

Multicultural Arts: Cultural Citizenship for the 21st Century



Transcripts: *Mix It Up* project presented by Milos Miladinovic, The Arts Centre; Ruth Rentschler, Deakin University; Stefan Romaniw, Multicultural Arts Victoria.

Mix It Up is a unique ongoing collaboration between Victoria's major arts centre and a multicultural arts organisation.

Milos Miladinovic, Arts Centre executive for programming and presenter services.

"Mix It Up was designed to allow the Arts Centre to engage with a whole range of people who otherwise may not have experienced what we do, or who imagine that Opera and Ballet is all that ever happens here"

- 800 local, national and international artists
- 40 nationalities
- 96 events
- 160,000 visitors

That comment by an Arts Centre programmer and the statistics, describe Mix It Up the ground breaking cultural diversity performing arts program presented at the Arts Centre in Victoria in 2006.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

My name is Milos Miladinovic; I am the Executive who is responsible for programming and presenter services at the Arts Centre.

Today I am going to talk about the program initiative MIX IT UP.

This presentation includes:

- An introduction to the background and objectives of Mix It Up
- A brief outline of the program presented last year
- A description of the partnership between the Arts Centre and Multicultural Arts Victoria
- A summary of the research and evaluation findings
- The proposed development strategy for Mix It Up into the future

Background

The Arts Centre is Victoria's major multi-venue performing arts complex, comprising six major venues, presenting over 1400 performance events every year to an audience of over 1.2 million people.

The Victorian Arts Centre Trust has been in discussion with Government over the last five years to refresh and re-imagine the role the Arts Centre should play in its community.

Central to that discussion has been the concept of an 'Arts Centre for all Victorians'.

The Government has committed to supporting the Trust's aspirations and our new Statement of Intent sets a particular direction:

Operating from the heart of Melbourne's cultural precinct, we collaborate with artists, presenters and cultural organisations to create and present distinctive world-class programs, to engage and inspire an increasingly broad and diverse audience.

During the course of those discussions with Government an incredible opportunity arose for the Arts Centre to demonstrate its ability to connect with a wider audience. A special one-off grant of \$850,000 was provided to devise a program that would:

'Engage with, and reflect in appropriate ways, the cultural diversity of Victoria'

and also

'Enhance the programming capacity of the Trust and its leadership role within Victoria's performing arts sector'.

Objectives

The money was unexpected and the timeline frighteningly short.

The first important decision we made was that we did not have the depth and breadth of community connection to truly 'engage with the cultural diversity of Victoria'. We clearly needed a partner who could bring strength in that area.

A very valued partnership was created with a strong grass roots organisation Multicultural Arts Victoria with whom we had worked successfully in the past.

Our staff, together with Multicultural Arts Victoria established the objectives for Mix It Up at the beginning:

- Create new community pathways into the Arts Centre
- Grow the breadth and diversity of audiences
- Grow development opportunities for non mainstream artists, by engaging them and their communities with key national and international artists

And importantly, we would do that by:

- focusing on contemporary interpretations of the performing arts, from a range of traditions and cultural influences

The Program

The Arts Centre was able to leverage existing programs to create a total budget of \$1.5 million for Mix It Up. The result was five major streams of activity across nine months; this included:

A mainstage theatre program

- Including presentations by major international companies drawn from a range of diverse cultures, with a focus on non-verbal art forms including contemporary dance and contemporary circus.
- Central to the success of these international visits was the presentation of master classes for local artists and education performances for students.

A music concert program

- This featured community based artists who were engaged as guest curators of the program.
- These talented people worked alongside our programmers to develop both free and paid programs that would engage the local community and feature both local and international performers.
- Over 200 artists were engaged in the program, drawn from a truly spectacular range of cultures

An extensive free public program

- These were presented at the Arts Centre as a prelude to the performances or as outreach projects working with schools, tertiary institutions and in the community.
- The excitement of seeing the foyers buzzing with a new energy and a new audience - literally thousands of people singing, dancing and engaging in workshops, forums, demonstrations and displays from many cultures – is what made this program so inspiring

An exhibition program – Meeting Place, Keeping Place

- This featured the work of 16 local, culturally diverse artists who explored issues of identity and place
- The exhibition was extremely successful with attendances totaling over 113,000 people over three months

A creative development program

- Through Full Tilt, more than 40 emerging artists from diverse cultural backgrounds were supported to develop six projects that would plant the seeds for the development of new works, illustrating the richness of cultures in Victoria.
- Several projects have now undergone further development with one project progressing to full performance in the Fairfax Studio in November this year.

Partnership with Multicultural Arts Victoria

Stefan Romaniw

“The Arts Centre took a risk and I bless them for it.” Curator from the Music Program

Pivotal to the success of the Mix it Up program was the collaboration between MAV and the Arts Centre. The Arts Centre realised in developing this proposal that it didn't have the connections to ensure the success of the program and identified the need to work in partnership with other organisations

This was an operational partnership between a large, structured and resource rich cultural agency and a small, grassroots, community based and resource poor organisation. The Arts Centre had profile, mass and momentum but found it more difficult to be flexible and move quickly. MAV is adaptive, informal and quick moving but found it difficult to have the diverse specialist skills and strong organisational systems required for such a project. As the project developed throughout 2006 staff from MAV and the Arts Centre had to deal with the tensions and problems that these organisational characteristics created as well as celebrate the benefits and synergies they created.

