

Creating a New World

Scott Rankin, Artistic Director of renowned arts and social change company Big hART spoke to Back Stage about writing and directing Nyuntu Ngali, a revolutionary theatre piece that challenges our perception of culture, community and the future.

Can you talk about the genesis of Nyuntu Ngali? What inspired the project?

Nyuntu Ngali began as a commission from Windmill Performing Arts for me to write a piece about the Pitjantjatjara lands based in a community called Mimili. I'd already been working out there on a show called *Ngapartji Ngapartji* for Big hART, and so as well as the commission we decided that it would be interesting for the two companies to collaborate. As a result the process of developing the show in the Pitjantjatjara lands became Big hART's responsibility and the staging became Windmill's responsibility. Beth Sometimes - the Musical Director of *Nyuntu Ngali* - has worked for a long time in Ernabella on Big hART projects along with many projects of her own. She is brilliant and creating the music became a large part of the developmental process in the community.

For me as writer/director the genesis was more personal. Having been invited to create a lot of new works with indigenous communities and people, I was interested in finding a place and

a narrative where we could get over the "otherness" as an audience. A piece that crossed over between cultures rather than focusing on differences.

The idea came when staying out there and thinking a lot about climate change, it was kind of a "What if?" What if in a couple of hundred years - post climate change - the only safe place for those living in this continent was in the Pitjantjatjara Lands... how would we then live? It created the opportunity to say that no matter who you were and where you were from, the country would dictate how to live. This in turn allowed us to begin exploring the ways people have survived for tens of thousands of years and combine this with different cultural references to the present... which of course in the play is now the distant past. This also freed us up to look at the languages and in the end it created its own unique world of movement, sound and text.

What challenges were there working in both Pitjantjatjara and English? What artistic

strengths were born out of working with these two languages?

Language is a fragile thing. It's a slight intonation carried on exhaled breath from tongue to eardrum. And yet on this fragile breath are some of the most complex expressions of culture and experience and life. So there are many challenges in what can be missed nuances of language and culture in this fragile journey. However there are also whole new universes of understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous, and language is the door between. Controlling the endless possibilities for a seventy minute show is more the issue. So we don't try and give equal time to two languages, we just dip in and out of Pitjantjatjara in song, and when naming things. Similarly with the visual and kinetic languages, they are woven together to create a kind of strange and unique world where the action takes place.

The project examines Central Australian survival techniques against a backdrop of a post-climate change future. How do you see the story?

As a warning? A parable for modern times? Or a story about love in the face of all obstacles?

The apocalypse is there in every age. It's necessary as a way of facing the "end of days" for each individual... What is interesting against

that backdrop is the will to live... and *Nyuntu Ngali* explores that. The show happens in a perpetual cycle and who we think the central character changes as that cycle unfolds. So in answer to your question, it is not so much the place of theatre to sound a warning about the future, but to illuminate the meaning of the present. Humans are deeply poetic creatures. They long to glimpse something more, some depth, that makes them long to contribute... before they are swept away in their own private and intimate apocalypse.

What do you hope audiences will experience when they see Nyuntu Ngali?

I hope audiences will experience a kind of woven poetry, which keeps shifting slightly under their gaze and then brings questions bubbling to the surface... not about some world in the future, but the world right now in this incredibly complex country, with its culturally divergent addictions and blindnesses. And I hope it is exquisitely beautiful to look at and listen to.

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SCRIVANO

SJED PRESENTS NYUNTU NGALI, A PRODUCTION BY WINDMILL AND BIG hART IN ASSOCIATION WITH ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE'S AUSTRALIAN STORIES PROGRAM, PLAYING FROM 5 MAY IN UHART 2. NYUNTU NGALI IS SUPPORTED BY SJED'S MAJOR PHILANTHROPIC PATRONS. TICKETS FROM \$25

