



Elanor Huntington speaking at TEDxSydney 2017.



# Exit stage right

**When it comes to live events and conferences delegates are asking for greater engagement, and that often falls on the speakers to deliver. But do organisers focus enough on curating their content, asks Sheridan Randall.**

'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'. That well-worn quote from *As You Like It* applies to the events world as well, as everyone who gets up on that stage, whether they are a keynote speaker, MC or simply there to welcome the delegates, is part of the show.

"With a conference it's one take, we don't get another shot at it," says Barry McLeod, event director at CMA. As an MC, host and event facilitator with more than 20 years' experience, McLeod also knows both sides of

the coin better than anyone that a live event or conference is "a form of theatre".

"When you have a good conference organiser that has liaised with the speakers and themed it properly then it is gold," he says. "The thing is it doesn't 'just happen'. You can't say 'this is the theme just do it'. You've got to discuss it with them to get the right outcome."

Getting that outcome can be a challenge for organisers who are time poor and have to liaise with multiple touch points who are behind the event.

"Sometimes with the amount of people involved in conference committees it can get quite muddled on who to bring in," he says. "For an organiser to drive that through, it is quite a skill set."

"There is no point having a list of speakers all talking about the same thing. A good organiser, along with a conference committee, will make sure it follows a chronological order that keeps it interesting and flowing. Know the key points you want delegates to take away from the conference

they are trying to remember what they have to say. The audience is comforted by the fact that they are speaking to them rather than just reading from a card."

However, Kernebone says that "their talk is their talk.. nobody is writing it for them... In terms of shaping their content our job as curators is to help them craft their message as best as possible". It's not just the speakers that get coached for the night, everyone who steps on that stage including the presenters goes through a rehearsal process.

"Everyone needs to rehearse," she says. "It might be that you get coaching or do an improve workshop, and acting workshops are great for this. There are all these other ways of doing it that can give you experience of what it is like to be in front of an audience. It doesn't just have to be the traditional speaker coach that tells you how to stand, and where to put your hands."

One organisation that has helped more than its fair share of Australians develop their ability to perform in front of an audience is the National Institute of Dramatic (NIDA). The likes of Cate Blanchett, Toni Collette and Mel Gibson have seen their performing skills sharpened at NIDA, but plenty of lesser known Aussies have benefited from the same calibre of training through its Corporate division.

"We use techniques to support people to be stage ready like we would with actors to get them 'stage' ready for any kind of event or public speaking forum," says Vanessa White, head of NIDA Corporate.

"We have been involved with conferences almost from inception delivering seminars and keynotes supporting the objectives of

event managers and conference organisers to engage people through practical workshops, where people actually walk away having learnt something, but also where then outcome is met – whether it is networking or getting them to engage with something."

A recent example was the Semi Permanent Sydney event this year, where NIDA Corporate held a series workshops for attendees.

"Part of our design process involves us asking organisers 'what do you want your audience to do, think or feel differently?' And we basically tailor the seminar to what that objective is," she says.

"We look to support the conference and its themes, and the audience. We really want to answer that question, 'what's in it for me?'"

The facilitators are often NIDA alumni and use the same techniques they learnt as students but framed in a way that makes sense for someone outside of the entertainment world.

"People understand NIDA and the role we have played in the performing arts realm, and that connection is also clearly made with NIDA Corporate," she says. "You are teaching performers to get up and feel confident on stage and feel that it the first they have done this naturally. But behind that is a lot of training and support."

"We talk frequently about what it means to have presence and gravitas which is a common thing people feel is a natural ability. But actually for many it's a trained ability. You can learn these techniques."

Curating the right line-up for an event or conference is more critical to the outcome than ever, which brings us back to Bill Shakespeare. To avoid having an event become a 'tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing', it pays to put in the effort. **CTM**