

# The opportunity of distance

Suzanne Spinner engages with the work of Darwin's Tracks Dance Collective

TRACKS, the Darwin based dance collective, grew out of the dance development program at Browns Mart Community Arts under the direction of dance officers Sarah Calver and David McMicken. Last year it acquired its own name and consolidated its direction. TRACKS functions as a part-time innovative dance company and full-time community dance program supported by the Northern Territory Office of the Arts and the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council.

The community it serves is broad in dimension and geography. In Darwin TRACKS runs classes for adults and teenagers, and a program with a 50-plus group, The Grey Panthers, as well as workshops with Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre. It also provides choreographic support for Darwin Theatre Company productions and directs *Gathering Ground*, an annual community dance event at Browns Mart, which brings together the diversity of dance in the town. Its activities outside Darwin are focused on Aboriginal communities, in particular Lajamanu.

This year TRACKS has staged a Darwin season of their work *Boundaries and Beyond* and taken it on tour to remote communities in the Territory, and just completed a five week residency at Yipirinya School in Alice Springs. In September, they are remounting *My House*, a dance theatre performance project in conjunction with Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre for a Darwin season and a tour across northern Western Australia in September. To finish off the year TRACKS will direct a cabaret show with the Grey Panthers.

*Boundaries and Beyond* showcased work from the last two years and included two extraordinary original works – *Silent Thought* and *Sacred Space*. While Calver and McMicken constantly hanker for more time to do this sort of thing – developing their own art as dancers and choreographers, they are the first to say that it is the community dance work that feeds their creativity and to imagine abandoning it would be cutting themselves off at the source. TRACKS' position is akin to that of many other contemporary dance groups across the country producing innovative work – funding structures and constraints mean they work as pick-up companies. However, TRACKS is in a stronger position than many because they have always combined community dance development with their own artistic exploration, rather than being force-marched that way by funding bodies.

In Darwin and the NT, the small population, the geography of distance and the relatively minimal professional arts

infrastructure has meant that a contemporary dance company or a contemporary art space (the position of 24 HR ART is very similar) must address itself to more than the cognoscenti. Rather than seeing such breadth and inclusion as compromise, TRACKS and 24 HR ART have used that matrix as a strength. Such an approach has led to an exploration of form coupled with content drawn from the community. The work is broadly accessible, strengthens regional identity and develops an audience through recognition of content, in time the audience becomes confident and familiar with the form and recognises style and innovation.

Such work is frequently celebratory but it can just as easily be critical and provocative and make its terms of reference for its audience as it goes. In this context *Silent Thought* and *Sacred Space* can be viewed as addressing gender relations between black and white Australians in works that both celebrate and provoke, and are read by predominantly white audiences in Darwin and Aboriginal audiences in communities in different and interesting ways.

*Silent Thought* was conceived and choreographed by Tim Newth for Calver and McMicken. It was inspired by the Ted Egan song *The Drover's Boy* – a tragic lament about the coupling of white drovers and Aboriginal women.

*Shoot the bucks/Grab a gin/break her in/ Cut her hair/land call her a boy/ the Drover's boy.*

The practice was common but rarely publicly acknowledged. *Silent Thought* is a subtle and very moving piece about the reining in of public emotion, as the song hinges on the observation of another stockman who watches the drover silently mourn his love and sees him steal a lock of hair from the dead 'boy'.

Ostensibly the piece reclaims a hidden history and honours the work and contribution of these women to the pastoral development of the NT. It also shows that despite the brutality of the breaking-in, there was a mutuality, companionship and passion across the racial divide. Interestingly, because Calver is obviously not Aboriginal, it subsumes, even subverts the category of race allowing the audience to focus on the secret relationship between a man and a woman and the pain of concealing the extent of feeling.

But it also works at another level – not only is the dancer meant to be Aboriginal, she is also meant to be a boy – she does the work of a man and no concessions are made to her femininity, so it is possible to read it as if she were a boy which raises further questions about sexual politics on

the frontier. Newth says that it was those very ambiguities that attracted him to the story. In *Silent Thought*, he has made a piece about sexuality and work which is about gender and race but does not lock the audience into the fixity of either. It is about a larger and more felt emotional truth. On this frontier socially constructed boundaries are malleable, and in the aftermath of brutality there is space for an essential connection between two individuals.

*Silent Thought* is riven with ambiguity. Even the sequence of the 'breaking-in', by its repetition and subtle shift of attitude transforms from an image of subjugation into an expression of need and desire, with the boy holding the reins. It's a very sensual piece, its eroticism is understated, and true to the shyness of one and the awkwardness of the other there is very little eye contact between "the tall white man and the slim black boy who never had much to say".

