

LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

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**Exploding Pineapples
for Fun and Profit**

AT THE FRONTIER

JOHN EMERY IN QUEENSLAND

"THERE IS THIS PERCEPTION THAT WE FAVOUR THE PHILISTINES RATHER THAN THE ARTISTS UP HERE. AND IT'S NOT NECESSARILY RIGHT. AND IT ISN'T RIGHT NOW BECAUSE IT'S IN THE PREMIER'S PORTFOLIO"

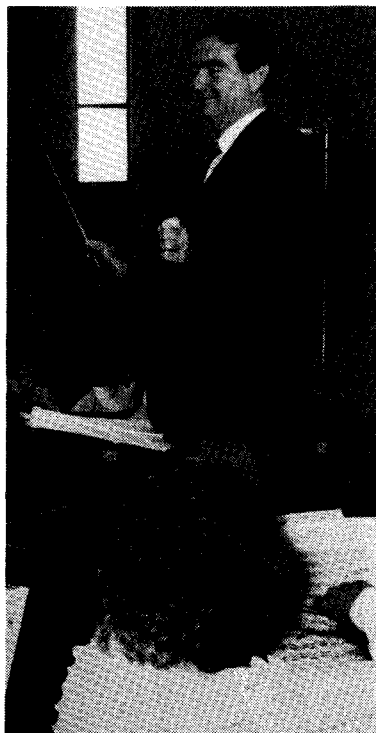
MIKE AHERN QUEENSLAND PREMIER AND MINISTER FOR THE ARTS

FROM THE AIR Brisbane seemed nothing special. An S-bend in a river crowded with buildings. Scrub-covered hills. Coastal swamps being turned into dormitory suburbs, and into an international airport.

The airport was so new, it hadn't been finished. All the energy was in the carpenters, welders, and carpet-layers. The passengers didn't seem to know where they were going, or what to do. But Expo was about to open, the billboards shrieked at me, and when it did everything would be all right.

In the cab, while the driver complained about the siting of the new airport, I reviewed my briefing on this operation. We had been negotiating this trip with what was now the Arts Division of the Premier's Department of the Queensland Government for a year. They wanted me to experience the energy, the vitality, the vibrancy of performing arts in Queensland. I wanted to find out about the censorship, and the depressed state of TIE since Education Department funding had cut them right back.

The streets smelled of diesel fuel and dust. They rang with the sound of jack-hammers. The sidewalks were boarded up. I, and the rest of



Above Mike Ahern, Premier and Minister for the Arts, during rehearsal at the International Festival of Youth Orchestras. **Opposite Page** Brisbane's Street Arts. **Back to Front:** Mark Crocker, Fiona Winning, Julie Houston, Sally Hart.

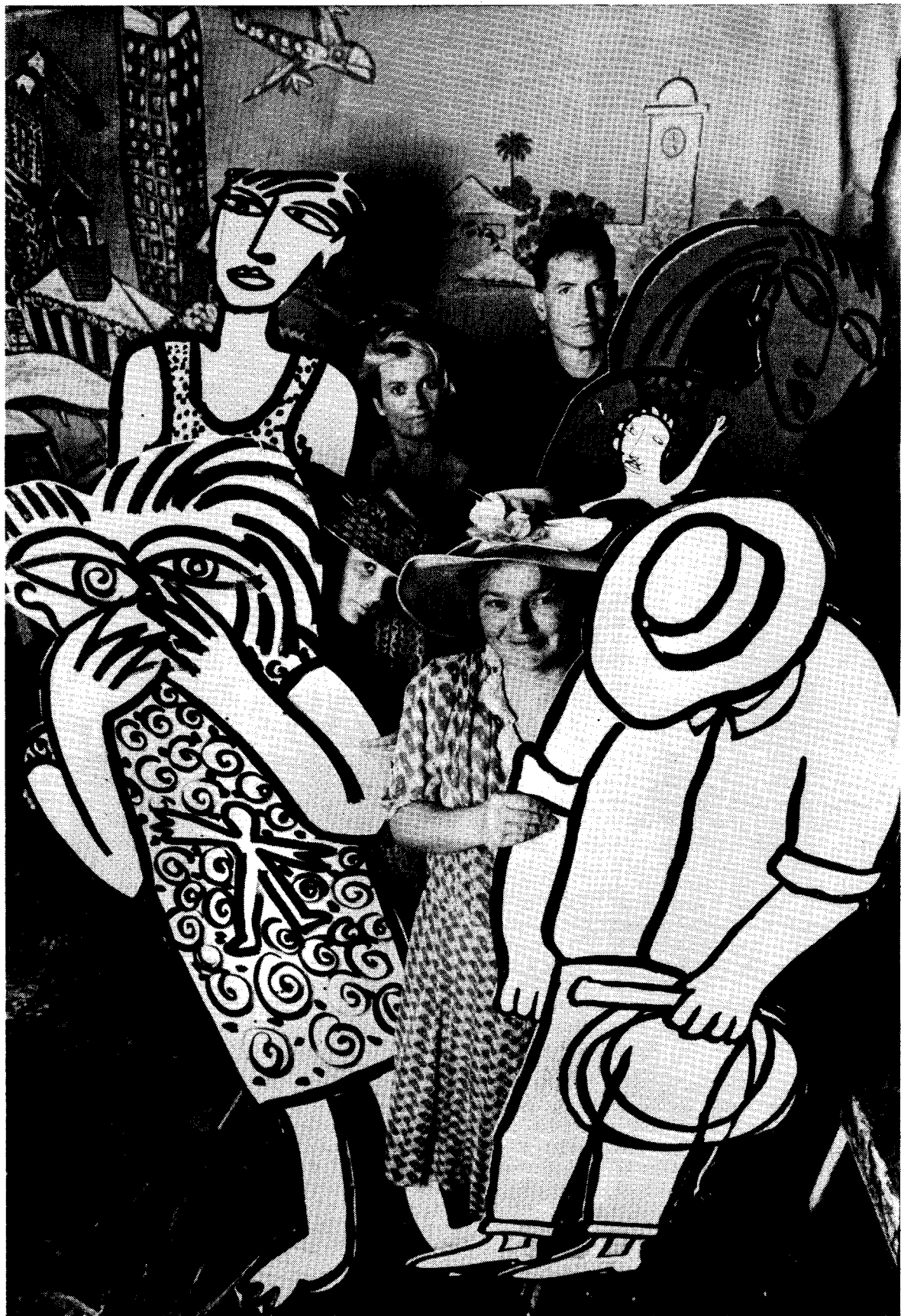
Brisbane's population, walked in the streets. Everything was being rebuilt for Expo. Myers had opened just in time, having gutted an entire city block, kept the Victorian facade, and rebuilt West Edmonton Mall behind it.

