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diversity nt



Co-Artistic Directors
David McMicken and Tim Newth

TRACKS

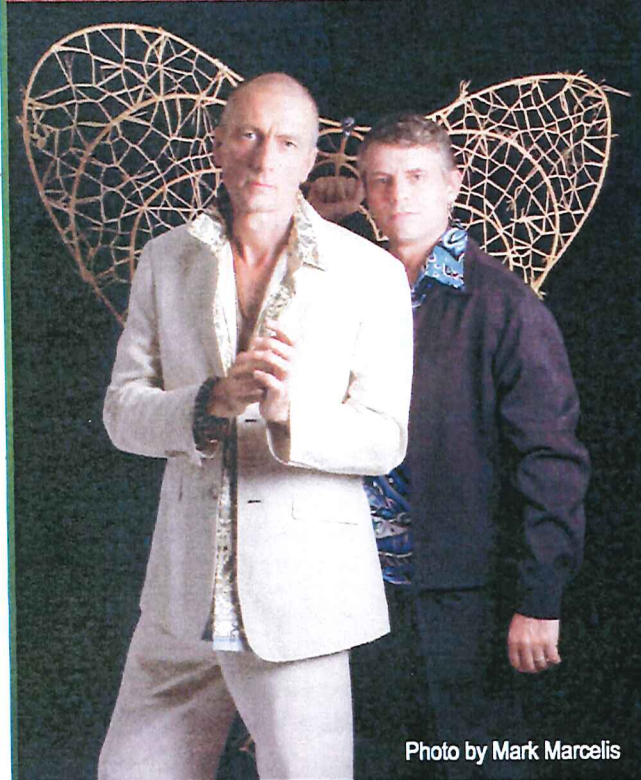


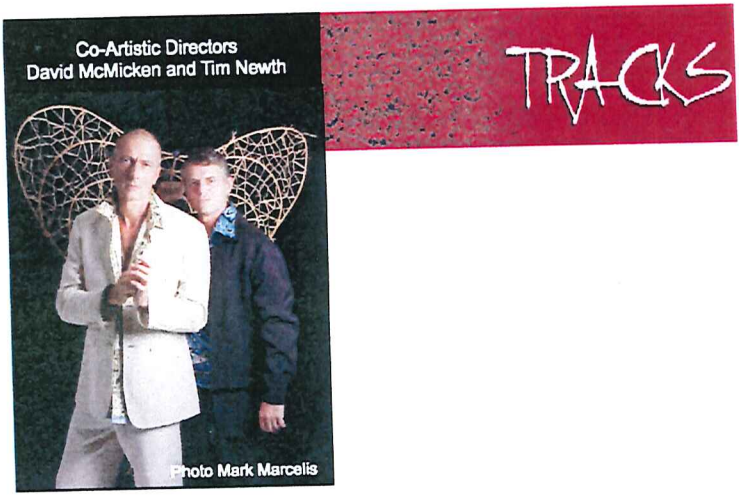
Photo by Mark Marcelis

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Tracks Dance
 Co directors David Mc Micken and Tim Newth
 Interview by Mark Halton – Diversity NT

I've lived in the Northern Territory for almost eighteen years, so I have had the opportunity to see TRACKS DANCE evolve, develop, and achieve over the years some amazing and inspiring works that not only involved the community but empowered those who have actively participated. Mark Halton editor.

Q.1 What would you consider to be the biggest achievement of the Company to date?

Tim: 'We have several funding bodies and there was a point where we were put onto what is called triennial funding with the Australian Council for the Arts; that's federal funding and we were really a small fish in as far as Australia, nobody really knew about the company so it was a real surprise to other dance companies right across Australia; I think there's like nine other dance companies and I think that put us onto the national platform so that was certainly a really significant step for the company nationally. I know it feels like a funding thing but it put us on that level with those other companies around the country'

David: 'It put us on equal footing with every other state and territory and the dance companies so people were able to start taking us seriously as an Australian contender but still being very strongly Territorian and Darwin based; and very soon after that we won an award the **Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award** which was for recognition as an Australian company for a long term commitment to developing Australian Art and we were very proud of that because we weren't just developing Art we were trying to create something that was particular about who we were and where we came from, so to be recognised to be creating Australian culture from the Northern Territory was a really big achievement at that point'

'We have also just had a significant national recognition in the last week where we went down to Melbourne pick up an Award for the **Australian Dance Award** and that was an award for **Outstanding Achievement with Youth and Community**, so that was fantastic really big glitzy affair at the State Theatre where all Australian dance companies were there from the Australian Ballet and the Sydney Dance Company down all being nominated and we won that award.

