

SYDNEY FESTIVAL OPENS TODAY, MARKING MILESTONE 50 YEAR ANNIVERSARY



Garabari

Thursday 8 January

Sydney Festival opens today, launching its 50th anniversary with a city-wide invitation to gather, play, reflect and imagine together. From today until Sunday 25 January, the festival transforms Sydney into a living stage, activating theatres, streets, alleys, parks and unexpected spaces with bold theatre, dance, music, visual art and immersive experiences that honour five decades of cultural transformation while looking firmly to the future.

Ahead of the 50th anniversary edition and his first Sydney Festival as Director, **Kris Nelson** said: “Opening Sydney Festival’s 50th anniversary is an incredible honour. This festival has always belonged to the city — to the artists, audiences and communities who gather each

January. We recognise that this year's festival will be presented to a city still grieving from the recent atrocity in Bondi. Our hearts are especially with the Jewish community at this time, and with everyone across Sydney affected by this loss."

"As we begin this anniversary edition, we're mindful of the moment we're in, and we're proud to open a festival that invites people to come out and reconnect with their city through art, culture and shared experiences."

Minister for the Arts, Music and Night-time Economy John Graham said: Minister for the Arts, Music and Night-time Economy said: "The Sydney Festival is clearly not getting shy about its 50th birthday! Every year, right as Sydney hits the peak of summer, the Festival unfolds with an amazing program. Happy Birthday to the Sydney Festival, here's to another great 50 years of big colourful nights, where anything feels possible."

Minister for Jobs and Tourism, Steve Kamper, said, "Sydney Festival is the nation's largest international arts and cultural event and a highlight of our summer in Sydney. Over the next few weeks our city is going to be abuzz with creativity and entertainment as we celebrate its milestone 50th anniversary. For half a century, Sydney Festival has enriched our state's vibrant arts and cultural scene, showcasing NSW as Australia's leading destination for world-class event experiences and this year will be no different."

This morning, two major artworks open across Barangaroo and Darling Harbour. At the heart of the 2026 Blak Out program, curated by **Jacob Nash** in his final festival as **Creative Artist in Residence**, is **HELD**, a series of commissioned sculptural works by Yuwaalaraay Wirringgaa woman **Lucy Simpson**, installed on Barangaroo's Stargazer's Lawn. Honouring earth and fire, sky and sea Country, these vessels will welcome all who gather across the full length of the festival. Later, they will also hold space for **Vigil: Belong**, Sydney Festival's shared closing ceremony on 25 January, where sacred smoke will rise at sunset as musician and writer **Nardi Simpson** leads singers from every generation, with **Uncle Matthew Doyle** tending the fires and maintaining the bridge between earth and sky.

Also opening today, acclaimed sculptor **Julia Phillips** presents **Observer, Observed** in Darling Harbour for its international debut following a celebrated year-long installation on New York City's High Line. A pair of custom-made bronze binoculars invite passers-by to take in the view but with a twist. A hidden camera broadcasts live footage of their eyes to a nearby screen, transforming a simple act of sightseeing into a striking reflection on surveillance, consent and the politics of spectatorship in the digital age.

Tonight's opening night events see international works take centre stage. Celebrated South Korean choreographer **Eun-Me Ahn** brings her kaleidoscopic vision to Sydney in **Post-Orientalist Express**, a dazzling work performed by eight dancers and featuring more than 90 costumes designed by Ahn herself. Across the opening nights, traditions from Okinawa, Bali and Manila are transformed into a vivid, audacious and satirical exploration of Asian stereotypes.

At Carriageworks **Travis Alabanza's** globally acclaimed **BURGERZ** arrives, turning a moment of trauma into a triumphant and unflinchingly powerful act of resilience that blends immersive storytelling, sharp wit and biting social commentary.

Running across the full festival and opening tonight, **Thomas Mayo's *Dear Son*** brings to the stage intimate reflections from twelve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, including **Stan Grant, Troy Cassar-Daley** and **John Liddle**. Adapted for the stage by **Isaac Drandic** and **John Harvey**, the work honours traditions of fatherhood, wisdom and masculinity within the world's oldest living cultures, weaving music, movement and story into a powerful act of cultural continuity.

