

*High Rise* 'giant ladder' set of the outdoor performance, Carlton housing estate.

OPPOSITE: *High Rise* 'giant boat' set of the outdoor performance.

The *High Rise* show was preceded by months of increasing engagement with individuals and communities at Carlton. There were also three lead-up public productions:

**Highlight on the High Rise**, April 18, to launch Housing Week 2001. The children performed with puppets made from cardboard, accompanied by a soundtrack created from voices, songs and interviews with projections of photographs taken by residents. The presentation went to three estates: Carlton, Flemington and Kensington.

**From My Window**, July 24, at the Carlton South Primary School for parents and children. Based around the use of an inflatable shadow booth, the show included shadow puppets, cardboard buildings and music.

**Melbourne Fringe Festival Parade**, September 23, with a large inflatable building as part of the Fringe Parade and a band of Turkish musicians from the Carlton flats playing behind the float. It won the Parade's Best Float Award.



Award-winning *High Rise* float, Fringe Festival parade, 2001.



**With the inclusion of the Polyglot Puppet Group into the school curriculum, an improvement in English language has been perceived across the school...the opportunities... provided have enhanced and expanded the purpose of language for all students and has stimulated knowledge and understanding. The principal joined the Board of Polyglot to ensure an ongoing relationship at the school and to provide formal links between the company and the education sector .**

**Annual Report of the Carlton South Primary School** to the Department of Education.



Director Sue Giles' diary of the project, excerpted below, provides a fascinating insight into the hands-on travails and triumphs which occur on the ground when working in the community.

**January 2001**

*Meetings with Terry Soumilas at the Tenants Union of Victoria and Ernie Sims, a resident who runs the popular Kids Clubs on the Estate. I also hung around with the kids at the clubs and talked. Often surrounded by a mob of cheeky Muslim kids who said they'd be in my play if I became a Muslim too! They were very disparaging of me when I couldn't say I had a religion. Quite pitying.*

**March 26th**

*Yesterday went to the Fijian Service to hear the choir on Sunday – lovely voices, very warm group. Every time I go to the flats and meet up with some cheeky kids who want to persuade me to become a Muslim or shy girls who summon enough courage to speak Vietnamese into musical director, Jennie Swain's tape recorder, or talk with a guy with a totally bent set of philosophies who is so full of personality and vigour – I come away refreshed.*

**April 9th**

*About to have a first full day of **Highlight On The High Rise** and that will be heaven. The puppets the kids are making will take a little more work but that's OK. First full workshop was today – big turn out. More cheeky kids. I think I have been planning too many things in my head. Doesn't work. High Rise is a very organic process and will continue to be so. We don't have that many definites yet and certain things will remain in flux ... kid numbers, workshop sites, rehearsal times, personnel involved. Can't over-plan. What's happening is very good for the process in the long run. Meanwhile, Jennie Swain has created some great stuff with the sound track and the slides are going to look amazing.*



June 12th

Met with John Norman, stage name **Johnny Shakespeare**, an old actor living at the flats. Had a wonderful hour with him. Ranged over topics such as his history as an actor, the story of how he cut his leg off in 1972 with a chainsaw (he suffers from schizophrenia, thought God had commanded him to do it in order to save the world). He recited a Banjo Patterson poem which was great. Going to be very interesting working with him...how to do it...?

August 15th

Fringe Festival Parade construction, many handed monster, crawling tube for lift shaft. Paper shadow tunnel. Backdrops of environments. Small puppet window stages – garden with Jack puppet with voice over. John Norman spouting poetry. Pigeons flying and pecking and sitting while you walk through because they're so tame. Big banners from corridor walls on Y side of Mercedes building. Long stretch of fabric/plastic from tops of buildings. One child calling to his/her mum at the 12th floor, **hey mum, can you chuck us down my thing?**

July 31st

I met Tamat, mother of school student Saddam. Indomitable woman with an amazing story to tell of her escape from war in Somalia. She lost her husband to the war, was separated from her brothers and her two children and walked for three months, heavily pregnant with Saddam, with no food or water. She had the baby all alone, in a bush, and was found by the Red Cross digging a hole to bury the placenta. She was eventually reunited with her two children and now lives in Melbourne, no family, one blind son and two other children...

Also, a very funny session with Erica's boys. Every time someone farted the whole mob would scatter, giggling and groaning, to the far walls. This happened at least six times. Boys that age are pretty predictable no matter their cultural background.

