

# The getting of intercultural wisdom

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Tim Newth and David McMicken are co-artistic directors of Tracks Inc, a contemporary performance company known for its innovative, large scale outdoor performances. The company's working methods have developed over a decade as a response to their home in the Northern Territory.

David: It is the melding of the differences between 2 directors, our backgrounds, personal beliefs, working methods, and multiple artform skills base, that creates our unique working environment. We work with diverse communities, making human connections, 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 and the meeting points, sometimes on ourselves as artists.

Tim: October 1995. I am informed that we have received funding from the Australia Council to produce and present Ngapa. This project involves a group of white and Indigenous artists travelling the rain storm Jukurrpa, a dreaming path about 2000 kms long which lies between Alice Springs and Darwin, then creating a performance from the journey. We arrive in the remote Aboriginal community of Lajamanu to meet with Freddy Jangala Patrick who jointly conceived the project. On that same day he is flown sick to Katherine Hospital 600 kms away and later that week we are informed he has cancer.

Late October, I'm back in Darwin and a phone call from a family member advises Jangala is still keen to do the project and wants to start it now. The Australia Council moves quickly to release the money and we move the starting date forward. I arrange permits for the non-indigenous artists to travel across Aboriginal land, book 4WD transport, hire a satellite telephone, make arrangements with a helicopter company for an emergency air lift (if required due to accident, illness or snakebite), search out a gadget that will pinpoint our position in such a case, arrange sound equipment to record stories on the trip and liaise with the other Tracks artists to revise the schedule.

David: Our methods reflect where we live. Although we are part of Australia, there are key differences: a culture spanning tropics to desert—a very arid time and a huge wet season; vast distances between population centres; 30%

aboriginal & Torres Strait Island populations with many language groups; a long history of pre-white trade with South East Asia.

Darwin harbour is almost twice the size of Sydney harbour but there is no beach culture, no surf here and the seas are home to crocodiles, box jellyfish and other tropical dangers. We are a major stepping-stone into and from Asia - Dili is our closest capital city and Indonesia is on our doorstep. We are constantly aware of "indigenous" and "multicultural" issues.

Darwin has no tertiary performing arts training, no resultant graduates and no facilities for re-training. We do not have full-time employed professional performers.

We are over 3000 kilometres from any large Australian population centre And acutely aware of an unusual physical phenomenon - the perceived distance between a southern population centre and Darwin is greater than the distance between Darwin and down south.

Tim: November, one week before we are due to leave, I have been feeling a strong need to speak to Jangala in person and instinctively make the 12-hour journey to Lajamanu. The night I arrive, he looks much sicker but his spirits are strong and I take him to visit 2 other old men who spend the evening singing into his cancer-swollen belly. I soon realise we won't be leaving next week. Two weeks later, I am still in Lajamanu. Within this time Jangala draws Ngapa (Rainstorm) dreaming designs with me and I record his stories of this country in the Warlpiri language. In broken English I also record his life story, how he travelled the country as a child with his family from one water hole to the next, the sacred sites of the Ngapa' dreaming.

David: As a result of different history and culture, our expressions also differ. Different ways of being have developed as a result of the Indigenous and South-East Asian links (people, trade, visits, family, food, etc). There is always something on the boil when you overlap the various cultural calendars.

Our current work practices have been researched and refined for over a decade leading to the discovery of many 'truths'. One core truth is that the collective or community way of thinking (as opposed to the individual), is an integral part of our culture."

The Western construct places emphasis on independence and less on a need for social involvement. This often entails paying less attention to the meta-messages of communication— the levels that comments on relationships—focussing instead on information as the only level that counts. It is what allows us to secret

ourselves away in a studio and to work independently, separately from the rest of the world (the stage becomes the intellect and the inner workings of the body).

Tim: December. Jangala dies in Lajamanu on an open patch of ground surrounded by over 100 family members. His body simply stops working. I return to Lajamanu where a sorry camp is set up in the bush just outside the settlement and all the family are there. It is respectful not to speak until after sunset and at night the women paint themselves white and howl. We spend 2 weeks living like this, waiting for the appropriate people to travel from other communities to perform the major ceremonial business.

