

SPECIAL AUDITION

EDITION! SEE PAGES 25-58

DANCE AUSTRALIA

ISSUE 231 APRIL / MAY / JUNE '21

DANCEAUSTRALIA.COM.AU

CANCEL CULTURE

Should we ban ballets that cause offence?

AUDITIONING THROUGH COVID:

How 'Moulin Rouge' and 'Hamilton' got on stage

NO, YOU DON'T NEED TO TRAIN OVERSEAS

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO SURVIVE AS AN INDEPENDENT?

DANCERS ON THE MOVE

Five dancers, five different directions

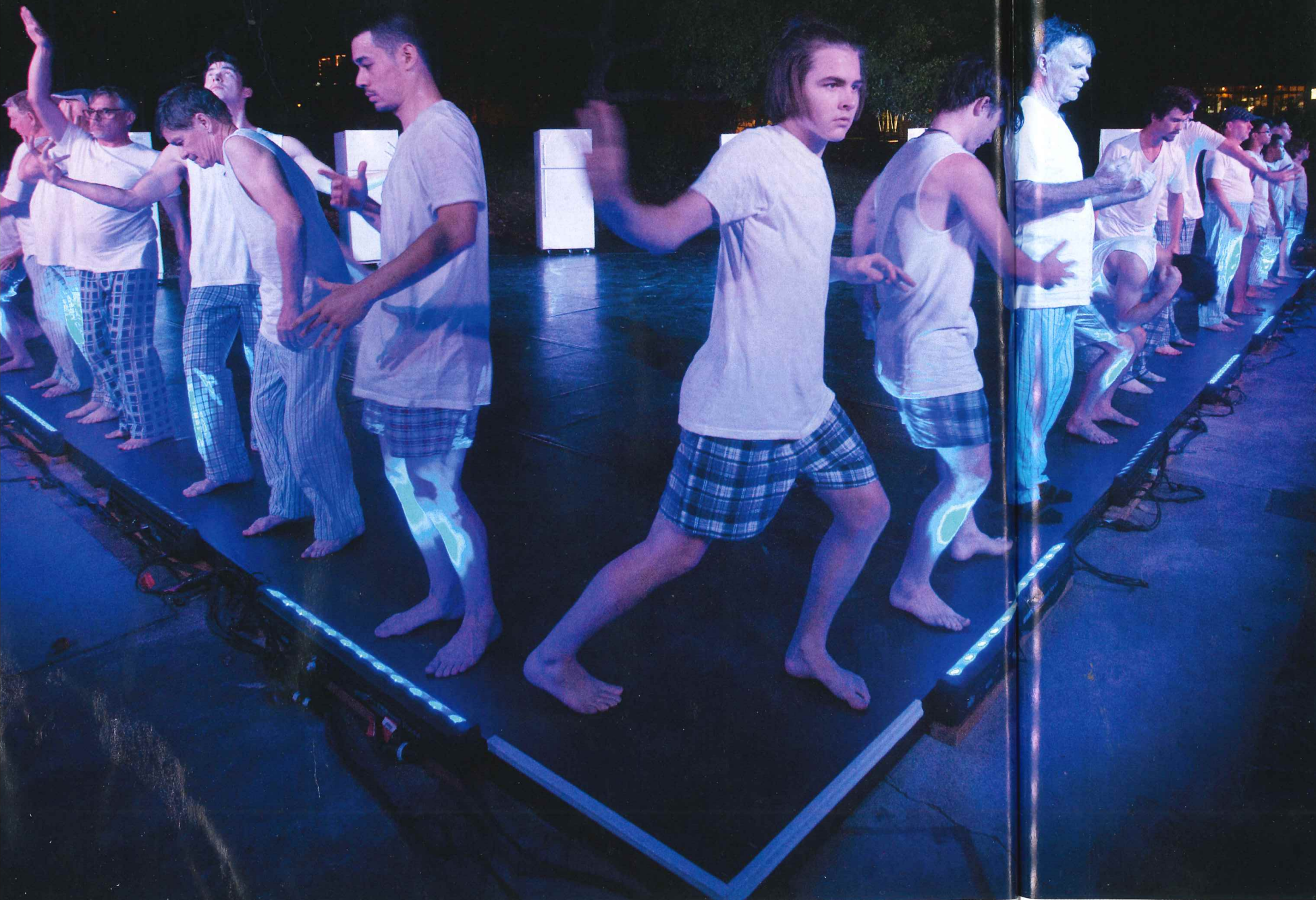


\$8.95 (incl. GST)
PRINT POST APPROVED 100005330



This multifaceted company has community at its heart, writes Karen van Ulzen.

