

Gunning Focus Group: its beginnings and role and the 1999 Gunning Arts Festival

The main road between Sydney and Melbourne, between Yass and Goulburn, passed through Gunning village from the 1850s. But improvements in vehicles and roads made the village ripe for bypassing by the Hume Highway, along with many other centres that were the subject of Michael McGirr's book *Bypass*, and finally, on 5 April 1993, a major 28 kilometre stretch of highway was opened bypassing both the village and the Cullerin Range. This had a singular effect on the village and especially its inhabitants, who lived in horror of the village dying through the bypass' impact. The railway was a similar story. The question was, what to do about the situation?

A glance at the map suggests that there should be few access issues in Gunning. It's one kilometre from the Hume Highway, it's on the main railway line and it's only 20 minutes drive from Yass, 30 minutes from Crookwell, and 30 minutes from Goulburn. The large regional centre of Canberra is only 45 minutes away. But appearances are deceptive; access is in part a state of mind.

Cultural and heritage activities had been one casualty of the village's gradual decline and the bypass' impact. In 1998, as part of his survey of cultural activity in his region, the Southern Tablelands Regional Arts Development Officer, Mark Viner, identified Gunning Shire as ripe for cultural development and was looking for a structure to develop as an arts council. He contacted the former Gunning Village Sub-Committee and on 29 April 1998 we held a public meeting to identify interest in an arts council, with the carrot of establishment funding of \$1000. Thirty eight people turned up and the process had begun.

The new body's first arts event, even before it was formally established, was on 15 September 1998 with the presentation of Theatre South's *The Perfectionist*, starring Australia's own Smith and Jones, Lenore Smith and Warren Jones, in the Shire Hall. Nearly 100 people turned out on a freezing night, which was harder on the players than the audience; backstage and the stage had no heating, while there was some heat for the audience. But it was a promising start.

We took the name Gunning Focus Group and became incorporated in December 1998 and on 8 January 1999 Alby Schultz, Federal Member for Hume, launched the Gunning Focus, Arts Council and Community Group Incorporated at the Gunning opening of Goulburn Regional Art Gallery's *A Sense of Place* touring exhibition in the Courtroom.

The second Theatre South presentation was *Wedding Games*, in May 1999. This consolidated our audience of 100 for theatre.

Later in 1999, leading up to September and October, we faced a dilemma. We had been offered a number of events over a short period so we decided to consolidate them into a festival. Over five weeks we had a play, *At The Crossroads*, a musical miscellany by Shortis and Simpson called *Sheet Dip*, another touring art exhibition from Goulburn Regional Art Gallery; we supported the annual Catholic art show with advertising; we held a writers' workshop and presentation *Put Spring in Your Writing*, by Lizz Murphy and Sarah St Vincent Welch, and a chamber music recital featuring Australia's great cellist David Pereira, who was to become a brilliant regular for us.

The festival culminated in a visit to Gunning by the Canberra School of Music Symphony Orchestra, playing selections from *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein and American written music by Bela Bartok. The Shire Hall will never be the same again. My abiding memory was this orchestra; the students had played the same program at Llewelyn Hall in Canberra the night before but all 87 young men and women were very relaxed and the teachers said they played even better here. Sadly, the orchestra far outnumbered the 60 in the audience.

I remember standing at the back of the Hall quietly weeping and whispering to myself in disbelief “Bartok in Gunning!!”

The Focus Group has continued to thrive over the past 20-odd years. It concentrates largely on music these days, always helped by the Shire Council’s donation of the cost of the venues, the Shire Hall and the Court Room, an enthusiastic band of members, and some brilliant musicians like Alice Giles, harpist and David Pereira, cellist. Our co-founder, the late Wendy Coley, in the beginning regularly rang musicians to get them to play for us but after a while such was our reputation that we were able to present repeat performers and others who offered themselves having heard about our enthusiastic audience and acoustically brilliant courtroom.

A major achievement was Gunning’s Event of the Year being awarded to the Focus Group’s presentation of Alice Giles’ Seven Harps Ensemble in 2006. It’s things like that that make the effort we put into the Focus Group tremendously worthwhile.