# WHEN SHALL WE THREE MEET AGAIN: REPORT

This report is based on a strategic initiative curated by Browns Mart, Tracks Dance Company and Corrugated Iron Youth Arts to reflect on where we have come from, acknowledge where we are at and discover where we want to go. The process was supported through the Arts NT Strategic Arts Program.

## CONTEXT

The performing arts in the Northern Territory is at the junction of professionalism and community. With a rich history of community based art, in recent years the arts sector has developed its practice to include increasing numbers of professional artists generating a wage for their work.

Browns Mart, Tracks and Corrugated Iron are key players and employers in the NT performing arts sector through the producing and creating of work. Each organisation developed a five year strategic plan which successfully led them to be funded by the Federal Government until 2020. The three companies are collegiate, sharing employees, artists, resources and equipment. The shared history between the organisations and the collegiate relationship placed them in an ideal position to posit the questions around the integration between professional practice and community based practice in Darwin.

This project enabled the three organisations to share their knowledge, break down thinking silos, find creative solutions, and to form appropriate and lasting partnerships, to secure their future and the future of the sector they operate in.

This project responded to the three organisations being separated 20 years ago and asked the questions - What has happened since? What are the key issues for the sector and the organisations today? How will they best address the challenges ahead and contribute to a thriving NT performing arts sector for the next 20 years?

TRACKS
www.tracksdance.com.au

BROWNS MART THEATRE
www.brownsmart.com.au

Corrugated Iron YOUTH ARTS
www.corrugatediron.org.au

## METHODOLOGY

The project was driven by the Executives of the three organisations.
***Sean Pardy,*** Executive Director, Brown's Mart
***Tim Newth and David McMicken***, Artistic Co-Directors, Tracks Dance
***Jane Tonkin,*** Executive Producer, Corrugated Iron Youth Arts

***Gillian Harrison,*** Local consultant, who supported the project through planning and consultation days.

**The three organisations:-**

- Created a project plan
- Met with the external consultant to explore the operating environments of the three organisations
- Designed the labs and identified the pool of artists and artsworkers to be invited to participate; criteria identified was that all had worked with the three organisations. Participants were loosely grouped into the following categories – Technical & Production / Drivers / Next Gen / Elders or Living Treasures / Staff / Colleagues. We acknowledged there was overlap between some groups, but the label provided a framework for discussion.
- Six labs were held – a full day of focused discussion, catered for enabling participants to fully focus on the task at hand.
- Met to review the material collected from the labs.
- Met with the external consultant, reflected on the labs and the potential future actions.
- Surveyed participants
- Planned the presentation back to the lab participants and designed the report structure.
- Presented to the lab participants
- Developed written report

## LAB PROCESS

A safe space was created where participants could express themselves, be candid about their experiences, and open about the challenges faced in our sector.

Participants were well catered for, and paid an honorarium for their time. Participants put away their mobiles and focused fully on the task at hand.

We set an environment for the day, that also built over the week, enabling participants to 'record' their story via visual prompts:-

- Bricks – building blocks that provoked/inspired creative careers were written on paper bricks and a wall was built over the course

**Project stakeholders consistently expressed a desire for a purpose - built arts precinct to offer studio/rehearsal space and common meeting and work-space, and that this would provoke collaborations and exchange of skills/ideas/expertise.**

of the week.

- Stepladders – helping hands and support mechanisms for career advancement were written on notes attached to a physical ladder.
- Slingshots – moments of propulsion were written on paper slingshots and pinned to a target.

Future ideas and recommendations were collected via:

- Seeds – ideas planted now for the future were written on paper seeds and posted on a whiteboard with a growing vine to reflect the growth.
- Keep/Change/Chuck repositories were three cute little bins, coloured coded, where participants could share with the organisations elements they thought could be kept or modified. Items in these bins were sector-wide observations as well as organisation specific.

The four representatives from the organisations hosted the labs. There were consistent questions discussed at each lab with room for some identified focus for respective groups.

**Topics for the labs:-**

- What brought you into the arts?
- Freelance/full or part time work balance
- Diversity of jobs – jack of all trades or master of one
- Future visioning – exercise that acknowledged we were reflecting on last 20 years but what will the sector and the organisations look like in the next 20?
- Feedback and reflection on the day

Over the course of the labs, we consulted with 39 people.
21 people attended the feedback event.

