

Lajamanu, Alice Springs, Tiwi Islands, Darwin

Throughout the year's 2001- 2003

A Tracks research project where non-indigenous and indigenous dance artists exploring the contemporary dance language that originates from Australian Warlpiri (desert) and Tiwi (Top End) dance forms.

A professional development project for Tim Newth and David McMicken. To explore the nature of traditional Aboriginal dance within a contemporary context, how does it sit in today's cultural context? How is it relevant to now? The project was to look at the context, the vocabulary and the choreographic process, in order to gain a better understanding of the contemporary nature of this traditional Australian dance, and to be able to counteract current concepts that Indigenous dancing is only 'traditional'.

Artistic Personnel

Researchers

David McMicken and Tim Newth

Artists

Lajamanu:

Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, Jerry Jangala Patrick, Molly Napurrula Tasman, Myra Nungarrayi Patrick, Maisie Napangardi (Kajingarra), Gladys Napangardi Kelly (Kangarariya), Rosie Napurrula Tasman

Additional Lajamanu Artists: *Margrett Nungarrayi Martin, Jeannie Napurrula Birrell, Peggy Napaljarri Rockman, Alice Napaljarri Kelly, Judy Napaljarri Walker*

Nguiu, Tiwi Islands:

Simon Tipangwati, Clementine Paruntatameri, Francine Paruntatameri

Alice Springs (Warlpiri and Anmatyere) - Janganpa Dancers:

Johnny Possum Japaljarri, Ted Egan Jangala, Jimmy Jangala Collins, Charlie Jampijinpa Brown, Albie Jampijinpa Morris, Frankie Japanangka, Derek Egan Jampijinpa, Noreen Nampijinpa Robertson, Lydia Nangala Sampson, Ida Nangala Granites, Pamela Nangala Sampson, Audrey Napanungka Martin, Judy Nampijinpa Granites

Research Report

Reference: For ease of understanding when using the word indigenous in this report we are referring to the groups with which we had contact (Lajamanu Warlpiri, Tiwi, town camp Warlpiri in Alice Springs) and not 'indigenous' in general.

Lajamanu

July 2001 (first trip)

Background. The Lajamanu Aboriginal Community (originally named Hooker Creek) is situated on the edge of the Tanami Desert, midway between Alice Springs and Darwin, in the traditional country of the Gurindji people.

The settlement was established in 1949 by the Native Affairs branch of the federal government with 25 Warlpiri people trucked there from Yuendumu (a similar Warlpiri settlement founded in 1946). In 1951, totally against their will, a further 150 Warlpiri were trucked there from Yuendumu. Unable to live away from their Dreaming Sites, the people all walked back to Yuendumu, a distance of over 400 kilometres. The notion of being removed from close relatives and from sources of spiritual power was anathema to them. Two further resettlements and Aboriginal walk backs to Yuendumu occurred before the Warlpiri residents were prepared to accept the new community at Hooker Creek.

Lajamanu is now home to 600 - 800 Warlpiri with a strong sense of cultural identity, helped by the settlement's remoteness, linguistic stability and its effective Aboriginal Town Council.

Lajamanu residents speak Warlpiri as a first language. The school teaches in English and Warlpiri.

Tim Newth and David McMicken talked with several key elders, both male and female, in Lajamanu. The act of talking to people has its own sense of adventure. Visiting a house or finding a place to talk is often difficult as one does not as a rule go into other people's houses. Many of the older women do not live inside anyway and they can be found in the older/single women's camp. If you want to get away from the grandchildren and the dogs and the general humbug, it is necessary to find a car, pick people up and go 'out bush' for a bit.

With the men we usually went to Lul Tju, an out-station about 15 kilometres down a sand track. With the women we would find a place in the grass plains to the east of the Community.

When working with this group of Warlpiri it is important to put their contemporary life in context.

- Most Warlpiri currently live in some of the most remote locations in Australia.
- They were one of the last tribes to be "brought in", contact happening in the 1930's and 40's. Many of the current elders remember their first white contact.
- In their current lifetime they have had to learn new economic, welfare, education, health, and religious systems.
- They have been forcibly relocated from their homelands to someone else's land.
- They have witnessed massacres of their own people, and removal of family members.
- They have been missionised into single belief systems.
- Artistic culture comes under the broad label JUKURRPA, (dreaming, law). They do not separate the art forms and often the discussion about dance is also about song, painting designs on the body, sculptural materials, place and journeys, history as it affects tomorrow.

We entered into the project with a set of general questions:

- Frameworks - what frameworks does the dance exist within
- Have you ever created a new dance? Why? Context
- What purpose does the dance serve? Why does the dance exist? Context
- Where does the dance movements come from? Inspiration
- How does this happen? Process!
- Who creates the actual movements? Choreography!
- Who are the dancers, how are they selected? Performers. Audition

- Who makes up the music? Composer
- Where does the story come from? Research Playwright, dramaturgy
- Who observes/perceives, the work? Who is the dance for? Participants? Audience?
- How do we know this is good/bad/proper? Evaluation
- What are the remuneration/commercial social payment aspects? Economic

Also:

- How are contemporary ideas incorporated into the traditional?
- How does the 'nowness' relate to contemporary dance practices?
- What is different or the same between Aboriginal and Western forms and dance making practices?
- What is the movement vocabulary? Where does it come from?
- How are the forms connected to other art forms?
- How does the art form connect one to land?
- What is contemporary/traditional, community/individual ownership?

