

This diva's all business

Soprano Tania de Jong wants to use the arts to unlock creativity in the workplace, writes **Lorna Edwards**

21 March 2009 WEST WEEKEND MAGAZINE 25

Tania de Jong admits one of the perils of being a self-described “diva entrepreneur” is putting a few noses out of joint in the arts world. The Melbourne-based opera singer unapologetically mixes arts and business with equal passion, something that is still a taboo for performers who subscribe to the starving-artist model of creative purity.

“There are parts of the arts industry over the years that I haven’t found supportive because I’ve been entrepreneurial and I put myself out there,” she says. But de Jong believes that, now more than ever, artists need to come out of their concert halls and theatres and contribute to society in new ways to survive.

“I think there is a lot of snobbery and that by holding itself up in some elitist notions, the arts industry doesn’t allow its full potential,” she says. “Many artists and performers could have a living — maybe not singing all the major opera houses or playing in the big orchestras — but they can work with organisations and make a huge difference to people’s lives by bringing their creativity into other forums.”

De Jong, who is currently touring WA with her musical theatre group Pot-Pourri, certainly practises what she preaches.

Her latest venture is Creativity Australia, a program for employers designed to unlock the creativity of their staff and encourage teamwork through workplace choirs and other artistic endeavours. Her agenda is not just to get employees singing but to activate the creative part of their brain which gets neglected in many white-collar jobs.

“The right side of our brains has really been ignored for a long time,” she says. “I’ve always believed that creativity is at least as important as numeracy and literacy, and essentially as human beings we’re all innately creative. We’re born creative.”

She is unfazed about launching the project in such grim economic times, believing employers now shedding staff have a greater need to address low morale and lost productivity among their remaining workers.

She cites evidence showing that each year in Australia, 30 million work days are lost due to absenteeism, with its cost reaching more than \$10 billion. The psychological power of singing in numbers has come to the fore through the heart-warming Choir of Hard Knocks, she says.

The latest Creativity Australia program follows on from de Jong’s The Song Room initiative, which has helped 150,000 disadvantaged children discover the joy of music.

“What we are doing is focusing on nurturing the attributes of human beings that set them apart from machines,” she says. “Our vision is to unlock the innate creativity present in all human beings.” Disgruntled or depressed employees who have lost touch with their creativity will become more personally fulfilled — and equally more productive to their companies — if they tap into it, she says.

De Jong also runs an entertainment company called Music Theatre Australia, which represents about 2000 acts, and she holds the rare distinction among performers of having a law degree, which has proved beneficial in negotiating contracts.

But it is singing that remains her greatest passion. She has been performing with Pot-Pourri along with her partner, baritone Jonathon Morton, and two other singers and a pianist for 22 years. Their gigs have ranged from performing a musical history of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch’s life at her birthday party, with Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch on stage, to singing personalised lyrics for corporate gatherings, such as a gynaecologists’ convention (“Supercalifragilistic . . . endometriosis”). The group has travelled overseas more than 40 times to perform.

“Singing for me is like meditation,” she says. “I don’t consider it work, I consider it a privilege.”

Her belief in the transformative power of music and creativity was the drive behind The Song Room, a program she founded a decade ago to create arts programs for disadvantaged children. The Song Room sends performers with teaching skills into schools without specialist music programs and helps them to create them.

De Jong is immensely proud of the project, which has 15 full-time staff and 80 performers teaching nationally. “A lot of the kids we have reached are very disenfranchised and don’t want to come to school, but once these programs start it does capture their hearts and their minds and they want to learn in other subjects,” she says. Last year, she was honoured with an Order of Australia award.



Yet despite her interest in charitable causes for children, de Jong laments she has never had time to have any of her own. “It’s been one of the conundrums of my life, to be honest. I love children but I don’t know how I could do everything I do and have children. Maybe I can make more of a difference doing what I am doing.”

In her early 40s, de Jong has no plans to lighten her frenetic business and performing schedule that fills around 90 hours of her week. With Morton and their pet poodle, Jet, she still lives in the Melbourne suburb where she grew up and remains very close to her parents, who inspired her love of music.

“I was the kid who said my favourite pop group was Beethoven.”

Pot-Pourri performs at His Majesty’s Theatre on Wednesday at 10.30am, the Moora Performing Arts Centre on Wednesday at 7.30pm and the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre on Thursday at 7.30pm. Also visit www.creativityaustralia.org.au