

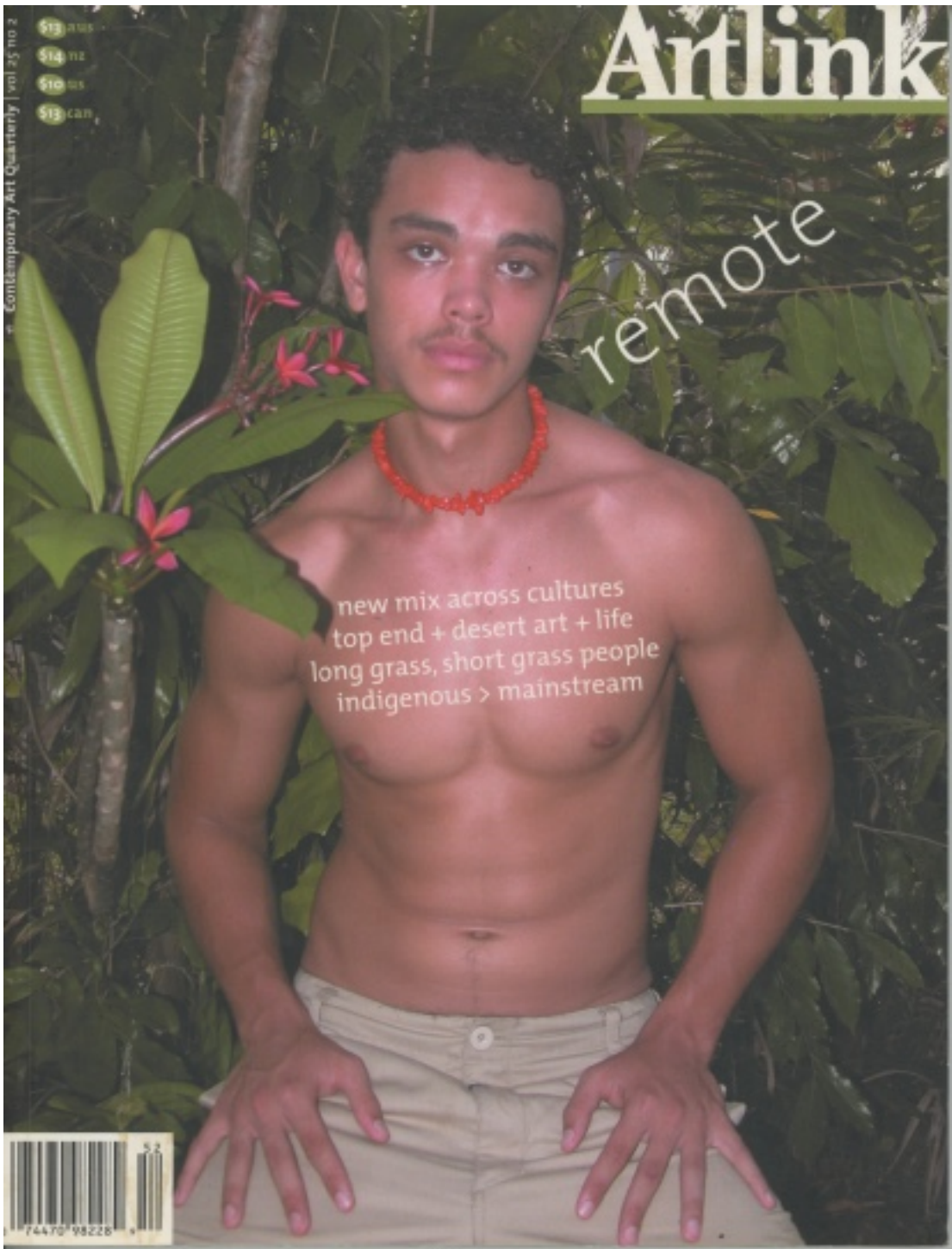
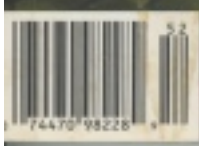
Contemporary Art Quarterly | vol 25 no 2

- \$19 uk
- \$14 nz
- \$10 us
- \$13 can

Artlink

remote

new mix across cultures
top end + desert art + life
long grass, short grass people
indigenous > mainstream



Susan Spanner

chasing culture

'When creating intercultural work the 'given' of one particular culture intrudes, sometimes being the 'new' in the context of the other.'

In the Northern Territory cross-cultural work with Indigenous communities in the performing arts has been undertaken over a long period by established local companies: Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre (CIYT) and Tracks Dance as well as by maverick individuals Neil Cameron and Andriah Saint-Clare. In the last decade, Tracks and Saint-Clare have produced a body of important work.

Cross-cultural performance is a form of cultural brokerage and plays a significant role in the maintenance of culture within Indigenous communities. For white audiences it interrogates the conventions of European theatre, reinstates the power of narrative and frequently blurs the boundaries between acting

and being. Typically performances are large-scale outdoor events but many are created for theatre stages and there is often an inside story and an outside story. Different audiences respond to things differently, rather than trying to get the same thing across to all of the audience the makers preserve and underscore these differences.