My first appointment was with Michael Forde, Artistic Director — also titled 'Teacher in Charge' — of Kite, the Queensland Education Department's Preschool Theatre Group. Kite was on the third-floor of an old downtown building. A building so old you could open the windows in it. It housed the Brisbane Metro Arts Centre.

Kite used to be five people. After the cutbacks it was now three. "I guess you've had a pretty torrid time, lately?" I suggested. But Forde was surprisingly optimistic.

"Well, we've patched up a few of the problems through networking with other groups," he said. He thought for a while. "In fact, the cuts have been quite positive in a way. They were across the board, and the Preschool Division fared better than many areas. With the support of the Preschool Division I contacted as many organisations as I could."

The result was Michael secured Australia Council funding for two



actors to tour with Kite. The Logan City Council — a satellite city in the hilly scrub country south of Brisbane — funded a Kite tour of their area. A deal was set up with the Brisbane CAE to do a program of *Babar The Elephant* with the Queensland Theatre Orchestra, and third year Dance and Drama students. Roadworks, the TIE section of the RQTC arranged for Forde to direct one of their shows. He landed some Expo work. And there was an ongoing joint production commitment with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre.

A fluke! I said to myself as I slogged up the hill, towards the brand new concrete and steel Cathedral, passing the cement-mixers and a huge hole in the ground that exposed bedrock, and into which a quaint old timber building with wrap-around verandahs — the Brisbane City Council School of Art — seemed about to disappear forever. Individual initiative! I said. It won't be repeated.

I was wrong again. Inside a disused factory I found the Queensland Youth Orchestra: three main orchestras and three other groups. 350-380 players. The number one orchestra had been touring the world since 1972, notching up successes in Festivals from Lausanne to London. 1988 was their 21st year of operation. It was the Bicentenary (as you may have heard), and there was also Expo. It sounded like the right time to repay all that hospitality with their own International Festival of Youth Orchestras.

The QYO's Administrator, Susan Dowrie, had the fire of enthusiasm in her eyes. So had the Festival's manager, Faye Vickers. More to the point, QYO had stayed solvent for 21 years. It had grown from a once-off 1966 Schools Music Festival, that afterwards parents and players wanted to keep going. So, by charging families for tuition and performance, by fund-raisers, by lobbying the Brisbane City Council,

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Queensland Government, and Australia Council, they had thrived.

JUST UP THE road from the QYO was the YMCA. Enthusiastic young men were demonstrating their biceps at the switchboard. Way up the back of the Y was a dance studio, a place where ex-dancing mums brought their daughters, to pass on to them that same insatiable ache for something beyond the horizon of scrubby hills and high-rise cranes.

Teaching part-time here was Shirley Treacy, one of the founders of the Queensland Dance School of Excellence. In 1982 she and two other dancing mums realised that, in order for their daughters to fulfil their dreams of dance they would have to go away down South, and abandon not just their families but any education beyond Year 10.

What I was beginning to discover I liked about Queenslanders was that they were very pragmatic dreamers. Yes, it would be marvellous if my daughter danced at Covent Garden, but what if something went wrong along the way? Her boobs got too big? The bottom falls out of the dance-business? Then what? She needs to complete her education as well as her dance.

So the three of them started the Dance School of Excellence, with 12 girls in the first year, backed up by a set of correspondence course lessons from the Education Department. The next year, 1983, the Department, "gave us a retired schoolmaster to supervise the lessons."

Then, once it was clear they were serious, the Department took them

under its wing. Special classes were created at Kelvin Grove High School. The students danced from 8-12 in the morning, and studied for Matric from 1.30-4.30 in the afternoon. By 1987, the Queensland Ballet had taken over responsibility for the dancing side of the curriculum — and guaranteeing a career for the graduates. The Queensland Dance School of Excellence had become part of the system.

As I slogged back through the mall, trying to ignore the biplane towing the placard advertising EXPO 88 passing overhead, I tried very hard to think of another Education Department opening its doors to such a scheme put up by three mums, and I just couldn't.

SO FAR I'd only investigated the north bank of the river. What was happening over the other side? Over there next to the mosque-like spire and Vancouver-like tents of Expo?

The cab driver couldn't think of one good thing to say about Expo. From the poor siting of cab access to the way his mother had been evicted from her southside flat. I had the Premier's press-release on it in my kit.

"A \$1,000 million project to redevelop Brisbane's EXPO 88 site will be undertaken by a consortium of local companies — River City 2000."

"Mr Ahern said he was confident Queenslanders would be absolutely delighted with the River City 2000 concept that had a strong tourist theme . . .".

"The community," says Fiona Winning, "was not consulted. And the community is not happy."

Fiona is spokesperson for the Street Arts Collective, a community arts/theatre group hanging on in the Expo fallout zone.

"This area," she says, "the West End/Highgate Hill area, is a low-income, multicultural area."

An area of large factories, like ACI Glass, or abandoned factories — like the old Spartan Paints site

Street Arts occupies now as squatters, having had their rent doubled by a new owner, and been served an eviction notice when they wouldn't pay up.

"The area's been ignored for years, but now Expo's given the green light for the Central Business District to expand across the river. Land values have escalated in the last year. Now they're trying to 'clean the place up'. Musgrave Park has been a traditional Aboriginal place for many years. Aboriginal people are now being harassed there more than usual.

"Lots of people are being evicted, or their rents escalated so they're forced to move out."

Street Arts work reflects this commitment to the local community. As well as being a political theatre-group they're a seeding ground for activities and training. Like their 1986 community circus show: *Rock 'n Roll Circus*. From that has grown a regular group of the same name, doing circus and popular theatre with a circus/ music base.

The end of my first day in Brisbane. I was knackered. I had everything I needed for sustenance in my room, as long as it was liquid and came in a yellow can with four red X's on it. I turned on the radio and listened to an Expo ad, and stared at my lampshade. The stem was copper, in the shape of a pineapple, circa 1930. But the shade itself was a neutral tone of 1976 hotel white. I preferred the stem.

I lay there puzzling about the town. There was definitely something different about it.

