



## What is Union House Theatre?

Union House Theatre (or UHT for short) is the hub of extracurricular student theatre at the University of Melbourne (UniMelb) Parkville campus.

A department of University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU), UHT programs a range of theatrical activities like productions, workshops, professional pathways, mentorships, residencies, and more. UHT also supports over 20 autonomous student theatre groups as they produce their productions in the Guild and Union Theatres.

UHT fosters creativity, builds community, and nurtures confidence in our students who bravely create ambitious works on and off stage. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds, study (almost) everything available at University of Melbourne and have varying levels of experience. Our doors are open to anyone looking to get involved, and we ensure that everyone has fun, makes friends, and grows to their full creative potential!

In a nutshell, UHT helps our students:

- Be creative and express themselves
- Make friends and connections
- · Build skills and confidence
- Learn from industry professionals
- Put on a show

We acknowledge that we live, work and create theatre on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We extend that respect to all First Nations people, and the long and rich histories of storytelling, art and culture on this land. Sovereignty was never ceded.



# 2023: A year of 'firsts', Artistic Director's reflections

This year, as we settled into our new home in the Arts and Cultural Building, we celebrated some significant milestones and many 'firsts'.

We presented our first productions in the new theatres: Do Everything Now Before the World Ends in the Guild Theatre and Summer of the Seventeenth Doll in the Union Theatre. It was the first time many of our students sang on the new stage, danced with tinsel in the new Guild, rolled around in the rehearsal room like a caterpillar on the moon and many more fun-filled adventures.

Now that we have ticked off our list of 'firsts', ironed out the kinks and truly understood the space we're operating in, we look back to see how our students embraced theatre this year. With 33 shows plus hundreds of theatre activities, we can confidently say that we have warmed our new home.

What's not a 'first' for us is knowing that our students feel more confident than ever stepping into student theatre – a lot of them are now starting student theatre companies, putting on productions, taking on arts administration roles or continuing to study in the field. Some have even pivoted their careers entirely to become theatre makers. Whether it's making bold, groundbreaking theatre or just having fun and making friends, Union House Theatre is the place to be, and we say thanks for sharing the year with us!

#### **Xanthe Beesley**



Artistic Director/Theatre Coordinator, Union House Theatre



# Introducing Chookas the Chicken — The new UHT mascot

Right before a theatre Opening Night, all the cast and crew tell each other 'Chookas'. But what does this strange tradition mean?

In Australian theatre, we don't wish each other "good luck" because we are superstitious characters!

Back in the 1900s, "chookas" was exclaimed when a show was sold out meaning that the actors could afford a chicken dinner. This tradition has carried on to present times, and now it simply means 'have an amazing season'.

And thus, our ultra-amazing purple chicken Chookas was born. They are our resident brand ambassador and their main job is to dance, cluck and attend student theatre shows, festivals, and all our events to give out good vibes and wish all our students "Chookas!"

"Cluck. Cluck. CLUCK. CLUCK. CHOOKAS! Student Theatre. Cluck cluck. Amazing! Clu-cluck CHOOKAS. GREAT THEATRE. Cluck cluccek. LOVE. CHOOKAS!"

- Chookas



## Union House Theatre 2023 — At a Glance



**33**Student Theatre
Productions



13 New Works



23 Student Theatre Groups



12,192 Audience members



1,643 Cast, Crew & Creatives



19 Staff & Mentors





Mirror balls used in student theatre shows







Students in our inaugural design collective



23
Theatre reviews 'The Dialog'

UNION HOUSE THEATRE — Year in Review 2023

## **Student Impact**

The Arts & Cultural Building was buzzing this year with student activity. Whether it was putting on ambitious, bold works in the Union & Guild theatres, taking over the foyer spaces with show decorations or activating the building with promenade performances, our students took complete ownership of the new space and transformed it into a theatrical wonderland.

We welcomed a large number of new and returning faces to our workshops, mentorship opportunities, writer in residence programs, intensives and theatre labs, everyone hungry to learn and express their creative selves.

Our student theatre program consisting of thirty-three shows welcomed over 12,000 patrons into our venues — an indicator that we are rising strong from post-pandemic blues and a change of location. Moreover, this year we saw UHT work alongside many UMSU departments, the University of Melbourne Performing Arts department, and external theatre organisations. We forged strong partnerships, worked collaboratively and achieved a singular mission — to develop our students' artistic practice, engage new and returning students, and invest in their creative wellbeing.

