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“Don’t drink poison – it will kill you” and other things learned in a multipurpose hall.

Twelve years of Bell Shakespeare School visits in rural and remote NSW.

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'… these types of performances when kids see something that's different from what is just in their small town, that they're like "Wow! There is so much more out there for me".'

Introduction

This initial report is the first in several that consider the key areas of the impact of Bell Shakespeare's Scully Artist in Residence and Bell Shakespeare's Players programs in regional and remote schools program in New South Wales (NSW).

The report draws on interviews with five Bell Shakespeare employees who have worked on these programs along with the acquittal reports prepared by Bell Shakespeare players to document the Company's yearly Rural and Remote school visits.

Unpublished Acquittal reports were provided to the researchers. The following reports were included for analysis: Acquittal Reports for the Scully Fund: 2009; 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017; 2018, 2019, 2021. Artist in residence report 2016.

Each yearly report is approximately 10-20 pages and includes narrative accounts from the players themselves, alongside letters from schools, and interview quotes from students and teachers.

A comprehensive thematic review of the 12 years of documents together with the interviews drew out four broad themes: access; fostering a passion for theatre; learning Shakespeare; and embodiment, engagement and enjoyment. In addition, what and how such programs are enabled in schools, alongside potential challenges to such programs are considered.

Each of the four themes are discussed below.

Access

Access was the most coded theme across the reports. Access to programs are opportunities often taken for granted in metropolitan areas, but they are 'few and far between' in remote and regional areas. There is also the issue of stereotypes created by limited and pre-existing descriptors such as 'regional' and 'remote' (Hansford, 2019) and the binaries between 'city' and 'country' that are created.

Each report noted the inequalities faced by young people in regional and remote communities when accessing education programs, special events, or theatre. Access

issues in regional Australia are multilayered. Physical isolation is, as expected, a key contributor to access issues. For many communities involved in Bell's program performances and events took place outside of their immediate area: "for any sort of cultural experience we have to drive at least 2 hours" (teacher, 2018 report).

Cost was also mentioned as a barrier to accessing arts in regional communities. With smaller student numbers, the share of cost for paying for programs and performances is much more than in city or larger regional schools. Socio-economic indicators tend to be lower in remote communities than most urban centres (ABS, 2021). This combined with the increased cost of travel in remote areas, amplifies the financial barriers to accessing cultural and artistic programs and performances. Several reports mentioned cost as the main reason for students' lack of access to theatre excursion or incursions. Even when these performances are available, most families cannot afford them (2015 report). Bell's commitment to regional and remote performances is what makes theatre accessible for many students.

Bell's program consistently brings theatre experiences to young Australians who have never seen a live theatre performance previously and to schools that would normally not be able to provide such experiences for their students. The notion that cultural experiences generally, and theatre performances specifically, were 'rare' was mentioned numerous times throughout most reports. Comments such as "Live theatre is a gift this far from Sydney" (2015 report), and "Some had studied Shakespeare, but most had not had the opportunity to see a performance" (2011 report) demonstrate this. The 'gifting' of theatre to those that had not experienced it before was predominantly highlighted as positive in the reports. For example, "What actor does not want to perform for people who had not ever seen theatre before?" (Player feedback, 2013 report), it was also targeted as an obstacle for the players, who are performing for an audience that had not learned how to be an audience, and the particular cultural and practical behaviours expected. Players noted that they were often warned by teachers that students may not know how to behave as audience members for live theatre and players deliberately worked with these students in ways that allowed them to engage.

Beyond the stress on the importance of young people accessing these 'rare' cultural events, the program had other access-related influences. On more than one occasion, the Bell Shakespeare visit generated enough interest in drama that the subject was offered in the school for the first time (or for the first time in many years). Students who had an interest in drama and theatre were often described as desperate for contact with people with similar interests and could share information about how they might access drama/theatre programs beyond school. The players provided these students with access to role models, "providing them with a 'young, cool, creative' male role model, particularly as few of the students have role models such as this in their lives" (2015 report). This was particularly impactful for students interested in theatre as these role models had similar interests and had pursued the performing arts as a career.

Research indicates that restricted access to information about, and demonstrations of, different career pathways have a significant impact on the life experiences of young people living outside urban centres (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). In an interview, an experienced Bell Player reflected on the importance of young people accessing knowledge about what's possible, and the difficulties associated with this when they live in a community that is remote from the multiple, complex employment pathways available:

> "*the concept of being an artist in any form just doesn't exist because everyone…well, you're either like on a farm or your family lives in town, and you're probably just working just to be able to get by…and you're not thinking about the world in a bigger context, I suppose…and so it's like these types of performances when kids see something that's different from what is just in their small town, that they're like "Wow! There is so much more out there for me". And you have moments where kids would come up to you afterwards and they're like "How do you, like…how do you do that? Like…how do I do this? This is so much fun. I've never thought of this as something that I can do!*" (Int O)

The Bell players not only provided opportunities for young people to share their passion for theatre with adults who had high levels of knowledge about the field but could also speak with the young people about career opportunities in the arts with high levels of authority.

