

LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

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AT THE TOP END

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

REPORTED BY IAN CHANCE IN DARWIN AND ALICE SPRINGS



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Left Festival of Aboriginal Rock Music, Darwin, 1988
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A NEW FRONTIER

FORGING A GENUINELY AUSTRALIAN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

THIS WASN'T my first visit to the Territory, nor even my fourth. In fact my very first job for *Lowdown* as editor five years ago was to write this same story — as I saw it then. But a ghost of Darwin always shades the town for me. It is that of the town I met nearly twenty years ago as a lanky long-hair on the run from the machinations of the big cities down south.

No doubting then that this was frontier city, the very edge of everything I understood. There was a special madness here, always close to the edge. It was my introduction to the world 'just out there', the wildness where I was soon to be working, out where your life was your own and you had better look after it. Where 'real life' came into sharp focus — in the snap of a rifle cocked in the dark, a crocodile in the nets, or a long fall to a very hard place indeed.

It was a place where the real pro's in the theatre of life were celebrated over every beer. Hard living, hard playing men and women with little time for the niceties of audience culture yet who could regale their mates by orating reams of Shakespeare's sonnets, Homer or Patterson's poetry. People with scarred, rough fingers that could caress the sweetest of folk melodies from the most battered of guitars — and then go on to tremendous displays of strength, perseverance or foolhardiness.

And still it lives. The town has

changed and the veneer of post-modern pastel sophistication has been laid on with a palette knife. But the character and the characters are there, little diminished by the crowds of tourist hotels, R & R Americans and post-Tracy public servants in their long white socks. For there's no denying those tropical eccentrics are in the very soul of the place, the source of legends that even the most timid of the Top End suburbanites hold close to their secret hearts.

The old ways, too, have infected

the new with their notion of unbridled enthusiasm as being the only adequate response to any half decent proposition. Or so it seems, for on this visit I found the artists and arts administrators I met to be the most refreshingly positive and active group of people that I have come across since the gutsier old Adelaide of the seventies.

But there are other changes. The most profound and most exciting is also one with the greatest ramifications for the rest of Australia. Because I also found here a busy interaction between black and white arts workers which I suspect must eventually lead to a restatement of the parameters of Australian culture as a whole. This is truly a new frontier, let me be the first to say that the arts movement in the Territory today is this strong.

It was my great relief to find growing amongst Territorians in all walks of life, finally, a genuine respect for Aboriginal people and an awareness of their rich culture. For two hundred years European culture in Australia has had the privilege of living with the oldest and one of the richest cultures on earth only to disdain and devalue it, even in the eyes of its owners.

Of course we have seen indications of a new awareness of Aboriginal culture in the rest of Australia, too. Galleries in Sydney and Melbourne filled with high-priced dot paintings from the Central Desert, three or four Jack Davis





plays on the circuit and a handful of novels by Aboriginal writers, a weekly program of Aboriginal arts on SBS Television, a Midnight Oil album and even Jimmy Pike designs creeping up our bedsheets and across our pillows.

But when was the last time you sat down with an Aboriginal person to discuss art, yours or theirs? Or really just to have a good earbash? After all, the Northern Territory doesn't have a monopoly on Aboriginal populations, in fact in sheer numbers there are only about half the number living here as in Queensland or New South Wales (from the 1986 census).

But cross-cultural interactions are a daily occurrence in the Territory because nearly a quarter of the population is Aboriginal, their art and culture is strong and getting stronger, and there are now a great many artists here, black and white, who are sufficiently attuned to give and take ideas in equality, and to

work together across cultural divides with equanimity.

The ripple of changed attitudes seems to run on a broad front, too. Though the redneck image of the white Territorian dies hard, for the first time I felt that I could give some credence to a statement such as the one made to me by Barney Foran, author of the Territory's would-be Bicentennial musical blockbuster, *Come Hell or High Water*, itself an attempt to reiterate the State's "fairly sordid and racist history". Barney expressed his optimism about the future of race relations in the Territory.

"Sure there's plenty of racism expressed here," he says. "But I feel that a lot of it is just on the surface and that deeper down there is a genuine warm tolerance, I think that such overt racism is far healthier than the deeper prejudices you are likely to find in the rest of the country where people don't have any day-to-

day interaction with Aboriginal people."

The conservative and complacent idea that there is little left to struggle for socially, politically and culturally in Australia today ignores the third world conditions that many of our Aboriginal countrymen live under. It ignores the structural racism that maintains these conditions and the great loss to our society in the ignorance of the rich and vital Aboriginal culture whose holistic religion and its links with the land should teach us so much about our place in the world. Our very survival may depend on the fostering of such attitudes.

"Black white relationships need to be creatively abraded," Barney Foran concluded. I saw plenty of examples of what he meant in the multitude of arts projects that have been undertaken throughout the Territory in the current wave of activity.



Left Scott Spencer, Anna Phillips, Phillipa Wright and Lisa Iley in Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre's 'Black Rainbow'

THE BUILD-UP

RENEWED VIGOUR ON THE TERRITORY

ARTS SCENE

IT'S A bloody big, small place, the Northern Territory. Over 1,500 kms north to south and nearly a thousand wide, its population numbers only about 150,000 people. Seventy thousand of those live in the capital, Darwin, and over twenty thousand in Alice Springs to the south. The twelve hundred kilometre road linking these two major cities is called The Track, the state's major transport link which makes up about eighty per cent of its sealed highways.

It's a long road to plough and seed with arts activities, and a dusty one, too. The N.T. Arts Council touring bus in its four long years of life has travelled over 400,000 kms, more than half of them on dirt roads. The floor fell out of it recently; "Too many times through the Adelaide River," they say with the laconic resignation of the Top Ender.

I came to Darwin the easy way, by Ansett. At least, I thought it was the easy way until our 727 began to

dodge and weave the turbulence of ice-capped nimbus clouds towering to 50,000 feet over the coastal wetlands surrounding Darwin.

"The Build-Up," muttered a fellow passenger with expletive. I waded through suddenly viscose air towards the airport terminal. This is the weather that shuts down N.T. activity, cancels incentive and primes an annual exodus to the south.

But this time also presented me with a window of opportunity. The year's programs are being wound down and people have time to reflect. Many people from outlying areas have come into town to avoid being trapped 'out there' by the Wet but will soon wing away to their home States for the holiday period. For Darwin is a town of expatriots, hardly any white Territorians seem to have been born here.

There are four organisations principally responsible for a renewed vigour on the arts scene in the

Territory. These are the N.T. Arts Council, the two major performing arts centres, Araluen in Alice Springs and the Darwin Performing Arts Centre, and Brown's Mart in the heart of Darwin. Under its long-time director, Ken Conway, Brown's Mart is one of the most successful community arts projects in Australia. It has been a foundation stone for arts development in Darwin but is also rapidly becoming a Territory-wide resource.

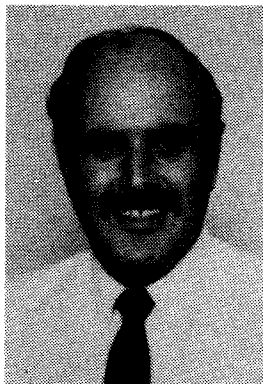
In addition to these four groups must be counted the State Department for the Arts and a plethora of Aboriginal arts projects, cultural offshoots of the rapid growth in Aboriginal political awareness and community organisation over the past ten years or more.

These include cultural maintenance and development projects in independent Aboriginal schools, crafts and community arts programs established by local community councils, maintenance and support of ceremonial activities by groups such as the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, and copyright and marketing work done by the Association of Northern and Central Australian Aboriginal Artists (ANCAAA) which is supported by the Lands Councils of both regions.

First amongst the major (predominantly white) groups must be the N.T. Arts Council. Newly restructured along more democratic lines, the Council was responsible for over 400 projects during the



Maggie Sydenham
(Left) Director, N.T. Department for the Arts: "We're in an exciting phase of development... We are funding programs that are showing something new all the time"



Don Dale, N.T. Minister for the Arts: "We're very cognisant of the need to develop Aboriginal Arts"

A Traditional Man

VINCE FORREST TRAINING OFFICER
CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL
MEDIA ASSOCIATION



VINCE FORREST is the Training Officer at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs. He's in charge of a three year program to train 33 Aboriginal people in radio and television production and broadcasting skills. The project has received \$3.2 million of Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) funds to undertake this task.

"Our broad philosophical approach to this whole thing is to use 20th century technology to bring Aboriginal society together," he says. "We promote Aboriginal culture, languages and traditional stories and so on, but particularly language. Over 90 per cent of programs broadcast on CAAMA (8KIN FM) are in one of the Aboriginal languages from the Northern Territory. Language maintenance is very important for the preservation of Aboriginal cultural identity.

"Many of the people in the program have been trained in translation and interpreting and now are getting other skills in modern media. Those who don't have a language are learning one at the IAD (Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs) and those who already have one language are learning another.

"The other side of our work is to show non-Aboriginal Australia we have a living culture and religion and the important part that the land plays in our life. Out in the broader community we are trying to get these things into the school curriculum for both Aboriginal and white kids, but the Minister for Education has just disallowed the positions of Aboriginal liaison teachers in schools. We're going to lobby that one hard.

