

# Ngapartji Ngapartji in Adelaide

Saturday, 16 June 2007

Alex Kelly describes the process of working on Ngapartji Ngapartji in the lead up to the Adelaide Cabaret Festival in Arts Hub.

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Friday, June 15, 2007

What could a young resident of an Alice Springs town camp possibly have to teach a successful white city-dweller? How about one of the oldest languages in the world?

You might have heard about Ngapartji Ngapartji as a huge stage show that has toured to critical and audience acclaim in Melbourne and Perth festivals. The show follows the story of Spinifex man Trevor Jameson and his family, and their encounters with the dark history of nuclear tests at Maralinga.

Ngapartji Ngapartji, which means 'I give you something, you give me something' in Pitjantjatjara, is more than just a performance. Making its debut in Adelaide is the other, more interactive version of the show - a theatre performance, language and culture course, and history lesson rolled together, where the opportunity to learn and exchange culture and language is taken to a much deeper level.

The Ngapartji Ngapartji project, which straddles grassroots and mainstream festivals, also attempts to engage with national policy, particularly in the area of Indigenous languages. Working on the project can mean joining in on skill-sharing workshops with young Pitjantjatjara speakers in town camps one minute, and meeting with ministers in Canberra the next. It can mean having a crowbar in one hand, helping elders to look for goanna, and a backstage pass to the Sydney Opera House in the other.

Jumping between these worlds is not easy, but Big hART recognises that these are exactly the kind of stretches that are required if we want to talk about reconciliation, about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians making a future together which works for everyone. First, we have to learn how to talk to each other, find out each other's stories. The big challenge is to make those connections work at many different levels.

The Ngapartji Ngapartji language show asks audience/participants to step up to that challenge, to take the opportunity to learn more than a few words of Pitjantjatjara, to learn about a complex culture, its kinship networks, its strength in family and incredible history of survival. The show is an invitation to participate in a generous exchange.

It's a challenge that, for many audience members, has been an incredibly rewarding and emotional experience. Here's some of the feedback we received from Melbourne audiences of the language show we performed there in 2005:

'Best honest performance I have seen in many years - exactly what is needed to bring worlds together'  
'I was transported to your country and I felt welcomed'  
'As a linguist seeing such an innovative way to get people aware of, involved in and keen to learn language it is the most wonderful project I have ever seen'  
'It changed my experience of the world'  
'I hope I get the chance to give you something'

What is given to the performers/participants in exchange is a powerful sense of pride in their culture, and the confidence to access 'mainstream' ways of sharing, through theatre, film, story, and song. The strength of being respected for language and culture feeds back into health, empowers communities, and changes the story of poverty and helplessness in Indigenous communities which is so often told by the media.

These changes are not always immediately obvious to audience members. The audience might leave the show feeling that they have been given an amazing gift of insight into a culture and story. But working with the young people, we have a chance to witness the changes that take place for them, and the transformation is just as dramatic.

The depth of exchange happening at the language shows is rewarding for everyone involved. It's only through this reciprocal learning that we can make the connections we must make with each other to walk together into the future. Like the Big hART principle says, 'it's harder to hurt someone if you know their story.' And there is already so much hurt in the story of Aboriginal Australia.

It's a joyful and very overwhelming project to be working on. The stresses of touring a massive show with ever changing team of performers, entire families, etc are also an exchange for us - the emotional demands are great, and the learning curves are steep. But in return we feel we are making the kind of theatre that really can change the world.

Ngapartji Ngapartji toured The Dreaming Festival from 8 to 10 June, and is appearing at the Adelaide Cabaret Festival until 17 June.

It's a unique and unforgettable experience, and we hope you take up the opportunity to share in the story.

For more information about Ngapartji Ngapartji, visit <http://www.ngapartji.org>.