

YIJALA YALA

2011 - 2014 | LEGACY PROJECT 2015 - ONGOING

MAKE: Theatre, interactive comics, short films, music, place-making, animation

BUILD: A stronger community and a more positive Roebourne, WA

DRIVE: The presentation of the heritage values of Murujuga, and an awareness of Indigenous incarceration rates

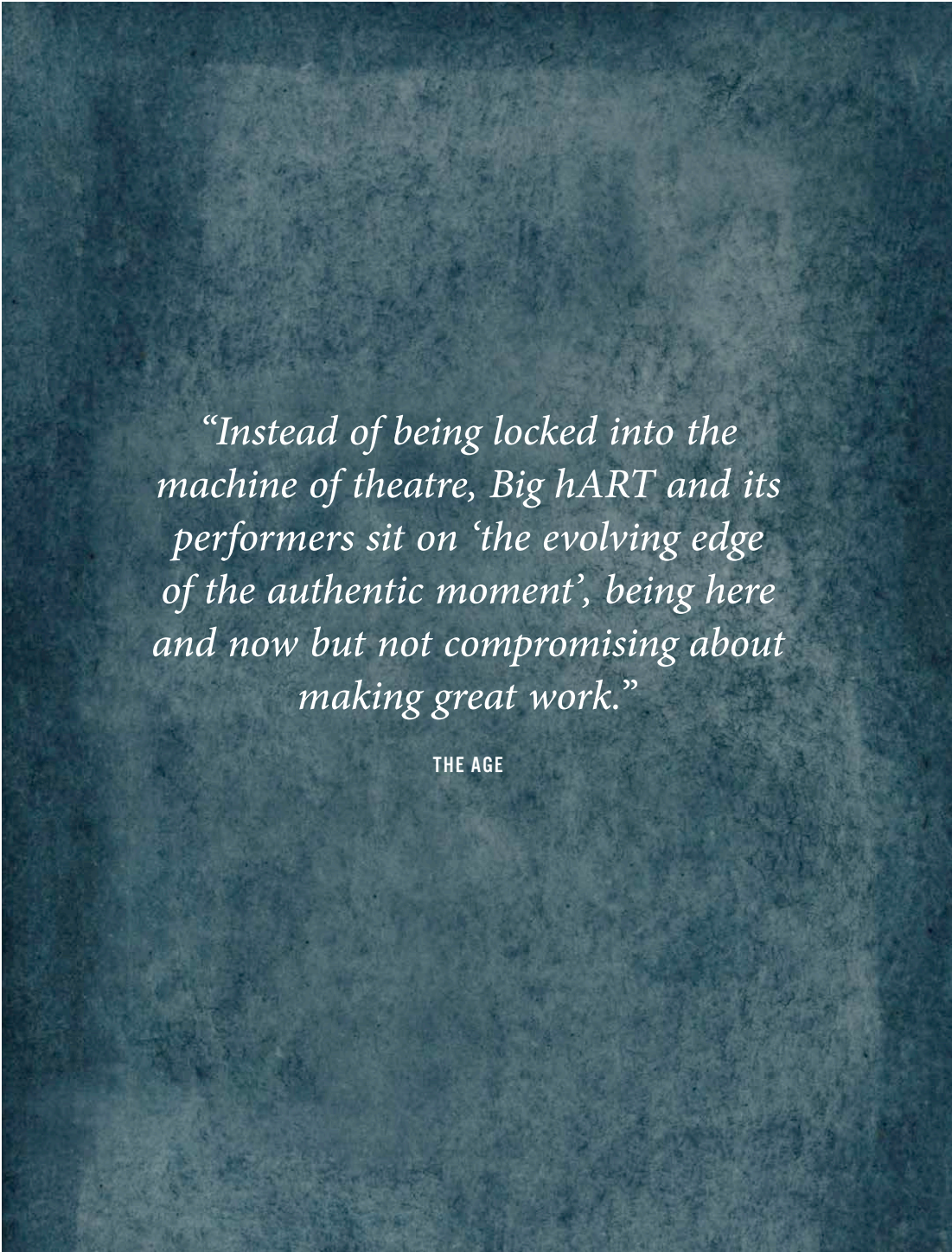
CONTEXT - THE HIDDEN STORY

The town of Roebourne is situated in the West Pilbara region of Western Australia - where the desert meets the sea. Once the main hub of the North West, it has now shrunk to a transient population of around 1000, yet maintains its place as the Aboriginal centre of the region. Big hART had been invited to work in Roebourne some years earlier, and had gained a strong sense of the community and its iconic story.

