

Rainstorm Dreaming

*Artist Tim Newth tells **ROSEMARY WEST** about a plan to create theatre that will be as effective for white audiences as for Northern Territory Aboriginal elders.*

ON THE edge of the remote Tanami desert, 1000 kilometres south-west of Darwin, one would expect Aboriginal culture to be alive and well. And it is relatively healthy compared to most other parts of Australia. Initiation ceremonies are still carried out and men's and women's business continues.

But the Warlpiri people of the 800-strong Lajamanu community are not living on their own land. They were moved there in 1949 from Yuendumu against their will because of the Government's resettlement policy. Twice, the people walked 400 kilometres across the desert back to Yuendumu and their Dreaming sites. Twice they were brought back and only in 1968 did they finally settle in Lajamanu, or Hooker Creek as it is known to some Anglo-Australians.

But the Dreamings have not been properly passed down from the old men to the younger generation at Lajamanu. These sacred themes are intimately connected to the land. They cannot simply be passed on around some distant campfire. And it is many years since the Lajamanu elders followed their section of the 2000-kilometre Rainstorm Dreaming path, which runs from the north of Alice Springs to Darwin.

Tim Newth, a Victorian-born artist

and theatre director who is now based in Darwin and has developed strong links with the Lajamanu community, plans to make the trip to Willowra across the Tanami desert early next year, with a party of artists and traditional owners from the Lajamanu community and a Darwin-based choreographer David McMicken.

The outcome is to be a piece of theatre designed to be equally effective when played to a predominantly white audience in a theatre or to a group of Warlpiri elders sitting under the shade of a tree in the desert.

Along the way, however, Mr Newth is hoping for something even more profound to take place. Included in the party is one of the two elders who are keepers of the Dreamtime stories — Freddy Jangala Patrick, who is a renowned carver and painter in the central desert dot-painting tradition, whose works hang in the National Gallery of Victoria. The plans are for the Dreaming stories to be passed to Mr Jangala Patrick's son, Steven Jampijinpa Patrick. Tim Newth and David McMicken, both have been adopted into Lajamanu families, will witness these ceremonies.

The *Ngapa Jukurrpa* Rainstorm Dreaming project has become more urgent since Mr Jangala Patrick was diagnosed with cancer a few weeks ago. Mr Newth thought they might

have had to cancel, but Mr Jangala Patrick says he wants to make the trip if it is the last thing he does.

Tim Newth recently completed another project with David McMicken, of the Tracks Dance Collective, working with children from the Yipirinya School in Alice Springs. The school was established 15 years ago for Aboriginal children who could not fit into state schools, sometimes because of language difficulties. Many of the school's 150 children live in the town camps.

For most, English is their second language. Apart from a prep class for pre-school children and a senior class to prepare children for high school, the school is divided into four classes along language lines: Warl-

piri, Luritja, Central and Western Arrernte.

The school nestles into the rocky foothills of that part of the MacDonnell Ranges known as Yipirinya (or Yeperenye) the Arrernte name for the bag-moth caterpillar, whose Dreaming is one of the most significant of several Dreaming tracks that intersect at Alice Springs.

That project dramatised the story of the caterpillar dreaming, and incorporated other themes relevant to local dreaming stories and to the children's schoolwork. It involved all of the children in the school, who danced and mimed the stories of particular relevance to their classes and language groups. As well, the performance involved giant puppets and fire sculpture.

Tim Newth's work is interdisciplinary in the broadest possible sense, enveloping the spiritual, political and cultural dimensions. In this he draws inspiration from the Aboriginal art tradition rather than from any European or American influence.

He tries to explain this influence. "I am shown a painting, danced a dance, sung a song. I am told they are one and the same, that they belong to my family and a piece of land somewhere in the middle of Australia," he says. "I do not truly know if I understand," he adds, with characteristic humility

In Melbourne he has been involved in two moving pieces of community theatre cum performance art. In 1991, he made the evocative giant

silk orange-bellied parrot puppet that was the centrepiece for the Wings of Summer project at Port Melbourne beach, and he was also responsible for drawing a giant dot painting in the sand, made from a design by Freddy Jangala Patrick sent by fax from Lajamanu.

The following year, he made puppets of the Eastern Curlew for Meme McDonald's Waderbirds Project, which followed the birds' migratory path and was performed in Auckland, Broome and Koshiro in Japan, as well as in Melbourne.

His eight-year relationship with the Lajamanu community began when children from the Lajamanu school entered a Northern Territory young playwrights competition with a play in their Warlpiri language. He

was then working with the Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre, in Darwin, and the company decided to take the play back to Lajamanu and perform it in their language.

"The audience were rolling around laughing hysterically," he said. "We couldn't really see the joke, but we were happy that they were enjoying themselves. Later, we discovered they were laughing at our incredibly bad pronunciation. Then, they said, 'We really liked what you did; why can't our kids do this drama-theatre stuff?'"

"So three of us did a two-month residency at Lajamanu and we helped them to tour a new work to other Aboriginal communities. Then they said 'Why can't we put it on in a proper theatre with lights and air-conditioning?' So 16 kids came up to Darwin with us to put together a third show. It was a most moving piece of theatre, called *Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani*," which Mr Newth translates roughly as I'm going back to Lajamanu.

The community insisted that the touring group had to be accompanied by some elders, and that was how Mr Newth got to know Mr Jangala Patrick and his wife, Myra Nungarrayi Patrick. Since then, he has spent part of every year at Lajamanu and has become a close friend and tribal brother of Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick.

Mr Newth's successful application for Australia Council funding for the Rainstorm Dreaming project includes a statement of support and explanation in Warlpiri from Mr Jangala Patrick, whose statement tells the story of their meeting.

"Some years ago, I was confronted by a young *kartiya* (European) fellow while doing a *Kuruwarri* (dot) painting. He asked me to explain to him about the patterns and dots in the *Kuruwarri* that I did in the canvas. As years passed, Tim spent a lot of time with us and we grew to love him as our son. My *jampijinpas* (sons) also call him brother. I knew Tim wanted to learn more about Yapa traditional ways and I am very happy to teach him my family's Ngapa (Rainstorm) Dreaming."

The Rainstorm Dreaming project with Steven Patrick's participation will ensure the survival of this segment of a 40,000 year-old culture to the next generation.

"I have a son of my own," Mr Patrick says, "I can't imagine him not knowing his father's dreaming."



Tank art: a water tank painted by Freddy Jangala Patrick and Tim Newth. The Ngapa Jukurrpa (Water Dreaming) by Freddy is in the centre.