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LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

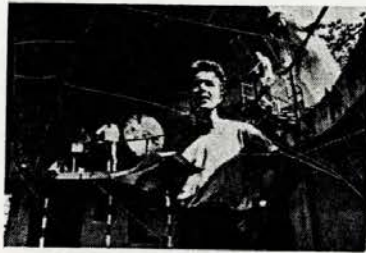
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AT THE TOP END



Left Darwin Theatre Company rehearse 'Dust Off Vietnam' Below 'Death of Balibo' by Darwin Theatre Company with the Timorese Cultural Association (Lafiek) Opposite Page Geoff Hooke, Artistic Director, DTC Below Opposite Aqua Robbins in DTC's 'Dragged Screaming to Paradise'

DRAGGED SCREAMING TO THE THEATRE

DARWIN THEATRE COMPANY DEVELOPS THE POOL OF CREATIVITY

IN MY SHORT time in the Territory I was generally so busy talking about art, culture, theatre, that I didn't actually get to do much of it. But it was the end of the season and there was only one show happening in town anyway. So I went to see *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*.

Director Tessa Pauling is a long-time member of the Darwin Theatre Group and a typically professional amateur member of this company. She has performed in some eight of

their shows since 1977, "in between having babies and working out how to live with a man". Tessa's first directing experience was earlier last year with a production of *Masterpieces*, by British playwright Sarah Daniels, for Women's Own Work. With a cast of six, three men and three women, the show's two week season at Brown's Mart was very well received.

"Women's Own Work produced *Masterpieces* as a response to a surge of sex entertainment at Darwin pubs

and nightclubs, and to the drafting of legislation to ban R-rated videos in the Territory," says Tessa, drawing my attention to the bad joke that the two biggest discos in town, on opposite sides of the same street, are called Fannies and Dicks.

"*Masterpieces* looks at three couples affected in very different ways by attitudes to pornography. The production was actually provoked by the Government's refusal to fund an episode of a TV show produced by women who wanted to interview the women working in those Prawn and Porn Palaces."

Tessa's show, *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, was hot. Full houses from its second night and word of mouth was "you just have to see it".

A locally written and highly parochial single-handed comedy it was economical and imaginative in design, acted with great timing and verve by Aqua Robbins which got every laugh that it went for.

The story is of the trials and tribulations of a recent emigre to the Top End, a modern woman with an independent life and work of her own who, with the greatest misgivings, follows her husband to his 'challenging and interesting' new job in the N.T. It obviously hit a responsive chord with expatriot Darwin audiences.

Dragged Screaming to Paradise



Photo: Brenda Yee



Photo: Ian Chance

"ONE OF THE GREAT STRENGTHS OF DARWIN IS THAT DESPITE ITS SIZE THERE'S AN AMAZING COLLECTION OF CREATIVE PEOPLE. IT'S THE SAME SIZE AS FRANKSTON WHERE I WAS BORN, BUT IT'S NINETY TIMES AS EXCITING AS FRANKSTON..."

Geoff Hooke

was written by founder member of Melbourne's nationally renowned Home Cooking Theatre Co., Suzanne Spinner, with the assistance of a Literature Board grant. Suzanne is herself a recent arrival in Darwin — arriving in 1987 under similar circumstances as her play's protagonist, though, having toured the N.T. with Home Cooking's production of her play *Running Up a Dress* last year, she swears that she screamed only a little.

Dragged Screaming was self-funded by the show's production collective, Paradise Productions. It was to have been supported from the Women's Own Work production funds pool, but someone left town with the chequebook.

So with a little sponsorship, a lot of hard work, goodwill and \$2,000 underwriting from a friend, *Dragged Screaming* hit the boards. By the fourth night of an eight night season there was \$5000 in the kitty so the cast and crew, 24 people, might get pocket-money yet. But you can be sure that much of the box-office will be set aside for the next production; that's the way things work in Darwin theatre.

Women's Own Work and Paradise Productions along with another company, Moving Feast, are ad hoc amateur theatre production groups who regularly stage one or more shows a year at Brown's Mart with the connivance and assistance of the Brown's Mart Community Arts Project and the Darwin Theatre Company. Nearly all members of these companies would also be members of DTC.

In bigger cities these three would be the professional alternative companies. But in Darwin the mainstream theatre (DTC) is alternative enough. A pro/am

company which employs only its administrator and artistic director, contracting occasional directors, designers, writers and technicians, DTC relies heavily on unpaid (the term amateur is hardly applicable) casts and crews to produce highly popular and professional theatre.

