

# Performing Arts Venues

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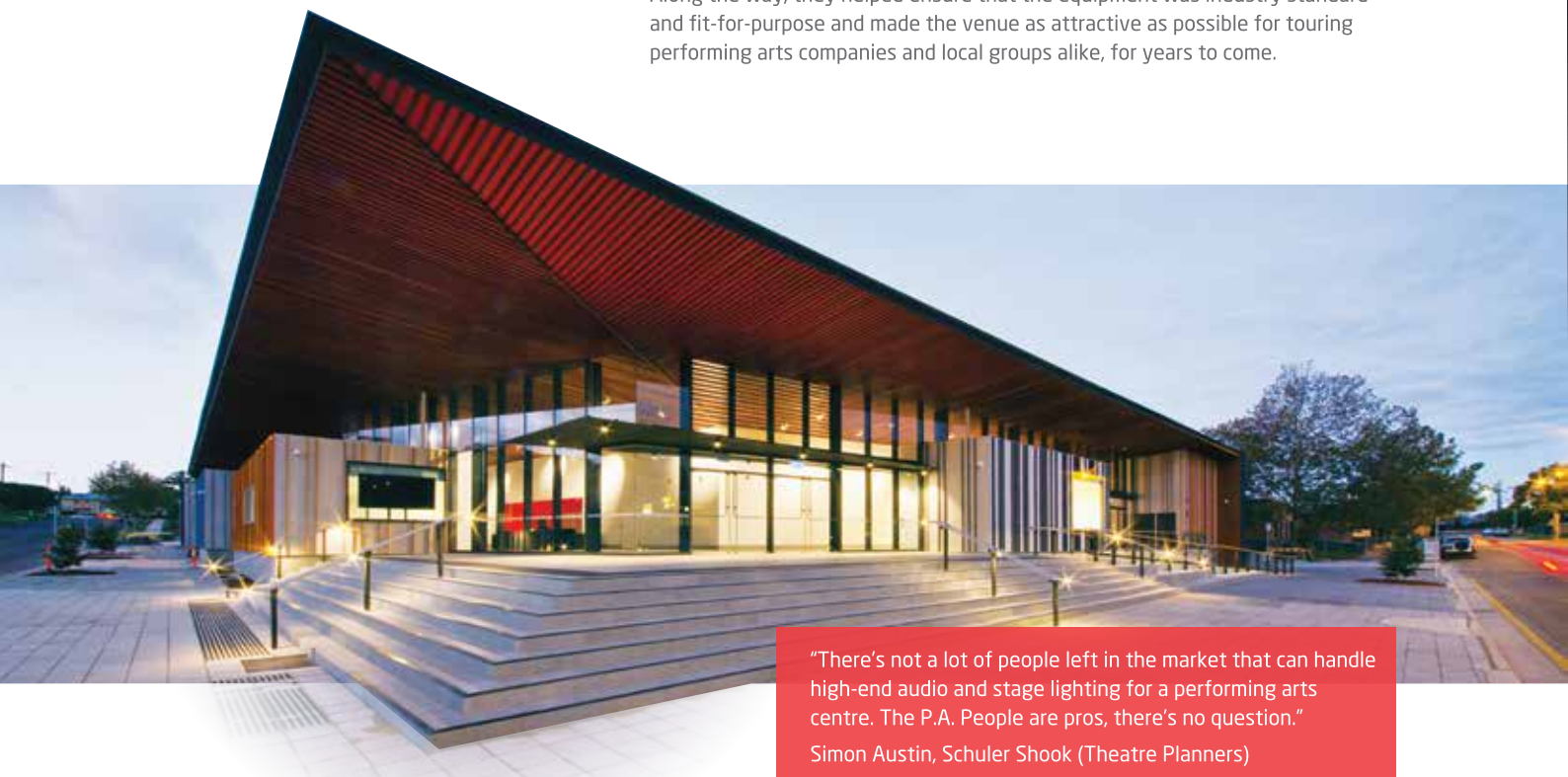


The Art House, Wyong NSW

## The Art House Wyong is a new, much needed fly-tower equipped performing arts venue in the heart of the NSW Central Coast.

Having opened in May 2016, the centre has been an early success, boasting a 500 seat proscenium arch Theatre and a flexible 130 seat 'Studio' space which is suitable for emerging artists - or it can be digitally linked to the Theatre and function as a remote orchestra pit. Significantly, this comprehensive venue was council funded and brought in at a construction cost of just \$12.7 million; a substantial return on investment that has hosted productions by popular local companies and is already attracting Australia's keynote touring acts.