Passion for theatre

Many of the themes in this report overlap, and the fostering of students' passion for theatre closely links with the discussion about access to role models above. In much of the feedback from schools, appreciation was shown to the Bell performances and the individual Players for their ability to foster students' passion for theatre generally, and Shakespeare specifically. This fostering of passion took a variety of forms, from more general discussion of students' discovering they enjoyed theatre, to very specific instances of individual students reaching out to engage in discussions with the players.

In several reports, the players discussed instances where they provided students with practical advice about working as an actor. As mentioned above, there are intersectional access issues in rural and remote communities in Australia, including access to working role models. Many of these students would never have had an opportunity to meet a working actor and receive career or performance advice. In addition to the performances, artists spent time on the tours talking to students about how to pursue careers in the performing arts. Artists often made comments such as:

> "*We were all particularly moved when Connor introduced us to a student who has aspirations of becoming an actor. This young man was so excited to chat with The Players and asked them for a few career tips. He emphasised how*

much he appreciated having access to live theatre and what a rare experience it was for him." (2017)

This is an unremarkable quote, in that similar comments are made numerous times throughout the reports, but it is illustrative of the kind of mentoring the artists provided. Similarly the following quote from the Moree tour in 2019:

"*In Moree, we had a handful of senior students speak with us after the performance, confessing that they love performing, but didn't think it was a realistic career path because of where they lived. As Emily, Violette and myself are all from areas outside of the major metropolitan regions we were able to encourage them to go for it and offer up some advice on how you can practically pursue such passions from remote Australia.*" (teaching artist, 2019 report)

Players who had lived in rural or regional Australia previously were particularly concerned with the importance of these discussions. There were instances where the players, in their reflections, or teachers, in their feedback, reflected on their own rural upbringing, and the importance of the Bell Shakespeare visits to them when they were in schools.

On more than one occasion, comments were made in the reflective report about how the Bell performances provided opportunities for the students and teachers to consider their relationship to theatre differently.

"*they are falling in love with just the energy of an embodied artist. And then the next thing they're falling in love with is drama and theatre and interactive storytelling, and then they're also falling in love with Shakespeare, because that's their first entry point into it. But it's their first experience of that energetic transfer between storyteller, artist, live performer, and receiver, an audience, and its fireworks.*" (Int J)

As Powell (2014) writes: 'you don't need an expensive education to understand the words [of Shakespeare], but you do need the luxury of time, space and specialism to put his words on their feet and try them out.' In one school, the students went on after the experience to begin devising and performing their own plays, supported by their teacher. In another, a teacher noted that the school had not realised there were students in the school interested in the arts until they saw their reaction to the Bell Shakespeare troupe. This changed the way this teacher interacted with, and planned for, their students.

The opportunity to develop and express passion for the arts can be considered an access issue. Having access to those that share your passion, or who have expertise in your passion, provides young people not just with knowledge and connection, but also validation. A comment from the 2009 report noted that it is like seeing plants that haven't been nourished in weeks getting a long drink of water (2009).

Learning Shakespeare

The second most charted theme in the interviews, reports, and school feedback over the 12 years of the program is its contribution to teaching Shakespeare. This theme incorporated sub-themes of assisting understanding, making Shakespeare accessible and relevant, and the development of more general skills.

Much of the feedback from teachers praised the Bell performances for their ability to help students understand Shakespeare. This development of understanding was considered important from early primary all the way through to Year 12. Specific 'understanding' focused on things like language, new perspectives on text, making the play easier to understand. In the younger years, the focus of the feedback was on how important it was for children to see, enjoy and understand Shakespeare and the Bell performances de-mystified what are often considered 'grown up' or complex texts (Erskine & Ewing, 2023). For senior students the teachers noted how the Bell performances supported students to study a specific text – solidifying their ideas about the play, helping to understand it more clearly. Understanding the complexity of the language and different perspectives on the relevance of Shakespeare was considered by Players and teachers to help the students think more clearly about the deeper ideas that the plays are about. One Bell staff member commented that what I think Shakespeare does, and the complex language goes into this as well, is, is, foster, a sense of critical thought (Int Ja).