This relationship can be expressed in the model shown on the power point. MAV and the Arts Centre identified the overlap in their objectives and interests that could be addressed through Mix It Up. The Arts Centre was able to bring significant funding sources to the partnership from Arts Victoria and its own programming funds. By utilising the skills and creative resources within the two organisations, the outcome was a far stronger engagement with artists and audiences from ethnic communities.

In practical terms the elements of this collaboration included MAV making a contribution to the design of the program structure, identification of local artists, delivery of public programs, making connections with local communities, developing the potential to engage new markets and audiences and participating in advocacy of Mix It Up.

The response to Mix It Up was perceived by us to be positive with a good critical response and lots of anecdotal feedback from audience, artists and the arts industry. This was reinforced by the receipt of awards by the Arts Centre from the Arts Victoria Portfolio Leadership Awards and the Victorian Multicultural Commission's Services to Multiculturalism Awards.

But MAV and the Arts Centre believed it was important to be able to prove this success. Through the support of the Australia Council Audience Development and Marketing program, we were able to commission research to evaluate the program from Deakin University.

Research Outcomes

Ruth Rentschler

I used to come here [the Arts Centre] as a kid and watch operas and think yeah I'd love to...do a hip-hop concert here. (Performer)

The research was an extension of the partnership between the Arts Centre and MAV.

Australia Council resources allowed us to evaluate the benefits of Mix It Up. We have produced a model for cultural diversity programming and audience development.

As there is no research in this area in Australia, we have produced a model for cultural diversity of interest to governments and departments.

- The Numbers

Attendees – fewer traditional Arts Centre audiences

Age – younger audiences, in hard to reach mid-years

Cultural Background – diverse ethnic backgrounds

Barriers to attendance – price, need-to-know the Arts Centre as a venue

Images and perceptions – new view of the Arts Centre as a venue and place for new audiences to visit/see performances

Experience – career development for artists

Market Segments, Age, Cultural Diversity

- The Interviews

Backed up the “hard” data with “soft” data from interviews

- Five Strategies for developing new arts audiences

Strategy #1

Create diverse audiences

Strategy #2

New ways of marketing

Strategy #3

Overcome barriers to attendance

Strategy #4

Change images and perceptions of the Arts Centre

Strategy #5

Quality of Experience

- Five strategies for working in new ways

Strategy #1

Achieve organisational and cultural change by appointing a change champion/champions

Strategy #2

Build relationships and create dialogues between communities and Arts Centre key players (curators and programmers)

Strategy #3

Appoint cultural ambassadors and holders of the keys to the doors to multicultural communities

Strategy #4

Empower marketing staff to act as facilitators with community marketers

Strategy #5

Provide skills to artists to enable them to leverage new work from Arts Centre performances

- Able to adapt and present research findings to meet any wider audience the Australia Council wants addressed.

The Way Forward for the Partnership

- a. worked with facilitator to develop partnership for 2007 and beyond,
- b. develop a model for future actions and responsibilities,
- c. MAV & the Arts Centre are currently negotiating a new partnership agreement for next 3 years,
- d. build linkages with other multicultural stakeholders eg Victorian Multicultural Commission, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, ethnic schools sector, Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia plus wider education sector.

The Future of Mix It Up

Milos Miladinovic

The Arts Centre views Mix It Up as a key component of its strategy to diversify and grow audiences.

We are committed to the long term growth of the program and it now forms one of the twelve core streams of programming, formalized in our three year cultural enterprise plan.

The second half of this year's program is music focused and is cut to the cloth of what we can afford out of our own programming resources. It comprises four concerts and their associated public programs. Three of the concerts in this season have already been held and were extremely well attended – the French concert in the 2,500 seat venue was completely sold out.

The word about Mix It Up must be getting out there!

The growth plan for Mix It Up over the next 3 years envisages the following:

- Implementing the five key strategies mentioned earlier that are about enhancing community connection and relevance
- Growing the funding base from Government and private sources to once again enable a full multi art form program to be presented
- Establishing regional touring of Mix It Up artists
- Widening the range of partners who share our aims – for example Victorian Multicultural Commission is already a valuable supporter

Clearly this represents the beginning of a long term strategy to change our audience mix.

I believe that this is a program that could serve as a model for flagship arts agencies that want to attract new and wider audiences. However I caution that it's not an easy road to go down and requires a high degree of commitment from senior management and staff to building long term, valued relationships directly with communities, treating them as equals and valuing their artistic and creative contribution.

It's not just the 160,000 attendances, the 800 artists employed and the 40 nationalities that we value at the Arts Centre. It's the buzz of a new energy and dynamic in the place, a new crowd of multicultural artists busy developing innovative works, and above all the audiences, who come to dance, sing and celebrate the intensity of their cultures.

It truly makes the Arts Centre 'A Place For All The People.'