

STAGE

Stars lash 'flawed' Melbourne Uni theatre restructure

Staff and students are up in arms about a restructure at Melbourne University's beloved Union House Theatre, where some of the country's brightest names got their start.

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Stars schooled on the boards of the world-renowned Melbourne University Union House Theatre have lined up to slam a proposed restructure of the creative crucible that would lead to five redundancies and their replacement with more junior staff to save cash.

Under [controversial changes](#) to the 75-year-old cultural pillar (read [the full proposal here](#)), the leading paid roles of artistic director, cultural services manager, head technician, production

positions. While overall funding of about \$500,000 a year and one existing role would be maintained, the onus will be on student theatre groups to source their own creative guidance from the industry on a case-by-case basis.

Leading playwrights and actors who got their start on the Parkville stage include Cate Blanchett, Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer, Lally Katz and Declan Greene.

Max Gillies, who until recently served on the university's advisory Theatre Board after a successful five-production stint as a student in the 1960s, says the changes are "draconian".

"On the face of it, it's terrible," he told *Crikey*. "I would really like to see the rationale ... those positions there have been critical to a very lively, active, creative scene for decades. That theatre has been unique."

The loss of a creative director is of particular concern, Gillies says, "given the state of campus life these days". "You need a focus and energy centre and some expertise. The level of ambition of the productions there is quite beyond what you'd have if you had an empty theatre and a booking manager," he said.

UHT hosts two major productions a year, in addition to over 30 smaller plays from individual student theatre groups. Highlights this year included a [commission of 1938](#), a groundbreaking opera that involved Aboriginal,

campus-based thespian hub.

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Under the restructure, respected artistic director Tom Gutteridge and cultural services manager Josephine Byrt will be given their marching orders. Gutteridge previously held the same position at WA's prestigious state theatre company Black Swan. Byrt told *Crikey* the "unbelievable" plan will reduce output by 75% because of a lack of professional guidance.

"This is motivated by ideology, but it's completely misplaced. I don't think they understand that we already do what they're proposing," she said.

The [broad plan](#) shifts UHT, the George Paton Gallery and the Rowden White Library from the union's private services arm MUSUL to the student-controlled UMSU. Together the "student-facing" services will form an Arts, Library & Entertainment "cluster". It says the edict was driven by a 2011 MUSUL decision to dispense with "the provision of non-commercial student-facing services or student engagement activities." In its new UMSU home, UHT funds previously spent on salaries will now be sent directly to student theatre groups.

reviews at Melbourne and Monash universities, says what made the theatre work during his glory days in the 1970s was a worldly creative guru at the centre of the organisation.

“The heart of UHT was a creative director. They were there to teach and to train and were occasionally as a source of advice ... but their main role to inspire people. Bureaucrats don’t do that,” Vizard told *Crikey*.

Vizard recalls legendary director David Kendall acting as a mentor for hundreds of artsy hopefuls. “It wasn’t about the seats and it wasn’t about the ticketing or the lighting – even though that was important – it was about that creative vision,” he said.

“What they have proposed is fundamentally flawed because they don’t understand the way in which students work. A lot of students won’t have the get up and go without those key creative people, who also provide the creative memory between different productions.

“It provides no incentive or inspiration for people to get involved in student productions. David would actually conduct classes ... who will do the teaching and say ‘why don’t you do this?’. Who’s going to take a kid aside, like I was, and tell them to have a crack? None of that is dealt with when you’ve got an ad-hoc arrangement.”

Eric Gardiner, one of two incoming arts officers for 2013, says student office bearers “had gone

“The restructure has been justified as working towards the interests of greater student engagement ... but it demonstrates a complete lack of awareness of the realities of student theatre at Melbourne Uni,” he said. “It’s entirely counter-productive to student engagement to replace permanent staff with someone in an advisory capacity ... it doesn’t reflect student interests because we haven’t been consulted.”

Outgoing UMSU president Mark Kettle defends the staff cuts and says they are really about student control of student affairs.

“These shouldn’t be seen as cuts,” he said. “We’ve had some great feedback to alter the proposal. I don’t think it’s constructive to take an oppositional stance; the changes weren’t intended to be taken that way.

“There has been a misrepresentation of the proposed changes which are currently in consultation ... it was made clear at the start that the proposal is open to suggestion for alternative models.”

A consultation process seeking input from affected groups is running until November 30. A student meeting will be held on Wednesday at 10am and is expected to be fiery.

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[Gavin Moodie](#)**[November 13, 2012 at 8:16 pm](#)**

Sigh: such happy memories producing and acting in plays in the Union Theatre and upstairs in the rather smaller Guild Theatre!

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