

-----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- using paint and fabric, a Dancer and Choreographer, a Puppeteer and a Puppet maker, even a Pyrotechnician and someone who has sewn countless thousands of meters 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 for this interview that I realised the range of theatre and events he had done up here. 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 year he worked on WADERBIRDS as a visual artist in collaboration with director, Meme Mc Donald 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 TASNANCE 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, windsocks, 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 windsocks pieces and hung them outside to catch the breeze, but with 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 kilometers 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 Mc Micken and CORRUGATED IRON YOUTH THEATRE Artistic Directors, 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 MAPULLBAH, 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 CIYT 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 YAMI.

(see: my article on this in LOWDOWN 1992 - check reference)

At the same time he met Community 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 1998 MAYDAY parade, and FIRE ON THE WATER staged at sunset on Mindil Beach. In 1989 for MAYDAY: FREEING THE FUTURE, Cameron brought up his Melbourne based collaborator, Meme Mc Donald and that began the twisting of another thread which eventually led to WADERBIRDS. 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 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 and 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...and it's where I met Freddie Jangala Patrick, my father there. He is one of the main elders and he has taught me heaps. He takes me hunting, he showed me how to make a Number seven 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, at first was lost on him. 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 chaperones. 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 protocols 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 when he was working with Meme McDonald and Beth Shelton in Melbourne, on Williamstown beach on WINGS OF SUMMER - the precursor to WADERBIRDS and focusing on the Orange-Bellied Parrot, Freddie faxed him from the bush, his Parrot Dreaming design which Tim reproduced as a sand drawing using seaweeds and pebbles on the beach on 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 that Aboriginal connection. ILLUMINATIONS was instigated by T ASDANCE 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 that place...from talking with them a storyline 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 can do, reclaim and show the Aboriginal history, the 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 a piece he made for T ASDANCE, in 1992 THE JOURNEY which is about the life rituals, birth, marriage and death and how in a mourning scene, he used white pennant flags which he had seen in ceremonies on Groote Eylandt when he was working there, and 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. And movement pieces need to tell a story, to show people something of their history. But he has not abandoned dance, and he says his ideal is a studio and dancers to work with, and last year in Darwin he had just that chance and from it came his most accomplished piece of choreography, SILENT THOUGHT based on Ted Egan's song The Drover's Boy 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 truth to your materials ensures a strong fabric that never rips or frays.

**SUZANNE SPUNNER** 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...

\* I tend to think of Tim Newth, as a fellow sewer because our friendship was seamed together not long after he came to Darwin in 1988 when he "saved" Home Cooking Theatre Company's touring production of my play, RUNNING UP A DRESS by locating an infinite supply of unbleached calico and running up an enormous backdrop on the day the show opened.

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