Over the opening weekend and throughout January, the festival spills out across the city. **Joel Bray's *Garabari*** reimagines the corroboree for a new generation, transforming the Northern Broadwalk of the Sydney Opera House into a vast open-air dance floor where audiences of all ages are invited to move together under the stars. City Recital Hall welcomes UK singer-songwriter **Paris Paloma**, whose immersive, community-driven performances have established her as one of contemporary music's most compelling feminist voices. At the Sydney Opera House, **Jannawi Dance Clan** premiere ***Garrigarrang Badu***, an ambitious new work celebrating Dharug Country and the vital role of women in carrying culture.

Meanwhile, visionary American artist **Lonnie Holley** leads the festival's return to **ACO On The Pier** across three nights, with performances that unfold differently each evening. A multi-disciplinary creator whose work spans music, sculpture, drawing and film, Holley's improvised sets evolve in real time. He'll perform solo, then be joined by acclaimed Gooniyandi and Walmatjarri Elder **Kankawa Nagarra** for one special collaboration, and Sydney's own jazz and neo-soul artist **Yasmina Sadiki** for another.

On Saturday, cinema spills into the streets of Walsh Bay with ***Live at Hickson Road: Efectos Especiales***, a free outdoor takeover that blurs street performance and live movie shoot. Created by Argentinian filmmakers and choreographers **Alejo Moguillansky** and **Luciana Acuña**, the work transforms Hickson Road into a site of collective spectatorship, with audiences becoming both extras and eyewitnesses as art unfolds in motion. Following the performance, the afterparty continues with a soundtrack by two standout Argentinian-born DJs. **Federico Puentes** primes the crowd with a deep, melodic and energetic journey through his signature club sound, honed across Sydney's venues and international radio, and Argentina-born, Naarm-based DJ and producer **Tina Disco** ignites the night with a high-voltage fusion of house, techno, bass and Latin-club rhythms.

As the festival moves into its second week, stories of identity, history and collective experience come to the fore. **Khalid Abdalla's *Nowhere*** opens at Roslyn Packer Theatre, weaving personal history through seismic global events in an intricate act of anti-biography. Dublin trailblazers **THISISPOPBABY** bring their world class Irish talent to Sydney with ***WAKE***, a joyous, high-energy celebration of life, while **Hot Chip** return to the Sydney Opera House for two nights celebrating 25 years together. Bringing their ***Joy In Repetition*** live show to Sydney, the genre-defying band transform melancholy into movement, drawing on classic house, shimmering synth-pop and the unmistakable voice of Alexis Taylor to turn the concert hall into a space of shared catharsis, supported by Sydney alt-dance mavericks **Haiku Hands**.

At Carriageworks, India-based **Conflictorium** opens as a living, participatory museum and a space for reflection and shared understanding, inviting audiences to share stories and honour disagreement as a pathway to empathy and repair. Sydney Town Hall is transformed into a full-scale roller derby track with the world premiere of **Mama Does Derby**, a major new commission by **Virginia Gay** and co-created and directed by Windmill's **Clare Watson** that blends theatre, sport, live music and immersive spectacle into a heartfelt celebration of resilience and reinvention.

Across the city, **Redfern Renaissance** honours the revolutionary art and activism of the 1970s National Black Theatre, while **Garage Party** turns Blacktown Arts Centre into a Pasifika backyard celebration of community, creativity and pride.

And midway through the festival, on **Saturday 17 January**, music and ritual take centre stage. **Sydney Symphony Under the Stars** marks the festival's 50th anniversary with a special edition at Tumbalong Park, bringing thousands together for an evening of music and community under the summer night sky. Performing an all-Australian program to open the evening – featuring works by acclaimed composer **Nigel Westlake** and rising star **Naomi Dodd** – the Orchestra will also be joined by world-renowned yidaki (didgeridoo) virtuoso **William Barton** for a striking performance of **Deborah Cheetham Frailon's Treaty**, a powerful new composition being presented for only the second time in Australia. **Antonín Dvořák's** majestic **New World Symphony** brings the evening to a stirring close, complete with a spectacular fireworks finale. Archival footage and iconic artworks from the festival's history will light up the big screen, weaving five decades of creativity into a vibrant, immersive tribute to Sydney's rich artistic legacy

From soul tributes by **Emma Donovan** to experimental opera, immersive sound worlds and children's works that invite play and wonder, the festival continues to unfold across generations and artforms.

Running alongside the performance program, Sydney Festival's **Summer School** offers an expansive series of talks, workshops and participatory experiences curated by Artistic Associate **Nithya Nagarajan**. Spanning galleries, public spaces and unexpected venues, Summer School invites audiences to dive deeper into the ideas shaping the 50th anniversary program, turning the city into a classroom for collective discovery.