Tracks is Darwin-based but it has developed a longstanding relationship with the traditional desert community of Lajamanu 950 km away. It began in 1988 when Tim Newth toured with Desert Boy a CIYT production and crystallised in the 1992 production Lajamanu Gimbe Kansa Yami. Thirty-four Warlpiri people - men, women and youth - came to Darwin during the long dry season holidays and worked at Brown's Mart Theatre with Tracks to create the show. The work comprised traditional dance by the women, presentation of paintings by the men, contemporary dance by the young people in segregated groups - about football and basketball, disco dancing and story performance about the highlights of the trip to Darwin. Tracks' Artistic Directors, Newth and McWicken continued this broad format but added to it the responses and reactions of themselves and other white artists to Lajamanu. In Sacred Space 1994, Culture shock was the subject and the question was whose culture was more shocked?

Ngapa 1996 took a new direction. It represented a trip, a long hard road trip taken by Newth and McWicken and seven Warlpiri men associated with the Ngapa Tjukurrpa from Lajamanu following the tracks of the Rainforest Dreaming.

From that primary cultural event a secondary performance was made that was shown to an audience at Brown's Mart Theatre. Preparations were made for the journey; the women painted up and then danced and sang while the men, including the kardiya/whitefellas, made a large sand drawing similar to the women's body painting. When the drawing was complete and the dancing finished, the trip could begin. Everyone got in, or hung off the back of a 4WD truck (small enough to fit inside the theatre) and the journey began. It continued, punctuated by stops to chase goanna and other choice bush tucker, or inspect an important place, and then to make camp and sleep till it was time to resume the next morning and so it went, ending at the end of the trip. Overlaid on the live action and dialogue were a recorded soundtrack in which each participant talked in their language about who they were and why they were on this journey and projected panoramic slides of the various sites and sights.





It was not performance in a Western theatrical sense, rather the art resided in its veracity and understatement, yet it was completely engrossing, moving and often very droll. Structure was inherent and natural, and true to the laconic intensity of such things. In the end they didn't actually get to the spot but were made to turn back just short of it by an inscrutable but powerful old man who said 'No - no further', and so they went back to where they began. So just as in life there was no climax. Resolution and closure were missed but in the end the point was the journey not the destination and it all made for a good story anyway.

Shades of Pink in 1999 and *Peter* in 2000 presented another take on the Lajamanu connection, concerning pioneer anthropologist Olive Pink who lived with the Warlpiri and dedicated her life to them. Miss Pink was a controversial and eccentric figure and the works explored perceptions of her within white society in Alice Springs; in the government bureaucracies of Darwin and Canberra; and the stories of her time with the Warlpiri and their accounts of her. Its sources were Warlpiri story and song, and Western archives and oral history; its form preserved these many different and often conflicting accounts. *Wipirni*, proposed for later this year, is a return to the primary elements - large scale performance combining traditional dance and youth fusions. Tracks' work has been eclectic in its sources and it privileges no one form of cultural interaction over another, traditional dance coexists dramatically with choreographed modern Western dance forms. The hybrid youth culture of desert communities with its rap music, baseball caps and myriad different inventive ways of wearing a t-shirt is depicted and celebrated.



Hungarian-born Andrish Saint-Clare by contrast abhors the baseball caps and rap music. His vision is to facilitate and direct cultural presentations that capture, before they fade, the great cycles of Indigenous song and dance traditions. His passion derives from identification with marginal groups trying to hang onto culture. As a child of refugees he knows the pain of losing culture and empathises with the old people who are the repositories of Indigenous law. Saint-Clare's background is in music for performance with AIDJ/WASDA and avant garde theatre with Rex Cramphorn's Performance Syndicate in Sydney, an iconoclastic group influenced by Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. Saint-Clare's approach is sophisticated and aware. There is no naivety or preciousness here. He takes on, head on, all the contradictions of the task - the smell of museum culture, the whiff of nostalgia and the stench of the high romantic.

His first NT project, *Trepang*, an Indigenous opera, celebrated the two hundred and fifty odd years of trade and cultural exchange between Makassan seafarers and the Yolngu, the Aboriginal people of North East Arnhem land. Every year with the South East Trade winds the Makassans came in their praus and returned home with their boats full of dried smoked

NOTED HEAD: *Burning Rainy* and *David Turner* Dancing *Assassins in Fire*, *Pier* *Burning Bright* 2000. Photo Leon Morris, courtesy Arkinson Arts. VAN-ANDRISH *Saint-Clare* *Trepang* 1999, performance Darwin Festival. ABOVE: Linda Timms in *Fire*, *The Burning Bright* 2000. Photo Leon Morris, courtesy Arkinson Arts.



treping, which had been collected in the warm shallow waters by Yolngu men and women. Trepang, beche de mer or sea cucumber was prized as an aphrodisiac by the Makassians' Chinese masters. The Trepang project, developed over a six-year period, enacted the trade and exchange it depicted. With research and performance on Elcho Island in Arnhem Land in 1996, then in Ujung Pandang in South Sulawesi (formerly Makassar) in 1999, the piece culminated in 1999 with a performance at the Festival of Darwin by six actor/musicians from Sulawesi and ten performers from Galiwinku/Elcho Island. They included Manojur Muhayang playing the Captain of the prau who is also the grandson of Yotjing, the last Makassian trepanger to trade and live with the Yolngu of Galiwinku.

