

## Events Made Simple: How to Make Your Arts Event Work for You.

Speakers: Stefanie Lewis, author of Events Made Simple  
Brian Keogh, Event Coordinator  
Julia Gelhard Franklin, White Space Consulting  
Ariane Lewis, Kuring-gai Council  
Victoria Johnstone, Event Manager

Monday 28 February 2005 – Australia Council for the Arts: 372 Elizabeth St SURRY HILLS

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By Tracy Ellis

For the first seminar of 2005, SAMAG brought together five experienced and established arts event organisers to share the knowledge and wisdom they have gained working on everything from community festivals to award ceremonies. As well as impeccable organisational skills, exceptional people skills, quick thinking, creativity, dedication and unflagging energy, the qualities of humour and passion also go a long way in what can be a stressful, but ultimately rewarding, line of work.

**Stefanie Lewis** is author of the book **Events Made Simple**, written as a guide for those who may not be experienced in staging events but find they occasionally need to draw on such skills as part of their job. And in today's multi-tasking world, particularly in resource-stretched arts organisations, it's unlikely you'll get by without having to organise, or host, a launch, reception, opening, special performance or award ceremony at some point.

Stefanie is big on "lists." They are central to effective work practices and can pave the way to a smooth-running event. A sentiment repeated by all the evening's speakers.

Lists go hand-in-hand with planning, and this is where being able to put your vision into words becomes important. You may have many meetings with your team, stakeholders and suppliers but you should never assume that everyone shares your verbally expressed vision until you are able to put it on paper. "If you can write it down or draw a picture that ensures someone has the same idea as you, you are more likely to have a successful event," insists Stefanie.

Her book also offers sound advice on catering, entertainment, insurance and protocol, focussing on procedures that are simple yet effective, and keep costs down. For catering, whether it's a cocktail party, lunch or sit-down dinner, you need to think carefully about how much food to serve, and also to consider cultural sensitivities like whether it is okay to serve pork or meat. A good caterer can also help you make the right decisions.

For entertainment you might like to think about using your organisation's own resources. Maybe you represent opera singers or artists who can be part of your event, or you may have a high profile board member who can help you source artists, MCs or VIP guests.

And on protocol, always take the opportunity to include a 'welcome to country'. "It's respectful to indigenous Australians and acknowledges the land which we are on.

"If you're unsure how to do it ... contact any of the indigenous organisations and they'll help you with the wording."

“To be completely honest,” admits event manager **Brian Keogh**, “I started in an illegal warehouse doing cabaret. We didn’t have any sprinkler systems, we just whacked on events and had a good time.”

But Brian has since organised countless high profile events, festivals and exhibitions where he has had to operate absolutely by the book, such as **Sydney Millennium** and **Rediscover Kings Cross**. His experience with events in the public domain have led him to become an expert at dealing with bureaucracy and what he calls “the initials” – all those organisations most commonly referred to in acronyms.

Brian suggests dividing your outdoor event into two components: the story of the event, and the official issues around the event that are going to entail dealing with bureaucracy. When you have come up with a positive fun story that will sell your event, such as “a reunion with an old friend who’s had a facelift.” for **Rediscover Kings Cross**, then you can work the angle through your marketing and publicity strategy and try to ensure that that image is carried through and, hopefully, is how your event is remembered.

“The story makes an event and how you create the story is everyone must be on board and they must all know about it,” ... which brings you to the initials. First and foremost are the local police. “If they get a mosquito up your nose then you’re going to get Typhoid Fever,” says Brian.

For **Rediscover Kings Cross** the first thing they did was meet with their Local Area Command. “We sat down and had a meeting and said ‘this is what we’re planning, this is what we think, what is your advice?’ We got told a whole lot of things that we probably already knew but we listened very carefully to every suggestion and we implemented every one of them. Some of them were completely unnecessary but basically, it’s not worth it.”

It’s worth noting that without the police on board you can be charged \$92.25 per officer per hour to police your event to the extent that they deem necessary.

“At Kings Cross, which is probably one of the most volatile areas in Sydney, they came in with none. So it’s your choice ... a political choice.”

When it comes to liquor licensing for outdoor events, the law, on one hand, is simple: You have to have a delineated space for drinking to keep out under age drinkers. But implementing that can be complicated and again, whether you end up having to delineate your space with decorated, waist-high barriers or cyclone fencing with security guards can come down to the politics of the day.

Brian recommends getting an existing licensee from a local hotel or business to handle the alcohol licensing for your event, which means that they take on all the security issues in exchange for the profits from alcohol sales. “You don’t really want to deal with it because you haven’t got the time.”

If your event requires road closures, you can apply for a User-pays Special Events Clearway from the RTA but, “they are going to charge you as much as the political climate will allow and that can be quite severe.” Alternatively, Brian, who has worked on both sides of government, suggests working with your local council, “who are far more politically vulnerable.” You can work with your local council traffic committee who will need about six to eight week’s notice. “If you’ve got a really nice traffic planner, they can deal with the SRA, all those other initials, they can deal with a lot of them.”

If your event requires Local Environment Plans (LEPs) and Development Applications (DAs), think again. Brian refers to his notes which say simply, “avoid, avoid, avoid,” citing the example of having to submit a DA to the Sydney Harbour Foreshores Authority that took 60 pages of detailed maps and diagrams for just one portion of a New Year’s Eve event.