The final week of Sydney Festival sees major international works, landmark premieres and bold local voices take centre stage across theatres, concert halls and public spaces. The Australian premiere of **LACRIMA** arrives as a landmark achievement of contemporary theatre, with **Caroline Guiela Nguyen's** sweeping and intimate production tracing the hidden human stories stitched into a royal wedding gown, spanning Parisian ateliers, Indian embroidery houses and global supply chains in a profound meditation on beauty, labour and belonging. Alongside it, a high-voltage collision of rock, drag and Blak pride takes over Wharf 1 Theatre with **A Night of Rock & Roll with Bogan Villea**, while **Undercurrent** transforms Riverside Live at PHIVE into a three-night celebration of Western Sydney's underground, Pasifika and queer-led music scenes, with newly announced highlights including powerhouse vocalist **Joseph Vuicakau** (*The Voice* 2025 semi-finalist), rising star **RIAH** (winner of triple j's Unearthed High Indigenous Initiative and handpicked by The Kid LAROI for SXSW) and fast-ascending rapper **Zion** (2023 Acclaim All-Star).

Operatic worlds unfold in bold and unexpected ways, from ***Opera for the Dead*** 祭歌 by guzheng virtuoso **Mindy Meng Wang** and experimental sound designer **Monica Lim**, a multi-sensory journey through, ritual and transformation, to a daring new staging of Puccini's ***Turandot***, reimagined by director and choreographer **Ann Yee** and presented by **Opera Australia** at the Sydney Opera House.

In the festival's closing days, children and young audiences are handed the microphone with ***The Censor*** at **Australian Theatre for Young People**, as kids rewrite the rules of what can be said, seen and shared on stage. Young audiences and families are also welcomed into the world of **Bangarra Dance Theatre** with ***The Bogong's Song: A Call to Country***, a magical journey into the Dreaming that blends storytelling, shadow puppetry, dance and song, inviting children to follow the path of the Bogong Moth and uncover the secrets of Country.

Ursula Yovich steps into the spotlight with a world-premiere tribute to Nina Simone, channeling the High Priestess of Soul through songs of freedom, defiance and tenderness. International music highlights continue with South London trailblazer **Raf-Saperra** making his Sydney debut, while **Sisa-Sisa** presents a powerful double-bill of dance solos grounded in Indonesian culture, memory and resilience.

Moments of ceremony and reflection continue with ***WansolMoana Lunar Assembly***, a durational gathering led by Tongan Australian performance artist **Latai Taumoepeau** at the historic McIver's Ladies Baths, inviting women and children into a night of meditation, music and water-based ritual celebrating collective care and feminine sovereignty.

Audiences are also invited to take part in one of the festival's most expansive participatory works, ***asses.masses***, a seven-hour live multiplayer video game performance where collective decision-making shapes the action in real time.

Elsewhere, two of Sydney's most daring queer-run organisations, **Life Rites Funerals** and **Queer PowerPoint**, join forces for ***Death by Powerpoint***, a site-specific collaboration that transforms a working funeral home into an unforgettable performance space, blending insight, humour and heart to explore life, death and everything in between.

Sydney Festival runs until 25 January, continuing its legacy as a space where the city comes together to listen, question, celebrate and imagine together.

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NOTES TO EDITOR

- Sydney Festival runs 8-25 January 2026
- The 2026 program is the first under the direction of Festival Director Kris Nelson
- Visit sydneyfestival.org.au for more details

MEDIA CENTRE

Imagery and B-roll available [here](#)

MEDIA CONTACTS

Jadan Carroll | jadan@commonstate.co | 0405 818 120
Alice Lewinsky | alice@commonstate.co | 0403 837 351

MEDIA TICKETING

Kristina McNaulty | kristina@commonstate.co

About Sydney Festival: Sydney Festival is one of Australia's largest international arts festivals, with a stellar reputation for bold, inventive and intelligent programming. Its vibrancy reflects the confidence, creativity and vigour of one of the world's most beautiful cities.

The festival's mission is to deliver an exhilarating summer of art, drawing stories from Sydney's 65,000-year history through to its contemporary zeitgeist. Sydney Festival stages the world's best artists whilst nurturing its homegrown talent; many of Australia's most memorable theatrical productions have stemmed from its premieres and commissions. The buzz of summer wouldn't be the same without the festival's spectacular installations, immersive experiences and live events splashed across Sydney each January. In 2026 Sydney Festival will celebrate its 50th anniversary.