"In a lot of ways we still get a pretty raw deal from the N.T.

government. What they and the business community have to look at is just what we are worth to the N.T. economy and what we can provide to the whole social aspect of life here too. But they have to realise also that part of our human rights are to be able to teach our children. We must have access to our kids, even in schools.

"When I say we, traditionally it was the grandmothers who taught the kids all they learnt. Those traditional practices are still going on, even the town kids get it. It's the old people's responsibility and it's still pretty strong.

"Long distance education via satellite is going to be very important in the near future and the education system will have to come to terms with us then because we've got the skills and we've got the technology," Vince adds.

We were sitting in the Gap Hotel just out of Alice where we had accidentally met 30 minutes or so before our appointment at CAAMA, just up the road. Vince had come in with some mates but, as with all my meetings with Aboriginal people in the Territory, I was the only one drinking alcohol.

We were talking about the development of contemporary Aboriginal music and I mentioned the conversation I had with the N.T. Minister for the Arts, and how enthusiastic he had been about Aboriginal cultural development. Suddenly the man who had been talking so fluently about satellite education and media technology takes a completely 'other' aspect. I am transfixed by the rage and the passion in his glare.

"I'm a traditional man," he hisses softly. "And I say that if he's so supportive then why the fuck did his government sit at 2am last week to pass legislation denying us the

Strehlow collection? We own that, no white man owns that, it's ours! How can one man own things older than the Bible?

"They're using white man's law of possession to keep our religion from us. They are making rules for our religion. It's not right! Give it back to us where it belongs, not in some museum or whatever the plan is for it, where everyone can see it and we can't use it in the ceremonies that we can't do without it.

"That's the issue. I'm glad the government is supporting our musicians but I put my religion before my rock and roll! White man's got a book, the songs and the dance are our education. They teach us about our land, about our history, about who we are and what we belong to."

Then it's gone, as quickly as it came. The ceremonial scars cease to well and the pub's musak is again the background to our conversation.

"I'm impressed by the way that the young people are using music to develop Aboriginal pride," he says, "and to attack problems like grog and racism, working as a team, proud to be an Aboriginal person working with Aboriginal people. That's cultural maintenance too.

"The development of music down at CAAMA is a really exciting part. For the first time now we're getting Aboriginal bands through and they know they've got a home here, and a pretty good studio too. The beauty of it is that we've got the radio station right next door and the product can start going out straight away.

"We're proving in the arts industry that the Aboriginal culture has unique things to offer.

"We're a family down there at CAAMA and there's a lot of energy in that."•



Dancers of the Dreaming at Darwin Institute Task Force Open Day

Bicentennial year. By far the largest recipient of State arts funds, over \$250,000 last year, the Council has taken on a much more pro-active role in the last two years with its seven newly independent branches each responsible for major community arts developments in their region.

These Arts Council developments mesh well with the ideals and policy of an equally important factor of recent times, the newly appointed director of the N.T. Department for the Arts, Maggie Sydenham. Herself a Community Arts Officer in Northern N.S.W. before joining the Department in 1985, Maggie's enthusiastic advocacy must be counted as playing a major role in gaining a high level of support from her Minister and Cabinet that has seen major increases in State arts funding and a growing diversity in the types of projects that they are prepared to support.

* * *

SO LET'S START at the top, in the office of the ruling Country Liberal Party's Minister for Everything and the Arts, Don Dale. I was impressed by this man's enthusiastic 'go for it' pragmatism, one that doesn't seem to exclude any idea on merely ideological grounds. If he can be convinced that it will work for the price and people want it, he'll be all for it.

A big, pleasantly bluff ex-cop, Don Dale is the image of the newly enlightened hard-man of the Territory. The tough, no nonsense approach is softened by a personal warmth and he seems to suppress a natural impatience, listening intently to the ideas of others. He makes no

claims to being an arts lover.

"I'm a sports-minded type of person," he says. "To be honest I've never been into what you would call the traditional arts. I certainly enjoy going to a play, not that I've done that often, I've probably averaged one or two a year over the past years. But I certainly see the benefit of the Arts to the community and in the development of the community.

"The basic philosophy I apply in my attitudes to this department is that I would much prefer investing money in the arts and sporting industries than I would in building goals to put people in because they are inactive or anti-social.

"And we see the Arts as a tremendous area for the development of Aboriginal society in terms of employment and functional activity," says the Minister. "The area of contemporary Aboriginal music is one that really interests me and we've got some pretty exciting projects in the pipeline there.

"We're very cogniscent of the need to develop Aboriginal arts. And when I say develop, I mean to put together people and resources so that the skills they already possess can be appropriately developed and managed by themselves. Nobody needs to teach them how to design a painting or play a guitar".

With its staff of three and a budget of around a million dollars, the Arts Department could be considered small fry in Don Dale's super-Ministry. His mega-department includes all aspects of what Mr Dale calls "People Services, from hatching to despatching", combining the Departments of Health, Welfare, Sport and Recreation, Ethnic Affairs, Arts, Correctional Services, Juvenile Justice, Consumer Affairs, Childcare and Pensioners, etc. These collectively employ in excess of 3,700 people with a total budget around \$205 million.

In the midst of such a bureaucratic role call it would be easy for a comparatively low priority department such as Arts to be relegated beyond the Minister's ken. Both Don Dale and his Department Director, Maggie Sydenham, insist that this is not the case.

"There is a major advantage in the

interaction between different departments," says Don Dale. "It's tremendous the way that it's working. One example in the arts area is the use of Aboriginal rock bands, who have been fostered or found by arts programs, by the Department of Health in their promotions."

Maggie Sydenham says that she was very concerned at first that the Arts could get lost competing with essential services under the same Minister. "Sometimes it was a bit hard to settle your conscience going for more money when you thought that some health or welfare organisation was going to miss out," she says. "But it doesn't work that way, they are separate budgets considered by Cabinet after all.

"I enjoy a fair amount of confidence from the Minister because he knows that I'm interested in arts development — and that I wouldn't leave him with egg on his face either. He's been extremely supportive. When you look at his total area of responsibility, Health, Welfare, Correctional Services etc., there's not a lot to be cheerful and wave the flag about. But he's also got Sport and Recreation, Arts and Ethnic Affairs. I think he'd agree that these are positive community development areas and I'm sure he wouldn't like to lose them from his portfolio.

"In fact, being in the combined departments has shown itself to be more of an advantage than disadvantage, mainly because we are a small unit and this way we have access to far greater resources, particularly human resources.

"There are a lot of specialists in the different departments and we're beginning now to look at multi-disciplinary programs, like the Aboriginal Music program with the Department of Health and perhaps, too, with the Department of Correctional Services. The Darwin Theatre Company have been employed in a police training program to role-play domestic violence and the Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre has been used to produce a youth AIDS awareness video. So there are many opportunities and we've only just

started to explore them.”

This sort of networking and cross-over of projects struck me as being typical of the way that arts organisations work in the Territory. As I talked to them all, the same names kept coming up in relation to different projects, the same projects were talked about in different aspects, from different perspectives. It's a very encouraging development, the obvious way to work in such a situation with limited human and physical resources spread over a vast area, but one that speaks well of the level of co-operation and openness of artists here that they can work so closely across artforms, cultural and organisational divisions.

“I said to the Minister just yesterday, ‘Struth, y're asking me to keep jumping from one thing to another’,” Maggie laughingly complains. “He said, ‘What do you think I have to do with 18 portfolios?’”

With a grants program budget this year of \$904,000, the N.T. Arts Department doesn't seem overly well endowed by comparison with other States. But apart from consideration of population sizes, this figure does not include many costs hidden in other, more inflated arts budgets. Not included are Museums and the State Art Gallery (line funded by the Department of the Chief Minister), libraries (Education Dept.) nor the operational budgets of the two performing arts centres which are jointly funded by the Australia Council and local government.

Don Dale pointed out that with the demise of the State Theatre Company and with this year's increased funding, there is now an extra \$400,000 available for the smaller arts organisations and projects.

“There is a considerable degree of enthusiasm here at the moment,” says Maggie Sydenham, “and I think it reflects the increased funding which really is an indication of the government's confidence in the arts industry. This year, because we are no longer responsible for the Darwin Performing Arts Centre nor the State Theatre Company, all that money, nearly one million dollars, is for purely developmental programs.

“We're in an exciting phase of development. The institutions that we do support, particularly the Arts

Council and Brown's Mart, are very dynamic organisations. We're not just maintaining the status quo and increasing funding to CPI etc., and we are funding programs that are showing something new all the time,” she says.

The saga of the late, unlamented N.T. State Theatre Company is an interesting example of the dynamics of Territory arts politics, even in a negative context. Against the advice of the arts community (who could see what it would do to their funding pool) a back-bench committee of the N.T. Government decided in 1985 that the brand new Darwin Performing Arts Centre needed a flagship theatre company. It is fairly obvious that State pride in this most junior State of the Commonwealth was as much a factor in this decision as any other.

Whatever the reasons, the timing was bad. The back-bench committee travelled Australia looking at other State companies without apparently becoming aware that Federal funding through the Australia Council was in the process of being screwed down tight on these very costly organisations. Their projected figure of \$300,000 in Federal support was just never likely nor forthcoming. On top of that, the new company was launched at a time when the Federal Government made a huge cutback in its total funding to the State.

