

Seven performers lost in the desert

DURING the past couple of years Peter King's Going Through Stages company has been quietly earning itself a reputation for boldness and innovation.

Some of that reputation has to do with the fact that the company is impatient with verbal theatre and is keen that movement and images, rather than words, should be the motivating factor for what happens on stage.

That being so, no one should be surprised to learn that while 'Lines in the Desert' has a script of sorts, the words (when you can hear them) are of little or no importance. The emphasis instead is heavily on movement.

The program calls it imagistic and poetic theatre travelling through the illusions of the desert. The characters could be travelling along the Birdsville Track ("one of the longest and loneliest streets in the world"). Alternatively, they might be in Egypt and the flat triangular hills in the distance could be the

THEATRE

Lines in the Desert, devised and directed by Peter King (Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, South Yarra, until 16 March).

LEONARD RADIC

Pyramids. For King and company, it doesn't seem to matter.

What they are concerned with seems to be the *experience* of travelling in the desert, and the way that experience affects their being, their relationships, and their social behavior. It is essentially imagistic rather than representational theatre, performed by the seven-member troupe primarily through movement.

Barefooted, and in black or dark blue costumes strung about with masking tape, they grunt, grimace, writhe convulsively on the floor, make nonsense sounds, behave at times like zombies,

pumelling their canvas blankets or rolling them into a ball. There are puns on the word "burning" and "yearning" and to "going to blazes". There are references to pain, and the occasional cry of grief.

"Where are you in all of this?" one of the men asks (as well he might). "I'm in the middle of it," a woman replies. "But where is the middle point?" he persists. Where indeed?

The piece runs for 80 minutes and is performed with a great deal of vigor by the cast, who run, jump and stand still until the sweat pours off them. They seem to find the exercise exciting and important. I found it mundane and pretentious. The fact is that contemporary dance and performance-oriented companies have been doing this kind of thing for years, only with a more developed language of gesture and a more interesting use of space. 'Lines in the Desert' has a few moments of genuine originality. But the overall effect is patchy and, for me at least, disengaging.