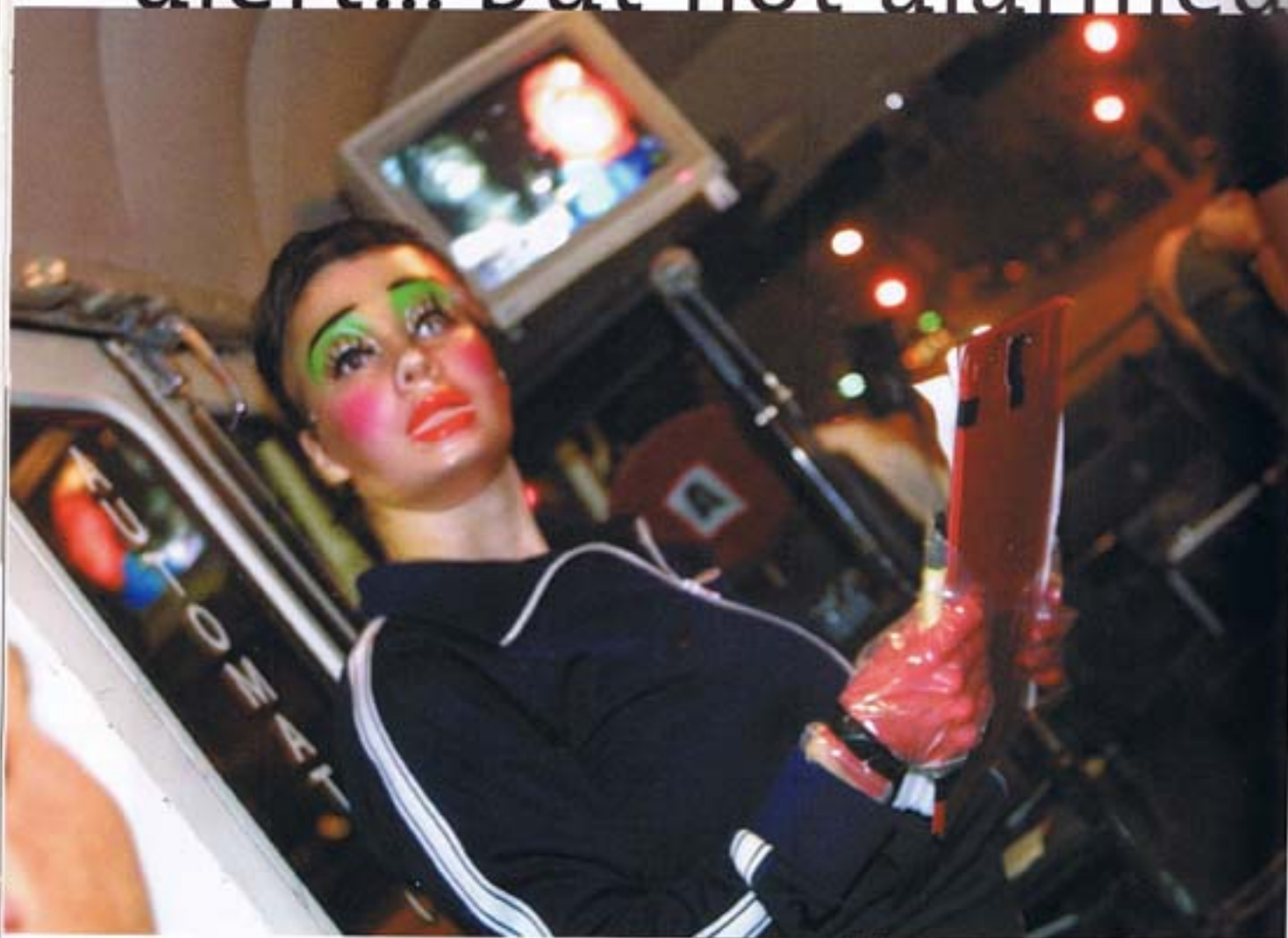


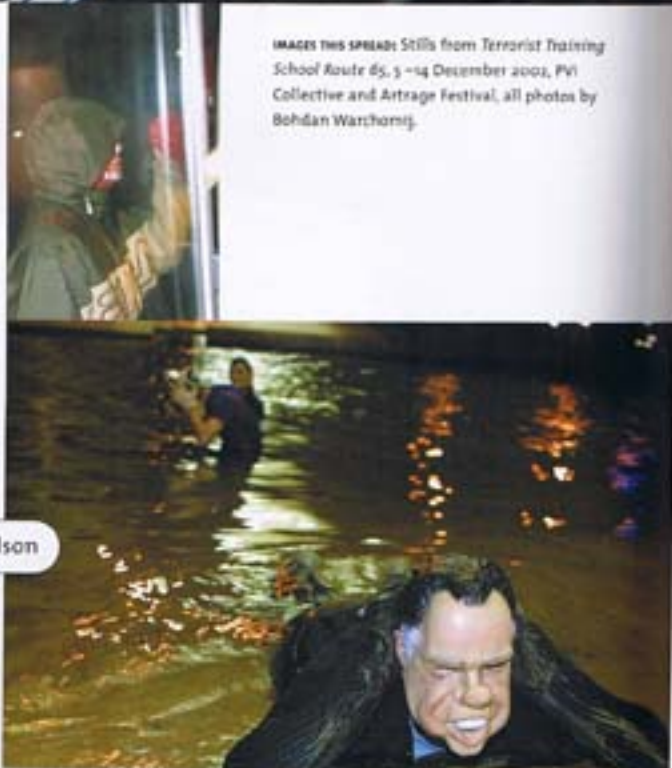
alert... but not alarmed



One of my favorite lines from my cynical youth is this: *Perth's heaven, but I'm too young to die*. This modality still circulates among certain sectors of our isolated community. It's hard not to join in, and who can deny that parody is a great antidote to despair. And it is true - it can get to you. The local paper, the Labor party, the Perthonalties who pepper the pages of the *Sunday Times*... Perth is easily coded as banal space, a kind of second-rate simulacra of real places that you must inhabit ironically unless you want to grow old and die of boredom in the suburbs. And if Perth is susceptible to such characterisation, the rest of Australia is not immune. The recent Commonwealth Government security campaign mobilises the image of a benign beach and barbie island paradise in order to dramatise the threat from outside our borders. But as we all know, benign paradises have their own local terrors.

Josephine Wilson

IMAGES THIS SPREAD: Stills from Terrorist Training School Route 65, 5-14 December 2001, PVI Collective and Artrage Festival, all photos by Bohdan Warchoń.



I find myself thinking about these and related issues as my 20-seater tour bus is occupied by a series of semi-naked masked tour guide/terrorists, undressing and dressing in track suits. We are here for *Terrorist Training School*, PVI



Collective's latest work. By the time we get to our first stop, I have opened my show bag and watched an introductory video which drew heavily on the opening sequence of *One Day in September*, the Academy Award Winning documentary about the kidnapping of Israelis by the Black September Palestinian faction at the 1972 Munich Olympics. *Welcome to Perth*. We laugh because we all know that Perth is a most unsuitable site for - well - most things, right? Alert but not alarmed, I peer out the window at our first stop, Kings Park, to see spotlight performers in track suits engage in abstract military training sequences. As our bus departs we are pursued by one of the performers, red-faced, sweating, his body pumping. At our next stop a woman is led off the bus. This performance is ruffling with references to the 1970s, to retro fashion, to real incidents where people died, to a film about those incidents. I begin to wonder at a performance that repeats someone else's tragic script; *first time as tragedy, second time as farce*. I think about Perth. But then, I remind myself, if terrorists have read the script, how can a contemporary performance avoid it?

Perth-based performance group PVI Collective have always been sophisticated users of the media. They know how to manipulate the concepts of real-time and reality and incorporate them into their work, with the concomitant risks. Past performances have played with live-link up, computer generated characters, phone-ins, creating an illusion of unmediated broadcast to perforate the black box. They understand the dramatic effect of reality. Ultimately, it is not the absence of the real that matters, but the degree to which reality appears un/scripted.

