

SPIDERS IN WANG - INVISIBLE CONNECTIONS PROJECT

BY PENELOPE BARTLAU, BARKING SPIDER VISUAL THEATRE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR PHOTOS: SARAH WALKER

SEPTEMBER 2009

In January this year, Maz McGann, the Cultural Development Officer for the Rural City of Wangaratta, approached Barking Spider Visual Theatre (BSVT) about a project idea she was hatching. In 2008 Maz had created another project called Heritage Idol: the Search for Our Oldest Things, which aimed to challenge the community's traditional experience of local heritage. This 2008 project encouraged people to acknowledge heritage through a range of activities and initiatives. As a part of this, Wangaratta locals were invited to enter their heritage items into the Heritage Idol Quest. The follow-on project, planned for 2009, was Invisible Connections, and it was for this that Maz contacted us.

The brief was for BSVT to come up to Wangaratta (Wang) to research, develop and present Invisible Connections, and to create a work that combined heritage objects and stories. BSVT was asked to create a multi-dimensional artwork installation, which was to remain in situ for seven days, emulating the museum experience of static displays, and then this was to be transformed into a performance site with shows using object theatre and traditional puppetry.

In early August the work began, and the BSVT team headed up to Wang for the first days of research and a reccy. The team consisted of myself as writer and director, Dan Goronszy as installation and puppet builder, Jason Lehane as lighting and set designer, and Sarah Walker as photographer. Later we were joined by Jessica Window, Victoria University theatre-arts student, who came to observe, but wound up working with us. We were treated to a tour of the El Dorado Museum, and had a good poke around Wang itself, looking at various

locations for the installation and performances. The locations we fell in love with (but became impossible for Maz to wrangle) were; a huge old vacant shop front in the main street; an empty, disused swimming pool at the local primary school; and (my favourite) an old four-storey water tower (1854 I think), which is currently tenanted by the local gunzel enthusiasts and their miniature railways are set up on all four floors. After about three weeks of doors shutting on these locations, we ended up at the Workshop Space, an exhibitions and performance hall located in the centre of town next door to the new performing arts centre. This is a fairly traditional, but recently renovated, old hall with a proscenium arch stage.

A week after our first visit, I headed up solo for three days to get into the nitty-gritty of the research. I was like a pig in the proverbial: one of my favourite things in the world is to sit and chat to people and listen to their stories. Maz had set up a "show & tell" lunch in the Workshop Space for anyone and everyone in the town to attend, on the proviso they brought objects and stories. Wang is full of all sorts of amazing characters, curious objects and fascinating stories. After the lunch I trotted off (with a full head and empty stomach as I was too engrossed to bother with lunch), I went to the Wangaratta Family Historical Society (where I was introduced to the resident ghost), followed by The Wangaratta Museum and Wangaratta Library the next day. My head was stuffed with stories, my visual diary with images and notes, and my camera with pictures of bizarre and wonderful objects.

Back in Melbourne I had the task of deciding which stories and

objects. Going over the material I'd gathered, I found themes that kept repeating: the experiences of isolation, deprivation and hardship, and of unity through community and family. With this in mind, I selected five stories to tell in object theatre and to present in the installation. Additionally, I had discovered a marvellous local identity Jack Dick, (deceased), who had been the teller of many extraordinary tall stories and instigator of all sorts of pranks. His name kept popping up everywhere – he'd died in the 1990's so he was still in living memory. The thing that made Jack Dick's tales so compelling was that I'd hear the same anecdote, but with completely different facts, again and again. It was clear that Invisible Connections would not be complete without the inclusion of Jack Dick. So, while the main body of the installation and performances involved objects and object theatre, Jack Dick was a traditional full-bodied hand puppet, who sat on his armchair centre stage, and kept audiences amused with his stories during each performance. We were lucky to have Mary Anderson, a Wang local, offer to make the Jack Dick puppet. With Dan's steerage, Mary made a beautiful puppet.

My brief had been to create between five and eight stories. I had five stories, and I had Jack Dick, but it was impossible to stop there: the material was so rich. One of the locals, Margaret Pullen, at the show & tell lunch, had dressed up in 1940's garb, and presented a whole character, story and with objects. I used Margaret's material to create an interlinking character for the show, who had come direct to us from 1949. I found a talented young actress, Lexi Aivaliotis, from the local players (where I'd run an object theatre workshop) who was perfect for the part. Her job was to guide the audience to each of the

five stories, presented on five different playboards in the main area of the Workshop Space, and to interact with Jack Dick as he told his tall-tales, and all from the perspective of a young lady from 1949.