Initial conclusions

- New work can be made
- Ownership of the work is more important than who makes it. The entire community owns the dance, some perform it, and some manage it.
- The purpose of the dance is to reinforce a cultural placement in the community
- There is no financial imperative
- Western performative issues do not apply as the relationship between dancer and audience is different
- Dance has an extended life; (the product continues for many years)
- The dance has to mean something - come from somewhere and speak to others. All perceivers of the work understand it to some level, although the understanding is layered and as you go through the law, more is revealed.

Lajamanu

September 2001 (second visit)

Tim and David returned to Lajamanu and put to the test the making of a new dance within the Lajamanu women's dance forms.

We used the story of Olive Pink because it was a common thread between us and we were all working towards a performance about her. She was the first white contact for several of the woman, and she set up camp at a very significant sacred site – Pirdi Pirdi.

This block consisted of trips out bush to find appropriate places to dance, the negotiation of storyline, important events, and characters, the decision of which songs to use or new songs, and then the choreography. The end result was a new work of fifteen-minutes duration that was created within the song dance cycle recognisable as Warlpiri but also with a contemporary difference.

Nguiu, Tiwi Islands

April 2002

Background. The Tiwi Islands, (first European contact in 1836 by the Dutch and later named by the British), are about 60 kilometres north of Darwin over the Timor Sea.

Melville Island is the second largest Australian island and covers 5,000 square kilometres. Bathurst Island is smaller and covers about 3,000 square kilometres. There are four main towns on the islands, three on Melville Island and one on Bathurst Island.

Nguiu is on the south-eastern tip of Bathurst Island, on the Aspley Strait. Nguiu began as a Catholic Mission and the influence of Catholicism is still strong (many local people have biblical names). This is the largest settlement in the district, with about 1,500 residents (of whom about one-hundred are non-Aboriginal).

Pirlangimpi (Garden Point) is at the northern end of Melville Island on the shores of the Aspley Strait. It is a town of about 350 people, of who about thirteen are non-Aboriginal. The police station at Pirlangimpi is the base for policing the district.

Milikapiti (Snake Bay) is on the north coast of Melville Island, about 15 kilometres east of Pirlangimpi as the crow flies. The settlement is slightly larger than Pirlangimpi, with about 500 residents, most Aboriginal. There is an Aboriginal Community Police Officer stationed at Milikapiti.

Pickataramoor is on the south-western sector of Melville Island. Originally a forestry camp, it is administered by Parks and Wildlife staff engaged in pine forest management. About 20 people live there.

There are two outstations at Wurankuru, on Bathurst Island, with a population of about 60, and Taracumbi on Melville Island, with about 30 residents.

The Aboriginal people speak Tiwi, although most people on the islands speak English as a second language.

The Tracks Directors had several contacts with the community of Nguiu prior to this development project. We had created several performances with the community and school (Kukanari Show 1998, Tiwi Flame 2000 for the Olympic Ceremony), and partaken in research for a project Outside The Camp in 2000. We had established working links with two key culture people of the Island, Simon Tipangwati and Clementine Paruntatameri.

We struck difficulties before we were due to start. Simon Tipangwati became very sick. We ran into some local politics with a Darwin based contemporary urban indigenous artists who felt that we had no right to partake in the work and said that we were "forcing ourselves on people who did not even want to talk to us". We had no choice but to step aside and not enter into the potentially damaging situation.

After a period of time we recontacted the key artists, who were wondering why we had stopped seeing them. We brought Simon and Clementine to Darwin, feeling that if they agreed to get on the plane and come to Darwin we could take it that they would talk to us. They brought two other Tiwi who participated in the interviews, (Francine, Clementine's Daughter, and Simon's wife).

We spoke to them with the same questions that we had put to the Lajamanu people. There were less language difficulties with these people who have had a longer connection to English speaking society,

being missionised by French Catholics in 1911. These two dance artists had worked at NAISDA and taught both traditional and the contemporary Bombing of Darwin dance.

This component was intense and short but having completed blocks one and two with Lajamanu, we were able to travel quite some distance. Sadly, Simon Tipangwati was hospitalised that night, (dying shortly after). As a result here was no second block with the Tiwi.

Alice Springs

September 2002

Background The Janganpa Group are Warlpiri and Anmatyere people, originally from the remote regions of Central Australia, northwest of Alice Springs, now living in Alice Springs. This group of tribal elders is known for their song and dance and acting work. Janganpa is the Warlpiri word for 'possum', an important totemic animal, but which has now disappeared from the desert regions of Central Australia.

However, the traditional culture and skills of these people are still very much a part of their daily life. Important links are maintained with families in remote communities in order to carry out the important kinship and ceremonial obligations. Included in Janganpa are traditional dancers, singers, hunters and gatherers, trackers, artists and craftspeople, and stockmen. They regularly perform short pieces of their traditional dances locally and overseas, in New Zealand, Germany and Korea.

Tim and David travelled to Alice Springs to work with Janganpa. We went to several places out bush where we were able to talk about dance (Pulapa), Aboriginal Law, and living today. As with the Lajamanu people, these Warlpiri elders made no separation between dance and culture as a whole.

