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THE ARTS

People power hits Melbourne

ALISON CROGGON finds the highlights of Spoleto and reports that the festival itself has blossomed into a highlight of the general public's year



Things are different this year with Spoleto.

Melbourne's festival of the arts. Under the direction of august founder Gian Carlo Menotti, it often seemed an elitist bunfight in the citadels of the St Kilda Road Arts City but new artistic director John Truscott promised to take Spoleto to the people and anyone going into the city would have to be blind or deaf to miss what's happening.

Flowerboxes along St Kilda Road, street decorations and, at night, free hands, street theatre and lasers playing along the Arts Centre spires all give a sense of event. And, despite Melbourne's unreliable September weather, the people have been out in droves to take a look. Spoleto has come of age. For the first time, it feels like a festival.

Perhaps it's only critics who visibly become haggard over festival time, staring guiltily when someone mentions some brilliant new show, they haven't seen. With Spoleto, this is complicated by its covering three festivals occurring simultaneously: Spoleto, Spoleto Fringe and Piccolo Spoleto. So, folks. I did my best... but this too, too solid flesh stubbornly refuses to be in more than one place at a time.

One of the main functions of arts festivals is to allow innovation and risk taking. The best of the theatre showcased in Spoleto certainly reflected this. Jenny Kemp's extraordinary creation *The Call of the Wild* shows one of our major theatrical artists at the height of her powers.

Call of the Wild derives much of its visual beauty from the surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux. Kemp uses these freefloating images to suggest the complex inner life of a woman bound by her roles as wife and mother but responding nonetheless to the promptings of her sensuality. Kemp builds a complex, constantly shifting array of images ranging from erotica to pornography to parody to disturbingly honest personal insights. The show splinters theatrical narrative, inviting us to perceive

this woman's journey from alienation to self-acceptance and harmony at deeper levels than the intellectual: one simply, experiences *The Call of the Wild*.

Performances by the five-member cast are all assured and committed, keeping essential control of potentially chaotic material. And Elizabeth Drake's innovative music, using the human voice as a major instrument, is an integral part of the experience. This show is intensely female, with none of the stridency of reactive feminism or the arch coyness of femininity. Kemp pulls no punches, yet at no stage compromises the sheer beauty of her images. It's a delicate balance and it has made *Call of the Wild* one of the shows of the year. It's playing at the *The Church Theatre in Hawthorn*.