



**Reflections on
The Coming Back Out Ball:
a dialogic evaluation**

**THE
COMING
BACK OUT
BALL**

**A spectacular social event
celebrating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Transgender and Intersex elders**



“Everyone loves a ball...
it’s an extravaganza”

The Coming Back Out Ball: a dialogic evaluation

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Executive Summary

The Coming Back Out Ball was a spectacular social arts event to celebrate Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) older people aged 65+. The project was developed in response to recent research on the social isolation and the specific needs of ageing members of the LGBTI community. Held at the Melbourne Town Hall on 7th of October 2017, this community gathering hosted by more than 520 people including more than 350 LGBTI seniors. The event was presented by All The Queens Men as a premiere event of the Victorian Seniors Festival in association with the 3rd National LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care Conference.

Through extended discussion with LGBTI elders¹ and the broader community, this research report aims to build understanding of the meaning and significance of The Coming Back Out Ball as a socially-engaged art project. The aim of the event was to honour the elders of the LGBTI community; however, there were many other social benefits. **Through the use of socially-engaged arts and community development strategies, the spectacular Coming Back Out Ball and events leading up to the event achieved four major outcomes:**

- 1. more nuanced representations of older LGBTI people and their stories,**
- 2. the strengthening of social connections for LGBTI elders and allies,**
- 3. extended dialogue through national media campaign,**
- 4. and the creation of a forum to think about the future.**

Participation in these events included approximately 520 guests (including 330 LGBTI elders 65+), 100 artists, crew and performers, and over 60 volunteers. An overview of the event and the community involved is followed by a discussion of the needs of ageing LGBTI communities and the benefits of social connection through dance.

The evaluation methodology is explained in the context of arts, social transformation and community building. With reflections collected from interviews, focus groups, observations and media, the event is described as a significant historical event through the voices of a range of stakeholders. All The Queens Men describe the Ball as a ‘gift to honour the LGBTI elder community’, volunteers and partners discuss ideas of community and belonging, and the beneficiaries of the event express both political and personal meanings to describe the value of participation. Further, LGBTI elders discuss the wide range of emotions experienced at the Ball – from nervousness to pride – and provide some critical feedback on the event. Finally, a discussion about the future includes detailed advice from LGBTI elders regarding future iterations of the Ball, social and housing needs, and the necessity for intergenerational and intersectional unity amongst the community. These observations and feedback conclude with a series of recommendations.

¹ The acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) is used without the use of the letter Q as “many elders of the LGBTI community were coming out when queer was a derogatory term and they have not been able to see past the condescending use or judgemental labelling that the word entails” (Power 2017 p 1). The term ‘elders’ has been used to show respect for all senior members of the community.



Overview to the Project

The Coming Back Out Ball was a once in a lifetime event

The project was developed through the artistic vision of Tristan Meecham of All The Queens Men, in response to research that revealed some LGBTI elders conceal their sexuality or gender identity when they access aged care services because they believe they are not safe (Barrett et al; 2015). These LGBTI elders have lived through a time when being LGBTI could result in imprisonment, enforced medical 'cures', loss of employment and rejection by family and friends. For many of these elders (the first generation to fight for equality), impending old age means going back into the closet or the risk of being deprived of companionship and quality care when needed most.

The Coming Back Out Ball is so named because of the biggest challenges faced by many older people within the LGBTI community is whether to be out and proud in late life, or keep this aspect of themselves hidden. (Joosten, 2017: 5)

The Coming Back Out Ball was hosted to honour the experiences of these LGBTI elders and surround them with celebration and community. All The Queens Men create spectacular theatrical and participatory art experiences. Led by artists Tristan Meecham and Bec Reid, All The Queens Men champion social equality by providing creative opportunities for diverse members of society, in exciting and technically proficient art contexts. The Coming Back Out Ball was inspired by UK-based queer performance group Duckie: they 'use popular forms of entertainment, volunteer participation and the poetics of partying to make their shows accessible to communities that are marginalised from society' (Duckie, nd).

The Coming Back Out Ball was a once in a lifetime event to celebrate the contributions of LGBTI elders and to combat loneliness with social bonding, connection to community, and to encourage expressions of identity through dance and fashion. The Coming Back Out Ball connected many who expressed they were experiencing significant isolation, through ongoing relationship building with older people and strong social sector partnerships.

Born out of a social history of queer performance culture the Ball 'doffs its hat' to historical traditions and showmanship of the Balls of the 1970s and 80s in Melbourne - key political and social activity for groups in the LGBTI community. Women's Balls were an important annual event on the social calendar for lesbians, also raising money for the liberation movement. While public assemblies such as Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras began as proud public protest to a society that discriminated against the LGBTI community.

Melbourne based allies from the broader community converged in response as volunteers, organisational partners and audience to bear witness to this historic event. An expansive media campaign profiled carefully nuanced representations of LGBTI elders and their stories, extending the message and community building initiative.



There were many people involved in The Coming Back Out Ball:

- 520 guests attended the ball (350 LGBTI elders 65+)
- 65 artists and production crew employed on the project
- 70 community performers (group honorariums provided)
- 55 volunteers (City of Melbourne and Victorian Aids Council)
- 8 volunteer evaluators (RMIT University)
- 50 Epicure catering and production staff contracted to the event
- 600+ elders and allies attended LGBTI Elders Dance Club throughout 2017

The Coming Back Out Ball was presented by the Victorian Seniors Festival in association with the 3rd National LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care Conference. Supported by Australia Council for the Arts, City of Melbourne, The Margaret Lawrence Bequest and the Victorian State Government. Project partners include Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Showtech Australia, Sofitel Hotels and Resorts, The Big Anxiety Festival, Priceline Pharmacy, UBER, Val's LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care and Victoria Whitelaw Beautiful Flowers. Project auspice from Auspicious Arts Projects and Victorian AIDS Council. The LGBTI Elders Dance Club is supported by Margaret Lawrence Bequest and Yarra City Council, with initial development from The Substation, Creative Victoria and Victorian Seniors Festival. Evaluation supported by RMIT University.



Context and Aims

A historical moment

The Coming Back Out Ball was held during a significant moment in Australia – the Same Sex Marriage Postal Vote. The celebration and safety of The Coming Back Out Ball brought the community together at a time when LGBTI rights were the centre of public debate with media headlines and protests on either side of the divisive marriage equality debate. Ongoing human rights concerns of Indigenous sovereignty, displacement of refugees and mistreatment of asylum seekers, and the extreme weather events of climate change also permeated the political moment. Activist voices were amplified through the #metoo, Occupy, Idle No More and Black Lives Matter campaigns. From August to December 2017, Australia's Same Sex Marriage mail vote was covered by every form of media in Australia.

The Conversation chronicles 106 articles on the Same Sex Marriage debate. On one hand, the postal vote brought discussion of the equality to the forefront, but on the other hand, this public debate had detrimental emotional, personal and professional effects on Australian LGBTI people and was divisive for their families and friends. We can understand the public 'yes' vote as a 'win' – for the Australian government to move forward on legislation, but the statistics were also read by many that 1/3 of Australians were homophobic. LGBTI+ counselling and community support groups reported massive increase in needs for their services.

