A tale of two cities

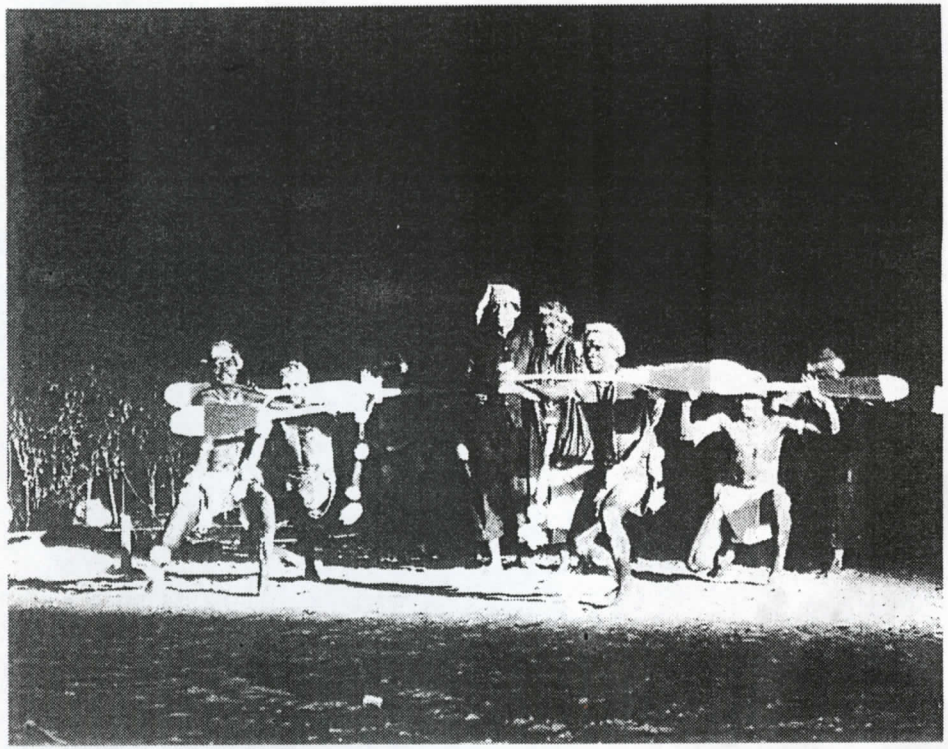
Suzanne Spunner in Darwin while Dili burns

The experience of this year's Darwin Festival was inevitably and indivisibly linked with the events happening just across the water in Timor. Darwin is a garrison town masquerading as a public service town with palms; it comes into its own during wars and evacuations. In September 1999, it was the best of times and the worst of times.

The ironies of timing were rich—the night before I left Melbourne I saw the premiere of Louis Nowra's *Language of the Gods* set in the town of Makassar in the Celebes, present day Sualwesi, in the dying moments of Indonesian independence. Amongst the audience was playwright Graham Pitts and ex-Darwin actor Terry Kenwrick who had created *Death at Talibo*, about the massacre of Australian journalists in Timor in 1975. Also present was John Romeril who wrote *Top End*, which conjoined the invasion of Timor and life in Darwin immediately after Cyclone Tracy, with timely reminders of the debt Australia owes the Timorese, and the corresponding support of Australian wharfies for Indonesian independence after the war. The night after I arrived, an architectural and historical icon of white settlement, The Hotel Darwin, was demolished. It had withstood the bombing of Darwin in 1942 and the fury of Cyclone Tracy. Each time it was rebuilt and its poetic blue tiled roof restored, only to fall prey to the rapacity of economic rationalism one hot and steamy night.

The times were intense enough in the arts over the 10 days I spent in Darwin, even without events in Timor. As well as the festival there was the NT Writers Festival and The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award. But in Darwin there could be no forgetting Timor. Gertie Huddleston, a senior painter and a winner in the Art Award told me about watching the news on TV back at Ngukurr and crying for the people of Timor and how she had just spent the day painting with some of the refugees in the park beside the UN headquarters. The night before I heard the Gyuto monks from Tibet chanting a prayer for peace but hearing that drone from a distance, mistook it for the didgeridoo. The monks made a fine sand mandala in the foyer of The Supreme Court, as mobile phones went off around them. The Arafura Ensemble gave a concert there and dedicated it to the people of Timor, and at the end Karyn Sassella read a poem about letting the peace keepers in. She looked strained; she was. Sassella was doing double duty. She'd come to read at the Writers Festival from working with the Kosovars down south and ended up counselling refugees at the Tent City on the edge of town.

