

GROUNDSWELL - National Regional Arts Conference 2002, Albury / Wodonga.

2002 Collaborating with Diversity a paper presented at the Groundswell - National Regional Arts Conference, Albury / Wodonga.

A joint paper by Tim Newth and David McMicken - Co-artistic Directors of Tracks Inc.

Tim Newth (T): Before we begin we would like to acknowledge all the many people who before us, upon this land, have danced their dances, sung their songs, told their stories, and painted their designs.

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David McMicken (D): And the dance continues.

Our work is complex and interconnected, evolving and firmly based on personal relationships, between ourselves and the members of the community with whom we interface. Our practice is a result of our environment: based in Darwin with a population under 100,000, considered regional: everything else in the territory is remote.

We cannot separate our work from place or people. We do not really collaborate across cultures but rather intraculturally. This is the world we live in and in the culture of Darwin, these elements exist and interplay with each other every day.

Tracks was created as a vehicle to realise the philosophies, visions and aspirations of its founders. It grew from a community dance program under the wing of Brown's Mart Community Arts Organisation, and our working methods have been developing for over a decade as a response to our 'home'.

With performers a performers' base of hundreds of people (from city, regional and remote people, Western, Non-western and Indigenous, 'locals and ring-ins'), we create work that reflects our connection to the place we lived in, and how the people of that place are in the best position to articulate their ideas. The artistic vision is intimately linked to community. We accept and celebrate the diversity found here, and research ways to authentically represent this through quality performance experiences. We are a dance company with no core dancers. Much of our work is Site Specific.

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T: In the early 90's I was predominantly working between the Northern Territory, Victoria and Tasmania. In this particular year, I remember working on projects that travelled me from Darwin to Launceston to Auckland to Melbourne to Darwin to Broome to Darwin to Japan to Groote Eylandt then back to Launceston. Somewhere in there, the question arose 'Where do I belong and what is my community'

While on my second visit to Launceston that year I went to a palm reader who suggested that I needed to curl up and stay still for a while. So I did it. I moved from Darwin to Launceston. Instead of sweating it out under a fan, I lit a small fire, drew the curtains and snuggled up under my newly purchased doona.

Ten months later I happily returned to Darwin and made a few changes. The first was to attempt to survive by working predominantly in the Territory. I felt ready to make Darwin my home and my community. I decided I needed a wider circle of friends that included people of

different ages. I started to go to church and to the Buddhist Temple. I was ready to make work that spoke of this place.

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D: We both live as active artists firmly placed in our community and as a company we work in a unique way in Australia, the result of accepting the differences between City and region, between Western and Non-Western.

We are two artists from different backgrounds, and with different skills but shared interests. It is the melding of the **differences** between the two directors, their backgrounds, personal beliefs, working methods, and multiple art form skill 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, on the meeting points, and sometimes on ourselves as artists. It is all about making great human interaction.

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T: October 1995. I am informed that we have just received funding from the Australia Council for the Ngapa project. A project involving a group of white artists and indigenous artists to travel the rain storm jukurrpa, a dreaming path about 2000 kms long which lies between Alice Springs and Darwin, then create a performance from the journey. I am in a remote aboriginal community of Lajamanu with Freddy Jangala Patrick, the man who jointly conceived the project. On that same day, he is flown sick to Katherine Hospital 600 kilometres away. Later that week we are informed he has cancer.

Late October back in Darwin I am getting phone calls from family members saying Jangala is keen to still do the project but wants to start it now. The Australia Council moves quickly to release the money and we move the starting date forward to mid-November. I arrange land permits for the white artist to travel across Aboriginal land, book four-wheel drives and a satellite telephone, arrange with a helicopter company to be able to make an emergency pick up in case someone gets sick or is bitten by a snake, search out a gadget that will pinpoint our position in such a case, arrange sound equipment to record stories on the trip, and work with the other Tracks artists to rearrange the years program to fit in with this change.

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D: Our methods reflect where we live. Although we are still a part of Australia, there are key differences in our culture:

- Territory culture spans Top End Tropical through to Central Australia Desert.
- We have a very arid dry time, and a big wet season.
- Distances between major population centres are vast.
- A large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island population (30% Territory Wide), with many separate language groups.
- A long history of pre-white trade with South East Asia throughout the Top End.
- Darwin harbour is almost twice the size of Sydney, yet we have none of the "Australian beach culture" - Here the water kills you with Crocodiles and Box jellyfish.
- We are a major stepping stone into and from Asia - Dili is the closest capital city. Bali is a very near holiday destination, Indonesia right on our doorstep.

