



## PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

# Gambles pay with gold and small gems

Artistic director Shelagh Magadza's inspired risk-taking had paid off in spades, writes **Victoria Laurie**

**N**OWHERE were the strengths of the 2008 Perth International Arts Festival, which ended on Sunday, paraded better than one warm evening last week at the Becks Music Box. The setting was perfect: this groovy open-air venue near the Swan River was Perth's answer to the Spiegeltent of other festivals.

It has been a huge hit, with full houses for such acts as Gretchen Parlato, Meow Meow, Yasmin Levy, Sonic Youth, Feist, Nouvelle Vague and Sharon Jones.

But that night the music was especially sublime. The Brodsky Quartet gave the premiere of a new piece by Perth composer Iain Grandage, lavishing praise on his composition *Black Dogs* and on local guitarist Craig Ogden who joined the foursome in the concert. It's a coup that this Australian work now resides in the repertoire of an internationally renowned quartet, and it's just the kind of creative cross-fertilisation between artists from near and far that festivals should be about.

PIAF's artistic director, Shelagh Magadza, notches up points for other aspects of her first of four festivals. It has achieved the highest box office in the festival's history: about \$4 million and a big jump on last year's record \$3.2 million. Paid attendances exceeded 160,000, a rise of 10 per cent on 2007 (which was itself a bumper year with 23 per cent growth in ticket sales).

Artistically, the two standout productions in the program couldn't have been more different. Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (now at the Adelaide Festival and then travelling to Sydney) was a riotous, joyful and colour-saturated version of Shakespeare's comedy, with an Indian cast.

Tero Saarinen's Finnish dance work *Borrowed Light* was a severe, reverential and yet visually beautiful celebration of religious worship in a Shaker community. Audiences went for the music as much as the dance: the

Boston Camerata performed live and unaccompanied on stage and mingled with the flailing, stamping dancers as they sang. They displayed the same impressive vocal purity as their singer counterparts in the New London Consort, another highlight of this festival that Magadza secured exclusively for Perth.

Convincing international acts to travel halfway around the world, let alone across the Nullarbor, involves compromise. One compromise is to go smaller, a choice Magadza made in some areas and struck gold.

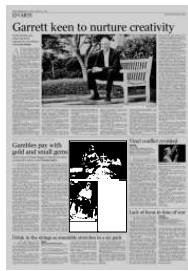
*Don't Look Back* was British artist Tristan Sharp's poetic journey through an abandoned building. It was one of the most original and thought-provoking dramatic inventions I've seen in years: each person passing through the installation creates the drama in their own mind. Another small gem was *Trad*, Galway Arts Festival's three-hander about an ancient man seeking immortality through his son's son.

A second way to beat the tyranny of distance is to program shows already coming to Australia.

Perth hosted the National Theatre of Scotland's riveting and hard-hitting shows *Black Watch* and *Aalst* after Sydney.

Their impact may linger longer in Perth, not least because the precision-drilled performances of *Black Watch* offered such a stark — and some would argue, unfair — comparison to the two ambitious Western Australian plays commissioned by Magadza for her inaugural festival.

*Jandamarra* by Steve Hawke, and *The Turning*, Bill McCluskey's bold adaptation of Tim Winton's novel, were two of the biggest local theatre productions ever mounted in Perth. Hawke's Kimberley story of Aboriginal rebel Jandamarra comes from the region's Bunuba people and faced huge logistical challenges: language, geography, lack of stage experience and a cumbersome



**Logistical challenges:** Jimi Bani and Ningali Lawford-Wolf on the set of *Jandamarra*



**Bold:** Nick Simpson-Deeks in *The Turning*

script. Goodwill for this ambitious project drew full houses, but not before the production got a critical pasting and a sizeable cut, post-opening, to reduce running time to under three hours. *The Turning* also suffered from slight over-length and unresolved

problems in the script, although its production values were high.

Exposing fresh work to the full glare of festival judgment is tough, especially when mature shows such as *Black Watch* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* each had longer gestations and many performances before their seasons in Perth.

Perth's under-resourced theatre industry has only recently clawed back from years of crisis. Big shows are largely uncharted territory, and there's no out-of-town touring circuit. Magadza concedes that both plays need more work and present a tremendous opportunity.

One problem, she says, is a lack of peer review in the city. In Melbourne and Sydney, people go to each other's work and respond to it. In Perth, there's not so many people to create a sub-culture.

The festival is committed to commissioning new work. But are there other organisations that offer the same opportunity? Who will take up that challenge?

The signs are good for Magadza's next festival. The state Government's \$73 million Ignite arts package, announced last December, includes \$5 million for important new commissions and money for a professional production house. Boomtime Perth and its festival just keep growing and growing.