

ABC ONLINE: Morris O’Riordan

Tracks is a professional dance company with a difference. Significantly, it is a company without a core ensemble of professional dancers. As co-founder/artistic director Tim Newth affirms, “the company is the community”. Furthermore, the notion of community which Tracks has fostered over the past decade is grounded in the unique cultural and geographic environment of Darwin and the Northern Territory.

Background

Founded in Darwin in 1994 by four dancers and a visual artist, Tracks evolved from a community dance programme established in 1988 by Brown’s Mart Community Arts Inc. With a population just over 100,000 comprising 60 nationalities and 76 ethnic groups, Darwin is much closer to the Asian cities of Dili, Denpasar and Singapore than other Australian capitals. Up until World War I white people were a minority in Darwin and the present-day city retains a strong Aboriginal and Asian character. Tracks’ performances embrace this multiculturalism. The company has brought together diverse communities - Indigenous, non-Indigenous, migrant, elderly and youth – for multimedia productions which explore Territory life and mythology. Co-founder/artistic director David McMicken elaborates:

“The many realities of our situation, often seen by others as negatives - i.e., isolation, small population, vast distances between population centres, highest incidence of many social ills, unbearable build-up weather, small western-trained base, limited performance opportunities – are what we seize on as opportunities. We chose to develop working methods appropriate to the people, place and spirit of where we come from.”

Creative duo:

The creative partnership of David McMicken and Tim Newth has been central to Tracks’ philosophy and artistic endeavours. Both artists moved to Darwin in the early ‘90s. McMicken came to Darwin after a promising career in Tasmania and Victoria as a performer and director with several companies. After training as a visual artist Newth began working with dance companies, developing a passion and talent for the creative possibilities linking space, movement and image. For both artists living and working in Darwin and the NT has meant a re-evaluation of their western arts training.

“We create very collectively. We’ve learnt that from working in Aboriginal cultures. A lot of the Asian cultures that we work with also come from a much more collaborative approach to creating art, or to creating rituals.” (Newth)

“We believe in the knowing that a community has of itself, participants performing about what they know best. Therefore our process involves diverse input at all levels. That negotiation of ownership of material, of what the actual material is, for me that’s the joy of working in this style.” (McMicken)

Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani (Coming Home to Lajamanu)

The history of Tracks’ involvement with Aboriginal communities stems from a 1987 play, ‘Desert Boy’, written in Warlpiri language by students from Lajamanu. Lajamanu is a predominantly Warlpiri Aboriginal community about

950 km south-west of Darwin in the Tanami Desert. A touring production of 'Desert Boy' at Lajamanu sparked the community's desire to involve their own youth in theatre performance. In 1990 Newth and fellow Tracks founder Sarah Calver responded with a three-month residency at Lajamanu and laid the foundation for several cross-cultural collaborations. 'Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani', one of the earlier outcomes, saw a group of Lajamanu teenagers acting out remote community life at Darwin's Brown's Mart theatre.

Warlpiri culture was also the basis of the performance 'Ngapa: Two Cultures One Country' (1996). 'Ngapa' was inspired by the 2000 km-long Warlpiri 'Ngapa Tjukurrpa' (Rainstorm Dreaming). Newth and McMicken travelled this Tjukurrpa with seven traditional owners from Lajamanu and an archivist, recording stories and visiting sacred waterhole sites along the way. Before undertaking the journey, however, the Warlpiri elder who jointly conceived the 'Ngapa' project died. Funding was then withdrawn but as Newth recalls, the community's collective approach was the key to continuing the project.

"In a Western individualistic way of thinking if the key artist dies then I guess the project couldn't go on but in this Aboriginal culture things have a collective ownership and it was just a matter of following the right protocol and waiting to be told who was the next right person or people. Eventually we cleared things up and the money was reinstated."

For the community, the eventual journey and its translation to an indoor stage for the Festival of Darwin – complete with 4WD and the creation of a traditional Ngapa ground painting – was a source of celebration, resilience and pride.

Tracks has developed productive relationships with other Indigenous communities in Darwin, Alice Springs and Territory-wide. It has tackled issues of frontier history and mythology ('Fierce: The Meeting of Olive Pink', 2001/02), petrol sniffing at Groote Eylandt and the Aboriginal experience of leprosariums ('Outside the Camp', 2000).

The great outdoors:

1997's '4WD Sweat Dust and Romance' was a turning point for the company. The production was its first large-scale, open-air event bringing together a multicultural cast of hundreds. From its supporting role in 'Ngapa' the 4WD became a fully-fledged Territory icon, loaded with tales of Top End travel that hit home with Darwin audiences.

The company has since produced other outdoor epics, making the most of Darwin's dry season months when cloudless night skies are assured. Just after full moon, notes Newth, is also a time of minimal mosquitoes. Such are the logistics of a company that has performed in a public water garden ('The Land The Cross & The Lotus' 1998) and more recently on the roof of Darwin's major shopping centre ('Ignite', 2002).

Tracks was commissioned to produce the creative component of the Arafura Games 2003 Opening Ceremony in mid-May. This outdoor spectacle involved over 400 performers from Darwin's Greek, Irish, Chinese, Torres Strait Islander and African communities. School-age performers rehearsed alongside the Grey Panthers, an over-60s women's dance group long associated with the company. Staged on Darwin's premier AFL oval, the

creative component was the ceremony's finale and expressed the Games' theme of harmony. It comprised three sections: preparing the ground, preparing the mind and body, and a 'cultural explosion' set against a techno soundtrack. With access to the Games' budget and resources Tracks could dream big. Props included limousines driving through football banners, fireworks-sprouting palm trees and mobile stages doubling as houses.

According to Newth, this commission recognised the company's expertise in community development, and the production "totally harnessed the very human and dance-based energy that Tracks are about". Less than four weeks out from the event, however, the Arafura Games was cancelled due to the fear and uncertainty caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, better known as SARS. Over half of the expected Asia-Pacific participants had pulled out, making the Games unviable. This was one logistical blow Tracks could not control.

'Great Human Interaction'

Tracks has nurtured individual talents and called on the expertise of performers, directors and choreographers from within and outside the NT. Several performers have refined their skills over a number of productions and remain a part of the company's ever-expanding resources. In this way Tracks has played a fundamental role in overcoming Darwin's lack of performance training opportunities. A central aspect of the Arafura Games commission, for example, was the development of skills for young dancers. Over one hundred youth were selected from a public audition and five were employed as team leaders. They headed the choreography along with the project's dance animateur, Julia Quinn, who has appeared in several Tracks performances.

While the blend of amateur and professional can be risky, it never fails to surprise or inspire. McMicken explains:

"We work with diverse communities, ignoring boundaries of professional and amateur, community and other. We promote quality in output and experience. Sometimes we focus on individuals, sometimes on specific communities, on the rubbing points between cultures, on the meeting points, sometimes on ourselves as artists. It is all about making great human interaction."