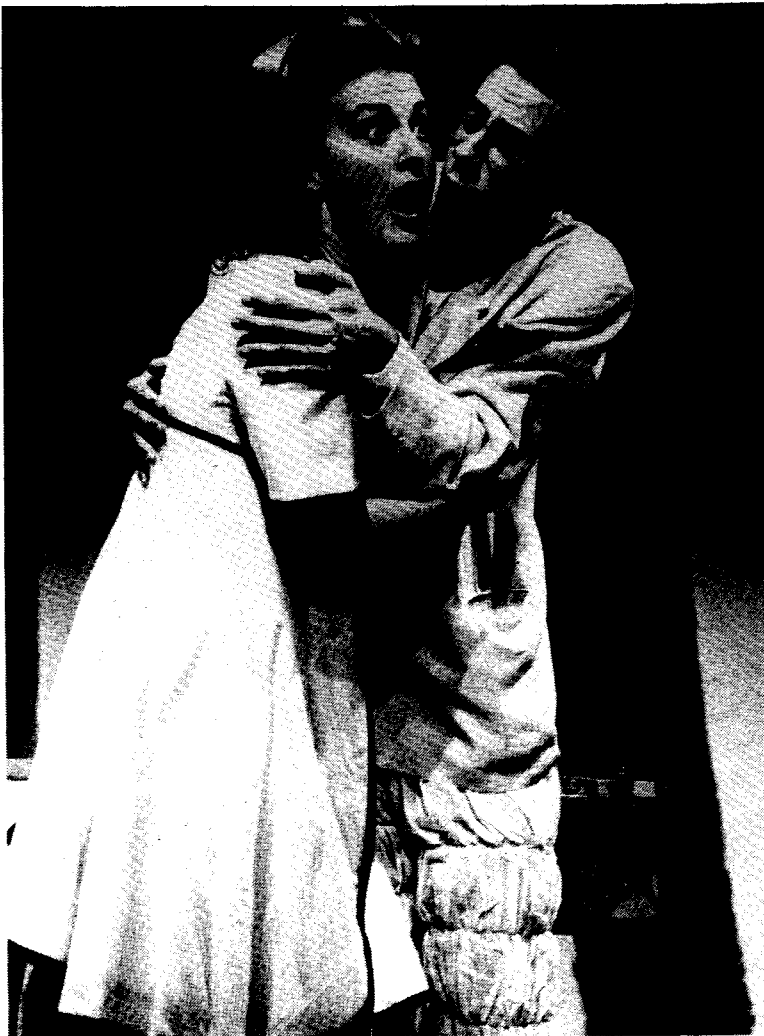
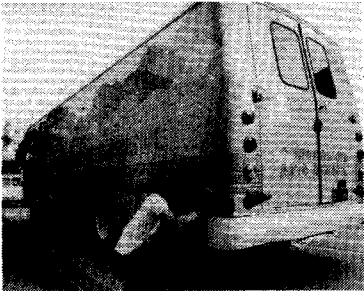
NEXT DAY began for me with the Queensland Arts Council. They also inhabited an old rundown mid-city building. I was used to Arts Councils being fairly ineffectual bunches of artistic do-gooders lost somewhere between Saturday cake-stalls and the streamlined superannuation mentality of the new arts bureaucrats. Again I was wrong.



Above Left Kite Preschool Theatre's Artistic Director, Michael Forde in 'A Moon Between Two Houses'.

Above Right The Queensland Dance School of Excellence.

Below Street Arts' *Rock 'n Roll Circus*. Back: Derek Ives, Chris Sleight, Antonella Casella. Front: Ceri McCoy, Lisa Small.



Above Left Queensland Arts Council tour bus.
Above Right TN21 1988 team. Top: Tara Franks, David Fenton, Mary Carden. Second Row: Jenny Kent, Irena Haze. Third: Jessica Veurman, Annette Downs. Ground: Brian Edmond, Russell Krause.
Below Jenny Kent and David Fenton in TN21's 'Fortune Found'.

Arthur Frame, the Education Program Director, talked at me for an hour, and I discovered that the QAC's operating budget, audience, and geographic area is the same as the entire operation of the Canada Council's Touring Arts operation. In fact Arthur's boss, Peter Dent, was over in the land of the maple leaf logos, looking at that operation.

Here was another example of Queensland get-up-and-go. In 27 years' operation this private, non-profit company had got its programs into 90 per cent of the state's primary schools (State and Private). It now had 70 branches across the state. They had just cracked High School touring, and in one year's full operation had 66 per cent of that market.

What does the QAC do? Basically, it books acts and co-ordinates tours. And it holds a well-recognised monopoly on this activity within Queensland schools. It is in the situation where, on the one hand, the Education Department comes to them to co-ordinate all in-school performances, and on the other individual companies come to them to get work.

As Arthur talked I began to feel uneasy. The way the QAC had got into such an enviable position, where it was doing a lot of good, was through hard work and a very cosy relationship with the Education Department. The Department had recently seconded them a teacher as Education Liaison Officer to produce follow-up material, booking brochures, teachers kits, for schools — and at the same time educate performers into how to present shows to schools, how to run the follow-up sessions, and so on.

The Department had done the market-research — at the QAC's request — which identified and targeted the High School audience.

I put it to him that there could be criticism of their position.

"Oh, people who don't pass the assessment are the ones who aren't happy," he said. "Some of them

accuse us of a monopoly.”

“The reason this organisation is in a strong position is that, over the years, we’ve got the logistics right. Our policy is, through our branches, to have a performance in every school in Queensland, regardless of distance and population. That’s from far distant schools with a population of 15 up. No other organisation can afford to do that. Our primary school rate is \$1.75 a show, and \$3.00 a family ticket. With that we have a box-office of \$1 million which almost covers our \$1.3 million operational expenditure.

“As a result of this, we can guarantee year-round work for artists. We’re running ads in *Lowdown* to urge interstate artists to come up here. We can accommodate the needs and philosophies of all artists who want to work anything from a seven week to a 42 week tour.”

On the way out, he showed me the renovations. The Works Department had done them for the QAC. I was now getting a feel for how you got things done in Queensland. First you had the ideas, the vision, the drive. Then you got a ‘special relationship’ with someone in government.

SOMEONE who’d had their run of knockbacks from the QAC’s ‘assessment’ was Sean Mee, Director of the TN2! Theatre Co., the youth section of the TN Theatre. He mentioned the *Copshop* show that was ‘independently assessed’ after local pressure-groups found the idea of a show reassessing the role of the police force too hard to take. A show based on Hindu myths went the same way. South Australia’s Silver Harris had her *Dragon’s Sneeze* tour knocked back because of the ‘superstitious’ element in it.

“Arthur is trying to clarify a higgledy-piggledy mess that just grew,” Sean explained. “Effectively, the QAC acts as if it has a right of veto over what goes into schools, through the assessment procedure.”

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“What is the assessment procedure?”