KEEPING TRACKS



W

HEN David McMicken arrived in Darwin for a working holiday 30 years ago, he instantly fell in love with the place.

Born and trained in Melbourne, mostly in contemporary technique at Rusden College, he had thought Darwin would be a parochial backwater and hadn't intended to stay. He had limped there after some bruising times in Melbourne – both personally and professionally. “The end of the 80s was a harsh time,” he recounts,

“the newspaper reviews for contemporary dance weren't 'pleasant'. I had about nine different jobs, running my own company [Storm in a Teacup], teaching, cleaning – I'd just got out of long-term relationship so I stopped my work for a while.” A friend suggested he go to Darwin for a working holiday and experience the exciting community dance based work that was being led by Sarah Calver and Tim Newth through Brown's Marty Community Arts. Three decades later, McMicken is still in Darwin, and he and visual artist Newth are together the Artistic Co-Directors of Tracks Dance, Darwin's main professional dance company.

Darwin is Australia's smallest, wettest and most remote city and one of the most remote cities in the world. As McMicken points out, it is 320 kms from the nearest population centre and nearly a thousand kms to Tennant Creek. The closest city to Darwin is Dili in East Timor and Darwinians tend to look northward to South East Asia rather than south. “So Darwin doesn't feel like Australia,” McMicken says – or at least what the majority of white Australians take “Australia” to be. The town has a population of less than 200,000 – small but made up of a broad and diverse cultural mix, being home to more than 40 different ethnic groups and a very visible Indigenous population, for whom dance is already an integral and natural part of their cultural expression.

“I feel I have a much stronger understanding of who I am as an Australian on this country.”

For McMicken, encountering the tropical heat, the outdoor markets and festivals, it felt both very foreign and exactly the place he should be. “The outdoor lifestyle was really attractive to me; even in the wet season it's warm. Coming from Melbourne, where a lot of dance is created indoors in the studio and in your head space, it was a real expansion to see the dance working in a way in Darwin that I'd wanted it to work in Melbourne. I was working with cultural groups in Melbourne, very strong cultural groups used to performing outdoors, but in Melbourne it felt it was imported.”

Tracks Dance grew out of Brown's Mart Community Arts, where most of the local arts and culture was centred, and the community dance program run by Sarah Calver, whose job McMicken stepped into when she went on maternity leave. She was already a close collaborator with Tim Newth through his community dance project, Dance on Darwin. Over time Tracks has evolved from a platform for different community groups to a more collaborative organisation – combining a small group of professional contemporary dancers with local artists and performers to produce something that represents Darwin's present day synthesis of cultures: “To create works that spoke about who we are in this place now.”

Tracks grabbed the nation's attention with its first major work for the Darwin Festival, *4WD Sweat Dust and Romance*, conceived and directed by Tim Newth. It was performed outdoors by a cast of hundreds: bringing together performers, four 4WDs and stories of travelling through the Territory. Tracks's small team of four professional contemporary performers – McMicken, Newth, Sarah Calver and Berenice Franklin, was joined by interstate artists Beth Shelton, Michael Collins, Nicky Fletcher, Desmond Madala from Elcho Island, and Markum Galut from PNG (with the now well-known choreographer Michael Leslie among the dancers). Thus was established Tracks's aims – an integration of local artists, cultures, wisdom and stories.

“Initially ... contemporary dance was only a small part of the mix because there weren't very many what you'd call independent dancers in Darwin,” McMicken

The full cast of dancers in 'Man Made', Darwin Festival (2017).



ABOVE LEFT: 'Lipstick and Ochre' (2008). (From left:) Rosie Napurrula Tasman, Bidy Napangardi Raymond, Margaret Nungarrayi Martin, Myra Nungarrayi Herbert, Trevor Patrick, Rosie Napurrula Tasman and Bidy Nungarrayi Long.

ABOVE RIGHT: 'Global Positioning' (2019). (From left:) Bryn Wackett, Darren Edwards, Venaska Cheliah, Jess Devereux, Jenelle Saunders, Jordan Bretherton and Madeleine Brown.

BELOW: Tim Newth (left) and David McMicken.

OPPOSITE PAGE: 'Milpirri' (2007) (From left:) Gerard Japanangka Scobie, Aiden Jampijinpa Kelly and Jarrad Jakamarra Ross.



explains. "Gradually the professional artists started choreographing or directing for the community groups. A lot of those cultural groups, as with Indigenous groups, were struggling with the idea that they were 'contemporary' Australia, but instead were 'other' or 'over there'. Yet they are sophisticated people and have incredible amounts of highly refined training in their bodies.

