# BIG *h* ART

## 25 YEARS

ESSAYS.RESEARCH.IDEAS

# BIGhART

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ESSAYS.RESEARCH.IDEAS

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*"Nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism."*

**EDWARD SAID**

*"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."*

**CORNEL WEST**

*"Beware of artists – they mix with all classes and are therefore most dangerous."*

**QUEEN VICTORIA**



# INTRODUCTION

This volume contains a collection of essays and research from a range of different authors collated to provide insight into Big hART's practice.

Over the last ten years Big hART has been fortunate to be the subject of many evaluations, including an Australian Research Centre (ARC) project through Murdoch University, which examined three Big hART projects over time. We present here a summary of this research, pulling together key observations from across the three projects, with additional essays providing background to the work of the organisation.

The extended work of the researchers Peter Wright, Christina Davies, Barry Down, Brad Haseman, Mike White and Scott Rankin can be obtained through Murdoch University, and includes insights from a comparator project in Durham, UK.

A full version including case studies and expanded findings can be accessed through Murdoch University, here:

Wright, P. R., Down, B., Rankin, S., Haseman, B., White, M., & Davies, C. (2016). BIG hART: Art, Equity and Community for People, Place and Policy. Retrieved from Murdoch:

*http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/35589/*

This condensed version of the research is followed by essays from James Waites, Jennifer Mills, Kerry Schaffer and Scott Rankin, previously published in various forums including Griffith Review, Big hART and online.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

# BIG HART: CULTURE AND THE RIGHT TO THRIVE

SCOTT RANKIN

This essay introduces the Australian Research Centre funded research project: *Big hART: Art, Equity and Community for People, Place and Policy*.

## INVISIBILITY

Australia is a rich nation, open and democratic, sashaying on the Asian Pacific rim with the swagger of the confident West. We're urban, urbane, cashed up aspiration junkies and yet – insert eye-roll if you wish – we seem ill at ease with "Culture" and view it with suspicion. It is as if culture is not part of the main game, rather a slightly dubious recreational add-on to the real stuff of life. Benign but unnecessary.

Perhaps this suspicion comes from our compartmentalisation, our narrowly commodified definition of culture as just one activity alongside many other pursuits, instead of experiencing culture as an all-encompassing web of connection which permeates all other pursuits. We place culture at the comfortable, pointy end of Maslow's hierarchy, beyond utilitarian food and shelter. Culture is the activity for idle hands as a result of thriving, rather than permeating our right to thrive and creating a whole-of-life pathway to thriving.

This compartmentalised view of culture ends up pigeon holing it as a commodity on the periphery of life, in the realm of mere entertainment, or at best a safe haven for sensitive outsiders, a club for elites, a stairway to enlightenment, perhaps useful for promoting a sophisticated national brand, or, like an Olympic gold medal, a salve on our thin-skinned national anxiety. Culture remains dubious, and so we dress it up with legitimizing concepts like 'Cultural Industries,' 'Cultural economies,' and in so doing, destroy it.



## TUG-O-WAR AND FIREWORKS

Human beings living in the West, with our protein rich diet and cotton wool OH&S mollycoddling live for about 700,000 hours. We spend about a third of that asleep, a third as infants, infirmed, insane or shuffling towards dementing eternity. Somewhere in the middle of those ticking hours each generation assumes grown up responsibility for "the world," for imagining a better future, and the 'tug-o-war discussion' of how we might construct this 'future'.

The previous generation, as it shuffles to towards the end of its usefulness, will generally advocate for conserving things as they were and the newbies, as they clutch hold of 'the baton,' will try and progress, advocating agility, innovation and disruption. This discursive baton will be passed back and forth in a hydra-headed, generational tug-o-war. Values and ideals will be tested. Privilege will for a time prevail, shrill media voices will turn heads momentarily… but as Martin Luther King said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

With each generation the arguments in this discussion fizz and crackle like a brief firework in the night sky, absorbing a small amount of our 700,000 hours, yet it is each generation's most vital task. The vibrant leading edge of this broad-all-in-discussion could be called culture. It is where we live and breathe and discover our being, and it fuels our imagining and construction of the future – as an 'idea' in the present. And as the remains of each failed idea falls like cracker-night ash to the ground, it forms our cultural heritage… the best of the best.

Sometimes we fall in love with these previous spent fireworks and collect them and house them in galleries and museums and name them as true 'culture.' The 'blockbuster'. We get hooked on the commodity of them, giving them our undivided attention, but fail to see the ongoing immersive cultural discussion that envelopes us every day. We devalue and dismiss that which does not resemble our exclusive narrative heritage. We miss this everyday expression of our collective selves, the flow of experiences in which we live and mature and explore what's left of our fleeting 700,000 hours. Instead we become mesmerized by the lauded commodity of culture, seeing it as something others give us to consume, rather than something we are always actively immersed in. Occasionally, when we look at these imposed passive forms of culture we suspect we may be witnessing the emperor's new cultural clothes… and sometimes,

when we are experiencing our own cultural tribe we feel right with our world. But mostly, we are not sure-footed, we remain suspicious of this cultural domain and somehow out of our depth.

## DOG-PADDLING IN THE CULTURAL FLOW

All of us live in the busy bubble of 'the present', and construct 'a past' from selective fragments of victorious memory, while projecting ourselves into an imagined future that we claim is already real. All of us are caught in this frenzy of addictive imagining, and the psychic-noise it causes is so constant we're hardly aware of it. We are actually swept up in culture. It is as if we are dog-paddling in the flow of a cultural river, believing we are swimming our independent, individual paths, without noticing the strong current. This cultural flow carries all of us as one downstream, yet we only notice our own swimming. However, it is the flow of culture, the current that largely determines our future and where we'll end up.

This cultural flow is not binary, not individualistic, it is influenced by individuals, but holds us all, past and present. The flow is inherited, but is not our heritage. It is not predetermined; courage and imagination constantly influence who we are and where we can end up. Within this flow, collectively we imagine past and future - individually, as families, tribes, friends and peers. However, if we do nothing, if we tread water, if we conserve, we are still swept along in this current of narrations that determine the future. Courage is what is needed. By all means, grab the floaties of heritage, but ultimately everyone everywhere has the cultural right to contribute to this cultural current that imagines the future, and brings it towards us.

Along the way, we prop up our collective imaginings with heroes and archetypes and icons, in philosophy, policy, sport, media-gossip, environmentalism, national catastrophising and international bullying. We explore it and reimagine it kinetically, theoretically, musically, logistically, artistically and all other iterations, in the realm of ideas. Edward Said calls this broad exploration of ideas, in all its wild manifestations of life, 'Culture'. Yet mostly we compartmentalise and relegate culture to the periphery.



## THE FEELING OF HISTORY

Over the last few centuries, culture and history have bled into each other and the 'writing' of history has been preoccupied with the 'facts'. Recently however, we've become more open to the 'feelings' of history - impressions, verbatim telling, historical memory, reminiscence. This nostalgic interpretation tends to legitimise and reinforce a heritage view of culture, implying that memory and commemoration of previous great works is the highest pedigree of cultural practice.

We know in the fragile core of our being that the future is not yet real, but we have this precious record of the past, to which we can at least cling, and this heritage view, this desire to conserve rather than rebel, skews and limits our view of culture - making it not just a commodity, but a sacrosanct commodity, worshipped and therefore easily valued and marketed as essential. We redefine 'new' as just new ways of doing the old. (Opera on Sydney Harbour, with Oyster, Pinot Gris and Merch.)

This safe interpretation of culture overwhelms our tax-payer and philanthropic cultural budget – skewing it to the propagation of the heritage arts and the institutions that house them. The heritage arts tend also largely to be the domain of the traditionally-literate, wealthy, with mixed peripheral audiences. The footprint of their presentation is small, often in festivals, and closest to a city's most valuable real estate. In recent years a secondary wave of festivals has cropped up in the places where the wealthy have their holiday homes. At these festivals we spend handsomely on reiterating and reinterpreting and conserving and re-curating the past. And we spend meekly on the unknown, the unknowable, the Indigenous, those who lack visibility, and equity. Our festivals and flagship arts infrastructure hardly ever commission or encourage an inclusive cultural discussion of the future. Our subsidized major orchestras, with their dwindling, elderly audiences, fill our halls with 'the canon', with the occasional work from the 20th century and almost nothing from living composers. It is a kind of Box Office madness, but more importantly it is a structural injustice, robbing our most vulnerable citizen of their cultural rights – the right to participate in imagining our collective future, the right to voice, to visibility.

## IMAGING THE FUTURE

When Edward Said talks about the future being an idea in the present, he is in essence talking about justice. Ideas can enter our discussion of the future kinetically, through the body, poetically and be shared visually, through deep study, or popular expression, through conversation, rumination, contemplation or policy etc. It is a potpourri of evolving ideas some of which may resonate in the zeitgeist, or as a sudden obsession, or may incubate quietly as a singular, lonely shy contribution. This discussion usually progresses more experimentally and openly on the fringes, as discursive experiments pushing for both utopian inclusion and ruthless exclusion. It is not either/or; our evolving discussion of ideas that continually constructs a future is an unpredictable yeasty, unethical brew, easily hijacked, coming with no guarantees. Most of all, it is not a prerequisite that it must come packaged in the antiquated forms of virtuosity.

This futurist impulse – to imagine where the cultural current is taking us and what we could make it – is prophetic, often driven by an impulse for survival and an undisciplined cry from the heart. Sometimes this exploration has its genesis in the world of experimental art. Often however, new ideas about the future can be triggered by fringe-dwellers and outsiders, by art brut, by the emergent, people whose lives prophetically remind us of better or different versions of ourselves and society... or worse. Their personal stories may have great currency, and when mentored by artists and cultural workers who have a practiced virtuosity, can trigger a rare and powerfully authentic expression of a future we long for. When done well, this is work of great consequence, a new socially engaged experimentalism, and when placed in front of audiences, it demands a new kind of literacy, which can alter the satiated lethargy of the cultural consumer. It can trigger shifts and changes that have strong consequences beyond the beauty of the content of work itself, to include the process of making the work and in the discussion of the future.

However, the literacies, the resources and the stillness required to imagine and present the future are still mostly given over to the terrain of privilege. And those who could benefit the most from a re-imagined future are those who are without literacy, resources, time and stillness – outsiders in the community. Often the only thing that people who find themselves living as outsiders have left is the gift of their story. Often it may be a 'victim narrative' which they wear as a cloak for comfort as the likely trajectory of their life unfolds beyond their control, threatening to blow them away, and off the page of our collective narrative and into the pain caused by invisibility. This invisibility, this protective and transformative potential of narrative, form the central motivating force for Big hART as a cultural entity. It has proved to be such a powerful, coiled spring of latent creative energy that the company has grown exponentially for the last 25 years. Everyone, skilled or unskilled, voiceless, discarded, inside or outside, can be drawn in and involved in the discussion that creates the future, but only if the appropriate community - dramaturgies are utilised to by skilled arts workers,artists and producers to open up the forums of inclusion.

## MAKING EVERYDAY LIFE VISIBLE

I have spent a lifetime as a writer, director and executive producer with Big hART, yet I don't really think of it as working in 'the arts'. Rather, it is working within the broader current or flow of culture. We can try to ignore this flow as we swim or cling to our various individual rafts of education, politics, family, community, science, religion, etc. We can paddle hard against the tide or with it, but the rafts are merely cultural vessels to which we cling to stay afloat.

For the last few decades, Big hART has worked within this flow, investigating ideas of narrative and invisibility. By experimenting with the cultural discussion and examining how stories of those we perhaps inadvertently oppress and exclude can become visible again, the company has helped reshape dominant assumptions about what the future has to be. This work means responding to a combination of audiences, paddling upstream - government and policy, artists, individuals, communities and fighting for the cultural rights of all people, not just dominant literate elites in the prime of their 700,000 hours.

However, the challenge remains firmly with the artist to create work that can withstand the scrutiny of time and virtuosities and remain potent, and to avoid the binary and empty classist proselytising. To create art for audiences, new audiences, that people love and hate – that is not degraded by lack of resource or circumstance – and is passed on from generation to generation, as part of our cultural DNA, a kind of fragile miracle... like much Indigenous expression; the art of everyday life.

It may sound counter-intuitive but Big hART is not interested in 'art for art's sake', it doesn't exist, it never has. The sublime is subversive. The artist is best to be a servant of her epoch, not her ego, so as to avoid being robbed of relevance, and consigned to the bin of the past.

So Big hART is an experiment in making invisible stories visible, in many different forums, for vastly different audiences, using hybrid forms, within a broader flow of culture. Seen in this way, work can deliver accelerated positive consequences in the imagining of a fairer future, not just in the literacies of 'the head,' but in the whole of life. That's it really.

## BIG hART: ADDICTED TO THE POSSIBLE

### BEGINNINGS

Big hART sprang to life almost by accident in 1992 in the small industrial town of Burnie on the North West coast of Tasmania – a town whose spirit was infamously captured by Midnight Oil's song of hope and despair 'Burnie':

> *"... two children in the harbour,*
> *they play their games storm water drains,*
> *write their contract in the sand it'll be grey for life ..."*

In 1992, with an arts career progressing well, and having maintained an ongoing commitment to social justice, a producer friend, (John Bakes) and I began to think about what it would mean to apply the processes utilised in making art in communities experiencing acute social justice issues. This in itself was not new, however our focus quickly became the professionalisation of this kind of work. The issues we had in mind were manifesting in the community of Burnie with some urgency, and yet they seemed invisible in the media and subject to a kind of political lethargy. The question was why? The invisibility of the problems? A lack of empathy? A lack of political will? Perhaps.

Our discussions also led us to think about the privileges for the creative person of living an expressive life, and the many positive and entwined layers to this creativity: the sense of being able to take action – agency; self-expression and knowledge and understanding; responses to your actions; community affirmation and sometimes a sense of power; the way the arts and media can help illuminate stories that are not visible in the general community; that communities and individuals could be invited into constructing new kinds of narrative, bigger than the victim narrative but inclusive of struggle. And how, if honed and crafted, these narratives could be fed into the narration that describes the future and becomes part of the narration that forms the nation, etc. These were all very grandiose claims, but we were younger and addicted to the possible.

John was 15 years older than me, and wiser; from a farming family from the beautiful country behind Burnie. His family had a way with potatoes, and John knew firsthand the kinds of backgrounds and hardship which served as a backdrop for families and young people around town. As a producer, he also knew the fragility of a seedling, and the fragility of grand ideas, and through simple counsel, nurtured the complex thought processes forming Big hART, essentially by never saying no. Finding a way. These ideas seemed especially outlandish when I looked at what was then being called 'community art' and cringed at how much of the art made under this label seemed deeply compromised by mediocrity and excuses, a haven for broken artists as much as for broken people participating in a project. It was dispiriting and somehow anti-art. There were of course passionately argued reasons why work made through community processes – though poor in the quality of the content – had to be critiqued in a different, more conciliatory way, how these stories belonged to participants rather than the artist and how the process was what really mattered. It seemed to us, however, that the artists were failing the communities they were working with, bringing an intransigent and blocked creative practice to these new settings, and allowing the dogma of 'the process' to become an excuse. We were our own worst enemy, hard-working artists, exhausted perhaps from the scarcity of resources, jaded, often defensive, in a ghetto we'd created for ourselves, renaming poor work as brilliant, concluding that, 'they wouldn't understand'. The more practiced and better-funded areas of the arts – heritage arts, flagship arts, institutionalised arts, tourist arts, funding bodies and arts policy boffins - looked on with slightly condescending smiles at our worthy efforts.

Yet there were unique and important skills being honed through the community cultural development disciplines: new mentoring skills, empathetic skills,

authenticity and flexibility, applied art techniques, community diplomacy, complex experimental community dramaturgies, and more. It seemed to contain potential new languages beyond the jaded offerings and creative slurry pouring wastefully from mainstream practice – often provincial and lazy and Euro-centric. It seemed that with a fresh commitment to virtuosity in both content and process, using new pallettes and disciplines, community cultural development practice could become the truly experimental and deepest, most imbedded form for artists to grapple with. Here was a promising possibility of a return to a deeper practice, more centered in the whole of life, away from the facile models of art-making based on commodity, manufacturing and tourism.

It seemed abundantly clear that this community cultural development arts practice was frequently working in communities with very serious survival issues and very low skills and capacity. Attempts were being made to achieve very big goals, with tiny amounts of funding and infrastructure. The arts disciplines needed were intensely difficult. They still required thousands of hours of practice in traditional areas, but also required a deep pool of inter- and intra-personal skills to be able to practice in community contexts where complex issues were present, just so as to reach the very minimum standard of do-no-harm.

The timeframes for these complex layered projects needed to be long and they would be expensive, yet the pool of funding was always so limited, and the end product or box office difficult to sell. Making art in these contexts needed brilliant producers, and yet – in these early days of Big hART – there were hardly any producers being trained in the sector. The term was not really thought of (now of course anyone with a spreadsheet is a producer apparently). It was like a practice built on a foundation of good hearts, the promise of optimism, the smell of an oily rag and the desire to save. Failure was built in, structured, from a policy level down.

Arts-workers working in communities often felt and behaved defensively. Many were burnt out and struggling with such big social issues that any constructive critique fell on deaf ears. Ranks closed. There was little interest or capacity for change or professional development - people had their heads down just trying to survive. What made it an even more difficult time was that this intensely interesting and taxing creative discipline was regarded as an easier substitute for artists who couldn't cut it in the mainstream. Larger arts companies would sometimes dip in and out of the sector - if there was a buck or kudos in it – while naively ignoring the discipline of community process, and behave like good-willed blind giants dancing in a china shop.

This was the context, after ten years of experimenting, out of which the Big hART model was born in 1992. It was an attempt to wrestle with the many layers of the practice, and to approach the working in communities with a desire for virtuosity – in content and process. What was needed was a way of signalling the significance of this cultural work, and showing the positive consequences of good practice to funding stakeholders. Then perhaps we could gain access to many different areas and scales of funding and policy, so as to improve delivery and reach a broader audience. Maybe we could also move beyond being ghettoised as 'arts' or 'community arts', and being palmed off as 'policy lite', instead being recognized as a highly calibrated practice which, in its best form, we were immensely proud to be working in.

The Big hART experiment was a recognition that unique benefits could be found in both the process of making and the experience of consuming the content - the story. If the process was deeply embedded and the artistry strong, the work could be made with such finesse and authenticity that a shift, an illumination, an understanding could be created in key places: portfolios, electorates, media and with opinion formers and influencers for example. Stories that were hidden, stories that were ignored, that weren't on trend, could be released into the broader narratives around which individuals, communities and the nation formed identities and created inclusion. These early experiments gave us the opportunity to define different layers or domains that each Big hART project would need to engage on, and different approaches that would need to be kept in play – like keeping plates spinning – for it to genuinely be a Big hART project.

## THE FIRST PROJECTS

Our first project happened almost by accident. We were invited to work on a crime prevention project for at risk young people and young offenders – which was not achieving results and would have lost its remaining funding in Burnie. The results were immediate and striking, with a reduction in offending from the young people from one a week to one in ten months.

Although the organisation was not yet officially named Big hART and not yet an incorporated body, the company quickly gained attention through the success of its workshop approach in stemming recidivism. Participants were engaged enough to deliver creative content in the community. Unusual for the time the project attracted independent evaluation which proved strategic and thus became part of the BIG hART model.

Interestingly, many participants from this initial project have stayed in contact over the years. They have ended up contributing to the community in a variety of ways, from raising children to managing tourism operations, joining the armed forces, working in aged care facilities and so on. The following are two portraits drawn from this first project. For the purposes of this document, the participants' names have been changed.

## PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS

Nat was a young woman who was feared by the police for her physical strength and capacity for violence (she was the only woman to escape from Risdon Prison). Nat had been essentially locked indoors away from interaction with the public for much of her childhood, and suffered abuse both sexually and physically. The family suffered from obesity and mental illness. Nat became central to the arts project and to the life of the group. She toured a number of performance pieces with the company, spoke at public functions and went on to employment. Some years later she rang to say hello late one night from an aged care facility where she was working. 'Guess what', she said, 'They've left me in charge of the drugs cabinet!' At the time of the project, this was inconceivable, as the future being predicted for her was framed by failure and a perceived danger to the community.

Cynthia was agoraphobic, obese, highly intelligent, socially isolated and bearded. She had every reason to feel rejected and angry. Cynthia initially began coming to the workshops after the other participants had left to help with the cleaning up. After a few weeks, Cynthia started arriving while the workshops were in progress. She would cope by sitting under a table and watching. It became clear that she enjoyed confined spaces and, as it turned out, although large, she was extremely flexible. This socially isolated young woman ended up having the main speaking part in a large, touring experimental stage production.



She would begin the show inside what seemed a small road case, which would burst open a few scenes later and she would roll out. This confined space seemed to give her confidence and calm her nerves. She was powerful in the show, and went on to contribute in many valuable ways to the community.

There were many, such as Jim, the almost illiterate son of a local detective, who arrested him before the project; there were young women who became mothers aged 13 and 15, and some young people who were just a little lost and had a story of disengagement and ordinary disadvantage, which came out in numerous, often violent or attention seeking ways.

One of the first workshops for the group involved an exercise on the stage of the local theatre. In the centre was a large stack of china crockery gleaned from local second-hand shops. As the workshop progressed, under the glare of the theatre lights, in the midst of other activities, participants were asked to come forward and smash a plate in front of the others. In this context, this extroverted group, known for their vandalism after dark around town, became strangely timid.

Little by little, however, they began to understand the power of this 'stage space', where the transgressive and the flamboyant could meet, where audacity was an asset, where the public demanded controlled shows of violent energy and drama … and so the plates began to be flung over and over cathartically at the back wall, shattering across the stage in an OH&S nightmare. Their potential – and inclination towards anarchic creative energy – was both broken open and harnessed. They understood the power of story/action once staged with intent, and the agency it bought to otherwise random acts. It was a telling moment and an unusual workshop technique.

Two of the shows we made together – *Girl* and *Pandora Slams the Lid* – went on to tour and win awards. Tragically, while the company was on tour with these works at the National Festival of Australian Theatre, an ambulance officer in Burnie was murdered by the peer group of this young cast. Had they been at home it is likely they would have been at the same party, rather than engaging with the national discourse. It proved a salient reminder of the potential contribution to the broader community that disenfranchised young people were capable of making when given the opportunity.

## MILLION DOLLAR KIDS

The projects were being observed by a clearing house called Youth Studies, and they coined the phrase 'million dollar kids' regarding young people such as those we were working with. From the time they first come to the attention of various government departments and agencies, at around two years of age, to the time they are spat out of the system at 18 years, they have millions spent on their wellbeing. These costs to the system include wages, administration, infrastructure, interventions, alternative housing, repair to premises, mental health, OH&S, health, legal representation, incarceration etc. The system that is supposed to support these young people is often of little use. Now, two decades later the situation is relatively unchanged, except that the figure is far higher. (For example, one young person in the system, running parallel with a local Big hART project, may cost the state $500,000 per year and this will continue to increase for many years to come.)

On the strength of the success of these initial projects and their evaluation, Big hART began searching for other approaches that were cost effective yet created opportunities with decent budgets, and was able to secure substantial non-arts funding to pilot and document further strategies. These projects utilised the skills of arts-workers on new non-welfare projects, which responded to related issues in the community such as domestic violence prevention; HIV/AIDS prevention amongst rural young people who were injecting drug users; re-engagement with school; and single teenage mothers in transient relationships and their vulnerable children.

Each of these projects attracted government attention through independent evaluation and strong use of the media, resulting in increased funding opportunities and growth. This rapid expansion and attention required Big hART to formalise its organisational structure, its name, and document its purposes and processes.

The company was fortunate in its naivety. We had no formal committee, no real status, no template. There is more pressure now for new startups to resist the entrepreneurial spirit and follow the formulaic approaches to organisational structure, governance and risk, which are often based on templates from other industries and centuries. In 1996, when Big hART was incorporated, the 'one size fits all,' sausage machine mentality for small arts and community start-ups was not yet established.

Big hART was fortunate at the time to meet a very elderly semi-retired local lawyer who offered to do the work pro bono. This beautifully Dickensian Mr Crisp was skinny, with a leathery face, enormous cabbage ears and deaf as a post. Suited in double breast and navy pinstripe, a simple swish of his thin silver hair was enough to send a cloud of dandruff wafting across the room. Mr Crisp yelled with the rasping whisper of a man who knew his gasps were numbered. But his work was free and, as it turned out, he was wise. He said he would do the legal work for us on three conditions: our board would be as small as possible, it would meet as infrequently as was legal, and our constitution was to be minimal. Big hART finalised its constitution and incorporation early in 1996, along the lines Mr Crisp required, and we have been grateful for the organisational dexterity it has allowed ever since.

## PRIME MINISTERIAL SUPPORT: MARTIN BRYANT AND JOHN HOWARD

1996 was a watershed year for us. Prime Minister Howard's conservative government was newly-elected, and in April the world looked on in horror as gunman Martin Bryant went on a senseless killing spree in Port Arthur in the south of Tasmania. The link between Tasmania and violence became collectively lodged in the national consciousness.

In some ways, a number of young people involved in Big hART's projects were not dissimilar to Martin Bryant - socially isolated, numb, disconnected from education and hurting. There was a clear sense that if they had access to weapons something similarly tragic was possible. Having worked with this target group for a number of years, written up the approaches we were using, and having been evaluated, we were in a unique position to approach the newly elected government. The Prime Minister was desperately looking for ways to reach out to Tasmanians to show strong leadership on the issue of guns and violence – so he was receptive to a positive story of community-driven change.

Perhaps unusual for a small not-for-profit organisation, we found ourselves an Australian Public Service mentor who was deeply interested in change and able to guide our path. We wanted to have a bigger impact than just in the local

community and, to achieve this goal, we had to try to have input at a policy level. With her guidance we hired what really amounted to a lobbyist who approached the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet regarding the Prime Minister meeting some young Tasmanians who, although at risk, were no longer connected to the justice system and instead were contributing positively to their community.

Prime Minister Howard agreed to launch Big hART as a newly incorporated body, with a manual capturing our approach at Parliament House. In the theatrette the PM commented on the confidence of these young people, noting their disadvantaged background and their courage in breaking away from their likely social trajectories.

It was only in the years following that we realised the value of having the imprimatur of the Prime Minister associated with Big hART. Being able to say 'launched by Prime Minister John Howard' proved invaluable in opening doors, triggering us to think more strategically about access to government, how to contribute to policy straight from the field, how to build relationships in Canberra, and create new approaches to cross-portfolio funding. It helped us avoid a backwater and safety of the arts, and instead to try and produce projects of scale, achieving multiple goals and aimed at multiple audiences.

What developed was a model of working at the grassroots; utilising hybrid cultural approaches and non-welfare strategies; working with the local community's strengths, then taking the work produced into the public domain through arts festivals and the media and targeting the policy or opinion domain beyond the arts. The key findings from these projects were then used to bring about more sustained change and information sharing in policy and research contexts.

This was at a time when evaluation was rudimentary and research on the ground on these kinds of arts and social change projects rare. In most of government, arts projects were thought of as soft-option and bread and circuses. In building a new model of Applied Arts - without making the art enslaved to committee or outcome - Big hART built a solid foundation for future application that is still being refined today. Interestingly, in breaking out of that mould we also avoided the self-satisfaction of so much lazy mainstream arts. The best thing that could have happened for Big hART was developing new models in the poorest electorate, in the poorest state, for a decade without funding bodies noticing. Instead of approaching the kitchen, plate in hand, grateful for a small dollop of funding gruel, we were in the back lane, raiding the mini-skip for piles of leftover funding from all kinds of other departments (tipped off by our lobbyist). Big hART was lucky to have the chance to develop much more sustainable funding streams from other departments, rather than suckling at the drip-fed teat of traditional arts funding.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME: CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF BIG hART

The silent 'h' in hART was a way of symbolising our intention to keep the 'heart' implicit in the values of the company. In other words, we were unashamedly attempting to make a difference through our work, based on the long-term processes we used on projects in communities rather than explicitly in the art being made. The values behind the silent 'h' can hopefully be found in the participatory processes used, the advocacy work for better policy, in the workshop processes, in the company itself, in the work with communities and in the viewer's experience of authenticity in the art made.

The 'BIG' also alludes to the company's intention to try to make work of consequence, working with communities with high needs, where change is essential, and the issues largely invisible. To this degree there was 'heart' in the politics underlying the projects and the urgency of the issues. The name captures the company's approach across different domains with individuals, communities, policy discourse, art and knowledge transfer, and how these contribute to cultural solutions within communities.

'BIG' is not so much about scale, rather it is consequence. It reflects the company's interest in contributing to society, bringing creativity to the centre of life, the whole of life, rather than relegating it to the realm of hobby, diversion or tourist commodity.

'Big Heart' also alludes to 'the heart of the country', the deep belly of the place, away from the coastal shell, and the iconic way it holds our collective consciousness. We fear it, but we know it is the interior of the country that will teach us what the future holds... the land itself and the First Peoples – if we choose to listen. The name resonated with our interest in rural, regional, remote

and isolated communities and their hidden stories. It hinted at what we haven't yet been taught by the country we live in as we huddle by the coast, waiting for boats to arrive and take us home to somewhere.

The name was deliberately enigmatic, it can be pronounced Big Art, with a silent 'h', or Big Heart. This proved useful as the company began working across government departments. Those whose foci was social or community oriented we would use the term 'BIG Heart'; with the arts & cultural sector and with audiences we would favour 'BIG Art.' This helped us avoid preconceptions about our work, helping us diversify our funding sources, with few rivals.

Lastly, 'Big' also resonates with 'big ideas' and the scale and importance of the issues that Big hART was tackling strategically. 'Big' in the sense of the positive consequences we can expect if we place the making of art more astutely in the broad cultural conversation.

## DEVELOPING THE BIG hART MODEL

Big hART's early projects received positive independent evaluations and a growing pool of funding options opening up across government if we sharpened our focus. What was it that government wanted to buy for the taxpayer? Could we meet this criteria? Instead of thinking of ourselves as an only an arts company, we began to see that if we focused on the outcomes of our work, rather than the content only, governments were desperate to buy what we were delivering.

We signed up to a thing called the 'Government Purchasing Index' that listed every tender and grant governments were putting out, and then thought about how our approach to community building could fulfill something that, say, the Defense Department needed in relation to relocating families. Although these ideas only rarely came to fruition, it helped train us in a new way of thinking, and at a new scale.

The organisation began to define the non-welfare processes we were using, and the benefits of utilising these community cultural development strategies to areas other than the Arts. It became apparent that the more strongly we could articulate the benefits in terms of evidence and focus on issues of acute concern to government, the more traction we could get in funding, policy and the media.



Our first attempts to write up the Big hART model was published in the form of a box of seven pocket-sized books, and a very modern VHS tape. The small books were designed so arts-workers could refer to them during workshops, when stuck for new ideas, games and exercises for participants. There were also books with tips on other strategies: use of media, building teams, engaging with policy, building communities, etc.

This makes it sound like a rigorous and well thought out process. Rather it was much more spontaneous and haphazard at the beginning, coupled with creative reflection amongst a small team. Trial and error began shaping what clumsily became known as 'the Big hART model: individuals, communities, governments and art,' which comprised of a number of elements including values, principles and aspirations of Big hART's projects.

