

urthona
art and buddhism

Gary Snyder

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Green Man

Borobudur

Aboriginal Architecture

Walt Whitman

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Twenty Jazz Greats

spirit of place



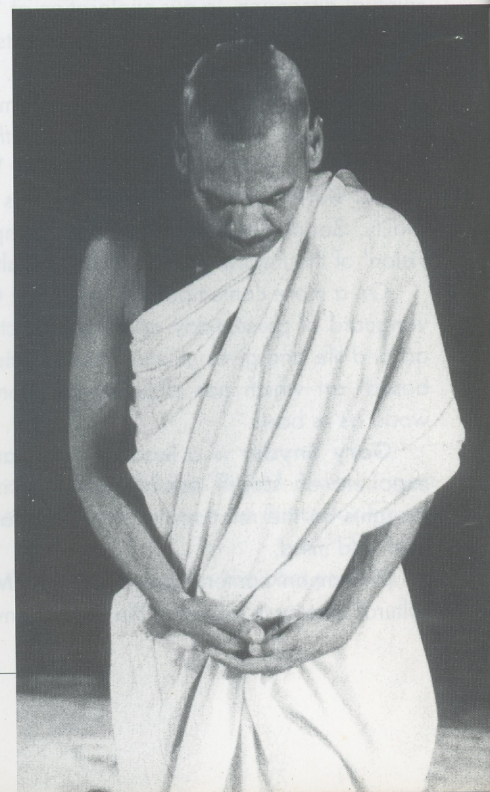
left: Dancers from *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus*
Photo: Therese Ritchie

below: Stanley Stanislaus in
Outside the Camp.
Photo: Elka Kerkhofs

facing page: Rukshana
Ramachandran in *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus*.
Photo: Elka Kerkhofs

creating Sacred Sites

Tim Newth is a co-director of Tracks, a performing arts company based in Darwin, Australia, noted for its innovative, large-scale performance pieces that bring together dance, visual art and theatre. He attends the Northern Territory Buddhist Society in Darwin and has a close relationship with a Sri Lankan monk, Venerable Sumedha, who teaches there. Satyagandhi spoke to him about his work and spiritual practice.



Satyagandhi: How did you get involved in your work?

Tim Newth: Early on in my career I found myself working in community arts, painting murals and things like that. At one point I was working in a community that also had a dancer based with it. I was making large fabric things filled with air, so having someone dance with them seemed like a great idea. The dancer and I created a work together which was very successful, and consequently I was invited to work with other dance companies in Australia.

about what was my community. Eventually I decided that I wanted to make Darwin my home and I wanted to consciously be a part of a community. By that time I had started to do some meditation. I discovered the Buddhist temple here in Darwin and began to attend it. Also around this time I had an inkling to go back to church. It was about church being a place where there were children, older people, and middle-aged people. So both the Buddhist temple and the Uniting Church began to provide me with that sense of community.

communities which helped me get an idea of what spirituality means to those people. *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus* looked at Buddhism, Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality. That project not only involved a Christian, a Buddhist and an Aboriginal choreographer, it also involved Christian, Buddhist and Aboriginal soloists and we worked with communities from each of those backgrounds. That's where Bhante Sumedha and I had our first artistic engagement if you like – getting the Buddhist community involved in this piece. People from the Buddhist communities were invited to participate as performers. They could also be a part of the process of the choreographer working with the dancer to interpret Buddhist ideas.

SG: Can you describe the finished piece a little?

TN: We chose an outdoor site called the Water Gardens which is a chain of water ponds. We built a whole series of stages, many of them in the water. A lot of the performance looked as if it was done on water. So it was stunningly beautiful in many ways. With each group we decided on the story we wanted to portray. The Buddhist story we looked at was about the young Buddha coming out of the palace and seeing somebody old, somebody sick and somebody dying. A journey of coming out into the world. With the Christian sequence we focused on Mary's story, her decision to give birth to Jesus and what that meant in a contemporary context. The Aboriginal story we worked with was a Tiwi story (Editor's note – the Tiwi are the Aboriginal nation who live on the islands close to Darwin) about a man called Purukupali; it is a story about the first coming to terms with death.

SG: This piece is obviously about exploring spiritual beliefs. Is your work with Tracks generally about conveying spiritual values?

