

Landed. An audience experience approach. By David McMicken. June 2016

The show is called Landed. It is Tracks Inc.'s (Tracks Dance Company) twenty-first consecutive outdoor season for the Darwin Festival.

Choreography for Landed was by David McMicken, Tim Newth, Kelly Beneforti, Gary Lang, Aaron Lim, and additional input from the dancers, especially Darren Edwards and Vera Tabuzo. Overall artistic Direction was by Tim Newth and David McMicken

The performers were sourced through various methods. The core three dancers were head hunted for their specific abilities and background. Millner Primary students were chosen because of our connection with the school and one of the teachers in particular who had a strong dance background. This group was given to us without selection, decided by the school. Millner Primary is a school with a high number of special needs children, many from broken homes and low socio-economic backgrounds.

The Casuarina Senior College Students were chosen because of our connection to the school and Kelly had done a lot of previous work through the school. They were the students who had chosen year 11 dance as a subject, and again we had no say as to who they were. Casuarina College, as a school, has a very strong demographic representation of Darwin, with many students coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Ensemble dancers were chosen through audition, with local Larrakia Indigenous dancer and choreographer Gary Lang, the choreographer for their section, running the audition and having input into the selection.

Then soundtrack was predominantly created by David McMicken, with an additional recording of a local cellist, Rebecca Harris (improvising and a piece of Bach) for the Earth Section, and a rework of a track that Matt Cunliffe had originally created for a Milpirri show with (Remote Lajamanu community festival) for the finale. The sound track was created in advance of the rehearsal period. In the performance the sound was played through 5 different systems: two from a powered sound desk, and three from portable battery operated sound systems. Except for one light used at the very end, there was no lighting design.

For costume design, the tea shirts were created by a local youth, Isaiah Balcombe with Tim Newth using a reverse tie-dye technique. The three main groups all had shirts of specific colours and designs. Air was green and more cloud like, Earth was brown and straighter lines reflecting the tree trunks, and Water was blue and spiky design like pandanus leaf. Other Costumes were bought or sourced from the Tracks wardrobe, under the eye of Tim Newth who was responsible for the overall production design.

The audience members, if arriving by car, drive towards the Darwin International Airport, and then turn going past the old Darwin Airport Lodge, (previously a fenced off detention centre). Continuing past the yelping of the Furry Godmother dog kennels, and onto a dusty gravel patch, they park beside a stretch of native bushland, on

Larrakia land currently 'owned' and managed by the Airport. The map calls this the Gurumbai walking Trail, Woodland Loop. It is part of the catchment area for Rapid Creek, Darwin's only freshwater tributary. The area is also known as Marrara Swamp. It is just over an hour until sunset.

The audience are experiencing the dry season outdoor setting of the Tracks Dance Company's latest offering. This means clear blue skies, gentle breezes, and cooler temperatures (29 degrees as opposed to 35). Regular Tracks audiences do not expect to enter a theatre, or to watch dance on a perfectly sprung wooden floor in controlled air-conditioned comfort. They are usually ready not even to stay seated for long. They do not expect a black out from a lighting design, but expect to be able to see the sky. They generally have a response to our use of space and the way that natural landscapes are borrowed and manipulated into performance venues, our 'Darwin' lifestyle choices, and the diverse content of each show. Many of the audience have been involved with the company for years as: performers, volunteers, work-shoppers and audience.

Unusual in the Australian dance sector, Tracks does not create work that is tourable. We Tracks prefer to work with large and diverse casts particular to the new work, and unusual and specific settings. These works cannot translate to the theatre stage, The site is as important as the dancers and their movements. As such, you have to come to us to see the work. Many of our loyal followers state how lucky Darwin, and they, are to have Tracks as their local company. There is a strong sense of ownership. The dance can only be made here, and seen here. On one hand it gives the work a kind of inclusivity for locals, while on the other it provides insight to others about how we view our world.

