

Opera in the shed

... and in the paddock ... and in the hills

by BRIDGET NICHOLSON

Regional and rural communities in New South Wales are devising innovative ways to bring quality operatic experiences to their towns. They've had to. With a limited number of tours by the South Australian national regional and remote touring company, CoOpera, and no stops in regional NSW this year by OzOpera, the Australian Opera's touring arm, opera enthusiasts have had to be inventive or go without.

But whether it be a no-frills concert in an unheated hall or a more ambitious production on a full stage with a lighting rig in a paddock, the presentation of opera in some rather unusual places has provided new entrees for regional audiences to this unique art form

and proven that even a 'no frills' production doesn't have to mean compromising on the quality of the music or the experience.

And the audiences are lapping it up. Last year at Morundah — the smallest village (pop. 18) in the smallest shire in NSW (Urana) — OzOpera performed Verdi's Carmen over two nights to a crowd of over 1,000 people at a black tie event in a large, purpose-built shed affectionately known as 'The Paradise Palladium' (25m x 12m, capacity 540). This year, in October, they got the Victorian Opera Company up to satisfy their newfound desire for the artform with performances of their award-winning Mozart's Così Fan Tutte in the shed at another two sell-out events. (Cont'd p.24)



'The Delungra Diva', Peta Blyth, performs at *Opera in the Paddock*, at 'Mimosa', 25km out of Inverell

December – January

2 December

Peter Pan and Wendy A ballet performed by children. The story of how Peter takes Wendy and her brothers to Neverland. Presented by Dancestar Studios, The Jetty Theatre, COFFS HARBOUR Tel 02 6652 8088

3 December

International Day of People with a Disability — Party in the Park Targets kids and others with disability, their families and friends and the broader community. ARMIDALE Tel 02 6771 2504.

3 – 7 December

Gr8 Par-T! R U Coming? A unique multi-arts performance project first performed in May in Murwillumbah to appreciative schools and general public audiences. TWEED Civic Centre & LISMORE City Hall. Contact NORPA Dance Action Tel 02 6622 3279

6 December

Chanukah in the Square Albury's annual grand Menorah lighting event for all ages. QEI Square, ALBURY Tel 02 60235222

(Cont'd from p.7)

Former Opera Australia singer Peta Blyth, known locally as the Delungra Diva, initiated her own presentation of opera in a unique regional NSW setting five years ago. She and her husband hosted the first Opera in the Paddock at their property, Mimosa, 25kms west of Inverell, in 2002. "Our whole idea was to bring music and singing of the highest professional standards to country audiences," Peta said. The demand was certainly there for it. When 700 people turned up to that first concert they knew they were on to something.

Opera in the Paddock went on to become an annual event, presenting a selection of music from opera, operetta and musical on a large makeshift stage under the stars. The event has more than doubled its audience since that first concert, with many of its 2000+ guests now travelling long distances to attend. Inverell Shire Council has come on board and the Department of State and Regional Development has provided funding for marketing. The concert has



Peta Blyth in a paddock. Photography & styling Richard de Chazal

not only become an integral part of the local arts calendar, but is also attracting the interest of a wider audience, people in the city looking for a bush cultural experience. The Blyths have also started their own non-profit company, Opera North West Ltd, which is aimed at taking performances to other regional venues.

Opera in the Hills was the name of an operatic concert in the town hall at Moonan Flat, a small town of just 60 inhabitants 50km east of Scone in May this year. Initially born out of the desire of the Timor Tennis club to 'put something on', the idea for the concert developed when a successful application for a grant from the Regional Arts NSW Country Arts Support Program led to a partnership with the Department of Primary Industry's Drought Support Program, which was set up to give farmers opportunities to connect to networks and services in a social setting. Moonan Flat was chosen as the venue because of the density of farming families and opera was suggested by someone who had been to *Opera in the Paddock*, and loved it. Tickets to the concert quickly sold out and 150 people filled the hall that freezing night. (Attendees had been warned, and came with blankets and eiderdowns as well as the mandatory eskies with drinks). The occasion had an informal flavour, but the presentation of a quality performance — with Peta Blyth on vocals, Deidre Rickards on piano and Nicholas Negerevich on flute — still drew the audience into another world.

Events like *Opera in the Paddock* and *Opera in the Hills* are making it possible for regional audiences to participate and engage with opera on a multitude of levels, and still keep the local flavour.

Recently I received a promotional CD from a group of three performers from Brisbane offering a touring program designed to provide accessible, but still high quality, performances and demystify opera in a humorous way. Titled *I can't believe it's not Opera*, the show does not require a large venue and is aimed at providing a more intimate experience for the audience. The trio is talking to a community group in Muswellbrook and hopes to organise a tour to the region in January 2008 ... and add yet another dimension to the regional NSW experience of opera. ■

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Opera in the Paddock, 15 March 2008, Delungra
Website www.operainthepaddock.com.au

CoOpera website www.co-opera.com.au
OzOpera website www.opera-australia.org.au > Explore OzOpera

February

22 February — 29 March

In Off On (In Residence, Off The Shelf, Hands On). Exhibition of works by local artists working in residence at the gallery. **BEGA** Valley Regional Gallery Tel 02 6499 2187

23 — 24 February

Tumbafest A weekend of music, wine and great entertainment. Visitors are treated to a feast of great music and the finest entertainers. **TUMBARUMBA** Website www.tumbafest.com.au

24 February

Hungarian Gypsies Concert
JENOLAN CAVES Tel 02 6359 3911.

27 February

Puppet Caravan Activities for all ages, including a Guinness World Record Attempt. **TAMWORTH** Tel 02 6633 3380.