## WORKING IN SIMULTANEOUS LAYERS INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, ARTS, POLICY AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Although we didn't know it in the first few years, the Big hART approach was essentially an experiment in community-dramaturgies. The same narrative principles we use to tell a story on stage can be adapted to help shift a community's narrative, or engage the media or contribute to an impact at a national level. Early on the organisation identified the layers-of-change in these longer-term projects that needed to be in operation for it to qualify as a Big hART project – as opposed to other fine community cultural development projects. The layers were: individuals, communities, national (policy or change discourse), the arts and knowledge transfer.

- **INDIVIDUALS:** When individuals - who are experiencing the effects of disadvantage - make positive changes to the direction of their social trajectory this is important. It is perhaps the single aim of most community projects. However, when an individual makes changes, they don't move through the community in isolation; they are part of a community system, which shouldn't stay the same.

- **COMMUNITY:** If change occurs, and the individual's story becomes more visible and understood, then their community will need to shift in attitude and behaviour in response, to help ensure something is learned and there is less harm to others in a similar situation in the future. If the

community and these individuals make these kinds of transitions this is good community development, however policy makers and opinion formers will also need to change in response.

- **POLICY:** Those involved in the national policy discourse - politicians, advisors, policy-makers, academics, evaluators, opinion formers and the media are all additional and important audiences for both the art created, and the narrative of the individuals, the community and the project. This involves thinking about the meta-narrative of the project and how it could play out positively in the public domain, and whether politicians will be able to engage with the project, the evaluations, the evidence and use it to prevent the reinvention of the policy wheel.

- **ART:** the quality of the authenticity, the integrity and the virtuosity of the art forms the project is experimenting with, are vital to the success of the three domains above, to ensure there is a deep and undeniable experience helping to fuel the personal, community and cultural shifts, rather than a response in patronizing platitudes.

- **KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER:** lastly the transfer of knowledge regarding the findings of the project and the approaches in the field is vital. This transfer is never one way. Communities and people experiencing these issues are in many ways the brains trust who teach workers. More experienced artists and arts workers can save younger workers entering the field a decade of time through mentoring and listening and sharing.

A good attempt at working on an issue becomes a Big hART project when these five domains are entwined and in play.

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF PRACTICE

When Big hART was running a large project in New South Wales, Bob Carr, then State Premier, was coming to the region and agreed to launch the project. He was asked if he would participate in filming part of the story by young people as an extra in a pub. It wasn't hard, he had to lean on the bar and pretend he was having a beer, while chatting to actor, Deborah Mailman, behind the bar. Ironically the Premier doesn't drink, but he has a sense of humour and agreed. There was much running around from his staffers, and strict instructions about how little time he would have and how it all had to roll out. In the end the Premier loved working with the young camera crew and stayed for a few takes, leaving late but in a fine mood. As a result, some months later, he flew to the Adelaide Festival to witness a large and unusual performance piece being staged by the same young people in a decrepit car park next to a soup kitchen, which included 'his film' playing a part. (It was unexpected and unannounced... and he was noticed nodding off during the performance).

Building on this, Big hART requested a meeting with Premier Carr to present a proposal for multi-year core funding sourced from across departments in a de-siloing exercise, something that had never happened. Humble organisations like ours do not usually get anywhere near busy Premiers, however the combination of art and public service efficiency seemed to catch his eye. And so with a boardroom full of slightly nervous staffers and advisors, our highly rehearsed presentation commenced. For two or three minutes the Premier and his Chief of Staff Roger Wilkins spoke to each other in fluent German – something about Mahler – the Premier listened to the presentation for a few minutes, stood up and said something as blunt as, 'Audacious, find a way to make this happen.'

In 25 years of practice, this proved Big hART's most productive and innovative funding model, with the company generating more than 3 dollars for every 1 dollar provided by the government annually for over a decade. It stemmed from inviting different kinds of audiences to experience the project from the inside. This included community members sitting alongside funders and politicians and resulted in an understanding of the approach and a release of funding.

## THE ARTS: CREATING DIALOGIC SPACES

Big hART is an arts company – and the work being made in and with these community groups and individuals must stand on its own merits in the cultural frame, or the whole thing is just the Emperor's New Social Work. It will need to find its own authentic language to be given the attention good art deserves. Without this authentic audience response, the rest of the project may well contribute positively, but the art will be part of the problem, eliciting a patronising response that continues to prop up the ghetto of invisibility for the groups involved.

Over the years, Big hART has developed an oral tradition for knowledge transfer

that plays out through mentoring, seminars for government, conferences and information sharing, master classes for collegiate peers, and the intense development of career trajectories for arts workers and producers on projects. Some of this is also written down, however there is a useful intensity that comes from addressing this professional development and mentoring informally, and embedded in the complexity and heartache of these difficult projects. In a sense this privacy will always keep Big hART operating at the scale of Meade's 'small group of friends', and that may well prove to be one of its major strengths in preventing the organisation's success leading to an institutionalisation. The model evolved around a set of ideas and values, assembled with the curatorial elegance of a bumbling bowerbird, and it continues to collect and refine and change.

## BEING RESPONSIVE TO AND GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY

One of the organisational strengths has been that it is light on its feet, with very little infrastructure, and so we have been able to respond quickly, delivering the resources that come in, to the work in the field, while more or less surviving when funding is lean. It has been important not to lose these values and this essential characteristic of the work and to resist becoming another agency or mini-empire. The beauty is that the income flows straight to the work in the field and we have been very inexpensive to run.

For much of the early projects it wasn't really about being paid. Money went to the grassroots of the project, the art, making it punch above its weight. We were to some degree self-funding and this brought purity to the motivations for each project, but also made life uncomfortable. People came in for small periods of time as arts contractors on each project and were gone again, continuing their own practice. However inevitably success meant more structures and internal mechanisms, and slowly the middle management grew to meet the size of the projects being delivered. On the whole however even these functions continued to be placed where they were needed, mostly on the ground in communities.

This charitable beginning has shaped the structure and maintained the values of the company. Big hART remains an anomaly in the arts landscape, bending with the winds and whims of arts language and administrative fads – some good, some not so. Cultural policy at a state and federal level in Australia began its love affair with administration, management and risk aversion when Big hART was focusing its funding strategies away from the cultural sector and it has been amusing to watch as the language of arts administration came to resemble that of manufacturing, with the artist low in the food chain, and creativity seen as almost peripheral to the core business of the 'arts industry'.

Like naughty children, small organisations were persuaded with new buzz-words on structure, development, governance, evidence and accountability. There was little creative thinking as the arts pushed themselves into an 'industry' mould in the hope of gaining some funding clout. Legitimising and proving the value of the arts became obsessions along with brand, box office, tourism, number of hotel beds sold, education, health and wellbeing. Each of these have important roles alongside art-making and creativity, however their pursuit to legitimise the arts exerted top-down management structures and an approach to art that was inherently anti-creative. Because Big hART received such a tiny percentage of its funding through cultural sources it was easier to avoid these procedural pressures and we could develop an unusual networked structure for the company as we grew.

## RHIZOMES AND TREES: DEVELOPING NETWORKED STRUCTURES

After the first decade, Big hART began to examine how the company was actually operating. It became clear that we weren't running a top-down 'tree-shaped' model; we were more like a bamboo plant with a complex and ever-shifting root system that ran the company and resulted in our consistent creative productivity. It was much more a rhizome structure.

This networked, flatter structure also worked alongside a strong authorial voice in the company through the Creative Director, as well as utilising the quiet and observational, values-based reflective input from the board. Values played a large part in the company's life, with trust mitigating some aspects of risk, as well as the linking of the company's aspirations to the aspirations of individual artists and arts workers who came and worked on staff. This hasn't been 100% successful, but on the whole it has been highly effective, allowing Big hART's exponential growth over 25 years. Inevitably though, as the company has got bigger, and as people's personal investment of time and energy and aspiration has increased, there has had to be a shift to new iterations of the rhizome structure, and combining it with strong independent leadership and internal structures to encourage discussion through producers meetings.

Big hART is no utopia, and often its best attempts have been less than ideal. However, it is a place of strong professional and personal development, a place where, for the most part, each person's narrative is important. One of the characteristics of Big hART has been that the artists who work on Big hART projects over the decades are encouraged to also engage in their own explorations in simultaneous careers. Big hART has taken – as part of its charitable aims – this very targeted approach of encouraging this richness and diversity of arts practice.

There is also a strong sense of the transient nature of the company – a kind of group of like-minded people who have coalesced for a time around a series of worthwhile issues, which ebb and flow and finish, and the organisation itself may one day disappear in a similar way, when different opportunities arrive for those values to be expressed.

## ASPIRATIONAL TEAMS

Building on the values the company tries to use in projects in the field, there is a commitment to new arts workers, producers and artists coming onto a project both to mentor and to inspire others. Big hART in a sense is nothing, and wants to stay that way. It has little or no infrastructure. Its media tools are quickly outdated and renewed. It would only take a couple of weeks to dismantle the organisation. Big hART exists in the experiences and values and tools of those who work on the projects. The corporate and individual memory that they take forward to their future endeavours in the field is Big hART. Although it is operating as an entity it is really a process of strong creative leadership, maximising gift and autonomy and managing change quickly and responsively.

To this end the organisation tries to invest heavily, by harnessing and where appropriate shaping and being shaped by the skills, values and aspirations of those who come to work within it. Wherever an individual's aspirations and those of the company can align there are shared values and commitment, and consequently, productivity and longevity on projects increases. There also seems to be a strong correlation between these factors and the prevention of burnout. It is easy, on these large-scale projects that are dealing with high levels of need, to feel at times awash in hopelessness, and it can be very debilitating. However, a strong sense of meaning builds between people working closely on the projects.



At these times the collegiate approach of the company is highly valued, calling people to the best part of themselves, and supporting each other.

Sometimes, as in any movement, this hasn't worked, and people learn from it... or don't. Whenever we've run a mammoth project, gone way over budget, or it looks like Big hART will have to fold, and the team are all exhausted, we make sure we go out for an inappropriately expensive dinner and spend what we haven't got ... eat and drink and laugh and cry... risk and value in one.

## THE ROLE OF STORY IN BIG hART

If we can see our lives as being lived 'in the moment', that the past no longer exists and the future is not yet real... if we can see that we are all living like this together, then a 'nation' becomes an ephemeral thing, ever changing, a series of 'narrations' we retell together in the present. A nation is a set of ideas wrapped up in a story that comes from the past, continually written in the present as a way of establishing collective definitions of what an imagined future may be.

There are dominant stories; stories that no longer have currency; stories that are not really that big or important but are growing in stature (think Gallipoli); stories that we are frightened of and are deliberately excluded (the way we dishonour our elderly and let them languish in dispiriting nursing homes because we are too scared to face our own mortality); and there are emerging stories and others that are invisible to most of us.

Propaganda utilises many of these story types and contexts to punish or exclude. However, art does not lend itself to propaganda because the inward journey, the contemplative journey, the journey of depth tends to expose the propagandist to the audience. Art is subject to all kinds of charlatan carpet bagging, but it does tend to move away from the static and the impulse to 'conserve' and to keep things as they are, to keep progressing - even while sections of the arts (heritage) cling slavishly to past content as well as to past craft. The poetic impulse meanders its way towards the sublime, or into 'the new' and sometimes both. This is not a linear progression; rather, it is a spiral inward, in tension, deepening, not in single generations, but across time or despite it. This transient, ephemeral notion of nationhood and society, and the place of story with in it is vital to Big hART's work. The right to story. Cultural rights.

A person's story can be their last remaining valuable asset in any community - those who have been excluded, whether deliberately or accidently, are often on the bottom rung of the community. Their invisibility has economic consequences. Their story is often valuable because it can act like a canary in the coalmine for society. If told in the right way, and placed with the right audiences, these stories can illuminate things we need to know about ourselves and things we need to shift. In other words, the value of a person's story is their ability to act like 'gifted consultants' who can help shift society. Their input into our ideas about ourselves and our social policies can change society for the future.

The discussion resulting from these unfolding stories in all forms through education, policy, song, dance, science, theology, media, sport, each with different entry points, evolving and entwining, when combined are basically what we mean by culture. It is the very essence of each of our waking hours. Whether we are the kind of person who contemplates it or not, we are all involved in this story-making, even when excluded from it. The narrative litmus test for the health of this discussion is empathy.

This empathetic response can end invisibility and provide protection for those in the community who have found themselves excluded from the narrative, or actively demonised by propaganda.

## STORY AS A PROTECTIVE MECHANISM

One of the basic principles of Big hART's work is that a person's story can act as a protective mechanism, or a restraint on the damage that society can inflict on some groups through a lack of understanding. If young people know more of the story of older people in a small country town, older people will feel an increased sense of safety. Most people are very tolerant and supportive of their neighbours when there is shared story or circumstance – this is often experienced in times of natural disaster, when people are involved in a common 'story' and have a common set of tasks to achieve.

## ILLUSTRATION: TEN DAYS ON THE ISLAND FESTIVAL

A Big hART project in Tasmania called *This is Living* included a performance in four towns across the state for the Ten Days on the Island Festival. It was designed to capture the stories of older people in the community and to value their contribution. These community members are often invisible to younger people. The idea was to bring young people in contact with older people and the symbolic pairing became skateboarders and the elderly. Initially this seemed like an uneasy combination of opposites, however, by the end of the process older members of the community – some using walking frames – were being thrown aloft by young people in a mosh pit during the credits at the end of a show in which they both performed. A new visibility had been created between groups.

Artists working in communities can naturally make a strong contribution by utilising their craft to help share stories from outsiders and those demonised in the community. The phrase 'it's much harder to hurt someone if you know their story' was passed down to Big hART via a residential service in northwest Tasmania for people with disabilities. This phrase has become a defining idea.

It could also be true to say the opposite: 'it is much easier to hurt someone if you know their story'. This is true in the 'personal', i.e. to hurt people on an individual level – to make the hurt more pinpoint accurate. This is one way in which everyday propaganda uses story in the press.

Big hART's approach is to create the opportunity for true stories to be told as a protective mechanism more broadly in society – to generate natural protective values around story. For instance, Australia has just witnessed a two-decade long storytelling manipulation concerning refugees by master storytellers in the polity, so as to drive a wedge between groups and gain re-election. These same strategies can be seen to be used in war mongering and in the weapons industry. However, by far the biggest cause of the clumsy harm caused to many is the invisibility of groups and issues in the community, when their story becomes excluded from our society's narrative.

## CREATING BROADER AUDIENCES

The more pressing the issue, the more phobic we become and the deeper the invisibility can be. The more a story is being manipulated, the more critical it is for the real stories to be broadly and deeply told and experienced by many people and specialist audiences, beyond small theatre and arts circles. Although ideas are still valuable in small circles for triggering new iterations of thinking, change

comes through a groundswell, not the white-horses whipped up on the surface by the wind. The process of change can be supercharged by knowing audiences for your work; using the media; involving decision-makers and softening key policy hearts, engaging the electorate and making it easier for politicians to make brave decisions. This comes from being strategic in thinking and in disseminating the story.

This role can be defined as 'social impact' and 'social impact producers', are now attracting philanthropic attention and funding. Their job is to ensure the work is reaching complex nodes in multi-layered networks that spark further change. This may mean broader general public audiences, but it also means targeting audiences who can respond to a growing groundswell with shifts in the national story and then shifts in policy.

## ILLUSTRATION: GREAT HALL, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

A Big hART project that helped define this for the company was a large-scale project called *kNot@Home*, which examined homelessness in many different forms through the eyes of around 200 young people. There were a number of outputs ranging from festival performances to an 8-part television series, a website and an exhibition. Near the conclusion of the project the company was invited to bring its performance piece involving fifteen young people to the Great Hall at Parliament House, Canberra. It was to be the centrepiece of a national awards ceremony for Centrelink staff (a one-stop-shop for human services in Australia). The award recipients in Centrelink were the best-performing workers in the centers nationally - for instance someone who had taken a large number of young people off benefits because they breached the conditions of their welfare payment. In stark contrast, we provided the opportunity for some of the most disengaged young people in the country to describe how they ended up homeless, unemployed, out of school and welfare dependent, to workers, policy makers, ministerial advisors and the relevant Minister herself, in ways that were polished, evocative and supported by strong arts resources.

As the evening unfolded and the young people performed, first the chatter at the tables quietened, the cutlery was still, then pin-drop silence came over the Great Hall for 40 minutes, broken only by the sound of tears amongst the audience, followed by a standing ovation. This then created the opportunity for a six-minute, incisive policy statement from Big hART that clearly articulated to the Minister the predicament faced by these young people and the costs to government – the policy statement being carefully prepared through mentoring with friends of Big hART in the Australian Public Service. The result was the opportunity to meet with the Minister and discuss the invisibility of this end of the client group, and the structural issues that usually prevented them changing their social trajectory. The stories of these young people, in this context, were as valuable as that of the 10,000-dollar a day political lobbyist, as this is in effect what they were delivering – policy lobbying of the highest impact.

When these high-value stories, created in collaboration with gifted artists, are illuminated well and placed in 'high-value' forums the response can be profound and appreciation cathartically expressed. These stories are 'expressions of self', and one of the strong foundations of Big hART's work is returning an audience's appreciation of this 'self-expression' to those Outsiders who are experiencing the issues, and who have expressed it through their story. This in turn can create intense moments that trigger strong new self-appraisal and often require new choices about who they are in the face of the issues they have successfully raised: their agency, their new skills, their new-found visibility, a sense of now being included, and having a worthwhile contribution to make. If this process is mentored, these participants in Big hART projects will often begin to make new and strong choices about changing their social trajectory. This is not some therapeutic magic pill, but rather a natural consequence of agency and intense inner work. It is harnessing one of those moments in life when we instinctively have permission to re-evaluate our identity. This re-evaluation, in turn, gets expressed in choices we make in our social trajectory.

Finally, because Big hART is interested in social and individual change, these moments are then supported and mentored, and as individuals make new choices, pathways are created on Big hART projects – through local events, use of the media, and dialogue with those in positions of power - to for individuals to influence the direction of their community. The learnings from projects then become part of evaluations and data collection, feeding into policy forums, and more importantly the art content, narrative material made by project participants can become powerful tools for opening the ears of the general public and their political representatives to injustice and helping to driving change.

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

**MARGARET MEAD**

*“All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.”*

**ALBERT CAMUS**



*"Society is composed of two great classes, those that have more dinners than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners."*

**SEBASTIAN ROCH NICHOLAS CHAMFORT**

*“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”*

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

# THE ARC OF PRACTICE

## THREE CASE STUDIES

# THE ARC OF PRACTICE

## NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI, LUCKY AND GOLD

From Big hART's point of view, these three projects are interesting as much for their imperfections and learnings, as for their strengths. They are significant because they formed leaping off points for Big hART, in its quest to keep professionalising its practice. The learnings have resulted in strong new experiments and iterations of practice with new projects such as - *Namatjira*, *Yijala Yala*, *Acoustic Life of Sheds*, *Project O* and others.

## INTRODUCTION

**PETER WRIGHT**

These case studies draw substantially on multi-locale ethnographic fieldwork in each site (Marcus, 1998), evaluation reports on each project (Palmer, 2010; Wright, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b), and a synopsis of those reports prepared by Susanne Thurow.

The three sites where these projects were conducted are geographically diverse. They range from the cool temperate forests and hinterland of North West Tasmania, through the scrub and water-scarce plains of western New South Wales, South Western Queensland and Victoria, to the parched red desert heart of Australia. Each of these is unique in their sense of place, and distinctive in character. They have in common disadvantage or communities doing it tough. For example, *LUCKY* worked with young people who were socially excluded or were living challenging lives. In *GOLD*, many families and communities were living with the extreme pressures that prolonged and intensive drought can bring, which were manifested in family breakdown, ill health and self-harm.



In Australia's desert heart Indigenous Australians were experiencing profound clashes of cultural expectations and values; this disadvantage has grown out of many years of inadequate support and infrastructure, and differing sets of cultural expectations and mores. This means that for these first Australians, attempts to reclaim self-respect are not easily realised.

Big hART seeks to serve these communities by conjointly developing cultural or creative solutions to sometimes intractable social problems.

Each of these three projects is described here as a way of providing context for understanding. An overview of the project is presented first, followed by background, each project is then unpacked, highlighting differing elements, and what these meant in terms of both process and product.

*"Language is a guide to 'social reality'... it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes… Human beings do not live in the objective world alone… but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society… The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group."*

**EDWARD SAPIR**

# CASE STUDY ONE: NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

## PROJECT SUMMARY

*Ngapartji Ngapartji* was a community development and language maintenance project conducted by Big hART with Indigenous people in various locations across the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara[1] (APY) Lands in central Australia and in Alice Springs. The project officially ran from 2006 to 2009, with spin-off projects and performances creating a strong legacy far beyond this narrow timeline. The project has been deemed highly successful by participants, evaluating bodies, critics and audiences alike.

*Ngapartji Ngapartji*'s main objective was to effect a sustained positive change in various disadvantaged, struggling Indigenous communities by offering local individuals opportunities to engage with their cultural capital in arts-based practice. Following up on the idea of creating a theatre show on Pitjantjatjara history and culture, consultation with community members brought forth five major objectives for the project:

- ***creating beautiful art in various art forms***
- ***maintenance of the Pitjantjatjara language***
- ***preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge***
- ***improvement of general literacy (defined as both the ability to read and write as well as the ability to engage in a culturally meaningful manner with new media and modern technology)***
- ***crime prevention by promoting social cohesion.***

With these aims in mind, many workshops in different art forms were conducted, and the products presented to diverse local and national audiences. By engaging with their personal history and the Pitjantjatjara language, young project participants were able to reconnect creatively with their heritage and build positive, strong identities based on experiences of assertion, inclusion, acknowledgement and affirmation. For the older participants, the project provided a platform from which to share stories and cultural practices with the next generation. The generous attitude and fortitude of these elders in sharing the painful as well as the joyous moments of their history, and also conjointly performing aspects of their culture to non-Indigenous audiences, allowed *Ngapartji Ngapartji* to tap deeply into the Australian reconciliation process. This performative and inclusive process both critically probed, as well as re-imagined it. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* was able to reach broad and varied audiences through its acclaimed theatre performance, generating a huge interest in the overall work of the project, which in turn, supported the push for a change in federal Indigenous language policy.

The project received funding and support from a range of foundations, government bodies, corporations, businesses and institutions.

1. Indigenous groups with strong ancestral ties to the land

## BACKGROUND TO NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

Big hART's complex approach to community development was the blueprint for the design of the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project. The seeds from which the project grew were planted in the late 1990s in the artistic collaboration between actor Trevor Jamieson and writer Scott Rankin. Jamieson, a Pitjantjatjara-Spinifex man from South Eastern Australia, wanted to tell the story of his family, his people, their history and their culture, which he saw as being in danger of rapidly disintegrating and sliding into the vortex of Western civilisation. After initial relatively unsuccessful theatrical experiments, the artistic collaboration linked up with first-time producer Alex Kelly, gained traction, and expanded into the multilayered community experiment that *Ngapartji Ngapartji* would ultimately become. Through this process the project came to address the wider issues of language loss and cultural disintegration across the APY Lands in a genuinely intercultural setting.

The story of the Jamieson family lies at the heart of the celebrated *Ngapartji Ngapartji* stage production. The Jamieson family history comprises in a nutshell the challenges Indigenous people of Australia, and especially of the APY Lands, have faced in post World War II Australia. This story has resonated powerfully with the communities that joined the project and has provided a strong link of identification, helping boost a renaissance of Pitjantjatjara culture and language across the involved communities.

The traditional homelands of the Spinifex people lie in South Western Australia but, as with many Indigenous peoples in Australia, their history is one of removal and fracturing. Until the 1950s, this language group lived uninhibited by Western influence in the remote and arid parts of the Great Victoria Desert. After World War II, however, the Australian government allowed the British military to conduct nuclear testing in those regions. This decision necessitated the forced removal of the Indigenous population who had forged deep spiritual connections to this particular stretch of land over thousands of years.

Tragically, their removal was marked by communication breakdowns and ill-informed infrastructural decisions, which ultimately led to many Indigenous people being exposed to radiation set free by the nine major atomic bombs detonated in the area between 1953 and 1965; the detonation of these atomic bombs making the area unsuitable for human habitation for millennia to come. Asked about their recollections of that time, traditional owners and residents of the APY Lands speak of the 'black mist' that travelled across the land and caused blindness, cancer and other radiation-induced illnesses.

The displacement and suffering had immense effects on the social structure and emotional wellbeing of the people. For example, the kinship structure so critical to Indigenous family life was broken up as people were settled in various locations in Central and Western Australia (such as Ernabella, Docker River, Amata, Kiwikurra and Cundalee), hundreds of kilometres away from their homelands. People were no longer able to follow their law and their long-established ways of life. This also meant that links to country, Ngura, integral to Indigenous identity and cosmology, and determining their holistic placement in the world, were broken.

In addition to being deprived of the basis of their identity, people were confronted with a radically new social and economic order marked by alien values and ethics, which induced further stress. These language groups and others like them have strived to integrate these two often opposing systems by adopting some and rejecting other elements of the two cultures. In a challenging way, and symptomatic of cultural match and mismatch, this delicate process has been further situated in an asymmetrical struggle with white authorities, who for the most part framed Indigenous cultures as primitive and uncivilised. This has meant that an affirming and enduring space for practising, celebrating and transmitting Indigenous cultural heritage had been barred, and people shamed for their cultural ties. In addition, the merits of white culture were vigorously promoted among the dispersed population.

Practicing and passing on culture in a surrogate context proved difficult and often resulted in discriminatory sanctions that led people to abandon their culture. Simultaneously, integration into the Australian mainstream did not take place. Even with the advent of affirmative government policies, attempts to bridge the divide between Western and Indigenous cultures have failed repeatedly, resulting in a lot of frustration, deep-seated mistrust, and a range of other deleterious outcomes.

Consequently, most Indigenous people have been struggling to adopt a way of living that allows them to create meaningful existences in this culturally divided space. Economic hardship, paucity of opportunities, a generally low level of formal education, increasing crime rates, substance abuse, increasing domestic violence, and a substantial loss of traditional cultural knowledge are issues facing today's Indigenous communities on the APY Lands and other parts of Australia.

## THE PROJECT

Alex Kelly, Trevor Jamieson and Scott Rankin came to the APY Lands to unearth material for a major theatre show about the Jamieson family and their history. They consulted with community elders and the Jamiesons' extended family about cultural protocols and gathered vivid first-hand accounts of the events and people they had come to learn about.

This emotional journey of discovery forged strong ties between the artists and the local communities. In 2002, the play *Career Highlights of the Mamu*, produced by Black Swan Theatre Company, represented the first stage in the theatrical exploration of the family's story. In Big hART's view it was unsuccessful in capturing the urgency of the story, and involved poor community process. Trevor and Scott were eager to try again, and Alex Kelly's passionate advocacy for social change paved the way for a more successful attempt. The capacity of the creative team to provide the community foundation on which to build the fledgling project, eventually laid the ground for a second major and successful stage production. In 2005 Kelly moved to Alice Springs and spent the ensuing

18 months establishing further contacts with community members, organisations and institutions across the APY Lands.

The major objective of this first stage was to meet locals, listen to their stories and first-hand accounts of issues facing their communities, and learn about local ideas on how to tackle those problems. This time-intensive approach was adopted in order to create a project that could generate a high level of communal ownership, empower people to reflect on and shape their own communities, and build trust as a basis of collaboration.

The philosophy informing this approach holds that solutions to community problems must start with the affected people and that strategies can only work if the locals' support is guaranteed. A defining and novel feature of the project in regards to community development methodology was that Pitjantjatjara culture and language largely informed the way people were working and interacting with each other. This generated a groundswell of support and engagement in the communities. By emphasising the Pitjantjatjara language in that way, the objective of language maintenance was organically foregrounded while at the same time creating a new space for genuine intercultural collaboration.

This powerful process allowed for learning opportunities on various levels, with not only young people broadening their linguistic repertoire, but also non-Indigenous workers being encouraged to adapt flexibly to the foreign cultural setting, and reflect on the practice of cultural diversity. This meant that all participants were required to navigate the pitfalls of intercultural exchange. Thus, not only did the cultural artefacts created over the course of the project (film, music, photography, digital media and theatre) reflect Pitjantjatjara culture, but the process of creation itself was steeped in Indigenous values. It was this important principle that generated the most important legacy of the project, that is, people connecting with their culture in a new way, building strong identities, and asserting themselves flexibly and successfully in a multicultural context.

The phrase 'ngapartji ngapartji' itself is informing. Glossed as 'I give you something. You give me something', it denotes a reciprocal exchange of gifts that creates a social framework of mutual obligations. In contrast to Western ideas of trade, here the defining element of exchange is not the material value of the objects and services traded, but the fact that trading itself establishes bonds that link people to each other – socially, emotionally and spiritually. Consequently, it is deferral of immediate gratification, not a quid pro quo situation that is sought. Embracing such cultural values had a range of repercussions for the design of the project and required a lot of negotiation and learning from artists and participants.

At the heart of the issues people repeatedly identified in the consultations between community and Big hART lay two causes. First, the alienation between generations, and second, the imminent loss of the Pitjantjatjara language and culture. Since a culture depends on the language it has grown from and evolved with, the power to transmit and preserve that same culture lies with the speakers of that language. Arising from the historical and cultural background as outlined above, loss of traditional culture has been rampant over the years and the number of fluent Pitjantjatjara speakers, especially among the young, has been dwindling.

Milyika (Allison) Carroll voiced her concern to a Big hART artist when she stated:

> ***'These days children do not understand complex words. These days they are only speaking really basic Pitjantjatjara.' The issue of language loss is not confined to the APY Lands, but is a sad feature of most Indigenous communities with Australia, which are experiencing the world's most rapid loss of Indigenous languages since the onset of colonisation."***

As the project's touchstone, language maintenance served as a social glue for the local communities in need of a boost in intergenerational relations, between old people who are full of cultural knowledge but marked by the colonial wounds, and a young generation not able to relate to this heritage and aggressively striving for a place in a Western world; a world that keeps failing to accommodate them as productive citizens.

One of the challenges for the Big hART workers and community members was to find a suitable framework that would capture the imagination of both old and young, and bring them together in a meaningful exchange. The development of a main stage theatre production taking place in interaction with the remote South Australian community of Ernabella provided a first possible field of interaction. To allow for a more targeted approach to language maintenance, an integrated online language course based on short film clips was developed.

The technological aspect and fun of creating film and digital media appealed to a large number of young people whilst elders were able to pass on language and cultural knowledge in a setting which fostered respect for their wealth of experience. In a series of pilot workshops, artists aligned with Big hART developed six short film clips on country with a group of youngsters from town camps[2] and remote communities, while elders were providing and advising on the content of the language lessons. Over the course of the project, this kind of working environment fostered mutual learning that allowed participants to experience themselves and others as creative and productive co-workers as well as helping reduce the alienation between the generations. The tangible outcome in the form of film clips put Pitjantjatjara culture on the map of communal life again and was received by the wider community with great vigour.