An invitation to return to Roebourne came from a completely unexpected source, the Rock Art Foundation Committee (RAFC). The ask was to meet with a group of senior women, show them a documentary about the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project in Ernabella, and to discuss the potential for a large scale, long-term project in the community.

The RAFC was formed when Woodside Petroleum began building a gas plant on Government annexed land on the culturally sensitive Burrup Peninsula (Murujuga). Murujuga is an incredible site of over a million petroglyphs (rock art). It is of world heritage value and profoundly significant to the Ngarluma people, the custodians for the Yaburara people (Southern Ngarluma) whose community was decimated with the arrival of European settlers in the mid 19th century. This policy of the West Australian Government to place large industrial works on Murujuga had been condemned as deeply insensitive.





“Instead of being locked into the machine of theatre, Big hART and its performers sit on ‘the evolving edge of the authentic moment’, being here and now but not compromising about making great work.”

THE AGE

Perhaps in recognition of this enforced cultural travesty, Woodside set aside a corporate donation of 37.4 million dollars towards maintaining and presenting the heritage values of Murujuga. The RAFC was set up to administer these funds and develop projects with the community. A number of years into the program the RAFC and Woodside were concerned at the lack of progress, and Big hART were approached to begin a conversation with the community with a view to designing a project.

Senior women from the community quickly came to the consensus that Roebourne needed a similar program to *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, to help end the stigma about the community perpetuated by the media and to talk about the ‘New Roebourne’. This brief became the starting point for Big hART to begin building a quiet community process.

THE PROCESS

Yijala Yala began slowly and carefully, with a producer living in the community, having cups of tea and listening. Roebourne has experienced 150 years of cultural trauma, beginning in the late 1860s to the present: the arrival of white farmers, the stealing of land, destruction of food and water sources by cattle, disease epidemics and slaughter, being pushed together onto reserves, the arrival of the mining industry, welfare and native title pressures. It has been a tsunami of change and brutality.

The first year of the project was spent working with the grandchildren of the senior women who brought Big hART to the community, running engagement workshops, creating literacy outcomes, while at the same time designing a longer term approach to working with the community. Once Big hART was embedded in the community a project name was chosen - *Yijala Yala* - meaning “now” in both Ngarluma (the country where Roebourne sits) and Yindjirbarndi (a larger nation who were forced off their own land and into Roebourne). The use of the word “now” represented the desire in the community to talk about the positives of Roebourne and its future, not just the pain and dysfunction of the past – and to do so with urgency. The conceptual foundation of the project, steered by senior people, was that ‘heritage is a future concept’ – they wanted to keep looking forward, backed by their strong connection to their culture, and the past.

Yijala Yala stayed true to its brief of helping to maintain and transmit the heritage values of Murujuga by embarking on a wide range of workshops with young



people. These involved digital literacy, intergenerational exchange, traditional stories, futuristic stories, music, video, re-engagement in education, juvenile justice support, and diversion from crime. The project explored these approaches to heritage, instead of a 'glass case' museum approach, and the community loved it.

THE CONTENT

Quite quickly the young people began achieving beyond community expectations. Their short films were screened locally, a homegrown interactive computer game was launched, concerts in and outside the prison were held, and a growing team of professionals mentored the community in a whole range of skill building workshops. These workshops led to many spin-off projects – *Neomad*, *Hipbone Sticking Out*, *MURRU*, *Tjaabi*, *Smashed*, *How Do We Get to Space* and the *John Pat Peace Place*.

The community grabbed *Yijala Yala* and ran with it. The workshops created too many layers of content to cover them all here, however below are highlights from the first 6 years in Roebourne.

NEOMAD

Neomad is an interactive comic made for iPad – a collaboration between young people from Roebourne and a professional creative team. *Neomad* was culturally and technically ahead of its time, and in 2016 it won Australia's top comic award – the Leger Award. The comic was hand drawn and then photoshopped by Aboriginal young people who were initially disengaged from education, with some considered almost 'unteachable'. This core group called themselves the 'Love Punks', and they created comic characters based on their own aspirations, each had quirky positive characteristics – they were smart, cheeky and fast on their feet.

