



# Antidote to hard times

*West Australians have ignored the global threats of recession and embraced the currency of art*



**VICTORIA LAURIE**

**A**MERICAN composer John Adams exhorts young people to go out and constantly expose themselves to truly great art in order to be sensitised to it. They won't find it on US airwaves, he told an interviewer recently from his Californian home. "I've got 120 channels on cable TV and I assure you there's almost never any discussion of serious art on any of them."

Adams would have been gratified to see so many young faces in the Perth audience of *A Flowering Tree*, his Indian folktale opera. The applause was warm for this elegant concert staging, the closing event of the 2009 Perth International Arts Festival, for which the festival, WA Opera and the West Australian Symphony Orchestra combined to stage the opera's Australian premiere.

Adams would surely have approved of soprano Rachele Durkin's glorious voice and spirited portrayal of his central character, the poor village girl Kumudha. Durkin is a former Perth schoolgirl who went in search of great art, won a place at the New York Metropolitan Opera and is now sought after by opera houses around the world.

Adams said his spirits soared recently when four classical musicians got star billing at Barack Obama's presidential inauguration, in a sign that — global recession notwithstanding — the new administration may support serious artists in new ways.

Had he been able to attend PIAF, Adams might have come away reassured that appetites for high-quality artistry can survive, even thrive, in a recession. A little history is required on this point. At precisely this time last year, I ended my wrap of the 2008 PIAF with the view that "like Topsy, boom-time Perth and its festival just keep growing and growing".

A year later, the boom has bust and thousands of West Australians (albeit fewer than in eastern states) are contemplating lost jobs, downsized businesses and an unnerving dip in Chinese demand for minerals and gas.

Yet the festival has just notched up the highest box office in its history and record attendances. General manager Julian Donaldson says this year's festival has pulled in \$4.2 million at the box office, up 7 per cent on

last year. Paying patrons will top 187,000 — up 16 per cent — by the time the festival's longer film season ends in April. "Given the difficult economic climate, we are thrilled with the box office result," says Donaldson.

Not all is rosy: the bills have not yet come in, and they are likely to be higher than anticipated. Distant Perth suffers more than other festivals whenever foreign exchange rates rise, forcing up the cost of flying in foreign companies, or hauling them across the Nullarbor with attendant freight costs.

It could be argued that PIAF's artistic director Shelagh Magadza, with her festival colleagues in other states, is already intelligently conserving costs by sharing productions. *The War of the Roses*, Sydney Theatre Company's marathon Shakespeare history cycle, was co-commissioned by Sydney and Perth festivals.

A major hit in Perth, the four plays struck this viewer as true Shakespeare for grown-ups. Director Benedict Andrews rejects the sugar-coated-pill approach of some Shakespeare exponents that seeks to make his work "palatable" by resorting to diversionary stage gimmicks or radical updating to a modern age. Instead, there's bodies and gore in abundance, a visceral picture of a time when power was lethal and people were butchered on the battlefield. Ewen Leslie as Henry V and the two King Richards — Cate Blanchett and Pamela Rabe — gave unforgettable performances.

The Japanese theatre troupe Ishinha delivered their loving, if over-amplified, account of Japanese migration to a new land in *Nostalgia*. In an amusing later encounter, director Yukichi Matsumoto and cast tried to teach their idiosyncratic dance style to bemused students of the WA Academy of Performing Arts (STC actors and visiting Irish dance company Fabulous Beasts also gave classes, in a program of access workshops for which PIAF should be applauded.)

Both *The War of the Roses* and *Nostalgia* provoked strong love-hate reactions, but the two smaller-scale offerings by Perth's theatre companies were almost uniformly applauded.

Black Swan State Theatre Company and actor Helen Morse delivered an exquisite version of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion's chronicle of the grief-stricken year in which she lost her husband and daughter.

In *Antigone*, a blistering ThinIce reworking of the ancient tragedy, Sophocles Greek chorus was imaginatively represented on stage by lyricist-singer Rachel Dease (from Schvendes). The assured tone of these two productions contrasted starkly with the under-developed, big-scale local offerings of last year, *The Turning* and *Jandamarra*.

