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ARTS

They jog while we miss the bus

SKYHAMMER

The Performance Space, March 18
Reviewed by JILL SYKES

Skyhammer is one of those frustrating events where the ingredients turn out to be more interesting than the performance itself. It was originally known as *Triple Alice* after the Alice Springs gathering last year in which people from a wide range of artistic disciplines shared their experiences of working in the region.

Photographic, written, drawn, painted and recorded impressions from these “informal laboratories” are attractively presented in the two downstairs galleries at the Performance Space — so very well presented

that I can't help lamenting a couple of basic spelling errors, including the unfortunate “Aboriginies”. And is there a reason for ignoring Uluru as the name of what used to be called Ayers Rock?

Moving on from the gallery display for which nine people are credited — one of them from the writers' representation of three major Sydney and Melbourne universities at the 1999 gathering — the audience enters the atmospherically low-lit performing area with an installation of tiny, scattered ridges of sand and four slightly off-centre vertical planks against the walls.

The five performers pass through the space at a jog, travelling up the passage and out the front door, which is then

closed and allowed to become part of the audience's view of the landscape, as is the courtyard. So everything that is observed as “desert” life in the auditorium is set in a context of an old urban Sydney building.

Trouble is that very little appears to happen in the desert.

As someone passionate about deserts and the astonishing life going on under an apparently “dead” exterior, I had anticipated director Tess de Quincey's butoh-based technique to dig beneath the surface of the performers' experience and reveal some insights. A butoh performance can be at its most intense when everyone is still.

Instead we had enough jogging to test the stamina of a marathon runner, accompanied by one-

word commentaries of the passing scenery — emu, trees, home-stead etc — to wonder if they represented a bunch of tourists. When they did slow down, there was a sense of heat and isolation, but it was superficial in comparison to previous productions by de Quincey.

Even the most experienced and sensitive performer, Peter Fraser, was struggling against the tide of blandness as a loner going mad and then an old-timer, bottom lip stuck out to house a cigarette as he talked about intrusions of a bus called Priscilla and other matters.

So much in sound, image and performer preparation has gone into *Skyhammer* that the resonance of the input deserved to be stronger.