

Milpirri - A Cross-Cultural Collaboration - 20 Years In The Making

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Milpirri is an extraordinary performance project that has resulted from a twenty-year working relationship between Tracks Dance Company and the Warlpiri Aboriginal community of Lajamanu.

“In the past we had our violent meeting, and our cultures were all mixed up, but there is hope for a life-giving future for us all.” Steve Jampijinpa Patrick

For this presentation, David and Tim prepared their presentation as set out below, as well as prepared questions for Steve, who answered in the moment.

T: This presentation is about a 20-year relationship that has evolved between the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu, specifically the family owners of the northern Tanami segment of the Ngapa Jukurrpa, or rainstorm dreaming, of which Steve Jampijinpa is a owner, and myself, (Tim Newth) and David McMicken, (Co-Artistic Directors of Tracks dance company).

Milpirri was developed by Steve as a metaphor for two strong forces that appear to clash, yet holding the promise of goodness, growth and celebration. Like the Milpirri storm cloud, (which forms when hot and cold air come together), we have had to deal with issues, resulting from two strong cultures contacting each other.

For the elders Milpirri sparks off old memories, and for the young it creates new ones.

D: Milpirri now shapes much of our talk to each other. In Lajamanu, it is influencing education, health, land care and other aspects of living.

Milpirri-thinking makes us ponder about what our two cultures' core values are, and what are the best ways of together walking forwards towards the goodness that comes after the storm.

This presentation is in 5 sections: Land or Place, Law and Responsibilities, Language or giving voice, Kinship or Relationship, Ceremony and Performance. It is the personal sense of being connected through these 5 things to which Milpirri aspires.

T: What we are about is becoming more Australian – together: We each speak from our own place, as our own bosses. But the stories when put together provide a whole - a Milpirri.

D: LAND - PLACE - Understanding Country. (Questions to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick)

D: Jampijinpa, you live in Lajamanu, can you tell us about that place and what you do there?

D: Also your Traditional homelands

T: What is the Milpirri storm cloud?

Explain the country & metaphor. Storm, rain, refresh

T: Two things coming together? Two understandings? (Yalakapara - a peregrine falcon), explain this. You call your self Yapa, what does this mean (Aboriginal) ? And what does Kartiya (non-aboriginal) Mean?

D: In 1949 Lajamanu was established by the Federal Native Affairs branch with 25 Warlpiri people trucked against their will from Yuendumu. In 1951, a further 150 Warlpiri were trucked to Lajamanu from Yuendumu. Unable to live away from their Dreaming sites, they walked back to Yuendumu, 600km across the harsh Tanami Desert. Being away from traditional homelands was distressing to them. Two further resettlements and walk-backs in 1958 and 1968 occurred before the Warlpiri residents were prepared to accept the new community.

Situated in the semi-arid country on the edge of the Tanami Desert, it is hard to imagine a more remote community. In Territory terms, it is very much in the bush, the nearest service town (Katherine) is 645k away by road.

T: In another world, David and I live in tropical Darwin, saltwater country, away from our respective birthplaces of Melbourne and Wangaratta. With deserts to the south and Asia to the north, Darwin is where we now call home.

An understanding of each other's sense of country and home has developed over time. To say "I am Australian" or "where's your country", or being a guest at someone else's place takes on new meaning.

When introduced to Lajamanu both of us talk about a strong sense of disruption: Why was I unaware of this in "My" own country, Australia? How do I exist here? Who am I in relationship to this land and these people? I had a feeling that established ways no longer worked here.

At first I felt like I had to give up everything and go and live there for several years in order to understand it. Living on an outstation, eating what they ate, not eating when they had no food, 48-degree heat, questioning things such as cleaning teeth and no toilet paper. However this led to becoming unwell and I needed to return to my own country to recover. David also reports on his first visits becoming sick and needing to return home to become healthy again. There are countless stories of others who find themselves in similar situations.

D: Home is not always where you choose to hang your hat.

Our search for meaning as artists can be paralleled by our search for a sense of belonging to place. We have both re-evaluated what it means to be an Australian and learnt new ways to reconnect to our old. Working across Western and Warlpiri cultures is not a standard cross-cultural collaboration - the personal and physical landscapes are vastly different.

T: LAW – RESPONSIBILITIES (Questions to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick)

D: When you talk about law, what do you mean?

