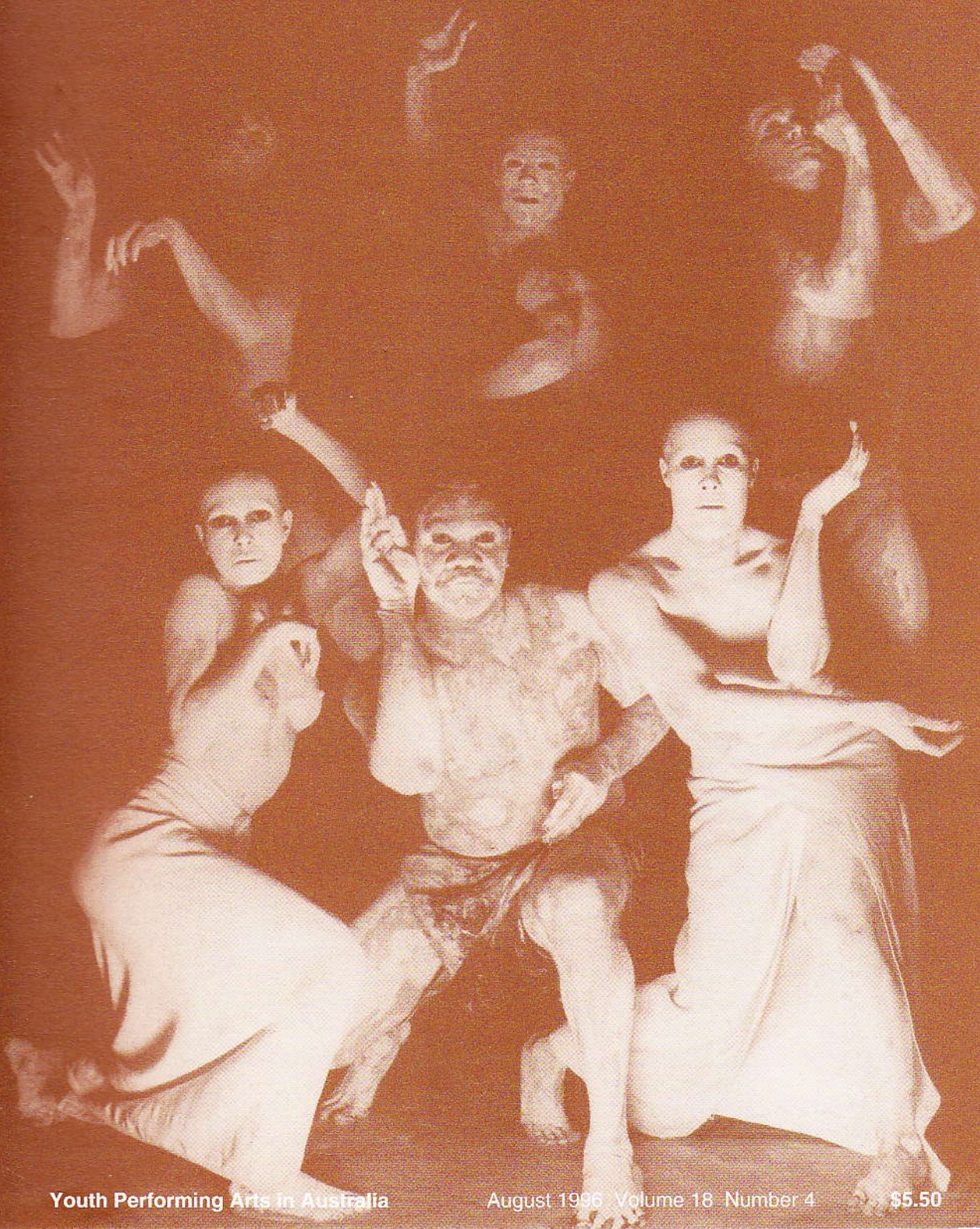


LOWDOWN



Nigel Jamieson plans a **TAKE OVER!**

No, it's not time for another Come Out - yet. But it's getting closer. The Artistic Director of the Australian Festival for Young People, Nigel Jamieson, talks to Tony Mack about what's in store.

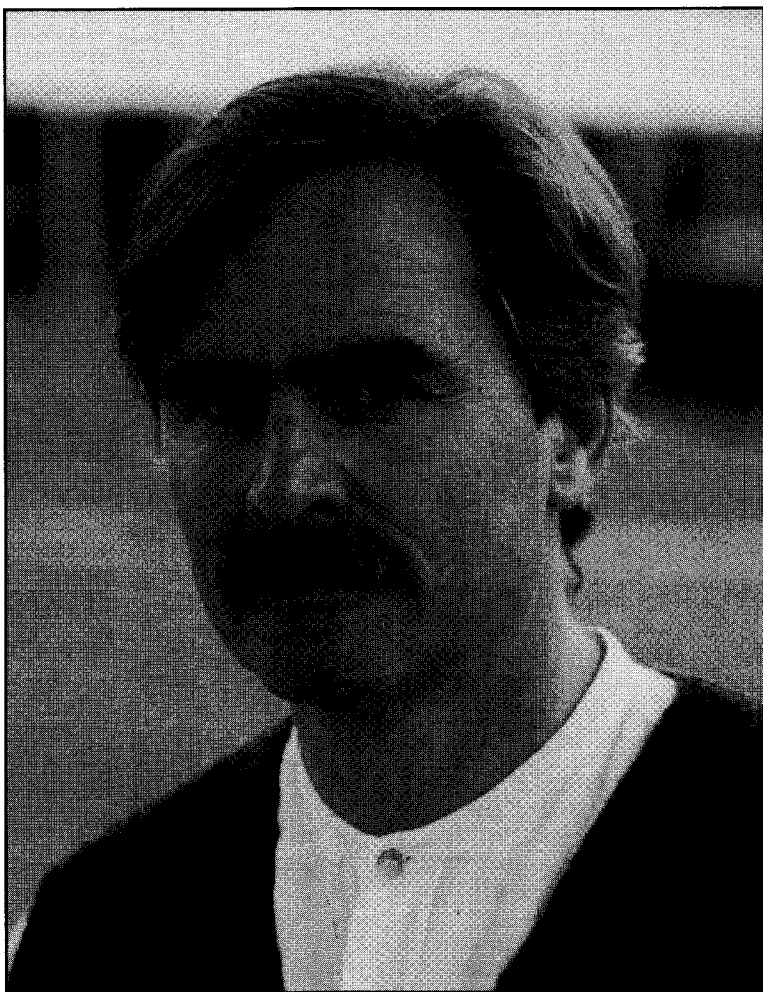
The first thing that people will notice is that Come Out is not Come Out anymore. **Why the name change?**

