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Sounds of Summer: Opera House

[PRINT FRIENDLY EMAIL STORY](#)

PM - Monday, 1 January , 2007 05:10:00

Reporter: Paula Kruger

ELIZABETH JACKSON: Hello, I'm Elizabeth Jackson. As part of the ABC's summer season, we now present a Current Affairs Special.

The Sydney Opera House is the most recognisable symbol of modern Australia, and there are efforts to have it voted as one of the new wonders of the world.

But while more and more tourists and loyal supporters of the performing arts flock to this architectural icon every year, all is not well inside those great white sails.

Paula Kruger takes a closer look at the problems plaguing the building's opera theatre and the effect that it's having on performers.

(Sound of opera music)

PAULA KRUGER: 2006 was a big year for opera in Australia.

(Sound of opera music)

Dreams and disappointments of contestants on the ABC TV series *Operatunity Oz* were shared by thousands of viewers, in a year that saw audience numbers for opera reach record highs.

(Sound of opera music)

The Sydney Opera House is the country's the most recognisable venue for the performing arts, and can take a lot of credit for opera's success.

On any given day, tourists from across the country and around the world wander around Bennelong Point, to see the building that has become a symbol of modern Australia.

A dodgy hip and jet lag wasn't enough to stop this visitor from hobbling her way up the monumental steps.

VISITOR: It's the first place you have to visit, innit, the Sydney Opera House.

PAULA KRUGER: What's your impression?

VISITOR: Absolutely out of this world. Ace. Fantastic. You can't imagine it. I was trying to imagine it, coming over all that way on the planes, and I was thinking ... but when I got here and looked about, I just can't believe it's big, it's larger than life, but it's so unique. Unique is the word, yeah.

PAULA KRUGER: But very few people visiting this architectural icon are aware the Sydney Opera House is actually not a good venue for performing opera, a result of the controversies that plagued its construction.

(Sound of opera music)

It was an ambitious project that came out of a simple need.

In the late 1940s in Sydney there were no suitable venues for opera and big concerts, well none that had a bar anyway, and that's not a minor point when you consider that most of the audience would disappear during interval to a pub across the street to get some liquid relief.

A competition was launched for a design, and it was 50 years ago, in January 1957, that Jorn Utzon was told that out of more than 200 entries his daring design was the winner.

The years that followed are a well-documented debacle.

(excerpt of Paul Robeson singing "Joe Hill")

After seven years the building was only just beginning to emerge.

(excerpt of Paul Robeson singing "Joe Hill")

It was then that American singer and civil rights activist, Paul Robeson, clambered over scaffolding to sing "Joe Hill" for construction workers as they ate their lunch.

The project was already well over budget and over schedule.

It became the political hot potato of the decade, and opponents accused Utzon of having lousy taste with a design that looked like copulating turtles.

And it wasn't long before Jorn Utzon's position was untenable and he left the country.

QUEEN ELIZABETH II: But every great imaginative venture does have to be tempered by the fire of controversy.

PAULA KRUGER: By the time Queen Elizabeth

opened the Sydney Opera House in October 1973, the project had blown out from its original cost estimate of \$7-million to a massive \$102-million.

But there was also a more long-term cost to the controversy.

Because Utzon was effectively sacked, his colourful designs for the interior were never realised and his acoustic and seating plans were scrapped.

(Sound of music)

Workers and performers at the Opera House have been paying the price for a compromised design for more than 30 years.

One person well aware of the problems with performing at the Sydney Opera House is Andrew Snell, Manager of the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra.

ANDREW SNELL: The biggest problem that the orchestra faces, without any shadow of a doubt, is the fact that around, between two thirds and three quarters of the orchestra play under the stage. In the vast majority of the good opera houses around the world, the orchestra's out in the open, and none of the members of the orchestra are under the overhang of the stage.

The pit's very small as well, which means we can't fit a very large orchestra in, and the medium-sized orchestra that we do fit in there is actually very cramped.

PAULA KRUGER: Does that limit the type of performances you can do?