TN: This is an interesting thing to talk about in an arts context. I think



One project was up in Darwin where I met a man called Cameron who works in large-scale outdoor events using lots of fire and many community groups – really big stuff. I realised that I wanted to work that way as well – bringing in the visual arts and dance and working on large-scale projects with communities. All of that woven together got me where I am today.

I made the decision to move to Darwin in 1988 but continued to travel a great deal as I was still working in Victoria and Tasmania. Eventually I got a little bit tired of that. I started asking myself questions

Very quickly those influences came through in my work, and in 1997 I created a piece called *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus* which drew together three threads that were part of my life. There was the thread of being born a Christian and finding out a bit more about what that was about. Secondly, the thread of going to the Buddhist temple and hearing about the Dharma, because those teachings immediately felt absolutely right to me. Then there was the thread of living in the Northern Territory, developing strong connections with Aboriginal people and doing residencies in Aboriginal

spiritual values are an essential factor of our work because it is that connection of people and place and stories that Tracks is about. It's often at the point of crisis in your life that you do find, or endeavour to find, a spiritual path. That's the point at which you start telling your story or you start asking what your own story is. So there is almost always a link. A big part of the learning that both myself personally and the company as a whole have done is finding out that you can't separate things. In Aboriginal culture there's no separation of the dance from the song, the design from the person from the land from the spirit. The company has really taken on that way of seeing things.

SG: Place seems very important in your work and you usually perform outside. Is the specific site a key element in your work or is your work portable?

TN: A Uniting Church minister who comes to our work made a fantastic comment after seeing about four of our performances. He came up to me very quietly and said, "Do you know what you do? You create sacred sites for people with your work. They're sites you go to for the performance but

they stay with you and you can continue to return to the sacred site if you want to, long after the performance is gone." Although I had never thought about it that way before, his comment made me feel I had succeeded.

Very often we put on performances in sites where people don't expect to find performance, like the *Outside the Camp* performance that we did last year. This was about an island across Darwin Harbour called Channel Island, which was a leprosarium in the fifties. Many Aboriginal people had family taken away from them and placed on that island because of the Biblical idea that lepers shall dwell alone, "outside the camp". So we chose a site at the end of a wharf where in the far-off distance across the water you could actually see the island. There is now a power station built there so this glowing island was the backdrop for the show. During the performance most nights there was a lightning storm so there were lightening bolts flashing about the island. It completely informed the spirit of that piece. We put a lot of work into choosing the sites for our performances.

SG: Let's talk a bit more about Outside the Camp.

TN: A friend of mine told me that his father was taken to Channel Island. He didn't actually have leprosy, but when he was a nine-year-old boy a priest who was running the mission here in Darwin thought the child had leprosy and rowed him over in a boat and dumped him on the island. I was really moved by that story. Stanley, the man whose father was taken away, is now a trained dancer and he danced in the performance.

Stanley is a very good example of how we work with people because they have an understanding of the story we want to tell. In *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus* the woman who portrayed Mary was a Sri Lankan born woman who had classical Indian training but she was of a Christian background. She was someone who was passionate about her Christianity and dancing, who happened to appear when we were looking for someone to play Mary. The people who appear can take you on interesting journeys.

SG: You also said that you wove Buddhist ideas of rebirth into Outside the Camp?

TN: During the project I met up with people from the camp and their stories were quite horrific. But one woman told me how she found her husband on the island – how they fell in love and how her whole life became that island. I was telling Bhante Sumedha about this and he told me the story of a couple that were reborn together in many situations of suffering until eventually they came to a point where they resolved something; one became a monk and the other a nun and they went on their own paths. Hearing that shifted the focus from that one moment on the island where the conditions were quite horrific and placed things in a larger perspective of life and death. So there was a Buddhist story in the show about the couple who kept being reborn and living their lives together because they needed to learn something from



left: Stanley Stanislaus and Tania Lieman in *Outside the Camp*, Sept. 2000

Photo: Elka Kerkofs

each other. People who were on that island would have been asking questions about who they were, why this had happened to them. I wanted to communicate the idea that their thought processes would have been informed by many different senses of religion and spirituality.

