One Fabulous Night Only: Entertaining the Territory

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When I came with my family to Darwin in the early 1950s, do-it-yourself entertainment was the order of the day. If you wanted something to happen, you had to create the opportunities yourself.

I am going to focus on leisure and pleasure, how Top End people from the 1950s and 60s pioneered today’s thriving arts and entertainment scene. This was part of building a new Territory community out of the ruins of World War II.

First let’s look at some pictures to set the scene. Can you remember performances of the Darwin Amateur Musical Comedy Society? The Darwin Theatre Group? Do you recognize any of these unidentified performers?

   PH0463/0019, W.E. Pott, Pott Collection, Northern Territory Library.
PH0463/0055, W.E. Pott, Pott Collection,
Northern Territory Library.

3. Darwin Theatre Group. *We can't pay? We won't pay.*
PH0044/0028, Advertiser Collection,
Northern Territory Library.
4. The Catholic Palais Hall at St Mary's, Darwin, 1951.
NTRS 1678, Dos Santos Collection,
Northern Territory Archives.

5. Norm Yeend's Hepcats.
PH0406/0764, Howard Truran Collection,
Northern Territory Library.
First I want to sketch what conditions faced those building lives in the Top End during those years. In the early 1950s, Darwin still lay in the ruins of World War II. The Esplanade was full of grass the height of a man, and littered with debris left by the departed troops. The business heart, Chinatown, had been burnt and looted, razed to ground-level rubble and overgrown with weeds. A single house had been built since 1945,¹ and water and electricity were only available at intervals each day.² ‘Doctors Gully was a junkyard. The old post office was a roofless ruin. The Harbour had not been cleared of the wrecks [of ships] left by the wartime raids,’ over 200 of them. The skyline ‘was dominated by the vandalized bulk of [Vesteys] meatworks’.³

Our family came to Darwin in 1954. My father, Harry Giese, had been appointed Director of Welfare in the Northern Territory Administration, and became, with my mother Nancy, one of the post-War pioneers who were to build up the Territory into what it is today. Practically every Darwin child, including me and my brother Richard, went to the Darwin Higher Primary School, or the Roman Catholic Convent.
It wasn’t until 1963 when Darwin High, the town’s first secondary school, was opened on Bullocky Point. In 1965, I was part of its first fifth year matriculation class. The handsome block on one of the best sites in Darwin was designed to be fully air-conditioned, but money ran out, and the original staff and students moved into what was in effect a sealed box, enduring the oppressive conditions for eighteen months. ‘Infuriated parents convinced the Commonwealth [government] to put in air-conditioning,’ remembers my mother, Nancy Giese, who led them.4

It was taking on the Presidency of the Parents and Citizens’ Association at Darwin High School that led to her lifelong involvement in Territory education and the arts. She was one of the pioneers of tertiary education, involved with the Darwin Community College, the DCC, and the Darwin Institute of Technology, and was elected Chancellor of the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University) ten times, from 1993 to 2004.
Here she is presenting degrees and diplomas at one of the dozens of Northern Territory University graduation ceremonies she attended as Chancellor.


She was also one of the mothers pressed into service to make costumes for school performances. This is the Darwin Primary School’s mid-1950s production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, to Tchaichovsky's music.

At secondary level, some of these school productions became quite ambitious. In the 1960s, the Darwin High School put on productions of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* and *The Mikado*.


**DIY entertainment**

What were some of the other roll-your-own entertainments and leisure activities of those years? There were all-weekend parties in Parap Camp; celebrations at the Catholic Palais; cocktail parties at Government House, at military headquarters and on visiting Naval ships; and a Debutante Ball. There were continual celebrations of life passages. Lilyan Chan, wife of businessman and mid-60s Mayor of Darwin, Harry Chan, remembers that ‘all the Italians and Greeks used to invite us to their babies’ christenings, twenty-first birthdays and weddings’. The Chans had dinner with Queen Elizabeth at Government House, during which they were asked by Her Majesty ‘where our people came from. She was surprised we were Australians’. The strong Chinese community of course had their own round of festivals and celebrations.
Then there were the productions of the Darwin Amateur Musical Comedy Society, like *New Moon* and *The Pirates of Penzance*, with 'costumes, sets and piano accompaniment…no Broadway show ever had more appreciative and enthusiastic audiences.' The subsidised Darwin Theatre Group and the Adult Education Theatre Group put on 'some very good plays'. Art-of-speech teacher Maureen Brown-Beresford directed productions such as *The Witches of Salem*. 
The Star Theatre became a focus of community life. Tom Harris was assisted by his wife, Heather, whose piano had accompanied silent films throughout the 1930s. At the Star, government officials, ‘the silvertails’ sat high and mighty at the back, Aboriginal people at the front on wooden benches, while everyone else sorted themselves out in between.

