

ENCHANTED RIVER WETLANDS IS A LARGE SCALE OUTDOOR THEATRE event being developed by, for and about the community of Albury Wodonga. Spectacular and breathtaking in its effects, the event will be a direct expression of the community's thoughts and feelings about the Murray River, interpreted with the assistance of professional community arts workers using circus skills, writing, poetry, shadow puppetry, giant sculptural images, mask making, fire art, lantern making, dance, music and singing.

Enchanted River focuses on a partnership between the arts and the environment and it will involve as broad a cross-section of the community as possible, and as many people as practicable. The project is expected to become an annual event, and to provide ongoing skills development through a program of master classes, guest lectures, community workshops, educational programs and other associated public events in the region.

This year the pilot event has been in the making. Educational material has been developed on a CD-ROM for students to study the issues before the artists come in to workshop the artistic components of the public event.

But the development process for *Enchanted River* doesn't just involve school kids. It's available to all, no matter what age, gender, race, profession, skill or level of experience – everyone who has an interest in their environment.

The passion most communities have for their local environment is a wonderful inspiration, and connecting the process of making art to something deeply important in the maker's life ensures the work is very potent. Many people feel disenfranchised regarding environmental issues. So when we say, "*Here's a project that will allow you to develop your own creative expression of your environment,*" all sorts of quite powerful things happen, as people come in to explore their creativity in an encouraging and safe place.

Relationships form between people who would never normally speak to each other – relationships that can really develop when the event happens on an annual basis. The skills also develop. People who make a simple pyramid lantern in the first year can come back and develop more sculptural skills in the next. The enriching experience of working alongside a team of experienced community arts workers leaves a profound memory.

Introducing this project to Albury Wodonga has been a very rewarding experience. There seems to be a hunger here for a project that engages people in this way, and the partnerships *Enchanted River* has brought about are deeply rooted in the life of community. Local government, education and environment sectors all have an acute interest in the work and will be observing the effect it has in this first year.

June

21 June

 Tamworth Arts Council presents a performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the Town Hall. 7.00pm. **TAMWORTH.** Contact Rob Hurcum Tel 02 6766 7507 or 02 6766 6911

22 June

 *Friends Winter Concert*, showcasing Tamworth's young musicians performing and gaining performance experience. 1.30pm in the Chapel Theatre. **TAMWORTH.** Contact Rob Hurcum Tel 02 6766 7507 or 02 6766 6911

The Performance

Enchanted River Wetlands will begin on Gateway Island, close to the river. All those involved in workshops will gather, lanterns will be lit, musicians and singers will warm up instruments and voices, stilt walkers will hop up on their stilts, giant puppets will come out and have their lights lit, dancers will be stretching and people will be putting on makeup. The audience will also be assembling and a sense of excited anticipation will be building.

Everyone will then move in a magical procession along the path beside the Murray River, musicians, lanterns, Flying Fruit Fly Circus stilt walkers, school children and their families, passing vignette performances and sculptural installations along the way.

The procession will move to Norieul Park in NSW, where the theatre spectacle will be presented. This will involve stilt dancing, giant sculptural lanterns and puppets, shadow puppetry, fire imagery, the band and choir, more dance and movement – the culmination of six weeks work in the community.

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Project Development

This project is the result of several years' evolution of work in various communities. The first project of this kind I worked on was *Oceans of Delight* (1994), directed by Kate Clere and staged at Phillip Island. I was hooked! People clearly needed this type of community celebration that addressed their concerns, and they became involved very enthusiastically.

The work involves a number of stages, each of which is an absorbing and fascinating project unto itself. The first is the funding and partnership development stage. To ensure that *Enchanted River* has the best chance of becoming a key feature in the annual Albury Wodonga calendar, I needed to have local government/councils interested, and to find other bodies to support *Enchanted River* as a sustainable event. So it's a great boost to have both Albury and Wodonga City Councils' financial contributions to the project, and to have Murray Arts on board, helping with arts funding and administration. Happily the environmental sector got hold of my project description with the upshot that *Enchanted River* now also has supportive partners in the Murray Darling Association, Murray Darling Basin Commission and the North East Catchment Management Authority.

