



arena
theatre
co

annual report 2024





Arena Theatre Company respectfully acknowledges the Dja Dja Wurrung people, and the Taungurung Peoples of the Kulin Nation, the first peoples of country on which Arena Theatre stands.

We pay our respects to all of Bendigo's First Peoples, and to their ancestors and elders. Indigenous sovereignty has never been ceded and we acknowledge that we continue to make art on what always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Cover and inside cover images: Leonie van Eyk

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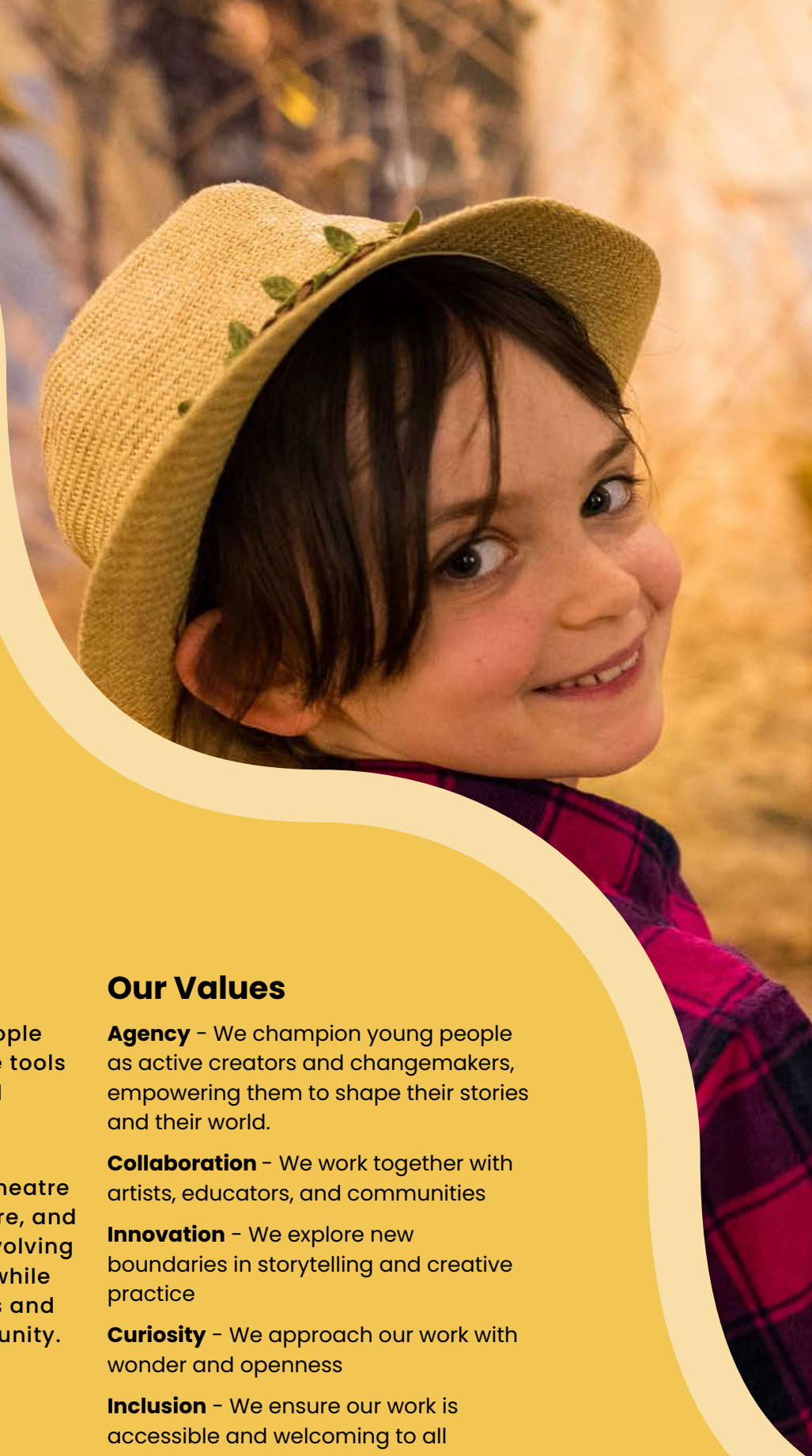
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About us

Arena Theatre Company is one of Australia's leading theatre producers for young audiences. Since 1966, we've created compelling performances and innovative storytelling across theatres, schools, and communal spaces.

