

Seasonal Smorgasbord Celebrates the Outdoors.

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In June 2009 Tim Winton's novel *Breath* won the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award for the fourth time; the judging panel calling it 'his greatest love letter yet to the sea and to the coast of West Australia.' Winton's voice, currently translated into 25 languages in twenty books for adults and children is steeped in the lives and landscape of WA, but speaks to a national and international audience.

Shelagh Magadza, current Artistic Director of the Perth International Arts Festival identifies that it is often an artist's response to our unique climate and environment that creates distinctive work able to resonate successfully on wider stages.

Shelagh sees our cultural influences, which have always included a strong response to landscape, as widening to embrace our Indigenous heritage and increasingly drawing influence from our neighbours. For proof she says check out the chop-socky, karaoke-infused Indigenous dance production, *Burning Daylight* by Broome dance theatre company - Marrugeku, at the Northbridge Festival in November.

Indigenous art represents an enormous strength for WA; the WA Department of Culture and the Arts reporting that this sector was valued at \$14 million in 2008. The launch of The Western Australian Indigenous Art Award in 2008 which showcases work from around the nation is now the richest Indigenous contemporary art award in the country and is positioned to be an influential event. It will be held in 2010 and biennially after that. Shelagh says the 2009 exhibition was an absolute stand out "I thought it was really stunning and the curatorial view that was adopted was so thoughtful, giving a real insight into various layers of Indigenous identity."

WA's warmer months typically kick off a seasonal smorgasbord of cultural celebrations, many of which tap into the state's love of the great outdoors including The Southbound Music Festival, Perth Fashion Festival, the St Jerome's laneways Music Festival, *Sculpture by the Sea*, Awesome Arts Festival and Foto Freo.

The high water mark is The Perth International Arts Festival - the oldest annual international multi-arts festival in the Southern Hemisphere (56 years and counting) which consists of three weeks of international and local contemporary art performances and exhibitions. 2009 saw its biggest year ever with record attendance and box office (237 events, 482 free events and 1018 performances to be exact). This year's program which kicks off in November is just as ambitious and the early signs are that it will be equally successful.

Indeed in the recent period which has included an early election, a change of government and the impact of the global economic crisis WA's flagship arts institutions, the West Australian Symphony Orchestra (WASO), The West Australian Ballet (WAB), The West Australia Opera Company and ScreenWest have all reported artistic and financial success and surprising growth.

WAB's 2008 annual report noted its largest ever box office return on their modern interpretation of Nutcracker; 70 per cent growth in corporate sponsorship thanks to new sponsors Woodside and Hollywood private Hospital and a private giving increase of 300 per cent.

WASO's last annual report recorded a 10 per cent increase in attendance and an increase in average house capacity. They added a number of corporate sponsors including BHP Billiton whilst continuing their principal partnership with Emirates. WASO CEO Craig Whitehead says WASO sponsorship revenue is the highest of any of the orchestras in the country.

Ian Booth Chief Executive of ScreenWest says uncertain times can create opportunities and that appears to be the case in a bumper year (2008-09) where ScreenWest's investment of \$5.33 million has achieved a record year of production valued at an estimated \$42.15 million. Total hours of production hit a record 72.5 hours up from 55 hours the previous year.

He believes that a major strength of WA's industry has been the imperative to partner with international companies to finance productions. This outward looking approach has also seen a Cross Media Development Initiative launched by ScreenWest and Singapore's Media Development Authority to encourage producers from both countries to collaborate on projects as a response to the increased need for digital content for multi platform distribution.

Jude van der Merwe, Executive Director of ArtSource: the Artists Foundation of WA reports a similar response to a difficult period for WA's artists which saw gallery sales drop. Jude says our art sector is healthy but a small population means that we must always look to where we can take our artists. She says successful galleries like Turner and Mossenson are constantly pushing into national and international markets on behalf of their artists.

Artsource identified strengths including a significant number of artists who specialize in public art. "These artists have gained so many skills over a number of years that they really are at the top of their game," she says. Presenting these artists to the international market has resulted in recent public art commissions with Singapore and the Middle East.

Jacqui Allen, Acting Director General of the Department of culture and the Arts says culture has a vital part to play in the lives of Western Australians citing data from 2006 that showed 88 per cent of Western Australians had attended arts and cultural events compared to just 46 per cent of the population attending sporting events.

The \$73 million Ignite arts package delivered by the previous state government in December 2007 represented the single largest state government funding initiative in Western Australian history. Ignite delivered new, one-off and capital initiatives which have had a significant impact providing reinforcement for existing institutions and new opportunities.

Research undertaken by the Department of the Arts in 2008 which investigated the size and impact of the creative industries in WA revealed that they form one of the fastest growing sectors of the states' economy contributing an estimated \$10.6 billion to the pot.

In terms of cultural investment the present government has committed to future plans for the Perth Cultural Centre and a new Museum; the new James Angus sculpture for Forrest Place; improvements to the Art Gallery of WA; the renovation to the facade of His Majesty's Theatre; upgrades to the State Library of Western Australia; the completion of the Albany Entertainment centre and the new state Theatre Centre of Western Australia.

The state government culture and the arts portfolio expenditure in 2008/09 was \$145 million plus capital expenditure of \$36.5 million.

Most arts organisations report requiring corporate and private sponsorship to survive and thrive. Many cite the lack of critical mass in potential audience numbers as a factor. Recent funding cuts to several arts agencies, and shorter opening hours for the WA museum and the WA art gallery have sent up red flags to many within the arts sector who are publicly wondering why the state's economic boom years and success of many agencies have not resulted in more support and recognition. Professor Geoffrey Bolton from the History Council of WA recently declared at a public forum to discuss the direction of WA's arts that the sector had been going backwards because of many years of government underfunding. The debate rages on.

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