

The Social and Cultural Impacts of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival

Prepared for the Board of the MICF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arts funding programs at a federal, state and local government level across Australia have a range of key guiding principles and objectives in common and these include increasing audience access and participation, community cultural development, increasing opportunities for professional development, extending the exploration of new media, audience development and support for young and emergent artists.

While the economic impact of the arts has been put under the microscope by the three tiers of government in Australia over the last decade, there has been curiously little interest in developing comprehensive evaluation methods for assessing outcomes of artistic and cultural projects and programs against objectives, in particular outcomes that relate to social and cultural objectives.

The reasons for this are complex but may include some of the following:

- a sense that these outcomes are hard to measure
- a sense that governments are duty bound to support the arts but as there is no concrete value in it, there is no point worrying too much about outcomes
- if the public expects governments to support the arts, then governments should at least try and justify expenditure by encouraging arts organisations to devise programs that help develop tourism

In the context of growing disquiet about the use of economic impact studies in the arts, there has been a groundshift towards developing a more suitable framework for evaluating and measuring the benefits of the arts. One significant Australian study by Deidre Williams was published in 1995 and a number of other studies are currently being planned and implemented.

The purpose of this small survey of MICF stakeholders was twofold:

- to apply some of the published indicators of the social and cultural impact of the arts to a successful urban festival to explore their validity
- to identify issues pertinent to arts organisations in the anticipated burgeoning of interest in this area of study

A survey was devised, stakeholder groups identified, a representative sample selected and interviews were conducted. The results are presented in section four and conclusions are presented in section 5.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to research and document the impacts of the arts is integrally tied in with the evolution of public or government support for the arts. In Australia, this can be traced to the formation of the Australia Council in 1968 (by Harold Holt) and its subsequent constitution as a statutory body in 1975 by Gough Whitlam. In 1976, the IAC (Industries Assistance Commission) published a report entitled 'Assistance to the Performing Arts', what was to be the first of many regular reports and enquiries into the exact nature of any public benefit arising from government subvention into the arts (see Gibson, 1999, pp107-108).

The use of economic impact studies to advocate for arts funding is a phenomenon that peaked in the US in the mid-eighties (see Madden, 2001) and in Australia in the late 90s. In Victoria, the state government arts funding body, Arts Victoria conducted a pilot study in 1998 into the Economic Impact of Festivals (using the regional festivals of Port Fairy, Mallacoota, Horsham and Hamilton as trial festivals) and refined this into a DIY kit in 1999, which was broadly available for festivals to implement from 2000. This trend is seen by many in retrospect as a symptom of an economic rationalist approach to arts funding, tied in with the emergence of the concept of cultural tourism.

1.1 The case against the economic impact study

In recent years, there has been widespread criticism about the use of economic impact studies (EISs) in advocating for government support of the arts. These can be summarised as follows:

The economists' perspective

Economist Chris Madden has written at length on the misuse of EISs in the arts sector, arguing that, "they were never designed for such purposes" (2001, p161). Their use in advocacy for government funding is inherently weak for the following reasons:

- The financial benefits they propose to track, often expressed as 'jobs created', bear only a tentative relationship to the social and cultural benefits created
- Size of economic impact of an arts event is not an indication of need for future funding in a given area
- There is no accepted level of economic impacts which leads to events being assessed as important or not important (1998, p15)

Madden takes the EIS argument for funding support to its absurd conclusion in this analogy: "In responding to demands for funding based on multipliers, a government should at least compare the net benefit of a proposal against providing its citizenry with a simple cash transfer or a tax break. An absurd corollary is that arts advocates who extol the financial benefits of the arts have no recourse if government decides to release \$1 million in one dollar bills from the highest buildings in every town rather than investing \$1 million into, say, an arts festival. Both actions have wealth and job effects, both have multipliers, but the point of the arts festival is lost." (1998, p16)

He further argues that EISs, and the use of methodologies such as multipliers are irrelevant, unconvincing and an abuse of economic analysis for the simple reason that money spent on the event in question is not being spent elsewhere, either in the immediate vicinity or nearby (2001, p165). If for example, two country patrons come to Melbourne for four days to see a few shows at a total cost of \$2,000, this is money that won't be injected into other activities in their home town eg sporting events, cinema, restaurants, bookshops and so on. For the economy of their hometown, their visit represents a lost opportunity. The negative multiplier effect means that suppliers to these businesses experience reduced business. "Economic impacts never successfully account for all financial effects, and are prone to overstate the net financial impact on the local economy" (2001, p168).