We're known for award-winning productions spanning traditional stages, digital platforms, and non-theatre environments, touring regionally, nationally, and internationally. Our mission centres on creating diverse artforms for young people that foster shared experience and social connection by continually redefining the boundaries of artistic expression.

From humble beginnings touring schools in a van, to our current standing as a leader in contemporary theatre for young audiences, our journey led us to make Bendigo our home in 2018. As the city's sole professional theatre company, we embrace a dual role: leading in creating diverse artforms for young audiences and advancing regional arts development.



Our Vision

Our vision is that all young people are equipped with the creative tools they need to build a new world

Our Purpose

To craft exceptional, original theatre experiences that delight, inspire, and transform young people by involving them in the creative process, while supporting professional artists and enhancing our Bendigo community.

Our Values

Agency - We champion young people as active creators and changemakers, empowering them to shape their stories and their world.

Collaboration - We work together with artists, educators, and communities

Innovation - We explore new boundaries in storytelling and creative practice

Curiosity - We approach our work with wonder and openness

Inclusion - We ensure our work is accessible and welcoming to all

Diversity - We celebrate differences in culture, identity, and expression

Respect - We honour diverse perspectives and approaches

Our Program Areas

New Works & Premieres

We develop and premiere original productions that push creative boundaries, combining traditional theatrical elements with new technologies to create unique experiences for our young audiences.

School Programs

Our in-school residencies provide immersive arts experiences that complement curriculum while fostering creativity and cultural understanding.

Touring Productions

We share our celebrated works with diverse communities through regional, national, and international tours, ensuring young people everywhere have access to high-quality theatrical experiences.

Research & Development Projects

The heart of Arena's artistic research and development is **Makers**, our laboratory where we create new stories and develop artform, and facilitate artists engaging young people to develop new ideas.



2024 at a glance

Audience



| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| 14,470 | Total audience |
| 22% | International |
| 53% | Interstate |
| 15% | Metro |
| 10% | Bendigo |

Workshops



| | |
|--------------|-------------------|
| 146 | Workshop sessions |
| 1,109 | Participants |
| 16 | Schools engaged |

Creative Development



| | |
|------------|----------------------|
| 5 | Works in development |
| 37 | Artists engaged |
| 54% | Central Victoria |
| 28% | Metro |
| 7% | Interstate |

Online Engagement



| | |
|---------------|---------------------|
| 2,937 | Facebook followers |
| 1,684 | Instagram followers |
| 4,844 | Website sessions |
| 10,838 | Website page views |



Image: Kristen Beaver

Chair's report

As I reflect on 2024, I am filled with pride at how Arena Theatre Company has demonstrated remarkable resilience while maintaining our unwavering commitment to creating extraordinary experiences for young people.

This year has shown the strength of our organisation through strategic development of our governance practices, partnerships, and financial position—all crucial elements that underpin our artistic achievements.

Our community partnerships have been instrumental to our success. The support from Agnico Eagle Mining and our delivery partnership with Bendigo Art Gallery expanded the reach of our **Country and Belonging** program, creating meaningful connections between young people and First Nations cultural practices. Our collaboration with the City of Greater Bendigo has established the foundation for our upcoming **Children's Festival** initiative.

A significant milestone was securing organisational funding through Creative Australia's Two-Year Investment Pilot. This validation provides essential stability for our ambitious plans and reflects the sector's recognition of Arena's unique contribution to young audiences.



I extend my sincere gratitude to our government partners, particularly Creative Victoria, whose continued faith in Arena's vision has been instrumental. Equal thanks go to our philanthropic foundations and individual donors who share our belief in theatre's transformative power.

My appreciation goes to fellow Board members for their strategic insight and governance oversight. Their diverse expertise provides Arena with essential perspectives for sound decision-making.

Finally, I acknowledge the extraordinary work of our team led by CEO Debra Allanson and Artistic Director Christian Leavesley. Their leadership continues to inspire us all as we move into what promises to be an exciting 2025.