Sydney's The P.A. People installed the heart of The Art House technical systems; the equipment that makes the everyday use of the venue possible and viable. Along the way, they helped ensure that the equipment was industry standard and fit-for-purpose and made the venue as attractive as possible for touring performing arts companies and local groups alike, for years to come.



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Simon Austin, Schuler Shook (Theatre Planners)

## Ten Years in the Making

The Art House Wyong has been just over 10 years in the making and Julie Vaughan, its Project Manager, was there at the very beginning. "There were a number of studies undertaken at a local and state level that identified the future needs for the Central Coast," she said. "We had a 65-year old centre with a leaking roof and poor wiring that didn't service the needs of the growing population. In the first few years of the project, there were three design iterations for a replacement. The first was a much bigger facility, similar to The Glasshouse in Port Macquarie, which would have been a \$42m facility. We scaled that back to a \$24m facility. The council committed \$8m and sought matching funding from both the state and federal governments. After four years of lobbying, when that didn't come to fruition, we modified it to a \$12.7m facility to be completely funded by Council. We believed strongly in what we were building, we were committed, and invested in capital infrastructure and a ten-year operational budget to fill the gap in our region."

The lack of a fly-tower theatre on the Central Coast became an important factor influencing the design and construction of what would become The Art House. "Council had a number of discussions with theatre facilities and arts organisations, looking at the types of touring groups that were attracted to other venues," explained Mike Horan, Project Manager at Council. "It goes to the business case as to which acts you can attract and the fees you can charge. It's about providing a mixture of facilities to both professional and amateur groups while also producing an income. The combination of a fly-tower with a seating capacity of 500 was a must." Julie Vaughan agreed; "Including the fly-tower represented a significant amount of our already reduced budget, but it was vital to the integrity of the theatre and to ensure we had a point of difference for touring product and a level of competitive edge."





## Form and Function

Sydney architects Tonkin Zulaikha Greer (TZG) provided all three of The Art House designs, with partner Tim Greer helming the construction of the final version: "The site is interesting because to the southern end is the City Council, to the east is the law courts, but to the north and west are free standing suburban houses," observed Tim. "So the question for us was 'How do we put a huge building next to the houses?' The architectural strategy was to locate the theatre so the foyer wrapped around it and opened to the street. The smaller foyer functions like box office, bar and amenities, were all arranged in the one-story building to the street that was compatible with the scale of the surrounding houses. Theatres are inherently inward-looking, and as such, they don't make particularly good neighbours. By wrapping the foyer around the outside, it makes a welcoming gesture to the street and opens out to it."



With a reduced budget, Nick Reichinger of SDA Consultants was part of the engineering team that helped Tim Greer and TZG make the building viable for the money. "The Art House was an ongoing project in our office for six years, and we'd worked on theatres with TZG before," said Nick. "There was a value engineering process to take some of the cost out. The building is essentially a donut structure that surrounds the theatre, which provides an acoustic break from the foyer and the outside world. That donut also provides the structural support for the theatre shell. Load-bearing reinforced concrete block walls form the donut and also provide the thermal break and fireproofing. Affixed to that is a steel frame that forms the foyer and all the spaces around the theatre. Alterations to the design that saved money included removing an orchestra pit and scenery stores under the stage."



## Team Effort

Local builders North Construction and Building were the successful bidders to carry out the work on The Art House. "With the six story fly-tower, this is the largest performing arts facility we've built so far" said North's Gareth Stephens. "With a building like this, the main challenge is in the details. There aren't many walls that are parallel or square with each other and the design is very architectural, often for acoustic purposes. There's a heavy architectural emphasis on the whole build. The level of finish needed is a lot higher than many other projects. Things like the specialist details for acoustics you don't see on 90% of other projects."

Theatrical equipment manufacturers and distributors Jands won the contract to supply and fit-out specialised flying and draping for the venue, with Sydney's The P.A. People providing all the other theatre technology including lighting and sound equipment. The original theatrical consulting task on The Art House was courtesy of the legendary Tony Youlden. Simon Austin of Schuler Shook subsequently engaged with the project and took it through the process to delivery.

"All of the equipment specifying was close to complete," recalled Simon. "We reviewed and added, then put the tender package together. We did a lot of work on the rigging's structural support. In terms of budget, we made some changes to the audio specification, but that didn't really change in quality. We worked with The P.A. People to look at changing the PA system. They are fantastic; there's not a lot of people left in the market that can handle high-end audio and stage lighting for a performing arts centre. The P.A. People are pros, there's no question."