Certainly, a review of government funding application processes across a range of programs in Australia today, federal and state, indicates that size (in economic impact terms) and level of funding support provided are not linked.

The cultural policy analysts' perspective

TB Hansen refutes the value of EISs for two reasons, that they fail to investigate whether the arts “have generated new consumption or new jobs,” (1995, p310) ie they fail to determine whether the arts are helping to create economic growth. Secondly, if the purpose of EISs is to advocate for government subvention in the arts, they need to demonstrate that economic development has occurred *to a greater extent* than if the subsidy had been spent elsewhere in the community. He argues that “the arts are subsidised mainly for cultural or social reasons...If one wants to evaluate the economic value of the arts, one cannot simply use an economic standard analysis which does not take account of the special purposes of the activity” (ibid, p315).

Arts writers' and analysts' perspective

Amongst academics writing in the field of the arts, the overwhelming majority refute the use of EISs as validation or advocacy for government funding on the basis that economic outcomes are not the purpose of the arts.

Policy analyst and academic, Eva Cox argued in her 1995 Boyer Lecture that, “The emphasis on [arts as] industry undermines our capacity to see the arts as an area where we explore creativity for its own sake; where we enjoy participating in activities even if they are not professionally saleable. Creative outputs are more than their resale value” (1995, p75).

Many other writers support this view.

Newcastle Community Arts Centre released a report in 2000 which stated “Community building and social capital goals are valid and vital in themselves; economic results are flow-on benefits, but are not the ultimate objective.”

South Australian arts consultant Deidre Williams argues that unless EISs of arts and cultural activities are supported by studies which evaluate the social and cultural impacts, they run the risk of placing economic outcomes over other more essential outcomes, and projects will suffer as a result. “The danger in pursuing particular economic aspects of the work in the absence of a broader commitment to the inter-relationship between the social, educational, cultural and economic dynamics, is that the economic strategies alone are likely to fail to deliver the expected results. Community-based arts strategies ultimately succeed in generating sustainable economic outcomes when they are supported within a broader cultural development focus incorporating related social and cultural objectives” (Williams, 1997).

Similarly, British arts researcher Francois Matarasso argues that the central flaw with EISs is that they limit the definition of economics to a study of the flow of money, “excluding such things as education, health and social cohesion” (1997, p2). These social impacts deliver a wider range of benefits, some of which can even be measured in financial terms.

1.2 The case for developing a different framework for assessing the arts

Economists and arts analysts alike agree that this area of study has been sadly neglected.

Madden acknowledges the increasing attention given by economists to 'development' theory rather than 'growth' theory as indicators of a thriving society. "Development theory encourages an attractive recalibration of perspective from the arid notion of the economy as an engine of wealth to a more elegant conception of the economy as an attendant to human well-being, betterment and enlightenment" (Madden 2001 p169). [And who in the arts wouldn't want to be part of an elegant conception of the economy?!]

Professor of Economics at Macquarie University David Throsby in his new book 'Economics and Culture' argues that what is needed is a framework for assessing the tangible (or measurable) *and* intangible manifestations of culture (Throsby, 2001, p44). "We have no accepted way of talking about cultural value so that it has status in the firmament of what influences governments - that carries weight, that isn't something that's just left over when you've fixed up the economics, that isn't self-indulgent to pursue, or is somehow or other soft, like marshmallow, rather wet, not where the real game is" (Marr, 2001). Throsby's latest work examines what he calls a paradigm shift within development theory towards a greater acceptance of the role played by culture in economically thriving countries or communities. "Central to this [shift] has been a reorientation of development thinking from a uniform commodity-centred model...towards a pluralistic human-centred one (2001, p72).

However, while calling for a move away from economic assessments, many observers are pleading caution lest the arts are hijacked by those with hidden agendas.

Irish journalist Kate Tregaskis suggests that Tony Blair's interest in the social, political and educational value of the arts has brought government policy perilously close to sublimating aesthetic qualities to utilitarian or instrumental ones. "The arts have become a fix used to plug gaps in other services," she argues and it is imperative that while these social goals are being articulated, professional artists and arts production are not being starved of funds. "We must continue to respect and invest in the work that artists produce" (Tregaskis, 2001).

