

The Independent Producers
A DIY approach for getting your ideas from page to stage

Speakers: Danielle Coonan, Phatspace artist-run gallery
Jane Powles, Spacejunk Production House
Liz Nielsen, Pinchgut Opera

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By Tracy Ellis

The October **SAMAG** seminar brought together three experts in independent production to give their perspectives on being DIY operators in the independent arts sector. Representing visual arts, contemporary music and opera, the three offered a broad range of experiences but, nevertheless, there were many parallels.

Danielle Coonan started **Phatspace** with two other artists in 2002. They were all coming to the end of their degrees at art school and were looking for somewhere to show their own work, but also a place where they could build a like-minded community and a support network of artists.

Phatspace was set up to exhibit experimental work and the work of young and emerging artists. In Sydney, where high rental prices can be prohibitive, they assist artists to access space and other basic resources. It is run by volunteers with some funding from the Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts.

While the work exhibited might be cutting edge, one of their goals is to make it accessible to the public. Their openings are more like parties, and often go late into the evening, unlike the usual 6-8pm timeslot allotted at most mainstream galleries, and they engage a DJ to help create the party atmosphere.

Coonan wanted to focus on video art because it has very specific requirements for exhibition and artists often find it hard to find a suitable space. At **Phatspace** she has created a video library with work from over 200 video artists from around the world and conducts evenings under the banner **Chewing the Phat**, where artists can get together over screenings, or to discuss issues and exchange ideas.

Coonan believes artist-run initiatives are important because they allow artists to control the presentation and circulation of their art. She is emphatic that **Phatspace** is "not a stepping stone" to the mainstream art world, but exists in its own right to promote experimental practice and allow a more intense relationship with the viewer.

Having achieved their initial aims with **Phatspace**, they are now looking for opportunities to extend their reach into the community. They are inspired by other local artists in their network, such as **Simon Barney**, a 'briefcase curator', who offers his briefcase as a space for artists and holds briefcase 'openings' at the **Hollywood Hotel**. Meanwhile, **Coonan** and the other two directors all continue to work jobs outside **Phatspace** to fund their own work.

When **Jane Powles**, director of **Spacejunk**, sought the advice of her teenage stepson about how to start her presentation for **SAMAG**, he suggested a horror story. Several sprang to her mind, like being faced with the black screen of a crashed computer on the first day of an international tour, or having to get US

visas for four band members waiting in the UK, right after September 11, 2001, and being told the only way was to fly them back to Australia – not an option within the budget limitations of the tour.

Spacejunk is a production house that **Powles** set up with her music producer partner **Tim Powles**. Together they aimed to "create a multi-faceted arts company that produced and promoted any genre or art-form – the only prerequisite being genuine artistic integrity." Within that, they also manage internationally successful, veteran Australian rock band **The Church**.

Powles's 'horror stories' would be familiar to many arts managers, who confronted with logistically complex projects often learn that their job is all about problem-solving. You have to be eternally on the front foot, trouble-shooting and planning contingencies. But of course, there is tremendous job satisfaction to be enjoyed when you work out the solutions.

Powles defines independence as being, "about making it happen on one's own terms and not compromising". Artists who choose the independent route often do so to keep artistic control of their product and avoid the dominance of commercial principles over their artistic decisions, but the irony is that to successfully do this, they often have to develop their own business and organisational skills above and beyond the average artist working in the mainstream, and often end up spending more time on the administration of their own affairs than they do on practicing their art.

Part of being DIY is taking responsibility for your own success and to be successfully independent "you have to be a master of many tasks," says **Powles**. She developed the skills she needed by attending many seminars and conferences, and also adopting some very experienced and helpful mentors. "A good mentor is someone who's done it, done it well, and is willing to impart their knowledge," she says.

The first hurdle to getting started in independent arts practice is usually finding the money. **Powles** believes it's a good barometer of your self-belief to be willing to invest your own money in your own art when you can, but you also have to "be creative about cash flow" and explore other avenues including corporate sponsorship, philanthropic donations, grants and other income streams such as merchandising.

