

## Top end mix

Suzanne Spinner reports on the pleasures and plights of The Festival of Darwin

In its previous incarnation it was The Bougainvillea Festival of Rhododendron, Waratah and Jacaranda, now it's The Festival of Darwin of Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney et al. Back then it was an excuse for local businesses and service clubs to festoon the trays of big trucks with plastic Bougainvillea; now it's a ridgy didge arts festival with strong community content and participation and a smattering of specially commissioned or imported events.

Although it was only renamed last year, the transformation of the Darwin Festival has taken place over six years since the appointment of its director, Fabrizio Calafuri and the formation a community-based festival committee. The Festival Of Darwin has to tread a fine line between art and populism and it does so by building on and amplifying the strengths of Darwin—its multicultural mix, the Aboriginal and Asian connections and the almost ingrained tradition of community arts in the town. As an umbrella it takes in various entirely autonomous events ranging from The Darwin Rodeo to the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory which attract their own specialised audiences. The central festival event is The Grand Parade which culminates in a free outdoor concert on the Esplanade under the stars. This year Circus Oz were the featured artists.

The Grand Parade theme was *Rivers to the Sea* and the festival again sponsored artists to work with schools and community groups. These days bamboo has replaced bougainvillea as the generic material of the ceremonial artefacts produced for the parade. The switch to bamboo, apart from its natural logic, was spearheaded by Techy Mesaro, who has been the resident festival artist throughout the transformation. Even among so many stunning large scale bamboo sculptures on the floats, the Grand Prize winner made by the PNG Society stood out. It was an outrigger canoe with a decorated

sail; the *piece de resistance* was an exquisitely made giant woven fish trap.

Last year's festival included a series of installations at sites all over Darwin; this year, apart from the Aboriginal Art Award, visual art was thin on the ground. However there was a rare treat, an exhibition from the Agung Rai Museum in Ubud. *Between Two Worlds—Contemporary Balinese Art* was held in the Great Hall of the palatial new Parliament House. The opening performance of the Legong Kraton by two classically trained Balinese dancers formerly from Ubud who have settled in Darwin spoke eloquently of the nearness to Asia. The exhibition was relevant and interesting but appallingly hung on ugly temporary screens instead of using the high walls of the hall. It is not an easy space to place such intimate work; but if it had to be there (given that the impetus came from The Department of Asian Relations—the pet project of Chief Minister Shane Stone—it did) then it could have been done elegantly. The exhibition early this year of the Kaltja Business Meeting Place modular mural, showed how to hang art in the Great Hall.

The highlight of the festival was, unquestionably, Tracks' show *4WD—a Night of Sweat, Dust and Romance* staged on the lawns of the Botanic Gardens. Directed by Tim Newth, *4WD* was an extraordinary community spectacle involving four *4WD* trucks, 80 performers including professional dancers, local footballers, ballerinas, PNG and TI dancers, ballroom dancers and school groups. The visiting choreographers and dancers included Beth Shelton, Nicky Fletcher and Michael Collins (Danceworks), Michael Leslie (*Bran Nu Dae*) and Markham Galut (PNG National Theatre Company).

*4WD* had it all—sweat, dust and romance as well as fireworks, smoke, large puppets and a powerful original music score composed by Scott Trenwith and realised by the classical musicians of the Arafura Ensemble, the percussion group Drum Drum and Aboriginal

songmen from Yolgnu Manikay. The only things missing were elephants and generators. As a local wit observed, "It reflected the great pastiche that is us Darwinians".

The next best thing was the performance by Waak Waak Jungi/ Crow Fire Music in the foyer of The Supreme Court. Waak Waak Jungi is a collaboration between two small communities—Ramingining in north-east Arnhemland and Christmas Hills in Victoria—which began four years ago and has involved musical exchanges and cultural homestays, resulting in the resurrection of 'lost' songs of the Woirworrung people from the Yarra Valley. Waak Waak Jungi brought together Sebastian Jorgensen, Sally Grice and Peter Mumme from Victoria and Songmen Jimmy Djamunba, Bobby Bununggurr from Ramingining and George Bambuna who lives at Fish Camp, along with drummer Alan Murphy who has played with Yothu Yindi and other Aboriginal bands and, a long time ago, lived in New York and was member of The Village People.

As well as amazing black and white voice you heard the didgeridoo, a live synthesised soundscape and the strings from the Arafura Ensemble; and then there were the dancers—group of Countrymen (and women) who live in town, or try to, at Fish Camp in the mangroves in between the suburbs of Darwin. Such songs they sang—about cockatoos and crows, of a massacre at Christmas Hill about kava in the community, about bottin cigarettes—in rasping, hard, plangent voice to the tap-dripping wood-chopping sound of the clapsticks and the drone of the didge. The result was a thorough mix, no pastiche but an impassioned and subtle impasto, that said as much for the reality of reconciliation as it sung out strong new music.

The ongoing vitality of the festival, let alone its very existence, depends on the ability and willingness of key local arts organisations to respond to the opportunity with relevance, innovation and creativity. Yet three of the best placed organisations, the Darwin Entertainment Centre (DEC), Darwin Theatre Company (DTC) and the Darwin Symphony Orchestra (DSO) seem to passively resist it with spectacular ineptness. One can only wonder what is going on? They seem to guard their patches out of a fear that they might spend money on something that might make the festival look good, blind to the notion that

they could actually gain national profile and local artistic credibility from partnerships and collaborations with the festival.

DEC are particularly intransigent; not only do they offer nothing by way of entrepreneuring partnerships, they manage to book out the centre to business conventions and conference groups at high rates and make it impossible for anyone else with more imagination or nous to utilise the prime performance venue during the festival. A few year years ago DEC were offered Nigel Triffit to direct a production of *The Fall of Singapore* with ten local actors and turned it down; last year they programmed a minor British two hander set in a freezing London flat; this year they offered Theatresports! Last year the DSO did their usual *Top of The Pops* concert; this year it was *The Magic of Brahms*! Other organisations who usually come to the party, Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre and 24 HR Art programmed badly and missed out, although 24 HR Art did come up with a brilliantly clever pirate float for the parade which managed to link the show they had on at the time on tattoo art with the sea theme.

So instead of the festival being an annual focus for these major arts organisations, an opportunity for them to program and commission their most exciting and innovative work which will have the best chance to make a mark locally and nationally, they go to ground, or water as the case may be, and proceed as normal, as if the festival wasn't happening.

So at the end of every festival, its director Fabrizio Calafuri questions continuing the good fight, but every time there are some things that make it all worth the risk and the ridiculous stretching of resources—this year it was the Tracks show and Waak Waak Jungi, last year it was seeing Tegy Mesaros' big bamboo bird sculpture on Mindil Beach, and a few years ago it was watching The Flying Fruit Fly Circus from the Murray River performing with the Maningrida kids. Calafuri feels he's given it his best shot and wonders "Where to next?"

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*Suzanne Spinner has moved back to Melbourne after living in Darwin for 10 years. She returned to Darwin for the festival and to work with Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre.*