
SPLINTERS

FOREWORD

MASSIVE LOVE OF RISK: THE ART OF SPLINTERS THEATRE OF SPECTACLE 1985–98

When I directed my first ever festival, the National Festival of Australian Theatre, twenty years ago this year, I was lucky to find Splinters in the national capital. The company had a reputation for artistic adventure, risk-taking and sheer lunacy. They opened that first festival of mine with *Guardians of the Concourse* and paraded by fire from the shopping centre to Civic Square with thousands following. What better time to recall their bold spirit than during Canberra's Centenary, when we celebrate all the good things this city has produced in its brief life so far.

Robyn Archer AO

Creative Director,
Centenary of Canberra



"How can something like this come from Canberra?"
"It's like this ***because*** *it's from Canberra!"*
- Splinters audience members, Adelaide 1992

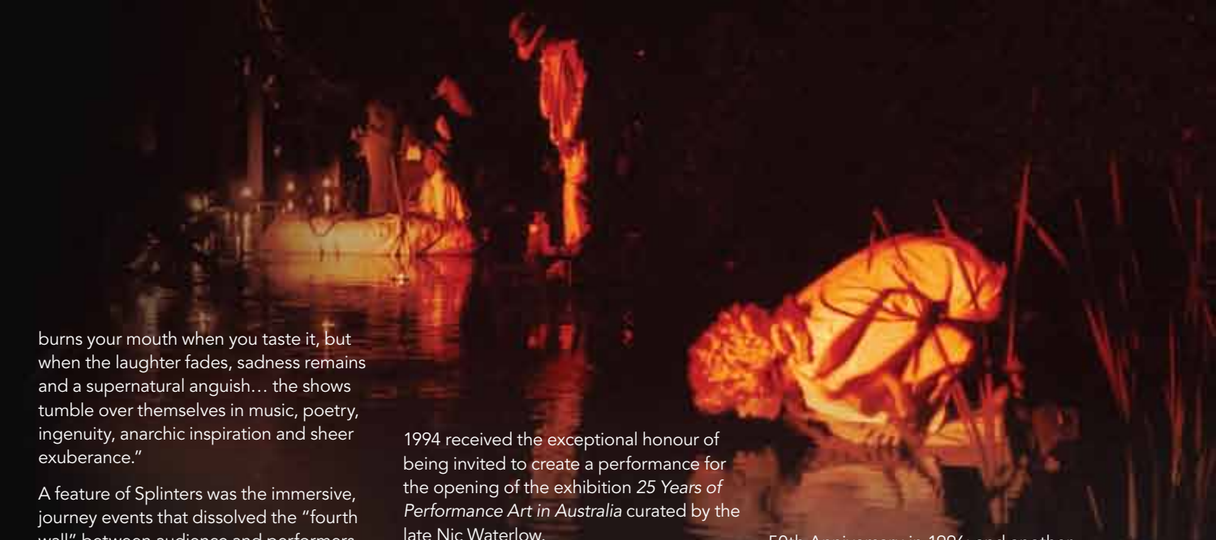
For a few dazzling years in the 1980s and 90s, audiences in Canberra and around Australia were challenged, delighted, shocked and entertained by Splinters, a brash young collective that gained a national reputation for daring theatre and large outdoor spectacles. The impact and spirit of Splinters can still be felt in Canberra, even though almost all its core members have left to pursue careers elsewhere.

It's impossible to convey in a few words what Splinters was about, or to capture the essence of its many diverse productions. This was total theatre, a way of life demanding utter dedication from its members: volatile and chaotic, yet shaped with immense talent and skill, driven by the desire to forge a revolution of everyday life. The company became known as Splinters Theatre of Spectacle in its heyday, seducing and overwhelming audiences through bravado, trickery, enticement and sheer audio-visual power.

Formed in 1985, Splinters was an ever-evolving collective of writers, musicians, visual and performance artists. Using techniques of theatre, dance, performance art, puppetry, pyrotechnics, sculpture, music, and crowd manipulation, Splinters performed one-offs, seasons, exhibitions, and events at theatres and festivals around the country. The massive major works were interspersed with performance art, more conventional presentations in theatres, regular cabaret style events and development workshops. It provided a springboard for many successful artists and companies including Snuff Puppets, ODD Productions, CIA Inc., Red Cabbage, Mikelangelo and the Black Sea Gentlemen, Temple State/Spectacle Art Inc., and The Village Festival.

Splinters began as an anarchist collective, but even as it became more professionalised it retained an open structure. Literally hundreds of individuals worked with the company over the years, including many young performers fostered by Splinters members working as tutors with Canberra Youth Theatre. Musicians in the group played in numerous bands, some going on to national and international success. Several key members were trained at the Canberra School of Art, whose work drove the company's strongly identifiable visual style, resulting in the striking posters, photographs, sculpture and video works that make up this exhibition.