It's a new area to try and recognise the huge amount of work that happens in those areas and really just in the main street dance companies and we haven't been able to get ourselves up there in the past because we don't work in the same way as those other companies'.

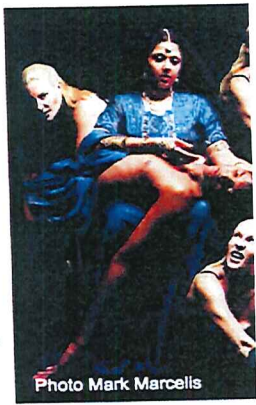


Tim: 'It is a very different way of working so it has felt really significant for us to get that National recognition, to go that we working is something the rest of the country applaud'

Q: Who would you consider has influenced you in regards to the development of TRACKS?

David: 'Because we create work about where we are; it's really important to have good influence coming from the people in the place we are, so in one sense quite hard to say "that particular person influenced once I was here". I had mentors from the past like a woman called Shirley

McKechnie, who was one of my primary teachers and who has remained a really close friend, who influences the processes I use but in each area different people have given me a strong push into different areas; there might be a particular indigenous person from a remote place in



Lajamanu who gives you the information and then passes you to the right people there's particular family there that strongly does that. I've had a lot of influence up here in Darwin in structuring things through people like Dave Pratt (Space Ace) and how he produces music and puts together and how I see that'

'If I'm creating a work that is about a particular thing like 'you dance funny' for example and I looking for comedic dance; well then I look quite broadly for where I get my influences from.

Given that Tim and I have had a 20 year relationship and I think we both continue to influence each other, that's the major creative collaboration and the ongoing one that has the most strength in the foundation I think'

Tim: 'There's sort of that comforting thing about people, place, spirit and for me when you're asking who? 'Who' connects us to 'place' connects us to 'spirit' and coming to the Northern Territory 21 years ago, for me my exploration is about who am I as an Australian, that's what I'm wanting to find out. Particularly coming to Darwin having contact with indigenous people living in remote desert communities for the first time, the people that I met there, how they create art, how they live, what they eat, all those things. And in the same way I grew up in a little country town in Victoria.

I always find it fascinating when I meet somebody who's the same age as me that's grown up during war or a boat person from Vietnam, those things really keep opening up this question of what does it mean to be an Australian and more particularly what does it mean to be an Australian living in this part of world.'

Q: Performance can be a very empowering thing for those who are involved, and it can also be extremely rewarding for your selves, saying that; what has surprised you most about that experience?

David: 'every time it is surprising and revealing how much people are prepared to give of themselves in the process. Often if we're working with people who haven't had much performance experience they might seem a bit nervous at first but by the time you get to the performance you've got people doing things where there is constant feedback, where they're going 'this has changed my life' or 'I never thought I could' or 'I've



really opened up myself to these other people', and often they're saying things that they feel are private or they don't want to let out and as soon as they do that in performance and

make it open in general there's a huge lifting of spirit that happens at that point. I've got a saying for myself: 'well you've just survived a

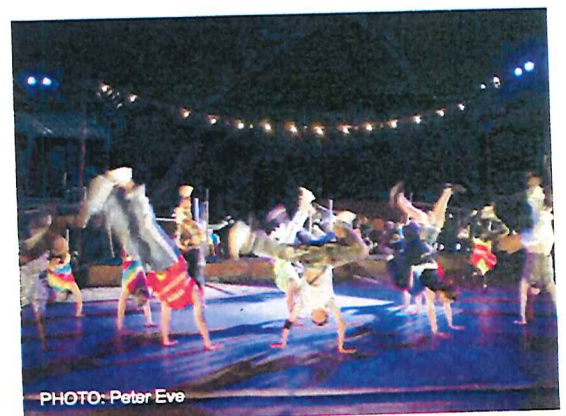
performance experience' and once you do break that barrier there's a huge very quick spike, they (performers) often think that you have to be a specialist or its only for particular people or I have no skills etcetera and so it is incredibly empowering to give that to the performer.