To attract potential investors you need an excellent prospectus to pitch your artistic product. Then, procuring that sponsorship requires strategy, but still doesn't preclude the serendipity of simply putting your prospectus in the right hands at the right time.

When budgeting, **Powles** considers it essential that those who are spending the money, ie. the artists, know exactly how it is being spent. She insists that all associated costs and expenses are scheduled in advance and, once that budget has been approved, she will play hard ball if she is asked to add things when a project is underway, especially if it might jeopardise the balance of her budget upon completion of the project.

When it comes to actually getting a show on the road, **Powles** is an organisational machine. She applies a series of timelines and schedules that list every critical task associated with the project, alongside a date for delivery and the person responsible.

She then has similar schedules for all the logistics associated with any tour or project, including publicity and promotion, organising and transporting gear, arranging vehicles and detailing technical specifications.

Her's is a lesson in the importance of applying big-picture practicalities in independent arts enterprises, where thoughtful and thorough planning can form the basis of a professional and successful DIY practice.

Liz Nielsen started **Pinchgut Opera** over lunch with friends who shared the belief that there were many worthwhile operas that weren't being represented in the repertoire of Australia's major opera companies.

Pinchgut started small and they are still small, but, "being small can be a great advantage." says **Nielsen**. "You can be creative and you can be flexible if you are small."

Since inception, **Pinchgut** has always been about the product and the excellence of the music. "Music remains first, foremost and central" says Nielsen. **Pinchgut's** policy is to maintain "excellent musical direction and an excellent orchestra."

To carry that excellence through to their presentation, **Pinchgut** chose a venue that was up to the task. They spend a large part of their budget on the hire of the **City Recital Hall** in Angel Place, but **Nielsen** points out that many similar organisations, such as the **Brandenburg Orchestra** and **Musica Viva** started out in smaller venues.

Pinchgut thrives on word of mouth and all those involved are committed to spreading the word. Nielsen herself admits to spending an inordinate amount of time discussing **Pinchgut** with anyone within earshot, but many valuable synergies have emerged from her conversations.

Pinchgut also has a policy to give creative people a chance. They will engage a young or inexperienced artist, designer or director if they display brilliance. They are also determined to let the artists drive the company rather than the bureaucracy. "What we don't want to have," says **Nielsen** "is a large machine that is hard to drive and be flexible."

They budget around the box office being their main source of income but they also receive donations from some philanthropists who feel as passionate about opera as they do. Like **Powles**, **Nielsen** tries to have funding coming in from several sources – box office, donations, corporate philanthropy and government funding – which leaves them less vulnerable should one source dry up.

Specific, one-off sponsorships have also helped them out. When they needed to purchase some expensive piccolos for the orchestra, **Pinchgut** sought the sponsorship of a law firm and were able to present the instruments to them, giving them tangible symbols of their involvement in the arts, and they also conducted an exclusive performance for the firm.

Pinchgut also saves money by not renting office space, but running the company from their own homes. They are also very media savvy so that they don't have to spend large portions of their budget on advertising. They have produced several, very effective images to promote all their productions and have received wide media coverage with them. To launch their upcoming show, a French opera, they staged a photo opportunity on the real Pinchgut (Fort Denison) to coincide with Bastille Day.

Pinchgut maintains a strong connection to their audience through an extensive e-mail list, regular newsletters and constant personal contact. "If someone rings **Pinchgut** they are going to be speaking to either myself or **Anna Cerneaz**, **Pinchgut** publicist, who has also been with the company since inception. That kind of close, personal contact with your audience is, again, one of the benefits of being small.

If there is one thing **Coonan**, **Powles** and **Nielsen** all have in common it would be that they each clearly take enormous pride in what they do and exhibit a high level of passion and commitment. The line between their work and their personal lives sometimes seems blurry, and their personalities seem suffused with their work, more like artists themselves than arts administrators.

Nielsen quoted yet another successful Sydney-based independent arts producer, Sculpture by the Sea's David Handley, who, upon the launch of the eighth annual exhibition, staged along the Bondi to Bronte coastal walk, recently said, "I thought I'd give it a go for the first year and then it took over my life."

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