If we had begun with this group, (with no working or social relationship) we may have thought that there was no place for traditional dance within a contemporary setting. We were constantly told, "you can't change our law. It's not just today but every day. Writing it down on paper does not change it ... I carry it on my back".

We went out bush. Much time was spent building basic trust, giving to them our labour as an exchange for information, hunting, stalking, singing, and eating. Then we were sent out onto the salt plain near the camp where the women presented us with several dances. Seeing them performed in the environment, not in a ceremonial context, and in street clothes, I was reminded of my own postmodern training with pedestrian activities happening in "unusual" urban settings.

The women proceeded to improvise a new dance-story about a Pungalung (?) creature that ate people and had to be killed. We were assured that this was not an old dance, but based on a story. Our initial understanding of the story was child like (like Swan Lake or Sleeping Beauty). From a start where it appeared that there was no avenue for creating new dances, we were presented with one.

This dance took place over a large space as big as four football ovals, with the most amazing backdrop of bush and setting sun. One could not have designed or lit it better for all the money in the world.

Later that night, with the winds howling through and the temperature at around zero, we were presented with a dance that uses men and women and has a semi-improvised feel to it. Jardawarnpa is a snake and emu dance and needs a big fire and lots of fun. It was the sort of song and dance that would have kept them up all night in the old days, and probably driven any near by white settlers to despair.

We had a rare opportunity to test all of our research in this project when we returned later in the year to create a new theatre work called 'JANGANPA', where we placed traditional Warlpiri dances onto a western stage, (much smaller, darker, set timing and space etc., afraid of whether we could actually do it.)

Instead of a choreographic block with Janganpa we directed their new work 'JANGANPA' which was performed for the festival of Alice Springs on the main stage of the Araluen Arts Centre. (See project Janganpa 2003 for more details)

Value and Benefits of Project

To the community

Tim and David now have a far greater understanding of the place of Indigenous art forms in both their contemporary life and ours. We are able to talk about it in real terms and debate the often-misunderstood differences between 'traditional' and contemporary.

We have been able to widely disseminate the information to artists and other Australians through conferences papers, and publications, (Groundswell Regional Arts ('02) AD2002, Bodytalks ('03)

Reconciliation has begun between the oldest culture and the newest, via our ability to provide platforms in our work that truly allow for these explorations to be expressed.

We have provided avenues forwards for other people. We are able to make recommendations that will ease the way for other people if they want to work in this way. This is an important piece of the contemporary research into movement practice as it exists in other parts of Australia that have not been affected in the same way by all of the myriad modern and, contemporary' movement arts practices.

To the art form

One of the prime values to the Australian Dance scene is that we have a greater understanding of the "nowness" of Indigenous dance. We have had to argue for many years that what is seen as 'traditional' aboriginal dance has to be viewed through contemporary eyes. These people use dance, (and many other connected art forms) to express who they are now, to challenge and educate, to show expertise and joy, to explain what is occurring to them in the present, to affirm where they have come from in the past. They take to heart the notion that the past provides a way forwards, whereas we often believe that the past needs to be left behind.

In our travels, through presenting papers and attending conferences, several key issues regularly arise. Contemporary practitioners often ask about how to make a connection to audience and community. This research, (as well as through some South East Asian forms) demonstrates that the culture is still very much related to the community. People are both doers and perceivers. The 'audience' have a strong connection to and understanding of what is being presented. A key difference is that of ownership and or copyright of the material.

It is evident in our western arts practice that for many years we have glorified individuality, solo virtuosity. This is in stark contrast to people in many parts of the world where they more often glorify involvement in family and clan, for women and men, for adults, youth and children.

The glorification of independence (the 'pioneer' spirit) may have well served the general "progress" of western culture: with individuals willing to leave the comfort of the familial to find opportunities, get the best education, training, and travel to find the best jobs, or even wherever their jobs or government sent them. More emphasis is placed on a need for independence and less on social involvement.

However, a Collective approach to things maintains relationships, affirms our humanness and strengthens personal relationships.

FAME: a challenge to ways of thinking that suggest new is better than old. It has been important for us to discard old ways of seeing, and to learn from those who understand the differences. Indigenous processes challenge many established Western premises, as it always seems to position the new in the context of the old.

We have had to question the inexorable chasing of the new, the modern, and question who benefits from this. Where does old wisdom, (as often held within traditional cultures) fit into the new?

The lack of fame that traditional cultural forms engender leads to greater liberty for the people who encounter that form. The perceivers, makers and performers are coming from a place of understanding, respect and reflection of themselves within their community.

The structuring of the contemporary form often removes the artist from the community and creates a situation where they firstly have to insist on deserving respect, and earning a reputation, and then constantly chasing and building an audience, a market that will eventually come to an understanding and then continue to support the artist in their endeavour to "make new and innovative" art.

We then have to question who makes up the audience. Are they imagined, dreamed, the great potential throng, an infinitude without faces, anonymous, the entire world, applauding and invisible?

Or

Identifiable faces, watching everything, admiring, approving, owning.

Who is showing what, and to whom?