In this context, it is incumbent on those of us who work in the arts to not only engage in the debate, but to lead the way in terms of redefining how the impacts of the arts are described and working towards creating a framework of collectible data that help us track these impacts. It is only through this that government policy towards arts funding will be informed, not by economists or cultural and social theorists, but by those who work in the arts sector.

2. DEFINING THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF THE ARTS

2.1 Defining 'social' and 'cultural'

The concepts of social and cultural are intertwined, in the sense that culture, as a group function, can only exist when there is a social context.

Professor Emeritus at Harvard University David Landes offers this broad definition of culture within a sociological framework:

"The sum and the interaction of the values and attitudes of a group – thus: the ambitions and the aspirations of the members of the group, the relations between the members, between old and young people, between the genders, between rich and poor, the religious beliefs and the relations between different faiths, the attitudes to work and play and the value placed on different kinds of activities."

Throsby notes that the manifestations of culture within this framework include “signs, symbols, text, language, artefacts, oral and written tradition.” He adds that the concept of culture has a functional dimension which requires that activities have a creative element, that they generate and communicate symbolic meaning and that they embody some form of intellectual property (2001, p4).

2.2 Defining indicators of social and cultural impact

In terms of moving from theory to the practicalities of assessing the social and cultural impacts of the arts, the independent studies of Deidre Williams in Australia and Francois Matarasso in Britain are the most comprehensive current sources.

Williams (1997) identifies indicators of social and cultural impacts in five outcome areas:

Outcome Areas	Indicators
Building and developing communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger sense of community identity • A decrease in people experiencing social isolation • Improved recreational options for community • Development of local or community enterprises. • Improvements to, and increased use of, public facilities
Increasing social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved levels of communication in community. • Improved levels of community planning and organisation. • Greater tolerance of different cultures or lifestyles. • Improved standards of consultation between government and community. • Increased appreciation of community culture.
Activating social change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased community awareness of an issue. • Community action to resolve a social issue. • Greater tolerance of different cultures or lifestyles. • Increase in local or community employment options. • Increased levels of public safety.
Developing human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved communication skills • Improved ability to plan and organise • Improved problem solving abilities • Improved ability to collect, sort and analyse information • Improved creative ability
Improving economic performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost savings in public services or programs. • Increase in local or community employment options. • Improved standards of consultation between government and community. • Development of local or community enterprises. • Increased business investment in community cultural development • Increased resources attracted into community and spent locally.

In his 1997 summary of an eighteen month study of the social and cultural impacts of the arts for participants associated with 11 projects in arts organisations in Britain, Denmark and the United States, Matarasso identifies six broad areas of impact (1997, pp 13):

Outcome Areas	Indicators
Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased personal confidence • Increased engagement with education and skills development programs • Greater social engagement
Social Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural awareness
Community Empowerment and Self-Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building organisational skills • Infrastructure regeneration • Greater engagement with democratic processes
Local Image and Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirming a pride in the local area
Imagination and Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifting awareness of those engaged in public authorities to the lives and

	needs of the users of their services
Health and Well-Being	• An increased sense of general well-being and happiness for participants

Matarasso provides a list of 50 social impacts of the arts (1997, page [x]) and these are included at Appendix 3 in this report.

3. THE SURVEY

3.1 Refining the purpose of the survey

Broadly speaking, the purpose of the study is to tease out the social and cultural impacts of the Comedy Festival by interviewing stakeholders of the festival. Questions needed to be developed which elucidated a broad range of possible impacts and provision made for quantitative analysis so that any significant consensus to answers could be noted.

As an exercise in preliminary research in this area of study, the sample was small (20).

It is envisaged that the findings of this research may be useful in refining a list of relevant indicators for any future research along these lines for the Comedy Festival (and other similar cultural events) and progressing a discussion both about the viability of creating means to measure these impacts and whether or not there is greater value in documenting these impacts in non-quantitative terms.

3.2 Developing the questionnaire

3.2.1 Refining the list of indicators

Using the work of Williams and Matarasso as a basis, and refining the list of indicators through consultation with MICF staff and research (including examination of five years of press clippings) a list of 63 indicators of social and cultural benefits was drawn up under the outcome areas of personal development, social benefits, community self-determination benefits, economic benefits, educational benefits, artistic benefits, local image and identity outcomes and cultural benefits.

3.2.2 Determining the complexity of the questions

The questions were fairly complex as the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone (as opposed to self-administered) and the respondents were, generally speaking, of a more educated demographic than the participants interviewed in both Williams' and Matarasso's research. Provision was made for respondents to expand on each of their answers with examples of the outcomes/benefits in question or further qualification of how they perceived the outcomes/benefits operating within MICF.