"My learning was from Melbourne, Tim's from country Victoria — our learning was pretty limited, was pretty white, and pretty controlled. You come here to Darwin and you think, why didn't I know about this Indigenous stuff? It's not an idea or a piece of politics, here it's the person in the next office. We wanted to know what it meant to be able to co-exist artistically with one of the oldest cultures in the world. Or how we could co-exist artistically, for example, with the likes of the East Timorese community, our closest neighbours, many of whom are refugees here, highly sophisticated people who holiday in Portugal."

Collaboration was the key. Over time McMicken and Newth built artistic relationships with local artists, stepping back, putting aside their sense of ownership, and handing over the choreography to other choreographers and musicians. "It's not unusual to have up to six choreographers for one production," he says. "You have to accept the expertise that's in everyone's body. Each individual comes with a cultural package to share."

Tracks has many parts: it holds an annual, large-scale public performance for the Darwin Festival; it has a participation program, which includes public classes and large-scale pop-up events, and the Grey Panthers, a seniors' dance troupe which performs 10 to 15 times a year. It

has a development program, which offers mentorships and studio residencies; a choreographic development course; and "other activities that are specifically around dance invention and experimentation". Part of this is an annual show called Fresh Tracks, in which "we provide a venue for independent artists so they have a platform without having to pay for it", McMicken explains.

Another important part of its activities is a long-term association with the Indigenous community in remote Lajamanu, nearly 900 km south in the Tanami Desert. Every second year the Tracks dancers and the Lajamanu Indigenous community come together for the Milpirri Festival — a bilingual, bicultural celebration, involving up to 200 people, young and old, using dance, music and spectacular visual imagery to "enliven tradition for an intercultural 21st-century future", as Creative Director Steve Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick says. Tracks also brings Lajamanu dancers to perform in Darwin. The association, which was initiated by Newth in the 1980s, is one of McMicken's greatest rewards.

"Lajamanu is pretty much *the* most remote community in Australia," he says, "a 12-hour drive, a lot on dirt road; it's incredibly hot in the summer, cold in winter, it's a rugged place. To go from the city to that really challenges you, and you become very aware that it's your culture that keeps you alive. In the city you can ignore your culture."

A big part of Tracks's success is its decision not to be a touring company. "You spend an awful lot of money touring and don't have very much left for making dance," McMicken says. Staying put has allowed the company to immerse itself deeply in its local community, discovering and



nurturing talent and relationships. "You're able to see culturally what's blossoming right in front of you and grab it."

Similarly at Lajamanu — the Tracks team spends regular, quality time in the same community rather than spreading itself too thin at different places. "Over the years it has become a relationship, and they respect us for being actually interested in their culture. A lot of these communities have an awful lot of white people coming in and out, staying for short times and not coming back. Tim and I have been going to Lajamanu for 30 years."

Tracks won the 2018 Australian Dance Award for Achievement in Community Dance, its fifth such award and both artistic directors have been bestowed with medals of the Order of Australia.

So it was a huge shock when, after 20 years of ongoing support, the Australia Council did not renew the company's four-year funding in the latest round. The announcement came in April, 2020, and the company was one of 49 to lose out in a particularly deep round of cuts. Tracks, like the other companies, was given a year's transitional funding through 2021 to help it adjust to its straitened circumstances. Then came Covid and shut down. Next year will be the crunch year.

