

SUMMARY SNAPSHOT

Evaluation Report 2021 Inaugural BlakForm Program



ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is a summary of the full report prepared by independent arts consultant, Penny Miles. It shares sections of the evaluation that are not considered confidential and are valuable context for the broader sector.

OVERVIEW OF THE EVALUATION REPORT

The report was commissioned by BlakDance to evaluate the success of BlakForm 2021 and identify any areas for future improvement of similar capacity building programs.

The report draws on information and opinions provided to the consultant through interviews with a sample group of BlakForm participants (artists and producers), program facilitators and partners.

The evaluation also considered a desktop assessment combined with the consultant's expert understanding of national and international performing arts marketplaces to form recommendations and insights on the success of the preliminary program and areas for continual improvement for extending and continuing the program.

Overall, the evaluation concluded the pilot program was a success and should be continued to help grow momentum for a generation of First Nations artists. The report makes 9 recommendations for how BlakDance could enhance BlakForm and similar capacity building programs.



EATING BANK' by Carly Sheppard, photos by Wright, NON Studio

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PROGRAM FORMAT

Throughout 2021, eight of Australia's leading First Nations dance makers and their producers participated in:

1. Online learning to build new skills and capacity in professional practice and market development
2. A choreographic development lab to help enhance and refine practice and artistic outcomes
3. Seed funding for the development of new work to grow a portfolio to address market interest
4. A showcase of works in development to market representatives (including pitching advice)

Participants were selected through an Expression of Interest process.

THE BLAKFORM PROGRAM

In 2021 BlakDance launched a new sector development program, BlakForm.

The program was a first of its kind for the First Nations sector and the broader performing arts ecology. It was both a response to immediate impacts and opportunities created by COVID, and a strategic intervention to systemic barriers to First Nations dance works – increasing market demand.

Successful market development can provide financial benefit, raise profile, and enhance artistic development through new collaborations or audience interactions. But entering new markets can be challenging and almost impenetrable without tuition and guidance.

The BlakForm initiative recognised these barriers and aimed to empower First Nations dance creators and producers with the tools, knowledge, and insights to equip them for entering new markets and succeed in fiercely contested environments.



THE ROLE OF BLAKDANCE IN MARKET DEVELOPMENT

As part of its role as a national industry organisation for First Nations contemporary dancers and choreographers, BlakDance has delivered transformative capacity building programs for over a decade.

These programs have supported the acceleration of creative, producing and career pathways.

The organisation's objectives also identifies market development as part of the holistic approach to promoting First Nations contemporary dance:

"...connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander choreographers and dancers with the market and to actively cultivate participation, enjoyment, employment and presentation opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander choreographers and dancers, both in Australia and internationally" BlakDance Constitution

In this context, market refers to venues, festivals and programming organisations that host and take the box office risk on productions.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAM

Over the past decade, the state of the market's interest and demand for contemporary First Nations dance could best be described as "slowly emerging".

For close to 20 years the market was dominated by one larger-scale First Nations dance company. The visibility of other independent and small to medium creators and companies was limited.

In the years leading up to 2020, however, the market had started to shift and gain momentum for more First Nations representation. This was largely due to the advocacy, promotion, and targeted initiatives of BlakDance, governments and other leaders in First Nations performing arts.

The pandemic, however, was a major disruption to the market with performing arts seasons cancelled across the globe. In partnership with ILBIJERRI,

Yirra Yaakin, and Moogahlin theatre companies, BlakDance surveyed 85 artists and arts workers to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on the First Nations performing arts sector.

The survey results highlighted adverse impacts on finances, future planning, wellbeing, and creative practice. BlakDance identified increasing market capacity would be a strategic response to these impacts. COVID disruptions also presented a rare opportunity to align the availability of a group of artists to participate in an intensive development program throughout 2021.

BlakForm was therefore conceived as a pilot program focused on enhancing market development capabilities. Ambitious in scale, the BlakForm Program was a first within this cultural sector and the broader performing arts ecology.



WHAT BLAKFORM HOPED TO ACHIEVE

Market Development can often be misconstrued as producing and delivering touring activities. But it is much more than this technical outcome.

In its purest sense, market development is the strategic and intentional connection and pursuit of certain markets or networks that will advance the objectives of a company and its products. In this context 'products' are arts activity, whether that be a show or a community engagement project.

