

# Festival of the never never

Suzanne Spinner at the 1998 Festival of Darwin

Over 2 weeks in late September the Festival of Darwin again celebrated the unique cultural diversity of the capital of the never never state. The focus of the festival was the Asia Pacific Cultural Village, a cluster of shelter structures made from bush timber, bamboo and woven palm leaf and situated in open woodland behind Mindil Beach. The 8 traditional houses of the village were arranged in a semi-circle facing into a common public area and looking toward a performance stage. Under the direction of artist Tchy Mesaro they were built by community groups from the region—Maori, Lombok, Torres Strait, Pacific Islands, Phillipines, PNG, Thailand and East Timor—and functioned variously as living spaces and places where traditional crafts were made by 'villagers.'

During the festival, performances of dance, music and theatre took place in the common area and every evening a different community prepared food for the villagers and the visitors; every night became a celebration in itself. By day school groups and tourists came to look and learn. The village was a massive logistical and cultural diplomacy exercise undertaken over the previous year. The structures themselves were made off-site in the festival workshop where the Grand Parade floats are usually made, so they had to be capable of being knocked down and transported to Mindil Beach. Each house was different in structure and style but the village had an aesthetic and functional unity in its commonality of materials and social purpose, and it served as an instant introduction to the repertoire of building techniques and climatically appropriate tropical design.

There are few things quite as compelling as being invited to stare at other people's houses and everyone had their favourites: the tall Lombok house with its little hut atop a tower and, underneath, chooks in a bamboo pen; the Kowe Kara, Hut of Friendship, made by people from New Caledonia, Samoa, Tahiti and Kirabati, a large open rotunda, its powerful high conical roof made of bush poles and coconut palm fronds. Carved totemic figures guarded doorways and roof hips, and everyone indulged in fantasies of which house they wanted to live in. The village had a life of its own and all the communities were reluctant to leave their 'house' and return to brick and fibro homes in the suburbs of Darwin; everyone had plans for recreating the village at another time.

*Campur Campuran*, presented by Tunas Mekar, was the major performance held onstage at the Village. Tunas Mekar is based in Darwin and directed by Darwin producer

and director Peter Stretton and his wife Desak Putu Warti, a classically trained Balinese dancer from the artists' village of Pengosekan close to Ubud. *Campur Campuran*, which means mixed up/mixed together, was a cross cultural performance reflecting on the relationship between Bali and Australia. It brought together Darwin performer Tania Lieman and composer-musician Michael Havir, who had previously worked on theatre, dance and music projects all over the Territory with Balinese artists—including Putu's sister, dancer I Made Mundra and brother, gamelan player I Ketut Partha, as well as other prominent Balinese dancers and musicians.

The project involved a 3 week cultural exchange residency in Pengosekan culminating in 2 performances—the first in Pengosekan in the Balai Banjar for the locals and then at the prestigious Agung Rai Museum of Art on the outdoor Open Stage. Immediately afterwards the group returned to Darwin for a season at the Village. Three weeks is a short time to make any new improvised work, let alone a cross cultural performance. The success of *Campur Campuran* was a tribute to Tunas Mekar's careful selection of artists of such high calibre and cultural adaptability.

The results were manifest in a collection of highly theatrical vignettes of Balinese village life and high culture, comments on Australian tourists, and on the Balinese perception of Australia, not to mention a clever take on Pauline Hanson all mixed in with mime, shadow puppets, dance, music, comedy and mask. The idea was to present a synthesis and coming together rather than to transport Balinese culture to Darwin and the result was an exciting fusion of styles. Some of the highlights included a mad disorganised gamelan orchestra who never quite got it together; a Wayang Kulit shadow play about a vain kangaroo who wanted to be as beautiful as a Balinese princess but learnt that it was better to be herself; an hilarious shadow play of village dogs fighting and bonking like mad. The show culminated in an over-eager Australian tourist photographing a traditional Legong dance and getting so close to the entranced kris dancers that he stabbed himself with his monstrous telephoto lens, much to the delight of everyone.