3.2.3 Exclusion of demographic data

It was felt that the gathering of detailed demographic information from the respondents would be unnecessarily intrusive because the sample was small (and therefore not definitively representative) and because demographic profiling of the audiences of MICF has been comprehensively undertaken as part of economic impact studies conducted in recent years.

3.2.4 Negative impacts

Matarasso (1997, pp 73 – 78) and Williams (1995, pp 48 – 133) have both noted that some events produce negative impacts. While the questionnaire didn't seek feedback on negative impacts, these were offered and have been noted in under point four below.

The questionnaire is included at Appendix 1.

3.3 Selecting interviewees

With the help of MICF General Manager, Malissa Gough, a list of stakeholder groups of MICF was compiled and interview subjects sourced from as many of these groups as possible. The group identified as having the most profound experience of social and cultural impacts was the registrants, or the 200 or so comedians who mount independent shows which are promoted under the umbrella of the Comedy Festival each year. This group is most strongly represented in the interviews.

The stakeholder groups identified were:

The current Board of Management	Founding members of the Board
The industry advisory group	Venue Managers (as a representative of the comedy industry in general in Melbourne)
Class Clowns Producer	Independent Producers
Years 9-12 students involved in Class Clowns	Registrants
Range from first-timers to regulars	Non-prof registrant producers
Comedy Zone alumni	punters
Women comedians (Up front)	Arts sector workers employed via events on the Comedy Festival program eg Directors, Lighting and Set-designers etc
Key funding bodies Arts Victoria and City of Melbourne	Media sponsors
In-kind sponsors	Delivered events organisers
Regional organisations who tour the roadshow	Work experience students

The limited timeframe of the project necessarily meant that not all stakeholder groups were canvassed.

4. THE RESULTS

4.1 Personal development

Personal development outcomes, as opposed to social or educational, are those pertaining to an increase (or otherwise) of an individual's self-image and engagement with the outside world, or if we return to Landes' definition of culture, the skills which encourage an individual to participate in the group.

For MICF, personal development was perceived to be strongest in terms of developing the skill base of participant comedians, their employability and their careers in the arts. 95% of respondents felt that MICF has 'significantly to moderately' helped build new skills, and 90% felt it had helped develop careers in the arts. 85% felt it had contributed to participants' employability.

While 90% felt it had significantly to moderately extended opportunities for social activity, this dropped to 85% in terms of helping people interact.

85% of respondents felt MICF had significantly to moderately lifted the public's confidence in the arts, and this was reflected later in questions about audience development.

Only 10% felt MICF had significantly to moderately encouraged people towards further education and training opportunities, but many added that within the world of comedy, training was more informal than institutionalised and valuable processes such as mentoring and peer support occurred within the social context of the Festival.

When asked about other personal development outcomes not covered in the questions, many respondents noted (here and elsewhere in the questionnaire) that comedy and laughter break down barriers in a way that no other artform can, making individuals feel instantly connected with the group. This unique benefit is something that could be explored further if MICF were to engage in a further study on its social and cultural impacts.

Overall 90% of respondents felt the personal development outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate.

Negative impacts offered (unprompted) included the difficulty, in the 'heated' atmosphere of MICF, to get sufficient publicity through editorials to achieve reasonable-sized audiences, and the consequent impact on self-confidence of playing to small houses. This was mentioned by participants ranging from first-timers to those with a solid background in comedy and a reasonable public profile. All registrant-respondents spoke of the difficulty achieving a break-even financial result, and the damage caused to self-confidence through losing money. One registrant commented, "some nights you feel bullet proof, other nights you die."

4.2 Social benefits

At least half of all respondents felt that each social benefit indicator was met by MICF in a significant to moderate way, thus it would be fair to say MICF was providing a broad range of social benefits. 95% felt that MICF significantly to moderately enhanced a sense of identity for a community, and 85% felt that it developed community networks and lifted spirits.

Other social benefits respondents felt MICF offered (further to those asked about in the questions) included its easy and accessible format which encouraged disparate groups (like office workers) to spend a night out together, thus creating greater cohesion for the group in its normal context. Many respondents offered that MICF provides an informal forum for younger comedians to interact with more established members of the profession, and for older people to engage with the views and life experiences of a younger generation. Almost half the respondents commented on the sense of excitement MICF generated in the inner city, particularly around hubs like the Town Hall and Trades Hall precincts.

