

FROM THE PIER OF SYDNEY HARBOUR TO THE DRY DUSTY PLAINS of the South West, in school gymnasiums and memorial halls, with a bus load of enthusiasm and a hire truck full of supplies, seven hard working community groups helped bring youth theatre to town.

Armed with the charter to create a new Australian play for young people, in association with South West Arts and Outback Theatre, the Australian Theatre for Young People (atyp) developed *Skate* in Deniliquin over a twelve month period, with Director Tim Jones and Writer Debra Oswald.

Skate tells the story of how a group of young people, marginalised within their hometown and with nowhere else to go, struggle with their families to get the Deniliquin Skate Park built. It's a story loosely based on the locals' experience.

Skate had its debut in Sydney, but we brought it back to the South West and toured it to Hillston, Hay, Balranald, Barham, Deniliquin, Finley and Moama. Many of the local hosting groups were unfamiliar with the touring business, or indeed with 'the arts' at all, but they were all keenly involved in the tour. The audience enthusiasm, the sheer number of people attending a piece of live theatre, were unseen before in this area – a striking demonstration of the importance of touring in rural communities.

Out here, in these small towns, among the hardest hit by the drought, the halls were packed to the rafters.

Skate made a great impact, on the cast – touring for the first time; on the hosting groups and on the audiences – watching as their own story unfolded upon the stage – who'd never seen such a show before.

As the RADO, it was like bringing a surprise package to my communities. *Skate's* combination of the excitement of live theatre and of live skateboarding showed the possibility and flexibility of the arts, how wide and encompassing the storytelling power of theatre can be, and how impactful.

As a local farmer commented to me, "it really takes the mind off the job doesn't it?" yet at the same time, *Skate* was the story of our townships, of the value of perseverance, of strength through friendships, and the ability to overcome adversity – qualities we see in communities each day.

I sat in the audience of seven vastly different townships and was continually touched and surprised by the audiences' reactions. Told in a vibrant, respectful and sensitive manner, *Skate* brought a real sense of pride and ownership to everyone involved. The electricity and emotion was tangible as people watched their story being played out, particularly in Deniliquin, where the story is set. The tour became a two way exchange of culture, stirring the interest and appetite for region-specific performance.

It established a strong interest in performance and storytelling in the region, but also gave positive experiences to the atyp cast, who made strong local connections.

Audience and cast grasped the opportunity to be involved in such a relevant play, written from within their communities. For many, it was their first experience of live theatre. At the end of each performance, as the audience wiped tears from their eyes, the young girls rushed to secure autographs I was mobbed (no – not by the autograph hunters wanting the RADO's signature but with cries of "What is next? What are you bringing for us next?")

In such a difficult time for the South West, *Skate* offered us all a welcome tonic. We watched as a group of 'city kids' gave us a powerful reminder, told our story, showed us again how perseverance, determination and courage works within our communities.

Skate

by SALLY BRANSON



For me, watching the audience's reaction and response was just as entertaining, rewarding and inspiring as organising the tour and watching *Skate* itself. ■

Skater girls performing
Photo: Phil Sheath



June

6 June - 20 July

👁️ *Portraits 2001* an opportunity to view portraits by some of Australia's leading artists who have previously exhibited in either the Archibald or Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. **ALBURY** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6051 3480 www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/gallery

7 June

🏠 *World Environment Day Fair* Learn about the activities of local groups, held in the grounds of the Holy Trinity Church, **LAURIETON**. 10am to 3pm. Contact Chace Tel 02 6559 6699

7 - 9 June

👁️ *Lions Living Craft Exhibition*, showcasing the diversity of our cultural community and featuring local artisans practicing their craft. **ULLADULLA** Tel 02 4455 4114 or 02 4454 0843 www.ulladulla.info/livingcraft

7 - 15 June

🏠 *EnviroFair*, stalls and activities for World Environment Day, areas represented include organic gardening, solar energy, alternative education, arts and crafts, recycled products and more. **TAREE** Showground. Contact Janita Ayton Tel 02 6550 0866