Beyond what people did for themselves, some notable performers visited. Four opera singers came up from New South Wales to perform for a single night. One of them subsequently married a local girl. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust sent up a ‘never-to-be-forgotten’ production of the hit play of the day, Ray Lawler’s *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.
Building community

13. Panorama of Darwin taken from the water tower behind the Victoria Hotel, looking towards Frances Bay, 1957. Buildings include Cashmans, Stewart and Lloyds (centre), the Melville Pre-School, Abbot House (centre right) and the Bank of New South Wales (front right).
PH0030/0008, Don Mutter Collection, Northern Territory Library.

14. Hotel Darwin, the Esplanade, 1950s.
PH0024/0009, Northern Territory Souvenir Collection, Northern Territory Library.

Apart from talking to people and trawling through the excellent pictures and documents in the collections of the Northern Territory Library and the Northern
Territory Archives, how do we find out how everyone entertained themselves during those years? *The Northern Territory News* is a mirror of life in the Top End. Under Editor Jim Bowditch it offered long, detailed, well-argued pieces on all the issues of the day, and made room for lively discussion on the letters page (*Readers Write*). In 1961, it published the first of its annual supplements on the Darwin Show, held at the Winnellie Showgrounds and attended that year by 25,000 people. An article traced the beginnings of the Show to 1951, to an exhibition where farmers and market gardeners could display their produce. From 1954, government departments joined in to showcase their work. The Show also offered heavy-duty commercial displays; competitions for animals, their trainers and riders, and for artists, cooks, photographers and craftsmen; plus displays of caber-tossing, country dancing and fireworks. Down Sideshow Alley, according to the ads, you could find Sharmans’ boxing troupe and shows including Zarak the Human Dart Board (‘$1000 if you can prove his performance is not GENUINE’).
One of my father Harry Giese’s first tasks as Director of Welfare was to try to attract to the Top End ‘people…who would see a future for themselves and their children in this community’, adventurous Australians from all over the country. He and Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck, with their family backgrounds among the little farming communities of south-west Western Australia, with Administrators such as Clarrie Wise and J.C. Archer ‘had a vision of what the Territory could do, and the role which a trained and intelligent, keen Public Service could play’. They had to obtain sufficient money, materials and manpower to build up Darwin and the little settlements scattered along the Stuart Highway, built during the War.
Funds for new undertakings were not popular with the fiscally conservative Menzies federal government, which was focused on the balance of payments, curbing inflation, and keeping unemployment low. Minister Hasluck had to argue strongly in Cabinet for Territory programs, against a perception that spending more money on Territory welfare, and especially Aboriginal welfare, would not win votes. ‘When the carve-up of the Budget came, every other Minister had more constituents than Hasluck,’ observed [Assistant Administrator] Reg Marsh. ‘He only got the crumbs from the Budget table.’

Local government simply didn’t exist. There were few functioning community groups in the Territory’s towns. The best that people had managed to this point was local Progress Associations. The Country Women’s Association was one of the few groups that in the early 1950s had branches throughout the Territory, at Tennant Creek, Katherine and Alice Springs, as well as in Darwin. Organizations needed proper buildings, such as halls that could be a ‘gathering point’ for the community, where they ‘could come together and talk about the community problems, and where they could have meetings and…the beginnings of a youth centre’. Without government assistance, associations including those for leisure would never have got started. Grants, ‘that initial boost’, were given to bowling and tennis and sailing clubs, so they could set up club-houses, for headquarters, meetings and storing equipment. Once they could get a bar to sell drink at a profit, ‘they came off the list of those who would receive any assistance,’ said Giese. The Welfare Branch provided loans of up to 300,000 pounds, available to organisations for 60 years at 1 per cent interest. They were the only such programs in Australia.
Harry Giese saw it as ‘a challenge, but it was an effervescent sort of community, where you had the feeling that people were beginning to see their role as citizens in a rapidly evolving community.’ His view was that ‘these services would grow and have some life in them for as long as they were operated and managed by the community itself’.