Neomad became an exceptional vehicle for youth work and re-engagement in the school system, fostering digital literacy and diversion from crime. Parents and elders were amazed to see the talent and positivity of these young people, and the new skills they had quickly acquired.

Futuristic and optimistic, *Neomad* builds on Roebourne's sense of humour and adventure, as well as the importance of country and heritage. It was an immediate hit, and the community were gobsmacked when their young artists were invited to present their work at a comic conference in South Korea.



“It’s an incredible achievement for a group of students who hail from a remote 1,000-person town perched on the northern shoulder of WA, surrounded by miles and miles of the Pilbara’s swirling red sands.”

THE GUARDIAN

HOW DO WE GET TO SPACE

Neomad was such a unique project that a documentary was made to capture the process, called *How Do We Get To Space* as well as 40 other short films made with the community, aired on NITV and other platforms. Thousands of Woodside Petroleum's employees were a key audience for *Yijala Yala*, with many of these short films being played on their intranet, so as to broaden Woodside employees' appreciation of Roebourne's positive attributes.

HIPBONE STICKING OUT

The Aboriginal name for the Burrup Peninsula is Murujuga - meaning "hipbone sticking out", capturing its geography sticking out into the Indian Ocean. Murujuga is a place of deep cultural significance where law comes out of the sea, and travels inland. It was also the point of first contact for the small ship that came to 'settle' the Pilbara, bringing sheep and small pox. Murujuga became emblematic of the *Yijala Yala* project and the many untold stories, beyond the museum view of rock art heritage.

Soon after Big hART began the *Yijala Yala* project, the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation Limited (NYFL) began building a Cultural Centre in the main street of Roebourne. The completion of the centre became a galvanizing deadline to try and tell the sweeping narrative of Murujuga and the town - by the community, for the community - in time for the opening. Through story collection, skills training and creative development workshops, the project began working with the community to tell both the tragic stories from the past again, such as the '*Flying Foam Massacre*' on Murujuga, or the story of John Pat - and also stories of hope. In the end the performance folded the past into the continuity of Roebourne now, and on this basis the show - *Hipbone Sticking Out* - was conceived. Vast in scope, and varied in style and technique, it was a deeply intercultural work.

Hipbone tells the recent story that gave rise to the town we now know as Roebourne, but the production begins in 1602 with the emergence of globalisation - relentlessly marching towards the Pilbara and sweeping over these ancient Indigenous nations. The central narrative came from the Pat family. They had shared with us the tragic story of their son John's death in police custody three decades earlier, which triggered the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody. The family generously worked with the cast, and John Pat became the lens through which the show could examine this sweeping narrative. As he lay

"That Hipbone manages to keep all these different levels of reality present on stage at the same time is its astonishing achievement. It's extraordinarily generous theatre: funny and tragic, tough and tender, unsentimental, angry and heartbreaking. The show generates its complex emotional impact from its very literal enactment of maragutharra, the Yindjibarndi word for "working together", and it's explicitly addressed to a white audience. It says, this isn't our history: this is your history. And it is, told as clearly and passionately as I've seen."

THE AGE

“Hipbone Sticking Out is a joyous, moving, life-altering piece of theatre that refuses to be anything but raw and unflinching in its view of history, and nothing short of hopeful in its outlook.”

THE HERALD SUN



on the floor of the police cell in the last hours of his life, he tried to make sense of what was happening to him, by traveling across time. The Pat family wanted John's story told, and came on tour to keep the story safe.

Hipbone was three years in the making. Large in scale like an iconoclastic opera, this intercultural work combined local talent with internationally renowned artists, involving 40 people on the road.

The performance began by evoking all the opulence of European high art, and over the course of the performance the artifice was stripped away, leaving just the company on stage telling the story of Roebourne now, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous alike, all part of the narrative. The story pulled no punches, weaving multiple stories of brutality into one. There was the stealing of land story, the prison story, the slave story, the reserve story, the crowded housing, the asbestos mining, and in the end, it captured the ongoing, changing and future focused story of this strong community with a future in two worlds.

