



# The west gets into stride

*The biggest festival west of the Nullarbor is all about bringing artistic diversity to the people*



**VICTORIA LAURIE**

**F**ESTIVALS should be about revealing insights, and one arrived in the opening hours of the 2009 Perth International Arts Festival. It is that existential writer Samuel Beckett has a rib-tickling sense of humour. Yes, he of *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, the play in which — as one oft-quoted critic wrote — nothing happens, twice.

*Samuel Beckett: Fragments* is a richly funny hour of superb acting and mime, punctuated by two bleak but thrilling theatrical fragments. If Beckett peers into the filthy abyss of human existence, says director Peter Brook, his humour saves him and us from falling in.

Brook is the famed British director of *Mahabharata* and 70 other major theatre productions spanning an illustrious career. He worked with Beckett in Paris in the 1970s, which explains his empathetic but exact direction, the minimalist sets and props. It sounds improbable, but the five skits about two men living in large sacks, three old women on a bench and a psychotic loner in a rocking chair are hypnotic to watch.

Down the road from Beckett's outing in a University of Western Australia lecture theatre (will Perth ever resolve its venue problems?), a capacity crowd was wildly applauding indie-folk musician Jose Gonzalez at the outdoor Music Box festival club.

For her first festival last year, PIAF's artistic director Shelagh Magadza relocated the club from the overcrowded veranda space at Perth's Concert Hall to a wide, grassy expanse on the Swan River foreshore. Since then, a giant illuminated Ferris wheel has been installed on the water's edge, lending a fairground feel to the nearby Music Box tent venue. A short stroll further along the foreshore, Cirque du Soleil is doing brisk business as hundreds of patrons each night make a beeline for its gaudily striped Big Top. Further along still, at Burswood casino, *The Phantom of the Opera* is pulling in good crowds.

The west has always offered rich pickings for promoters, despite the daunting logistics of getting across the Nullarbor. So far, the economic crisis has not dented Perth people's willingness to pay top dollar for shows with a strong commercial appeal.

night performance of the *Laya Project Live!* was not huge, although it was appreciative. Conceived as a musical tribute to the victims of the 2004 tsunami, *Laya Project Live!* interwove the musical traditions of 25 Pacific and Indian ocean musicians on stage. Funds were raised that night for victims of another natural disaster, Victoria's bushfires.

Magadza says she came back from the recent Sydney Festival exhilarated by director Fergus Linehan's street-party performances in the Domain, whose headline acts such as Grace Jones were calculated to draw in passers-by and new patrons. "He's really tried to respond to the vibe of the city, and a lot of the About an Hour [\$25-a-ticket dance] series at the Opera House was about attracting that younger, urban audience," says Magadza. Perth's festival still struggles with that connection with crowds on the streets. It is an aspect Magadza is working on; meanwhile, she deserves credit for the runaway success of the Music Box among Perth's young music fans. "That's why were so focused on audience development," says Magadza. "We want not to be gatekeepers but to open as many gates as possible to people, because fundamentally we think festivals are a public good, as much as a streetlight is."

Perth's ticket-paying patrons don't need to be convinced. PIAF is already tracking a slight increase on ticket sales compared with the same time last year, which ended in a record box-office take. Sydney Theatre Company's production of *The War of the Roses* (which PIAF co-commissioned with Sydney Festival) is selling well. Music is faring even better; jazz legends Chick Corea and John McLaughlin's sizzling concert in Kings Park last night was almost sold out. Even *Little Match Girl Passion* and *Stimmung*, two esoteric evenings of choral music by Danish singers Theatre of Voices are attracting solid audiences.

Magadza says corporate support for Perth's festival has risen this year (although that money was set aside in companies' budgets before their share prices crashed, and generosity might ebb in the new financial year).