If you live in Adelaide you know that Come Out is a young people's festival, and a whole set of images come to mind. I think if you don't live in Adelaide - if you live overseas or don't have much to do with the young people's theatre industry - and you say 'Come Out Festival' it has a whole different set of images. I think it's confusing and there's probably been a little bit of merriment at the festival's expense. That's on a superficial level, but there's also a suggestion of 'come out and play', and if there was talk of changing the name of the festival I wanted something that was more proactive than that.

The Australian Festival for Young People is a generic name, a sort of "corporate title" for the festival. I suppose it was felt that recognised Come Out as the largest and longest running youth festival in Australia. It's the one that covers all of the age ranges - other festivals have more specific age ranges that they cater for.

So what's the vision for this festival?

This festival is called Take Over. Very simply, it's about the take over of the city. The central idea is that tens of thousands of young people and 900 education organisations will work together to create a visionary city - Capital City - in the heart of Adelaide.



What is Capital City?

It is a city currently being designed by 20 architecture students from the University of Adelaide, who are all doing it as their final year thesis. It's going to involve a Web tent, a large outdoor stage with screens to be used for

film, video conferencing, rock bands and so on. It involves the transformation of the Festival Centre - all aspects of it - which we've been invited to do. We're hoping to bring in a circus tent, a flying trapeze, to build a ceramic village which will have huge kilns

burning at night, with firings and films and sculpture parks, food, drink, nightclubs. We're trying to get every class - whether it's a sculpture class or a primary class - to build a totem pole, and if we manage to do that we'll have over a thousand totem poles installed around the perimeter of the site.

And where will that be?

In Elder Park. We're also exploring the possibility of building a bridge over the Torrens, and opening up to Memorial Drive and that whole area. There are feasibility studies going on about this at the moment - fifty different ways of building a bridge for nothing! I think what's brilliant about it is...it's not only about building the bridge, it's the adventure of trying to build the bridge.

So it's process as well as product.

Absolutely, it's process as product...One of the central features of Capital City is the parliament. We're going to have a democratically elected group of young people who are going to be discussing the issues that matter in their life. We're hoping that they can conduct a series of public interviews where they can talk to the Howards and Browns of this world, and ask them about issues that concern them, and that those will be held in a media tent. We've talked to the papers here about setting up a media tent where part of the paper is created on the site by young people. We've also talked to the ABC about young people creating programmes for the ABC, and young people reading the news that week - just that presence of young people in the city.

Is the structure similar to the last festival, where a number of mini-festivals operated under a unifying theme?

The structure is similar - absolutely. We still have 1st Site, we still have Allwrite, we still have Community Come Out, we still have the schools programme. How it differs is...take my input into the last festival, which was 'Galax Arena'. I mean I hope the people who came to 'Galax Arena' were excited and stimulated by it, but I did think for an awful lot of them the experience was to get on a coach, to arrive at the Festival Centre, in a foyer which was just

the Festival Centre foyer, to go in and see the play, and then to come out, and go back to school. Which isn't quite the full festival experience. I know there were some very successful packages, such as the Botanic Gardens, which were lovely ideas, but there wasn't the sense of coming somewhere and being there with ten thousand kids. And if you didn't seek out the visual exhibitions you wouldn't see them. So my very first thought was, all this is happening across the city, but the city's a big place and it can tend to be lost - what would it be like if we tried to pull it all in. So if you come down to Capital City you walk through all this artwork, and sculpture work, installations and environments, maybe you hear a school choir singing here and you might see a rock and roll band over there. You come through, past the catering students serving food, you go up through this created walkway and into the theatre and then you see 'Galax Arena', and afterwards come back out into this environment. So you really have a sense when you go home that you've been to a festival. It changes the city in some way. Obviously I'm currently best known in this city as director of Red Square, and I think that we proved pretty conclusively that there was a very large audience ready for this kind of experience.

Yes, I was thinking of that. What I think was very successful about Red Square was that it created that focal point for people who wanted to indulge in the '96 Adelaide Festival, to be stimulated and challenged by it.

Yes, that's right.

What artists have you got lined up?

Obviously I have a long list of things that we're hoping to have. The programme will be finalised mid-September. The elements that we're looking at are, for the young audience, work which is beautiful and witty, with a very high visual content and a lot of physical skills tied to some good solid storytelling. I'm very keen to avoid the "wobbly head" syndrome - you know, that "let's act for children" style which treats children as some sub-species. I've just created a show

for three to eight year olds, and my brief to myself was, if something doesn't move me, I don't see who I am to serve it up to a three year old. And then we move through, with older audiences, to work that is experimental, mixed media, and full on 'in your face'.

