



SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Inviting Proposals Artists & Creatives

2026 Castlemaine State Festival (19–29 March)

Background

Castlemaine, located on Djaara Country in the heart of Victoria’s central highlands, boasts more creative industries residents per capita than any other local government region in Australia.

For almost 50 years, the Castlemaine State Festival has drawn inspiration from the region’s unique landscapes and vibrant creative energy, bringing adventurous art to life in its historic and intimate spaces.

We’re excited to celebrate that spirit as part of the Festival’s next chapter, through the ideas and inclusion of artists and arts organisations from the region, and beyond.

The 2026 Festival

Established in 1976, Castlemaine State Festival will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2026 – a special moment to honour its incredible history, the people and places that have shaped it, and to continue expanding artistic and audience experiences in new ways.

We are thrilled to announce **SURPRISE, SURPRISE!** as the theme for the 2026 Castlemaine State Festival.

A celebratory vision imagined to mark this milestone, it has been designed to spark artistic inspiration and bring truly unique experiences for the delight of our audiences near and far. Surprise strikes wonder and amazement through the unexpected. It sparks curiosity, challenges our thinking, and lies at the heart of exceptional arts experiences.

Festival Ethos

As we reach this milestone, we’ve been looking back on the Festival’s wild ride — celebrating what we’ve achieved and what we’ve learned. Feedback from our community has reminded us of what makes this Festival so special:

- The incredible places and spaces that spark fresh artistic ideas and create unforgettable experiences
- The opportunity to feature local artists and creatives and build global connections and awareness
- A lasting legacy of the arts as a cornerstone of our town’s identity, growth, and creative energy
- A sophisticated education program that enriches students and shapes the future of our community
- The power of community participation and collaboration to elevate the life of the region

Expressions of Interest

The Festival is excited to once again be able to collaborate with artists, creatives, and organisations who have a deep connection to the region's community and environment. This engagement promises to spark unique and inspiring possibilities for the 2026 Festival.

We're now inviting Expressions of Interest from local artists and makers across all artforms to propose ***uniquely imagined festival works that respond to the Festival theme: Surprise, Surprise!***

We encourage applicants to draw inspiration from the region's hidden gems—its **secret** and **special** spaces—and let these unique places shape their creative visions for the Festival.

Festival Audiences

The Festival will offer a diverse multi-arts program designed to engage audiences of all ages, with tailored events and experiences for:

Families – Fun Together – for local residents to enjoy with their loved ones

Over 55 Years – Arts Lovers – for both local residents and visitors who appreciate the arts

Under 40 Years – Uplifting Experiences – for locals and visitors seeking vibrant, inspiring experiences

Eligibility

The EoI is open to those living, working or connected with Mount Alexander Shire. Selected artists from outside the Shire will also be directly invited to participate as part of a program embracing local and global ideas and creative practice.

Funding & Production

Applicants are asked to include a budget outlining any expected income and expenses related to their project. The Festival will aim to provide a fee and resources within its means, and these details will be discussed and negotiated with shortlisted applicants.

Process

The Festival Programming team will review the Expressions of Interest received, with a selection proposed for April / May 2025.

To express your interest, please complete the Application Form found at:
www.castlemainefestival.com.au.

You will be asked to provide:

- Name and contact details
- Festival work concept
- Proposed location
- Production and technical requirements
- Anticipated budget including proposed fee from the Festival
- Support material: weblink preferred.



The Closing Date for applications is 4.00pm, Friday 14 March.