The Coming Back Out Ball: sharing life stories of LGBTI elders

While the experiences of LGBTI people are diverse, contemporary representations in the media still remain limited. Dominant media specifically expresses two narratives to describe older LGBTI people's lives. First is the narrative of *constraint*: marginalisation, loneliness, inequality and isolation (King 2017) and second is the *celebration and empowerment* narrative: agency

and autonomy (Simpson, 2014; Hughes and King, 2017). In the context of a growing awareness of the needs and rights of older LGBTI people, there remains limited research on their experience of loneliness. Australian scholar **Marcus Hughes (2017) notes that “until recently, little attention has been given to the gender and sexually diverse nature of the older population resulting in LGBTI people being invisible in a wide range of settings and encounters, including in the delivery of social services in the home and in residential care (Bayliss 2000).”** This invisibility has been reinforced by what Catherine Barrett et al describe as “decades of discrimination involving the medicalisation and criminalisation of non-normative sex and gender characteristics and behaviours – an environment in which “institutional homophobia was sanctioned” (2015: 138).

The Coming Back Out Ball: building social connections

Loneliness was discussed as a key issue for older LGBTI people, by participants and partnering organisations. All The Queens Men employed a number of strategies throughout the project including monthly Dance Clubs, connecting volunteers and outreach. Even the small details of seating arrangements were considered to address isolation. “The connection between loneliness and social isolation is not a simple one. While previous definitions describe consequence of social isolation, more recent studies have highlighted that loneliness is associated more with the quality of social bonds than the number of connections a person has.” (Barnett, 2015: 5). Hughes's 2017 research reports higher levels of loneliness among LGBTI seniors, than among the general population. He cites Fokkema and Kuyper's (2009) study of people aged 55-89, in which “the rate of loneliness among gay and bisexual men was about double that of heterosexual men, while the rate among lesbians and bisexual women was about 1.5 times that of heterosexual women.” Similarly, he argues “the proportion of those identified as seriously lonely was much



higher among gay and bisexual men (19%) than heterosexual men (2%), as it was among lesbians and bisexual women (14%) compared to heterosexual women (5%).” He goes on to explain how approximately 30% of lesbian and gay adults believed that they would have no one to provide them with emotional support in later life (Hughes, 2017: 1962).

Loneliness was discussed as a key issue for older LGBTI people by participants and partnering organisations and there were a number of strategies used throughout the project including outreach through monthly Dance Clubs, connecting volunteers, and even the small details of seating arrangements to address this issue. The LGBTI Elders Dance Club has been running monthly since October 2016. Over the last twelve months, over 600 elders and their guests have attended the dance. The monthly attendance has increased dramatically since The Coming Back Out Ball.

The Coming Back Out Ball: extending reach through media campaign

The Ball aimed to combat this over-simplification and stereotyping by focusing on individual stories within a broader narrative. To augment the once in a lifetime event, there was a major media campaign for national visibility of LGBTI elders. All The Queens Men and their publicist Ben Starrick (Starling Communications) worked incredibly hard to ensure full diversity of the community were included in the media engagement. This included direct and 1:1 interviews with gay men, lesbian women, separatists, pansexuals, bisexuals, transgender and intersex elders, and people who had previously identified as heterosexual prior to coming out. It also included those that are pro marriage equality and those that do not believe in marriage but would like equality, those who are living with HIV, and those who have mental health issues and gender non-binary identified people. Overall the media investigated this event via three

pathways into the story of The Coming Back Out Ball: the event, LGBTI elder's life stories, and the political context.

1. The title of the event was significant for the event – offering a way for journalists to engage with the politics of the project. The artistic features of the event were also used to create a visual image of the proposed event and its flamboyance. Partnership was essential for delivery of the program and ensuring community cohesion. Each piece of media referred to the extensive partners that supported this project.
2. Personal narratives were explored in a variety of media. People were very courageous in their sharing of personal stories, love, loss, experiences of violence and criminalisation. As explained in the Herald Sun weekend article about Judith Slade “I was sentenced to prison for one month because I was living with a lady, because it was illegal to consort then. Now, people are happy to see two girls walking around the supermarket with each other. This vote won't stop us being together, they are not gonna break us down.” (Byrne 2017)
3. The timing of the Same Sex Marriage Postal Vote and the associated press related to LGBTIQ people's lives, could never have been predicted 18 months prior when the Ball was conceived. The public integration of LGBTIQ people's human rights related not only to the plebiscite but also safe schools, trans people's human rights and LGBTIQ families with children, all of which were under constant scrutiny. All of these issues were mentioned in subtle or direct ways throughout the press.

The media for The Coming Back Out Ball (television, radio, print and online) reached over 3 million people. The archive can be found here: www.comingbackoutball.com/media/



The Event

The Coming Back Out Ball: a gift to honour LGBTI elders

Tonight is a spectacular celebration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex elders. I stand before you, a young gay man, to offer this night as a gift, a gift in appreciation and respect for all that you have done. To the LGBTI elders who have led the way, who have shaped our community, who have fought for my rights to stand here in fabulous six-inch high heels and gold nail polish. To you, I say thank you. I bow down to you...
(Tristan Meecham, October 6, 2017)

The moving speech offered by Meecham at The Coming Back Out Ball framed the motivations for the development of the project. He described The Coming Back Out Ball as a 'gift' to LGBTI elders who had made significant contributions through their own struggles and celebrations. In his words: "we see you, we hear you, we thank you, we honour you".

Gift is a metaphor used in many social art practices to signify the start of a reciprocal relationship between artist and community (Purves, 2005). The extravagance of this gift is also relevant to the community All The Queens Men has been engaging. Tristan explains "...the event was spectacle, born out of a performance culture that has the capacity to shift something for moment." All The Queens Men events are planned and curated to the last detail, yet they bring the joy of spontaneity to the audiences who happen upon them, much like what Melanie Joosten described in the Guardian as "the original transient flash mob" (2017: 2). The initial vision of The Coming Back Out Ball was to showcase the stories of LGBTI

elders through the development of a collaborative performance event. Meecham's vision shifted from a big spectacle event to also include a community building movement in which LGBTI elders attended as honoured guests and beneficiaries rather than performers. The original vision, from two years ago, was to have community on stage, but All The Queens Men recognised how the group of LGBTI elders wanted and needed to see high profile people on stage to reflect themselves.

The historical and social significance and the timing of the event was recognised by many. Reminiscing on the Balls LGBTI elders attended in the 1980s to consider what has been achieved in the last 40 years, one attendee proclaimed, "A Ball is exciting, something that one never gets to go to..." Others commented that attending Coming Back Out Ball might be a good way to dress up and meet other people, as "there are a lack of appropriate venues to meet other gay men." Further commenting on the current political moment, some expressed they felt confident to attend The Coming Back Out Ball because they thought it would be a safe space without judgement at "a time when the postal survey has brought bad memories and cruel attitudes to many."