What about 1st Site, and the literature festival, Allwrite?

1st Site is a crucially important part of what we're doing. 1st Site is that part of the festival that is not only the work of people under 25, but is also curated by them. This is the one section of the festival I don't decide, the 1st Site Committee decides. That runs through the festival - there's a core 1st Site theatre programme in the Space. They're also going to have a club on site, which will be run by them and programmed by them. I think that it's important that there's a section of the festival that will be totally controlled by young people, and those events will be marked in the programme with a 1st Site stamp. Allwrite! will move on to site, and have a tent in Capital City - and when I use the word "tent" it doesn't necessarily mean a traditional tent. We're looking at different types of temporary housing.

And outside Adelaide?

The festival has never just been an Adelaide festival - it's always been a South Australian festival. And I think that's what makes it extraordinary and exceptional. It has a huge geographic brief. The way we're trying to pull this event together is through the Web tent on site, which is a multimedia environment with both small terminals and large conferencing screens. So it's possible for arts events to be created around the state and beamed into Adelaide, and the work in Adelaide to be beamed out to them. We're also working on the concept of the Conference of the Giants, inviting cities all over the state to build these "giants" - huge carnival style puppets - bringing together schools communities, business communities, youth groups and local artists. These will travel down from their communities, taking part in the opening day parade, and then setting up on the Festival site, where they'll represent the

collective creativity of those communities. At the end of the festival we're working on an idea called 'Convoy', which is basically where the festival packs up and goes out on the road. If say, Port Pirie is doing an event, the Convoy heads off there and joins with local groups. We envisage a visual arts component, and a writer, a show for young kids, a show for older kids and a band - that's the pattern we're looking at.

I'm interested in your concept of what a festival should be. Apart from an experience in itself, the environment you envisage seems designed to heighten the perception of individual works of art within it...

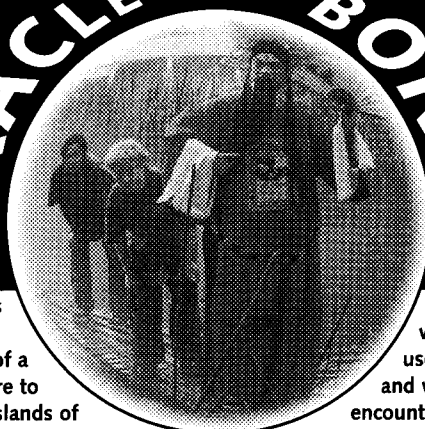
I think that's absolutely what you need to do. What is any work of art, really? It is attempting to get one to look at the world in a new and fresh way. If you invite a theatre director to create a festival, hopefully what they'll want to do is stage a show. I suppose for me, this is the opportunity to stage a show. And I think what's exciting about staging this show is to turn it over to some extent to the thousands of young people in this city, and the institutions and all the energy. More than that I hope to create a festival that gives Adelaideans an image of their city as an exciting place to be, a world leader, a place to look to - something to reenergise people. I would like people, after Take Over, to have an enlarged sense of Adelaide as the place to live in terms of excitement, and to have an enlarged sense of the capabilities of the arts to make our lives richer. Most of all, it should make us realise that nearly 40% of the population of this city is under 25, and that represents an incredible pool of energy and inspiration if it can be nurtured and respected and listened to, and convinced that this is the best city to live in and work.

What we've got here is a wonderful city to throw these kinds of events - it's small enough and it's big enough. Do a festival for young people in London and it's hard to make the whole city sit up, and what we hope to do is make the whole city sit up.

Tony Mack

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next wave

a festival devoted to the works of young and emerging artists

The Next Wave Festival has come
and gone in Melbourne, leaving
behind two minor controversies,
a small amount of biff, at
least one undoubted triumph
and (I presume) a degree of
satisfaction from the Festival
organisers.



PHOTO: Tim Webster

The artists of Sing Sing - a celebration of music and dance from across Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands.

The Next Wave occupies a difficult place in the constant parade of festivals working their way through Melbourne. It lacks the budget (or inclination) of a major international arts festival, with the accompanying hype and public profile. Nor is it an open-community-fringe festival with their promise of the unexpected (and often unwanted). Rather, Next Wave is, in the words of Artistic Director Zane Trow, a "medium scale" festival devoted to the works of young and emerging artists. In this the Next Wave is more a festival for arts practitioners and those keen on the new, rather than a festival for the general public.

The Festival kicked off with a launch at the National Gallery of Victoria. Black clad Melbourne artists chatted about art and the capacity of their latest computer, before speeches from Zane Trow, the Deputy Lord Mayor of Melbourne and Lorraine Elliott, MP standing in for Alan Stockdale, Victoria's very own



PHOTO: James Braund

Jay Kranz performs at Show'n'Tell: speak now or forever hold your peace. (Writers program)

Minister for Multi-Media. Combined with the opening of Perception and Perspective, part of the Art and Technology programme, the launch was politely low key (as these things usually are) although one or two in

the audience seemed keen to address Mr Stockdale in the flesh. Things became warmer at an open forum the following Monday. Titled 'Do We Lead or Are We Led', the debate focused on the use of



Eric Dando & the bald men in sleeping bags.



Deborah Mailman

contemporary and multi-media, the impact of technology, the relevance of hybrid arts and the old chestnut, is text dead? Discussion soon centred on the future of theatre and why young people are staying away. Michael Fitzgerald of Youth Performing Arts Australia commented that, in his opinion, a lot of young people's theatre was second rate and that he saw better production values in football or at a disco. Zane Trow called for more space for critical debate in the arts and kicked the ball off by accusing the larger mainstream theatre companies of producing dull and dead work (much to the distress of a representative from the Melbourne Theatre Company who was sitting in

the audience).