“It’s basically a system of censorship. All shows for school touring must be assessed by one QAC person and one Education Department person. This means, for someone who wants to tour, they’ve got to be assessed by their competition! The individual school principals have reneged on their responsibilities of deciding what goes into their school and have passed the buck right back to the Director General of Education.

“The QAC only allows three-member teams to tour. We want to run an eight-person tour!”

TN2! works out of the Princess Theatre, a lovely old theatre that was built in 1888, housed the USO Pacific Tours rehearsals in the 1940s, went derelict in the 1980s, and was renovated in 1986. It, too, was on the Southside, Expo-land.

The Queensland Cultural Centre was here, too. A dreadful-looking place. A series of concrete cubes stacked on top of each other and spread along the riverbank. Cut in half by a major freeway. On one side of the freeway are the theatres. On the other side the museum, art gallery, and library.

But inside the museum and gallery the view is entirely different. They open out, full of light and space. Intelligent displays put the Australian heritage of European and Aboriginal culture into their places

amongst the world around us. Outside, a series of platforms lead down to the river.

Inside the theatre-spaces it’s all that cold, exposed concrete aggregate which was the vogue in the late-60s and 70s. The blockhouse feel. Maybe an intimation of this is where it all ends, in a fallout shelter waiting for the air to run out. I sat at the stage door, waiting for Jim Vile.

Jim was full of enthusiasm. He and his wife, Sue Rider, had fled Adelaide’s theatrical incestuousness to come here. Jim took a big dive in salary to get to La Boite as Artistic Director. He just had to escape. Now he felt he had room to breathe.

“The thing in Brisbane, that’s not in Adelaide,” he said, “is a great feeling of goodwill and co-operation. If you’re in trouble, people will rush to assist you. If your show sells out, people are genuinely pleased for you.

“There’s been a backwash of bad publicity built up over the last 20 years, but the energy is now building, and the Arts Division people are behind it. Dona Greaves, Director of the Arts Division, has an openness, a desire to get things done, and she’s prepared to make judgements within the political situation that exists here.

“Three years ago there was little going on in youth theatre at La Boite, but the Donemans have shaken it up, and found major funding from the Federal and State agencies. And people are prepared to work their arses off because of it. And whatever the problems with the QAC, it’s guaranteeing people a livelihood.”

The Donemans arrived at La Boite at what must have been its darkest hour. La Boite had been constituted as an amateur theatre, and worked as such from the early twenties to 1972, when they built their lovely theatre in the round, and moved towards their current pro-am mix. But by the mid 1980’s the organisation had fallen apart. The parent company was close to bankruptcy, and the once flourishing program of the early childhood development unit had become Kite,

leaving just a smattering of youth workshops.

Jim Vile's leadership turned the main company around, and the Donemans did the same with the youth component — to the point now where the youth section gets a direct injection of \$65,000 from the Australia Council, against the total state funding of \$60,000 to the whole organisation.

Cuckoo-like, the youth section is growing larger and larger. And has influenced the thinking of La Boite's 'grown ups' section into doing Arts Council school tours, and also programming such school syllabus productions as *Hamlet*.

Michael Doneman winces as he mouths the dreaded cliché of the 1980's, but can't think of a better way to describe what they do. "Our philosophy is to 'empower' the kids, to employ them to express a voice, to equip them with skills that go beyond simple theatre skills, so they can communicate on all sorts of levels."

To do this they run workshops for 140 young people a week, with 12 tutors, building skills, and then honing those skills in performance programs, like *Interplay*, and community festivals, such as the one at Maroochydore that they have been asked to run.

All of this means livelihood for La Boite's half-dozen full-time employees and its dozen or so part-time workers.

Maybe livelihood was enough? It was obvious as I sat in the Art Gallery, watching the people from way out west easing their way in, staring cautiously at 19th Century British paintings as if they might bite, that there was a lot of educating of the audience necessary in this town.

The Education Department was doing its part. Theatre and music education had boomed throughout the state. Even dance education. Say what I would about the QPAC bunker, it was packing bums on seats, bringing in touring orchestras and shows — though the local

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companies found the hire-rates of the theatre and auditorium too steep to generate anything but break-even. But I was getting this uneasy feeling as I worked. When asked to evaluate the scene, people were reluctant to comment. On one level that was a refreshing change from artists 'down south', who just love being catty — "strictly off the record", of course. But, on another . . . there was a certain belligerent assertion that Queensland was, "alright, thanks". There was none of that uneasy feel for the flux of international events which keeps the artists down south in an anxiety-state.

And there was a definite rot at the top. No two ways about it. The founding director of the Queensland Theatre Company — now the Royal Queensland Theatre Company — Alan Edwards, had resigned. And everyone was heaving a sigh of relief. The best that was said about the RQTC in recent years was that its programming was "conservative".

ROADWORKS is RQTC's official TIE section, and the director, Christine Campbell had driven in 100 km from her vacation to talk to me. Roadworks was run on the proverbial shoestring. Christine is administrator as well as director. She co-ordinates and runs classes and workshops — particularly aimed outside the Metro area. And tours shows through the auspices of the Queensland Arts Council.

Christine is a pragmatist. The QAC had decided that Roadworks' touring schedule be cut, and she'd gladly agreed. "I think too much touring is what got Roadworks its bad name in the past," she said, "And has led to rumours from some quarters that we'll be scrapped."

She works hard at squashing those rumours, but they keep persisting.

NEXT DAY verified that the infrastructure for the Arts was, indeed, up and running. Dr Cathy Brown — a Renaissance woman; dancer, pianist, administrator, scientist — and now Deputy Controller of Programming at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, outlined their educational programming — master-classes, programs for the elderly, disabled, in-theatre with Kite.

Her intention is to use the unique, high-tech. resources of the blockhouse to bring in the sorts of shows that can't be done locally. Marionettes Theatre, for example. Or master-classes with their Fairlight synthesiser. "We can compliment the limitations of local TIE, and the QAC, with the full complement of technical theatre," she said. "Our brief is to cover Queensland, but we're neither funded nor staffed to tour. In our Outreach program we commission works with major companies to develop here, so they can take them on tour.

"I see our role as a seeding role. We originated the idea of a touring program for secondary schools, that the QAC later took up. 'Tots Pops', music for pre-schoolers, was started by us, and when the orchestras saw how successful it was, they took it up."

I asked her about my perception that theatre in general and young people's theatre, in particular was seeing a renaissance. She agreed.

"Young people's theatre was not all that strong, but it's now strengthening. The adult companies have developed youth components, like TN2! or La Boite, rather than

specific youth companies emerging on their own.

