

uniquely educated as well as being Platonov's would-be mistress, Nina Sosanya is required to move in and out of the action observing and sometimes controlling, while at the same time being hopelessly caught up in her own feelings. In *Ivanov* Sosanya has a smaller part as the sick and betrayed wife, but once again she breathes natural authority. Anna Chancellor's Arkadina in *The Seagull* is a performance of a different kind. As a first-rate actress playing an actress who was probably no more than second-rate, she can indulge herself by showing exactly how it shouldn't be done. Even away from the theatre this Arkadina never simply walks, she glides and strides; she's incapable of making a point without a pose; she primps her profile; she twists her uplifted arms into weird candelabra-like shapes.

There's doubling, even tripling, between the plays. Olivia Vinall is, by turns, a rejected lover, an ardent admirer and a sweet ingénue, getting full value out of three different versions of female vulnerability. Peter Egan shifts slightly but inevitably from an aristocrat in *Ivanov* – baffled, boozy and broke – to a tedious old buffer in a wheelchair in *The Seagull*. Each performance carries with it a sense of incomplete decline, of unfinished patterning. This is not so much a theatre of secrets as of dead ends that are almost, not quite, in sight. Adulterous affairs, especially when they involve a middle-aged man and a younger woman, will never, as long as they're driven by what they seek to replace, confirm a new start. All expressions of desire are confessions of need; sex with other people is repetition by default.

It is unusual for any production of Chekhov to achieve such levels of psychological complexity and, at the same time, solicit our involvement quite so directly. More often we're moved, sometimes overwhelmingly, yet held back by cultural distance and even, on occasion, by the dominance of conspicuously great acting. By contrast, Jonathan Kent's readiness to indulge direct address invites and then challenges our complicity. When Trigorin, the novelist in *The Seagull*, shrugging his shoulders at his lover's tearful pleas not to abandon her, turns downstage and asks us, "Is this really what women want?", we can be fairly certain that a substantial proportion of the audience won't give him the time of day. Conversely a chilling instance of spontaneous participation comes when *Ivanov*, tormented by the guilt-ridden truth that he no longer loves his dying wife, turns on her with an unprompted, but utterly devastating, burst of anti-Semitic bile. On press day this produced a widespread gasp from an audience struck by the sudden crudeness, shocked that the sinister transference was so immediately recognizable. Here was the inclusion operating to full moral effect.

One probably needs to see all three plays on the same day fully to appreciate the continual exchange of similarity and difference, the endless sequence of one step forward, one step back, that makes up Chekhov's vision of social reality, though each production does stand as a completely satisfying theatrical event in itself, as well as a distinctive component of the triptych. Awash with misery, *Ivanov* comes to an awful realization: "People think there's something deep about despair. But there isn't". He might have added that what survives of despair is comedy, a theatrical law evident to his creator from the outset.

Glowing dots

Millennia of cultural capital at the Darwin Festival

FIONA GRUBER

DARWIN FESTIVAL
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Politics is everywhere in Darwin. There's the sharp race between parties and politicians as the Northern Territory approaches parliamentary elections in late August; but there's also the wider and deeper politics based on its geography and history, the tendency of Australia's northernmost city to be both a postcolonial fish and ethnically-diverse fowl.

Despite being named after the world's best known natural historian (the HMS *Beagle*'s commander, John Clements Wickham, called the port of Darwin after his erstwhile shipmate when he came here in 1839), it is another nineteenth-century scientist of evolution, Alfred Russel Wallace, who seems more relevant to the place; his imaginary line delineating a transitional ecozone between Asia and Australia echoes the city's culture and aspirations. Wallace's ecosphere hovers over Darwin's arts festival, an annual event in the dry season. It is based on the internationally familiar Edinburgh and Avignon model, but also engages meaningfully with its northern neighbours – Jakarta is closer than Sydney – and the local indigenous communities. Alongside a mixture of Australian and European theatre, cabaret, circus and comedy, the programme is full of indigenous and regional flavours, including local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and shows from Australia's Asian neighbours.

Many events are outdoors in Darwin's lush tropical parks. The city is laid-back and handsome but its gentle sea shore conceals crocodiles in the shallows, while kites patrol low over the rooftops, adding a predatory edge to a city that has always favoured adventurers and pioneers. Perched on the edge of the Arafura Sea, Darwin today has a mixture of seventy ethnicities in a population of 138,000, including the land's original inhabitants, the local Larrakia people, who have been here for 60,000 years, trading with their island neighbours. They are disadvantaged but, unlike in many of Australia's cities, they are visible and play a vital part in the city's life and commerce.