The Coming Back Out Ball: phases of development

After initial meetings with community and partner organisations, All The Queens Men quickly followed up with key members of the community individually to listen more to their experience and aspirations. Tristan Meecham describes this work as what a 'heart space feels like' – expanding the artistic vision through community building. This is how LGBTI Elders Dance Club developed. It has been held monthly at Fitzroy Town Hall since October 2016 and has been programmed to continue throughout 2018. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex elders and their allies are invited to attend this free monthly social event, learn new dances, enjoy delicious catering and drinks, and interact with other LGBTI elders and allies. Dance Club was pitched originally to the Victorian Senior's Festival two years ago as a regular space that holds the community parallel to building the larger one off event of The Coming Back Out Ball. The hope is for LGBTI Elders Dance Club to be presented indefinitely into the future, with the commitment of local councils to enable its sustainability.

The Coming Back Out Ball was built through a scaffolding approach. Across 2016, All The Queens Men engaged with community leadership and government on the rights of LGBTI elders through public forums such as Where Do We Start? and hosted a series of events including New Moves High Tea (with Alice's Garage and State Government Commissioners), and began the monthly LGBTI Elders Dance Club as a way to make new connections across communities, socialise ideas and build trust. Philanthropic and public funders from local, state and national levels came on board through both resources for creative

arts and for community specific projects with seniors.

There is a dexterity in the way Meecham speaks about the work and his role. He describes the projects always starting with 'an offer or a provocation for people to respond to' which he describes as a gift. This concept has been described by social art theorists as a form for encounter and exchange (Purves, 2006; Badham et al 2016), setting into motion a long-term relationship between artist and community. In explaining how Meecham first set the idea in motion, he first presented to the LGBTI elders with a vision for a spectacle event. The process was both confronting and revealing, reflecting on how he "wanted to do everything, please everyone, and not create conflict" and thought he "needed to work harder to engage everyone, but didn't want to make decisions." Laughing, he explains this approach may have "made people think he was a crazy person and they needed to understand what his agenda was" Meecham wanted to celebrate, connect, and assist in shifting sense of self – and this includes his own trajectory as a young gay man.



The Coming Back Out Ball: motivations for attending

“It’s the first time I have been honoured for all the decades of struggles and my lifetime commitment to my activism for my community.”

There were a range of motivations for attending The Coming Back Out Ball. One would expect that each of their experiences were different but quite simply, attendees wanted to celebrate the contributions LGBTI elders have made for the community. Described by guests as an “event with heart - they are all too rare,” the majority of attendees were LGBTI elders, but the broader LGBTI community attended as did their allies including friends and families, and workers and volunteers of community service organisations in the arts, aged care and the City of Melbourne. All guests wanted to have fun and celebrate in a safe space.

The Coming Back Out Ball was aptly named those for whom the process of coming out including the denial and hiding of identity had been experienced a number of times because of ageing or aged care. One attendee explained this problem: “I found myself having to come out again and again, and thought what’s this about?” (Wade 2017: 2). The shared experience of the event provided a safe space for reassertion as a community by coming back out again.

Honoured guests and community

Many LGBTI elders had been invited personally by All The Queens Men through the outreach activities with partner organisations such as Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Boilers, Celebrate Ageing, City of Melbourne, Matrix Women’s Guild, Organisation Intersex Australia, Switchboard, Transgender Victoria, Victorian Aids Council, Victorian State Government - Equality Branch, Vintage Men (amongst many others) and relationships built through LGBTI Elders Dance Club. Free tickets were distributed to all LGBTI elders over 65 with the care given to speak to each invitee personally to ensure their requirements were accommodated. Many expressed the value of their friendship with both Meecham and Andrew Westle (a key creative of The Coming Back Out Ball) who managed all the personal contact with LGBTI elders in the lead up. The LGBTI elders who attended expressed a range of motivations for coming to the Ball including having a safe space at a free event, to meet new people, and to have fun with their peers.



Coordinated promotion through partners

Further, there was promise of great catering and the line-up was impressive including Robyn Archer, Carlotta, Gerry Connolly, Deborah Cheetham, Lois Weaver with many others directed by The Coming Back Out Ball Event Director Cameron Menzies, which in fact convinced some interstate guests to travel.

Many guests heard from friends who were invited, “my two old queens from Brisbane invited me to join them”, while others were visiting Melbourne attending the 3rd National LGBTI Ageing & Aged Care Conference by Val’s LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care at La Trobe University. A new audience for the project saw the event listed as a keynote event in Melbourne Seniors Week promotional material and booked tickets for themselves. This cross promotion and schedule coordination with relevant partner events was key to attracting a broad range of attendees. dancing and celebrating the community.

Care and attention to access needs

The Coming Back Out Ball provided care to support the access needs of older people to participate in the event. This not only to promote accessibility at this event but also encourage best practice by other organisations. There was a tiered ticketing structure including free tickets for LGBTI elders aged over 65. This was essential in not only honouring them but also making the event accessible for them (Aged Care Guide 2017: 3).

Tickets to the event included a full table service three course free meal, drinks and transport options to and from the event. Westle made contact with every LGBTI elder in advance of the Ball to ensure their access needs were accommodated. This individually focused care ensured their participation through assisting with transport and seating decisions but also developing enduring relationships. Attendees felt respect and confident their needs would be cared for on the night.

To ensure those attending alone also had social support, elders were connected immediately at entry with a volunteer. More than 50 volunteers were enlisted and trained by the City of Melbourne with volunteer support from Victorian AIDS Council.





Volunteers, partner organisations and allies

Other attendees described themselves as volunteers, partner organisations and LGBTI allies, who made up the rest of the participation at the event, including representatives of partner organisations, volunteers and artists performing at the event. Again, many had been invited personally or through the notably strong networks such as friends, community organisations, and social media. Attending the event was an opportunity for people to show respect to LGBTI elders and support the community in the particularly difficult time of the Same Sex Marriage vote. Some guests were engaged in volunteer roles to accompany individual elders to the event and “make sure they had the time of their lives” and had their particular social and physical needs accommodated including transport, introducing them to others, and simply providing companionship by accompanying them in the fun.

Other volunteers helped with the logistics of the evening and others engaged attendees in informal interviews. Through surveys and discussion after the event, LGBTI elders commented how they thought “the volunteers were brilliant and plentiful and it seemed a very supportive event.” These 50 volunteer roles were vetted by Melbourne Council through police checks and training in advance of the Ball. Volunteers were grateful for their inclusion in the event. **“It made me feel happy that I could help make this event a night to remember for the guests and I felt so good being able to give my time and my energy to such a great event. Being part of the volunteer crew was very special and I was so happy I was chosen as a volunteer.”** The impact of the volunteers included not only ensuring swift registration and flow of people, but also an important social support role.

A strong mix of strong emotions

Survey and interview responses from people who attended The Coming Back Out Ball expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experiences of being involved. LGBTI elders felt honoured and affirmed, volunteers expressed a humbling experience, and overall, there was a general enthusiasm for the night’s events. Words were used like: amazing, fantastic, fabulous, magical, terrific, proud, welcoming, joyful, supportive, happiness, feelings of belonging, almost perfect night, overwhelmingly positive, felt the love in the room...



It was the MOST WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE I have felt for a long time!! I met old friends and all sorts of gorgeous people I would not usually meet.