Skills or expertise gained, employment opportunities

Appreciation of Time Frames: long and long term. Because the contemporary culture of the remote indigenous people that we worked with have a vastly different set of daily priorities, one has to find a way for the two time management systems to mesh. This means allowing more time, and shorter repeat visits has achieved the best results, allowing for appropriate and productive relationships. (Family and kinship is the basis for most culture and this cannot be compacted into short one off periods.) A good example of this was when we worked with Janganpa in 2003 we came back into contact with two Warlpiri women that we first worked with in 1992, at Yipirinya Aboriginal School. Having worked on two projects with these women, they had a greater understanding of our working methods. As a result we progressed more quickly with the women as the relationship was already established over more than ten years. It is a family link.

Time frame limitations: too short, not taking into account real difference in culture. If the time was ever too short we would encounter difficulties such as a belief that we did not appreciate Aboriginal ways, or did not respect the culture, or that we were just behaving like pushy white people. Although this happened rarely, (at times in the Tiwi context, and occasionally with the men of Janganpa) it reinforced a basic notion that this type of research will happen in its own time" not in the time of our company or funding bodies or other deadlines. The deadline has less importance than the result. (We thank the Australia Council for its understanding and flexibility.)

Small Steps. This is a fundamental understanding that is needed when working in this way. As in any sense of survival, someone needs to be able to be knowledgeable enough to teach the basic concepts to others in order to continue. The seed cannot fall too far away from the tree. This does not exclude change but states that the change cannot be too great. Many small steps lead to great change. Single Leaps increases the chances of new ideas dying.

This is dirty work. You cannot wear white in this work place. You are dealing with third world conditions as far as health and welfare go. (True!) People do not eat or sleep well. The arts worker needs to be able to put up with hunger, illness, language limitation, supplies not getting in, rain stranding you, other people's business is always more important than you: strangers in a strange land.

White and Black, together. Not one or the other, not separated. Accepting true difference. The work is not about reconciliation but understanding from both sides. The Indigenous contemporary world runs side by side with the Western world, however there are profound differences that make them two different worlds. This is not to say that there is not any overlap.

Dance form key differences: language. Simple but easy to forget: that when working with Indigenous people from traditional backgrounds that the English that they do speak is not Standard English. The people we worked with use English as a very 'foreign' language, often third, fourth or further down the line. Their own Australian language obviously encapsulates their own cultural concepts and a basic understanding of the difference provides a key into the difference in cultural expression. It describes these concepts, and reinforces the links between people and place. Warlpiri language grammar structure often has 'locaters' within it, telling us how many people, their relationship and their placement in space. As a language Warlpiri is verb rich, English is noun rich.

Dance form key differences: Space: Directions. The indigenous space is very real, and three-dimensional, based on landscape. When we talked about space we had to alter our sense of it. Westerners are now generally so separated from their real surrounds that we talk about space in conceptual terms. In our practice we talk about front, or downstage, or from the audience's point of view etc. Indigenous will talk about towards the singer, or towards the sunset or towards the sunrise. Directions cannot just be rearranged. North is North is North!

Dance form key difference: Time. Although there is the notion that you cannot change aboriginal traditional dance, there still appears to be quite a lot of room for things to shift. The number of times a cycle may be repeated can vary because the music is always live and the song person just sings it again. Therefore dances can vary greatly in time. Also, although the music has its own set rhythm, the dancing seems to follow the story more than the rhythm. This translates into new works when created. Sections take as long as the singer takes.

Dance form key difference: Energy. Western dance practice often explores the energy of movement as a separate area of creation. One comment often made when viewing extended sessions of Central Desert indigenous dance is that it lacks dynamic variation. To the Western eye, any not-understood style not only lacks a certain amount of core understanding but often also carries an assumption of limited information. (I cannot perceive it therefore it does not exist.)

When new dance is created it has to fit into the understanding of the audience, and in the case of a cultural or language group that audience may be limited in size. The indigenous people we worked with have a very different view of how time fits into their worldview. Rather than a thing rushing past, it is a continuum that extends way back and forward at the same time. The future holds things to be discovered and tested against a past that affirms placement. As a result the dynamic qualities are often extended over longer periods, creating rhythmical patterns that do not play out over four or eight bars or short phrases, but rather over entire song-and-dance cycles, some of which may continue for hours or days. The result is that in the short term the dynamic range appears flattened.

Westerners need to slow down their expectation of the rate of change in order to appreciate the dynamic range of the traditional indigenous dance form.

Ownership of material - kinship system. Western dance concepts generally ascertain that someone is the choreographer, or at times a collaborative process takes place. Nevertheless, the artist creates the work on dancers and presents it to an audience.

In the indigenous model, the equation is based on who is present: new people change the equation so it often seems to shift. Some people are owners of the creation; others have a job to 'manage' the material as method of maintaining integrity. As a result, the work is actually owned by the community and managed by select caretakers that are determined by a skin relationship to the material.

The performer. People enter the dance with a relationship to it and other people, including 'audience'. A change in people affects the dynamics. It is not always the best or most accomplished performer who dances. In the western way it is usually the choreographer or ballet mistress or rehearsal director, (someone) who keeps the work happening. In the Indigenous context other people can determine who performs when. We had examples of a visitor entering the rehearsal space and the change in kinship meant a change in the performer and the order of the dances.

