

VIVACIOUS IS ONE WORD THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU MEET artistic director and conductor, Michelle Leonard. Tenacious is another, as is evidenced by the 1,000km she travelled through outback NSW in five days last March to discover our next generation of men singers. As the Regional Arts Development Officer at Outback Arts, I was lucky enough to spend many hours on mostly straight and dusty outback roads discovering exactly what has driven the director of the Moorambilla: Festival of New Australian Music to unearth what many would see as a 'needle in a haystack' — a regional choir of boy sopranos.


Some might ask how a professional conductor might find herself trawling some of the most remote outback towns of NSW in search of singing boys. Maybe it's because she grew up in one of those towns, Coonamble, a small rural community 160km north of Dubbo. While music at that time was "a part of our normal existence," Michelle explains it was never something to consider professionally. "I didn't know that you could actually really make a living as a conductor. It was always something that everyone else could have done — but not if you came from Coonamble."

That was until at the age of nine, when her school was visited by a female conductor and an ensemble of eighty players through the DCAP disadvantaged areas program. It was this pivotal experience that began Michelle's journey toward an impressive career as the Assistant Conductor of the Sydney Children's Choir, and most recently with the National Children's Choir Gondwana Voices, who performed earlier this year at the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony in Melbourne. It is this experience also that has driven her to return to the far west community and offer similar opportunities, "It was the biggest eye opener in my life to think that you could actually choose to do that with your life".

Michelle is best known in the far west however, as artistic director of the Leichhardt Espresso Chorus, who last year visited on their 'Songs for the Outback' tour. She is also quietly infamous for the 'Songs in the Key of Bloke' spontaneous men's ensembles developed with enthusiastic community members, a case of beer, and minimal rehearsal time. Best known, that is, until September, when Coonamble hosted its first Moorambilla Festival of New Australian Music. It was an enormous community effort made possible through the dedication and generosity of volunteers who worked in everything from food preparation, to official welcome staff as festival 'angels' and on the Moorambilla Songs in the Key Commemorative Mural. The real show stealer, though, was the Regional Boys Choir and Sydney boys who, following their second residency camp in Barradine with Michelle and brilliant young composer Dan Walker, performed original compositions in front of a stunned audience. The highlight was a piece written for the boys and Coonamble Songs in the Key of Bloke choir who Leonard describes as, "a bit like an oncoming truck really, a Mac truck!"

February

6 February — 29 March

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Moorambilla

by ANGELA SIDOTI

Magic



Michelle Leonard & the boys from the bush


I watched gob smacked in classrooms all over the region as this incredible woman worked virtual magic with these kids. To some, it was a near impossible sounding project, to create a soprano boys choir in one of the most masculine regions in NSW; to Michelle it was completely normal, a challenge too tempting even. And it's this commitment that makes an enormous difference in people's lives. She explains, "I think that a lot of people who are older, when they look back on their life, the things that really changed the course of their life or the path that they chose was an individual person taking some time and making an effort to listen to them and to offer them an opportunity when they notice that they had the capacity at something. And that's all it really takes — it takes one person in a whole lifetime to plant that seed and if this does this for one person then it's been a wild success."

With the establishment of a Regional Boys Choir Scholarship fund and donations from Sydney and the regional community, the boys choir was a great success and one that Moorambilla organisers are looking forward to repeating in 2007, only with women and girls as the new theme. And its opportunities like these that Moorambilla will continue to create. As Michelle says, "It's vitally important, because it gives people the scope to think beyond where they are, and 'what else is possible?' and that's really valuable. I feel that's really valuable." ■


Angela Sidoti is the Regional Arts Development Officer for Outback Arts

*The Regional Boys Choir performs at Moorambilla.
Photo: Georgie Lampe*

10 — 11 February

 The Flowing Festival at Lake **JINDABYNE**. Dragon boat races, the Monaro Colonial Dancers, the Cooma Rock'n'Rollers, Kulture Break hip-hop performances, the Toe Sucking Cowgirls + more Tel 02 6450 5600

13 February

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