The two pillars of the project, the Pitjantjatjara language course and the performance piece, kept informing each other throughout the project in order to generate the strongest possible impact towards achieving the project's goals. As a result, the theatre show incorporated many elements of Pitjantjatjara language teaching. This hybrid structure, along with the alacrity and generosity with which the story was offered to non-Indigenous audiences, affected many of its viewers deeply. The power of this emotional connection also meant that, in turn, the interest of several festival directors was sparked. These directors not only supported the presentation of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* in various venues because of its high production values and aesthetics, but also because it embodied a radically new approach to reconciliation within the Australian nation. The increasingly high public profile of the show constituted a vital asset to the project as it resulted in more people showing an active interest in the project (participants, online learners as well as future partners and staff), and enhanced media coverage.

In September 2004 a first official showing of a pilot language lesson produced by Kelly as a creative producer in Coober Pedy was a huge success and motivated more people to join the then budding project. In blocks of three months, workshops were held on country with youth from town camps[2] and remote communities, resulting in a plethora of film material that was written, planned, created and edited by young people from the age of 5 to 18. Many of the films were both uploaded onto the ninti website (launched in April 2006) and published on DVD compilations, which were distributed by the

2. Town camps are communities of mostly Indigenous people situated within or adjacent to an urban area. These camps are usually poorly serviced by authorities, and are often used by people moving between remote and urban centres in order to access health care and other services.



young people across their communities. Big hART further assisted these young people to organise community film nights that generated publicity and brought the generations together in informal ways that helped foster reconnection of communal ties.

Especial care was taken by Big hART to afford these young people as much exposure for their artworks as possible, to enhance the experience of appreciation and to promote communication and reflection. For example, a film created by a girl from Docker River exploring the damaging effects of petrol sniffing was screened at the Remote Film Fest 07 in Alice Springs as well as at a media conference in Sydney. Participants presented the project and their works at conferences and festivals on a regular basis, while a strong media strategy ensured regular coverage on local and national level.

As Big hART aspires to offer a broad range of opportunities in the arts, workshops were also conducted in other disciplines such as dance, photography, digital storytelling and music. As music has a strong history in the APY Lands, these workshops were especially popular with participant numbers ranging from 50 to 100+ each time. Activities included song writing, performing, voice training, recording and sampling. As well as bringing artists to remote communities to conduct those workshops, Big hART also partnered with the record label Tracks of the Desert to record and publish project material, e.g. the *Ngurakutu Ara* CD in Pukatja with proceeds going towards purchasing musical equipment for the community.

All songs and other materials recorded in the project have been made available to the communities by way of portable storage media and by uploading material onto publicly accessible computers. In addition, Big hART has worked closely with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy and Research of the Australian National University (ANU) which published project material online on its 'Youth Learning' page [3].

This collaboration was greatly assisted by the work of ANU researchers Dr Inge Kral and Jerry Schwab who advised on the literacy elements of the project and conducted their three-year study *'Lifespan Learning and Literacy in Remote Indigenous Communities 2007–10'* in conjunction with the project. Improvement

3. http://caepr.anu.edu.au/projects/Youth-and-Learning

of literacy in both Pitjantjatjara and English was a strong element of the project, but was not especially foregrounded in the workshops themselves.

As many participants had had negative experiences with formal education settings and as shame is a strong inhibitor to participation in Indigenous communities, literacy was playfully integrated into the general workshop activities and in this way project participants were 'trained on the job'. This form of cultural learning tied in with the asset-based approach Big hART adopted for the project in that the task focus was laid on the story while literacy skills were imparted by way of accessing this story and supporting the individuals in translating it into art. The benefits of this method were clearly measurable in the comparative assessments made at different stages in the project.

The partnership with leading experts on literacy and language development (both on the ground and across Australia) provided an ideal starting point for the development of the language policy strategy that formed one part of the project's legacy. With the successful launch of the project, over 300 subscribers, numerous clicks to the online language course and extensive publicity, Big hART was in a strong position to push for a change in federal language policy. Together with representatives of other organisations in the field of Indigenous language maintenance, Alex Kelly succeeded in lobbying politicians to start work on an action plan designed to combat language loss across Australia. This eventually prompted the release of the Commonwealth government's strategy paper *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* in August 2009.

Alongside the focus on creative workshops, website development and literacy, the creation of the second main stage theatre production was a constant tier of the project. This production proved to be extremely successful and generated immense interest in the project well beyond the perimeters of stakeholders in Indigenous affairs. The story about the Jamieson family remained a strong element of this show. However, the project made this particular story universal by positioning it in the larger cultural context of the sufferings of various groups affected by World War II bombings (including British soldiers and Japanese civilians). In this way, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* gently invited audiences each night to consider issues of reconciliation and healing within the Australian nation. As a catalyst, the show incorporated playful, participatory language lessons, directing attention to the endangered status of Australia's languages and most people's ignorance of them.



Creative developments were organised in the remote community of Ernabella to give people the chance to observe working processes and participate in various capacities on and off stage. Taking on roles as performers or assisting technicians greatly expanded participants' professional and personal skills. This form of involvement was then accredited and acknowledged by an invitation to join the multiple tours of the production to national festivals as paid members of the performance/production team. The recognition of participants' contributions boosted their confidence, strengthened intergenerational relations, broadened horizons and opened up career paths that were formerly deemed unattainable by most participants. The national recognition and the sense that audiences were eager and desperate to know and understand more about Indigenous culture and history was a very important, albeit at times tiring and bewildering, experience for the cast members.

The stage production *Ngapartji Ngapartji* received broad critical acclaim, was seen by over 30,000 people, won several awards and was subject to substantial media coverage. However, the most significant moment in the play's production history remains, for most cast and crew, the show's involvement in the sixtieth anniversary of Ernabella Arts in September 2008. After long sojourns into various parts of Australia, the show was brought back to its country of origin and the people it represented, and subjected to the community's scrutiny. The adventurous endeavour to stage a show designed for main stage venues in an open-air creek bed setting and the negotiation processes with community elders regarding cultural protocols are the subjects of the ABC-funded documentary *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji*, broadcast nationally in June 2010.

The documentary forms part of a memory basket that Big hART created in collaboration with project participants documenting achievements, outcomes and challenges encountered over the years. Other physical legacies of the project include the spin-off performance *Nyuntu Ngali*, workshopped in Ernabella in early 2009 before completing seasons at the Adelaide Festival Theatre (November 2009), the Australian Performing Arts Market (February 2010) and the Sydney Theatre Company (May 2010).

As a further project outcome, Big hART's *Namatjira* project was also incepted during *Ngapartji Ngapartji*'s lifetime as Elton Wirri (artist and project participant) provided the link to the Hermannsburg community – now recognised as the home of an important Aboriginal art movement – and helped promote Big

hART as a company of credence among elders. To keep the focus on Indigenous language maintenance at the forefront of federal policy decisions, the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* stage production was revived on a smaller scale for a winter season at the Canberra Theatre Centre in July 2012.

It was the non-physical legacies of the project, however, that constitute its most significant achievements. These achievements include a tangible reinvigoration of Indigenous culture and Pitjantjatjara language across the APY Lands, strengthened community ties, the formation of strong affirmative identities among local people, and bringing to Australian eyes a 'good news story' from a place habitually framed as dismal and depressing.

*"Educate a boy, and you educate an individual. Educate a girl, and you educate a community."*

**ADELAIDE HOODLESS**

*"Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."*

**NEIL POSTMAN**

*"Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less."*

**SUSAN B. ANTHONY**



# CASE STUDY TWO: LUCKY

*We meet no ordinary people in our lives*

**C.S. LEWIS**

## PROJECT SUMMARY

*LUCKY* was an innovative intergenerational crime prevention and community development project conducted by Big hART on the North West coast of Tasmania which had its beginnings in 2005 and concluded in 2009. Several legacy projects have extended the project's scope well beyond the official funding period of 2006–2009. It has been deemed very successful by participants, evaluating bodies, critics and audiences alike and was lauded for its innovative arts-based approach to community development.

Lucky was made up of three interlinked projects which all focused strongly on the recording and sharing of oral histories: *Radio Holiday*, *Drive In Holiday*, *This is Living* and *DRIVE*. The project targeted four marginalised groups that most cultural workers have found hard to engage: struggling teenage mothers and their children, elderly people living in isolated circumstances, and young men at risk of embarking on harmful trajectories. These groups entered the project at different stages: in 2006 young and isolated teenage mothers and their children were engaged in early childhood and creative workshops, continuing Big hART's pilot projects *Radio Holiday* and *Drive In Holiday* by cross-collaborating with shack communities.[4]

This three-generational exchange was widened in 2007 to include elderly people who lived in rural and remote areas. The young mothers interviewed and photographed the elderly participants, and employed their new creative skills to shape the enthralling life stories into intricate mirrors of the Tasmanian community. Their work formed the basis of a major stage performance This is Living which also enlisted the support of a group of teenage skaters from Burnie which had been loosely linked to Big hART through lobbying for a new public skate park.

4. A shack community is one that has grown informally over time, often loosely based on remote or inaccessible fishing spots and without any formal approvals or infrastructure.

All three groups worked closely and with great success on this production that addressed issues of isolation, ageing populations, crime, fear of crime and alienation between the generations, but at the same time represented in its fabric a way to overcome and re-imagine these paralysing complexities. Binding the group of young men closer into the project, the third official year of *LUCKY* fully developed the new strand *DRIVE* which inquired into the many recorded cases of 'autocides' – single-vehicle, single-driver fatal crashes – on Tasmanian roads. Young men associated with this hazardous practice and deemed at risk by community workers, engaged in digital media workshops and produced an acclaimed in-depth documentary revealing the toll every single one of these needless deaths has on families, friends, service providers and the community at large.

At its core, *LUCKY* addressed issues of isolation and disengagement from community. Big hART successfully set out to assist participants to give shape and voice to their own stories, to divert them from criminal trajectories, to develop new skills to re-imagine alternative pathways and to (re)connect with each other and the community at large. A strong media strategy ensured that the project's reach exceeded its immediate audience and opened up possibilities for participants' continued evolution in the arts sector, while at the same time raising awareness of issues like the changing nature of land use (*Radio Holiday, Drive In Holiday*), the ageing population (*This is Living)* and the harmful trajectories some young men are committing themselves to in remote areas *(DRIVE)*. A major legacy of the project is a model for community development based on creative arts practice which Big hART continues to make widely available to the public.

The project received its main funding from the Commonwealth Government's Attorney General's Crime Prevention Program, as well as complementary grants from the Department of Transport and Regional Services, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Australia Council for the Arts and several foundations.

## BACKGROUND TO LUCKY

Tasmania is one of Australia's smallest and economically weakest states. With Bass Strait isolating it from the mainland, its soils and natural resources beautiful but only allowing for limited utilisation, and its scarce and ageing population hardly forming a sustainable local market, the state has a long history of economic hardship and ensuing social problems.



In 1992/93 the North West coast town of Burnie experienced additional upheaval as the long-established local paper mill 'The Pulp' was sold and radically downsized its personnel after plunges in profit margins and repeated industrial disputes. The town's already high unemployment rate subsequently soared dramatically and many people found themselves suddenly relegated to the very margins of society. Frustration and general disengagement were strong follow-on effects of these events and prompted local artists to establish Big hART in order to counteract the loss of community cohesion. The overriding objective has since been to model new approaches for rebuilding and sustaining the social and economic potential in regional and remote communities under threat from poverty by raising the quality of life through artistic practice. Although quickly embracing the national landscape, the company has since retained a strong presence in Tasmania, conducting projects on a regular basis with people who experience disadvantage and trauma at the fringes of society.

The *LUCKY* project was part of this continuing presence and encompassed five years' work, responding to social developments on the North West coast of Tasmania. Dramatic changes among local youth, with soaring rates of suicide, drug abuse, reckless and violent behaviour and an increasing number of teenage pregnancies, painted a distressing picture for the region's future. Big hART addressed those issues with the conviction that young people choose their pastimes according to the choices and opportunities they are given, with the logical conclusion that an improved, vibrant living environment will ultimately alter adopted trajectories and result in a healthier community that enjoys a higher quality of life.

## THE PROJECT

Big hART took a first step towards creating such an environment by setting up a base in a disused marine shed on the outskirts of Burnie Harbour and turning it into the 'Creative Living Centre' – the company's continuous headquarters and major workshop space for the duration of the project. Rather than using council amenities, the shed allowed for a fresh beginning, providing a blank space for the young target groups that they could make their own. The open plan areas allowed accommodation of the recently exiled skate community who were on the lookout for new premises after Burnie City Council closed the public park in favour of auspicious investment plans. Big hART staff members assisted the teenagers in

designing and building an interim park while also providing guidance on lobbying and communication strategies for the fight to win back a public park.

The degree of generosity and acceptance that Big hART showed in this partnership resulted in a positive image for the company among the young target groups, nurturing curiosity and helping to draw in curious participants for the project. Teaming up with local service providers like Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation, No 13 Youth Centre, Community Corrections and Job Net Burnie also directed staff towards young people whom they believed would benefit from participation in the project. These prospective participants all came equipped with an array of social and personal problems which had severely affected their self-esteem and had hindered their productive involvement in the community, at times even leading them to criminal trajectories. Big hART set out to provide these teenagers with opportunities for personal and social development by way of enhancing community and civic participation, through offering training and education in the arts and arts management, as well as facilitating employment where possible.

A key defining factor in Big hART's work on *LUCKY* was that young people were given the opportunity to rise to occasions, being awarded responsibility in spite of their troubled records, thereby giving them the chance to achieve without the burden of a past dragging them down in the esteem of their co-workers.

## RADIO HOLIDAY/DRIVE IN HOLIDAY

In the project's first stage, Big hART provided support for isolated young single mothers and their children by offering workshops in early childhood education in which the mothers were able to learn about all aspects of the healthy development of their children. There was a major focus on facilitated play sessions in which creativity, trust and bonding between the generations was actively aided. In the belief that healthy families start with strong and self-supportive parents, Big hART ensured that the teenagers found a supportive environment in order to develop social and professional skills which form the base for strong choices regarding parenting, education and economic participation.

Jemma, one of the regularly participating mothers, testified that this approach enabled participants to redefine their identities when she remarked to an outsider:



> ***"They treated us like equals and looked past all that other 'stuff' [that everyone notices]."***

Finding acceptance and genuine interest in their situation and wellbeing among the Big hART crew gave the mothers a feeling of visibility, which they had lacked before.

This project provided these young mums with purpose, diversion from harmful everyday routines, and with understanding company that buffeted negative energy – all positive effects that already in themselves helped create a better living environment for the mothers and the people surrounding them. 28 young mothers took part in the early workshops which covered artistic fields like movement and drama, photography and portraiture, textile design, sewing and jewellery making, song writing and sound recording; as well as practical guidance in nutrition, cooking with and for children, early childhood resilience and games.

In order to increase bonding and trust between the young mothers and their children Big hART took care to offer a wide variety of playful, fun activities that promoted close interaction between the families: toy making, sculpture slams, creating family histories, painting, cartooning, print-making, dancing, lullaby writing and storytelling sessions. The art of play was at the centre of these activities, fostering the development of imagination and resilience in participants and preparing them to engage in widening social circles. Communication skills aiding professional development were additionally focused on in separate sessions including areas like public speaking, voice training and interviewing techniques.

The mothers were further given the opportunity to apply their new skills directly by joining Big hART artists and other teenagers who were working on the Radio Holiday project with shack communities across the northwest and west coasts of Tasmania. Linking the mothers in artistic practice with a social group that shared similar experiences of alienation on the outskirts of society quickly yielded a lively dialogue from which sprang a compelling array of oral history accounts that captured a way of life under threat by the island's changing use of its public lands. The mothers and other marginalised teenagers conducted interviews with 150 'shackies' from five communities and assisted Big hART artists to create a series of live 'radio play' installations, which were presented to great acclaim at the Ten Days on the Island Festival in 2005.

To re-create the unique and rugged atmosphere of the shack communities, Big hART and participants framed the presentation with visual arts installations mounted in six vintage touring caravans from the 1960s and 70s – each catering to different themes and styles – housing artworks, poems, photos, films and stories, while also performing live music and sound effects from the community. Apart from touring the island as part of the annual festival, the show also played in the communities themselves and was broadcast nationally on ABC before featuring in Federation Square as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival in 2006.

The objective for the artistic output of *Radio Holiday* was to pilot the making and branding of a tourism product which would attract people to remote Tasmanian communities, thereby enabling these communities to sustain their idiosyncratic lifestyle in the breathtaking Tasmanian scenery in the face of the ever-resurfacing commercial investment plans. Due to its success both in process and outcome, Big hART ensured that the constructive connection between the two target groups was reinforced in a second working phase which put a stronger focus on the intergenerational aspect of the joint work and sought to create a more empathetic understanding of the needs and struggles of the groups involved. In this subsequent phase, interviews continued, this time in a more dialogical format with some of the 15 mothers assisting with the making of five 15-minute films. These films included, among others, high-profile national film and TV stars, and later played to packed audiences as part of the touring circuit of the 2007 Ten Days on the Island Festival.

Aside from the deepening connection between the young mothers and the 'shackies', *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday* also provided social and professional engagement for other struggling teenagers. For example, it greatly aided Bruce, a young man suffering from autism spectrum disorder and greatly at odds with formal education settings, to discover for the first time in the arts a social space that was capable of accommodating his needs. In an intensive mentoring process he sponged up knowledge about editing film and audio as well as producing his own music which he then performed as part of the project's team at the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts.

The beauty of Bruce's story and development shone in his own words when he stated:



> *"I now have other goals in my life, I want the world to know me not as a stupid person, but as a unique person who is capable of doing things they aren't capable of doing. I have a lot of perspective on life. I have high expectations of myself. I want to be known as someone who is capable of doing a range of different things."*

Apart from the immaterial successes of *LUCKY* (stronger bonding between families and raising the teenagers' self-esteem and respect), participants generated a range of products which testified to their active involvement in the project, including the magazine *Scream Zine*, a website and blog, and silver 'pasta' jewellery that the young mothers presented in 2009 to the Tasmanian Premier and Cabinet in a bid to draw attention to the necessity and value of good service provision for the state's fragile families. Along with this precious tangible token of the dormant potential that can be unlocked within the next generation, the mothers entrusted federal Justice Minister Senator Chris Ellison at a panel discussion on crime prevention, with a policy document that outlined their ideas for a social policy reform. The fact that the mothers had been capable of drafting such a document and of presenting it with such gracefulness in a high-profile context testifies to the outstanding success of this first year of the *LUCKY* project.

Already in those early stages, Big hART took care to establish a broad base for the project's sustainable outcomes by setting up and maintaining strong networks with local governments, councils and service providers, inviting them into the project and keeping them up to date with the project's progression. This bond ensured that participants gained a positive profile not only with their immediate audiences, but also with local bodies and organisations, which in some cases led to employment opportunities for the teenagers. A community organisation worker expressed her bafflement at the rapid change she saw in the teenagers after a relatively short time of working with Big hART:

> *"When I first met with many of these young women the subject matter of their conversations was going out and getting pissed and doing other stuff that just crushed your hopes for them … now I see them and they talk about going to music festivals, arts exhibitions and their latest show. These are the most far-fetched changes in aspirations and life worlds you could imagine."*

The overriding success of Big hART's approach is also reflected in numbers. None of the constantly involved mothers re-offended, and 80 per cent of participants either joined the workforce or enrolled in further education while many also joined other service-related groups and activities that aided in overcoming the isolation which had previously driven them towards harmful trajectories.

## THIS IS LIVING

In 2007, the second year of the main funding period, Big hART expanded the intergenerational focus of the *LUCKY* project and established contact with a range of elderly persons who lived in regional, rural and remote parts of Tasmania. Members of this group had expressed a feeling of disconnection from the general community which had led to pronounced feelings of vulnerability and fear of becoming the victims of crime.

The idea to team them up with the young mothers in order to record their life stories was based on two underlying assumptions: first, that the direct contact between the two groups (including assumed perpetrators), would reduce the diffuse fear of the elderly, and second, that this intergenerational interaction would open lines of communication between the groups, and create a better understanding of the needs and struggles facing the other group.

Consequently, Big hART staff arranged meetings in five nursing homes, several seniors' groups and in the houses of some of the elderly, taking the young mothers out of their usual environment in order to meet their new collaborators. In interview and photography sessions facilitated by the young mothers, over one hundred elderly people relived their most joyous, fearful, rewarding and defining moments, capturing the breadth of lives lived to the full.

The effect these meetings had on the teenagers was profound, reversing long-held stereotypes and creating a tentative bond between the generations. One young woman described the effects these workshops had on her:

> *"I used to think that old people smelt bad … people think they are just waiting to die. Now I know that they are lovely people with so much to tell … they're just like young people wanting to get out there. They have so much respect. Now I can't wait to be old."*



After postproduction of the interviews was finished, the teenagers mounted a photographic exhibition in the Burnie Nursing Home which attracted much interest from the local community. Some of the pictures were published in the regional newspaper which made the fledgling artists and their subjects immensely proud. The profile generated from this also brought interested people in from the community for other reasons than purely the duty of care; this interest, in turn, alleviated the feelings of isolation many of the elderly had previously expressed.

Nursing home staff were very pleased with the impact the project had on their residents as they seemed to improve their mental capacities through recounting their most cherished memories and also became much more energetic and lively through the creative processes. More specifically, 29 of the elderly joined in the photography workshops to learn a new craft, 11 formed a mentoring group for the young mothers, and 14 took part in oral history workshops.

The main output of this second stage of the project was the stage production This is Living which saw 144 elderly people, 40 young women and 30 young men forming Tasmania's largest theatre company to explore the issue of quality of life in an ageing population. The press release for the show described it as:

> *"...a dark comedy, [which] weaves together the complexities of life and love with local histories of intimacy, photographic memorabilia, haunting music, a layered text and the kinetic art of skateboarding."*

The young mothers' role in the project started to shift at this stage from creating artistic output to mentoring the other participants on creative processes, as well as assisting in the production and presentation of the show. The interviews from the collaboration between the young mothers and the elderly served as stepping-stones to model a story of love, loss and humour onto the stage. This story was further amplified in its local grounding by the use of archival material supplied by the elderly people who performed as a chorus on stage along with three professional actors and a group of skateboarders.

The skateboarders' involvement grew from first being drawn into the project through a range of IT workshops in the marine shed, focusing on the technical aspects of mounting a theatre show. As the ideas for the stage production matured, a kinetic stage design was agreed to be a suitable backdrop for the show. Different ideas were played out and in the end the show was framed by

local boys from the age of 12 to 19 crisscrossing the stage on their skateboards, performing elaborate tricks on the way and presenting skating as a complex art form. This particular aesthetic disrupted the widespread assumption that it was a dangerous and damaging pastime for rowdy and disrespectful kids. The focus, precision, discipline and cooperation necessary from all participants for the successful performance was strongly appreciated by the involved audiences who started to give credit to the locally known 'rogues' for their skills rather than their deficiencies, which had previously been the focus.

The media strategy followed by Big hART paid off well with an overall 31 media stories appearing in local and state newspapers and on the web, as well as broadcasts on ABC local and national radio. Here again, the skateboarders assisted the profile of the show by tying in the promotion of the show with their successful lobbying efforts for their new public skate park, which yielded features on Triple J local radio and other commercial radio stations for the Luckyproject.

This is Living had its premiere in 2007 at the Burnie Civic Centre as part of the Burnie Shines Festival. An audience of 400 local people enjoyed four performances, including some of the elderly people who had contributed material to the show, but who had chosen not to take a further role in the production.

Despite the strenuous voyage and hurdles that these elder participants were faced with (bad acoustics and access problems), seeing their perspective on life reflected on a big stage imbued them with great pride and joy. The show was an acknowledged success, winning the Burnie City Council Award for 'Event of the Year'. The performance then went on to perform at the Senior Citizens Week, at Wynard High School and at the Waratah Wynard Council AGM before heading off on a regional tour of Tasmania. This tour was also accompanied by a professionally designed exhibition of the portraits shown in aged care facilities, council buildings and the Wynard High School.

The overwhelmingly positive reviews of the show had a huge effect on the self-respect, confidence and self-esteem of many of the participants who saw their socio-cultural capital enhanced by something that they had dedicated themselves to.

To raise public awareness of the issues of the ageing population and their political and social repercussions, Big hART also organised a discussion panel



that brought local politicians, nursing home residents and project participants together while also ensuring that the project was presented at the annual Local Government Association managers conference. In 2008, the show underwent a further development and was invited by the Ten Days on the Island Festival in 2009 to tour the state. Funding for this tour was leveraged from the Tasmanian State Government, the Tasmanian Community Fund, the Australia Council and Tasmanian Regional Arts.

## DRIVE

Drawing young men considered to be 'at risk' into the project became a major objective throughout 2007. With the skaters joining *This is Living*, an early base of participation was established that continued to widen over the course of the year. With multimedia workshops taking place in the marine shed and the interim skate park on site, a lot of contacts evolved organically while some referrals also came from peers and local service providers that worked closely with Big hART.

As some of the skaters were already working on a film that portrayed the local skate scene by documenting the lobbying process for the new council skate park, there was a general sentiment that work on a second film should engage with a different aspect of Tasmanian youth culture. A consensus was found in the courageous decision to explore the issues of male adolescence in remote areas and the high rate of 'autocides'[5] on Tasmanian roads.

A core group of 36 young men spent the third year of the *LUCKY* project producing a 55-minute experimental documentary and a website with supplementary reference material and 69 additional short clips. The films investigated the fine line between healthy risk taking and the dangerous behaviour that many of the participants were enacting on a daily basis while growing up in an area offering only a very limited range of inspiring pastimes.

The proposal for this third phase of the *LUCKY* project was received with great interest by local and state sources who supplied additional funds for the film production. Ninety six young men, all residents of Tasmania's North West coast intricately linked to the issue of road trauma, took part in 257 task-focused workshops which imparted skills in sound recording, film making, interviewing, storytelling and digital media production. These workshops were conducted by

5. Autocide is young men self-harming in single-occupant motor vehicle smashes.

a wide range of artists, including film makers, skaters, beat boxers, sound artists, designers, illustrators, dancers and musicians who all added their own signature to the colourful mix that informed the final outcomes of the project's last phase.

In order to shed light on the impact the deaths of their friends had on their community and to bring their stories to the big screen, the young men interviewed over one hundred community members who had been affected by road trauma. The interviewees included mothers, police officers, counsellors, other young men, car manufacturers, emergency officers and five families who generously opened up about the turmoil they had gone through after having lost someone to suicide.

These encounters had a profound effect on the young men and challenged them to consider the wider repercussions of their own behaviour. Reflecting on issues of identity and rites of passage, many participants gained a greater sense of self and the responsibility they would have to take on as adults. The final cut of the film was launched in the second half of 2008 in Burnie to an audience of over 100 people of all ages. The film was then shown in several local screenings to an audience comprising the young men's peers, school children and members of the local communities in rural and remote North West Tasmania. Following 12 high-profile promotional events, it was distributed nationally, shown at festivals – including Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney film festivals – and broadcast on ABC TV, receiving outstanding feedback and critical acclaim.

On the policy level, Big hART used the presentation of the film to set conversations in motion with educational departments, policy makers, police, emergency services, health services and mental health services in a bid to develop early response patterns that would help young men at risk to deflect from their trajectories.

A special merit that made *DRIVE* yet another successful part of the *LUCKY* project was that it challenged the young men to be seen and heard, actively encouraging them to reflect on their trajectories, and to make strong choices about their futures. That many benefited from their involvement with Big hART was clearly visible in the wrap-up of the project which saw thirteen young men who had formerly been at the brink of dropping out of the educational system strongly recommitting themselves; five participants returning to school; two enrolling in the army; eleven gaining casual employment in the media sector and some securing one-off employment with partnering agencies and councils.

In addition, some of the young men remained in close contact with the Big hART team and acted as regular mentors to high school students in the legacy project *Love Zombies*. This project, together with partner events like *Mad Month of Making*, helped to invigorate the cultural landscape of remote parts of the North West coast of Tasmania even after Big hART's exit-strategy for *LUCKY* had been completed.

*"A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess."*

**A PHILIP RANDOLPH**

*"The strange power of art is sometimes it can show that what people have in common is more urgent than what differentiates them. It seems to me it's something that theatre can do, but it's rare; it's very rare."*

**JOHN BERGER**



# CASE STUDY THREE: GOLD

*"I had a terrible education. I attended a school for emotionally disturbed teachers."*

**WOODY ALLEN**

## PROJECT SUMMARY

*GOLD* was a crime prevention and community development project conducted by Big hART in Griffith (New South Wales) and across the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) – Australia's largest inland river system – that ran from 2006 to 2009. The project targeted two marginalised groups: young people outside mainstream education from Griffith and farming families from rural communities across the MDB severely affected by Australia's worst drought on record. *GOLD* addressed issues of climate change and water management and their impact on life in rural areas. It did so by pursuing a layered approach. In the first stage of the project, young people were engaged in task-focused creative workshops building and strengthening skills in digital media, communication and filmmaking.

Participants then employed these skills in the second stage of the project to create portraits of the farming families and their daily struggle for financial, emotional and spiritual survival. The creative encounters between the target groups helped alleviate feelings of isolation and alienation, while at the same time reducing negative stereotypes on both sides. A strong media strategy ensured that the narratives gathered in the project were continuously made accessible to the greater (and national) community in the form of media reports, presentations, online content on the project's website and Gold-Crop – a major travelling exhibition and installation.

The project met its three major objectives, all of which helped to divert young people at risk from criminal trajectories: (i) developing literacy as well as other personal and professional skills; (ii) re-engaging the farming families with their

communities; and (iii) taking drought experiences back to the broader [and national] community in order to lend a human face to the discourse on climate change and water management in Australia.

Even though these achievements were acknowledged by stakeholders and audiences alike, the project is deemed by some to have fallen short of its potential. The major criticism levelled at the project was its failure to engage in broader ways with Griffith community stakeholders. Big hART's decision to explore mental health issues among farming families in the MDB as part of the creative work created further unease with some local factions, a sentiment that contributed to a heated debate about Big hART's role in the aftermath of a farmer's suicide, which concentrated on issues of ethical media practices and responsible conflict management.

The project received funding from federal and state government initiatives directed to the arts, education and community development as well as from the Westpac foundation.

## BACKGROUND TO GOLD

The Murray-Darling River Basin covers a region of over one million square kilometres. Communities involved in the project were located in Hillston, Rand, Boree Creek, Talgarno, Trundle, Mildura, Wentworth, Nangiloc, Taralga Springs, Stanthorpe and Goondiwindi as well as the regional town of Griffith. Therefore,the project covered a substantial area of the MDB, stretching from southern Queensland to western New South Wales into Victoria and all the way to the South Australian border. The MDB is Australia's most important agricultural region as it supplies 70 per cent of all water used for irrigation, making it Australia's premier 'food bowl'.