Market development objectives can be geared toward financial benefit, profile raising, and/or artistic

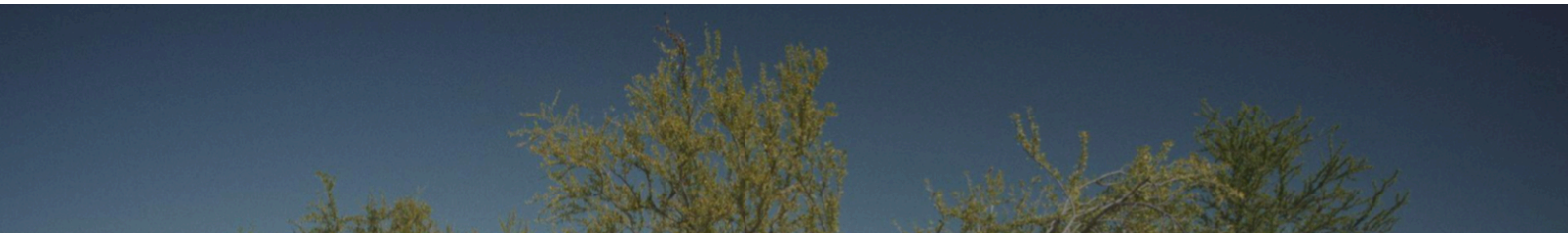
development through new collaborations or audience interactions.

Markets are not homogenous. State, national and international markets often have different modes of working across each geographical territory. There are also differences across the various presenting 'buyers' in the market ranging from major festivals, community festivals, local and state government run venues. There are distinct drivers that influence why presenters in a certain market might purchase a show. There are equally different relationships and benefits in each unique network

The subtleties and complexities of performing arts market development are almost impenetrable without tuition and guidance. Each network has its own language, funding structures and mechanisms for how shows are considered.

Some operate formal pitching forums, others informal network recommendations. Saturation of more product than presenting partners can accommodate exists in most markets. This means it can be an unforgiving business pursuit if an artist is not properly equipped to represent their show/ product correctly to match the style and interests of a particular market.

The BlakForm initiative recognised these barriers of market development and aimed to empower First Nations dance creators and producers with the tools, knowledge, and insights to equip them for entering new markets, determining which markets are best aligned with their work and aims, and how to stand out and succeed in fiercely contested environments.



KEY OBSERVATIONS & INSIGHTS

The evaluation identified 9 areas for refining and enhancing program delivery. These are for the administration benefit of BlakDance and outlined in the full report.

In addition, there were observations and insights that have larger scale impacts for First Nations performing arts and these are listed below for sector consideration:

- artists in the program have secured an array of presenting and commissioning partnerships in international and national territories that can often take years to cultivate.
- a desktop review of a sample of Australian performing arts centres' 2023 seasons, confirms there is still opportunity to grow the market penetration of First Nations contemporary dance.
- there is a group of leading venues across Australia that are committed to regularly programming First Nations productions. But the overall there is larger group of late adopters.
- there is need and opportunity to grow the First Nations performing arts market impact and support the sector to cut through barriers of perception and understanding that is the inherent in the broader established systems.
- Influencing lasting change in the market will likely require partnerships and a long-term outlook. For example, it might require funding incentivise programming,

and/or changes in First Nations representation in marketplace roles (e.g. partnerships with venues to set employment targets and skills development)

- some participants and course providers questioned to what extent should First Nations artists strive to work within the established market structures or create opportunities to forge new ways of working.
- We are now seeing momentum for governments and society to champion more opportunities for First Nations artistic and cultural expression, it is more critical than ever that there is a pipeline for these works to be seen, experienced, enjoyed and celebrated by the broadest audience possible.
- Market development is the key to this. And in return the benefits of market development will fuel income generation, employment, and sustainable practice for generations of First Nations artists to come.
- Saturation of more product than presenting partners can accommodate exists in most markets and is likely to increase with the new focus on developing First Nations works. This means it can be an unforgiving business pursuit if an artist is not properly equipped to represent their show/ product correctly to match the style and interests of a particular market.

Overall, increasing sector impact is a significant and long-term undertaking for all involved – artists, producers, presenters, and support organisations

Image credits

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Front cover: 'SILENCE' by Karul Projects. Image by Simon Woods

Page3: Preview of 'SEATING BANK' by Carly Sheppard. Image by James Wright, NON Studio.

Page 4: 'GARABARI' by Joel Bray, Chunky Move. Image by Jeff Busby

Page 6-7: 'PREPARING GROUND' by Marilyn Miller, Jasmin Sheppard & Katina Olsen. Image by Samuel James



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