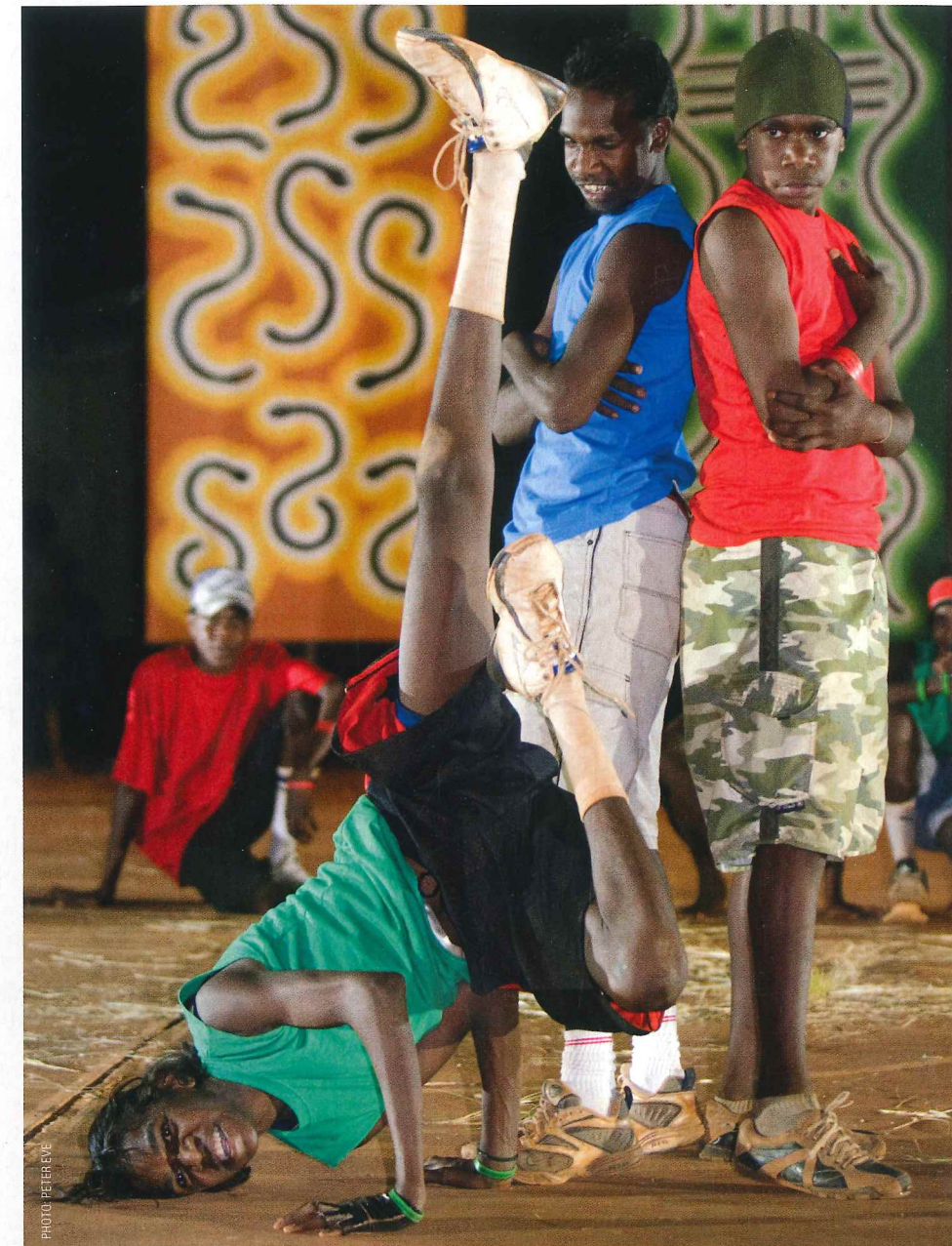
McMicken shrugs his shoulders. "We don't take it personally," he says. "It's shocking to see how government had taken money away from the Australia Council — I feel sorry for the panel having to make such awful decisions."

Asked if he can nominate the most rewarding part of his job, he nominates his work with Lajamanu.

"It is extraordinary what I have learnt from Lajamanu. You go there and you're in a foreign country. They don't speak the same language, they don't have the same culture, and you feel disjointed, you have to reinvent yourself, so we can walk forward together, without being one or the other. We don't have to be Indigenous, they don't have to be white in order to walk forward. There's this beautiful space in between, like that moment you hold hands."

"I feel I have a much stronger understanding of who I am as an Australian on this country. It's not just an intellectual idea of being Australian, and it's not mateship, it's a strong sense that this country has the capacity to imbue us with its own meaning. First Peoples say you need to speak to country, you need to be on the land, to listen to the land, and it means you need to be fully invested in where you are, and that includes what the vibrational spirit of that place is. It's a big shift from my contemporary dance practice."

The Lajamanu project is secure for now, thanks to sponsorship from Newmont Mining. With regard to Tracks, McMicken seems to be facing the uncertainty with an open mind. "Tim and I are getting old and needing to move and the company has to keep reinventing. This funding [decision] has given us the push to do that maybe a little faster," he says. ~



FOOTNOTES

McMicken's first job was as a drama tutor at Arena Theatre, Melbourne. He danced with Jacqui Carrol's Dance Group Adelaide, was a founding member of Tasdance, Director of St Martins Youth Dance Company, and founded Storm in a Teacup Dance Theatre in the early 1980s.

Tim Newth trained as a visual artist and moved into being a director who works in dance, theatre, and community arts. Based in Darwin since 1988, Tim is well known for creating spectacular outdoor performances in diverse spaces that connect people, place and culture.

Both artists received AMs in 2014.