Last year the highlight of the festival was the Tracks Dance show *Four Wheel Drive, Sweat Dust and Romance* at the Botanic Gardens. This year they also created an outdoor work *The Land, The Cross and The Lotus* for the Jingli Water Gardens. It brought together the Tiwi, Christian and Buddhist communities to tell 3 parallel



*Campur Campuran*

Therese Ritchie

journeys of Purukapali, the Tiwi ancestor, the Virgin Mary and Siddharta. Conceived and directed by Tim Newth, each journey was choreographed by a different person and featured soloists alongside members of that particular spiritual community.

Beginning on the land beside the water with Michael Leslie's interpretation of the tragic story of how death came to the Tiwi (danced by Stanley Stanislaus) it then moved to a procession by barge across the water of the apparition of Mary, Theotokos or God bearer (danced by Rukshana Ramachandran and choreographed by Beth Shelton) and finished with a contemporary reinterpretation of Siddharta (by Kai Tai Chan and danced by David McMicken) who in his final form appeared to walk on water. Choosing between each piece was as invidious as choosing a spiritual way. Each had much to recommend it but perhaps the boldest and most interesting, both as choreography and performance, was *The Lotus*. All were profoundly moving and utilised the potential of movement, sound, light and water in various and sumptuous ways.

Reconciliation was the other major theme and it was heralded by the installation of *The Sea of Hands* on the Esplanade looking out towards the Cox Peninsula, the site of the Larrakia Kenbi Land Claim which yet again was in court in Darwin. The Larrakia took charge of the hands and they were arranged to represent a dugong and a turtle under the direction of leader Billy Risk. Elder and artist Koolpinyah Richard Barnes made 2 sets of burial markers remembering the Larrakia dead; one was placed in the grounds of the Museum, the other at NTU.

Larrakia singer/songwriter June Mills created *Blackout*, a one woman show staged at Browns Mart. June is an exceptionally talented performer with a commanding presence, one cheeky woman who has always been unafraid to tell it like it is. *Blackout* was about Mills' life as a Larrakia woman in Darwin: the Kenbi Land Claim, her kids, hassles with the Housing Commissions, with side swipes at the notorious Mandatory Sentencing Act and Zero Tolerance policing policies of the NT government. Fishin' and huntin' singin' and dancin', it was all there conveyed with a sharpness and exuberance and from her string bag Mrs Larrakia, as she dubbed herself, pulled wooden clapping sticks and a mobile phone. Alongside moments of great hilarity and biting satire there were other extraordinarily moving passages. Against a

backdrop of projected portrait images of the Larrakia recorded in the 1870s by the Territory's police chief and official photographer Paul Foelsche, June sang, "When I die care for my children/Wrap my naked body in a paperbark sheet" and against video projections of open sea, we saw her miming fishing in the old way, casting the net out over the audience.

From Alice Springs came *Dream of Reconciliation* music dance and storytelling featuring a mix of Centralian locals, black and white, musicians and dancers brought together by Bob Rawdall, the singer and writer of the hymn to the Stolen Generation, *Brown Skin Baby*. While the spirit of reconciliation was evident in the generosity of the performers, it was a bit too feel good folksy and generalised for my taste.

I arrived after the opening weekend and everyone I met told me I had missed the best bit of all, the performance of *Luuli*, a collaboration from Townsville between Dance North and the Mornington Island Dancers, which was apparently startling and powerful for the way it combined the greatest artistry of traditional Aboriginal and European dance with dancers moving between cultures. Two years in the making it was said to far surpass anything seen previously by Darwin people. The whole time I was there people were telling me about it, and they all wondered why it wasn't touring the nation.

The festival closed with *Journey to the Mythical Place* by Darwin's Arafura Ensemble, presented in the grand marble foyer of The Supreme Court with barefoot musicians standing on the glass mosaic Milky Way Dreaming. It combined performance poetry by Karyn Sasella with works by Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards and Romano Crivici. Crivici is director of the Elektra String Quartet in Sydney and he returned to Darwin to conduct and perform in the premiere of his new work *As Night Follows Day*.

As Karyn Sasella says—"you won't find another place/you won't find another sea/this place is going to follow you"—and it does and so I go back.

*Festival of Darwin 98, Darwin, September 12 - 21*

Suzanne Spinner travelled to Darwin for the festival on her own initiative utilising Frequent Flyer points accrued in all her previous trips back.



Rukshana Ramachandran, *The Land, The Cross and The Lotus* Therese Ritchie