



More than films at Message Sticks



THE Sydney Opera House is expanding this year's Sydney season of the Message Sticks festival to include live

performance, a panel discussion and a pitching competition.

Singer and actress Ursula Yovich will be performing the musical cabaret *Magpie Blues* in the Sydney Opera House Studio for three nights on 13-15 May. The magpie is Yovich's totem, and also symbolises the dual heritage in her life, having been raised in Darwin with an Aboriginal mother and a Serbian father.

"A lot of (the show) has got to do with growing up in Darwin being of mixed heritage," she said.

"And also how music influenced me through all of that."

During the show, Yovich does a medley of 80s hits depicting herself performing in her bedroom and being influenced by the popular music of the time.

It wasn't until she was about 13 or 14 that she started to feel more confident and would sing and perform for her dad, she said.

Yovich said a strong theme in *Magpie Blues* was her dislocation from culture and language. Her Aboriginal mother is a Burarra woman from Maningrida, but Yovich stopped visiting the community at the age of eight

when her mother left. Yovich went back there when she was 21 and speaks in the show about the experience, 'realising how much I really don't know about my mum and her family and where I fit into the family'.

"My mother speaks her language fluently, but she left when I was eight-years-old, so that's where the lack of language and culture comes from on that side," she said.

Meanwhile, her father, who had poor English skills and had a difficult time adjusting to life in Australia, never taught his children to speak Serbian.

"He really wanted us children to know our English well and be part of this country," she said.

"I come from two very, very strong cultural backgrounds and I don't know either languages or cultures, that's another part of *Magpie Blues*.

"Music for me fills the space."

The show ends with Yovich singing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and includes a verse sung in her mother's language and a verse sung in her father's language.

"The last few years I've been singing that song quite a lot, but it brought new meaning to me once my daughter was born," she said.

"She's two now. For me the lyrics are just all about opportunity. I've always perceived it as that."

"Everyone deserves a better life, so when I sing it I really do sing it for my

little girl and her future and what that holds for her."

Head of public programs at the Sydney Opera House Ann Mossop said that when Message Sticks began 12 years ago it was a multi-arts festival with 'quite a lot of performance'.

"Over the years it has waxed and waned and the part of it which has really endured is the film festival," she said. "What we wanted to do was make sure the film festival keeps going strong but bring back some of those other (performance) elements."

Mossop said the Sydney Opera House was hoping to hire an Indigenous producer to help with the transition.

Other elements of this year's festival include *I See (Ngarrany Nhama Datiwuy Ngath I Man)* presented by NAISDA Dance College – a Babies Prom for children aged between two and five; an AFTRS pitching competition with 10 aspiring Indigenous filmmakers pitching their ideas and \$4000 up for grabs; and a panel discussion hosted by Rachel Perkins called *Telling Indigenous Stories*, featuring Stephen Page, Hetti Perkins, Wesley Enoch, Warwick Thornton and Andrew Okpeaha MacLean. For more information, visit sydneyoperahouse.com/messagesticks

– By RACHEL SCOLLA

