

# Drawing the Threads

## A PROFILE OF TIM NEWTH:

Weaver of fire, air, fabric,  
bodies, stories and places.

Tim Newth is a community based artist who could variously be described as a director, a designer, a visual artist, a dancer, a choreographer, a puppeteer and a puppet maker, even a pyrotechnician, and someone who has sewn countless thousands of metres of fabric in his time. When he talks about his work, fabric metaphors are frequent; he uses terms like "drawing the threads from the place" and "teasing out the threads of the story."

Over the six years he has been based in Darwin I have seen all his work here, but it was only through talking to him that I realised the range of theatre and events he has done in the NT. Today, he defines himself first as a director, but the visual and movement elements are the warp and weft of his directing. His most recent work has been woven from very diverse elements on a loom that is breathtaking in its extremes. Tim's work travels across the country and between continents, and ranges from intimate dance duets to large scale community events involving some five hundred people. He moves between Darwin and Launceston with the ease of a suburban commuter. He works with professional dancers in a studio in Melbourne, Darwin or Tasmania; with mobs of Aboriginal kids in the isolated desert community of Lajamanu, or on remote Groote Eylandt; or with teams of roller-bladers in a Launceston Park. Last



Tim Newth with Eastern Curlew feathers

year he worked on 'Waderbirds' as a visual artist in collaboration with director Meme McDonald and choreographer Beth Shelton to create enormous silk and bamboo puppets of the Eastern Curlew for an environmental event about the fragility of the world's wetlands which began in Auckland, and went on to Melbourne, Broome and culminated in Koshiro, Japan. So it's not surprising that he finds it ironic to be a community artist who

calls no one community home, and on a Darwin verandah, he dreams of the cottage in Tasmania he is off to next week. "to sit down and stay still for a while."

The common thread that unites all his work is the integrity of form and the truth to the material he pursues. At first this was in terms of his training as a visual artist and it translated in his early work with dancer Beth Shelton and 'Danceworks,' and later Tasdance,

into a fascination with creating fabric forms that moved with and in response to a dancer's body. These were not so much costumes worn by the dancers but soft silken sculptures animated by movement. Their forms evoked parachutes, wind-socks, sails, flags, pennants and kites, which came to life upon contact with moving air. They billowed, swayed, furled and rippled with their own specific and engrossing repertoire of gestures that enhanced and revealed the choreography of the dancers who wore or carried them. As a fabric artist he had previously made wind-sock pieces and hung them outside to catch the breeze, but with the dancers wearing them, they could make winds and waves of air inside.

Tim distinguishes a number of formative influences on his work, and his collaboration with Shelton was the beginning. They met not long after he completed art school and went back to his home town of Wangaratta in 1985 where he made 'Arm to Arm: The Great Shirt Link Up', a fabric and movement event as part of a youth arts festival. Wangaratta is the textile capital of Victoria, home of Brucks and Yakka, and the event celebrated that heritage and used two kilometres of pink fabric! It was at Brucks alongside some very doubting professional machinists that he learnt to sew on industrial machines and was shamed into keeping up with the women. The following year Shelton arrived in town to create what became 'Going Dancing', a community dance event and it provided Tim's first opportunity to work with dancers. Even at this stage Tim knew he had found a thread. As an art student he had decided that being an artist should not have to be about sitting alone in a dark, dank, cold room scratching away at a painting and hoping that after you died you

might be recognised. He knew he needed to work with people and he wanted to make art that had meaning and resonance at the time of its making. He also liked being in the sun. Through Shelton and 'Danceworks', he met contemporary composer and musician/performer Sarah Hopkins, who was then based in Darwin. Their meeting led to his coming to Darwin to work on 'Skysong' with Hopkins and Shelton at Browns Mart in 1988.

Browns Mart Community Arts and its director, Ken Conway, then became the spindle for the next stage of his work. He met local dancers, Sarah Calver and David McMicken and Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre Artistic Directors,

theatre director/writer and pyrotechnician, Neil Cameron, who came to Darwin in 1988 to revive 'Mayday'. From Cameron, Tim learnt about the lightness and flexibility of bamboo and the brightness and power of fire and how to draw the threads from a community and weave magical stories from them. Tim also saw the possibilities of really enormous outdoor theatre events that combined rituals and pageants. Under Cameron's tutelage he worked on the 1988 Mayday parade, and 'Fire on the Water', staged at sunset in Mindil Beach. In 1989 for 'Mayday: Freeing the Future', Cameron brought up his Melbourne based collaborator, Meme McDonald and that began

the twisting of another thread which eventually led to 'Waterbirds'. Once Tim had moved outdoors, his work would never be quite the same again. So these were the influences at play when he went to live and work in Lajamanu, a Walpiri Community. In the sandhill country of Lajamanu, he found his spiritual



'Illuminations' - a Tasdance Community project.

Janet Robertson, Steve Gratton and Venetia Gillot. Tim worked with them as a designer/visual artist and occasionally as an actor/dancer in mainstage productions like 'Black Rainbow' and 'Mapullban' as well as outdoor shows. He even designed a play performed under a banyan tree - 'The Struggle of the Naga Tribe'. He also worked with C.Y.T. on two seasons of plays written by young Territorians - 'Living in Isolation' and 'New Ways/Old Ways' and both productions toured to remote Aboriginal communities around the NT. From the 1988 'Living in Isolation' tour came 'The Lajamanu Project' which ultimately led in 1992 to 'Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yarn'. At the same time he met community

centre and the axis for his work in tropical Darwin and temperate Tasmania.