ANNE HENSHALL

Chair



Image: Christian Leavesley

From the CEO

2024 has been a pivotal year for Arena Theatre Company, marked by significant achievements that affirm our standing both nationally and internationally.

Our Helpmann Award-winning musical, **Robot Song** finally embarked on its much-anticipated international journey after pandemic-related delays. The tour took flight to New Zealand in April before continuing to Canada in May. This international recognition represents a crowning achievement for Jolyon James' remarkable work, made possible through support from Creative Australia and Creative Victoria's International Touring programs.

Locally, our **Country and Belonging** program expanded significantly throughout Bendigo's schools, bringing this important First Nations-led initiative to more young people than ever before. The success of this program reflects the strength of our partnerships with the Department of Education and Agnico Eagle Mining, and the generous support of the Dennis Osbourne Clark Trust.



The **Makers** program, supported by the Betty Amsden Foundation, has evolved into an exceptional laboratory for developing new work and nurturing artistic talent. This initiative has already yielded significant results, including Regional Arts Victoria funding for our 2025 production of **War of the Worlds**. Our **Hidden Creature Gallery** also resumed its residency at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, bringing innovative audience engagement to new communities.

Development of our long-awaited **Bendigo Children's Festival** advanced with a three-year grant from the City of Greater Bendigo, setting the stage for this exciting addition to the region's cultural calendar.

I extend my sincere thanks to our dedicated Arena team and brilliant artistic collaborators whose extraordinary commitment continues to exceed expectations. Looking to 2025, we share in the excitement of furthering Arena's mission to create extraordinary experiences for young people.

DEBRA ALLANSON
Chief Executive Officer



Images: Kristen Beever

Artistic Director's Report

We had some wonderful highlights in 2024 – **Robot Song** opening the prestigious Vancouver International Children's Festival to a standing ovation, **Hidden Creature Gallery's** return season to Tasmania Museum and Art Gallery, and the programming of **War of the Worlds** in the 2025 Adelaide Festival among them.

Behind these public achievements, Arena's real strength in 2024 was delivering a program capable of serving the range of communities the Company is committed to.

Over recent years we have worked to build a creative model that delivers world-class performances, while bringing the consistent level of engagement our Bendigo community requires. The success of this endeavour can be challenging to discern while in the thick of it, but with a short period of reflection, it is spectacular to see how effective our work has been.

The **Makers** program engaged groups of teenagers with professional artists to explore and learn about professional creative processes in the making of new works. This is a critical gap in the Bendigo performance landscape.

Of the three **Makers** projects in 2024, two will feature in Arena's future professional program. By the publishing of this report, **War of the Worlds** will have already had its World Premiere in the 2025 Adelaide Festival. Of the four professional artists who have worked on **Makers** projects since late 2023, three have ongoing projects with Arena. Our **Makers** projects are serving our local community, and communities around the country.

Our schools program took an important step forward with our First Nations-led **Country and Belonging** program becoming part of the Department of Education's Strategic Partnerships Program. We were resident at six Central Victorian primary schools during 2024, spending half a term with each school, opening

opportunities for local children to engage with Arena throughout the year in essential cultural and artistic experiences.

While doing this essential work in our own community, we have been taking our award-winning performances beyond Central Victoria. **Robot Song** did its very first international tour of New Zealand and Canada. It was a joy to welcome back the extraordinarily talented team of Jolyon James, Nate Gilkes, Phil McInness, Ashlea Pyke and Bridget A'Beckett. The brilliant Ashlea re-joined the show for the first time since before Covid, and Bridget for her very first season.

Hidden Creature Gallery also continued to evolve and delight in a variety of forms and contexts across Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania during the year.

Behind the scenes we have been working on **The Creativerse**, our new festival that will provide a central point of focus for all of Arena's new works. It brings together work in our community, artist development, and new professional touring work in a way that serves all three in a powerful way.

On a personal note, I took a period of long service leave in the second half of 2024 to take care of some challenging family events. I want to thank Anne, Debra, the Arena Board and staff for their incredible support through this period. Their perspective, confidence and hard work meant that the Company did not miss a beat during this time.

I also want to thank all of the artists who worked with Arena throughout 2024. It was a year of incredible achievements that has established a new base for Arena's creative model that makes the coming years very exciting for the art that we will produce for the many communities we serve.

