

True Territorian Theatre

"We live in one of the most artistically provocative regions in the world. I believe that artists and arts organisations by combining resources and strengths when required will give rise to an inspired Northern Territory culture."

Ray Scanlan, NT Arts Council — NT Arts Action, June 88



Rehearsal of *Death At Balibo*

BRENDA YEE

The closest most of us will get to Territorian theatre of any sort in 1988 will be a visit to the production of Capricornia currently touring a number of centres. But it's a Sydney creation nevertheless, if based on a novel by a true-blue Territorian.

As we can discover from these twin reports from Suzanne Spinner (currently living in Darwin) and Katharine Brisbane (invited recently to Alice Springs), our Deep North can be full of surprises — some quite exciting indeed.

*Suzanne Spinner reports on activity in Darwin in recent months, discovering a diversity of achievement but a unity of purpose — within the boundaries of what is probably best described as community theatre. Katharine Brisbane looks more kindly on the Territory's Bicentennial 'rock opera' *Come Hell Or High Water* but has some tough things to say about the NT government's arts management. Comments, as she points out, which apply equally to the arts management attitudes of other government authorities around the country — especially with regard to new performing arts centres.*

Grass Roots Take Hold — Recent Theatre In The N.T.

Theatre that arises from the community in which it is performed, that has something to say, someone to say it with, will always find an audience. More often than not it will be a new audience, and one that doesn't usually go to the theatre.

For community theatre to work it must obviously be relevant to its constituents, though far too often relevance of content and earnestness of intentions become the be-all and end-all. Unless community theatre addresses theatrical form in a challenging and creative way, its effect will be short-lived and in the long term negative.

The aim should be to create new theatre for an audience, and a new audience for theatre. Community theatre must take its responsibilities for that audience seriously — treat it with respect, nurture, educate, inspire, excite, and encourage its critical response.

In recent months in the Northern Territory, prior to the arrival of the balmy days of the Dry, the onslaught

of tourists and the arrival of the cultural caravan from the south (this season bringing us *Capricornia*, *Cho San*, *Running Up A Dress*, *Circus Oz* and *Los Trios Ringbarkus*) we had a number of interesting local theatrical events. All of them fall, in various ways, under the rubric of community theatre: *Come Hell Or High Water*, *Death At Balibo*, *Living In Isolation*, and the *Mayday Gilruth March* addressed subjects and issues close to the audiences they were made with and for, and were hailed as successes. In such a climate of general approbation it is also important to recognise the shortcomings and failures and understand why they occurred.

The Territory Rock Opera, *Come Hell Or High Water* (see article by Katharine Brisbane, also) by all accounts was given a rousing reception in its home town, Alice Springs. In Darwin the reception was decidedly luke-warm. The reasons for this are substantial, not the consequence of some spurious ultra-parochialism.

To begin with, it was neither rock

by Suzanne Spinner

nor opera but overblown folk music and, within that genre, repetitive and uninspired. The play traversed the same tired Territorian generalities about black/white, up here/down there, mining/environment, and male/female relationships as Gordon Francis' *God's Best Country*, and neither came within cooe of the gritty insights of Xavier Herbert in *Capricornia*, written in 1937.

Other than an uncritical Bicentennial celebration of consensus by compact: "We'll make it together, come hell or high water/all of us striving as one", the play had little to offer in terms of new ideas or even more subtle renderings of old ones. Most seriously, a sustaining or enlivening dramatic image could not be found in the writing, the direction, even the design — plodding along a tedious and predictable narrative track for a solid three hours as a result.

The complete disregard for theatrical style and grace exacerbated the amateurish feel. It was not simply a matter of the inexperience of the writers and performers, rather that their potential was not garnered or well enough utilised by the professional director/dramaturg Peter Copeman. The blame must be laid squarely at his feet for allowing the production to go on for far too long in a shapeless, undisciplined and utterly uninspired way. The production did a great disservice to those who put so

A story-teller functioned as the intermediary. In delicate poetry, folk truisms and snatches of Fretlin rhetoric an interpretation of what we were seeing was suggested to us. Precise meanings were outside our grasp — we were aliens in this world. There were many poignant and beautiful images, and some fearfully powerful moments. One of the women tells of returning to her parents' village to find it sacked and burning. Suddenly, we are not watching an actor, we are with her, reliving her terror.

Yet we were also watching a play, for the Timorese cast were consummate performers — graceful and powerful in movement, with rich and expressive voices. Somehow their craft was invisible, whilst their integrity made the communication total.

The second act was largely in English and focused on the Australian journalists (see, also, *Kerry Davies' review*). The contrast was almost too much to bear. We could understand every word, reference, nuance of behaviour; yet what we could see so clearly amounted to so little — the pursuit of a good story? We knew by now that beyond their hotel verandah was a whole world the journalists could not even begin to fathom. Even the searching Greg Shakleton, who wanted to, was lost and out of his depth.

The dramatic encounter was brief, sketchy, culminating in the sudden,

Creek, *A Tour With A Difference* by Jabiru Area School (years 7-9), *Wall's Hill* by Lee Frank of Alice Springs and *Desert Boy* by Lajamanu School students. Together, they formed a refreshing insight into the concerns of Territory youth.

