

Revelation found in broad daylight

Rosemary Sorensen From: [The Australian](#) October 30, 2009 1:00AM

AN Aboriginal musical does not have to sound like Bran Nue Dae, and Aboriginal dancing can be something entirely different from Bangarra. That's the message, loud, clear and defiant, behind Burning Daylight, a million-dollar investment by a host of backers, including the West Australian and federal governments, and the consortium of presenters known as Mobile States.

For Rachael Swain and Dalisa Pigram, the co-artistic directors of Broome-based company, Marrugeku, this dance theatre production provides a model for the next generation of indigenous theatre.

"I think we're on to something new, something others can use as a template, but we've only just come to that realisation ourselves," Pigram says.

The process has been slow, almost five years of planning and development, with the first seed production, a collaboration with Marguerite Pepper, performed in project form in Broome and Zurich. (The Zurich audience didn't understand a great deal but got the feeling and responded warmly, Swain says.)

Both women believe that what they have done and the way they have gone about it are crucial for what they call "sustainable public storytelling" or, in other words, connecting theatre with the heart of communities, not just as entertainment but as cultural embodiment.

Patrick Dodson, Yawuru lawman and Pigram's great-uncle (her "pop", or grand-father, in Yawuru clan terms), who has been part of the consultancy process behind the creation of this show, says it's important that indigenous cultures develop performance outside ritual ceremony, so young people understand the stories are not just about them but also for and by them.

"We've got to utilise the technology in a way that helps to get the storytelling across and to do it in a relevant medium for young people, so that they can clearly get a sense that it's not ancient history," Dodson says, talking about the way Burning Daylight incorporates live hip-hop music and big-screen film projections created by Warwick Thornton, director of Oscar contender Samson and Delilah.

"To get young people to do things in a play that is not directly linked to the protocol and practices in a ceremonial setting gives a good foundation for them to begin to understand culture."

The weary but intensely focused faces of Pigram and Swain, just a day before Burning Daylight had its premiere last night in Broome, in an open-air, makeshift theatre space on the edge of

town, suggest just how ambitious are their ideas about performance, how difficult the task they set themselves, how thoroughly all belief, all courage, all skill must have been tested in the long process of this show's making. "We don't do it because it's fun," Pigram says. "We do it because we believe, from our hearts, in what we are doing. It's one thing to get permission to re-create something in an obvious way, but it takes a long time to create art in a way that's inspired by culture."

That's not to say that the end product, what audiences in Broome, then Perth, Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart will see during the next month as *Burning Daylight* tours, is a fun-free performance. Quite the contrary. Although Swain says those who saw Marrugeku's first big-scale outdoor production, *Mimi*, may be taken aback at this new direction, this speedy, cartoon-like, tongue-in-cheek, karaoke-inspired, bar-room portrait of Broome, and its "mongrel" people. This is attention-grabbing theatre, designed to pick you up from the opening off-stage sounds of incessantly barking mongrel dogs, and plonk you right in the middle of a riotous, slightly dangerous, balmy-night party.

Trevor Jamieson, who co-wrote the groundbreaking *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, plays an Aboriginal stockman, appearing like a vision from the past among the revellers during karaoke night at a pub in the raucous heart of Broome. In red boots with his chest bare beneath a fancy pink vest, tight jeans cinched by an enormous belt buckle, Jamieson's character shrieks trouble, an embodiment of sensuality wrapped inside a body taut with desire. Around him, as he struts and glowers, throng a host of ghosts, all those who have lived and died in this town once known as the Asian wild west.

This is a show shot through with desire: for sex, for fun, for a good time. But beyond all the surface desires, and going much deeper, it's a show about identity, belonging, about the yearning for the sense of self that comes through identification with a place and a community. Broome, once the only place in Australia exempted from the White Australia policy to allow the pearling trade to flourish with the assistance of workers from places such as Malaysia and Japan, may look like a tourist oasis for those who fly in and head to a luxurious resort on Cable Beach. While the mission stories told in Jimmy Chi's musical, *Bran Nue Day*, were sung in what Pigram and Swain call "saltwater music" style, that nostalgia, easy and comforting, is none too subtly undermined in *Burning Daylight*.

With strong visual references to Tracey Moffatt's cheesy send-up photographs of exotic native portrayals, with their sleazy voyeuristic titillation and underlying cruel violence against the women portrayed, *Burning Daylight* sets up a series of stories within stories, where passionate cross-cultural romance comes up against disapproval and institutional violence. The modern-day party-goers at the karaoke night sing about love, while the film screens behind them show what was probably their own family history, the deported Malay father, the ostracised Aboriginal woman said to have "lured" a white man into marriage.

