

Four years ago in the Northern Territory a project was started with the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu in merging contemporary and traditional dance and theatre forms in a work featuring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal performers. Darwin playwright **Suzanne Spinner** investigates the background to *Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani*, and experiences the culmination of an extraordinary project.

Photography **David Haigh**

slow but *SURE*

The last five years have seen an explosion of Aboriginal cultural activity in the visual arts and popular music scene which has created a national and international profile for Northern Territory artists, but surprisingly little Aboriginal theatre with a national focus has emerged from this region. Even when parts are created for Aboriginal performers by local white writers, they tend to be cast outside of the Territory.

Darwin's Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre has been working to redress this imbalance and each year it has seen more young Aboriginal people involved in workshops and productions, with more outlying communities being reached by tours and workshop programmes. A quiet revolution is being seeded among Aboriginal youth through exposure to theatre.

It is against this background that *Lajamanu Kurra Karna Yani*, a contemporary and traditional dance theatre event, performed by the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu must be

seen. This involved bringing a cast of sixteen young performers and a traditional dance troupe of twelve women plus six community elders (as supervisors) to Darwin to work with seven white theatre professionals to workshop,

devise, rehearse and produce a sellout show for local audiences. Needless to say this was no mean feat, nor one that happened overnight.

The Lajamanu project arose directly from the *Living In Isolation* tour undertaken by CIYT in 1988 on the initiative of then Artistic Director, Janet Robertson. The program comprised four plays written by young Territorians, one of which was

entitled *Desert Boy*, a five minute piece written in the Warlpiri language by students from Lajamanu School.

One of the aims of *Living In Isolation* was to take the work back to its source. The response in Lajamanu to hearing their own language spoken by white people was overwhelming, according to Tim Neweth (the Director and

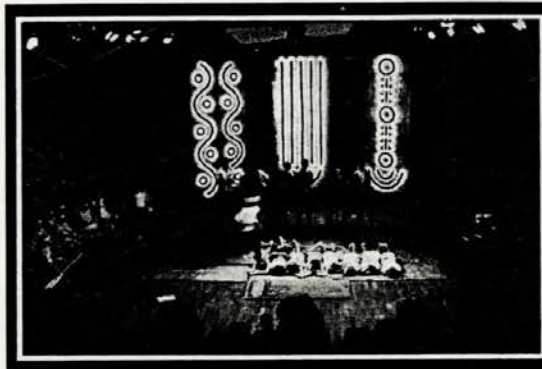


Designer of the project), compounded only by the perverse delight they took in hearing white people speak their language so badly. To show their appreciation for the performance the

take up invitations and leads that may be offered to you as an individual which advance your knowledge and standing, but can cut across your work and social commitments as a

their dance/movement repertoire.

They performed at the Barunga Aboriginal Sports and Arts Festival in front of people from all over the Territory. The highlight, however, was



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women in the community danced for the company after the show.

And that was the beginning of the exchange. A few months later, the school council contacted CIYT to ask if there was any way their kids could do this sort of work for themselves. By mid 1989 a group comprising the original CIYT team, Director Janet Robertson, Tim Neweth and choreographer Sarah Calver returned to spend three months in the community. The project was funded by the NT Office of the Arts and the Performing Arts Board, under the aegis of Brown's Mart Community Arts.

For the group, just living together in a tiny house and working together in a remote desert community a thousand kilometres from Darwin proved as challenging as learning the points of entry into the community. Getting out and meeting people and finding out about their lives is not a simple social matter in an Aboriginal community.

Until you have been assigned a relationship in the community to particular individuals in terms of kinship as well as given a 'skin' name, you run the risk of asking the wrong things of the wrong people in the wrong way at the wrong time. Invariably there is a lot of waiting and watching. You have to be prepared to

group.

Under difficult and testing conditions a show of sorts was assembled and toured through desert communities including Yuendumu, Ti Tree, Alice Springs and north to Wave Hill, Katherine, Pine Creek and a hesitant performance in Darwin at Casuarina Shopping Square. The Western theatre tradition assumes a constant group of performers preparing for a prescribed performance on a set date in a set place.