UHT programmed two productions — *Do Everything Now Before the World Ends*, a devised piece in the Guild Theatre, and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in the Union Theatre. There was a significant amount of interest in auditions and intensives this year for our UHT productions and almost all of our workshops in 2023 sold out! We received wonderful comments from the students about our diverse offerings and engagement initiatives.

Additionally, the Peer Mentor program was a major hit, as a broad range of students participated in low-pressure (and fun) theatre exercises and showings. We started a content creation team to have student voices in UHT's marketing, developed a formal theatre volunteer pool program and kicked off a new design collective.



## **Student Theatre Groups**

Corpus Machina Collective

**Element Theatre Company** 

Flare Dance Ensemble

Floor Work

Four Letter Word Theatre

Intercollegiate Activities Council – ICAC

International House Theatre Group

Medleys - Med Revue

Melbourne University Chinese Theatre Group – CTG

Melbourne University Comedy Revue Board - MUDCRABS

Melbourne University Law Revue

Melbourne University Shakespeare Company – MUSC

Newman College Theatre Group

Ormond College Drama Club

Queen's College Music and Drama Society – QC MADS

Short Straw Theatre Company

St Hilda's College Drama Society

Trinity College Dramatic Society

**University College Theatre Company** 

University of Melbourne Music Theatre Association - UMMTA

# Honorary Theatre Groups — Affiliated with Clubs & Societies

Melbourne University Chinese Music Group - CMG

Melbourne University Sri Lankan Students' Association – MUSLSA

**UMSU International** 

With each production, the student theatre groups brought about a force of creativity, ambition and artistic sensitivity to the space. Across 2023, these student theatre groups put on 31 shows in the Union and Guild Theatres.

"This year, I have really connected with the value of student theatre. From the two-hander of Eleven Eleven Theatre's debut show to the twenty-strong ensemble of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, the common goal has been sharing the love of theatre within the team and to the audience. The beauty of student theatre is having a space to learn, explore, mentor and connect with incredibly creative and passionate people. My highlight was directing *The Drowsy Chaperone*, the most rewarding opportunity to witness the growth and talent of performers and creatives. There is no more special feeling than seeing people light up when their work hits the stage, sometimes for the first time ever."

Emma Parfitt

QCMADS and Eleven Eleven Theatre





# **Union House Theatre Program '23**

- SummerFest
- Writer in Residence Program
- Artist in Residence Program
- Mentorships
- Workshops
- Peer Mentor Program
- Sound Explorations
   Workshop –
   UHT X George Paton
   Gallery
- WinterFest
- · Volunteer Program

- Design Collective
- Theatre Archive Project
- Theatre and Dance Productions
- Awards Night & End of Year Party

# **Creative Workshops**

UHT offers a diverse and exciting program of workshops that build creative, backstage and administration skills.

- Acting Essentials
- Vocal Power and Presence
- Directing for Theatre

- · Prop Making
- Meaning and Movement
- Performance Photography
- Body Mind Connect: Dance and Wellbeing
- Site-Responsive Theatre Making Lab

# **Backstage Workshops**

- The QLab Lab
- Stage Management
- Costume & Makeup Design
- Producing Essentials

- Lighting 101
- Production Management 101
- Sound 101
- Power Tools for Theatre





## **UHT Productions**

# Do Everything Now Before the World Ends

Do Everything Now Before the World Ends was an original, devised performance work that drew on theatre and dance forms to construct a makeshift world out of a unique assemblage of people and ideas — the students' experiences and explorations of where they're at right now — as they grapple with the possibility of the world ending, and a new one beginning, all at once. Many of these students were new to performing, and this project marked their first time collaborating on a devised work.

The project started life as a response to the unrelenting urgency of life right now – wondering what it feels like to be a young person today, amidst the pressure of the world coming down on them, while simultaneously confronting a totally unfathomable ending (decaying, exploding, imploding, overheating), and doing your best to conjure a beginning.

With such a challenging and multi-faceted topic underpinning the process, the dynamic cast met the material with generosity, curiosity and humour to create UHT's first production in the new Guild Theatre. Eight young people gathered in unfamiliar terrain to connect through conversations, meetings, fever dreams, actions, anger, struggle, self-care, academic research, motivational quotes, sustenance, touch, mindfulness... by looking back, looking ahead, looking into a crystal ball, looking "up there" into an infinite universe, running, hiding, greeting and eating, and finally, dancing.

