

Saving for a Rainy Day - a Model of Continuity

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By David McMicken and Tim Newth - Tracks Dance Company

Context

Good Morning My Name is David McMicken and alongside Tim Newth we are the Co-Artistic Directors of Tracks Dance. Today we are going to present to you our company as a case study for Change, a company whose work in the Northern Territory spans 32 years

- Firstly - Through the introduction, you will learn about who Tracks Dance Company is.
- Then we will look at how **innovation** has driven our ability to adapt and change.
- We then look back at our **lineage** as a way of looking forward through personal stories of how we got to where we are now.
- Then we explore how having **diversification** throughout our artistic plan and delivery provides a multitude of possibilities.
- And we will finish with **Resilience**: A Rainy Day Story about our Volatile Funding Environments, and COVID 19

The slide show in the background reminds us that we are working with and for real people in the Northern Territory

Introduction

Tracks is a dance company based in Darwin. Our core business is the creation of original Northern Territory dance works that give voice to Territory culture.

Our geographic positioning influences our dance language, drawing from South East Asia to the North and Australia's central deserts to the south. Our work comes from the vitality of our living culture enriched by traditional and contemporary life.

We have an emphasis on being local; on a national level, this is considered radical; most dance companies create work for national and international touring, not purely for local consumption.

Both locally and nationally Tracks is a recognised leader in creating dance with a true connection to its community - So why is local good? The general model for a dance company is to work with a small group of professionals, to create a show, perform it, and then tour it. Tracks does not tour and this gives us the capacity to engage over long periods of time and with large numbers of people. Tracks prioritizes local employment. We work on the ground and stay in relationship with our community. In the end - Our company is our community.

Our work can be viewed through several windows.

- Iconic Tracks Works - Large in scale, big casts and outdoors
- Youth Dance
- Older Adults and Elders
- A Culturally Diverse Voice - reflecting our community
- Lajamanu / Milpirri - Remote Indigenous work
- Participation Projects
- Research and Development
- Professional Dance - supporting employment and careers

We have sound strategic and business models that enable us to produce the highest quality work that celebrates the Northern Territories point of difference.

We work collaboratively. We perform in locally constructed outdoor theatres often in unusual places. Linked to the themes of the work, these spectacular venues are all part of the Tracks experience.

Every Tracks show is different - you can expect the unexpected.

We are driven by our values to pursue the highest standards of artistic and cultural achievement and engagement. We believe in dance as a whole of life activity. And by not touring we deeply explore our community in all its diversity to tell our local stories.

Our Tools

On our journey, we have been able to gather many tools to clarify, extend, and shape our working environment. The good thing about a tool is you only use it when it is useful. Some tools are specific, while others are multi-purpose. Once no longer useful, a tool can go. Some tools last the test of time.

Let us unpack a few of our tools: The key three can be grouped under the headings **Innovation, diversification, and resilience.**

Innovation - Building the New in the Old

As one would expect in a creative industry, **innovation** is key to our success. The more competitive the environment, the more innovative we become. Here are 6 innovation points:

1. The new in the old
2. Finding our real Point of Difference
3. Specialised Products, and minimising competition,
4. Research and Development - finding new products,
5. Quality - striving for the highest standards while working with experts,
6. and perhaps a new concept, that of the **Prosumer** - you will hear about this later

It's unpacking time!

The New in the Old

Tracks' innovation is built step by step. We mine our collective pasts as much as we vision our future. Our history lays the groundwork for the creation of new local products.

We operate at the sweet spot between creating the familiar while breaking new ground. We do not jump at something just because it is new. We know that a new idea is more likely to succeed when placed in the context of the familiar.

In Darwin one has to deal with constant newness - Agility is demanded when living in a town with approximately 19% population turnover per annum, the vagaries of boom and bust businesses, seasonal variations, and a complex tourism industry.

Point of Difference - Being fiercely and radically local. Making work that can only come from here

Local means being aware of the immediate environment, its idiosyncrasies and subtleties. By placing the local in the national context we find our point of difference - Keeping money in our economy, employing and spending here, building strong local partnerships, and sharing resources.