Contemporary performance often seems bent on escaping the theatrical frame, eroding the boundaries, and making problematic the relationship between theatre and reality. In *Terrorist Training School*, PVI abandon traditional theatrical space altogether, opting for the bus. Anthropological research confers a certain authenticity; in preparation for this show PVI members boarded tour buses, trams, took tourist walks, infiltrated the Army reserve. Contemporary terrorists, on the other hand, appear to have read the manuals of dramatic arts, of cinema, advertising. The terrorist strives for the grand entrance, maximum audience impact, burns on seats. It is as if each realm were predicated on a fascination with the other.

At times TTS is funny, dark. We are told in the best tour-guide voice that the Park is most vulnerable to attack by fire. As we stand outside Parliament we learn that the institution is most easily stormed on Visitors' Day. Security is never tight. I laugh because I know that nothing like this could ever happen here in Perth, Australia. Right? It is as if our image of Perth resists the possibility of terrorism as much as resists its own theatricalisation. Perhaps Perth, perhaps Australia, is

best staged in certain ways - comedy, satire, or gentle suburban nostalgia. We cruise the CBD, taking in the iconic sites, and finally unite in a belly laugh at the Belltower, which we all agree is so Perth. Hey, where else do they build a tower just because they are given a pair of ye olde second hand English bells? ¹

We drive across the Narrows Bridge. The tone shifts imperceptibly. We disembark under the bridge, to stand on a parapet. I see that the performers have beaten us there. They line up behind each other, extending into the dark water underneath the clean illuminated lines of the 60s arches. As the performers jerk and thrash about on the sand and in the water, one of them takes the microphone and delivers a Darwinian tract. *Survival of the fittest! Long live the individual! Somebody else is frantically excavating hollows in the sand. He might be digging a grave, or he might be searching for a body. I shiver. Perhaps, after all, there is tragedy in ordinary places. To my side two young girls approach, their heads wrapped in scarves. They are inquisitive and slightly nervous. I see their parents in the distance, craning their necks. We might be dangerous. I want to reassure them that we mean well, that they are safe. I lean over to the girls. 'Don't worry,' I whisper, 'it's theatre.'*

In certain countries ordinary people are blown up on buses. A seat on a plane has never been a sure thing. In Moscow, a ticket to a Musical could be fatal. But back on the bus, as I rotate my popstick to indicate I believe there were 35 bus stops between here and the CBD, not 30, I feel quite safe. Steve is driving. We are not speeding. This is Perth. This is performance. No one will die tonight. ☺

TTS: *Route 65* was staged by PVI Collective and Artrage Festival in November 2002.

Josephine Wilson is a Perth-based writer.

¹ Note: they did crack a mention in *Wallpaper** magazine...