Every time they break through that it surprises me cause you always think maybe they won't; but you know they will'

Tim: 'The thing that keeps coming to mind is the long relationship with Lajamanu the remote Aboriginal community and just in the last recent years Caleb Patrick who's in his early 20's now. When he started to come up here he auditioned to be part of one of our youth shows with all the other youth in Darwin and actually got into the cast and just the fact that unless you've actually lived in an Aboriginal community, maybe this is hard to understand but he's been prepared to come and live up here by himself for six weeks to actually be part of a Tracks performance.

He lives a thousand kilometres away in a tiny community where most people don't speak English. I guess the thing that's here is that when I first went down to that community 20 years ago I worked with his grandfather on dance projects; he is no longer alive.

The reason he comes up here is that we've been working with his family for three generations now; and there's trust there, and it's a trusted relationship. It's much bigger than performance or empowerment, it's this whole life relationship and connections that just keep growing'



Q: Indigenous culture has been an important element in the journey of Tracks Dance from 1988 when you first engaged the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu right up until the last performance in 2008 'Lipstick and Ochre' with the Yawalyu Ceremonial Dancers of Lajamanu. What would you consider the most valuable lesson learned; working with these people after all this time?

Tim: 'I think it's about the work relationship being sort of like any other relationship it's a commitment to another person and that that commitment sure in our context connects to a performance it's actually bigger than that'

David: 'To me one big lesson is; don't make the work - make the relationships and the work will come. You can go in and say we're going to do this and this and this, and you leave everyone behind or you can go in and say what are we going to do today? It not quite that loose, but what journey are we going to go on together?'



Part of that relationship is that you have an openness with the people you're working with to get it wrong, you don't have to get it right every single time all the time, it's all about

those relationships with the people, they're real, they're family. They are thirty percent of the population here and they take up about thirty percent of our thinking work life. But that aside, that's not why we do it, we do it because they are true honest relationships with those people. Both sides feel committed to each other'

Tim: 'it's certainly about learning to respect difference'

David: 'and we have often said that part of who we are (I mean it's our job) but part of who we are as people are people who are passionate about creating culture and if you want to know about culture in this country and how to exist on this big huge lump of land there are certainly people here who have such a wealth of experience that we can learn from. And so that's why when we're saying that there's this exchange you can't make comments about Australia without dealing with it.

Even though the population over all is around three percent or something it seems small it's still an incredibly huge amount of what this country is, and I can't learn that from just hanging around my own folk. It's very confronting at times but it's really important'

Q: Do you feel that being Gay men has helped you to clearly identify what it is like to be a minority or does this play no part in your performance work?

Tim: 'I think when you're young and you're a gay man you certainly - I think it's changed a bit but I never saw stories on the television or in the movies that reflected me, I think that been a big part of being able to work with minority groups'

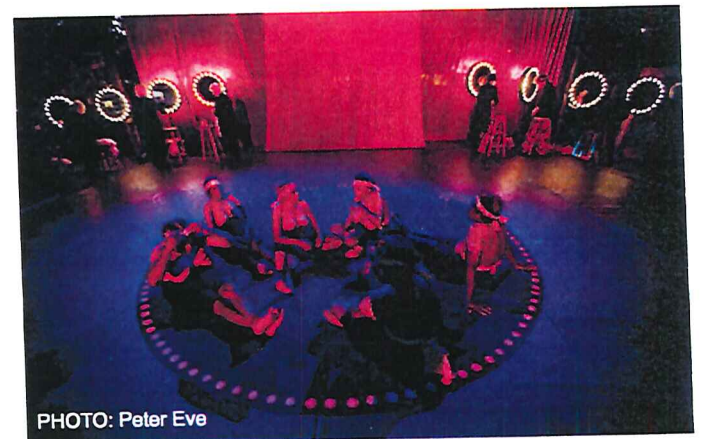


David: 'I think it has a major effect an influence on me and it's a driving factor in a lot of what I do. Our whole mission statement I guess is to give voice to Territory culture and in order to do that the main thing is to ensure that many voices are heard.

