

Slow Tucker Long Yarn

TOM E LEWIS AND JAYNE NANKIVELL

Tom E Lewis and Jayne Nankivell tell us of a project which involved six communities in the Northern Territory, exploring their own community health through story and song.

A boriginal communities are vastly different places in comparison to the cities that most Australians reside in. Each community is different to the next, but they have many things in common too. For example, each community has institutions like a shop, a clinic, a school and a council office. The community shop is an interesting place to the outsider – there is a steady stream of fast food and soft drink being sold and consumed by people who already have more health problems than cityfolk. When walking around the community one can hear TV and American hip-hop music blaring out from the houses and this is where community members believe cultural breakdown begins. ‘The campfires are all split up,’ says Tom E Lewis. ‘We have to bring everyone back to one campfire to sing together and tell the stories to the children.’

This is the basis of the ‘Slow Tucker, Long Yarn’ project that grew from the ‘Let’s Go! To the outback’ project in 2002, where requests from community elders to assist with building cultural strength through the arts highlighted their concerns about community health. Arts Katherine and ATSI Arts Katherine worked with communities to develop the project and to access funding to offer opportunities to as much of the Katherine region as possible. The Katherine region covers an area of about 400,000 square kilometres, from the Arnhem Land coast to the desert, consisting of over 30 Aboriginal communities and this year the

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Puppetry at Barunga, Slow Tucker Project. Photo: Sandy McKendrick

project travelled to five communities on the east side of Katherine, spending one week in each location. During the week participants told the stories of their region, its cultural background and its strengths and weaknesses.

Community artists, Tom E Lewis and Sandy McKendick, managed the project offering a diverse range of skills in drama, puppetry, music and visual arts. Richard Coburn documented the processes and stories from each community and artists Megan Cameron, Megan Holt, Josh Ingrams and Samantha Chalmers offered extra skills at different times through the five weeks. Communities visited were Mataranka and Jilkminggan combined, Minyerri, Ngukurr, Barunga and Wugularr (Beswick). In the communities, the artists worked with mostly youth and women to develop stories of community health.

In mid August the car was packed for a five-week tour with materials, food, swags and artists to start Slow Tucker, Long Yarn. The weather at this time of year still has nice cool mornings and 32 degree days, but it's also the time for season to change into hot oppressive days of 38 degrees and balmy 25 degree nights. There's no air conditioned motel for the artists to retreat to in the evenings, not even a house in most places, just a humpy made by the artists with some of the local bamboo with a tarpaulin tied to the top. Shade is the artists' most treasured resource at this time of year.

Mataranka was the first stop, where the Mataranka and Jilkminggan communities joined together to develop their stories from their region. These two communities combined provided a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous and all agreed that one of the aspects that kept their community strong was the link with recreation, food and the environment. We focussed on fishing, an activity that is significant for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people, both today and in the past. Stories of fishing were developed and songs were written. Kids created fish models with bamboo and woven palm fronds. Katherine Hospital donated old X-rays, which were made into shadow puppets. Working together, teachers, artists, kids and community members developed a story about camping, spending time together fishing, cooking the



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fish and eating together. Caring for the environment was a strong message also as none of the fishing would happen if the environment was not looked after. The finale of the week was a performance presented to the community with a feast of fresh healthy food, giving the rest of the community the opportunity to participate in the project and to celebrate together. The song was popular with the kids:

One cold day we went to the river
We took three dogs, two billycans and
a cooked damper.

But instead, we ate yallabourne along
the way.

We saw kangaroo jump across the
road, as the eagles they fly, and we
saw the white buffalo.
OOOOH!

When we got there, the beautiful river
was blue, green and white, it was
running faster than my life.

One big log was there in the water
And I see all the fish swimming, down
under.

There was Bream, catfish, ngaladarra,
turtle, saratoga, longbottom and
Mahndorrwogu,
And there was fish for everyone ...

Written by Mataranka students, music
by Tom E Lewis

The feast at the end of the week became the final focus for the project in all communities. For the community people to come and celebrate in the 'Slow Tucker' was just as important as the 'Long Yarn' part was for the participants.

Barunga community focussed their story around the ever-present problem of transport in the community. An analogy was made between the health of the community and the health of a motor vehicle. If a motor vehicle is not looked after then it doesn't work very well, just as the human body is unwell if it isn't looked after. The teenage boys wrote their own rap song and a tray top vehicle was brought in to dance on. The performance identified an array of issues ranging from the beautiful environment of the region to a slap stick performance of all the conflicts and issues that can arise from doing the wrong thing in a community, using the motor vehicles and scenes of road conflicts as an example of how things can go wrong and misunderstandings can happen if people aren't caring and looking after each other.

