

The excitement and challenges of Sydney Theatre Company.

Anne Dunn co-CEO and Executive Director, STC, 7th Feb 2023

Anne Dunn treated our near record audience with a fascinating insight into the numerous components that combine to make the STC one of Australia's premier artistic companies, and drive it to new heights with marvellous performances, whilst contributing to its renowned school education programme (boosting literacy, confidence etc) and fostering new talent across the spectrum of theatrical endeavour.

After recalling the history from a start in 1978 based on performances initially at the Opera House, then establishment at Walsh Bay in 1984, she covered the massive renovation in 2018, which was undertaken in partnership with the NSW State Government to not only reinvigorate the facilities at Wharf 4/5 for STC, Sydney Dance Company and Bangarra Dance, but also to convert the long empty Pier 2/3 into a new home for the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Bell Shakespeare Company and the Australian Theatre for Young People as well as the philharmonic choirs, the song company and Gondwana Choirs. It is now a hub for 9 of Australia's finest performing arts companies.

The renovation works at STC were co-funded by a generous group of donors. The project STC50 was the largest capital raising exercise the company had ever undertaken. The works delivered improved facilities for rehearsals and administration and entirely reconfigured its two wharf theatres to make them more flexible, with state of the art technical capacity and a vastly improved experience for both performers and audiences.

Currently STC employs around 700 people per annum and manages 3 theatres (the 900 seat Roslyn Packer theatre, 380 seat Wharf 1, 160 seat Wharf 2) as well as still being resident company in the 550 seat Opera House Drama Theatre. Across these 4 venues, this year the STC will produce 16 productions, delivering around 700 performances as well as tours to 8 cities outside of Sydney. At any one time there are up to three performances on stage concurrently plus 2 in rehearsal and 1 or 2 on tour (including this year presenting productions at Perth, Adelaide and Auckland)

STC is the largest not-for-profit theatre company in Australia. She described its unusual dual management structure, with 2 co-CEOs, Artistic Director Kip Williams and Executive Director Anne Dunn, who work very collaboratively to create the best art the company can afford.

STC's revenue mix (in a non-COVID affected year) is approximately box office 70%, philanthropy 14% government funding 8%, venue hire, corporate partnerships, F&B etc the remaining 8%. Such a high box office proportion is unusual for national/state artistic companies globally. Many of our members were shocked to hear that the NSW Government subsidy is approx. \$500k, less than it earns from rent as the landlord of the wharf, and despite the huge boost to many businesses located there from the audiences etc.

COVID was a crippling financial challenge, with smaller audiences (social distance rules etc), lower bar revenue etc, especially as it coincided with the reopening of the Wharf and higher audience capacity (and budget), plus the need to continue to prepare new plays, and maintain key workforce for the future. Several productions had to be cancelled or postponed.

Emerging strongly from the COVID drama, STC ended 2022 with two hit shows in RBG and The Tempest, plus now is in a fully sold out return season of the hugely successful Picture of Dorian Gray. Brochures for the thrilling 2023 season were circulated.

She described how STC exists to make theatre shows, including bringing new Australian works to the stage, staging the best of new international works, reinventing the classics, as well as to introduce these to new audiences. It aims to push the artform forward - to find new ways to tell stories. In an era where competition for attention is now more likely to be Netflix than a competitor theatre company, the need to stay relevant and connected to audiences has never been more real.

Anne fielded a wide range of questions with great eloquence, transparency and candour, highly impressing our members, who were represented by Kim Oates in giving a well-deserved ovation of appreciation for such an interesting talk.

As a follow up, STC has generously agreed to host for us a back-stage tour of their Wharf facilities mid-year

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