



The art of success

BRIDGET LACY catches up with some of the driving forces behind Albany's emergence as a regional artistic hub and discovers there have been years of hard work in the city's overnight success

THE PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL'S Great Southern program is on an evolutionary path.

If Charles Darwin, himself a visitor to Albany in its formative days, was to chart that path his ultimate destination would be an Albany International Arts Festival.

It might sound like a pipe dream, but according to some of the city's art movement leading lights it is increasingly a reality.

Rod Vervest is one of the cultural faces of Albany – and the PIAF Great Southern program manager.

He is also incredibly proud of how far and how fast the whole concept has grown since it arrived in town in 2002.

In 2009 that means two Australian premieres, three WA premieres and a number of exclusives. Nope, not bad at all for a regional city some 400 kilometres south of the State's capital.

Rod says PIAF has been a natural fit for Albany and locals relish the opportunity to be involved.

"We've been on a steep growth curve for the past seven years and we're finding we're bringing more events here every year," Rod says.

But he says the festival's role in the region is as much about challenging people with an arts experience as it is about being a populist success story.

"The arts community of Albany has been right up for that challenge and there's a genuine feeling of people wanting to be surprised, challenged and inspired by art," Rod enthuses.

"That's a great sign that the community is culturally sophisticated."

He says one of the strengths of PIAF is the festival is trying to embed itself in the local community, rather than simply sweeping through town once a year.

"We say yep, let's bring all this wonderful stuff down from Perth, but let's not just dump it and leave it.

"We like to engage with local artists and leave footprints."

Another artistically inclined local who has left her own footprint around Albany is Joan May Campbell.

A resident since 1966, Joan May Campbell stands proud, and tall, at the heart of the Albany arts scene as both pioneer and artist.

Joan believes her adopted home is at an exciting stage of its artistic evolutionary journey, with a cultural plan to

be launched on February 28, but says it had been a long hard road.

"When I first came to town talking about modern art people saw me as the village idiot," Joan laughs.

"But that's really changed now, because of seeds sown a long time ago," she says.

"We are now seeing those seeds flowering everywhere, and it is so rewarding to watch."

Albany and the Great Southern is not exactly a cultural desert while it reaps the rewards of its PIAF connection.

It is home to national and international stars such as Tim Winton, Ross Ryan and the Waifs.

So why is this still mostly pristine coastal environment such a lively cultural hub?

Joan believes the importance of art is often overlooked.

"Like sport, it is most important to a balanced life and a balanced city," she says.

"It's archetypal, it's there for everybody and its importance is not in what it produces, but in the creative process itself."

Both Rod and Joan are passionate about the future development of the



Albany arts scene and believe now is a crucial time to act for further growth.

"We can't let just the bottom line drive us when it comes to the arts; it's a fluid thing you need to let seep naturally into all the cracks and crevices to do its work," Rod says.

"As soon as you try to control it you stifle it," he says.

Joan says it is also due to a core group of people who have also persisted over the years.

"But I think Albany's history also has a role to play," she adds.

"It was the first settlement, two years before Perth was founded, so while it was so remote it was the doorway to Australia for a long time.

"It had to learn to be self sufficient, and that's part of it."

She also says her legwork days are over and she is

turning to her own artistic career which has probably been put on the backburner in her work to develop Albany's cultural scene.

"In many ways Albany is as much an art form to me as my paintings," she says.

On whether her campaign has been a "When you throw pebbles in a pond you don't know where the ripples will go, and it doesn't really matter either."

Rod says PIAF is preparing the soil for Albany to have its own international arts festival.

"It's about us standing up and looking the world in the eye and saying we have our own arts festival.

"You'd have to go a long way to find a regional community which has its own string quartet and chamber orchestra."

In fact, you would have to go a long way to match anything Albany has to offer.



