Fascination in the flames

THEATRE

By HELEN MUSA

The Fertile Millennia, coordinated by Splinters Theatre of Spectacle. Exhibition Park, 6.30pm, April 4. Closing ceremony National Folk Festival.

Fire leads to germination, said Splinters and the 60 youthful players who joined them last night in a celebration of the four elements on the oval of Exhibition Park. So it may be, but for the crowds gathered to witness the closing rituals of the National Folk Festival, fire was a source of fascination, not the subject for reflection.

Thus it was that from the outset, while the performers, dressed as moths, birds, pods and obese consumers, moved around a gigantic female effigy, the crowd chanted: "burn her, burn her!" Cries of "shut up!" also resonated as impatience with a serious exploration of the cycles of nature burnt out of proportion. Feminist protesters, too, mingled with the crowd, objecting with banners to the primitive burning of a 10-metre-high fertility goddess whose private parts were rapidly revealed in the conflagration the crowd had so long awaited.

Splinters needs urgently to review the question of combining words with spectacle in such large-scale presentations. The use of well-known folk musicians as background to the action was an inspiration, as was the celebratory nature of the concluding dance, where the oval burst into movement before the dying embers of the goddess. But the decision to narrate the story of a girl's discovery of songlines in Australian culture was surely a mistake.

The fine costumes, the message about balance in nature, the ritual drumming — these should all have been directed towards the fiery, joyous end of a festival aptly described by a bystander as "just like a pilgrimage".