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Autumn 2008



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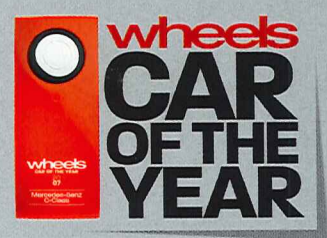
Overseas model shown.

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DESERT SPIRIT

You don't need a theatre to produce breathtaking visuals, as Tracks' artistic co-directors have found

By **ASHLEIGH WILSON**



A photograph of two men, Tim Newth and David McMicken, standing against a black background. They are both wearing large, circular frames made of woven bamboo or cane, which are traditional didgeridoo frames. Tim Newth, on the left, is wearing a light-colored, possibly white or cream, blazer over a patterned shirt. David McMicken, on the right, is wearing a dark jacket over a patterned shirt. Both men are looking directly at the camera with serious expressions. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their faces and the texture of the frames.

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TIM NEWTH
TRACKS ARTISTIC CO-DIRECTOR

■ Tim Newth and David McMicken, artistic co-directors of Tracks dance company.

Under a desert moon last October, a group of dancers decorated with body paint spread across the basketball court that serves as their dusty stage. Dogs wander past as men and women, young and old, take their places.

Their movements are solemn and deliberate, traditional and modern. Half of the 500-strong population of Lajamanu – a remote Aboriginal community 600km north-west of Alice Springs – is playing a role tonight. The other half is watching.

A group of wiki poles – huge poles decorated with dried leaves – are set on fire and the dancers weave their way through the smoke and embers. At the end of the performance the entire area is on fire. It's a stunning spectacle, and the show's artistic co-director, Tim Newth is thrilled by the audience response.

"The performance, Milpirri 2, is based on a story about preparations for an initiation ceremony. The whole scene with the fire takes the elders right back to the ceremonies of their childhoods, and that's fantastic," he says.

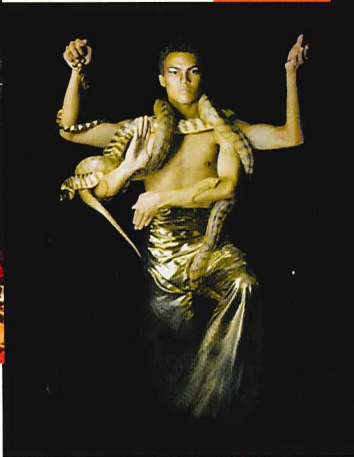
It is a show you won't see anywhere else in Australia. A production by Darwin's innovative dance company Tracks, Milpirri 2 can be seen only at this remote desert community. The set, the people, the town and

From Darwin, the artistic directors have embraced the unique cultural melting pot of the north, taking on indigenous and South-East Asian themes. In 1998, for example, they created 'The Land, the Cross and the Lotus' – a story based on Christianity's Virgin Mary, Buddhism's Siddhartha and Tiwi culture.

"I had a whole range of symbols to play with. It was wonderful," Newth recalls. "It was all performed on water. The Virgin Mary was on a flat lotus boat which was elaborately painted, inspired by the Buddhist temple in Darwin.

"The boat was pushed by angels and then they lifted up the boat and it became the backdrop," Newth says. "It was very contemporary and larger than life and the key for me about the whole thing was the way it connected with our audience."

Tracks' intense creativity and meaningful focus delivered them the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award in 2004. And, although they operate thousands of kilometres from southern cities, remoteness has never been a concern. Indeed, they once put on a show called 'The Opportunity of Distance'.



even the basketball court are all integral parts of the show, so tours are out of the question.

"We've taken on the philosophy that you don't move Uluru for people to see it," says Newth. "Most dance companies create their work and tour it, but we don't create work to tour. Most of our work is site-specific – we create works for particular places. I think of them as sacred spaces."

David McMicken, Tracks' other artistic director, talks about the transforming effect of performances like Milpirri 2. "If you walked into this community the day before the performance, you'd have seen the army arrive, the flies, the dogs, the empty basketball court, everyone inside. Suddenly, the next day, the place is totally transformed!"

Over two decades, Newth and McMicken have overseen the growth of Tracks into the Northern Territory's most celebrated dance company, renowned for its spectacular, large-scale shows which have been compared with opening ceremonies created by Rick Birch.

"It's not uncommon that people in remote or regional areas, particularly young people, don't feel good about where they are, that it's got to be better somewhere else," Newth says. "But I don't live in a place like that, so I feel I have a responsibility to develop something that counteracts that perception."

With funding from the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments, Tracks was officially founded 10 years ago. But its beginnings date back to 1988 when Newth, who had worked in dance but been trained in the visual arts, moved to Darwin from Melbourne. A few years later, McMicken arrived, also from Victoria, and the pair joined forces.

"In Victoria, there's a structure about what a dance company should be," Newth says. "You have 10 dancers, you lock yourself away in your box, create your works and put them in another box called a theatre.

"I guess what we learned from spending time in indigenous ►

communities, and working with South-East Asian artists, and also just living here, is that there are other [performance] structures," he says. "The dance we create is much more connected to communities."

Tracks puts on about three productions each year, at varying venues. Partly due to the lack of venues in Darwin, but also a desire to connect with the environment around them, Newth, 45, and McMicken, 48, find themselves choreographing dancers in the most unlikely locations, like a demolition site. In 2004 they created 'Snakes, Gods and Deities' on a Darwin golf course with Sri Lanka's Sama Ballet.

CURRENTLY they're planning a show in a Darwin bank, telling a fictional story about Ned Kelly in the Top End. "The place is quite specific to a show, so people who come to a Tracks show actually venture into a space that relates to its meaning," Newth explains.

Newth and McMicken are guided by four

principles: indigenous, multicultural, seniors and youth. Whether suggested by colleagues or inspired by personal interests, their productions always involve at least one of these elements. But what really turns heads is the intoxicating creativity used to stun the visual sense.

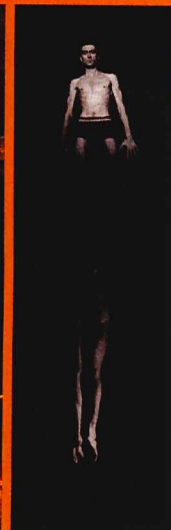
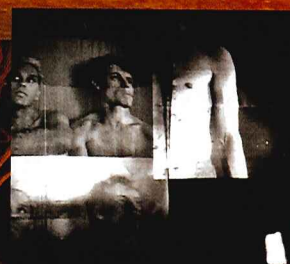
And so it was at Lajamanu, with this year's event requested by locals two years after the first Milpirri performance. The company now has funding for another two Milpirri shows in the region.

Milpirri 1 came about after a local elder approached Newth and McMicken expressing

a desire to bridge the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous culture. They then set to work, putting together a production that followed the idea of Milpirri – a concept about a storm cloud.

"The idea is that the storm cloud is formed when hot air and cold air meet, making thunder and a lot of lightning and rain," McMicken says. "If you get in the middle, it's dangerous, but if you look where it's going, there's got to be some good that comes out of it."

Says Newth, "I've worked in a lot of indigenous communities, but Milpirri is the first thing I've been involved in that the whole community connected with. It actually drew people together. For us, Milpirri is much more than just putting on a show. It's bigger. It's cultural growth and community development as well." ■



RE MOTENESS HAS NEVER BEEN A CONCERN. INDEED, THEY ONCE PUT ON A SHOW CALLED 'THE OPPORTUNITY OF DISTANCE'.