Evoking those ghosts, says director Swain, giving voice to what may not have been said out loud before, is as much an ethical conundrum as an artistic one.

"When we get the balance right, the feeling traps you, builds on a poetic level," she says.

"One of the things we attempt to say is, this is about Broome and it's very particular, but there's this issue about young people everywhere, young people whose grandparents and parents have left country behind, and who lead culturally sophisticated lives, haunted by this history, the ghosts of the past that won't let them go."

As Pigram says, *Burning Daylight* is, like her, "pure Broome; that is, mongrel breed from way back".

Pigram is an extraordinary dancer, her solo work and with the other heterogeneous collection of performers in *Burning Daylight* breathtakingly good. Like every one of the cast, she seems to move in entirely her own way, a body that is memory and future tense.

This is partly the result of Marrugeku's decision to work with choreographer Serge Aime Coulibaly, from West African country Burkino Faso, who has also worked for many years with Belgian company, Les Ballet C de laB. Coulibaly talks about how really contemporary dance, the kind that is relevant across the world, and not just in the places where it is conceived, is created by drawing out of the dancer's body their own story, their own connection to the world and the places they come from.

He brought, he says, "new eyes" to the *Burning Daylight* project, hooking on to their desire to break out of any "fixed idea" of what contemporary indigenous dance is. "This is a new process, a new aesthetic," he says. "You carry in your body your story, and so it's a process of learning to use your body to create what you want to say."

Swain comments that the skill and success of the Bangarra style of dance has tended to lock audience expectations, here and overseas, into a narrow range, as though all indigenous dance will have that same vocabulary, that same aesthetic.

"We're looking for accessible contemporary forms of culture that also carry that culture forward into the future," she says.

That's also why she sought out Perth rapper Dazastah, who is part of the on-stage band comprising Marrugeku co-founder and musician Lorrae Coffin and Justin Gray, lead singer of Broome rock band Kross Kulcha. Dazastah, whose hip-hop band Downsyde is on the crest of international success, has Burmese-Malay heritage. It slots him in perfectly to this production that is not just about hybridity but, as Coulibaly says, one that brings forth these stories in movement. Dazastah closes the show with a poem about what it means to be mongrel breed, and how it swirls about members of the present generation as they relive the patterns of the past.

He says this experience of working in an ensemble is taking his own performance as a hip-hop artist into areas he had not imagined, disciplining him to control how the words are delivered. With a hip-hop performance, he says, you keep it nice and simple, letting the rhythms drive the meaning, but when you're there with a microphone, responsible for carrying the meaning of what the dancers around you are embodying, "that's a whole different kind of performance".

From a family of musicians who used to tour playing big band dance music, Dazastah fronts this different audience with panache, confident his rapping - a hybrid style forged by a new wave of Australian performers he says will soon be feted internationally for their particular style, getting more sophisticated all the time - is strong enough to carry the weight of responsibility for the finale of *Burning Daylight*.

He has the final say. His poem about mongrel breeds yearning to connect with their histories accompanies the exit of Jamieson's stockman, Pigram, Yumi Umiumare (whose dance that turns plastic barrier sheeting into a kimono is a knockout), powerful Sermsah Bin Saad, febrile, twitchy, mesmerising Owen Maher, the athletic Kathy Cogill and Antonia Djiagween (a Broome-based trainee with the company). "It's like all creative things work," Dazastah says. "We hadn't planned that the show would end like that, but that's how it turned out."

Dazastah says he has been "egged on" by the directors and other performers in *Burning Daylight* to take his hip-hop performances into new territory. Now, he says, it's up to him to convince others, his backers and audiences, that he can do more and do it better. That has also been Marrugeku's project, to change the perception of what indigenous dance and theatre can do, and how it can be done.

All the bits that "didn't fit" into *Burning Daylight* are being worked into a new youth production called *Buru*, which has been developing the skills of 10 young Broome performers. As Dodson says, these are productions designed to change young people's minds that culture is "for old people, something special and unique that I really can't get involved with".

Burning Daylight plays tonight and tomorrow at the Goolarri Outdoor Venue, Broome; then Perth, November 4 to 7; Sydney, November 12 to 15; Melbourne, November 19 to 22; and Hobart, November 26 to 28.