


Celebrating 50 years





The Sydney Opera House acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, traditional custodians of Tubowgule, the land on which Australia's most iconic building and premier performing arts centre stands. We honour the long Gadigal history of gathering and storytelling, and celebrate the strength and resilience of First Nations people and communities, past and present. The Opera House continues this legacy today by embracing and celebrating First Nations artistic expression and culture.

Cover: Tim Minchin and cast, *Play It Safe*. Photo by Damian Bennett.
Smoking ceremony at the launch of Megan Cope's *Whispers*. Photo by Cassandra Hannagan.



Introduction

As a living work of art, the Sydney Opera House continues to evolve alongside the community it was built to serve. With that in mind, our 50th anniversary program had a dual purpose.

After five decades of memories, storytelling and performances, this was our chance to celebrate everything that has made the Opera House what it is today. At the same time, we wanted to consider what the Opera House could be in the years ahead. At this hinge point in our history – after the completion of the Decade of Renewal, a period of transformation both for the building and the programming we present – we were giving our audiences, artists and visitors a taste of what's to come.

The anniversary came at a time of renewal for the city itself. Over 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 had forced us all to recalibrate our thinking during months of uncertainty and disruption. We set out to deliver a celebration for the whole community in an environment characterised by recovery, skills shortages and cost-of-living pressures. NSW Government support through the Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative helped the Opera House rise to this challenge with a broad and diverse artistic program as the community engaged once again with public gatherings and shared experiences.



Open House Weekend. Photo by Daniel Boud.



From the Sails: Light Years. Photo by Daniel Boud.

The pandemic also brought the fundamental mission of the Opera House into focus. With fewer international visitors walking through our doors, we tuned our antenna ever more closely to the people around us, and the response was overwhelming. As the anniversary year gathered pace, community enthusiasm was palpable. News outlets devoted considerable coverage to the milestone. Visitors returned in high numbers to food and beverage outlets, including Opera Bar and Mark Olive's new restaurant Midden, and more than 136,000 people took part in special anniversary year tours.

This report documents the sweep of activities presented as part of the Opera House's 50th anniversary year, online and on site, including large-scale outdoor activities, heritage events, international spectacles, community gatherings, contemporary art, storytelling innovations, plus new merchandise and dining experiences. It also sets out some of the lessons we learned along the way.

The anniversary program began in October 2022, with an audiovisual narrative on the sails and community choirs on the Monumental Steps, and peaked a year later with the Open House Weekend, when almost 30,000 people came to explore the newly renewed building. Those two events were the bookends of 12 months of diverse programming that encouraged everyone to share in the possibility and wonder of the Opera House.

More than 340 events took place across the year, with many being free or low-cost. More than 240,000 people attended ticketed events, including a quarter at free events, while another two million people experienced free outdoor events/activities. Our online Screen program also hosted a digital audience of more than 1.3 million.

By threading First Nations voices and storytelling throughout the program, we created opportunities to engage with the world's oldest living culture on the world's most recognisable stage. As Australians prepared for the 14 October 2023 referendum on a Voice to Parliament, the 50th program provided a platform to discover First Nations stories, old and new. This included talks with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, free performances on the Forecourt, and support for First Nations programming among our resident companies. One of the most ambitious projects was Megan Cope's *Whispers*, a monumental artwork and powerful symbol of Indigenous resilience, which was displayed on site for 60 days.

As the Birthday Festival in October 2023 reached its peak, a letter arrived from Buckingham Palace, addressed to the current custodians of the Opera House. The writer was King Charles III. Fifty years to the day since his mother, the late Queen Elizabeth II, declared the building open, the monarch sent his own message of congratulations.

“Since its opening in 1973 by my beloved mother, the Sydney Opera House has stood as a continuing legacy for Australians, profoundly influencing contemporary arts and culture, both locally and internationally, and having global recognition as a symbol of modern Australia,” he wrote. “In return, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to you all for a most memorable and successful celebration.”

Deloitte Access Economics, meanwhile, calculated that the Opera House’s social value had increased by 38% in real terms to \$11.4 billion over the past 10 years – almost four times the value of the land and building. Deloitte also found that 72% of people agreed that visiting the Opera House improved their wellbeing while 71% felt more connected with companions and the community, results that matched brand research findings that showed a boost in the sense of connection and belonging felt by Sydneysiders, especially families. This was further reinforced by the response to the short film *Play It Safe*, Tim Minchin’s love letter to creative courage, which was viewed more than six million times around the world. Of community members surveyed, three quarters said they had a better opinion of the Opera House after watching the film and half said they were very likely or certain to visit as a result.