Other small-is-beautiful moments were Samuel Beckett's five-skit *Fragments*; three performers were simply flawless in their



acting out of these wry existential tragicomedies. And you could have heard a pin drop in *The Little Match Girl Passion*, an emotion-charged choral piece by Pulitzer-prize winning David Lang, sung by Denmark's Theatre of Voices.

This year's musical offerings were rich across many genres and often sold out, from Chick Corea and John McLaughlin's consummate jazz session to the warm vocals of Jose Gonzalez, from the gospel send-up band House of the Holy Afro to an affectionate tribute by the five remaining members of the Triffids to their singer-songwriter David McComb.

The visual arts program still needs work, something curator Margaret Moore (a late-comer to this year's festival) will no doubt remedy. A number of installations lacked impact, especially Daniel von Sturmer's disappointing test pattern panel on a new building that obscured its visibility.

Even Gina Czarnecki's gorgeous *Spine*, her mesmerising footage of dancers from the Australian Dance Theatre swirling into a spine-like continuum, was ignored by many city-goers who didn't bother to look up at the illuminated city wall.

And tighter economic times may force the festival to cull labour-intensive projects that don't deliver an eye-stopping impact.

French street theatre troupe Royal de Luxe is working on a big spectacle for the 2011 festival, but this year's smaller, static *Revolt of the Mannequins* made little public impact. The rebellious mannequins, dummies in shop windows whose appearance was subtly changed overnight, were stuck in shop windows that only intermittently drew big crowds.

Yet overall, Magadza has produced a dense and diverse program in her second festival. She's made progress on certain personal goals, such as increasing children's attendances at the festival with stand-up kids comedian James Campbell and *The Nargun and the Stars*, a magical adventure story with high production values that Perth co-commissioned with the Sydney Festival. Thousands of children attended Perth Writers Festival's Family Day, perhaps

accounting for the increase in patronage by 5000 to 20,000.

Magadza has ended the festival's hectic 3½-week season with a heavy cold but quiet optimism that her remaining two festivals will find a way around budget cuts and gloomy forecasts. She admits the future is tinged with grey: if cash-strapped companies pull out of arts sponsorship in a town where major arts bodies rely heavily on the mining and resource giants, they and the festival may find themselves cutting back on performing or touring.

WASO, for example, has boosted its corporate sponsorship from \$500,000 to \$3 million in the past five years. That's all good, but government funding went up by less than \$500,000 to a mere \$1.9 million. If corporate sponsors pull out or reduce their sponsorship, the orchestra will be affected.

Even state Arts Minister John Day admits he is worried that corporate arts support will come under pressure in the forthcoming financial year. Yet he warns that the Barnett Government — which has mandated 3 per cent cuts across all portfolios — will not be able to step in and fill the fiscal gap.

It fell to Blanchett to gently prick Perth's corporate conscience when she addressed a hand-picked group of executives at a private boardroom luncheon last week. The *War of the Roses* star and Sydney Theatre Company co-director echoed Magadza's passion for child-focused arts events. She plugged the importance of supporting arts education, the teaching of creativity and active participation in arts, not just selling tickets to shows.

Blanchett also uttered the word "risk", so terrifying to many businesses but the driving force of theatre companies. How, she asked, were they to bring risky artistic enterprises to people if their supporters became risk-averse in spending money? And isn't this the very time when we need a lively artistic life, either to articulate new ideas or simply banish peoples worries for a while?

One suspects that Adams, had he heard Blanchett's words on the other side of the globe, would have been vigorously nodding his head in agreement.



**Art for dummies:** Jean-Luc Courcoult, of Royal de Luxe, in front of a shop window hosting *Revolt of the Mannequins*

Picture: Andy Tyndall



**Blistering:** Kate Mulvany in *Antigone*



**Big number:** A scene from John Adams's *The Flowering Tree*

Picture: Andy Tyndall

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