

# Sidney Arts Festival

Summertime in Sydney offers a vast cultural banquet. A rich mix of quality offerings in opera, classical music, jazz, cinema, video, ballet, modern dance, drama, musicals, cabaret, street improvisation, art exhibits, lectures, recitals, fireworks, writing workshops and a circus are being held during January and February. Up to a hundred separate events take place daily, providing a surfeit of activities for people of all ages, tastes, and means.

The steps of the Opera House, Joern Utzon's masterpiece, and Sydney's icon that is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year, command a great view of Sydney's magnificent skyline. Each building in that CBD forms a backdrop to the recession that has engulfed Australia in the last couple of years. One in every five floors is vacant. Premier landmark-grade buildings have lost half their value in the past three years. One in nine Australians are now unemployed. WestPac, the largest bank, has suffered enormous losses and is under attack by its second largest shareholder, Mr. Kerry Packer. Qantas, the National flagcarrier, was recently partially acquired by British Airways. And Arnotts Ltd, another nationally known brand, is under siege by its former "white knight," America's Campbells Soup Company.

Considering the upheaval in the economy here, the Arts have fared surprisingly well in this recession. According to Steven Hall, founder and director of the not-for-profit Sydney Festival for the last seventeen years, city, state, and private funding has remained stable this year at about \$A3,550,000 and ticket sales and attendance at free events are up at least ten percent.

Opera attendance is stable or better according to Anthony Clarke of the Australian Opera. Subscriptions have held to sixty percent of available seats and he estimates that single ticket sales by foreign tourists amount to five percent, an amount which guarantees the break even of the productions without dipping into Government funding or Corporate sponsorship donations. This year's summer sales are up over last year's ninety-one percent to a near nightly sellout in an industry where, as Mr. Clarke puts it, "anything over 90% is extraordinary."

Local business continues to see the value of supporting the events. Some look for immediate commercial benefit by association, like Coca Cola which sponsors the \$A300,000 New Year's Eve fireworks "Skyshow" over the Sydney Harbour or Bacardi who hosts over two dozen Jazz, Latin, and Rock concerts at the Hyde Park Barracks. Others are motivated more by community responsibility like WestPac or Esso, that sponsor the Domain concerts or MEPC, a local property company that underwrote the production of "La Boheme" and has had an association with the Australian Opera for the last eight years. James Broadbent, the Managing Director of MEPC, said "Times are hard for business here. We've had to scale back dramatically, but we're an ongoing business and must maintain associations regardless of the difficulty of making a profit. We feel that as a corporate citizen we must put something back into the community and it gives us an opportunity to say thank you to the people we do business with. Besides, conditions of romantic poverty are not ones in which our cultural institutions can flourish."

The Arts, in fact, are a substantial net contributor to the local economy. Mr. Hall suggests that as much as \$A50,000,000 is added to the local economy by intrastate, interstate, and international tourism hotels, and food and beverage spending by those visiting Sydney for the special summer events. Ted Reedy of the New South Wales Tourism Commission, notes that Greater Sydney's 3.5 million population swells by twenty percent in January. Foreign tourists account for a fifth of these visitors and Asian Nationals for half of this overseas traffic. During the Opera intermissions, one can hear conversations in German, Japanese, French and Chinese.

A number of the drama performances have characters suffering enough to put the current local economic downturn in perspective. Mimi in "La Boheme" dies from exposure brought on by inadequate housing and medical care. Given Sydney's warm climate and extensive state medical services, this is most unlikely here. Both "The Street of Crocodiles" and "Dancing at Lughnasa" are set in the poverty of the global depression and social dysfunction leading up to World War II. "Lughnasa" is the simple, sad story of the breakup of a family. "Crocodiles" is a brilliant mix of imagination, memory, dreams, and nightmare, depicting the dawn of childhood in Eastern Europe. The intense conditions portrayed in these two works mitigate any feelings an audience might have about their own lot. The festival organisers deny any conscious selection of productions that might have such effect and note that their criteria was to obtain works of great quality and imagination. But as one Sydney actress put it "great art is always relevant."

But not all of the summer Arts program is aimed at catharsis; much of it is geared to provide Sydney-siders the

basic simple sense of community belonging, togetherness, and celebration, fulfilling a need as old and as basic as found in the ancient Celtic summer solstice festival depicted in "Dancing at Lughnasa." On Saturday evenings in January up to one hundred thousand people come to the Domain, a park in central Sydney, to listen to free Opera, Symphony, Jazz, or Australian Country Music concerts, prompting prominent politicians to compete to make the opening remarks.

Even though she was wary of the projected size of the crowd, Jo-Beth Lampkin went to see the opera version of "Romeo and Juliet" with seven friends, two unemployed. She was surprised because she "saw no drunk, no obnoxious people, and no drug use even with few visible police around. Everyone stood for the national anthem, even my normally derisive friend. At the end of the concert, the amazing thing was everyone collected the trash and deposited into the recycling bins marked for metal, glass, paper etc. This really is the best of Sydney." Her friends were so taken with the opera that now they are planning to go see together a performance of "La Boheme".

Tamiko Yamane was also hesitant to attend the outdoor opera but went with friends and had a great time. She observed "In Japan, we haven't got this sort of event. Each generation has its own event. Silver generation have 'bon odori' dancing. Young people go to fireworks. In Sydney, baby to silver generation get together and enjoy own way. Atmosphere so nice. Very casual not formal. I enjoyed very much."

Other events also take place outdoors, under the mild Sydney sky. Many are free of charge. Wednesday evenings, some five thousand people gather on the Opera House steps to watch free showings of vintage Australian films. Outdoor concerts are held at midday and early evening almost daily at various convenient locations.

Street theatre, the funny, participatory blend of mime and improvisation, is another accessible way that people can laugh, relax, and open up here. This year, Andrew Hookway, the outdoor program coordinator of the festival, has budgeted a 30-40% increase in funding and the number of daily street theatre performances. In his view, his "street theatre brings quality talent from around Australia to tourists and people who can't afford a forty dollar theatre ticket. It's an opportunity for people to discover improvisation as an art form and it is a nice way to avoid the recessionary blues."

Andrew Booth and Karen Crone, who turn heads as members of the "Naturals" a Brisbane-based street theatre company performing here find that they "are getting people interested in the arts as well as getting them to laugh." They note that "a few years ago the downtown business people walked by us with blinkers on. Now they are more responsive and willing to see the establishment mocked." As far as their own careers have been affected by the recession, "only major festivals can afford us now. We work at 1991 prices so that our group can stay together; but we have to perform more and have less time to workshop new pieces."

Given the relative success that the Sydney Festival has had in these economic times, Mr. Hall believes that show business could provide a few pointers to other businesses trying to improve their results. Quality product, group teamwork and sacrifice, professionalism, and keeping faith with the customer are the virtues he would have them emulate. And, of course, the golden rule: the show must go on.