- We do not have tertiary performing arts training, no resultant graduates, let alone retraining, or the resultant pool of western-trained performers taken for granted in larger population centres.
- We do not have full-time employed professional performers
- We are constantly aware of “indigenous” and “multicultural” issues
- The simplest things taken for granted in larger population centres with relatively close proximity to each other, are simply not relevant to us here.
- It is over 3,000 kilometres to an Australian population centre of over 100,000.
- Living in Darwin you are acutely aware of an unusual physical phenomenon - that the distance between a Southern population centre and Darwin is greater than the distance between Darwin and down South.

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T: November, one week before we are due to leave, I have a feeling that I need to speak to Jangala in person. I make the 12-hour journey to Lajamanu. He looks much sicker but his spirits are strong. The night I arrive I take him to see two 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 with me Ngapa dreaming designs and I record stories of this country, in his Warlpiri language. In a broken English I also record his life story, how he travelled his country as a child with his family from one water hole to the next. These water holes are the sacred sites of the Ngapa dreaming.

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D: 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, (both in people, trade, visits, family, food, etc). By the time you overlap the various cultural calendars, there is something on the boil at all times.

Our current work practices have been researched and refined for over a decade. We have discovered many 'truths'. One core truth is that **“the collective or community way of thinking is an integral part of our culture, as opposed to the individual”**.

The Western Construct places emphasis on independence and less on a need for social involvement. This often entails paying less attention to the metamessage levels of communication - the level that comments on relationships - focusing instead on the information level. This may go so far as the conviction that **only** the information level counts. It is what allows us to secrete 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)

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

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D: Collective approach to things, including talk and when in a group this includes “small talk” maintains relationships, affirms our humanness and strengthens personal relationships.

These are qualities that in the Western world generally have been denigrated as frivolous, a waste of time, beating around the bush, and insignificant. Certainly not “getting down to the brass tacks” of real endeavour.

As the world becomes more “global” it is being matched with a new approach to community, as seen in the increase and success of community banks or in the proliferation of the new “virtual” communities such as the multitude of e-chat groups. In a recent book by a Melbourne Science and technology writer Damien Broderick, called **The Spike, How our lives are being transformed by rapidly advancing technologies**, the author states that the faster technology changes, and the more global and singular become the big interests: then 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.

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T: Steve, one of Jangala’s sons, comes with me at Christmas time to visit my family just outside of Wangaratta in Victoria. It’s his first time out of the Territory.

I am not sure now how to negotiate things now. When someone dies you can't even mention their name. A water tank that the two of us had painted with dreaming designs is moved from the centre of the settlement. However, I get a message from the women saying they are ready and Steve has started to negotiate with the men as to who should be travelling with us.

But shortly after this, I get a letter from the Australia Council to say the money had been withdrawn due to the key artist dying. In a Western individualistic way of thinking if the key artist dies then I guess the project couldn’t go on but in this Aboriginal culture things have a collective ownership and it was just a matter of following the right protocol and waiting to be told who was the next right person or people. Eventually, we clear things up and the money is reinstated.

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D: Our predominant process is one of collaboration, relationships that highlight connections. In order to produce quality work, we work with experts. These experts are often not people regular artists might approach.

The many realities of our situation, often seen by others as negatives, (ie. isolation, small population, vast distances between population centres, highest incidences of many social ills, unbearable build-up weather, small western trained base, limited performance opportunities etc etc) are what we seize on as opportunities.

You can fight the place you live in or you can explore and celebrate. We chose to develop working methods appropriate to the people, place and spirit of where we come from. We decide the currency.

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T: Late April. David and I finally head down to start the project, with an archivist travelling down 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 cut and the mail plane and food trucks not able to make their way in.

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D: Our unique processes lie in the difference between the individual and the collective. It is evident in our Western arts practice that has for many years glorified individuality, solo virtuosity, in stark contrast to people in many parts of the world where they more often glorify involvement in family and clan for women and men. Many of our principles are paralleled in cultural, anthropological, and linguistic studies.

The glorification of independence (the 'pioneers') may have served the general "progress" of Western culture: Individuals willing to leave the comfort of the familiar and the familial - to find opportunity, get the best education, training, travel, work wherever they could find the best jobs or wherever their jobs sent them. More emphasis on a need for independence and less on social involvement.

However, a Collective approach to things maintains relationships, affirms our humanness and strengthens personal relationships.