Overall 100% of respondents felt the social benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate. The only negative social outcome suggested was that comedy can sometimes reinforce intolerance but this was not offered as a negative impact of MICF specifically.

4.3 Community self-determination benefits

As MICF is not a community-based cultural Festival as such, it is not surprising that the benefits strongly associated with community arts were not perceived to be greatly in evidence here. The most significant benefits noted were that MICF had extended insight into political and social ideas and it had facilitated the development of partnerships. 85% of respondents felt both benefits were significantly to moderately evidenced.

Less than half of respondents felt MICF had significantly to moderately enhanced the community's capacity to organise itself, helped people extend control over their own lives or helped build support for community projects.

Overall, 65% of respondents felt the community self-determination benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate.

While respondents didn't suggest any further benefits under this category other than those asked about, a range of other comments were offered. Some felt that MICF was gradually losing its community connectedness as it developed a more and more corporate image. Some felt that MICF misses the opportunity to 'improve the lot' of Melbourne comedians year-round. Both these perceptions came from the registrant stakeholder group and resonate strongly with what Williams and Matarasso both define as a negative impact. Many of the case studies in Williams 1995 study 'Creating Social Capital' note that without ongoing support to sustain the positive impacts of arts and cultural events, participants will soon lose motivation and willingness to commit to a long-term view, leading to "erosion of enormous potential" (Williams, 1995, p104).

4.4 Economic benefits

The response to economic benefits created by MICF was strong in terms of outcomes normally associated with economic impact studies with 95% of respondents agreeing MICF significantly to moderately enhanced tourism, 80% agreeing it had created employment [this was perceived as strong in the short term but tempered by the losses many registrant comedians suffered], 65% saying it attracted new resources into the community and 60% agreeing it encouraged the development of local enterprise.

The broader economic benefits that have been linked with cultural events, notably through the research of Williams and Matarasso, such as improving consultative processes between government and local community (20% felt this was significant to moderate), improving productivity in local public or community services (40%), improving the planning and design of local public places (15%) and easing the burden on public expenditure (5%) were not felt to be strong outcomes associated with MICF. It is worth noting that two other festivals, Next Wave and the Melbourne Fringe, also based in the Fitzroy area of Melbourne, are more clearly founded in community cultural development objectives while the organisational goals of MICF are more focussed on traditional economic benefit outcomes such as tourism and direct and indirect employment. This area of questioning recorded a high 'don't know' score (20% of all possible responses) indicating that questions may need to be rephrased to tease out some relevant personal experiences eg improved interaction with local services as a result of MICF. (Alternatively, it may simply suggest that these broader economic benefits are not a significant result for MICF).

Other economic benefits not contained in the questions but offered by respondents included the generation of overseas employment for Australian comedians and the economic benefit to Melbourne of promoting MICF and Melbourne comedy in general through the Comedy Festival Roadshows to country areas.

Overall, 85% of respondents felt the economic benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate. Negative impacts were offered and these were the negative financial effect of MICF on registrant comedians and the perception expressed by two respondents that MICF's focus of comedic activity into one month of the year has led to "irreparable damage of an otherwise healthy and thriving year-round comedy scene." It is beyond the scope of this study to explore this more fully, other than to suggest that this perception bears some relationship to earlier comments about the potential benefits to MICF of permanent staff to focus on issues relating to community development within Melbourne's comedy community.

4.5 Educational benefits

95% (or 19 out of 20) of respondents felt that MICF had significantly to moderately enhanced skills in planning and organising activities. This was perceived as a very significant outcome for the registrants with one registrant commenting that putting on a show as part of MICF made him realise how hard you have to work to achieve the level of professionalism evident in the majority of shows under the MICF umbrella and that this was the clear difference between MICF and other inner urban festivals, such as the Melbourne Fringe. 85% felt MICF had significantly to moderately enhanced skills in communicating ideas and information, 75% felt it had enhanced skills in problem solving and 65% felt it had enhanced skills in the collecting, analysing and organising of information.

