It is a first-class fortnight in the making — all made in Oz

By ANN NUGENT

National Theatre Festival '93

THE AUSTRALIAN Theatre Festival got off to a exciting start, with Splinters leading the crowd towards the Canberra Theatre, where Legs On the Wall opened the Festival with its gripping, physically spectular performance-theatre piece *All of Me*.

If the rest of the festival program matches the standard of Legs on the Wall show then the festival's artistic director, Robyn Archer, is giving Canberrans a first-class fortnight of theatre. Unlike other theatre festival programs, which boast international offerings, Canberra's Festival focuses solely on Australian productions. And, not surprisingly, the program has a very multicultural flavour.

William Yang, who started his career as a photographer and who now combines his photography with performance, says he sees himself "as a photographic witness of our times". Yang confesses that he feels compelled to perform his slide shows in order to unburden himself of the things he has seen. In his show, *Sadness*, which opens at the Courtyard Studio tonight, Yang explores both his Chinese-Australian ancestry in the Queensland goldfields of the 1890s, and his life in the 1990s, where "death can seem as omnipresent as AIDS". *Sadness* plays at the Courtyard Studio from October 18 to 23 at 8pm. Theatre buzz is that this is an evocative performance, definitely not to be missed.

Funerals and CIRCUSES is another performance with a death motif, this time Aboriginal death in a country town. *Funerals and CIRCUSES* was premiered by Magpie Theatre at the 1992 Adelaide Festival and since then it has been solidly in demand. Music by Paul Kelly, promenade theatre, and some first-class performances, make this a scintillating piece of theatre. Do not be put off by the "funerals" in the title; the show is full of vitality and hope. *Funerals and CIRCUSES* plays at The Playhouse, Tuesday to Saturday at 7.30pm, with matinees at 10am on Tuesday and Thursday and 2pm on Saturday.

The Playbox production of Michael Gurr's new play, *Sex Diary of an Infidel*, comes encrusted with Green Room Awards given in Victoria: for best new Australian play, best direction, best drama production and best male supporting actor. The

best direction, best drama production and best male supporting actor. The play exposes the depraved and corrupting world that underlies prostitution and drug dealing on the international scene between Melbourne and Manila. The production has four performances only in Canberra: Thursday to Saturday, October 21-23, at 8.30pm and also Saturday at 5.30pm at the Canberra Theatre.

All of Me, the show that opened the festival on Friday last, has just three more performances at the Canberra Theatre. Written by Mary Morris and directed by Nigel Jamieson, the Legs on the Wall's show is full of extraordinary physical agility and imaginative flights. *All of Me* plays tonight and tomorrow night at 8.30 and this morning at 10 o'clock.

A word of warning, *Gormenghast*, a gothic horror tale presented by Canberra Youth Theatre, is performed in the courtyards and covered walks of Gorman House Arts Centre, so the chills of Canberra spring evenings may be added to the hauntings of the castle. It is a lively, entertaining production. *Gormenghast* plays Tuesday to Friday at 7.30pm and on Sunday at 5pm.

The Odyssey begins its workshops next Friday at 10am to 5pm. Daily tickets to the workshops cost $6 so if you would like to see how plays are made this is your opportunity. The workshops run until Saturday, October 30.

As I mentioned in last week's column it is possible to combine the Sunday morning *Odyssey* workshop with Lunch on Art, a backstage barbeque lunch to meet the performers in the festival, followed by artist George Gittoes's *Dry Solace* audio-visual theatre presentation at the Australian National Gallery, and then back to the Players Club at the Canberra Theatre Centre for Barrie Kosky's *Songs of Exile* at 7.30pm. To join in the barbecue just add $18 to the cost of tickets for all or any of the other shows.

Free festival performances this week are Splinters "on the street" at the Canberra Centre at 7.45pm on Friday, and the Italian women's choir Le Gioie Delle Donne, also at the Canberra Centre at 7.45pm on Friday.

Next week the Arts Ball, to be held at the Albert Hall on Tuesday, October 26, promises a spectacle to match stage shows. A medieval theme has been chosen for costumes and music, as well as menu and entertainments. The Canberra Critics' Circle's awards, the *Canberra Times* Artist of the Year Award and a new award for "the professional performing artist of the year" will be announced at the ball. Tickets cost $38 single and can be booked by phoning Gorman House Arts Centre on 249 7377.

Tomorrow night Narrabundah College drama students will be giving a short performance of the piece that they are taking to the International Schools Theatre Association's Festival in Bangkok in November. Bon Voyage!

Guy Ellicott, of Sharkbite Theatre, tells me that *The Pace Mystery*, an Australian detective comedy, is having its last performance at the Carrington Restaurant in Bungendore next Friday. Dinner and show costs $48 per person and bookings can be made by phoning 238 1044.

The main theatre focus in Canberra is on the Australian Theatre Festival and its fabulous program of events, this week and next, so enjoy. Bookings for all shows can be made by phoning Canberra ticketing on 257 1077. Some specially priced three-pack and five-pack tickets are available.