T: What do the people get out of Milpirri? The old, young, and middle mob

D: You recently published a report - desert knowledge - Ngurra-kurlu: A way of working with Warlpiri people, can you tell us what Ngurru-kurlu means, what is it? (“feeling at home within “– five pillars of Warlpiri community, Land, Law, Language, Ceremony, Kinship)

D: For most Westerners the law is only a set of rules and regulations with consequences for breaking them. Religion, particularly Christianity, has provided the basis to many of our laws, as well as our structures of work and rest, of holidays, and what is considered to be a lawful relationship. Our laws have been developed over a long period of time and adapt to the ever-changing world. When creating a show, one rarely looks at the law.

When we say we are working through legal structures it does not mean the same thing as working through Warlpiri legal structures. But when creating a show with the people of Lajamanu, law constantly comes in to it. It encapsulates a lot: Knowledge, beliefs, customs, practices, rules, regulations, but more importantly, how being connected to this creates a whole or healthy member of the “tribe”. It seems more active - there is certainly no shortage of lawmen.

T: Once an agreed understanding of following law or legal guidelines has been established, disagreements pass more quickly. We now deal with things like copyright and rules of theatre practice in different ways. Whose stories are we telling? Whose values are we representing? Who has the right to perform what? Often when a dance is presented all we see are people's backs, and we want to step in and change it to suit our aesthetic. But when we are told that the law dictates that the dance travels East, we must work with that.

D: Milpirri spotlights Warlpiri values. We respect the senior lawmen because, like our lawyers and judges, they have spent years learning and dispensing law. We also respect and honour our own culture. It may feel like we are challenging opposing laws, but it could be seen as two attorneys battling it out in court; not looking for the one winner, but for a new winning situation for all.

In the beginning we have had heated debates about rehearsal structures with old men - "Why do you bring us here each day. We already know our dances," they say. It's fine for Warlpiri Elders to stop everything and yell at everyone to get it right. In ceremony, the rehearsal, technical production, dress rehearsals and performance happen all at once – the working-out happens in the process. But the Milpirri show is not a ceremony; it is a performance, worked out with two strong laws operating side by side.

T: CEREMONY – PERFORMANCE (Questions to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick)

T: What made you think about the Milpirri project?

T: How does ceremony work in Milpirri

Explain: ceremony

D: What was your first connection to Tracks?

Explain 1988, and Tim coming, and the play written and performed in Warlpiri (Manangkarawardingki Malju, Living in Isolation Tour – 1988)

T: Why did you choose to work with Tim and David for Milpirri?

Explain: connection to old people. Wanted to have that connection as well.

T: Tracks produces original, contemporary dance performances, recognised as large scale, outdoor, visually spectacular and site specific. They are Territorian in theme and bring together participants from diverse cultures, ages and artistic disciplines.

We have a job to do. Funded by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Northern Territory government our job is to make excellent Australian performance, that reflects particular Australian values.

With the people of Lajamanu we have created over 25 projects in 20 years. The following is a brief outline of a few key projects.

D: In 1988, Darwin's Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre toured the winning plays of a Territory wide playwrights competition back to the plays' origins, including a bilingual play from Lajamanu. A team, including Tim, set out to perform the Lajamanu entry in their community. The community responded to this troupe's valiant attempts to speak Warlpiri and in return shared some of their dances. Tim returned to Darwin inspired by a culture he had not yet been exposed to.

T: Over the next few years, three of us were invited back to the community for two three-month residencies, both resulting in young Warlpiri people performing and touring to neighbouring Warlpiri communities.

D: In 1992, we produced **Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani** (Going Home to Lajamanu). It was developed as a full length dance-theatre show in Darwin, a direct result of the youth performers asking if they could create a show with higher values such as: they wanted to work in air-conditioning on a wooden floor rather than on the dirt outside in the heat. The final cast included 16 youth and 14 elders.

T: In **Ngapa - two cultures one country** (completed in 1996) Steve, David and I travelled along the Ngapa (Rainstorm Dreaming) pathways owned by Steve's family. We travelled with a senior man and a group of women elders from that country. This shared experience led to the Ngapa performance for Darwin Festival.

D: Also that year Tracks toured a work called Sacred Space to Wangaratta and Melbourne, Tim's and David's countries of birth. We took a western cast, Steve, and a group of senior women dancers. It was also a chance for the Lajamanu mob to meet their "Southern" relatives.