Development and delivery of the 50th anniversary program on top of business-as-usual activity placed significant and sustained demands on the Opera House workforce. Staff consistently went above and beyond in planning and delivery, and sometimes both at once, demonstrating innovation in working with each other and the broader cultural sector. As ever, success grew out of the tremendous passion, skill and commitment of teams right across the organisation. With special thanks to Fiona Winning for her artistic vision and the many creators, artists and arts workers involved in bringing the 50th program to life.

Generous support from the NSW Government, as well as from our donors and partners, created the conditions for a broader, more diverse and more ambitious spread of experiences and events – local and international, many of them free and low-cost – than might otherwise have been possible. With overseas visitors yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, we sharpened our focus on the community around us while testing the possibilities of what we could do in the years ahead. It was a vivid illustration of our new organisational strategy and its ambition to be Everyone’s House.

Our challenge now is to build on the momentum of this remarkable year and ensure the Opera House is a place everyone feels welcome, on site and online.

→
What Is the City but the People? took over the Forecourt as the opening event of the Birthday Festival. Photo by Ken Leanfore.





The 50th program

The 50th anniversary celebrations were built around the following proposition.

“In our 50th year, let’s invite everyone to be part of an extraordinary celebration of contemporary culture, and reflect on the past, present and future of the Sydney Opera House.”

To achieve this, an enabling framework identified three guiding principles, each containing specific objectives:

- Create deeper connections with the entire community.
- Drive awareness and recognition, shift perceptions and inspire positive change.
- Invest in the Opera House for future generations.

We experimented with new forms of experience while rising to the challenge of this historic moment, from the extravagance of *Amadeus* to the quiet authority of Megan Cope’s *Whispers*, one of several First Nations projects spread throughout the year. We reached deep into the community for *What Is the City but the People?* and *From the Steps: Voices at Dusk*, showing how the Forecourt could be used for free, accessible events. We extended these ambitions for *Inside/Out* at the House, a new programming model that involved close collaboration with resident companies and lowering barriers to entry, and Open House Weekend, when 27,000 people brought an electric, celebratory atmosphere to Bennelong Point. These were among the many free and low-cost events, combined with performances online, that invited more of the community to connect with the Opera House than ever before.

Alongside the artistic program, we presented heritage events and storytelling moments that uncovered fresh insights into a building that has evolved into a symbol of modern Australia. We also broadened the appeal of the Opera House with popular commemorative merchandise, tours and food and beverage experiences.

Throughout the year, meaningful collaborations were forged with resident companies and external organisations, as well as across portfolios within the organisation. The projects that involved the most experimentation tested the limits of our capacity and capabilities; while challenging, they created fertile ground for new ideas and learning.

The program as a whole received a very enthusiastic response from the media, stakeholders and the community at large. After 12 months of activity, the scale of the achievement was clear: with inclusive, diverse programming, a sustained marketing and communications campaign, NSW Government Blockbuster funding and the enthusiastic participation of the community, the Opera House had come to life as a masterpiece of imagination that belongs to everyone.



Megan Cope making *Whispers*.
Photo by Zan Wimberley.



Amadeus in the renewed Concert Hall.
Photo by Daniel Boud.



From the Steps: Voices at Dusk.
Photo by Belinda Dipalo.

Timeline

2022

28 September

50th anniversary program announced.



19-30 October

Award-winning nightly *From the Sails: Light Years* sails projection celebrated the past, present and future of the building; and *From the Steps: Voices at Dusk* free community choir performances on the Forecourt.



20 October

Premiere of the ABC documentary *Inside the Sydney Opera House* on the 49th birthday.



10-18 November

Forecourt concerts by R&B singer Ngaiire and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Fat Freddy's Drop, Wanha! Journey to Arnhem, Tim Minchin and Vance Joy. The season included two free performances.



December

Concert Hall performances by Khruangbin, the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir, and Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.



27 December to 21 January 2023

Exclusive season of *Amadeus* starring Michael Sheen as Salieri in the renewed Concert Hall.



2023

3 January-3 February

The reimagined Harbour Restaurant fish and chips pop-up opens in the Yallamundi Rooms.