Revisiting the centrality of ways Bell's program provides access to for students, beyond the physical and financial access discussed above, there are also issues related to intellectual and linguistic access to Shakespeare's plays. James extended on his comment above to consider how the Bell Players demonstrated this critical thought for students and modelled how one might discuss and analyse plays:

> "*So, so this, so the play, the show, will be, you know, scenes from Macbeth or Romeo & Juliet, and or something, but then the characters will stop, and there'll be one who…you know…has gotta bee in their bonnet about something, and then they'll have an argument, and the other one will respond. And, and so we kind of model the conversations that the students might want to have in their classrooms later on, about the play and about the world of the play, about Shakespeare himself, within the show itself.*" (Int Ja)

Shakespeare is a core tenet of Australian curriculum, and often associated with high stakes learning and assessment. Many students, however, expect to find it difficult to connect with the language and content of the plays (Erskine & Ewing, 2023), or consider the themes inaccessible as they are too removed from their everyday lives and experiences.

> "*Shakespeare is the barrier, but because Shakespeare is so high stakes in schools and seen as so hard... that actually becomes part of the strength, too*." (FJ Interview)

One of the most common words used to praise Bell's approach to teaching Shakespeare in the reports was 'relevant'. A snapshot of this feedback indicates that Bell's workshops Bring Shakespeare to life (2009) and to immersive Shakespeare learning in activity and embodiment as a way of teaching these ideas that are just very 'head-y' in the classroom. (Int O). The feedback from schools also claimed that by linking with modern texts and events it helps students connect with themes (2011) and in doing so makes Shakespeare relevant today (2014), making Shakespeare accessible and students excited about Shakespeare. (2019). To sum up these multiple instances, a teacher in the 2009 report indicated that Bell "manage to bring Shakespeare 'to life' and show contemporary relevance to an isolated audience which has limited exposure to the 'big wide world'.

By 'making Shakespeare relevant' the Bell Players and Artist in Residence encouraged students to connect Shakespeare to their own stories and understand the perspectives of Shakespeare's world and how it might be the same as today.

> "*And then the second half of the 10 week workshops we'd be bearing our own stories. So, if you would like to bring a story or something...could be a personal story, it could be anything. We're going to explore storytelling that way so. And I would invite that by, by telling a story from my life that was like an impactful moment or something.*" (Int FJ)

This opens opportunities for students to bring their own funds of knowledge and consider how their diverse experiences help them to have different insights into the play:

> "*they can have a debate about what Romeo, and Juliet's intentions were, and why they had to do what they did, and why they did, and maybe they shouldn't have. We've done this play in a juvenile detention centre I've been involved in a number of Residencies that juvenile detention centres as well, and it stokes an extraordinary debate there about family and the role of children and parents, and then, in, you know, communities, perhaps in Western Sydney, where there's a real understanding of what an arranged marriage is, you know, in a way that I can't possibly understand.*" (Int JA)

The willingness of the Players as 'experts' of Shakespeare to spotlight the students' experiences and ideas, recruiting these as indicators of their understanding of the play demonstrates the ways they encourage students to connect the ideas to their own lives.

There were other learning benefits from the Bell tours that were lessons learned *through* Shakespeare that had relevance to other subjects and or skills. Commonly mentioned was deep learning about theatre that supported drama students to understand elements of performance. One lament from teachers was that the lack of access to professional theatre in these communities resulted in not having explicit guidance or modelling of how to 'do' quality performance. Bell players provided students with not only a demonstration of this, but also explicit discussion and workshopping to help students unpack different elements of performing Shakespeare. Teachers also indicated that the Bell Shakespeare tours helped students understand the process of text analysis, initially through Shakespeare, but this was a transferrable skill which assisted with other texts in English and Drama.

Embodiment, engagement and enjoyment

Engagement is a key element in learning (for example, Astin, 1999; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). The Bell reports every year commented on the role of the program in fostering engagement and enjoyment. A key aspect of what the participants and Bell staff believed contributed to this enjoyment was the centrality of embodiment and liveness.

> "*It's embodied learning. It's moving them ,it's taking them, they're whole human...their bodies as well you know. It's not theoretical. And what that does is it asks them to participate in a level deeper than what they're used to.*" (Jules Interview)

As a Player stated "just that the idea of live-ness and the immediacy of having another human being, trying to affect another human being on stage in front of you is often electric" (Int JA). This 'electricity' fostered engagement, enjoyment, and "Most importantly, they have learned that Shakespeare is about performance and enjoyment, not studying scripts" (Teacher feedback, 2010 report). One player remembered a dramatic exercise students participated in as part of a workshop on Macbeth:

> "*it summed up the play of Macbeth and where his head was, and so the throne was just made up of all this dead bodies and the people that it was like behind him. It was just so good. And there's a group of Year 10s that didn't know the play three days before that.*" (Int FJ)

This attention to live-ness and Shakespeare beyond the script is a deliberate focus of the program.

