



STRANGE FRUIT: A CASE STUDY

In late 2001, Roderick Poole, founder of Strange Fruit, faced a critical decision about the street theatre company he had created in 1994. Before him lay two viable pathways, heading in quite different directions. His choice would determine the future of an organisation representing over seven years of work, and with a million dollar annual turnover.

STRANGE FRUIT: STREET THEATRE

Strange Fruit creates street theatre magic in the form of wondrously costumed and choreographed artists swaying over 4 metres in the air on fibreglass poles. Its grand spectacles, for which it has gained an enviable international reputation, are large-scale, highly visual productions. The company performs works free of charge in public places almost anywhere in the world. It has performed for over 200 international festivals and events in 34 countries. Based in Melbourne, Strange Fruit is a company of 22 performers, 6 production and tour management staff, a production director, an office manager and an artistic director.

STRANGE FRUIT: HISTORY

Roderick Poole talks of the genesis of Strange Fruit not so much as a company but as a work. "The Field" was commissioned by the 1994 Melbourne Festival. Its initial content was minimal, very Zen, its unique feature the first use of the 'sway' poles for which the show would become famous. In the following year Roderick brought performers together to re-work it for a tour of Sydney, Wellington, Perth and Adelaide. Then in 1996, under the guidance of theatre director Suzanne Chaundy, a week's work effected a transformation, creating the artistic expression for which Roderick had been striving. "In July of that year we toured Europe for the first time, performing for 16 festivals in Belgium, the UK, Netherlands and France. It was a huge success."

From 1997 to 2001 Strange Fruit grew prodigiously, creating new works including "Flight" and "The Spheres", and undertaking extensive overseas tours, including to Europe, USA, Canada, Mexico, Japan, South Korea and China.

Throughout this five year period, Strange Fruit was in constant demand at home in Australia. Over sixty performances were booked to enhance festivals, celebrations and special events throughout the country, including most of the capital cities, and in many regional areas in NSW, Victoria, and Tasmania. In 1999 Strange Fruit won the Sydney Myer Performing Arts Award. The formation of a second ensemble in 2000 made simultaneous tours to North America and Europe possible, extending the flexibility and availability of the company.

STRANGE FRUIT: THE "COMPANY"

From its inception Strange Fruit has been very much the brainchild of its creator Roderick Poole, owing to him not only the seeds of its intellectual creativity but also the dynamic energy and versatility that powered its growth and organisation. The organisation, management and the accompanying business practice of Strange Fruit were thus very much the proverbial one man show.

In an environment where everyone was willing to share ideas, where decisions were being made collaboratively, it was accepted as inevitable that things at the beginning would be got going for nothing. They experimented and rehearsed unpaid. Even after the initial success of "The Field", the subsequent work by theatre director Suzanne Chaundy to imbue the work with greater artistic strength was unpaid.

There was no planning as such; just one project based performance after another. Strange Fruit was driven by demand, at first for festival performances at home, and then for an ever-increasing number of international festivals. After the initial European tour, Strange Fruit became for Roderick Poole a full time job. However, although he was aware of the need for planning and appropriate company structures, with an increasing demand for changes in performances and repertoire, Roderick had little time for these. In fact, there was no "company" as such, no entity with formal structures or governance.

The first European tour had been made possible by an Australia Council grant that supported touring expenses. At the end of the year, with surprising success behind them and wonderful demand beckoning to an exciting future, they were back to zero.... with lots of work to be done and no money to do it.

Strange Fruit was clearly a success, bigger than anyone could have reasonably predicted. The impact the company knew it was making made everything worthwhile. In the last two years to 2001 there was an annual turnover close to \$1m.

In retrospect, however, Roderick talks of 'increasingly struggling' to keep up with the vibrant 'momentum' of his creation. He was constantly torn between artistic direction and financial management. From the beginning Roderick, an extremely capable person, had just assumed the financial management of the company himself, working it out "in my brain".

Towards the end of 1999, after an exhausting and difficult, although very successful European tour, the company arrived home tired, demoralised and in poor financial shape. The final 'gig', after four months away, had been a disastrous tour in South Korea that resulted in unpaid fees of \$15,000. Unable to pay the company's wages bill, Roderick had brought Strange Fruit back to Australia on the verge of insolvency. The immediate financial crisis was solved by the unexpected announcement of a Myer Foundation Performing Arts Award. However, the annual financial crisis remained. Without ongoing support, Strange Fruit's future was precarious.