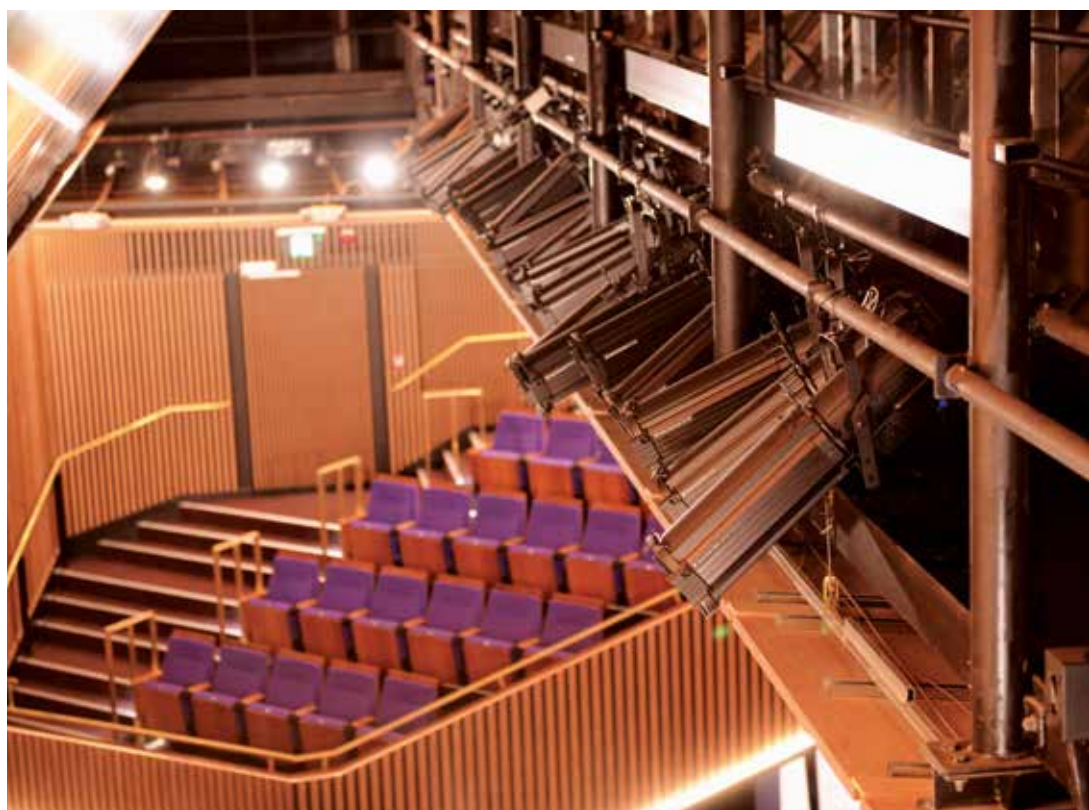


## Up To Date

Project manager for The P.A. People was Brett Steele, who worked with Council and Schuler Shook to ensure that the technical fit-out was industry standard and the best they could afford. Chris Dodds (MD, The P.A. People) led design and to this end, several changes to the specified design were made as the project evolved: "One of the biggest changes was the LED lighting rig," said Brett. "Originally they had specified various GPOs around the lighting bridges and galleries to power up the LEDs, but to turn them off they would have had to do a site walk and switch them off manually. We convinced them of the virtue of putting in dimmer racks that, with patches to the lighting bars, would give them the option of using traditional incandescent fixtures if they wanted, but also use them as power distribution through relay switching and turn the rig off from the control room or dimmer room. In the end, both the Theatre and the Studio

have a dimming system. The Theatre is an LED rig and the Studio is a traditional rig of 40 Profiles and 40 Fresnels."

Another significant change to the technical specification was the decision to make the audio control and distribution digital instead of the original analogue design. Analogue cabling is now costly, time-consuming and inflexible compared to digital systems; Brett and The P.A. People recommended a Yamaha mixing and signal distribution solution, moving to a Yamaha QL5 digital mixer and various Dante enabled I/O devices installed or floating around the venue. "Changing to digital saved infrastructure costs," Brett agreed, "and they got a great desk in the Yamaha QL5. It's very well understood and recognised in the industry. With operators coming and going with touring shows, The Art House needed equipment that techs feel comfortable to come and use."



## Everyday Workhorses

The Theatre's PA is a JBL VRX 900 Series system, with four elements each of VRX932LA-1 at left, centre and right. Two VRX918S subwoofers are flown above centre. Front fill is provided by five JBL AC18/26s, with a further two AC18/26s used for 'under balcony' fill. The rig is powered and processed by a combination of Crown DCi 4 and DCi 8 amplifiers. Further processing for the Back-of-House system is courtesy of a BSS BLU-100, also connected to the Dante network. The Studio's PA is a flexible system of JBL EON615s and 610s that can be flown or tripod mounted as required. The house mic kit is a mixture of wired and wireless models from Shure.

