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Milpirri giving new hope in the Tanami Desert

The Jarda-warnpa atonement and reconciliation ceremony, revitalised after nearly 30 years of being absent from community life, has given new hope to the Warlpiri people in the Northern Territory. Janice McEwen describes a unique performance project with Tracks Dance.

In the desert, when the cold air and the hot air come together, the Milpirri heavy rainstorm cloud is formed, a powerful dreaming for desert people, and a key to the survival of the Warlpiri people, bringing rain, new growth and nourishment for the people and their culture.

Traditionally, when Milpirri formed in the skies above the Tanami Desert, the Jarda-warnpa atonement and reconciliation ceremony took place, enabling the four major groupings of the Warlpiri skin system to settle disputes and work out their differences. However, until recently the Jarda-warnpa had been absent from the life of the remote Northern Territory community of Lajamanu for thirty years, and the skin groups that signal each person's accepted place and relationships within the community were breaking down.

Then, through the inspiration of Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, a Lajamanu teacher and elder, parts of the Jarda-Warnpa were performed for the whole community. Steve believes his dreaming is a powerful metaphor for what he wants to achieve in his community, so he approached Tracks, who first worked in Lajamanu in 1988, to develop a performance based on this dreaming of his clan. The outcome was a performance project that brought the old and young of the community together in a new and reciprocally respectful way, with a full-scale

Milpirri

work: milpirri
photographer: robert carter
concept: steve jampijinpa patrick
directors: tim newth, david mcmicken and lajamanu elders

For more information about *milpirri* visit the tracks website:
<www.tracksdance.com.au/html/work_2005_milpirri.html>.

dance and music performance featuring a cast of around 200 community members and high production values, before the whole Lajamanu community.

The Milpirri development project aimed to increase school attendance in Lajamanu, where attendance is 40 per cent to 60 per cent, and the school is viewed as 'a white fella thing'. Steve believes the Kadiya (white fellas) at the school don't understand the Yapa (Warlpiri) way of learning, so children are not encouraged to attend school.

The production aimed to re-focus the community's attention on the value of education and to make possible the needed strength 'both ways' to make the most of life in this remote community. Steve believes that the school needs to become a 'learning centre', a place that is an integral part of community life. 'My people need to understand both world views' he says.

Tracks worked with the elders, members of the community council, staff of the community school and the young adolescent students. Youth dance leaders, trained in hip hop and break dance, worked with the young school students, while Tracks directors Tim Newth and David McMicken developed a sound track which included narrative in both Warlpiri and English.

The performance brought a night of transformation to the community, with high anticipation in the air with the preparation of the stage, the outdoor basketball court, and the gathering of the 200-plus performers. The community audience was seated on the ground or perched on the backs of utes parked around the performance arena, backed by sixteen colourful banners of clan designs.

There are four distinct groups of performers—the male elders who sing and play clapstick boomerangs; the older women, the Yawalyu dancers; young traditional male dancers; and the younger school kids who perform contemporary dance routines. Each group is divided into four by colour, representing the four skin groups. The performance becomes an interweaving and building of meaning. With the coming of the rain, floodplains provide a feast of colour, activity and celebration. There are four parts to the song cycle: the traditional Warlpiri warriors' purlapa, danced by the young men; the traditional Warlpiri women's yawulyu; the young women's contemporary interpretation of the story; and the young men's story interpretation.

This pattern is repeated is by each skin group. Young and old, traditional and contemporary, all contribute to the stories and the messages, and the pattern of the performance. Each of the song cycles has a powerful message for the people.

Then come the Jarda-warnpa, led by the four main skin group leaders with the young initiated men, dancing together in a circular group, getting closer and closer to a chorus of vibrant calls, rising to a crescendo as the dancers press together in a tight-knit group.

But first all the children dance to a contemporary song, 'Desert People', a fusion of songs sung by the North Tanami Band and Elders of the Lajamanu Community,



Women of the Napaljarri and Nungarrayi skin groups
Front: Judy Napaljarri Walker
Back: Myra Nungarrayi Herbert



Girls of the Napaljarri and Nungarrayi skin groups



Kneeling: Dion Jakamarra Patterson
Flipping: Gerald Japanangka Robbo

and performed by the Lajamanu Community. This is an expression of recent history and community pride which has everyone—performers and audience alike—moving to the rhythmic beat: 'We are the desert people, we are the Warlpiri tribe, we are the people of the desert, the desert people.'

The performance culminated in a selection of parts of the Jarda-warnpa atonement and reconciliation ceremony, revitalised and updated after nearly 30 years of being absent from community life. The ceremony allowed the community to start afresh, with strength and hope and a renewed commitment to the traditional Warlpiri values that are embedded in the song cycles that are performed.

Inspired and excited, the elders are planning to further revitalise the Jarda-wampa, and there's talk of the old men taking the ceremony into the bush the next day. The children, even more excited, stay behind to dance and play on the basketball court well into the night.

This year when the storm clouds again form over the Tanami Desert, the Lajamanu community and Tracks will once more create the Milpirri performance.

Janice McEwen was the Executive Officer of Ausdance NT, and is now the President of Ausdance NT. She is also the Director of Top End Arts Marketing in Darwin.

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