The five stories presented on the playboards were: Billy the Puntman – the Wildman Grouch of the Ovens 1856, about a surly puntman turned lousy bushranger; The Murray Cod Monster & the Two Little Graves of Three Mile Creek 1870, a cautionary tale for children, Walking the World Alone: Mary Jane Milawa -The Last Pangerang 1888, about the last indigenous person in Wangaratta; The Doll Story 1953, a story of the experience of post-war immigration; and The Greta Craft Group 1972, about the creation of a community through the endeavors of local women.

Informed by the Workshop Space aesthetic -it was essentially a big white-walled room with a stage at one end - and considering what we wanted to present, Jason Lehane came up with a very sympathetic overall design for the space and the lighting. The performance was to be promenade style.

Each story was played out on a tabletop playboard / shallow sandpit Jason constructed out of fence palings: each was filled with a different element; scoria, river-mud, earth, sugar, and wheat grain - relevant to the stories played out on each. For the performance, each playboard was also covered by a large white fabric curtain, suspended from high above and attached to a pulley system. Within each curtain was hidden a light which faded up when the curtain drew up and the story was played out. When the audience entered the hall



for the performance, the curtains veiled the playboards, so the room looked like part of a grand old house that had been closed up and had great dustsheets over the furniture. Everything was shrouded in white. As the play unfolded each curtain was drawn up and remained suspended like a great luminous cloud. Throughout the performance the room gradually filled with colour from the objects and materials on the playboards. During the installation-viewing week the curtains were left up so people could freely view the works.

In terms of the puppetry and puppeteers, it seems that Wang is brimming with hidden talent. I was fortunate to find three wonderful women to manipulate objects: Trish Gallagher, Margaret Pullen and Jackie Creek. As for Jack Dick, a week out I was panicking I'd not found someone to operate him. Enter Nick Creek (dragged in by his wife Jackie), very reluctant and adamant that he was not a performer. Nick had never touched a puppet, had never learnt lines – nothing – and he was extraordinary. He was a natural lip-syncher, had a beautiful voice, and was a gem at script interpretation. The Polyglot guys were in the theatre next door setting up for The Big Game and came to one performance, and the question was asked: "Who is this guy – he's great! Where'd you get him? We haven't seen him in Melbourne." We got lucky to find someone so naturally talented.

The other element to the production was a series of interactive dioramas we set up on the stage area. There were so many stories and histories to tell, that we decided to create an old post-office storeroom, filled with unclaimed parcels and packages, each wrapped in brown paper and string: there were around 70 in all.

Sarah Walker created the dioramas, with Jason's design input, and Jessica's assistance. The dioramas – five in total, were made up from old photographs that Sarah doctored and had made 3D. Each was inserted into a different box, and then wrapped as a parcel, with a peephole inserted for viewing. Jason had created a method for changing the view through the peephole, using magnifying glass attached to a sliding device. Some dioramas also used slot-puppetry mechanisms or had other movable parts for the audience to play with. Each diorama had a surprise "reveal" through the employment of these devices. In a moment of genius, Jessica took a bundle of the parcels on a trolley to a nearby home for the elderly, and they scribed their old addresses: so the parcels had lovely old-fashioned handwriting (and old stamps I'd sourced) to complete the aesthetic. The five dioramas were each interior lit with hidden light source. The descriptions for the content of each diorama was delivered as a letter. Each diorama parcel had a personal letter attached to its exterior, so the viewer could enjoy details of the story behind the pictures with a sense of period language and culture.

The post-office storeroom was presented as part of the installation and integrated into the end of the performance.

For the performance itself, the five tabletop stories were told in voice-over, with accompanying ambient sound tracks of bush, river, farmland etc, (designed by Nick McCorriston), with the three puppeteers manipulating objects and creating the images. The puppeteers were dressed in simple white period costumes – as were the BSVT crew, unifying the aesthetic.

The last of the five object theatre stories was about the Greta Craft Group. The three puppeteers took coloured balls of wool that were preset, on the floor at the edges of the room, with the loose ends attached to the junction of the wall and ceiling. They unraveled the balls of wool, drawing the strands to the room's centre where the story's playboard stood, and connected the wool to the miniature gum tree standing at the installation's centre. At the close of the performance, the room that had been simply white, with secrets hidden under white curtains, was filled with colour, and centrally unified by these coloured strands of wool. These strands were like the little histories that were played out: what was invisible was now seen, connecting past to present.

The overall result for the installation and the three performances was very satisfying. The performers did a beautiful job, and the Wang support team likewise. The audience's response was very positive. Local people came to understand and interact with their history in a completely new way – which had been Maz's intention: the aesthetic and dramatic choices paid off. My hope is that, for the future, more possibilities open up to present history in unique ways and forms: there is great potential to further strengthen local identity and culture, and to do so imaginatively. ■



PHOTO: PENELOPE BARTLAU