SG: I'm fascinated by the way you bring together different spiritualities and rather than neatly try to make them fit with each other you show the bigger picture.

TN: I don't think they do neatly fit together for many people - that is reflected in how people live here in Darwin. The beauty of Darwin is that it is not ghetto-ised in a way. People are very mixed up. I might have an African living on one side of me, and a Timorese on the other and an Aboriginal family living across the road. There is a lot of informing each other of culture and religion that happens here quite naturally.

Sticks and Stones was another project we did last year, where we worked with groups of refugees and immigrants, indigenous and Western young people. Artists from different cultures did workshops with these groups. One of the workshop groups were young people from the Buddhist Temple. So one day we took one of the Aboriginal women artists into the Temple to do her workshop. As soon as we brought her in, as she was standing in front of the young people, she went straight into speaking her own language. I said to her afterwards, "What's that business you were doing at the beginning? You haven't done that before." And she said, "I just came into this place and I was so spiritually moved by the spirit of this place that straight away, I felt I had to go into my own language and talk to my elders and my spirits to explain what I was doing here." That was quite amazing to witness.

This happened just two weeks before our Wesak celebration. The Aboriginal woman (and her mother who had also come along) asked, "Could we sing and dance here as part of that celebration?" So at the

Wesak celebration, a whole Aboriginal family did a traditional dance. They also lit a fire and sang a song. This had never happened before. The Buddhist people were really moved by it because here were the traditional owners of this land, in a place that was now a Buddhist temple, doing traditional songs which related to that land and that place. What an incredible gift. The Aboriginal people came in and helped us connect with the spirit of the place. Their focus was on spiritually nurturing that land; they enabled Bhante (Sumedha), the other monks there and the whole community to see that that is what they are doing in their contemporary role. It enabled everybody to let go of some of the petty tensions that had been there and move on.

SG: Can you tell me a little about your relationship with Bhante Sumedha? Do you consider him your teacher? A friend?

David McMicken dancing in *The Land, the Cross and the Lotus*

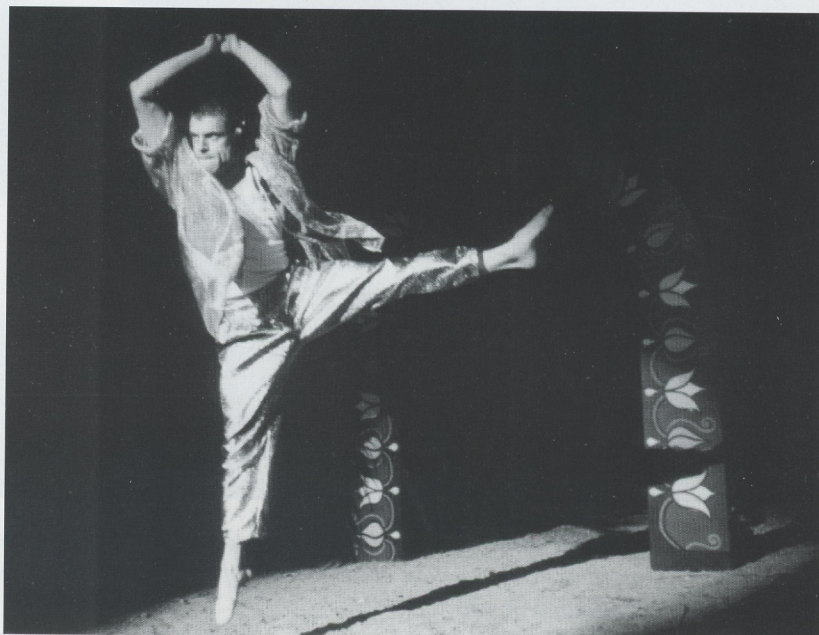


Photo: Elka Kerkofs

TN: I think he and I would both prefer to call ourselves friends. We just seem to journey through life together and learn through these experiences. He now has a fantastic understanding of what the arts mean and what the process is that leads towards a performance. Two years ago he invited me to go with two other people on a journey with him. We went to Sri Lanka, and then we went to India to the sites there where the Buddha was born and Enlightened and where he gave his first Dharma talk and where he died. Bhante took me on that journey so there could be a greater knowing between the two of us. We just keep informing each other's lives and it's a wonderful, rich friendship.