A chess metaphor. People have particular roles and limitations. Like a game of chess where each piece has its set moves. The eventual play is determined by what pieces are still in play, and the play changes as pieces are removed or added. Understanding comes from across the full gamut of pieces, not just the king and queen. (16 skins, 8 for men and 8 for women, gives millions of possible combinations.)

Audience size & new audience

Through this project we have come to question the notion of audience development, especially in terms of size, or ever increasing size. The indigenous contemporary form has two ways to go. One is to create work relevant and understood by its language speakers and therefore for a limited audience. The benefit of this is that the understanding within the cultural constraints will be much deeper and richer.

The other is if the work is to exist for the Western notion of a general audience, there will be a great amount of initial misunderstanding as people place it into their own western aesthetic, making shifts through translation.

We believe that a strength that Tracks has is due to its longevity and planning. It is able to gradually place the work within a context of indigenous and non-indigenous, working together on a journey of shared understanding, both ways.

One has to question who is it that benefits from the creation of a new audience. It is not necessary to view all work in the paradigm of an ever-expanding audience. Audience can be related to an ever deepening of understanding and acceptance. There is certainly a potential audience of people 'down South' who appear eager to come to some reconciled understanding of dance from Australia's first people.

This way the audience becomes far more connected to the work, with a sense of ownership that transcends the ego of the creator. We had several opportunities to test the 'new' audience issue.

For Fierce we targeted audience people with a social, linguistic, historic and anthropological interest; people with a connection to the subject matter rather than the art form.

With Janganpa we targeted specifically the tourist industry, an industry in Alice Springs that is crying out for authentic aboriginal dance, (there is a lot of unauthentic material, and much that comes from Queensland.)

In terms of getting indigenous people to pay to go and see representations of their own culture, there is a long road to follow. There are issues surrounding general health, poverty and different priorities.

During our research we came across some younger people (30+) who became excited when talking about new and contemporary work. They saw it as a necessary way to go forward and keep their young people interested in their own culture. In Lajamanu this was through Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, a man who, amongst other things, has gone through teacher training, run a youth-centre in Lajamanu, and has worked on several Tracks' productions, including a Melbourne tour. In Tiwi this was with Francine Paruntatameri, Clementine's daughter. Francine seemed to come from a place where she was used to the business surrounding her mother and her 'fame' as a culture woman whom had toured to Sydney, as well as having an engendered sense of questioning, that also seemed to come from her mother. In both cases these people were exceptions. From this there was some sense of a potential revitalisation of work and audiences, but that has come from them saying that it would be good.

Opportunities and access

The project offered Tim and David a chance to spend proper time with people without always pushing for the creation of new work and the deadlines of a production. This enabled knowledge to be shared over a natural time frame. When working on one of our projects the Lajamanu women particularly, are very keen to do the 'right thing', both for themselves but also for Tim and David who they see that they have family obligations to. It is the long-term general contact with Lajamanu that allows for the real relationships, trust and performance outcomes to occur.

Janganpa: We had access through Janganpa to work with a new group of people from the same language group as Lajamanu. In working with this group we were able to research several new key issues within a kinship system in which we already belonged.

1. These people, although very old and very traditional, lived in a town camp setting and had partaken in several film shoots and international visits. They therefore had a different interface with western contemporary life.
2. We had access to a group of men who were still dancing, (This was near impossible in Lajamanu). There are very clear differences in men and women's business, and as we had gained most of our knowledge through the women of Lajamanu, it was essential to get more information from the men.

Performances: because of the long time frame that this project took place over, we were lucky to have several opportunities to test our findings. This added a great deal to our development. We were able to build and maintain relationships over a period of time that is more natural rather than being constrained by project deadlines.

We also had three different and important opportunities to present our findings as we went. (Groundswell Regional Arts 2002, AD2002, Bodytalks 2003) In all cases the chance to disseminate our findings to our peers in various fields was greatly valued, both by the audience and us. In all cases we were presenting to an articulate performing arts audience.

Groundswell was presented to a national audience of community artists, not just dance. The interest was in the creation of work across cultures and from a remote and regional perspective. We highlighted

the differences between individualistic and collectivist approaches to the creation of cultural product. This was most relevant to community arts workers.

AD2002. We were asked to present our processes to an audience of 40 directors of small to to medium performing arts companies. At this conference there was a focus on the sustainability of the performing arts and we were able to introduce to the directors other notions of what cultural outputs were.

Body Talk 2003: This conference was a dance focus. We were able to present findings about working methods that took place over longer periods of time, and the incorporation not only of indigenous material, but also indigenous methods of working into the general Australian cultural landscape.

Appreciation within the community for art

Feedback on our presentation as mentioned above has been extremely positive, and has led to publishing of the information on the regional Arts Website, in Realtime magazine, and through Ausdance National. We are now able to shed a light on an aspect of Australian culture that has been difficult to explore. That is; the traditional indigenous and western contemporary artistic paradigms that have appeared to be at loggerheads with each other. Because we have been working and researching now for over a decade, the findings hold more weight than if we had simply done a project or two.

Alice Springs: appreciation in Alice Springs is growing. It is a very hard town to deal with Aboriginal performance as there are so many social issues attached to the local and visiting indigenous people. Much culture is imported from interstate and performed in a way that traditional people get very angry about. We did not just come to town to tell people how to do it, or to suggest that there are better contemporary ways of working, but rather over time established strong relationships, with a broad range of individuals, organisations and groups. The prime cultural workers in Alice Springs now feel confident that if we are involved then the work will be imbued with great cultural sensitivity and will be able to cover the difficult areas of Westerners working with full blood traditional Aboriginal people.

