

Keeping our distance

Suzanne Spinner

In Darwin for the Indigenous Art Award and the Darwin Festival, I felt a palpable change in the mood of the place. It was brought home to me when 24 HR Art's new media man, Malcolm Smith, pointedly drew my attention to his distinction between the louvres and the aircon people, or the *Louvrist*s and the *Aircognescenti*. He knew I was an unreconstructed *Louvrist* while he naturally aligns with the *Aircognescenti*, but he is nostalgic for the louvres as only a true po-mo can be. The distinction refers to those who hold onto Old Darwin and the new breed who want to place the town in modern mainstream Australia; for me it is about valuing the distinctive and the distance.

The Hotel Darwin has gone, the genius of Troppo architects has left (leaving behind a thriving business), and feminist historian, National Trust advocate and planning activist Barbara James has gone (to heaven). Blazex has gone and so style has left the room—in its place a homewares shop called, without any irony, Humidity. The Roma Bar threatens to close due to rapacious development. Cane toads have already reached Kakadu and they are expected in town this Wet. Central Darwin is left looking like a theme park of Irish pubs and tacky franchises. What was particular, even peculiar about Darwin is being swamped in its rush to be just like everywhere else: mirage architecture multi-storey airconditioned boxes squashed together. The Labor Party is in power but the pit bulls are still off their leashes and savaging the innocent. Small business rules supreme. Darwin's development is a chimera as it always has been, dependent on something that's about to happen and either doesn't, or if it does, doesn't deliver. The much vaunted railway, for instance, has delivered pensioner



TRACKS, Snakes Gods and Deities

Mark Marcelis

tourists who spend little and lack vibrancy and curiosity. Now Darwin waits on the disputed and morally tainted Timor gas for its next boom around the corner. The pipeline has replaced the railway line.

We were at the opening night of *Surviving Jonah Salt*, a collaboration across the tropics between Darwin's Knock-em-Down Theatre and Cairns' JUTE. Brisbane-

based Darwin writer Stephen Carleton, Darwin's Gail Evans, Alice Springs' Anne Harris and Cairns-based Kathryn Ash wrote the play, based on a proposal by Carleton: one place, 3 ways, a roadhouse midway between Cairns, Darwin and the Alice. Four characters (one per writer) leave home and meet there. In the second act they collide. Realised by JUTE director

Suellen Maunder and performed by Darwin's Mary Anne Butler and Tessa Pauling and Cairns' Susan Prince and Nick Skubiji, it opened in Cairns to rave notices and returned to Darwin in triumph.

On opening night Playlab Press launched *From the Edge: Two Plays from Northern Australia*, which included *Surviving Jonah Salt*. The mood was high and the vibe good, a sense of relief in the air. Heart stopping performances and taut classic drama in the vein of Tennessee Williams (must be that steamy weather) with a dash of magic realism. Among all that class, Carleton's writing and Pauling's performance as the Valley tart Patricia stood out.

The relief was due to the fact that in the same week another new play opened on the big stage at the Entertainment Centre. *Tin Hotel* by Darwin Theatre Company was jointly written and directed by Gail Evans and Tania Lieman. Publicity was everywhere, and with a large local cast, expectations were high. The cast was solid, the musical direction by Merrilee Mills good, the design by Kathryn Sproul stylish. The concept and writing were problematic; it was uncertain where to pitch its tent. Was it a feelgood musical about multi-racial Darwin, like *Bran Nue Dae*? Or a searing racially driven tragedy with wild comic overtones, like Louis Nowra's adaptation of *Capricornia*? If it wasn't either of these, then what and where was it? Its grasp of history, politics and race relations was sentimental and naïve; scenes were



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short and 'cinematic', meaning quick edits which on a big stage with a large cast became ponderous. Often the scene changes seemed longer than the action. It felt as if it was constantly about to go deeper, develop an idea, a character, a conflict, but shied away every time. There was potential for something else in the opening and the scenes involving the 3 town gossips, led by the redoubtable Kay Brown in a marvelously black performance.