“My new department had to find \$5 million in savings,” says Minister Don Dale. “The State Theatre Company became a luxury we just couldn't afford. So we had to take what I can tell you was a very brave decision after less than 12 months operation and chop it. One can say there was a little fear that we would end up with egg on our face after it. But I think it was ultimately accepted by the community that this was a wise move.

“We had wanted a venue and a company which could provide a vehicle for the best talent in Australia. That of course would flow on to amateur groups and all this was seen to be a way of developing the Arts generally. Given that we had chopped that out, what we said this year was ‘let's invest the money we've saved back into the arts scene so that the Arts are being delivered in more diversified forms.’” It is a matter of general comment that the

State Theatre disappeared with hardly a murmur.

The unique aspect of this story is that a State Government (and the Minister, who had been part of the instigating back-bench committee) were prepared to admit that they had made a mistake. Seeing that they were not able to fund the project at the level required to make it a success without sacrificing all the other gains made in arts development, they refused to throw good money after bad. The arts community's response was a sigh of relief, not recrimination. It is an object lesson that other State Governments could wisely study.

A more positive example of refreshing thinking in N.T. arts bureaucracies is the case of Ken Conway at Brown's Mart. Now it's well known that if you are good at doing something, you end up organising it. It's a formula that has been a great drain of Australian arts talent — and Ken Conway is very good at community arts projects.

In the 16 years that he has directed Brown's Mart, Ken has as a matter of course built up a sizeable administrative load, much to the detriment of his involvement in projects. During his recent one year sabbatical he reflected on this and posed the problem to Maggie Sydenham. No worries, Brown's Mart now has an administrative assistant on a one year trial and also a trainee administrator, both funded by the N.T. Department for the Arts.

“We expect the new staff to be able to take most of the admin. load off Ken,” says Maggie. “It's on a trial basis of course, but we can't afford to let his talents go to waste on the bookwork.” Read it and weep Australia.

A final word from our sponsor. “The development of the Arts in the Northern Territory is in a very exciting phase,” says Don Dale. “I would certainly like to invite people in all the various areas involving the Arts to look to the Territory. It is, I hope without being corny, a frontier in the Arts and we are very much at the development stage. To anybody with a bit of initiative and a genuine interest in the Arts there's an opportunity for them to come here and make some very valuable input while at the same time getting a great deal of self-satisfaction and personal development.”

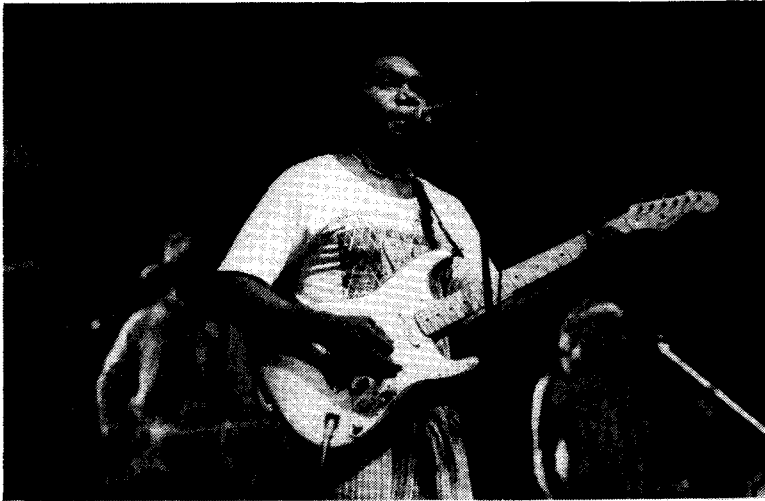


Photo: Peter Mathew

SING LOUD, PLAY STRONG

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC BECOMES A POWERFUL FORCE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

SITTING mid-morning at an umbrella'd table in the Mall, capuccino time in any city. But here the sky is pulseless blue and fiery ochre cliffs rise in punctuation to the streetscape. Even at this hour the December temperature around Alice Springs is reaching the high thirties.

Cool-confident, all in white, the two young women drinking coffee with me are outgoing and direct, talking brightly about their work and plans, their hopes tinged with realistic expectation unusual in teenagers. But I feel the sidelong glance. The tape recorder is rolling. These young community-minded people are well aware of the pain wreaked by journalists more concerned with the story than the subjects, for they are Aboriginal and one of them is named Perkins.

"So, you're writing about arts in the Territory," says Rachel. "Well don't forget to talk about the biggest performing arts movement here, aye? It's the longest surviving, it involves the most people and it's the

most complex. And, it goes on all the time. It's the traditional culture of Aboriginal people, a living theatre that's gone on for thousands of years. Real theatre, just as good as anything on a whiteman stage but performed in its own ways. It's probably more important than white theatre because it is the key to our cultural survival.

Our meeting was toward the end of my second week in the Territory. I had set out on this assignment with two clear objectives and the first was to become as fully informed as possible about all manner of arts activity by Aborigines. My other objective was to get out of the major population centres to find out firsthand what was happening in isolated communities. This proved by far to be the harder of the two. For, while Aboriginal arts have become a very prominent interest at all levels of cultural involvement here, cheap, convenient transportation to outlying areas at certain times of the year is just about an

impossibility. So in the end I had to do my research in Darwin.

As it turned out, one of the hottest items on the Aboriginal arts calendar last year was held in the capital and attracted people from all over the Territory. It was not what you would call a traditional event but there was no avoiding it. Everyone was talking about the Aboriginal Rock Music Festival.

Organised by the N.T. Arts Council and staged in the outdoor Darwin Amphitheatre last September, the Aboriginal Rock Music Festival brought together 150 musicians from 24 bands and attracted 8,500 people over its three days. "But there were a lot of holes in the fence so I reckon we might have doubled that number," says Arts Council Director, Ray Scanlon.

Contemporary music is becoming a powerful force in the Territory's Aboriginal communities. It has brought recognition, even national fame and international tours for some groups but, as has been the case in many third world societies, Aboriginal contemporary music has also become the medium with the message.

One aspect of this development has been the Rock Against Grog concerts that are now a regular feature in Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin, as well as occasional concerts at outlying communities. The idea is to provide an entertaining night out in a non-alcoholic environment while providing work for local bands. They are all organised from within the Aboriginal community itself and are very popular.

"When rock 'n' roll first developed in Aboriginal communities it was considered a little bit of a demon," says Ray Scanlon, "as I'm sure it was in our own society in the fifties. But a lot of older people have now begun to respect these musicians, for their commitment, for the entertainment they provide and for what their music is about.

"One old fellow from Borroloola who hadn't been out for 13 years came along to the Darwin Festival to see the Malandari Band, and the Festival itself has actually been



Photo: Ian Chance

**"IT'S UNFORTUNATE THAT A LOT OF NON-TRADITIONAL
ABORIGINAL CULTURE IS PUSHED ASIDE AS NOT BEING
'THE REAL THING'... JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT
TRADITIONAL DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE NOT
ABORIGINAL"**

RACHEL PERKINS

Opposite Page Singer/Songwriter Yothu Yindi **Left** Rachel Perkins and Tricia Morton, young activists about town, Alice Springs **Below** Frank Yama, solo performer, musician extraordinaire

included in a song cycle around Roper River. So it had a lot of support, not just in Darwin but from Aboriginal people in traditional communities too."

The Arts Council provided a series of workshops in the lead up to the big concert. Bands were given pointers in presentation, stage management and technical information about setting up big P.A. systems. A representative from the N.T. Government also came along and talked about areas of funding and government support.

"But the best thing was the opportunity for the musicians to get together and talk about their music, where they came from and what they sing about. So many different styles emerged from all over the Territory," says Bill Searle, the Arts Council's man on the spot.

A video of the Aboriginal Rock Music Festival was produced by CAAMA and is now available all over the Territory. Called *Sing Loud, Play Strong*, it has been shown on the ABC, with simulsound broadcast on 2JJJ, and will also be shown in Britain, France, Germany, the USA and Canada.

Although planning for another two annual Festivals, in the best tradition of pro-active community arts the N.T. Arts Council claims no sense of ownership of the event. "We see it as three year involvement and then we hope that it will have enough impetus to carry on itself," says Ray Scanlon. "There has been a tremendous amount of follow up and now that there are stronger links between the bands and communities other than their own they are starting to think about touring and circuits.

"We can help a lot with the development of this because we

really do have vast experience of touring the Territory. In '89 we are planning at least one tour, with a band each from the Central Desert and the Top End. It will be a concert format and the two touring bands will be supported in each performance by a local group. All the bands will get the same performing fees."

The Arts Council will co-ordinate and provide transport for this tour and also hopes to take on two trainees through DEET to help make future tours independently viable. They are also assisting bands with funding through their Country CATS local initiative grants to get them into independent recording studios in Jabiru and at CAAMA in Alice Springs.

The N.T. Government is also showing considerable interest in this

emergent form and is looking to programs which will foster Aboriginal contemporary music as an industry in its own right. This also reflects the recommendations of the McLeay Report which noted the almost complete absence of Government support for popular contemporary music.

That the Darwin Rock Festival is now included in a song cycle provides an interesting insight to the dynamism of traditional Aboriginal culture. Though many of us will have seen or heard of ceremonial performance of stories dating from the thirties or the coming of white man, most of us are still locked into the concept of the traditional culture being a fixed thing, set in the 'Dreamtime'. Just how wrong this concept is, how quickly events are incorporated into the song cycles and how they move across the country, is illustrated by another story that I heard.

