



New Spaces and New Ideas

Speakers: Rachel Healy, General Manager - Belvoir St Theatre
Sue Hunt, Director - CarriageWorks
Lisa Havilah, Director - Campbelltown Arts Centre

Chair: Emma Kirby, SAMAG Committee Member

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By Frances Derricourt

The September SAMAG seminar brought together three speakers who have taken on the responsibility of creating new performance spaces in Sydney, and transforming the local performing arts landscape for both audiences and artists. The speakers provided a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at how artistic goals can be achieved through the transformation of a building or space, and sometimes how that building or space can take on a personality all of its own.

The three speakers work with very different spaces, audiences and expectations. Rachel Healy from the Belvoir Street Theatre has had the challenge of redeveloping a site with incredible nostalgic and historic importance to Sydneysiders, and the new Belvoir is due to open within days to a very curious local audience. Sue Hunt is working for the NSW Ministry of the Arts and CarriageWorks to transform a massive industrial, urban space into a new home for a variety of performing arts companies, including Performance Space. Lisa Havilah has led the development of the Campbelltown Arts Centre which opened last year and is now working on building audiences and developing an exciting and on-going arts program.

While the topic for the evening centred on the development of buildings into performance centres, it became very clear that for these projects to be successful they had to have an artistic vision from the very start. For Rachel Healy, the vision for the future of the Belvoir Street Theatre was uniquely intertwined with the theatre's past. Belvoir Street theatre-goers are generally aware of the theatre's history and its struggle to survive against the odds, and are also appreciative of its informal and accessible feel. Rachel reminds us of a time when theatre going was about red plush carpets and wearing your 'Sunday best', and in contrast "the Belvoir Street Theatre created an environment that was informal, accessible and welcoming, and backed it up with shows that were new and sometimes challenging and frequently Australian and ticket prices which were as cheap as the company could make them".

The vision for the redevelopment of the theatre therefore had to maintain the building's accessible feel, whilst enhancing the experience of coming to the theatre, by improving things like seating, bathrooms and disabled access. Just as important, was improving the working environment for the administrative and creative staff, and to develop office spaces to match creative needs and corporate expectations. Rachel makes the point that whilst major companies are constantly assessing how physical environments affect staff, arts organisations rarely make the effort to do this – part of her vision for the new Belvoir was to have a space which led to healthy and creative working practices.

History has also played a part in CarriageWork's redevelopment of the Everleigh railway workshops, a site which retains many of its original industrial features (which are heritage-listed) and has been utilised by many performing arts companies in the past. But Sue Hunt realises that to fill such a vast space the vision for Carriageworks must be equally grand and all-encompassing, and her aim is nothing less but to create

"a new home for contemporary arts practice in Sydney." The site will hold three performing spaces, the biggest seating 800, three rehearsal rooms, a scenery construction workshop, and a café and there will be a number of arts companies in residence.

"My vision for CarriageWorks is to make it a place of innovation, creativity and unique spirit of place" explains Sue. "CarriageWorks should be the physical embodiment of creativity, which means you have to be creative right from the word go." This has meant developing the huge space in a way which captures its colourful history and becomes a place where artists can be creative and audiences can be comfortable. Railway tracks, graffiti and cranes intermingle with rehearsal rooms and giant corridors, to make a truly unique space to fit in with the contemporary arts companies who will perform there.

Lisa Havilah is in a very different position, having worked on a brand new performance space. The Campbelltown Arts Centre opened in 2005, after a \$10 million redevelopment of a regional art gallery into a theatre complex with workshop spaces, rehearsal studio, residency studio and outdoor amphitheatre. Funded by the local government, this development was part of a series of projects which aimed to provide more performance spaces to Western Sydney. "When you're looking at the changing environment of performance and cultural infrastructure it's always important to put that in the context of growth", says Lisa. Western Sydney is one of the highest growing areas in Australia, with 1.9 million residents already and therefore the vision for new performance spaces is shaped by a desire to provide better access to the arts in a growing area, and to raise the level of support for performing arts.

While each speaker feels that these visions are on their way to being fulfilled, there are always practicalities which need to be overcome. For Rachel, the process of developing the theatre was "full of drama", and she experienced many lows during the renovations from finding asbestos in the roof to having to spend the majority of the budget on plumbing! While Rachel wanted to keep all theatre staff under one roof, building difficulties meant that the administrative and artistic units have had to be moved to a warehouse down the road. "It will be crucial that the artists and the staff working for the theatre keep in contact with the Company so as to minimise a sense of isolation", says Rachel.

Lisa Havilah was driven by a desire to deliver a fresh and innovative performing arts program to local audiences, but to make money and fill the space she has had to opt for a more commercial program in combination with developmental programs. She has also had to continually lobby for funding as she has found that local government are happy to support initial costs, but are not so keen to provide ongoing financial support.

The issue of funding is crucial and for these spaces to keep their vision alive, they must fund themselves in a sustainable way. Sue Hunt is determined that CarriageWorks will be self-sufficient, as half of the space will be developed into commercial property paying rent which will go towards CarriageWork's costs. "One of the underlying principles is that after the capital and set up cost there's no ongoing impact on government ... that's a really interesting challenge to develop this business plan". Rachel agrees that this self-sustenance is vital to a thriving performance art space, arguing that some of the best theatres in Sydney were "founded by the blood and sweat of artists, not the policy of government or lobbying of administrators".

Crucial to all three projects was creating a positive relationship between the performance space and the community at large. For Lisa, this is vital as she works in a unique demographic where one in four people weren't born in Australia and half are aged between 12 and 25. Performances need to appeal to these audiences, and so "the work being commissioned is focused on having context and engagement with communities and telling the history and stories of those communities". She has organised open days with sausage sizzles and free performances, and has also brought in school groups or cultural groups to watch performances which relate to their own cultures and community.

Sue Hunt has a similar idea for CarriageWorks, albeit with a more 'inner-city' feel. Taking advantage of the already established 'arty' communities of Newtown, Marrickville and Sydney University, plus the growing Redfern-Waterloo precinct, she wants CarriageWorks to be a place where these communities want to spend their time. "We'd love CarriageWorks to be at the centre of the community, where people spend their time drinking and talking, and where they feel at home".

For the Belvoir, it is important that they can ensure loyal audiences that despite redevelopments the building is still 'their Belvoir'. Rachel has incorporated the history into the new building with a series of signs and plaques retelling the theatre's story, as well as recognising the work Sydney-siders have put in to protect the theatre.

But what about those people who will be working within these developments – the artists themselves? In the end, the environment must be shaped by the artists' needs and must encourage creativity and innovation. For the Belvoir, this has meant retaining what actors love about the theatre – the unique corner stage which provides a special proximity to the audience, and the focus on staging Australian drama. The redevelopment had to retain Neil Armfield's artistic vision: "Great theatres create their own performance styles, their own production styles, ultimately, even the kinds of plays that are written, and it is the Belvoir corner that is responsible for that simple, unrheterical yet detailed and focused style of production and performance that Company B has become famous for."

For Lisa, involving artists in the programming at the Campbelltown Arts Centre is crucial to the centre's success. By commissioning local artists, and taking on local touring products she is actively encouraging artists to feel a sense of belonging to the centre, and therefore foster a healthy arts culture within the local community.

Sue Hunt believes strongly that artists themselves must be consulted in every stage of development of a performance space and that their ideas are crucial if you want to "develop something that is a hub of activity which will make a significant difference in the Australian and international scene". With such a strong sense of partnership with the arts makers, it seems these three women are on the right path towards doing just that.