Two organizations who built themselves up through their own hard work were the Darwin Chung Wah Society (here are Sidney Chin and William Fong selling their famous sartees at the Darwin Show) and the Darwin Golf Club (who manned a bar there). Both groups are still thriving today.

19. Darwin Golf Club members manning their bar at the Darwin Show.
PH0480/0003, Jean Page Collection,
Northern Territory Library.

20. Larry Delahunty from Charters Towers ran a boxing troupe which travelled all over north Queensland and the Territory, including to the Darwin Show.
PH0569/0036, Frank Young Collection,
Northern Territory Library.

To organize initiatives such as the Darwin Show and the activities of other leisure associations, you needed dedicated volunteers, people prepared to put in thousands of hours of unpaid work. Nan Giese was one of these. In education and the arts, she was a driving force well beyond the time my brother and I left home to go to university. ‘I joined many other concerned people to work for the development of education services, essential if the Northern Territory was ever to progress beyond outpost of Empire status,’ she said.
Of her work for Territory schools, Nan says: ‘I learnt a lot in that exercise—to marshal community support, to cultivate the decision makers, to keep myself fully informed at all times, to work through a committee so that you didn’t seem too pushy if you came up with good ideas. If you are passionate and obsessive about what you are hoping to achieve, prepared to work hard, and never, never give up, despite all the setbacks, you will succeed in the end.’

In the 1960s, Top End tertiary education consisted of the Adult Education Centre headed by the redoubtable Harold Garner. In the second half of the decade, when there was a huge increase in Darwin’s population, enrolments at the Adult Education Centre almost doubled, from 1,860 in 1964 to 3,499 in 1967. Garner looked back on his ‘lively and challenging’ period leading Territory Adult Education as ‘a gift; there was no TV, there was no heavy-handed direction from anybody.’ His work exemplified a can-do philosophy of education in line with Territory needs: access and ‘attainable goals for everybody’.

The Darwin Community College, the DCC, was the prototype community college in Australia. It offered both TAFE and Further Education courses. From 1972, buildings, including labs and trade workshops, art studios, classrooms, a library, a theatre and student accommodation, started to go up. ‘The concept of a comprehensive institution was difficult to sell in Australian education circles,’ said Nan Giese. They ‘clearly identified University, Advanced Education and TAFE as the three tiers of tertiary education and were highly suspicious of new-fangled American ideas.’ By 1974, 148 different courses were being offered in Darwin and at the DCC’s Alice Springs annex, and there were over 4000 students.

**Music and visual arts**

Arts became an important part of the DCC’s, its successor the Institute of Technology’s, then, from 1989, the Northern Territory University’s work. Two initiatives in particular have had long-term effects in the Top End community and beyond: music and the visual arts. NTU’s Arts Acquisition committee was appointed in 1981, with a budget of $5000 a year, boosted in 1983 by a $10,000 grant from the Australia Council. Works were acquired from local, visiting and other contemporary Australian artists, and displayed on campus to the public. In the late 1980s, display and storage space was provided in the new Administration block, and in 1989 the University gallery set up. The Department of Visual Arts and the School of Fine Art administered it, displaying 14 exhibitions a year. Two NTU graduates started the NT Crafts Council, now Territory Craft.

Print-maker Leon Stainer initially set up workshops in Aboriginal communities to demonstrate techniques to talented local artists, and work with them. Northern Editions introduced techniques such as etching, linocuts, lithography and silkscreen printing to already famous and emerging artists in communities throughout the Territory, Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia. During the 1990s, prints by participating artists were taken on tour to Territory and Western Australian communities. Indigenous artists from Utopia in Central
Australia to Arnhem Land were involved. Through collecting a copy of every print created under the program, Northern Editions’ unique and valuable print collection now includes work by some of the top names in indigenous art, including John Bulun Bulun, Banduk Marika, Queenie McKenzie and Rover Thomas. It has become one of the most significant publishers and collectors of Aboriginal prints in the world. Such work has empowered indigenous people, offering them a means of communicating their culture, and leading to economic stability and social cohesion.