Two festival streams have directly benefited; Wesfarmers has sponsored an expanded visual arts program and a series of Art:City lectures, co-ordinated by former Art Gallery of Western Australia curator Margaret Moore. And mining giant Rio Tinto funds enabled PIAF to co-commission (also with the Sydney Festival) the new children's play *The Nargun and the Stars*.

"The Rio Tinto partnership has allowed us to expand the children's program and opened up a huge raft of questions in my mind about how to engage more kids with the arts," says Magadza. "It was one of the issues in the [Rudd Government's] 20-20 Summit, that we needed more arts education in schools, to teach more creativity and active participation, not just us selling them tickets to shows."

Notably absent this year are large-scale works by local arts companies — Black Swan has opted for a beautifully realised but modest one-woman show, Joan Didion's *The Year of*



*Magical Thinking.* Last year, Black Swan staged the epic Kimberley story of Aboriginal rebel Jandamarra, which drew enthusiastic audiences but suffered a critical pasting and a sizeable cut, post-opening, to reduce running time to under three hours.

After last year's festival, Magadza noted that both *Jandamarra* and another local offering, Perth Theatre Company's stage adaptation of Tim Winton's novel *The Turning*, needed more work, "although the core integrity and concepts are still strong".

She said Perth lacked a peer review culture that could constructively critique emerging artists and new shows. "In Melbourne and Sydney, people go to see each other's work and give responses to it. The festival is committed to commissioning new work and that will never change," she said. "But are there other organisations that [will] offer the same opportunity? Who will take that challenge up?"

Magadza was thrilled when, in December 2007, the Carpenter Labor government launched a \$73 million Ignite arts package over four years, aimed at giving the state's cultural sector a sorely needed shot in the arm. It included \$5 million for major new commissions and funds for a professional production house that could assist independent performing companies that lacked resources.

Fourteen months on, progress is slow. The Barnett Liberal Government has dropped the name. ("The arts package formerly known as Ignite is now called Fizzle," one wag jokes to *The Australian*.)

The Department for Culture and the Arts, which responds to media inquiries with curt, often unenlightening written responses, says the major production fund has attracted 14 applications over two rounds. It offers no further information about what kind of companies got how much, or when we might see the fruits of its investment.

But insiders say the Government is committed to honouring Ignite's financial

promises, for now. If so, it means that Magadza could partner with either the state ballet, opera or theatre companies, or independent groups that gain funding, to produce major new works for her final festivals in 2010 and 2011.

"To be able to realise projects that are ambitious in conception, if not in scale, is really important," Magadza tells *The Australian*. "That's where diversity of voice and form will come from, the organic layer that can provide distinctively Western Australian work." "More venues" is the perennial catch cry in a city that has lacked any decent cultural infrastructure investment for decades. The WA Government recently killed off the prospect of a desperately needed new museum, as part of cost-cutting measures.

Luckily, building is too far advanced to stop the new State Theatre Centre (formerly known under Labor as the Heath Ledger Performing Arts Centre but also re-named by the Liberals.) Located on a busy corner of Perth's inner-city precinct of Northbridge, the half-constructed building will house the 575-seat Heath Ledger Theatre and a 200-seat flexible studio space, with associated rehearsal rooms. Black Swan and PTC will both move in next year.

"Two constantly recurring themes in WA are shoring up and stabilising the major companies," says Magadza. "With the orchestra and the ballet, it's about finding new homes for them and in Black Swan's case, stable funding that allows it to be ambitious and commission new work."

Magadza says she feels happy when patrons are surprised, even shocked, by what they see. Like discovering that Beckett can be funny.

"It's a real sense of achievement when it happens," she says. "What kind of makes me grin when I'm sitting at my desk is knowing what's coming, including lots of little surprises that I haven't told anyone about. I can't wait to share it and see what everyone thinks."



My sitar gently weeps: Perth International Arts Festival director, Shelagh Magadza, with international artists from *Laya Project Live!*, preparing for this year's event

Picture: Andy Tyndal