T: Tarlkinjiya - the Meeting of Olive Pink, took place over several years, and incarnations. Initial interest came during the Ngapa project, while being on site at Pirdi Pirdi, or Thompson's Rock Hole, where Miss Pink set up camp in the early 40's, in a time when few white women entered the 'outback', and before she established herself in Alice Springs. For several people on the Ngapa project Miss Pink, who they call Tarlkinjiya, was their first white contact. For this show, the women created a new song and dance cycle based on their experiences of meeting Miss Pink.

D: The Milpirri performances have evolved through a history of collaboration between Lajamanu people and Tracks artists. During this journey the differences and similarities between ceremony and performance have been constantly explored.

D: LANGUAGE - GIVING VOICE (Questions to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick)

D: Tell us about what you mean when you talk about language as an identity

D: What about the saying you use for Milpirri: Speak to the land and the land will speak back.

T: Language is a way we make sense of our world view. For the majority of Warlpiri speakers, English is not the first or even second language, although at any level it is far higher than David's or my Warlpiri.

Tracks says that it gives voice to Northern Territory culture. To do this we use performance and have developed highly refined and complex performance language. The vocabulary is drawn from Australia's arts and dance history, which encompasses western, Australian Indigenous, South East Asian and Pacific and other cultural heritages. We value contemporary and traditional forms of movement as a tool to create new work. We value the cultural richness and diversity of the Northern Territory, and the individual's own truth and story.

D: When working with Lajamanu the performance language includes the other aspects of Land, Law, Ceremony, and Kinship. We use the non-verbal language of dance and visual arts to speak more broadly to many people. Milpirri uses themes from certain ceremonies. For Example, in the first Milpirri the theme from one kinship group came from a goanna dreaming (Wadapi) and the moral theme was Purami or following the right way. The elders had Ceremony that encapsulated their worldview of this. We created new male and female dances that looked at how younger Lajamanu people understood this concept.

Tracks is developing a frontier dance language that values a diversity of practice and beliefs while celebrating aspects of Australian culture. At times rough, tough, and robust, at others

so refined that it can only exist in the smallest of places. Sitting on the ground at the end of the day, scratching in the dust and looking at the sunset, is often where language comes to a meeting point.

Through Milpirri we are finding an emerging shared language of performance and ceremony that comes from Traditional men and women's business, and Western methods of creating performance; it's a language of movement, design, visual arts and ritual objects, music, song and story. We are taking small steps to climb Mount Improbable, but we are finding a new language that comes from working together.

T: KINSHIP – RELATIONSHIP (Questions to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick)

T: What is Kinship or skin?

T: We all come from someone and somewhere. Some relationships are through birth and blood, others are formed through invitation and time. Kinship and relationship provide a stage to explore and build these feelings of belonging.

Kinship is not just about blood, it is about obligations and responsibilities that are part of the system: It extends to people who might not originally see themselves as part of that system. Kinship is about knowing where you come from. It gives us all a common sense of belonging.

D: In a kinship world-view, all is related. In order to make sense of the contemporary world, the people of Lajamanu have to establish where Westerners fit in. And in return, we have to learn what roles and responsibilities come with our interaction with their system.

T: Boundaries are tested and respect earned. From simple starting points of trying to see where we fit in, relationship and kinship now span generations. Students at the school are children of youths I originally worked with twenty years ago. Our recent Darwin Festival show, Lipstick and Ochre, had a Lajamanu grandmother and two of her grandsons performing.

D: Tracks is a company built on relationships. Our Lajamanu relationship has not only been built on creating performances, it has also grown from things like:

T: staying at outstations

D: visiting sacred sites

T: holding newly born children

D: going to ceremony

T: hunting

D: watching children grow into adults

T: being with people as they die

D: maturing - from young man towards being an elder

T: painting together

D: carving a boomerang

T: teaching someone to drive your car

D: having people staying in your house in town

T: watching football

D: sexy dancing at the disco

D: As guests in the community of Lajamanu, relationship was extended to Tim and I as an honour and privilege.

T: It puts us in particular relationship to the entire Milpirri project and keeps us looking after each other. Now Steve & I are brothers and David is our cousin. With these relationships come shared responsibilities.

D: Jampijinpa: you say Milpirri makes all of us more Australian - How does it do this?

Explain: looking after country - not just Yapa, Kartiya

T: What about the future of Milpirri? Where do you see it going?

Explain: responsibility to bring people together, and understandings, to make sense of this country.