

Unfortunately, Sydney has become a real showstopper

**Paul
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With the premiere of knockout show Tina at the Theatre Royal this week, people might think all is well with Sydney's theatreland.

Unfortunately, they would be wrong. The premiere celebrating Tina Turner's epic talent is the exception rather than the rule for our city.

Sydney has a venues famine. We are missing out on blockbuster shows as a result. Even worse, we are losing them to Melbourne.

For example, *& Juliet*, the new musical breaking box office records

on Broadway, won't even make it to Sydney from Melbourne and will instead head to Singapore.

There is a reason Melbourne gets the big shows and Sydney misses out.

Melbourne has four large commercial theatres in its city centre.

Sydney has three – the Capitol in Haymarket, the Lyric at the Star complex and the Theatre Royal in King St, which at 1100 seats, is still considered too small for blockbuster productions.

Melbourne's surfeit of theatres means it can do the double act of concurrently staging an eclectic clutch of popular revivals as well as big show premieres.

It is good that NSW Arts Minister John Graham has recognised the problem and has set an ambitious goal for Sydney to have the equivalent of its own West End

theatre district. We wish him luck with that.

In the meantime, Sydney theatre producers need to combine the skills of a number cruncher and a crystal ball gazer to complement their core talents as impresarios.

A number cruncher to find a theatre with sufficient seats in Sydney to host the shows that are stunning audiences on Broadway and in the West End and a crystal ball gazer to work out what year, if ever, this might become possible.

Wearing his number cruncher hat, leading Australian producer Michael Cassel can tell you how many Hamilton ticket-holders were left disappointed when the pandemic locked down our theatres and the rest of society.

And by the time Covid was over, no suitable theatre was available to

reopen the show. A missed opportunity on that scale could break a producer's heart.

Having set his ambitious goal of a West End theatre district, Mr Graham is no doubt aware of how hard it will be to achieve. Apart from Tina, Sydney's track record for premieres is poor.

A consultant report to the Perrottet government outlined the size of the problem. Sydney's stage shortage has left producers waiting, on average, 5.6 years to premiere shows after their opening elsewhere in the world.

In Melbourne, it is just 3.7 years. It found Sydney needs a 1700 to 2000-seat lyric theatre, the equivalent of another Capitol Theatre.

So what is the quickest way to end Sydney's venue shortage?

The obvious solution is the Entertainment Quarter in Moore

Park, which could have a new theatre of the size and scale that Sydney needs, and in the perfect location.

This could also be perfect timing. EQ is inching towards long-term leasing arrangements for the site.

The current leaseholders – Mark Carnegie, Katie Page, Gerry Harvey and John Singleton – are close to deciding what they want as the central features of a redeveloped precinct.

But they first need certainty from the government on leasing arrangements for the former Showground site.

Let's hope the plans for EQ ultimately include a theatre of the size and capability that Sydney needs and that the government opens a path for this to happen.

Paul Nicolaou is executive director of Business Sydney