Mixing desks are Yamaha digital on a Dante backbone, with a QL5 for large shows in the theatre and a smaller TF1 for the Studio, or smaller, single operator shows. A Yamaha Rio3224-D sits at the Theatre's prompt side, a Rio1608-D at opposite prompt. A second Rio1608-D is sleeved and can be deployed anywhere on the Dante network as needed. An eight-in Ri8-D and an eight-out Ro8-D are mounted in the bio box for local I/O. Dante sits on a separate switch from the building's IT network, with the Primary and Redundant connections running on separate V-LANs. There are 24 dedicated Dante patch points throughout the building.



## Industry Standard

The stage management console is a custom build by The P.A. People and houses a Jands EZICOM 401 master station, a Leon Audio QLM16 MK4 cue light master station, Shure mic and a dual 8" LCD video monitor. Comms headsets are from Beyerdynamic and the Back-of-House area paging is through a combination of JBL and TOA ceiling and surface-mount loudspeakers.

Theatre lighting control is from an industry standard ETC Gio, while the Studio is run from a smaller ETC Element 40. The system is built around 20 Jands HPC12 digital dimmers, which control a predominantly LED rig built around ETC Source 4 LED models and Selecon Rama LED Fresnels, flown from Jands JLX-Pro lighting bars. Cyclorama wash is provided from seven Chroma-Q Color Force CF72 LED battens.

The P.A. People also installed Jands curtain tracks in the Studio, JLX Lite lighting bars, and designed and installed the lighting grid in the Studio. They installed 11 LED video displays, three cameras for digital signage and performance relay throughout the building and the video infrastructure to support it, including HD-SDI links between the Studio and the Theatre to enable the Studio to be used as an orchestra room.

## Full House

After positive beginnings, The Art House is taking solid bookings into the future. Well received by locals and visitors alike, both Council and the team who worked on the building are proud of its success, which comes down to all parties working together to deliver the best possible bang-for-buck. "Theatres are a beast by themselves," said Council's Mike Horan. "The Art House project was exciting, difficult and challenging. What worked really well was the proactive approach of all the parties involved. We chose a local builder, which paid dividends. Most of the money went internally. That's what the theatre is all about - if it doesn't work you have a dud."

"It's great to see local councils building theatres," said Tim Greer of TZG Architects. "They're very difficult buildings to deliver, with their multiple stakeholders. Wyong, with their limited resources, now have a great asset. Not everyone in the community agrees that there should be a substantial amount of money committed to the performing arts, but Council has a responsibility to build projects in all areas, whether it's sport, arts or public spaces. They have to manage constrained budgets. It's terrific they've delivered this. There's a strong culture of theatre and performance groups within the local government area of Wyong who have agitated for this venue for a very long time and it's good they've got such a great facility."





## Fit For Purpose

"Architecturally, they really worked it," agreed Simon Austin of Schuler Shook. "There were a number of major review processes, to look at the theatre tech and a lot of innovation in terms of bang-for-buck. It's really well kitted-out. It's a fantastic building and the Jands / The P.A. People partnership worked very well."



"The Art House is a clever design," observed Brett Steele from The P.A. People. "Council was always open to understand and discuss what would attract their customers. They understood that cutting the technical budget too much would detract from the facilities and impact their ability to sell the building to their customers. In that, they've been very savvy. It's a very positive experience to work on a regional theatre and see it go from bare ground to a functional venue."

## Amazing Value

"The P.A. People are very knowledgeable," said Julie Vaughan, Project Manager, The Art House Wyong. "I worked with both Brett Steele and Chris Dodds. They walked the council through the process and as we changed and updated a lot of the specified equipment throughout the project, they were prompt with re-quotes and keeping council up-to-date. As a result, the council got amazing value for a regional theatre and the community is now enjoying a very professional space. We didn't have to sacrifice on the technical aspects and we installed industry standard equipment. The lighting and sound equipment we use every day isn't where the cost savings were made. The equipment that makes the venue run is where the quality is, so the shows don't suffer."

"We got incredible value for money" continues Julie. "What we went to tender with, and what we got are two different products. The critical component of this project was everyone working together through the many design reiterations. Most people who visit The Art House get the impression that it cost closer to \$24 million. Every month and week, things changed, but we never compromised on the performance or aesthetics of the Theatre. The local community are blown away, and they say there's not a bad seat in the house!"



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