

# Terror takes to the streets – the age

April 19, 2005



pvi performer James McCluskey runs beside the bus for much of the terror tour.

Photo: *Shannon Morris*

## **The minibus of terror has rolled into Melbourne, and you're invited aboard. Meg Mundell buckles up for the ride.**

It could happen any time, we're told — the abandoned backpack, the tourist with the video camera, that twitchy passenger in aisle 24, your bearded neighbour buying too much fertiliser, white powder in the post, bacteria in the air vents, suspicious vehicles driven by suspicious people.

We know the drill, we've seen the posters. Be alert, sure. But alarmed? Hell, no! No need to worry folks, it's all under control.

Or so our leaders tell us. It's a confusing message, and — here's the irony — a frightening one. Post- September 11, after the Bali bombings, with our troops still fighting a dubious war and horrific images beamed nightly into our lounge rooms, just how worried should Australia be about terrorism? As any shrink will tell you, fear makes people pliable. Spook someone and they're putty in your hands.

This notion is explored by a group of Perth artists (pvi). The group's moniker stands for "performance, video, installation", the three cornerstones of their work. In a startling new show, *tts: australia*, pvi takes the audience on a surreal minibus tour of city landmarks.

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"We've grappled with the concept of fear as a method of social control, a mechanism that gets us to behave in certain ways," says pvi member Kelli McCluskey.

“What goes on in the bus itself is quite safe,” co-conspirator Steve Bull says with a smile. “The challenge lies in what’s outside the windows.”

**tts tip: Use aliases when meeting new people**

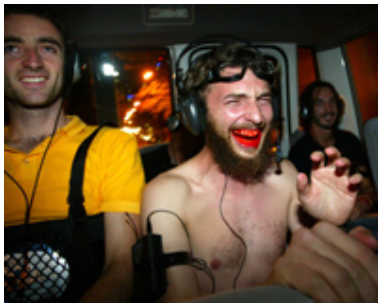
Audience members are inducted into the tts: route 30 tour from a dark Collingwood street, then sucked into a bizarre parallel world that mingles tour-guide kitsch with military recruitment tactics, multimedia hoodoo and a dash of paranoia.

The show’s interactive nature cleverly smudges the line between audience and performers. Parts of the performance induce a trancelike state; the city, the world, undergoes a subtle shift. (Did that really happen, or was it part of the show?)

“We create a nightmare vision of a cityscape, where the citizens are alert, alarmed and in a heightened state of anxiety,” says McCluskey.

Meanwhile, inside the bus, the citizens are also amused. Despite being an unsettling 80 minutes, the tour is also very funny.

“All our work has an element of black humour,” says McCluskey. “The audience faces the dilemma: ‘Should I find this funny, or is it horrific?’”



Tour guide Jackson Castiglione.  
Photo:Shannon Morris

“Working outdoors is unpredictable,” says McCluskey. “It’s the opposite of the ‘white cube’ gallery space. Anything could happen — it’s really exhilarating.”

**tts tip: Our prime minister and other leaders are working hard to keep us all safe**

Terror (and its “ism”) is a brave topic to tackle, and even the pvi artists sometimes feel uncomfortable about where to draw the lines. They’re all too aware that this is dark territory.

The show was originally named *terror(ist) training school: australia*, but was shortened to *tts: australia* when newspaper editors kept snipping out the all-important brackets.

“We didn’t want a 25-year jail sentence for running a terrorist organisation just because we’re using an ironic title,” Bull notes dryly, referring to Australia’s controversial new “counter-terror” laws.

The piece also questions the media’s role in propagating terror. Says McCluskey: “We’re now fed horrific information in a very casual way — these bite-sized chunks of horror in neatly packaged snippets.”

The three years of research backing this multi-layered work are evident. It offers no neat answers, no preaching. Instead, at a very personal level, this twisted sightseeing tour challenges blind acceptance and black-and-white thinking. Audience members find themselves caught up in unsettling “what-if” scenarios. “What are we complicit in?” “How far could we be manipulated?”

Research has been remarkably hands-on — two pvi members joined an Australian army reserves recruitment drive, and their bizarre insights have been woven into the show.

**tts tip: CBD surveillance footage is only kept for 12 days**

The seeds of the tts tour can be traced to previous projects that explored the rise of surveillance culture and the subsequent erosion of privacy.

“Technology keeps shifting the goalposts,” says McCluskey. Over the past decade, surveillance cameras have multiplied, been given the innocuous title of “safety-cams”, and are now being integrated invisibly into building design. Crowds are monitored with facial-recognition and behavioural-analysis software.

Reality TV, webcam girls, consumer profiling, database mining . . . We’re becoming a society hooked on watching and being watched.

“Even we get seduced by the technology in our work,” admits Bull, recalling pvi’s Truster Buster project, which was based around former military lie-detector software that had been repackaged for the domestic market.

“On one level, I was disturbed by that software. But, on another level, I wanted to play with it!” Bull raises the question that’s central to much of pvi’s work:

“Whether the extensive lengths we go to in order to protect ourselves might inadvertently harm us. Do the benefits outweigh what we’re giving away?”

**tts tip: Everything’s going to be fine**

tts: route 30 is at the mid-point of a three-city tour that also covers Sydney and Adelaide (routes 76 and 21, respectively). When the project first rolls into town, there’s an orchestrated scramble to tailor it to its new setting, and coordinate the small army of local volunteers that forms an essential part of the action.

Detailed site-specific research gives each city a distinct character — local artists Cicada provide projections, and Jason Sweeney built the customised Melbourne soundtrack.

The details of the show are classified secret. But those considering a tour on the minibus of terror, be warned — your hosts for the evening tackle this daunting topic with wit, technology and an alarmingly small pair of red speedos.

**TTS: ROUTE 30**

**WHERE** Various locations

**WHEN** Nightly until April 24

**HOW MUCH** \$25

**DETAILS** Tel: 1300 136 166 (seats are limited); [www.pvicollective.com](http://www.pvicollective.com)