"The Lajamanu link has been a key to my life and it's affected everything I've done since going there six years ago. There I found where this land comes from. Lajamanu brings together place, people, art, land, ceremony and history and it all involves theatre, fire, dance, music and design - a cycle in people's lives tied to particular places. It's where I met Freddy Jangala Patrick, my father there. He is one of the main elders and has taught me heaps. He takes me hunting, he showed me how to make a Number 7 boomerang, how to find the right tree to carve it from and what to hunt with it. Freddie

has a fantastic sense of history - mysterious, a spiritual history, and he has shown me how important it is to find out about the spirit of a place".

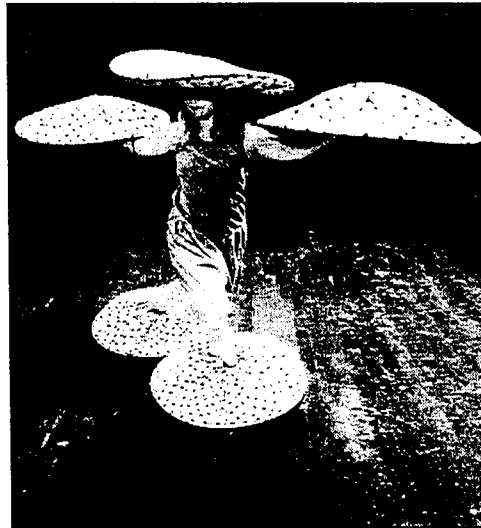
They met as Freddie was painting a corrugated iron water tank with his Dreaming; and Tim was subsequently assigned his correct skin name and kinship classification. The significance of Freddie adopting Tim and becoming responsible for him was lost on him at first. He recalls how he planned to take a group of local boys and the large Flying Ant puppet he had made with them to Darwin to participate in 'Fire On the Water', when he suddenly found that Freddie and his wife Myra were coming along as chaperons. At the time he couldn't understand why they seemed to think him incapable of managing the boys on his own. The subtleties of Aboriginal protocol eluded him. But after the truth dawned

he realised he was Freddie's son and that was that. Over the time there in a succession of residencies he would show Freddie slides and photos of his work in other places. In 1991 he was working with Meme McDonald and Beth Shelton in Melbourne on 'Wings of Summer' - the precursor to 'Waderbirds'. The orange-bellied parrot was the focus of the piece, so Freddie faxed his Parrot Dreaming design from the bush and Tim reproduced it as a sand drawing using seaweeds and pebbles on the beach at Port Phillip Bay.

It is a long way from Lajamanu to Launceston and the experiences of the Walpiri are very different from those of the Pallowah, Tasmania's Aborigines, but 'Illuminations' '92 and '93 are unimaginable for Tim without the Aboriginal connection.

'Illuminations' was instigated by Tasdance as a way of bringing together the community of Launceston, and the site chosen was Cataract Gorge, in the centre of town: "The very heart of the place, you walk into it and feel a presence, the gushing river, the place where the Tamar and the South Esk rivers meet - it felt right. The key was to ask the Aboriginal people about the

place ...from talking with them a story line evolved about the spirit of the Gorge for the first event and in the following year, other spirits were added to represent different elements. This is something theatre



'New Ways, Old Ways' - CIYT

can do; reclaim and show Aboriginal history and Aboriginal knowing, so it begins with a child's voice asking for permission to step upon the land. It is important that we take into account their spiritual ownership, because it's not often recognised down there."

In Tim's work, there are constant crossovers between cultures. He describes a moment in 'The Journey' - a piece he made for Tasdance in 1992, which is about life rituals - where he used white pennant flags in a mourning scene. He had seen these in ceremonies on Groote Eylandt when he was working there. The Groote Eylanders in turn had borrowed the imagery from the Maccassan traders over centuries of contact. In the beginning Tim says he was interested in pure forms - how a piece of fabric and a dancer moved - but now he is more interested in the story and the spirit. Movement pieces need to tell a story, to show people something of their history. He has not abandoned dance however and says that having a studio and dancers to work with is his ideal. Last year in Darwin he was given just that and from it came his most

accomplished piece of choreography, 'Silent Thought', based on Ted Egan's song *The Drover's Boy*. The story is about the young Aboriginal women who became stockmen and bedmates to the drovers of the North. It was a chance to work intensely with two dancers he knows well, Sarah Calver and David McMicken, to create an intimate, finely observed and delicate piece of extraordinary power. To knit such diverse threads together - working with two dancers you have known for years, or with five hundred people you've only just met, to work in sweltering Darwin and chilly Tasmania - is a considerable achievement in itself, but to make such consistently fine work, confirms that the truth to your materials ensures a strong fabric that never rips or frays

**Suzanne Spinner**

*Suzanne Spinner is a Darwin based Playwright/Designer and Dramaturg who has written 'Spilt Milk' and 'Radio for Help' for CIYT, as well as many plays for older people.*

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