Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995), Wednesday 16 December 1992, page 27



# Festive carnivale on operatic scale

THEATRE

By ANN NUGENT

THE THEATRE group Splinters chooses the most unusual places for its performances. The smallest venue I recall being the gardener's cottage at Corroboree Park and the largest, the brickworks at Yarralumla. This time it's a grand space — the bus depot at Kingston. "It's huge," says long-time Splinters mover and shaker David Branson.

Just perfect, I suggest, for Splinters' customary epic staging. "" 'l," says Branson, "it's epic but it's intim. .."

*Flowers of Gold*, that's the name of the new show, is not about wattle. Indeed, I am told its associations are more psychedelic than botanical. "Psychedelic," meaning bright and imaginative, of music being played loudly, and, in the case of a Splinters production, of having sudden, pyrotechnic explosions. Typically Splinters.

"Is that what the audience can expect with *Flowers of Gold?*" I asked. Branson's face clouded, rather like Moses' visage confronted with the wantonness of the Israelites. Immediately, I knew that I had committed a blasphemy against Splinters' holy writ. Branson, assumed the persona of an ageing patriarch and explained that it would make Splinters "unhappy, very unhappy" if the audience knew what to expect.

However, I am assured that the audience can expect to be participants, as they usually are in Splinters' shows. And there'll be an obstacle course, and a symbolic battle, and the harem, and music, and fireworks, and lots of light-hearted fun.

*Flowers of Gold* is spectacle. "We are trying to get away from the word and into visual image," Branson says.

The show also features a procession of machines; some have been brought from Melbourne specially for the production. In the production the machines come to life and "take-over," but it is all good festive fun with no great "this is the meaning of life" messages.

It's wrong to give the impression that *Flowers of Gold* is exclusively a Splinters' show. The concept is Splinters, and Splinters is coordinating, but the show is made up of lots of little shows each with its own theme and inspiration. Branson says it's the largest scale collaboration that Splinters has been involved in with other independent groups. About 80 arts practitioners are working on the show.

The HIV performance group from The Company, Waiting Women, Yvonne Webber, Dawn Gardiner and Fiona Boszic are just a few of the performers in the mega-production. Orchestrating the whole show is Renald Navarro, of the Canberra based group Tango 160. Penny Sands, who

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Picture: RICHARD BRIGGS

A scene from *Flowers of Gold*, with, from left, Jasper Seconddeath, Simon Rosengarten and Sophie Boord.

worked with Splinters and Jigsaw on the Exploding Sardine, has designed costumes for *Flowers*.

Earlier this year Splinters had packed houses and high critical praise, for its *Cathedrals of Flesh*, performed during the Adelaide Festival at the Adelaide jail as part of the Fringe Festival. "It was great," Branson beams, "the jail inmates conducted people around, and a couple did a cell scene. It's a bit the same at the old bus depot," he muses. "The ACTION bus employees come down and look in on rehearsals."

Thinking of the Adelaide success makes Branson a little downcast. Although he thinks Canberra is a great place for developing work, he can't help feeling that Splinters' work goes unrecognised here, while it is lauded interstate. Splinters was not on the list of 1993 grants announced recently by the ACT Government through its Cultural Council. Branson said the group had applied for a modest $20,000. This year the Cultural Council gave the group $16,000 seeding money (no pun intended) for *Flowers of Gold*.

"'We've done most of our work in Canberra this year and most of it was unfunded." Branson ticked off the list — Arts Council at Weston Creek, the Canberra Festival for Kids, and *Waiting for Godot* (with Waiting Women) for the Tuggeranong Arts Festival. "I don't think we deserve to be punished," he said.

On the bright side, Splinters has received $40,000 from the Australia Council for 1993. Since that's a national body, Branson says that technically Splinters can produce their work anywhere next year, it doesn't have it be in Canberra.

"Why keep on?" I asked. "We keep on because we believe in the work itself," Branson replied. Branson says the foundation Splinters group (mostly students from Watson High School) set out in 1985 to investigate non-representational performance, particularly the creation of "an atmosphere of event and ritual." According to Branson, Splinters continues to challenge itself.

I think that a Splinters' production is always a form of controlled anarchy. *Flowers of Gold* looks like being an orchestrated festive carnivale on an operatic scale.

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*Flowers of Gold* has a short season from December 16 to 19, at 8.30pm, at the old Kingston Bus Depot, (the one with the temporary Splinters sign in puce purple), Wentworth Avenue, Kingston.