CHRISTIAN LEAVESLEY
Artistic Director

Artistic Program

Robot Song

It was exciting to send **Robot Song** on its first international tour of New Zealand and Canada. Led by Writer/Director Jolyon James, and performed by Phil McInness, Ashlea Pyke and Bridget a'Beckett, **Robot Song** played 2 venues in New Zealand and 4 venues in Canada. Among a host of highlights, **Robot Song** was the Opening Night Show for the prestigious Vancouver International Children's Festival.

It is always a very special opportunity to see how international audiences respond to an Australian work.

Unsurprisingly, the responses were every bit as powerful for the New Zealanders and Canadians as they have been right across Australia to this most wonderful of plays.

WATCH

| | |
|--------------|-------------------------|
| Dates | 16 April to 31 May 2024 |
| 6 | Venues |
| 27 | Performances |
| 2 | Countries |
| 2,879 | Audience |

New Zealand

Hawkes Bay Art & Events Centre, Hastings
TSB Showplace, New Plymouth

Canada

Arts Court, Ottawa, Canada
Surrey Arts Centre, Surrey, Canada
Fleck Dance Theatre, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada
Performance Works, Vancouver, Canada

Creative Team

| | |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| Writer & Director | Jolyon James |
| Production Manager | Ben Van Dillen |
| Stage Manager | Imogen Millhouse |
| Composer | Nate Gilkes |
| Producer | Caitlin Williams |

Cast

Bridget A'Beckett
Philip McInnes
Ashlea Pyke



SUPPORTERS



"I saw the show yesterday. As a mom of a highly artistic, neuro-divergent, trans son with BPD I just wanted to say thank you. You melted my mom heart with tears and laughter. What a beautiful piece of art you and your team have created ♥"

Audience member, Canada 2024

"I watched your show on May 18th. I really loved that show. I think it's so important for younger viewers to stand up against bullying and it showcases that we are all different inside. Whether it be at school, online or in life.

This show really made me cry multiple times, which is that good. I hope your show will be seen for many years to come."

Usher/audience member
Harbourfront Centre,
Toronto

"Watching Robot Song by Arena Theatre was a profoundly touching experience. The blend of heartfelt storytelling and cutting-edge technology left the audience feeling inspired and deeply connected to the characters. It's a beautiful reminder of the resilience within us all and the extraordinary power of imagination."

Associate Producer, Harbourfront Centre,
Toronto

"A wonderful production that shows us the different ways different kids may experience the world around them.

From an accessibility standpoint, I appreciated the set-up and warnings within the show — and the stretches and breathing moments for the audience! The company were absolutely terrific to work with around access plans."

Accessibility Coordinator, Harbourfront
Centre, Toronto



Artistic Program

Hidden Creature Gallery

Hidden Creature Gallery continues to tour, activating public places and engaging children and young people in animating and voicing original digital creatures. No two **Hidden Creature Galleries** are ever the same.

Throughout 2024, we expanded across multiple venues. Long-term installations continued at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Starlight Foundation at Monash Children's Hospital. To our delight, TMAG invited us back to present a return season in the 2024 July school holidays.

With the Starlight Foundation, **Hidden Creature Gallery** toured to hospitals in NSW and Queensland. The responses were beautiful and heart warming, as they captured the experiences of some of the long term child patients of some of our major hospitals.

The short-form version featuring workshops and creature hunts successfully engaged communities in Colac and at the Kingston After Dark Festival. The kids involved in the creature making were very proud to see so many people looking at their creatures.

Dates

Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery until April 2024
Monash Children's Hospital until March 2024
Royal Children's Hospital Vic April 2024
Children's Hospital, Randwick May 2024
Royal Children's Hospital Qld May 2024
Colac Performing Arts Centre 19-20 Jan 2024
Kingston 10 August 2024

7 Venues
8,148 Audience
6 Artists

Artists

Mark Egan
Jolyon James
Christian Leavesley
Sarah Walker
Sarah Branton
Phil McInnes

Producer

Caitlin Williams

WATCH

DELIVERY PARTNERS



Images: Various

kingston**arts**





Artistic Program

Country & Belonging

The first iteration of **Country & Belonging** was led by Yorta Yorta artist Annie Brigdale, taking place over a term at California Gully Primary School. In 2024 we rolled out the second iteration which is delivered over 5 weeks, increasing the number of schools we can work with. In 2024 we went to 6 schools. The schools reported that this experience fostered a broader, deeper, and more enduring understanding of the cultural significance behind Acknowledgement of Country practices.