The turn of the century marked a shift in weather patterns unknown to the region since the start of recording in 1891. Due to lack of rainfall, the 20 major rivers crossing the area, including the continent's longest rivers – the Darling, the Murray and the Murrumbidgee – were carrying ever less water which resulted in a drought that lasted over ten years and affected the whole basin. The ecological impact on the delicate ecosystems has been vastly destructive and has been felt all over the region. Among the many issues facing the area in drought, failing harvests especially contributed to a spiral of community corrosion. As Wright describes, failing harvests and extreme weather conditions result in

> *[A] commensurate reduction in income and economic security, gaps in services widen, employment opportunities contract, access to and experiences of education diminish, physical and mental health deteriorates, stress increases, social cohesion weakens, and hope fails. In short, drought diminishes capacity and the human ability to thrive. It is [in] this context that social interaction becomes more easily brutalised and relationships brittle and fragmented which, research proved, was the case among the MDB farming communities.*
>
> *(Wright, 2011a, p. 5)*

Consequently, the initial economic ramifications of the drought soon affected the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the people in the area, which found expression in increased criminal and (self-) harmful behaviour such as domestic violence, depression and substance abuse.

Big hART's *GOLD* project set out to address the social dimension of this ecological disaster by targeting people who have been relegated to the margins of their communities by being subject to the previously mentioned dynamic. The first stage of the project focused on young people who had been engaged in anti-social behaviour in the regional centre of Griffith in western New South Wales, and who were either already outside the formal education system or in danger of dropping out very soon. These teenagers came from problematic social backgrounds that encumbered their relationship to the community at large – a circumstance further exacerbated by the diminishing resources allocated to education and sinking employment prospects.

Although not yet recorded in the judicial system, these teenagers were subject to extensive negative local media coverage and deemed at risk of committing to harmful trajectories. In a country town environment in which the economic and social base had been subject to fast-paced change, but values and attitudes were still being modelled on conservative beliefs of stability and a 'fair go' for everyone diligent and ambitious enough, these young people expressed a strong sense of alienation and isolation from the mainstream community.

The same sentiment of abandonment was expressed by the rural farming families who were among the ones hardest hit by the drought. With their financial future in jeopardy, water allocation dividing the farming communities, and the political debate largely focusing on statistics and abstract models, the families suddenly found themselves isolated in the midst of a fiery debate that seemed to have forgotten about its human dimension. One farmer poignantly expressed this sentiment when he exclaimed: 'Remember us? We grow your food.'

Apart from increasing the urban–regional divide in the minds of the affected farmers and generating negative assessments of townspeople, the frustration progressively vented in the form of violence, substance abuse and mental health issues within the private family circles.

## THE PROJECT

As a company committed to promoting social justice, Big hART works on the premise that inclusive social structures depend on functioning ecological systems in order to thrive. Climate change and resulting water shortages threaten this balance on an international, long-term scale. The idea to create a project addressing those issues, therefore, evolved organically from the company's mission statement.

In 2003 Big hART started researching the international commodification of water as the future's most precious resource and the associated challenges for Australia. Conversations were begun in different forums that helped to shape the focus of the future project. In 2004 members of the Griffith City Council followed up on the ideas raised and encouraged Big hART to conduct the prospective project in their town.

Upon being granted funding under the Attorney General's *National Crime Prevention Program* and receiving additional grants from the Australia Council for the Arts and the Westpac Foundation, the project officially launched in July 2006. Chris Saunders, creative producer of Big hART's then recently completed, acclaimed Northcott Narratives project in Sydney, joined the team and began to establish contacts with local service providers and institutions. However, an early setback was caused by a media report that disclosed the amount of funding Big hART was able to secure for its fledgling project. In a town that struggled to maintain its cultural infrastructure many local arts and social workers felt uneasy about an 'outsider' company taking up what was perceived locally to be such a large part of available resources.

This sentiment continued to be a strong undercurrent in the respective communities of Griffith throughout the project and prevented some partnerships from evolving while indirectly informing others. The effects of this negative perception were partly mitigated by the establishment of a 'reference group' in Griffith comprising representatives of six local and national service providers which met regularly to advise on the project's strategies and networking possibilities. Over the course of the project, Big hART was consequently able to form partnerships with 62 organisations and institutions, 19 of which committed in a formal way to support the project, with 28 additional individual supporters coming on board.

Despite the fragile connection with established local stakeholders, service providers in Griffith referred a total of 43 young people who showed an active interest in the project. 22 of those formed a core group that stayed involved throughout the three years. Participants were generally between 15 and 19 years old and had attracted the attention of social workers because of their repeated anti- social behaviour (drug abuse and dealing, loitering and minor cases of assault), and clearly struggled with continuous involvement in formal education.

The project employed an early intervention strategy to keep those teenagers out of the judicial system by distracting them from their adopted trajectories, and involving them in informal educational settings which were designed to foster social and professional skills. These settings involved task-focused creative workshops throughout the project that used the teenagers' interest in music, digital media, film and photography to impart practical skills, while also developing social competencies such as communication skills, empathy and discipline.

All in all over 300 creative workshops were conducted from 2006 to 2009 yielding an enormous amount of material, i.e. 33 short films, 22 recorded songs, 1500 curated photographs, 60 recorded interviews comprising 95 hours of exchange between the participants of the project, and 39 stories published online on the project's interactive website.

The creative workshops started in Griffith in March 2006. Music and song writing were key to engaging the first participants. Facilitated song-writing sessions with Big hART artists provided a creative outlet for the participants, allowing them to tap into their creative potential without the pressure to jump right into confrontational dialogues. The workshop program was soon expanded, first by photography sessions in town areas chosen by the participants, and secondly by film shoots in Griffith. In March 2007 Big hART decided to move its headquarters from the Griffith Regional Theatre to a shopfront office on the main street, which resulted in an increased public profile for *GOLD* as people found it easier to cross the threshold into art practice (a shopfront in this case), without having to enter what was for them a culturally alien institution (the theatre).

Meanwhile, the team actively sought to establish contacts with farming families in the basin, on the one hand, by working with consultants in Griffith and in the communities themselves, and on the other hand by attending various community events such as an ABC Radio National broadcast in Condobolin, 230 km north of Griffith. The Patton family joined the project in Condobolin after being approached by members of the Big hART team. Despite the tough situation on their farms, many farmers were enticed by the idea of supporting the teenagers in their bid to take on responsibility for their personal development.

Over the course of the project, 33 farming families from across the MDB were thus involved in the project, with 13 regularly contributing to the creative output.

Imparting their experiences and stories to an interested audience was seen as a welcome opportunity to engage in exchanges that would help to raise awareness of the issues they were facing. From 2006 to 2009, these farming families repeatedly invited the team and participants onto their farms, opening up the possibility of starting the second stage of the project. This second stage saw the young Griffith teenagers charting unfamiliar territory, being invited as guests onto the rural, isolated properties and testing their newly developed creative skills on curious yet diffident outsiders.

With the collaboration between farming families and the urban teenagers as the central focus of the project, and with partnerships in Griffith largely not evolving, Big hART decided to close the shopfront office in Griffith in early 2009. This allowed more resources to be allocated to the visits on rural properties, yet also caused a disengagement of some of the teenagers who were unable to participate in the road trips and who consequently felt abandoned by Big hART.

The task of profiling the farming families required the young people to decentre and separate from their own backgrounds, to open their minds to a different lifestyle, and develop empathy towards other members of the community. In gently shifting the project's focus to recording the oral history and experience of the farming families, the major role of the teenagers turned from one of self- expression to one of facilitating expression in others – a task that allowed them to experience themselves as productive artists positively contributing to a reinvigoration of communal ties.

The Big hART team actively reinforced this new self-image by enabling the presentation of the project in various contexts spanning from 9 conferences and 15 community events across the MDB to 12 exhibitions (including a constant travelling work-in-progress version of *Gold-Crop*) in a range of venues, including the Griffith Regional Arts Gallery (New South Wales), an old restaurant on Mildura's main street (Victoria), an oval in Talgarno (Victoria), a dry dam in Boree Creek (New South Wales), the Adelaide Performing Arts Market, Sydney's Carriageworks, the Trundle showground (New South Wales) and mobile, open-air film screenings on the streets of Griffith. In addition, partnerships with outside institutions enabled selected young project participants to gain work experience on the ABC show *The Chaser* and to take part in the Newcastle National Young Writers' Festival, providing them with valuable professional experience and a budding profile in the arts sector.

The ongoing public presentation of the work in urban and regional settings throughout the project generated audiences of about 6200 people, raising awareness of the dire situation farmers found themselves in on Australia's dried up land. To increase engagement across the region, Big hART also experimented with different engagement tools, such as a photographic competition in 2009.

Building on their tentative relationship, the farmers and teenagers managed to establish a strong basis of trust for their collaboration that allowed the personal cost of the drought to be evocatively foregrounded in the material created. The farmers demonstrated a high degree of willingness to open up about the

emotional impacts the drought had on their family life and mental state. A lot of the interviews subsequently revealed that deteriorating capacities to cope with problems on a mental level affected many of the farming families. However, the common behaviour pattern saw families isolating themselves from their communities as they associated the issue with shame and weakness, something that if openly acknowledged would overstretch their capacities for survival.

It was due to this circumstance that Big hART deliberately decided to address issues of mental health as one of the key concerns of the *GOLD* project in order to support and contribute to these communities ripped apart by the drought. This decision caused a great deal of controversy in the immediate environment of the project. Concerned community stakeholders challenged the arts company's qualifications to address those issues. Big hART reacted proactively to these contentions by seeking help from related service providers and schooling staff in first aid mental health provision.

Nevertheless, some community liaison partners continued to bar the team from contacting affected families in their areas. One of these families were the Mitchells from Talgarno who had joined the *GOLD* project in June 2007. A concerned gatekeeper sought to prevent their further involvement by blocking any approaches from Big hART. As a response, and in line with the company's belief that changes within communities cannot be effected without a broad local consensus, Big hART respected the gatekeeper's viewpoint and refrained from contacting the Mitchells in the ensuing 12-month period.

Working with other families and perceiving the many positive effects of their creative engagement, however, prompted Big hART to reconsider its adopted stance. In December 2008 the team re-engaged with the Mitchell family who gladly embraced the project again and quickly became one of its driving forces. With more and more stories of hardship from dedicated farmers surfacing across the MDB, formerly isolated families started to reconnect with each other, meeting regularly, venting their frustration in understanding company and finding new strength therein. By way of example, one Queensland farmer expressed his relief in feeling freer to communicate with his peers, stating to the *GOLD* team:

> ***"All my friends used to talk about the farm or whatever like that. Now we talk about how high a dose of depression tablets you are on. And we're all on depression tablets."***



A further poignant example was that of Ken Mitchell. A farmer by heart, Ken was one of the project's participants who most openly disclosed his problems in coping with his farm's impending financial ruin and displayed a kind generosity in supporting the teenagers' creative endeavours. However, despite the strength and reconnection his attitude had brought back to his family, Ken Mitchell fell prey to his fragile mental state and committed suicide in September 2009. His death was devastating to everyone around him as it not only constituted the loss of a dearly beloved person, but also humanised and clearly marked the toll depression and mental health issues were having on the farming community at large.

These sentiments strongly informed the final presentation of the *Gold-Crop* exhibition in November 2009 at Sydney's Carriageworks, which was dedicated to the memory of Ken and where 31 farmers from 12 families and 7 of the Griffith teenagers celebrated his legacy in an emotional and personal vernissage. The exhibition was mounted on three tonnes of earth from the MDB on which 600 metres of fencing wire held 1200 images, offering a window into the MDB.

Twenty-five films created in the project invited audiences to step into the farmers' worlds and to appreciate their struggle and persistence on lands that over the last years had yielded only a fraction of the crops necessary to sustain a healthy nation. As a reminder of the quality of life at stake, the opening's catering exclusively featured local produce from the MDB supplied by the farming families.

The exhibition was critically acclaimed and received outstanding reviews in local and national media that heightened the public awareness of the farmers' strife and contributed to the project's very successful media strategy.

Strong involvement with the media, however, caused yet another heated debate revolving around the *GOLD* project. In mid-2009, the Mitchell family as key participants in the project had allowed representatives of the ABC to feature them in a portrait of *GOLD* for the ABC's current affairs program the 7.30 Report, due to air later in the year. After Ken's suicide, the ethical implications of making public the family's grief and the danger of exploiting it for the sake of ratings and public profile became a contentious topic among people in the MDB. Big hART's role in encouraging public discussion on those issues was interpreted by some as irresponsible and hypocritical.

The company defended itself strongly against those accusations and continued to support the Mitchell family in the aftermath of the tragedy. The family eventually decided to approve the broadcast. The report was watched by 159,000 people on national television in December 2009. The report sparked a discussion of mental health support services in remote areas and contributed to the formation of self-help groups in the MDB, thereby creating an important legacy for the project.

As core to the project, the Griffith teenagers benefited significantly from their involvement in the project, with seven members of the core group returning to mainstream education, one gaining admission to TAFE in Melbourne, ten gaining sustainable employment, and most pursuing their own artistic projects, including writing novels and producing community radio shows.



*"Law and justice are not always the same. When they aren't, destroying the law may be the first step toward changing it."*

**GLORIA STEINEM**

*"The nervous system of any age or nation is its creative workers, its artists. And if that nervous system is profoundly disturbed by its environment, the work it produces will inescapably reflect the disturbances, sometimes obliquely and sometimes with violent directness."*

**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

# DOMAINS OF CHANGE

# DOMAINS OF CHANGE

PETER WRIGHT, CHRISTINA DAVIES, BARRY DOWN

***One of the most interesting aspects of the Murdoch University research is the identification of domains of change within Big hART's work and the productive conditions that need to be there. What follows is a summary of these domains of change.***

One important element of the research was to highlight areas where we might usefully look for evidence of change. We are mindful that evidence of change is a tension within arts-based work or any form of development. It has been our experience, for example, that what constitutes evidence varies; there is a current fetish for metrification, and 'proof' of change in and of itself means very little. Our own preference is to be better able to answer: What works for whom? In what ways, and circumstances? And for whose benefit? (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Through the research we have been able to describe seven domains of change.

In participatory arts practice change is both the means and the ends where benefits accrue.

We have used the language of 'domains' of change. A domain of change, as it is used in the development field (Dart & Davies, 2003), is a 'place to look', or even a signpost pointing the way. This means that, if change is to occur through project involvement, then it could be apparent across any one of the domains or combinations of these. These domains are purposefully broad as it's possible that individuals experience them differently. Nevertheless, domains serve as useful conceptual organisers when looking at Big hART's work.

Key to this understanding is that these domains are not mutually exclusive, and that they exist in association with each other. For example, as young people develop agency, they are more likely to experience wellbeing and move towards work of meaning and value. What the research reveals is that there are many paths to change and these domains might be necessary but not necessarily sufficient for change.

For the purposes of this summary of the research, each domain is accompanied by a project portrait, to help illuminate the domain and the productive conditions found within it.



## DOMAIN 1

## ENHANCING HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH NETWORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

CHRISTINA DAVIES

### INTRODUCTION

This domain examines the psychosocial processes that need to be generated to positively influence an individual's thoughts and resulting behaviours. The focus is on understanding how participants develop psychologically as they interact in their Big hART social environment.

Participants, artists, community members and funders acknowledged the benefits of engaging in projects such as *LUCKY, Ngapartji Ngapartji and GOLD*.

According to participants, Big hART had a positive impact on their life by increasing their:

- confidence
- self-esteem/self-worth
- self-image/self-pride
- hope for the future
- motivation

Their participation in a Big hART project led to feelings of:

- happiness
- achievement
- enjoyment
- excitement
- enthusiasm
- belonging
- acceptance
- empowerment.

Each of these were key to participants' psychosocial and emotional development.

In addition, Big hART projects improved participants' knowledge and skills (especially multi-literacy skills), reduced feelings of isolation and reinforced to participants that they were important.

The positive impact of Big hART projects can be more fully understood through the narrative of Kylie. The narrative is in Kylie's words, from her point of view, and shows how Big hART's *LUCKY* project made a difference to her life and the lives of others.

## INTRODUCING KYLIE

Kylie lives in Tasmania. She is in her twenties and is a mother of three. Kylie started off as a Big hART participant on *LUCKY*, but as the project evolved and her confidence grew she went on to help the project team with recruitment, project tasks, cleaning and childcare. Kylie provides a unique perspective into project impact as both a participant and then subsequently as a project worker. She was able to talk about changes she experienced as well as changes she observed in others. This is Kylie' story – (names have been changed):



## KYLIE

### The key thing is social connections for those who don't reach out.

*"It was great for socialising for them who didn't get out. It was great for the kids … we made friends. There was a real thing about connecting and sharing our stories. We did jewellery making. I still make jewellery now. I make all my own. The project let parents know that there is things out there for them. They can have opportunities even though they have kids. Like we did our Tourism Certificate through that, everyone got a certificate so now you can be the guide on tour busses and things like that with that qualification. It gave them a qualification and just knowing that you can do something.*

*One of the people that has really changed is Michelle. She now does a full-time course at TAFE to do aged care. She's doing her second year of that. This is someone who didn't do anything, who has never done anything in her life at all. It's [the project] got her out there and doing something. I think my public speaking improved cause I always got dobbed in to do the speaking. Now I work in a call centre and have to talk to people even more. I do tech support for computers. Which can be fun. We do Apple computers and I had never used one before so it was four weeks training and exams every week.*

*As a young mum you can feel alone and isolated, looking for help, especially those mums who have always been at home. It's a place you could go and socialise that didn't cost us anything. Sewing as well. I know Kim now sews flat out. We did a big sewing thing. Kim made a blanket for her son that she was really proud of. The hard thing with Kim is that she has never been good at anything and everyone has always put her down for it. But now she knows she can do stuff which is just a big confidence builder as well. The difference for her was the fact that someone was willing to give her a go and to help her to try to do it. Kim had changed so much. Her confidence is heaps better. She is willing to get out there and try to do stuff and not let anyone tell her that she can't. Knowing there are people that care about her and are willing to give her a go and help her has been the biggest thing for her. She's trying to get her driver's license at the moment. She is continuing to try.*

*We did a thing where we shared recipes, like on the '**LUCKY**' website where*

*you could do it from home or you could use the computer there. For '**This is Living'** we interviewed the older people in the community for background stories and things like that. To go up to strangers and talk to them was a massive thing for some people. I did a lot of the typing up of the interviews and listening to them and typing them up was amazing, listening to the stories … We thought we had it bad but it was nowhere near as bad as the stories that I heard. Jewellery, sewing, writing, expressing our feelings through the writing, and not being afraid to express ourselves and have other people see it. Mostly through Facebook a lot of us still communicate heaps. Making new friends was important. We keep up to date with what each other is doing, what's going on, things like that. The key thing is social connections for those who don't reach out to have been involved in something where they have had that chance to reach out and know there are people there who are going to listen and not judge what they are saying."*

## PSYCHOSOCIAL ATTRIBUTES

Kylie's narrative highlights attributes that help young people in the process of positive mental health and social connection, for example:

- Listening and avoiding judgment: I am not alone *'...there are people there who are going to listen and not judge...'*
- Encouraging self-expression, peer support and communication *'...not being afraid to express ourselves...'*
- Creating caring, helpful spaces: building confidence *'...someone was willing to give her a go...'*
- Providing creative, interesting and confidence building activities *'...Kim made a blanket for her son that she is really proud of.'*
- Facilitating activities to develop knowledge and skills *'...it gave them a qualification, and just knowing you can do something.'*
- Developing opportunities for social networking and personal growth *'...it was great for socialising for them who didn't get out.'*



## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

The following productive conditions provide a scaffold in which change can occur and enable communities to forge the kinds of attributes of psychosocial health described above.

### DRAWING ON LOCAL ASSETS, LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCES

Big hART projects build local capabilities by increasing the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals especially among those most often marginalised from decision making.

### REINVENTING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES

Big hART projects involve a set of artistic processes that help individuals improve and enhance their psychosocial wellbeing.

Participants are able to individuate, discover new trajectories, and feel affirmed and recognised within their own communities, through media attention and placements in festivals and national television.

### BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Big hART fosters positive relationships within and between the participant and the community, therefore promoting values of trust, respect and care.

### DEVELOPING A SPIRIT OF INCLUSIVENESS AND RESPECT

Big hART values each participant and encourages them to engage in an artistic process that enhances psychosocial health and social justice.

## CONCLUSION

Big hART projects highlight the value of engaging young people in creative projects, thereby providing support, knowledge, self-empowerment, hope, perspective and the possibility of a better future.

DOMAIN 2

# BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH CREATIVE SPACES

BARRY DOWN

## INTRODUCTION

This domain examines the cultural and artistic processes that need to be created and more widely sustained in order to build a sense of community. Of particular interest is the manner in which collaborative artistic performances can assist communities in the task of enhancing intergenerational relationships, developing a spirit of reciprocity, and preserving local funds of knowledge including oral histories, memories and cultural artefacts.

This domain seeks to explain how organisations such as Big hART are able to mobilise the human, social, cultural and economic resources necessary to build a spirit of community through creative performance.

In these times of economic and social insecurity where the values of individualism, consumerism, competitiveness and materialism control all aspects of our lives, there is an urgent need to reinvigorate the role of communities as the cornerstone of human affairs; this domain is key to those processes.

When we look closely at the narratives of participants on Big hART projects we see emerging evidence of positive impacts on:

- *Intergenerational engagement and connection*
- *Quantity and quality of relationships*
- *Sense of belonging and connectedness*
- *Peer and family relationships*
- *Collaboration among community members and stakeholders*
- *Awareness of community assets and resources*
- *Civic engagement and spirit of generosity.*



## INTRODUCING CHRISTIE:

Christie is a young single mum living on her own, who started her involvement with Big hART with two small children. She has now an established history with Big hART, having been involved with three separate projects over three years including elements of *LUCKY* including *Radio Holiday*. She now has four young children. Her previous life mainly involved staying at home. Christie has learnt photography, developed some sewing and textiles skills, grown in terms of her confidence, and has goals for the future. What Christie's story reveals is how she has been metaphorically 'held' by Big hART, and how the benefits she describes are generative in nature. Christie, for example, now acts as a mentor to other young mums in Big hART project work. This is Christie's story told in her own words.

## CHRISTIE

**I developed more social skills with people who I never have expected to be friends with.**

*"The number one thing I got from the projects were friendships, I am still friends with the majority of them. I did a lot of public speaking, but I don't really enjoy that. I have become more myself, learnt to be more relaxed around other people, more people skills, there was heaps of that. I also learnt some cooking skills, and some interaction skills with the kids. I give things more of a go now, like trying to develop my refurbishment skills. I have heaps of family support, but many of the young mums don't, they see Big hART as their own little family. And I was a good support for them. They are an excellent supportive group of people. It was disappointing there was no other funding for the project to continue.*

*I'd like to see myself with my own little business in 12 months. In **'LUCKY'** I learnt some sewing and we made some jewellery. I've now refurbished the kid's toy box, and I bought a table in a garage sale, and I'm going to do it up. I wasn't doing any creative work before, I just used to stay at home, go to Number 13 [a youth drop-in centre] – got kids off the street, that was pretty much it, but now I have some confidence to have a go. Before Big hART I didn't really have any goals or look into the future. It was the supportive*

*background [they provided] that made the difference. There was no cost involved, transport was provided, free food. That made the difference. If I had to sum it up in a few words I'd say that has been one of the greatest highlights of my life. I developed more social skills, with people who I would never expected to be friends with."*

## ATTRIBUTES OF COMMUNITY

Christie's story sheds light on the kinds of attributes of community that appear to help young people in the process of 'becoming somebody' including the following:

- Creating friendly and welcoming public spaces *'...the number one thing I got from projects was friendships...'*
- Providing creative, interesting and socially worthwhile activities *'...I learnt some cooking skills and some social interaction skills with my kids.'*
- Creating imagined futures *'...before Big hART I didn't really have any goals or look into the future.'*
- Developing opportunities for social networking, friendships and personal growth *'...I developed more social skills, with people I'd never expect to be friends with.'*

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

The following productive conditions were identified as those that provide a scaffold in which change can occur to help build communities in which human flourishing becomes possible for all. Herein lies the essence of BIG hART's community capacity building approach to artistic endeavours.

### DRAWING ON LOCAL ASSETS, LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCES

Big hART projects set out to build community by firstly acknowledging and valuing local histories, language, customs and culture; and secondly, drawing on local assets, leadership and resources. Community renewal is conceived from a capabilities perspective where local residents steer changes rather than relying on paternalistic, top-down policy interventions by outside experts. Central to this approach is the view that communities have a reserve of skills, knowledge, talents, resources and leadership as well as constraints that may limit what is possible. The emphasis is on building local capabilities by increasing the level of community participation especially among those individuals and groups most often marginalised from decision making. This more empowering approach has a deep commitment to the principles and values of local democracy, organic leadership and grassroots initiatives to enable social change.

### REINVENTING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY IDENTITIES

Big hART brings to local communities a set of artistic processes to help individuals and communities reinvent their cultural identities by moving beyond pathologising policies and practices.

### BUILDING COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The process of building collaborative community partnerships is absolutely pivotal to the work of Big hART. They work with the community rather than speaking for them or attempting to own the community renewal process.

### CREATING SPACES FOR DIALOGIC CONVERSATIONS

What holds Big hART projects together conceptually, artistically, ethically and practically is the centrality of dialogic conversations. The emphasis is on generating local ownership, building relationships and fostering collective action with a view to enhancing the quality of life of all citizens.

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Community engaged artistic performances enable a form of social criticism whereby individuals and communities can see that their 'personal troubles' are neither unique nor isolated, but are 'public issues' shaped by wider structural and historical forces.

### SUPPORTING INNOVATION AND RISK TAKING

Where community leaders and policy makers are willing to support innovation there is a greater chance of finding productive solutions to complex social and economic problems. In communities where traditional top-down approaches do not work, fresh ideas and creative strategies can play a crucial role in reinvigorating the community renewal process.

### IDENTIFYING SOCIALLY WORTHWHILE COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Big hART is able to produce exhibitions, performances and artefacts of social significance with high production standards. When people are involved in activities that are meaningful, rigorous, inclusive, valued, creative and fun we see evidence of profound changes in individual identity and self-worth as well as community interdependence and wellbeing.

### DEVELOPING A SPIRIT OF INCLUSIVENESS AND RESPECT

Underpinning this spirit of community is an inherent belief in the values of human dignity, local democracy, social justice and ethic of care for and about each other. The success of a community can only be properly measured by the extent that the least advantaged feel included and respected. This is profoundly relational work... It is where our culture and identity are shaped.

## CONCLUSION

In the words of one Ernabella woman:

> *"Ngapartji Ngapartji was good for us. But not just good for us, for white people, black people, everyone. That was the first time [the Jamieson family] story was told, the first time they had a theatre, a live performance, with actors and people they knew."*

Drawing on the stories of participants like this Ernabella women and Christie, we quickly gain an appreciation of the profound importance of the relational nature of communities as places where our individual and collective sense of self is formed.



Holding this community capability approach is a clear message about the importance of nurturing local knowledge, resources, leadership and ownership by listening deeply and respectfully to what people have to say about their lives and the circumstances in which they find themselves often through no fault of their own. Drawing on these insights, individuals and communities are able to mobilise themselves (with external support) to produce artistic works of social value, meaning and efficacy.

For more on the key attributes of building community - see Barry Down - *Big hART: Art Equity and Community for People Place and Policy*. Murdoch University.

## DOMAIN 3

# DEVELOPING AGENCY AND A SENSE OF EFFICACY

PETER WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

This domain relates to a person's sense of agency, of being able to act upon the world. At its best, the notion of agency highlights the way someone can be confident and purposeful, and act to direct his or her life. What the notion of agency foregrounds is individual choice, freedom and intentionality; it speaks to being purposeful and the benefits that flow including having and taking control in one's life.

This notion of agency can be understood by way of contrast to people who are passive, or have a self-image that invites abuse or manipulation, or the disempowering belief that they should 'give up'. In other words, a lack of agency results in people feeling small, worthless and inadequate with no capacity to change or effect anything in their future; these feelings are described as 'learned helplessness' in psychological terms.

Key to understanding this domain is how learned helplessness with associated feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and an inability to change goes beyond

psychology and into social action. It is also important to understand that, while behavioural change can be thought of as individual, and based on logic and rational choice, what this domain reveals is that behavioural change grows out of Big hART's practices of community, social acceptance, and experiences borne of deep engagement in heart-felt dialogue, creative acts, expression and reflection.

## INTRODUCING MAXINE:

Maxine, a young woman who came into a project, serves to illustrate this domain and how she came to 'do things differently'. As an adjunct, while Maxine's story illustrates agency and also a level of interconnectedness across domains, she is able not only to describe her own experiences of agency development and what this meant, but also how she was able to observe this in others.

## MAXINE

### Step by step changing my life for the better.

*The early years of my life were troublesome. I abused alcohol and drugs and I surrounded myself with friends who reinforced this abuse. I went to school until Year 11, when I left and had my first child. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that Di [a Big hART worker] asked me to be a part of a Big hART project, which she described to me as a crime prevention program. At first I was reluctant to participate, but my sister and me went together. In the beginning we would only go unless we went together, but after a while we became confident enough to go on our own. Over the years we have participated in* ***'LUCKY', 'Radio Holiday', 'DRIVE'*** *and* ***'This is Living'.***

*Being involved in these projects changed my life for the better. The people at Big hART supported me, they got down on my level, they respected me, they never judged me, and they made me confront my life and my choices. These things started to affect me. I started to feel happy about myself and lucky to have children. I started to feel important. I questioned my comfort zone, like the kinds of friends I kept. Big hART gave me a new circle of friends who were on the straight and narrow – I could disconnect from those other friends of mine. And this meant that slowly, step-by-step, I stopped doing the drugs. I haven't touched marijuana for 6 to 7 years now, and I haven't touched anything else, except alcohol, for 3 to 4 years. I'd say that these Big hART projects got me started in changing my life for the better. I would never have thought we could do something like this on our own but after a while these projects made us realise that we could go it alone. And I know these projects have affected other people in a similar way. People who are or used to be involved are on the right track now – they have got jobs, they've got married and they've bought houses. Even I've bought a house now. I've learnt that anything's what you make it."*

## ATTRIBUTES THAT HELP REVEAL AGENCY – FROM ACROSS THESE PROJECTS INCLUDE:

- Developing capacity over time '...you've got to take a step back sometimes to see it... the progress you've made.'
- Providing opportunities for engagement and participation '...there's nothing for unusual teenagers in this town... but this is different. You couldn't do this stuff at school...'
- Working as an artist '...when we do all those little things... stop motion, time capture, photos... and I like them videos...'
- Developing self-awareness '...most of us have disabilities, one way or another, we're all outcasts.'
- Learning and successfully applying a new skill '...I went into this junkyard where we were all living at, and I took all those awesome photos and everyone thought they were really good.'
- Feeling purposeful and confident '...just gave me interests I didn't know I had. Future plans. I've sort of got my head on.'

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

The arts are a powerful route to agency, self worth and social development. The following describes the productive conditions present in Big hART's practice that enable agency to be developed.

### THE CREATION OF HIGH QUALITY ARTEFACTS

Agency and feelings of self-worth, respect and efficacy are enabled through art practices and the creative conditions that surround them. This was reflected in participants' engagement with arts processes and products that were both open-ended but built towards high quality artefact – performance, original music, documentaries... strategically placed in festivals, free-to air TV and radio, and high-profile public events such as in Parliament House in Canberra and Federation Square in Melbourne.

