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Arts&Entertainment

SYDNEY FESTIVAL REVIEWS

A rare, compelling gift from Spinifex Country

■ THEATRE

NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

Sydney Festival/
Company B/Big hART
Belvoir St, January 10
Until February 10
Reviewed by Stephen Dunne

THE title, in Pitjantjatjara language, means reciprocity and co-operation; roughly: "I give you something, you give me something." This extraordinary work from Big hART and its leading performer and co-creator Trevor Jamieson is indeed a gift – an emotional, educational, effective and deeply affecting experience of indigenous history as told through Jamieson's family, forebears and cultural traditions.

It ranges from his people's first encounter with whites, in the 1840s, complete with a mimed, prancing British horse and a military twit. It includes the religious missions, custom, stolen kids and family tales. It features various traditional and pop songs, all in Pitjantjatjara, including Burt Bacharach's *This Guy's In Love With You* (for the courtship of Jamieson's parents) and, perhaps most importantly, Talking Heads' *Once In A Lifetime* (aka *Wantiriyalanti*). While the water might be flowing underground, is it the same as it ever was? Not quite, as our postwar government handed over Spinifex Country for 12 years of British nuclear testing from 1953.

As an introduction to language, we start with a singalong of *Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes* (here *Kata, Alipiri, Muti, Tjina*). Only much later, with the bones of the dead ground up by scientists to test levels of strontium 90 in the uncounted people dying on their land (after being warned with signs only in English), does the innocent children's song acquire its gruesome resonance.

Yet the work has a lightness of touch and supple vitality – after a heart-stabbing account of the black mist that brought disease and death, told with the simple authenticity of a woman who was there as a girl, it can shift to Jamieson's childhood reading: *Winnie The Pooh* with that odd Kanga, also disconnected from his own country.

Jamieson is an extraordinary presence. Despite the women of the Ngapartji Choir, six actors, artist Elton Wirri and Andrew MacGregor on shakuhachi and



Cultural translation ... Trevor Jamieson dominates with engaging dance and movement. Photo: Edwina Pickles

Beth Sometimes on guitar, Jamieson dominates with engaging dance and movement, while his vocal delivery has a warmth and sly wit that effortlessly takes us through this often difficult and sometimes devastating territory. Country is important, even

if due to scattered radioactivity it won't be inhabitable for another 25,000 years. As he notes: "We can wait ..."

It's a discursive, personal story of national implications, a demand about the importance of connection and country and

especially the need to retain and encourage indigenous languages. Despite the enormous skill of the production, cast and crew (director Scott Rankin), it is a work of appealing, rough simplicity. A rare, compelling and essential gift indeed.

Liedtke's final work built to last

■ DANCE

CONSTRUCT

Playhouse, Sydney Opera House, January 10
Until tomorrow
Reviewed by Jill Sykes

TANIA LIEDTKE'S last work, *construct*, is a funny, sad, witty essay on the world around her. She expressed her ideas through the simplest metaphor of making a building and giving her cast of three a movement language based on their construction tasks yet rich in resonances, that go as far as the viewer's imagination cares to take them.

The piece begins hilariously with Paul White in the role of a builder trying to set in place a couple of planks – played by Kristina Chan and Alessandra Mattana in rigid stance, crashing to the floor the moment he lets go of one or the other.

This is the kind of classic comedy routine that you might see on an old film where they had a chance to cut and paste any aberrations. Here it is live and impeccably timed to have the audience roaring with laughter in anticipation of the action as well as the jumbled human jigsaws that result.

By the end of this sequence, the bodies of Chan and Mattana have been stretched and pulled in all directions. They are both phenomenally flexible but strikingly different in height and physique, a factor that contributes to the visual variation Liedtke achieves with so few performers



Paul White and Kristina Chan are given a leg up by Alessandra Mattana. Photo: Edwina Pickles

in such a basic set. An open stage is bordered by some carpentry tools – a ladder, a sawhorse, an electric drill and so on – plus decorative elements such as fairy lights and a bold red cord that briefly frames the action. Lighting by Ben Cobham and Geoff Cobham, including a silhouette sequence, and the diverse electronic soundtrack designed by DJ TRIP add to the variety.