For this performance the site has been chosen for several reasons. With the basic premise of the show being "where do you go to find wisdom in times of trouble?" we came upon this site while looking at Rapid Creek. The chosen site is the catchment area for Rapid Creek, the 'source' of freshwater. As the concepts developed, the idea of landing or of being landed came into play, and the site is near the airport. Furthermore, an overlay of an idea gained from working in Lajamanu - "Speak to the land and the land will speak back to you" - suggested the need for a natural setting. The site also has some social and political aspects. The local Rapid Creek landcare group and Save Rapid Creek community groups have a strong sense of proprietorship and Rapid Creek itself is also currently subject to the investigation of high levels of the fire fighting foam being present in the water as a result of runoff from the Royal Australian Air Force, who share the runways with the airport. All in all the show takes place over five areas in this site.

This site allowed for a combination of installing a stage for the initial story, but then moving into three different bush settings. Some of the choreography has been generated as a definite response to the landscape, while some is installed to give a sense of foreignness. The sites also allow multiple audience perspectives. Tracks places dance into these sites as an intervention, disrupting the normal activity of the site to create a focus on our conceptual works. The atmospheric mood of the place

seeps into the work, allowing a deeper understanding of the place for both performer, creator, and audience.

For the Landed performance, because much of the dance is set within the bushland setting, the company carries the words from local Larrakia Elder Bilawara Lee's welcome to country into the program: "We ask that you tread softly on mother earth while you are here". This is instilled in performers, production crew, front of house staff and volunteers, and the audience. The bushland setting was burnt out last year and as such is full of young new growth. The grevilleas are particularly fragile and we are warned by the land care group Veg North not to stand on them. This adds another element to the choreography as there is not free range over the ground to work with.

As audience members arrive at the outdoor box-office they are greeted by our staff and volunteer ushers. The General Manager is here to greet guests personally and to keep an estimate of audience demographics. People are given one of the two differently coloured boarding passes, orange Gate 1 or a yellow Gate 2, to designate membership of a group. They are told they will be walking and at some point they will form two different groups. Audiences are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the insect repellent. There is a food stall for refreshments if desired. There is a shaded portable seating bank hired from Rotary. This, and single white plastic chairs and wooden stools, make a seated audience space for two-hundred situated in the middle of a grassy area covering about half an acre. Audience sit or stand around talking to each other, the feeling is casual. Opposite the seating bank, in full view, is the set up for the first performance area. It is a built infrastructure that has been imported onto the site; two large grey containers, a slightly raised floor area of approximately 3.6 metres by twelve metres, temporary fencing, some covered in black plastic. It is in the sunlight. An airport luggage buggy with a trailer full of luggage is stationed in front of this compound.

Before the show has even started the audience are immersed in many qualities that are nothing like the usual theatre experience. They have had to make their way to an unusual place, a place to where most people would not have been. They do not have theatre seating, and, if they are smart, they smell of insect repellent. A soundtrack that incorporates sound grabs of aeroplanes and birds augments the natural ambient sound of birds, the airport, and the nearby dog kennel. The staging is in full view, and the audience are in the natural elements of the outside world.

A group of green reverse tie-died tee-shirted children appear from the compound area behind the stage and sit on a mat on the ground beside the audience. A helicopter sound effect comes from the speakers and the show starts. Four baggage handlers arrive. Three handlers/ break-dancers unload the baggage in a most irreverent and heavy-handed manner, dropping as many bags as they catch, whilst displaying their physical prowess and comic behaviour. After a quick swig from a hip flask, the fourth man drives off the luggage trolley over the grassed area in front of the audience. A line of dancers in high visibility jackets enter and add to the scene by mechanically moving luggage suggestive of a baggage carousel. One at a time the three core dancers enter the staged area having recently disembarked from their overseas and interstate flights. They give the impression of being inside the airport, although the actual setting is

clearly outdoors. The sound track, to match the break dancers, has an old school hip hop sound reminiscent of DJ Shadow, and is a conglomeration of electronic voices in various accents and languages making airport announcements, telling us they have a "one-way ticket to Darwin", and asking for our attention. We hear that flights have landed from Manilla, Rome, and Sydney – the characters have landed. The main factors affecting physical and psychological human comfort are listed, stressing ambient heat and cool surfaces. We are told that "humans are only comfortable within a very narrow range of conditions".