Controversy of a different kind broke out in two different directions. The first concerned a project from the RMIT interior design students, a "sound installation" located outside the Arts Centre. The installation involved the large bronze sculpture, *Standing Figure* by Willem de Kooning, being struck by a series of soft mallets, drumsticks and brushes, powered by a small engine and a series of counterweights and chains. The result was a series of sounds as different parts of the sculpture was struck by the different drumsticks. The clanking of the chains as they hauled the mallets into place, the odd yet pleasing sounds produced and the slow rise

and sharp fall of the instruments transformed and made interesting what I have always regarded as a fairly dull piece of contemporary art.

To me, this was one of the highlights of the festival and judging by the crowd that seemed to be always gathered around, it was an opinion shared by large numbers of passers by and the idly curious. The National Gallery didn't see it that way and after concerns were expressed over the integrity (and health) of *Standing Figure*, the installation was removed.

The second controversy came with *Sing Sing*, a musical event planned to incorporate music and culture from Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands. With a cast lineup including Kev Carmody, Archie Roach and Not Drowning Waving, *Sing Sing* was planned to be one of the highlights of the Festival. The project hit a snag however, when Kev Carmody noticed that the performance was part sponsored by CRA and decided to withdraw.

Another performance from indigenous artists had a far calmer passage. 'The Seven Stages of Grieving', a production from Brisbane-based Koomba Jdarra performing arts company, was based on Kubler-Ross's five stages of dying (Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance) and the seven phases of Aboriginal history (Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-determination and Reconciliation). The piece focused on performer Deborah Mailman as she worked through the less than glowing history of indigenous people in this country since 1788 to (hopefully) reconciliation in the 1990s. Audiences were prepared for an emotional and angry piece, what many did not expect was the level of humour. This was at times an extraordinarily funny piece and it was impossible not to come away moved. Visually striking and powerfully performed, this was the highlight of the Performance section and a bold illustration of what contemporary theatre can achieve and should be.

In keeping with the Festival's stated aim of "engaging with the city", the Art and Technology section took place in a series of galleries and areas scattered across the city and inner suburbs. Chief among these were *Ruins in Reverse* (at the RMIT

Gallery) and Nothing Natural at the Basement Gallery in Collins St. Ruins in Reverse featured thirteen artists examining the relationship between art, architecture and institutional space, using a variety of media. Most notable was Lauren Berkowitz's striking 'Polystyrene Room' made entirely from polystyrene milk crates, Chris Ulbrick's 'Dissolves' and Christopher Langton's cheeky 'The Biggest Game in Town'. Although Ruins in Reverse was interesting, it was overshadowed by being located next to the even more striking Storey Hall annex which has been baffling and enraging Melbournians since it's completion in 1995.

Nothing Natural suffered by comparison by being tucked away in a basement gallery in quiet and leafy Collins St and lacked the high visibility of Ruins in Reverse. This was a shame as I thought Nothing Natural was the more interesting exhibition. Nothing Natural explored the relationship between the artist, technology and biology, raising questions about human evolution (and devolution), genetic engineering and the profit motive, interactive technology and the commodification of the body (all this and the omnipresent Sophie Lee).

Next Wave presented such a variety of new and developing art during its two and a bit week run that at times, the choices became overwhelming. From the Performance section (apart from 'The Seven Stages of Grieving') 'Grind', 'Rub the Angel', 'This Romeo & Juliet' and 'Downloading' were spoken of highly, as was 'See Spot Run' in Visual Arts and 'Perception and Perspective' from the Art and Technology segment. Also notable was the "Technopath" down Swanston Walk. This essentially was a series of flashing dot matrix messages discussing the nature of technology and virtual reality and located on top of city maps and information stands. Once you stopped to read them, the "Technopath" did have a certain mesmerising quality (although they kept reminding me of an episode from 'The X Files' where subliminal messages from electronic appliances spark an outbreak of random killings).

One way of judging the success of any festival is numbers; bums on seats, audiences through the door.

This information has not yet been released, so it is not possible to say whether Next Wave '96 has been a commercial success. It is possible, however to make some comment about its artistic success, which is perhaps the more important issue in these bleak times.

There is a perception in the Melbourne arts community that the arts in general, and theatre in particular, are in crisis. What growth there has been has occurred at the macro level, the overseas blockbuster like 'Sunset Boulevard'. For home based theatre, the outlook is less rosy. Offerings from the large companies like the Melbourne Theatre Company and Playbox (such as 'Burning Time' and 'Miss Bosnia') have come under a hammering, with critics attacking a perceived lack of dramatic imagination. Even what might be called the traditional avant-garde (a la Barry Kosky) seems to have lost its power to shock, becoming instead a series of ritual set pieces.

At the same time, the "medium level companies" who could produce first class work in a professional setting and still afford to experiment, such

as The Church or Australian Nouveau Theatre, have ceased to exist, leaving only companies operating at or near the fringe. A Festival like Next Wave, with its eyes firmly set on new and developing artists becomes even more important in these circumstances.

Contemporary art should disturb, nothing creates like a degree of intellectual biff. This is where festivals like the Next Wave step in. By providing a forum in which new artists can work, Next Wave allows the new a medium in which they can operate. By these standards, Next Wave '96 should be judged a success. Although not all pieces worked, the organisers provided a valuable outlet for the new and emerging, for those artistic forms with which the artistic establishment cannot afford to experiment. Zane Trow believed that there was little point in holding an arts festival in which artists did not want to participate. The sheer scale and depth of work exhibited is testimony to the importance of festivals like Next Wave.