6 February-3 March

A broad range of Concert Hall performances by Marcel and Rami Khalifé, Kae Tempest, Jordi Savall, Angel Olsen and the Kronos Quartet.



17 February-5 March

Coinciding with Sydney WorldPride, the *Always Proud* exhibition showcased LGBTQ+ performers at the Opera House over the past 50 years.



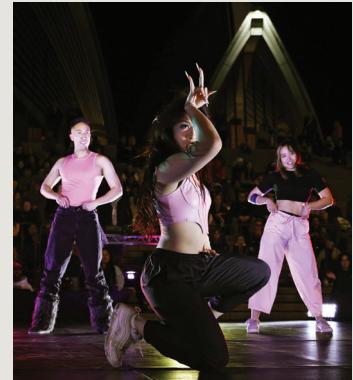
2 March

Blak & Deadly: The First Nations Gala Concert, presented by Sydney WorldPride 2023.



March-September

Free culturally diverse precinct experiences at night, including collaborations with the Museum of Contemporary Art and Museum of Sydney, supported by the NSW Government's Culture Up Late program.



15-26 March

Ascent, a special anniversary season by the Sydney Dance Company.



29 March-7 April

Ocean Visuals exhibition, a visual journey through climate change causes, impacts and solutions.



1-7 May

Inside/Out at the House, a new concept with performances by the London Symphony Orchestra, The Australian Ballet, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and Australian Chamber Orchestra in the Concert Hall and Joan Sutherland Theatre broadcast live to audiences on the Forecourt.



22 May

The Opera House receives a 6 Star Green Star rating from Green Building Council of Australia, recognising its global leadership.



26 May-17 June

Life Enlivened, a sails projection spanning artist John Olsen's six-decade career, as part of Vivid Sydney.



8 June-15 July

Yuldea, Bangarra Dance Theatre's world premiere season by incoming artistic director Frances Rings.



9 June

The Australian Museum unveils one of the world's largest Tapa bark cloths, the Ngatu Me'a'ofa, for the first time in 50 years, gifted by the people of Tonga to the Opera House for its opening.



From June until December

Historical storytelling displays about the Opera House and Tubowgule appear on hoardings across the city and on site.



1 July-3 March

The People's House: Sydney Opera House at 50, a free exhibition by Museums of History NSW in collaboration with the Opera House.



4 July

Opening of *Midden* by Mark Olive.



28 July

Launch of a new immersive digital experience covering 50 years of Opera House memories, based on *Light Years*.



3 August

First Nations Speaker Series hosted by Rudi Bremer, celebrated performing arts practice through a First Nations lens, presented in collaboration with Museums of History NSW.



3 August

Mad Scenes with Jessica Pratt, presented by Opera Australia.



3 August

The Royal Australian Mint launches a sold-out range of commemorative coins.



9 and 12 August

Jonas Kaufmann performs *La Gioconda*, presented by Opera Australia.



18 August

Multi-disciplinary Australian Danish Exchange (MADE) 10th anniversary celebration.



15 September-14 October

The Visitors, a production about first contact presented by Sydney Theatre Company and Moogahlin Performing Arts in association with the Opera House.



23 September-6 October

Polyglot Theatre's child-led, highly sensory, accessible and captivating *Paper Planet* for kids and families.



26 September

Publication of *Transcendence: 50 Years of Unforgettable Moments at the Sydney Opera House*.



**29 September-
26 November**

Whispers, a monumental public artwork across the site by Quandamooka artist Megan Cope.



1 October

The month-long Birthday Festival begins with *What Is the City but the People?*, a unique portrait of Sydney created by its people, showcasing the story, sentiments and soul of the city on a 60-metre stage. Other performances include *Dimanche*, *Camp Cope*, *Message in a Bottle* and many more.



10 October

Australia Post launches a sold-out range of commemorative stamps.



17 October

Jan and Lin Utzon appear in a very special in-conversation event as part of the UNSW Sydney UTZON Lecture.



18 October

In collaboration with Museums of History NSW, the First Stories of the House in-conversation event and performance celebrated the life and legacy of opera singer Harold Blair AM.



18 October

Premiere of *Play It Safe* film brought together resident companies and Australian artists to celebrate the Opera House and creative bravery, with an original song by Tim Minchin.



20 October

The Opera House turns 50.



