

# Artistic adventurer

Brisbane Festival's artistic director thrives on drama, as Chris Herden discovers

Noel Staunton's face beams whenever he talks of his love of theatre; his eyes light up, his smile is wide and his Irish lilt makes his words bounce. The stage has been in his blood from a young age, when he first worked behind the scenes in school plays in his home town of Limerick, Ireland.

"I've been in theatre all my life. Funnily enough, I never wanted to perform but I loved dreaming up ideas and making things happen," he says as his latest project, Brisbane Festival 2012, passes the halfway mark of another successful program.

Brisbane Festival's artistic director began his impressive career with a technical stage management course at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, then worked in production management at Glyndebourne Opera and Kent Opera, touring extensively throughout Europe. At age 27 Staunton became the youngest technical director of the English National Opera (ENO).

"They presumed I was older and so I went from 27 to 47 in about four weeks because one had to learn very quickly. The ENO had 500 staff members and the largest stage in London. It was a big organisation that had to be ready for opera performance eight months of the year."

In 1987, and after 12 years with the ENO, he was offered the position of technical director at the Australian Opera (as it was then called). He was a tad wary at first of committing himself to a home and career on the other side of the globe. "They phoned and asked me if I'd be interested and I said I would have to come to Australia and have a look first," Staunton says. "That was a Monday and the following Saturday I was standing on the steps of the Sydney Opera House. It was just an incredible sight and I thought this is a city I could live in."

"He has always wanted to give artists every opportunity to do their best," says Opera Queensland general manager Russell Mitchell, who was part of the Australian

Opera's management team when Staunton first touched down in Sydney 25 years ago. They have remained close friends ever since. "Noel is a fearless administrator, he recognises creative talent, encourages it, and pushes organisations to deliver their best."

Staunton, who lives in a Brisbane city apartment, confesses to getting by on just a few hours sleep each night. This probably explains his announcement at this year's Brisbane Festival launch that he wants Brisbane to stay up late more.

"I'm a complete insomniac, [sleeping barely] three hours a night and up at 4am. I read a lot in the morning and occasionally, when I do need some sleep, I book into a motel for a weekend. I like to cook to relax because food is a great way for conversation. I love the old-fashioned dinner parties where people talk and the fun starts - we don't do enough of that."

It seems that Staunton's passion to entertain is not confined to large-scale festival events as

he often enjoys showing off his gastronomic flair to friends and workmates as well.

"Noel loves having people around him and entertaining them with food," says Mitchell. "Food is his great communicator. He gathers people around to celebrate an event, and that's a feature of his personality."

During his time with the Australian Opera (AO), Staunton fell under the artistic spell of film director Baz Luhrmann and designer Catherine Martin who were creating an experimental music theatre work for the AO at the time. When Luhrmann decided to set up a theatre company for a planned live staging of his cinematic success *Strictly Ballroom*, he offered Staunton the role of executive producer.

"And that's how I made that transition from the technical to the artistic side of things. Baz, Catherine and I got on really well and we decided to do what I call a 'petty cash' production of *La Boheme* - rent everything, do it for two seasons and then throw it out."

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Brisbane Festival  
artistic director  
Noel Staunton

The rest, as Staunton says, is history. The 1990 Luhrmann version of *La Boheme* was highly acclaimed, as was the Tony Award-winning remount on Broadway in 2002. While working with Luhrmann he also co-ordinated the opening celebrations of Fox Studios in Sydney and the world-wide launch of *Moulin Rouge*.

In 2004 Staunton's big show expertise was called upon by the State Opera of South

Australia which was facing technical difficulties with its \$15million staging of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, a mammoth 16-hour, four-opera work which tends to strangle the lifeblood from the companies that perform it.

"He starts every project with the view that everything is possible," says Melbourne Festival creative director and Staunton colleague and friend Josephine Ridge, who worked in the

Australian Opera's publicity department during the late 1980s. "His technical background gives him a well-rounded view of what actually is possible. He is a very expansive thinker with a deep understanding of the arts in all forms."

Staunton joined the Sydney Dance Company as general manager in 2007 but the sudden death of newly appointed artistic director Tanja Liedtke required Staunton to take up the role and he hurriedly set about curating the company's dance program for the following year. "My history has dictated I'm a character of change," says Staunton. "Give me drama, give me chaos and I can change it and deal with it. I'm not a director who is happiest just having to run a stable organisation."

Brisbane Festival chairman Chris Freeman applauds Staunton's desire to make each Brisbane Festival bigger and better and has extended Staunton's contract to 2014. He sees Staunton's move to introduce a higher quality artistic element at the expense of street fair

activities (such as dinners on the bridge) as a strategy that seems to be paying off. Box office receipts for Brisbane Festival 2011 (Staunton's second as artistic director) topped \$1million and there were more than one million attendances across the free and ticketed events.

"He didn't have a lot of time to put the 2010 program together but he did an excellent job. When we lost the Riverfire F1-11s we were really concerned because it was such a massive drawcard, but Noel came up with the idea of creating the Santos GLNG City of Lights and we've been able to deliver a pretty spectacular light show. We've left the F1-11s behind with hardly a ripple."

From his apartment Staunton keeps measure of the city's pulse. "I love living in the city and that you can live in an apartment and come down into the world of coffee shops, people to meet in the street...it's like the middle of New York. I love Brisbane, it's my home and is so welcoming and fun."

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