Music was part of the teaching program as early as the Community College days. ‘Musicians are passionate about what they do, and we were lucky to be able to make good appointments, particularly in the Institute of Technology times, with people like Martin Jarvis and Adrian Walter,’ said Nan Giese. The early musical activities of the DCC led to the setting up of the Darwin Symphony Orchestra which plays all round the Territory, often in spectacular natural settings. Concerts have been successfully presented in Kakadu, Katherine Gorge, Jabiru and Alyangula. Another initiative is the International Guitar Festival, which brings top players from all over the world to Darwin.

‘Everyone came’

In the early post-War years in Darwin, what people newly arrived from the South missed most about their lives was regular live entertainment such as orchestral music or professional theatre.

Like other Top End community organizations, the Arts Council of the Northern Territory, a government umbrella and funding body, was formed from a public meeting. It was called in 1968, with the Chief Justice as President. When he returned South in 1972, Nan Giese was elected in his place and held the position until 1983. The Arts Council was affiliated with the federal Council, in operation since the 1930s. In 1968, the first presentation was Acker Bilk and his Premier Jazz Band, on the boxing ring of the Police Boys’ Club. He played his hit tune, *Stranger on the Shore*.

The Territory body gave opportunities to local artists, but it also aimed high. Why shouldn’t international artists include the Territory in their Australian visits? After all, it wasn’t every day a violinist could play in Alice Springs, or a dancer perform in the Darwin Botanical Gardens on a frangipani-scented tropical night. Acker Bilk was followed by the English Chamber Group and the Bach Festival Ensemble, which offered a program from Mozart to Stravinsky, on strings and Darwin’s only grand piano, Pfitzner’s Music House Bechstein Grand.

The Arts Council aimed to reach a good proportion of 100,000 Territorians scattered across 500,000 square miles. But it operated with one car, one telephone and one office. Nan Giese gained a licence to drive the small bus that met visiting performers at the airport. One-man shows toured the Territory in little planes, performing in schools, halls and churches, in Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Nhulunbuy. Said Nan: ‘Everyone came. People were hungry
for it. In isolated and remote areas, they had no access other than through radio to this sort of thing.\textsuperscript{20}

She remembers 'all sorts of exotic people' performing. The Polish Chamber Orchestra visited. The Arts Council ferried some 20 members of the Baranggay Dance Company from the Philippines, with costumes and musical instruments, in a chartered plane all over the Territory.

\textbf{21. The King's Singers inscribed this picture of themselves:}

‘For Nan, with many thanks for making our 2 Darwin visits so enjoyable’.

They performed after Cyclone Tracy at Darwin High School, ‘to cheer people up’.  

Courtesy Giese family.

Right after Cyclone Tracy, the King’s Singers came in ‘to cheer people up’, from a makeshift stage at Nightcliff High School. In October 1971, during the ‘build-up’, the sweltering time before the Monsoon, Dame Margot Fonteyn and the Australian Ballet arrived for ‘ONE FABULOUS NIGHT ONLY’. Onstage at the Gardens Amphitheatre, a dancer failed to grasp her partner’s sweaty hand, and fell heavily to the concrete stage. Bleeding from her lip, she returned to the stage to acknowledge the applause of an audience of 3500. Then Nan rushed her to the hospital. The dancer’s partner refused to speak for three days.
Branches of the Arts Council were formed in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, then Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Groote Eylandt, all run by volunteer committees. Compared with other states such as Queensland, with a staff of fourteen, the Territory ran a lean operation. The only paid worker in the whole organization was the part-time secretary. A range of performers visited the main centres, and also Aboriginal communities including Warrabri, Bamyili, Yuendumu, Yirrkala, Milingimbi and Bathurst Island—all on a touring grant of $4000.

For the first time, Territorians were able to enjoy international music ensembles, theatre and ballet companies: 'comedy, drama, music, puppetry, dance, films, circus', and cultural exchanges with countries including India, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. Musica Viva as well as the federal Arts Council ‘adopted’ the Territory. The federal Council subsidized experienced directors to work with local groups.

