

**IT ALL STARTED WHEN JULIE McCROSSIN ACCEPTED AN INVITATION from Cathy Welsford and me to come and perform in Armidale two years ago. Why stop at one celebrity, we thought. All we needed was a few more professional female comedians and a whole festival could be produced.**

The Armidale Women's Comedy Group obtained a \$2000 Third City of the Arts grant from the local council, as well as promises of discount airfares, accommodation, makeup and hairstyling from local businesses. Stand-up comic and writer Sue Ingleton drove down from Macksville to run a comedy workshop. Sue-Ann Post flew up from Melbourne and Janet Meredith from Sydney. Cathy and I raided opportunity shops and dressed as Xena and Gabrielle. The Armidale Musical Society, Stage One School of Drama and Fabulous Floosies dance troupe all contributed items. PLC provided a stage band musical director. The UNE's Theatre Studies School produced a skilled female stage manager. Technicians and volunteers were lined up.

## A comic business

by ANGIE SMITH



The biggest venue in Armidale was booked for the Gala Comedy Show, in addition to local cafés and pubs for fringe events, and the First Australian Women's Comedy Festival was born in an extravaganza of laughter, champagne and tampon gags.

Looking back on that weekend we are amazed at what can be achieved by a small group of enthusiastic rural women. As we gear up for the third Festival we admit it's a lot of hard work but

have yet to lose our enthusiasm. Professional comedians are now ringing up and asking to be a part of it and more local women are signing up for workshops and auditioning for the shows. The Festival is also beginning to acquire a reputation that attracts some audience members from interstate and overseas.

The particular problems associated with producing a festival of this type in a rural centre are similar to those of many regional businesses. Small local markets and high transport costs can result in a perilously small profit margin, and when GST, insurance and advertising costs are added to the scales, the balance frequently threatens to tip towards non-viability. Celebrities' agents stipulate we must pay all travel, meals, accommodation and liability expenses in addition to performance fees. Fair enough. It's hard to imagine good performances from comedians who have driven several thousand kilometres from Melbourne and been billeted in someone's farmhouse at shearing time.

We've had to work like bilbies at Easter to make it happen – writing grant applications, seeking support from businesses and marketing the Festival, all of which are full-time jobs in themselves. It's crucial that we sell tickets to our shows and that's not as easy as it sounds, even with top performers. Armidale offers between three and seven shows on any weekend, giving audiences a wide choice. Rural patrons do not expect to pay high prices to see a show and many simply cannot afford it, especially during a drought, so ticket prices become a gamble between enticing patrons in and covering expenses.

The Festival has a policy of providing paid work for local female performers and technicians. Said Welsford, *"Women's volunteer labour is always welcome but it's quite another matter for rural women to find paid work, so all our performers and techies get paid. It's not a lot yet, but the Festival is only in its infancy, and it does lead to other paid work."*

Volunteers and amateur performers are also teamed up with the more experienced workers to increase local skill levels. *"One of the marvellous things about the Festival is seeing professionals and amateurs backstage laughing together and giving each other tips. It's a great opportunity for new performers to make contacts, and women love to network."* ■

*The third Armidale Women's Comedy Festival featured Adelaide cabaret comedy singer and virtuoso guitarist, Merri-May Gill; Melbourne stand-up comedians Denise Scott, Sue-Ann Post and Monica Dullard; Sydney comics Jackie Loeb and the Older Women's Network Theatre Group, Sue Edmonds from Tasmania's Ovarian Sisters, plus local stand-up comedians. The program also featured two hilarious dance troupes, a radio play, the Devil's Pinch CWA and a free open mic fringe event.*

*The Armidale Women's Comedy Festival website is auspiced by Arts North West and supported by Festivals Australia, Armidale/Dumaresq Shire Council, The Community Grants Program, QANTAS Link, The Flight Centre, New England Travel, The Deer Park Motor Inn, Che for Beauty, Hair Trekking and The Wicklow Hotel.*

**Website [www.new-england.org/womenscomedyfestival/](http://www.new-england.org/womenscomedyfestival/)**

### April

4 - 6 April

🎻 String & Wind Workshop, Shoalhaven District Residential String and Wind Workshop, **BERRY**. Contact John Sandes Tel 02 4421 2074.

4 - 6 April

🥁 Percussionale Festival of Percussion, Honeysuckle Railway Workshops, **NEWCASTLE**. Website [www.ArtsHaus.com.au/percussion](http://www.ArtsHaus.com.au/percussion) Email [percussion@ArtsHaus.com.au](mailto:percussion@ArtsHaus.com.au)

4 - 12 April

🎭 2 Friendly 4 Words, devised by the Lieder Youth Theatre, funded by the Commonwealth Regional Arts Fund. Lieder Theatre, **GOULBURN**. For bookings contact Lieder Theatre Company Tel 02 4821 5066

4 - 13 April

👁️ Youth Week Exhibition, **GLOUCESTER** Gallery Fri-Sun 10-4 Tel 0265 583157

4 - 13 April

🎪 Country Energy **FORBES** Heritage Festival. Contact Forbes Shire Council Tel 02 6850 1300