Big questions of life explored

By ANN NUGENT

***Roading Home to Aunty*. Splinters and associates, at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space Gallery, Gorman House and environs, until Saturday 27 at 9pm. Professional.**

SPLINTERS ambulatory productions inevitably explore the larger questions of life — sex, love, death, the universe.

Roading Home is no exception. The journey starts in the CCAS Gallery and finishes some two hours later in a far courtyard.

Roading Home is draped loosely upon the sacrificial elements of the Catholic Mass.

After a harangue in which the "individual" performer turns the tables on his audience, the "gathered togethers" are invited to join in a chanted blessing.

Splinters inflate the forms of traditional blessings with meaningless twaddle and so explode religious ritual in the faces of the beholders. This is just the beginning.

After passing by several diversions, including a prating man in a tree and an installation of diners, the "followers" (audience hardly seems an appropriate term) emerge from a long black tunnel to be confronted by another Splinters familiar, the giant old woman puppet.

Splinters has a wonderful panache for bringing out the magical in familiar environments.

On Thursday night the young men encased in white, perched high on Gorman House's red-tiled roof, were silhouetted against a starry night sky with a full circle moon.

Of course Grandma takes one of them for her pleasure and, after gestation, gives birth to the young man set to save the world.

Indoors once again, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and an incredible session of bartering of bowls set up among the audience with the words "Take this bowl" culminate in a communion ritual of a shared fish taken off the stomach of an inert young man.

Splinters sustains dramatic tension by these sudden switches of visual stimulation and "interruptions" in narrative lines.

At this point *Roading Home* owes a creative debt to Peter Greenaway's film *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*.

A baroque high table is set up under the vigilance of a licentious tyrannical female boss who controls even the peptic juices of the diners — Pauline Cody gives a nerve-stretching performance as one of the diners.

The long table becomes a ship, a shot rings out — no doubt heralding the demise of the mariner's albatross. The performance could have finished here (the piece is too discursive) but since sex, death and immolation had not been fully explored, the show went on.

I have previously commented on Splinters' preoccupation with the phallus.

In *Roading Home* they turn hermaphrodite in a no-holds-barred sexual orgy.

I'm sorry, Splinters. This is really no substitute for fully facing female sexuality. Indeed, the presentation of the female as progenitrix or as a "fisher of men", a role put upon Cody, leaves much of the female principal unexplored.

Still, Splinters is the most exciting drama experience in Canberra at the moment and I would not have missed a minute of their irreverent, iconoclastic, convention-eroding show.

THEATRE

***Canberra Kids/Real Kids*. Written by Lee James and directed by Joe Woodward. StageCoach Theatre School at the Jolimont Centre Theatrette near bay 9, the Jolimont Centre. Public performances each Tuesday at 7.25pm until August 27. Youth Theatre.**

THE OPENING scene of *Canberra Kids/Real Kids* will jolt anyone who has ever travelled by coach into convulsive laughter — not because coach travel is funny but rather from relief at having survived its boredom and body-wrenching discomforts.

On stage the driver's deadpan voice-over elaborately describes the minimal "comforts" of the coach as the passengers resign themselves to a bone-shaking night.

The StageCoach production achieves

The StageCoach production achieves a nice continuity between life and art when school visitors from interstate tumble out of a "real" coach into the theatrical interior of the "Pyrex" bus.

On Tuesday evening students from Paisley Secondary College in Melbourne and their bus-driver joined the audience for the 58th performance of a show designed to present Canberra and Canberrans to young visitors.

In *Real Kids* Veronica Hobsbawn convincingly portrays Sydneysider Sunny, a reluctant young visitor to Canberra.

The coach becomes a mad twilight zone as Sunny dozes off to sleep and

fellow passenger Isabella Brown performs a zany, entertaining version of *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*.

Soon the bizarre dream gives way to nightmare as Sunny imagines myriad hands clutching at her.

The coach has reached its destination.

Sunny arrives hating the national capital but, after a day on park benches, a landmark tour, an interlude in the garden of the new Parliament House and conversing with a group of young actors, she falls in love with the city and its friendly inhabitants.

It is all rather idyllic as the Canberrans help her to see the beauty of the landscape and to convince her that they are "real" kids.

Canberra, it seems, is an earthly paradise peopled with philosopher kings.

Fortunately there is also an ironic vein in the script.

At a bus interchange the temporarily penniless Sunny meets an ornithologically-inclined Senator Michael Tate, a well-judged performance by Neville Lewis.

Senator Tate actually loans Sunny some money to phone home. Who ever heard of a politician giving away money? Sunny's mother asks.

The overall tone of the piece is welcoming.

The performance concludes with a rap number which opens the way for mingling between the audience and performers.

The freshness, warmth and skills of the performers convinced me that these Canberra Kids are very "real" and very talented young people.