As the three lead dancers show us an insight into their characters we realise that they are returning to Darwin after some extended time away. The sound track, (as well as by just looking at the cast,) informs us that one is Italian, one is Indigenous Australian, and one is Filipino. Face value identity is immediately visible, bringing with it the first responses from deep within the audience's personal histories. A Darwin person would probably not actually notice the cultural mix so much, seeing it as everyday. A southerner may well read this as a statement of our multiculturalism, or as a political point. Musically we hear piano accordions, Italian cooking class, high heel shoes on hard surfaces, 1980's video game sounds, a professor talking about the lack of Indigenous recognition in the constitution, and a range of traditional Filipino music and songs and in Tagalog.

The Italian character (Kelly) has a bag of books. She is smart, sophisticated, very European in a Pina Bausch kind of way. She is constantly interacting with her books: reading, balancing on the head, standing on them, and sliding them on the ground. She has a light shawl that is affected by the inconsistent breezes, not something a dancer in a theatre would have to deal with, which slips to the ground. She turns, poses, lies on the ground. She wears her heart on her sleeve, making the absurdities of her actions work to appear intentional.

The Indigenous dancer, (Darren) dressed in a heavy jacket and urban jeans, has a duffle bag and a copy of the Koori Mail, (a fortnightly newspaper that has as its banner "The Voice of Indigenous Australia). He is full of energy but has trouble directing it. Some of his moves depict him as a warrior, moves like Indigenous footballer Adam Goodes used on the field, evoking a fear in some people that he was doing a spear throwing 'war' dance, and showing that many people still respond from a deeply ingrained racist perspective. Darren's character walks a line between anger and a desire to change things.

The worldly Filipino dancer (Vera) is surrounded by six pink suitcases diminishing in size, and is constantly on her smart-phone, setting up meetings, photographing her many pairs of shoes, adjusting hair and fur jacket, she knows she is on display and that looks count. She easily moves between contemporary western movements, and traditional Filipino actions. Together we feel they are perhaps not from Darwin – A local will quickly spot the outsider by their dress and manner. It is not an uncommon response to say "she is clearly not from here". Often a person arriving from 'down South' is over dressed, and all three have cold weather jackets.

We experience the dancers' first moments of the airport doors opening and the thick humid air hitting them, like a wet towel in the face. The sound track is distorted and has a feeling of whale calls, deeply wet and thick. The dancers' response is visceral, something that any Darwinite, or visitor to Darwin, would feel, and know deep in their physical and instinctual being. Home again and the weather is experienced as a persistent and all-pervasive element.

The sound of mosquitoes buzzing leads to a swarm of lower primary school students running from the seated area beside the audience. Full of hard to channel enthusiasm, they are irritating and bitey and attack the core dancers. One can always tell the newly arrived by the masses of mosquito and midge bites they display, the red raw spots of attack. Our returnees are again experiencing the nature of the Territory, something that cannot be experienced inside a theatre. Our audiences at this point are experiencing the real climatic conditions while being asked to view a staged performance. It is not just the content, but how it is staged. The smart ones have pre-applied insect repellent, a staple item always found at our Box Office. Darwin audiences are used to outdoor living, especially in the dry season. They are also used to thinking of the weather as a real thing that can be friendly in the dry, tortuous in the build up, and spectacular in the wet seasons.

After a 20-minute segment, the audience is instructed by the Head Usher to get out of their seats and follow the children, who are now behaving like the local green-ant, diligently going about their task of carrying silver coloured books, (that they stole from Kelly's shiny red suitcase,) on their head as they cross the grassy space and enter into the bush, followed by Kelly who is trying to change her shoes from European boots to more comfortable runners while chasing her precious books. The audience watch the children and Kelly disappear into the bush.

The underfoot texture of the walk changes as people walk across grass, to gravel, to compact dirt, and back again. Audiences have been warned that there is walking in this show and that 'sensible footwear' is appropriate. Even this information lets them know that this is not a traditional theatre experience. It is not just a sit and watch and listen. The pathway is the Garrambai Walking Track, Garrambai being the local indigenous language (Larrakia) for the Rapid Creek. The word means elbow and the walking trail covers some of the now dry swampy area that is the catchment area for Rapid Creek. Birds can be heard in the canopy and the rustling in the undergrowth lets us know this is native land.