These were expressions of strong feelings of belonging, respect and celebration, but reflections also included emotions that were somewhat mixed. Some LGBTI elders recounted that they felt great on the night sometimes but also contrasted their positive experience that night with the past. “We felt pretty pretty bloody fabulous. We dressed right up and felt really good about ourselves and created a great sense of community again.” Many of the older people attending who lived on their own explained how they “didn’t get out very often as they didn’t have places to meet other people in their community, so this was a “big night”! Participants suggested they felt “a few years younger perhaps”, “fabulous, invigorated, flirty (and that’s been a long time!)”, and even “like a queen for the night”. More comments about love, joy and even “feeling like I was surrounded by a big hug in the room with all the smiling faces.” This emotion was dense and raw in the room, growing as the night progressed.

Sometimes, I thought my heart was going to burst the performances and speakers were so empowering and for our community!!

Some who came to The Coming Back Out Ball had more overwhelming emotions - both mixed and shifting over the night: “excited, emotional, even a bit overwhelmed at times” and “happy, honoured, tired, surprised.” There was a clear shift in the mind sets and expectation of some attendees after their participating. One person explained how the event made them feel connected” and another felt:

like part of the Rainbow community. It’s not often I feel like I’m part of the community, even though I am. It can be very heteronormative or racist, but ATQM create wonderful events and environments that break all of that down. I’m throwing myself at all of their events in future.

Another woman explained that she felt “Better about the world. It also gave me the encouragement to continue to be more actively engaged in social change- been feeling a bit worn down recently.” One attendee explained an opposite shift, expressing how she “felt a lot of love and delight, but also anger to our government - if they’d done their jobs on SSM [same sex marriage] in August, it could have been more of a celebration of how far we’ve come rather, than another in a long line of embattled and hurt moments in history!” Another poignant comment explained this mix of emotions through witness: “Both elated and disturbed as a result of hearing the stories of the abuse some LGBTI elders have experienced.”



A number of LGBTI elders explained they were anxious when they arrived, but quickly felt comfortable with volunteers, connecting with old friends and the people they were seated with at their table. **“I was very nervous, but once I arrived and I met Andrew who introduced me to some volunteers, I felt so welcome. Matt was really lovely. I felt very safe and had just so much fun. I would have loved it to have gone to at least midnight.”** The emotions amplified as people embraced the experience: “it was quite emotional towards the end on the dance floor - such magnificent human beings all in the one room.” The observations detailed in another response described the experience of many who attended...

An exciting and noteworthy event to experience first-hand. To be welcomed with a smile and a show of respect. To see people arrive, dressed to the ‘nines’ with a sense of nervousness break out into a smile as they approached the Town Hall - Moving. Nervousness faded and Excitement took its place. To hear people talk about their experiences - Inspiring. A night that unfolded as Exhilarating. Such courtesousness and support from all involved.

Others also described their anticipation in advance of the event with many expecting a great time but others were nervous. The six hours of The Coming Back Out Ball seemed to host all of these sentiments and reactions.

Social connection and affect

It was clear to all that All The Queens Men and volunteers were committed to bringing this community together and showed this responsibility through giving care. All night, the emotion coming from the organisers suggested the authenticity of their contribution and many expressed their appreciation of the effort that went into making this event happen. Other organisational partners involved also commented on this “effort and authenticity that was shown by All The Queens Men from the first event planning meeting to the outcome of the event.” Comment was also given regarding how and where attendees were seated, specifically noting the care Westle gave to where they were seated. Some individuals came alone so were seated with other social singles, a group of feminist lesbians choose to sit in a cluster of tables, and others guests wanted to be up front to be in the action. “I was on an amazing table filled with fantastic people I should be meeting to help my career, as well as some glorious elders who were so lovely and full of amazing stories.” “I had the opportunity to talk to others at my table.” “I sat on a table with two older gay guys, 2 lesbians, a young indigenous boy, gay



entertainers, a transgender woman - it was a hoot to watch their different reactions to everything - it was bonding.” New social connections were made.

This emotional impact of the event was described by many people interviewed and surveyed. Allies and the broader LGBTI community felt strong empathy for the elders recognising that many had lived a difficult personal life and expressed great respect to their experiences as pioneers. This appreciation of the elders’ contributions to the community was in fact the aim of the project. “It was fabulous being part of a spectacular evening surrounded by everyone who had such a wonderful time and acknowledging the hardships the gay community has suffered in the past.”

The artists and organisers involved did not foresee the emotional impact The Coming Back Out Ball would have on both the community and themselves. The effects of the Ball were experienced on an individual level, expressed through social relationships old and new, validated and informed organisational cultures, and was articulated for those outside of the immediate experience though media. While not uncommon for socially-engaged arts practice, the affective engagement and labour of the organisers was immense - including levels and tasks of emotional labour outside of their roles as artists but certainly within their responsibilities as human beings. While All The Queens Men were able to gently hold this affective space for The Coming Back Out Ball, it is important that the social and government sectors are able to respond to the now recognised needs in this community.

Feedback on production and program

The evaluation provided a range of methods for discussion and feedback on The Coming Back Out Ball. All respondents to the survey, interviews, live participatory evaluation, and unelicited responses sent by email to organisers gave very positive feedback about The Coming Back Out Ball. More than 80% felt strongly that an annual event like this is important for bring the community together, while others offered ideas of more regular social gatherings. These responses had a few specific suggestions on how to better the planning and delivery of The Coming Back Out Ball and other had expansive suggestions. There is evidence of strong agency from evaluation respondents in voicing their interests and concerns.



Generosity of critical feedback

In terms of the overall quality of the entertainment and production, most attendees were very impressed describing the performances as “good classy performers.” There was general consensus on the value and quality of the event with many noting the vision of the artistic director working closely with Event Director Cameron Menzies. “Impressed with Tristan’s vision and capability to create such a fantastic night.” The event “exceeded all expectations with every detail carefully considered and a whole lot more. It was a spectacular event!” The quality and relevance of performances was commented on by many with one even suggesting “I felt like I was at a Las Vegas Event.” **“This was such a BIG night! It was a seriously big show! I was blown away. The talent was amazing. The messages on the night were so supportive of this marginalised group. It had a very high “feel good effect” for all involved.”** However, many had concerns there was not enough time for dancing and socialising. While the event originally had one hour planned for dancing, the program had to start late to accommodate important guests, so there was reduced time for dancing. And as with every crowd, a few people disliked one or another performer.

While most respondents to the survey and interviews agreed it was a great night, there was concern by some about the timing and choices of particular acts. Most resisted giving any criticism: “In the light of such enjoyment and success any criticism seems petty.” This one respondent covers much of the generous feedback including criticism that came from a few guests. “It was a great night, but over programmed. It was a shame the choir only sang one song, I know by then the night was running way over time. The DJ missed the mark with the audience, we were all standing on the dance floor going “we can’t dance to this”. So it was a fabulous and memorable night, with a few programming glitches.”

More time for dancing!

Could have had a bit more time to bust out moves on the dance floor!