Brendan Ryan

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OUT OF THE

It's amazing to see the Queensland Performing Arts Complex being overrun by young people, their families and carers. For a brief time the usually staid and formidable space comes pretty damn close to being an accessible venue for communities.

BOX



Sofia Gibson and Paul Green from Company Skylark's 'Wake Baby'.

Even the usually formal suited front-of-house staff get into the atmosphere by donning fairly weird and perhaps, to young people, frightening hats and costumes. The space is bombarded by visual art installations created by young people during a ten week artist-in-residence programmed by Raquel Redmond, Sara Butcher and Susan Poggioli. The overall look of the festival was managed well by Maria Cleary and the tactile interactive installations, 'The Enchanted Tree' and 'Pirate Ship' had kids poking around in

them all day. The 1996 Festival brought together a diverse programme representing Queensland, Australian and International companies dedicated to presenting works targeting the 3-8 year old. The performance programme included promenade theatre, foyer presentations, outdoor works, roving entertainers and formal theatre space offerings. The Festival also included PictureBook Land, visual and aural installations, musical concerts, a critical Forum Programme, an executive

meeting for ASSITEJ, theme days, family day and Kids' Village; an outdoor feast of art, craft and cultural activities for children. Artistic Director Cate Fowler believes there is an enormous need to open up opportunities for young children to express themselves and explore their creative potential. Out of the Box provides just the opportunity for this special age group. The criteria I look for when programming is that the events, production and activities presented are stimulating and surprising. I believe that good

product not only works for children but will work on a number of levels. Adults accompanying children will also be engaged in the programme.

Not all works were commissioned especially for the Festival, however. What began to emerge throughout the week was the lack of readiness of some productions. Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking production values here; the problems related to either management of narrative, or understanding and placement of the 3-8 year old within the performative context.

This raises the question of the role of the Queensland Performing Arts Trust and Out of the Box as producers, and their artistic and educational support and management of individual productions. Where is the coordination of content, form and context to bring the Festival into a curated and cohesive structure?

The development of new work is an expensive, time-consuming process. Many of the works for this Festival were aired for the first time and perhaps needed to be framed more strongly with this in mind? Out of the Box does have a strong history of process and development of new work. However when newer works are framed within a consumer oriented environment, they are bound to be mis-represented.

Out of the Box may consider a longer developmental process for works with pre-Festival showings through the QPAT Education Program. Kooemba Jdarra's 'Little White Dress' has such a history and is a good example. Having been developed and produced in 1995 under the name 'Spirit', Kooemba Jdarra then had the opportunity to revisit the work and re-present it at the 1996 Festival to strong audience, education and artistic support.

It was interesting to discuss the performance programme with some ASSITEJ delegates, many of whom were overwhelmed with the budgets rather than the shows. Interestingly enough it raises the question as to how Out of the Box chooses to spend its money and allocate resources. QPAC is an expensive venue with

many in-built costs that can't disappear but it seems that the money was spent on production values rather than the management of supported process and lengthy development.

The works on offer were diverse, from huge extravaganzas in the formal performance spaces (Lyric, Concert Hall, Cremorne Theatre) to itsy little works (foyer spaces) and spectacles (outdoors). Programming in QPAC must be a nightmare for Out of the Box; tonnes of shows with 2 huge (2000 seat) and 1 not-so-huge venues. At various stages of "newness" the selection below provides a decent overview of what was on offer.

'The Incredible Adventures of Jackpot Jessie' combined the work of the Murray River Performing Group and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and is a strong example of community theatre. This was one of the very few works which embraced young people as participants and producers in work for young people. For this very reason the Fruit Flys engaged their young audience through performance skills in acro, tumbling, fire work, web rope, juggling, lifts, balances and stilts.

Unfortunately, the physical work is not well integrated into the narrative and only serves to slow the telling of the story.

Technically, the work was managed extremely well. However it was difficult to move beyond the stereotypical, comic cut-out characters and care for Jessie, her family and their home. The mother was called "Mum", the father was "Dad" and the kids on the island were all "ooga booga". The Dad 'n Dave comedy flew over the heads of most 3-8 year olds and some became quite distressed at the implied cannibalism on the island.

'Little Piggies and a Sausage Went for a Walk' presented by WA's Spare Parts Puppet Theatre was framed well within the Festival Programme. Clearly the work was pitched for 3-5 year olds with fun the main agenda. A moderately budgeted work, performed in a foyer space, it was

inventive, fast-paced, engaging and very funny. Based on the stories by Sally and Paul Morgan and Elisha Majid and Peter Kendall, the performance adaptation was sweet, energetic and embraced its very young audience with intelligence and humour.

'Wake Baby' by ACT's Company Skylark had an amazing pre-festival buzz attached to it which affords the company either a potential success or disappointment amongst its peers. Performed in the adaptable Cremorne Theatre 'Wake Baby' was a visual feast. It was beautiful, visually stunning, surprising and clever. Utilising objects, puppetry, acro and rope and a beautiful soundscape it was clearly evident that the company had access to clever minds, clever hands and a sizeable budget.

Although a feast for the eyes and heart, the mind was left wanting with 'Wake Baby'. The beauty of the images and the technical proficiency failed to narratively engage in a clear way. We follow a young female protagonist, fear for her and slowly care for her. However, she is not allowed to confront her demon a pair of scissors that chase her (paper, scissors, rock). She meets a young boy and valiantly he overcomes the scissors and protects her. This could be interpreted as a child learning from a child; a young girl's learning comes from a boy who can fix her demons. I'd love to see a redraft of this.

