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Inclusion of a small independent theatre space (less than 100 seats) in the Pier 2/3 Development of the Walsh Bay Arts Project

I want to expand my earlier brief submission on this, with a number of additional reasons about the importance of this opportunity to enhance the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct (SSD 7689).

First, some background.

Theatre patron demographics in Sydney.

I attend theatrical events regularly. My observation is that my fellow patrons can be, quite approximately, placed in three demographics.

One group of patrons attends the big shows, blockbusters, and extravagant musical theatre events.

A second large group attend 'serious theatre', that is the classics, reworkings of the classics, new plays by major Australian playwrights, and productions brought to Sydney by major production companies from other parts of Australia and overseas.

The third group are interested in experimental theatre, avant garde theatre, works by promising but less well known playwrights, and comedy.

Venues.

What companies and venues provide for these groups in Sydney?

The first group will attend mostly the Sydney Lyric Theatre (capacity 2000), the Capitol Theatre (capacity 2094), The State Theatre and presumably the newly opened ICC Theatre (capacity 2500).

The second group of 'serious' theatregoers is provided for by Sydney Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Belvoir Theatre (Upstairs), Griffin Theatre, ATYP (Walsh Bay), The Seymour Centre, Ensemble Theatre at Kirribilli, Independent Theatre (North Sydney), Hayes Theatre in Potts Point, Eternity Playhouse in Darlinghurst, New Theatre Newtown, NIDA (Kensington), Glen Street Theatre (Belrose), Genesian Theatre Company (Kent St City), Riverside Theatres at Parramatta.

The third group is usually found in the smaller intimate venues, namely the Griffin (Kings Cross, about 100 seats), Belvoir Downstairs (Surry Hills, 80 seats), The Old Fitz Theatre (Woolloomooloo, 63 seats), the 505 Theatre (Newtown), the Tap Theatre (Surry Hills), the Depot Theatre (Marrickville).

The conclusion from this analysis is that while the large second group of theatregoers is well provided for in the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, the third group is not. In order for Walsh Bay to become a balanced theatre domain, a small intimate venue available to the producers, performers and audience who comprise this demographic is needed. There is at present a pronounced dislocation of venues for group 3: they are all on the other side of Sydney and the inner west. Walsh Bay needs to be part of this scene, and to correct the imbalance. This is a principal reason for incorporating a small intimate theatre space (less than 100 seats) in the redevelopment of the precinct.

The proposed use and potential users of the small theatre at Walsh Bay.

I suggest that the seating in the small theatre space be reconfigurable. A bar should be adjacent to its foyer.

It is envisaged that the space be available for hire by independent theatre companies and other producers of small scale experimental theatrical events. Control of the use of the space would preferably be independent of the major theatre companies, and best handled by a City of Sydney or State Government cultural body. In order to be successful the hire costs should be minimal, because the potential users are generally small companies, and the audiences are necessarily small. A search (www.creativespaces.net.au) for affordable creative spaces (<\$20000 per week) yields just five, located in Newtown, Surry Hills, Erskineville, Redfern and Eveleigh. The Walsh Bay small theatre should be less expensive.

There are many small independent theatre companies in Sydney. They need to rent space for their productions. I am aware (though attendance at their productions) of the following organisations that could choose to use the Walsh Bay small theatre:

Cross Pollinate Productions is a collaborative community of artists who aim to make quality, innovative, and thematically enduring work.

subtlenuance is a Sydney based, independent theatre company. "We are solely dedicated to the creation of original, Australian work. Our focus is the exploration of political and philosophical ideas. We believe theatre is a forum for many voices. For this reason, it is an art form especially suited to both the exploration and creation of subtlety and nuance."

BAKEHOUSE is an independent Sydney-based theatre company producing work that showcases new voices. "On 15 productions we have provided opportunities for over 150 emerging and established artists. We have provided opportunities for over 100 culturally and linguistically diverse artists. We have staged world and Australian premiere productions of new African, Asian, Islamic and Indigenous work. And in 2016 we're working on 3 new cultural projects, all of them Australian or world premieres."

Pete Malicki has been described as "one of Sydney's best new generation playwrights" and is the recipient of 19 major awards for his monologues at national/international events. He produces theatre and major festivals, and runs monologue workshops at New York Film Academy, Sydney. He is a published fiction author and has had 65 of his plays staged in over 700 productions.

SmallShows This is Chrissie Shaw, a performing artist based in Canberra. She produces independent shows which she tours to Sydney and other cities.

Strange Duck Productions, whose most recent production was *Blonde Poison*.

A small theatre space at Walsh Bay could also be of interest to the Festival of Sydney, allowing it to attract curated or open productions (theatre, monologues, comedy, music), perhaps in the style of the Edinburgh Fringe.

Aspiring and nascent musical groups could be interested in holding performances in the small theatre space. Obviously this theatre would be soundproofed, avoiding disturbance of the neighbours and disturbance of the performances by helicopters, etc.

Two theatre organisations, *Short and Sweet play festival*, and *The Sydney Fringe Festival* have small theatre festivals in Sydney. Both festivals use various venues in the inner west of Sydney, and could be interested in expanding into the Walsh Bay precinct.

Integration with the City of Sydney culture program.

The City of Sydney actively promotes small venues and events, such as small bars, intimate live music events, pop-up venues for commercial or cultural activities, and Art and About.

From w.clovermoore.com.au/culture: " Opening up our properties. One practical step has been to give our buildings renewed life as performance spaces — converting a former Tabernacle into the state of the art Eternity Playhouse and providing a home for the award-winning Hayes Theatre. A new management approach for the City Recital Hall promotes broader programming and young people now use City community spaces to play and practice music. City properties on Oxford Street, William Street, Redfern Street and in Woolloomooloo are providing affordable short-term and co-working spaces for innovative cultural and creative enterprises and emerging artists. Working with the private sector, the City has secured a new 2000 square metre, \$25 million creative hub for dance, theatre, music, film and visual arts facilities as part of the new Greenland development on Pitt and Bathurst streets, currently under construction."

I feel sure that the City of Sydney would strongly support the inclusion of a small theatre in the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct.

Conclusion

The small theatre scene in Sydney is currently located mainly in the inner-west, inner-south and inner-east of Sydney. The Walsh Bay area (inner-north) is isolated from this cultural genre, even though Walsh Bay is renowned for its big theatre presence. A mature arts precinct needs diversity: Broadway has Off-Broadway, the West End of London has large and small. An independent and affordable venue that attracts developing and small theatre to Walsh Bay will enliven and diversify the culture of the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, and attract new audiences.

I strongly urge that a Walsh Bay intimate theatre with less than 100 seats be built into the redevelopment of Pier 2/3.

Ian Dance

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