



Artistic Report 2004

by

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2004 Artistic Report

2004 was a year of change for UTP. Although there were significant physical changes in 2003 – move to new premises, appointment of a new General Manager – the following year prompted artistic and management realisations that will shape the direction of the company for the next three years.

By mid 2004 UTP had completed a three-year back-to-back cycle of large-scale intensive community collaborations, including a commission for Adelaide Festival 2002. This has been work for which the company has become increasingly renowned. What began to become apparent, however, were the effects this cycle has had on the organisation artistically and administratively. Consecutive programming of these works has not allowed adequate time for the company to fulfil administrative obligations, pursue new opportunities and plan satisfactorily for the future.

Emerging from this phase, the company engaged the services of arts management and marketing consultant Tess Dryza to facilitate a Vision Day for the staff and board. This process snowballed, informing intense internal analysis of the company's artistic and managerial vision, and provoked the development of a range of new strategies used to focus and describe the company's direction.

Essentially, the company determined that it operates three arts development strands:

1. Professional teams of artists working in collaboration with community based groups to devise and present new large-scale works;
2. Development opportunities for emerging and established artists through the provision of workshops, residencies, performance opportunities, mentoring and tailored professional development; and
3. New works devised and performed by professional teams of artists.

The company realised that focusing on large-scale community based collaborations had not enabled the development of other objectives and, consequently, developed a three-year business and artistic plan to reinvigorate itself.

To a large extent, the remaining part of the year involved the implementation of systems and processes to support a new organisational structure, which included the appointment of a company Administrator, Jessie Deane. It also focused on securing strategic partnerships, such as pursuing a proposal for the development of a dedicated multi-purpose facility to house UTP, Bankstown Youth Development Service and Citymoon Theatre, funded by a State Government grant made in 2002 to Bankstown City Council. Neil Simpson was engaged as a consultant for this project. Neil developed a needs analysis and proposal, which has since been submitted to Bankstown City Council.

The three organisations housed at Hackett House continued their refurbishment of the leased premises and have made valuable use of the rehearsal space and other facilities created. The developments at Hackett House have continued to provide a resource for the many emerging artists and community arts organisations in the region who have not previously had dedicated access to a space within which they can develop work and engage in their diverse range of activities.

The company also began to engage more long-term planning strategies and begin negotiations with a number of potential partners for the development of future works. These relationships, such as with Sydney Olympic Park Authority and the NSW Department of Housing, will provide valuable support for the company in 2005 and beyond.

Throughout the year, 21 performances were staged, as follows: *Karaoke Dreams* (8); *Short 'n Sharp 3* (3), *Plaza Real* (10).

The Company's first major artistic work for the year was *Karaoke Dreams*, a site-specific performance event created for the unique environments of the Bankstown District Sports Club.

Karaoke Dreams was created by a team of professional artists working in collaboration with 15 community members to devise and present the work. A strong partnership was forged with the Sports Club, who provided cash and in-kind support for the event.

Our second event was the continuation of *Short 'n Sharp*, a program of short works by emerging and western Sydney artists, initiated by the Company in 2002. *Short 'n Sharp 3* featured ten short works in a cabaret setting at Bankstown RSL, curated by experienced director and designer Carols Gomes.

The second major work created for the year was *Plaza Real*, a new physical theatre work co-produced with Branch Nebula (Lee Wilson and Mirabelle Wouters). The work was developed over an 18-month period. Following initial research and development, and auditions held in 2003, a 4-week creative development process was held at University of Western Sydney in February, followed by a 6-week rehearsal period in August/September and 2-week season at Performance Space in October. The work received critical acclaim for its unique performance language and rigorous social and cultural interrogation.

In October, the Company conducted a 1-week research and development period with Shannon Williams for a new work scheduled for 2005, *Back Home*.