"Being a part of Union House Theatre has been the highlight of my University experience. My only regret is that I joined in my final semester, I wish I'd done it earlier. I got more out of being in *Do Everything Now Before the World Ends* (DEN) than any of my course subjects. The professionalism and work the UHT team put in to provide such an enriching experience is amazing and I was truly blown away. I finally felt like I had a community at university and the friendships I formed in DEN are so special. I am also blown away by the fact that UHT is free for students. I have done short acting classes before that cost a fortune and I got more out of DEN than I did from any of those classes. The directors made me feel so supported and created such a safe space to express myself and explore with my peers. I had so much fun and will be forever grateful for this invaluable resource UMSU provides."

– Pippa Arton-Powell Ensemble

## **Ensemble**

**Pippa Arton-Powell** 

Simon Brownjohn

**Sonya Chong** 

**Aadityaa Gupta** 

**Abigail Kargbo** 

**Saraf Tatinee** 

Sophia Zikic

Simin Dolatkhah



Directors and Choreographers -**Xanthe Beesley and Caroline Meaden** 

Lighting Designer - Richard Vabre

Costume Designer - Natalie Gillis

Set Designer - Emily Collett

Sound Designer - Sharyn Brand

Stage Manager – **Noelle Li** 

Production Manager – Connor Ross

Set Realisation - Allen Laverty

Head Technician - Clynton Jones

Marketing – Simran Giria

Dramaturgy Consultation -

**Liv Satchell** 

Assistant Set Designer -

Louisa Fitzgerald

Assistant Stage Manager –

**Perry Feder** 

Costume Assistant –

**Linh Phan** 

Dramaturgy Mentee -

**Alexia Shaw** 

Sound Design Mentee/ Operator -

**Kit Nicholson** 

Lighting Mentee -

**Nguyen Thanh Long** 

Front of House Manager -

**Annese Lingafelter** 

Poster Image Photography -**Alice Hutchinson** 



### **Summer of the Seventeenth Doll**

In Semester 2, UHT presented *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* by Ray Lawler in the new Union Theatre.

The old Union Theatre was built in the 1930s and from those early days it housed a vibrant community of student artists. In 1953, the Union Theatre Repertory Company (URTC) became resident in the Union Theatre and worked beside students using the venues in the non-Semester time to present impressive seasons of work, including the inaugural performance of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Throughout the proceeding decades, many companies — students and community alike — used this space to make new works, produce existing plays and share with audiences the love of the performing arts. The venue is synonymous with burgeoning creativity, and has a mile long rollcall of artists, designers, makers, managers and writers to match.

The Union Theatre in the Arts & Cultural Building is a new venue with an old history and with this production we marked a special occasion – UHT's first presentation in this version of the theatre. It was important to offer a nod to the venue's significance, a chance to present a play that started life in the old Union Theatre, and pull together a team that reflects UHT's recent history in student theatre. We were delighted to invite Petra Kalive as our guest director (Petra was the Artistic Director of Union House Theatre 2015 – 2019 when the plans for this venue were initially in the making).

Alumni actors (some of whom got their first taste of theatre here on campus) shared the stage with current students, while alumni designers and a team of UHT technicians worked alongside our student crew. This intergenerational practice exchange fostered learning and a chance for our students to make long-term connections with industry professionals.

"The ability to direct this production at this time in this brand-new Union Theatre with professionals and students is personally incredibly humbling. I began my career in student theatre, forging my path, like so many others before and since. Student theatre has an impressive legacy in this country and the Managers and Artistic Directors of the Union (and Guild) Theatres, have provided opportunities, given voice to, and shaped so many artists' lives... The Union Theatre and its programs have an indelible impact on our Australian theatre culture."

- Petra Kalive





#### **Creatives and Crew**

Producer & Movement Director – **Xanthe Beesley** 

Director - Petra Kalive

Assistant Director - Charlotte Rogers

Intimacy Coordinator – Margot Fenley

Text and Vocal Coach – Amy Hume

Lighting Designer – Richard Vabre

Costume Designer - Natalie Gillis

Set Designer – **Brynna Lowen** 

Sound Designer – Rachel Lewindon

Stage Manager – Annese Lingafelter

Stage Manager: Technical Rehearsals – **Christa Jonathan** 

Production Manager - Connor Ross

Set Realisation - Allen Laverty

Head Technician - Clynton Jones

Marketing – **Simran Giria** 

Lighting Mentee & Operator – Ishana Girish

Sound Mentee & Operator – **Amy Todd** 

Costume Mentee – **Bridie Turner** 

Set Design & Construction Mentee – Maya Anderson, Lauren Luchs, Leanne Kong

Production Management Mentee – Felicity Bayne

Marketing & Producer Mentee – **Elizabeth Victoria Pardallis** 

Publicity Assistant - Weiying (Irene) Lu

Cover for Olive – **Sophie Lampel** 

Poster Image Photography – **Alice Hutchinson** 



### **UHT Peer Mentors**

Throughout 2023, UHT's Peer Mentors, Dominic Weintraub and Sodi Murphy-Shrives, continued their work on campus, designing and delivering a range of activities to engage new students in student theatre.

