

Stones concert features rock in role



Bardi dancers from Western Australia at Stonehenge, the first Aboriginal dance group to stage a performance there.
Photo: *Julian Andrews*

Annabel Crabb
June 4, 2006

The Dreamtime comes to Stonehenge to make history, writes Annabel Crabb.

SACRIFICIAL altar? UFO landing site? Primitive sun dial? Stonehenge is the best-known and most intriguing scared site in Britain.

A puzzle to historians and mystics alike, it continues to inspire wild and bewitching theories: what purpose has the distinct stone circle served over its lifetime of 5000-odd years?

But yesterday, Stonehenge met representatives of an even older culture — the Bardi dancers from Western Australia's Ardiyooloon community.

From the other side of the world, 200 kilometres north of Broome, the Bardis have come to Stonehenge to make world history, being the first Aboriginal dance group to stage a performance at the stone circle.

They are appearing as the guests of the Salisbury International Arts Festival, and as part of Undergrowth Australian Arts UK, a two-year program of Australian culture in Britain.

And yesterday they staged an exclusive Stonehenge preview for *The Sunday Age*.

"The Bardi dancers and we at the festival both really like the link between two ancient cultures coming together," says Jo Metcalf, who herself came from Perth to direct the Salisbury Festival, and thus is part of Australia's notorious "reverse colonisation" of the British arts scene. "The fact that Stonehenge was and still is used as a meeting place, is used for ceremony and is one of the world's great cultural icons really excited the Bardi dancers, and they were thrilled when I invited them to perform their dreamtime stories and ceremonies in this place."

Members of the Bardi group range from teenage boys to elders in their 70s.

Salt-water people, they depict traditional hunting and fishing rituals in their dances.

Their performance at Stonehenge is an extraordinary event.

The site is closely guarded by English Heritage, and public access is heavily restricted. But on Monday and Wednesday nights, the group will perform sold-out dusk shows in the sacred "inner circle" itself.

"We tried to be very respectful of the site, and obviously there are certain technical and logistical things we are not able to do," says Ms Metcalf.

"But a performance like this, that does not require sound, lights and a huge stage, is perfect."

Salisbury Festival is this year presenting a range of Aboriginal artists; David Page's Company B Belvoir show, *Page 8*, became a festival hit last week, and *Rabbit Proof Fence* author Doris Pilkington is due to speak today.

Ms Metcalf said media and public interest in the Stonehenge performance had been intense, and that tickets had sold quickly for both shows.