Approximately 75% of those interviewed felt they didn't have enough information to say whether or not MICF had encouraged high school completion or encouraged non-completers into other education or training programs, although two respondents were able to offer personal accounts of this happening. As school completion and community engagement are receiving much current attention amongst policy makers as possible and desirable outcomes of cultural and arts activities (an example of some recent research is included at Appendix 4), it is possible MICF is achieving some significant results in this area through its Class Clowns and Raw Comedy projects. These outcomes could be tracked through interviewing participants in both projects before and after their involvement [Dr Colin Sharpe of the Foundation for Young Australians has developed an evaluation process which measures such things as a commitment to remain at school as a result of a project, a commitment to finish a training program, the identification and pursuit of new training programs or tertiary courses of interest, engagement with new training and cultural networks and finding employment].

Other educational benefits suggested by respondents that were not covered by the questions included two associated with Class Clowns: one CC participant said that her involvement had given her a greater respect for her teachers and made her feel more connected with other students and another respondent noted that through CC, MICF is presenting young people with some relevant contemporary role models. Others noted that laughter increases well-being in the school community (as it does in the broader community) and that it promotes lateral (or right –brain?) thinking.

As an educational outcome, MICF has also educated Melbourne audiences towards a greater appreciation of the diversity of the artform of comedy.

Overall, 75% of respondents felt the educational benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate. No negative impacts on education outcomes were put forward by respondents.

4.6 Artistic benefits

95% of all respondents felt that MICF had significantly to moderately stimulated further work of artistic merit and developed audiences for the arts.

In terms of audience development, respondents noted such things as the high number of 'first-timers' (or people for whom a MICF event was the first 'arts' event they had been to) attending MICF events, and that a lot of people who don't go to other arts activities go to MICF events. For many respondents this observation led them to the status of comedy as an art-form – there is a clear perception that comedy is not widely accepted as one of the arts. As audience development is an area of high priority for arts funding bodies both federally and at a state level, MICF's possible strong performance in this area could be documented as part of an audience survey during a festival.

85% felt it had nurtured creativity.

Although 80% of respondents felt MICF had significantly to moderately provided training in aspects of the arts and encouraged the development of new arts networks, groups or activities, only 30% felt it had improved access to arts education or training. Clearly the type of training and networking that occurs as a result of MICF is informal (but none the less significant) and includes such things as mentoring, peer appraisal, exposure to a wide range of new material and semi-formal collaboration. Effectively, the month-long activities of MICF are a giant classroom for all comedians who participate.

Other artistic benefits suggested by respondents and not included in the original questions were the introduction of the multi-stage venue to Melbourne and the subsequent training of production and front of house staff to manage these and the encouragement of younger performers through projects such as Class Clowns and Raw Comedy.

Overall, 100% of respondents felt the artistic benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate. It has been noted elsewhere in this section, but negative impacts on artistic benefits were expressed by a number of respondents, one who noted that in terms of nurturing creativity, “the overall pummelling some comedians experience can be brutal.” To add balance to this perception, this could be regarded as a negative outcome of taking the risk of going on stage (in any artform). The risk itself is positive, ‘dying’ on stage is really just part of the learning process.

4.7 Local image and identity outcomes

The most-recognised local image and identity outcome for MICF is its ability to send a positive image Australia-wide about Melbourne with all respondents agreeing that this was significant to moderate while 85% felt it enhanced Melbourne’s image internationally. 95% felt it added to the sense of being part of and involved in local life, while 85% felt it developed pride in local traditions and cultures, developed pride in local landmarks and created new traditions. 75% felt it helped make people feel better about where they live, although one respondent noted that MICF hasn’t achieved this on its own but is an important part of the mix.

Very few respondents felt MICF had helped transform the image of public bodies (30% felt this was significant to moderate) although most respondents were aware that Arts Victoria and the City of Melbourne were major financial supporters of MICF.

A range of other benefits than those presented in the questions were offered and these are mostly benefits that are unique to MICF. MICF has confirmed Melbourne as the home of comedy; it has firmly established April on the cultural calendar as the month of comedy (and the month for local and international comedians to come to Melbourne to ‘catch up’); MICF has confirmed Melbourne as the home of one of the three internationally significant comedy festivals along with Edinburgh and Montreal (and this has resulted in some unexpected outcomes such as international comedians adopting Melbourne as their home base) and MICF has supported the emergence of some new comedy venues which are open year-round such as The Store Room (North Fitzroy).

For the month of April, MICF also improves the image of the CBD, particularly around the Town Hall precinct in Swanston Street (this is perhaps a standard outcome of festivals and something that the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts also achieves).

Overall, 95% of respondents felt the local image and identity outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate.

No negative impacts on local image and identity outcomes were put forward by respondents.

