

## STAR TURN

# Playwright overcome by new paradise

Suzanne Spinner — the playwright responsible for such local stage productions as *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, *The Ingkata's Wife*, the controversial *Spilt Milk* and the forthcoming *Overcome By Chlorine* — hated the idea of moving to Darwin.

To put it mildly, she was terrified.

Her husband had scored a good job up here but for Suzanne the idea of leaving Melbourne was like cutting the umbilical cord.

"I imagined Darwin would be like a cross between Frankston and Denpasar," she said.

"I was really frightened of coming up here because I thought I'd be moving into a

backwater, that there wouldn't be any stimulus.

"It was horrific because of that — I was very happy in Melbourne.

"I knew Melbourne and Melbourne knew me.

"I had a place and I knew how to read that place.

"I knew what was happening there.

"I had friends and co-workers and I didn't want to lose that.

"I thought Darwin was going to be a sort of desert for me."

In Melbourne, Suzanne had graduated from being "the fearless theatre critic" — "I was hated and loathed and respected and shunned and abused and maligned so it was very intense and

exciting" — to being a playwright in her own right.

Her first major production, *Not Still Lives*, was staged in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide.

Her second, *Running Up a Dress*, had been performed at Melbourne's Spoleto Festival.

Suzanne Spinner — playwright, dramaturge, film-maker, freelance writer and researcher — had found her niche.

And then she was uprooted and transplanted to Darwin.

"As I said in [my first Darwin play], *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, you go to another place partly out of a desire for the other place but, I think, primarily out of a desire to leave where you

are," she said. "And I had no desire to leave where I was.

"I could acknowledge the intellectual interest in the possibility that this would be different and therefore interesting, but the first year was pretty hard.

"There were little islands within it that were exciting and I responded very quickly to the natural environment and was excited by the access to Aboriginal culture and the whole vitality of that, the art and politics that I thought I'd known about but had no idea about really until I was here, and that was really exciting.

"Those two things were the most important and first things that happened and they were continuing and sustaining things, but I kept going up and down in terms of the impossibility of finding a place to work here in that sense of people and environment.

"During the second year, (when I really wanted to get out) things started happening and I really haven't looked back since then.

"The advantage I seized on here is what I initially perceived to be the disadvantage — the relative



*Safe 'n' Sound: The Driver as a Mother* ("about the obsessed safety-conscious mother"), *The Accompanist*, *First Have the Spot*, *Edna for the Garden* and *Tea and Pictures*, Suzanne has also become heavily involved in the independent Darwin

essentially, about the dangers of sex without a condom.

"For me the irony is that I was trying to address the issue of language as language and that's the stuff they can't cope with.

"But I think the audience response to that line that 'it's

taking risks so we've got to talk about it and you can't talk about it without naming it.

"It's a catch 22.

"It'd be funny if it wasn't so serious."

Spinner is now working on *Overcome By Chlorine*, the second play in a trilogy about life in Darwin, that was kicked off by *Dragged Screaming*.

A reading of the work in progress, which focuses on the obsessive vagaries of swimming pool maintenance, was held at the Beaufort Hotel pool on June 1.

"*Overcome By Chlorine* has turned out to be fabulously banal, I hope, in the way that Sandy Stone is fabulously banal," she says.

"Pool maintenance is really the device for saying what I want to say about relationships between men and women and parents and children and marriage and having kids."

So what are her feelings now about having been dragged screaming to paradise?

"The thing that's now become very clear to me in my work is that now I'm here, I'm absolutely rooted here.

## 6 I was really frightened of coming up here because I thought I'd be moving into a backwater 9

isolations. Writing here has been good for me because I've found a group of people I can work with and who want to work with me and whose work I think is really exciting.

"And I'm able to do things, to get things on here in a way that I was doing in Melbourne that I don't think you can do in Melbourne or Sydney now.

"I think the situation down there has become a lot tighter, institutionalised, beauracratished, grantised and over-crowded so it's really hard to get things up.

"I've now acknowledged that it's always been as important to me to write things as to get them on. That's been part of the process.

"I haven't written anything that I haven't produced.

"The fact that you can do that here is really important."

As the title suggests, Spinner's first Darwin play, *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, chronicled the trauma of being uprooted from a comfortable existence in the south and transplanted to this slice of paradise on the northern fringe of the continent.

Initially staged in Darwin in 1988, the production toured the Territory last year.

While she's maintained her links with the Melbourne scene with productions like

theatre scene with such performances as *The Darwin Rebellion*, *Dust Off Vietnam*, *The Ingkata's Wife* and *Freeing the Future*.

The latest production in which she was involved as dramaturge was the controversial Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre production, *Spilt Milk*, a play about AIDS, funded by the NT Health Department and, ironically, banned by the NT Education Department.

"You naturally have two views," she says of the controversy surrounding the banning of the play.

"I think it's disappointing and pathetic and only affirms the immaturity and red-neckedness of the place.

"On the other hand, it was funded by the Health Department, so there are other values at play here. I think that if the play goes outside the Territory it will do it a great deal of good the knowledge that it was banned in the Territory.

"It affirms that parody of the Territory along with Queensland and Bjelke which, at a political level, in lots of ways is true here.

"I think it was fantastically incompetently handled by the Education Department."

The Education Department, it seems, disapproved of some of the language in a play that was,

so easy to do and so hard to talk about', that sense of absolute acknowledgement and affirmation amongst the audience says it all really and that's what the play was trying to do.

"It's easy to do and it's risky to do so we've got to talk about it.

"That's the nub of what we're addressing.

"You're doing 'it' or you're about to do 'it', you're

"This is the world I know now and work is coming out of here. These are the stories and the issues that I want to do, so it's pretty unimaginable at the moment to be located in Melbourne."

Naturally, she'd like to see her Darwin-based plays performed interstate.

"I'm profoundly committed to the idea that good regional art will speak to everybody else as well," she said.

"I tend to have this pattern of alternating plays like *Chlorine* which come from my own experience and the people around me, and things like *Ingkata's Wife* which are biographical historical works.

"I seem to need that balance. I love the academic research aspects of the historical ones and the immediacy of the contemporary ones."

— Andrew McMillan.

(*Spilt Milk*)  
(*Spilt Rules; Death in Dili*)

NT  
*Author of the Month*

**JUNE**

**Suzanne Spinner**



Photo credit: Jude Swift

**UNDER THE BANYAN TREE**  
*State Reference Library*  
**25 Cavenagh Street Darwin**  
**12 Noon 27 June**

NORTHERN TERRITORY DEPARTMENT OF  
**EDUCATION**



# ON THE



□ ABOVE: Terry Kenwick and Suzanne Spinner laughed their way through the evening

## Opening attracts

The Darwin Performing Arts Centre was packed to the hilt on Wednesday night for the opening of Medieval Players.

There were screaming program sellers, which made the gathering speak in quieter tones and have a quick look out of the corner of their eye.

sti  
wh  
tw  
clo  
the  
-  
pe  
mc