Our casts reflect our diverse population, they look uniquely of this place, like a mix of people you might find in a Darwin shopping centre. Like the Deckchair Cinema and the Darwin Festival, our performances maximise the unique geographics and lifestyle of tropical Darwin.

Specialised Products - Less Competition

As a Not For Profit, we work in the gaps that the commercial sector does not cater for, and yet we need to deliver services and sell our products. As the commercial sector shifts, so do we. Twenty years ago a key involvement was with people aged between 15 and 25, providing exceptional performance experiences about being a youth in Darwin. However, with the rise of popularity of dance in schools and the emergence of a local youth dance company, we shifted to specialising in providing specific development programs, growing our future artists and dance-makers.

Research and development

The search for new products and development drives our creativity and is a crucial factor in the survival of the company. As part of the development of Northern Territory contemporary culture, we develop vibrant and creative individuals with a strong sense of belonging in their community. We research and collect ideas together creating a powerhouse of innovation with a greater chance of success.

Quality and Expertise

Tracks produce quality at all levels of our business. This is evidenced by our winning of awards, such as several for excellence at the National Australian Dance Awards, the prestigious Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award, a Business and the Arts Awards (NT and SA), and the Artistic Co-Directors were made Members (AM) in the general division of the Order of Australia. Our reputation (and brand) is founded on our community's ongoing trust in the 30 years of quality work

We recognise and celebrate the expertise found within our community: For example, we believe that our seniors are the clear experts in being Elders, remote Indigenous people are experts in living remotely, rural people experts on rural issues, and migrants are experts on what it is like to come to this country from somewhere else. In short, our community members are the experts in their own community, experts to be consulted and listened to.

Being a Prosumer

Tracks work largely on what is seen as a 'prosumer' model - this is one where the same people produce and consume the products. Prosumers are involved in designing and customizing products for their own needs. The prosumer promotes the product because they are invested in it. It is like having solar panels where you both produce and consume the electricity - Tracks dancers both create and perform - they are both performer and audience.

So How Did We Get Here - Tim Newth

As a kid, Darwin held both a fascination and fear.

The fascination came from an old photo. My uncle and aunty were standing beside their car parked alongside this endless strip of dirt road which was the old Stuart Highway. They were driving to Darwin. I was drawn to this vastness and the idea that this road linked one side of the country to the other.

The fear came from the look on a toddler's face as they cried in front of a twisted pile of metal and timber. This photo was on the front cover of the Women's Weekly after Cyclone Tracy hit in 1974.

I was living with my parents and three younger brothers on a small farm in Ned Kelly's country in Victoria. Life rotated around the shearing shed and football oval.

I made sense of the world from making stuff: Rock walls and playing with water flow down in the creek, cubby houses with bits of tin and wood from my grandparents back shed, joining together bits of fabric on my mum's sewing machine.

After a wonderfully practical education at the local tech school, I ended up studying art, not through a clear point of making a decision, it was just what I was good at.

Starting my career I found myself being paid to paint murals with community groups in Queensland and then running a youth arts program in Albury Wodonga.

Wangaratta, the closest town to home, had just appointed a community arts officer. He contacted me and wanted to know if I would like to be Artist in Residence for the City Council. I was keen, but why me? He talked about natural knowhow you have, from growing up in a place, knowing its colours, its season, its culture. In this job, I built a lot of confidence in what I was good at and established myself as a visual and community artist.

During my time in Wangaratta, a Melbourne based dance company placed a dancer in the community, with whom I collaborated. This led me to work with Dance Companies in Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland, firstly as a designer and then as a director for large scale community events.

Over the Christmas break of 1987, I found myself driving the Stuart Highway with a dancer friend to work on a 6-week project in Darwin. Six weeks later I decided to stay. But what kept me in Darwin?

In the first year of being here, I found myself working for a youth theatre company on a season of works written by young Territorians. It was a competition and if your play was chosen as one of the six, the show would be toured, along with the others, back to the place it was written.