Hipbone Sticking Out was the debut show in the amphitheatre at the new Ngurin Pilbara Aboriginal Cultural Centre, delighting a packed house of people from across the Pilbara and moving them to tears of sorrow and joy. It also represented Western Australia in the Centenary of Canberra festival before touring Perth and then the Melbourne International Arts Festival, where it was a sellout sensation.

MURRU

'Murru' was John Pat's nickname, and his family liked the idea of naming the music workshops in Roebourne District Prison after him. Many people from town go through the prison, in some ways it's a rite of passage. Music is a good way of keeping inmates connected to their community. *MURRU* workshops brought many high profile artists to Roebourne and helped keep the issue of deaths in custody on the public agenda. The *MURRU* band was formed, an album produced, and the *MURRU* concert was staged.

The statistics are stark – 51.8% of young people in prison in Australia at the time of the project were Indigenous. Big hART used *MURRU* to gain attention and support for other organisations campaigning to lower these statistics and pushing for justice reinvestment (reinvesting money in prevention programs which divert young people from the justice system).

MURRU launched with a concert in Fremantle, performed in Roebourne, and

“Big hART’s Hipbone Sticking Out is gob-smacking in its ambition and its achievement. It’s a landmark work of Australian theatre that writes its own rules (and then breaks them).”

ABC ARTS

opened the 2014 Melbourne International Arts Festival with a free concert in Federation Square. It was programmed in the festival in tandem with *Hipbone Sticking Out* and a public forum at the Wheeler Centre looking at the issue of Indigenous incarceration rates. Having Ms. Juggari Pat (John's mother) and the Pat family with Big hART on tour added raw emotion and gravitas to the issue. Workshops continue in Roebourne, both in the community and the prison, building bridges beyond the prison walls, and assisting in rehabilitation.

TJAABI

As the fourth year of the project approached, *Yijala Yala* moved into its legacy phase. Often stronger outcomes emerge when you shift successful projects, creating gaps for new approaches to grow in the community with more independence.

The legacy phase began with a project name change - from *Yijala Yala*, to *New Roebourne*. Central to the legacy strategy was Big hART's residency at the new Cultural Centre, and backing creative leaders in the community. Ngarluma man Patrick Churnside had been in the cast of *Hipbone Sticking Out* singing tjaabi (a public song form) handed down from his grandfather.

Patrick was passionate about tjaabi, which can be roughly described as being like a sung haiku. Tjaabi contain precise lyrics set to an often inherited melody, with an underlay of rhythm, that capture the essence of a moment, or country, or perhaps a dream. Once a tjaabi comes upon you, you become the keeper of that tjaabi - it stays with you and is passed through your family. These sit in the public domain and can be safely heard by non-Indigenous audiences.

Although still sung, tjaabi have been under pressure for the last few generations, sitting in the background, but often brought up by elders as something that should be more alive and embraced by young people.

Patrick's love for tjaabi, and passion for passing the tradition on to young people, complimented his ability to walk between cultures. He saw how these public songs could form a generous intercultural bridge between worlds.

He became inspired to learn more about tjaabi from his elders and combine song, dance, video, movement and story in a performance piece. The community embraced this intergenerational workshop program.



Patrick's grandfather was a famous tjaabi singer, and it was important to bring the extended family on the journey of the project by inviting them into the workshop and rehearsal space. The *Tjaabi* project pulls young people together for workshops, bring elders in to advise on song and dance, supported by other arts workers as the show is assembled. These workshops have triggered extensive talks with other families who hold many other tjaabis across the Pilbara.

The *Tjaabi* project is central to the legacy of Big hART's work in the Pilbara. There were around 900 people living in Roebourne, and when we first performed *Tjaabi* in the amphitheatre, with Patrick's family sitting up close to support him, and about 900 people turned up. It was one of the most powerful moments in 25 years of Big hART's work. Here was a wave of joy, relief and respect for the songs and a flowering of potential, as Patrick sang and young men and women danced, and senior men spontaneously joined him on stage, dancing in support.

While *Tjaabi* is being created to tour Australia and South East Asia, it also provides a local vehicle for working with young people in the Ngurin Pilbara Aboriginal Cultural Centre.