Their program sought to 'spread the word' about student theatre and UHT's offerings and create low-pressure engagement opportunities for folks with lots of passion and very little time. Over the year, Dominic and Sodi's activities spanned: performance making projects, weekly workshops, dance parties, community building events, one-on-one mentorships, a UHT award, as well as a 'free hot choccy' stand on Monash Road. These projects, varying in their approach and energy, all facilitated countless interesting conversations, new connections, impactful learnings, and memorable experiences. Most excitingly, many of the students worked with throughout the year are still making theatre. Some are starting to work together, some are planning student shows for next year, some are producing shows off-campus, and some are starting their own companies.

"Dom and Sodi are a gift to the UniMelb theatre community—I learnt oodles about devising theatre and made lasting friendships through their generative, engaged, and relentlessly kind mentorship. Their support and genuine belief in their mentees enabled me to give creating work for Mudfest a crack, which became a highlight of the year for me. I would not have had the confidence to put on independent work if not for Dom and Sodi and the beautiful creative community they seed wherever they go!"

- Peer Mentor program participant

# The Dialog — The home of student theatre reviews

With a team of thirteen and led by editor Oscar Lidgerwood, *The Dialog* reviewed a massive season of student productions, turning out twenty-four UHT student theatre reviews as well as 3 external show reviews across the year.

This year saw a revamp in *The Dialog*, as they expanded from a WordPress site to creating their own Instagram page, as well as establishing The Dialog Spotlight wherein they interviewed theatre companies and industry artists. With Instagram, The Dialog marketed their publications to a much wider audience than previously, while also helping bring the student theatre community closer together. Their Spotlight articles helped extend their reach beyond the University with an array of interviews and articles about artistic practice in industry. In their Spotlight interview with Short Straw Theatre Company, they discussed the process of starting up a student theatre company, and in their interview with Victorian College of the Arts grad Benjamin Nichol, they talked about a career in the theatre industry, to give readers a chance to see the possibilities of what could lie beyond in a career in theatre.

Continuing into 2024, *The Dialog* team wishes to continue to grow and nurture the brilliant community that has been established on campus.



## **Student Engagement Initiatives**

## **UHT Volunteering Pool**

Responding to the needs of our student theatre community and devising a way for UniMelb students to engage with our program and develop new skills, we formed our first ever formal UHT Volunteering Pool. In our first callout, we received a staggering response of fifty-eight applications! These students are either interested in theatre or want to learn more about it before they get artistically involved. Through this program, we are developing a community of volunteers (vollies) who help with front of house duties, marketing projects and basic administrative tasks. Our vollies have already found new friends through this program, and have developed skills that make them employable, all while getting a taste of theatre on campus.

### The design collective

The idea for a Design Collective came from our set designer community who have a desire to learn more, do more and find a group of like-minded people. These budding designers have grappled with questions about becoming a part of the Melbourne theatre industry and want to learn the skills they need to be a professional.

#### **Content creation team**

Students are the heart, soul — and face, of theatre on campus. The 'content creation team' is an initiative where students come together to brainstorm, film and edit Instagram reels wherein they showcase their theatrical journey at UHT, as well as amplify the voices of our student theatre groups. Be it rummaging through the UHT costume store to find a perfect outfit for a date, or making a friend in UHT 'Wes Anderson' style, our students' creativity knows no bounds and has helped to expand our social media reach and share student creativity!



## **Writer in Residence Program**

The Writer in Residence program was an opportunity for 12 emerging writers to work with a professional playwright over 6 months, developing their unique style and voice as writers of new works for stage.

Students participated in workshops and one-on-one sessions with writer and director Benjamin Nichol. Over three intellectually stimulating and creative months, our student writers took the important first steps of testing and sharing their words in a supportive environment. Many of the works incubated in this program will go on to have future development opportunities at La Mama Explorations, with Student Theatre Groups and in UMSU festivals such as Tastings or MudFest.

