

HOW HAVING ONE OWNER HELPS MONA FOMA



Professional gambler and owner of MONA, David Walsh, at a SOHN Hearts and Minds conference in Hobart in 2022. *Alastair Bett*

The Tasmanian arts festival gets much of its funding from a single person in professional gambler and MONA owner David Walsh. A freewheeling program results.

There's not that many arts festivals where the mainstream likes of Paul Kelly and Queens Of The Stone Age share a bill with queer retellings of Filipino folktales, or French-Korean children playing Latin-American music.

But then Mona Foma, which runs until early March in Hobart and Launceston, exists essentially on the public-spirited whim of one man.

Professional gambler David Walsh started Mona Foma in 2008 as a kind of outreach program for his Museum of Old and New Art, the den of antiquities and challenging contemporary pieces he established on Hobart's Derwent River in 2001 (initially as Moorilla Museum).

Financial statements indicate Walsh loses an average of more than \$20 million a year on the overall operation of MONA, which remains free to his fellow Tasmanians. His spending on Mona Foma isn't broken out, but such losses would indicate it's at a higher level than the \$6.9 million the Tasmanian government chipped in for the three festivals between 2022 and 2024.

(The winter arts festival backed by MONA, Dark Mofo, was rested in 2024 in what director Leigh Carmichael called a chance to "reassess" a changing festival market where cost pressures were increasing. Contrary to talk that the furlough was in part aimed at increasing state funding for future editions, Carmichael said that after 10 successful years, the need for a break was such that the festival didn't even enter negotiations with the government.)

Curated since its inception by Walsh's mate Brian Ritchie, the bass player for The Violent Femmes, Mona Foma's relative lack of financial stakeholders encourages a provocative program with little evidence of groupthink.

The 2024 festival, for instance, features an activation by Nigerian artist Emekah Ogboh, in which he partnered with a Hobart distillery on a gin fusing botanicals from Tasmania and West Africa. Ostensibly a tribute to the benefits of cross-cultural pollination, the gin – which is being “marketed” on billboards throughout Hobart – comes wrapped in newspaper clippings about Australia's policies against boat arrivals.

Literally arrived by boat at the festival, meanwhile, is Indonesian-Australian band Arka Kinari. They travel the world on a 24-metre schooner, and Constitution Dock (and later Bellerive Waterfront) will become their venue throughout the festival, as they perform songs about the climate crisis while images of plastic-filled oceans and the like are projected on to the sails.

“A lot of musicians talk about low-emissions touring, but Arka Kinari are really walking it,” Ritchie tells AFR Weekend.

Mona Foma resists having a model – not for it the same three stages every year – and Ritchie says the only rule is eclecticism over populism, with plenty of free events to help all Tasmanians feel included.

So for the balance of the festival, you might catch Taiwan's Yahun Chang painting the floor of Princes Wharf 1 with a brush as big as he is; attend a meditation session soundtracked by Hindustani and Rajasthani folk musicians (the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade did help fund their visit); or catch a show by Aboriginal heavy metal outfit Mulga Hard Rock.

The Mona Foma Festival is in Hobart and Launceston until early March.

Reference: The Australian Financial Review – Michael Bailey. Feb 21, 2024.