

UNLESS you have the misfortune to be an Australian politician or a public servant you'll rarely get to visit the Brasilia of Australia — Canberra. For the rest of us it is only the odd conference that lures us to those verdant groves of academe — the ANU.

Such an event which lured me to Canberra recently was the conference on Recent Australian Drama held at the Humanities Research Centre on August 27/28. Unlike the annual playwrights' conferences, this one was not dominated by Sydney. At this one the Melbourne contingent was large and vocal — leaving one with the probably unreal impression by the end that Australian theatre emanates entirely from our fair city.

The gathering of about 60 assorted academics and practitioners was opened by Jack Hibberd with a witty, ascerbic and typically hyperbolic address on the current state of Australian theatre. Jack's diagnosis was that 10 years after the first flowering of Australian theatre, we are now in the middle of a hiatus and are beset by a strange calm, characterised by passivity and a lack of urgency.

The performing arts are in a state of crisis. Writing for the theatre, according to Hibberd, is devoid of deep significance and actors are still in search of a role. The phenomenon of indigenous writing has been largely accepted and the Australian dialect assimilated with the net result that there are merely more Australian faces on the same stage. We are veering dangerously towards being merely quaint and scholarly. Now that we have a theatre we are still left with the internal

Time for 'dingo' drama

SUZANNE SPUNNER goes to Canberra in search of the elusive Australian drama.

dilemma of what to do with our theatre.

With this malaise upon us we can go on as usual churning out productions and pretending it doesn't exist or we can flounder about and soul search, but either attitude will be a retreat from the question. While everywhere else, everything is calm in the foyer, he commended the Australian Performing Group for at least wearing its tension on its sleeve, but added that the ideological snobbery of the APG was only the other side of the pervasive cultural snobbery of the rest of Australia.

He urged the assembled experts to rise from their stunned mullet calm of the spurious achievements of the last 10 years. We need to press ever onwards. 'The weird thing is that the best is yet to come: If we don't have a deep and adamant sense of national culture yet, we at least have a beginning.' He saw the prevalence of the one character play — the

monodrama — as an indication of the lack of confidence or nerve about ourselves. We don't yet feel we have enough society to sustain theatre on an epic scale.

Hibberd urged us to assert ourselves flamboyantly, and to be aggressive about the uniquely physical and volatile qualities of our theatre. We need to dismantle big museum theatres which are by and large bureaucratic institutions which make the theatre expensive and unwieldy and return to the Poor Theatre form with its richly expressive means.

Community theatre groups with an organic and highly specific relationship to the community they serve are one practicable possibility. Standards of performance per se in community theatre were not applicable criteria, rather they should be judged in terms of the appropriateness of the theatre experience they offer to their audience or community of patrons.

Hibberd's final rallying call was for theatre that depicted life as it appears. He wanted to see more 'dingo' directors and 'dingo' writers in the theatre. What the specifics of this breed of creature might be, he did not divulge . . .

Malcolm Robertson who was with the Melbourne Theatre Company when it was still the Union Theatre Repertory Company, spoke of the early days of Australian theatre and reminded us that 25 years ago the UTRC under the directorship of John Sumner was a revolutionary force in Australian theatre. In those days it was primarily an actor's company with a healthy ratio of one bureaucrat to every four actors and a firm commitment to Australian writing. His remarks were a salutary warning and corroborated the Hibberdian diagnosis. When you consider the MTC of today, the dangers of complacency and self-congratulation are obvious.