STRANGE FRUIT: TIME FOR REFLECTION AND DECISION

The company was heading into 2000 without confirmed funding sources. Like all arts companies, Roderick had formed Strange Fruit with the help of government and philanthropic grants. He first attracted funding from both the Australia Council and Arts Victoria on the basis of one-off grants offered for the development of new works and also to support touring costs. Then the incredible success of the company internationally contributed to a successful application for 'one year' triennial funding from the Council. However, contrary to Roderick's expectations, no further funding from the Key Organisation category was secured when the company reapplied the following year.

The Australia Council's requirements for continued funding for the triennial period focussed on issues such as governance, best practise of boards, skills mix, and in particular, capacity for self-assessment. Strange Fruit did not meet these requirements. The company's board, for example, was made up of close friends and colleagues who shared Roderick's vision. Nor did Strange Fruit have the healthy reserves required. Further, there had never been time for assessment of any kind. In competition with other applicants to the funding category, Strange Fruit was unsuccessful.

Following a new application for support to the Australia Council, they were allocated funds to undertake a strategic review facilitated by an outside consultant. This would include the formulation of a business plan with an emphasis on risk management, governance and the international aspect of Strange Fruit's work. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the support was the provision of arts business consultant, Ian Roberts, who would facilitate the rethinking of the company's operations.

Ian Roberts gave Roderick Poole and his partner Suzanne Chaundy, in Roderick's words "the luxury of reflection, of having time to think," the chance to really plan a future for Strange Fruit. As discussions progressed, it became clear that there were two main options for Strange Fruit. Put simply:

- a adopt a formal company structure, with Roderick in a less central position, with more power sharing and a properly planned business; or
- a adopt an individual, non-profit family business structure, working on a project by project basis.



STRANGE FRUIT: PLANNING A BUSINESS

The choice was made to take the company option. Ian Roberts was able to help Strange Fruit devise a business plan. The first task was a clear articulation of what the company would do. The 'product' of the company was 'art'; as such there was a need to be really clear what the 'art' was and what it could be turned to. Everything followed from the development of an artistic plan. Consideration then was given to time frames, markets, etc in which this 'art' could be produced. As well as creating marvellous theatre, Strange Fruit needed to be perceived in terms of a product that could be planned, market tested, made into a workable business projecting into a three to five year period.

Gradually the detailed workings of the new company were analysed and set down; a business plan was worked through. Strategies of artistic programming, marketing, governance and management structures and budget forecasts for the next three years were developed. Key result areas, outcomes, business strategies and performance indicators were delineated. A new board of management was appointed and new positions defined, including that of Roderick as artistic director.

As Ian Roberts put it, in order to secure a viable future, planning and sound governance structures have to be achieved. "The point of good business practice is that it makes life easier."

Strange Fruit has moved on. Ian Roberts insists they "saved themselves; they had the answers" needed to build a future. The company continues to create magic and to be great advocates for the Arts in Australia internationally. Roderick Poole and the board continue to face challenges.

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The material upon which this case study is based was gained through a series of interviews with major players associated with the formation and development of Strange Fruit. They include Roderick Poole, founder and artistic director of Strange Fruit, Suzanne Chaundy theatre director, Ian Roberts, arts consultant, Kim Hanna, the Australia Council, and Debra Jefferies, Arts Victoria. Interviewer and writer: Judy McCowan. Editor: Rosemary O'Connor, RMIT Business.





SOME FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS: PROJECT TASKS

You are thinking about starting up a new, innovative arts venture. What are some of the essential elements your venture will require to be financially viable – in other words to survive – as well as artistically exciting?

You are advising Roderick on the composition of the Strange Fruit board. What do you think will be the best mix of people (eg, their skills, experience, knowledge, contacts etc) to bring onto the board?

You are approaching a large business organisation for significant sponsorship funds for Strange Fruit. How would you 'sell' them the benefits of being associated with Strange Fruit? What would you expect from the company, and what might they expect from Strange Fruit?

LINKS - STRANGE FRUIT, FUNDING PROGRAMS ETC

Strange Fruit: www.strangefruit.net.au

Arts Victoria www.arts.vic.gov.au

Australia Council: www.ozco.gov.au

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