Dancers of the Dreaming is a program of traditional ceremonial song and dance that was toured by the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation to the 1988 Adelaide Festival and later to the Portsmouth Festival in Britain. While the performers were in southern England they were taken to see the famous giant chalk-hill carving of a horse.

On their return this event was recorded in a song cycle which has already spread right across the Territory, across clan, tribal and language boundaries. The essence of the story is that 'these whitefella did have a dreaming once but they must have lost it. We know that now, because we saw one of their sacred sites'.

There is an interesting dialectic happening in Aboriginal culture

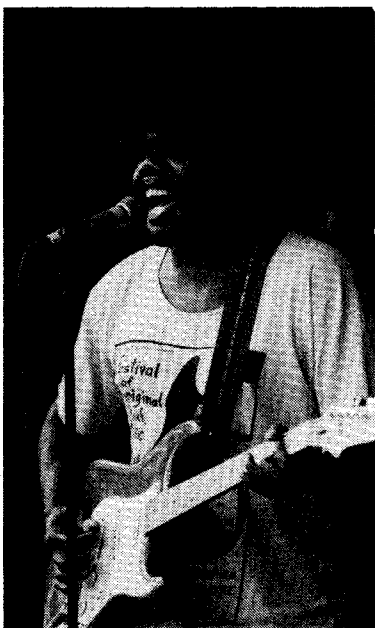


Photo: Peter Matthew



Photo: Ian Chance

Up The Ladder

ROGER BENNETT ACTOR, PLAYWRIGHT

THE DEVELOPMENT of the Darwin Theatre Company's (DTC) first Aboriginal written play, for production later this year, is a good example of the provocative role that visiting artists often play in the Territory.

Melbourne director, Peter Oysten has visited Alice Springs several times in recent years. The first time was during the creation process of Handspan Theatre's much underrated play, *The Haunted*, when the entire company spent several weeks in the desert developing their work. Peter returned to the desert for Halley's Comet, when he was asked to produce and direct the *Comet Cabaret* for a pick-up group who decided that they wanted to do a fairly hard-hitting parody of the life and times in the Centre.

The *Comet Cabaret* is reputed to have been Alice Springs' first theatre production ever with a 50/50 cast of Aboriginals and whites. One of the cast was Roger Bennett who played the role of an Aboriginal elder. Now an Alice Springs resident, Roger was born in Brisbane and his early years were typical of what has sadly become traditional life for many urban Aborigines, he spent over ten years in gaol between the ages of 14 and 30.

"There was a big hole in my education between leaving school four weeks into 6th grade until I was 30, but at least I could read and write," says Roger. "Then in '79 I went to college in Adelaide, studying Community Development at the Task Force (Adelaide CAE). Not that I passed but the achievements were in being there and in learning.

"After that, Alice was just my

first stop travelling around to find work. But I got a job with the Aboriginal Congress in the Alcohol Rehab. Unit. I started as nightwatchman for 12 months then I was a Counsellor for three years. Finally I was Co-ordinator of the Unit for another year.

"During the *Comet Cabaret*, Peter used to come to my home and yarn about how he was putting the show together and he really got my interest," says Roger. "I told him I wanted to find out more about directing. Well, two years passed and I thought he'd forgotten but then I got his invitation to be an Assistant Director, a trainee, on a show he was doing for Playbox, *Black Rabbit*, which was written by an Aboriginal guy called Ray Mooney.

"Meeting Ray gave me the idea of writing too. The time I spent in Melbourne showed me the ropes of how a play was put together. Now it was up to me. I came back to Alice and applied to DTC to be part of the Aboriginal involvement in a play they were going to produce called *State of Shock*. I applied for a director's position.

"Well one thing led to another. The artistic director left DTC and the new director (Geoff Hooke) wanted to do more original material so that play was dropped. Geoff passed through after his visit to China and we had a talk. I'd already said that I wanted to write and Geoff said he'd like to produce it if I came up with something."

Apparently the involvement of Aboriginal actors in *Comet Cabaret* had already seeded the idea of an Aboriginal theatre (Mbantua) and Roger felt that his play could be a good starting point. The local Arts Council came into

the picture with the assistance of its President, Clive Scollay, a man deeply committed to Aboriginal culture, and a playwriting workshop was organised. Bob Maza came over from Sydney and Neil Cameron, a community theatre director (ex Welfare State U.K.) who has directed many projects in the Territory over the past years was also involved.

"It really turned over my idea of writing," says Roger. "That you can workshop through ideas before you actually sit down to write them, providing you have a basic idea to work from. My writing skills are not fully honed yet but those guys really set me straight. Now it's full bore ahead. DTC are firmly behind it and I'll be in Darwin soon for more workshoping.

"I'm writing about something I know a little bit about and it should be interesting. My father was a boxer and worked with the tent shows. The story is based on Aboriginal boxers of the forties and fifties, about the problems these fellas had to face to get to the top and to survive through the hard times. It's called *Up the Ladder*.

"It was because of the idea of Mbantua that I decided to write. After the workshops with Bob and Neil some of the energy has fallen away, so I want to bring the play back here to tie it all in, 'cause it started here. So I want to finish it here, not for personal reasons but to give it back. To say 'right, if people really want to do something you can do it'. In the end to generate more interest, get a tighter group and do things instead of being scared to have a go. It doesn't have to be big."

The story of *Up the Ladder* could well be Roger Bennett's own.

between those who might be termed 'traditionalist' and those who might be referred to as 'modernist'. The subject reveals a range of thought and some of the problems facing Aboriginal cultural development.

Working mostly with the people of Arnhem Land, the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation is predominantly involved in the support of traditional culture by facilitating traditional sacred secret ceremonies. They also regularly stage festivals of traditional Aboriginal culture and tour performing groups.

The Chairman of the ACF Gawirrin Gumana, is quoted as saying: "Culture for us is our foundation — our feet, our body, our flesh. If we had no culture that would mean we are nothing. Ceremony is our life.

"We have never felt the need to form a national theatre company to build up our identity as tribal people because we have never lost our identity. We feel that to form such a company would only undermine our traditions."

Down south in Alice my two young friends Rachel Perkins and Tricia Morton are CAAMA media production trainees (Rachel in television, Tricia in radio), they are regular presenters on 8KIN FM, study Aboriginal languages, history and culture at the Institute of Aboriginal Development (IAD) and are involved in the organisation of regular Rock Against Grog concerts.

And they are also involved in the move to form a contemporary Aboriginal theatre company called Mbantua. Mbantua is the Arunda name for the country around Alice Springs. "We want to set up a theatre to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to get into something different and to express themselves in ways that wider groups can understand," says Rachel. "It's like combining Aboriginal theatre with white theatre, because for too long Aboriginal people have felt that when they go on stage they have to do it the white man's way.

"But, as I've said, we've had a real, living theatre that has gone on for thousands of years. We feel that it's equally as good as any white theatre that's presented and we want to mix the two so that we can communicate with white and black people, but in an Aboriginal way.

"We want to do our first performances in a traditional setting, by firelight in the Todd Riverbed. It may develop into a stage performance but we want it first to be accessible to the broadest Aboriginal community and for them to be part of the process. In this town, theatre and the performing arts — unless it's traditional — is just not accessible yet to Aboriginal people because they don't feel comfortable going into most of the venues. Mbantua could be a way of getting past that."

It seems like a pretty simple division between traditional and modern views. But then Rachel and Tricia reveal a conservative opinion that might even cause the ACF some heartburn.

"The public exhibition of traditional performance is not nearly as important as the ceremonies they perform for themselves, that's a matter of survival, not entertainment. The danger of public exhibition is that the culture may become seen as just entertainment, even by Aboriginal people themselves. That would be the cruellest loss to our culture, a trivialisation of the real mystery.

"It's like the paintings. Nowadays

some people just see dot paintings as a way of making money, of making ends meet. It's good that there is a way for Aboriginal people to earn a living doing something so close to their culture, it's just that the danger is there that the real meaning of those symbols becomes less important than the paintings as a saleable product."

It's a fascinating cross-over of opinion and one that doesn't even reveal the flaws of internal contradiction, simply the tensions of a culture in flux — as in any contemporary society. Rachel also went on to illuminate the other side of the problem for contemporary Aboriginal artists.

"It's unfortunate that a lot of non-traditional Aboriginal culture is pushed aside as not being 'the real thing'. So it doesn't get any credit as a real, vital culture. Just because you're not traditional doesn't mean you're not Aboriginal. Contemporary Aboriginal artists should be seen as just that, not merely in the context of contemporary art. These people are painting, or dancing, or singing from an Aboriginal experience of things that are important to contemporary Aboriginal culture."

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Left Kings Canyon, south west of Alice Springs Below
Circus Oz prepare to take off! Maningrida, Top End
Tour, 1988

ON TRACK

THE ARTS COUNCIL BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE HEARTLAND OF AUSTRALIA

CONTEMPORARY and traditional arts meet at the crossroads of many N.T. Arts Council projects. Not only are touring arts groups encouraged to do intensive workshops in communities they visit but the Arts Council is also responsible for the initiation of many community arts development projects in isolated areas.

One such Arts Council initiative which has led to an Aboriginal community developing its own community arts/cultural maintenance program was set in Borroloola on the north eastern coast of Arnhem Land. In 1987 Yan Wizinski, Debbie Solenburg and Tony Hargraves (ex Circus Oz) were

employed by the Council as musicians-in-residence to work with young people in this area where there has been a lot of music activity.