Minyerri is a community more isolated from the influences of grog and fast food, and the community strength shows, but there are still affects of these things evident in the community and concerns amongst the elders regarding the breakdown of culture due to these influences. Minyerri community embarked on the week of learning and sharing with vigour, with a theme of 'Life's a Circus'. Young people learnt circus skills,



Shadow puppets at Mataranka, Slow Tucker Project. Photo: Sandy McKendrick

**This country is rich with
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through the river
systems from the coast.**

drama, sculpture and dance and older people taught the artists and the young people about traditional collection, sorting, grinding and cooking of water lily seeds. The project was based at the community school and the Principal was heard at 9.00pm one night saying in desperation 'Would you all go home from school please!' The advertising went home for 'The best ever circus to be seen in Minyerri' and the whole community (all 400) came out for a night of entertainment and feasting. One week doesn't prepare performers fully for presentation no matter how confident the practice is; the music started, the ringmaster introduced the performers, who had all got stage fright and were hiding. After a bit of coaxing, the acrobatic tumblers came out, followed by the stilt walkers and the human pyramids rose from the earth and collapsed at all the right times. A giant sculpture of a turtle entered the circus square along with printed festive flags and the circus scene was backed with film of collecting water lily seeds. The evening closed with a disco where the challenge went out between community members and artists to show off their dance expertise. Everyone collapsed into their swags about midnight to be woken at 7.00 am by kids arriving at school again. Part of the song 'Life's a Circus' was:

Something's going on in Minyerri
Circus smiling to embrace a story
Children learning, future yearning

Though each we build and grow.

Who, ... so who are we,
Eyes open wide,
But do you listen

You, ... that's you and me,
A life that's free
A time for giving,
It's up to you a time for living.

Big top, acrobats, performers vision
Take your time because it's your
decision
Life can smile or life can hurt us,
Put it together as life's a circus.

Written by students at Minyerri school,
music by Tom E Lewis

Ngukurr is a larger community in the 'rock country'. Rock country is beautiful, but rugged country that takes in escarpments, creeks, river systems and springs. This country is rich with history of people flowing, travelling through the river systems from the coast. Cultural strength was the focus of the stories brought to the surface at Ngukurr, with the traditional stories of how people travelled from the coast in Koras (Macassan boats). The strength of the spectacular and rich environment is a strong force in the stories and the women used the produce of the environment to weave boat sails and boats for the performance.

Traditional dance and stories being performed by all age groups in the community was very emotional for the older people in the community, who were moved to tears at remembering their old stories.

The River is Flowing

The river is flowing,
Flowing and flowing.
The river is flowing,
Down to the sea.

Mother carry me,
A child I will always be.
Mother carry me,
Down to the sea.

Traditional Folk Song

Wugularr, the last of the communities and it's really hot now, but this does not deter the community or the artists. The young people tell their stories in a song called 'Do you Know Wugularr', which talks of the weather and its trials, waiting for the rain and hoping it doesn't flood again. Maybe weather is upmost in everyone's minds when it is so hot or it might be that weather is a prominent part of people's lives at Wugularr. Wugularr is built too close to the river and every year the community evacuates for the flood waters. The first and last verses of the song are:

Verse 1

Do you know Wugularr
All de people bin waiting for dem
knock em down rain
And dat little one fly, bin fly away
Hoping that someday it will be the
same again

Verse 4

When everything's good again
Hope it doesn't flood again
We'll be waiting for dat knock em
down rain

While the young people were making puppets for performance learning skills and writing songs, Sandy McKendrick was 'out bush' with the women collecting pandanus and dyes for basket weaving. Throughout the process of collecting materials, the women were inspired to write a song:

Weaving From My Hands:

I gotta go gettum pandanus
Hey brother take me down the road
Hey sister help me carry mine load.

Now let dat one pandanus dry
Then pick em up and twist and turn-em
round
Weaving things that we all need to
learn.

Chorus

Now we gotta go gettum colour
Orange, red and bright one yellow too
Cook-em in the flour-drum
Stir-em good and the colour come.

All the women go langa bush
Getum but-but to make string bag
Blah make im soft one, bla make im
long.

Women stay strong weaving
Baskets, mats and dillybags
Teach-em all dat picciny story and our
songs

Close

This is the secret of our life
This is the story from our heart
This is the weaving from my hands.

Written by Vera Cameron, Vera Lane,
Lyn Ashley and Julie Ashley music by
Tom E Lewis



Collection of water lilies from Minyerri, Slow Tucker Project. Photo: Sandy McKendrick

The final event for Wugularr and the project was held at the pensioners' camp and was combined with the screening of another community arts project addressing petrol sniffing. The old people were proud to have such a community gathering at their place and the whole community enjoyed the time to gather together and showcase their talent.

'Each community had a completely different *nyngiya*, or spirit, producing stories unique to their history, country and experiences' said Tom Lewis, 'This is what brings people back to their campfires'. When the project started, the focus was on an arts, health collaboration, but it became evident early in the project that there was much more involved than just those two connections. Art is like the underlying soul of the community, whose survival and well being is dependant on the health, environment, education and the culture. Without art, the community doesn't exist, it comes from and is influenced by the environment, it keeps the community healthy and happy, it encompasses the cultural boundaries an integral part of daily and future life.

The effects of the policies of many community council leaders to maintain 'the essentials' as they might call them, is a misguided approach to management of a community. Community cultural development (ccd) is the essential ingredient for communities to keep the ties between art, culture, health, education and environment together and is the essential ingredient to maintaining human dignity ■

Tom E Lewis was born in at Ngukurr and grew up in the Katherine region. He has spent most of his working years in the performing arts industry working in film and theatre, both nationally and internationally. More recently he has dedicated his time to community arts in the Katherine region. Tom's gifts in ccd are in the combination of professional skills and the knowledge of the people he is working with on Aboriginal communities.



Jayne Nankivell has lived in the Katherine region for 20 years and is the coordinator of Arts Katherine – the regional arts organisation. She creates a ccd focus for the organisation and each year a major ccd project is undertaken. She believes in the enormous talent throughout the communities of the Katherine Region but sees the reduced opportunities and access to skill development through isolation and other issues.