

MAKING TRACKS



The contemporary Tracks Dance Collective, based in Darwin, works with remote Aboriginal communities. Through residency programs, workshops and performances, it creates dance-theatre that fuses traditional culture with modern concerns. In this second part of our 'Outback' series JAN WOSITSKY reports.

Lajamanu is an Aboriginal settlement of Warlpiri people 900 kms south-west of Darwin. Getting there from Darwin is like travelling from Sydney to Melbourne, except you pass only one town to speak of — Katherine — and five other wayside stops. The road is mostly a single lane, the last 100 kms dirt.

Open bush and cattle station country envelop the thin ribbon of road. A yawn can last a mile. Opening a drink bottle with your teeth whilst steering can take at least another 10

Above: The 1991 members of Tracks waiting to load their gear onto a plane at Groote Eylandt Airport (from left): Michael Havir, Tim Newth, Bereni Franklin, Deb Batton, Sarah Calver, Matthew James and John McCormick.

kilometres. Trying to get comfortable with sweat trickling down the inside of your shorts takes all day. Then a road train — a semi with three trailers — blasts you off the road into the metre deep floodwater channel.

David McMicken and Sarah Calver perform Tracks' current program, 'Silent Thought' (1994).

Photo: YORIS WILSON

Back on the road night descends, and you pull up to don warmer clothes. Eventually you get to Lajamanu. The air, the sky, the world, is filled with voices, and you don't understand a single syllable, because English is only one language here.

While you unpack your bags, you are likely to be asked, "Where's your country?"

The journey to Lajamanu is the story of Tracks Dance Collective's new dance-theatre production, *Sacred Space*. Performed by co-directors Sarah Calver and David McMicken, it answers the question "Where's your country?" with symbolic gestures only, perhaps a reminder that very few Australians can address this quest for identity in its deepest Aboriginal sense.

Since 1988 (previously under the name of the Brown's Mart Dance Program) Tracks has run a diverse program of Territory-wide, community-based and professional dance performances and residencies. These activities have taken place from the islands of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the central arid regions, 1500 kms south.

But *Sacred Space*, which Tracks will take on tour through the Territory this year, demonstrates, as is expressed in a line in the show, it's "not the tyranny of distance (that counts) but the opportunity".

The relationship between Tracks and Lajamanu began in 1987, when young Yapa (Aboriginal) people from Lajamanu sent a play, *Desert Boy*, written in English and Warlpiri, to Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre (CIYT) in Darwin.

Tracks members participated in the CIYT performance of the play, which toured to Lajamanu. The performance was followed by an invitation from the people of Lajamanu to help put together a show that would deal with issues that can't be easily talked about in ceremony and traditional dance. It was a challenging project, dealing with changing identity now that everyone has video, television and a fast food shop, in a performance that would express a love of contemporary as well as traditional music, while at the same time expressing the need to create from the perspective of a people who live in both the Warlpiri and European way.

The projected audience was other Aboriginal people who live with the same issues. But the idea was also to tell *Kardiya* (non-Aboriginal) people about the Warlpiri relationship with the land.

McMicken understands the word *Kardiya* to derive from the Warlpiri verb meaning "to take, to grab hold of". Many



scientists, welfare people, anthropologists and artists have appropriated, dominated and stolen Aboriginal culture on their way through Lajamanu. With their work, McMicken and Calver feel they have avoided such acts.

"As an artist," McMicken says, "I want to do what I want to do. So when I'm facilitating [the work], I give them the same power. You've got to be culturally sensitive. After all, we've been invited into their community."

Melbourne-born McMicken moved to Darwin in 1992. He is a graduate of Victoria College, Rusden campus, was a founding member of Tasdance, and director his own Melbourne company, Storm in a Teacup Dance Theatre. English-born Calver is a graduate of the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, and has lived in the Territory for over 10 years. Both are community dance development officers. The pair are assisted by dancer-in-residence, Dorothea Randall, who was one of the first graduates of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association, and long-time local teacher/choreographer, Bereni Franklin.

Tracks worked at Lajamanu over a four year period, facili-

The Aboriginal settlement of Lajamanu: 'Jordon', on the uni-cycle, is one of the performers in the show.

tating shows that toured the bush settlements. By the final year, the Warlpiri participants were taking control of the work, including having the final say on all artistic considerations, often according to Warlpiri custom and law.