ANDREW SNELL: Ah, it does to a certain extent. The company is trying very hard not to let it affect the type of repertoire that's chosen, but of course it does affect. If you are wanting to play Wagner, for example, you should really be playing it with 25 to 30 violins. We can only fit 18 in.

It means that we have, because of the design of the pit, the percussion section is on a lower level at the back of the pit, they can't see the conductor properly from where they are, so they actually play their performances a lot of the time from video monitors, rather than from actually being able to watch the conductor.

We have major sound issues in there. The ceiling's very low, and again I say it's very cramped conditions as well, and an orchestra makes a lot of sound. It's a very loud environment, and we have to take real special care of the musicians' hearing.

PAULA KRUGER: So it can be quite dangerous for the musicians?

ANDREW SNELL: Yeah, absolutely. We roster our orchestra very, very carefully, so they have a specific weekly allowable dose of noise, and we can't roster them any further than that. So we have to rotate players in and out of the orchestra depending on what the repertoire is.

So it works, but it has huge operational impacts as to what we can perform, when we can perform it, who can perform it, to the extent that we've even had to replace sections halfway through performances, so we'll have one horn section, for example, play the first act of a show, then they go home and another horn section comes in and finishes the performance off for them.

PAULA KRUGER: Does it make it a lot more expensive?

ANDREW SNELL: Yes (laughs). We're constantly fighting the budgetary problems. It's, for obvious reasons, if you need four horn players for something, it's twice as expensive as if you need eight. We only have an orchestral strength in the permanent strength of the orchestra of 69 players, and, for example, I'll use the horns again as an example, we have five horn players in the orchestra. If we need eight for a performance,

obviously three of them have to come in from outside and we have to pay them on top of the salaries of the permanent players. So, yes, it can be very expensive.

PAULA KRUGER: These problems have been going on for a long time, so I guess there's a certain level of acceptance of what you have to do to perform at the Opera House, but does it irritate a lot of the performers?

ANDREW SNELL: It irritates them hugely. From a conductor's point of view, a conductor would always like to have exactly the same place if you're in exactly the same seat, every single night for their performances. We can't give conductors that. If a symphony orchestra tried to do that with conductors, they would just not accept it. So we have to make compromises that certain other orchestras wouldn't have to make.

And even down to the simple nuts and bolts of it, if you've got more players than you actually need to physically perform it having to be there because of the noise situation and the respite that's required, you've got to rehearse them as well. So we have, we require more rehearsals, because we've got to get more players rehearsed and ready to play. That means we have to engage conductors for longer to look after those rehearsals. That clashes with their stage rehearsals.

It's just a very, opera's a very complicated thing to actually schedule and put together, and it has huge knock-on effects all the way through the production.

PAULA KRUGER: How about the international performers that come through Sydney, do they get frustrated by the limitations of the venue, and does it affect the quality of international artists that we get here?

ANDREW SNELL: Um, certainly in my time here, it doesn't seem to affect the quality of artists we get. The Opera Company's very highly regarded

internationally and has no problems attracting conductors and singers.

We had a visiting conductor recently, who shall remain nameless, who was very surprised to find the way that we set the orchestra up in the pit. We don't sit the orchestra in a standard orchestral formation for these very reasons.

If you put the wind section under the stage, which is where it traditionally would be, you can't hear flutes and clarinets, the sound just doesn't get out, it doesn't escape, so we sit them very close to the front, and normally the conductor has the strings very close to the front. And so it takes the visiting conductors in particular a long time to get used to that unusual set-up.

We also have problems with the singers being able to hear the orchestra properly, and the dancers, during the ballet season, being able to properly hear the sound of the orchestra. If they rely purely on the acoustic sound, they would have to wait for the sound to get out into the auditorium, come off the back wall, and reach the stage, when there's obviously then going to be a delay. So we have to have fallback speakers at the side of the stage for them to be able to hear what's coming out of the orchestra here.

PAULA KRUGER: So it's basically a lot more work to have that professional level of performance that people can go and see and think that they're getting good quality opera?

ANDREW SNELL: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the thing that's, I've been in the job here for just over a year, and the thing that's amazed me is the quality of performance that's put on. The venue poses severe problems for us, but they're not problems that seriously impact on the quality of the performance. We've, over the course of many years, found ways and methods of dealing with those problems, however it would be an awful lot easier and an awful lot cheaper if we didn't have to do it.

