

NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

2005 - 2010

MAKE: A language and culture website, theatre work, music, short films, documentary

BUILD: An intercultural exchange

DRIVE: Change in National Indigenous Languages policy

CONTEXT - THE HIDDEN STORY

Driving from Adelaide to Alice Springs in 2004, a raft of issues converged in a brainstorm between Big hART workers and Pitjantjatjara actor Trevor Jamieson: nuclear waste dumps on Pitjantjatjara lands, a lack of Indigenous language policy continuing the cultural genocide, the bombing of Pitjantjatjara people at Maralinga, and the struggle to survive trauma on Pitjantjatjara country. How could we collaborate to tell a Pitjantjatjara story about nuclear tests and subsequent dislocation, in a way that non-Indigenous audiences could engage with deeply? How could they even enter into the narrative when language is so vital to the nuance of story, and most non-indigenous audiences would be surprised to know Indigenous languages like Pitjantjatjara are still very intact? It was as if these language traditions had been barred from our cultural life, deliberately languishing untaught and under resourced by our education system.

We realised if we wanted to collaborate to tell these vital stories, we would have to rethink our approach, and demand more from our audiences. We would have to assist audiences to learn something of Pitjantjatjara language before they came to a performance that tackled these stories.

The phrase 'ngapartji ngapartji' translates as something like an exchange: "I give



“This is searingly truthful, vital theatre that pierces the heart of glossed-over periods of Australia’s Indigenous history. It is wonderfully performed and told, and is certain to be remembered as one of the memorable productions of the year.”

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

you something, you give me something.” We decided we would try not to be part of the white audience gaze, instead we’d create an intercultural work that built an exchange with the audience.

The great icon of Uluru stands on Pitjantjatjara land, and is the face of Australia generating millions in tourist dollars. Yet we are unaware of the language and culture that surrounds it. We know how to say ‘hello’ in French at the foot of the Eiffel Tower but not in Pitjantjatjara, at Uluru – how can that be? Is the lack of support for Indigenous languages part of an ongoing cultural genocide?

When we began the project in 2005 there was no national Indigenous languages policy, which meant there was no mechanism to deliver funds to schools to teach Indigenous languages. These seemingly invisible issues, relationships with the Pitjantjatjara community, and the hidden story of Maralinga survivors formed the basis of a multi-layered project. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* also pushed Big hART to question and refine our approach to working with communities and driving policy change.

THE PROCESS

We knew these meta issues were critical and urgent, however, we needed to begin with Pitjantjatjara elders and then, with permission, engage young people. The vehicle for this work became an online language and culture course created with the community, for audiences who would attend future performances. The next step was to create smaller teaching versions of the show, based on Pitjantjatjara cultural themes such as land (ngura), body (puntu), family (walytja), and story (tjukurpa) – which we would tour in advance of a big festival show. We would encourage audiences to engage with language and culture first, come to the teaching shows, and give them ‘homework’ to do before coming to the large performance piece.

At the festival show, our aim was to reverse the cultural gaze. The 37 cast members – of Pitjantjatjara, Greek, Afghan, Indian, Anglo, and Japanese descent – would say hello in their own language, and then teach the audience to say hello in Pitjantjatjara. The audience would learn the simplest of childhood songs (‘heads, shoulders knees and toes’) in language, before we even got started on the show. Through this structure, there would be an exchange, a reversal, and a reciprocity – ngapartji ngapartji.



*“It’s a discursive, personal story
of national implications, a
demand about the importance
of connection and country, and
especially the need to retain
and encourage Indigenous
languages.”*

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

The process began with community workshops in Alice Springs and Ernabella with accompanying digital workshops to create online content, singing workshops to translate contemporary songs into Pitjantjatjara, encouraging the women's choir, lobbying for a national Indigenous languages policy, building the online community, and only then would the showbiz juggernaut hit the road and tour festivals.

THE CONTENT

The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* production presented the story of Pitjantjatjara people fleeing across the desert as their Maralinga homelands were subject to nuclear testing for over a decade, with explosions a thousand times more powerful than the blast at Hiroshima. Plutonium was spread across their country, where they had lived for tens of thousands of years, and left them refugees. This story provided a powerful vehicle to illuminate the blundering physical and cultural aggression of the last 200 years, and was contained in the story of actor Trevor Jamieson's family.

The last of Jamieson's extended kin walked out of the desert to see white people for the first time in 1986, and their story – as internal refugees in our country – resonated with the many stories of the global diaspora in the decade following 9/11. The theatre work that came out of this compelling story was musically rich, with contemporary songs translated into Pitjantjatjara, traditional public songs, and a text full of warmth, sadness and humour. Audiences laughed and wept in sold out seasons across around the country, as it toured nationally to much acclaim, at the Sydney Opera House, Belvoir St. Theatre, the Victorian Arts Centre, and venues in Perth and Alice Springs. Smaller versions then toured overseas to Rotterdam, Australia House in London, and to Japan, for the first anniversary of Fukushima.

The creative high point of the project was taking the show back to the community in Ernabella, and staging it outdoors, amongst the ghost gums in a dry riverbed. This journey home and the emotional impact of the project on many was then captured in Big hART's award-winning documentary – *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji*. This documentary went on to be broadcast on ABC, screened in festivals internationally, and was the recipient of many awards, including a Deadly Award.



FAVOURITE MOMENT: Peter Garrett, then the Minister for Heritage and the Arts, sitting with senior women in the Ngapartji Ngapartji office, as they sang Midnight Oil's song – 'Beds Are Burning' – in Pitjantjatjara. Tears flowed as the point was made that soon this type of exchange wouldn't be possible, unless we have a national Indigenous languages policy. A few years later we had one. Ngapartji Ngapartji helped fuel the desire for Big hART to work in strategic ways so as to place the art in critical forums and to drive campaigns.