'Girl Boy Toy' presented by Brisbane's Backbone Youth Arts (housed in La Boite Theatre) was one of the very few offerings where young people were programmed as presenters of work. Emerging from Backbone Youth Arts Workshop Programme under the Artistic Direction of Louise Hollingworth, the kids involved were between 5-10. 'Girl Boy Toy' presented a series of vignettes exploring construction of gender, violence and popular culture. It facilitated young people to work as artists within a safe context and challenged audience perception of young people's

ability to manage form and content.

'Taiko Drummers', the offering from the Japanese Company Tamakko-Za, combined traditional drumming and contemporary comic interludes. Very Shakespearian in a sense it hit the audience with the serious work and rewarded them through humour. Beyond the sheer density of their programme, the skill and commitment to their mediums were clearly evident. What also was easily apparent is that the company has worked together for a long time. This again, is an important, if not crucial element, in the development of new work.

The highlight of Kazoo with 'Special Guest, Mem Fox Narrating Wombat Devine' was Mem Fox reading her story with beautiful underscoring and composition by Sean O'Boyle and visuals by illustrator Kerry Argent. The Kazoo concert was colourful but flat and used a very "boys and girls" approach, failing to move into a sophisticated narrative context.

'Tom's Egg' by Brisbane-based arts workers Jan Russell and Scott Witt was a quiet little work in a foyer space backed up against a door to the Lyric Theatre. This is an example of the status given to local companies within programming or the way in which local companies perceive their place within the festival. If anything, due to geography, local arts workers and companies have the opportunity to work closely with Out of the Box personnel to create and develop larger scale works over long periods of time. 'Tom's Egg' utilised dance, soundscape, spoken word and physicality, exploring the notions of being young, being on your own and being brave. Directed by Hilary Beaton and performing to audiences of around 35 children, the work connected and engaged with young people in a quiet and caring way and provided a great reprieve from the masses.

'Changing Into Animals' by REM Theatre was also a fairly quiet offering. With pre-recorded and live sound, 3 big projection screens and two performers 'Changing Into Animals'

animatedly narrated and actioned us through the story of Becky in search of disappearing animals. I went along for the ride but couldn't quite work out why Becky's story was being narrated by a friend rather than us seeing Becky in her story.


Another buzz around the Festival occurred with 'Castles in the Sky' by America's Gale LaJoye. Gale LaJoye is a great silent comic, a funny clown and the audience responded warmly to his humour. 'Castles in the Sky' traces the character Snowflake. It's his job to catch all the falling stars. The premise is that a falling star occurs when a child loses its hopes. Enter the child who loses its hopes and Snowflake sets about getting it back in the sky as soon as possible.

A large to huge scale work utilising clowning, slapstick, puppetry and a strong soundscape, 'Castles in the Sky' has moments of delightful humour but the tension of putting that star back up for the child's hopes to live becomes secondary to the humour. The use of 'Somewhere Over

the Rainbow' as a recurring sound motif for the child's hopes makes for a syrupy feel. The cockles of my heart were not warmed but my sugar levels were up. I sensed that the work lacked the tension to engage its younger audience.

The Festival in 96 had some strong successes and some worthwhile failures and it is to QPAT's credit that the festival is supported and its venue opened just for kids for a week or so. What becomes very clear, however, is the need for a strong developmental arm to be created from within the Festival to support both the brand spanking new works and to challenge and oversee the redrafting of existing works. It is not enough to have great images, sounds and colours if they mean nothing beyond a 45 minute distraction. QPAT has now returned to its usual self and let us hope that what's brewing for 1998 gets a long time on simmer.

Louise Gough



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PERTH'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL

Thanks to a programming muddle in early '96, Barking Gecko was in receipt of an amount of funded finance that was subsequently unusable for its earmarked project. What to do with this money? A festival! Thus began the mammoth undertaking of organising Awesome, Perth's first International Festival for Children. With less than 12 months to attract additional sponsorship, overseas productions, and a large audience base consisting of mostly primary school children, Barking Gecko set about the challenge of bringing Western Australia's young people together in celebration of the Arts. A couple of months after the actual event, the WA Arts Community is still reeling with admiration for the Awesome crew's outstanding accomplishment, with great hopes from industry, audiences and funding bodies alike that it will become a regular arts event.

The Festival, which ran from December 2 - 8, was a visual, performance and multimedia feast for the bus-loads of young audiences/participants that arrived each day. All but two or three events were housed in the beautiful, leafy Subiaco Theatre Centre and Gardens, making accessibility to activities and performances a highlight. The Gardens were transformed into a delightful mixture of serene watery rest spots, secluded performance and workshop areas and large open performance, eating and travelling areas. Everywhere there were beautiful works of art - in trees, on benches, round railings - that grew in number as the days passed and kids contributed their creations. The Festival programme included



'Pablo Percusso' Awesome Festival

local and three international performances; a film festival of new and "old favourite" movies for kids at a local cinema; fantastic art exhibitions; a speccy multimedia component called Starship Imago; workshops; and the Launchpad, an

outdoor stage decorated with artwork by local children, where school groups strutted their stuff before other festival goers. Exhibitions included 'Flying Fridges', a wonderful display of work from children statewide who

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exhibited on the outside of fridges, and the work of professional visual artists whose work was installed inside. A favourite was the fridge which housed a family of white mice who had the run of shelves with real and constructed food items. Another impressive exhibition was 'Together Under One Sun', a collection of Chinese children's work in which children as young as four had contributed truly beautiful, highly skilled and often exquisite drawings. See the feature which follows for a summary of performances.

Awesome opened with a vibrant street parade and the release of white doves and purple and orange balloons in honour of the Festival's theme: First Flight. This theme worked well - there were extraordinary sculptures of flying creatures and machines scattered throughout the gardens; one garden venue, The Satellite Tent was surrounded by its own moons in orbit; and children undertook workshops or dressed up specifically to address the theme. It was wonderful to be sitting in an audience amid children with wobbling antennae or bright pink and green flying costumes.