Everything blurred, the place is so small. The Festival Club was set up on the wharf, and to party at the club you had to pass a military checkpoint because the naval ships were parked alongside waiting for the orders to move out. Get Frocked's



Paddle dance, *Trepang*

Mary Lynn Griffith hoped the concrete wharf was safe and not about to succumb to the same insidious, undetectable, "concrete cancer" that had invaded the Hotel Darwin and necessitated its overnight demolition. The Fourth Estate, a blues ensemble of a dozen local journos playing manual typewriters, bemoaned "the deadline blues" and around the town there was not a hotel bed or a roll of film to be had for love or money; the place was awash with foreign correspondents reporting from as close to the war zone as they could get.

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What we saw under the stars that night was a series of cultural exchanges—songs and dances performed for one group by the other to introduce and reveal themselves, and at the same time we saw what the Yolgnu made from that contact. We saw a boat built, blessed with ceremony, a sail hosted and a great voyage undertaken, we saw the arrival on a distant beach and strangers approaching strangers. We saw gifts given and received, and dances about all the new things—tobacco, cloth, knives, playing cards, dugout canoes with sails, and alcohol. A marriage ceremony between a Macassan boy and a Yolgnu girl signifying and sealing the promise of friendly relations.

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At the daily meetings at the 'East Timorese Embassy' in Raintree Park, leaflets urged us to boycott Indonesian goods—Balinese clothing was mentioned specifically—meanwhile an exhibition at NTU, *I've Been to Bali*, celebrated the first major exchange visit of NT Fine Arts students whose course now involves an extended homestay in Ubud. And at the Mindil Beach Market we ate our satays, wore our batiks and smoked our kreteks, and watched the bloody red sunset, and heard that in Jakarta the Australian Embassy was being stoned and all over Indonesia Australians were passing themselves off as Americans.

The highlight of the Darwin Festival was *Trepang*, an Indigenous opera directed and devised by Andrish Saint Claire, which celebrated the 300 years of trade and cultural exchange between the Macassan seafarers and the Yolgnu, the Aboriginal people of SE Arnhemland. Every year with the South East trade winds the Macassans came, in their praus, and returned with their boats full of dried smoked trepang, which had been collected in the warm shallow waters by Yolgnu men and women. Trepang, bêche de mer, sea cucumber, was prized as an aphrodisiac by the Macassan Chinese masters.

On the opening night, various Aboriginal leaders welcomed the audience: Billy Risk from the Larrakia Association spoke of the Tamarind Trees the Macassans planted all along the Northern coast and welcomed the refugees from Timor; and Terry Yumbulul, artist and cultural manager for the Elcho Island people who performed the show, reminded us that this was a trading history between business partners. Marcia Langton talked of *Trepang* as being "family history", a long history of mutual respect and friendly relations between neighbours, then and now, a story of first contact and wondered, as we did, what things would have been like if this model had been our dominant image of cultural contact.

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The entire opera was sung in Macassarese and Yolgnu Matha, which includes a repertoire of some 450 shared words, but even to outsiders like myself the story was clear in the detailed performance; we just missed out on lots of jokes that had the large Aboriginal audience in stitches throughout. We were the strangers, the Balanda, a Yolgnu word for white people, given them by the Macassans from their word for Hollanders, the Dutch who had colonised their country.

There is a moment in *Trepang*, a very subtle moment, really an accident, a rupture in the illusion of first contact that occurred in the dance where the wearing of sarongs is introduced. The Macassans present sarongs to the Yolgnu and show them how to wear them. Everything proceeds with the pleasure of novelty and pretend naivete but one old Yolgnu man, once he'd wrapped his new sarong around himself, immediately made that unmistakable gesture of adjusting the fit and settling it on his gut by deftly rolling the top over. That small gesture revealed all. He could not dissemble, he knew he was part of Asia as only recently the rest of Australia has begun to learn and, like him, we cannot unlearn that knowing.

What a difference a year makes! Last year I came back for the premiere of my play *Silver Seafarers*, celebrating the annual Darwin to Ambon yacht race and the maritime history of the Arafura Sea, including the little known but extraordinary meeting between Matthew Flinders and the Macassan fleet off the coast of Arnhemland in 1803. The race began 28 years ago as the Darwin to Dili Dash, but in 1975 everything changed and it rerouted to Ambon. This year the race was suspended and everything has changed again.