

Queer Narratives: Story to Song

Project Report June 2015

Testimonials gathered from Qtas FB page:

Nic Phillips: *Congratulations guys on an AWESOME performance tonight in Launceston - BRILLIANT!!*

Louise Hamilton: *congratulations - a memorable evening, thankyou.*

Leny Sutton (re Hobart, participant): *Fantastic performance. I felt very proud to be part of it. Congrats to all involved.*

Wendy Armstrong (re Hobart, audience member): *Great evening. Fantastic energy. Amazing songs. Beautiful arrangements. Well done and thank you!*

Qtas undertook the Queer Narratives: Story to Song project during 2014, drawing together Qtas Choir, local songwriters and composers and members of the LGBTIQ community as storytellers.

The project began early in the year as a community cultural development project, with consultations with the LGBTIQ community in the north, south and east coast of the state. A weekend retreat was held in the northwest, gathering stories from the LGBTIQ community from all these areas. Members of the LGBTIQ community were also invited to submit written stories or to tell their story via interview. Qtas travelled to the east coast and to several rural locations to interview people to gather stories. Twenty-four stories were gathered based on either interviews or written submissions.

These stories formed the source material for song writing. During the middle of the year songwriters, arrangers and composers created ten original four part songs based on this material. The choir learnt this repertoire at weekly rehearsals, preparing for two end of year performances in November. Musical Director, Helen, made both scores and rehearsal tapes available online so that anyone around the state who had been involved could learn their part and participate in the concerts. Qtas also ran a weekend singing intensive at Mole Creek so that northerners had an opportunity to learn the material and practice with the choir, ready for the performances.

In order to generate promotional material for the project, an artmaking workshop was held with members of the LGBTIQ community in Hobart to create imagery. This was combined linked with short quotes from songs and interviews into designs for printed promotional postcards. These were widely distributed to the networks and contacts that had been established throughout the project with other LGBTIQ organisations and in the wider community. The Qtas Facebook page also became an active site for promotion. The postcard imagery, in combination with soundbytes from stories was also used to create visual projections for the performances.

The two final performances were promoted by TasPride as a part of the TasPride Festival of events, with one in Launceston at Fresh on Charles and the other in Hobart in the Founders Room, Salamanca.

The performances presented songs that reflected diversity within the LGBTIQ community and portrayed aspects of queer life, embracing difficulty and celebrating community. Both performances were well attended. The Hobart show was sold out, filling the Founders Room. Feedback from the concerts included:

From vox pops of audience recorded by Kylie Eastley:

Just seen the first performance of QTas Choir; absolutely loved it! Material was really fresh, exciting and touching at the same time. Quite moved by the pieces. Well put together. Brilliant conducting! Really enjoyed the whole night, it was brilliant.

I also loved it, I was really taken by the sense of community that was really evident both in the choir, but also in the audience who were supporting them, and that warmth that you felt in the room was just fantastic. The original music and the variety of music was terrific. A very unique experience.

The creation of the documentary was the most difficult part of the project to manage as it was largely out of our control. Significant parts of the project were filmed for the planned documentary – rehearsals, the story gathering retreat, interviews and the Hobart performance were filmed. It was anticipated that some of this footage would be edited for inclusion in the performances but time constraints did not allow for this. One of the filmmakers became ill and another prioritised a bigger project. The editing of this footage is still in progress and we may seek further funding to enable this to continue. Once this short film documenting the process has been created it will be available online as planned.

Social inclusion has become a strength of QTas. The community engagement aspect of the project connected QTas with LGBTIQ community around the state, both to individuals and to other LGBTIQ services. It generated significant interest from the community in the project and drew in some community members who had been feeling isolated. Several people talked about dark times in their lives and named the project as part of what helped them pull through – either through participating as a singer or as a storyteller.

Feedback from within the choir in response to the question: "Tell us, what were the highlights from last night's sell out QTas performance?"

Catherine Fraser (participant) - Everything! It was all a highlight

Iona Johnson (community engagement co-ordinator) - Hearing the audience sharing stories too

Helen Thomson (musical director) - Good grief. How long a list would you like?

Deborah Wace (choir co-ordinator) - My list is a mile long too. :)

Phoebe Adams (publicity officer) - I got a little choked up when Felicity received such a loving and warm reception from the audience after Girl In Blue. Particularly when I noticed Felicity was tearing up too.

JoJo Ravin Gwatking (fundraising officer) - Me too on Felicity & Girl in Blue. Had to brush away the rolling tear...

Wanting opportunities to connect was a recurring theme in conversations. QTas has taken this on board and this year plans to do a performance of the project in the North-West, including running an intensive singing retreat workshop again in the north to allow northerners to participate. Helen has also researched live streaming and rehearsals are now streamed live to air every week to enable those in regional areas to stay connected.

The project has clearly benefitted choir members who have increased their musical skills and developed strong repertoire that they are proud to perform as advocates for

the LGBTIQ community. It has also been an opportunity for talented songwriters and composers to extend their work and to be paid for their artistic work. Some of the musical contributors were established musicians while others were emerging artists.

Some fundraising was undertaken by choir members during the year to raise money towards the costs of the project – this was capacity building for those involved, enabling leadership development, increasing commitment to the choir and the project, and also enabling QTas to cover all costs for the project. Organising the performance events involved managing complex logistics, with venue and equipment questions as well as a choir of up to 30 people, at two locations. We contracted technical support and a director to ensure this was managed well.

The project was certainly a success, achieving more than expected, particularly in community engagement, developing high musical standards and powerful, original repertoire. QTas learnt an enormous amount about event management, community engagement and performing. The project has laid solid foundations for ongoing choral participation and representation for the LGBTIQ community around the state. It is anticipated that this will be illuminated and further supported by the resolution of the documentary, which will be distributed online and beyond the state.

QTas is currently preparing to perform *Queer Narratives* in August in the Northwest of the state and will run a workshop for local participants in July prior to the performance. A short version of the film footage is being assembled for this performance. A further ten-minute mini-documentary is expected to be completed following this.