

# NAMATJIRA

2009 - 2017

**MAKE:** Theatre, watercolour app, animation, feature documentary

**BUILD:** Support for the Namatjira family and Western Aranda communities

**DRIVE:** The return of the copyright for the Namatjiras, and support for their art movement

## CONTEXT – THE HIDDEN STORY

One of the young people in the cast of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* was a 14 year old man, Elton, who was related to Albert Namatjira. He was the quietest member of the cast, and a beautiful artist, who drew his country on stage throughout the performance. Each night during the bows, when Elton was introduced as Albert Namatjira's kinship grandson, you could feel a ripple of recognition throughout the audience. As well as a deep affection for Namatjira, there was an unsettling feeling, a recognition of the injustice he suffered. Night after night, we'd listen and wonder whether this compelling narrative could speak to the unhealed heart of the country.

## THE PROCESS

2009 was the 50th anniversary of Albert's passing, and building on Elton's relationship with the company we began talking with the Namatjira family about their story and their needs. What emerged was the strong desire for recognition and justice.

A collaboration between Big hART and the family clearly had the potential to raise awareness and push for change and so a community engagement process in Ntaria (Hermannsburg) – one hundred kilometres west of Alice Springs – was begun, to understand the community more deeply and design the project respectfully.



*“The word is never said, but Namatjira is an enactment of reconciliation ... a sudden generosity of possibility. And that’s a rare thing to witness... a tribute to how artfully its makers step through the political minefield of this kind of community-based work.”*

#### THEATRE NOTES

For 12 months Big hART ran workshops in the community, exploring the little known aspects of Namatjira’s story and the family’s aspirations. Many iconic issues came into focus, the most vivid being that his family didn’t own the copyright to his paintings. Even though there are many very fine painters still following his tradition, they struggle to find enough income and support to paint and sell their work sustainably.

Big hART’s long term project came quickly into focus after that first year of research and development. We partnered with Ngurratjuta Many Hands Art Centre in Alice Springs, and community workshops began in earnest in both Ntaria and Alice Springs to develop a new theatre show. Sydney’s Belvoir St. Theatre readily agreed to include the show in their subscription season. As well as working on a strategy to raise awareness regarding Albert Namatjira’s copyright and starting discussions to buy it back, Big hART organised exhibitions in partnership with Many Hands Art Centre to tour with the stage performance, and a feature length documentary received preliminary funding.

#### THE CONTENT

The family wanted their story to be told, and although touring with a theatre show was a foreign experience, and they were busy with family and cultural business, they wanted to come on the road. Each night during the performance they drew in chalk on a huge backdrop, creating a compelling Namatjira landscape across the stage, to deep appreciation from the audience.

The narrative we were telling was iconic, yet many of the details were not so well known. Albert walked out of the desert into Hermannsburg mission with his parents in 1902, as Federation formed the nation. He survived drought and poverty, and grew to be an entrepreneurial young man. The watercolour artist Rex Battarbee arrived in Ntaria - they swapped skills and opportunities, and Albert learned to paint. Rex championed Namatjira in the cities and together they began the Indigenous Art Centre movement, central to Australia’s international cultural image to this day. Namatjira became a famous and wealthy man, supporting 600 people in his family and community. Albert had citizenship forced upon him so the government could tax him, and he was ‘allowed’ to live in town, although his family were not. Racism bit hard - he was unfairly jailed and died a broken man.

Premiering at Belvoir St. Theatre the show was immediately embraced, and sold



*“Namatjira is confident, articulate and beautifully made theatre.”*

THE AGE

*“We rose to applaud Namatjira without hesitation on opening night, brought to our feet by this generous and enlightening production.”*

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

out wherever it toured. There was a sense of being witness to something special every night, as members of the Namatjira family, drawing live on stage, brought their country into the theatre. The combination of skills across the cast - with virtuoso musicians, actors and artists alongside the Namatjira family - was a rich and rare mixture of cultures and idioms that went on to touch the hearts of 50,000 people.

Before and after the show, the associated exhibitions of watercolour paintings proved popular, boosting art sales for the family and supporting their community. Painting workshops were held in towns and cities, with participants learning directly from the Namatjiras. School groups attended the production, and there was a shift in consciousness about the injustice the Namatjira family continued to face. People signed up each night to the campaign 'Friends of Namatjira', wanting to lend their support to securing sustainability for the Namatjira family.

At the end of the tour the production returned to Ntaria (Hermannsburg), where it was performed outdoors to an audience of hundreds, who had driven many kilometres across the desert to sit around fires and watch Namatjira's story unfold, right where it happened. The then Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion MP, was invited as part of the copyright strategy, and was captivated by the show. As a result, in the fifth year of the project, Minister Scullion hosted an exhibition of paintings by five generations of Namatjira artists in Parliament House.

Building on Albert Namatjira's historic audience with a young Queen Elizabeth, and wanting to lift the profile of the copyright quest, Big hART also toured the production to Southbank in London. The Prince of Wales, The Duchess of Cornwall and remarkably Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, met with Albert's grandchildren Kevin and Lenie Namatjira and representatives from Big hART, at Buckingham Palace. They discussed the art work, their life in Alice Springs and showed their private collection of Albert's paintings. The UK press picked up the story of deep injustice, adding pressure to right the wrong.

Big hART created a feature documentary covering the project and its work to return the copyright, so as to assist the setting up of the Namatjira Legacy Trust, help sustain the Namatjiras and continue advocating for them and their community.

**FAVOURITE MOMENT:** *The full circle of Kevin and Lenie Namatjira travelling to Buckingham Palace, holding strong in their culture, having a gentle one on one chat with the Queen about the shared memory of their grandfather. The Namatjiras' strength of culture and desire for justice filling the conversation with conviction.*

*"A deal perceived by many as a serious cultural injustice...the Namatjira Legacy Trust aims to set up a lasting legacy for the family."*

ABC WORLD TODAY

*"Albert Namatjira left behind our most famous indigenous art estate, so why does his family have no say in how it is run?"*

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

*“Every so often a theatre performance will come along that has the rare power to touch the heart, lift the spirit, make us laugh, move us to tears and change the way we view our world. *Namatjira* is such a production.”*

CANBERRA TIMES



*“Deeply personal...this film is a reminder of how far we have come and how far we have to go.”*

THE AUSTRALIAN

*“Part of what makes the film so powerful is the sense of collaboration and generosity.”*

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

