

“True love,
roses and
kisses.”



COLLABORATION – *SONG CIRCLE*

Blue Roo Theatre Company
Opera Queensland

In 2013 a creative partnership was formed between Blue Roo Theatre Company Inc. and Opera Queensland's *Open Stage* Program. The Arts Queensland and Centacare Disability Services Queensland funded partnership resulted in *Song Circle*, a song-based production performed over three days at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane.

THE PARTNERS

Blue Roo Theatre Company— Clark Crystal, Artistic Director

Blue Roo is a theatre company which provides opportunities for people with disabilities to be actively involved in the performing arts. Its mission: “Presenting inclusive theatre and performing arts events of a high professional standard to the general public; Challenging stereotypical perspectives - particularly regarding disability and inclusive theatre; Behaving in a way that widens understanding of people’s potential and abilities; A creative culture that is respectful, supportive and challenging and to celebrate the freedom of disability”.



Opera Queensland— Mark Taylor, Manager Open Stage

One of Australia's major performing arts companies, OperaQ serves Metropolitan Brisbane and regional/remote Queensland through the development and presentation of opera projects that reflect our core values of Excellence, Community and Adventure.

The *Open Stage* program is at the heart and soul of Opera Queensland's commitment to opera for all Queenslanders, providing hands-on arts experiences for schools and communities.

Opera Queensland's aims and objectives are to increase participation in the arts with the belief that participation contributes to community well-being.



How did the collaboration come about?

Clark: Blue Roo is an inclusive theatre company who in 2013 wanted to sing more in performance.

I approached OperaQ to ask about their new community engagement program *Open Stage*. After several conversations the organisations agreed to a three year creative collaboration. The team decided that the first year of the collaboration would be in the form of a Song Circle. 2016 is the final year of our three year collaboration.

Mark: In 2013 Clark Crystal, the Artistic Director of Blue Roo theatre company phoned OperaQ after reading about our *Open Stage* Program on our website– its purpose being to engage Queenslanders through the arts and participation. After several years of creating plays the Blue Roo artists had told Clark that they wanted to sing in their next main production and he felt that we could assist.

The then Creative Director of *Open Stage*, Jason Barry-Smith and I met with Clark and spoke about possibilities. We visited some of their weekly rehearsals and attended their 2013 main stage performance to build a good understanding of what they did.

Why did you decide to get involved?

Clark: OperaQ are industry leaders here, their approach to community engagement is the best.

Mark: OperaQ believe that the arts can enrich communities, particularly through direct participation. Jason and I observed the passion and commitment that the Blue Roo artists brought to their performance.

Music is such a wonderful way to communicate and show expression and we knew that the non-verbal members of Blue Roo would also greatly benefit from the experience.

Lindy Hume, Artistic Director of OperaQ, had developed *Open Stage* and we were keen to explore what we could create and who we could work with. It was fabulous that Clark found us. We began collaborating with Blue Roo on the 2014 production *Song Circle*.

As opera/singing was a new medium for many of the artists, it was decided that a song cycle that allowed them to share their own personal stories would be the best approach. Not all members of the ensemble are able to communicate verbally; hence some were assisted by their peers with signing. The group of artists who are in wheelchairs performed a choreographed dance in their chairs, illustrating their challenges but also the freedom they enjoy.



What was involved?

Clark: Blue Roo raised the money to support the project through Arts Queensland. Funds were used to pay opera singers and teachers. The working process was one day a week over nine months working towards three public performances at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts. Jason Barry-Smith from OperaQ and I shared the artistic direction and artistic risk.

Mark: After OperaQ and Blue Roo decided to proceed with the collaboration, Clark applied for Arts Queensland's Project and Programs funding using a budget created together with both organisations. Fortunately the funding proposal was successful and this allowed the first year pilot program to proceed. The funding covered OperaQ's costs, which meant that all box-office takings after venue fees were for Blue Roo, the independent organisation.

What unexpected issues arose?

Clark: The bar was raised in this collaboration and this brought with it new challenges. Everyone had to adjust to their new expectations and define the expectations of their new roles.

There was a time of adjustment and relationship building that had to organically occur so that all could work together.

An important part of this process was the Blue Roo members themselves learning to trust and essentially get to know Kylie (singing teacher) and Jason from OperaQ.

The main issue however was that a single year of collaboration was not long enough to really make the most of the opportunity that this artistic partnership offered. We all felt it needed a three year period to complete the journey. The artistic map began with personal stories sung - *Song Circle*. After this we worked towards the first inclusive opera for Australia- *The Bulimba Opera* and finally this year a classic from the operatic repertoire, Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*



Mark: The process ran relatively smoothly, however it was a learning experience for Opera Queensland. Working with people with disability requires extensive planning around venues etc.

The Lavalla centre, located in the inner city suburb of Brisbane, which is used for rehearsals, was not available at times, but the OperaQ studio was made available. It was wonderful to have the Blue Roo company on site and for the project to be profiled more widely across OperaQ. The OperaQ staff had opportunity, whilst sharing our home with Blue Roo, to see the project, it's challenges and outcomes, first hand.

Was it everything you hoped for?

Clark: It has been so much more. The collaboration has been artistically brilliant!