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

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T: Mid-May. We head in for another attempt, artists, an archivist, 4wds and gear including the magic satellite phone. It's dark now and we are just a few kms out of the settlement, a car stops us 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. We meet with the women who are not able to talk because of the sorry. 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 the women are released early. Three days after our third attempt to begin the project we are all loaded up, men, women and equipment ready to go.

As we head out of the settlement the men and the 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.

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D: **We believe in the Knowing that a community has of itself**, participants performing about what they know best - what they have the most experience and expertise in - Therefore our process involves input from diversity at all levels, planning, Committee of management, creating, performing, evaluating, recommendations. Input as experts. People coming away knowing more about who they are as a community member, knowing through experience (as performer, worker or audience), feeling emotively what they know, kinaesthetically and rationally knowing. They come away richer, and more articulate in a number of forms.

Employment of specialists who are not necessarily seen in the mainstream as such but highly qualified within our context

Our practice has a community base because we live in a regional community. It is about Soul, Relationship, time, commitment, interconnectedness of self, form and cultures.

Because we are working artists creating work about who we are and where we fit into our view of the world, we have spent a great deal of time honing our skills and consolidating them within the greater picture of the cultural development of firstly our own place, and then secondly into the bigger picture of Australian Culture.

One has to respect the difference that is in the workplace, and when that workplace is the wider community then it can quickly become complicated. Some lessons are obvious and some take years to learn. As We have learned from work in indigenous communities, knowledge is only passed on when the student has shown that they are responsible enough to handle the information, (an opposite approach to Western education that says all knowledge is yours to have, you just have to study.)

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T: In 2002 I took up a three-month Asialink residency in Sri Lanka. I was interested to see if the residency reinforced ways of working Tracks had adopted over the years. Based in Darwin, where we are strongly influenced by Indigenous Australia and South East Asia. Here work is often created in a much more communal way. Events and celebrations created for particular seasons or phases of the moon. After 15 years of working in Darwin I have learnt That if you put on a show leading into the full moon you will get mozzies, just after and your fine. The interconnectedness of art and its relationship to people, place and spirit is vital.

In 1990 I did a similar thing by spending three months in Lajamanu which was personally and professionally significant. I called myself an Australian yet here I was in the centre of this country surrounded by people of different colour, culture and language. I felt like within my life so far I had been like a blackboard collecting what I thought was important to survive. Here I had to wipe this blackboard clean and start again.

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D: Respect for difference, accepting that there are many stories, that no one is the only boss. Respect for the importance of holding onto, nurturing, and maintaining culture. Respect for different methods: Contemporary arts practice is often very derogatory towards people who do not think, act, or believe in the same philosophies and practice. Respect for who has the information, who owns/manages the information. Respect for who sees the final outputs: some work remains secret, some work is open.

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T: In Sri Lanka I attached myself to a Buddhist organization. Living and travelling with monks we went to temples, funerals, high ordinations and other rituals, I travelled into war zones and gave presentations to artists, students, lay people and indigenous elders. In particular, I participated in three major cultural events.

I also attached myself to the dance company Sama Ballet and saw dance performances, traditional rituals, weddings, and homecomings and toured local theatres, flash hotels and smoky bars. I was challenged by people's stories of corruption and war. I was inspired by how connected people's spiritual lives were to their culture.

All the major events I participated in had a strong sense of community and professional participation. People talked about the transition of dance moving from the villages in the form of rituals to now being performed on stage. In both cases, it was how people connected to an audience that really interested me. It made me think about why we expect an audience to come and see our work and what is their connection to it, if any.

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D: Our processes challenge established Western methods. We place the new in the context of the old.

We question the inexorable chasing of the new, and the modern, and question who benefits from this. Where does old wisdom, (as often held within traditional cultures) fit into the new?

The lack of fame that Traditional and cultural forms often engender leads to greater liberty for the people who encounter that form, perceivers, makers and performers are coming from a place of understanding, respect and reflection of themselves within their community.

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 and then 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? Imagined and imaginary - unidentifiable, dreamed, the great potential throng, an infinitude without faces, anonymous, the entire world, Applauding and invisible?

Or

Identifiable faces, watching everything, admiring, approving, owning.

Who is showing what, and to whom?

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T: For culture to stay alive we need to teach it and pass it on, take note of our environment and grow and adapt accordingly. There is no such thing as the norm. We need to come together to better understand ourselves, our neighbour and the world around us.

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D: Here are some pictures of people we have worked with. These are our company.

[SHOW SLIDESHOW, COLLABORATING WITH DIVERSITY]