It's one of the things I've learnt a lot from indigenous culture as well and it's time to look at something. They go around the circle and everyone gets a say, and I've been so used to so many people and groups that I've worked with not being able to have a say and not being able to get heard in what they might call the mainstream, therefore they are seeing themselves as minor.

I think that it's a really important part of our work to make sure that we don't carry on those ways of being that hinder that voice, and that might mean we have to be aware when we're creating work that we're not just creating for the mainstream culture or the heterosexual culture, that we're allowing others, and it's sometimes about sexuality and its sometimes about race and its sometimes about gender, but it is in a sense not necessarily seeing them as minorities but seeing them as the key people who can speak about themselves or dance about themselves or create theatre about themselves'

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Q: It must be extremely gratifying to work in the performing arts, when you both look back at the long list of works that you have created and the diversity of topics, what stories still need to be told?

David: 'I think there are a huge amount of Indigenous stories that need to be told and they are not the surface stories, they are not 'let's tell a dreamtime story' or 'let's tell about the invasion'. The deeper we go the richer those stories are and Australia is just ignorant to that, not everyone but for a lot of people, so I think there is a huge richness to tell.'

Because we create contemporary work, the fusion of cultures in Australia, and how they sit side by side, is a constantly changing picture. In Darwin in the last five years there has been an influence of African culture which we haven't yet assimilated into our thinking to get them into our program, but we are finding that it's there.

How do people exist in a world that is becoming more diverse and how do you deal with diversity?
They are big stories to be told'

Tim: 'In the context of the company we have this thing that the company is the community and with the 'stories to tell'. I do want to tell my story in my community story; and my story today is different to the story I will need to tell in six months time. I do know that there are more stories to be told and what Tracks is about is about creating contemporary culture from here'



Q: Would there be a place for performance in the future that would deal with the prejudice that effects the GLBTI community?

David: 'What prejudice? (laugh) the energy in the company comes not just from us, it comes from underneath. What I've called the love trilogy- 'bodies of light' 'love verses gravity' and then that developed into 'rivers of the underground' - was about how I was dealing with love as a gay man and the prejudices that are there, they were driven very strongly by me and my views. But it comes through in our work in different ways, part of what we do in creating new work is to present an idealised world, a world where it stops being a problem so we want to make sure that gay and lesbians if they are there are in our work; without saying that they are a separate minority' But given what happens in the community if it comes



up and it's a major thing for the people we work with then it is something that gets transformed into projects'

Tim: 'I think because David and I are gay men that work in a company that is based in the community the example that comes to mind it not a tracks work but David's wedding where there were thirty Grey Panthers (older performing women's group established by Tracks) women in their 60's 70's and 80's all with their hankies crying their eyes out while he said his vows; that were utterly supportive of him in that. I know that doesn't answer it, but for me it's how we are part of the community and we can all learn to accept each other by walking together'

David: 'And to be able to show other members of the community, this is very odd cause it's a dance company; but to say as openly gay men in the community and to stand up and say look what you can achieve.

You don't have to let yourself be beaten down and so part of what we offer is a haven for that.

A lot of the support against the prejudices comes through the rehearsals, you don't see it on the stage, it is about getting the person to the point where they can proudly stand there and say you can't knock me down, I'm here.

We're certainly post stonewall - I remember for myself as a gay man when I was eighteen it was still against the law in Victoria and just going - no! - and fighting for law reform then and fighting for law reform up here and saying I'm not going to stand there and I don't think anyone should'

Q: Do you dance at home when you're alone?

Tim: 'I can tell you a story. I actually don't come from a dance background, and I only realised a couple of years ago that I actually stopped dancing in any public sense of that because I had this thing that I was the artistic director of a dance company and oh shit I'm not a dancer though, do I tell anybody or do I not, because everyone make that assumption, so yes it was a really conscious thing a couple of years ago to realise I actually loved dancing as a younger person and I had stopped doing it'

So yeah I'm looking for opportunities to get out there whether it be in my lounge room or at a somebody's party, I'm available.

