



# The NSW Schools Spectacular is too good to miss

*Bill Minnis*

**P**ublic schools across NSW are busy this month as the biggest date in the performing arts calendar draws close. Now in its 26th year, the NSW Schools Spectacular just keeps on growing... more schools, more variety, more dancers, more singers, and more musical talent. And an all-embracing theme – *Reaching out*.

This year's four performances on Friday 27th and Saturday 28th November at the Sydney Entertainment Centre will see choral singers drawn from 62 schools, dancers from 128 schools and solo instrumentalists and vocalists performing to music by an 80-piece orchestra and a stage band, made up of musicians from across the state. Holding it all together is a production team of teachers from 63 schools.

The 2009 Spectacular will be the first to be directed by Peter Cook. He has taken over the director's role following the retirement of Mary Lopez after 25 years. Cook is no stranger to the Spectacular, having been involved for 18 years, first while teaching dance at Newtown High School of the Performing Arts, then at Kingscliff High School on the NSW north coast and, for the last five years, as state dance director with







NSW Dept of Education, Arts Unit.

“Every year is a new year for the Spectacular,” Cook says. “This year’s ‘reaching out’ theme acknowledges who we are and what we have... it’s all about inclusiveness and respect.”

“Seeing the Spectacular on ABC TV is one thing, but to be present for the live show, with 3000 performers on stage for the finale and the Entertainment Centre packed with parents, families and friends is nothing short of electric.

“Performing in a Spectacular is a wonderful educational opportunity for the students... it’s also a great professional learning opportunity for the teachers.”

The number of schools participating in the Schools Spectacular grows from year to year, with small remote schools joining in and becoming enthusiastic participants, Cook says.

“In country schools where class attendance can be sporadic, being part of dance and music workshops during the year, with the prospect of being part of the show, can help to reconnect children to their school.”

Being selected to perform isn’t simply a matter of ‘putting ones’ hand up’, Cook emphasises. Every year, more than 6,000 applications are received for the 3,000 available places.

The first round of choral and dance auditions

is recorded on video locally, followed by a second audition for groups that get past the first round. Solo singers and instrumentalists perform live, with the standouts called back to face the selection panel for a second audition.

“Experiencing the selection process is an education in itself,” Cook emphasises. “To be selected is a great triumph, we have such a variety of singers – opera, rock, country, music theatre... and it’s the same for dance.

Does it cost a huge sum to stage the Schools Spectacular? Not really, according to Cook. The central budget is supplemented by the fundraising efforts of an army of parents who





Director Peter Cook and a cast of thousands.



keep busy during the year raising funds through chook raffles, sausage sizzles and the like. Any parent, teacher or student with a talent for using a sewing machine or assembling costumes is quickly put to work.

“Preparing for the Spectacular exposes children to all aspects of the performing arts,” Cook says. “Besides costumes, there are so many other aspects to staging a show. Over the years, many performers have gone on to careers on stage, in technical production or teaching performing arts.”

Leisa Munns is one. She enrolled at Newtown High School for the Performing Arts in Year

11 in 1992 and danced in two Spectaculars. After she finished Year 12, she went on to complete her BEd in Dance and Drama at UNSW in 1999. After graduating, she returned to Newtown High to teach classical ballet and contemporary dance and is now the school’s head teacher of dance.

Newtown is renowned for the quality of its performing arts programs and attracts applications from all over NSW and interstate. Entry into its dance, drama and music programs is selective in Years 7 and 11.

“There’s nothing quite like Newtown High elsewhere in NSW,” Munns says. “Students

graduate with top results in both their creative and conventional academic subjects. They are incredibly motivated.”

This year she is preparing 48 dancers – a classical ballet ensemble and a contemporary dance group for the Spectacular. Taking Newtown High students to the Spectacular is a highlight of the school year she says.

“The Spectacular is an unique performance opportunity. It’s such a huge space and performing in front of thousands is so exciting. It’s such a positive achievement for young people.”

To the audience, the Spectacular is a seeming effortless production that could only be the result of weeks of drilling the performers, like the Beijing Olympics or North Korea’s set piece performances. But it’s not. In fact, the dancers have only three days to get the steps together before the run-through performance on Friday.

It’s the same for the orchestra and the stage band. While the individual musicians practice their parts throughout the year, they come together as orchestra and band respectively for the first time on the Thursday before the Friday run-through.

Peter Cook says: “Stephen Williams [conductor] drives the orchestra and stage band through two and a half hours of non-stop playing. Their talent and stamina is amazing. They are phenomenal musicians.”

Australians continue to make their mark in the entertainment industry around the world; many had their first taste of the thrill of performing in the NSW Schools Spectacular. If your school hasn’t been involved, for an investment of just \$59.00 you can send someone along to see what your community has been missing out on.

[www.schoolspectacular.com.au/2009/index.php](http://www.schoolspectacular.com.au/2009/index.php)