The transient nature of the Warlpiri had different priorities and it was only two days before setting off on the tour that the cast was fixed. This was not the problem it may look to be, as any one of hundreds of kids knew the routines, not just because they had all been taught them but because of the prevalence of mimicry. Neweth described seeing choreographer Sarah Calver rehearsing a group of kids and looking across to other side of the oval to see a girl mimicking Sarah leading another group through the same steps.

In 1990 the team re-assembled with Robin Laurie replacing Janet Robertson. Robin brought a new emphasis on circus and acrobatic skills. Again the work culminated in a north-south tour with juggling, unicycles and acrobatics added to

a show at Bagot Aboriginal community in Darwin as part of NAIDOC Week.

During 1991, the project hit a wall. The funding bodies were concerned that so much had already been put into this one community and questioned further funding if they were going to confine themselves to Lajamanu. The group was clear that it was pointless to go somewhere else at this time. Tim, however, received a personal development grant from the Visual Arts and Crafts Board of the Australia Council, and was able to return to Lajamanu frequently for short stints to continue his work.

The Community Council initiated the next stage. Inspired by their new awareness of youth theatre via exposure to CIYT, as well as videos they had seen of Albany's Flying Fruit Fly Circus, the adults wanted their kids to have the same opportunities as white kids elsewhere.

And so the third Lajamanu show was conceived as a joint project between the group and the community. The Lajamanu Council met the cost of transport, accommodation and living expenses for the month in Darwin whilst payment to the white artists and hire of the rehearsal and performance venue would be sought from the arts funding organisations by the group themselves.

Thirty four Warlpiri people - men, women and kids - came to Darwin during the long dry season school holidays to work at Brown's Mart with Tim and Sarah. They were joined by Assistant Director and Choreographer David McMicken, musical collaborator Annie Gustin, visual artists and puppet makers Neil Cameron and Faridah Whyte and theatre technician Mathew James. CIYT provided acrobatics tutors Conrad Page and Andrea Clements and two young performers to work with the group.

And yet there were still vast cultural differences and expectations to be met and bridged, but an extraordinary show happened. It was powerful, beautiful, funny, deeply moving, simple and complex. A genuine fusion of the traditional and contemporary, combining elements of old and new - painted breasts with rock and rap.

This third Lajamanu show brought together all the work previously done. Its elements were traditional dances and stories, routines from previous shows, comments and observations collected from the community threaded through a narrative of daily life in Lajamanu.

And so to the performance itself. We watched the women sitting under the trees in the park outside Brown's Mart paint up (decorate) their bodies with concentric circles and parallel

tracks of white ochre. As they painted each other they sung the stories being marked out on their bodies. They lead us into the darkened theatre, where banners were hung painted with similar designs in bold colours.

On the floor were more paintings, but these turn out to be decorated gym mats. The women's dance continues inside. Their feet stamp flatly on the bare wooden floor raising no dust, but resonating in the high ceilinged theatre. They hold their dancing boards in front of them, painted with the same designs of circles and tracks as they make the characteristic shuffle movements with bended knees. The women finish and the boys make a dance drawn from routines of football training and the girls make a parallel piece about basketball.

Then thumping rock music - Aboriginal and black American - fills the hall and the boys and girls come together to dance in an overtly sexual display. The western style of disco is suggested but the segregation of the sexes is maintained - the group over the individual.

Some of the girls' steps were like the echoes of the women's dances; the stiff shuffle advance and retreat suggesting flirting and yet contained by the traditional form and the perpetual presence of adults. The

'evening' ends with sleep and the painted mats are laid out in rows, separate lines of boys and girls sleeping close together. This peaceful scene is disrupted by a snoring sleeper. The performers move and re-arrange themselves until the culprit is isolated - but the gender order is never broken.

A new day dawns and they set off for Barunga. The journey is the occasion for recalling stories called up by the places on the way. On the road they meet two white tourists who are interested in buying paintings and so the mats are unrolled and displayed and the stories of the paintings acted out. They perform acrobatics at Barunga and then take the bus and retrace the desert roads back to Lajamanu.

The final image is a reprise of the song *Sweet Sweet Lajamanu* recorded by the North Tanami band but in this case it's stripped of guitars and desert rock and sung by all to the accompaniment of hand clapping. And so the show ends. The boys and girls peel off to opposite sides of the performance space and the women assemble in a line at the front to perform a sequence of farewell dances. The exchange is completed and everyone is happy, satisfied that it's been a long haul, but worth the wait.