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A 'Value Ecology' Approach to the Performing Arts

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In recent years, ecological thinking has been applied to a range of social, cultural and aesthetic systems, including performing arts as a living system of policy makers, producers, organisations, artists and audiences. Ecological thinking is systems-based thinking which allows us to see the performing arts as a complex and protean ecosystem; to explain how elements in this system act and interact; and to evaluate its effects on Australia's social fabric over time. According to Gallasch, ecological thinking is "what we desperately need for the arts." It enables us to "defeat the fragmentary and utilitarian view of the arts that dominates, to make connections, to establish overviews of the arts that can be shared and debated" (Gallasch NP).

The ecological metaphor has featured in debates about the performing arts in Brisbane, Australia, in the last two or three years. A growing state capital on Australia's eastern seaboard, Brisbane is proud of its performing arts culture. Its main theatre organisations include the state flagship Queensland Theatre Company (www.queenslandtheatre.com.au); the second major presenter of adapted and new text-based performances La Boite Theatre Company (www.laboite.com.au); venues which support local and touring performances such as the Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Arts (www.judithwrightcentre.com) and the Brisbane Powerhouse (www.brisbanepowerhouse.org); emerging talent incubator Metro Arts (www.metroarts.com.au); indigenous companies like Kooemba Jdarra (www.kooemba.com.au) and independent physical theatre and circus companies such as Zen Zen Zo (www.zenzenzo.com) and Circa (www.circa.org.au); and contemporary play-producing company 23rd Productions (www.facebook.com/23rdproductions) (cf. Baylis 3). Brisbane aspires to be a cultural capital in Australia, Australasia and the Asia Pacific (Gill). Compared to Australia's southern capitals Sydney and Melbourne, however, Brisbane does have a relatively low level of performing arts activity across traditional and contemporary theatre, contemporary performance, musicals, circus and other genres of performance. It has at times been cast as a piecemeal, potentially unsustainable arts centre prone to losing talent to other states. In 2009, John Baylis took up these issues in *Mapping Queensland Theatre*, an Arts Queensland-funded survey designed to map practices in Brisbane and in Queensland more broadly, and to provide a platform to support future policy-making. This report excited debate amongst artists who, whilst accepting the tenor of Baylis' criticisms, also lamented the lack of nuanced detail and contextualised relationships its map of Queensland theatre provided.

In this paper, we propose a new approach to mapping Brisbane's and Queensland's theatre that extends Baylis' 'value chain' into a 'value ecology' that provides a more textured picture of players, patterns, relationships and activity levels in local performing arts. A 'value chain' approach emphasises linear relationships between production, distribution and consumption in a specific sector of the economy such as the performing arts, and locates gaps in the chain which might impact on that sector's ultimate productivity. A 'value ecology' approach goes further by examining a complex range of rhizomatic relationships between production infrastructure (training, professional associations, policy, public funding, equipment, venues), distribution infrastructure (venues, agents, media, markets), and consumption infrastructure (distribution outlets and modes, media, market segments, trends, competition) and how they influence each other within a sector such as the performing arts. Our approach uses a 'value ecology' model adapted from Hearn et al. and Cherbo et al. to map and interpret information from the AusStage performing arts database (www.ausstage.edu.au), the Australian Bureau of Statistics (www.abs.gov.au), and other sources such as previews, reviews and an ongoing local blogosphere debate. Building upon Baylis' work, our approach produces literal and conceptual maps of Queensland's performing arts as they change over time, with analysis of support, infrastructure and relationships amongst government, arts organisations, artists and audiences. As debate on *Mapping Queensland Theatre* gives way to more considered reflection, and as Baylis develops a follow-up report, our approach captures snapshots of Queensland's performing arts before, during and after such policy interventions. It supports debate about how Queensland artists might manage their own sustainability, their own ability to balance artistic, cultural and economic factors that influence their work in a way that allows them to survive long term, and allows policy makers, producers and other players to better understand, articulate, assess and address criticisms.