Schools featured in the tours. Travelling groups entered enthusiastically into the spirit of what could be quite gruelling itineraries. In February-March 1976, the Tie Die theatre-in-education company performed ‘participation plays’ for primary, secondary and pre-school students, and for adult audiences at hotels and clubs, in five Territory centres, over a month and a half. Its themes were ambitious: a play about the transportation of characters from industrial England to the Australian goldfields, and the run-up to the Eureka Stockade; a ‘fun show’ about a young lad growing up, The Legend of Bung Buidoon; and a pre-school event incorporating colour recognition and painting. ‘We received many expressions of interest and offers of help both within and outside schools,’ wrote Ken Conway in his report. Conway, Executive Officer of Darwin community arts initiative Brown's
Mart, travelled to Tennant Creek and Alice Springs with the Tie Dies, and also to Gove and Groote Eylandt, Batchelor, Adelaide River and Katherine. On Groote, mining company Gemco provided accommodation and meals, while airlines TAA, MMA and Ansett subsidized airfares.

The Angurugu School headmaster reported afterwards that he appreciated the way the colour recognition play was extended by on-the-spot improvisations, to attune it to his Aboriginal students. The head of Karguru School, Tennant Creek, said that ‘the whole team was totally involved with the children, who enjoyed the experience to the full. The workshops were also an enriching experience.’ The Principal of the School of the Air’s response, when the team came into their studio to perform, was ‘Tremendous! Made so by the thorough preparation by Ken Conway beforehand. Checked microphones, switches, space, distributed copies of script etc.…’ On another occasion, Nan Giese remembers a small boy coming up to her and asking, in wonder: ‘Is that what opera is?’

In 1978, special events were organized to mark the transfer of power from the Commonwealth to the new Northern Territory government. The Australian Opera gave a concert. The Queensland Theatre Company visited, and there was an Italian Arts Festival. That year a second full-time paid Arts Council officer, to handle schools and tours, was appointed to cope with the 79 per cent increase in school audiences. In its Annual Report, the Council noted that transport and freight costs continued to be the largest component in its touring budget. It traded in its bus for a larger vehicle more suited to long-distance touring.

During that self-government year, Maori singers and dancers were among those ‘received with great enthusiasm by school and adult audiences alike’, as were the jazz group Galapagos Duck, who stopped off for one night for a sell-out Darwin performance, en route to Europe. Robyn Archer performed and ran composition workshops. Exhibitions of jewellery and Rubens’ prints toured, and the Pipi Storm Children’s Circus provided opportunities for audiences to join in with music, mime, drama and dance. ‘More interest was generated in arts activities among children by this innovative creative and dedicated team than by any other single programme the Council has sponsored,’ noted the Annual Report.

Nan Giese also served as Deputy President of the Arts Council of Australia, and on its Music Board, travelling to Sydney every fortnight for three years. The Board handed out grants to applicants like composer Peter Sculthorpe, and Giese took the opportunity to recruit performers for the Territory. There was a sense of the north becoming part of building a national arts community, audiences and performers, and helping make decisions about the way the arts developed Australia-wide.
‘Didgeridoo and singing sticks optional’

23. Eisteddfod competitors preparing to go onstage at the Gardens Amphitheatre.
PH0351/0014, Harry Giese Collection, Northern Territory Library.

After the Watts-Gallacher Inquiry into the needs of indigenous people for education was presented in March 1964, more indigenous pre-schools and post-primary schools were built. The Report of the Inquiry emphasised the importance of incorporating Aboriginal dance, legend, art, craft and music into curricula, by including Aboriginal elders and adapting teaching methods to acknowledge cultural differences. In 1959, noting a renewed interest by Aboriginal parents in transmitting their culture, Harry Giese had commented that ‘if it is considered that Aboriginal art and dance and music and craft are important and that these can enrich our cultural heritage, then we should be considering...a school at which both Aboriginals and other persons could study these activities. What seems already to be clear is that the introduction of older Aboriginals as teachers in the schools has given a status to and a new pride in Aboriginal traditional life and a desire for much closer involvement in what is going on in schools.’