"There's a kind of vibrancy here, right now. The arts scene wants to go somewhere, particularly since Dona Greaves' appointment and the change of government. But it's not yet focused. It doesn't know where it wants to go and is exploring as widely as possible.

"The advantage of working in Brisbane, right now, is that you can get away with more in a mainstream-way. Things that would be regarded as Fringe ventures down South. And people can work co-operatively."

And the down side?

"Obviously we're looking at budget cuts. There's been a slightly false sense of optimism provided by the Bicentennial and Expo 88. But come 1989 there are going to be substantial cuts across the board."

Someone to challenge Dr Brown's idea that young people's theatre was only growing out of the mainstream companies was Alan Rogers, founder of the ETC Company, in 1985. ETC came out of a schools' performance project, got an Australia Council grant for a show, *Jumping The Gun*, planned a tour . . . and the show was found unacceptable by the Education Department.

Landfall, written by Michael Doneman, was a hit at the 1987 Community Theatre Conference. It is now touring under the auspices of the Arts Council.

ETC has been unable to pay Alan a wage, so he took on the job of Community Arts Officer with the Brisbane City Council. He now heads up a three-person team, with Bernice Gerrand and John Smout. They're targeting visual arts in their first year, along with a multi-arts project called STARS — involving visual artists, writers, and performers. Alan described STARS as ". . . an ETC Company project", and seemed to find no conflict of interest between his position vis-a-vis it and the Council job.

But, then, that might be



Above Left The ETC Company's *'Landfall'*.
Above Right Roadworks' *'The Jarle Garden'*.
Below Anthony Weigh, Dawn Albinge and Irena Haze in La Boite Theatre's *'The Kelly'* Dance.

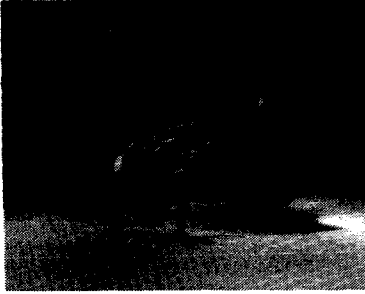


Photo: Darryl Wright

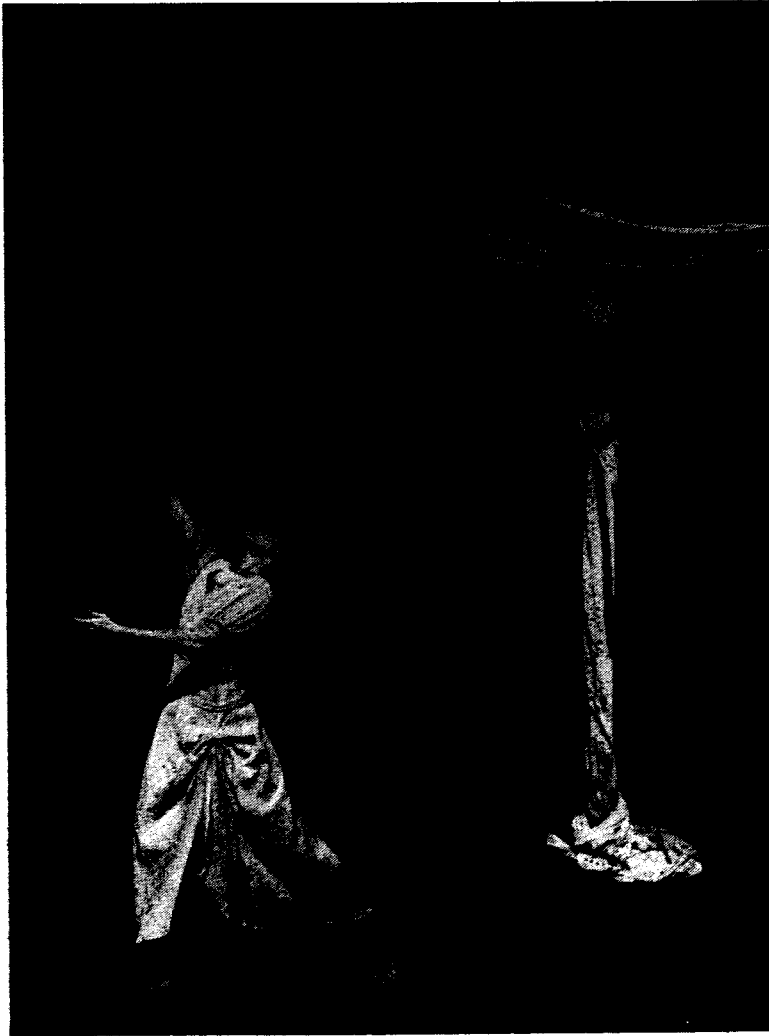


Photo: Michael Richards

Above Left Dance North's 'Reef', from 'Sun-Hunters'.
Above Right Melanie Duncan and Jan McNamee in Athena —
 MacKay's Theatre for Young People's 'The Glass Menagerie'.
Below Debbie Saxon in Expressions' 'Grit to Silk'.

Queensland.

Alan is a performer who picked up his skills along the way. First in New Zealand, then in Brisbane. But the infrastructure exists now, through the Theatre Arts Program of the Drama Department at Kelvin Grove CAE, to create professional theatre artists, well-crafted and with a philosophic breadth to them.

Mark Radvan has been co-ordinator of the Program the last four years, changing it from an Associate Diploma Course to an Undergraduate Degree course by 1989.

"The overall feeling of theatre in Queensland is one of youth," he says.

"But still a lot of us feel we have to go to Sydney and Melbourne for valid recognition. It's absurd, but it's strongly felt, even though the opportunities here for financial and artistic success are very powerful."

He sees his course as, "Geared to Brisbane, through our unique relationship with the TN company, who are sited in the same building. We share resources and the Princess Theatre. Our aim is to turn out professional theatre artists — actors, technicians, administrators — who are conscious of their art form as an art form, and can shape their careers with a sense of art.

"We would like to prepare them for the theatre that should exist, and also for the theatre that does exist."

Mark sees his problem in overcoming Queensland's version of anti-intellectualism as inherent in the State's school system.

"The education system in Queensland is not geared to encourage thought, even though the theatre-arts syllabus has grown enormously. Issues-based theatre, anything that stimulates thought, is seen as dangerous. The Education Department is hyper-sensitive to parental reactions, to an absurd proportion, and it got worse towards the end of the previous administration. *Dags*, for example, was toured in 83, but rejected in 87 when Roadworks proposed it. And

the reason given was language and issues. Censorship does exist here for material going into schools.