The Ecological Metaphor

In recent years a number of commentators have understood the performing arts as an 'ecology', a system characterised by interacting elements, engagements, flows, blockages, breaks and breakthroughs whose 'health' (synonymous in this context with sustainability) depends on relationships between players within and without the system. Traditionally, performing arts policies in Australia have concentrated on singular elements in a system. They have, as Hunt and Shaw say, "concentrate[d] on individual companies or an individual artist's practice rather than the sector as a whole" (5, 43). The focus has been on how to structure, support and measure the success – the aesthetic and social benefits – of individual training institutions, artists, administrators and arts organisations. The 'health' of singular elements has been taken as a sign of the 'health' of the system. An ecologies approach, by contrast, concentrates on engagements, energies and flows as signs of health, and thus sustainability, in a system. Ecological thinking enables policy makers, practitioners and scholars to go beyond debate about the presence of activity, the volume of activity, and the fate of individual agents as signs of health or non-health of a system. In an ecologies context, level of activity is not the only indicator of health, and low activity does not necessarily equate with instability or unsustainability. It is helpful to think of the biodiversity of a rainforest compared to an arid desert (Costanza): the different ecosystems have evolved to maintain their structures in unique environments in such a way that level of activity cannot be the sole indicator of their success.

An ecological approach is critical in Brisbane, and in Queensland more broadly, where attempts to replicate the nature or level of activity in southern capitals are not necessarily the best way to shore up the 'health' of our performing arts system in our own unique environment. As the locus of our study Queensland is unique. Queenslanders account for 20.1% of the Australian population (OESR), with about two-thirds living in the south-east corner of the state in Brisbane, on the Gold Coast, and on the Sunshine Coast (ABS 'Regional Population Growth'). Brisbane has a smaller population than Sydney or Melbourne, but it is growing more quickly (ABS 'Population Projections'). 2200 people arrive in Queensland each week, 1500 of whom settle in the south-east. Many are upwardly mobile young professionals seeking career and lifestyle opportunity in what Cunningham calls "yuppie heaven." Consequently, Brisbane is now home to "a new type of demanding consumer who expects schmick cultural infrastructure along with their café latte" (Cunningham).

The levels of performing arts activity in this 'lifestyle superstate' (Leadbeater, in Cunningham) in which landscape, location and ways of living allow most people to balance work with leisure, family and friends are, perhaps surprisingly, lower than in Sydney or Melbourne. Despite this, Brisbane's creative industries have grown in recent years. Indeed, in the first half of the 2000s, jobs growth in this sector was stronger in Queensland than in any other Australian state (Cunningham). In this period, there was growth in the digital, new media, film and television sectors of the creative industries and younger audiences, changing tastes and digitally-enabled modes of practice did emerge in Queensland's theatre scene too. Nevertheless, the centre of gravity in the performing arts stayed in Sydney and Melbourne. Queensland has 20% of Australia's population, but significantly less than 20% of its performing arts producers, and many talented people continue to migrate to the south (Baylis 4, 28).

An ecologies approach can break into oft-cited anxieties about artist, activity and audience levels in Brisbane, and in Queensland, and create new ideas about what a 'healthy' local performing arts sector might look like. This might start to infuse some of the media and social media commentary that currently tends to emphasise the gaps in the sector. Ecologies are complex systems. So, as Costanza says, when we consider ecosystem health, we must consider the overall performance of the system, including its ability to deal with "external stress" (240) from macro-level political, legal, social, cultural, economic or technological currents that change the broader society this particular sector or ecosystem sits within. In Brisbane, there is a growing population and a desire to pursue a cultural capital tag, but the distinctive geographic, demographic and behavioural characteristics of Brisbane's population – and the associated 'stresses', conditions or constraints – mean that striving to replicate patterns of activity seen in Sydney or Melbourne may not be the straightest path to a 'healthy' or 'sustainable'

sector here. The attitudes of the players and the pressures influencing the system are different, so this may be like comparing rainforests with deserts, and forgetting that different elements and engagements are in fact 'healthy' in different ecosystems. From an ecologies point of view, policy makers and practitioners in Brisbane and in Queensland more broadly might be better to stop trying to match Sydney or Melbourne, acknowledge that a 'healthy' ecosystem here may look different, and generate policy, subsidy and production systems to support this. An ecological approach can help determine how much activity is in fact necessary to ensure a healthy and sustainable local performing arts sector. It can, in other words, provide a fresh approach that inspires new ideas and strategies for sector sustainability.

