of the artform. From an audience perspective their work might be seen to be of higher quality. This is cause for concern by some Indigenous companies who label themselves as the ‘engine room for non-Indigenous companies. By once again appropriating Indigenous culture, this time theatre, they are cutting of its life blood’ (McDonald 2002).

In order to strengthen its position, Indigenous theatre needs to urgently grow the understanding of its importance within the Australian theatre experience. If it is to succeed in competition with the larger theatre companies, it must engage in future advocacy with stakeholders, and in strategies for national recognition and for audience development.

From this research project, Koorrii Jdarra recognises that it is imperative that Indigenous theatre companies seize the debate, write the articles, undertake the research and clearly advocate the need for Indigenous control of the artform. This is a big ask for a sector that is under-resourced and over-extended. Further research is necessary to develop mainstream audiences for Indigenous theatre across Australia, because from increased involvement comes understanding and resourcing for development.

References