In 1967, Kormilda College, to which bright indigenous students from all over the Territory could come as a transition from primary to high school, was opened. It was intended that they would then move into mainstream high schools. Begun with just 24 students, by 1972, 227, representing 40 centres and many groups and languages were furthering their education. Vocational courses in trades such as mechanics and metalwork, in business methods and office procedure, in agriculture and pottery, and in cooking, hairdressing, sewing and home nursing were also set up. Aboriginal instructors taught traditional song and dance, art and crafts.
In 1957, the North Australian Eisteddfod Council was set up—and again Nan Giese served on the committee. The Eisteddfod involved performers from across the community, in competitions in everything from lieder to mime. A unique component was the participation of hundreds of Aboriginal competitors in dance, campfire singing (‘didgeridoo and singing sticks optional’), choirs, vocal duets and verse speaking. The little halls reverberated to stamping feet and singing sticks as groups from Bathurst Island, Daly River or Beswick Creek danced. Walpamur Paints offered a prize for ‘two songs of own choice in native dialect’. Some Aboriginal school choirs performed in indigenous languages. In 1962, Yirrkala Methodist Mission choir sang *Jinaga Bala Tarbal*, a version of *Away in a Manger*. By 1961 indigenous choirs outnumbered those of the Darwin schools. In 1969, 500 of the 800 competitors were Aboriginal, and more than 1000 people packed the Gardens Amphitheatre to see the finals of the traditional music and dance competitions.

The Eisteddfod involved a wide range of Top Enders. Some performers went on to make careers. Film star David Gulpilil first competed as a fourteen-year-old, beating off all competition from senior dancers. Marilynne Pasapaley, daughter of the pearling dynasty, went on to act on television. Businesses and local dignitaries offered cash prizes, were sponsors (‘additional general donations from the ABC, *The NT News*, A.E. Jolly, Martin’s Newsagency, Jeanette Frock Salon, C.J. Cashman and Co. and His Worship the Mayor’) and took out display ads in the program. In 1962, Darwin High School Headmaster T.A. Kissel announced that ‘young people now make up eighty per cent of the entries. This is good for it augurs well for the future and reflects the fact that this is a young and virile community.’
In April 1963, Harry Giese suggested that a representative of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust visit Darwin to view the performances of Aboriginal dancers and singers in that year’s Eisteddfod. Dynamic Trust Executive Director Stefan Haag was so impressed by their artistry and stagecraft that he set up two-week seasons for later that year in both Sydney and Melbourne. Dancers from Bathurst Island and Yirrkala were chosen to participate. Singers from Daly River included two women, who traditionally play important roles in chanting the song-cycles relating the legends of the Brinkin and Malak Malak people.\(^{32}\)

25. Dancers from Yirrkala taking part in a ceremony in front of a grandstand erected for a Royal visit. PH0351/0028, Harry Giese Collection, Northern Territory Library.

This was the beginning of the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation. Logistically, its work presented many challenges. A dance sequence showing the spearing and killing of a kangaroo required, for instance, that a spear be broken by a wounded ‘animal’.\(^{33}\) The total of 36 rehearsals and performances required 70 specially-made spears. Before the dancers set out, excursions were made to acquire special possum fur used in arm and head decorations. Ochres were gathered for body-painting.

The opening night in Melbourne in November 1963 was a huge success. Wrote Geoffrey Hutton in *The Age*: ‘This is not an Anthropologist’s curiosity, or a lecture-demonstration. It is live theatre and a memorable experience, which I recommend without reservation.’ Sydney audiences were bigger than Melbourne’s, near-capacity. Wrote *The Bulletin*: ‘Most of us have great goodwill towards aborigines and their culture, without having more than a superficial knowledge of their art…This remarkable stage show is not to be missed.’\(^{34}\)
The Aboriginal Theatre Foundation was to develop in many different ways over the following years. Stefan Haag went on to take a group of performers to Japan. Through the 1970s, as the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, dancers from Bamyili, Yirrkala and other areas toured to, and performed at festivals in places as diverse as Fiji, Nigeria and Mexico City.

**Dogs, traffic and Jake the Peg**

![Image](image_url)

Back in Darwin, performances in makeshift spaces rather than purpose-built halls continued. Often it was so hot onstage that violinists broke their strings. Dogs ran among the players. At Nightcliff High School, up to 800 chairs had to be carried in for every performance, then cleared away afterwards. And of course there had been that fall at the Ballet.