Significantly, in the fucking sequence, there is eye contact preceded by an image of the two looking into each other's faces as one is supported above the other, and what it suggests is Narcissus drinking in his reflection; that recognition of love being recognition of the self in the other.

The feeling is elegiac and the pleasure in the physical is felt through the work rituals and the sense of freedom and expansion of self in doing this kind of work. The music takes the song in John Williamson's version and cuts into it the plangent cellos of *G Clef* by Kronos Quartet, and, to suggest the galloping hooves of horses, the syncopated drum beat of Not Drowning Waving.

The movement phrases are strong, graceful and elegant. Both Calver and McMicken employ the other's body as horses to mount and ride, as rocks or saddle bags to sit on by the campfire, and at other times carry one another. In the repetition of these actions with the roles reversed, the polarities of subject/object, active/passive, strong/weak dissolve into mutuality. Real actions are distilled, abstracted and repeated in sequences which resonate with charged emotion.

*Sacred Space* was created and performed by Calver and McMicken in collaboration with writer and performance poet Karyn Sasella, and centres on the community of Lajamanu in the Central Desert. From living and working there, all three have formed strong connections with the community, though they have never been there at the same time – each person's experience has been discrete and particular.

*In that hot/red land/I learnt/ so clearly/that it's not/ the tyranny of distance/ but the opportunity*

*Sacred Space* is about culture shock but firmly poses the question: Whose culture is shocked? Compared to *Silent Thought*, which had an historical distance and suffused feeling, *Sacred Space* is set right here in the full blinding glare of the present. It announces itself as a distillation of experiences lived by the two performers with their feet firmly on the ground and their eyes out on stalks. Sasella's poems, which are threaded through, are another experience which often parallels and complements Calver's and McMicken's.

*Sacred Space* is structured in three sections – getting there, being there and internalising there. The space is divided down the middle by an invisible line. At first this seems merely to reflect Calver's and McMicken's sides of the story, as we see them packing up to leave Darwin and then driving the long long way to Lajamanu. But once they arrive it becomes clear the space reflects the Walpiri division of the world into men's business and women's business and parallels the separate but continuous spheres of life they encountered at Lajamanu.

Only in the duet *Lover Boy Lover Girl* do they come together in the space and in so doing literally cross the line as the dance is not simply about courtship but about wrong skin love – a taboo but common occurrence in Aboriginal communities. The dance is set up with a game of flirting with torches in the rec hall after everyone else has gone to bed. The dance is both furtive and shy, cheeky and bold, pervaded by play and risk, and regarded as a wicked hoot by Aboriginal audiences.

*Sacred Space* is shot through with wit. We laugh with them laughing at themselves as we see ourselves reflected as strangers in a strange land. We feel the awkwardness



*Sacred Space* with David McMicken

Yoris Wilson

and confusion of being on the outer, in the minority. The piece is serious and respectful of cultural difference but is never precious or earnest. There are hauntingly beautiful images – McMicken binds his clothes with string into a rope as thick and lumpy as an intestine, or a snake, while exquisitely fine sand falls from the ceiling and Calver dances in its rain. The sand falls slowly and keeps on falling. There are movement sequences based on Walpiri sign language which look at the disjunction between the simplicity of hand sign and the complexity of meaning it evokes. The power of the imagery in the piece comes from the lived experiences of the dancers.

*Sacred Space* speaks most clearly and loudly of the trust and connection between these white artists and this Aboriginal community. This relationship of exchange and collaboration has been built slowly over the last eight years and produced a series of works for, by and about the community. Like all good exchanges it has been properly two way; *Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yami* in 1992 brought the community – men, women and children, dancers, performers and painters – to town for a show and art exhibition at Browns Mart.

In 1996 TRACKS is planning to take *Silent Thought* and *Sacred Space* and a group of traditional Lajamanu women dancers, Yawalyu, to Melbourne for Greenmill Dance Festival to present their work alongside an exhibition of Lajamanu desert painting. It will be interesting to see what a national audience makes of this unique collaboration. Greenmill next year will coincide with the Dance Alliance, a biennial event, so TRACKS will be exposed to international dance aficionados. What will they make of it?

Suzanne Spinner is a Darwin playwright and dramaturg.

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TRADITION, CLOTH, MEANING - CONTEMPORARY TEXTILES

long gallery salamanca arts centre hobart 14 september 1995 - 7 october 1995  
an initiative of and presented by salamanca arts centre inc,  
a CAST touring exhibition, made possible by visions of australia,  
sponsored by commonwealth bank and hobart city council