### THE DISCIPLINE OF PUBLIC PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Moving towards a public performance outcome meant that the open-ended creative processes Big hART uses are then directed into successive iterations of rehearsal. This meant people had to be present physically, emotionally and psychologically in order for a quality performance to be realised. This discipline was contingent on the quality of relationships formed, and feelings of ensemble and responsibility towards others.

### HIGH-STATUS, QUALITY MENTORS PROVIDING MODELS AND SUPPORT FOR CREATIVE ACTION

For many participants being able to work with and see these professionals 'at work' provided models of application, humility, status and entré into an arts world previously inaccessible. They also learned about the pleasure of association, status gained, and support from faces they knew though media exposure.

### LEARNING IN A SOCIAL-AESTHETIC SPACE

Skills are taught in context and at a point of need. For example, oral histories had to be collected from informants who often had challenging lives to live. This meant that they had to be engaged, respected, facilitated, and carefully listened and attended to. Each of these elements implied a level of sociality, and 'felt' responses that required both awareness and responsiveness.



### CONCLUSION

Agency is contingent on opportunity, learning, resources, culture and social equality:

> *– it is a journey rather than a point to be reached. What we consistently observed was that Big hART was concerned with adolescents rather than adolescence (Vagle, 2012).*

## DOMAIN 4

# USING PARTICIPATORY ARTS FOR AN EXPRESSIVE LIFE

BRAD HASEMAN

### INTRODUCTION

This domain relates to the impact Big hART's creative processes and artistic outcomes have on young people and their communities. It is essential to recognise that art making and producing, in its various forms and activities, lies at the centre of Big hART's approach and it is impossible to separate their theatre productions and artistic products from the community engagement strategies deployed to produce them.

Big hART's work is neither 'high' art nor 'low' art, 'art for art's sake' nor popular culture or a  manifestation of the intrinsic value in art over the instrumental application of art for social justice.

The abiding commitment to making art with a rich aesthetic and affective dimension is unwavering and acts as a magnetic north guiding every journey Big hART makes with a community. This section examines the various dimensions of art, the pivotal domain from which other domains and their impacts flow.

### INTRODUCING KERRIE

Kerrie was employed by BIG hART in Alice Springs as a worker on *Ngapartji Ngapartji*. Kerrie is a strong and independent thinker who was employed on a

number of the workshop programs, including music and choir development, even though she had never played music in public before the project. The project was both magical and brutal for her and one in which she 'learned heaps'. Kerrie made a total physical and emotional commitment to the project which she acknowledges gave her 'some really amazing experiences'. After years of working with Indigenous communities and learning their language, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has still not settled for her. Some aspects of the experience remain unresolved and she is still working it through three years later. The following narrative portrait illustrates these ideas in her own words.

## KERRIE

**It was important to know the Indigenous language and it was essential to build truly collaborative ideas.**

*"'Ngapartji Ngapartji' was a remarkable achievement and I felt that participants were aware they were creating something new – recording songs etc. At the time and when the show was touring I found that really profound. The Indigenous participants all say 'we really did something new here, we really created something that had never happened before' and that still rings true to me. There's this whole other story that Australia doesn't know. So while 'Ngapartji Ngapartji' handed white audiences a catharsis on a plate – in some ways it was really simple, honest and brutal – but the complexity of the message was less understood.*

*But the show was only a part of the outcome, just the shiny bit that everybody remembers, where lots of people clap. The workshops and everything else were the bigger part. The most positive impacts were for the Indigenous participants, the women and young people who during the time of the project became much more confident in speaking their own minds to non-Indigenous people. They tended to socialise better too by the end with much less awkwardness and shyness when they got together. The most important identity building happened for the people of Ernabella in particular, for that community as well as for the individuals themselves. Their identity as show makers or as storytellers, dancers, performers all built in and filtered into the community, and not just through the show.*



*For me it was important to know the Indigenous language and it was essential to build truly collaborative ideas especially around song writing. In fact the musical outcomes wouldn't have happened if I hadn't spent the time just being with people and learning their language. Knowing the language meant I could give ideas permission and overcome participant shyness. So much of what happened flowed because I was able to spend time in community and with their language. At the beginning, the workshops were providing profound experiences for non-Indigenous people working on the project but some of us, including me, became frustrated and cynical by the end of the project. There was the feeling that I was never being met halfway by participants especially around logistical details like dates, deadlines and so on.*

*There were tensions too around family demands which pulled people off task and economic circumstances and welfare dependency was a problem. We had to watch white tutors especially if they were out of touch and came breezing into Indigenous communities thinking they know what the Aboriginals want. This approach doesn't ask participants to accept responsibility, and so they do too much for participants which finally did not enable them. My frustration built as the various parts of the project were seen by some participants and tutors as playtime – not essential, not a life necessity. I believed in and wanted an equal relationship with people but this did not come about as often as it should because there was not an equal investment from all participants. I can see though that I did something unique with the music and films we recorded. And the collaborative song writing – there were no other young women writing songs. Songs weren't just raps over garage band beats, some of the songs they actually sang in the show were old people's. A core value has emerged I suppose – to let ideas breathe and to be able to feed back with improvements to build quality in the work.*

*Working on 'Ngapartji Ngapartji' gave me the opportunity to have real life experiences with people from a different world view, expand my mind by learning about difference and language, sing in harmony and travel to beautiful places in the desert. But I'm not sure that the story is 100 per cent positive – and was never going to be. While 'Ngapartji Ngapartji' can't change this problem, empowering people*

*is good and the project could and did do that. Where I've been for about a year*

*is unable to talk about it. I've been deeply frustrated that I've been unable to articulate wisdom or learning or all of these things that people attach to me because of what I've done. It's something that I want and need to learn how to do, to learn how to articulate it all."*

## ART ATTRIBUTES

These attributes of art identified from Kerrie's narrative from Alice Springs were echoed over and over again by the workers and young people who engaged in Big hART projects in Griffith and Tasmania as well. These projects:

- **Value both the processes of learning through workshops and the quality of the final performances** 'But the show was only a part of the outcome, just the shiny bit that everybody remembers, where lots of people clap. The workshops and everything else were the bigger part …'

- **Enable a deepening engagement for participants which results in a sense of pride, achievement and pleasure** 'The Indigenous participants all say "we really did something new here, we really created something that had never happened before"

- **Establish challenging developmental and performance goals which extend all participants and make demands of them** 'But I'm not sure that the story is 100 per cent positive – and was never going to be. While '*Ngapartji Ngapartji*' can't change this problem, empowering people is good and the project could and did do that.'

- **Need community workers and artists with skills, passion, collaborative practice and shared purposes** 'Working on '*Ngapartji Ngapartji*' gave me the opportunity to have real life experiences with people from a different world view, expand my mind by learning about difference and language, sing in harmony and travel to beautiful places in the desert …'

Finally, these attributes demonstrate that production and presentation of art in and with communities holds both great promise and great anxieties. Benefits are not easily won. Progress can be slow and even go unnoticed.



## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

By identifying these productive conditions, we gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic circumstances that produce the effects and impacts that flow from Big hART's creative processes and artistic outcomes with communities.

### THE PERFORMANCE IS HIGH STAKES.

Big hART projects all set goals which required participants to perform in high stakes settings, where what they did mattered and demanded sustained commitment and skill acquisition from participants. Part of the challenge for quality also comes through a commitment to produce work that is valued by that community and society.

Unlike much community and cultural development which seeks to raise personal awareness among the participants and audiences, Big hART's projects chase larger policy targets. As a result, the intent of each piece of performance is complemented with particular strategies targeting different audience.

Participants are able to report the value of 'belonging to something bigger than yourself'.

### THE PERFORMANCE BECOMES A PIVOT AND FOCUS FOR A RANGE OF CULTURAL AND CREATIVE ACTIVITIES.

Big hART use the driving imperative of performance to stimulate and motivate participants to join the many skill-building opportunities which will eventually see them perform in high-stakes settings.

Early in the life of a project, the menu of workshop offerings is designed to help young people find out what they are interested in. The requirement for participants to maintain commitments to skills development and step up to meet the rigorous demands of performance produces a creative environment characterised by the dynamics of mutual and shared obligation for both participants and Big hART staff.

**HIGHLY SKILLED AND COMMITTED ARTISTS ENGAGE FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME.**

Underpinning Big hART's success is their capacity to attract artists who have sophisticated skills in working in and with communities over an extended period of time. Their particular ability to interact with community groups and to act as artist mentors complements the work of project coordinators in developing new projects and revitalising existing ones.

Authentic partnerships for community engagement and development are formed.

Fundamental to building effective partnerships is a deep commitment to dialogue. Dialogue which establishes shared and clear expectations, realistic scope and trusted circuitry is important in Big hART's management of all partners, but it takes on added nuance and texture when working with young people themselves.

Big hART sets out to expand young people's experience and knowledge base by engaging them in something that matters for them personally. The company recognises that greatest growth and productivity starts with the interests of young people but then, gradually and consistently, they sharpen the challenges the young people face.  The priority is not to overwhelm young participants, but rather to allow them to experience the incremental difficulties of the task, the need to step up and into that task, and the reward that comes from successful resolution and accomplishment.

Managing this crisis of commitment and securing the ongoing participation of the young people until the whole work was done always depends in part upon the quality of the larger partnerships within which this work is occurring.

## CONCLUSION

At the centre of all Big hART's work is the recognition that the art and its accompanying aesthetic power is central to both their working processes and successes. Consequently, the works and objects Big hART creates with communities must necessarily be 'beautiful', for it is from their emotional charge, their feeling force, that other benefits and values flow.

For more on the key attributes of using participatory arts for an expressive life see Brad Haseman - *Big hART: Art Equity and Community for People Place and Policy*. Murdoch University.



## DOMAIN 5

# CONSTRUCTING PRODUCTIVE LIVES: ASPIRATIONS AND WORK OF VALUE AND MEANING

**BARRY DOWN AND PETER WRIGHT**

## INTRODUCTION

In this domain we seek to identify and describe an alternative set of possibilities made available through creative practices, rethinking the links between the economy and job opportunities for young people.

Young people today face an increasingly fragile, volatile and uncertain economic environment. Since the mid-1970s, the forces of globalisation, technology and neoliberalism have wreaked profound changes on society and the economy. Nowhere is this more apparent than the youth labour market where the idea of permanent, secure and well-paid work is rapidly disappearing.

The extent to which these global labour force dynamics impact on individual lives is largely influenced by social class, gender, race and geographic location. Big hART projects occur in communities where the ravages of broader economic forces have been most acutely felt in terms of diminishing job opportunities and a range of indicators of social disadvantage, such as high levels of unemployment, poor educational participation and retention rates, low school completion and achievement levels, social welfare dependency, high rates of crime and delinquency, poor mental health and illness, youth suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse. Under these circumstances young people can easily be stigmatised as the 'problem'.

Deficit views and victim-blaming discourses often abound with labeling in derogatory and demeaning terms like 'unproductive', 'lazy', 'unmotivated', 'at risk', 'troublemakers', 'irresponsible', 'dumb' and so on.

In response, it is hardly surprising to find evidence of anger, anxiety, alienation and anomie as young people experience a heightened sense of despair and hopelessness about their economic futures.

## BIG hART'S WORK HAS POSITIVE ECONOMIC IMPACTS IN TERMS OF:

- Making things of interest to sell thus building entrepreneurial spirit
- Enrolling in further education and training courses to enhance skills
- Developing employability skills, e.g., public speaking, confidence, team work, creativity, and organisational and planning skills enhancing writing and literacy skills
- Developing social networks and support structures
- Developing motivation and drive.

## INTRODUCING KYLIE AND RACHEL

Kylie and Rachel are staff at Personnel Services in Griffith, an NGO based across the Riverina Region of New South Wales. Personnel Services are a not-for-profit organisation that tenders for placements from the federal government and reports to the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations. As an NGO, Personnel Services works in its community to get its clients jobs and move them towards independent living. What Kylie and Rachel were able to reveal was that two of their clients, also involved in the *GOLD* project, were able to gain in confidence, find a 'place' that accepted their differences, develop strong social networks, and move into independent living by getting a job; each profoundly influenced through their project experiences. This is how they described the role of Big hART in assisting young people into the world of work.

## KYLIE AND RACHEL



**Big hART provided a safe place... where being different is okay ... knowing that everyone has something else to bring.**

*"There was some cross-over between participants in 'GOLD' and those who were clients of our service. One focus of the service is seeking to secure employment for those who are traditionally 'hard to place' because of their life circumstance. What we were able to see was the rebuilding of a positive youth identity through 'GOLD'. It was Big hART's processes that enabled these two young people to connect with others, develop motivation and drive, and move towards successful independent living.*

*One of the things that said to me the project had an impact was the fact that Jim [pseudonym] put down Big hART's Creative Producer as a referee on his resume.*

*This shows that it meant something to him. He obviously made a connection with the people involved in order to do that. Jim has Asperger's so he has never really fitted in. A lot of the time he has been on the end of bullying or a fight, mainly from being different. So that he has made a connection is quite significant, because so many people don't understand him or his personality. That is not an easy thing for him to do. So now he is working at Target, and there are still barriers. He can't read or write, so there was help needed to get him into that job, with his resume, the induction process, reading safety and hazard signs, etc. That is where we fitted in. And I don't think he would have had the motivation or drive to do that before Big hART. He has also completed the full six months with National Green Jobs Corp project and graduated from that. That happened after Big hART and I think that was what gave him the motivation and drive to give these things a go. He now lives out of home and is renting, so he is much more independent, he has his own place and his own job.*

*Billy [a second client] got into his creativity through Big hART – he was a very withdrawn person, a bit of a loner. It was hard to engage even to get him to an appointment. He would always walk around with his music in his ears. He wasn't accepted for being different. There were a lot of anger issues with him. He has gone on to working lots of hours at Coles in the deli; we actually exited*

*him from our service because he was well on his way to becoming independent. It helped with his confidence, and using his creativity, he grew into the person he wanted to be. Using his creativity really helped him with his anger issues; he was able to release them and engage his creativity, so a lot of these issues resolved because he got into the things he wanted to be. This certainly wouldn't have done this before [Big hART]. Billy's case, it was certainly a case of don't judge a book by its cover, he is a big burly bloke. He actually is in a customer service role now, and he is good at it. He has progressed and is living an independent life.*

*Big hART provided a safe place, it is somewhere where everyone who is different can be – somewhere where being different is okay, but also knowing that everyone has something else to bring. This demographic has had a lot of prior experiences of people being let down, it is part of their history, but Big hART really came through for them. What they did was provide access; there are not too many options here [in town]. You can go to the movies, but you need money to do that, and transport; there is only the pensioner or school bus."*

## ATTRIBUTES OF ECONOMIC IMPACTS

- Reinventing identities 'It was Big hART's processes that enabled these two young people to connect with others, develop motivation and drive, and move towards successful independent living.'

- Building social networks and support 'One thing that said to me that the project had an impact was that Jim put down Big hART's Creative Producer as a referee on his resume. This shows that it meant something to him.'

- Valuing diversity and difference 'Jim has Asperger's so he has never really fitted in... So that he has made a connection is quite significant, because so many people don't understand him or his personality...'

- Providing transitional support arrangements 'So now he is working at Target, and there are still barriers. He can't read or write, so there was help needed to get him into that job, with his resume, the induction process, reading safety and hazard signs, etc. That is where we fitted in. And I don't think he would have had the motivation or drive to do that before Big hART.'



- Providing opportunities for creative activities 'Using his creativity really helped him with his anger issues; he was able to release them and engage his creativity, so a lot of these issues resolved because he got into the things he wanted to be. This certainly wouldn't have done this before [Big hART].'

- Creating public spaces to enhance access and job opportunities 'This demographic has had a lot of prior experiences of people being let down, it is part of their history, but Big hART really came through for them. What they did was provide access; there are not too many options here [in town].'

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

Productive conditions that enable Big hART to make a difference in terms of economic effects and transitioning young people into paid work and potential careers.

### CHALLENGING 'DEFICIT' THINKING

If we are going to advance the employment prospects of marginalised youth then there are clear benefits to be gained by starting with a more optimistic and humane view about the potential of young people...

Big hART challenges (deficit thinking) by creating a set of cultural practices in which young people are seen 'at promise' whereby their knowledge, experience, language and interests are recognized as assets.

### MOVING BEYOND THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Big hART offers an alternative set of possibilities by acknowledging that are all young people are in the process of becoming, therefore, it's a matter of creating the appropriate cultural settings to build confidence, experience, relationships, capabilities and knowledge in more empowering ways.

### UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF YOUNG LIVES

Big hART acknowledges and welcomes young people no matter what their

circumstances and is willing to work with multiple and complex forms of disadvantage including health, poverty, housing, transience and so on... The priority is providing innovative practices that engage them in socially worthwhile activities over which they have control and ownership and see relevance.

### DEVELOPING A CAPABILITIES APPROACH

Given the collapse of the youth labour market, there is a strong case for developing an alternative capabilities approach to education... Many young people require experiences and knowledge that assist them to build multi-dimensional capabilities such as: social relations and networks; the capability to be a friend and mentor; respect and recognition; self-confidence and self-esteem; aspiration and motivation; health and wellbeing; emotional safety; and voice (Walker, 2006). Once these capabilities are in place, we are much more likely to find a willingness to re-engage in learning, social life and employment.

### CONNECTING TO MENTORS AND EXPERTS

In uncertain times there is a risk that far too many young people feel left behind with no secure identity or sense of purpose in life other than survival and short-termism and its associated problems of anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (Standing, 2011)... Where young people once felt left out, excluded or without direction Big hART has been able to construct artistic practices that connect, engage and inspire. This was achieved by providing access and connection to mentors and experts able to 'develop motivation and drive, and move [participants] towards successful independent living'.

## CONCLUSION

Participants report a range of economic benefits arising from their involvement with Big hART projects. These ranged from the acquisition of vocational skills related to reading and writing, self-confidence and public speaking, to technical skills such as jewellery making, photography and lighting, to developing social networks and support structures, and confidence to undertake TAFE courses related to specific careers. One of the participants summed up her renewed sense of hope in the following words:



*"When I started going to Big hART I didn't really have any future goals ... I suppose because I was young and, you know, didn't really see into the future ... You know, but then I just thought, wow, I would like to own my own clothing company ... have my own clothing line. It was good."*

DOMAIN 6

# STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES AND DISPOSITIONS FOR LEARNING

BARRY DOWN

## INTRODUCTION

This domain explores the ways in which Big hART processes enhance participants' learning in terms of capabilities, knowledge and life skills. It is important to note that Big hART typically works with young people who are disengaged and alienated from mainstream educational institutions such as schools and university. Against this backdrop, Big hART seeks to create alternative spaces where young people have an opportunity to re-engage in learning and community life through arts-based projects.

Underpinning the Big hART approach is the view that all young people given the appropriate cultural settings are willing and capable of learning.

Big hART's approach is a form of transformational learning that helps young people move beyond limited and scripted ways of being in the world (e.g. 'at risk', 'lazy', 'low achiever', 'disadvantaged', 'troublesome', 'non-academic', 'single mum', 'unemployed', and so on) to take on more powerful identities as smart workers and active citizens. Big hART achieves this by humanising relationships and engaging in collective action around relevant, meaningful and worthwhile community projects. In this environment young people feel safe to take risks and flourish.

By way of summary, there is evidence of positive impacts in terms of:

- exploring future educational options
- developing confidence to speak publicly
- developing organisational and planning skills
- problem solving and team work
- writing and literacy skills
- developing social skills
- pursuing passions and interests
- developing a sense of self-efficacy.

Whilst basic life skills related to reading, writing and numeracy cannot be taken for granted, the participants in Big hART projects are learning a great deal more as they recreate their identities in new and creative ways. For many participants, their involvement in Big hART has provided the rare and precious opportunity to challenge some often damaging and deficit images of themselves as they begin the journey of re-invention based on a sense of hope and optimism.

## INTRODUCING MICK

Mick was directed to Big hART by the police after becoming involved in criminal activity. Mick describes how Big hART had a positive impact on his life. His involvement in the *DRIVE* project enabled him to learn a range of important technical skills that he otherwise would not have. Importantly, he was able to think about himself and others in different ways. The ability to think reflectively about life's experiences and events was a powerful learning opportunity. Mick's story reminds us about the importance of 'hanging in' with troubled young people, no matter what the circumstances. His story also reveals a great deal about the sociability of learning whereby people desire a sense of connectedness around common interests and concerns in order to make a difference.



## MICK

**You've got to really put yourself aside a bit, when you work with other people. I slow myself down a bit and listen to others.**

*I became involved with Big hART after a cop caught me getting into mischief. I was bored and breaking into classrooms at the local school in an attempt to steal and hock their computers. I had a bit of a drug problem. I didn't know what I was doing, or where I was going. I was lost. When she caught me she thought I had nothing else to do and I needed something to keep me out of trouble. They basically told me they were going to take me somewhere, to see if I could learn something from these people. 'Which people?' Big hART. They told me all about it and I said I'd give it a go. When I went to Big hART, they asked if I could paint caravans. I said, 'Sure, I can do that.' Then they asked if I could put lights on caravans. I said, 'Yeah, I can. No worries'. It was my first involvement in a Big hART show. I've been involved now for six years at a technical level, with sets, lighting and sound. Before Big hART I couldn't work a video camera, I couldn't even hop on a computer hardly. But they got professionals to come and show me how to do things. When they showed me I just knew how to do it. I've tried to cherish everything they taught me. Another thing that's made a big impact on me is listening to the stories of people in the shows we put on. The 'DRIVE' project had the biggest impact. I was doing sound for that, and when I was doing that I listened to the stories, and these affected me, especially the Hicks story. He had everything, just got himself and had almost finished apprenticeship, and was working real hard. He fell asleep while behind the steering wheel and hit the back of a truck. It was kind of disturbing hearing about how he was still alive and how he was crushed between the two cars. He lifted his head up and said he was sorry to the truck driver. And when I heard that, it was devastating to me. Just imagine the truck driver. It wasn't his fault. He was just driving round the corner.*

*I learnt about others too. You've got to really put yourself aside a bit, when you work with other people. I slow myself down a bit and listen to others. It's more about listening to other people."*

## LEARNING ATTRIBUTES

Learning is a social practice in which individuals come together to understand themselves and the world with a view to improving it. Viewed in this way,

Big hART develops opportunities for young people to reconnect with learning in ways that honour the civic and democratic purposes of education envisaged by educators such as John Dewey. Such approaches to learning can be described in many ways including democratic, participatory, engaged, emancipatory and transformational.

## KEY ATTRIBUTES OF THIS KIND OF LEARNING IN BIG HART

- Acknowledging the relational dimensions of learning 'I learnt about others too. You've got to really put yourself aside a bit, when you work with other people...'
- Starting from where young people are at 'I didn't know what I was doing, or where I was going. I was lost.'
- Appreciating the complexity of young lives 'I was bored and breaking into classrooms at the local school in an attempt to steal and hock their computers. I had a bit of a drug problem.'
- Valuing students' funds of knowledge 'When I went to Big hART, they asked if I could paint caravans. I said, "Sure, I can do that." Then they asked if I could put lights on caravans. I said, "Yeah, I can. No worries."
- Working from weakness to strength 'Before Big hART I couldn't work a video camera, I couldn't even hop on a computer hardly.'
- Connecting to mentors and experts 'But they got professionals to come and show me how to do things. When they showed me I just knew how to do it. I've tried to cherish everything they taught me.'
- Investigating real world problems '...The 'Drive' project had the biggest impact. I was doing sound for that, and when I was doing that I listened to the stories, and these affected me...'
- Creating spaces for self-reflection 'He lifted his head up and said he was sorry to the truck driver. And when I heard that, it was devastating to me. Just imagine the truck driver. It wasn't his fault. He was just driving round the corner.'

This list is by no means comprehensive but it does provide some important signposts to the kinds of learning young people value. All learners are individuals with unique sets of needs, desires and aspirations.

Young people lives are often complex, messy and unpredictable and these circumstances require a different kind of learning, one grounded in relational trust, mutuality, adult relationships, flexibility and meaningful tasks.

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

Productive conditions that enable Big hART to connect to the lives of young people in ways that enable transformational learning:

### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE INCLUSIVE, ENGAGING AND ENABLING

Creating spaces of this kind requires a consistent set of guiding principles, values and protocols founded on a deep belief in the value of individuals and their capabilities to succeed in careers, family and life.

### CREATING DIALOGIC SPACES FOR IDENTITY WORK

These safe spaces privilege the voices of young people, what engages them, what is real, and what is relevant to their lives. In other words, the starting point of all learning is their culture, language, experiences and interests.

### INTERRUPTING DOMINANT CONSTRUCTIONS OF SELF AND YOUTH IDENTITY

If learning is to be transformational it requires opportunities for young people to interrupt the dominant negative images of self and youth identity driven by such forces as mass media and advertising. Transformational learning of the kind advocated by Big hART endeavours to help young people to re-write their identities as part of their ongoing process of personal and social transformation.

### REMAKING INDIVIDUAL LIVES IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Big hART offers a place to reconnect to community, a place to develop

relationships, feel welcome and belong. At the heart of this pedagogical work is a desire to transform inequitable and oppressive institutions and social relations so that individuals can learn, grow and develop to their full potential.

### RE-SEARCHING LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND PRACTICES

Underpinning Big hART projects is a pedagogical approach to knowledge production which is collaborative, generative and localised. This approach to learning eschews the idea that external experts know best. Certainly professional expertise is important, but the starting point is somewhat different because they are invited to work with communities rather than on them.

### LEARNING IS COLLABORATIVE, HANDS-ON AND INQUIRY BASED

Projects are long-term and community based, requiring a significant amount of time and energy to build rapport between stakeholders including local, state and federal agencies and professional workers including teachers, nurses, youth workers and council officers.

## CONCLUSION

Participants in Big hART projects report a range of learning from the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, to technical skills - through to newfound social skills including self-confidence, public speaking, problem solving, and confidence to pursue further education and training. Above all, participants acknowledge the ways in which Big hART creates spaces for young people to engage in truly transformational learning that enabled them to remake their lives and identities for the better... 'It is big picture learning... learning with a purpose.'



DOMAIN 7

# (RE)INVENTING IDENTITY THROUGH CULTURAL PRACTICES

PETER WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

In this domain we consider the issues of identity, cultural learning and becoming and how they might be 'sites' to consider when looking for evidence of impact of Big hART's work. Each of these concepts are so broad that is almost impossible to consider participatory arts without this domain being tagged.

However, the idea of change and a sense of self – or becoming – and the hope that is implicit in it, makes this domain of change an important site to consider even if there is scepticism about whether there is in effect one true or 'authentic' self to become.

## INTRODUCING MIKE

Through the research we identified the way that identity evolved, changed or developed. For example, Mike, whose portrait we share, went from being someone whom people crossed the road to avoid, to someone who provided good quality service in the job he ultimately secured...

Of particular importance is the way identity exists in relationship to others, and how it is constantly being constructed and re-constructed. This reveals the centrality of sociality in Big hART's work where relationships are built, sustained, and then shared through the art that is created with community.

Key to Big hART's processes, is the importance of creating art that is placed in various fora, ranging from communities of origin, no matter how small or remote, to national arts festivals or community events. What this means is that the way participants express who they are is witnessed by others, thereby building, affirming or re-affirming identity.

In each project, participants created work that was then viewed in the

communities from where participants came. The art then became the currency of exchange between participants and their community, and because this was of high quality, perceptions of participants changed, in Mike's case from a person to be avoided at all costs, to someone intentionally sought out.

The following portrait of Mike shows both his own changing sense of self from pushing back against what he saw as a 'closed' community where he was a 'misfit', to identifying himself as an artist and celebrating his own point of difference.

## MIKE

**It's a very close-minded, insular community. I've always felt like an outsider here ... in school, it's been like your clothes are too tight and there's nowhere to grow.**

*"An opportunity to grow and think from a different perspective It was Personnel Employment that sent me to Big hART. I was out of school, hadn't got a job, had been expelled. I was rebellious. But I needed to survive. I needed to get a job. I remember the first time I walked into the Big hART shopfront. It was night. 6 o'clock. I remember walking inside and talking to people. There was a vibe that I had never experienced before. In this city, there is a lot of judgment. It's often the first impression and then people make their mind up about you. It's a very close-minded, insular community. I've always felt like an outsider here. I was not social at all. Here, and in school, it's been like your clothes are too tight and there's nowhere to grow. But when I walked into Big hART, they were friendly.*

*The people at Big hART don't judge. The vibe was positive. I didn't have a lot of positivity to my life, so when I walked into Big hART it was like a moth to a flame. Big hART has attracted a lot of us misfits, the people who don't fit in. A lot of us couldn't fit into proper schooling, were expelled, left school early, had problems at home. But Big hART gave us a positive environment, it allowed choice; from being a writer to being involved in film, arts, sculptures, Claymation films, and that affected me. I have 70 to 80 paintings. While school is a closed off environment, Big hART isn't. It gave us an opportunity to grow. It's built my confidence. I can interact with people, on multiple levels. A 180-degree change to what I used to be. Before Big hART and the 'GOLD' project, I was not a people person. But in going to the 'GOLD' show and engaging with people regularly in a wide range of activities and projects, you just learn skills to engage with people, work together, and collaborate creatively. To be a better person personally. I mean, to have a conversation like this and not feel like it's a waste of time. I'm getting something out of talking, but before Big hART I wouldn't have had that. Big hART allows me to think from a different perspective, and allow me to control my actions. Over time I have become a pacifist rather than getting angry and violent. It's about learning and growing into my true potential."*

## IDENTITY ATTRIBUTES

The following attributes of Big hART's work playing out in the identity domain.

- Identity is performed Big hART provides tools and opportunities for identity to be inquired into, experimented with – in the sense of trying on new identities – and then communicated, or rendered visible, to others. Evidence of change can be revealed in: (i) how participants view themselves, (ii) what they do, and (iii) the way they connect to others.

- Identity is emergent Key to understanding this expression of a new or emergent self is the support provided by arts workers. Making art, making time, making relationships, and making things that matter are consistent principles across Big hART projects. Making in this way can be understood as (re)presenting identity. In the most positive sense this allows reimagining and remapping connections to self, community and place –place-making in the sense of finding a place as an antidote to being lost or dislocated.

- Identity is shaped and framed by context and access to cultural resources Knowing how you fit in, or not, is key to identity formation. Performing or 'writing' a new identity is an act of agency rich with potential to create and transform; it is a 'shaping of presence' for participants, potentially enabling them to 'be' and 'be seen' differently. The arts-based practices employed by Big hART create a 'third space' that enables participants and others levels of reflection and inquiry.

- Participants' viewpoints offer rich readings that had been hidden or

marginalised, meaning that identities were elaborated and made resonant, and in some cases cultural resources were accessed for the first time. These richer readings available through the range of artefacts produced not only enabled and animated participants, but also helped those around them move beyond reductive and stigmatising views.

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

Identifying the productive conditions through which identity can be re-imagined, and cultural learning facilitated.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CO-CREATION

Big hART provides creative opportunities for participation in projects with meaning and authenticity that simply wouldn't exist without their presence. This was particularly profound in rural and remote locations where geography, transport, facilities and expertise where limited or non-existent.

### EXPERIENCE IN ART MAKING

Arts workers bring to each project a sophisticated understanding of how to make art, the power of the aesthetic, and creative problem solving. More than this was a commitment to making art with, of, for and in community, meaning that it was authentic and had meaning for those who made it.