The audience hand in their Boarding Passes to two of the break dancing luggage handlers, the pass colour matching the high visibility tops the handlers are wearing. This way the audience is split into two groups heading off on different pathways. They move from the open grass and gravel area into the edge of the woodlands and watch the next scene from opposite sides. They can see the children sitting reading their books, Kelly, and each other. Kelly dances with the primary school children, balancing on books and tree stumps. The landscape, full of ant eaten trees, and ant hills, woodland plants, a predominance of acacias, and spider webs, determines the pathways, and the speed she can move through the natural obstacle course. As the dance takes place in the bushland, the audience have to navigate their sight lines

through trees and shrubs. The dancers are wearing sand-shoes and there is no dance floor, just undergrowth. The children have books that they in turn read in the shade and bring them to life as butterflies. In this bushland there are many crotalaria plants, a low shrub locally known as rattle plants, or butterfly bushes. These attract large numbers of native butterflies, all taking off as someone nears them.

Audiences members can see not only the dance, but also directly experience the bushland, and make decisions about where and how they stand. They also observe the other audience members opposite, and are in turn observed. The audience becomes integral to the performance space, its current and historical usage, its connection to local political and environmental issues, and its natural and changing life. Evidence of past fire is all around, and in some places abandoned concrete structures suggest a different past usage of the area. We feel for the dancer and children, their immersion into the bush. We worry about the real presence of spiders and snakes, we are confronted with our fear or delight in nature. We may even question the placement of dance into this environment.

This dance is about air, lightness, and allowing the three dimensional and experiential aspects of the outdoors to seep into the choreography. Kelly emerges from having her head in the books, to having her whole body in the bush, from a sense of weightiness and drama into lightness and freedom. This section was choreographed in two parts. David and Kelly started the choreography with the children, David finishing it with the assistance of Tim, and Kelly choreographed her solo material under the direction of Tim and David. Parents of the children were amazed that their child could be so focussed and knew what they were doing.

At the conclusion of this section the audience continue on their walking trail in opposite directions to each other. One group goes to the Earth performance site, and the other group to the Water site. You become acutely aware that you have been separated from the crowd as the two groups can no longer see or hear each other, except in a few places where the bush thins out. The nature of the bushland changes.

At the Earth site the indigenous dancer, Darren, is immersed in an earthy woody bushland landscape, dancers emerging from the dirt and undergrowth. Darren ties red cloth to the trees to both keep him from getting lost, as well as letting the country know he is there. This landscape is surrounded by bush but has many white trunked eucalyptus trees spread throughout, and new growth grevilleas. The haunting sounds of the cello play an improvised sound track that leads into a melancholic piece of Bach. The single instrument sounds hang in the space while the low resonance grounds the sound. As the dance proceeds the earth dancers come to life. The grass and leaves and dirt clinging to them. Through gesture the solo dancer is symbolically painted with ochre, the very ground he stands on being forced onto and into his being. With the Earth welcoming the dancer home he can leave the space and enter into the world as a more grounded man, controlling his previously unchannelled energy. This section was choreographed by Gary Lang, a respected local indigenous dancer and choreographer. He has his own company in Darwin and his work is generally recognised for its balletic influences and his seasons are performed on the main stage of the Entertainment

Centre. Audiences that know Gary's work will see this section as departing in movement style from his usual vocabulary, but in its very placement on the ground, it is still recognisable as coming from his spiritual understanding of his dance.

Continuing on the trail the audience passes the other half of the audience as they move to their next site. The two halves of the audience do not view the show in the same order, thus creating two different versions of the narrative. Some people greet the passes by,

At the third site, we see flattened grass and pandanas plants. The pathway is edged with flowering plants, some tiny blue and more vigorous purples. The knowing audience avoids the pandanas on the path's edge, remembering the number of times they have been scratched and pricked in the past. (For me I am reminded of the feeling of cutting my hand on sward grass as a child, a feeling I can still easily bring to mind.) A local knows that pandanas trees are usually found near water, and often in a swampy area beside paperbark trees. This area is the source of Rapid Creek, the moist fecund swampland that spends half the year under water, and the other half in a state of dryness. The footpath has gone from gravel to dark grey spongy dirt.