"My experience as a Writer in Residence at UHT was a universally positive one. The students approached our lessons with curiosity, eagerness and tenacity which meant they were a joy to work with. They developed a wonderful collection of short writing pieces across a variety of genres that showed a deep connection to the here and now of Melbourne — several of whom have stayed in touch with me, and I am aware have continued to develop these pieces into larger productions. Not only this but in teaching them, I was allowed the chance to interrogate and learn from my own creative practice; to consider and revitalise the trajectory of my own artistry."

#### - Ben Nichol

Writer in Residence, 2023



2023 was packed full of technical and logistical problem solving as UHT's production team helped to realise the creative ideas of a myriad of artists staging impressive shows.

There were some great challenges: can we get more mirror balls than audience members into this venue? Can we get the whole audience on stage behind the curtain? Can we make this set piece fall over easily but only when we want it to...?

It was the year of rostra and flats, with some big sets going in to both the Guild and Union theatres. Some shows pushed the limits of what the lighting and sound systems can do, and there were production meetings that pushed the limits of how many bad jokes from the UHT production team a student theatre group can handle.

In 2023 we expanded our productions into the many pockets of the Arts & Cultural building and further afield to Market Hall, and we look forward to supporting more theatrical happenings in new places in 2024 — along with plenty more creative challenges to come.

"The fortnightly production meetings and workshopping processes with the UHT staff were invaluable, and our entire production team felt very well equipped to tackle what could have been quite a complicated show."

- Student theatre group in 2023



# Mentorship

Supporting, advising and advocating for students continues to be a significant focus of UHT's annual activities and programs.

Formal and informal mentoring opportunities exist at every level of the of organisation. Whether students are just starting out, trying something new or looking to take their first steps into the industry — our experienced staff were able to guide, challenge and celebrate each step of the way. As well as a full program of mentoring activities within UHT, we also drew on a wealth of connections to industry professionals from various disciplines to continue to empower students as they progress on their creative journey.

Mentorships available within UHT:

- Directing
- Stage Management
- Production Management
- Marketing and Publicity
- Technical (Sound / Light)
- Set Building and Design

"This was my first semester and my first time living in a different country. As an international student, it felt exciting and scary as well. I tried to participate in many activities, hoping for exciting experiences and new connections. Among many things that I tried, I felt most welcomed and belonged to UHT. I learned knowledge and skills of different aspects of producing and met people who share a similar enthusiasm for theatre with me in workshops organized by UHT... I feel more confident than ever. UHT helped me to land smoothly to a new chapter of my life. I am genuinely happy and grateful to meet all the amazing people in the UHT and be a part of it."

Weiying LuCurrent student



# **Theatre Archive Project**

According to the 2017 Significance
Assessment of the UMSU archive, the MUST
(Melbourne University Student Theatre)
database is an important contributor to the
social significance of the archive as it is
currently the only publicly accessible aspect
of the UMSU Archive.

With support from the University of Melbourne Theatre Board, UHT maintains an archive of student theatre materials. The aim is to develop a streamlined system for archive materials, reinvigorate the MUST database, and find engagement and activation strategies to celebrate the rich theatre history on campus. Arabella Frahn-Starkie was the archive intern with UHT for 2023 and currently studies Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation course at University of Melbourne and has a specialised interest in the preservation and archiving of live performance.

"During my internship I devised a proposal and action plan for the re-organisation and cataloguing of the UMSU archive. The main goals were to increase space for ongoing collection, create a more intuitive and accessible order for research purposes, and improve the environmental storage conditions for archived materials.

Another key project I worked on was the improvement of the MUST Database website, engaging with web developers to redesign the website using university wide web page templates. This project is still in the development phase as it is complex and large-scale. The redevelopment of this website is an important and viable project of significance to the future research and curation capabilities of the Union House Theatre Archive."

#### – Arabella Frahn-Starkie

**UHT Archive Intern** 







t. Hil<mark>da's *Addams Family*, photo by David E</mark>



### **UHT Staff**

Thank you to everyone in our community for your support in 2023.

Artistic Director / Theatre Coordinator - Xanthe Beesley

Production Coordinator - Connor Ross

Head Technician – Clynton Jones

Marketing & Development Officer - Simran Giria

Stage Carpenter – Allen Laverty

Also pictured - Annese Lingafelter, 2023 UHT casual

"UHT staff are so supportive, generous, friendly and ready to support students with any level of production experience."

"The support and mentorship from UHT staff is something you wouldn't get anywhere else and is invaluable to putting on a student theatre show."

"UHT staff always go out of their way to ensure that each show is well supported."

- Student Theatre Groups in 2023

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