



Wet start gives way to plenty of crowd-pleasers with culture-lovers treated to the traditional and the innovative

# Festival winds up mixed bag of fare



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**F**rench water theatre troupe Ilotopie must have felt jinxed when strong winds blasted their epic pyrotechnic show off the Swan River at the opening of the Perth International Arts Festival.

The false start came just a few weeks after their two shows on Darling Harbour to open the Sydney Festival were washed out.

It was a shaky beginning for new PIAF artistic director Shelagh Magadza, who also faced the loss of vital income on Festival eve when otherwise welcome rain shut down the popular outdoor film screenings.

But in true show business spirit, Ilotopie's Water Fools resurfaced to attract strong crowds on the Saturday and Sunday of the opening weekend.

The three-week Festival wrapped up last night by returning to the water's edge at Hillarys with its final Floating Films screening after thousands of people saw *My Totoro* at the Bayswater and Applecross foreshores.

Paid attendances were 162,000, up from last year's 152,000 and putting the Festival on target to double its

ticket sales over five years from 2006. About 150,000 people saw the free events.

Relieved as much as sad that the Festival was over for another year, Ms Magadza said she was encouraged by the breadth of the audiences seen at the 250 performances and events. "There have obviously been some scary moments but it has given all of us at the Festival the courage to go further next year," she said.

"The aim is to be bigger, better and bolder."

Culture lovers were in the mood to party when Premier Alan Carpenter chose the first day of the Festival to announce the new \$500 million WA Museum at East Perth, two months after giving the arts its biggest injection of funds in WA history.

But the bubble of confidence was deflated somewhat in the first week by the premiere of *Jandamarra*, the much-anticipated epic about the 1890s Kimberley resistance leader from Black Swan Theatre Company and Fitzroy Crossing's *Bunuba Films*.

More than three hours long, the play by first-time playwright Steve Hawke had a few fine moments but otherwise fell flat for audiences who had to endure the uncomfortable

stadium seats (with no quarter or three-quarter-time break) installed in the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre.

About \$1 million from various sources was spent to bring to life *Jandamarra* and Bill McCluskey's stage adaptation of Tim Winton's *The Turning*, which has another week to run at the Playhouse. Both plays were near sell-outs, attracting almost 15,000 people eager to see local stories turned into flesh and blood in the theatre. But the reviews were mixed, suggesting more work should have gone into the script development for both productions.

Ms Magadza said she was undeterred in her determination to get the Festival involved in commissioning more WA works for the stage. "It is an important thing for the Festival to do," she said.

Local plays opening under the harsh light of an international arts festival were judged against shows that had been performed and polished for several years before landing in Perth, she said. "I don't think it should make us shy of producing work from WA of significance." The monstrous building squatting by the river on William Street also hosted *Black Watch*, the National Theatre of



Scotland's explosive play about Iraq veterans which was one of the highlights of the Festival.

One play that crept under the radar to transfix and unsettle audiences was the National Theatre of Scotland's two-hander *Aalst*, about a couple who killed their children.

The ebullient Anglo-Indian multilingual version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at His Majesty's Theatre was another international polished gem.

This spicy take on Shakespeare cleared the stage later in the Festival for *Borrowed Light*, a Finnish dance work blended with early American singing that mesmerised some audience members and repulsed others, a key measure of any successful Festival show. Ms Magadza's decision to convert the

Esplanade into "PIAF Central" paid off, as did the reinvigorating move of the Writers Festival to a tent village at the University of WA.

Not only did *Black Watch* and *Jandamarra* attract big audiences at the convention centre, but the nearby sound shell of the Beck's Music Box — the venue of many sold-out shows — gave PIAF a big physical presence in the heart of the city.

Audiences embraced the UWA tent village, capped off by the children's open day last Sunday, giving Ms Magadza a foundation to produce a more ambitious writers' program next year. "My favourite, favourite moment was finding a mother of a toddler fast asleep in one of the sessions while the children were engrossed on the floor up the front," she said.

Ms Magadza was just as gratified by the enthusiastic response of the hundreds of international performers and other visitors in Perth for the Festival.

"Their eyes pop out on stalks when they see Perth and the kind of life we live here," she said.

"Perth has really outdone itself. Ideas of Perth being Dullsville are diminishing into the distance now. Perth is the new black. Everyone wants to be in Perth."

Ms Magadza is already well advanced in her planning for the 2009 Festival.

The only glimpse into the program has been the news that Oscar winner Cate Blanchett will star with the Sydney Theatre Company in the Shakespeare adaptation *The War of the Roses* at His Majesty's Theatre.

**HITS AND MISSES**  
What good is a festival if it doesn't get people talking? Here's what generated a buzz among the chattering classes this year.

**Aalst:** The smallest production had the biggest impact. Just two actors and a disembodied voice gave a chilling study of parental abuse in the National Theatre of Scotland's companion play to the headline-grabbing *Black Watch*.

**The Architects Project:** Sometimes bigger really is better. The series of CBD billboards celebrating the fantastic possibilities of urban design were lost amidst the clamour of Boom Town.

**Don't Look Back:** This Dickensian descent into the bowels of the Old Treasury Building opened visitors' eyes to the great power of myth and the immense potential of this neglected city landmark.

**Borrowed Light:** Hailed by *The West's* reviewer David Hough as the triumph of the festival, this blend of dance and a capella singing set friend against friend as surely as an Eagles-Docker derby.

**Jandamarra:** A worthy and fascinating story of the colonial-era Aboriginal leader collapsed under the weight of a questionable script and stodgy direction.

**Music Box:** As a statement that the festival was in town, it was fantastic. But the jury is still out on the Esplanade venue that has sacrificed some intimacy to meet growing ticket demand.

**Writers festival:** Creating a tent village at the University of WA and allowing the kids to crash the literary talkfest has breathed new life into a greying festival tradition.