From the late 1960s, the Mitchell Street Town Hall had become a major venue. Built of fibro cement with banks of glass and metal louvres, it ‘invited in the noise of the continuous stream of street traffic…creaking ceiling fans and banks of moveable metal seats that when vacated folded with a loud bang’. During the Wet season, rain drumming heavily on the metal roof drowned out whatever was happening onstage.

Lobbying began, not only from Darwin, but from the Arts Council nationally, for a venue with the necessary facilities for performances. Meanwhile the Darwin Theatre Group, with government assistance, converted the historic sandstone landmark, Brown’s Mart, into a little theatre, and it later became a venue for community and visual arts. A spirited campaign led by Lyn and Peter Serventy
helped to preserve the building and the land on which it stands into a recognized heritage site.38

‘With a small government grant and an enormous amount of self-help and determination’, the Darwin Amateur Musical Comedy Society ‘surprised everyone by producing the Cavenagh Theatre, boasting an auditorium, proscenium arch stage and dressing rooms, one block back from Daly Street’.39

In 1965, the Darwin City Council built the Gardens Amphitheatre in the Botanical Gardens, a concrete stage and two dressing rooms, useable only in the Dry season. Up to 15,000 people could sit on the gently sloping lawns—provided it didn’t rain. The Amphitheatre hosted performers including the Ron Burrows Quintet and Rolf Harris, who one night fell off the stage during an over-enthusiastic rendering of Jake the Peg.

In November 1973, a public meeting was called to begin the work of building a permanent performing arts centre. Nan Giese was elected to chair the steering committee, and the designers of the Adelaide Festival Centre were commissioned to undertake a feasibility study. They recommended that it should be built next to Darwin High School. Then came Cyclone Tracy. Afterwards, performers ‘soldiered on’ in churches and schools, the badly-damaged Gardens Amphitheatre, ovals—anywhere the artists were prepared to perform.

It was well into the reconstruction of the city before the idea surfaced again. In October 1975, Mayor Ella Stack proposed that $200,000 left over from the Tracy Relief Trust Fund be used to attract a 4 to 1 subsidy for a cultural complex. By 1978, the newly-elected Northern Territory government ‘sensitive to the needs and desires of its electorate, acknowledged the lack of cultural facilities and the
importance of quality of life factors in creating the sort of society people wanted.\textsuperscript{40}

It took a proposal from a developer to get started on a building, a 5-star hotel incorporating a conference centre and shopping arcade, as well as a large and beautiful performing arts venue. The Darwin Performing Arts Centre on the Esplanade finally opened in the mid-80s. Over a thousand people can sit in the stalls, with another 2-300 upstairs. The stage can take a complete orchestra, which it does today with Darwin’s own Symphony Orchestra. There are excellent sight-lines from every comfortable seat, and first class backstage and technical facilities.

\textbf{With our neighbours}

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In 1964, Ken Waters, the Member for Arnhem in the Legislative Council, introduced a Bill to set up a Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory. Again, there was a grand plan. Museums and art galleries were to be established, acquired or received for maintenance, control and management. Waters became the Board’s first Chair, and Nan Giese served on the committee. A year later, its Annual Report confessed, with refreshing candour: ‘In its first year of existence, the Board can boast of no achievements whatsoever in respect of recordable events.’

It was offered many helpful suggestions about possible sites. Then the right person arrived to push the cause. One-man powerhouse Dr Colin Jack-Hinton, the first Director, helped refurbish the old Town Hall and a flurry of collecting began. Before the paint was dry, there were exhibitions of pottery made by
Aboriginal people at Bagot and Bathurst Island, a collection of Police Inspector Folsche’s nineteenth-century photographs, and a display of French lithographs. By August 1973 the restored building stood in a lush tropical garden behind a white picket fence.

But this museum was only a shell. It needed far more display, storage and office space. Then even what was there was swept away. The morning after Cyclone Tracy, the staff salvaged what they could of the collections. For the next six years the Museum operated out of an insurance company building. It took until 1977 to settle on a new site at Bullocky Point, just down from Darwin High School.

