

The life of the mind

Are we happy? Is it a question we should be asking? What does it mean anyway? January at the University is the time and place to ask these and other questions, writes **Diana Simmonds**

Sydney Festival artistic director Lindy Hume says the University is a key element in her new approach to the traditional Sydney summer event. Major events are scheduled for the Great Hall; and the Seymour Centre is to be a new festival “hub”. Hume and Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence share a vision for the relationship between the University and its city. Hume’s planning with the University, for 2010 and beyond, is part of what she calls “the recalibrated optimism” she feels about the “post-economic crisis world, especially in Australia.”

Part of the spirit – signified by a soaring yellow balloon – is a renewed engagement with what is often tagged “the life of the mind”, which has at its core the subversive notion that intellectual pursuits, elite ideas and rigorous debate are vital and entertaining components of a vigorously engaged community.

“The Great Hall is part of the architecture of this Festival with the Happiness event,” she says of *Are We Happy Yet?*, which is “part performance, part talk, part forum and getting away from the lectern-bound thing, so people can eat and drink, talk and consider the arguments. It’s part of a program called *The Scope* that I hope will give people a chance to be aware of the themes and connections in the Festival.”

Led by Dr Geoff Gallop, the event is Australia’s inaugural *World Café* event. It is the initiative of Meredith Hall whose *Sydney Ideas* lectures have become a must-do on the calendar and which continue into 2010.

Also in the Great Hall is Ensemble Offspring, an Australian contemporary music trio that features a glass harmonica in a work by Damien Ricketson titled *Fractured Again*. From Belgium comes Collegium Vocale Gent making their Australian debut. Their intimate performance piece, *Ruhe*, includes 300 wooden chairs, Schubert lieder and confronting verbatim theatre.

The Seymour Centre will be a



new Festival performance hub and lynchpin of the Inner West precinct with Carriageworks and the Enmore Theatre. The Seymour is the venue for one of the most anticipated shows of 2010: *Tempest: Without a Body*, a new work by controversial New Zealand choreographer Lemi Ponifasio.

“It’s bleak and beautiful,” says Hume. “Part traditional dance, part Maori activism and it’s about moving away from a Eurocentric view.”

Another part of that move is one of director Hume’s favourite shows, *The Manganiyar Seduction*, in the York Theatre. “It’s probably my favourite and I saw it first outdoors in Vienna with 10,000 of my closest friends! It’s 43 Rajasthani musicians in windows – like those prostitute windows you see in Amsterdam. As each musician begins to play the window lights up until the stage is a dazzle of colour, light and music. Wonderful!”

The *About an Hour* series returns for 2010 and these short, affordable shows are based at the Seymour Centre. “Sweet shows for 30 bucks,” Hume calls them. “The best of the Edinburgh fringe and loads of other stuff. They’ll be stacked so you can do two or three in a night if you want, and the Seymour will really be a place to go and have a good time.”

Among the *About an Hour* shows is Dublin’s Pan Pan Theatre with

Oedipus Loves You, Australia’s Shaun Parker with the world premiere production of *Happy as Larry*; BAFTA comedy alumna Isy Suttie, Hugh Hughes in ... *360*, Tim Key’s *The Slutcracker* and the Invisible Dot with *Party* (all from the UK).

Sydney Festival January 9-31, 2010
program at www.sydneyfestival.org.au
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Seymour, do more

Tim Jones, artistic director and general manager of the Seymour Centre says of the unique Sydney landmark, “My ambition for the Seymour is for it to become a leading campus-based arts centre. It’s nothing to do with training, it’s a platform for the University to speak to its city and its community.”

It’s not before time. Despite its prominent position the Centre has long languished in a doldrums all its own. Nevertheless, visitors can already experience the new energy and ideas as long overdue improvements to the buildings are now underway. These include lift access from the foyer level to the theatres and smartly renovated restrooms. Jones is also eager to upgrade food and bar amenities to help the Centre fulfil its promise as a social and artistic hub of both the University and the neighbourhood.

Jones recently visited the USA, where the concept is well established, to look at a range of university-based arts centres. He came home invigorated with fresh ideas.

“The plan is for the Seymour to be a *real* centre – a place where people want to come, a meeting place. From 2010 there will be a core program with a definite philosophy running through it,” he says.

