

# Castlemaine State Festival – opening weekend

**RICHARD WATTS**

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Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, Castlemaine State Festival is one of regional Victoria's treasures.



*Image: Going Through at Castlemaine State Festival; photo by Christine Sayer*

With its broad streets and grand Gold Rush era-buildings, the small regional town of Castlemaine (population 6,751 according to the 2011 census) is the perfect setting for a biennial arts festival.

Unlike similar events in larger cities, which are often diluted, reducing their impact, Castlemaine State Festival and the concurrent Castlemaine Fringe permeate almost every aspect of the town. Remarkably, the Festival manages to feel both grassroots and high end; it's simultaneously a participatory community event and a showcase of elite national and international talent. It's also damn good fun.

The success of the Festival over 40 years has profoundly enriched Castlemaine, with the arts well-integrated in the local community – even into the curriculum at Castlemaine Secondary College. Children from primary schools in the goldfields region also participate in the Festival program, while some 90 local visual artists are

taking part in an associated program of open studios, exhibitions, tours and workshops.

Another 100 locals, including actors, musicians, filmmakers, dancers and digital media artists are participating in the Festival. Coupled with the influx of visitors from Melbourne, interstate and elsewhere in regional Victoria, which sees the town's population double over the program's 10 days, the result is a truly festive atmosphere.

The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary festival kicked off on the evening of Friday 13 March with **The Big Bang** in Western Reserve. A crowd of at least 5000 people gathered for this celebratory birthday party and opening night event, conceived and directed by Jude Anderson, from local live arts company Punctum. This joyous alfresco evening featured roving musicians, spontaneous conga lines, picnic hampers and live music ranging from Balkan brass to New Orleans jazz, and samba to salsa, including the first of several appearances over the weekend by festival guests **El Son Entero**, an eight-piece band travelling outside of Cuba for the first time, whose presence generated dancing and delight everywhere they played.

In the nearby Theatre Royal (opened in 1854 and the oldest operating theatre on mainland Australia), the opening night party continued – albeit after a shaky start – with **Queen Cannibali and the Skull Island Orchestra**. A newly commissioned work, this cabaret-cum-concert featured an eight-piece band fronted by Aurora Kurth as Queen Cannibali, a jungle queen raised on mythical Skull Island, best known as the home of King Kong. Playing Theremin-flavoured lounge, mambo and South Seas-inspired exotica, and drawing on a rich history of B-movies from the Fifties and Sixties, the cabaret aspects of this promising but clearly underdeveloped performance cried out for a skilled dramaturg to tighten aspects of character and story; even the musicians looked uncomfortable, while the audience's ebullient mood quickly flattened. It wasn't until the second half of the show, after chairs were cleared away during the interval, and the cabaret gave way to a full-blooded and enthusiastic concert performance, that the mood lifted and the evening's celebratory air was restored.

Saturday afternoon saw the highlight of the opening weekend; the performance of a new dance work, **In Plan**. Choreographed by Michelle Heaven, with an audacious but beautifully integrated design by Ben Cobham, this hallucinatory and sublime production, staged at the old Castlemaine Woollen Mill, featured graceful

performances, haunting imagery and a hypnotic score by Bill McDonald. Any discussion of its unique elements will lessen the impact of *In Plan* for future audiences, which are limited to 20 people at a time; suffice to say it would be a crime to miss a performance should the work be toured or remounted in the future.

Indigenous soprano Deborah Cheetham's *'Til the Black Lady Sings* is an autobiographical account of family, history and the transformative power of music – especially opera. A member of the Stolen Generations raised by a white family in Sydney, Cheetham made her international debut in 1997, and has since performed in the theatres and concert halls of Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and around Australia. Here, she weaves together her life story with extracts from *Porgy and Bess* and other operas, including her own landmark work, *Pecan Summer*, sensitively accompanied by pianist Toni Lalich, her partner. First staged at Brisbane Festival in 1999, *'Til the Black Lady Sings* has lost none of its impact – this writer was regularly wiping away tears throughout the performance – while Cheetham's voice remains a beautiful instrument, resonant, articulate and clear.

Actor Uncle Jack Charles is a national treasure. He stars in the latest play by John Romeril, *Going Through*, staged in the exercise yard at the Old Castlemaine Gaol, where Charles was previously incarcerated. Imaginatively directed by Maude Davey, the play is inspired by one of many colourful moments in Charles' life: one day, warders forgot to collect him and another prisoner from their community work, forcing the pair to walk back to the gaol and knock on the door to regain entry to their cells.

Here, Romeril spins this anecdote into a comedic road-movie, with projections on the prison walls and the clever use of props helping bring the story to life. Playfully exploring adoption, sexuality, faith and family, the play is slight but engaging; musical interludes add little to proceedings, though seeing musician Nigel McLean wielding a violin instead of a rifle in the watchtower overhead adds a certain frisson to proceedings – and a moment where the prison gates swing open to reveal the setting sun and the freedom Charles and James Benedict (as his fellow prisoner) have been denied is a dramatic masterstroke.

Unfortunately, it was all too evident on opening night that Charles had not yet mastered his lines; his frequent stumbles and rushed delivery suggested that his words were being fed to him through an earpiece, resulting in his delivering them without appropriate emphasis or emotion. The other actors – Benedict, Lisa Maza and Sue Ingelton – did their best, but Charles is the heart of the play, and without him driving proceedings, overall the production fell well short of any potential it may

have had. It is to be hoped both Charles and the play find their feet as the season continues.

## **Castlemaine State Festival 2015**

**[castlemainefestival.com.au](http://castlemainefestival.com.au)**

**13-22 March**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Richard Watts is ArtsHub's national performing arts writer; he also presents the weekly program *SmartArts* on community radio station Three Triple R. The founder of the Emerging Writers' Festival, he currently serves on the boards of La Mama Theatre and the journal *Going Down Swinging*; Richard is also a member of the Green Room Awards Independent Theatre panel. Follow him on Twitter:

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