Teacher surveys revealed transformative impacts on participants, including notable increases in self-confidence and a strengthened sense of belonging within their school communities.

Students formed valuable connections with Arena artists, deepening their cultural understanding, particularly regarding First Nations art and expression. Educators observed that these foundational experiences will continue to resonate and develop as students mature, creating lasting cultural awareness and appreciation.

Dates July to December 2024
108 Workshop sessions
6 Schools
886 Audience
5 Artists

Term 3 Residencies
Eaglehawk Primary School
Huntly Primary School
St Peters' Primary School

Term 4 Residencies
Heathcote Primary School
Bendigo Primary School
Lockwood South Primary School

Artists
Josie Gower
Leonie van Eyk
Kate Stones
Annie Brigdale
Christian Leavesley

Program Manager
Kristen Beaver

WATCH



DELIVERY PARTNERS



Education and Training



BENDIGO ART GALLERY



Images: Kristen Beever & Leonie van Eyk

Artistic Program

Makers

Makers is a first of its kind program for young people in Bendigo, and for Arena Theatre Company. The program achieves 3 goals for Arena:

1. To seed potential new professional projects
2. To introduce Central Victorian young people to the processes and practice of developing new performance
3. To build Arena's network of professional artists

Makers has exceeded our expectations, with two of our four projects advancing to professional development. **Finnegan the Fart Detective** is being developed for our Children's Festival, while **War of the Worlds** will enjoy its world premiere at the 2025 Adelaide Festival.

Three of the professional artists who participated in **Makers** in 2024 will continue their journey with Arena on future projects, demonstrating the program's effectiveness as both an artistic incubator and talent pipeline.

We blended our ensemble work experience into **Makers** and spent a week workshoping the **War of the Worlds** script with a group of local teens.

Digital Theatre

14 February to 27 March 2024

Audio drama

8 -11 April 2024

War of the Worlds

23 - 26 September 2024

| | |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 15 | Workshop sessions |
| 80 | Audience |
| 6 | Artists |
| 6 | Schools |

Artists

Philip Rouse
Lachlan Woods
James Shaw
Daniel Soncin
Kate Stones
Christian Leavesley

Schools engaged for work experience

Bendigo South East College
Bendigo Senior Secondary School
Castlemaine Secondary College (2 students)
Catherine McAuley College (2 students)
Creek Street Christian College
Girton Grammar School

Program Manager

Kristen Beever



WATCH

DELIVERY PARTNERS

BETTY
AMSDEN
FOUNDATION



Images: Kristen Beever
& Lachlan Woods



In Development

The Creativerse A new children's festival in Bendigo

The Creativerse emerged as a significant initiative throughout 2024. A project control group was established with representatives from Bendigo Venues & Events, City of Greater Bendigo, Regional Arts Victoria, and producers Jenni Tosi and Sarah Lockwood. Through comprehensive research and a consultative co-design approach, we developed the festival's thematic direction, programming framework, and brand identity.

Scheduled for Saturday October 11, 2025, in the Ulumbarra Theatre precinct, **The Creativerse** will offer a vibrant intersection of art, technology, and play for children aged 5-12 and their families. The festival will showcase performances, interactive installations, and participatory experiences from leading Australian and regional artists.

While beginning as a focused single-day event, **The Creativerse** is being designed with expansion in mind—with plans to grow into a multi-day celebration in future years, establishing itself as a fixture on Central Victoria's cultural calendar. This initiative strengthens Arena's role as a cultural anchor in Bendigo while creating new pathways for audiences to engage with contemporary performance experiences.

Creative Producer
Sarah Lockwood



PARTNERS



War of the Worlds



War of the Worlds' playwright, Fleur Kilpatrick travelled to Bendigo to work with our Bendigo-based ensemble across a 3-day intensive at the start of the September school holidays.