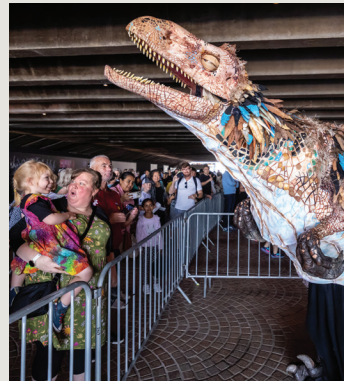
20-22 October

ICON laser show on the Opera House sails by Robin Fox in collaboration with Genius Laser Technology.



21-22 October

Open House Weekend threw open the doors of the World Heritage-listed masterpiece for the first time in eight years with a free weekend of exploration and surprise.



2-4 November

William Kentridge's remarkable *Sibyl*, an Australian exclusive fused dance, opera, drawing and film.



8 November

In Architecture Symposium: Concept, Innovation and Renewal, experts unpacked the significance of the Opera House's architecture, construction and technological innovations, as well as the future social, political and renewal challenges and opportunities.



More information on the history of the Opera House can be found at sydneyoperahouse.com/our-story

8 November

Unveiling of the Creators Project, a series of bronze panels honouring the contribution of Jørn Utzon, Ove Arup and Peter Hall in the creation of the Opera House, as well as the collective creativity of all those involved from conception to construction.



15 December

The launch of Nikau Hindin and Gail Mabo, *Badu Gili: Celestial*, created in collaboration with Biennale of Sydney and the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain.



31 December

The last hurrah – City of Sydney's New Year's Eve tribute to the Opera House with projections on the Sydney Harbour Bridge pylons celebrating key moments in its history.



Results

340+

public events/
performances,
with 47% of all events
free or low cost

240,000+

attendees at ticketed
events, of which 25%
attended free

2m+

estimated attendance
including at large-scale
free outdoor events



4,688
special 50th group
tours attended by
136,929 people

117,000+

visitors to *The People's
House: Sydney Opera
House at 50*

27,000

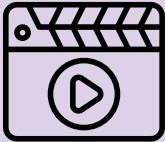
people attended Open
House Weekend. More
than **700** staff and
contractors worked
on the event, the
largest whole-of-house
collaboration ever



6,000
guests at the Harbour
Restaurant fish and
chips pop-up

1,000+

artists, performers and
creatives contributed to
the program



10,000+

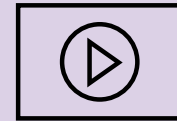
1.3m

Play It Safe reached 1.8 billion people globally, including six million views on Opera House and artist channels

media clips about the Opera House and anniversary program, including almost 700 news stories for *Play It Safe*

digital audience for the Screen program and 38m online engagements and 10.5m unique website visits

38,000+



new customers purchased **100,000** tickets

13% of new customers were from Western Sydney, purchasing **16,682** tickets

71 performances/events on Stream, including 11 livestreams & 4 digital-first Screen projects



1 in 5 customers at ticketed events were under 35

100%

digital program was free

6,382

post-visit survey responses collected from attendees

98%

of survey respondents agreed that the event they attended was enjoyable

88%

of survey respondents agreed the Opera House is a “place they are proud to be seen at”



Free & low-cost events compared with paid events brought:

- twice as many under 35s
- three times as many under 16s
- 66% more culturally and linguistically diverse customers

95%

of survey respondents agreed the Opera House is “for someone like me”

+81

Net Promoter Score (four points above target)

“I love it that there are so many different experiences that the Opera House offers now. They are diverse and exciting.”

Vance Joy attendee

“I first attended the Opera House when it was opened 50 years ago. I have made a point of introducing my children, and then my grandchildren to the Opera House and what it has to offer. It was important to me that they saw the Opera House as somewhere they belong.”

Inside/Out, London Symphony Orchestra attendee

“The experience of attending the Opera House and *Amadeus* was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. It was my first time at the Opera House and I will attend again. Coming from Tasmania it can be an expensive trip but so worthwhile. I will be on the look out for another theatre production to attend.”

Amadeus attendee

“Love how Opera House values First Nations culture and promotes free events for people to attend; like DanceRites, Bangarra.”

Wanha! Journey to
Arnhem attendee

“*Dimanche* was highly entertaining, funny at times while being thought-provoking about climate change.”

Dimanche attendee

“Always a great experience, feel so proud of having the building in Sydney. It's realisation was truly visionary! Never tire of being there.”