A redevelopment of the opera theatre is really the only proper solution. We've tried all the standard solutions of moving people around, of rostering. It was never originally designed to be an opera theatre, and I think ultimately that's where the problem comes, and the only way to really deal with it is to design it as an opera theatre from scratch, and I believe the plans will really just about, they'll leave the outside shell up, and that will be about all that's left. Everything else will have to go and start from scratch.

PAULA KRUGER: As far as you're concerned, it is possible though to have a very good quality opera theatre if those drastic changes take place.

ANDREW SNELL: Yeah, we've seen the draft plans, and certainly the management down at the Opera House are extremely positive about what can be achieved. The plan would be, for example, from the orchestra's point of view, there will be a totally open orchestra pit, and a significantly larger orchestra pit than we've got at the moment. And it would be a larger theatre, so there would be more seats that could be sold, the sight lines are better for the audience, the acoustics are better, both for players and for audience. So it would be, no, it will be, a far better place to work.

PAULA KRUGER: Orchestra Manager Andrew Snell sounding optimistic about planned changes to the opera theatre.

But if the renovations go ahead, Opera Australia and the Australian Ballet won't be able to perform there for at least two years.

That will have a major impact on the revenue generated by these companies, which owe much of their success to the appeal of the Opera House and its ability to attract tourist dollars.

MARIO CESCA: We are from Italy, and my name is Mario Cesca, and whenever we travel we always try to book a opera or a concert. We were rather

hoping to have an opera here. But I'm very interested to see the inside, because it appears to be huge, and so we are very curious.

PAULA KRUGER: Curious tourists like Mario Cesca generate a quarter of Opera Australia's Box Office revenue. So how long can it afford to be without their famous venue?

Adrian Collette is the Chief Executive of Opera Australia.

ADRIAN COLLETTE: Well, the simple answer is we can never afford not to have a venue like the Sydney Opera House, because the finances of the company rely on it. We get a huge boost to our income from tourism.

And, by the way, the advantage of that boost in income is enjoyed not only in Sydney and Melbourne, but through all our regional touring, 'cause it's part of the financial model of this company. We have to take about 25 per cent of our box office through international tourism every year, and the thing that allows us to do that is the Sydney Opera House. If it's not there, we will lose a very, very large percentage of our box office income.

How long can we afford to be out of the house? Ah, you know, one year is a strain, two years is a bigger strain. To undertake the kinds of renovations that the Sydney Opera House is talking about, we're probably talking about three years.

Now, we can do it, because I think governments and other people understand that the only reason you renovate and rebuild an opera theatre is to welcome back the Opera Company and the Ballet Company, that's what it's there for. But, of course, I don't underestimate the challenge of that.

It means that our performance numbers in Sydney would reduce dramatically, probably by a third, and my biggest challenge will be to keep the expertise in this company together and going forward over the three-year period, so we come out of it as

strong as possible.

Of course, if we have less performing responsibilities in Sydney over those years, then we may have a possibility of touring more and showing off the company a bit, but that's all in the future. And all those solutions are costly ones, by the way.

PAULA KRUGER: So given that you won't be getting the revenue from the Sydney Opera House because it will be closed for renovations, you'll still have enough funding for those regional programs?

ADRIAN COLLETTE: Ah, yes, well that's the plan, and we've looked at it really carefully. We would still perform. We would find another theatre in Sydney, so that we don't lose faith with our core audience, our subscription audience and our single ticket buyers, but we would lose that tourism load by a very large factor.

And we would find other ways, as I say, of showing off the company and what it can do and ways of keeping it together. But we can only sustain that for so long. The major companies in Australia, and certainly in Sydney, need the Sydney Opera House. It's no question. It's as vital a component in our income as government funding.

PAULA KRUGER: If you had to choose between a very good venue which wasn't so iconic, or a Sydney Opera House with its numerous quirks, which would you be happier with?