This led to my first experience of being in an Aboriginal community. It was Lajamanu. So after driving two days up the dirt Tanami tracks from Alice Springs in an un-airconditioned minibus, here we were in Lajamanu, performing a play written in the Indigenous Language of Warlpiri by the senior students of the local primary school. People laughed, a lot; not at the play but at our attempts at speaking Warlpiri.

But this opened a door, one which was about respecting each other's culture. For me, it was the beginning of much questioning but it also gave me a sense of landing. As a 26-year-old, I thought I knew what it meant to be an Australian but after continuing to return to Lajamanu and being immersed in a world so different to the one I had grown up in I realized that my journey into understanding what this meant was only just beginning.

Back in Darwin, employment led me to work with people of PNG, East Timorese, Balinese, Indonesian, Indian, Philippino and Thai background. My friends and neighbours were not only from down south like me, but some had also actually grown up here, and others were born in places like Cambodia, Sri Lanka and China.

When I was a kid, Australia had a white Australia policy. Now here was I, in my late 20's, living and working in Darwin within the Arts and Culture. I felt then, what I know now, that Darwin is at the forefront and cutting edge of Australian culture. This is what keeps me here.

And I feel like all the performances I have been involved in making over the past 3 decades have all asked the same question. What does it truly mean to be an Australian?

How Did We Get Here - David McMicken

Born in Melbourne, I spent my childhood years in the coal mining town of Yallourn, Gippsland, surrounded by lush farming country, forestry, and smokestacks from power stations and paper mills. My father worked in the Coal Electricity sector.

In the mid 60's he got a job in the NT as an engineer involved in building Stokes Hill Power Station. (My drawing paper as a kid was the blueprints for that station). Eventually, after about 7 years of FIFO, 3-months on, two-weeks home, my father flew home the day before Christmas 1974, narrowly missing Cyclone Tracy.

In the 1980's My younger brother, fresh out of the army, moved to Darwin to work in water treatment. After 7 years he returned to Victoria, 2 weeks before I moved to Darwin. In all that time between my dad and my brother I never visited Darwin. I had seen the many Darwin slide-shows of my father's: water skiing off Dinah Beach (with no Crocs), buffalos on the road's edge, endless mudflats, and the flat, brown, treeless city and suburbs, with shimmering heat and limited shade. I thought Darwin was the last place I would ever want to go.

Melbourne in the late 80's was in recession, and the cultural mood was combative. I had 12 different jobs, working in dance, theatre, music, Secondary and Tertiary Education, youth arts, university research, cleaning, City Council public entertainments, and several other areas. Meanwhile, I ran my own dance company, specialising in experimental collaboration that combined dance, theatre, design, music, fabric artists, photography and film, indoor/outdoor.

On Arriving in Darwin in 1991, I got off the Ansett aeroplane, walked down the mobile steps onto the tarmac, looking at the tin terminal, felt the heat and humidity hit me in the face like a wet towel, and I had an overwhelming sense of arriving home.

In 1992 I got a 1-year contract full-time job at Brown's Mart Community Arts, in the dance program. This job covered all my areas of interests: Performing, community cultural development, teaching, cross-cultural understanding, multi-artform practice, community engagement, and the outdoors.

I loved so much about this new work here. I loved: the research and development that led to the creation of new products, working with many artists, and with large groups of people. I loved the sense of community, and lack of city-pressure to constantly come up with the next best thing. I loved how the

weather made you slow down, and contemplate. I loved the opportunities, the access to diverse cultural arts, the challenge of working with Indigenous Australians on a country that I realised I no longer felt that I fully understood. I loved the storms, mangoes and smell of frangipanis, landscapes and the sense of wilderness - I loved the sense of a country in its wholeness. I had not felt this anywhere else.

It was quickly clear the different ways to be a Territorian:

- A blow in that comes, spends some money, tells us what is missing, and then goes
- The 2-year contracted public servant - who wants some local engagement but will be soon be moving on
- The multi-year build-up survivor - probably going to stay for awhile
- The committed resident - in for the long haul - they love the place and can put up with the supposed difficulties
- Not to forget the Locally Born, and The Survivors of Tracy

30 years later I am still here working in the same job?