So now that the dust has settled and heartbeats are back to normal, how does the Awesome team evaluate the whole experience? Grahame Gavin, Artistic Director of both Barking Gecko and Awesome and Gary Chard, Festival and Sponsorship Manager, are excited by their achievements, circumspect about problems and eager to improve the overall event next time. They are delighted with how well the site worked, with the way kids took ownership of the festival and took over the grounds. The gardens

became an area of discovery, and a place to passively derive joy just from being there. Both are pleased with the overall standard and diversity of entertainment. Reports from schools suggest teachers loved giving their students the opportunity to see international acts. This is gratifying as imported works (from interstate and overseas) were the biggest risk and all were chosen sight unseen except for Samite and Pablo Percusso. As Gavin indicates: "Imported works always have a bigger profile and if they are awful then the whole festival, being an international one, will seem silly, or a failure, or pointless. But we definitely got it right, thankfully!" Interestingly, they got it right as well with the two Barking Gecko shows 'Unreal' and 'Alice In Wonderland' which had sell-out festival seasons. Where the festival got into trouble was in the area of support for other local works. "These works were excellent, but, with the exception of 'Daddy Wake Up' which had its own strong promotional campaign, they did not fare well at the box. It was so disappointing because they were well worth attending. Next time I think we would encourage more selling by the locals of their own productions - the festival can do some of the "audience getting" but we would get companies to look at taking some responsibility for their own audiences. Artrage gives small marketing grants and this may be a way to handle it."

Nevertheless, Chard is happy with attendances overall. There were 1200 kids in the opening parade, 5000 people attended the closing event and over 15,000 people attended the festival over the week. "Burns on seats tallies were good

considering this was the first year of the festival, but it does need to grow next time." The subject of next time is a tricky one. This festival was heavily subsidised by Barking Gecko and its staff to the value of \$100,000, an impossibility for subsequent Awesomes. The festival will need to find this amount, or shrink dramatically. This is not an option as Gavin sees it. He is not willing to reduce the number of international acts, and reduce the festival's appeal. "Increasing attendances is an option whilst maintaining the established size. Weekend attendances at shows were disappointing this time but introducing something like a Big Ticket for family groups would turn that around." The WA Department for the Arts is non-committal regarding future funding for Awesome. Despite glowing praise for a great visionary team, quality programming, excellent promotion and admirable efficiency, energy and dedication from all involved, the department at the time of printing was unable to commit to anything other than a hope that the festival would become a regular part of the WA calendar.

The big disappointment of the festival for me was the appalling lack of interest shown by Perth's major newspaper, The West Australian. In what appeared to be an act of apathy, the Arts Editor did not attend or review one show.

Diane Jeffries

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I was disappointed with the dance production 'Spilling the Beans' performed by locals Phillippa Clarke and Liz Cornish. Phillippa Clarke, as artistic Director of 2 Dance Plus is responsible for some of the best dance I have seen in WA, yet this show lacked the focus, discipline and fresh ideas that characterise her other work. The performance deals with supermarket shopping and one shopper's obsession with beans. With the aid of strategically placed paper shopping bags, cans of beans and a stepladder, we are taken through a sequence of contemporary dance pieces representing such events as shopping in a store, physically training for the rigours of shopping and discovering 101 things to do with beans. There were clever and entertaining dance sequences and the kids loved the audience participation. The major problem was that it needed some solid direction to iron out the superfluous elements and prevent confusion.

I guess there's always a dud at any festival, and this one had a monster. 'Daddy Wake Up', performed by two men, was patronising and unfunny, with a central character who was silly and annoying. The story centred on a father of two girls, who is separated from his family and sees his children only once every second weekend. We listened to his badly scripted, undisciplined complaints about fatherhood and sat through such songs as 'Josephine' which dealt with his frustrating inability to have sex because the kids are around. The sad thing is that one of the duo is a fabulous musician - the best part was when he played his saxophone, clarinet and recorder on stage alone. Yes kids love colour and movement, yes they love music, silliness and song but not at the expense of intelligent script or performance.

Presenting 'Two Unreal Stories' at Awesome was an odd selection for Barking Gecko to make, considering the Company has a wealth of highly praised and awarded shows from which to choose. 'Unreal', an adaptation which melds Paul Jennings' stories 'Without A Shirt' and 'Smart Ice-Cream', was mounted several years ago by the company; that production highlighting difficulties with script, abrupt scene

changes and sloppy characterisation. Surprisingly, this current production was met with full and enthusiastic houses. Also surprising is that much of the confusion (resulting from the perils of making two stories into one play) has been ironed out by a combination of fine acting and clever direction. The many characters are clear and discrete and the relationships between them strong. What were awkward changes, are now covered with appropriate banter so that the play flows easily from one scene to the next. The play still had difficulties: it was hard to hear in the large tent, the set needed a touch-up, and the script could still use some amending. What makes the play succeed is the way the four actors

see and hear as the actor was in a small secluded pond and it was disappointing to miss out! The character of Alice needed a little more attention as well but these are small gripes - overall it was a wonderful romp!

Included in the programme were two presentations of Aboriginal Dreamtime Legends, one a dance theatre piece in the Playhouse Theatre by Sydney's REM Theatre, and the other a more intimate rendition by Perth's Yirra Yaakin. The set for REM's 'Buralga' is beautiful. The landscape is unmistakably Australian, with shapely orange fabric boulders, paper representations of native trees, sandy patches of earth, and light filtering through branches onto a backdrop where



Wallace and Gromit - Awesome Festival

bring Paul Jennings' naughty, mad, endearing and spooky characters to life with warmth, intelligence and complete commitment. The audience had some great laughs and left feeling good if somewhat bewildered.

