



TACKLING THE BURNING ISSUES

WITH A SWATHE OF SUCCESSFUL PRODUCTIONS UNDER THEIR BELT, RECENTLY ANNOUNCED AS A STC ASSOCIATE COMPANY, ZEAL THEATRE'S NEXT PROJECT GOES BUSH, AS THEY HEAD TO RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS TO INVESTIGATE THE IMPACT ON THE DROUGHT. ZEAL'S STEFO NANTSOU REPORTS ON THE CREATION OF BURNT.

THE OVERVIEW

There are many regional communities who are experiencing intolerable strain and suffering as a result of the current drought. The social fabric of rural Australia is being ripped apart. Depression, caused by economic hardship exacerbated by unpaid loans, over-borrowing, failed crops, starving livestock, is becoming an ever-increasing plague on the spirit of the people. In country towns throughout Australia, there is an average one suicide every four days. What are the effects on the young people in these areas?

"*Burnt* has begun in a totally unusual way. Usually Zeal projects begin from our own interest in a certain area or story. We start with some 'grassroots' interviews and a mixture of journalistic research and gatherings of 'reference' materials.

Then out of that stage becomes more targeted interviews with people 'higher up'. In some cases we may interview a detective in charge of a case, or a judge who works for the juvenile justice system, or a range of psychologists or an expert in the issues we are exploring.

The conception of *Burnt* happened in totally the opposite way. Peter Kenny from AgForce (a representative body who meet with the Prime Minister to discuss regional policy issues) approached Helen Hristofski (STC Education Manager) to make a show about the effects of the drought on regional and remote communities.

Helen connected Peter to Zeal, and his interest in a show immediately sparked our interest for a show. I then met Peter in person at the Farmers Federation headquarters in Canberra in October, a day before he was meant to present a report on drought affected communities to the Prime Minister. He gave me a stack of interesting research materials, DVDs and a list of potential people to interview for the creation of the script.

Our meeting lasted four hours and we could still be there, we got on incredibly well! Two days later Peter rang me and told me he had discussed the project with the Federal Minister Tony Burke and the Prime Minister and that there is already a sense of great expectation for the development of the piece. You can imagine my reaction to that! So, *Burnt* is a project which has actually begun from those 'higher up'.

Since the meeting with Peter Kenny the interviews and researching has already begun. We have made a wonderful connection with members from Outback Theatre Company in south-western NSW. It is planned that Tom Lycos and myself will travel to Deniliquin early in 2009 to work with the young people from that company to help us develop the script for a high school audience. Along the way, interviews and meetings with interested people will no doubt snowball. We will continue to keep in contact with those in AgForce and the Government who already have a keen eye on the project.

So the development of *Burnt* bodes very well indeed. A very exciting project for STC and Zeal, and one which may have a very long life due to some major support already forthcoming from those 'higher ups' who usually prefer to remain at arms length from an artistic project of this kind."