

ARTS

ON THE ISLAND

Festival thrives on variety

Two years, Tasmania
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 jamboree, writes
 Matthew Westwood

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'We provide a platform for artists to have a voice that is national and international'

Elizabeth Walsh, Ten Days artistic director

In Geoff Chapple's play, with a perfectly
 timed performance by Stuart Devenie, we
 see Hatch give one of his public lectures in
 which he attempts to salvage his reputation
 and livelihood from the smears of such
 wicked conservationists as H. G. Wells and
 Douglas Mawson. No rhetorical flourish —
 "I do not deny that penguins are cute" — is
 left unsaid in Hatch's penguin-oil polemic.
 This is affectionate satire that arouses
 empathy even as it condemns.

Theatre Vesturport from Iceland has
 produced a highly theatrical adaptation of
 Franz Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis*.
 The storytelling is direct and powerful, aided
 by an athletic performance by Gisli Orn
 Gardarsson, who transforms himself into a
 giant insect by scuttling down stairs and
 crawling up the walls and ceiling. A moody
 soundscape by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis
 underscores the action.

The story of a son's alienation and the
 family's incomprehension and eventual
 abandonment of him is played at almost
 pantomime pitch, so that finally it is the
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 grotesque. *The Metamorphosis* has the
 power of parable, although it rarely touches
 the emotional truth of a family in jeopardy.

The centrepiece of the visual arts program
 is *Evolution*, Piccinini's installation of trans-
 generic sculptures. The name of the exhibition
 reflects on the anniversary of the publication
 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of
 Species*, and the installation at TMAG — a
 museum that combines art and natural
 history — gives delight by placing Piccinini's
 zoological inventions among the stuffed
 birds and Tasmanian devils.

These creature sculptures, with their
 anthropomorphic faces and big dewy eyes,
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thetic response, such as the baboon-woman
 that suckles an infant human (*Big Mother*,
 2005) or the boy cuddling a geriatric dugong
 as if it were his grandmother (*The Long
 Awaited*, 2008).

A conversation between Piccinini and
 curator Juliana Engberg at the museum on
 Saturday made plain the narrative impulse in
 Piccinini's work. Indeed, much of it can be
 related to her personal experiences: wanting
 to believe in medicine as her mother was
 dying from cancer; breastfeeding her nephew
 so that she could learn to feed her baby son;
 discovering that some baboons are unable to
 part with their dead infants even as the
 bodies decompose.

These episodes speak to Piccinini of a
 powerful nurturing instinct. "There are
 things that cut across all the different species
 on the planet, and I think that is one of
 them," she told the audience on Saturday.

Other exhibitions and installations reflect
 on notions of heritage, nostalgia and conser-
 vation, sometimes through the juxtaposition
 of modern forms in historic places.

In a series called *Trust*, curator Noel

Frankham has invited eight Tasmanian
 artists to create interventions — from
 sculpture and painting to digital media — in
 historic properties under the care of the
 National Trust of Tasmania. In another
 project, Rosny Barn in Hobart, an 1818
 property transformed into a small arts venue
 is home to a New Zealand installation,
Aniwanawa.

In *Ruined*, about 15 decrepit pianos,
 salvaged from across the state by experimen-
 tal musician Ross Bolleter, have been
 installed in the Bond Store at TMAG.
 Visitors are encouraged to hammer at their
 barely functioning keys, or reach inside and
 pluck the rusty strings.

Each instrument has a history and a
 personality that can be seen, heard and
 touched. The Mignon piano from the US has
 moth-eaten felt on its hammers and was
 found in a shed with possum skeletons; the
 George Murphy instrument from London
 sets off a death rattle when its lower D is
 struck. The most illustrious is a 1908 Beale
 on which the future concert pianist Eileen
 Joyce used to practise. Bolleter's ongoing
 project recalls the days when the piano was
 the focal point of many homes, but this is no
 exercise in nostalgia or sterile museology.
 These pianos are earthy, gutsy and interac-
 tive in the best sense of the word.

Ten Days on the Island still has a week to
 go, with highlights including the TAP Dance
 program (Tasmania Asia Pacific Dance) in
 Launceston and the premiere of Richard
 Mills's new choral work, *St Mark Passion*.

It certainly would take 10 days and
 hundreds of kilometres to experience all that
 the festival has to offer. The printed program
 includes a suggested itinerary for those who
 are tempted to try: a grand tour that takes in
 historic sites, natural wonders, food and wine
 and contemporary performance.

Walsh says Ten Days is conducting an
 economic impact study for the first time this
 year. The festival involves 52 communities
 and occupies 1400 beds for artists and staff.
 But while catering for Tasmanians, the
 festival also aims to attract interstate visitors
 with money to spend.

"We get people who are involved in the
 cultural industries, rather than a general
 tourist," Walsh says. "It's not mum and dad
 in a campervan. It's people who want to
 embrace Tasmanian food and wine and a
 cultural experience."

Matthew Westwood travelled to Hobart as
 a guest of Ten Days on the Island.

TEN DAYS ON THE ISLAND

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Every two years, Tasmania plays host to an unusual cultural jamboree, writes Matthew Westwood

EVERY mainland capital has an exposition of books, films or performances that is called a festival, or a multi-theatre venue called an arts centre. It's as if imagination and daring are left at the threshold when it comes to naming sites of creativity.

Not so Ten Days, a biennial jamboree that proudly states its duration, place and theme. It began on Friday night with Theatre Vesturport's production of *Metamorphosis*, an outdoor party with live music and, around Constitution Dock, Big Hart's dreamy floating installation, *Junk Theory*. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery stayed open until 9pm for Patricia Piccinini's exhibition, *Evolution*, with traffic of about 4000 people. By the end of day one, it was clear this festival by another name had got off to a strong start.

The first edition of Ten Days was in 2001 with Robyn Archer as director and Elizabeth Walsh as executive producer. Walsh has been artistic director since 2007.

"I think events grow out of and respond to the communities they're in," says Walsh, whose previous roles have included head of programming at Sydney Opera House and program manager of the Sydney Festival during the Anthony Steel years.

"To bring international work into the creative community is really important," she says.

"One thing this festival has done for Tasmania is give it a much more confident cultural voice. You can look at it in terms of the scale and ambition of the work that local artists are engaging with. We provide a platform for artists to have a voice that is national and international. That remains central to what Ten Days is doing. There is a lot of investigation into the notion of place and heritage."

Ten Days is a celebration of island cultures from across the world. It is committed to this theme and shows no sign of being hamstrung by it. There is certainly no shortage of islands in the world if one does not insist on them also being nation states. So while continental Canada and the US would be disqualified, Walsh can still invite artists from Nova Scotia (singer and banjo player Old Man Lueddecke) and Manhattan (crossover string quartet Ethel).

Others come from Anglesey, Wales (Hoi-polloi, with a theatre piece called *Floating*), New Caledonia (Karbal Noumea Ballet, in a double bill with Tasdance) and Taiwan (Wu Hsing-kuo's Contemporary Legend Theatre, returning to Australia with a solo version of *King Lear*).

Walsh has assembled an attractive program that offers intimate experiences as well as big, extrovert ones, such as the dance hall series at local venues from Launceston to Zeehan. And it truly is a state-wide event. While there is a concentration of performances in Hobart, residents of other communities don't miss out.

The one-man show *Hatch* from Auckland Theatre Company, staged amid the chandeliered Victoriana of Hobart Town Hall, tells the remarkable story of embattled entrepreneur Joseph Hatch. He was the pioneer of a barbarous enterprise in the late 19th century: extracting oil from royal penguins on Macquarie Island, between New Zealand and Antarctica.



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