

Picture: ANDREW CAMPBELL

Splinters Theatre performers cast joyful shadows on the beach of Acton Peninsula as they rehearse *Utopia/Distopia*.

An island invitation

Splinters Theatre's new show will open on Wednesday. CASSIE PROUDFOOT gives a preview.

ON A SMALL island in Lake Burley Griffin life is divided into four categories: Fire, Earth, Wind and Water. The fire workers are in charge of keeping the flames while the water workers tend the small craft used by the people of the island.

On Wednesday the island folk will be inviting the people of Canberra to share their island life for a short while. The urban services barge and two ferries will take people to Springbank Island. If hordes of visitors show up various small craft may be pressed into service.

Once on the island people must go through customs. After that they may proceed through the scenic willows to the grassy secret glade within. There, amid their 4.5m crystal towers, the island people will demonstrate through movement, song and word their versions of work, rest and play in a show called *Utopia/Distopia*.

"The audience will see a whole social system functioning," islander Catherine Hassal explains. "A lot of the communication is done through movement, but it is very simple and easy to understand. We will demonstrate what 'Work' is to the people of fire world, as well as what is 'Play'. No matter where people grow up everybody works, rests, plays, and interacts with others."

In fact most of the Springbank Islanders grew up in Canberra. Waterworld, fireworld, earthworld and windworld have been created by the members of Splinters Theatre. Founding member David Branson says, "We are making a microcosm planned society within the planned society of Canberra. We want the audience to come on a journey through a beautiful installation with us, an arts group. As well as the society

group. As well as the society theme we have a subtle green message, which is the natural result of working and performing within the small, fragile eco-system of the island."

After 10 years of performing in Canberra, Splinters has gained a reputation as an *avant-garde* company. "In the early days we did a lot of very chaotic pieces, dancing maniacally around fires playing violins and so on," Branson reminisces, "but now we are doing much more controlled work. We try to come half-way towards the audience, but we hope they will make some effort too. Just as doctors and lawyers are experts in their field, we work 10 hours a day at our endeavours and thus we have a certain level of skill and expertise within a cultural framework."

Fellow Splinters founder Patrick Troy believes that as the company has matured it has come to understand the power of simplicity. "We have always been known for doing theatre of spectacle — for a while we were even known as the pyrotechnics group," he says. "Now we are creating a subtle spectacle. Simplicity can be vastly moving, I am hoping we can progress to the point where an audience can be so moved by a performance that they see the everyday in a new light.

'AFTER all, Lake Burley Griffin is a man-made structure, but it is nevertheless very beautiful. But people can forget that, as they drive past it every day to work and throw their rubbish into it. I would like to reinvigorate people with a zest for life."

The idea for a production on Springbank Island came from Branson and Troy, who remember attending a "magical" production of *Alice in Wonderland* on Springbank "many eons ago when we were young".

"It was a real event," Branson says. "It was a magical experience, travelling over on a boat, promenading through this beautiful island, which is normally off limits to some extent, and coming across all these beautiful prop objects throughout the scenery.

"We want to infuse our production with a little of that magic. It will be a fairly intimate experience as well, because due to the water journey numbers are limited. Although we have the water taxis, row boats, canoes, all sorts of transport standing by, naturally the barge and the ferries are our mainstays."

The production has a cast of about 70, including the Splinters company, Youth Theatre, and professional actors Victoria Spence and Jai McHenry from Sydney. With the exotic and secluded island setting, the spectacular fire skills and ensemble work of Splinters and the singing and dancing of the Youth Theatre, the show is bound to be entertaining. It will be fascinating to see whether the new simplicity and discipline that Splinters has discovered tempers, or deepens, the impact of its theatre of spectacle.