"They were looking at stories that had been and that could be put into song — hunting stories, travelling stories, things like this," says Arts Council Director Ray Scanlon. "There are so many stories out there and Yan is a natural storyteller and gatherer. Because of the friendships and contacts they made in Borroloola during the residency the group was asked by the community to come back and help with other projects."

These have now become an ongoing program called the Yanua

(People) History Project. Money has been raised to produce a film and there are several bi-lingual books in the pipeline, one already published.

Similar projects amongst the Arts Council's 400 events last year have also led to a high level of follow up. A couple include the placement of an Irish imagemaker working with local materials and found objects in the community of Maningrida and a major sculpture project on Groote Island by local Chilean-born artist Fetchi Masero.

Such programs are totally planned and co-ordinated by the local Regional Arts Councils. In the case of the sculpture project, Fetchi Masero worked with about 40 local people including two Aboriginal artists who are painters and carvers, both traditional owners of two areas on the island.

"The whole project took about six months and used 45 tonnes of local rock," says Ray Scanlon. "It was an extensive project which used about \$6,000 in funding, including admin., materials and artists' fees. The local rock was used with the permission of Aboriginal owners, the admin. costs were covered by the N.T. State Government and project funds came from the CCDU of the Australia Council. Additional money was provided by B.H.P. who operate a major bauxite mine on the island.

"If somebody comes in with a half-baked idea, we try to bake it," jokes Ray. "There are very few instances where we give a flat no. We



A Presidential Message

CLIVE SCOLLAY CHAIRMAN
N.T. ARTS COUNCIL



CLIVE SCOLLAY has been Chairman of the N.T. Arts Council for a year and President of the Alice Springs Arts Council for five. He's a ball of energy who gets excited about good ideas, many of which are his own. One project is never enough for this man, he has two-year-old twin sons, owns a feed store out of Alice and acts as an agent for people who want to find out more about Aboriginal culture. He has contacts everywhere.

"At the last National Conference of Arts Councils, held in Alice Springs in October last year, I think we created some new attitudes about arts in the Territory," Clive says. "One of those is that we blew the idea of isolation out of its tree.

"We said in effect that if you reach out to us in our isolation we'll bite your finger off". There is a rich culture in the bush that is there to be fostered and tapped. We can help to forge a genuinely Australian contemporary culture from that foundation. One of the things that is strongest is our desire to build on what's here, to have confidence in that, even to export it to the rest of Australia, too.

"Our opening event for the Conference was a fire spectacle in one of the gorges. It was dance and music and an invitation from the traditional owners for people to enjoy themselves while they were here. It was an eye-opener for many of the arts administrators from the cities to find out just how closely we are tapped into the bush and how the land dictates our art and culture, both European and Aboriginal, and how much people understand or have a sense of place here. And that we don't have this sense of cultural deprivation that is expected of us.

"That remoteness is in the mind. We are comfortable here, though we won't be totally comfortable

until everyone in Australia comes to grips with Aboriginal issues and traditions. This is something that has been forced on Europeans in the Territory in advance of the rest of Australia. You're still fighting the nasty skirmishes in Redfern and Moree.

"1988 was a very interesting year for the Arts Council, one that began with the visit of Amandala, an African liberation ensemble who arrived in Alice at the beginning of their tour. Their visit here was managed by Barbara Shaw, a local Aboriginal activist, and we made sure that it really was a cultural exchange. They got to meet the local Aboriginal leadership and even did a couple of performances at the town camps, a most unusual event. As well they did a performance at Araluen to pay the bills.

"A spin-off from this tour was the inspiration it lent to the formation of Mbantua, the Aboriginal theatre company for which Neil Cameron had identified possible directions, one of which was an Amandala-style ensemble. Neil also did some very interesting work with the kids at the Gap Youth Centre in building circus skills (The Gap is an Aboriginal

run community centre). The Arts Council brought in the Circus Oz tour at almost exactly the right time for that one.

"The process has been an important one for me because of its ongoing nature, the models that have been set by visiting companies, the political, social and artistic exchanges which have inspired and given goals to local projects.

"Another interesting development has been the process of visiting artists eventually joining the infrastructure of arts programs across the State, through the Arts Council, in a long term way. They come and go but they have a place, each visit builds on the previous in a positive way. You see, it's possible through the Arts Council to build these sorts of relationships with the heartland of Australia.

"It's really important because every artist who comes here, working in any medium, is profoundly influenced by the place. Their own practice becomes enriched by that experience. If it relates to something that is tangible and real for the community here then the building of a culture becomes an internal process of cultural exchange within Australia."



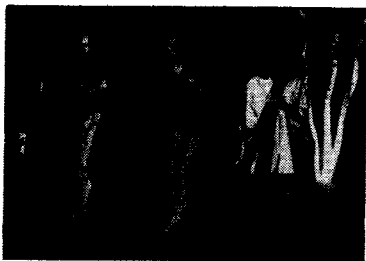
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UNTIL EVERYONE IN AUSTRALIA COMES TO GRIPS WITH
ABORIGINAL ISSUES AND TRADITIONS"

CLIVE SCOLLAY

The Mockety Mob welcome delegates to the 2nd National Conference of Arts Councils, Alice Springs, 1988

try to keep ideas happening.

"About seventy per cent of what we do is community-based, conceived and administered by the seven Regional Arts Councils. These programs are often artist-in-residencies and we try to make sure that the placement suits developments in the region, so that they will lead to more ongoing activity."

One such has been the development of a community theatre in Katherine, a rapidly growing regional centre about 350 kms south of Darwin. The process has taken three years and culminated last year in the largest arts event ever seen in the area.

"The new township at Katherine became the focus of a community arts project which grew out of the old amateur theatre group," says Ray. "They had been doing old fashioned melodramas and basically about six people did everything, directing, lighting, design, acting, the lot. The regional Arts Council wanted to see if more of the community wanted to and could be involved."

In 1986 the Council placed a Darwin Institute theatre studies graduate, Terry Annesley, in Katherine as a community theatre artist-in-residence. His brief was to draw together local skills and talents, form good links with other community groups and generally to revitalise local theatre. Now Katherine has a newly independent incorporated community theatre with a membership of over 120.

"Terry really has the ability to walk into a pub and say to people, 'I want you in a show. I want you to learn about theatre and be involved', and get results," Ray adds. "This year the *Utopia* project was the final phase and now they are on their own and flying along very nicely."

The *Utopia* project was a one night only community theatre extravaganza directed by Neil Cameron. He workshoped circus skills and the 150 participants staged a fire spectacle and outdoor theatre for an audience of over 1,000. Pretty good for Katherine and described by local Arts Council representative and high school teacher, Judy Monkhouse as, "a very positive experience for the entire town, a celebration of what life can be as opposed to what is often a very negative view of the future".

Local Arts Council groups in the Territory lead a pretty precarious existence because of the small populations in each centre and the high turnover of people. Even one key person leaving town can put a group into decline.

"Even in a community of a couple of thousand with an Arts Council membership of 50 there will be maybe five people doing most of the work," Ray says. "As well there will be a folk group and a theatre group with two people doing the work."

"In that situation it's crazy to have three groups trying to maintain independent resources. The Arts Council can function as an umbrella group while allowing the other groups complete autonomy but working together perhaps. It's the same in Darwin, even with heavily funded groups, we have to look at our resources and how we can share them."

The Arts Council is a lean operation with a small staff and extremely limited capital equipment. Last year their total operating budget was \$650,000. Nearly \$300,000 of this is State funding.

"The figures look pretty good when you see that 94 per cent of our budget, including project admin. components, is spent on arts

activities," says Ray. "Administration takes about 34 per cent of our funding and we generate 40 per cent of our income, more this year because of sponsorship. We generate all of our ongoing administration costs at the box-office."

Regional Arts Councils each have a discretionary budget of \$2,000 plus whatever they generate in box-office and workshop fees to go towards local arts development programs. In addition they are encouraged to seek further funding from local government.

* * *

"WE RECOGNISE that the talent is here and the influences that can come from the Territory are quite powerful," Ray says. "I guess overall we want to reverse the trend of importing arts to the Territory and start exporting. Theatre, music and regional art in particular is unique and has a lot to offer the rest of Australia."

However, touring is still the financial basis of the N.T. Arts Council despite the majority of their programs being locally based community arts. It has been said in the past that the Territory Arts Council ran for a year on one Slim Dusty concert.

These days the Council tries to integrate touring companies into their local arts development programs by getting them to do local workshops wherever possible. The optimum financial tour is run over three weeks, but now if companies are willing they often do extended tours of five or six weeks which will include periods of intensive workshops.

Last year the N.T. Arts Council's major tours were by the ANC performing group, Amandala; the Territory Bicentennial rock opera,

Come Hell or High Water, Skysong, a dance music work by Sarah Hopkins, Beth Shelton and Ian Ferguson; the contemporary vaudeville show, *Dancehall Racketeers*; Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre's Living in Isolation tour; Home Cooking Theatre's *Running Up a Dress*; Circus Oz; David Poulton's Puppet Theatre; and Playbox Theatre's *Cho Cho San*.

