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idea

Big-noters

Tania de Jong wants workplaces to once again be places of creativity and humanity – and she's achieving it through the power of song. Story: Jenny Brown

Some unlikely five-star hotel visitors ascend the escalators at The Sofitel in Collins St and ask for directions to “the choir?” Dave, in a cowboy hat, has few teeth, and Brett, with a bandage around his wrist, are from a Salvation Army men’s shelter and they’re here to sing. They came last week and say “it was great”.

On the open mezzanine terrace they join 30 members of the Chinese Many Moon Choir and other people whose tram fare from the Collingwood and Fitzroy Housing Commission flats have been subsidised.

Then, into the scene drift “the suits”: people such as Allan’s Music CEO John Helme and Peter Kronborg, chairman of

a strategic leadership company. Catherine Brewster, Sofitel’s training manager, leads in other hotel employees “people from finance, room service and the whole HR department”. Nathalie Mbala, a management trainee with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, is another who has come to sing her heart out for an hour or so.

This unlikely gathering which eventually adds up to 70 people is put through some breathing and voice exercises by conductor Shaun Islip. “Two ... three ... four ... hold ... two ... three ... four.”

The motley crew that makes up Melbourne Sings then open up into a performance that is very quickly so cohesively choral that it draws the odd interested onlooker from the lobby.

They’re good and they’ve only been practising for a few weeks.

The collective voice grows louder and so does the babble of mirth that punctuates the song list. “Shh ... shh ... shh...” says the conductor, calling for order among all those shining faces and suddenly upright, energetic bodies. He repeats himself in Chinese.

Courtesy of the now-famous Choir of Hard Knocks, the community choir is a familiar format. But because this one is so socially stratified, it is a very different beast, according to the woman who provided the platform, Melbourne soprano and entrepreneur Tania de Jong.

After performing for many years in the group Pot-Pourri, which often led her into the corporate world, Tania set

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Tania's goal is to reinvigorate people's creativity, in projects such as the one at the Sofitel hotel in Melbourne (opposite page). Photos: JOHN WOULDSTRA, RODGER CUMMINS / FAIRFAX PHOTOS

up other socially enfranchising endeavours such as The Song Room, which has worked with 150,000 disadvantaged children.

Last year the peripatetic Ms de Jong started a not-for-profit business called Creativity Australia which she hopes is going to give expression to many disparate groups who for one reason or another are suffering from what she identifies as creativity deprivation.

"Creativity is educated out of us," she says, "so Creativity Australia's initiatives are about reinvigorating the right brain which is everyone's creative potential and, hopefully, our essential humanity.

"Only three out of four Australian children have access to music in schools, and in the workplace especially everyone has become so focused on results and so stressed and squashed into their job descriptions and their computer screens that they don't feel their voices are being heard and they are quite depressed. Workplace depression is a very well-documented phenomenon."

As part of her quest "to bring wellbeing into the workplace and to create community by bridging social capital" – for instance, by bringing the executives and the socially marginalised together to

sing from the same songsheet – Tania is hoping to increase general levels of social wellbeing.

The Melbourne Sings choir, which is practising to perform every few months at major events, is just one of the artistic endeavours in the organisation's diverse creative programming.

"We're not about making great singers," Tania says. "We are about creating wellness and creating communities." Where singing works so quickly and effectively is that "the voice is very symbolic of the self".

Tania knows from long experience that includes performing with state opera companies, that "to sing well requires a real opening of the heart and the body and the mind. Singing is spiritual. That's why it is so good for you."

The rising harmonies of You'll Never Walk Alone and Brett's open-throated participation amplify the point very poignantly. But there are more subliminal benefits arising from exercising the voices of such a varietal grouping.

In the odd assembly, networks open up and in some cases there is talk of jobs being offered.

Catherine Brewster says that "it is such a great way to get involved with a

community. Working in the city can sometimes make you feel very disconnected from what is happening out there in the suburbs."

Nathalie Mbala, recently arrived from Cameroon, says it helps her with communication and with learning about Australian culture.

Peter Kronborg says it is very positive strategy to bring into workplaces "which have sometimes become so de-personalised that daily survival is a real challenge. It is also a great social leveller and breaker of barriers because everyone enjoys singing. It's like singing in the shower, only better."

John Helme, a choir sponsor and another abashed shower singer, says he originally thought it was "a left-of-field idea" but has watched more and more of his Allans Music staff join each week.

"I can't sing to save my life," he says. "But this is great fun."

The other payoff is that after rehearsal the Sofitel, one of the group's many corporate sponsors, provides a meal for the group who would sing for the sheer joy of it let alone for their supper.

Jenny Brown is a Melbourne writer

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