ADRIAN COLLETTE: Oh, the Sydney Opera House. It is a, I say it is one of the foundations on which these companies are built, you know, the ballet and the opera, the theatre companies, the Sydney Symphony, all these companies give wonderful performances, you know, they're arts companies and when they're good they are sensational, but anyone responsible for running them will tell you the same thing, that as wonderful as these companies are, we know that the Sydney Opera House delivers a larger audience for the

work we do than we would otherwise get. And I think we would be very unwise to turn our back on that.

(Sound of opera music)

PAULA KRUGER: The Australian Ballet also has the Opera House as its Sydney base and the Opera Theatre as its main venue.

The ballet's Artistic Director, David McAllister, has mixed feelings about this.

DAVID MCALLISTER: The Opera House is an iconic building and, you know, every time you walk up to it you think what an amazing place to be working. And then, you know, you walk inside the building and then, you know, you have a very different experience of the whole thing.

Um, I mean the good side is that the theatre is very intimate, so you feel very close to the audience, so there is sort of an immediacy about the house, which is quite wonderful. There's also an immediacy of when you run off stage, because you're sort of, you know, cascading into, you know, concrete wings.

PAULA KRUGER: For the ballet performances, is it mainly just that wing space that is a concern to them?

DAVID MCALLISTER: Well, it's the size of the stage too. I mean, ultimately the more space you have onstage, the more you can sort of step out your dancing and you can really move in a different way, whereas on the Opera House you have to sort of confine the way you dance and, you know, sort of tailor the sort of performances you do to the space you have.

PAULA KRUGER: Could you describe what it's like onstage for a performer, for a dancer? How is their experience at the Sydney Opera House different to anywhere else in the country?

DAVID MCALLISTER: Well, say in Melbourne, for instance, if you run off stage you can run almost the width of the stage again into the wing, so you can actually really pelt off and slow down as you get past, you know, the edge of the stage, whereas in the Opera House you have to have that same illusion of running off stage and then coming to an abrupt halt.

PAULA KRUGER: Is it true that in the past they've padded walls and even, you know, the point where they had muscled bodybuilders catching dancers?

DAVID MCALLISTER: (Laughs) Well, you know, sometimes it was other dancers, who were fairly well muscled. But in certain productions, I mean, that was actually one thing that used to happen in the old production of *Swan Lake*, because the girls used to run off this ramp, and in Melbourne there'd sort of be a ramp that they'd run down, so it would sort of just be a natural flow-off. Whereas, in Sydney, because there isn't room for the ramp, they used to have sort of like two steps, so they'd have sort of like someone there catching them as they sort of came off the ramp. And things like that are sort of quite common.

PAULA KRUGER: Is it frustrating to be an artistic director working within these limitations?

DAVID MCALLISTER: I think the thing that's always a little frustrating is the fact that, you know, as a production, for instance, we're doing a brand new production of *The Nutcracker*, which is actually meaning that we're having to make two separate sets, one for the rest of Australia and one for Sydney. And while that's, you know, because Sydney is an important market, we're prepared to do that, but it's just, you know, doubling the cost for a new production.

So that is, you know, slightly annoying, because you could be spending that money on doing other productions, which is one of the most vitally important things.

PAULA KRUGER: Management of the Sydney Opera House would not talk to the ABC about its planned renovations. It's believed to carry the price tag of between \$400-million and \$700-million. In the year ahead it has the delicate task of trying to secure state and federal funding for the job.

But the Opera House makes no secret of problems with the venue.

During hourly tours helpful bubbly guides point out which areas of concrete had to be blown up and laid again because construction started before the design was complete, they're told of the budget blow-outs and the shameful treatment of architect Jorn Utzon, whose name wasn't even mentioned during the official opening.

Bent Flyvbjerg is a professor of Planning at Aalborg University, the Danish town where Jorn Utzon was born and raised. He recently wrote a paper on the politics of mega-project approval.

The Sydney Opera House features strongly in that study, where it is described as a tragedy in the world of architecture.

BENT FLYVBJERG: In one way, of course, the Opera House is a huge success. It's a huge success being probably the most spectacular building built in the 20th century, and it's a huge success for Sydney and Australia, bringing in all the people here, including myself, who would like to see the Opera House.