October 3rd

A Big Month has passed. September 23rd was the Fringe Festival Parade and **WE WON THE BEST PARADE ENTRY!!!!** Huge bouncy inflatable building (which I was terrified of) Tony Kriegler's four wheel drive covered in buildings the kids made, pulling a long red trailer stacked with musicians, playing to Fadil's Kurdish tune, and Princes Hill music students bashing the high rise drums the kids had made. Mark driving completely blind, the kids' portraits looking down on the crowd amidst glorious sunlight. Geoff's workshop cut-outs along the street were so popular they all disappeared!

November 5th-9th

Full-on set construction. Residents love seeing it all unfold as we rehearse on site. Residents Alby, Fred and Macca are going to hoist the boat. Macca said **I was gonna go up north and try to change my life, time I had a bit of direction, but then I thought, well, I might as well stay around ...**

November 17th

Tonight was opening night. Audience gathered. About five hundred sat on the grass and in the building behind them every window had people in it. Everything got set. Aboriginal Joy Wandin Murphy did the welcome. We started ... and the kids were amazing. The weather was perfect. Everything worked. Jack saw his window piece with a big smile on his face and moist eyes. John was splendid and held the audience in the palm of his hand. Ernie was radiant on his high rise throne. Yasser Suliman was there with tears in his eyes watching those kids. Everyone loved it. My cup is full.

Diary, **Sue Giles**, Artistic Director, Polyglot Puppet Theatre



Sue Giles invited me to come on the project and the great thing was it's **long term** community development. So we had almost a year to build up relationships in stages of works-in-progress working with different groups. Like the refugee population mostly from the Horn of Africa. The kids hadn't had much experience of schooling, having spent most of their lives in internment camps. We started with drums made from cardboard, the kids seeming to need thumping something or other. Then we moved onto songs, the kids having never before heard each other's songs in their different languages – Chinese, Vietnamese, English, Arabic and Farsi.

We used soundscapes too, of the flats. Terry Soumilas took me around the flats to collect the sounds of things like the Chinese playing mahjong, and the Spanish women in their English classes, the wind in the towers, the bird calls. There were also interviews with people like the great Irish guy who works voluntary on the gardens just because he wants to, and the Somalian woman who spoke through her son as an interpreter and whose translations were wonderful. Her son talked about her milking the camels with the three levers under their bellies. He said with awe that you pull the levers and the milk comes out!

**Jennie Swain**, Musical Director, *interview*



OPPOSITE: *High Rise* outdoor performance, Carlton housing estate.  
OPPOSITE BELOW: *High Rise* children's poster artwork.







# HighRise

The idea of *High Rise* originated with Sue Giles, the Artistic Director of Polyglot Puppet Theatre. Polyglot is a company focusing on funky work with young people. But polyglot itself means many languages and the company prides itself on reaching a wide audience with the emphasis on accessibility in content, style and ticket pricing. For several years Giles had driven across the city to work; passing the public housing estates in Flemington and Carlton and musing on the possibilities of visual theatre on high rise towers. *That's how I work, she says. There's always a lot simmering away on the mental back-burners.*

Polyglot began working at the Carlton housing estate in January 2001. The estate is notable for its high proportion of Muslim migrants and refugees from Africa. Many of their children attend the adjacent Carlton South Primary School. The Principal of the school, Geoff Hale, was later to state that the project had released the kids to express themselves, to develop skills and confidence, and broadened their self image.

## Polyglot's Project aims.

- Create a great and unique theatrical production based on the lives of the people who live in a high rise community, working specifically with children and young people of the community.
- Ensure the processes of the project provide an opportunity for participants to gain confidence in their skills and talent and tell their stories to a wide community to increase understanding.
- Connect the broader community to the Carlton High Rise Estate and to break down some of the fear and negative perceptions about residents and the precinct.

*Creative Connections: Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing through Community Arts Participation.*  
Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Polyglot Theatre's project took its generic name from its main production, *High Rise*, performed first for two nights on the estate and then, in 2002, for a sold-out one-week season at the North Melbourne Town Hall. Based on the dramatic device of a Muslim girl who drops her scarf from the window of her flat and so begins a search of the site, *High Rise* used stories from the residents accompanied by images and sound. The first night, outdoors, was spectacular with one hundred and eleven kids on stage, a fifteen-person choir, a ten-piece band, five girls on xylophones and many more adult residents helping backstage as well as sometimes performing. The predominant visual elements were large puppets and a giant ladder reaching to the tower windows above with children climbing the ladder.

On the second night, high winds and hail forced the production indoors for an impromptu performance in a packed room with ad-libbed narration to describe the visual affects. Nonetheless, Sue Giles still accepts the night as one of the risks you run with outdoor theatre and in any case it was a triumph of making-do with an audience enthusiastically using their collective imagination.