Brisbane, Baylis and the Blogosphere Debate

The ecological metaphor has clearly captured the interest of policy makers as they consider how to make Queensland's performing arts more sustainable and successful. For Arts Queensland:

The view of the sector as a complex and interdependent 'ecosystem' is forging new thinking, new practices and new business models. Individual practitioners and organisations are rethinking where they sit within the broader ecology, and what they contribute to the health and vitality of the sector, and how they might address the gaps in services and skills. (AQ 12)

This view informed the commissioning of *Mapping Queensland Theatre*, an assessment of Queensland's theatre sector which offers a framework for allocation of resources under the *Queensland Arts & Cultural Sector Plan 2010-2013*. It also offers a framework for negotiation with funded organisations to ensure "their activities and focus support a harmonious ecology" (Baylis 3) in which all types and levels of practice (emerging, established, touring and so on) are functioning well and are well represented within the overall mix of activities.

Utilising primary and secondary survey sources, *Mapping Queensland Theatre* seeks:

1. to map individuals, institutions and organisations who have a stake in developing Queensland's professional theatre sector; and
2. to apply a 'value chain' model of production from supply (training, creation, presentation and distribution) to demand (audiences) to identify problems and gaps in Queensland's professional theatre sector and recommend actions to address them.

The report is critical of the sector. Baylis argues that "the context for great theatre is not yet in place in Queensland ... therefore works of outstandingly high quality will be rare" (28). Whilst acknowledging a lack of ready answers about how much activity is required in a vibrant theatre culture, Baylis argues that "comparisons are possible" (27) and he uses various data sets to compare numbers of new Australian productions in different states. He finds that "despite having 20% of the Australian population, [Queensland] generates a dramatically lower amount of theatre activity" (4, 28).

The reason, according to Baylis (20, 23, 25, 29, 32, 40-41, 44), is that there are gaps in the 'value chain' of Queensland theatre, specifically in:

- Support for the current wave of emerging and independent artists
- Space for experimentation, learning and failing
- Connections between artists, companies, venues and festivals, between and within regional centres, and between Queensland companies and their (inter)national peers
- Professional development for producers to address the issue of market distribution
- Audience development

"Queensland lacks a critical mass of theatre activity to develop a sustainable theatre culture" (48), and the main gap is in pathways for independent artists and companies who have few models to aspire to and few places to present beyond Metro Arts. Quality new work does not emerge, energy dissipates, and artists move on. The solution, for Baylis, is to increase support for independent companies – especially via co-productions with mainstage companies – improve national and international touring, and investment in audience development.

Naturally, Queensland's theatre makers responded to this report. Responses were given, for example, in inaugural speeches by new Queensland Theatre Company director Wesley Enoch and new La Boite Theatre Company director David Berthold, in the media, and in blogosphere commentary on a range of articles on Brisbane performing arts in 2010. The blogosphere debate in particular raged for many months and warrants more detailed analysis elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, though, it is sufficient to note that media, social media and blogosphere debate about the health of Brisbane and Queensland theatre culture acknowledged many of the deficits Baylis identified and called for –

- More leadership
- More government support
- More venues
- More diversity
- More audience, especially for risky work, and better audience engagement
- More jobs and retention of artists

Whilst these responses endorse Baylis' findings and companies have since conceived programs that address Baylis' criticisms (QTC's introduction of a Studio Season and La Boite's introduction of an Indie program in 2010 for example) a sense of frustration also emerged. Some, like former QTC Chair Kate Foy, felt that "what's really needed in the theatre is a discussion that breaks out from the old themes and encourages fresh ideas – approaches to solving whatever problems are perceived to exist in 'the system'." For commentators like Foy, the blogosphere debate enacted a kind of ritual rehearsal of an all-too-familiar set of concerns: inadequate and ill-deployed funding, insufficient venues, talent drain and an impoverished local culture of theatre going. Repetitively invoking such concerns, the conversation seemed to confirm that "collectively the [theatre] sector is," as Knell says, "better at identifying ailments and weaker at suggesting solutions."