Barking Gecko's other contribution, and another remount, 'Alice In Wonderland', was performed mostly outdoors, before sunset, in the beautiful Festival Gardens. This show was a huge hit for the company two years ago, demanding an extended season. Audiences were equally enthusiastic and enchanted this time. The excellent characterisations and faithful adherence to Lewis Carol's loopy creations made it a joy to watch. The Mock Turtle scene was a little difficult to

we see the image of an Aboriginal man, and later, racing skies. There is a combination of recorded birdsong and live music as two dancers enter amid smoke and changing light and proceed to treat us to a lively rendition of the story of how the girl Buralga is transformed into the lovely Broilga. A musician, playing didgeridoo, sticks and other indigenous instruments, provides a musical backdrop for the dancers' superbly represented array of Australian animals and Dreamtime Spirits. The atmosphere changes from ethereal, to earthy, to silly, as an array of images pass before us. This show is designed for young children. It was good to be mindful of this when I began to question the value of narrating a

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part of the story and then reiterating it with dance, rather than letting the dance tell its own story. Mostly, I found it charming and clear storytelling for the little ones - who loved it.

Not so Yirra Yaakin's 'Donkalonk'. Set outdoors beneath the trees in the Festival grounds in a delightful little space behind a hessian fence, two well known Aboriginal actors and elders stand in front of a quaint shelter and share the task of telling us the stories of Donkalonk the frog, and how the Rosella got its feathers. This was a difficult space in which to perform, with groups of passing children and other distracting outdoor noise. It was also somewhat difficult for the small audiences, given the soft voices



Barking Gecko 'Alice in Wonderland'



'Scat in the Hat'

and subtle actions of the storytellers. With a little more planning on behalf of the actors and more solid direction, the performance would have been lifted to captivate the audience, but too often with this one it appeared that lines were forgotten and there was confusion as to what would happen next.

One of the highlights of the festival for me was Richard Tulloch's charming, lively and hilarious rendition of 'Stories From Our House'. In an intimate indoor setting with small audiences seated on chairs and cushions and with only a table strewn with several of his published books and one hat to help him, he treated us to an hour of thoroughly absorbing, simple, enchanting storytelling. From the

moment he began he had us (adults and children alike) participating eagerly with claps and gasps - he then fitted our routine into his first story, 'Four Glass Drinking Mugs'. There followed a selection of some of his favourite tales, always with a friendly and entertaining introduction which was often educational to boot, giving us an insight into the world of publishing, writing, designing drawings for books, inspiration, etc. We followed the tale of 'The Brown Felt Hat' as it wended its comical way via Richard's arms and head from manufacture to adventurous life and we felt very privileged to be hearing some work in progress.

'On the Wings of a Song' presented by Perth musicians Kerry Fletcher and Alain Thirion, and 'Samite', assisted by drummer Kweyao Agyapon, from Uganda were similar in that they used song, (often in other languages), indigenous instruments and explanatory stories from pertinent countries, to give kids a musical experience of foreign and Aboriginal cultures. The strengths of both shows were similar too: costumes were spectacular reds, browns and oranges, and both stages looked great with interesting instruments strewn about. All are fabulous musicians and Kerry and Alain in particular produced beautiful harmonies. Both had the audience swaying and clicking, clapping and singing, asking questions and helping up on stage. All the elements were there, yet for both shows the kids weren't engaged as fully as they might have been. The hot and stuffy conditions of the Satellite tent may have been responsible, but I think the answer may well lie in the performers looking at the way they deal with kids once they are on stage. A certain lack of gentle kindness with the kids spoiled it a little for me.

And now we come to two quite spectacular international shows that had me on the edge of my seat. They demonstrated the enormous advantages of understanding and loving one's audience, of tight direction, a great script and confident, skilled and committed performers. 'Tiger Tango' from Denmark tells the fabulous story of an encounter between a tiger and a man who has always wanted to meet one. With a

simple jungle backdrop, a stool and two wonderful musicians on violin and double bass, we were treated to absorbing, funny, delightful storytelling as one actor narrated his lifelong passion for tigers while the other became the tiger itself. What precise and disciplined performing, what clever and fresh ideas, what beautiful music and what great and sparing use of the musicians to help set scenes. It was exciting to wonder what would happen when this man actually met a tiger. We were not disappointed. Despite the man's father's voice warning him to be reasonable, he and the tiger began a relationship which was gratifying to watch. The tango sequence was a hoot! It all got a little weird at one point, but I figure some of that could be translation - this was the first time ever they had performed this show in English! 'Scat in the Hat' has to be one of the most innovative shows for kids I've seen. The story goes that an official from the Vancouver Childrens' Festival saw Scat (Richard Side) performing his adult stand up comedy routine and said to him "Hey, there's a kids show in there somewhere". Its easy to see why he's an international festival favourite. He is so funny! Scat, whose beatnik persona is fast, groovy, witty, cool and assured, takes us through a series of planned segments that leave us breathless with surprise, in admiration for the man's mastery of poetic verse and in stitches from his humour. His bass toting cohort Doghouse strums jazzy riffs beneath Scat's clever rhymes. The show begins with a catchy song about "doodads". It doesn't matter if you don't know what it means - the journey through the song is hilarious. I was impressed at how he'd taken time to adapt his material for Perth. Scat's 'Beatnik Private Eye', where he tells a detective story and has to incorporate previously unseen written sentences derived from kids at the top of the show, is a masterpiece. Audience participation and heckling was handled superbly and each participant received a free gift such as a poetry amplification unit (magnified plastic sheet). I'm still singing "What do your doodads do!"

Diane Jeffries