David: 'The other day I received four cd's from Space Ace (Dave Pratt) from Zoo (a dance club night in Perth) and I out them on and I couldn't help having a good boogie around the house until my partner told me I had to stop and said 'you're not at work now' .

Q: Why does your relationship as co directors work so well?

David: 'I think for me that there are several reasons, one is that our skill sets aren't so different, they go well together.

At the same time, because when there are moments of work difference, we have a commitment to working through that, as we said early work for us is about relationship.

Part of having a relationship that works is being able to get through difference and resolve things and we do that through the work as well.

There's also such a long time working together it's like an old married couple and you go 'is it worth throwing this away. I don't actually think that, but at the moment I could not see my work with Tracks without Tim'

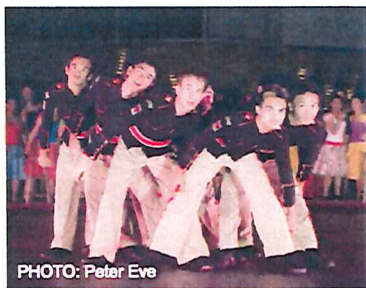


PHOTO: Peter Eve

Tim: 'I think in the first instance David and I have a common belief system if you like, in the biggest terms of what a belief system might be, which is the thing that keeps us on the same path together'

David: 'There's an ethical foundation to our work, to each other and part of that is about supporting not just the people we work with but each other as well'

Q: Are there any goals still to be achieved or is this journey of Tracks something that continues to evolve?

David: 'To me as long as the Territory keeps changing I'll keep changing with it and I'll keep evolving how I work, and there's a natural progression to for myself as I get older there a lessening of something's I can do so as I keep changing I'll keep evolving too'

Tim: 'it feels like a personal thing you know. I keep finding things inside myself that surprises myself whether it is realising that I haven't got up and danced for 15 years and therefore have to do something about it, I'm a strong believer in the more personal it is the more universal it is in many ways too. I feel there is still a lot to know about who I am and how I exist in the world'.

David: 'I've done a lot of work with the Grey Panthers women over sixties group and we've done a lot of work with elders in Communities and its always until more recent years been something like 'the old people' and I'm learning from them there's a pathway there, but the closer I get to that the more I'm actually interested in not just doing stuff that entertains for them but stuff that's more about myself as an aging man, as a gay man.

Thanks to David McMicken & Tim Newth / co directors of Tracks Dance.



PHOTO: Rodney Laredo

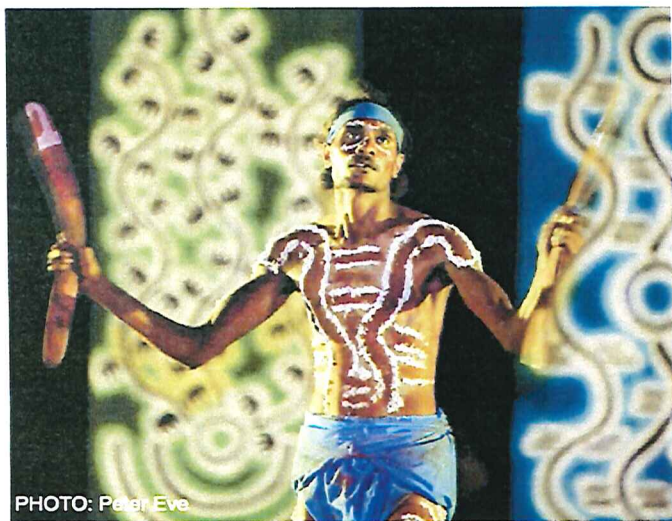
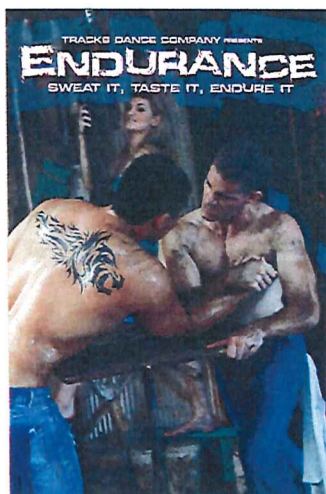


PHOTO: Peter Eve

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