'Value Chains' versus 'Value Ecologies'

Why did responses to this report demand more artists, more arts organisations, more venues and more activities? Why did they repeat demands for more government-subsidised venues, platforms and support rather than drive toward new seed- or non- subsidised initiatives? At one level, this is to do with the report's claims: it is natural for artists who have been told quality work is 'rare' amongst them to point to lack of support to achieve success. At another level, though, this is because - as useful as it has been for local theatre makers - Baylis' map is premised on a linear chain from training, to first productions, to further developed productions (involving established writers, directors, designers and performers of excellence), to opportunities to tour (inter)nationally, and so on. It provides a linear image of a local performing arts sector in which there are individuals and institutions with potential, but specific gaps in the production-distribution-consumption chain that make it difficult to deliver work to target markets. It emphasises gaps in the linear pathway towards 'stability' of financial, venue and audience support and thus 'sustainability' over a whole career for independent artists and the audiences they attract. Accordingly, asking government to plug the gaps through elements added to the system (venues, co-production platforms, and producer hubs, subsidy, and entrepreneurial endeavours) seems like a logical response or solution.

Whilst this is true, it does not tell the whole story. To generate a wider story, we need to consider:

1. What the expected elements in a 'healthy' ecosystem would be (e.g. more versus alternative activity)
2. What other aesthetic, cultural or economic pressures effect the 'health' of an ecosystem
3. Why practices might need to cycle, ebb and flow over time in a 'healthy' ecosystem

A look at the way La Boite works before, during and after Baylis' analysis of Brisbane theatre illustrates why attention to these elements is necessary. A long-running company which has made the transition from amateur to professional, to being a primary developer of new Australian work in its distinctive in-the-round space, La Boite has recently shifted its strategic position. A focus on text-based Australian plays has given way to adapted, contemporary and new work in a range of genres, regular co-productions with companies in Brisbane and

beyond, and an ‘Indie’ program that offers other companies a venue. This could be read as a response to Baylis’ recommendation: the production-distribution-consumption chain gap for Brisbane’s independents is plugged, the problem is solved, the recommendation has led to the desired result. Such a reading might, though, overlook the range of pressures beyond Brisbane, beyond Queensland and beyond the Baylis report that drive – and thus help, hinder or otherwise effect – the shift in La Boite’s program strategies. The fact that La Boite recently lost its Australia Council funding, or that La Boite like all theatre companies needs co-productions to keep its venue running as costs increase, or that La Boite has rebranded to appeal to younger audiences interested in postdramatic, do-it-yourself or junkyard style aesthetics. These factors all influence what La Boite might do to sustain itself, and more importantly, what its long-term impact on Brisbane’s theatre ecology will be. To grasp what is happening here, and get beyond repetitive responses to anxieties about Brisbane’s theatre ecology, detail is required not simply on whether programs like La Boite’s ‘plugged the gap’ for independent artists, but on how they had both predicted and unpredicted effects, and how other factors influenced the effects.

What is needed, in effect, is to extend mapping from a ‘value chain’ to a full ‘value ecology’.

This is also something Hearn et al. have called for. A value chain suggests a “single linear process with one stage leading to the next” (5). It ignores the environment and other external enablers and disregards a product’s relationship to other systems or products. In response, they prefer a “value creating ecology” in which the “constellation of firms are [sic] dynamic and value flow is multi-directional and works through clusters of networks” (6).

Whilst Hearn et al. emphasise ‘firms’ or companies in their value creating ecology, a range of elements – government, arts organisations, artists, audiences, and the media as well as the aesthetic, social and economic forces that influence them – needs to be mapped in the value creating ecology of the performing arts. Cherbo et al. provide a system of elements or components which, adapted for a local context like Brisbane or Queensland, can better form the basis of a value ecology approach to the way a specific performing arts community works, adapts, changes, breaks down or breaks through over time.

