

PROFILE

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JUDITH ISHERWOOD

CEO, Arts Centre Melbourne

BY DANIELLA CASAMENTO

Life as a jillaroo is the farthest thing from a career in the Arts you could imagine but in her mid-teens and studying agricultural science at school, this was a career that Judith Isherwood once contemplated. "When you are that age at first it seems great that you are out in the country but as you enter your teenage years, being in the country wasn't where I wanted to be. I wanted to be a big city girl," she says.

Originally from Melbourne, Isherwood's family settled in Geelong where her brother still lives. Her sister now lives in Melbourne. A fan of Geelong Football Club, Isherwood says football "is like theatre on a grand scale and the MCG is such a great experience." She found the football vernacular to be a great asset during her six year stint as Chief Executive of the Wales Millennium Centre in the United Kingdom. However knowing nothing about rugby, Isherwood was very quickly introduced to Cardiff City Stadium. "While it is fun to

watch," she says, "I still have no idea of what scrums are about."

Appointed Chief Executive of the Arts Centre Melbourne in 2009, Isherwood inherited an expansive office that sits just under the spire skirt and overlooks the Arts Centre forecourt to the National Gallery of Victoria with views to the Queen Victoria Gardens opposite. It is perhaps this view that helps her to maintain an aura of calm amidst a frantic pace of appointments and meetings. As we sit in the plush Truscott Lounge at Hamer Hall and accompanied by Truscott's two Academy Awards for the film Camelot, the soothing emerald green room and quiet corridors of the empty hall seem to slow down time.

Isherwood recalls her childhood wonder at the magic of Carols by Candlelight at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl one Christmas Eve. The experience of being enveloped in the darkness of the parklands late at night with a view of Melbourne's city skyline beyond is one

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The experience of being enveloped in the darkness of the parklands late at night with a view of Melbourne's city skyline beyond is one of her strongest memories of live performance.”

lead to her seeking work with Arts Victoria during the premierships of Joan Kirner and Jeff Kennett, to better understand the machinations of government funding of the arts across the board. Later, Isherwood became the Director of Performing Arts at the Sydney Opera House before taking the role of Chief Executive of the Wales Millennium Centre.

During her six years in Cardiff, Isherwood and her partner Cheryl had a home just outside the city with an acre of garden that was home to an array of woodpeckers and hedgehogs. Back home in Prahran, Isherwood refers to the Botanic Gardens as an "oasis" and one of her favourite spots in Melbourne where the couple regularly walk their little rescue dog. Here, the sound of bellbirds is something that she finds very soothing.

"Having been back in Melbourne for three years now, I'm really enjoying rediscovering the city and rediscovering Australia," she says. "Whenever I do get the opportunity for a break, even it is a short break, I love to visit Castlemaine or Daylesford or up the coast somewhere or down the Great Ocean Road. I love this great country; it is a really fun place to explore but also the city has changed so much in the time that I was away that I'm actually enjoying rediscovering those bits in the city that I have known in the past."

As the public become accustomed to the refurbished Hamer Hall, Isherwood continues to look ahead and plan for the future of Melbourne's arts culture. "We think of ourselves as one of that group of international arts centres of the scale and complexity and in the same context as places like the Kennedy Centre in Washington or the Lincoln Centre in New York or the Southbank Centre in London," she explains. "But equally we are very focused on what happens throughout the whole Asia-Pacific area."

With plans to attend a conference in Hong Kong later this month, Isherwood is keen to talk to her former colleague Michael Lynch, now Chief Executive of the West Kowloon Cultural District Development. She regards this as currently one of the most extraordinary arts precincts being developed anywhere in the world and is eager to understand how the "notion of an arts precinct is beginning to form in the context of a city like Hong Kong."

Showing great self-awareness of the gaps in her learning and a genuine love for developing the arts throughout her career, Isherwood has capitalised on each experience. For now, her aim is to lead the Arts Centre into the next stage of development. Plans are currently on hold until the release of the State Government's master plan for the whole cultural precinct later this year. The area comprising Sturt Street and the cultural organisations along St Kilda Road including the VCA will form part of the master plan.

"We need to look at how you develop the piece of land between the Theatres Building and Hamer Hall, and find some way of connecting it down to Sturt Street which would be the perfect pedestrian access down," she explains. "That notion of the Arts Centre site being the gateway to the precinct beyond, I think is certainly very much in the forefront of all of our thinking."

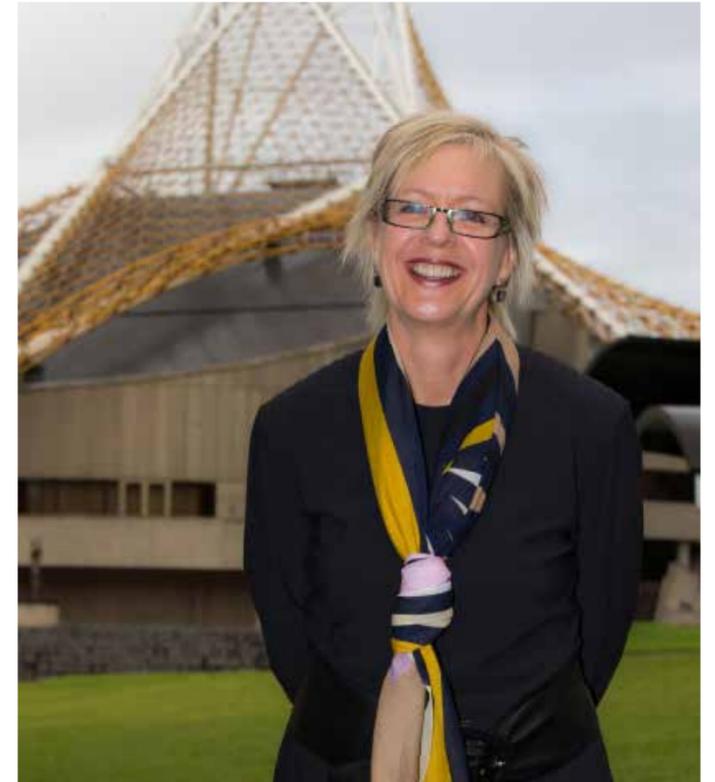
"I love doing the capital developments and these big arts centres because they are hugely challenging," she says. "But the challenge is always to make sure that whatever you are creating can actually be run properly and not just in the few years after you open. You've got to think decades out."

Keenly aware that the success of arts organisations depends largely on the

management ability of those running them, Isherwood is on the Board of NIDA and is hugely enthusiastic about expanding the range of programs and opportunities for skills development and career paths across the arts spectrum.

"I am increasingly thinking about how we can offer more opportunities for people either who currently work here or who work at other organisations to come into some structured training to help expand the skills. Because one of the beauties of an arts centre like this is that we work right across art forms," she explains, adding, "We also cover the full range of scale from a 10,000 seat event at the Myer Music Bowl to a 2500 seat concert hall to a 400 seat studio right through to the 100 seat Spiegelent."

It is time for Isherwood's next appointment and as she leads us out of Hamer Hall and back along St Kilda Road to the Theatres Building, she considers that there is something about stage management as a starting point that provides a good grounding in how one manages all the disparate parts of arts production. "When I started as stage manager, if someone said to me that I would be doing this sort of job I would have thought there is no way that someone as a stage manager could end up in this position."



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