Sibyl attendee

“Thoroughly enjoyable experience. Appreciated the \$20 tickets. This made it affordable for our family.”

Inside/Out at the
House attendee

→

Audience members at Ngaiire and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Forecourt Concert Series. Photo by Prudence Upton



Awards

From the Sails: *Light Years* **Art Processors**

2023 Good Design Awards
Gold in Architectural Design,
Installation category

**Fast Company Innovation
By Design Awards**
Innovation Award for Experience

MUSE Creative Awards
Platinum in the Public Event category
Gold in the Experiential & Immersive
Live Experiences category

Amadeus **Romance Was Born and Anna Cordingley**

Sydney Theatre Awards
Best mainstage costume design award

Play It Safe

Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity

Film Grand Prix

Two Silver Lions in
Film Craft and Entertainment

Clio Awards

Gold in Film craft

Silver in Branded Content

Bronze in Branded Content & Partnerships

Spike Awards

Gold in Film Craft, use of original music

Gold in Film, travel retail

Silver in Entertainment, film under 5 mins

Silver in Music, music video

Bronze in Film Craft, direction

Bronze in Film Craft, editing

The Andy Awards

Best-in-Show, craft

The One Show – Australia

Gold Pencil for Moving Image Craft &
Production, writing

*Revolver x Somesuch Sydney with The
Monkeys Sydney, Revolver Sydney and
Somesuch London for Sydney Opera House*

Gold Pencil for Branded Entertainment,
music videos

*The Monkeys Sydney with MassiveMusic
Sydney, ARC EDIT Sydney and Revolver x
Somesuch Sydney for Sydney Opera House*

Cairns Crocodile Awards

Bronze for Audio Craft

Gold for Film

Gold for Film Craft

The People's House:

Sydney Opera

House at 50

Museums of History NSW in collaboration with the Sydney Opera House

National Trust (NSW) Heritage Awards

Winner, exhibition category

Events, exhibitions and tours



Hidden House tour. Photo by Ken Leanfore.

What we learned

Many factors that framed 50th anniversary planning were unique to this moment in time – the program took shape during a global pandemic; the World Heritage-listed Opera House had just completed a historic decade of renewal; and the NSW Government provided significant one-off funding for large-scale events.

However, the anniversary proved a highly successful testing ground for practices that will support the Opera House’s new organisational strategy (2024-26).

Lessons for the future include:

- Free/low-cost events for the 50th attracted significant new, younger and more diverse audiences, demonstrating the importance of such events in achieving the Opera House’s ambition to be Everyone’s House.
- NSW Government Blockbuster funding enabled the Opera House to present a very broad range of international artists and free/low-cost events. With such funding unlikely to be repeated, private funding will be essential to supporting these types of activities in future.
- The Open House Weekend revealed a strong community appetite for more regular open days and family-friendly activities. The event also brought Opera House staff and contractors together in a unique way, engendering a tremendous sense of pride.



Message in a Bottle. Photo by Daniel Boud.



Terrapin Puppet Theatre entertaining the crowds at Open House Weekend. Photo by Daniel Boud.



Children viewing Esme Timbery's shellwork of the Opera House at *The People's House* exhibition. Photo by James Horan for Museums of History NSW.

- New and complex projects required considerable planning time, especially those involving negotiations with multiple organisations and world-wide streaming. Also, collaborating with community-based and smaller organisations needed additional time and resources to be scoped.
- Cross-portfolio project groups established to support planning and delivery of the 50th were effective and will be a model for future collaboration. This was also the case for external collaborations, including with resident companies on multiple projects and with MHNSW on *The People's House* exhibition, adding value to each other's programs by sharing content and expertise and strengthening the connections between institutions.
- While the 50th enabling framework set out effective guiding principles for the program, establishing clear targets early in the planning process could have enabled a continuous framework of measurement, analysis and evaluation.
- The 50th also highlighted the value of strengthening the organisation's data analysis capacity to support broader planning, decision-making and evaluation.
- While sustaining a year-long campaign was challenging from a marketing and comms perspective, the highly successful *Play It Safe* film demonstrated the power of tentpole brand campaigns.
- The 50th confirmed the profound sense of connection and pride felt by the broader Opera House community, including all those involved in creating, managing, maintaining, performing at and supporting the building and organisation. How these stakeholders are engaged at significant milestones, including current and former staff, is an important consideration for strategic and operational planning.