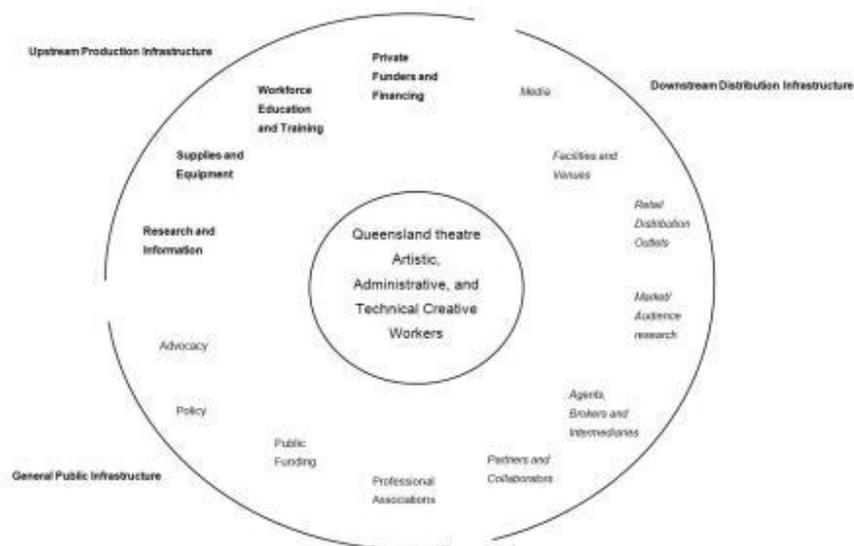


Figure 1 – Performing Arts Sector Map (adapted from Cherbo et. al. 14)

Here, the performing arts sector is understood in terms of core artistic workers, companies, a constellation of generic and sector specific support systems, and wider social contexts (Cherbo et al. 15). Together, the shift from value chain to value ecology that Hearn et al. advocate, and the constellation of ecology elements that Cherbo et al. emphasise, bring a more detailed, dynamic range of relations into play. These include ‘upstream’ production

infrastructure (education, suppliers, sponsors), ‘downstream’ distribution infrastructure (venues, outlets, agents), and overall public infrastructure. As a framework, lens or filter for mapping ‘value ecology’ this model offers a more nuanced perspective on production, distribution and consumption elements in an ecology. It allows for analysis of impact of interventions in dozens of different areas, from dozens of perspectives, and thus provides a more detailed picture of players, relationships and results to support both practice and policy making around practice.

An Aus-e-Stage Value Ecology

To provide the more detailed, dynamic image of local theatre culture that a value ecology approach demands – to show players, relations between players, and context in all their complexity – we use the Aus-e-Stage Mapping Service, an online application that maps data about artists, arts organisations and audiences across cityscapes/landscapes. We use Aus-e-Stage with data drawn from three sources: the AusStage database of over 50,000 entries on Australian performing arts venues, productions, artists and reviews; the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on population; and the Local Government Area (LGA) maps the ABS uses to cluster populations.



Figure 2 – Using AusStage Interface

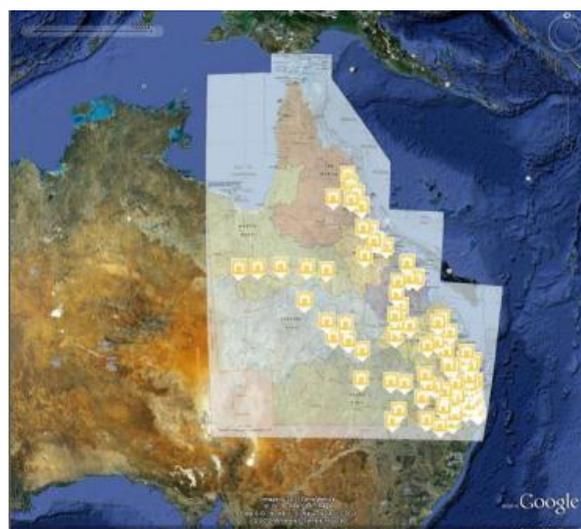


Figure 3 – AusStage data on theatre venues laid over ABS Local Government Area Map

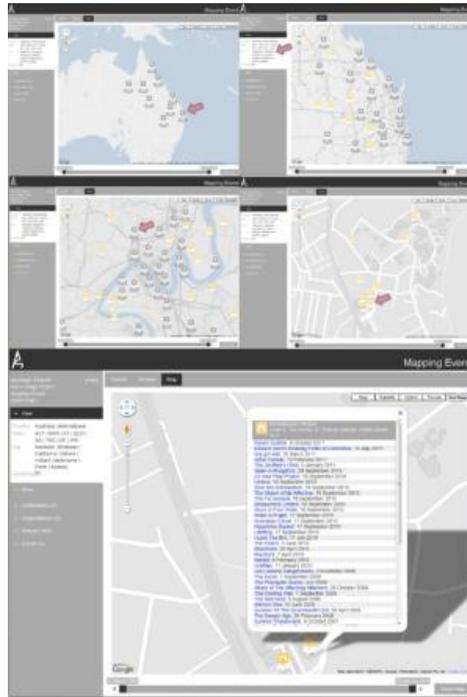


Figure 4 – Using Aus-e-Stage / AusStage to zoom in on Australia, Queensland, Brisbane and La Boite Theatre Company, and generate a list of productions, dates and details.

