

# Dust storms, Donkeys and Deadlys

Wednesday, 22 October 2008

Last Updated Tuesday, 18 November 2008

Congratulations at the outset to Trevor Jamieson and Scott Rankin who were presented with a Deadly Award last week for 'Most Outstanding Achievement in Theatre' for the show Ngapartji Ngapartji. Congratulations and thanks extend to everyone who has worked on the Ngapartji Ngapartji project over the past three years &ndash; you have enabled the theatre show to become what it is.

Apologies for the lateness of the news but we are indeed in the aftermath of the incredible feat it was to tour the Ngapartji Ngapartji stage show to Pukatja (Ernabella) community, followed by a three-night season in Alice Springs to coincide with Art in the Heart, the Regional Arts Australia National Conference. The task of mounting the full-scale theatre show in a creekbed in a remote community cannot be underestimated and thanks needs to go to management and crew, most of whom went well and beyond their usual work hours and roles to make it happen so successfully.

The camp at Itjinpiri Homeland, 8kms from Pukatja, became home to the 50 or so cast, crew and kids over the two weeks it took to set up, stage the show and bump out. Despite the numbers, the efficient planning and organization by company manager, Mariaa Randall, assisted by literacy worker-come-'equipment gatherer', Jane Leonard, made for a relatively smooth-running and peaceful camp, guarded over by senior project participant and community member, Pantjiti McKenzie, whose husband Simon, also joined the camp for a few days.

## Dust storm, Itjinpiri

Production week was not without its hitches, particularly with a dust storm terrorizing camp and performance site two days before the show was to go up, causing us to evacuate and making it impossible to rehearse on the site until the afternoon of opening night. But despite late-night donkey-raids, searing days, freezing nights, camp dogs and unfamiliar circumstances for many of the crew, the night of the show brought perfect stillness as hundreds gathered to see at last what they had been hearing about for the past two years.

Visitors had also come to Ernabella to take part in the Art Centre's 60th Anniversary Celebrations and the night prior to the theatre show, the stage was used to host a concert of traditional dance, choirs and reggae bands from across the APY Lands. This event also saw the emotional return of Winifred Hilliard, deaconess at the Arts Centre from the 50's to the 80's.

On all three nights multiple small fires were lit to keep audiences warm in the dramatic cold snap that followed the dust storm. Smoke from the fires enhanced the atmosphere created by Neil Simpson's lighting design and Genevieve Dugard's set and costumes looked exquisite in the red sand, truckloaded in from a local site called Womikata, at the request of the ladies.

## Kids at Ernabella transfixed by the show

We hear reports from Ernabella now that people are gazing wistfully at the empty site where our production crew worked tireless days and nights erecting scaffolding towers, screens, lights and set, in the extreme elements to stage a performance of a scale and nature perhaps never witnessed in such a location before.

After all this everything was packed and trucked up to Alice to be remounted at the Araluen Centre for the Arts. Ngapartji Ngapartji was first presented in Alice in June 2006 as a 'developmental showing' with a prototype set, a much longer production, no costumes and an interval. Feedback from Alice audiences were an important part of the creative development before the show went on to premiere at the Melbourne International Arts Festival in October 2006. So bringing the show back to Alice was an important season for the project, for family, friends, partnering organisations, town campers, local councilors, media and government, to see how the show had developed or, if they had missed it in 2006, what it was all about. The theatre was nearly full every night and each show commanded a standing ovation.

Thanks to Tjanpi Weavers, NPY Women's Council, Angela Lynch, Georgie Stewart and all those who helped us get so many elders and family members of the cast along to see the show. Thanks also to Natalie O'Connor for coming on board to carry out the often-underestimated community support role in Ernabella and Alice and to Ajita and Rosemary for their assistance in this. It was an important return for the project and a very special season.

## Uwankara, Pukatja 2008

Meanwhile a documentary centred around the Ernabella tour is in production under the direction of filmmaker Suzy Bates, which is hoped to be broadcast next year. And completed just before the tour, the Ngapartji Ngapartji mobile gallery 'Munta uwa, nyangamala' made its debut appearance at Alice Springs airport during the Regional Arts Conference, offering a window to visitors into the community project and an introduction to Pitjantjatjara language.

Since the regional tour, Alex and Trevor attended 'Maralinga Arts and Justice Call for Objects' in Sydney last weekend. The afternoon session at the Museum of Sydney brought together a range of artists who have made work in response to Maralinga - films, visual art, music and theatre. According to Alex, it was a fascinating session and there are plans to pull together an event within the next 6 months with a view to potentially creating a book and perhaps even a festival reflecting on the range of works represented.

That's it for the news and that's it for me as I will be leaving the project at the end of the month. Palya.

Dani Powell

Community Producer

Ngapartji Ngapartji