



Festival comes to an end with popular waterfront film nights and ticket sales up 7 per cent on boom year of 2008

PIAF scales attendance heights



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The Perth International Arts Festival ended on an upbeat note with thousands attending three free waterfront film screenings at the weekend and a healthy jump in ticket sales defying the wider economic gloom.

Organisers said they were surprised by the strong box-office support, which was on track to meet their budgeted target of \$4.7 million, with the rest of the \$14 million funding coming from sponsors and public agencies.

With several events still to conclude, ticket sales were up 7 per cent on the bumper takings at the height of the boom last year.

Critically, the Festival largely went to script without any obvious dud shows.

The reception was mixed for the highly regarded Nostalgia, from Japan's Ishinha theatre company, and Druid Theatre Company's The New Electric Ballroom. There were a few walkouts from the Theatre of Voices' performance of Stockhausen's 1960s one-note vocal work Stimmung.

More disappointing was the opening night concert Laya Project Live, which drew a small crowd to the Supreme Court Gardens in uncertain weather and failed to declare to the city that the Festival had arrived in town.

High points included The War of

the Roses, the Geneva Ballet, the opera A Flowering Tree and the poignant music of The Little Match Girl Passion.

The Music Box again attracted big audiences — with concerts by the Triffids and Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu reaching emotional heights — but its exposed location on the Esplanade proved testing on the cooler nights.

"I think the quality across the board has improved this year," Festival artistic director Shelagh Magadza said. "There hasn't been a moment when I've stood in a theatre and gone 'uh, oh'."

Two major successes were the challenging contemporary classical music program and the revamped Perth Writers Festival, where more big-name authors and a family day attracted 20,000 people, a 30 per cent increase on last year.

As other festival-goers escaped thoughts of recession and bushfires through the high-camp silliness of The House of the Holy Afro and The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, several popular writers' sessions on geo-political affairs also suggested an appetite in 2009 to confront what Joan Didion might call a "year of serious thinking".

"I am really pleased that this program had a much more contemporary feel but it has been gobbled up with a great degree of intelligence by the audience," Ms Magadza said.

The outdoor film season, the

Festival's reliable cash cow, also benefited from a post-meltdown rush back to the cinemas experienced around the world.

Wrapping up her second festival, Ms Magadza said she was wrestling with ideas for attracting more people to the annual three-week event.

Internal Festival surveys showed that 40 per cent of Perth people had little interest in the arts and just 49 per cent were aware that the Festival was on. "You do want to find ways to celebrate Perth and to make people feel that they are part of that," Ms Magadza said.

She rejected suggestions that PIAF, the only Australian festival to cover all the art forms from writing to film, was spread too thin to ignite the public imagination.

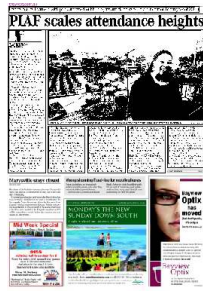
"That diversity is what has given us such a high level of engagement per capita compared with other cities in Australia," she said.

"As old as the Festival is, it is lucky to enjoy an iconic summer status in Perth and people know about it and accept it even if it is not how they want to spend their time."

Planning for the next Festival would be governed by her caution about revenue from ticket sales and sponsorship, she said.

"We have been lucky this year but we will definitely not be too gung-ho in our approach for 2010.

"You have to be respectful of what people are going through. You can't just merrily party along."



Packing up: PIAF artistic director Shelagh Magadza at the Music Box. She says diversity separates the Festival from others around Australia.

Picture: Greg Burke