As the audience arrives we can see the Filipino dancer, Vera, still dressed in her very worldly smart pink dress, emerging from the grass and pandanas swamp with her smaller pink suitcases on her head. There is a pile of larger pink cases in a pile on the ground of flattened bull-grass (not native to the area). There is a huddle of youth dancers (Casuarina Secondary College), with blue reverse-dyed tee-shirts, the pattern reflecting the sharp angles of the Pandanas. Vera looks both out of place, and yet carries with her a sense of knowing what to do. The setting reminds me of Viet Nam, or Bali, or the Philippines. The placement of Vera in this environment creates a slight location dislocation; Darwin swamp, South East Asia overlay. At least we know we are in the tropics.

Vera maintains her control. Coming from a place of knowing 'just what Darwin needs' she is now confronted with the reality of not knowing what she herself needs. Her set of pink suitcases are as out of place as she is. The Secondary School dance students perform the watery choreography reminiscent of deep sea creatures; fluid and dark. The sound track reflects this mood, as it moves from deep bell chimes, through static and Morse code, into tribal drumming, before returning to the sparse bells. At this point the audience feels more at home in the setting than the dancers. At first Vera exists in the space full of confidence and self-belief. She soon realises that this way is not 'natural' to her current setting. The dance students draw the dancer under the surface; to a place where she needs to confront herself. The dancer is swamped by her luggage as it is piled up on top of her prone body. She emerges and swims across her luggage, being buoyed up by her past situation, but having to adapt it to the new. Then seductive sounds and sites of water pouring from large glass bowls is comforting and provides a sense of harmonious conclusion.

Kelly Beneforti, again in two sections, choreographed this work. Vera's solo material was created separately in the studio, and the Casuarina Senior College students created during school time. It was then brought together in the space.

Once all the audience have seen all three bushland sites, they emerge from the dappled bush and swamp areas into the low setting sun. Walking to the final site they sense a moment of reuniting and sharing of experiences. Rediscovering the original grassy area, but this time watching from the other side than the beginning. There is another built stage, quite small in size. The entire cast are standing on the grassy area looking towards the stage, away from the now close to setting sun. The soundtrack starts and has elements of the previous three scenes. Fifteen seconds in and the voice of Steve Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick,¹ floats through the soundtrack entreating us to “speak to the land, and the land will speak back”. The dancers all drop to the ground and speak to the land. Returning to standing this is repeated and they finish lying on the ground, looking at the sky. We hear that there are signals in nature, in the land, in the sky. “Look Up”. The audience again are made aware of the vast three dimensionality of where they are, not in a theatre, but under a wide clear sky, not lit by theatrical lights but by the low setting sun, and cooled by dry season breezes, not air-conditioning. It is through bodily sensations that the audience experience this event. This is not an intellectual or entertaining happening that is experienced in the darkened theatre and explored in the head.

The three core dancers walk across the land and the lying dancers ripple in response to their presence. Everyone starts moving, most dancing their own “Speak to the Land Phrase, with the occasional few doing the same as someone else. Kelly, Darren and Vera head for the Stage and the other dancers all sit down and watch intently. This is the first time they have actually danced as a trio. We see that the three elements that they have been dancing within join to make one point of arrival – that truth lives in complexity and collaboration, not in the individual.

The curtain call is set in three circles, the outer being the water dancers, the middle being the Earth Ensemble, and the centre being the Air insects. Everyone stands to face the audience. The core bow from the stage, the outer circle bows and crouches, followed by the middle circle, and then the inner children. Everyone bows together and we let the children run off first, followed by the entire cast as they go through the back gate into the compound and changing rooms.