Darwin gave me everything I didn't really know I wanted.

1. Firstly, interesting and challenging diverse work.
2. Secondly, the politics being dealt with down south were actually happening here - Especially areas of Indigenous Australia, Refugees, Multiculturalism, and our connection to Asia. Here it was not talk talk, but lived experience
3. Thirdly - there was great scope to work collaboratively with the community, to celebrate the uniqueness here rather than the same same in the big smoke.

I was working alongside my long term collaborator and friend Tim Newth (a colleague before I came to Darwin and who made a very good case for me to come here in the first place). We both wanted to live and work in Darwin and the Northern Territory. We saw that the Down South models would not work here - the one night stands of Territory touring was too expensive, population centres are too far apart, and not enough audience to be financially viable. For Tracks we created a business model that allows us to stay here, work as we want to as artists, and utilises the core values and philosophies we both held.

As a result, the Brown's Mart dance program evolved into what is now known as Tracks - named after the great Track itself, the Stuart Highway, as well as referring to leaving and reading the marks left on the earth. We incorporated in 1999.

Diversification

Another major tool in our survival pack is the **Diversification** of our products.

While maintaining our major performance seasons for the Darwin Festival and the Milpirri performance in Lajamanu, we cast our creative seeds broadly - to push this metaphor, different things germinate in different soils.

All businesses have limited resources, we cannot risk losing everything in one big hit. It is hard to know what will succeed and thrive in the future, so having multiple options is essential.

Our diverse program of activities and range of entry points allows a broad professional and community engagement.

What are our Core Activities?

Major Works

These are our Big-ticket items - they are iconic, large in scale, NT stories, local employment, outdoor venues, large cast, a mixture of the professional and community participants, high production values, and higher ticket prices.

And these major works utilize multiple artforms and trades, not just dance and choreography. A major work could also involve, builders, designers, administrators, riggers, marketers, visual artists, composers, bookkeepers, actors, electricians, photographers, filmmakers, food suppliers and technicians.

Development Projects

These are about skilling up and professional development, looking for new concepts: involving research, experimentation, new ways of working and presentation. Residencies and Mentorships are focused on the making of dance with choreographic and artform development for the young and old.

This year the company received a prestigious Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council. Working with the University of New South Wales, we will look at the dance-making practices between Tracks and the Warlpiri artists of Lajamanu to develop a digital cultural knowledge base.

Participation Program

Is all about getting involved, be that for the first time or from a lifelong interest. Having fun, belonging to your community, feeling safe and developing social cohesion.

The Grey Panthers are a prime example of a Track participation activity. The over 60s dance troupe is arguably Australia's longest-running weekly dance class for seniors - which has been ongoing since 1988. The group showcases the company's whole of life approach. They have performed in over 60 major performances and danced at hundreds of community events.

We also work with Diversification by having:

Different length of engagements

Activities of different time frames cater to a variety of people and their needs. From full-time employment to volunteering, a commitment might range from three months of rehearsal to a one-off dance class, or anything in between.

Advocacy

As a key arts organisation in the Northern Territory, we have a responsibility to advocate for the wider sector.

Locally we have formed We3 with fellow performing arts companies Corrugated Iron Youth Arts and Brown's Mart Theatre, giving a stronger and more cohesive voice for the local performing arts sector.

Nationally we provide a confident Northern Territory voice through being represented and heard at National conferences, Awards, industry gatherings, and through academic work, publications and writings.

Audience Development

Our work truly lives when an audience is engaged. Our diverse audiences all have different engagement needs: From being entertained by a local story, supporting a performing friend, family member or professional colleague, or the adventure of being taken into a new place they may not have known about before.

Our audience engagement creates a sense of local pride and social cohesion. Audiences like our participant gain an expanded understanding of their world, by having it reflected back to them through performance.

Resilience - Adversity and the Bounce Back

Building Resilience into our business model has prepared us for the rainy day.

