REFLECTION ARTICLE

Documenting Australian Society – Performing Arts Community of Practice

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Australian Research Data Commons

Abstract

While the performing arts are a vitally important dimension of the cultural life of Australia, the performances themselves are often ephemeral and difficult to document in an enduring form. This article describes a successful, collaborative, community of practice-based model for ensuring the creation and curation of performing arts documentation in Australia. The collaboration involves key national professional and industry organisations and peak bodies, working together to ensure that important documentation is identified, preserved, and made available via the AusStage research and discovery platform.

Keywords: Communities of practice; Performing arts; AusStage; Documentation strategy.

The community responsible for producing, collecting, preserving and researching the performing arts in Australia has become a model for best practice, both in Australia and internationally. The performing arts is a highly ephemeral artform, sometimes with no material trace of its happening after the event. This creates challenges for the accurate recording of the artform for posterity, challenges which have been largely overcome by a strong community working together for the greater good. Performing arts practice is a highly collaborative endeavour, and this is reflected in the community of practice dedicated to documenting it for future generations.

There are three pivotal stakeholders in the performing arts community of practice in Australia. Two professional bodies, the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA) and the Performing Arts Heritage Network (PAHN) of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), represent the theatre, drama and performance studies scholars and the performing arts collections custodians, respectively. AusStage, the research and resource discovery platform for Australian live performance, represents the interests of both of these bodies, as well as industry and government, providing a useful focal point for the community.

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Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies, the peak academic association promoting the study of drama in any performing medium throughout Australasia, represents staff and postgraduate students of Australasian institutions of tertiary education who are engaged in teaching, research and practice in theatre, drama and performance studies. Directors of associated theatres and members of the theatrical profession are also active members. ADSA's annual conference is held once a year and attracts delegates from universities, industry, government, and collections.

Performing Arts Heritage Network is a small yet vibrant national network whose members come together in the interests of collecting, preserving, and making accessible Australia's performing arts heritage. Records documenting this rich heritage are found throughout dispersed collections residing in museums, galleries, and libraries both urban and rural. PAHN holds annual conferences that have sought to highlight these dispersed collections and, by emphasising regional and place specific performing arts heritage, to make connections between collections, research, industry, and practitioners.

AusStage is the discipline's research and discovery platform, a sophisticated research tool which documents performing arts productions with integrated associations to data about physical resources. AusStage performs a curatorial function, accumulating a virtual collection of items that are otherwise dispersed in actual collections nationally and internationally. By streamlining discovery in this way, AusStage enables researchers to more easily engage with the rich history and heritage of Australian performing arts and artists, at home and abroad. As a result, AusStage provides improved opportunities for research and education, and increased visibility for libraries, museums, archives, and documentation centres of the performing arts.

AusStage's methodological innovations and data standards were acknowledged in a recent review of digital resources in *Theatre Journal*, the discipline's leading periodical. In it, AusStage is described as one of 'the most sophisticated and promising efforts to develop a digital database for theatre and performance research' with 'broad application' for 'reshaping the way we think about preserving, examining, and cataloging performance ephemera'.[1]

The symbiotic intersection between ADSA, PAHN and AusStage has facilitated relationship-building among the community. Members of PAHN provide AusStage with the source material to create 'thin' data records detailing event information, such as place and time, cast, and creatives. In turn, AusStage provides PAHN members with increased public exposure by recording information about holdings in their collections. Members of ADSA use AusStage to give scholarly interpretation to the data and PAHN holdings in research papers, journal articles, books, and other research outputs.

The organisations also have formalised relationships. The Chair of PAHN has been a partner on every AusStage funding application and holds a position on the Advisory Council. Likewise, ADSA has been represented on each AusStage funding application with the Chair of the Executive holding a position on the Advisory Council. Reciprocally, the Project Manager of AusStage has been a member of PAHN since 2002 and has held a position on the Committee since 2008. The AusStage Manager also holds a position on the ADSA Executive Committee.

Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies, PAHN and AusStage facilitate, promote, and nurture relationships between stakeholders, forming a coherent, cooperative and collaborative community. The focus on Australian performance histories provides a common passion for professionals from research, collections and industry to explore synergies and opportunities for future collaboration. Many of the members of the community have a background in performance practice, so collaborative practice and working towards collective learning are traits that are well engrained and heartily embraced. There is a tacit

understanding that by working together there will be outcomes for the common good in the documentation of performing arts in Australia.

Furthermore, the organisations themselves are driven by the needs of their users. Their governance is derived from their membership base, providing a ground-up approach to leadership. This model of self-governance gives a sense of ownership which creates identity, trust, value, and connection. Practitioners in the community view each other as peers and place value on their shared identity in relation to the performing arts. This ensures that practitioners perceive a high return on the time they invest in participating in the community.[2]

The community coordinates the annual ADSA and PAHN conferences, and the triennial AusStage symposium which allow the members to meet, share, discuss, collaborate, and evolve; these face-to-face events are enthusiastically attended. Communication in between conferences is less formalised but regular bulletins keep the membership up to date without becoming overwhelming. Informal communication between members is common and is encouraged.

The ephemeral nature of live performance is a contributing factor to the success of the community, not the impediment some might think it to be. Work in performing arts heritage is often about rendering tacit knowledge explicit, making tangible the intangible, and capturing, validating, and documenting that which may otherwise be forgotten. Our community members are storytellers whose stories are about the practice of story-telling. Together AusStage, ADSA and PAHN provide a supportive platform for these stories to be rehearsed, shared, and re-told.

Notes on contributor

Jenny Fewster, is the Humanities Arts and Social Sciences and Indigenous Research Data Commons Director at the Australian Research Data Commons in Adelaide. She began working on performing arts databases in the early 1990s in her role as Research Assistant at the Performing Arts Collection of South Australia. She joined AusStage, the Australian national online resource for live performance research, when the project began in 2000 and was appointed Project Manager in 2003. During her time with AusStage the project was successful in gaining over $4 million (AUD) in funding from the Australian Research Council, Australian National Data Service, National eResearch Architecture Taskforce, eResearch South Australia and the Australian Access Federation.

Notes

1. D Caplan, 'Notes from the Frontier: Digital Scholarship and the Future of Theatre Studies', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 67, no.2, 2015, pp. 357–358.
2. Etienne and Beverley Wenger-Trayner, *Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses*, 2015, available at: https://www.wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/15-06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf accessed 31 July 2023.