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Darwin Festival: the best of times

Cath Bowdler



The Tube
photo Karen Maxwell

The experience of this year's Festival of Darwin was inextricably linked to events that unfolded on election night, Saturday August 18. There couldn't have been a better time to launch a festival, one that could ride the unprecedented wave of excitement and the possibility of change. It happened like this...Only 2 days after the festival's official launch, we all went off to vote. A friend and I had booked to see a local multimedia production that night. The election had been seen as a foregone conclusion, a bit depressing actually. Even this time, the pundits had us believe there was only going to be marginal change. However, on the way to the show, the story was breaking on the car radio. Seats that had been held for 26 years were falling like cards in the northern suburbs, the CLP heartland. Things were happening, excitement was building, a sense of momentous occasion starting to dawn. We didn't want to go inside and leave the radio. Doing our duty, we entered the womb, and immersed ourselves in an extraordinary environment. The clamour of the outside world diminished for a moment.

The Tube, a multimedia installation and performance created by 2 Darwin women, Elka Kerkhofs and Elle Parsonson, was described as "an intriguing journey through the mind, body and emotions of women." The distinguishing feature of this project was its setting in the amazing WWII Tunnels under the Esplanade in the city. This site, once a fuel storage area, is a 250m long subterranean tunnel with a post-apocalyptic industrial ambience, dripping with water and disused heavy machinery. For this production the tunnel became the metaphor for the internal bodily landscape. We entered through the mouth, were shepherded through the vagina and ended up in the womb, where there just happened to be a DJ, a stage and a whole lot of TVs.

The first marshallng area near the mouth contained a multi-layered, diaphanous installation on which images were projected, with references to



**venture
every week
into strange
worlds of
innovative
art**



peeling back layers of clothes and consciousness. The tunnel contains a dogleg just past this point and, led further by a woman on stilts, we were presented with an extraordinary sight. The tunnel at this point stretches 170m in a straight line, with curved rock walls and a shallow drain running along the floor. At regular intervals, 9 naked women, wearing only swimming goggles, were stationed, each holding a flickering monitor to her crotch. The scene stretched seemingly to infinity. The screens, glowing blue, illuminated the dimly lit scene as the audience craned to get a look. The tunnel is not wide and we passed single file by the women. The frisson of proximity and possible recognition combined with the sexualised imagery on the screens added to the sense of drama. It was an intriguing and mysterious experience as we made our way down the tunnel of love. The saga of conception and reproduction was enacted by dancers in front of a large bank of monitors flanking the DJ. Unfortunately the performance, where the metaphor was spelled out rather too literally, did not quite live up to the introduction. There was a tendency, as with a lot of performances that blend hybrid art forms, to try to do too much. The Tube—a major logistical feat by emerging artists—was successful when they stuck to their strengths.

I couldn't wait to get back to the car radio and find out what had happened. The rest as they say is history and we were re-born into a new reality where the political landscape had changed forever. We went along to the Waratahs where the party faithful, and really anyone who wanted to go, were drawn like moths to the flame of change. It was quite a night. Party politics aside, the euphoria was palpable. It really was time!

The Festival of Darwin is a community event. It falls on the cusp of the Dry just as the weather is about to change. The setting sun glows like a huge orange, reddened by the dry season haze. It's all about to turn nasty...but not yet. The festival is in some ways the peak of the crescendo of activity that builds up during the Dry. There is so much going on that it's impossible to get to it all. The place is packed. Events like the Grand Parade, the Teddy Bears' Picnic, the Festival Club on the Wharf, the Fig Jam Indigenous music gig, the Barrdy'wanga Gunga String Festival, innumerable art openings and performances draw huge crowds. Amazing cross-cultural interactions are often noted by visitors, but if you live here it's like that all the time. It just escalates during the festival as the ranks swell.

Tracks Dance usually stages one of its trademark multimedia, cross-cultural performances, often a highlight of the festival. Tracks have worked for many years with groups including Indigenous communities, cultural groups, young people, trauma survivors, elderly women and even football teams. Their's is a theatre of inclusion.