It seemed fitting that indigenous arts dominated the opening weekend, with dance and music threading their way through a clutch of award ceremonies and the tenth Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair. Each stall at the fair sported a metal outline of Australia and a small light signifying the community art centre represented. There were more than fifty-five, glowing dots of creativity, status and much needed income in some of the remotest parts of the continent. Although the market for indigenous art has softened, this fair continues to attract a strong contingent of international and Australian collectors.

The Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) and the National Indigenous Music Awards also offered plenty of opportunity to celebrate the richness and depth of indigenous arts. NATSIAA's selection of winning entries places contemporary conceptual works alongside the colourful canvases familiar to Western collectors. These latter works manage to be both abstract and decorative to the casual eye



Harold Joseph Thomas

while full of stories, tales of totemic dreamings and secret initiations, for those in the know. No arcane knowledge was necessary to decipher the winning work by Harold Joseph Thomas (*Bundoo*), however. "Tribal Abduction" is the depiction of indigenous children being forcibly removed by white officials; it shines a spotlight on the dismal history and brutal treatment of Aboriginal people. The cluster of fighting and fleeing figures in the foreground forms a dark mass against the shimmering outback landscape. It is a powerful and charged narrative painting and hard to walk past. Thomas was himself a member of the stolen generation, and the artist's catalogue notes mention the "diabolical emotional consequences and despair" suffered by parents and children from a practice that was still rife in the 1970s.

Down the road at the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, "The Most Stolen Race on Earth", a collaboration between the Sydney-based indigenous artist Blak Douglas and the white artist Adam Geczy, explores the exceptionally high rates of deaths in custody among indigenous prisoners. Although making up only 2.3 per cent of the Australian population they represented 18 per cent of all custodial deaths between 1980 and 2007. Figures for incarceration are exceptionally bad in the Northern Territory, where 82 per cent of adult inmates are Aboriginal. The figures are even worse for juvenile detention; 97 per cent of juvenile detainees are indigenous. The installation includes a dangling matrix of rope nooses in the red, black and yellow of the Aboriginal flag, prison jumpsuits and a wall of children's clothing pulled out of shape. It is crude and not particularly well exe-

cuted but it succeeds in shocking; equally shocking were revelations last month of systemic abuses, including the use of tear gas and shackles against the overwhelmingly Aboriginal inmates of the local Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre. Sometimes they get to paint; another exhibition, *Behind the Wire*, displays prisoner art at Fannie Bay Gaol, a project run by the Correctional Services Art Education Program. Nearly all the paintings are by Aboriginal inmates, but with a few exceptions they look apathetic, angry and disconnected from Country. This might not be the image Darwin wants to project, but its festival, under the artistic director Andrew Ross, frequently poses the question of how a society sees itself, how it engages with other societies and how it tackles the questions that need to be asked.

Goberno is an interactive theatre piece from the Filipino company Sipat Lawin Ensemble. Under the challenge "create your own Utopia" audiences are invited to take control in planning the ideal government and creating a national constitution. *Medium*, which premiered at the festival, is another, more nuanced exploration of freedom and diversity from the Indonesian dancer and choreographer Rianto, incorporating the traditional Javanese Lenggeng dance form. It is a co-production with the Belgian company deSingel Internationale Kunstcampus and Germany's Hessisches Staatsballet and an example of the hybrid art forms burgeoning across the region, combining the traditional with new forms.

Less overtly political fare at the festival includes two plays, *Broken* by the local playwright Mary Anne Butler, which explores the lives of three survivors of an outback desert car crash, and *Lippy*, from Ireland's Dead Centre Theatre Company, a play that revolves around the tale of four women who starve themselves to death. *Lippy* is a clever play that has been on the festival circuit for a number of years, but has lost none of its edge. Brisbane is its next port of call.

Critics of the contemporary international arts festival might argue that the template is a tired one and that all but the local offerings are too shallow. Imported acts arrive and leave within a matter of days, swift forays that deliver a one-size-fits-all festival product and only a simulacrum of cultural – and multicultural – exchange. Sceptics of the Darwin Festival in particular will question why it has run up a big deficit bringing in an ambitious roster of artists from around the world; its board, headed by the territory's former Labor Chief Minister, was sacked less than two months before the festival's opening night, allegedly for financial mismanagement. Conservative politicians are contemplating a return to the community-based Bougainvillea Festival that began in 1979, featured floats and flowers and was a civic response to the flattening of the city by Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Day 1974. The Labor Party has turned to sport, pledging, if it wins the election, to bring back the Arafura Games, a jamboree for Darwin's Asia Pacific neighbours.

But it would be a shame if Darwin pulled in its cultural horns and lessened, rather than increased, its artistic engagement with its diverse range of neighbours. The local Aboriginal inhabitants have been building relationships and engaging in exchange across land and water for 60,000 years. Darwin, flattened twice by cyclones and once by the Japanese in little over a century, has relatively shallow roots. But whether it turns its face to the sea or to the land at its back, it has millennia of culture to tap into.