### HIGH LEVELS OF SOCIAL SKILLS

Unconditional positive regard is a term usually attributed to the humanist Carl Rodgers (1980). It basically means that a person is accepted and supported regardless of their social status, level of ability or biography. It is generally accepted that this notion is important for positive human development and so has particular salience for arts workers who work with marginalised and disenfranchised groups. For example, young people often push back against what they see as attempts at support or care. Big hART workers through this capacity for relational ways of being and working are able metaphorically to 'hold' someone as they transition to a new sense of self.



### RECOGNITION BY OTHERS

Changes in identity are contingent on those being recognised by others. Big hART has a commitment to the quality artefacts developed through creative opportunities being of value and placed in society. This means that stereotypes of particular groups – 'at risk' young people, the elderly – are challenged as audiences can literally see participants in a new light.

### ENGAGEMENT AND EVOCATION OF AFFECT

In this attribute participants are engaged through rich personal story. This means that not only are strong stories evoked, but these are remembered as familiar human feelings, human interactions, referencing levels of connected and disconnectedness.

### WITNESSING PUBLICS

Building on, but going beyond public performance is the 'eventness' of the work. This not only engaged participants, allowing them to 'perform' differently in a public way, but affected those who bore witness to them and their experiences. This provided reciprocal benefits. There were changes of public perception and the possibility of action animated through a moral or ethical dimension. In addition, participants were allowed to belong more to the wider community who became a congregation to the work, thereby being united through the public witnessing that occurred.

## CONCLUSION

There are many 'identities' one can have; these are not 'fixed' but are flexible and hence negotiable and jointly accomplished with – or sometimes against – others. What this domain reveals is that art is a powerful way to engage with, inquire into, and express identity. Overall, Big hART projects are a platform to access, explore and express an individual's cultural identity as well as a way of experiencing other cultures. This domain is particularly significant because it exemplifies cultural learning, with the projects in this sense being understood as cultural interventions.

# DOMAINS OF CHANGE: SUMMARY

## PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS, BENEFITS, RISKS AND POSSIBILITIES

**PETER WRIGHT**

What is clear to those who consider the work of Big hART or similar participatory arts companies is that the work is complex and layered. The results of the work accrue over time and in multifarious ways. One useful way to think about this work is as an ecology of practice with many elements going to make up a whole – the whole being greater than the sum of its parts – and the interaction between them is key.

Drawing across all seven domains identified through the research we are able to describe the productive conditions that support Big hART's award-winning work. These conditions have been developed over many years of trial and error as well as successful practice.

Recognising that successful project outcomes are interactions between place, context and person, and given Big hART's exemplary practice, we can consider these productive conditions as markers of quality participatory arts practice.

What people experience is dependent on how participants engage and participate in projects, and their experience can vary depending on their own biographies, values and the meanings they attribute to them. Paradoxically, the power that comes from Big hART's responsiveness to what participants bring to the projects – in this way being authentic to them, and so 'particular' – is often perceived as a limitation in scientistic world views. What we have been able to distil from the research is that productive conditions for Big hART's exemplary participatory arts practice have the following attributes and dimensions.

**INFORMED BY THE FOLLOWING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES:**

I. values that promote individual and social growth

II. values of inclusiveness and respect

III. humanistic principles

IV. relational in nature

V. being grounded in community

**ENACTED THROUGH:**

VI. provision of opportunities

VII. provision of resources – including financial, physical, material, and varying forms of knowledge and expertise located in arts workers, creative producers and partners

VIII. embodiment of social justice principles

IX. a focus on identity work – individual and community

X. creative workshops that have meaning and authenticity

XI. animation of the imagination

XII. actively 'teaching' skills that are engaging to participants

XIII. support – notions of 'holding' participants as they grow and change

XIV. a focus on innovation and risk taking, stretching participants beyond what has been taken for granted.

**SUSTAINED THOUGH:**

XV. collaborative community partnerships

XVI. projects that are socially worthwhile to those who are in them, see them or might be touched by them

**XVII.** projects that culminate in a public event with the artefacts developed strategically placed in community

**XVIII.** a developmental approach

**XIX.** quality in both process and product.

In other words, opportunities are provided that have certain characteristics. These opportunities foreground (but are not limited to) experience in art making that is supported through high levels of social skills; with a consequence being recognition by others. In addition, these opportunities are infused by humanitarian values and principles, and the facilitation of participants working as artists. Finally, there are key moments within this social-aesthetic frame that are important for change to occur. In other words, art making and learning combine to teach and animate, provide perspective and insights, and lead to different ways of being in the world, each of which provide a call to action with an ethical or moral dimension.

**FOR THE FULL VERSION OF THIS RESEARCH:**

Wright, P. R., Down, B., Rankin, S., Haseman, B., White, M., & Davies, C. (2016). *BIG hART: Art, Equity and Community for People, Place and Policy.* Retrieved from Murdoch:

*http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/35589/*



*"Give me a laundry list and I will set it to music."*

**GIOACCHINO ROSSINI**

*"There are three primal urges in human beings: food, sex, and rewriting some else's play."*

**ROMULUS LINNEY, SIX PLAYS**

# CONCLUSION TO THE RESEARCH

# BIG HART: SPEAKING BACK TO THE RESEARCH

**SCOTT RANKIN**

A personal reflection: Big hART projects are ambitious and intense. At the time there are so many unknowns, they're all consuming, lasting years, in difficult settings with limited resources... and always about important fragile issues. The odds against success are so great the projects require a kind of vanity of belief, a belief that they are more than the sum of their parts, that they have value, that it is not hopeless, that they are offering something positive to those involved, that the idea behind the project and the combination of art making with the other layers of the project is valuable. Years later, once the project has concluded there can be a strange pendulum swing, the demon of doubt creeps in, you want to move on and not look back, in case all the failures flood in to sabotage the genuinely good attributes of the project. Conversely there can also be a sense of wanting to preserve the project and document it, not to let it slip away only to have the wheel reinvented in the future. You want the years of intense effort to have an ongoing meaning.

Yet the projects themselves don't really exit. Permanence and sustainability are over-rated. The projects have their life in the flow of culture and identity. They lodge in the lives of others – participants, audiences, communities, artists, etc., this is where their power and influence sits. And they exist also in some of the better poetics of the project. An idea rendered artfully will always deepen and grow, if the artisanship has integrity, and will remain as part of an expanding vocabulary of memory, not only amongst the participants or the audiences, but in the present for new audiences. The poetics of the project may become a kind of beacon, a channel marker in the cultural flow that others may use as they develop their own community practice and create their art, flowing on from the project, a kind of memory in the present.

Evidence, statistics, metrics, evaluations – all the easy buzz-words don't work in the same way. They are often reminders that things didn't go wrong. That projects were completed in a satisfactory way. To mitigate against risk. The evidence is useful at that moment in time, the poetics – although under-rated and perhaps suspect are more useful across time.

The currency of having an 'evidence base', of having committed and long-term observers looking at Big hART projects has thrown a new light on the idea of permanence. There is now a certain poetics of observation – the evidence itself is becoming creative and poetic. It has its own narrative academically, with many projects being evaluated over long time frames. The three projects *Ngapartji Ngapartji, LUCKY* and *GOLD* for instance inspired many others, and provide a provenance of inspiration and design. What we considered brilliant in our practice on these projects has been refined, and this is part of the legacy – the way in which communities teach Big hART as an organisation.

*Ngapartji Ngapartji* helped give rise to the permissions for the eight year *Namatjira* project, which grew into a deepening relationship with the Namatjira family. And the *Yijala Yala* project in the Pilbara flowed from both of these, and in turn evolved into the *New Roebourne* legacy project.

*Museum of the Long Weekend*, the *Acoustic Life of Sheds*, *We Vote Soon*, and a raft of other single issue projects flowed from the free-form shambolic structure of the *LUCKY* project. Similarly the ambition of *GOLD* - although not fully realized - working across a vast geography has shaped our thinking around scale and the non-geographic nature of community.

To have had a permanence of observation alongside and inside as well as outside Big hART looking at a cross-section of the work, at the same time as new projects have been emerging and delivered has been a unique opportunity, creating reflection within the work, simultaneous with the development of new iterations of that work and this is a rare thing, hopefully they are useful alongside the descriptions of projects and reflections on the model.

Sustainability is something of a weasel word that is cleverly applied where people are usually scrambling for justification of a strategy or wanting to demand more of a project. It can actually mean anything, but usually means nothing. Do we really want everything to be sustained?  Do we want to be burdened by past approaches and outputs, when we are struggling to respond to a rapidly changing

future. Do we want our poor practice to be sustained, or our guesswork? Failure is essential. It is the compost in the soil of education. A lack of sustainability is what can sometimes make these approaches to community work nutrient rich. Sustainability often means building in dependency and keeping the snout in the trough a little longer. Sustainability can be a good thing, provided you build in change and growth and risk.

It is useful to understand where these project really live and breathe – in the lives of different audiences and participants who are learning from them in different ways. It is useful to remember how they sit within the flow of cultural change, in the life and memories of communities and individuals. In this context documentation, reflection, rumination, nostalgia, evidence, aesthetics and poetics all mix together to create an ephemeral artefact for carrying forward the good ideas behind projects that do not have to be sustained, but can influence others as they re-imagine their futures, their aspirations and their trajectories, creatively through their work.

At the end of the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* documentary *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* a wise and powerful man, a Pitjantjatjara elder from Ernabella (who has since passed on) says by way of advice to Trevor Jamieson:

***"Trevor, talk about the life. Talk about the language and the culture."***

There is something big in this. The life. Not 'how things were' necessarily, not how things were compared to the brokenness now,' (the brokenness is a white lens), rather the life that runs through all things, and runs through how things will be. Talk about it. In a sense, with the benefit of 60,000 years behind him, he was talking about the constant change inherent in sustainability. Sustainability is really another word for change. Change as opposed to churn. Change driven by wisdom, and yet we often use it as another way of talking about permanence, and the fear of change... as a kind of grab for power.

If the words in this document are to be useful they should help to avoid the dogma of the community sector – including Big hART's dogma. They should help to reflect and dream up new approaches to this kind of work. Community diplomacy should encourage thriving and flourishing pockets to emerge in communities through working within the flow of culture. This sits well with the idea of entwined domains, or 'estates' – whole ecologies – where change continually takes place. Nothing is in stasis, and in this work everyone in a community has a responsibility to work with change. Whether you run the local newsagent or car yard or you're an artist or community worker, you are part of imagining the future life of the community. The domains outlined above by the researchers from (Murdoch, QUT and Durham universities), through spending time with these Big hART projects and the communities that invited us in, provide valuable ways of thinking about and defining work of this nature.

As Margaret Meade has said change is often precipitated through 'a small group of committed friends'. It is easy to undervalue the strength of a small group of friends/workers/artists compared to large strategies and organisations. However a crystal clear idea, a deep commitment, a savvy and working as friends 'with a secret' can be very effective in lighting the bushfire of change. The intensity of it, the shorthand, the shared values, the maturity it requires, the reward, is 'the life'. It is meaningful. It is poetic. It lives not in dogma and sustainability, but in those who shift their identity through involvement, through change, and the flow of culture.

We are awash in the white noise of media – old and new creating tangles of time-consuming networks and information, all demanding a response or deletion. Digital coms are flicked between us like information gluttons, feeding off our vanity and need for connection, often this information is masquerading as a way of taking action to bring about 'change'. Yet the superficial candy of the 'like' is often a way of not taking action. This white noise keeps us switched on, unable to say 'no', prostituting the small amount of time our brains are awake and perceptive to receive new ideas, ways of thinking, ways of maturing, ways of giving and receiving. We are promiscuous with our receptive hearts and minds and devices, fearing that if they do not remain 'on' and at hand, that nothing may come and that nothingness is a harbinger for frightening digital mortality. And so over-achieving is the new achieving, multi-tasking the new diligence. We are rarely quiet enough or focused enough to be able to discern and decipher rather than just receive. Instead we get sucked to the left or the right, to the binary, into the noise and into group vanity.

However, change happens in and through relationships. Change for the better depends on discernment. It has more to do with poetry than information and

intervention, more to do with narrative, more to do with imagining a future diplomatically, and describing it in story form, so a community can move within it and towards it. In social settings this needs to be balanced with how the narrative is getting told, who is included in it, who is invisible, who have cultural rights and who doesn't, and how a tribe is being formed around it. Something as complex as contributing to change through community development, and tackling these issues of social invisibility works very well amongst a small group of committed friends, and this is the basis of Big hART's work.

The work is a series of domains, which are overlaid in a rhizomic manner, defying reduction, and never locked into the dogmatic. Next time Big hART's work is examined, some of these core attributes or domains will be the same, and some will no doubt have been refined. And like the observations in this monograph, many of the deepest things will come from the acute perceptions of those who continue to quietly explore the projects and approaches, and ask questions through the filter of their inquiry, over the next 25 years... or 5years... or 5 months – sustainability doesn't mean forever, sustainability is about changing with grace... it's like jumping on a skim board at the beach, in the shallows, in the summer, the joy comes from knowing the ride can't last forever, but there's more where that came from, and next time it will be perfect.

Big hART would like to thank the researchers and observers who have taken an academic and a poetic interest in researching our work and applied themselves to its analysis, sometimes following projects in difficult locations over many years.

# ESSAYS

*"The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination."*

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*"Truth never damages a cause that is just."*

**MAHATMA GANDHI**

*"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."*

**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**



# ON THE (IM)PRACTICAL AND (IM)POSSIBLE PERFORMANCES OF BIG hART: THE VALUE OF CULTURE IN CREATING FLOURISHING LIVELIHOODS

**KERRIE SCHAEFFER**

I've been interested in the work of Big hART for several years now, observing as an international arts festival goer/spectator (Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney), in parallel with the development of my own practice–based research, and latterly research, in the field of community-based performance. As a member of the Performance, Community Development and Social Change research group led by my erstwhile, and now emeritus, Drama colleague, Associate Professor David Watt, at the University of Newcastle, Big hART's work has provided one (of several) model(s) of praxis not only in relation to our own processes but to refer to students, academic researchers, participants and stakeholders when we hoped to make a case for, or otherwise found it difficult to articulate, the possibilities of performance (beyond producing a 'play' with professional performers in a traditional 'theatre' space).

While working on the Birabahn/Threlkeld Project[1], I followed the development of Big hART's *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, which examines the legacy of the then Australian government's decision to allow British atomic bomb testing on the homelands of the Pila Nguru (Spinifex people) in the Western Desert region of Australia. The story of the propulsion of the Spinifex people into the global flows of nuclear modernity is told with reference to the family history of performer, Trevor Jamieson, poignantly linking the personal and political. Ngapartji Ngapartji explores the material, social and spiritual disintegration that followed in the wake of the bombs, and draws out points of continuity via 'vertical mobility', or movement in 'deep time', that make it possible to re-imagine vital livelihoods projected beyond the radioactive half life of the residual elements of the bombs[2]. *Ngapartji Ngapartji*deals in radical hope and reciprocity as foregrounded in the

1 See Schaefer, K. 2009. 'The Birabahn/Threlkeld Project: Place, History, Memory, Performance and Coexistence' in Political Performances. Theory and Practice. Eds. Susan Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz and E.J. Westlake. Amsterdam: Rodopi

2 See Gilbert, H. 2013. 'Indigeneity, Time and the Cosmopolitics of Postcolonial Belonging in the Atomic Age' in Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies. 15.2: **195-210. Gilbert draws on geographer Nigel Clark's concepts of vertical mobility and deep time**.

project title taken from a Pitjantjatjara expression meaning, 'I give you something, you give me something'. The exquisite performance initiates a relationship that compels an engaged response with Big hART's broader cultural activities in Alice Springs and elsewhere on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Central to such activity is the online Pitjantjatjara language and culture site (ninti.ngapartji.org) and community organizing focused on a national Indigenous language policy.

That an arts project such as *Ngapartji Ngapartji* might materially support the revitalisation of language and culture provided a point of connection to the Birabahn/Threlkeld project in Lake Macquarie (supported by University of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie City Council and Arts NSW). The Birabahn/Threlkeld project re-examined the relationship between English missionary, Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld, and Awaba-kal leader, Birabahn, described as the "greatest English language scholar of the 19th century"[3], and whose bi-lingual proficiency was fundamentally crucial to the production of the first written documentation of an Indigenous language in Australia[4]. Given that Threlkeld and Birabahn together produced a written record of the Awabakal language, one of the questions of the project was how performance might contribute to reviving a dormant language. Unfortunately, the extent to which a project sited in central Australia could serve as model for a project located close to the site of 'first settlement' proved to be quite limited (and limiting). In contrast to the Spinifex people who were suddenly thrust into the flows of a particular modernity, the process of colonization on the East coast of Australia was arguably more mundane but no less banal in its outcomes. To follow through a particular practical example in this context would have been impractical, if not impossible. While the Birabahn/Threlkeld project raised questions about how it might be possible to revive a dormant language in and through performance, it also drifted into questions concerning language group boundaries and inter-relations between language groups. These were contentious issues due, in large part, to the residual effects of the long term, violent processes of colonization and it wasn't the aim of the project to catalyse further division. The project sought to explore reciprocity in the relationship between Birabahn and Threlkeld, and to seek in its historical example resources for conflict management and coexistence in a post-Reconciliation context.

3 Maynard, J. 2002: ***https://downloads.newcastle.edu.au/library/cultural%20collections/awaba/people/birabahn.html***
4 Threlkeld, L. E. 1834. *An Australian Grammar: comprehending the principles and natural rules of the language, as spoken by the Aborigines in the vicinity of Hunter's River, Lake Macquarie &c., New South Wales. Sydney, Stephens and Stokes.*



Big hART's *Northcott Narratives*, set within the John Northcott housing estate in Surry Hills, in inner city Sydney, offered a touchstone for the '2036 Windale Project' which began in about 2005 after an approach from Rotarians from Bennett's Green. A suburb in the City of Lake Macquarie, Bennett's Green, is divided by the Pacific Highway from the adjacent suburb of Windale, a residential estate with a high percentage (approximately two-thirds) of public housing. The high concentration of public housing might not be remarkable except for the fact that when it was established Windale was provided with its own post-code. It is this irregular combination of single-suburb post-code and high concentration of public housing that has led successive research studies into social disadvantage to label Windale the most deprived urban post-code area in New South Wales and Victoria[5]. That Windale topped this post-code-based social deprivation index twice in succession confirmed it as a place of entrenched social deprivation requiring urgent intervention. The influential and oft-reported research report compounded negative stereotypes of Windale residents (see the regular segment, 'Wayne from Windale', or the one-off 'special report' on the 'Windale Earthquake', both created and broadcast by a local, commercial FM radio station). Against this background, the Bennett's Green Rotarians wanted to make a performance with residents of Windale to be held in a premier venue such as the Civic Theatre in Newcastle's emerging 'cultural precinct', hence the approach to Drama. There were several points in the approach that influenced the decision to engage with the Rotarians. Firstly, Windale's status and reputation as socially deprived was fundamentally queried. Secondly it was assumed that performance had the potential to enact 'community' differently. Lastly, the Rotarians clearly believed that Windale residents were more than capable of co-creating a work of high cultural value. There was some prevarication around the idea of a performance produced and presented in a traditional cultural venue. A main aim was to keep the process and any high-profile, public performance outcomes situated in Windale in order to create a positive, public profile of the place itself. Moreover, Windale was where residents were secure in their local knowledge and expertise, able to draw on and develop community assets, and to directly or indirectly participate in all/any aspects of the creative process.

5 Vinson, T. 1999 Unequal in Life: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services; 2004 Community Adversity and Resilience: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services.

Again, Big hART's work on the John Northcott estate provided an example of what might be possible. A long-term process engaging multiple arts and social agencies culminated, in 2006, with Sydney Festival performances of *Stickybricks* on the estate. A car park was laid with grass turf and set with a stage made out of large, white, brick-like blocks. The high-rise buildings set behind the improvised open-air auditorium, became a surface onto which colourful, patterned illuminations were projected. The performance of the estate as a built environment extended beyond its surface and saw stairwells, balconies and apartment windows exploited as performance spaces. In the foreground, professional performers and estate residents appeared together to interweave discursive narratives and diverse experiences of dwelling in a public housing estate. The performance palimpsest provided a persuasive example to the Rotarians, and captured the imagination of Kathy Mee, a Human Geographer with a research specialism in public housing (cultivated by growing up in public housing estate in Western Sydney) and a cognate understanding of community as dynamically enacted, as opposed to a static social welfare determination. After initial field research, many meetings and some small amounts of funding (from Rotary and the Department of Housing) to pilot creative projects (led by Brian Joyce), a collaborative team began on an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant application to, very briefly, execute and critically evaluate a number of performance-based Community Cultural Development (CCD) projects in Windale.

The vagaries of research funding and life being as they are, what had roots in a collective, inter-disciplinary, practice-based investigation of CCD in Newcastle, Australia, has shifted to an individual research project undertaken in the Drama department at the University of Exeter in the UK (with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Leverhulme Trust and Singapore's National Arts Council). It maintains tendril-like links to Australia, not least via a case study of Big hART's *Hipbone Sticking Out* made as part of the Yijala Yala project based in Roebourne in the Pilbara region of WA. What has facilitated an ongoing connection with Big hART's work, and a move into ethnographic study of a performance making process in the Pilbara, is, primarily, the company's participation in the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) in Rotterdam in 2011, 2014 and 2017. ICAF is a triennial gathering of international community arts practitioners and researchers led by the incredible team at Rotterdam's Wijktheater in close partnership with Utrecht-based community arts researcher/ practitioner, Eugene van Erven. Big hART's inclusion in festivals in 2011 (*Ngapartji Ngapartji*), 2014 (*Blue Angel*) and 2017 (*Namatjira*) has opened the way for critical comparative analysis of their work in the international field of community arts practice[6].

Big hART's multi-layered methodology involving individual, community and national social policy change along with the creation of exquisite art has been subject to thorough ongoing analysis. There is, understandably, wariness within the field concerning the appropriation by dominant culture of indigenous or community embedded cultural practices and the commodification of these cultural forms via their re-presentation as an experience of 'authenticity' for privileged 'others'. There is also discomfort with the notion of art as a tool for social change given the instrumentalisation of arts in cultural policy (especially in the UK). As 'community' moves from being a 'territory of government to a means of government'[7], there are legitimate concerns about the place of community and participatory arts practices in post-welfare states. At the same, time, criticism of Big hART's methodology tends to overlook the fact that the development of community arts (and community cultural development) in Australia has occurred in a close relationship with government (cultural) policy and patronage[8]. There is, or has been, an advanced understanding of community as, essentially, creative and of the relationship between creating community and health/wellbeing at state and local government levels[9]. The official support of community arts as an art form worthy of funding by the Australia Council for the Arts, and the attachment of arts/culture to other policy areas may go some way towards explaining Big hART's artistic/creative virtuosity and the company's capacity to achieve policy ambitions linking the fields of culture, education, criminal justice, and/or health and wellbeing.

This is not to underestimate the effort it takes to effect social/policy change. While *Ngapartji Ngapartji* was successful in campaigning for a national Indigenous

6 See Jan Cohen-Cruz and Eugene van Erven 'A Field Ready to Leave Home: Notes from the ICAF seminar' (pp. 140-180) and Schaefer, K 'Something is Happening Here! Big hART's *Ngapartji Ngapartji* in Rotterdam' (pp. 198-213) in *Community Art Power. Essays from ICAF* 2011 Ed. Eugene van Erven. Rotterdams Wijktheater, 2013.
7 Rose, N. in Mulligan, M and Smith, P. 2010 *Art Governance and the Turn to Community. Putting Art at the Heart of Local Government*. Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, p. 31.
8 Hawkins, G. 1993. *From Nimbin To Mardi Gras. Constructing Community Arts*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin; McEwen, C. 2008. *Investing in Play: Expectations, Dependencies and Power in Australian Practices of Community Cultural Development*. PhD thesis. University of Sydney, NSW.
9 see Mulligan and Smith (2010 ).

language policy to support the teaching of Indigenous languages in schools, the restoration of watercolourist Namatjira's copyright to his descendants (*Ngapartji Ngapartji*) or the *One in Two: Unlock the Future* campaign, which seeks to address incarceration of Indigenous Australians (*Yijala Yala)*, remain ongoing struggles. These long-term arts and social processes comprise small steps and quick wins, and sometimes run into dead ends. However, the creative producers and teams continue working the angles, and finding points of leverage, all the while producing astonishingly beautiful artistic outputs. This became clearer when I sat down to talk to Chris Saunders, Creative Producer on *Northcott Narratives* and *GOLD*. Big hART's *Northcott Narratives* was instrumental in the John Northcott estate becoming the first public housing estate in the world to be accredited as a member of the International Safe Community Movement by the World Health Organisation (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Community Safety[10]. I had assumed that it was the strength of the process and the power of the creative outputs (performances, art exhibitions, music, etc.) that led to this significant international award. However, Saunders explained that this wasn't a straightforward case of recognition. Rather, contemplating the end of Big hART's creative intervention, Saunders began thinking of ways to bind social agencies in to providing continued support for the Northcott estate residents. He began to search online and discovered, via a well-known internet search engine, the WHO Safe Community movement. In making the application for Safe Community accreditation for the Northcott estate, Saunders and Big hART aimed to bind their partners into a formal agreement to provide continuing support for the tenants and their programs for change. In other words, with the WHO Safe Community accreditation, Big hART aimed to sustain the hard won collaboration of different social agencies which had resulted in more engaged and holistic mode of support of tenants who had, at the same time, assumed collective agency in directing that same service provision. Implicit in Saunder's responsive legacy planning was the recognition that the social dysfunction at the John Northcott estate was not due to the tenants but was a product, largely, of different government/public bodies and organisations failing to coordinate services to a community with complex needs.

The fragility of the changes catalysed by Big hART's creative intervention on the Northcott estate was highlighted only a few days after the StickybrickS run of performances. Approximately sixteen days after the four night, sell-out Sydney Festival season of *Stickybricks* a skeleton was discovered in an apartment on the estate. Despite Big hART's sustained media campaign to promote positive stories at Northcott and a series of high profile art projects highlighting the exceptional creativity of Northcott residents, the media seized on the tragedy. News crews converged on the estate from where they filmed live reports for hourly news programs, their site-specific performances re-presenting the Northcott estate as a spectacle of death, deprivation, dysfunction, decay, and despair. The journalists and camera operators are shown in 900 Neighbours, a documentary film made about the process, paying little attention to the residents milling about in their near vicinity: their message is already pre-formulated and pre-packaged. Similarly, The New South Wales Minister for Housing and Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health) is shown appearing before the news cameras performing for the media the government's concern. This extends to enjoining public housing tenants to become better neighbours by 'saying hello' and to 'getting to know' each other (which, she explains, is the message contained in a stack of pamphlets she has brought to post around the estate space). It was unclear whether she was ignorant of the work of the Northcott tenants, Big hART, local police officers and the department of housing, or whether she sought to capitalize on it. *900 Neighbours* beautifully highlights the default performances of powerful interests, such as the media and politicians. The attempt by a state government minister to shift social responsibility for the tragedy onto the estate residents, and to suggest behavioural change as a singular solution, remains extraordinarily revealing.

It could be argued that these events at the John Northcott estate call into question the power of community-based arts projects to create and sustain social change. What these events appear to make abundantly clear, however, is the refusal of certain powerful elements in society to positively engage with particular types of communities and their programs for change. It raises the question of who is, in fact, the anti-social 'other' in society? In a wide ranging discussion of social inclusion/exclusion in their Vic Health commissioned report, *Creating Communities*, Mulligan et. al. promote a broad understanding of social exclusion as the "ways in which people are systematically cut off from the resources – economic, social and political – that are necessary to fully

10 More information and access to a copy of the application is available at: ***http://www.safecommunities.org.nz/sc/nort/view***

participating in society"[11]. The report's authors further elaborate a more nuanced conception of social exclusion as forced and voluntary (my emphasis), after Anthony Giddens and others who were conscious of not further stigmatizing an excluded underclass. According to Mulligan et. al., voluntary social exclusion "refers to situations where people can afford to effectively secede from the rest of society, and their obligations to it, exemplified in such practices as tax evasion or choosing to live in a gated community"[12]. They assert that "in theory, voluntary and forced exclusion are … causally connected – that is, opting out of social and financial obligation by those at the top has the effect of further excluding those as the bottom, such that reducing voluntary exclusion is seen as key to solving forced exclusion"[13]. However, Mulligan et. al. also note that in practical policy contexts the expanded notion of inclusion has been lost: "the focus of much recent policy around social inclusion and exclusion has almost exclusively been on the forced exclusion of those at the bottom, with little attention paid or actions taken to re-connect those at the top into the social bonds of community"[14]. While policy makers may have returned to a narrow understanding of social inclusion/exclusion, community-based performance practitioners have been concerned to 're-connect those at the top into the social bonds of community', which is essential to reducing inequality, a key social determinant of health and wellbeing[15].

The value of radical inclusiveness is carried into the *Yijala Yala* project where Big hART, based on an invitation from the Roebourne/Ieramugadu community, is working with a wide range of interests, including multi-national mining corporations, involved in the governance of remote Australian communities. *Yijala Yala* is a multi-arts program engaging in performance (*Hipbone Sticking Out*), digital media (*NEOMAD*), film (*Smashed*) and music (*MURRU*) co-production. *Hipbone Sticking Out*, made by Big hART with the family of John Pat and members of the wider Roebourne/Ieramugadu community, revisits the death of 16 year old Pat in police custody in 1983, one of many deaths that triggered a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991). The final

11 Mulligan, M., Humphery, K., James, P., Scanlon, C., Smith, P., and Welch, N. 2006. ***Creating Community: Celebrations, Arts and Wellbeing Within and Across Local Communities***, VicHealth and Globalism Research Centre, Melbourne, p. 26.
12 ibid. p. 27.
13 ibid.
14 ibid.
15 Marmot, M and Wilkinson, R.G. 2006. ***Social Determinants of Health*** (2nd edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press.



report of the Commission in 1991 made 339 recommendations, however, few have been implemented[16]. In addition to remembering John Pat, working with Indigenous inmates in Roebourne goal, and young people at high risk of or already in contact with the criminal justice system, Big hART is engaged in a campaign to address the ongoing problem of disproportionately high rates of incarceration of Indigenous Australians, and the sheer waste of human potential attached to that. Contact with the criminal justice system has been recognized, along with poor health and education outcomes, as a serious impediment preventing Indigenous participation in the mainstream Australian economy[17]. At a time when the mining industry in the Pilbara is booming, it is scandalous that such impediments to Indigenous participation in the mainstream Australian economy remain in place.