In addition they produced *Come Hell or High Water*, the Festival of Aboriginal Rock Music and the National Conference of Arts Councils in Alice Springs. It was a very busy year for the Council's full-time staff of three. The touring season in the Territory runs from March to October, the Dry season, and booking on venues in major centres during this period are very heavy so itineraries have to be finalised at least three months in advance.

N.T. Arts Council tours come in two flavours, the three week tour which takes in Alice, Darwin and the major population centres up the Track, or the five or six week flavour which will take in outlying communities as well, mostly in Arnhem Land, including Groote Island, but sometimes in the Central Desert and even out to Bathurst Island in the west.

There are many pitfalls to touring the Territory and some companies arrive with very little real idea of what awaits them. "We try to give people all the information about what to expect," says admin. assistant and Schools Program Co-ordinator (until January 89) Tania Smiler. "We tell them about the scattered population centres, the weather, the roads and about our 24 seat, non air-conditioned bus — if you have air conditioning it just goes slower and instead of a nine or ten hour journey it takes 12 hours. (However, thanks to increases in State funding, the Arts Council's 1989 model tourer will be both more powerful and air-conditioned).

"The hardest thing to get out of the companies is the exact weight and dimensions of all their equipment, sometimes we don't get that until a week before the tour and even then they don't realise just how critical this information is.

"The largest truck that we can hire in the Territory is two and a half tons, so everything has to fit in with that.

Above that weight we use carrier companies but then we have to fit in with their schedules and take lots of risks by not travelling with the show. Also if the tour includes outlying areas in Arnhem Land the only viable method is to fly. Then we use a DC3, it takes two and a half tons including people — and that reduces in the wet because it has to take on more fuel to divert around bad weather, and the payload comes down to two tons. We tell companies that, when they go to Groote and Gove, a pair of knickers and a toothbrush is it, no suitcases.

"It's also hard to get across the difference in the weather between the Centre and the Top End, the heat and humidity up here can take some getting used to. Circus Oz decided to save weight by doing all their shows in the daytime, leaving the heavy lighting rig behind. Doing a physical show like that in the day was just extraordinary, they even had to drop their make-up, it was just running off their faces. However, the tour was a great success, it was extremely well received and apart from being completely knackered by the end of it I know that they really enjoyed themselves."

"But," adds Ray Scanlon, "one of the real pitfalls is coming to the

Territory with the gleam of missionary zeal in the eyes. Depending on the artform, a high percentage of the audiences are probably going to be Aboriginal and quite often they are not really open to European theatre. They're certainly open and interested in imagery and movement, dance and particularly music, but not really into theatre.

"Generally what happens in Aboriginal communities is, well, venues for instance, there aren't any. It's going to mean performing under trees and out in the open. And the way that Aboriginal audiences attend a performance is to sit anywhere within half a mile of the performance, constantly get up and move around, talk about what's happening etc. They are just like many other audiences, particularly in Asia, but if you have expectations grounded in white Australian audience behaviour the experience can be shattering."

Tania pleads; "Please, pay attention to what we tell you, touring in the Territory is very different. But it's also very exciting and I think the audiences here are great, very receptive. Certainly come to the Territory, but keep it small, keep it mobile and make sure it's moveable."

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Photo: NT News

Left Michelle Ford, Conrad Page, Tina Stubbs, Chris Osborne, Milton Andrews and audience members in *The Nobodies from Nowhere*, Browns Mart, January 1989 **Below Right** Ken Conway, Director, Browns Mart Community Arts Project, Darwin **Below Centre** Jen Vuletic and Fiona Stewart busk at Parap Saturday morning market, Darwin

THE BROWNING OF THE MART

COMMUNITY ARTS REBUILD AFTER RESOURCE CUTS

ESTABLISHED IN 1972, Brown's Mart is the Territory's best known theatre venue and probably the longest running community arts project in Australia. Housed in one of the city's few remaining early colonial buildings, it is set on the edge of parklands near the heart of Darwin. Brown's Mart Community Arts Project, as it is properly called, is the home of Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre (CIYT), the independent pro/am Darwin Theatre Company (DTC) and, until last year, Feats Unlimited dance group.

The Brown's Mart program is a constant stream of one-off community arts projects, artists-in-residencies, large-scale community theatre events, celebratory or festival activities and community music programs. Regular Sunday evening events, *Mixtures* at the Mart, developed by Project Officer Trish Latham feature local or alternative performers and are one of the strongest focuses for Community Arts in Darwin. For the past ten years the annual cavalcade has also included the legendary Kids Convoy, a multi-skilled troupe of performers who are brought together

for a six-week tour of remote communities, predominantly Aboriginal, with activities, workshops and shows.

Keeping all the balls in the air since the earliest days of the project has been Ken Conway, a former lawyer who gave up a partnership in a thriving Darwin practice to become the Territory's first full-time professional arts worker outside of the education system.

Ken says that Brown's Mart works on both pro-active and reactive community arts models. That is, both by identifying needs within the community and instigating projects to cater for them, hoping that by creating demand other organisations will move to establish ongoing programs to satisfy



Photo: Ian Chance

it, and by reacting to requests from the community or community organisations for arts programs which satisfy specific needs they have identified.

Successful examples of pro-active projects initiated by Brown's Mart include a major Youth Festival which they staged annually in Darwin between 1975 and 1980. Building on creative play activities which were a regular feature at the Mart, the Youth Festival developed a large and varied program which included performances by youth and for youth, street processions, and an arts adventure playground which was established for two weeks each year in the Botanic Gardens and involved local and interstate artists and tutors.

As other agencies took up the challenge in programs such as the Darwin City Council's Fun-in-the-Park holiday program and teachers began to use creative play techniques in the classroom and incorporated arts and craft into daily school life, Brown's Mart's focus of interest moved to favour other areas of need. In a sense though, the Mart was also reactive to the demand that they had



Photo: Steven Gratton

created themselves in the youth arts area and responded by setting up the Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre in 1980.

In reactive mode, Brown's Mart played a major part in support, liaison and participation in the Trades and Labour Council co-ordinated May Day March and Gilruth Incident celebrations last year, described by Frank Hardy as the best May Day celebrations he'd seen anywhere in the world.

It was a well-financed event, with total funding by the Australia Council Art and Working Life Program, other State and Federal agencies (including Brown's Mart), unions and sponsors to the tune, it's said, of around \$100,000. It was also so successful and popular that grants bodies have promised more than was asked for this year's event.

Something that every arts worker in Darwin is still talking about is Brown's Mart's production of *Fire on the Water*, a mammoth community theatre work directed, again, by Neil Cameron. An allegorical portrayal of incidents in the life of one of those famous Top End characters, in this case the artist Ian Fairweather, *Fire on the Water* involved pyro-theatre, shadow puppets, a steel-drum band, and actors from Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre.

It seems that in the late seventies, Fairweather was pretty much leading the life of a hermit somewhere across Darwin Harbour. At one time (as I recall the story) he became somewhat depressed, probably due to the combined effects of solitude, alcohol and the Wet. He decided that he had to get out of Darwin, out of the Territory, out of Australia. Having no money he built a fairly ramshackle raft and early one morning set forth at the whim of the sea, operating on his hypothesis that the currents would take him to Indonesia.

The truly fantastic thing is that he succeeded. Several weeks later, disoriented and weakened, he was washed up on the island of Roti, south east of Timor. Here he lived for a year, celebrated by the local people as a truly worthy adventurer. I was told by recent visitors to Roti,

"INCREASINGLY PEOPLE ARE WANTING TO DEVELOP
LINES OF WORKING WITH MODERN FORMS OF
EXPRESSION FOR TRADITIONAL VALUES AND CULTURE.
BUT IT HAS TO BE DONE 'SOFTLY, SOFTLY' ..."

KEN CONWAY

themselves expeditioners sailing from Bali to Australia in a fleet of tiny outrigger sailing canoes, that Fairweather's raft is still on a headland, unscavaged, as a tribute to his voyage of epic faith in imagination.

The retelling of this legend in *Fire on the Water* was launched by massed archers from Darwin clubs firing salvos of flaming arrows from Middle Beach into the late sunset. Estimations of the crowd who witnessed this and following spectacles vary from between ten and twenty thousand.

Ken Conway says that Brown's Mart is now looking to focus on the cross-cultural links, Asian, European and Aboriginal, that are the undercurrents of the cultural ethos of the Top End, including this story about Ian Fairweather.

"Through our recent recruitment program I realised that there is a high expectation that we do a lot of work with Aboriginal people," says Ken, "— and we don't. But I feel that it is soon to happen, the tentative steps are being made, the bridges built.

"Increasingly people are wanting to develop lines of working with modern forms of expression for traditional values and culture. But it has to be done 'softly, softly', waiting for people to come forward and just holding the door open."

In fact, for three years Ken was working toward a Bicentennial project called *Other Peoples' Dreaming* which was based exactly on these cross-cultural concepts. An unhappy combination of events which included the loss of Feats Unlimited dance troupe and the death of Ken's main support in the Aboriginal community (his name will not be used in deference to Aboriginal custom) meant that this was one of the rare occasions when a Brown's Mart project was not fulfilled by the date due.

Perserverance furthers however, and the idea is certainly not dead.

"The old man from Yirrkala said that he often felt he hadn't properly passed on the stories," says Ken. "He felt that this project was another way of doing it. But his passing and the loss of Feats set me right back. I'm still angry that Feats is gone because dance and Feats director, Maggie Phillips, have the real potential to make the contact.