In 2004, UTP also supported several professional development opportunities for core staff and artists associated with the company. In February, Belinda McDonald travelled from South Australia to observe the creative development of *Karaoke Dreams*. For emerging artists, the company provided a free 1-week masterclass with renowned improvisational performer Andrew Morrish, and sponsored six placements for emerging artists to participate in a performance-making workshop conducted by Bert van Dijk. During the Melbourne International Arts Festival in October, UTP supported 81-year-old ventriloquist Cecil Parkee, who appeared in *Karaoke Dreams*, to perform at the festival's Blue Rinse Club.

During the year core staff undertook professional development opportunities through attendance at the 6th Australian Performing Arts Market and Adelaide Festival, and Melbourne International Arts Festival. The company supported artistic director Alicia Talbot's participation in Time_Space 3, and general manager Simon Wellington's participation in the Asialink Leadership Program.

The company enters 2005 having successfully secured a new triennial funding agreement with the NSW Ministry for the Arts for 2005 to 2007, with a 13% increase in core funding. Charged with renewed vigour and rigorous forward planning, in the year ahead UTP is looking to strengthen strategic partnerships in the development of new work, continue to pursue opportunities for the continued life of work in repertoire and provide alternative pathways for the development and support of emerging artists.

Summary of 2004 Artistic Program

#	Title	Nature of project	Presenter	Partners	Venue	Shows
<i>Projects</i>						
1	Plaza Real	Creative Development	Branch Nebula & Urban Theatre Projects	School of Contemporary Arts (SOCA) University of Western Sydney	SOCA, University of Western Sydney	1 public showing
2	Karaoke Dreams	Rehearsal & Public Season	Urban Theatre Projects	Bankstown District Sports Club	UTP Premises & Bankstown District Sports Club	8 public performances
3	Plaza Real	Rehearsal & public season	Branch Nebula & Urban Theatre Projects		UTP Premises & Performance Space	10 public performances
4	Short 'n Sharp	Short works program	Urban Theatre Projects		Bankstown RSL Club	3 public performances
5	Back Home	Research and Development	Urban Theatre Projects		UTP Premises	
Professional Development						
6	Bert van Dijk	Workshops	Bert van Dijk and Urban Theatre Projects		UTP Premises	6 participants
7	Andrew Morrish	Workshops	Urban Theatre Projects		UTP Premises	12 participants
8	Cecil Parkee – The Blue Rinse Club	Commissioned performance	MoMO, Melbourne International Arts Festival & Urban Theatre Projects		The Arts Centre, Melbourne	
Auspices						
9	Belinda McDonald	Emerging artist grant	Arts SA		UTP Premises	

Works created 2 major works, 1 short work season
 Creative Development 1 major
 Research and Development 1
 Seasons presented 2 major, 1 short season
 Performances 21
 Auspices 1

Program of Activities

Projects 1&3

Plaza Real

A co-production with Branch Nebula and Urban Theatre Projects

Timeline

Stage 1

Audition day	1 November 2003
Audition workshop	7 – 9 & 11 November 2003
Creative development	27 January 2004 – 20 February 2004

Stage 2

Creative development	16 August 2004 – 3 September 2004
Rehearsal	6 September 2004 – 29 September 2004
Public Season	30 September 2004 – 10 October 2004

Venue

Stage 1

Auditions	UTP Rehearsal Space
Creative Development	University of Western Sydney, SOCA Studios

Stage 2

Creative development & rehearsal	UTP Rehearsal space, Bankstown
Rehearsal & public season	Performance Space, Redfern

Artistic Team

Stage 1 – Creative Development

Director/choreographer	Lee Wilson
Designer/choreographer	Mirabelle Wouters
Dramaturg	Alicia Talbot
Performers/devisers	Valerie Berry, Joe Jurd, Keith Lim, NOMISe, Emma J. Cooper
UWS Secondments	Cristina de Mello Greg Boddam-Whetham