Aus-e-Stage produces not just single maps, but a sequential series of snapshots of production ecologies, which visually track who does what when, where, with whom and for whom. Its sequences can show –

1. The way artists, companies, venues and audiences relate to each other
2. The way artists' relationship to companies, venues, and audiences changes over time
3. The way 'external stressors' changes such as policy, industrial or population changes effect the elements, roles and relationships in the ecology from that point forward

Though it can be used in combination with other data sources such as interviews, the advantage of AusStage data is that maps of moving ecologies of practice are based not on descriptions coloured by memory but clear, accurate program, preview and review data. This allows it to show how factors in the environment – population, policy, infrastructure or program shifts – effect the ecology, effect players in the ecology, and prompt players to adapt their type, level or intensity of practice. It extends Baylis' value chain into a full value ecology that shows the detail on how an ecology works, going beyond demands that government plug perceived gaps and moving towards data- and history- based decisions, ideas and innovation based on what works in Brisbane's performing arts ecology.

Our Aus-e-Stage mapping shows this approach can do a number of useful things. It can create sequences showing breaks, blockages and absences in an individual or company's effort to move from emerging to established (e.g. in a sudden burst of activity followed by nothing). It can create sequences showing an individual or company's moves to other parts of Australia (e.g. to tour or to pursue more permanent work). It can show surprising spaces, relations and sources of support artists use to further their career (e.g. use of an amateur theatre outside the city such as Brisbane Arts Theatre). It can capture data about venues, programs or co-production networks that are more or less effective in opening up new opportunities for artists (e.g. moving small-scale experiments in Metro Arts' 'Independents' program to full scale independent productions in La Boite's 'Indie' program, its mainstage program, other mainstage programs, and beyond). It can link to program

information, documentation or commentary to compare anticipated and actual effects. It can lay the map dates and movements across significant policy, infrastructure or production climate shifts.

In the example below, for instance, Aus-e-Stage represents the tour of La Boite’s popular production of a new Australian work *Zig Zag Street*, based on the Brisbane-focused novel by Nick Earls about a single, twentysomething man’s struggles with life, love and work.

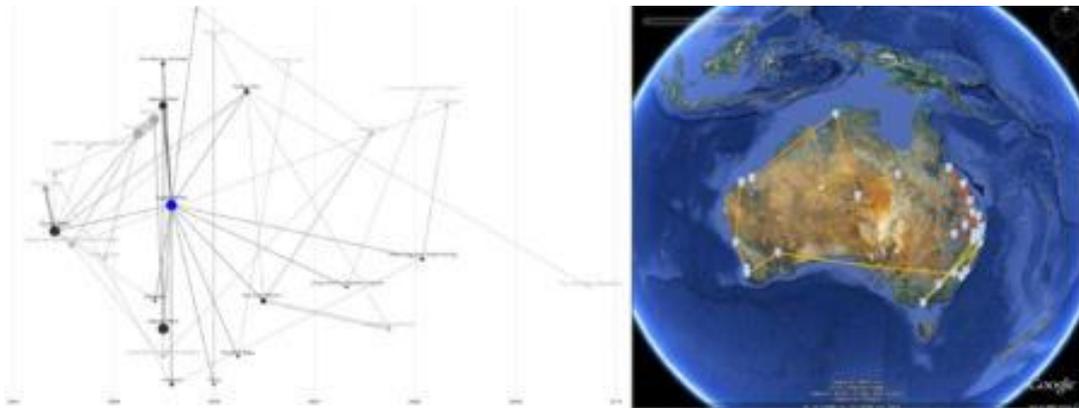


Figure 5 – Zig Zag Street Tour Map

In the example below, Aus-e-Stage represents the movements not of a play but of a performer – in this case Christopher Sommers – who has been able to balance employment with new work incubator Metro Arts, mainstage and indie producer La Boite, and stage theatre company QTC with his role with independent theatre company 23rd Productions to create something more protean, more portfolio-based or boundary-less than a traditional linear career trajectory.