"Queensland theatre has suffered since 1983 very obviously from the failure of the State Theatre Company to give leadership. That's created a corresponding strength, because the smaller companies had to take up the challenge, even without sufficient resources.

"As the RQTC moved towards theatrical irrelevance, so, for example, the TN Company was forced from experimentalism into the mainstream to meet the challenge."

And, as for TIE, Mark sees incoming RQTC Director Aubrey Mellor's choices as, "... either Roadworks will disappear, or else Mellor will accept the challenge and lift it out of its rut."

IF TIE was in a rut, Dance In Education was a reality in Queensland, its headquarters in a tacky inner-city building inhabited also by the Aquarian Whole Health and Meditation Centre and International Socialism. It was the kind of mix I'd have expected in Canberra. But, again, no one was belly-aching or bitching as I climbed the in-need-of-renovation stairs.

Expressions TIE was packing for a U.S.A. tour. They'd been invited to the Houston Festival.

Like everything else in this town Expressions had "developed out of a perceived need," in 1984. Artistic Director Maggi Sietsma had arrived, in fact, in 81, when there was nothing happening. She went to Townsville and worked with a strong amateur dance society, out of which had emerged Dance North.

Expressions' aim is "to present contemporary dance throughout Queensland and develop a wider appreciation in the community" — by which they mean adults and children.

They offer schools work, an annual choreography workshop with leading interstate artists, and

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whatever tours they can rake up. Like the Bicentennial-funded *Gumtree Full of Galahs* show which was already on the road. With only individual project funding from the Australia Council, and some general funding from the State Government, they rely a lot on box-office and class fees.

I hit the street again, and bought a newspaper. A dancer at the Casino had been fired for allegedly carrying too much weight, but really for trying to get backstage conditions improved. The police poofster-bashing blitz was starting to draw a reaction. Someone was suggesting steel screens in public toilets as a way of stopping AIDS. The Fitzgerald Inquiry wended its way along, creeping inexorably closer to the deposed Premier. The Minister for Conservation, Geoff Muntz, was supporting the Lets Clear-Fell a Rain Forest brigade with a \$200 contribution. Coal Prices were rock-bottom once again. But once EXPO opened everything would be all right.

Queensland was trying to fight its way clear from all those kind of associations of the past. Amongst artists there was an almost unanimous agreement that the best thing to happen to performing arts up here was the coming of Premier Mike Ahern, his decision to be Minister for the Arts along with Premier and Treasurer, thus upgrading the Arts Division, and his entrenching a Queensland-born woman, Dona Greaves, to run the

show.

The Arts Division hung out on the 6th floor of the Executive Building, part of the cluster of sleek 60s-style public buildings on George Street. It was the one last place I had to check out.

Security was tight. You don't just walk into the Executive Building. You sign in with an ex-cop behind a row of monitors. I told him I was heading for the 6th floor, but my aim was actually far higher. The 15th, where the Premier's suite took up the entire floor. An interview for which I had been subtly coached by the Division's PR person, Katherine — no negative questions, please — Davis. And to which I was accompanied by Dona Greaves.

I DECIDED to start at the beginning.

"Mr Premier, why did you take on the role of the Minister for the Arts as well as Premier?"

He was guarded. His half-glasses cut off his eyeballs, so you couldn't read him. I got the feeling he was aware of it.

"I felt it was timely that in our state our party, and government, gave a higher profile to the Arts, and that would be achieved by my association with it. It would get some special attention under the Premier's wing, as it were. I think, in our state, whilst we've done some very innovative things and got some great programs going, there is a community perception that we have somehow got the Arts over into a corner; into a small, discrete elite. The idea is to draw it out into the general community, to get a better community perception of its importance within life for a whole range of reasons — life quality issues, the various economic issues, as well as the need within the general community to be, at this point in our history, fostering innovation and creativity. That was the idea in my mind. I hope I'm fulfilling that role. No-one's game to tell me I'm not, in this state."

He suddenly smiled and took the

half-glasses off.

"There is this perception that we favour the philistines rather than the artists up here, and it's not necessarily right. And it isn't right, now, because it's in the Premier's portfolio."

"Most other politicians I talk to speak of the Arts wholly in economic terms, in terms of delivering product and creating jobs. Is that the way you're thinking of it?"

"No. No. I think you have to market it in terms of what it is. Economics is a broader issue, though; it doesn't hurt to emphasise the economic context. But I wouldn't be marketing it solely on that basis. In fact I don't think you should market something as something it ain't."

I was mentally applauding that line, but Dona was prompting another.

"We need to emphasise the role of Queensland's artists," she said. "Not only the quality of life, but the opportunity for people to live here within that quality of life, so the artists can earn a living in somewhere that has a high quality of life."

Ahern cut back in. "There's a fair history of arts initiative in this state, right through, with links to the Education Department, which are very strong, very healthy . . ."

"Can we talk about Federal-State relations in the Arts? For example, South Australia and Victoria are being pressured to take over quite a lot of the responsibilities of the Australia Council through their Arts Departments."

"We are resisting that," Dona Greaves said quickly. "We are not going to fell a forest to come up with some paper on devolution. But we want to find the quickest and most efficient way to get the money into the Arts as soon as possible."

Her boss wasn't going to let her have all the good lines.

"There is a broader issue," he said, and his voice got more gravelly, "in that, historically, commonwealth governments have developed initiatives, funded them, promoted

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DONA GREAVES



Dona Greaves Director, Queensland Arts Division.

them, marketed them, and then sort of devolved them onto the states, given them some money to do it — in the interests of efficiency — and then when the next cycle of General Revenue grants comes around, the money disappears, and so does the Program. It's a well-recognised commonwealth process of walking away from programs, in all Departmental areas."

"The Australia Council would not be interested in some of the things we do here," Dona added. "Like funding amateur groups, who are the life-blood of the Arts in our farthest regional areas."

"The thing that gets said to me by artists is that the Queensland government fairs pretty well on national standards," Ahern added. "So we are in no way apologetic about what we do."

"How do you regard the arts/tourism mix?"

"Other states talk about cultural tourism!" Dona exclaimed. "We do it! Look at the Maroochydore Youth Arts Festival, our involvement in 1988 with the arts components of community festivals in Toowoomba, Gympie, Gladstone, and Stanthorpe. One in eight Australians have

bought either a season's or multi-use ticket to Expo."

"Expo is a cavalcade," Ahern added. "How we're going to take it all in . . . it makes me tired thinking of six months of it. It's going to be great!"

Our time was up. In another ten minutes he'd have to be talking to someone else. I could sense the aides hovering.