In casting and choreographing, for instance, kinship obligations come before the usual Western criteria of pure skill. For example, a Warlpiri son-in-law has no contact with his mother-in-law — they don't even look at each other — so try to get them to dance together and all you'll get is crossed arms and chins on chests, and the relations ashamed at the ignorance of this "whitefella" trying to push them around. Men's and women's activities are usually distinct and separate, which, in the Western sense, restricts the choices a choreographer can make.

Such rules naturally affect the focus and energy of the performance, but both Calver and McMicken accept this way of working. "We recognise that we're product orientated, and have to put that aside," they say.

Touring shows from Lajamanu also involves a different way of working. The touring party often numbers 40, and will include the appropriate family members and elders to chaperone the youngsters through Warlpiri as well as "foreign" country.

Once travelling, the usual "get to the venue, set up, do the show, bump out" style of operating has also proved inappro-



priate. To drive, say, from Lajamanu to Alice Springs, on a combination of bush tracks and highway, usually takes a day. But because Warlpiri people have strong obligations to the country between these two centres, it takes three days.

For the Warlpiri elders, such a trip is an opportunity to get back to their country, from where they were removed by welfare agencies after World War 2 and trucked north to be settled at Lajamanu.

So as they pass through their Dreaming places in the Tanami Desert, the driver will slow the bus to a turtle's pace, and the elders will sing their country. I've heard it expressed that this singing "keeps up" the country — keeps it alive — the songs being part of a symbiosis that began when, in the Dreaming, people and other animals sang the land into existence, the hills, trees and everything else in the landscape being named and recorded in their songlines. On such a bus trip it is the duty of the elders to sing those songlines so that, spiritually, the country can regenerate.

The drive is also constantly punctuated by truck bogging, or sudden stops to chase goanna and kangaroo through the mulga or to chop sugar bag (honey) out of the branch of a tree.

It's a different country altogether from the normal product-orientated arts world, the culture shock made more profound because you don't even have to get your passport stamped to get there.

But you do need a permit,

Somewhere in the desert,
bogged in a river bed,
1992.



approved by the community councils and the governing Aboriginal Land Council. This permit means you agree to abide by the laws of the land. For Tracks, in Willowra, another Walpri settlement, 400 kms as the crow flies south-east of Lajamanu, it meant coming face to face with payback law.

Payback law, roughly translated, is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and it may be inflicted on the family of an offender. On one tour, mid-way through the performance, a group of extremely angry Willowra women began beating up the show's cultural liaison officer, also a female. (We can't mention her name, because someone of the same name has recently died, and in Warlpiri law it is forbidden to mention the name of the dead.)

In what Calver describes as a surreal version of "the show must go on", the performance continued whilst a very real sideshow with fighting sticks raged nearby.

The liaison officer was bleeding badly, and had broken bones in her wrist. The company somehow managed to get her into a kitchen of the local clinic and locked the doors. But no medical staff were present, and the woman needed treatment urgently.

Outside, the angry Willowra women wanted to complete the punishment. The nearest hospital was at Tennant Creek, 433 kms away. Then, amidst all the anger and panic, the bus

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keys vanished. After a frantic and fruitless search they hot-wired the bus. Six hours later, they eventually made it to the hospital at Tennant Creek.

The rest of the tour was cancelled. It was time for the performers to go back to their own country. The funding bodies may wring their hands, the other isolated places may have been crying out for a show, but this was family business, and that "the show must go on" was simply a nonsense.

For McMicken and Calver, adapting to another way of doing things has been an enriching experience that feeds their personal work. But in *Sacred Space* there is no sense of plagiarism; it's all their own work, inspired by their experiences, and they see it as their own songlines intersecting with the ancient tracks.

During 1995, Tracks will be touring a double bill of *Sacred Space* with *Silent Thought*, a piece based on the Ted Egan song, "The Drovers Boy" — the story of the old bush practice of drovers capturing young Aboriginal girls to be their partners, and then parading them dressed as boys. Both pieces are equal to anything the Territory has to offer, and will make you leave the theatre thinking, "Where is my country?"

Tracks will also tour to remote areas with CIYT, and has residencies at Lajamanu and Yiparinya, an Aboriginal school in Alice Springs. There are hopes for a tour of regional NSW in the last half of the year. All up, that's countless kms making more tracks, and many more sunsets in the widest horizon in the world. ■



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