I started hearing that people are sick of historical plays, bored by theatre about the place, asking "why can't we just have some solid plays about somewhere else?" They reckon they've had too many, which as a Louvrists who has championed a regional identity I found disturbing and confusing. Further questioning revealed that it was alright if it was good; they all agreed for instance that *The Pearler* by Sarah Cathcart was fine (RT63, p44).

WordStorm, the NT Writer's Festival had successfully negotiated the regional-national nexus, typified by the involvement of nationally significant writers such as Barry Hill, Neil Murray, Nicholas Rothwell and Peter Goldsworthy—all of whom passionately engaged with the Northern Territory in sessions alongside locals like Andrew McMillan, Stephen Gray and Sandra Thibodeaux. The event included masterclasses, debates, song-

writing and 'how to' sessions—a proper writer's festival, not just a publishers' feast. All the words I heard about the *Storm* were positive and a tribute to the vision and organisation of Mary-Anne Butler, director of the NT Writers Centre. *True North*, an anthology of contemporary writing from the NT, edited by previous director Marian Devitt, was launched at the *Storm*.

There is a strong sense that Darwin has changed and few are comfortable with the level of unbridled development. The opening scene of *Tin Hotel* combined news footage of the wolve's-hour demolition of the Hotel Darwin with a dance routine in which everyone brandished the ubiquitous hot pink plasticated cardboard development signs. Winsome Jobling's entry in *Sculpture in the Park* also echoed the concern. She constructed an entire estate of tiny ticky tacky boxes by carefully cutting up the pink signs. *Glimpse*, the winning work by Tobias Richardson, was a clever tilt at the bland-ising of the city. The title referred to an aqua blue paint that has been used for all the street furniture in the City Mall's most recent refurbishment. Richardson painted dozens of household objects with the colour and placed them throughout the mall, making them so indistinguishable it took several circuits to identify the ring-ins.

Tracks' new show *Snakes, Gods and Deities* was a reminder of what Darwin can do better than most other places: the outdoor, site specific event. Conceived by Tim Newth and directed by Newth and David McMicken, the show was a cultural exchange arising from Newth's residency in Sri Lanka. It brought 3 dancers and a drummer from the Sama Ballet to Darwin and teamed them with local dancers and musicians. The show included seriously large live snakes, a fabulous Bollywood sequence, Maori Haka and break dancing. This was eclecticism run riot, reined in by the direction and the precision of the aesthetic as exemplified by the setting. A shimmering curtain of broken CDs was suspended like a glass prism behind the exquisite, perfectly spreading branches of a vast raintree.

Darwin does outdoors best, and the festival under the direction of Malcolm Blaylock saw the smart sound Star Shell installed in the Botanic Gardens. Every night there was a program of live music and performance that included alongside international artists Darwin's own Balinese Tunas Mekar in collaboration with dancers and musicians from Ubud, Indigenous music and dance such as The Red Flag dancers and Yilila from Numbulwar, and Djilpin Dancers from Wugularr.

Aboriginal art was everywhere at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, in all the galleries around the town and even in the Botanic Gardens. Following on from the Garma Festival, the Galuku Gallery, or gallery in the trees, came to town for the first time. An array of wonderful coloured linocuts from Yirrkala in North East Arnhemland were hung and illuminated every evening by spotlights in a grove of palm trees. The trunks of these squat trees were ochred white, making a witty mockery of the sanitised white walls of the modern art gallery. After partying at the Festival Club in the Star Shell you could wander among the cool art in the gallery under the stars.

The final show in the Star Shell was the inaugural NT Indigenous Music Awards. The audience overflowed into the surrounding gardens where the concert and presentations in the shell were relayed onto big screens. You could picnic on the grass, watch the action and listen to the music, all for free. A Darwin experience that suited everybody: locals, tourists and those who'd come in from remote communities.

Darwin Festival, Aug 12-29