Dona and I went down to the 6th floor. It was past knock-off time. She found a bottle of scotch and Katherine found some warm soda water. We sat down and looked at the river from their windows. The sun was dropping towards the south-western hills. There was a slight dust haze out that way, making the horizon red.

I was thinking that I'd just heard the best, clearest sense spoken about arts-politics for a long, long time. "I don't think you should market something as something it ain't." I could put up with Expo for that.

If that was Redneck-farmer political wisdom then the arts-lobby down south could do with a heap of it. And I was getting the impression that the real Rambo in the Arts here was Ahern's hired gun: Dona Greaves. She was running a small, tight unit that was making a lot of decisions without all the assessment panels the rest of us have come to know and dread — particularly if we've got to sit on them. I asked her about it.

"We haven't got a structure here for assessment," she said. "We ask the companies to select their own assessors, and they have a right of reply on what is said, even then. The staff of the Division also does assessment, and we have a small team of three, an Arts Advisory Committee, but it's voluntary. We don't want to go into a system where there's an enormous cost for each art form so someone can tell us what we . . . (she almost said, 'already know', but hastily amended it . . .) Well, the marketplace, for example, told me last year that Expressions

went up 45 per cent in box-office. So I knew they were doing something right."

"With a lack of peer-group assessment aren't you going to be put into conflict with the Australia Council?"

"Yes, most definitely. And that's something we're mindful of. We don't want to lose Federal Government funds."

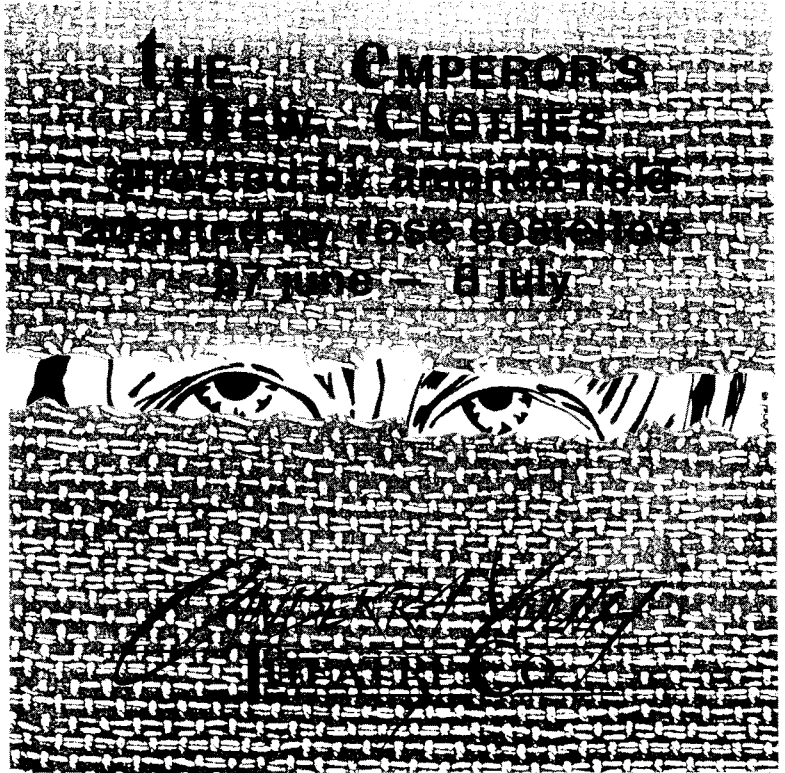
We sat back with our warm scotches and watched the sun set. Dona was reminiscing on Queensland, and how she felt about it now she was back.

"When I was here before, very little was happening in the Arts, of any great standard. Now I think the changes I've seen have to do with a greater confidence in the arts community. There was a lot of suspicion between various groups at first, because the way funding works in any state is that you establish the big performing arts companies in all the big buildings, and then you've got nothing over for the more innovative groups. We've been working flat-out to create an equity of opportunity to overcome that."

QUEENSLAND had been going its own way in the Arts for so long now, that as the Australia Council begins to bow out around the country, it's far better off than any other State. In a funny sort of way I realised that Mike Ahern's vision of the Arts was like that of Gough Whitlam's, way back when the Arts were something other than a form of employment.

The setting sun was reminding me of the dusk out there on the Brisbane streets. The smell of tropical flowers among the rows of timber houses up on stilts. The feeling of going-it-alone positiveness I'd met. That, 'So we can't get a grant? To hell with it, we'll pass around the hat and still do it,' mentality.

Yeah. It was Frontier mentality, and so it got sneered at by people who had not known a frontier for three or four generations. But that's what the Arts are: frontiers. ●



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YOUTH STORMS THE FRONTIER

QUEENSLAND'S YOUTH ARTS FESTIVAL

BY ROD WISSLER

ON EASTER Saturday the Sunshine Coast, a hundred kilometres north of Brisbane was wet, windy, and almost cold. But it was still Easter and that meant full churches, Iron Man contests, and every caravan park bulging at the seams.

But the Saturday morning shoppers at Maroochydore discovered themselves in the middle of a different kind of celebration. Young people with great, florid banners, decked out in the plumage of parrots and flying fish, lumbering stilt-men, multi-coloured faces, *commedia* apprentices in odd Easter bonnets and obscene noses, chanting a Ya-Ya song at the tops of their voices. And, over at Cotton Tree Park, a circus Big Top rising up through the rain, smaller, even more colourful tents clustering around it — hung with pennants, lights, and banners.

