

**'MODERN SECULAR REASONS TO SING'
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER**



Sydney performance artist Maria White is investigating why we sing in the secular world. She's been at it for a while, having participated in community choirs and public performances elsewhere, before coming to the goldfields. Here she digs further, to see why Central Victorians also like to sing, having heard of the number of choirs and flash mob outfits, for which the Castlemaine/Bendigo region is building a reputation.

This Seedpod is a work in progress. With a 'show template' set up to fit communities pretty much anywhere, her experiment is aimed at exploring the specific reasons that people sing in specific communities and places (other than sacred spaces like church).

Maria goes out, meets, observes, interviews and documents members of local choirs, singing groups and artists, to discover their reasons for singing. It seems nowadays, we live in a world that, while embracing public singing on TV, on a stage, in church and other 'sanctioned spaces', still has problems with random outbursts of song in public places. (Hence the importance of flash mobs!)

Maria's show at Punctum's White Space began with audience participation; she wanted to know why *we* sang. We helped her compile a list of reasons, which she wrote out black texta on a long piece of butcher's paper tacked to the wall. On other walls, other pieces of paper displayed various songs and other reasons for singing. Some were small cut up comments, which Maria eventually read out – or belted out! - on the mic.

At certain junctures she brought songs into the performance. One saw her don a shower cap and suit up in a kitsch, zebra-patterned shower curtain, for a 'singing in the shower' vignette. At one point she bolted up to the room's only precipice, singing what sounded like a hymn, dropping down black plastic balls onto us from above. Her big finale was a corker – a cheesy 80s hit sung into a hairbrush. There she literally let her hair down, donning more zebra wear (genie pants), and going for it like a teenager in her bedroom, singing to a Casio backing track.

It was a sweet show, one aimed at reflecting the voices of those she had been privileged to meet in her 2 weeks in the goldfields, and also aimed at reflecting the joy involved in singing – in both private and public spaces, as individuals and groups. She revealed a myriad of reasons the locals sang – of which we all could relate to, no matter how contrary.

Obvious perhaps, but nice to be reminded – Maria did establish that singing is a universal, even for those of us who shy away from it. Somehow, each day, our lives are touched by singing, whether as participant or observer. That was underlined in the text Maria presented; as was many singers' distain for populist singing competition shows like 'The Voice' and the various incarnations of 'Idol'. From her 'research' she gleaned that a good many of the local singers resented the commodification of their pastime, and having such a 'pure' endeavour turned into a competition.

Maria's audience were intrigued... Many were singers and choir members – as they revealed during the feedback session. They also brought various expectations to her performance, some thinking that there would be a participatory component (others relieved that there wasn't!)

One way or the other, they were satisfied with Maria's thoughtfulness about this beloved activity of singing, and the way she presented her 'findings' from her two weeks in situ.

It's clear to see the potential of her fully-developed theatrical show. The material would benefit greatly from having other participants involved (from individuals to a small choir,) reading/singing the material so Maria didn't need to perform all of the 'characters' herself.

It would be nice to see the performance in a space where staging was involved; where good lighting design and sound would fully support the musicality, theatricality and ultimate intimacy of the piece. (While Maria had adequately designed her props/costumes/gear to fit to *its* stark whiteness, her presentation screamed for a space that can better fit to *Maria's* material.)

The piece is well on the way to becoming fully-realised; the only element that seemed a little 'MIA' was singing itself. It was there – only it needed to be more front and centre. Maria did punctuate the performance with some short songs which she sang (both acapella and to a backing track – she has a lovely voice too!) But it would have been perhaps more canny to have really zapped us with the power of song, straight up, in a big way, to remind us of the transcendent and joyful qualities singing brings to our lives, when we let it.

Somewhere along the way, to also have invited us to sing along with her might have underlined her *raison d'être* for 'Modern Secular Reasons To Sing' – especially given the significance of the local choirs, in her research. There we were assembled, like a sitting duck choir. Would we have said no? Don't reckon!

Point being – it seems Maria is at a lovely tipping point; the material is there, now how best to stage and present it to an audience?

Post these two Seedpod gigs, no doubt such ideas and many possibilities are swirling around Maria's mind, as she continues growing this extremely ripe material into a full-fledged work. It's a pledge to which she appears extremely dedicated.