A common lament from both Bell staff and teachers was the over-reliance many schools had on teaching Shakespeare as static text, rather than a play that supports embodied, engaging learning:

> "*very often we have teachers saying, "Well, the way we teach Shakespeare is, we give out the classroom set. We sit around and they read it from beginning to end". And of course the kids are gonna hate it, they don't understand what they're saying!*" (Int JA).

This resonates with much of the research that demonstrates that limited of the text using outdated pedagogy can reduce learner interest and engagement in Shakespeare (see for example, Purewol, 2017).

The Bell Shakespeare players and Artists in Residents deliberately move away from this approach with its active, immersive approach:

> "*The whole point of what we do is that antithesis to what the teacher is doing which is just sit down and open this book. And, that's just a mass of words, whereas we're jumping out and physicalising an idea, a concept, using our body. So because a lot of these kids are kinaesthetic learners. They love sports that, you know, that's their comfort zone. So we're doing that. We're playing games, we're exploring ideas like status and dramatic irony and things like that physically.*" (Int JE)

This shift has long lasting effects in some schools. Reports and Bell Players discussed how often they receive feedback from schools that their program reinvigorated the teaching of Shakespeare (and often Drama) in the school.

> "*I still get emails from that teacher, you know, saying, after we left, she was like 'the entire school is alive now'. They, they, they, they're awake, or they've like, yeah, they've, they've just like they've been reinvigorated.*" (Int J)

Many considered the program to be so engaging because it draws on storytelling to teach. Not only does storytelling align with ways of knowing and learning in Indigenous cultures, but it is also considered by the teaching artists as a universal way to connect with ideas and people.

Players commented that many students who begin the performance seemingly disengaged (either with the play or with Shakespeare) become engaged throughout the performance. Laughter and fun were key elements of what the Players felt they brought to the students, particularly the younger audiences This was especially stark in the 2021 report – travelling to towns that had been severely impacted by the bushfires and then COVID, there was a sense that bringing excitement and joy was needed and that students were hungry to experience connection, laughter and joy:

> "*… that's the blessing of it, because a lot of what we do is just go in and just have fun, and the teachers talk about the joy that has just been experienced by everyone this week, and they haven't seen the kids laugh or have that much fun, you know for a long time.*" (JE interview)

Enjoyment and engagement were not only 'for' the students. Many of the players commented on the joy performances and connections with community brought them, including the privilege of cultural exchange between the youth and the artists.

Enablers for the program

Bell staff noted several enablers for the Rural and Remote programs. First, and potentially most obviously, was funding. Linked with issues of access, teachers, principals and players all commented on how without the Scully funding these opportunities would be impossible to source and fund in most cases.

The enthusiasm of the teachers at the schools was also a core enabler. The program was not only intended to work with children, but the residency program also provided teachers with different 'ways in' to the work, allowing them to first of all, get excited about teaching in a new way, and then they become champions of this kind of new system of active learning (Int JA) Bell staff acknowledged the teachers who 'championed' the program and noted the engagement with the students came more easily if teachers had been working with students to prepare them before the visit.

Finally, the adaptability and versatility of the Bell Shakespeare staff were crucial to the success of the program. There were times when players reported having to change shows on arrival at the school. For example, one school had booked a very challenging show (which was a mix of Othello and Macbeth) and after discussions with the teachers, the Bell players decided to change the show and performed Romeo and Juliet Intensive instead as the students were more familiar with the play. The players are all familiar with a range of shows and can adapt as needed, at times with little or no notice. Even when everything goes as planned, the players may be working with 6 year old students in the morning and 15 year old students in the afternoon, having to adapt quickly to the different audiences.

Challenges to the program

There were several tensions and challenges mentioned in the reports. While enthusiastic teachers were considered a key enabler, teachers were also the most commonly stated barrier to the success of the programme. Reports often commented on language teachers used to describe the children, or question the students' ability to behave appropriately or their capacity to learn and engage. For instance a quote from the 2009 report:

Ben (the Bell player) is full of praise for the kid's enthusiasm. This same teacher grumbles "He's one of the bad ones." We are all taken aback by the comment. It is clear that this is part of the problem. Students who don't fit the mould are labelled as 'bad'. Their creativity and exuberance isn't harnessed and encouraged. It is inconvenient, abnormal. I bet no one ever asked him what his passion was.