The death of 16 year old Pat in 1983 marked something of a turning point coming towards the end an earlier mining boom, beginning in the 1960s, that led to social disintegration similar, perhaps, to the detonation of a nuclear bomb: 'everything fell apart'[18]. It's a long and complicated history, and I do unpack and discuss it in more detail elsewhere. What I want to focus on here is now. The *Yijala Yala* project takes its name from the Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi words for now. Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi are the main language groups of the people who came from across the region to settle in the town of Roebourne, on Ngarluma country. Once the main town in the Pilbara, Roebourne is now mostly home to Indigenous groups after mining companies built new towns that mine working populations and government services re-located to. Now mining corporations under Native Title legislation introduced in the 1993 are required to sit down and negotiate with native title owners. Now some of these companies, in particular the older more established ones[19], are taking seriously the responsibility placed on them by government grant of social licence to operate. Now these companies are exploring ways of addressing the destruction of Indigenous cultural heritage as in the destruction of rock art on Murujuga/Burrup Peninsula (named after its topography which resembles a hipbone sticking out). Now there is an opportunity to invest large amounts of money paid to traditional owners of the land on which mining occurs to address the government deficits that have led to remote Australia becoming a 'Failed State'[20].

16 ***https://changetherecord.org.au/review-of-the-implementation-of-rciadic-may-2015***
17 See Taylor, J and Scambary, B. 2005. ***Indigenous People and the Pilbara Mining Boom: A Baseline for regional Participation*** ANU e-Press No. 25.
18 See ***Exile and the Kingdom*** 1993 [Documentary Film] Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation.
19 See Edmunds, M. 'A New Story – Roebourne: a case study' in Walker (2012).
20 See Walker, B.W. (Ed.) 2012. ***The Challenge, Conversation, Commissioned Papers and Regional Studies of Remote Australia,*** Desert Knowledge Australia, Alice Springs.

I got a sense of the urgency invested in the present moment when listening to Marcia Langton's Boyer Lectures (2012) on the journey to the Pilbara from Exeter, UK. In an argumentative tour de force she takes issue with criticism of the dominance of mining in remote area economies in Australia. She characterises this criticism as coming primarily from left-leaning, non-Indigenous, cosmopolitan environmentalists who assume, moreover, that Indigenous groups support their concerns about the impact of mining on the land and the environment. Langton asserts that the assumptions underpinning this critical position reveal a pernicious racism:

How did it come about that the economic life of Aboriginal people has come to mean mendicancy on the welfare state? How did it come to be that those of us who argue for jobs for Aboriginal people, for policies that encourage entrepreneurship among Aboriginal people, are despised and loathed by that section of the population that can only tolerate the 'cultural Aborigine'?

Drawing on Noel Pearson's program for Indigenous economic development on Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, Langton makes clear that participation in the mining industry presents a once in a lifetime opportunity for remote Indigenous communities to break the cycle of welfare dependency and engage in the mainstream Australian economy. While Pearson's program is, in fact, a four part plan which entails 'access to traditional subsistence resources, adaptation of welfare programs into reciprocity programs and the development community economies'[21], it is the fourth element of the plan, that is, engagement in the mainstream economy, which has been broadly adopted including by government in a policy shift from self determination to 'mainstreaming'. That subsistence livelihoods, reciprocity and community economies have given way to Indigenous participation in mainstream economy, reinforces the dominant notion that the Pilbara, like other remote parts of Australia where industrial scale mining occurs, is an economy rather than also a society[22].

Anthropological research undertaken in the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, at the Australian National University, Canberra, has examined the economic impact of remote area mining[23] and the history of Indigenous participation in the mining industry in the Pilbara[24]. This body of research asserts, contrary to Langton, that mining has not had a significant economic impact on remote Indigenous communities. In fact, it is claimed that there are significant impediments (education, health, contact with the criminal justice system, etc.) that prevent Indigenous people from participating in the mainstream Australian economy now and in the future. The research argues further that a broad based desire to participate in the mining industry is demonstrably not present. Holcombe's study of historical aboriginal engagement in mining demonstrates that, due to lack of missions/missionaries in the Pilbara, traditional (that is, culturally disposed) and communitarian modes of Indigenous organisation remain dominant. This default communitarian mode of organization has been effectively mobilised in the past, for instance, during the Pilbara pastoral workers' strike of 1946, and has shaped Indigenous engagement with the mining industry in the region. Holcombe notes that the communitarian structures of Indigenous organization (such as collective bargaining and community trusts) tend to inhibit the sort of individualist, entrepreneurial activity dominant in the mainstream economy. Scambary and Holcombe come to the conclusion that the creation of culturally disposed livelihoods and community economies will probably outweigh Indigenous participation in the mainstream economy of the mining industry.

It is significant that Big hART's work in the Pilbara has been attuned to the development of culturally specific livelihoods as well as mainstream cultural production and distribution. In addition to producing a national touring piece of theatre, *Hipbone Sticking Out*, the *Yijala Yala* project has supported the development of performances (theatre, dance and music) for the Roebourne cultural centre and amphitheatre, and for other times/spaces that have specific, as opposed to mainstream, meaning and significance (such as the forthcoming performances in memorium for John Pat). Scambary has said in relation to economic development in remote Australia that, "there exists a poor understanding of Indigenous capacity by the state and the mining industry" and that this lack of understanding "perpetuates dichotomous relationships with Indigenous people"[25]. Big hART's navigation of Indigenous participation in

21 Scambary, B. 2009, p. 180.
22 Edmunds in Walker (2012).
23 Taylor, J and Scambary, B. 2005. ***Indigenous People and the Pilbara Mining Boom: A Baseline for regional Participation*** ANU e-Press No. 25; Scambary, B. 2009. 'Mining Agreements, development, aspirations and livelihoods' in Altman, J and Martin, D. (Eds) ***Power Culture Economy: Indigenous Australia and Mining*** ANU e-Press, No. 30; Scambary, B. 2013. My Country, Mine Country: Indigenous People, Mining and Development Contestation in Remote Australia. ANU e-Press No. 33.
24 Holcombe, S. 2004. ***Early Indigenous Engagement with Mining in the Pilbara: Lessons From a Historical Perspective*** ANU e-Press No. 24.
25 Scambary, B. 2009, p. 201

mainstream culture, whether that's national (Australian) theatre or commercial digital media production, is embedded in the development of specific cultural dispositions and identities. The virtuosic act of broaching these otherwise disconnected or disjunctive spaces places cultural production firmly in dialogue with economic development and opens up radical possibilities for future performance practice.

*I'd like to thank Big hART Creative Producers (past and present) - Chris Saunders, Sophia Marinos, Cecily Hardy, and Debra Myers – and then National Producer Alex Kelly - for being profligate with a scare resource: their time! Also thanks to Scott and the team for allowing me to observe Yijala Yala process in May 2013 in Roebourne/ Port Samson.*



*"We have words for racism and sexism, but wealth discrimination isn't fully recognized. It is a bias in favor of the wealthy and against labor, the environment, and the community. Concern for the public good must become the animating force of our economic order."*

**MARJORIE KELLY**

*"I think it is important that people who are perceived as liberals not be afraid of talking about moral and community values."*

**MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN**

# SOGGY BISCUIT

## INVISIBLE LIVES – OR THE EMPEROR'S NEW SOCIAL WORK?

**SCOTT RANKIN**

*Soggy Biscuit first appeared in 'The Griffith Review' - number 44.*

IN the first month of John Howard's government, my then toddler son offered the new Prime Minister a soggy biscuit. That moment came early in my attempt to set up a savvy arts-based company that could experiment with cultural approaches to complex social problems. Without realising it at the time, the soggy encounter was the turning point in Big hART's approach to Community Cultural Development (CCD).

There we were in the hallowed halls of Parliament House, about to introduce the PM to his best worst nightmare – a bunch of ex-juvenile offenders, reformed recidivists from Tasmania. Mr Howard came striding across the marble, media-scum stumbling and cursing behind him like some multi-limbed pot-bellied animatronic political spore, as he power-walked his way to the theatrette deep in the bowels of the building. History was working in our favour that day. Tasmania in early 1996 was momentarily flavour of the month, especially when it came to young offenders, and so the PM had agreed to meet us.

My young son in his blue polka-dot onesie, brandishing a rusk sucked to a dangerous point, stopped the whole posse. The security contingent blinked at the half-chewed weapon. Mr Howard's eyebrows twitched like instinctual 'bad-photo-op-antennae', men in black talked into their cufflinks... If it were just a baby that needed kissing, easy done, but this disarming offer of soggy communion, this subversive snack, the toddler table manners? Nobody was sure what to do.

Cameras shifted their Cyclops gaze back and forth. Then, out of the mouth of a babe, a tremendous biscuit burp. Saved. The PM laughed, pinched Locky's Rubenesque cheek and swept triumphantly into the theatrette to meet the ex-recalcitrants, who, apparently, had been reformed by art. Not the sort of gig a PM from the Right would normally say yes to, but these were dark and desperate days as the spectre of US-style gun-barrel criminality threatened the peaceful backwater of Australia.

In the cock-a-hoop weeks following Mr Howard's election, things had been travelling nicely until the day Martin Bryant, slaughtered the innocent on the same blood-soaked soil that once housed a decidedly brutal public policy solution for recidivists at Port Arthur. Bryant was nothing special, like many other young people on the fringes – boring, jilted, disconnected. In fact, he was not unlike quite a few young people involved in Big hART's early arts-based projects dealing with society's invisible contemporary lepers: young offenders; women and children split open by fist and phallus; injecting young people at risk of HIV, scare-mongered underground by ponytailed advertising wunderkinds with big budgets and small brains; the rural poor; whatever.

This was the context Prime Minister Howard walked into when offered that rusk. A bunch of young people from the fringes of the law, lying in wait on stage, with hundreds of house bricks stacked and ready, about to perform some dangerous brick-throwing performance art for an unsuspecting PM.

A mashed-up experimental mix of Kronos and Nirvana met the PM's ears as, on stage, a brick set was torn apart. Choreographed masonry flew through the air with precision and was stacked faster than a bricklayer's apprentice could be bastardised in a portaloo. Sitting there, the prime minister may have struggled with this set of slightly obtuse metaphors –

> *"hmm, everything made of paper and bricks unravelling in this performance piece created in the pulp'n'paper mill town of Burnie, all the structures falling down, families breaking apart, crime on the rise... Economic and societal concepts, captured without a word in a sophisticated mash of mixed media pulp-non-fiction. It's fine at some G20 thing, to sit wearing funny shirts and watch a bit of culture, but not in our own backyard please – his fixed smile seemed to say. Which newbie adviser got me into this mess? Sack 'em."*

By the end, though, he knew from the pin-drop silence he was witnessing something special, and even if the dramaturgy of the art was difficult to decipher,

what he couldn't deny was the dramaturgy of the independently evaluated stats we presented alongside the performance – one offence a week from the target group at the beginning of the project, one offence in ten months at the conclusion. You could see the PM's people doing the math, counting the beans, instead of watching the performance – excellent, just as we hoped, forget the art, this represented a saving of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the taxpayer. More importantly however, here was a good-news story from Tasmania, and a moment to reinforce strong leadership after the Port Arthur Massacre – a new narrative for the decisive new track-suited action man. Golden opp. Bingo... 'I don't know much about cultural solutions but I like what I know. Quick, somebody draft a press release.'

If I wanted to use the word 'beauty' here in a serious discussion of art and culture, people could well snigger – What is beauty, What does it mean? What is its value in the context of the arts? However if I wanted to talk beauty in the context of sport – Ah yes, the beautiful game. We'd accept it without a second thought. We hear it regularly in the media. It may say more about the health of sport than the crises of meaning at the heart of the arts.

Football could be viewed as a very interesting integrated community development model – toddlers drawn to it from isolated houses in problem suburbs and put into teams, with coaches and mentors, a sense of belonging, colours, songs, discipline, volunteering, cake stalls, fitness, alertness, reward, end of season rituals, small shiny sculptures handed out, families who don't know each other bonding over a sausage sizzle. (Sure it has been stolen from the community by some of the world's largest global companies to flog alcohol through association with macho stereotypes of winning, heroism and steroids, and sure it's been infected to its core by the virus of gambling and cheating, but we seem to ignore that.)

Unlike artists, sports elites see themselves as mere heroes, whereas the arts quietly casts its best practitioners as messiahs leading society to a better place. The lingering scent leftover from enlightenment: the arts as a way to a higher self,' a better world, a way to bring about change.

The idea that there could be solutions found through cultural activity is a genuinely interesting one. We have to be careful here, because the notion of 'wanting to bring about change' walks on the knife-edge of fanaticism. Roll the title 'Cultural Solutions' around in your mouth and it can reek of finality, of a dying pillow, of brutal change-ism. Solution sounds definitive, whereas culture is never final. Communities are never static. Answers are mirages. There is no neat utopia.

There is, however, something deep and worth exploring in this enveloping idea of culture, in which all our lives unfold.

Sport, like art, has sometimes been hijacked for social purposes. Sport could be used right now in this way. For instance, why, in the twenty-first century, do other countries agree to play sport against Australia – given our extraordinary expressions of malice and hatred against the most vulnerable in our community? No, not the current poster child of our café-self-flagellation, refugees, let's look closer to home. Right now, fifty-one out of every hundred young people in the juvenile justice system are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Where are the boycotts of the Ashes, or of the beautiful game, or AFL? Right now, at the same time as we are locking these young people in wicked proportions, footy scouts are out scouring the country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent, to pluck young gladiators out of obscurity for mass entertainment in beer-soaked arenas.

We lock up these boys to try and reduce crime rates. In this, as in many areas of high social need, punitive and legislative solutions do little more than create industries, waste taxpayers' money, break mothers' hearts, and perpetrate a cultural genocide on a generation. For what? To win scrappy, 'law and order' one-upmanship electoral skirmishes?

The arts have no more responsibility than any other sector to assist with solutions. Could we have a Real Estate Solution, or a Manufacturing Solution. The sports industry already does a lot of good work. All sectors can and do contribute to both problems and solutions.

But culture is worth a second look, because it envelops both problems and solutions. Culture is not a chapter in the story, it is the story, everything else sits within it, as it unfolds, and it is this 'unfolding' process that is so useful to this discussion.

What could 'cultural solutions' possibly be? Perhaps it's those well designed, inexpensive, layered and effective, creatively infused community development projects – so often the targets for cheap shots for not being 'evidence based', or lacking longitudinal studies, too soft, the good works of bleeding hearts etc. It's all too easy to view complex approaches to complex problems dismissively from the sanctuary of the gated intellectual communities of the cloistered commentariat, their opinion-fingers tapping away after their morning metro swim, doing laps across the perfectly textured crema of their milky flat-white sea. Oh, for a caffeinated great white to leap from the deep dark double-shot depths and, in one gulp turn their Twitter-fingers into useless stumps. Half the country's print media would hit streets empty, screens blank. 'Write your own misplaced opinion here.'

It is right to be suspicious of 'solutions', it is a presumptive word. Solutions are simple and neat. Culture is complex and untidy. Can they work together? The best attempts to work with and in communities, to trigger positive developments using cultural approaches, are messy, rambling, hard to define, and require real, diligent, personalised, one-on-one, values-in-action work, in the field, by people with integrity.

Culture is always part of the problem as well as the solution. It's a moveable feast of dodgy contradiction and mostly, success won't even look like a solution – not the kind of solution a stats-saint like Don Weatherburn would like anyway. It takes six years to train to become a doctor, it takes a decade to learn to work innovatively in a hard social and cultural context, on the job, and by then you're burnt out and bitter as a lemon. I know I am, thirty years on.

The early Big hART performance in Parliament House could have been defined as a cultural solution, but not because we were using 'the arts' as part of a reformist agenda. Rather, it could have been defined that way because it was working as part of a complex system. We were trying to understand, and speak to the many different layers of our audience – the political dramaturgy as well as the theatrical one. The prime minister only played a small part in this long and complex cultural project, but these young people who were telling their story, controlled the moment and placed many different aspects of their emerging solution on show, artfully, in a place of power. The complexity was not so much in the content of what was on stage, but in the long-term processes used to create it, and then to place it in front of these multiple audiences. Not one critic, patron, subscriber, agent or arts funding person was in the room or even knew of this very targeted use of high-end performance work for these very specialist audiences, it was a new expression of dramaturgy.

Naively, from then on we claimed Parliament House as our own theatre, and for the rest of Howard's eleven years in office, it was sometimes useful to be able to write 'Launched by the Prime Minister, The Honourable John Howard MP', when we were struggling to get traction on an issue.

Politicians come and go, but from that exercise we learned many things. We learned about multiple audiences and how to speak to them simultaneously; about avoiding funding ghettos; about how change unfolds; about the serious business of assisting change that is happening all the time in difficult social settings; about how the arts are largely irrelevant in Canberra; about how the business end of the public service has hardly heard of a tiny arts agency like the Australia Council; about how many, many of the people working within the public service are trying to bring about solutions to social problems and are working incredibly hard; about how to spot a dud public servant and shut down a meeting; about how to know when you are being fobbed off and to keep that steel-capped iconic artisan shoe in the door; about how public servants rarely get out into the field and how many aspects of the stories they are trying to deal with are new and emerging and almost invisible to them; about how little departmental corporate memory there really is; about how the loudest blowfly buzzwords in grant applications 'sustainability, capacity building, best practice', are mostly just boxes in search of ticks, in an infinite loop, vital tips for making 'experimental, complex, outsider art, with communities'. Gulp, I mean making 'cultural solutions'.

Perhaps one of the most important things learned early on in Big hART was that on the whole, groups of people get hurt in our community not because we're a brutal, uncaring society, but because they are invisible. Sure, sometimes people get vilified in story for political and social gain. Sure, we are often tossing life jackets at toddlers in the water rather than pulling them to safety, and shooting across the bows of boats full of refugees, and intruding into Indonesian waters... whoops, oh is that what a GPS is for? Sure, we might've done the same thing years ago to Vietnamese refugees, but now we love our delicious rice-paper rolls and other introduced delights, and the narrative moves on. Most of the damage

we do is when people are invisible and their stories unheard – excluded from the unfolding cultural narrative.

Sometimes stories are the most valuable thing these groups of 'outsiders' have left. One person's story can become a 'protective story' for a whole group of citizens, to shine a light on something hidden, and bring it to the attention of many. They can also be valuable more broadly, like a 'canary in the coalmine' to indicate the dangerous moral atmosphere that we may inadvertently permit to build up, like some deadly toxin, because we may have been unaware or blind to an issue. In this context, an authentic story, if mentored and not stolen, if fanned to flame, if made highly visible, can have great currency for those who own it.

We have to be careful here with thoughts of 'cultural solutions'. These issues and stories are important. They can be volatile and have far-reaching consequences. Culture and the arts subsist in a scarcity culture. Any idea that can potentially attract funding is seen as fair game – whether a company has experience in the area or not. Sponsors require logos, but communities require process and long-term commitment, dexterity, listening, a complex expertise.

Major performing arts companies, for instance – who do a great job of creating seasons of work to sell tickets and help fill hotel beds in our major cities – sometimes raise their gaze and come lumbering towards high-needs communities, jumping in, thinking it is just a question of telling the story that desperately needs to be told. This of course could be a fantastic addition to the national discourse, especially if put together, through a rigorous and careful process, in such a way as to be part of a cultural solution...or not.

Around the globe, this practice of Community Cultural Development – or what we are calling Cultural Solutions – is a rapidly expanding field. It is a deeply engaging and satisfying place to apply a suite of creative skills as an artist, arts worker or producer. It is an approach that looks forward into the twenty-first century, rather than back into the nineteenth, and it needs more attention, more productions, films, impact, distribution, critique, discussion, evaluation and funding. It needs more participation from high-end companies and institutions, and this will involve more learning opportunities.

Communities are global as well as local, and cultural solutions must focus globally as well as locally. Big hART now works across a range of issues and continents and stories. We produce documentaries, digital interactive comics, seminars, online content, short films, concerts, and some theatre – the form follows the fight – the environment, prisons, domestic violence, mental illness, language loss, slavery, first nations, poverty, housing, food quality, honouring the elderly, cosmopolitanism, the value of life. We have to say no to most requests. We say yes to projects that burn brightly, that can speak to a broader audience in the community and beyond it. We say yes to new projects when narrative and form combine in an iconic way, around invisible stories, in high-needs communities that are begging to be told.

In Roebourne, where Big hART has been working on the *Yijala Yala* project for three years, twenty-two of the young people we work with were arrested for nicking a bike at Christmas 2012. The bike shouldn't have been stolen. But which is worse: the structural/policy crime of that authoritarian over-reaction and under-training for jock police, or pinching a pushy? On the one hand in these communities, jail is not such a bad thing, kids quite like it – air-conditioned in the Pilbara heat, regular food, less abuse maybe, perhaps some schooling, scabies gets treated. On the other hand, a perfect place for advanced schooling in crime and crime networks, and cultural dissolution.

One young man from that same group, a repeat offender, was recently sentenced by a judge to Big hART, to make art, music, digital comics and theatre. To tour, with his elders as part of a performance piece created with his community to national arts festivals, and to make a short documentary of his efforts to bring back to court – sentenced to a cultural solution. Interesting.

There were many partners in this strategy, a circle of elders, old Nannas and Aunties, government, big business, other young people, the Australia Council, arts festivals, local organisations, high-end professional artists, producers. This young man performed the story of his community, straight from stage to policy wonks, politicians, community elders, critics and peers on one of the best stages in the country. He had never experienced a moment of success and appreciation like it. He had never been useful. He had never felt the currency and value of his story, his culture, his knowledge. He had never felt himself being appreciated. He shook the hand of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard. He flirted with her. Boasted...and went home and offended again.

The re-offending is expected – solutions unfold, they come after a series of steps back – there's no easy salvation. It's a process coming back from the edge, of despair, of self-harm, of criminality, of addiction, of numbness, of death, of costing the community a fortune – to participating and contributing a fortune.

His peers, friends who hang out on the bottom rung with him as part of the same project, were in Korea recently at an international comic conference, teaching high-achieving Korean kids Photoshop techniques they'd learned in Big hART workshops. High achievers, made possible by complex partnerships between unlikely groups – elders, Woodside, government, arts workers, festivals – and realised by hardcore work on the ground. These are internationally award-winning young people. They also stole a bike.

This is difficult. There is so much hubris in the community art sector: hotheads mouthing off, renaming failures as successes, avoiding scrutiny, evaluation and critique. So much of the art made under this label is deeply compromised by mediocrity. It is something of a haven for broken artists as much as for broken people participating in a project. And it can be dispiriting.

There are of course, passionately argued reasons why work made through community processes – though it may be poor in quality – should be critiqued in different, more conciliatory ways, how these stories belong to others beyond the artist and how the process matters. This is mostly bullshit:

Worthy, but bullshit. This is just artists failing the community groups they are working with. Bringing an intransigent and blocked creative practice to new settings. Jaded, hard-working community artists can be our own worst enemy. Other areas of the more refined and better-funded arts practice look on rightly with condescending smirks at our efforts.

Yet there are so many unique and important skills in CCD disciplines, new mentoring skills, empathetic skills, authenticity and flexibility, applied art techniques, community diplomacy, lobbying, insights learnt from time spent living in hard-bitten communities, having the capacity to learn from them, ignoring the government pleas to maintain the client/professional relationship and becoming friends. It contains potential new creative languages beyond the jaded offerings and creative slurry often pouring wastefully from mainstream practice – 'great, yet another young gun taking a shot at a Seagull in a Sydney subsidised theatre and shooting himself in the foot.' What we need are new influences and disciplines, new commitments to both virtuosity and authenticity. What seems promising is a return to a deeper practice, more centred in the whole of life, well-funded and alongside the well-established and worthwhile models of art-making based on commodity, manufacturing and tourism.

Community arts practice is frequently encountering communities with very serious survival issues, a very low skills-base, and is attempting to achieve very big goals for multiple stakeholders, with tiny amounts of money and very little infrastructure. The arts disciplines needed are intensely difficult. They require thousands of hours of practice, and a deep pool of 'inter- and intrapersonal skills' to work in contexts where these serious and sometimes dangerous issues are played out. We often build in failure to the structures of this practice.

In this context, artists working in communities often feel defensive, behave myopically and sprout dogma. People are often so burnt out and struggling with such important issues that new approaches fall on deaf ears. Ranks close. At national regional arts conferences there is an intense interest in drinking, but less interest in high-end professional development, it's hangovers and then heads down just trying to survive.

The idea of community should be inherently collegiate and yet it is such a fraught practice, defined by scarcity, defence and dogma, and the 'right way' of doing the work, even if that is badly. This intense and taxing creative discipline and the resulting practice is hardly even recognised as more than a sheltered workshop for artists who don't cut it in the mainstream. Why would anyone want to work in this sector? Why would governments fund it?

Yet, more and more it is coming into focus – cultural solutions are flexible, effective and cheap.

Story, when created with outsiders in our society, and told well with a deep authenticity, and placed in the right forums, can be a powerful tool for triggering new thinking. Unique benefits can be found in both the process of making, and the experience of consuming the story. If the process is deep, long, and partnership-based; if the artistry is strong; the work made with such finesse

and authenticity that a shift, an illumination, an understanding is created in key audiences – portfolios, electorates, media, opinion leaders – then new, once hidden stories can be released into the narratives around which individuals, communities and the nation form. It may even be plausible to talk of cultural solutions. This has been Big hART's decades-long exploration and experiment and at times failure.

We are now in a phase where all and sundry are being asked to knock at the philanthropic door and the corporate door, more than the government door... one hand out, the other hand knocking. Let the market work out the solutions. A creative industry think tank – 'What about...some well-known artists, working (briefly) in a prison with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees... I know, doing Shakespeare. Sponsored by a European car manufacturer... Are there market synergies there?' Bingo, sponsor.

If we really think this is the model for the way forward in cultural solutions, let's pop on a pinnie, start singing 'Amazing Grace' and march backwards into the nineteenth century.



*"Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm."*

**PUBLILIUS SYRUS**

*"The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."*

**MURIEL RUKEYSER**

# SPEAKING WITH STRENGTH

**JENNIFER MILLS**

***'Speaking the Strength' first appeared in the 'Ngapartji Ngpartji' memory basket at the conclusion of the 'Ngapartji Ngapartji' project.***

We are losing our voices. Of the 145 surviving languages in Australia, 110 are severely or critically endangered. Many of these are spoken by only a handful of people.

Since it began in 2004, Big hART's *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project has used performance, workshops, and political lobbying to address this crisis. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is Pitjantjatjara for 'I give you something, you give me something.' The Pitjantjatjara concept of reciprocal exchange forms the basis for the project's way of working in more ways than one.

In a few short years, the Big hART project *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has become a voice to reckon with in Australian theatre. Combining music, history, personal narrative and dialogue in Pitjantjatjara and English the show tells the story of Trevor Jamieson's family, exiled from South Australia by the nuclear tests at Maralinga.

The stage show has also provided the scaffold for a longer-term community development project based on a radical participatory model of cross-cultural storytelling. The critical and popular success of the show has enabled the project to campaign for the revitalisation of Indigenous languages.

## THE SHOW, THE STORY

I first saw *Ngapartji Ngapartji* in Alice Springs in a developmental showing in June 2006. I was moved to tears and laughter by the performance and also struck by the project's ambition. Crossing cultures and generations, lands and languages, the story seemed to trace the flaws at the heart of our national narrative. Even as a work in progress, I was aware I was witnessing an important event in Australian theatre; my mind kept returning to Jamieson's mantra: 'nyangangka kutjuparinyi, something is happening here!'

The stage show *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, written by Scott Rankin, follows the story of Trevor Jamieson's family, displaced by the Maralinga nuclear tests, and documents the resulting exile of the Spinifex people from their country in South Australia. Like many Indigenous people before and since, they became refugees in their own land, losing their history in the process. In telling his story, Jamieson recovers a part of this history; his voice becomes a part of all of our history.

Trevor Jamieson and Scott Rankin met in 1999 through Rankin's work with Leah Purcell on *Box the Pony*. Trevor wanted to make a film about his brother Jangala to help him find his way back to his culture after release from prison. They began researching, writing and testing out ideas for a story – be it theatre, film or television – which would trace the Jamieson family's history, following their exile from the Maralinga test site in the 1950s. This work lead to the script and tour of *Career Highlights of the Mamu* in 2002. In 2004 Alex Kelly came on board as Creative Producer and in 2005 the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project opened up shop in Alice Springs. The connections were soon being made between cultural displacement, language loss, environmental damage, exile from country, and the gaping holes in Australia's national narrative, and *Ngapartji Ngapartji* began its evolution.

As much as it is about our history, the show is also about the future: rebuilding the connections between generations. Performer and Director of Ananguku Arts, Milyika (Allison) Carroll identified the importance of bringing the story home to young people who may not be aware of the history of Maralinga and its impact on the lives of their own families.

> ***"Ngayulu kulini, alatji, nyanga palumpa purunypa, Ngapartji Ngapartji kuwari ngaranyi, palu purunypa nyaa, Piranpa tjutangku kutju nyakupai, cityngka, ngura kutjupa tjutangka. Ka Anangu tjuta nyanga palumpa purunypaku ninti wiya, Anangu tjuta munu tjana kuwari kutju, kuwari kutju alatjitu nyakula urulyaranu alatjitu. Munuya pulkara kulini munuya pulkara alatjitu mukuringanyi, kuwari kutju nyakula, show nyangatja kuwari kutju nyakula urulyaranu alatjitu "Ai! Wirunya alatjitu!" Tjitji tjuta kulu-kulu, young ones, young people tjuta, tjana ninti wiya nyaaku, bomb panya iriti.***

*Panya palumpaku tjana ninti wiya, tjana urulyaraningi alatjitu. Ngurpa. Ninti wiya.*"

***"I think, in this way, things like this – the show Ngapartji Ngapartji that is on now – things like this are only seen by non-Indigenous people in the city, in other places. But Pitjantjatjara people are not too aware about this kind of thing. So seeing something like this for what really is the first time, people really have been shocked and surprised. And they've been deeply considering it and thoroughly impressed by it, taking this show in for the first time. Really surprised and saying "Hey! This is excellent!" Kids too, young people – they are unaware you know, about the bombs that occurred in the past. Because they didn't know about that they've really been shocked. Unaware – they didn't know."***

An estimated five hundred nuclear tests (including bombs) were exploded in the South Australian desert in the years 1953-1963, causing untold death and illness and making the region uninhabitable for a quarter of a million years. The nuclear tests did not only harm the Aboriginal people who were living there and/or haphazardly evacuated. The tests have also had a ripple effect which runs across national and cultural boundaries. The cast includes Japanese-born Yumi Umiumare and Tomoko Yamasaki, addressing the connection with the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Lex Marinos plays the part of a worker on the test site who is struggling for recognition and addressing his own responsibilities; British servicemen are still seeking compensation for the harm done them by the tests. The story seems impossibly wide in scope, but resonates through these many perspectives.