Community Consultation

Community consultation and creative development are where the project really sparks into life and begins to gather energy.

We talk to selected people about their history in this region, how their present relationship with the Murray River was established, what their concerns are, and their hopes for the future of the river. These are ordinary people, not experts, people who live their lives on or near the river, and who engage with it in a very physical manner. And what stories! What amazing people.

We tease out the common threads in people's stories and develop a story that will encompass everyone's concerns as much as possible, without being confrontational or judgmental or alienating anyone. So we use theatrical tricks! Invent characters and relationships to carry the story, tell it like it is.

The *Enchanted River* story begins in the Education Kit and carries on into the performance. So when the families of the students come out to celebrate their kids' work they will feel a connection through that story, and their children's experience of the project.

that's important, but when the process is working properly, the product is amazing. The collective energy of hundreds of participants, fed by thousands of their families and friends as audience, invariably makes for a memorable evening. And of course it's all for one night. These shows are one-off, and the work very ephemeral, which creates a wonderful fresh dynamic. We are in the business of making memories. ■

Check out the website at www.murrayarts.org.au (under projects) and mark 21 June in your diary for an evening by the Murray River with *Enchanted River Wetlands*.

Photos: From *Enchanted Ocean*, a similar project at Wilson's Promontory (2001).



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by ANNIE EDNEY



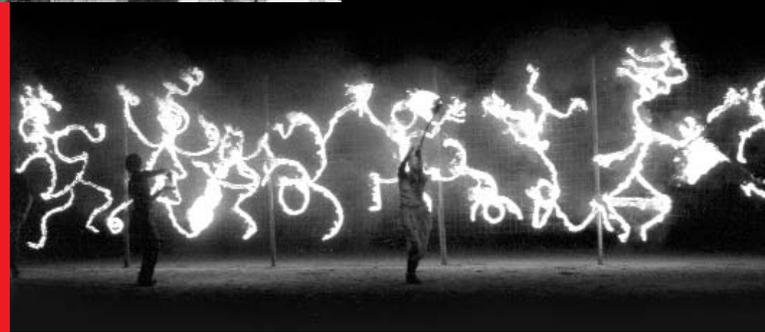
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Workshop Programs

A workshop schedule is developed that works for both schools and artists and we are offering schools a number of options in the way they can engage with the project. A centrally located community workshop space will also be established, and local artists invited to participate and learn a new skill.

The Event

The procession and the performance are the event. It's community cultural development work, so it's the process not the product



June

27 - 29 June

🏠 *Fiddler on the Roof*, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harrick, book by Joseph Stein. Presented by the Tweed Theatre Company Inc. at the Robina Community Centre **MURWILLUMBAH**. Bookings Tel 07 5534 6544

27 June - 30 July

🏠 National Local Gov't Community Dev't Conference: *Just and Vibrant Communities*, ensuring sustainable long-term benefits in the development of just, fair, vibrant and creative communities. **TOWNSVILLE** (QLD). Tel 07 3000 2220 www.lgaq.asn.au Email events@lgaq.asn.au

28 - 29 June

🏠 *A Celtic Cultural Experience*, back by popular demand Celtic groups of the **HUNTER REGION** are again combining to present a weekend of workshops, displays, performances and a Saturday evening Ceilidh. Contact Elma See Tel 4943 3436 Email westwick@telpacific.com.au

28 June

🏠 The Murwillumbah Theatre Company presents *Icing on the Cake*, theatre restaurant comedy, bigger and more riotous than *Dimboola*. Written and directed by Sue Jenssen-Clare. At Greenhills on Tweed, **MURWILLUMBAH**. Contact Bryanne Tel 02 6672 5554