How do we define and build resilience?

Through **Leadership, Governance, Relevance, Evolution, and Lineage.**

Leadership

The company is a leading voice in artistically led engagement, diversity and inclusion, lifelong dancing, and the telling of Territory stories. The work has influenced thousands of people. Creative leadership is central to the company.

Good Governance

Our Board, Budgets, Succession, relevance, transparency.

- **Our Board of Directors** are head-hunted and value-add business mentoring and skills not held within the employed staff.
- **Planning and evaluation** - Planning provides us with a clear roadmap and forward direction. From a 4-year Strategic Plan, through an annual Artistic and Financial Plan, all the way down to our daily plans. Evaluation lets us check-in and makes sure we are still on the right path. We plan, make work, present, evaluate, learn, put it into the next round.
- **Financial responsibility** - Our budgeting is also a long term road map. Our reserves are important - they are built up while times are good.
- **Succession** - constantly training others with the required skills to work in the NT - a Tracks dancer needs to be like a 4WD. Who knows the future and who will step into the spaces made by people moving on?
- **Relevance** - staying in touch with the changing community and being aware of needs and dreams. A high Population turnover means that business models have to be constantly revisited, tested, and reassessed.
- **Transparency** - a sense of public and civic responsibility is important in this small town where we see people every day at the shops, bike path, markets, cinema, or medical centre etc. It is hard to hide so why try? Better let your brilliance shine out.

By Evolving

When standing at mount improbable, looking up the cliff-face to the peak, it may seem impossible to get to the top. But when broken down into smaller steps you can see that there are many pathways to get there. Evolution is a combination of the small steps, it always grows from something that came before.

Through Lineage

An advantage of following your history and lineage is that you can look back and see patterns, cause and effects, and consequences, and see your place in the bigger picture. We stand on the shoulders of all who have gone before, and this makes us stronger.

We have made sure that our three-decade legacy, gained knowledge, and sense of NT Culture will continue through investment in digital platforms such as our website, and through ensuring our history is available and researchable. We have made long term investments in quality documentation, so it looks good too.

2020 - Funding Cuts and COVID 19

And now it's 2020 and it feels like that rainy day is truly here.

For us, COVID 19 arrived in Darwin in March and at the same time as a result of the Federal Government slashing arts funding and alongside much of our national sector, we lost our federal support.

However, out of COVID, a new National view is emerging: that Local is the new Global, that working in your neighbourhood community is the new touring, and that reaching out and authentic customer engagement is a major foundation for work.

During a drought you don't increase your planting, it is a time to sharpen the tools, fix the fences, and looking at different segments of your business model. We have built resilience through some strong structures.

Our years of refining work practises in the Northern Territory, along with our sound financial planning and product development, has put us in a good position to adapt and continue our business.

In Conclusion

How have we adapted post covid and federal funding notification?

- Put more focus on artistic development, rather than performance - making sure our tools are sharp and ready for future use.
- Continued to look at making new artistic products.
- We have only moved areas of our practice online if we can maintain our community connections.
- By putting our money where our values are, ensuring our core staff and local partners are looked after. As a baseline, we have reduced core staff hours by nearly 20%, with the opportunity to increase if resources become available.
- Over the decades we have built our reserves to over 20% of turnover and along with Northern Territory Government and Corporate funding, this will keep us afloat for at least the next 4 years.
- Look to new sources of income with a realistic view of recession and possible depression.
- Reduce the size of groups we work with while reinforcing our strong community commitments and connections.
- Put some focus on the items that might cost a little less to produce.
- In COVID times, we need to find new ways to build closeness when you can't be in the same room as someone. We have utilised video technology in this space.
- This year we have spent time analyzing and consolidating our archives, history and lineage. Starting to make our knowledge into learning tools and digital research platforms, furthering our presence and reach.

After the downpour of rainy days, new growth appears. In hard times you have to change, a culture will die if it cannot adapt. New ideas arrive and take you in new directions. After the deluge of rainy days, there is always new growth, even if the tree falls this creates a fertile ground for future generations.