Stage 2 – Rehearsals & Production

Director / Choreographer	Lee Wilson
Designer / Choreographer	Mirabelle Wouters
Dramaturg	Alicia Talbot
Sound Designer	Phil Downing
Performers / Devisers	Martin del Amo, Valerie Berry, Joe Jurd (Development only), Keith Lim, NOMISe, Emma J. Cooper, Lee Wilson
Production Manager	Adam Quinn
Stage Manager	Katia Molino
Production Assistant / Rigger	Clare Britton
Publicist	Rosie Dennis
Artistic Observer	Emily Parker
Graphic Design	Mirabelle Wouters
Creative Process Documentation	Deb Shaw & Des Devlin
Yoga Instructor	Deb Shaw
Research Consultants	Dr Amanda Thomas and Melissa Butcher

Plaza Real is a co-production between Urban Theatre Projects and Branch Nebula. Branch Nebula proposed the artistic concept to UTP, and continued to drive the production artistically with Lee Wilson as director and Mirabelle Wouters in the role of designer and co-choreographer. UTP managed the project and collaborated in the artistic process with Alicia Talbot in the role of dramaturg. UTP and Branch Nebula shared the financial input of the project.

Project description

"Eerily self-contained, the newest agoraphobic shopping malls and vertiginous shopping centres are full of reflective surfaces, fine-grained timbers and stone, classy piped post-muzak, and are replete with comforts and choices that shoppers of yore would not recognize. They can be seductive refuges where the faintest of aberrant behaviour leads to removal. There is no place for the homeless, the loiterer or beggar. Security guards and cleaners clear away all detritus. The pleasures of shopping, of promenading, of relaxing, of being untroubled among your kind is at a premium in these palaces of hygiene and style, communal but not of the community.

***Plaza Real** is one such center, realized as performance with all the requisite clarity of intent and stylishness but with the most modest of means—sound, bodies, theatre lights shaped into strict lines and sculpted in an ominous cluster, and a sea of uniformly inflated plastic shopping bags. This is no literal recreation of a shopping center, but an exquisitely surreal evocation of one in which superficial order and fine design will sooner or later surrender to fundamental passions, where the object is not purchase but the other—desired, fondled, embraced, stalked and attacked. These enactments are just what you won't encounter in the modern mall, nor are the bursts of monologue, of interiority let loose. Their ironies, ugliness and despairs are the stuff of art, not shopping. In such circumstances the growing imbalance between order and disintegration yields suspense and surprise as introspection is supplanted by brash extroversion, as touch displaces hostility and embrace turns into dance— beauty where there should be none."*

To shop, to die (for)

Keith Gallasch, *RealTime* No.64, Dec '04/Jan '05

Plaza Real is a physical theatre work investigating diversity, ethnicity and cultural resistance. Set in the heart of a corporate-owned public space, *Plaza Real's* emerging ethnic intermixture is fiercely competing for self-representation in its search for a sense of community.

The project set out to work with physical performers and actors of a diverse skill-base and background. The cast reflected this mandate in the diversity of the ensemble. Thematically, the intention was to reflect on aspects of life in public spaces like shopping plazas, not to recreate them. As everyone knows and has their own experiences of these spaces, the artistic concern was with the incredibly diverse mix of inhabitants of a plaza like Westfield in Parramatta. Stepping up to meet those within the public space in a cultural clash is the final focus of the work.

Plaza Real was an opportunity for the artistic team to continue its investigation into the creation of a theatrical form that consists of eclectic components; dance, acrobatics, popular movement forms, text, sound and music, and design. An important concern of the artistic team was to create a non-specific place, a virtual world that was not about transporting the audience to another place but about acknowledging the fact that a theatre houses the production. It was important that certain visual and subliminal aspects of public, corporate-owned spaces inspired the design, not only the superficial decorative aspects, but also the random uncontrolled debris inherent in the operation of such a space. *Plaza Real* evoked moods and ambiances without tying things down, allowing the possibility for associations to be formed by the audience.

Audition

The open audition day and workshop was a professional opportunity for performers from western Sydney. An initial audition day sought interest from participants of diverse cultural and skills backgrounds. The workshop provided an opportunity for people from the western Sydney area who may not have the opportunity to audition for professional productions, because they are not in the city-centred loop or may not feel that their skills-base would be

sufficient in a professional context. The aim of the audition workshop was to work with a group for an extended period over a few days. During this time a number of choreographic, acting, movement and text exercises were explored. The audition process allowed a greater number of interested participants the possibility of being seen, in addition to providing them with an in-depth auditioning experience.

