

# nt's festive season

## suzanne spinner at the 2007 darwin festival

THE TOWN WAS ONLY JUST RECOVERING FROM THE EXCITEMENT OF OUR NICOLE AND HER KEITH ACTUALLY DRINKING COFFEE IN THE LOCAL COFFEE PALACE, THE ROMA BAR, CAUSING A STAMPEDE OF PAPAZZI OUTSIDE AND THE SUBSEQUENT DESIGNATION OF THE FRONT CORNER TABLE AS A SACRED SITE TO BE VIEWED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PILGRIMS IN SEARCH OF WHAT NICOLE WAS HAVING. PERHAPS ARTIST CHAYNI HENRY WHO MAKES RETABLO STYLE PAINTINGS OF ORDINARY MOMENTS IN HER OWN LIFE COULD BE COMMISSIONED TO CREATE THE NICOLE SHRINE. THE FEBRILE FLURRY SURROUNDING THE FILM PEOPLE SEGUED NICELY INTO AUGUST FESTIVAL TIME.

And have we got festivals and events for you! The Darwin Cup, followed by Garma, then the Telstra Aboriginal Art Award and Art Fair, and the Darwin Festival itself; as the glossy copy from travelNT.com says, "vibraNT, enchaNTment, eNTertainment", but not a word about iNTervention. On the waterfront, relentless development proceeds turning the place from a piece of paradise into yet another condominium capital in the north, Gold Coast mirages and gallerias dependent on air conditioning to celebrate what the locals now tout as their unparalleled lifestyle in their own schmick mag, Resident, or should that be resideNT. "Down disconsolate streets" indeed in a town that seems to have forgotten its history, its uniqueness, and which is in danger of perjuring its soul in the pursuit of aspirational lifestyles. Was it ever thus—always waiting to be discovered?

### guan wei

Culture Trackers at 24HR Art showed the results of a two-week artists' camp in Arnhem land at Injalak bringing together local Indigenous artists and a group of non-Territorian, non-indigenous artists for a potential exchange. On the evidence presented not a lot got exchanged and most of the artists retreated to familiar territory, except for the marvelous Guan Wei in his A Mysterious Land series. Wei places himself smack in the middle of the work as a plump, naked pink figure peering shyly out from behind trees or termite mounds, or scurrying up a likely branch to escape from crocodiles or to slyly observe the natives dancing. In black ink on Chinese scrolls, he exquisitely details images like paper cutouts of every plant and creature encountered in "the forest" or in an entire billabong. These run over 19 delicately drawn panels, all done in situ, one panel at a time.

Meanwhile the festival thrives under balmy night skies down in the Botanical Gardens. You can eat Jimmy Shu's raita, roti and rendang under the golden paper lanterns strung in the big trees, watch Indigenous dance in the Starshell every sunset, and even look at art. This year the palm tree gallery, Galuku, includes Yolgnu barks and an installation of larritj (polés) as well as the usual range of framed prints. The flow on from Garma includes Sing Sing, featuring the master songman George Telek with David Bridie, and introduced the Morning Star marvel, Hein Arumisore, dancer extraordinaire in concert with Ari Ingram and Darwin's PNG community choir. At the Supreme Court, the Gyuto Monks are back, installed, chanting and scraping fine coloured sands to make delicate ephemeral art, and sharing sumptuous barbecues every evening courtesy of their sponsor, Fannie Bay Butchers.

### constance drinkwater

The sunsets over the silver sea are redder than ever and the markets at Mindil beach and Parap as frantic as ever. Territorians all seem to have adapted very well to the vicissitudes of the tropics, and Darwin is finally a destination as well as the gateway to Kakadu. The prospects are good and the real estate is booming—unimaginable a hundred years ago on the eve of Federation to the desperate denizens of Stephen Carleton's creation, the northern outpost of Somerset. Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset is

At Browns Mart, The Theatre Practice, a Singapore-based company, presented Play Play. Touted as physical theatre at its most whimsical from a multi-lingual company that celebrates diversity, it failed on all counts. Serving up inane and glorified mime with a plethora of cute sounds created by the four performers in the style of Tinky Winky from the Teletubbies, and staged within a pristine Brooksian white cube by white clad performers, the production lacked insight or élan. Others enjoyed it greatly, but clearly my inner child had been put down for the evening.



a gothic, possibly baroque melodrama that references Capricornia and Coonardoo, and is laced with deadly white powder: strychnine in the damper, arsenic in the scones. The surviving matriarch, Constance Drinkwater, maintains that the English language recollect and practiced amidst increasing unease and disease is her only defence, but it is not enough. A deadly mélange of racial and sexual politics, Darwinian science and sectarian utopianism, Federalism and White Australia fuels the drama and fans the hysteria. The damaged centre resides in her last two surviving daughters, played with compelling intensity by Ella Watson-Russell and Daniel Cunningham as Fortitude and Hope, no less, who may or may not be turning into shrieking curlews foretelling an horrific future as they attempt to outwit the plague that has engulfed Somerset. In a joint venture between Darwin Theatre Company and Cairns Jute theatre, Merrilee Mills has directed a good enough ensemble cast but Carleton's apocalyptic vision was compromised by unimaginative staging, in particular indifferent lighting and a lacklustre and inconsistent soundscape.

### the tangled garden

By contrast, The Tangled Garden made by Sydney's Sidetrack Theatre in collaboration with Komunitas CCL from Bandung, Indonesia, is genuinely whimsical and an utterly beguiling depiction of Sundanese life through the prism of high German romanticism, a genuine celebration of diversity. In part based on Thomas Mann's story, The Transposed Heads, the intense friendship and concomitant rivalry of the male protagonists propelling the drama and the tragedy is pure blutbruderschaft, and as powerful a myth as any thrown up by the Sundanese. While the music, lighting and mise en scene is captivating the narrative meanders and you begin to wonder if it will come together, but then suddenly it does by way of the galvanizing performance of Gusjur Mahesa. He is the journeyman actor who takes on many roles including an absolutely startling rooster, but to all of these small parts he brings finely observed textures and subtly expressed feeling.

### you dance funny

Tracks Dance Company rarely disappoints and You Dance Funny is no exception. Concept, writing and directing is shared by David McMicken and Gail Evans. Evans' script is biting, political and very funny. McMicken has made dancers from actors and made them dance so good it's funny. Set in a boxing ring outdoors and presided over by the Strictly Salsa Infernal Couple, Gail Evans and Yoris Wilson, it's a mixture of carnival tent show and reality television, without either tent or television. La Famiglia Del'Inferno, a Pirandelloesque troupe of dancers, auditions local contenders to fill the vacancy in their troupe. They engage the audience at every level, teach them en masse to dance various hilarious routines and provide points of identification for everyone from

Grey Nomad nostalgia, to martial arts, rave party glow girls and everything in between.

Each segment is mercilessly judged by The Producer, Kin Leong in Iron Chef style, and the matriarch nonna, Crena Hemmings, who does a great line in croll delivery reminiscent of Graham Kennedy. You Dance Funny abounds with loving local references and acerbic national and global power points. Everyone dances, every dance style and fad is lampooned, no one gets hurt and everyone laughs. It is profoundly inclusive and sharply critical. No mean feat to dance funny and say something as well. In You Dance Funny, Darwin delivered a unique eveNT, and entertainmeNT.

### Darwin Festival, Aug 9-26

For more on the Darwin Festival see page 40 for a report on the Interpositions live art program and go to [www.realtimearts.net](http://www.realtimearts.net) for a review of Red Dust Theatre's Barracking

Image: You Dance Funny, Tracks, photo Peter Eve