Dancing was a key priority for most at The Coming Back Out Ball. In general, most attendees wanted “less entertainment, more time for dancing & talking.” There were concerns the dance music at the end of the night was not long enough and wasn’t conducive to their age group. “Lets have more time for dancing and a greater variety - including perhaps a slow bracket or two.” “My only critique is that the dancing was too short and the event finished too early! We were still having fun and had only begun to boogie.” “I would like there to be more dancing - in between courses perhaps and more variety in the songs. The entertainment could be shortened. I’m being picky I know. It was the 1st one, hopefully not the last. But above is how I’d like it to improve.” “Next time, get a DJ from our generation, or at least someone with a knowledge of OUR dance music.” “Hope there will be another Ball next year. More dancing - suggest perhaps intersperse segments of social dancing between segments of acts / speeches. Shorter bursts of dancing take less toll on the ageing joints. Perhaps consult with some older people about dance music. Some of it was OK but extended play 90s disco was not so much.”

On scale and replicability

Many guests of the Ball recognised the scale of the inaugural event was likely not replicable annually due to the costs and immense labour. Thoughts about scale and location featured as a strong theme in feedback with some suggesting more regular events but smaller, around the city and in regional locations to provide further access. Enthusiasm was strong.

More events like this! It would be great to have more frequent ‘scaled down’ versions of this event, eg a monthly dance with, say, an afternoon tea and one or two performers. I mean, it would be great to have an event EXACTLY like this every month, but I don’t think that would be feasible!

While many hope for “More exclusive nights like these” but there was not consensus on this, as others suggested a shift in scale and site. This question about replicability will be discussed later in recommendations.



Coordination of entry and timing

A few individuals suggested improvements could be made including to the coordination of the entry for the guests and the timing of the entertainment. While the 'rainbow' carpet stairwell amplified the glamour of the event, others talked about anxiety of arrival and the stress of the entrance process – finding names and getting seated took too long for some. For some it was difficult socially to be in a hectic crowd but also physically standing for a period of time. One attendee described her great experience but when asked to offer critique had a few suggestions. "Just that it was late starting and there must be a better way of checking in. There was a bottleneck there this year." Another suggested other interest of time "some improvements could be made, these include: improve ticketing and arrivals - many older people were left standing for too long; reduce the number of performers..." Another suggestion to care for those who couldn't stand to socialise or dance for long periods of time was "to set up a quiet area: a place of refuge to take time out."

Sharing LGBTI elders stories

The accommodation of social and physical needs at the event was discussed thoroughly, but perhaps more importantly was how to amplify the experiences and knowledge of LGBTI elders. One participant suggested an addition to the program of "awards for those who have made major or long-term contributions" while others were interested to hear more stories on the night: "I think there could have been more focus put on the stories of some of the people there. If they could be filmed (and edited), small, short vignettes telling who they were and their story would be really beautiful. We got a glimpse of this in the interviews with Tristan, but this could go further."



During the evening, LGBTI elders address the audience talking about their lived experience and their involvement in The Coming Back Out Ball. Additionally, All The Queens Men worked with LGBTI elders to ensure diverse representation in the program. This included interviews by Melanie Joosten, images by Gregory Lorenzutti and Bryony Jackson and short video segments by Keith Deverell with LGBTI elders (which appeared on the event website). These platforms connected with those who had been part of this initial creative process and will expand into the future. Other guests reinforced the need for representation across the diversity of the community. "One of the best parts of the night for me was hearing LGBTI elders speak about their experience - I would have liked that to be a bit longer (6-8 voices) and to be truly representative. As a middle-aged lesbian, I was sad not to hear the voices of trans and intersex elders - of which there were several in the room on the night. This is not about being tokenistically inclusive - it really matters to people's mental and physical health that all groups of seniors who attend are validated and recognised and it was very disheartening to only hear from L&G elders in that segment. My heart ached for the elders whose voices were not represented and hope this can be a feature of the ball in future that can become truly engaging and celebratory of all our tribes."

Continued dissemination of representations of LGBTI elders

Documentation of this flagship event was important to attendees in ensuring appropriate and just representation of this community. One respondent expressed they "would love to see a record/ the video highlights of this event." It was also suggested that **"utilising the positive feedback from events such as these to garnish public support & put to an end all the myths & phobias of alternative lifestyles."** A documentary film, directed by Sue Thomson, is currently in production and extensive photography by Bryony Jackson is also featured on the All The Queens Men website to archive and disseminate the event. Additionally, All The Queens Men will produce a short film documenting the event, directed by Logan Mucha.





Theoretical Frameworks

The Coming Back Out Ball as social dance

As well as celebrating diversity, it's the intimacy promised by dance... The dancing is the thing that keeps you connected,' Lizzie says. 'I think with sexuality, as you get older – and Derek and I have chatted about this a lot – it's not just about having sex, it's about holding hands. It's about sharing a movie and a meal. About having a purpose to cook and what are you going to wear?' (Russell, 2017: 4)

The needs of the LGBTI community change as they age and many are looking for the social connection that is offered by dance. In Australia, The LGBTI Elders Dance Club can be understood in the context of a number of creative ageing programs also focused on dance (Creative Ageing Centre in Australia, 2017; Tracks Dance Company NT, 2017; Tasmania Performs, 2016). This includes an emergence of aligned health based practice and research looking at the impacts of dance on ageing, grief, and disease such as Parkinsons (Romensky, 2017) or the engagement in community events to end loneliness and social isolation. However, unlike LGBTI Elders Dance Club, much of this work is focused on instrumental value of dance, rather than the intrinsic value of cultural and creative expression and it is important to note there is a gap in not only research, but also programming which explore the role that dance plays specifically in the lives of LGBTI older people.

More broadly, there is also a gap in the understanding of LGBTI sensory experiences of dance as a queer medium and its relationship to ageing and the process of queer friendly public locations to meet and explore relationally. Contemporary queer performance spaces in Australia include a combination of private businesses and public events. These events, festivals and happenings are taking shape nationwide, and utilise diverse art form practices, explore broad concepts around gender and

sexuality and include a real mix of activists, artists, fashion and event organisers imagining a queer cultural context, for audiences.

While a number of these queer clubs still exist in the Melbourne scene, some LGBTI elders mourn the loss of connection to these sites of queer performance culture. After hearing this from older LGBTI individuals, Meecham wondered if community was more dispersed than in the 80s and 90s both politically but also through the use of technology and dating apps. As LGBTI individuals age, this safe space to celebrate and socialise is very important. This includes not only the 65+ but also those who consider themselves past 'bar age'.

One man shared this wish: **"THIS is something I have been DYING and waiting to see for ages: acknowledgement of the elders and their contributions I must admit, as an "almost" 50 year old virile gay (still-feel-young- and excited) gay male I'd LOVE to see a ball or event (or even just a bar or night) for the aged 45+ to mingle and talk, dance and meet...away from devices, apps and technology: much like Saturday night...just the generation before! There is NOWHERE for us to go and meet anyone anymore!"**

The Coming Back Out Ball artistic influences

To describe The Coming Back Out Ball accurately, it has to be positioned as both an artwork and community development project. Tristan Meecham, Bec Reid and All The Queens Men collaborators put themselves into direct engagement with communities and audiences to deal with contemporary issues. Meecham describes his strong artistic influences from the UK performance group Duckie, including Simon Castle and Dickie Eton, who combine art, queer performance and community work. Every Saturday for last 30 years, Duckie has run a queer Cabaret at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and more recently created The Posh Club, a regular social event for the elderly. Their



manifesto states: "We believe that art and performance can be used as tools to bring about community solidarity, to make ordinary people happy and even for personal development and recovery for the most vulnerable amongst us." They also host Slaughter House, an artistic connection program for people impacted by drug and alcohol abuse and other programs for young trans people of colour.

