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Dangerous waters

Cath Bowdler



Front: Samantha Chalmers, Allyson Mills, Anthony Johnson, Steve Hodder, Michael Angus Back: Jodie Cockatoo, Shellie Morris, To the Inland Sea
courtesy Darwin Sun

Having only just returned from a road trip across the Barkly, driving for hundreds of kilometres through a sea of yellow grass stretching from horizon to horizon, flat as a tack for as far as the eye could see, the notion of an inland sea is both credible and evocatively appealing.

What is not so appealing is the notion of another piece of theatre based on the heroic exploits of some misguided white male out to pit his manhood against this country's heart of darkness, searching for a personal holy grail. This focus was obviously not behind the Darwin Theatre Company's most recent production, *To the Inland Sea*, based on Charles Sturt's ill-fated 1884 expedition. The DTC team charted quite a different trajectory across this well-trodden territory.

Conceived and written in the NT, this ambitious project was billed as "a fiction based on Sturt's epic journey, during which he carried a whale boat on a wagon through the desert", searching for a mythical inland sea on which to launch it. With this compelling story of folly and disappointment as a starting point, writer-director Tania Lieman, co-writer Gail Evans and Indigenous composer Shellie Morris also intended to tell the story of the Indigenous guides and traditional owners of the country being 'discovered.' As well. This post-colonial approach is par for the course these days in Darwin, as is the exploration of multiple histories and ways of seeing.

In *To the Inland Sea* Sturt's linear, historical narrative is interlaced with a contemporary story of another lost soul, a young Aboriginal boy dealing with issues of dislocation and alienation of another kind. These stories run in parallel throughout the production, interweaving past and present, reality and dream, and interior and exterior perspectives.



A giant video screen provides the backdrop for much of the action and dominates the stage. On a huge scale, vast landscapes, endless sand dunes and flocks of birds stream past as Sturt's company becomes ever more mired in the desert. During the contemporary scenes the landscape imagery is replaced with the face of the Aboriginal boy, filling the space with anger and pain.

This psychic link between the 2 stories is alluded to in the opening words of the play, "everyone's on a journey", spoken by the Aboriginal boy's mother, sitting down painting her country. Some journeys are physical and some are spiritual. Not all lead to the goal we seek or necessarily to redemption.

Another link between the narratives of past and present is made by the chorus: singers Shellie Morris, Jodie Cockatoo and dancer/vocalist Samantha Chalmers. Morris' beautiful and haunting music was a highlight of the production.

The usual DTC style of physical theatre dominated the more conventional narrative. There was an abundance of energy and action amid all the drama as well as choreographed set pieces such as a fictitious 'last supper' featuring a cast of explorers pontificating about their exploits, including a ragged Wills, like Hamlet, holding a skull.

Unfortunately as the production continued I felt I was drowning, being overwhelmed by altogether too much going on. There was never enough breathing space amid all the colour and movement and technical whizz-bangery. There were beautiful, poignant moments but too rarely the possibility of savouring them. This was a pity because otherwise To the Inland Sea was an enjoyable production with all the right elements: great ideas and visuals, energy, points of cross cultural contact and risk-taking.

**Darwin Theatre Company, To the Inland Sea, Darwin Entertainment Centre,
June 11-22**

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