

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Adelaide Festival 2004

2004 would be the Recovery Festival for Adelaide. That has been the received wisdom ever since the 2002 event ended in inglorious shambles. The experience with iconoclastic American director Peter Sellars had been financially and organisationally traumatic. He had embarked on an ambitious series of community arts programs which he then left to a team of Associate Directors with neither experience nor clout.

Half the projects failed to eventuate and those which did were poorly promoted. Soon forgotten were the Festival's achievements - co-production in new films including *The Tracker*, *Beneath Clouds* and *Walking on Water* and a concert performance of John Adams' *El Nino*, as well as a substantial indigenous Australian program, a great deal of which was free to the public.

Instead what rankled was Sellars' refusal to go on what he himself called a "cultural safari" - to bag big ticket items from overseas. Forever at the centre of Euro-American culture himself, Peter Sellars had no notion that festivals such as Adelaide's offer a unique opportunity for audiences, including local artists, to see challenging new work.

The post -2002 reconstruction has restored much of this. With the appointment of Stephen Page and the consolidation of a team including General Manager Simon Bogle and programmer Kate Gould, things would get back on track. Stephen Page has proven to be an ideal choice. With his modest and direct style, he has not only restored integrity to the Festival he has brought optimism and respect.

Caught in the political flak of 2002 himself and beset with personal tragedy during that time he has proven constant and committed to his task. Promising to return to the "Mother Festival" he even added a touch of mysticism to the pragmatic task of attracting back sponsors and reclaiming the pre-eminence of the forty year brand that Adelaide can claim for a festival that has, until recently, been ranked alongside Edinburgh and Avignon.

Review by Murray Bramwell

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From the time Page announced his program it was clear that the Festival was going to get a tail wind. The local media has been consistently strong in support and discouraging words have not only been seldom heard, they have been non-existent. It would seem that just as the legend runs that 2002 was an unmitigated failure, so 2004 is to be, not only a success, but one of the greatest ever.

The reality, of course, lies somewhere short of that. Stephen Page has put together an enticing and edible festival on a limited budget. Tickets sales have been excellent - latest figures announced on Sunday indicate that the Festival reached box office targets the week before it opened and then went 40% above that. Sixty performances sold out with many others exceeding 80% This compares very favourably to 2002 (especially because many of those events were free) as do overall attendances of an estimated 360,000 which also includes Womadelaide, reintroduced to the festival for the first time since 1992.

So, while Page's festival stacks up well against its predecessor and is already being proclaimed the best in twenty years, it would be unfair to the facts to suggest that 2004 can hold a candle to those directed by Barrie Kosky and Robyn Archer - or further back to those of Rob Brookman and Christopher Hunt.

That is to say, you can't have everything. And, in gathering together programs in music, dance and theatre which have struck more of a chord with audiences than with reviewers - and more seasoned festival patrons - Stephen Page has staged an accessible and profitable festival rather than a distinguished one.

The dance section was always going to be strong given Page's own high standing as artistic director of Bangarra Dance Theatre. Alan Brissenden, dance critic for The Australian, describes the program as "impressive, varied but mostly flawed." He praises the beauty of Frances Ring's Unaiapon but notes the obscurity and excessive length of the other sections of the Bangarra triple bill. He remarks on the energy and imagination of Emilio Greco/PC's Conjunto di Nero and the brilliance in conception of Australian Dance Theatre's Held - for many a festival highlight.

"Of the two major companies," he adds, "The Ballet Nacional de Espana brought a glossy, over-refined and highly theatrical show with a real star in Esther Jurado. But we had the best first - the Australian ballet's tribute

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to George Balanchine gave us three of the great choreographer's finest, danced with elan, accuracy and sparkling assurance."

For many it is the music program that rates a festival and Stephen Page has been disarmingly frank about the limitations of his knowledge in the area.

"I was virgin in curating a festival.", he told me in an interview last year, "I didn't have a plan. It's the way I have always worked. I've always dived into deep water.

Noting that music had been lost in previous festivals, critic Graham Strahle from the Australian commends Page for his breadth of choice. "Peter Sculthorpe's Requiem caught the audience's imagination as a gesture towards reconciliation. The first of the events to sell out, the Requiem, was for me the single most memorable event of 2004 and Elena Kats-Chernin's chamber opera Undertow gave the festival a much needed credibility."

Notably this festival has pleased audiences with familiar high profile artists such as Bryn Terfel and Ivan Rebroff, as well as mainstream programs of Dvorak and Mozart from the highly rated Prague Chamber Orchestra.

In theatre there have been some real crowd pleasers. Several from the Edinburgh Fringe - 100 and Twelve Angry Men have, along with The Overcoat, and Circus Oz and Rocket and Roxy's Stunt Show at the Universal Playground, given the festival a more accessible image, while experimental works - from Forced Entertainment and La Carniceria Teatro - have been mixed experiences of limited quality. State Theatre's Night Letters, adapted from the novel by Robert Dessaix has divided audiences exactly as a festival premiere should.

Stephen Page has had some of his greatest successes with indigenous works. Low key about these themes, he has astutely incorporated events from the opening Smoking Ceremony along the Torrens to the theatre premieres of Riverland, a charming work for young people based on the painting of Ian W. Abdulla and the festival triumph Gulpilil, a project Page himself initiated.

There are many elements which make up a successful festival. The weather in Adelaide has been balmy and the nights clear. The crowds at Writers Week and Artists Week have been at record levels and the

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numbers at the splendidly organised festival-within-a-festival, Womadelaide, have been unaffected by competition with the Fringe and the rest of the program in the second weekend.

This has been a favoured festival and a hugely good natured one. Stephen Page has brought the warmth of his personality and a refreshing lack of hype which is hugely to his credit. His successor Brett Sheehy has much to aspire to in his fixture in 2006 - and he is already firing warning shots about the need to boost funds and the increasing heat of competition especially from Robyn Archer in Melbourne.

He is dead right - and he has some hard decisions to make in his programming. 2004 has been a popular, but unambitious festival, which has greatly pleased the people who paid for it - the citizens of the city. If the Adelaide Festival is to maintain its triple AAA rating internationally, however, Sheehy will have to use his stronger Australian dollars cleverly and raise the bar quite a bit higher than this year.