Robertson carefully ordered the sequence of the plays to show off the naive, honest strengths of the writing and the considerable range of performance skills her ensemble of young actors have now acquired. At the same time, she took her audience across the Northern Territory on a bold theatrical journey.

One Of A Kind — in which "Pete, a year twelve student, isn't asked to his friend's party" was an exercise in acutely observed and heightened naturalism; for its audience reassuringly similar to television but more subtle and pointed. Then, out went the school desks and chairs and *A Tour With A Difference* began — in which "a group of tourists find themselves hopelessly bogged". We were transported into a *commedia* world of caricature and broad social satire. The ensemble's work was disciplined, inventive and funny.

The mood changed again for *Wall's Hill* in which "a Sydney teenager moves to Alice Springs". With choreographed movement and sound textures, the contrasting worlds of city and desert mountains were made with the pliant expressiveness of these actors' bodies. The final play, *Desert Boy*, the story of Bob Jalparjari, a white boy brought up by the Walpiri people, brought us full circle to the true beginnings of Australian theatre — the Aboriginal art of story-telling. The play is mostly in Walpiri with only fragments of English.

All told, *Living In Isolation* was highly satisfying theatre, thoroughly professional in execution, stylish and unpretentious. It could only foster the making of a critical, open-minded theatre audience alive to the many possibilities of dramatic expression.

The *Mayday Gilruth March* was the culmination of some months of arts activities instigated by the NT Trades and Labour Council to commemorate the forging of the union movement in the Territory. It took as its start the following story: in 1918, the workers of Darwin marched on Government House demanding the resignation of the Administrator, Dr John Gilruth. The 'Darwin Rebellion' was bloodless but effective — Gilruth left a few weeks later under armed guard.

The project was funded by the ABA, Australia Council, the ACTU and other union and corporate sponsorship. As well as a spectacular march on Mayday itself — with giant puppets, music and banners — it was also supported in the lead-up period by three issues of the *Northern Standard* (name of the original union paper). The purpose of this was to publicise the march and related activities, and to inject into the local scene some much needed press independence, including a more radical view of contemporary NT politics.

The project was instigated by union leader Jamey Robertson. The theatrical re-interpretation of the rebellion itself



Omar Puma, Neil Cameron, Tim Nelson, Susie Westerhaven with Gilruth puppet head

was animated by Melbourne director Neil Cameron and Omar Pumar (a Chilean puppet-maker and theatre director now living in Darwin).

Giant puppets representing the main protagonists of the struggle were carried through the streets amidst inflammatory banners and hundreds of red flags to the gamelan and reggae rhythms of a steel band, the Mayday Metals — a group formed for the occasion and equipped with 44 gallon drums, brake drums and hub cap cymbals.

The march began with a rousing speech by union leader Harold Nelson, played by Robertson, and when we reached the gates of Government House we were provoked to fever pitch by the taunts of a vaudeville duo, The Cowboy and the Butcher. They represented the historical figures of Paddy Cahill, a Territory adventurer and buffalo hunter, and Lord Vestey who, at the same time, owned most of the NT.

Their contemporary equivalents were instantly recognised by the crowd, so that by the time Dr Gilruth appeared (played at his own suggestion by the current Administrator, Commodore Eric Johnston), trying to fob us off with bureaucratic excuses for his despotic behaviour, the jeers were almost real. Gilruth's diatribe against the unruly mob was interrupted by a local barmaid, and the crowd was persuaded by Harold Nelson to move to a nearby park and burn an effigy of Gilruth. It was a spectacular display of pyrotechnics, the top hat exploding in a burst of red smoke and flames.

Some 84 local arts workers and seven interstate artists contributed to the event, and more than 4,500 people participated in the march to create a mass theatrical spectacle, the likes of which I don't think has been witnessed in Australia before. Frank Hardy, who addressed the crowd afterwards, claimed it was the best Mayday march he'd seen anywhere in the world!

MANIEN FENELEY



'Living In Isolation', Conrad Page, Anna Phillips, Jim Newth, Jo Harrison and Saler Calver — Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre

much into it, and only seemed to reinforce the worst local prejudices about local products.

By contrast, *Death At Balibo*, a joint production of the Timorese Association and Darwin Theatre Group, was an exciting and innovative example of community theatre at its best. The play was an adventurous hybrid of song, dance, story-telling, myth, naturalism, more abstract forms — and all of it committed to conveying a passionate story of the destruction of Timorese culture by the Indonesian invasion.

The lengthy first act, primarily in the Timorese language, recreated the everyday rituals, dreams and desires of village life, and placed the English-speaking audience in the position of invited voyeurs, or passive observers. For the Timorese in the audience, it provided a cathartic opportunity to re-enter and identify with their own culture.

random mowing down of these culpable innocents. The staccato machine-gun and roll-call of familiar names; a flash of light; the fall of dead weight to the ground — and the play was over. All possibility of why particularly these men, on that day, in that place, happened to die was lost. And we were left with the sure knowledge that the Timor we had previously glimpsed was also about to be destroyed.

Last year, the Darwin-based Corrugated Iron Youth Company invited young people living in the Northern Territory to write a one-act play on the theme 'Living In Isolation'. According to Janet Robertson, instigator and director of the project, "the entries submitted covered many aspects of isolation — geographical, cultural, spiritual and physical".

Four plays were chosen — *One Of A Kind* by Carey Rohlach of Tennant