But it is essentially the performers who create the changing moods and convey the ideas. Their choreography is based on everyday movement that is moulded, amplified and stylised into a form of theatrical

expression powered by the thoughtful intelligence behind it.

As they work with their lengths of wood, window and door frames, the dancers create vignettes that touch on relationships, families, buildings as shelter or symbols of wealth, newness and decay – amusing and poignant aspects of human existence.

Everything happens at a crackling pace, occasionally slowed long enough to allow full play to Liedtke's subtle sense of humour. The quickest and funniest sexual coupling I have seen on stage is instantly followed by the arrival of a fully fledged toddler in the body of the crouching Mattana,

who grows slowly and cleverly through gangling puberty to her full, elegant height.

This is the Australian premiere of *construct*, which was first shown in London last May, three months before a tragic accident ended Liedtke's life and her immediate future as artistic director of the Sydney Dance Company. There are plans to revive *Twelfth Floor*, a more ambitious and complex piece which won her a 2006 Australian Dance Award. Watch out for it – meanwhile, see this one.

Construct is at the Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, from January 16-19.

From little things, an emotional tribute

■ MUSIC

CANNOT BUY MY SOUL

State Theatre, January 10
Reviewed by Bruce Elder

I HAD been forewarned. "Hope you've brought your tissues with you," a couple of people who had seen the rehearsals remarked.

"I know Kev Carmody's songs," I replied. "They're powerful. They're political. They're sensitive and intelligent. They speak with great clarity and integrity about the modern Aboriginal experience. But they are not tearjerkers."

What I had not taken into account was the finale – Carmody's and Paul Kelly's great land rights anthem *From Little Things Big Things Grow*. Sung against a backdrop of images of the dullard aristocrat Lord Vestey,

the courageous Wave Hill mob led by Vincent Lingiari and that unforgettable moment when Gough Whitlam poured sand into Lingiari's hand, it was impossible not to reach for the tissues.

It was an emotion-charged culmination to an evening that was more a musical biography than a collection of songs.

On stage were all the concert's singers and performers: Dan Kelly, Tex Perkins, the Last Kinection, Missy Higgins, the Church's Steve Kilbey, members of the Drones and the Herd, Sara Storer, Clare Bowditch, Dan Sultan and Glenn Richards – with Carmody, Paul Kelly and Broome's Steve and Alan Pigram all joyfully singing the song's lyrical and triumphant chorus.

This was a concert that told the sad and complex history of Aboriginal Australia through 14 songs that Carmody wrote.

The thesis that underpinned the song cycle was the idea that

Carmody's life – from drover and station hand in the 1950s and his forced migration to the dark urban awfulness of Queensland's Logan City to Sydney where he found his radical, poetic and musical voice – encapsulated the modern Aboriginal experience.

Carmody literally and metaphorically wandered through his songs. He sometimes sang (*On The Wire* saw him accompanied by a sweet chorus comprising Higgins, Bowditch and Storer), sometimes told stories about his life and sometimes introduced the singers.

At one point he picked up a guitar and sat around a campfire with the Pigrams (*Eulogy For A Black Man*) and he even brought his grandchildren onto the stage and showed them aspects of his life story.

The masterstroke of Paul Kelly, who conceptualised the concert, was to choose singers and groups who perfectly matched the songs.

The concert opened with songs about Carmody's life growing up poor and black in rural Australia. Dan Kelly sang the acoustic story-song *I've Been Moved* and country-music sweetheart Storer followed with the romantic idyll *Moonstruck*.

The rawness of Carmody's exposure to the mean streets of Logan City was given powerful expression by Perkins's sparse, spoken interpretation of *Darksides*, a tale of suburban teen despair, and the Drones delivered a compelling and intense version of *Perfume Of Tears*.

The optimism of *From Little Things Big Things Grow* was a perfect finale.

Yes, there were a few minor and irritating technical hitches but they did not detract from the power and emotional integrity of this very personal and unforgettable tribute to one of Australia's greatest singer-songwriters.

THE INCREDIBLE SEBEL PIER ONE
MAY HAVE FIVE STARS, BUT THAT DOESN'T
STOP THEM TAKING SOME OF OURS.

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