

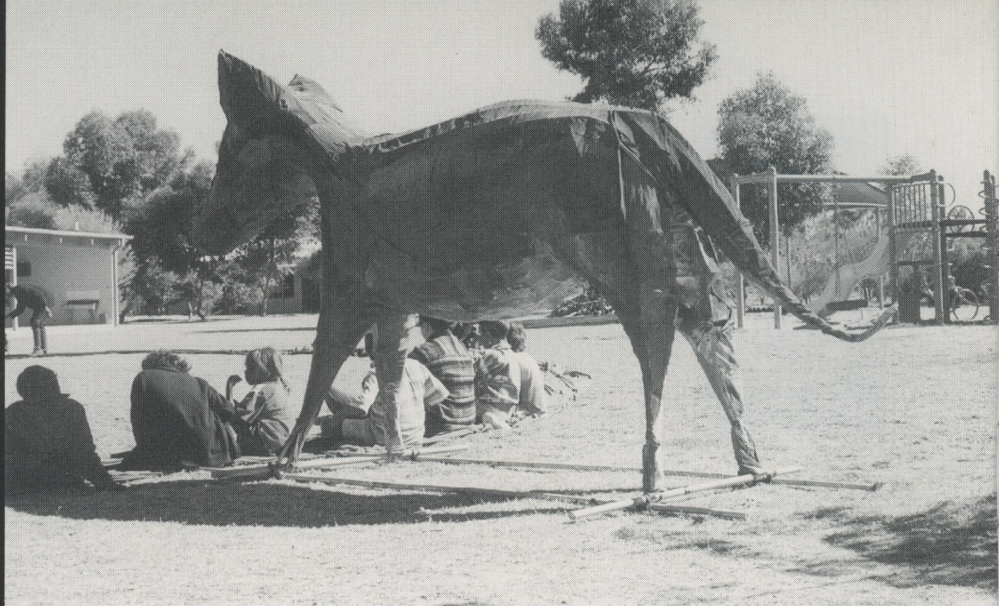
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C O M M U N I T Y A R T S N E T W O R K S A

R i P P L S E



Yipirinya School's 'After the Rain' dingo

This story is about returning; revisiting. For the last five weeks a team of artists has worked with the Yipirinya School, an independent

Aboriginal primary school in Alice Springs, to create a performance. This team of artists — Tim Newth, Kwementye ¹ McMicken, Dorothea Randell and Mahoney Kiely — is entwined together by strong relationships. It is these relationships — and the growing bonds with the school community, seeded on previous visits — that feed and shape the work.

Tim Newth is based in Darwin and travels around — as seems a requirement, perhaps a wont, of artists who work with communities. Tim is here to direct a theatre piece *After the Rain* with the Yipirinya School. The circumstances that led to the project are neither chance nor casual. Rather they grew out of the strengthening relationships which weave across the Northern Territory.

The unravelling point which goes back seven years to Darwin. One-act plays are called for from young playwrights. A script from Larjamanu, written in Walpiri (the indigenous language of the area) is produced by Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre from Darwin and toured back to

Larjamanu. 'The response, because we were speaking Walpiri incredibly badly, was that they laughed hysterically the whole way through. But they really opened up to what we did', recalls Tim.

This project, acting as a pebble, had a ripple effect a year later when the Larjamanu School Council thought: 'Why can't our kids do that? Why can't our kids do theatre?'. So they did. They worked with a small team of artists, including Tim, in Walpiri. It was very successful and they toured the production to Alice Springs, including Yipirinya School.

This ripple had the same pebble effect as before. People at Yipirinya School were really impressed and asked: 'Why can't our kids do theatre in our language like that?'. [So] they talked with Tim, negotiated some funding from the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, and three years ago the performance piece *From Little Things Big Things Grow* was created. The outcome was a spectacular night-time outdoor event of dance, music, colour and celebration involving all the children from the school in what was their first significant public performance of any kind. This show was a huge hit with the kids, teachers and audi-

ence. It generated a great deal of enthusiasm and support, leading to an invitation for Tim and Kwementye McMicken to return for the present project *After The Rain*.

Each project is a ripple from the previous pebble — itself a ripple from the pebble before.

Lake

Coming to live in Alice Springs, I soon learnt that I knew less about things here than I did about the surface of the moon. If my images of a sunbeat, windswept desert were way off the mark, then my ignorance on cultural matters belonged on a different plane.

For many people in the Central Lands, English is not the first or even second language. The first language of Alice Springs is Arrernte. Arrernte, like a Switzerland, is surrounded by many other languages. Replace Italian with Pitjantinjara to the south; German with Walpiri to the north; and French with Pintubi or Luritja to the west — and you may begin to get the picture.

Just as Switzerland had defences to keep it neutral and safe amidst turmoil, the Central Lands have had some protection because of distance. Today, however, telecommunications and schools have well and truly arrived. And these schools are in English.

Imagine that foreigners have taken over your country; your home. Imagine that you are a young child and at the new school all the language of the teaching is foreign to you — as are all the cultural ways. This school is a place where you must learn and prove yourself. Clearly a daunting hurdle.

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This is akin to the situation that faces Aboriginal children for whom English is a second language. Response? Start an independent Aboriginal school in Alice Springs which teaches in indigenous languages as well as in English. And so you have Yipirinya School: a school where classrooms are based not on age but on language groups. There is the Walpiri class, the Luritja class, the Central Arrernte class, and the Western Arrernte class; as well as a kindy, pre-school and senior class. There you have Yipirinya School. There you have a lake — a lake where pebbles may cause ripples.

Revisiting

Artists — unless they want to wrap up a community, Cristo-like beneath their own egos — need bow to more graceful practice which values, draws out and includes. Otherwise, as if beneath some monstrous canvas, community ideas and expressions may never see the light of day.

After seeing the performance of *After the Rain* and talking with Beverley Angeles, a teacher from the Central Arrernte class, it became clear that considerable grace had been exhibited by this team of artists. The approach they took to each dance

was to adopt the theme that each language class was using at the time. 'We were doing birds, so they suggested we do this emu dance. But they didn't say, "Right, we'll do it this way"'. They asked the kids', Beverley remembers as we talk in her kitchen on a cold Alice Springs morning.

Mahoney, a local artist involved in the project, corroborates this view: 'I don't think Tim tried to fit Yipirinya into a pre-set structure at all. I think that he's really remarkable in that he's open to everybody in the project having directorial input at any point, no matter what their status.'

However, this process of creatively working together is a big ask, as much for a community as for the artists. The process may be greeted with general silence, especially when involved in a cross-cultural situation. At its worst an artist can become insensitive and may begin prying into all sorts of matters they know very little about, in their efforts to draw out expressions and ideas. But who tells all at first meetings? Repositories of community knowledge and expressions may be sitting quietly in a corner. This is perhaps particularly so for Aboriginal people.

As Tim suggests: 'The developmental side doesn't happen without going back. They had a clearer understanding about what was going on this time, as they had seen us work with them before and therefore this time they were able to take more control over what was happening. It is very hard for someone to control something when they've got no idea of where it's being driven'.

'More control' was evident at the very start of the second project. Elder community members with cultural authority