It's a tragedy in the sense that it destroyed the career of the architect who built the building, Jorn Utzon. The situation is similar if we ask today for maybe the most famous architect, Frank Gehry, who did the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, and many other buildings, that we could have only one of his buildings, choose which and now we'll destroy the others. You know, that's basically what happened to Utzon, he didn't get to build anything else spectacular after the Opera House.

PAULA KRUGER: Why is that such a tragedy? Could we have expected amazing things from him with other works?

BENT FLYVBJERG: Absolutely. Architects usually peak after they're 50. Jorn Utzon was 36 when he won the competition for the Opera House in Sydney, so that alone indicates what we missed. But certainly the building is an inspiration, I think, to anybody with a sense of aesthetics who goes to Bennelong Point and look at the building. It also has spelled out some lessons very clearly for me. It's an extreme case of things going wrong in building projects like this, so in that sense, professionally, it's taught me a lot.

PAULA KRUGER: So what were the main things that Sydney did wrong with the Opera House?

BENT FLYVBJERG: Well, the main thing was a completely bungled decision-making process, an implementation process fast-tracking, there's a lot of specific circumstances with a mortally ill premier who, and an election coming up and so on, that they made the decision-makers fast-track the project and start building before the designs were finished and things like that.

And also you have a young architect who's not trying to build this kind of building before, so there's inexperience on the side of the architect regarding how to do this, how to build it, and there's also inexperience on the side of the Government in New South Wales. They've never tried something like this before.

It's actually amazing, when you think about it, how they would make the decision to do a thing like this, considering what Sydney and Australia was at the time.

PAULA KRUGER: In a situation where you've got a major project being built and planned, is there a problem where architects are often not taken seriously, they're seen as the artistic person, but

aren't given a firm hand when it comes to the practicalities of the building?

BENT FLYVBJERG: Yes, that's the danger for any architect, and actually I interviewed Frank Gehry, who has a reputation for building on time, on budget and to design, how he does that, and he said that his rule number one is to keep out businesspeople and politicians once the design has been decided and construction starts. So this is his measure against what you're talking about.

Often businesspeople and politicians, I mean the people who order the projects, will come in and want to make changes to the building, and there'll be endless debates about this during design and also during implementation, which is more problematic.

PAULA KRUGER: But if Jorn Utzon was able to follow his principles, would we end up with an Opera House that was actually quite good for opera?

BENT FLYVBJERG: (Laughs) Yeah, I think so. That would be the possibility. I mean, that's one of the problems, the Opera House is not good for opera, the acoustics are not so good. But I think this is because Utzon wasn't there to finish the interior, you know, somebody else finished the interior. If Utzon was there to finish, had been there to finish the interior, and he'd put the same diligence and care into the interior that he put on the exterior, I mean the interior would be fine also regarding opera and acoustics and so on today. And hopefully that is going to happen in the future.

PAULA KRUGER: You were recently at the Opera House. Would you like to see Utzon return to have a look at it in person, or do you respect his reasons for not coming back to Australia?

BENT FLYVBJERG: I have to respect his reasons, but I cannot understand them. I mean, it's such an amazing thing to be at the building that I cannot understand how, if you design something like that,

you wouldn't want to go back and see it.

PAULA KRUGER: Jorn Utzon is now 88 years old, so travelling from his home on the Spanish Island of Majorca to Sydney is far too challenging for the tall, frail man.

He is, however, playing a big part in the plans to renovate the Opera House.

And while he may never see it in person, Utzon has always insisted he is never far from his creation.

JORN UTZON: I have the Opera House in my head like a composer has his symphony - he can any time go into the symphony and hear it.

PAULA KRUGER: As Jorn Utzon continues to visit the Opera House in his head, thousands will continue to visit the real thing, perched on Sydney Harbour, regardless of its limitations.

(Sound of opera music)

VOX POP: I've seen some pictures of it, some movies, but never saw it so close. Of course, it's wonderful.

(Sound of opera music)

VOX POP 2: I saw it on television so many times, and I never realised how it would be to be here.

(Sound of opera music and applause)

ELIZABETH JACKSON: Paula Kruger with that report.

And you've been listening to a Current Affairs Special.

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