4.8 Cultural benefits

95% of respondents felt MICF had significantly to moderately encouraged positive risk-taking and challenged conventional attitudes. Around 75% felt it had allowed the exploration of values, meanings and dreams, helped the wider community raise their vision and raised expectations about what is possible. The benefit normally associated with cultural development arts programs, the blurring of the line between creator and consumer, is predictably not seen as significant for MICF as this process is simply not an element of the presentation of MICF (several people remarked that consumers have a tendency to want to climb on stage, particularly once they have consumed more than their fair share of alcohol, but this was not something most comedians encouraged or felt had any benefit to themselves or their audiences).

Other cultural benefits suggested by respondents were many and varied and included the “bigness” of MICF and how generally uplifting it is to have such a large, comprehensive a long program of arts activities in Melbourne. MICF has been responsible for creating a climate in which several television and radio comedy shows have been developed and produced and on its own, this outcome will have generated a range of economic, social and cultural benefits. MICF has over the years educated audiences about comedy and their subsequent sophistication in this respect has encouraged comedians also to “lift the game”. MICF has celebrated “dagginess” and made it cool to be a bit of a misfit (one respondent suggested people who are not normally “in” can feel like one of the in crowd during April). Through comedy, MICF is celebrating Australian culture and placing it in an international context and this has a range of spin-offs, such as lifting our own pride in our culture and causing us to reflect on who we are and what is valuable to us. MICF also allows both comedians and audiences to explore what the socially acceptable level of tolerance is on a range of issues.

Overall, 80% of respondents felt the cultural benefit outcomes of MICF were significant to moderate.

No negative impacts on cultural benefit were put forward by respondents.

CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that a range of important social and cultural benefits are being delivered to the Melbourne community by the Comedy Festival.

On a personal level, these help develop people’s confidence, employability and enhance creative and social networks. Comedy is also a unique social binder with the capacity to instantly turn a crowd of strangers into a group. At the group (or social) level, benefits are broadly felt in terms of exploring, defining and celebrating community identity and challenging stereotypes. Interaction that occurs between comedians of varying stages in their careers, between audience members and between generations is empowering and supports social cohesion. At a broad level, the festival allows examination of political and social ideas and significantly encourages the building of partnerships that extend this creative examination year round. This festival contributes significantly to increased tourism to Melbourne with specific and flow-on employment benefits. It has the capacity to alter the course of vulnerable people in the education system, encouraging engagement within schools and further education and employment processes. The benefits to defining, refining and developing the art form of comedy, from both the performer/producer and audience perspective, are strong at a local and international level. This festival has lifted the perception of comedy as an art-form and consistently developed new audiences. The Comedy Festival has revitalised areas of the

inner city, boosting the image of landmarks and buildings and sending positive messages about Melbourne across Australia and overseas. It is created new traditions which Melburnians feel proud of, defining Melbourne as the home of comedy and the place to be in April. This festival has had a significant impact on developing new formats within a range of wide-reaching media including radio and television, thus extending the unique benefits of comedy geographically and over many months of the year.

In terms of developing a framework for effectively gathering and assessing the social and cultural impacts examined in this study, the complexities surrounding the outcomes of benefits need to be understood. Many of the impacts are intangible and elusive and they can effect one individual in an entirely different way to another. For some, involvement in the arts can have a negative impact, but change itself, whether positive or negative, is a vehicle for individual or social growth. Ultimately it is important in whatever framework is developed that there is room for the unquantifiable stories to emerge – in this way we move closer to understanding the multi-dimensional richness of the arts and its impact in our lives. There are a range of benefits which can be measured and these include educational outcomes (completion of school or training programs), audience development, tourism and employment benefits and skills development. The complex network of interaction occurring between those involved in the Comedy Festival and local and state public authorities and services could be measured as a way of defining and assessing the mechanisms of social and community fabric.

As stated earlier, it is incumbent on all of us who work in the arts to participate in this relatively new area of discussion so that the evolution of this framework of assessment is informed by a thorough understanding of the depth and breadth of the impact of arts activities on our lives. We need to be constantly aware that this new framework, like other frameworks that have gone before, is an advocacy tool. It will require arts organisations to justify their funding on the basis of how well they are performing against an agreed set of indicators and it is up to us to ensure that these indicators are a valid reflection of the complex, intricate, elusive, empowering and often confounding effects that engagement with the arts can have on us as individuals and collectively.

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