Jack-Hinton saw it as ‘the state museum and art gallery for the Northern Territory. But it wasn’t the Northern Territory in isolation, it was the Northern Territory with its boundaries in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific.’ He had a vision for collections covering the archaeology of the region, and his own specialist area of maritime history. Links were built with museums and art galleries in Asia and the Pacific, ‘our neighbours’. He aimed for continuing representation of Australian art, and a core collection of fine arts inspired by the Territory. He set up an annual artists’ camp and invited major Australian artists to the Top End. They donated some of what they produced to the Museum, pictures which Jack-Hinton credited with ‘creating Kakadu’ around Australia and overseas. Using George Chaloupka’s ground-breaking photographic documentation of the vast ancient body of Arnhem Land rock art, the Museum displayed the world’s longest-continuing art tradition.

It took time for a suitable place to display these treasures to be built. It wasn’t until after self-government that, in 1981, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, a spacious waterside complex flooded with light, was opened by Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowan.
30. Aerial view of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, in the centre, with Darwin High School behind it. PH0056/0005, Northern Territory Museum Collection, Northern Territory Library.

There is now a thriving entertainment scene in Darwin, with musicians, dancers and players from all over the world performing regularly at the Entertainment Centre and many other venues all over the city. All tastes are catered for and extravaganzas like the huge rock concerts with imported bands, such as Elton John’s appearances this year, are worlds away from those early pioneering days. Marrara Stadium can seat 5000 and cater for audiences of 17,000, in much more comfortable conditions than the schools, church halls and paddocks that were regular venues in the early days. The Darwin Chorale and the Darwin Symphony Orchestra go from strength to strength, Aboriginal culture flourishes, and at the Entertainment Centre you can see comedians, cover bands, indigenous music, Gershwin and Irish dance. I hope you’re keeping your posters, programs and pictures so that in 50 years time, another audience can come into the Library and find out about entertaining the Territory today.

Notes

1 This paper draws on and uses extracts from a longer piece of work prepared for a 2007 Northern Territory History Grant, given by the Northern Territory Archives Service, A better place to live. This is an overview of building community and culture in the Top End from the 1950s until self-government, and the initiatives in education and health that underpinned this. I explore in it what it was like for those living through those pioneer years of post-War recovery, from the perspective of the actors themselves. It will be available as a book in 2009.
2 See ‘The towns and trials of Tam, The Star, 23 April 1981
4 Nancy Giese, ‘Towards a Northern Territory University’, the Lampe Oration, NT Council of Educational Administration, November 1991, p. 3
6 Nancy Giese, Address to the Institute of Secretaries, 1994, author’s possession
10 Reg Marsh, interview with Francis Good, NTRS226, TS 1028, 3 September 2001, Northern Territory Archives Service, Tape 1, p. 8
11 See discussion, Harry Giese, Tape 29, Sides A and B
12 Harry Giese, Tape 29, Side A
14 Nancy Giese, Opening Address, Women’s Forum on *Sex Stereotyping and its Effects on Women’s Health and Career Aspirations*, undated [late 1990s], Northern Territory University
16 Ibid., pp. 21, 23-24, 41
17 Ibid., p. 18
18 Nancy Giese, Address to the Institute of Secretaries, 1994, pp. 13-14
19 Ibid.
20 Nancy Giese, interview with Diana Giese, December 2007, Darwin, author’s possession; see also Arts Council of Australia *Annual Reports*, Northern Territory Archives Service and *The Star*, 6 October 1978
22 Nancy Giese, ‘Arts Development…’
23 Arts Council of Australia, Northern Territory Branch, NTRS 229/P1, Box 3, correspondence, itineraries, reports and performance reports, Northern Territory Archives Service. The Northern Territory Library and the Northern Territory Archives both have rich collections of posters relating to both local and touring performances. A selection were exhibited at the library as part of “One Fabulous Night Only” presentation.
26 Ibid., p. 28
30 *The Northern Territory News*, 9 July 1969, p. 16
33 Ibid., pp. 20-21
34 Ibid., p. 28
35 Harry Giese, ‘Planning a Program…’, p. 12
36 Presidents’ Reports, The Aboriginal Theatre Foundation, 1969-75
37 Nancy Giese, ‘Arts Development…’
38 See [www.brownsmart.com.au](http://www.brownsmart.com.au) for an interesting history of Brown’s Mart Community Arts
39 Nancy Giese, Address to the Institute of Secretaries
40 Ibid.