“Work with your local council and try and avoid DAs, or work with people who can help you through your DA if your event is worthwhile.”

**Julia Gelhard Franklin** worked with Brian on **Rediscover Kings Cross** and, in her 14-year career, has staged everything from the **Prime Minister's Awards** to the opening of **Fox Studios**. Delegation is a crucial part of her particular management style, working with a team she can trust which frees her up to stay focussed on the big picture.

"I much prefer to get the tender from the client, come up with the creative idea of what an event should be..."

Having utmost faith in your team, from lighting and audiovisual technicians to caterers, and developing those relationships can really pay off.

"Your only as good as your suppliers ... suppliers that you trust, that you've worked with, they're the ones that make your event a triumph."

Julia has a flair for creating unforgettable events with a touch of theatre. She creates stunning entrances using lighting, colour, spotlights, red carpet and banners; dresses stages and halls elegantly with flowers and lecterns, uses food arrangements and buffets, or ice sculptures and customised screens to dramatic effect.

She also points out the importance of using your entrance to actually make an entrance, so that everyone knows when your MC or celebrity guests arrive and the event is due to start, such as her event for the Sydney Airports Corporation where she created a jungle travel theme. The invitations looked like passports, menus were printed on the back of paper jungle masks and the MC was carried in wearing a Safari suit.

When taking on such high profile and theatrical events, you have to be prepared to "expect the unexpected," like something not working or not arriving on schedule. But one wrong note doesn't have to ruin the whole concert. "It's going to screw up for you one way or the other," says Julia. "Usually the client doesn't see it. Usually we get away with it."

Always plan contingencies where you can, especially for the ever-unpredictable weather. Consider alternative indoor settings, marquees, or have volunteers on hand to distribute plastic ponchos.

Youth events can pose an entirely different set of challenges and, as Youth Services Officer with Kuring-gai Council, **Ariane Lewis** knows all about them. Her responsibilities include staging 10 events a year at the local youth venue, The Fitz, running two band competitions, a mobile youth outreach service, and being part of the annual **ShoreShocked Festival**, a multistage event held in North Sydney during Youth Week which attracts over 10,000 young people.

Security is one of the most important issues at youth events so it's important to work with a youth-friendly security company. And, "it's important to have a gender mix in your security," so that a young female in trouble can turn to a female security guard for assistance with something like sexual harassment.

At Kuring-gai they have developed a policy to present to security companies and all service providers so that they are aware of the different rules and requirements for dealing with youth. The policy addresses issues like making the stage a non-smoking area for band members and avoiding aggression as a means of crowd control for security officers.

Bands are given a contract which, as well as payment and promotion details, reiterates their youth policy with respect to their obligation not to incite cultural/religious/gender based hatred while on stage and not to consume alcohol on or near the premises. Everyone has to be "fully aware that it is a youth focussed event run by young people for young people," says Ariane.

You also have to consider access to public transport when working with young people, and make sure your event doesn't finish too late, and working around school and study schedules is important. Major events should be planned during school holidays, committee meetings scheduled after school, and always avoid exam times.

You can publicise your event through local schools by distributing posters, flyers at lunchtime, or speaking at school assemblies but long lead campaigns don't always work with the short attention span of teenagers. A month is usually ample.

The most important thing with any youth event, if you want it to have credibility, is to "talk to your young people." Set up a youth committee and consult with and involve young people in all the decision-making that you do.

**Victoria Johnston** has over ten years experience in event management and recently staged the ambitious **Peat's Ridge Festival** in Glenworth Valley – a three-day event that offered something for all age groups with a focus on environmental sustainability.

Staging such a large-scale event requires the ability to simultaneously check off hundreds of details while still keeping your eye on the big picture.

"There can be a million things happening in one's mind at once and you can be thinking about them simultaneously and independently but in the process they have to collide in a very succinct time frame," explains Victoria. "Absolute thorough planning and attention to detail and budgeting is essential."

The **Peat's Ridge Festival** was a new event with a limited budget, unfamiliar stakeholders and the venue was an untested site where infrastructure had to be imported in. The first thing Victoria did was to bring together "a team of people with a vision," a steering committee of five individuals with experience and knowledge in the field.

They researched other large festivals, both around Australia and internationally, and sat down and thought about what they wanted their event to be. "We wanted it to be a three day music and cultural festival [with] a major emphasis on sustainability practices, environmental technology design and education as a core component."

They found the perfect site at Glenworth Valley – flat, with lots of shade and separate spaces for camping and staging, but they still needed to make sure they could get large trucks in and maintain access for emergency services.

"When you're in the country and your going down a dirt road the land can turn to mud very quickly."

Traffic management was also a priority. It had to be safe to get so many people in and out of the site from the highway and through security checkpoints. Then there were community concerns about noise levels, and in keeping with the theme, waste management was essential. Everything had to be recycled. But this huge event was a huge success, which means Victoria will probably have to do it all again in 2005.

In summing up Victoria says, "Event management is obviously a very creative industry and you need to be passionate about it. Too many people nowadays think about how much they get paid. We're very honoured to be working in this industry and you've just got to keep passionate and pursue it."

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