

Sydney Theatre Company Annual Report 2020 Chair's Report

“If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.” Fabian’s words from *Twelfth Night* are also an apt reflection on the 2020 financial year. All of us at Sydney Theatre Company love observing fanciful stories. Last year we all lived one.

Every person, family and business has had its own unique experience during the COVID pandemic. The Company’s experience was characterised above all by the manner in which Sydney’s artists and theatre-lovers showed their love of the Company, and rallied together to give us the confidence not only to survive, but to play a role in Sydney’s determined response to the pandemic.

That is not to say the experience was always a positive one. There were times, particularly early on, when we worried deeply about the welfare of our artists, and the Company’s viability. But very quickly, our artists, management team and board focused on what we could control. And above all, we sought to find a way to keep making art, keep artists employed, and prepare for the return of theatre at the earliest opportunity. Whilst multiple scenarios were modelled, and multiple contingency plans developed, our people kept doing what we do best: make art. STC Virtual took us into the living room of some of our most loved artists; *No Pay No Way* was performed live on Zoom; Mia Wasikowska rallied her friends for a memorable reading of *The Great* before a small, mask-clad audience sitting on the stage of the Ros Packer theatre. Our designers kept designing; our builders kept building; our artists kept preparing. And then finally in late September, Hugo Weaving and Wayne Blair opened *Woonnangatta* to a “full house”, which was then capped at 16% of the theatre’s capacity (147 people). And we were back. *Rules for Living* followed. And then, to round off a bizarre year, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was one of the most widely acclaimed productions in the Company’s history. So as it has throughout history, art thrived in adversity.

We will always judge our success above all else by how well our art honours Richard Wherrett’s vision. Of course we also have an obligation to run the Company sustainably, so it can succeed for decades ahead. Like arts companies the world over, when the pandemic hit we were faced with months of no revenue. From early March, our board was meeting often several times a week to undertake scenario planning, and support our management team in making key financial and operating decisions. Even

at the height of the uncertainty, we were determined to do whatever we could to keep artists and administrative staff employed, and to prepare for a return to our theatres. That we were able to do is due entirely to the vision and generosity of governments, major donors, loyal STC theatre-lovers and artists. Our Annual Financial Report is, regrettably but unavoidably, a little difficult to follow for anyone not steeped in the nuances of accounting standards. Most importantly, I would highlight that at the end of a year in which our theatres were dark for more than half the time, and on reduced capacity for much of the rest of the time, and in which we completed an ambitious project to build world-class performance spaces as part of the renewal of the Wharf, we have the resources to continue recovering and rebuilding, although we are cognisant of the ongoing challenges.

The completion of the Wharf Renewal project was the culmination of nearly ten years of planning, project management, partnership between the Company and the NSW Government, and donor generosity. After such a long period of hard work and anticipation, we held our collective breath to see how the COVID pandemic might impact our vision so near to the finish line. A combination of skilful government policy, great professionalism from our construction partners, hard work from our people and luck meant that the project finished on budget at the end of 2020. The opening performance of *Playing Beattie Bow* in February of this year exceeded even our most optimistic hopes regarding the quality of the performance space. The reactions of artists and theatregoers, and indeed design experts who recently recognised Hassell with the Sulman Medal for Public Architecture (26 years after the original repurposing of the Wharf was similarly recognised) have provided further confirmation that together with the NSW Government, we have delivered a theatre that is befitting of Sydney's potential to be a great global centre for the arts.

On behalf of the Company and theatre-lovers everywhere, I would like to thank the NSW Government and the Federal Government not only for the critical financial support they provided to help us meet the COVID challenges, but also for the care and interest they showed as we interacted with them during the year. I would also like to thank all our donors, whose generosity led to an increase of more than 60% in fundraising revenue compared with last year. The support of our STC Angels came at a critical time in the year, and gave us the confidence to keep planning the 2021 season. And literally thousands of subscribers, casual ticket buyers and other theatre fans showed an extremely touching willingness to donate ticket refunds to the Company or make donations in other forms. It is

impossible to overstate the gratitude we feel to all of you. One of the lasting memories of this year will be Heather Mitchell, who aside from being a Board member is one of our most loved artists, personally phoning subscribers to thank them for their donations.

Finally, I would like to thank my board colleagues, and members of the Foundation Board, for their caring and diligence during the year. And above all, I would like to thank our Artistic Director Kip Williams, our Executive Director Patrick McIntyre, and their respective teams. Their professionalism, work ethic and commitment to the Company were instrumental in steering us through this turbulent year. Since the end of the financial year, we have announced that after 11 years of outstanding service to the Company, Patrick has decided to leave to take up an exciting new role leading the National Film and Sound Archives. Although that is not an event relating to the 2020 financial year, and we will thank him appropriately in coming months, I want to acknowledge him formally here. His skill, flair, commitment and creativity will leave an indelible positive mark on the Company. We will all miss him greatly.



Ian Narev
Chair