In the earliest days the small initial Splinters group lived on the road, touring extensively to Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney under the leadership of Patrick Troy, Stuart Vaskess and the late David Branson. They quickly earned a reputation for fearless and provocative work, with one critic describing 1988's *Gumboot Full of Blood* as "Too shocking… too extreme, too violent." The Canberra Times memorably described Splinters as like "a big strong succulent dish that burns your mouth when you taste it, but when the laughter fades, sadness remains and a supernatural anguish… the shows tumble over themselves in music, poetry, ingenuity, anarchic inspiration and sheer exuberance."



A feature of Splinters was the immersive, journey events that dissolved the "fourth wall" between audience and performers, inspired by a Roman Carnival day held at Watson High School. The groundbreaking *Cathedral of Flesh* in 1992 was a turning point. A large group of artists were invited to bring already made material and then work together to devise an overarching performance that took the audience on a hilarious and harrowing trip through the Old Adelaide Gaol. Named by the *Adelaide Advertiser* as Best Promenade Theatre of both the 1992 Adelaide Festival and Fringe seasons, it was described as "eclectic, electric theatre of the real… powerful, unforgettable."

As the company gained recognition it attracted significant government funding, collaborations and commissions. The first of these was *Guardians of the Concourse* commissioned by Robyn Archer for the 1993 National Festival of Australian Theatre. In the same year, Splinters was invited to perform as part of the 20th Anniversary celebrations for the Sydney Opera House, as well as the Summernats National Street Machine Exhibition, and in 1994 received the exceptional honour of being invited to create a performance for the opening of the exhibition *25 Years of Performance Art in Australia* curated by the late Nic Waterlow.

In theatre terms, Splinters was strongly connected to the group of experimental companies that arose around Australia in the 1980s including The Sydney Front, Open City, Entr'Acte and Sidetrack Theatre, exploring collaborative, cross-art form approaches and the use of new media and techniques. Splinters was preeminent among a younger, anarchistic second wave of groups such as the Post Arrivalists in Sydney and Imagineers in Melbourne. The meeting of the three groups at the 1992 Adelaide Fringe catalysed an exceptional creative outpouring nationally in the following years. Splinters also drew inspiration from La Fura dels Baus (Spain), Dog Troep (Netherlands), Welfare State (UK) and Survival Research Laboratories (USA).

Notable productions in the company's later period include: one of the first Playing Australia grants for a tour of far Western NSW in 1994; *Faust: The Heat of Knowledge* commissioned for the Australian National University 50th Anniversary in 1996; and another commission in 1996 to produce both the final production, *Mysteries*, and the closing ceremonies for the old Canberra Playhouse. The last production under the Splinters banner was in 1998, by which time the key members of the company had left Canberra.

The tragic death of David Branson in a car accident in December 2001 definitively marked the end of the Splinters era. Fortunately for posterity, David kept everything: reviews, scripts, production notes, posters and handbills, photographs, videos, office records and more. These now form the basis of the David Branson Papers at the ACT Heritage Library. This material ensures the work of Splinters is accessible and allows for a proper assessment of its influence in Canberra in terms of theatre practice and the impact the company's productions had on the broader cultural life of the city.



Splinters energised and catalysed Canberra's cultural life as no group of artists before or since, or are likely ever to do so again. But theatre is by its nature ephemeral, and while memories of Splinters are still vivid in the minds of many who saw those fantastic, fiery shows, memories are doomed to fade. This exhibition is the second phase of a project that aims to ensure that the legacy of Splinters can inspire new generations of Canberra artists. A reunion of Splinters members created a new work *Dirt Babylon* for The Village Festival in Glebe Park in March 2013. Also a permanent online archive is being created. For further material and updates on the archive project visit:
www.splintersarchive.wordpress.com.

Gavin Findlay, Splinters member 1992–94
PhD Candidate, ANU Digital Humanities Hub

From the David Branson Papers HMSS0233, ACT Heritage Library

Exhibition curated by Gavin Findlay and José Robertson

Exhibition managed by Mark Bayly and the CMAG team

28 September – 8 December 2013

Front cover, *Faust: the Heat of Knowledge*, ANU, 1996, photo by 'pling
Inside p1, *Flowers of Gold* , 1991, photo by Katherine Pepper
Inside p2, *Faust: the Heat of Knowledge*, 1996, photo by 'pling
Rear cover, *Flowers of Gold*, Old Kingston Bus Depot ACT, 1991, photo by Katherine Pepper

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