Splinters dusts off fragments for 10th birthday celebration

FIRE JUGGLING, ballet dancers, impromptu palm reading, spotlighting the audience and allowing a dream-like narrative to evolve naturally through a series of related dramatic segments "like a plate full of sweetmeats from which the audience can sample, all relish some and create their own memorable theatre experience"!

This sounds like contemporary theatre as it is being done around Australia and the world.

However, Canberra audiences have had access to his sort of post-modern, interactive theatre experience since Splinters Theatre Company was founded in 1985 by three teenagers with the princely sum of $1000.

Founding members David Branson and Patrick Troy are still with the group, which is celebrating 10 years of continuous creative activity and ground-breaking productions at the 1995 program launch today.

Beginning at 11am at the Old Canberra Brickworks, the launch will be opened by Peter Haynes, of Nolan Gallery.

The group will put on a short performance. Props, costumes and presentations of past productions will be on display.

The Splinters office at Gorman House exudes the same friendly anarchy as a typical Splinters production, with people everywhere, new people arriving every minute and the phones running hot — mostly with acceptances for today's launch.

Many of Canberra's theatre workers, artists and musicians have done a stint with Splinters during the past decade. Splinters' signature style of theatre, described by the ebullient Branson as "eclectic installation", relies on somehow drawing together the enthusiasm and creativity of a vast assortment of participants.

The founders of a pioneering ACT interactive theatre company tell CASSIE PROUDFOOT 'group feelings' beat 'personal visions'.

Some Splinters' shows have had casts the size of a respectable theatre audience. Usually the resulting theatre performance is buoyant, innovative and cohesive, but the practicalities of organising a huge number of creative and somewhat erratic individuals can be less enjoyable.

"In nearly every show we have had a problem with somebody feeling that their personal vision has been somehow lost or distorted in the outcome, which has to be dictated by the overall group feeling," Patrick Troy said.

When Troy and Branson founded the company they had high hopes and unworkable ideas.

"We were going to fill auditoriums with water and have the audience in snorkels — that sort of thing," they said.

Countless groups of teenagers just out of Year 12 must have had similar wild visions; the difference is that Branson and Troy turned their visions into a workable theatre company, which has been all around Australia, won awards like Adelaide Festival's Best Promenade Performance and is still forging ahead a decade later.

Splinters' most recent pieces have been "environmentally based", with cast and audience moving around and through a landscape, such as Weston Park or the Brickworks.

They started doing these pieces "because we wanted to tour our shows but we couldn't always be assured of a venue large enough".

Incorporating the landscape into the performance has suited the group's new narrative direction and they are developing this theme in their latest production, *Utopia*, which will open later this year.

"It will be a theatre experience," Branson said.

"The audience will be ferried out to Springbank Island, where all the action will take place.

"With the cast and audience together on the intimate and unusual space of the island we envisage a really special result."

Those attending today's launch may get a sneak preview of *Utopia*. Going by Splinters' track record it could involve almost anything, from fireworks to *a capella* singing.

Whatever it is it will certainly not be boring.

A party for Splinters' members, past members and friends will be held at the Brickworks at 6pm. They assure me it

members and friends will be held at the Brickworks at 6pm. They assure me it will be a blast. I'm pretty sure they are speaking metaphorically . . .