Darwin and Lajamanu: the appreciation here is already established, but we were able to reinforce it.

Business and the Arts: We were requested to present our working methods to a group of Darwin business people who are interested in the arts. Due to professional development afforded by this project we found ourselves able to clearly articulate the importance of a Territory Culture that is inclusive.

Tim and David are gaining a wider reputation for their work in the overlap between indigenous and Western work methodologies. Our processes are becoming more widely accepted and appreciated as we gain more opportunities to articulate them.

Professional networks

This project was not really about developing professional networks although it did afford us the opportunity to build strong networks in Alice Springs, particularly with the Alice Springs Festival, and the Araluen Cultural Precinct

Community participation

Within the context we were working there is no real separation between community activity, and culture; they are very interwoven. Therefore, for this project, the professional development was more in Tim and David's community participation. It was necessary to deepen relationships and gain trust and confidence through our involvement more fully in community activities.

In Lajamanu this would entail general socialising, hunting, getting food and drink, listening to other stories, looking at paintings, reliving past memories, looking after children.

In the Tiwi component we ran into trouble with this very aspect. Because someone that we had brought over to Darwin became sick and was hospitalised, (later to die) we were expected to then fly over quite a number of family to look after him. Because we were not able to financially do this, the artists we were working with became angry. It was one aspect of the breakdown of communication with this group. We discussed this with Steve Jampijinpa Patrick from Lajamanu who although he could see why we could not just fly everyone to Darwin; he still said it was "Yapa" (Aboriginal) way, and that the obligation really was on us. It is this sometimes-overbearing sense of obligation, and the rules that govern it, and the misunderstandings that occur due to lack of knowledge and language, that often crushes Western workers. It certainly gave us a severe bruising.

Alice Springs and Janganpa: this entailed spending over two hours driving around the four or five town camps to pick people up each time we wanted to talk, and the same to return them home at the end. (One camp is thirty minutes drive out of town) getting food and drink and other provisions, cooking, getting people to and from Health Congress or hospital, taking other family members where they need to go, negotiating with housing, banks, going out bush hunting etc, ... the list goes on. One has to make a choice how far one goes in this part of the 'work'. As Westerners we tend to draw the line and say that's not the job responsibility. But in a culture that says that 'is' our responsibility, or even that the person with the goods/money/transport has the obligation to share, and then if we do not give out, they will not put in.

Some issue in translation to Western terms.

Production values:

Time management is different. More has to get done in the same time. The deadline is less important than the correctness of the procedure.

Prioritising activity: When dealing with the poor social health, other things take priority. Also Familial obligations override everything.

Frameworks for agreeing decision-making. Who is in charge changes with who is present and what the issue is. A culture that spreads responsibility and ownership over the entire community has resulted in very clear areas of demarcation. One cannot just 'nominate' someone as leader.

Example: We were taken out bush and shown some dances. We then managed to get access to the main stage of the Araluen Arts Centre to work on contemporary contexts for traditional dance. We were shown more dances, including Jimmy's quite amazing Emu dance. As soon as we tried to instil Western production values (by ordering material, looing at transitions, or trying to get a flow that would make sense to a Western audience, or imposing aesthetic choices on the material such as facing, presenting to an audience, making the spacing identical each time, direction of travel), we ran into difficulties. We needed to find where the boundaries were: what was absolute and what could be manipulated. All of this was within a framework of "you cannot change aboriginal law". So what was exactly was the 'law'?

Every time we thought we had got somewhere we would then ask to see it again. Their response was that they already knew the dance and there was no need to do it again. (Remembering these were old men with health and alcohol problems). We knew that we had to take smaller steps over a longer period but we were trying to ascertain just what were those small steps. Both sides were pushing the boundaries. Eventually the situation developed into loggerheads. Jimmy exploded 'what for we just doing this over and over again. WE KNOW IT ALREADY". Our limited language and opposing concepts were out there. We were after the transitions between (which was the time that they would stop and spit and cough and look all over and wait). From here we were able to instigate a theatre idea of a 'walk through". This was a Grand Western Concept that allowed them to relax and not have to keep performing, and allowed us to focus on production values.

Rehearsal process

We generally accept that people will get to a rehearsal and get home, and look after their own meals, that they come relatively prepared and that they will look after themselves. We even expect people to 'leave problems at the door'.

Here are some differences

People live in different conditions. Many indigenous people live with large numbers of people in a household, if they live inside at all. Food is often limited especially at the end of the welfare fortnight. Living in poor social conditions also means that often just getting sleep is impossible. Family obligations, especially for women, are intense and overriding. Few people have transport and if a car is available then there is not always petrol.

Example: We were trying to work one day with some women in Alice Springs, finding out who is allowed to do what and how far can we alter things. It was reliant on key women being available because without them the entire dynamic and decision making would change. We went to pick up one Nangala from a town camp where many women live under plastic with one Donga for a shower between about 20 women and children.