Like Duckie's work, The Coming Back Out Ball can be seen as both a community building exercise amongst LGBTI elders, allies and organisational partners and but also has a strong focus on creative outcomes. Recent work of All The Queens Men could be described across a spectrum of practice in the field of socially engaged arts. Suzanne Lacy has explained this as 'new genre public art' in which we see "... artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility" (1996: 13).

On one hand, their work can be described as 'dialogic art' which has been characterised by art making processes that focus on conversations and interaction with the community (Kester; 2004) as demonstrated by the many public dialogues hosted by All The Queens Men in the two years of development with partners such as The Wheeler Centre, MPavillion, Metro Arts and The Substation. On the other hand, The Coming Back Out Ball has the scale aligned with other ATQM spectacular events like Fun Run with iterations held from 2010 until recently at Australian and international locations. This is a riotous celebration of endurance in which artist Meecham runs a gruelling 42.2kms on a treadmill supported by massive visual effects, a booming soundtrack, and hundreds of performers and athletes from the local community.

Socially-engaged art

The field of socially-engaged arts refers to a range of complex creative and collaborative practices by artists with communities of both place and interest. Some of these artistic interventions are focused on participatory arts processes or local sustainability and capacity building, while others have more sophisticated aesthetic goals. In Australia, the field has been dominated by the histories of the community art movement from the 1960s and the institutional success of what became known as community cultural development, a formal part of the Australia Council for the Arts from the mid-1970s (Hawkins, 1993; Badham, 2013). Today, there is a broad 'instrumentalisation of the arts', signalled by a range of social uses for art, a commitment to partnerships and the interest from non-art agencies and government departments across all public policy areas, from health and urban renewal, to crime prevention and anti-discrimination.

Over the last decade, the sector has become increasingly professionalised, with postgraduate training courses and complex projects run by specialist organisations such as All The Queens Men. Local government bodies and arts institutions show a renewed interest in the idea of community engagement with non-specialists in art-making across many contemporary forms (Mulligan and Smith 2011). This recent focus on partnerships reflects the fact that community-based practice in Australia has entered a new phase, characterised by an interest of cultural workers and organisations in working 'in' and 'with' communities from a range of areas and art practices; the development of programs through strategic cross-sectoral partnerships.



The Coming Back Out Ball: a forum to think about the future

The Coming Back Out Ball was a spectacular event in terms of entertainment, glamour and sociality, but this was also not disconnected from its primary function to bring the LGBTI community together. Reflecting on The Coming Back Out Ball through planning and evaluation was an important way to articulate concerns and socialise aspirations from individuals in the community. In particular, the MPavillion live participation evaluation conversation was able to hold this exchange of ideas.

Attendees were asked **what they wanted for the future for the LGBTI community** and there some very purposeful, practical ideas were shared. The question was purposefully ambiguous, not specifically about art programming or about the needs of elders in particular; and therefore, it elicited a wide range of responses. This survey and interview question was particularly poignant, asking elders about the future because in fact they have so much knowledge from a long life of experience. Embracing and sharing their historical knowledge and past lived experiences is incredibly useful in imagining a new future for the community. LGBTI elders have a lot of advice to give and they were generous with their feedback. Firstly, respondents all shared their aspirations for equality before the law, respect, and to lessen stigma of diverse gender and sexual identities in the mainstream. **Actions for the future were very specific and clear about the urgent needs of the community in terms of social and housing concerns and the interests for increasing intersectional, intercultural and intergenerational social activities and learning.** Finally, respondents wanted more social engagement opportunities to bring people together: this included almost unanimous commitment and ideas for a future annual Coming Back Out Ball for the LGBTI community, but some had questions about scale and location.

A focus on equality

Feedback about aspirations for the future were not just practical but largely values based and political. While framed as aspiration, we must note these are simply human rights and equal rights. "I would also like to see Australia join the rest of the civilised world in allowing us to marry whom we choose - even though it is already too late for me and my late partner of 37 years!" The language used was clear and repeated by many. Key concepts included:

1. **Equality and unity** – amongst the LGBTI community (amongst all groups) and with Australia mainstream; Marriage equality; Equality, no fear, no homophobia
2. **Diversity** - More recognition of the community's diversity, An understanding of sexual politics in this country
3. **Respect for LGBTI community and elders** - a natural and honoured placed within society
4. **Inclusion and integration** - 'LGBTIQ' is no longer required as a label and that people are just people - regardless of gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or any other factor; Successfully integrated into the social world while embracing our differences.
5. **Leadership and representation** - Parliamentary representation by more prominent LGBTIQ people; stronger laws against discrimination and vilification of LGBTIQ community members in all aspects of life; marriage rights; adoption rights.

Housing and social needs

Within the literature, research and comments throughout the evaluation data about the value of partnerships and the collaboration between service providers. There is also a lot of guidance from LGBTI older people about how they would like to be treated by service providers. A strong, direct and clear call was made to address the everyday interests of LGBTI elders such as the urgent need for social and domestic support. Hughes explains it has been argued that their invisibility in service settings and public life are barriers to identifying and serving their needs. (King, 2017; Traies, 2016).

Culturally specific care and housing is a priority for many. "In particular, as we age I would like to see a positive move to care and support of older LGBTI in the form of community support and perhaps communal support and living environments and accommodation for those in need of age support. Others suggested the need for "large 'lifestyle' accommodation projects", to look at aged care options including "friends buying flats together and those on low income being funded somehow to be able to live together". Programs could be developed for home visiting and visiting programs increased in aged care facilities. More retirement housing is required for the LGBTI community including nursing homes and retirement villages "where it [our lifestyles] is really is just ok with everyone (may take a millennia)".

A nuanced understanding of the intersection of identity politics is required across the gender and sexuality diversities, culture, class, geographic and health status people's identities where explored in detail throughout the media. Sexuality is just one of the intersections. A specific example may include, living with HIV. This related to people's identities and was explored in the literature and expressed by the community. Brian Day, 77 "is also concerned that services for the aged care are not prepared to deal with the residual grief of older gay men, particularly the trauma of the AIDS epidemic" (Rychter, 2017: 2). Due to the age of the LGBTI elders involved, many have either lived with the illness, lost friends, or cared for people with HIV/AIDS. This was further explored as an issue in regards to the aged care context.

Intergenerational and intersectional opportunities

More broadly, it was expressed that more activities are needed for seniors and to this end, it was expressed that avenues for "ongoing funding for key community orgs within LGBTI community" is required. Further, it was expressed that more research into ageing and health is required. Respondents to the evaluation firmly believe that there is a problem with isolation and that elders need to stay connected. This can be done through **"any event that will make us LGBTIs socialise together and with the general community... like the ball, social dancing, movies, or other group activities"**. "Lots more outings to be amongst the group." This could also be simply "more events based around doing or learning something together." This need for more activity was expressed loud and clear.