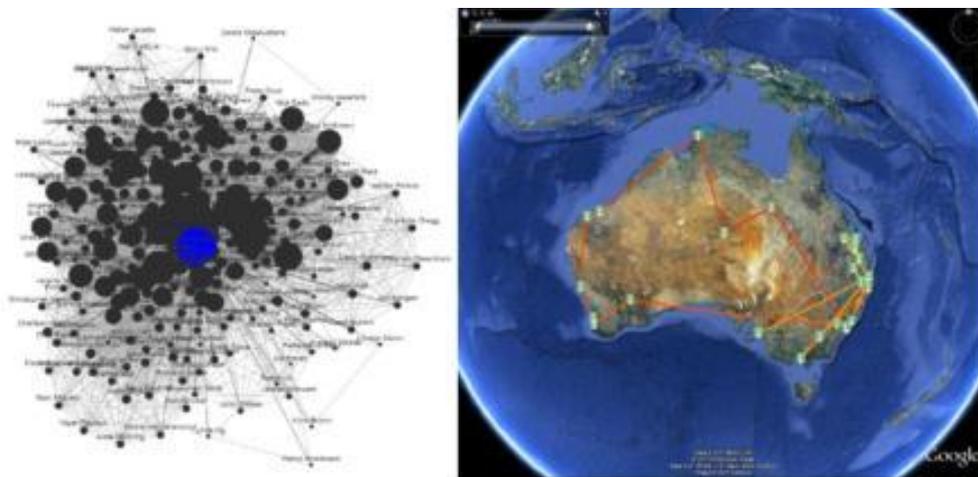


Figure 6 – Christopher Sommers Network Map and Travel Map

This value of this approach, and this technology, is clear. Which independents participate in La Boite Indie (or QTC’s ‘Studio’ or ‘Greenroom’ new work programs, or Metro’s emerging work programs, or others)? What benefits does it bring for artists, for independent companies like play producers 23rd Productions (www.facebook.com/23rdproductions), contemporary devised performance collective The Escapists (www.facebook.com/pages/The-Escapists/115725051082), or Australian gothic puppet theatre making company the Dead Puppet Society (www.deadpuppetsociety.com.au), or for mainstage companies like La Boite? Is it one-off subsidised productions? Is it a launching pad leading to ongoing, sustainable production practices? What happens to artists afterwards? What new audience populations do they encounter? What do artists, audiences or

others say about these trajectories in previews, programs or reviews? Using Aus-e-Stage as part of a value ecology approach answers these questions. It answers questions about emerging artist and emerging work programs like the La Boite Indie program, the Metro Arts Independents program, the JWCOCA Fresh Blood program, QTC Studio Season and Greenroom Season programs, as well as other venue, support and subsidy strategies. It provides a more detailed picture of what happens, what effect it has on local theatre ecology, and exactly which influences enabled this effect: precisely the data needed to generate informed debate, ideas and decision making.

Conclusion

Our ecological approach provides images of a local performing arts ecology in action, drawing out filtered data on different players, relationships and influencing factors, and thus extending examination of Brisbane's and Queensland's performing arts sector into useful new areas. It offers three main advances – first, it adopts a value ecology approach (Hearn et al.), second, it adapts this value ecology approach to include not just companies by all up- and down- stream players, supporters and infrastructure (Cherbo et. al.), and, thirdly, it uses the wealth of data available via Aus-e-Stage maps to fill out and filter images of local theatre ecology. It allows us to develop detailed, meaningful data to support discussion, debate and development of ideas that is less likely to get bogged down in old, outdated or inaccurate assumptions about how the sector works. Indeed, this is data that lends itself to additional analysis in a number of ways, from economic analysis of how shifts in policy influence productivity to sociological analysis of the way specific practitioners or practices acquire status and cultural capital (Bourdieu) in the field. Whilst descriptions offered here demonstrate the potential of this approach, this is by no means a finished exercise. Indeed, because this approach is about analysing how elements, roles and relationships in an ecology shift over time, it is an ever-unfinished exercise. As Fortin and Dale argue, ecological studies of this sort are necessarily iterative, with each iteration providing new insights and raising further questions into processes and patterns (3). Given the number of local performing arts producers who have changed their practices significantly since Baylis' *Mapping Queensland Theatre* report, and the fact that Baylis is producing a follow-up report, the next step will be to use this approach and the Aus-e-Stage technology that supports it to trace how ongoing shifts impact on Brisbane's ambitions to become a cultural capital. This process is underway, and promises to open still more new perspectives by understanding anxieties about local theatre culture in terms of ecologies and exploring them cartographically.

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