There was also tension evident when teachers questioned what Shakespeare could 'do' for those students who might be experiencing complex social or learning difficulties: "every year we have teachers who question the validity of Shakespeare for Wilcannia Students" (Player 2011 report). There were occasional breakthroughs reported around this, for instance some reports noted that their observation of the students during the Bell Shakespeare workshops boosted their belief that their students were capable and could understand complex things. However, these attitudes towards the students and the performances limited the potential opportunities of the performances for those students.

The second biggest challenge mentioned in the reports was concerned with the extent to which students experienced 'shame' when participating or struggled to 'look cool'. It is the first barrier a lot of the time (Int FJ). Players noted that this sometimes led to students stopping each other contributing or being openly rowdy. 'Shame' as a challenge for the students and players was mentioned in half the reports for instance, in the 2015 report a girl asked the players how they dealt with the 'shame of performing in front of people'.

> "*There's a lot of shame in getting, getting up and putting yourself out there in the spotlight, which doesn't...It's a different reason. It's like, don't be, you know...trying to be cool.*" (Int JE)

Performers tried to overcome Shame in many ways. Most common was to play all or most characters themselves and allow the young people to engage in whatever way they needed. Sometimes working in groups, rather than solo helped. Year 9 and 10 are so quiet and so locked up in 'shame', that they say nothing, do nothing and don't even so much as answer a question such as 'what is your name'. (Artist in Residence, 2018 report). Some reports discussed the Bell performances as beneficial as it directly combated feelings of 'shame' and allowed people to engage and enjoy the performances. However others indicated that 'shame' was a significant challenge throughout the tour.

A final key challenge mentioned in the interviews was the sustainability and longevity of the program. Particularly this was in reference to the Bell Players program, which was only in the school for one day, and may not return the following year. Although many teachers discussed reinvigoration for teaching Shakespeare, there was not always the support or opportunity to maintain this.

> "*… we try and work to have long term engagements with the schools, but that Bourke thing that was just with the players, and we kind of didn't really go back for years. But the regional teacher, mentorship and other programs. That's the way of us engaging on a long term with these teachers and schools.*" (Int JE)

The Regional Teacher Mentorship program is a way Bell Shakespeare has tried to address this, and many of the teachers involved in this longer-term professional

learning initially developed interest through their observation of the Bell Players or Artist in Residence program in their school.

Benefits beyond the sites

The Bell staff interviewed had all been members of the Players or Artist in Residency programs and discussed the benefits they received from their involvement. This included the opportunity to reflect on their own learning, and their position in the schools that they toured:

> "*It reminds me to be vulnerable, it pushes me to be vulnerable in front of a group of 30 Year 10s that wanna tell me to get f*d you know, it pushes me to critically reflect on my upbringing...I've been, I've been like, really lucky, and I get to go to all of these...the outreach programs and all those. So, I get to really like, see my privilege...(it's) giving me pause to reflect on my life and my advantage, and, and where I sit. So it's given me a really good lens and viewpoint.*" (Int FJ)

Many of the Players and Artists in Residency had backgrounds in more traditional theatre where the audiences are very polite. They sit quietly in the dark theatre. And applaud politely at the end even if they don't like what you did. (Int JA).

In contrast, each school site offered different kinds of spaces, acoustics, audiences, and engagement.

> "*For players is a pretty spectacular program in terms of developing your skill as a performer working in with school kids is arguably one of the harder audiences I think you'll ever encounter so definitely just builds up your, I suppose skill at responding to whatever's happening in that room and just being really flexible as a performer.*" (Int O)

Conclusion

In nurturing imaginative engagement with Shakespeare's work, Bell Shakespeare's teaching artists were able to foster students in remote and regional contexts opportunities to develop their own understandings of Shakespeare. For some, this extended to a love of theatre and a change in the way they viewed drama.

The flexibility required to respond to the physical, intellectual and relational demands of the different school sites, and exposure to different kinds of audiences also helped those employed by Bell to learn new ways of performing and hone their skills as a actors.

The learning opportunities provided by Bell Shakespeare for learners, teachers and teaching artists alike are critical:

> "*In a world where institutions powerfully orchestrate our routines, and greater systemisation is perceived as greater professionalism, it is easy to go through the motions of teaching and learning unconsciously, or at least unquestioningly. This very easiness is why we need alternative spaces, unpolished visons, risky dreams via which we might collaboratively teach and learn, make mistakes, fall and catch each other. In such spaces, participants have a heightened sense of being and a receptiveness to experiencing the new with others. Knowledge comes from being in these spaces and that knowledge is authentic, person, lasting.*" (Semler, Hansen and Manuel, 2023, p.353).

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