

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Melbourne Festival – strategic review towards 2020

In November 2010 the Board of the Melbourne Festival commenced an extensive review of its operations and its future priorities as one of Australia's leading arts festivals. The aim was to chart a course towards 2020 that would ensure the Festival's ongoing vitality, growth, success and value to the people of Melbourne and Victoria, and visitors to the state.

One catalyst for the review was the impending selection process for a new artistic director to succeed Brett Sheehy, who will deliver his final festival program in 2012. The Board was also alert to the need to think creatively about how events such as the Melbourne Festival can fulfill their mission into the future – how best to engage with artists and audiences alike, how to most effectively create opportunities to develop new audiences for the entire sector, how to support innovative artistic practice and how to optimally serve the community at large.

As is the way of such reviews, the approach has been to reflect on achievements to date, appraise the nature of the changing cultural and social milieu in which the Melbourne Festival operates, and then identify the imperatives and opportunities that could, or should, shape the Festival's future. The review deliberately looked beyond the next artistic director's term and towards 2020.

One early outcome of that review process was to change the senior management structure of the Festival organization, creating a new Executive Director role, as joint chief executive with the Artistic Director.

Melbourne Festival – broader context

For 25 years, the Melbourne Festival has presented a premium quality, internationally referenced program, principally in locations in and around the city of Melbourne, including both cultural precinct and unconventional sites. The Festival provides audiences with outstanding examples of performance and visual art from around the world, offered alongside outstanding commissions, collaborations and new work by Australian artists. The Festival program is intense, high powered and multi-faceted. It aims to celebrate, to stimulate, to refresh, to surprise, and to inspire - for artists and for audiences alike.

The Festival is expected to complement and stimulate the existing cultural milieu and practice. By virtue of the scale, diversity and nature of its program, it is a uniquely differentiated showcase and celebration. Equally, the Festival has been prepared to push, poke, provoke and challenge everyday norms. It is about the extraordinary, the unfamiliar, the innovative and the value of taking risks in the pursuit of excellence, extending people's appreciation of creative endeavour.

As the year round programming of other arts organizations continues to develop, as the everyday cultural context evolves and changes, so too will the Festival evolve and change— always responsive, adaptable, differentiated and fast on its feet. The guiding principles may well be abiding values, but in shaping its nature and form, its positioning and its style, the Festival should be expected to set an ambitious and boldly distinctive course for the future. To become repetitive, formulaic and predictable would be to fail in one of its essential purposes.

Festivals as major events

Melbourne is a city of major events, and the Melbourne Festival is one of the hallmark cultural major events on the city's calendar. It aims to become even more significant in the life of the community it serves.

Successful major events typically have an international reputation and presence that is nonetheless grounded in the life, character and spirit of their city. They respond to the immediate cultural context and contribute to the city's unique identity, location, creativity and character. They celebrate and stimulate people's shared experience of place, the diverse communities, the histories, the urban character, the value of cultural connection and of cultural distinctiveness. Major events are broadly accessible, widely engaging and enduringly valued. They appeal simultaneously to audiences of dedicated participants, to those already interested and familiar, to those curious about the experiences and opportunities on offer and to those who may become interested and involved if given the right kind of chance.

Successful major events recognize their history but are not captured by it. They build on their strengths - one of which is their especial ability to adapt and evolve as their social and cultural milieu adapts and evolves. They energise, enthuse, and re-define. They are sites of energy and of opportunity, generating a unique and lasting legacy and delivering a broad public benefit.

Approaches to creative leadership

Major festivals use a variety of models of creative leadership for developing and selecting their annual program. Some have “artistic directors”. Some don’t. Festivals that have an artistic director at the helm sometimes change the occupant of that role frequently. Others do not. For those with higher turnover rates in their creative leadership, the changeover has often been treated as the major mechanism by which that festival renewed and refreshed its approach and its program.

Within the model of “artistic director”, individual practice varies widely – some simply select the program and have little to do with the process of presenting and marketing the event, and even less to do with leadership of the festival organization generally. Others are integrally involved in the day-to-day management and strategic leadership of the festival organization.

The Melbourne Festival has typically appointed an “artistic director” for one, two, or three years - but not more than four. It has experienced a wide variety of interpretations of the role, across the spectrum summarized above. The approach and style of role in future will build on those foundations. Styled as a “creative director” to reinforce the expectation of a creative leadership role, it could look quite similar to familiar examples of festival artistic directorships around the country. Or it could look quite different. It will initially be for some agreed fixed term, but will not necessarily be capped at a four year maximum term.

The Creative Director will be expected to respond to the Melbourne Festival’s strategic imperatives, strengthen the Festival brand, interpret and animate a creative brief, lead the development and selection of the annual program and contribute to the day to day leadership of the Festival organisation. The Creative Director will need to be adept at fostering and guiding a wide range of creative partnerships, collaborations and innovative programming opportunities. Together with the Executive Director, the Creative Director will lead an organization whose role is to realize the potential of the Melbourne Festival and achieve the Board’s goals, towards 2020.

Selection of the Festival’s next creative leader will be finalized before the end of 2011. The appointee will then contribute to further shaping the Festival’s medium term strategies and approach, generating new creative partnerships, and giving form and style to the Festival program as it evolves over the coming years.

The timing question – February-March, or October

Since its inception in 1985, there have been two possible optimum timings for the Melbourne Festival in the annual calendar – in short, sometime in “autumn” or sometime in “spring”. In 1985 the choice was to schedule the Festival in September, to fit the dates when all the venues at the Arts Centre would be available – since the Government wanted the Arts Centre to be the focal point of the arts festival. Consistently inclement weather saw the Festival move to the mid October timeslot, in 1994. Even in October, the weather issue has remained a significant impediment and risk to most outdoor activities.

The alternative period, sometime in autumn, offers better weather, better opportunities for strategic and community partnerships, better opportunities for creative coordination with other major performing arts programming around the country, better opportunities to reach a broader demographic and build audiences for the arts. In short - better opportunities for more people to have fun, learn, dream, watch, hear, participate, own, think and revel.

The logical timing of such a move would be after the 2012 Festival, to skip October 2013 and to present the new Festival program in February-March 2014 - as the first of a series of annual Melbourne Festival programs developed by the new Creative Director.

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