Says DTC's new artistic director, the well-respected young Melbourne professional theatre director, Geoff Hooke; "The joy of working with DTC is that we have this enormous pool of extremely well-trained people, we've got nearly 80 active members, most of whom are mainly

interested in performance.

"You have to remember that although they are amateurs they've had professional direction since the early seventies with people like Nigel Triffit, Simon Hopkinson and other well-known guest directors brought up during those 15 or 20 years. It's certainly one of the things that drew me here. Now I've got the chance to do large-scale productions that I just don't have down south; just about every theatre director has to work within that restraint on the size of the cast. Up here you can do anything you like as long as you can enthuse

the people you are working with.

"One of the great strengths of Darwin is that despite its size there's an amazing collection of creative people. It's the same size as Frankston where I was born, but it's ninety times as exciting as Frankston because there are the most extraordinary people here," Geoff says. "So at the moment I've just been going out to listen to ideas and they're coming in thick and fast — from Roger Bennett in Alice, from Suzanne Spinner, Neil Cameron, Jan McDonald, Yan Wizinski. . ."

DTC's administrator, Sylvia Langford adds that 1988 saw a surge of activity, interest and creativity in Darwin theatre which even brought it to national prominence. "It's an interesting place with an exciting mix of cultures," she says. "And I think that we really helped put Darwin on the map this year with the production of *Death at Balibo*. Suddenly everybody knows, every major newspaper and all the TV networks covered it."

The staging of *Death at Balibo* was a fine example of the high level of creative flux between the city's community organisations. The initial approach was made to DTC and Brown's Mart by Barbara Pitman, Multicultural Arts Officer for the Migrant Resource Centre. She in turn was responding to the desire of Darwin's small but energetic Timorese refugee community, who wanted to practise and demonstrate their traditional culture in a context which would also express their

political situation and relationship to their new home.

The outcome was a combined effort by Lafaek (Crocodile) Timorese Association Cultural Group, the Migrant Resource Centre, Brown's Mart and the Darwin Theatre Company (who produced the show). Brown's Mart was able to secure funding for playwright Graeme Pitts to become writer-in-residence for the duration of the project and to help with liaison and administration between the groups.

Death at Balibo combined the story of the deaths of eight Australian journalists at the hands of Indonesian troops during the takeover of East Timor with an expression of Timorese life and culture and some of the effects that the forceable joining of their country with Indonesia had on their lives. *Balibo* is credited with being a powerful demonstration of the important role that theatre can play in teaching a community about itself and the diversity of its culture.

"Lafaek have approached us to do another show in 1989 and we are very interested," says Jeff. "The co-writer of *Death at Balibo*, Graeme Pitts, has another writing fellowship in Darwin this year and has also approached us for some assistance then."

"It's very much our role at DTC to assist other groups in producing their work," says Sylvia Langford. "It's not altogether altruistic either,

because we know that every increase in theatre activity develops the pool of creativity and the audience pool on which we depend."

Geoff Hooke's program for DTC in 1989 is an even-handed mix of straight drama, musicals, classics, children's theatre and community theatre, with a good dash of touring thrown in. "We are looking to get as much of our work out of Darwin as we can while still servicing our audience here," says Geoff.

The calendar includes a revival of Gilly Farrelly's ever-popular *The Swashbuckling Adventures of Grandma Mad* (see review this issue), and *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepherd. The musical for the year is to be what Robin Archer recently referred to as "Kurt and Bert's greatest hit", *The Threepenny Opera*.

DTC have what has almost become a "dry season tradition" of performing a Shakespearian classic outdoors in the ruins of the old Darwin Town Hall. Geoff has no intention of letting such valuable community traditions die.

"We have a wonderful outdoor venue and the weather is unfailing as are the people. It's very popular with our core audience and particularly with schools. It's also popular with tourists as well, a right little money-spinner. This year we will probably do *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, apt don't you think?"

The final show of the year is to be a music hall melodrama with a topical, satirical twist, probably to be directed by Ken Conway.

Geoff seems to be reserving a lot of his enthusiasm for Roger Bennett's script-in-process, *Up the Ladder*. Probably to be directed by Neil Cameron it will be toured Territory-wide as a tent show. "We'll be working to get local community theatres to provide buskers, spruikers and a whole menagerie of carnival events going on outside the tent as well, shell-game con men, fairy floss machines, the works," Geoff waxes enthusiastically.

"I think it's going to be a fantastic year. Now I've finally got the opportunity to be a really good producer, to get on shows like *Up the Ladder*. It's just the kind of show I've been wanting to produce for years, conceptually, politically, figuratively, formatively, the lot. It's exactly the kind of theatre that I think we need in Australia."●