"It was a big loss. It made me realise just how vulnerable it all is, just blink and it's gone. It was 1987, the year of the long knife. The N.T. Government says that it didn't cut Feats, just Brown's Mart by the equivalent of the Feats budget. But it either meant the end for Feats or the slashing of every other Brown's Mart program," Ken adds.

"It's ridiculous but I still feel that if I hadn't been away that year I could have put up a stronger fight. I'm particularly angry that Maggie's skills, energy and talents weren't recognised in her own home town. Fortunately the Australia Council have been generous in making up some of that ground and we've had a dance officer since June and a big community project coming up.

"In '87 it was pretty savage. The N.T. Theatre Company went, the Education Department had a cut of \$6 million and the TIE/DIE company was gone overnight, all the Drama Advisors' positions went that year. I came back and three companies were finished, twenty odd jobs.

"But because the N.T. Theatre Company is gone the community based groups got funding increases. Still it's a big hiccup to lose all those resources, especially the human ones. Now DTC must rebuild to the level that it was before the N.T. Theatre Co. Fortunately things have been swinging along on a creative high, so the only way to go is up."

Living in Isolation

YOUTH ARTS IN THE TERRITORY



Karrlidge Community College Aboriginal students participate in after-school Performing Arts program run by Steven Gratton, Artistic Director, CIYT. *Walls High* (Below): Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre members perform during the Living in Isolation tour

I WAS TOLD independently by the N.T. Minister for the Arts, the Director of the Department for the Arts, by the Multicultural Arts Officer of the Migrant Resource Centre and the Director of the N.T. Arts Council, all, that youth arts were a priority on their lists of developmental programs. The suggestion is certainly that none are satisfied with things as they stand.

"In youth areas in the Territory there isn't a great deal happening, though Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre is the strongest base. But we do try to get all our touring artists to work with young people," says the Arts Council's Ray Scanlon.

Within schools, the 1987 cutting of the N.T. TIE/DIE Company as well as all Arts Education Advisors has left a hole only part filled by occasional Arts Council school tours and the formation of the Theatre as Education team. The latter is an independent group made up by Darwin Institute of Technology theatre studies graduates and partially resourced by that institution.

Associate Director in Theatre Studies at DIT, Tony Soszynski, says that the passing of TIE/DIE was not unexpected and that as the first director of the team he found it hard to justify the expense of running the company. "Everyone was on a full-time education officer's salary," he says. "That meant an annual salary bill that to me would run a company of ten people.

"I wasn't sad to see it go, because there was another problem in that TIE/DIE was a totally departmental unit and had a certain play-safe philosophy. Even in my time I felt that you had to 'behave', that you had to be very guarded if you were covering a controversial issue. When you're within the structure of an education department you often feel that pressure."

At the Arts Council, Ray Scanlon says that their youth program was given a strong boost by last year's CIYT Living in Isolation tour but that development of schools tours is also hampered by lack of funding support from the

Education Department.

"We are really keen to establish a youth arts network throughout the N.T.," says Ray. "We've been working a lot in N.T. schools but without any funding from the Education Department. Quite often we are getting something like \$6 per performance for a show that we take to Banka Banka or somewhere on the Track. So you see that without the support of the Education Department it's just not very feasible.

"What we are looking at in '89 is to be able to establish programs specifically for young people, community arts projects, theatre projects — but which are outside the schools system. At Katherine for instance there is already a youth arts group, a basis for a youth theatre, which has grown out of the Community Theatre project, and the work done by Judy Monkhouse. She's a teacher at the local high school who is also heavily involved with the Arts Council."

Some existing youth arts projects in the Territory include regular activities at Brown's Mart (apart from CIYT), holiday programs by the Darwin City Council, a children's theatre which is an ongoing student project at DIT, embryonic youth theatre groups in Tennant Creek as well as the one in Katherine, regular programs of children's films, visiting theatre groups and after school activities at Araluen in Alice Springs. There is also the well-established if little known The Centre Youth Theatre in Alice Springs, and arts development activities which form a regular part of programs for Aboriginal kids at The Gap Community Centre in Alice.

A major youth music event held in Darwin each year is said to be the biggest youth arts event in the State. Produced by the N.T. Education Support Committee and the Darwin Rotary club, *The Beat* is a mammoth amalgam of young choral and solo voice, orchestral musicians and dancers staged over two nights. This year the event involved over 1,000 singers, 30 musicians and 60 dancers and

actors.

In all, it sounds like a fair amount of activity for a State that "doesn't have much happening in youth arts". One suspects that a lack of interaction and perhaps a lack of mutual appreciation between the various programs may be a stumbling block. Hopefully good intentions can overcome these problems — for some recent projects in the Territory have shown that in the field of youth arts, as in others, this State has a lot to offer in creative energy and innovative approach.

Two that still have everybody talking are Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre's *Black Rainbow* and the Living in Isolation project which culminated in an Arts Council tour reported by the company's Artistic Director, Janet Robertson in *Lowdown*, Aug/Sept 88.

Black Rainbow, a play by Keith Gallasch and directed by Robertson looks at the lives of disenfranchised youth and their journey into the Aboriginal history of Australia.

"*Black Rainbow* was a milestone project — not just for youth theatre but for theatre in Darwin," says Robertson. "It showed a style that was innovative and proved that Darwin Theatre can create product from within its own community that can match theatre produced anywhere in Australia."

Living in Isolation consisted of four plays on the title theme selected from thirty submitted by young people all over the Territory. The produced plays were *One of a Kind*, written by Carey Rorlach of Tennant Creek, *Tour with a Difference* written by pupils of the Jabiru Area School, *Walls Hill* by Lee Frank of Alice Springs and *Desert Boy* by pupils of the Lajamanu Area School.

Travelling with a cast of six young people, three in their early teens, the tour took place in May last year following the plays' Darwin season at Brown's Mart. It travelled to Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala on Gove Peninsula, Groote Island, Jabiru, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Lajamanu, out across the Tanami

Desert near the West Australian border. The bi-lingual teaching Lajamanu Area School has a reputation as one of the more progressive in the State but is extremely isolated.

There are a number of reasons why the Living in Isolation tour was so well received and has had so many repercussions. One of course is that it was a good show and that people recognised themselves in its characters and situations. But more than this, it was the first time that the far flung peoples of the Territory had seen just how good youth theatre can be. The young CIYT cast were an inspiration and encouragement for fledgling youth arts groups and young people's creativity everywhere they toured.

Artworkers and writers, too, have obviously been impressed by the quality of these plays written by young N.T. people, in reaffirmation of their own faith that important Australian works can and will be created here.

One of the most important facets of the tour was as a strengthening of the links of a youth arts network that has existed pretty well unrecognised in this State. For instance, the confidence of the Tennant Creek script was an outcome of an Arts Council writer-in-residence project in that town in 1986 and an expression of the tentative steps towards a youth theatre there. Author of the Alice Springs script, Lee Frank, is a young Flinders University graduate who is leader of the theatre skills program for Aboriginal kids at The Gap Community Centre and tours one-person shows, mainly dance/movement, to Central desert communities.

There were other links, too, that perhaps even CIYT weren't aware of, such as the eye-opener that their show provided to the Gove Little Theatre (youth). Or the opening up of new aspects of performance to participants in the Jabiru Music Centre program, established three years ago by Ken Hutton as an outreach of the Area School and which involves young Aboriginal musicians (students and post-school) in rock and trad/classic music performance, studio

recording and video production.

At Lajamanu Aboriginal community the Living in Isolation tour has been the catalyst for the desire within the community to develop new forms of expression. The Aboriginal community was so enthused by seeing a play from their own community presented, some of it in their own language (even if spoken by unpractised young whites) that they asked Janet Robertson to return for a series of writing and theatre production residencies. I was informed by the Minister, Don Dale, that he is very keen on the project and has approved funding for residencies in 1989.

Another youth arts development is being undertaken at the Kormilda College at Berrima, just out of Darwin. I spoke with Ken Hutton who had been responsible for setting up the Jabiru Music Centre and who has now been hired as one of three artists to establish a performing arts unit at Kormilda.

"Kormilda is an independent Aboriginal boarding school taking kids from Year 8," says Ken. "That's the year when most Aboriginal kids leave school and the College role is to encourage successful students to go on to Year 12. Kormilda currently has about 200 students and hopes to expand to about 500 over the next two years.

"The Executive Director of the College, Peter Harris, sees the Arts as a very strong area for Aboriginal development. He's established a trial set-up of six months, the brief being to develop a cultural show using puppets, theatre and music. It will be written and produced at the College and will tour to a cultural festival in Fiji in mid-89.

"The program is to have a strong bent towards industry understanding. Kids will be trained in management and project co-ordination skills as well as in arts skills. It will work part-time within the curriculum and part recreation time. The performing arts unit should eventually become a community centre for performing arts development. It is one of the most unique projects I've seen attempted."



Left: Darwin Theatre Company rehearse 'Dust Off Vietnam' Below: 'Death of Balibo' by Darwin Theatre Company with the Timorese Cultural Association (Lafiek) Opposite Page: Geoff Hooke, Artistic Director, DTC Below Opposite: Aqua Robbins in DTC's 'Dragged Screaming to Paradise'

DRAGGED SCREAMING TO THE THEATRE

DARWIN THEATRE COMPANY DEVELOPS THE POOL OF CREATIVITY

IN MY SHORT time in the Territory I was generally so busy talking about art, culture, theatre, that I didn't actually get to do much of it. But it was the end of the season and there was only one show happening in town anyway. So I went to see *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*.

