



## **Spotlight Bunny**

By SQUIDSILO, aka Julie Vulcan and Ashley Scott  
Critical response by Megan Spencer

*A seated, performance inside a stationary car... It's like a drive-in but live.*

Sydney-based artists Julie Vulcan (theatre designer/performer) and Ashley Scott (sound design/performer) spent six weeks in Castlemaine working with local community groups, developing the second Seedpod Amplified for 2014.

This ambitious, multi-site 'visual theatre' performance took place on a sunny Sunday early-Spring afternoon, at the Castlemaine Botanical Gardens. The aim was to insert audience members into what might be considered a "real life film set".

Three simultaneous performances were scheduled across the afternoon, at hourly intervals. Four different cars were parked in three different locations around the Gardens. After meeting at the central Rotunda, audience members were duly sent off to sit in their assigned cars – 'venues' - after a brief introduction from Julie requesting that "if possible", participants "not speak during the performance". Rather they were to quietly observe what might unfold in front of them, outside of their respective car windows, to be open to catch whatever might come their way...

Once seated, various performances played out proximal to each car and contained spectators. Some performers (such as the chess players and tai chi practitioner) were bound to one location; others such as the Castlemaine Highland Pipe Band marched, paraded and performed at multi-locations – as did the 'circus folk', who strode between several, creating a surreal street spectacle.

Julie Vulcan also 'went mobile', cheerfully riding between the three locations at timed-intervals, on a colourful adult-sized trike, fully-decked out with a delivery cart. (She called to mind an 'inverted version of the The Wizard of Oz's Wicked Witch of the West character, joyfully on her bike, spreading cheer.) Julie was not only part of the spectacle; she hand-delivered fairy cakes from her cart through each car window, making sure everyone was in good spirits (and no doubt checking the soundtrack playing through the car speakers was on and working!)

Other performance troupes included a spangly-sparkly family dressed in neon lycra and glitter-streamers; they played jump-rope on the street at two locations, arriving at specific intervals, delivered by two beautifully-restored vintage cars 'chauffered' by members of the local car club.

Three dancers appeared from a distance at the location near the bridge, eventually enveloping the two cars parked next to each other, busting moves around them as if on the set of 'Solid Sold'.

The idea was that real life would intermingle with these 'odd ball' shows, so that the spectators would not be able to discern what was 'real' and what was 'staged'. On occasion this certainly did happen, as you would imagine it might, do in this vast open public space.



Inside each car, spectators also listened to a unique soundtrack played from cassette. Ashley Scott (also a performer at the factory location) composed the music/soundscape with each particular location in mind, aiming to evoke a particular mood for each location.

Each 'session' went for about 30 minutes with a performer eventually breaking 'the fourth wall' (as much as there could be one!), by opening the car door and inviting the participants to return to the "their real lives".

This Seedpod Amplified was an ambitious one with many players – both amateur and professional - and much coordination involved.

The 'surveillance' concept was fantastic, and certainly the objective to present a kind of live 'kino' performance with a captive audience inside a car, was realised. Many audience members had fun and fascinating experiences in the various car 'venues' – some likening it to being a "private detective", staying across more than one session to experience *Spotlight Bunny* from multiple locations and perspectives. Certainly the great game – of trying to guess what was 'real life' and what was 'performance' - was *SB's* great strength. It has a strong universal concept that could be transplanted to any location, to deliver a unique and engaging experience.

As the artists acknowledged during feedback, the undertaking presented many challenges with not all of their goals realised in this instance.

This was due in part to having to coordinate so many 'unknowns', and also as 'interlopers' from elsewhere, unfamiliar with the local town. Some members of the public who, while interested, didn't ultimately participate (eg the local CWA), which made planning difficult. (NB. those who *did* perform on the day did a great job, 100% committed to this piece of visual theatre!)

The role of the soundtrack – and its fidelity - was also at the mercy of 'spontaneity'. The day was warm so car windows were wound down and outside sounds impinged upon those inside. The soundtrack was not particularly 'immersive' either, played from cassette on low volume levels. Attention to sound - and the playback systems - was also acknowledged by Ashley as not ideal; in particular the sound aspect of *Spotlight Bunny* was not as strong as it might have been, rendered almost irrelevant.

Perhaps overall, *Spotlight Bunny* might have been strengthened had the work been a) at a better time and, b) confined to a smaller, and busier locale, whereby more opportunities for 'real life' to intersect with 'performance' might have been maximised? (eg on a Saturday at Castlemaine's smaller, busier Victory Park closer to the town centre, and earlier in the day to catch all the foot traffic and shoppers?) The amount of 'unknowns' might have diminished – there is so *much* space in the Botanical Gardens, a smaller area might have been easier to control. ... The idea being to ensure the location and time of the performance is optimal for a future staging of *Spotlight Bunny* in the same place, or elsewhere.

There are so many ways for *Spotlight Bunny* to have gone, and the artists did very well to settle on solid parameters, and make it as successful as it was, given they needed to work quickly within a finite time frame, with so many variables and in a location that was mostly unfamiliar to them.

The keys to strengthening the work for any future Festival programming, lies in the artists' ability to make informed, confident decisions within each unique location/context, and to attend to the variables that are most likely to impact on the strength of the audience experience (as outlined above).



And possibly, trying out the work out at night with the titular spotlight – that could take things to a whole new level! (Perhaps in this particular instance, it should have been re-named ‘Sunlight Bunny’?!)

Otherwise, *Spotlight Bunny* was an engaging, fun and fascinating work with much potential, which I was very glad to have experienced, especially in the bright brilliance of its outdoor setting.

