TIMES
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Utopia dream

Photomontage Kouy

LIZ ARMITAGE talks to David Branson about Splinters' ten years of collaborative theatre and unusual performance spaces, and its latest work *Utopia/Distopia*.

SPLINTERS will celebrate its tenth year this month with a spectacular involving 60 members of cast and crew, *Utopia/Distopia*, set on Lake Burley Griffin's Springbank Island.

This is Splinters' "we've come a long way show", and its most commercial enterprise to date. A frenzy of publicity has gone a long way toward fulfilling Splinters' vision of making its art accessible to a wide audience.

"We don't believe we should be just performing for a specific audience," says one of the founding members, David Branson. "We're not trying to to be high art, or ghetto art [or] for National Folk Festival types."

This was the thinking behind a performance at the Summernats earlier this year. It was a brave step to take on what has been tagged "the festival of the yob", and the show was both a success and an absolute failure, says Branson. The success stemmed from a grandiose, Circus Maximus-inspired performance incorporating Tryclops (a flame-throwing, fire-eating group), a parade of open-top cars, a Rhinoceros Komble van, and an enormous castle with burning skeletons falling from it.

The failure stemmed from time restraints: "They'd just had the judging of the hottest car, and there was a wait of 20 to 40 minutes because they were tuning the video for the strip show that was to follow us. By the time we got on, [people] were really fed up." The audience reaction was varied: "Some of them expressed ... lack of appreciation, at one point they were shouting 'we want tits'. What was interesting was that we managed to win

preciation, at one point they were shouting 'we want tits'. What was interesting was that we managed to win a lot of people over [because] our work is a sincere endeavour to engage people artistically ...to entertain them."

Splinters has made little impact on Canberra theatre, says Branson, but more so on Australian theatre at large. It has enjoyed collaborative relationships with contemporary companies like The Post Arrivalists and Sydney Front (both Sydney), and Mad Love (Adelaide).

The theatre scene in Canberra is insular, he says. It's still about who's going to get the role in *Guys and Dolls*. "*Guys and Dolls* is a fine play, but we're on about an investigative performance."

The company has travelled Australia, and relocated to Melbourne from 1985 to 1990. Wherever Splinters is, it's like the "core of the clan". People come from all over the place to work on shows, and sometimes they'll inhabit a performance space for months.

Renowned for performing in unusual locations, Splinters has occupied the Kingston Bus Depot, the old Canberra Brickworks, the Weston Park Maze, the Old Adelaide Jail, and now Springbank Island. There are a lot of logistics and wrangling with government departments involved in the use of such spaces, but they really bring a production to life, says Branson.

"The island has always been a show that we've wanted to do. Its got all this cultural resonance, a history. Uni students used to swim out to the island and read poetry under the poetry tree .And Blue Folk put on a performance of *Alice in Wonderland* there that I remember seeing when I was about 12."

In Utopia/Distopia, the island will serve as the place where four worlds meet (water, earth, fire and air). The worlds live in harmony through cycles of work, rest and play. Utopia? Not quite. A story will unfold, parallel to the workings of these four worlds, and it will bring in the juicy stuff of theatre, power, love, and relationships.

Audience members will be ferried to the island, and inducted through a "customs" tent. For the rest of the night they will be part of the island's culture.

"As soon as you're part of an event like this you're working in a collective," says Branson. "You're a crowd. When you go to a theatre performance you're sitting in one spot. But that's not necessarily the case with a Splinters show. Our desire is to entice people to take a journey with us."

Utopia/Distopia **is at Springbank Island Nov 15-25. Bookings: 257 1077.**