

The skill of Namatjira's grandson

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Even when cut into tiny pieces, 16-year-old Elton Wirri's desert landscapes are eerily familiar.

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The delicate grey gums and ochre mountain ranges evoke the European-style watercolours of his tribal grandfather Albert Namatjira.

Elton's father, Kevin Wirri, was taught to paint by Namatjira's son, considered a brother through the kinship system.

Already represented by galleries in Alice Springs, Elton was taught to paint by his father from the age of "eight or nine" and said he preferred the Namatjira style to the traditional Western Desert "dot" style. "It is the same in importance," he said.

His work now forms the backdrop for Ngapartji Ngapartji, a performance at the Sydney Opera House which tells the story of the Spinifex or Pitjantjatjara tribe of Central Australia and their encounter with atomic testing at Maralinga in the 1950s.

For Ngapartji Ngapartji, one of Elton's watercolours was cut into small squares which are turned as the play progresses to reveal the landscape.

Performed to sell-out crowds at the 2005 Melbourne International Arts Festival, Ngapartji Ngapartji translates to "You give me something, I'll give you something".

Co-creator and performer Trevor Jamieson said the piece worked to find common ground with the audience.

"We give something to the audience and they learn a bit about our culture," he said.

Opening tonight and running until Sunday, the play is the first stage of the story of the Spinifex people. Each performance offers a different language lesson. The lesson tonight is Anangu or body, with Jamieson and a group of tribal elders leading the audience in a Pitjantjatjara rendition of "heads and shoulders, knees and toes".

Ngapartji Ngapartji is part of a larger project, based in Alice Springs and co-ordinated by Big hART, to re-engage marginalised indigenous communities. Jamieson and Ngapartji Ngapartji's writer and director Scott Rankin have included several Pitjantjatjara elders as language "tutors" in the performance, along with 10 young people from camps around Alice Springs.

It was at a workshop at Abbott's Camp that Jamieson and Rankin discovered Elton. "He was sitting there drawing and we said, 'This kid is amazing,'" Jamieson said.