

# Darwin Director Draws a Circle

By [Eamon Evans](#) ArtsHub | Monday, August 07, 2006

Darwin Festival Director Malcolm Blaylock likes to think big.

When he took the helm in 2003 – as a Melbournian, and one best-known for quintessentially ‘Southern’ festivals like Moomba and the Adelaide Fringe – it wasn’t that many years since the Darwin Festival had been a flower show with artistic trimmings. And even after the Bougainvillea Festival became the Darwin Festival – became more curated, more ‘artsy’ – its focus remained determinedly provincial.

“To me a festival means to be creative and innovative from within”, former Director Fab Califuri told *Arts Hub* in 2002, “not booking a creative show from overseas.”

For Blaylock, it means both. Darwin’s 18 nights of “colour and excitement” this year will see 15 nations represented among its 1,000 plus artists and performers. With comedy and cabaret, film and theatre, dancing and music, Darwin has become the Southern Hemisphere’s fastest growing festival. Ten venues will host over 70 productions and some 112 events between 10-27 August.

The punters seem to approve: audience numbers have doubled under Blaylock’s watch. The 2005 festival attracted a record 53,000, and box office sales are up on this time last year. Given Darwin’s population of 130,000 people, there’s a sense in which NT hosts Australia’s most popular festival.

And Blaylock wants it bigger still. While Australia’s other major festivals get between \$12-15 million in annual funding, Darwin gets about \$1 million. Parity is not the goal, but “we’ve reached a point where, for the festival to continue to expand ... it needs the proper infrastructure.” “I think that a really good sustainable Festival for this area would be a \$3 million Festival.

(Though not at the expense of other Territory arts activity, he’s quick to make clear. “I think that arts funding here is at a pretty low level generally ... For artists to work successfully they have to be paid properly, and the reality in the Territory at the moment is that very few are.” )

So was Darwin Festival kept too small for too long? “All Festivals change with the times. Society changes, the world you live in changes, everywhere around you changes, and festivals reflect the society they’re in ... I think about it in those terms, not in terms of what’s gone before having been wrong or whatever.”

One of Blaylock's first, and most controversial, changes was to scrap the “dated” grand parade – considered by some to be the Festival’s showpiece, and main opportunity for the community to join in. Even the then-Opposition Leader, Terry Mills, joined the chorus of mutterings, vowing to reinstate the parade if he won office.

Blaylock's predecessor sunk the boot in too, arguing that the community had not been properly consulted about the change and was ill-served by an director based interstate. “He’s in Darwin part-time”, Calafuri said. “There's a diminished capacity to work closely with the local community from the festival office.”

Blaylock is still part-time. He lives in Darwin six months a year, “which is about what most Festival directors do. When I first started I was also doing St Kilda Festival and St Kilda Film Festival. This now takes up a lot more of my time; it takes up nearly all my time, in fact.” He’s

bought a unit in the city and describes himself as “quite settled”.

And he’s certainly settled into the “community” rhetoric. “The festival I’m running has to be Darwin, has to reflect Darwin, and we have to work with the people and the community and the society that we have. The Festival will only succeed if people feel like it’s theirs”.

So, do they?

Blaylock says yes. “I think we are really reaching out to really make this a festival for everyone in Darwin, which wasn’t always the case in the past”, he told ABC Radio in 2004.

What did he mean by that? “If you just look at the figures, less people went, less people connected with it. For it to work, everybody in Darwin has to feel that there’s something in it that they can go to. I try and present a fairly eclectic program.”

Plank two of “community” is participation. “We still do quite a significant range of community events, and a lot of the cultural groups participate in the Festival in various ways.” The local participation element is “quite strong”, he insists. “It’s just that we’ve added other things”.

But so many other things, and such big ones: this year’s Festival numbers Tripod, *Keating!* and Bud Tingwell among its major interstate names. Is there a danger that local acts will be outshone?

“I wouldn’t have thought so, no. And that’s clearly not the case. Tracks Dance Company gets the best audiences of anybody in the Festival and they’re a local company. Darwin Theatre Company has a great support base. Last year local artist Rob Curgenvin packed out with a work called *Surrounder*. Now he’s doing another one called *Surrender*. I wouldn’t have thought it was that way around at all.”

In any case, Blaylock argues, the Darwin Festival is not just about the world embracing the city, but the city embracing the world. “People here want to see stuff from outside. All artists want to connect with other artists, and collaborate with them.”

“As we grow, we’ll be able to have stronger connections with a lot of countries and both bring in product from those countries and do collaborations with the artists from those countries.” “Nearly every artist I know thinks that’s a great idea.”

But, with this continual growth, with this ever-more international theme, is there a danger that Darwin Festival will just end up as a sort of unhappy compromise? An event too small to compete with the Melbourne’s and the Sydney’s, but too big to have an organic, community vibe?

“We don’t compete with Melbourne and Sydney in any way,” the director says. “They’re different cities and they have different festivals that reflect that. A festival is a celebration of an area and what we have in Darwin are two really outstanding things culturally.”

One is the local Indigenous culture. “Across the board we do a lot of Indigenous arts”, says Blaylock. “The Festival focuses very strongly on that at the moment in music, visual arts, dance, traditional dance, contemporary works.”

The other is the connection with Asia. “Draw a circle around Darwin, you cover all the top half of Australia and all the bottom half of Asia. I think that’s what the Festival will be all about, and I think we’re coming some way towards that at the moment.”

If the Festival can reflect on that and build on that, he argues, “we’ll really create something that’s very unique here. You’re going to have to come to Darwin to see what goes on in this region”.

“I think the first year I took over, and we started to make changes, there’s no doubt that some people when ‘Ooh, Heavens: we don’t want this sort of change’. But ... most of those people are now part of the Festival.”

“Whatever reservations people might have had four years ago, I certainly don’t notice them now.”