At the conclusion of the show audience go home, or go uptown to the outdoor Darwin Festival Park to enjoy relaxed conversations about their experiences. They are very aware that this is not an in-theatre experience, and yet they are often overwhelmed by the theatricality.

¹ Steve is a Warlpiri man and the Creative Director of Milpirri, (a Tracks Lajamanu collaborative project spanning over 25 years and with a biennial performance in the remote desert community of Lajamanu.

<http://tracksdance.com.au/milpirri-kurdiji>

<http://www.tracksdance.com.au/story-behind-milpirri-festival>

<http://www.tracksdance.com.au/lajamanu-tracks-relationship>

Tracks is renowned for creating outdoors performance experiences that transform our opinion of local sites and places. It has been said that the company is more in the business of creating contemporary 'sacred sites' that will lead to the altering of locals' views of the very place they live in. It is the spirit that comes from combining people and place that is carried home by the audience as they return to their everyday worlds. They respond to feeling connected to a cultural life that they are part of, that they understand, and that they have input into its shape.

A Tracks performance in general disrupts an audience member's view of theatre, or traditional performance. It has drawn many its performance practices from South East Asia and remote Indigenous Australia where the Western theatre construct is far less apparent, if it is there at all. Traditional Indigenous ceremonial dancing takes place on specific country and the dancing ground is created or prepared each time. Much South East Asian dancing (Traditional style) is performed at sacred venues or in the street. Both influences find glory in the outdoors, both borrow from the landscape they find themselves in and manipulate this to their own ends. Both cultural influences revel in the deeply layered narrative that their work displays, and both make far less separation between the different 'art forms' than we do in Australia, in fact the language is usually around cultural activity rather than artistic.

A Tracks audience member has to experience the real world in conjunction with the artistic and imagined world. We do not try to block out the real world but allow it to impinge on the performances. At times the real world can almost interrupt the performance as a plane flies over, a mosquito settles in for a meal, or the smell of the food van wafts over. The cast are often in close proximity to the audience, reinforcing the immediacy of the form, as well as the intimacy. Tracks Dance always considers how the audience will either observe or interact with the performance.² The constant changing of the proximity, positioning, and angles of observance, and not settling for only one, changes how an audience reacts, responds, and communicates their part in the dialogue of the performance.

Another aspect that is a regular component of a Tracks performance is that the technical and performance skills of the cast are varied. This is not just in virtuosity, but also in form and cultural knowledge. While this may not be to 'purist' dance audiences liking, (as they may prefer a staged hierarchy with the soloists and experts supported by high quality technical dancers, or an evenness in the standards of the cast,) it certainly adds to the immediacy and authenticity of the audience experience. They see some people who are their next door neighbours or their doctor, or the roofer or electrician, performing highly technical Indian style dancing, or a group of elderly performers reminding us that we are all ageing and that you can usually keep moving. Rather than observing dance from the distance of "I could never do that" a Tracks show often invites the audience to feel themselves as a performer, or of dreaming

² In their 2015 Darwin Festival show, Last Light, audiences were made to sit in a 200 seat grid formation, 1.5 metres from the nearest person, for 6 minutes and simply watch the sunset while listening to the sound track through personal headphones. Soon after, dancers moved in and through the audience dancing solo material for individual audience members at very close proximity.

about the potential. The sitting side by side of diversity of style, form, and levels of ability, creates an unusual and different pathway into meaning, both for performer and audience.

Finally, a Tracks show, although a single entity, is often created by multiple choreographers, (Landed has five,) in collaboration with each other, and the performers, and directed by two Artistic Directors – one from a dance and theatre background, and one from visual arts. The work truly explores collaboration of form, artists, and landscape. It is only right that the audience feel that they also have some influence on the work. A Tracks artist is always asking of their work “how does this read?” The audience is present in most aspects of the creative process. We want to connect with our audience broadly. We want to be creating relevant and contemporary artistic statements that our local communities can relate and respond to. In a town as small as Darwin, you know many of the audience members, and you cannot hide away. You have an immediate responsibility to them. They will find you at the market, at the shops, in your yoga class, or at another festival event. The audience response is often immediate, and regularly ongoing.