Their latest production Fierce is based on the life of Olive Pink—an anthropologist, botanist, Aboriginal rights activist and cranky soul—who lived in Central Australia. She was variously labelled a communist, a mad woman and the “fiercest white woman in captivity.” This production focuses on historical and fictitious elements relating to an encounter between Miss Pink and the Warlpiri people of the Central Desert. In director Tim Newth's notes, the performance is said to be about connections between a white world and a Warlpiri world. He's talking about the Grey Panthers and the Warlpiri Ceremonial Dancers of Lajamanu, 2 groups of female elders with whom

Tracks has worked extensively. Between these 2 groups and at their intersection hovers the awkward figure of Olive, who in this production is played by Melbourne-based performer Trevor Patrick. The old women dominate the production.

The Grey Panthers are first seen as a Greek chorus decked out in plain calico dresses, their faces also masked with calico, features exaggerated as grotesques. This is the white world where they sing “Nothing else to do” as they wave Olive off into the distant ‘other’ world she will inhabit as an alien for the rest of her life. Patrick’s portrayal of Olive, which ranges from affected geisha to high camp drag, is strongly counterpointed with the earthy femaleness of the Lajamanu women, natural and charismatic performers. In contrast, at times everyone else seems stilted and not totally together. Olive’s botanical work, her strident and relentless writings appear in various ways in the design and narrative. Some members of the cast had first hand contact with Olive and cross-cultural misunderstandings about her story add to the narrative, the notion of her ‘pinkness’ being one.

In development for 3 years, the production is a rich and layered experience. It also involves the melding of various artforms with original music from the Arafura Ensemble, visuals by Gay Hawkes and Mat Mainsbridge, and choreography by the creative team, highlighting the collaborative way in which Tracks works. The subtext is the exploration of encounters with ‘difference’ on all levels, which this company has made their signature in recent years.

The visual arts were well represented in this year’s festival. One of the most interesting was Ending Offending, Our Message. This collection, created by inmates of the NT Correctional centre as part of the Ending Offending initiative, presented a strong show of mostly Indigenous, first time, artists. Staged at the disused Fanny Bay Gaol in a wire-caged shed, the opening crowd was a strange mix of the usual art set, art advisors, prison guards and prisoners. The food was definitely non veg. The show was opened by Margie West, Aboriginal Art Curator from Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory (MAGNT), who pointed out that the gaol has been the scene of art production for over 100 years, as prisoners contributed to one of the first shows of Indigenous art, The Dawn of Art, in 1888. Some delicate reproductions from that show hang in the cellblocks in another part of the gaol. The predominance of Aboriginal artists is a sad reflection on the disproportionate number of Indigenous prisoners in NT gaols and this exhibition, the fourth of its kind, focused on the concerns of the prisoners in a very direct way. Much of the work is narrative and contains heartfelt messages of reconciliation or pleas such as “I like to see my family to make me happy.” The project and these paintings are important for cultural maintenance and the telling of collective narratives, documenting harsh social realities from domestic violence to commentary on the justice system, with a raw honesty and stylistic freedom often only found in first time painters. The artworks employ hybrid styles with naïve painted storyboards, outlined with dot work or other traditional styles. My favourite, Horses around Oenpelli by Lennie Naborlhborr, is a poignant reminder of country and experience far from the confines of his present situation. Now there is a government in power committed to the scrapping of Mandatory Sentencing legislation, there may be some cause for celebration by prison inmates as well.

These events, totally different and realised with varying degrees of success, represent a snippet of the diversity of the Festival of Darwin. For many people it was the best of times and it just keeps getting better.

Ending Offending Our Message, Fannie Bay Gaol, August 30-September 31;
Fierce, Tracks Dance, Browns Mart, September 22-26; The Tube, WW11
Tunnels, the Esplanade, Darwin, September 17-19

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