David: As the world becomes more “global”, it is being matched with a new approach to community, evidenced by the increase and success of community banks or the proliferation of the new “virtual” communities such as the multitude of e-chat groups. In *The Spike*, How our lives are being transferred by rapidly advancing technologies Damien Broderick states that the faster technology changes and the more global and singular the big interests become, the more important it is to truly encourage and celebrate diversity in all its forms. This is the role of artists and philosophers—to show the way forward.

Tim: Steve Jampijinpa, one of Jangala’s sons, comes with me at Christmas time to visit my family just outside of Wangaratta in Victoria. It is his first time out of the Territory.

Traditionally, when a person dies, your respect is shown by not mentioning their name and I am not sure now to negotiate with the community now. A water tank that the 2 of us had painted with dreaming designs is moved from the centre of the settlement. I am relieved to receive a message from the Lajamanu women saying they are now ready. Steve negotiates with the men as to who should be travelling with us.

Shortly after this, I get a letter from the Australia Council to say the money had been withdrawn due to the death of the key artist. In a Western individualistic way of thinking, if the key artist dies then the project cannot go on. In Aboriginal culture, there is a collective ownership. It was just a matter of following the right protocols and waiting to be told who was the next right person or people. Eventually, the money is reinstated.

David: Our predominant process is collaboration and establishing relationships that highlight connections. In order to produce quality work, we work with the kind of experts a regular artist might not approach.

The many realities of our situation, often seen by others as negatives (such as isolation, small population, vast distances between population centres, highest

incidences of many social ills, unbearable weather, small Western-trained base, limited performance opportunities etc) we seize upon as opportunities.

Tim: Late April. David and I finally head to Lajamanu to start the project, with an oral history archivist following a few days later with the other vehicle. Three hours out of Lajamanu it starts to rain. The dirt road of dust and corrugations turns into a river. We are one of the last vehicles to make it in. Like everyone else we are stuck in Lajamanu for two weeks, the phone lines are down and the mail plane and food trucks cannot get through.

David: It has been important for us to discard old ways of seeing and to learn from those who understand the differences.

Tim: Mid-May We head in to Lajamanu for another attempt - artists, archivist, 4WDs and gear including the magic satellite phone. It's dark now and we are just a few kilometres out of the settlement when a car stops to tell us someone has just died and the people we plan to travel with are involved in the sorry business. It could take anything from a week to a month to complete.

The next day we are called in to have a meeting with the men. They are able to leave and want to get going without the women who are heavily involved in the sorry business. We meet with the women who are not able to tale, half naked and painted white, waving their hands and shaking their heads, trying to convince us not to leave. With the men in the background yelling "let's get going", we wait.

Over the next few days there are several community meetings. A ceremony takes place where we are required to provide tins of flour and blankets as payment and then the women are released early. Three days after our third attempt to begin the project, we are loaded up with men, women and equipment ready to go.

As we head out of the settlement, the men and women start to argue. Do we now take the soft sand road which means we will spend a lot of time digging ourselves out of being bogged or do we travel through the stick country which means many punctured tyres. I guess the project has begun. ...

David: Our processes challenge established Western methods. We place the new in the context of the old. We question the inexorable chasing of the new, the modern and question who benefits from this. Where does old wisdom, (as often held within traditional cultures) fit into the new?

The structuring of the contemporary form often removes the artist from the community and creates a situation where they have to insist on deserving respect and earning a reputation. Then they are constantly chasing and building an

audience, a market that will eventually come to an understanding and then continue to support the artist in their endeavour to “make new and innovative” art.

Who makes up the audience? Who is showing what and to whom? Imagined and imaginary—unidentifiable, dreamed, the great potential throng, an infinitude without faces, anonymous, the entire world, applauding and invisible? Or is it identifiable faces, watching everything, admiring, approving, and owning?