Trepang was performed under the stars in Darwin, regrettably not on a beach, as a sequence of cultural exchanges, songs and dances performed for one group by the other to introduce and reveal themselves and we saw what the Yolngu made from that contact. We saw a boat built, blessed with ceremony, a sail hoisted and a great voyage undertaken, we saw the arrival on a distant beach and strangers approaching strangers. We saw gifts given and received and dances about all the new things - tobacco, cloth, knives, playing cards, dugout canoes with sails and alcohol. There was a marriage ceremony between a Makassian boy and a Yolngu girl signifying and sealing the promise of friendly relations. The entire opera was sung in Makassianese and Yolngu Matha, which include a repertoire of some 450 shared words, but the story was clear in the detailed performance. We just missed out on lots of jokes that had the large Aboriginal audiences in stitches throughout. We were the strangers, the *Ralanda* - a Yolngu word for white people, given them by the Makassians from their word for *Hollanders*, the Dutch who had colonised their country.

There is a moment in Trepang, a very subtle moment, really an accident, a rupture in the illusion of first contact that occurred in the dance where the wearing of sarongs is introduced. The Makassians present sarongs to the Yolngu and show them how to wear them. Everything proceeds with the pleasure of novelty but one old Yolngu man once he'd wrapped his new sarong around himself immediately made that unmistakable gesture of adjusting the fit and settling it on his gut by deftly rolling the top over. That small gesture revealed all. He could not dissemble, he knew he was part of Asia and always had been.⁷

During 2000 the Jirawun Artists from the East Kimberley were working towards an exhibition, *Blood on the Spinifex*⁸ and bringing out the massacre stories of the region, painting them, talking about them publicly and making a Joonba (corroboree) about them. Later that year, in September, the Nemisuarlin Dance Group went to Darwin for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award and presented the Joonba. Three months later tragically Timmy Timms the visionary Gija leader died suddenly. After his funeral in early 2001, his sister, Peggy Patrick undertook to bring the story out further and to make a big Joonba for a larger outside audience and the group engaged Andriak Saint-Clare to work with them. In May they visited the massacre site at Bedford Downs station and Saint-Clare filmed two of the women on the hill overlooking the site, as if witnessing the events below.

ABOVE AND FACING PAGE: *Trepang* 1996, Trade Darwin, Photos: York Wilson.



In the original form the *Jookba* was powerful and moving but essentially mysterious and mystifying to an outside audience. The massacre which was the impetus for its creation was not represented and there was no way of knowing the context without recourse to extensive notes. The new version, *For Aye, Burning Bright* (Marriner, Altemus) (Jilbi Binawarrigi) reconciles the narrative demands of Western theatre and Aboriginal memory without traducing the history and has been made in the same generous spirit of the original *Jookba*.

It is an ambitious task to retain the form of the *Jookba* and sit it within a narrative, mimetic style. We see the White people – the station owner, manager, his chief stockman, and the police who put the culprits in jail and later walk them back chained together. All these parts are played by the Aboriginal performers wearing white face paint in a reverse minstrel show. This device releases and frees the ‘performers’ to vent their fury and as ‘whitemen’ they hurl abuse and invective at the ‘blacks’. This convention returns us to the roots of theatre as a cathartic communal process. It forces the white audience watching to see the level of racial hatred these people experienced. The performers are not actors assigned an arbitrary role but the descendants of the Indigenous people portrayed in the story. They re-experience events and revisit memories which (and now have been too painful) to be out in the open.

Now they are the masters of the events, not the victims, and being called ‘a bloody black bastard’ can be registered and laughed at. It is no mere artistic conceit but a buried fact, the performers are people for whom the story is not just a story

but part of their history. To represent the events is actually to re-present, revisit and rework the pain of the past into a compelling and unique piece of theatre. *For Aye, Burning Bright* was presented at the Perth Festival in the Quarry Amphitheatre in February 2002 and, in yet another monumental transformation, on the main stage of the State Theatre of the Victorian Arts Centre at the Melbourne Festival in October 2002. Saint-Clare’s current project *Masters of Ceremony*, the *Maggie Goose Song Cycle* from *Rainy Season* is in development this year and promises to be as ambitious as its predecessors.



1 Andrew Cairns (Lanc), *The Tropic Project*, Playworks, Melbourne 1999.
 2 Andrew Saint-Clare is a New Media Fellow with the Australia Council 2002-4.
 3 *Tracks* is the 2004 winner of the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award.
 4 See Paul Havelka’s photographs of the *Lanolin* wearing castings
 5 *Blind on the Genitals*, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne Dec. 2000 – March 2001, curated by Tony Oliver, artists: Paddy Bondini, Coady Barrett, Kuanwika Prober, Lena Nyeki, Razy Peters, Pegg Parrish, Georgia Salter, Freddy Simons, Terey Thomas, Phyllis Thomas.

Suzanne Spawton is a playwright and writer living in Darwin.