Since the anniversary, research has revealed a noticeable improvement in community perceptions of the Opera House as well as an increase in the number of Sydneysiders considering visiting the precinct and being likely to recommend visiting. Perceptions of the Opera House also improved across all tracked attributes, all of which reinforces how the 50th worked to deepen connections across the community.

“There is always something special about sitting on the Opera House steps, looking back over our beautiful city and drinking in the culturally diverse atmosphere and talent.”

Inside/Out, Ngaiire and the
Sydney Symphony Orchestra attendee

Acknowledgements



The 50th anniversary program was proudly supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative and select events through the Culture Up Late initiative.



What Is the City but the People? received support by local government partner City of Sydney.

Private Funding

The Sydney Opera House acknowledges the support of our corporate partners, individual donors as well as foundations and trusts who played a vital role in the celebration of the 50th anniversary. It is through their generosity that the Opera House was able to uplift and inspire the community at this important milestone.

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Timeline Photography /Image Credits

2022

19 – 30 October: *From the Sails: Light Years*. Photo by Daniel Boud

20 October: Cast of *Inside the Sydney Opera House*. Photo by Ben Symons

10 – 18 November: Wanha! Journey to Arnhem. Photo by Ken Leanfore

December: Khruangbin. Photo by Jordan Munns

27 December – 21 January 2023: *Amadeus*. Photo by Daniel Boud

2023

3 January – 3 February: The Harbour. Photo by Kitti Gould

6 February – 3 March: Marcel and Rami Khalifé. Photo by Joseph Mayers

17 February – 5 March: *Always Proud* exhibition. Photo by Daniel Boud

2 March: Cerulean, Miss First Nation: Supreme Queen 2023. Photographer unknown

March – September: Destructive Steps. Photo by Prudence Upton

15 – 26 March: Sydney Dance Company. Photo by Pedro Greig

29 March – 7 April: *Ocean Visuals* exhibition. Photo by Anna Kucera

1 – 7 May: Inside/Out at the House. Photo by Katje Ford

22 May: Tito Torredimare in plant room. Photo by Ken Leanfore

26 May: 17 June – *Life Enlivened*. Photo by Daniel Boud

8 June – 15 July: Bangarra Dance Theatre. Photo by Kate Longley

9 June: Tapa unveiling. Photo by Laura Matarese

From June until December: City hoarding. Photo by Brigid Collaery

July – 3 March: *The People's House*. Photo by James Horan for MHNSW

4 July: Mark Olive. Photo by Katje Ford

28 July: *From the Sails: Light Years*. Photo by Daniel Boud

3 August: Rudi Bremer. Photo by Teresa Tan for ABC RN

3 August: Jessica Pratt. Photo by Rhiannon Hopley

9 and 12 August: Jonas Kaufmann. Photo by Keith Saunders

18 August: MADE students. Photo by Cassandra Hannagan

15 September – 14 October: *The Visitors*. Photo by Daniel Boud

23 September – 6 October: *Paper Planet*. Photo by Katje Ford

26 September: *Transcendence* book. Photo by Katje Ford

29 September – 26 November: *Whispers*. Photo by Daniel Boud

1 October: *What Is the City but the People?* Photo by Ken Leanfore

17 October: Jan Utzon. Photo by Katje Ford

18 October: Harold Blair and Ida Scott. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Dorothy Blair

18 October: *Play it Safe*. Photo by Damian Bennett

20- October: *ICON*. Photo by Daniel Boud

21-22 October: Open House Weekend. Photo by Daniel Boud

2-4 November: *Sibyl*. Photo by Stella Olivier

8 November: Jack Zunz, Mick Lewis, and Ove Arup. Photo by Max Dupain, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

8 November: Unveiling of the Creators Project. Photo by Cassandra Hannagan

15 December: *Badu Gili: Celestial* on the Bennelong sails. Photo by Daniel Boud

31 December: Harbour Bridge pylon on New Year's Eve. Photo by Morris McLennan

50th anniversary report project team

Special thanks to all contributors and the report project team:

Ashleigh Wilson, Brigid Collaery,

Hannah Hibbert, Hugh Lamberton, Emily Cooper and Novel team.

Design – Novel Creative.

Sydney Opera House
Bennelong Point
Sydney NSW 2000
Australia

T 612 9250 7111

sydneyoperahouse.com



William Barton, *Play It Safe*. Photo by Damian Bennett.