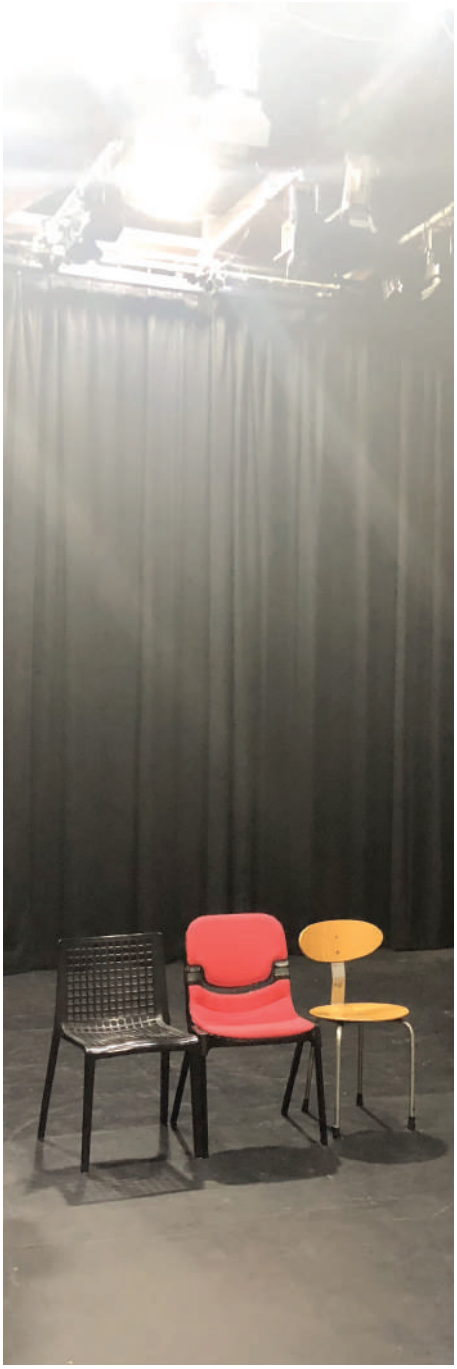
## WHAT DID THE ORGANISATIONS LEARN?

Each organisation took away individual learnings but observed a number of common threads running through the project.

**Project feedback: access to a desk, resources and advice, equipment, auspicing and sustaining casual employment is vital for artists continuing creative lives.**

- Everyone had an influential individual for example teacher, mentor, boss, parent, and an experience such as performance coming to school, church life, finding their tribe moment. These influences were pivotal in inspiring a creative life.
- The work balance between freelance and permanent positions is challenging. Whilst the freelance work offers variety and control, it has extreme ebbs and flows, and lacks reliability. It becomes untenable for some people when other pressures mount [eg health, family, bills]. Permanent work comes with compromise; artists own practice often takes a back seat. For some a balance can be achieved with experience, and for others it remains a

**Project evaluation: 85% of participants described the process as worthwhile and reflective. Over 91% said they would participate in this sort of process again.**



frustration that they cannot focus purely on their craft.

- It was articulated strongly the crucial role organisations play in providing both soft and hard infrastructure. That access to a desk, resources and advice, equipment, auspicing and sustaining casual employment is vital for artists continuing creative lives.
- Casual and contract work does not include provision for leave entitlements, superannuation and professional learning. Whilst the three organisations have taken steps toward ensuring superannuation is paid regardless of minimum earnings, the other issues remain unaddressed.
- The three organisations need to maintain a nimbleness to respond to the varying needs of artists and artsworkers including supporting mid-career artists who often fall in the gaps of funding initiatives, and early career artsworkers, who have quite different expectations about the employment landscape.
- There was a consistent view expressed that silos should be broken down as a way to enable access to organisations, strengthen artist support and encourage sharing and maximising of limited resources.
- Overwhelmingly participants expressed that they had not participated in a day like this before, and used words such as worthwhile, reflective, inspiring, affirming and collegiate to describe the experience. 85% of participants described the process as worthwhile and reflective. Over 91% said they would participate in this sort of process again, with the remainder neutral.

## COLLECTIVELY THERE WERE COMMITMENTS MADE BY THE THREE ORGANISATIONS.

The organisations will:

- meet twice yearly to look at programming and collaborative opportunities,
- facilitate further strategic initiatives and labs
- share resources with each other and the broader sector in a more pro-active way
- be more pro-active in generating or brokering professional learning opportunities for non-permanent staff