Jones is also working to build partnerships within the University and in the wider arts community. In 2010 the significant new collaboration



Above left: Lindy Hume, photo: Ted Sealey; above: the new Seymour Centre logo



with the Sydney Festival (see left) is the keynote and springboard for the reinvented and refreshed Seymour Centre. Other collaborators include eminent and innovative companies such as Musica Viva, Chunky Move, Monkey Baa, White Box and the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (Booker Prize nominee Sarah Waters will be at the Seymour as part of the latter).

“Alongside the physical changes we’re working on the less obvious,” says Jones. “Ideas that examine, engage and investigate where we are and who we are; as well as being terrifically entertaining, of course!”

More information and full program, plus news of alumni discounts and special events: www.seymour.usyd.edu.au or call (02) 9351 7940



New decade, new dynamic

The University begins 2010 with a fresh outlook – and a new look – designed to better represent its position in the minds of alumni, students and staff, and the wider community.

“Market research told us that we at the University know what’s happening and how important it is, but we haven’t been as good as we should be at telling the rest of the world,” says Marian Theobald, executive director, External Relations. “We surveyed widely both inside and outside the University, and the recurring message was that while we knew Sydney was different and distinctive from other Australian universities, we couldn’t articulate

exactly what that distinctiveness was.

One of the problems is predictable, but difficult to overcome – when a much-loved plus is also a minus: “We had been relying too much on our ‘sandstone’ heritage and not communicating the message that our real asset was our people, challenging, courageous and committed to critical thinking. The University makes a difference in the world and it’s our staff, students and alumni who do that. The buildings are where we are, but it’s the people who matter.”

Increasing financial pressures on all universities, and more competition for international and domestic students, have led to greater reliance on self-funding – and an obvious need for a defined and distinctive “brand identity”. At a national level, the higher education agenda is undergoing major reform with the federal government committed to introducing fundamental changes in all areas of educational endeavours, particularly research and teaching. Within the University, there is serious thinking about its future size, shape and structure as part of our strategic planning process. The brand project is part of this new environment.

Responses to the market research conducted during the project were remarkably consistent, says Theobald. “To be honest, although everyone knew we were the first university in Australia, we were strong academically and we had lots of famous graduates, we were also considered arrogant, old fashioned, ivory-towerish and unresponsive to the outside world.”

Breaking down this perception is important, says Theobald, because it reflects the way the University once relied on its “sandstone” past.

The new brand will mean a new logo, but more importantly a new way of telling the University’s

story. Communications will be more focused on people and on the impact their work has than on the amount of research dollars they attract.

Vice-Chancellor, Dr Michael Spence, agrees and has spoken extensively with staff and alumni during a long consultation period. He says of the fresh outlook, that “whether we like it or not, every organisation has a brand ... and ‘oldest’, in our context, is not much of a claim”.

People who are prepared to challenge conventional wisdom, debate and question are at the core of the brand, and, says Dr Spence, this is where “the dynamism of the University really lies. We have a heritage of remarkable people and it’s their excellence that has really made a difference. It’s the quality of our people and the quality, therefore, of our present and our future.”

Ranking rise

The University has improved its position in the *Times Higher Education* world rankings, moving up one position to now be ranked 36 in the world’s top 200 universities, and equal second in Australia.

The Vice-Chancellor, Dr Michael Spence, says he is encouraged by the result. “I am pleased that our continual improvement and our reputation for world class research and research-led teaching is being recognised internationally.”

The University has also shown considerable improvement in the rankings for specific subject areas. Of particular note are the Life Sciences and Biomedicine which are ranked 15th in the world (up from 27 last year) and the Natural Sciences ranked 34th (up from 44). In other subject areas Arts and Humanities are ranked 19th, Social Sciences 27th and Engineering and IT 40th in the world.

A feature of this year’s rankings is the fall in the number of North American universities and the slight increase in the number of Asian universities in the top 100.

The United States and the United Kingdom still dominate, with Harvard, Cambridge and Yale ranked as the top three. In Australia, all the Group of Eight research universities are ranked in the top 100.

Above: The Manganiyar Seduction, in the York Theatre; left: the new look coat of arms