JOHN PAT PEACE PLACE

Big hART's legacy in Roebourne also involves bringing resolution to the Pat family around John's story, and providing the community with a safe and peaceful place to remember his life, while looking positively to the future. A small landscaped garden, the John Pat Peace Place, sits in the grounds of the Cultural Centre, positioned inclusively as part of the amphitheater and overlooking the peace of the river, with subtle design features alluding to John's life, and a new future for the community.

BIG hART IN ROEOURNE

Big hART's legacy projects all come under the banner of *New Roebourne*. This is an enthralling community, with its wet and dry seasons, cyclones and intense heat, nestled where the desert meets the sea. It sits in the West Pilbara on the Ngurin River, now dammed to provide water for mining. It is beautiful, harsh and hurting. The resource industry will be gone in a generation or two, and the community is working hard to straddle different economies and secure a future benefit. In the meantime, the main aspirations focus on family and culture rather than resources. Roebourne sits as the only town on the highway between

Geraldton and Broome, and has so much potential to become a centre of intercultural excellence, and cultural tourism.

Roebourne's population of 1000 expands and contracts with transient families at different times of the year. Around 400 of these are young people, and Big hART has worked with 80% of them across many layers of the project. Here is the heritage. Here is the potential. The struggle is the consistency of support.

Before Big hART began to work in the Pilbara, the author Nicholas Rothwell, who writes passionately about his experiences of Aboriginal Australia, was writing a story on the *Namatjira* Project. When he heard we were also beginning work in the Pilbara, he said it was his favorite part of the country, "but the Pilbara eats people." He didn't expect us to last a year. Six years on, the community has afforded the company a remarkable privilege.

FAVOURITE MOMENT: *This community is much maligned by the media, however its generosity is expansive - it is a warm generous place with a strong sense of family, always working to build a better future for their young people. Watching kids like Max, who started as a small child and is now a strong young man - mentoring other young people on how to walk in both worlds, is especially rewarding.*



*“Pilbara songs are hanging in the air
under a swollen moon, near a stony
riverbed edged with spinifex grass...
Indian prayer bowls brimming with
salt, spinifex seeds, sand and water
have been laid on pillows of red dirt...
Earlier in the day, lead performer
Patrick Churnside rehearsed his
cherished songs, with a dozen local
children behind him.”*

THE AUSTRALIAN





“Since the show opened, on a daily basis people are coming up to me and wanting to talk about it because it was dealing with incredibly important issues ... and doing so in a very impactful and poignant way. It was an enormously important work and quite central to the entire program.”

JOSEPHINE RIDGE, MELBOURNE FESTIVAL DIRECTOR, 2015

ALLERY SANDY

CULTURAL ADVISER, PERFORMER - YIJALA YALA AND NEW ROEBOURNE

I have learnt a lot from Big hART. I have learnt about their love and compassion for people, and their role in bringing out untold stories about things that have happened, but have never been told. Big hART directs strong teams and has effective relationships with community groups. Big hART has lots of compassion and respect for elders, I saw this all come about in the Roebourne *Yijala Yala* project, when we began working on *Hipbone Sticking Out*. When I saw the finished version of *Hipbone Sticking Out*, it hit me so powerfully that I was standing in tears, and I have never experienced that in my lifetime. Everyone hears and tells their story as a intercultural company, and it came out beautifully with the kids from Roebourne.

Big hART's work shows little kids know how much they can learn and achieve. These projects encourage the younger generations to continue with their school and look for greater challenges in their life. I can see this happening with my grandsons, going back to school and their involvement in the Big hART programs and community leadership.

I can trust Scott Rankin and when I met him and I felt like I had known him a long time. Our working relationship and communication grew strong to benefit the community people. I feel safe in everything that he does, but if he jumps off the track I can tell him. Big hART has a vision for the community. Its work with Aboriginal people is something that we can trust, rely on and we know it will perform. I have been watching how they operate, keeping things moving forward gently and powerfully.

I see Big hART fighting for funding, getting projects on their feet and fighting for the support on our behalf. It is about the untold stories, so they can come alive through art. There has been an introduction to music through Big hART programs and music hits your heart.

Big hART has been doing this for 25 years. I hope they keep going with the work that they have done with both cultures, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, for they have a heart for the people. They have great respect for the community and know how to bring about projects, by working alongside and listening to us.