Nangala, (who was the blood sister of the Nangala in Lajamanu that was seen as David's Lajamanu mother and who had died last year and could not be mentioned or talked about) was a key dancer. Her son, a twenty-something alcoholic, had ended up in hospital, catatonic. He had just come out with his leg in plaster, severe complications, and was immobile. She said I gotta stay here and look after my son". Clearly this was a priority. With only a few days left and this being the only day left for the women we did not know what to do. Everyone assumed that we were in charge and that we understood the full situation. We sheepishly asked if anyone else could look after him. We really did not take into consideration the severity of the man's condition, and the imperative Nangala had to care for him. Nangala found someone and came with us but clearly felt that we had imposed on her and she remained distracted and we had to let her go early.

Getting to work. We generally assume that contemporary people have a particular work ethic that includes the ability to get to work.

In the Territory we sometimes have some very long distances to get to work. Lajamanu is about 1,000 kilometres from Darwin; Alice Springs is over 1500 kilometres away. There are few flights to communities.

Darwin to Alice has one flight a day. Lajamanu has two Mail flights per week, from Katherine. In order to link up from Darwin you need an overnight stay in Katherine. We simply do not have a transport system to get people across these distances. People in Alice Springs have been known to get a taxi the 400 kilometres to Yuendumu to get there for business, spending over a month's welfare.

If we are to work in this context, it is expected that we will provide the transport to and from work, regardless of what this costs, or where they are coming from.

Artistic/Cultural Respect

Age is a major difference in the creation of contemporary work. In the Western format dancers will tend to be young, choreographers beginning relatively young as well. In all of the indigenous contexts that we worked in, it was the older adults who were making the decisions. This was not just as a control over the young or the culture, but more because their knowledge was respected and it was assumed that they were more capable of fitting the new into the old, and of making decisions.

Break in Contemporary, New versus old. The indigenous worldview is not currently so separated in time between then and now, the very definition of contemporary is filtered. New things can be seen as old things waiting to be discovered, history is laid out in front, not behind. We have been told things like "You Mob have just forgotten your dreaming. You lot have got to refind them", Wentin Rubuntja, Yipirinya School, Alice Springs)", and "Even if you have not seen something before, it still has to have a dance. You can learn it." Clementine Paruntatameri, Tiwi.

Transition (from dancer to what?) it is expected that people will dance basically until they die. Once a dance is created it falls into the larger cultural repertoire and will stay there as long as there are dancers who know it and people to make sure it is presented properly. The idea of transition is not strong and so new works are not created to only be performed by the young and energetic, but to be continually performed until you can no longer dance.

"Dreaming" a new dance. All of the research groups talked about how new dances can be dreamed into existence. This is in keeping with the notion of the old waiting to be discovered. In the Tiwi situation this went so far as new totems becoming key dreamings for the tribe, (ie Pig, Buffalo etc)

Janganpa quickly created a new performance of a spirit being, Pangalang. It was instantly recognised that this was a real thing and that it belonged to women and children.

Lajamanu women created a Tarlkinjirra (Miss Pink) song and dance cycle complete with make-up, properties, costumes, and body design.

Hybrid nature of culture, role of 'artist'. We found an overwhelming lack of understanding of the separation of artistic forms as found in Western contemporary arts practice. It is in the hybrid nature of the art that we find the role of the indigenous artist. Some people may be known in western terms as a song man or a painter, mostly they are known as 'culture' man or woman. They exist in the community as ordinary people. Everyone is expected to take responsibility for some part of the creation, maintaining and passing on of culture. As a result there are many people working through an interconnected hybrid manner taking many steps that build into a cultural shift. The individual creator is not relevant, no one knowing who left the actual imprint. Leaving behind a series of tracks enabling others to follow the footsteps. This small step method requires a subjugation of ego, unlike the western contemporary innovation, the giant leap.

We are beginning to see in the indigenous visual arts a scene that has individual painters and separate art forms. But this separateness is far more in the Western perceiving of the work. An artist might say

"that is my dreaming" but they do not mean that the design is separate from the other ritual and ceremonial activities that encapsulate it. It is just part of the multi layered way of viewing their world.

Language, Songs. We do not speak the language. This is a great block in the full understanding of what we are looking at. The difficulty goes both ways. If we could understand the language of the songs (often in an old Ceremonial Warlpiri) then we could tell more where the shifts in content come from. It also limits the level of verbal communication which relying on both sides on infantile speech. This is not meant to imply that either side only have child like understanding of the issues, but rather that the language itself encapsulates cultural information.

Successes and Failures of Project

Intended outcomes: Greater understanding of traditional Australian Indigenous dance forms and their relevance to contemporary life style and choreography

Areas of Understanding

- Ownership of cultural material, who and how?
- Hybridism, art forms are not separated .
- Preparation: different roles for who does what. Owner, manager, and shared roles.
- Spatial issues: real direction cannot change. Travelling west has to be travelling west.
- Ability to move land relationship, culture is strongly linked to real place but the expression of that can relocate, however the relationship remains.
- Relationship to land, people, responsibilities. The interconnectedness of people place and culture is paramount. Any new information has to filter through this lens.
- Relevance to life style
- Health: The people we are dealing with here have the worst health in the Country. Also the highest incidence of many social ills such as alcohol and drug use, sexually transmitted diseases, diabetes, etc.
- Respect: this is an active thing, not just a concept. Respect is earned, and payed. it involves place and things and animals as much as it does humans.
- Community standing: people have a knowing of how they fit into the community. They have a knowing of their law and they sense the differences.
- Acknowledge the history and what has come before, belong to a continuum. History travels forwards.
- Contemporary Choreography

Relationship of material to the community. The Performer and audience relationship is stronger. They know each other personally. They are identifiable faces, watching everything, admiring, approving, owning. They provide immediate feedback

Hybrid nature of outputs: easier to understand under new media arts terms than single art form. The interconnection tells the story.