Following the creative developments, weekly rehearsals continued in-person and online, with our interstate casts, across Term 4.

The year ended with South Australian designers, Bianka Kennedy and Dan Thorpe travelling across to work with the Bendigo team on the look and sound of the Bendigo performance.

Artists

Playwright
Director
Associate Director
Technical Director

Fleur Kilpatrick
Christian Leavesley
Kate Stones
Calum McClure

Companies

Arena Theatre Company, Bendigo
Riverland Youth Theatre, Renmark
D'Faces, Whyalla

Producer

Kristen Beever



School Holidays Development

19 - 22 September 2024

8 Participants
2 Artists

Work Experience Development

23 - 26 September 2024

8 Participants
2 Artists

Term 4 rehearsals

23 - 26 September 2024

10 Participants
3 Artists

December Design Development

16 - 18 December 2024

4 Artists

PARTNERS



Image: Kristen Beever
Illustration: Sam Wannan

Finance

Arena Theatre Company had a strong financial year in 2024, recording a healthy surplus—a significant turnaround from the 2023 deficit. Our continued stable funding from Creative Victoria, new investment from Creative Australia’s Two-Year Investment Pilot, and a notable increase in philanthropic support have all strengthened our financial position.

| Operating result | | |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Income | 2024 | 2023 |
| Government | 365000 | 200000 |
| Earned | 118229 | 107009 |
| Project Grants | 100507 | 0 |
| Philanthropic | 100000 | 10000 |
| Interest | 4092 | 4438 |
| TOTAL | 692512 | 330635 |

| Expenses | | |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Salaries | 398732 | 364625 |
| Production Costs | 88075 | 55799 |
| Administration & Marketing | 45528 | 38863 |
| Overheads | 59445 | 62336 |
| TOTAL | 591780 | 521623 |
| Operating result | 100732 | -190988 |

| Financial Position | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Assets | 584317 | 465360 |
| Liabilities | 232742 | 214517 |
| Net Assets | 351575 | 250843 |



Image: Kristen Beever

Organisation

Arena Theatre Company is a not-for-profit organization based in Bendigo that has created live performances for young audiences since 1966. We operate under the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 and prepare our financial statements in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards – Simplified Disclosures.

Our Board comprises Directors with diverse expertise across Arts, Business, Finance and Community sectors, providing strategic leadership and oversight. Two specialised committees support the Board's work:

Finance & Governance Committee

This committee ensures the integrity of financial reporting and audit processes, oversees risk management systems, maintains organizational policies, and supports sound employment practices.

Philanthropy & Partnership Committee

This committee develops strategies and nurtures key relationships to diversify and strengthen our funding and resource base, ensuring Arena's long-term sustainability and growth.

Board members:

Anne Henshall (Chair)
Debra Allanson
Emily Fiori
Christian Leavesley
Stan Liacos
Liahn Nortjé
Meg Upton
Abe Watson

Staff

Arena prioritises the recruitment of its people from within central Victoria. We are committed to growing the pool of talent and expertise through work placement, internship and volunteer opportunities, and our talent development initiatives, including our Makers program and artistic residencies.

Chief Executive Officer – Debra Allanson
Artistic Director – Christian Leavesley
Program Manager – Kristen Beever
Executive Officer – Fionna Allan

Operations Partners

Financial

- AFS & Associates Chartered Accountants
- Better Bookkeeping Management

Contract Services

- Auspicious Arts Projects

Legal

- O'Farrell Robertson McMahon Lawyers

Touring

- Nicholas Clark Management

Artists

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Bridget a'Beckett | Imogen Millhouse |
| Kyrilee Bodin | Ashleigh Pyke |
| Annie Brigdale | Daniel Roche |
| Mark Egan | Phil Rouse |
| Josie Gower | James Shaw |
| Jolyon James | Daniel Soncin |
| Bianka Kennedy | Kate Stones |
| Fleur Kilpatrick | Daniel Thorpe |
| Jade Cuskelly | Ben van Dillen |
| Kristan Lame-Ruff | Leonie van Eyk |
| Philip McInnes | Lachlan Woods |





Partners

Arena is grateful to the following organisations for their support throughout the year.

State Partners



Project Partners



Education and Training



Operations Partners





This rose arbour was rebuilt in 1912