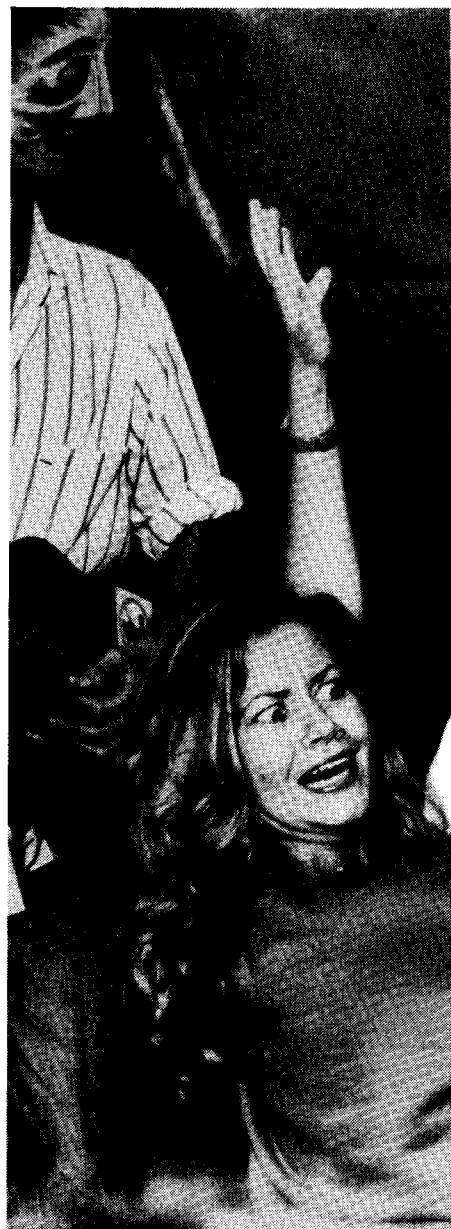
It was the first Queensland Youth Arts Festival, funded by the State Government's Arts Division, sponsored by SANTOS, and in the capable hands of Michael and Ludmila Doneman of La Boite Youth Theatre. They, with Declan McNamara and Greg Connolly of the Arts Division and staff of the Drama Department of BCAE, and tutors from Street Arts, Rock 'n Roll Circus, plus freelancers Michael Whelan, Jamie MacLean, and Mirka Mora, pulled together a free-wheeling, multi-arts spectacular of a week of workshops, and then two

days of public performance, commencing with the Saturday parade.

The young performers came from all over — 90 from the Sunshine Coast, and the other 30 or so from Brisbane, Gympie, the Gold and the North Coasts. The attraction for them was, as locally raised Michael Doneman said, "The promise of being able to work at what they love, of being able to do a little bit of everything. I keep thinking how, when I was 16 and living here, what I would have done to get such experience. The kids are marvellous, they're not distracted by the holiday-makers around them. They don't give a stuff about who's watching. They just want to learn."

It was also a chance for eager young performers to showcase their work to their peers, and meet and exchange ideas. One of the strongest points of the Festival was the way it cut across traditional art boundaries — with workshops in writing, visual arts, music, and traditional theatre skills.

All participants showed their



work in the weekend shows, which were open to the public. The music group made magic with the dancers using a consort of woodblocks in percussive rhythms. Within hearing of them, the sculpture group displayed projects for next year's Festival — including a flock of giant floating pelicans. Poems and prose from the writing group were published in the local paper — which was giving the Festival all its support in editorials and feature-coverage. Perhaps helped by the presence of local State member and Finance Minister, Brian Austin, and the largesse of the SANTOS



At the Maroochydore Festival The Bonzani Company, Brisbane CAE.

sponsors.

Six hundred people saw the final show in the brightly-lit tents, but it was the workshopping, the skills-development and sharing that formed the most important part of



the Festival's role in the artistic life of the community.

The hope is that this will serve as a stimulus for participants to involve themselves further in local arts activities — and to see a follow-up in the community and schools.

For 1989 Michael Doneman hopes to be able to more fully explore the local sense of place, with a large contingent of Aboriginal artists to bring out the feelings touched on by Brisbane's Wakka Wakka dance group, and the constant granite presences of the two mountains — Coolum and Ninderra — and Old Woman Island.

Maroochydore, on the Coast, full of youthful energy as well as memories of more ancient times, seems the right place for a celebration of the new life that is surging into the Arts in Queensland.



BEYOND THE FRONTIER

QUEENSLAND REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS

BY JOHN EMERY

THE DISTANCES are huge. The communities are small. The work is hard. The climate is harsh. It is a world which most Australians have never seen, yet which they mythologise constantly. The world of Flying Doctors, Flying Art Schools, Flying Vets, Flying TIE Companies. And the endless road celebrated by Slim Dusty.

"A country Community Arts Officer is their own best support system . . . To beat professional isolation, use the phone often . . .".
Paul Jenkins, CAO, Gladstone.

"The wide flat streets, the Aborigines who walk those streets in the quiet of the night, the hot humid conditions, the pub on every corner, the bureaucrats, the cow cockies, and the young people who stay and create . . .".
Ruby Red, visiting director in Rockhampton.

"These mining towns are beautifully appointed, but any opportunities you have to make yourself. All there is in the leisure-time is football, video, and the club. I saw the need for freedom of expression in the children, for their own worth as well as for education, and I saw that to do that I had to give my students an opportunity to perform."
Annamaria McGregor, founder of the McGregor Speech & Drama Centre in Mackay, and now directing the Central Qld. Youth Theatre in Glenden.

"I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived in Townsville, from Europe, to find a well established, high quality Civic Theatre, with an extremely well established structure of arts activities, that didn't



La Luna Youth Theatre, Townsville, 'Amazon Airport 1987': Paul Griffen, Connor Walsh, Jemma Price, David Astley, Rebecca Reynolds, Mary Gilliver, Cecilia Christensen, Ellen Grattidge, Verity Gallagher.

differentiate between amateur and professional. The amateurs were very good — if it hadn't been the distance to training centres, the cost of training, or simply the Grace of God, then these people would have been professionals. And the professionals working with them did not differentiate, did not regard the amateurs, as they would in Europe, as a bunch of no-hopers." *Lorna Hempstead, Administrator of Dance North.*

"Problems? The problems are the isolation, the lack of contact with other people doing what you are doing. The problem of finding good, relevant scripts, for example. Or of getting black-&-white film processed for publicity shots. Can you get us some decent scripts?" *Janet McGee, La Luna Theatre, Townsville.*

"Rockhampton? It's the type of place you can do anything and get

away with it! It's a small place, fairly open, sure it's a cow-cocky town, but it has a healthy sub-culture. If you do something different people might criticise you, or you might get a better audience, but people won't condemn you, like they do down South." *Annette Poole, Backyard Theatre Collective.*

As I listened to these voices coming down the phone lines, hearing the eagerness with which they grabbed at the sound of a sympathetic ear, it reminded me of my own time in the far north. Northern Territory mining camps in the 1960s. Driving all day and night from Tennant Creek to Mt. Isa to compete in a Drama Competition, then driving back again. Or watching an amateur company doing Chekov while, across the street, the country-music PA of a travelling boxing troupe drowned them out. But, above all, the eagerness with which we did things: started bands, theatre companies, wrote stories, scrambled motor-bikes, sat up all night listening to Wagner and Charlie Parker. Stuff I would never have tried 'down South'.

There's no way I could cover that scene by telephone. So what we'll do is organise our man in Brisbane, Michael Doneman, to do a *Lowdown* country tour, and report back to the rest of the world in a subsequent issue. Stay tuned to this frequency, folks.●

Quotes from Paul Jenkins and Ruby Red taken from Queensland Community Arts News, Issue 1, March 1988.