The process of researching and telling the story of these harms was difficult for many. In Pitjantjatjara society it was and is taboo to speak of the dead. Pantjiti Lewis from the Pitjantjatjara Choir puts it in her own words:

*"Ngayulu kuliningi Ngapartji Ngapartji yaaltji-yaaltji? Munu ngayulu pitjangu nyakunytjikitja munu kulintjikitja mununa tjanala tjunguringkula showngka ngarala kuliningi "Ai! Mulapa, nyangatja wiru mulapa!" Tjukurpa wirutjara munu tjituru-tjiturutjara panya iriti nganampa walytja tjuta wiyaringkunytja. Mununa pukularingi wiru mulapa nyangatja mununa kulini panya ngayuku kangkuru Kunmanaranya show nyangangka ngarapai munu paluru ayini-ayini tjuta palyara ikaritjingalpai – munu paluru malpa tjuta palyani. Kana palunya kulira tjiturutjitururinyi munu pukularinyi wiru tjuta kulira, palunyatjara. Uwa palya ngayulu ini Pantjiti Lewis.*"

***"I was thinking, what is this Ngapartji Ngapartji really all about? So I got involved in order to see and to understand and while working together to make this show I've been thinking, "Ah so it's true! This really is worthwhile!" This show contains good stories, sad stories and talks about what happened to our families all those years ago and of the deaths. And so I've been really impressed and happy to be working in this show - particularly because my older sister Kunmanara was in it and used to clown around making people laugh, and making friends everywhere. Thinking of her brings sorrow but I also feel happy thinking about the positive things she was involved in. Alright. My name is Pantjiti Lewis – performer/community health worker."***

The post-colonial reality of shifting culture has its advantages: some stories can now be told in violation of ancient protocols. Participants are well aware of the cultural compromises involved; life consists of a series of such choices. Though this can appear to an outsider as a tragic irony, it is in reality a set of informed decisions. The interplay of tradition and modernity is constantly discussed and negotiated. In such discussions, children are always invoked. In language, in history, in culture, the next generation is the important one.

In linking these fragile threads of our pasts, stories can do more than bare government policies, go deeper than any compensation money. In the public domain of the arts, just as before a campfire, stories have a ceremonial power. A story can allow us to open ourselves to new ways of being, new constellations. It is with the imagination that we are able to make the leaps across cultural, racial, linguistic and geographical gaps to meet as equals. It is in learning one another's story that we begin to do the work of reconciliation.

Personal narrative is central to the Big hART model, which begins with the idea that each participant has their story to share. From its beginnings in 1992 in Burnie, Tasmania, Big hART has been turning lives around through narrative-focused arts mentoring in communities that have suffered trauma or serious marginalisation. The company argues that working through the arts can achieve

social change and increase participants' self-worth while simultaneously producing high quality art for mainstream audiences. If Big hART argues that it's possible to produce quality art and effective social change at the same time, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is living proof that world class theatre can be built from the ground up in marginalised communities.

Critics have lauded the performances:

> ***"A rewarding theatrical experience… The magnificently dignified female elders and performers who act as chorus to the epic telling sing, dance and give the audience a snap lesson in Pitjantjatjara in order to draw us into the magic circle of their culture. It does honour to the festival that has presented it."*** – The Age

> ***"Jamieson is a charming and persuasive storyteller. Through gesture as well as words, he is the tour guide on a voyage that veers between laugh-aloud humour and silence–inducing anguish. This is an inclusive plea for understanding and justice."*** – The Australian

> ***"This is more than just a night out at the theatre. From the very beginning there is real exchange between audience and performers … an important reflection on Australia's darker past."*** – Artszine

> ***"It is at once a lament for the dead, a joyous celebration of survival and an extraordinary expression of reconciliation… a pure gift."*** – Theatre Notes

For some participants, the show is the payoff for months of work. For others, it is the most difficult part of the job. In a modest culture where 'shame' is the norm, particularly among young people, going on tour and performing before strangers can be a confronting process. Being on tour with any theatre project is intense, but for *Ngapartji Ngapartji* the envelope is pushed even further, and not only because of the show's unwieldy size. The health of some performers is an issue and some have responsibilities as senior members of their community. Others may have sorry business or obligations as carers, and family crises and loss affect each season of the show.

But the performance aspect of the project is essential to bring to national attention this blind spot in Australia's history, and to raise awareness of the existence and importance of Indigenous languages. Watching the enormous amount of organising that goes on before and during those tours, from sourcing funding to dealing with the logistics of mounting a show of this scale, I have been struck again and again by the crew's commitment and strength, their absolute faith that the story they are telling is of vital and urgent importance.

The show has played the Melbourne International Arts Festival, the Sydney Opera House, Perth International Arts Festival, The Dreaming Festival in Queensland, the Adelaide Cabaret Festival, a season at Belvoir St Theatre as part of the Sydney Festival, toured to the remote community of Ernabella, back to Alice Springs, and up to Garma on the Gove Peninsula. Audiences have totalled over 30,000 people, and almost every show in every season has played to standing ovations from full houses. Bringing my family to see the show at Belvoir St in 2008, it was clear the performances had been polished, the irrepressible humour sharply honed, but the gravity and urgency of the story remained fresh.

They may have filled the Sydney Opera House, but for many of the participants the show's two-night season in Ernabella in 2008 (immortalised in the documentary *Nothing Rhymes With Ngapartji*) was the highlight of all the touring.

Ernabella is a community of between six and seven hundred people nestled in the Musgrave Ranges in the North West corner of South Australia. Founded as a mission in 1937, the land was returned to the Anangu in 1981 and it is now home to a arts centre, school, store, date farm, and the usual coming and going of Toyotas. Many of the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* workshops took place here and it is home to many of the key performers.

The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* season in Ernabella brought the story home to the people to whom it belongs, and shared the experience of professional theatre with many people who have never seen such a show in their lives. The stage, set and scaffolding were trucked in and built on site amid camp dogs and dust storms to form part of the Ernabella Arts Centre's 60th anniversary celebrations. The event will not be forgotten in the community. Even on my brief visit, children ran to me to ask 'Ngapartji Ngapartji! When is there going to be another one?'

Shortly afterwards, Trevor and Scott accepted a Deadly Award for *Most*

*Outstanding Achievement in Film, Theatre & Entertainment*, testament to the impact of the project nationally. Trevor said, 'I am immensely proud of this play. Its evolution over a nine year period has seen hundreds of people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, explore new ways of working together.' It is that exploration and willingness to open the process to participation which sets *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, the show and the project, apart.

## THE WORKSHOPS

In April 2009 I accompany the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* team to Ernabella, 30km south of the Northern Territory border in remote north-western South Australia, to observe the company process. I'm on a fact-finding mission, but am quickly recruited to tie swags down on the roof racks, haul Eskies, and whatever else needs doing. The role of participant observer sits neatly within the team's operation; their democratic instincts are well-honed and there is always a sense of all hands on deck.

On arrival, the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* team settle in the school which has offered its classrooms for the duration of the visit. Musicians Beth Sometimes and Steve Fraser have been here for two weeks already, working hard in the makeshift recording studio, running workshops, recording material, and planning the music for the spin-off show *Nyuntu Ngali*.

In one room, documentary maker Suzy Bates and editor Vanessa Milton run through archival footage from the 1960s and 70s. With ABC funding confirmed, the documentary 'Lost for Words' is proceeding quickly. In another room, creative producer Alex Kelly is negotiating a meeting in Canberra with the office of the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, and Arts and Heritage Minister Peter Garrett to talk about a potential language policy. Outside, another Steve (Langton) is making musical instruments out of car parts and recycled polypipe. Now and then a cloud of very happy children sails by, whistling through homemade flutes.

Soon, Batesy is back in the car to find the senior community members who need to give clearance for the video material. Finding people seems to be a big part of the job, but elders tend to have a lot going on. It's just another day at work, balancing the many variables of remote community life with the protocols of culture, the demands of managing a huge cross-platform media project with young Indigenous people, and the sluggish urgency of negotiating with Canberra. It strikes me that the leaders here and those in Canberra work in spheres which are not so different from one another. There are a lot of maybes in both worlds, and it's necessary to be responsive to multiple ways of doing work - and adapt yourself to other peoples' changing priorities.

We find some of the women in the Arts Centre and wheel out a TV. The place is buzzing with mukata making in advance of the Alice Springs Beanie Festival. Ernabella Arts is a shed full of old trestle tables covered in canvases, thick with the smell of acrylic paint, and trodden through by various children and the occasional puppy. Senior woman and performer D. Haggie watches from her customised off-road wheelchair, blanket slung over the shade frame, frowning very slightly at the noisy felters in the corner. The women sing along with the songs and laugh. Ms Haggie nods, her regal bearing occasionally broken by an approving smile.

I emerge into the desert glare to find that in the yard outside the store someone from Centrelink is explaining their new rules with a picture book and a translator. A dozen or so people are gathered there, sitting in the shade at a safe distance and exhibiting cool detachment. The skinny white donkey that hangs out at the school stands right in front of the government men as though intent on reading the page. I'm struck by the absurdity of the way business is normally done here. But it isn't the only way.

The stage show of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is only the small part of the project visible in the public domain. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is also a radical cross-cultural project that offers a functional participatory model of community development centered on the Pitjantjatjara concept of ngapartji ngapartji, 'I give you something, you give me something.' This sounds as familiar as barter. However, reciprocal obligations in Pitjantjatjara culture do not have the impersonal quality of free market trade. Debts and obligations are instead a mark of the seriousness of relationships. For the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* team those relationships are family, biological and adoptive. Reciprocity is not possible without relation. Anangu way, family grows ever wider, and every individual is part of the weave of the community:

*"Walytja, family, is like, grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, big brother, big sister. I think of it like this: If we work together, stand together, we are family. You and all of us are together, all of you are our family, all of us who work with Ngapartji Ngapartji. Palya."*

*– Pantjiti McKenzie, Language Advisor and performer*

The workshops are run in genres: music, dance, multi-media and film-making. They extend more broadly to storytelling, writing, collage, illustrating, and confidence building. Young people in the town camps of Alice Springs and the communities of Ernabella, Docker River, and many others in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, use new technologies to make language lessons which are then posted online. This offers everyone a unique opportunity to learn an Australian language, and gives young Pitjantjatjara speakers a chance to share their knowledge and culture.

Taken together, these lessons become an online language course on the website, ninti (smart, knowledgeable), which feeds into the show, giving audience members a choice about how far they step up to the challenges offered by *Ngapartji Ngapartji*. Audiences are invited to sign up to the course, the first of its kind in Australia, which offers a deeper understanding of the multilingual performance. Ninti is made up of discrete video and interactive material broken into sections so that students can work through lessons at their own pace and also gain an understanding of the context in which the language is spoken. In three and a half years since the course was launched, some 350 people have taken up that opportunity. The ninti site will stay online and continue to be updated beyond the lifespan of *Ngapartji Ngapartji.*

As the project took shape, some participants and elders asked that workshops be held to improve participants' English and Pitjantjatjara literacy. In 2008, literacy and learning co-ordinator Jane Leonard came on board to work with arts workers and the community producer Dani Powell to meet this challenge. The resulting arts and learning workshops and support sessions emphasised the exchange of languages between cultures that are equally valued, bringing Pitjantjatjara into domains which are so often dominated by English.

Like any Big hART project, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* attempts to build capacity within communities for change to occur. Instead of running fly-in, fly-out workshops which abandon young people soon after beginning work with them, Big hART takes a longer view. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has evolved a flexible and adaptable workshop program delivered by arts mentors who are committed to building relationships with young people. In Alice Springs and Ernabella, this has some special challenges. Young people living in town camps and remote communities struggle with family obligations, illness, sorry business, petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse, low literacy and interrupted schooling, the difficulty of straddling two cultures, and high levels of transience between town and bush. The idea of reciprocal exchange might be an ancient concept in Pitjantjatjara culture, but here it is plugged in, online, and networked, building relationships that can move beyond geographical isolation and make encounters between strangers possible.

In communities, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* workshops are held in improvised spaces. In town, young people crowd into the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* donga. Some workshops involve over 50 young people aged between one and eighteen. Activities might see young people storyboarding their ideas, or involve a small group heading out in the Toyota to film a movie they have written. A group of musicians might be learning how to set up a recording studio in the school hall; another group might be building collages that go on to form the backgrounds on the ngapartji.org site. Catering, transport, and age-appropriate activities must be organised. The workshops have been targeted as school holiday programs and run over regular periods to give opportunities for relationships to grow. And like any serious event out bush, there's usually a disco at the end, held outdoors or in that same shed.

While they work on their art practice or writing skills, young people are supported in accessing services such as Centrelink, housing, and health, and opportunities including youth workshops, conferences and courses. The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* office on South Terrace doubles as a bustling drop-in centre. Some participants bring children of their own along. Community building is vital to the project, with a focus on fun, sharing food and cups of tea, and an approach which leaves the door open for participants who may drift away for a while to meet life's other demands, but are welcome to return when they choose to.

This 'open crowd' approach has resulted in a whole-of-community ownership of the project, as extended families become involved. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has built the project to include dinners, picnics and film nights at town camps, bush trips

and city adventures that see participants dressing up to meet the Governor-General one day and getting the crowbars out to look for honey ants the next.

> *"Hello my name is Sadie Richards, I come from Alice Springs. Nganana kuwari nyinanyi Thakapette-la and nganana pitjangu learnarikitja and workshop palyantjaku and tjana kuwari pitjangu communitynguru, Yuendemu, and Lajamanu and Wingellina and Beswick … nganana kuwari tjananya nintini yaaltji-yaaltji palyaningi panya nganana panya Anangu communitynguru Docker Riverlakutu anu munu film nintiningi, camerangka mantjiningi and recordamilaningi panya Ngapartji Ngapartjingka picture mantjiningi munu unkunytjaku katingi munu Tjukurpa nintiningi panya Piranpa tjutakutu panya kungka community tjutanguru nintiningi munu palulanguru nganana malaku pitjangu Alice Springsalakutu munula paluru tjana nintiningi nyaa computerngka. Ka tjana Ngapartji ngananana nintiningi tjanampa tjukurpa panya alatji alatji tjana palyanu panya Ngapartji Ngapartji ngaranyi ngayulu unganyi ngayuku Tjukurpa ka tjana Tjukurpa tjanampa ngayla-unganyi.*
>
> *"Hello my name is Sadie Richards and I come from Alice Springs. Today we are at Thakepette, we came here to learn and to do workshops, some people came from Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wingellina, and Beswick … we did work and went to Docker River community to do filming with video camera and recording, doing Ngapartji Ngapartji, showing film and stuff … teaching and telling stories to our non-Indigenous friends and also to the younger girls and from there we came back to Alice Springs and now we are showing them work today on the computer and at the same time they are showing us their stories. Ngapartji Ngapartji - I am giving them my story as well."*
>
> *- Sadie Richards, 20 year old language tutor and workshop participant (translated from Pitjantjatjara)*

The high level of participant ownership of the project is impressive. Big hART uses the arts to engage people in telling their own stories, building relationships across generations. In the case of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* the charismatic Jamieson provides a role model for young men; the senior women of the Pitjantjatjara choir, powerful leaders in their community, inspire younger women's interest in culture. Writer/Director Scott Rankin gains great satisfaction from the collaborative process:



> *"Few opportunities come along where the process of making the theatre piece and the end result are both full of meaning. Ngapartji Ngapartji, however, with its ongoing work in community and its evolving language and culture website, continues to be deeply rewarding. In turn, each season of the work has seen a different aspect of the narrative brought to the foreground. The possibility that this project may continue to evolve and contribute to change makes it a deeply satisfying experience."*

In remote Indigenous communities, the imposed narrative of hopelessness and inertia can be just as damaging as socioeconomic marginalisation. Too often Aboriginal people are given the message that they are not part of a national discourse, a message reinforced by discriminatory policies. Media reports broadcast that narrative of hopelessness around the country while the people concerned are rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has worked with the intention of turning that narrative around, prioritising participants' stories, transforming apathy into participation and eventually autonomy. By attending workshops or participating in the show, people discover their capacity to utilise new media and access the arts establishment. They begin to place themselves as active and valued agents. They find their voices.

## THE LANGUAGE WORK

> *"Ngayulu wangka walytja kunpungku wangkanyi, nganana wangka walytjangku wangakanyi tjingaru nganampa power nguwanpa you know? Ka tjingaru Anangungku pakara wangkanyi Pitjantjatjarangku watingku, minymangku, kunpungku, ka piranpa tjutangku nyakupai munu tjana tjingaru ninti wiyangku palu tjana panya action nyanganyi, yunpa nyanganyi, mara nyanganyi, body language nyanganyi munu kulini "Ai! Nyangatja power alatjitu wangkanyi! Kunpu tjingaru nyangangku wangkanyi" Tjana ngurkantanu, nyanga palu purunynpa. Nganana wangka walytja nganana kunpu wangkapai."*
>
> *When I speak my own language, speaking strong, when we speak our own language, it seems like we have power, you know? For example a*

*Pitjantjatjara person could stand up to speak, a man or a woman, speaking in Pitjantjatjara and non-Indigenous people would see and despite not understanding they would observe in their actions, by watching the face and hands, taking in the body language and they would think "Wow! This person is speaking with authority". They would be able to pick that. When we speak the language that belongs to us, we speak with strength.*

*-Nami Kulyuru, Language Reference Group and Performer*

At the same time as *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has mounted a massive stage show and run five years of workshops, it has been orchestrating a behind-the-scenes campaign, lobbying the Federal government for a commitment to revitalise Indigenous languages. In August, 2009, as *Ngapartji Ngapartji* was travelling to the Garma Festival of Indigenous Culture in Arnhem Land to perform scenes from the show and take part in a panel on new creative industries, the Federal government finally announced the implementation of a National Indigenous Languages Policy.

According to UNESCO, there are nine factors which determine the viability of a language, from how many speakers remain to the level of intergenerational transmission, and covering community attitudes, government policy, documentation and media. In 2005 the Australian Government commissioned the National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS). The survey found that of the estimated 250 languages that existed in Australia in 1788, 145 survive. Of those, only eighteen are in a healthy state, with 110 listed as severely or critically endangered; the remaining languages are at a lower, but still serious risk.

Why save a language? Increasingly, it is understood that languages are a vital repository of traditional cultural knowledge. Languages contain embedded knowledge about places, relationships, plants and animals, and medicines. But more broadly, the existence of cultural diversity is essential for human growth. Embedded in a language are the many different understandings of space, time, land, family, and so on which add to our humanity. Linguists have long campaigned for resources to be directed toward Indigenous language revitalisation. Australia suffers the most rapid language loss of anywhere in the world.



*"There is only a small window of opportunity for 'reversing language shift' once it has started for most Indigenous Australians. Our figures show that once language shift starts, it proceeds very rapidly. One generation fails to speak the language, but may understand. The following one does not learn the language at all because it does not hear the parental generation speak it."*

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES SURVEY, 2005

Australia has specific issues, with small, isolated populations, a higher incidence of chronic illness and lower life expectancy among older speakers, and a high level of transience due to displacement from traditional country. The NILS report found that the situation was 'very grave' and called for urgent attention.

Language loss is not inevitable. Successful language revitalisation has occurred with languages such as Irish, Welsh, Hebrew, Māori, and Hawaiian. In New Zealand, the Māori Language Act of 1987 gave Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) official language status, and gave speakers a right to use it in legal settings such as in court. It also established the Māori Language Commission to promote the language and provide advice. Since then, the successful revitalisation of the language has been a model for the world.

Given the volatility of education policy and the rapid rate of change in Indigenous communities, without careful attention, the mother tongue can soon dissipate. Pitjantjatjara speakers have identified to *Ngapartji Ngapartji* workers the loss of certain kinds of words and grammars and identified a concomitant loss of traditional cultural knowledge:

***"Kuwari tjitji tjuta ninti wiya tjukurpa pulka tjutaku. Kuwari Pitjantjatjara uti tjuta kutju wangkanyi. Ninti wiya.***

***Mungatu nyangangku katjangku wangkangu, "Malu anytjapiri mantjila" ka tjitji kutju kunyu putu kuliningi "Nyaa, nyaa?" putu alatjitu kuliningi "Anytjapiri"***

***Tjana ninti wiya, nyanga tjana tjutaku, Pitjantjatjara alatjitu.***

***Malu anytjapiri wangkanyi, tangka panya, malu tangka munu winki katinyi,***

*palyantja wiyangku katinyi. Anytjapiri – whole.*"

*These days children do not understand complex words. These days they are only speaking really basic Pitjantjatjara. They lack knowledge. Recently this person's son was saying "Go and get malu anytjapiri" and the child he was speaking to apparently couldn't understand and was saying "What? What?" – he couldn't understand it at all, anytjapiri. They don't understand these kinds of words, real Pitjantjatjara. If you say malu anytjapiri, it means cooked kangaroo that you would carry together. Not yet divided up – anytjapiri – whole.*

MILYIKA (ALLISON) CARROLL, PERFORMER

*"Nyuntu nganana kuwari changes nyanganyi. Tjingaru nyanganguru, another twenty years, fifty years, this language really change. Kuwaringuru ngula. We can't go back. Nganana malaku putu ananyi. Nganana Pitjantjatjara nyangatja kawalaringkukatinyi, wangka nyanga nganampa, tjitji tjutangku ma-changira-changira munu fifty years, kuranyu, nganana malaku putu ananyi. Ka wiyarinyi, changira-changira alatjitu. Wangka changarinyi nganampa mind, palumpa tjanampa mind changirinyi alatjitu. Ka malaku angkupai wiya. Ka nganana kuulangka, ngurangka, nganampa wangka tjingaru nintinma alatjitu. Paluru tjana next generation.*"

*You and all of us are now seeing changes. From here, perhaps in another twenty or fifty years, this language will really change. From where it's at now into the future. We can't go back. It is impossible to return. We are carrying this language Pitjantjatjara in such a way that it may become lost. The children are further and further altering our language and fifty years in the future, we won't be able to go back. It's dying as it shifts and changes. And as the language changes, our minds, their minds, change irreversibly. It is not possible to go back. So at school and in the home, we should be teaching our language properly. They are the next generation. "*

MAKINTI MINUTJUKUR, LANGUAGE REFERENCE GROUP

It takes more than political will; it takes a concerted effort that cuts across government portfolios and through the red tape that so often drowns attempts at change in Indigenous communities. It takes the voluntary participation of native speakers and their children and grandchildren in taking care of languages. More broadly, it takes a general cultural acknowledgement that languages are important, an acknowledgement of the value of language diversity.

Through the arts, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has sought to shift that broader cultural consciousness while at the same time campaigning at the level of Federal policy. In all its projects, Big hART works simultaneously at the levels of individual, community, polity and society to make change which lasts because it becomes part of the social fabric. As a result, the national discourse has shifted. Indigenous languages are more visible and more discussed than ever before.

*Ngapartji Ngapartji* built strong connections with linguists and Indigenous experts so that when it came time to approach the government with a policy proposal they were able to lay out what that policy might look like and point to the experts. For the meeting in Canberra, Alex Kelly was able to arrive with a bound folder of forty articulate, passionate letters of support from linguists and language authorities across Australia. It is testament to the level of professional respect for the project that it has been able to build the necessary relationships to achieve this.

Despite the optimism generated by the policy announcement, the future of Indigenous languages remains uncertain. Governments are unpredictable. The plan to phase out bilingual education in the Northern Territory in 2010 contradicts the new national policy, which has as one of its objectives, 'To support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools.' Such plans are being hotly debated. Grassroots language projects, essential to revitalisation, are poorly supported. Intem-antey Anem (These things will always be), a bush medicine and language documentation project made by the women of Utopia in collaboration with the Batchelor Institute, is one example. Others include the Wangka Maya language centre in the Pilbara, Kaurna Warra Pintyandi language revival project in Adelaide and Miromaa language technology by Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association. Committed as they are, these projects tend to run on scant resources. A thorough Federal policy would be funding them effectively, working with the States and Territories to support local initiatives. The policy we have is a beginning, but there is a lot more work to be done.

*"It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge."*

**ALBERT EINSTEIN**

*"Art is the only way to run away without leaving home."*

**TWYLA THARP**



As *Ngapartji Ngapartji* draws to a close, it is good to look back at the project's successes. It has had a profound effect on audiences and been successful in getting its message to Canberra. Perhaps it has brought Indigenous languages into the spotlight, for a short time at least. On a local level, it has been a transformative five-year journey for many of the participants. Many are ready to move on to other Big hART projects, like the new theatre shows Nyuntu Ngali or *Namatjira*, about the life of the famous artist. Some will pursue careers in the arts; others prepare to take their experiences into new fields. Even looking in from the periphery, it is sad to see the project wrap up. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* has been an important story which has had a powerful impact in the lives of many, forming links across generations, cultures, political positions and languages.

This memory basket is here as an archive, so that *Ngapartji Ngapartji* can be recorded and remembered. But it is also a continuation of the project in a new way. The story of Maralinga will remain alive when it is told, shown and shared. Like a language, history requires the vitality of use, and the strong relationships that make that use possible. This is ngapartji ngapartji, the gift we give to one another.

# WANTINYALANA! ONCE IN A LIFE TIME!

**JAMES WAITES**

A few days back on a festival blog entry I waxed lyrical over the rich treasure of the Kev Carmody tribute concert. There I mentioned how some of us were ready to cast aside our White Supremicist arrogance, sit down at the feet of Aboriginal Elders and listen to whatever it was they saw fit to tell us.

How could I know that the Carmody concert was but a warm up for Big hArt's enthralling drama - *Ngapartji Ngapartji* - about the life of the Central Desert's Spinifex people and, in particular, the joys and sufferings of lead storyteller, Trevor Jamieson and his immediate family. Do the gods really ever listen? Maybe totems do. For here I was, a few days later, not just in the presence of a truly major work of art - brimming with ideas and emotions, and exquisitely realised - but in the form of the very 'sit down and listen' I had asked for.

In a style that bounces joy and sometimes even reckless laughter off the cold walls or wisdom, grief and sadness (found also in the film *Ten Canoes* to those who saw it), I was among the second-night Festival audience who, first up, learned how to sing the kindergarten song 'Heads Shoulders Knees and Toes' in Pitjanjatjara: 'Kata alpiri muti tjina'. A great ice-breaker. All of us being little kids again. The child in us brought to the surface, we were sat down again and so the lesson began.

Much recent Aboriginal expression deploying western theatre forms has been reminiscent of grief counselling: where the victim initially unleashes the horror of the experiences that is holding their healing back. The story has almost always been personal and, however compelling and sometimes hilarious, we whitefellas cannot help but come away 'shamed'. I'm thinking of works including the plays of Jack Davis about the 200-year-old 'White Problem' in West Australia to the solo shows of Ningali Lawson and Leah Purcell, *Seven Stages of Grieving*, and many more.

*Ngapartji*'s writer and director, Scott Rankin, worked with Purcell on her excellent one-person show, Box the Pony, which premiered at the Festival of Dreaming in Sydney in 1997. A decade later he is one among a vast tribe of artists, volunteers, language teachers, activists, web specialists, and others, known as Big hArt – who have brought the elusive dream of 'community art' practice to a level artistic sophistication that rivals Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.

Big hART's *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project centres on the concern for lost language, the glue that holds any culture together. Australia has already lost half of its 300 indigenous languages; and 110 of the 145 surviving are on the critically endangered list.

You could say the current production at Belvoir Street (where, for a Sydney season, this show belongs) is the above-surface component of the Big hART *Ngapartji Ngapartji* iceberg; the bulk of the cultural activity taking place beneath this surface. Perhaps it's better to imagine Uluru as the tip of a mountain rising bluntly out of its shimmering Central Desert surrounds, with the bulk of its meaning, history and purpose lying beneath the surrounding red-earth surface.

Nearby Alice Springs serves as the centre for Big hART. As the program notes, this location on Arrente country is along way from the Jamieson family's Spinifex nation to the south west. But much of this land is uninhabitable, even unapproachable, due to the poison that lies in the soil since atom-bomb testing which took place, most infamously at Maralinga.

But Big hART has worked on projects across the length and breadth of Australia, including sites in Tasmania, the troubled Sydney beach community of Cronulla; and even Northcott – the daunting Housing Commission estate that raps its loving and sometimes troubled arms around the Belvoir Street Theatre.

In development is *GOLD*, a Murray-Darling basin project which is looking at the effect of water (or lack of it) on communities from the Queensland border and along the course of the river system down into South Australia. It is Big hART's first foray into the matter of global warming. And in typical fashion it is coordinating opportunities for those effected to share their stories, and by whatever means appear appropriate, art-making will emerge.

In yet another most fortuitous merging of opportunities, Big hART's National

Creative Director and Co-Founder, Scott Rankin, was invited to give the 2008 Rex Cramphorn Lecture, included for the first time in a Sydney Festival program and delivered yesterday. Rankin offered an extraordinarily insightful commentary – again, like all Big hART's work I've now seen, swinging artlessly from sombre fact-telling to self-deprecating joke-telling, taking in both big-picture vision and microscopic and respectful observance.

*Ngapartji Ngapartji* is the perfect example. The production's central performer, Trevor Jamieson, explains that he began on this project because he wanted to make a film about one of his brothers, Jangala, who - like so many dispossessed - was having trouble holding his life together. There is some stunning footage of this film where family, including Jangala's own children, gather round after his release from jail to discuss, quite animatedly, where he might go from here.

This story of one young man's troubles is used to personalise the big version of the Spinifex people who were driven from their land after the Australia agreed to Britain's request to use nearby country to test atom bombs. We are all aware, to varying degrees, the impact this had on those who were poisoned. While physical illness in terms of cancer is widespread, so was the dispersion of community and consequently language. To quote Cape York elder, Roger Hart, "When I speak language, it makes me feel home". And Rita Mae Brown: "Language is the roadmap to culture. It tells you where people are coming from and where they are going." So this is the story of profound loss.

And it helps explain why, if you dip into the Big hART website, you can find out how to enroll in Pitjanjatjara, the language of the Spinifex people. This company is not just out to point the finger of blame, it is rolling up its sleeves and getting into the business of helping with the healing. On the matter of radiation poisoning, the cast includes Japanese-born Yumi Umiumare, who contributes her own people's version of this catastrophe; and we are reminded too that Australian scientists stole the bones of hundreds of infants for years, both black and white, to test for the effect of pre-natal radiation poisoning. So white people have also been abused.

Drawing on the malleable language of western theatre practice, this production takes the previous work (above mentioned) of Davis, Lawson and Purcell, et al, a step further. Here we go beyond identifying the crisis and releasing some of the pain, to a new phase of learning and healing - the beginning of. That we start with rehearsing the most simple kindergarten song is fun, but no joke. Most of us really do have to go right 'back to the very beginning' to make our start. In a stark reminder touched on during the production: we all know how to go to France and say 'bonjour' to the locals. But how many of us can do the same in even one of Australia's 150 surviving traditional tongues? As Rankin reworked this alarming fact into his lecture: John Howard sent in the army to help but, after jumping off the trucks, not a single soldier knew how to say 'hi' in the vernacular of the people they had supposedly turned up to help.

By familiar western theatre standards, *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is a profound and moving drama, exquisitely told. Trevor Jamieson carries the weight of the production with such a gift for movement and story-telling that you imagine he is carrying around a feather. He share's the stage with a fine supporting cast including artists and artisans, Australians of other blood-lines, and half-a-dozen women elders. Their presence proffers, in equal share again, both laughter and gravitas.

Already eight years in the making, *Ngapartji Ngapartji*is, at its core, the unfolding of one family's story. Without giving too much away, now is an amazing time to catch where this family story is at. Let me just say this: I called my response to the Kev Carmody concert: 'Art Can Save Lives'. *Ngapartji Ngapartji*is living proof.

To hear the David Byrne/Talking Heads anthem, 'Once in a Lifetime' wash over you in Pitjanjatjara is a once-in-a-life-time experience. So is this show: the bold little foal I mentioned last week is now bolting around the paddock. Go take a look. Such beauty can make you weep!

*"What is possible in art becomes thinkable in life."*

**BRIAN ENO**

*"Reason can answer questions, but imagination has to ask them."*

**RALPH GERARD**



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