Mark: As the person managing the project administratively, the outcome was far greater than expected. OperaQ's mission is 'To reflect, celebrate and enrich life in our communities' and I believe this project exemplified this perfectly.

Would you do it again?

Clark: Yes I'd do it again, but now, after three years we'd be thinking of a new partner. However, perhaps in another three years, collaboration with OperaQ's *Open Stage* is a distinct possibility.

Each time will be different whatever we do; however there are creative practices for any collaboration that you apply. For example, respect for each other, a shared experience and combining the skills of each other.

Mark: We did do it again! We're currently working on our third project with Blue Roo. The first year *Song Circle* focussed on the artists telling their individual stories through music. The second project a new opera, *The Bulimba Opera*, was written by the Blue Roo and OperaQ team which allowed the artists to experience the creative process.

This year we are stretching the artists further creating a new production of Gluck's Orpheus and Eurydice.

OperaQ artists are playing the principal roles working closely with the Blue Roo ensemble.

Is collaboration always a good idea?

Clark: It always works for Blue Roo and the collaboration is reciprocal, as it provides artists an insight into the world of disability.

Mark: Yes, as long as you're collaborating with the right people.

Has it created opportunities to profile your work?

Clark: The profile has been exceptional. For the company it has provided a new level of artistic status. Blue Roo performers have developed skills including voice production, capacity building, style of presentation, and the ability to accept professional criticism.

Mark: The project is niche in its nature, the goal was never to expand our current season offerings, rather it was to engage with a community who wanted to learn and work with OperaQ and create innovative new works to highlight the wonderful work inclusive theatre groups are creating.

Have you developed new ways of working?

Clark: Working with industry leaders offers superb insight into how creativity works and inspired and raised expectations in a really positive way.

The ensemble thoroughly enjoyed sharing the stage with OperaQ throughout the creative process and performances. It has improved the ensemble's capacity to focus and concentrate and has expanded their self-belief.

The unique characteristic of the partnership challenged social perceptions about community engagement - especially in the arts. It broke down barriers between 'inclusive' and 'mainstream' arts.

Mark: Absolutely. The creative process has been very organic, utilising each organisation's strengths.



How do you leverage each other's audiences?

Clark: We shared our networks and the response was great. Opening night was six tickets short of a full house and we averaged 80% houses across the three nights. This was the biggest audience that Blue Roo ensemble had ever performed to.

Blue Roo is an inclusive theatre company and its community is partially defined, however through the collaboration we now attract a more mainstream audience.

The strongest alignment will be this year's classic opera. It will appeal to pure opera lovers and the Blue Roo community. It works fantastically.

Mark: We do promote the Blue Roo projects through our usual networks/social media groups. We have not specifically measured audience crossover. Certainly some OperaQ patrons have attended the performances and I was delighted that almost all staff members from OperaQ took the time to attend – regardless of department.

Blue Roo's audience traditionally has been made of the company's family, friends and support network. This however is not the necessarily the target audience. I hope that OperaQ's involvement might assist in highlighting the wonderful work this organisation does for their community.



What were the benefits and risks of collaboration for your company?

Clark: OperaQ's passion and commitment has been outstanding. *Open Stage* is a thoroughly organised program and any challenge was quickly resolved.

Blue Roo has just gained four year organisation state funding for the first time. Without a doubt, this collaboration played a very important role in achieving this funding status.

Mark: Blue Roo taught us about their resilience, innovative thinking and willingness to tackle ambitious projects with limited resources. Their strengths lie in understanding, catering for and nurturing their own community.

OperaQ has a deep understanding of what's involved in producing a new piece such as royalties, reporting through to marketing. OperaQ's PR agency helped generate editorial coverage across Brisbane. Blue Roo's strengths lie in understanding, catering for and nurturing their own community.

Did the collaboration contribute to the development of the art form?

Clark: It has made a massive contribution to Blue Roo's art form of singing and chorus work and it has expanded the idea of what community engagement looks like.

Mark: Yes. It led to the creation of new work, and adapted existing works for people with disability. The initial Song Circle collaboration allowed the Blue Roo artists to tell their stories widely to an audience, many of whom would not be aware of the challenges the performers face.

Have artists improved their career pathways and development as a result of the collaboration?

Clark: It has defined a pathway for two ensemble members to consider the performing arts as a career.

Mark: Yes, a willingness to be flexible and adaptive to allow maximum access and experience for the Blue Roo artists was vital. OperaQ's principle artists took a step back as the Blue Roo performers tended to be the stars with the audience and subsequently with our artists too. I believe our artists expanded their professional empathy, understanding and patience by working on this project.

How did your organisation's staff find the collaborative experience?

Clark: It has definitely enriched our practice, inspired aspirational thinking and reinforced the artistic and social value of Blue Roo.

Personally, co-artistic directing with Jason Barry -Smith has been a remarkable creative experience.

Mark: At times challenging and confronting however it was and continues to be a rich, innovative and rewarding collaboration.

What sort of collaboration would you like to see happen in the future?

Clark: Collaborations with museums and art galleries.

Mark: We have ambitions to further expand on our work. We're interested in introducing a volunteer community chorus. We run *Open Stage* community workshops with interested members of the general public. We'd like to blur the lines between those in Blue Roo and those in our usual choruses—all just singing together for the joy of singing, to allow others the experience to work with such an incredible group of committed young artists.