Intergenerational and intersectional social and learning opportunities need to be developed to strengthen understanding of life stage or age, gender, and cultural diversity amongst the community. Many individuals from the LGBTI community who gave feedback discussed the need for older generations to connect to young people. While their experiences are very different, there is an opportunity for learning between the groups. This was expressed as how they would "love to see some more cross over between generations", more "activities combing seniors and teenagers" and more "opportunities for older and younger LGBTI people to mingle." A specific suggestion was to develop "LGBTI housing projects for the elderly and/or displaced youth." In general, this could build "more respect and care for elders". One respondent shared concerns about this lack of exchange, so they wouldn't be "attacked for our values and beliefs by youngsters who think of us as dinosaurs."

The Coming Back Out Ball was the start of this coming together across intergenerationally and intersectionality for many including Tristan Meecham as he expressed in his opening remarks. **"We are a diverse community. We each have lived different experiences. And yet, the hope from the creative team of The Coming Back Out Ball is to demonstrate that we all need each other, especially during this time when our rights of equality are being debated and questioned. During this period, it is important that we spend more time to connect, to celebrate and to love together. Despite our differences, the LGBTI community are united by the fact of having to come out at one point in our life publically. For many this experience has been difficult and even traumatic."**

The Coming Back Out Ball was an important event to celebrate the community but it also amplified the need for increased exchange for foster greater "unity" and "more understanding between the tribes". It was notable to "bring together the various non-heterosexual groups ... to remedy the separatism." "More socialising especially across genders" was discussed as an important social and political objective. "I'm hoping it will become a yearly celebration for LGBTI seniors and it raises awareness to our society. It's about having fun too. It is also bringing the radical lesbians back into the community as they often think they are on their own." Others noted the lack of cultural diversity in the room and wondered what could be done to connect better in the future.

The social value of the project

The Coming Back Out Ball makes the invisible visible, the forgotten remembered and the past treasured and valued.

The evaluation including the public forum, interviews and post event survey asked a number of questions about people's individual experiences of The Coming Back Out Ball and its contributions to the community. A final question asked specifically about the value of The Coming Back Out Ball. Again, responses were varied, but offered greater insight into the significance of the event. As expressed in earlier discussion about whether or not to host an annual Coming Back Out Ball, the cost and immense human energy put into hosting the event was recognised by many, particularly the LGBTI elders +65 who received free tickets. Many who purchased tickets expressed they received value for what they paid for, while others who received free tickets also said they would pay to attend. "The



value is in the recognition of elders and their contribution and their resilience. Also to offer the community a good time and to celebrate together." Most respondents valued The Coming Back Out Ball through social and emotional terms and explained its political and historical significance the community and Australia more broadly. "It was worth everything. Money can't buy the experience I had."

I think it made many people who, in their day to day lives in our society feel or are made to feel marginalised, neglected, invisible, weird - I think it made these people feel valued, important beautiful and cared about. I cannot express strongly enough how valuable that is - it brings tears to my eyes just thinking about the value of the Ball in this way.

Many responded commented that "to know that for people over 65 it was free was extraordinary." "The event had high value to respect our elders and for young people to learn from their wisdom." Some attendees did try to put a cost figure to the event "\$1000000000! Bringing together LGBTI across generations is so rare and powerful." Another tried as well, "In terms of money, say \$200,000 plus sponsors!" Both of these statements were certainly true but the other perhaps more important forms of value were less easy to put measurable quantification on. People tried to put words together to explain how The Coming Back Out Ball was "priceless" and "had immense value". "Incalculable support for elders who came through illegality, AIDS, and the official rejection of their value as people." "Huge value that we are once again visible when we mostly feel invisible... to celebrate our lives, our loves, our resilience..." "The importance of feeling valued as we are." "The value is in having people comprehend their own value and own contributions they have made to the LGBTIQ community (perhaps often unwittingly) and celebrating these contributions."

Recommendations from the evaluation

The Coming Back Out Ball marked a significant moment in the history of the LGBTI community in Australia, but it was clear to all that attended and that were involved in the delivery of the event, that the scale and scope of the event is not replicable on an annual basis. Aligned with the motives of socially engaged arts, partnerships and continued movement towards nuanced processes empowering collective leadership, participation and self-determination are essential in cultural development practices. **"Empowerment is commonly stated as the ultimate aim of arts programmes with social objectives. It does not seem possible to develop the empowerment of individuals or communities without giving them control over their own process of change." (Matarasso, 2007)**

On the question of the future of The Coming Back Out Ball, the stakeholders of the project need to explore an invitation to the conversation and the democratisation of leadership in the future. There are three primary possibilities which could achieve the ambitions of the community for intergenerational, intersectional and intercultural exchange:

1. The continuation of annual Coming Back Out Ball - shift the coordination of the event to a local partner such as City of Melbourne or Victorian State Government. This not only ensures sustainability for the project but also can provide the required social support for participants. Artists will be required to work closely to develop an aligned creative vision, but outreach activities will be focused through the development of required services for LGBTI elders.
2. LGBTI Elders Dance Club to be presented indefinitely into the future, with the commitment of local councils to enable its sustainability. Multiple smaller scale and regular targeted social events for the LGBTI communities - In lieu of or alongside an annual event, develop regular arts and community activities for



LGBTI communities in de-centred ways to ensure a diversity of interests are fulfilled. (ie: Dance Club, social outings to galleries and exhibitions, non-arts activities like card playing or educational programs). Engagement and maintenance of the volunteer base is essential for ongoing activities.

3. Another annual leading performance project for the LGBTI elder community to continue to extend the artistic vision for new future iterations by All The Queens Men with new partners and increased volunteer participation from the community. All The Queens Men have considered that the next iteration might take the form of T Dance for LGBTI Elders, an afternoon event in a public space with featured artists, high tea and fireworks!

Finally, there are important sustainability needs for further work in this area. Firstly, a Council of LGBTI elders could be developed for consultation by government and social sector bodies for the development of coordinated services regarding culturally specific shared and low income options for aged care.

Additional research is required specifically on the needs of LGBTI elders in Victoria is essential. In the context of the current focus of Victorian State Government and City of Melbourne on combating social isolation, supporting ageing, and health agendas regarding loneliness, there appears to be a significant opportunity for All The Queens Men and The Coming Back Out Ball to consider a future research and practice collaboration. **A long term partnerships with All The Queens Men with sustainable funding models and engagement of the LGBTI elders community developed through The Coming Back Out Ball could explore this further through creative work to develop a better understanding of loneliness and social bonds.**

Finally, it is the intention of All The Queens Men to donate all research data and documentation materials to Australian Gay and Lesbian Archives. This includes the collection of all research literature to contribute to a community library. Reports and documentation will be circulated widely.