Transformative nature of the performer. The Indigenous traditional performer becomes the dance, or rather, the vehicle for the dreaming to pass through. This is not only historic or ancient. This is more like South East Asian dances where the God/Goddess dances through the dancer.

Multi layers of meaning. The dances contain many layers of meaning that are learnt through multiple viewings and over time. As the observer shows they have what it takes, the next layer of knowing is given over.

Land and history of activity on the land. One cannot separate activity from where it occurs. Much Western Contemporary of recent past exists as explorations of intellectual concepts and exists in a no-place.

Expertise, knowledge, holding historical information: The dance contains information for future generations. It is one way that the past travels forwards.

Black and white history: at the moment on this land there are two histories, or rather a clear before and after. Our development is strongest in the exploration of work that looks at how both histories are running side by side.

An historical Aside:

(edited from <http://www.australiadancing.org/subjects/241.html>).

This is to show a serious attempt to integrate Indigenous concepts into a western framework. We may now scoff at the lack of actual indigenous representation but this was a genuine attempt.

Corroboree [Dance work made to the score of John Antill]

Composer John Antill completed his monumental music score, Corroboree, in the mid 1940s, based on Aboriginal rhythms written down on visits to Aboriginal communities at La Perouse in Sydney. He intended the work to be used for a ballet and annotations on the score indicate that he had a well developed framework in mind. The manuscript contains detailed bar by bar instructions for the unfolding of the storyline and lists 'characteristic movements' that might be used.

In the 1940s Dorothy Heimrich of the Arts Council of Australia approached two choreographers then working in Australia, Bodenwieser and Borovansky, asking them to stage the work. Both declined. The score was first used for a ballet by Rex Reid who made his version of Corroboree for the Melbourne based National Theatre Ballet in 1950. With a set by William Constable and costumes by Robin Lovejoy the Reid Corroboree premiered at Sydney's Empire Theatre in July 1950 and featured John (Jack) Manuel as the Medicine Man.

A second version of Corroboree was made by Beth Dean in 1954. Performed for the first time in Sydney by the Arts Council Ballet at a gala event in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II. Dean claimed anthropological authenticity for her version and she and her husband, Victor Carell, spent several months in Arnhem Land researching Aboriginal movement patterns, which she incorporated into her work. Dean also added a narrative line that went beyond Antill's descriptions of the music and in the 1954 staging Dean herself danced the leading role of the Initiate. It was remounted during the 1970s, specifically for the Captain Cook Bicentenary, and for this staging the Initiate was danced by Ronne Arnold. Dean's Corroboree was taught to students of the Australian Ballet School in the 1990s when it was also notated in both Benesh and Laban notations.

A third dance work using a suite from the Antill score was made in 1995 by Stanton Welch on dancers of the Australian Ballet. Performed as part of UNited We Dance, a festival held in San Francisco to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the United Nations charter, Welch's Corroboree is a generalised ritual and, unlike the Reid and Dean versions, has no passages that attempt to imitate culturally specific aspects of Australian Aboriginal dance or life.

Better ability to work in a contemporary context with indigenous dance artists from "traditional" backgrounds.

- Acceptance of form as relevant within a contemporary context, therefore opening the way forward for better collaborations.
- Small steps evolution of material.
- Setting the new within the understanding of the old
- Agreement: going on a shared journey together. Us going "back" to find a meeting point and then going forward together - find an agreed point of travelling together
- Slowness. The constant search for the new and innovative does not allow time for people to catch up or understand. It places the holding of knowledge into a very few hands. It also creates a 'star' or fame system that again works to take the cultural knowledge away from people. In its wake it potentially leaves a group of people as observers who have to be convinced of the validity of the outputs.
- In productions Fierce (2001 and 02) and Janganpa (2002) we were able to utilise
- The skills forged through this project.

Ability to articulate the issues involved for us as non indigenous Australians when working in this context

It feels important for all Australian dance, (so rooted in western forms that originate in Europe and America), that the Aboriginal artists (highly respected in their own communities in the Northern Territory) and their work is acknowledged and understood in Australian contemporary dance terms.

As mentioned before, many of these issues have since been presented and published and we continue to seek opportunities to present the work.

New Artistic work developed as a result of Project

- 2001 Fierce: The Story of Olive Pink. [click to read and see](#)
- 2002 Fierce: The Meeting of Olive Pink. [click to read and see](#)
- 2003 Janganpa (The bushfire Project). [click to read and see](#)

Presentations

- 2002 "Collaborating with Diversity" - Groundswell, National Regional Arts Conference, Albury / Wodonga. [click to read](#)
- 2002 AD 2002 Ballarat (Artistic Directors of small to medium companies).
- 2003 "The Getting of Intercultural Wisdom" - Bodytalks Melbourne. [click to read](#)