Director Tessa Pauling is a long-time member of the Darwin Theatre Group and a typically professional amateur member of this company. She has performed in some eight of

their shows since 1977, "in between having babies and working out how to live with a man". Tessa's first directing experience was earlier last year with a production of *Masterpieces*, by British playwright Sarah Daniels, for Women's Own Work. With a cast of six, three men and three women, the show's two week season at Brown's Mart was very well received.

"Women's Own Work produced *Masterpieces* as a response to a surge of sex entertainment at Darwin pubs

and nightclubs, and to the drafting of legislation to ban R-rated videos in the Territory," says Tessa, drawing my attention to the bad joke that the two biggest discos in town, on opposite sides of the same street, are called Fannies and Dicks.

"*Masterpieces* looks at three couples affected in very different ways by attitudes to pornography. The production was actually provoked by the Government's refusal to fund an episode of a TV show produced by women who wanted to interview the women working in those Prawn and Porn Palaces."

Tessa's show, *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, was hot. Full houses from its second night and word of mouth was "you just have to see it".

A locally written and highly parochial single-handed comedy it was economical and imaginative in design, acted with great timing and verve by Aqua Robbins which got every laugh that it went for.

The story is of the trials and tribulations of a recent emigre to the Top End, a modern woman with an independent life and work of her own who, with the greatest misgivings, follows her husband to his 'challenging and interesting' new job in the N.T. It obviously hit a responsive chord with expatriot Darwin audiences.

Dragged Screaming to Paradise



Photo: Brenda Yee

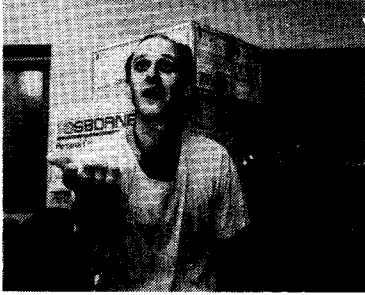


Photo: Ian Chance

"ONE OF THE GREAT STRENGTHS OF DARWIN IS THAT DESPITE ITS SIZE THERE'S AN AMAZING COLLECTION OF CREATIVE PEOPLE. IT'S THE SAME SIZE AS FRANKSTON WHERE I WAS BORN, BUT IT'S NINETY TIMES AS EXCITING AS FRANKSTON..."

GEOFF HOOKE

was written by founder member of Melbourne's nationally renowned Home Cooking Theatre Co., Suzanne Spinner, with the assistance of a Literature Board grant. Suzanne is herself a recent arrival in Darwin — arriving in 1987 under similar circumstances as her play's protagonist, though, having toured the N.T. with Home Cooking's production of her play *Running Up a Dress* last year, she swears that she screamed only a little.

Dragged Screaming was self-funded by the show's production collective, Paradise Productions. It was to have been supported from the Women's Own Work production funds pool, but someone left town with the chequebook.

So with a little sponsorship, a lot of hard work, goodwill and \$2,000 underwriting from a friend, *Dragged Screaming* hit the boards. By the fourth night of an eight night season there was \$5000 in the kitty so the cast and crew, 24 people, might get pocket-money yet. But you can be sure that much of the box-office will be set aside for the next production; that's the way things work in Darwin theatre.

Women's Own Work and Paradise Productions along with another company, Moving Feast, are ad hoc amateur theatre production groups who regularly stage one or more shows a year at Brown's Mart with the connivance and assistance of the Brown's Mart Community Arts Project and the Darwin Theatre Company. Nearly all members of these companies would also be members of DTC.

In bigger cities these three would be the professional alternative companies. But in Darwin the mainstream theatre (DTC) is alternative enough. A pro/am

company which employs only its administrator and artistic director, contracting occasional directors, designers, writers and technicians, DTC relies heavily on unpaid (the term amateur is hardly applicable) casts and crews to produce highly popular and professional theatre.

Says DTC's new artistic director, the well-respected young Melbourne professional theatre director, Geoff Hooke; "The joy of working with DTC is that we have this enormous pool of extremely well-trained people, we've got nearly 80 active members, most of whom are mainly

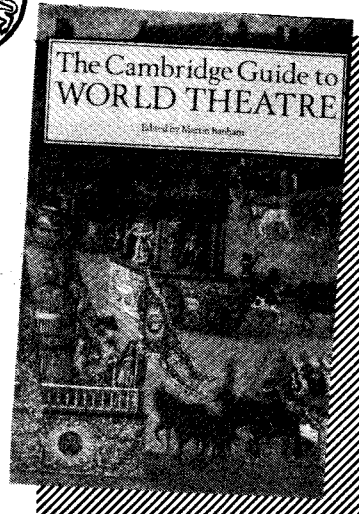
interested in performance.

"You have to remember that although they are amateurs they've had professional direction since the early seventies with people like Nigel Triffit, Simon Hopkinson and other well-known guest directors brought up during those 15 or 20 years. It's certainly one of the things that drew me here. Now I've got the chance to do large-scale productions that I just don't have down south; just about every theatre director has to work within that restraint on the size of the cast. Up here you can do anything you like as long as you can enthuse



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the people you are working with.

"One of the great strengths of Darwin is that despite its size there's an amazing collection of creative people. It's the same size as Frankston where I was born, but it's ninety times as exciting as Frankston because there are the most extraordinary people here," Geoff says. "So at the moment I've just been going out to listen to ideas and they're coming in thick and fast — from Roger Bennett in Alice, from Suzanne Spinner, Neil Cameron, Jan McDonald, Yan Wizinski. . ."

DTC's administrator, Sylvia Langford adds that 1988 saw a surge of activity, interest and creativity in Darwin theatre which even brought it to national prominence. "It's an interesting place with an exciting mix of cultures," she says. "And I think that we really helped put Darwin on the map this year with the production of *Death at Balibo*. Suddenly everybody knows, every major newspaper and all the TV networks covered it."

The staging of *Death at Balibo* was a fine example of the high level of creative flux between the city's community organisations. The initial approach was made to DTC and Brown's Mart by Barbara Pitman, Multicultural Arts Officer for the Migrant Resource Centre. She in turn was responding to the desire of Darwin's small but energetic Timorese refugee community, who wanted to practise and demonstrate their traditional culture in a context which would also express their

political situation and relationship to their new home.

The outcome was a combined effort by Lafaek (Crocodile) Timorese Association Cultural Group, the Migrant Resource Centre, Brown's Mart and the Darwin Theatre Company (who produced the show). Brown's Mart was able to secure funding for playwright Graeme Pitts to become writer-in-residence for the duration of the project and to help with liaison and administration between the groups.

Death at Balibo combined the story of the deaths of eight Australian journalists at the hands of Indonesian troops during the takeover of East Timor with an expression of Timorese life and culture and some of the effects that the forceable joining of their country with Indonesia had on their lives. *Balibo* is credited with being a powerful demonstration of the important role that theatre can play in teaching a community about itself and the diversity of its culture.

"Lafaek have approached us to do another show in 1989 and we are very interested," says Jeff. "The co-writer of *Death at Balibo*, Graeme Pitts, has another writing fellowship in Darwin this year and has also approached us for some assistance then."

"It's very much our role at DTC to assist other groups in producing their work," says Sylvia Langford. "It's not altogether altruistic either,

because we know that every increase in theatre activity develops the pool of creativity and the audience pool on which we depend."

Geoff Hooke's program for DTC in 1989 is an even-handed mix of straight drama, musicals, classics, children's theatre and community theatre, with a good dash of touring thrown in. "We are looking to get as much of our work out of Darwin as we can while still servicing our audience here," says Geoff.

The calendar includes a revival of Gilly Farrelly's ever-popular *The Swashbuckling Adventures of Grandma Mad* (see review this issue), and *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepherd. The musical for the year is to be what Robin Archer recently referred to as "Kurt and Bert's greatest hit", *The Threepenny Opera*.

DTC have what has almost become a "dry season tradition" of performing a Shakespearian classic outdoors in the ruins of the old Darwin Town Hall. Geoff has no intention of letting such valuable community traditions die.

"We have a wonderful outdoor venue and the weather is unfailing as are the people. It's very popular with our core audience and particularly with schools. It's also popular with tourists as well, a right little money-spinner. This year we will probably do *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, apt don't you think?"

The final show of the year is to be a music hall melodrama with a topical, satirical twist, probably to be directed by Ken Conway.

Geoff seems to be reserving a lot of his enthusiasm for Roger Bennett's script-in-process, *Up the Ladder*. Probably to be directed by Neil Cameron it will be toured Territory-wide as a tent show. "We'll be working to get local community theatres to provide buskers, spruikers and a whole menagerie of carnival events going on outside the tent as well, shell-game con men, fairy floss machines, the works," Geoff waxes enthusiastically.

"I think it's going to be a fantastic year. Now I've finally got the opportunity to be a really good producer, to get on shows like *Up the Ladder*. It's just the kind of show I've been wanting to produce for years, conceptually, politically, figuratively, formatively, the lot. It's exactly the kind of theatre that I think we need in Australia."●

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