Evaluation Methodology

Dr Marnie Badham (RMIT University) and Lenine Bourke (independent artist) were engaged to assist All The Queens Men in understanding the significance and meaning of the social art project. Building on their research and practice experience in community partnerships, socially engaged art, and working with vulnerable communities, a narrative research methodology (Liamputtong, 2006) was developed in close consultation with project stakeholders. The primary aim of the evaluation was to support the artists, partners and community to critically reflect on their experiences, explore the value of The Coming Back Out Ball through action research (Wadsworth 2006), and consult stakeholders to plan for the future. All The Queens Men retain the intellectual property rights on the data collected. The evaluation methodology employed multiple methods:

- ethnographic site-based observation
- review of key literature and media: political context, research on LGBTI ageing communities, socially engaged arts/cultural development, dance with older people
- extensive pre and post event interviews with Tristan Meecham, All The Queens Men
- the design, support and analysis of volunteer-led semi-structured interviews with a range of community, artistic and partners (47 @ 20 minute interviews at event)
- access and review of All The Queens Men organisational material including project planning and internal correspondence
- online post event survey with more than (153 respondents of 500 attendees)
- live public participatory evaluation conversation at MPavillion (34 participants).



While all levels of stakeholders were interviewed, particular attention was given to the response of LGBTI elders and arts workers to unpack their own experiences and tacit knowledge. Building on this relational approach, this evaluation extended the dialogic approach embedded in most of All The Queens Men's projects.

Successful evaluation of socially engaged arts projects like The Coming Back Out Ball and LGBTI Elders Dance Club are rare as they are resource heavy, require long-term commitment from organisations and individuals, the need to develop long term trust and relationships with community, and the impact of events is difficult to measure in the short term (MacDowall et al., 2014). There are two primary challenges limiting the effectiveness of evaluation, which this research aimed to overcome. The first often-cited reason for this limitation is the social or cultural complexity of community contexts and second, is the myriad of different ways and contexts in which art can function (Goldbard, 2005).

Socially engaged arts projects employ localised and specialised creative processes. Activities are often complex and unfold in non-linear, unpredictable ways, posing challenges for evaluation, particularly where resources are limited. **Here, by paying close attention to the knowledge of practitioners and community, we aimed to better understand how the project functions by exploring both artistic and community aims.** Furthermore, socially engaged arts often aim to contest the idea of singular narrowly-defined or pre-defined ideas of cultural value and these aims are not usually reflected in evaluation frameworks or processes. For instance, queer performance and spectacle or social dance with LGBTI elders will exhibit different aesthetics and ontology than other forms of professional dance.

Socially engaged arts projects are often tasked with working in complex cultural situations or addressing intractable social problems (Badham, 2013); in this case: the issue of discrimination and stigma and the social isolation of LGBTI

elders. Therefore, we have embraced the notion of research partnerships, or 'community-engaged research' (Mulligan and Smith, 2010) to ensure ongoing relationships exist following the project and research. Evaluations and research using these democratised strategies work from a participatory advocacy approach, aiming to renegotiate the power structures that exist within these forms of knowledge collection. The scope of the research was limited by the short period of time available for design, engagement and delivery. Fieldwork was restricted due to limited resources of cost and time; however, open and generous planning through ongoing dialogue with All The Queens Men began six months in advance and analysis conversations continued for three months after. Another limitation to the research was the evaluator's limited understanding of the Melbourne LGBTI cultural context but also queer performance more broadly. An additional researcher Lenine Bourke was added to the team to assist with these barriers.

The issue of overly positive reporting or 'negative value' in the evaluation of socially engaged arts points to power structures of inequity and agency when artists engaged with vulnerable communities. While many evaluation informants are pleased with the project and express this, they may not always feel confident to offer critique. Community would not want to put the project or organiser in jeopardy. However, in this instance, a number of ideas were relayed that could be described as constructive criticism with response to this line of questioning about the future activity. It was clear that the layering of methods for evaluative reflection over time assisted in encouraging this shift.

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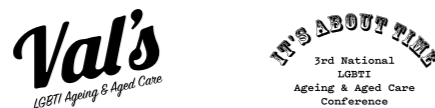
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Artistic and Production Team

Blake Adams, James Andrews, Robyn Archer, Andy Black, Carlotta, Deborah Cheetham, Gerry Connolly, Keith Deverell, Jarred Dewey, Forde + Nicol, Luke George, Russell Goldsmith, Benjamin Hancock, Gregory Lorenzutti, Bryony Jackson, Toni Lalich, Dr. Kathleen McGuire, Sally McPhee, Logan Mucha, Melbourne Gay and Lesbian Chorus, Tristan Meecham, Cameron Menzies, Marzi Panne and Miss Ellaneous, Anna Pidgeon, POW Circus, Bec Reid, Nick Roux, James Shannon, Rockie Stone, Sue Thomson, Lois Weaver, James Welsby, Andrew Westle.

Orchestra

Ben Castle (Concert Master), Edwina Jensen, Rose Kavanagh, Tara Murhpy, Elyane De Fontenay, Tom Higham, Molly Collier, Jarred Mathie, Anna Porkorny, Alexander Araiswale, Sophie Western, David Reicht, Justin Beere, Lyndon Watts, Rachel Shaw, Fletcher Cox, Ming Li, Justin Jacobs, Kathryn Thomas, Kathleen Halloran.

Volunteers

Ada, Ailsa, Alice, Alissa, Amy, Anna, Andrew, Angela, Angela, Annette, Ben, Bertrand, Brian, Cameron, Chanelle, Charlotte, Deheny, Dimitiri, Emily, Fee, Fernando, Gabriel, Holle, Jacinta, Jai, Karolina, Kate, Lorette, Lucy, Maddy, Mara, Marme, Nicholas, Nik, Nina, Olivia, Patti, Paul, Robert, Reema, Renea, Sam, Samantha, Sherene and Susan.

Evaluators

Dr Marnie Badham, Lenine Bourke, Alyson Campbell, Joshua Durrant, Samantha Harlow-Black, Susan Maco Forrester, Steve Pereira, Tara Prowse Robert Walton

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Phillip Adams, Ro Allen, Brenda Appleton, Kristy Aryes, Lou Austin, Dr. Marnie Badham, Kirsty Baird, Dr. Catherine Barrett, Caroline Bayer, Paul Brophy, Michelle Brooker, Jill Bowen, Sheryl Bryce, Daniel Bryen, Lenine Bourke, Kent Burgess, Liz Craig, Karen Cochrane, Jan Cochrane-Harry, Pauline Cramer, Brian Day, Matt Dixon, Maddy Dowling, Drew Downing, Alison Duncan, Tanja Farmer, Deb Fryers, Nanette Fox, Sally Goldner, Robyn Good, John Hall, Bonnie Halsall, Nick Henderson, Cas Hunter, Andrew Jacobs, Jen Jennings, Shona Johnson, Ann Lafferty, JR Latham, Benjamin Law, Olivia Manzart, Fiona Macleod, Peter Mensfeld, Heather Morgan, David Morrison, Erin Milne, Roger Monk, Jacinta Moylan, Logan Mucha, Jess Murphy, Terrence Murphy, Rory O'Neill, Katie Page, Toni Paynter, Nance Peck, Chris Reidy, Mark Trevorrow, Jason Triolo, Clive Scott, Judith Slade, Ben Starick, Annie Stephens, Sherene Stewart, Brad Spolding, Magda Szubanski, Ardy Tibby, Noel Tovey, Brendan Valmont, Jenny Villa, Sam Wallman, Tony Walsh, Peter Waples Crowe, Victoria Whitelaw, Gordon Wilson, Jennifer Wolcott and William Yang.



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