Four out of the five cast were living and or working in western Sydney at the time of casting. The cast selected from the audition were Valerie Berry, Joe Jurd, Keith Lim, NOMISe and Emma J. Cooper.

A key factor in the success of the casting process was the fact that Branch Nebula were able to assess the performers over four days. Most of the cast were unknown to Branch Nebula, so the in-depth process was essential in getting a feel for how the participants adapted to the working methods and the scope of their abilities, ultimately allowing Lee and Mirabelle to make a well-informed final decision.

Stage 1 – Creative Development

The Stage 1 Creative Development took place at UWS. The period was dedicated to training the ensemble, sketching out ideas for the show, and delving into the themes of the production. The working process was conducted over four weeks, working four days a week with the ensemble, leaving one day specifically for development of design and technical aspects. Research into movement and performance related to the themes of the show was carried out. Design and prop ideas were incorporated into daily research. The development culminated in a showing to an invited audience.

The creative development successfully met the aims and expectations of the team. The development period created cohesion within the ensemble by creating a hybrid of the various performance and movement backgrounds of the performers. During this period of development, more scenes, characters and ideas were fleshed out than Lee and Mirabelle had imagined would be possible. The use of a studio as well as the theatre meant that performers could work on tasks separate from the group. Additionally, Lee, Mirabelle and Alicia could work one-on-one with performers at the same time. This certainly was instrumental in the breadth of the material that could be covered.

A considerable amount of time was well spent training the ensemble. A goal of the project was to create a hybrid of the skills within the group, and to create a movement language, which would become a currency of the ensemble. The ensemble undertook a daily three-hour movement, dance, yoga and acrobatics class. The level of fitness attained through vigorous training made possible the dynamic physical intensity of the material created in the development. In addition, theatrical tasks centred on the themes of the work were undertaken and presented to the group. These presentations provided the opportunity for discussion building an understanding of the particular qualities of the performance that was the aim of the project. Therefore, the entire team consisting of the artists and performers were developing and learning as the project progressed.

The Stage 1 development was assisted and observed by two secondments from UWS. Cristina de Mello focussed primarily on video documentation of daily rehearsals, which was used in constructing and assessing material. Greg Boddam-Whetham assisted primarily with production and research tasks.

The process was documented by Deb Shaw, an independent documentary maker, and was self-funded. Deb also documented Stage 2 and as there are hours of footage, the full editing process has yet to be completed.

The showing provided the opportunity to document and edit a video for promotional and funding purposes, and was also of great assistance in picking up the material for the Stage 2. production phase.

Residency

UWS provided the ideal studio space required for a dance/movement-based project such as *Plaza Real* and the opportunity to perform the showing in a theatre with lighting and set in place. In retrospect, the creative development stage in the UWS studio was instrumental in the advancement of the work as Branch Nebula was able to develop lighting and set design to such a degree as to be almost complete. The resultant level of sophistication in the design would otherwise have been impossible with the time-constraints of bumping into Performance Space.

Stage 2 – Rehearsal and Production

"That microcosm of humanity the shopping mall emerges from a mire of grunge and explodes in a clash of personalities and racial insults in Plaza Real. Of course, malls can be sleek and sophisticated, but this one isn't: among the piles of discarded plastic bags the truth rises to the top. [...] Confrontation develops into an anarchic, whirling chase around the performing space that is no doubt as tightly choreographed by the director/performer Lee Wilson, as it appears to be raw and wild. [...] Plaza Real is a strong and satisfying presentation, with remarkable cohesion for a group piece."

Clash of shopping mall cultures

Jill Sykes, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2-3 2004

The six-week Stage 2 process was divided into sections. The first three weeks were devoted to further creative development, utilizing this period to generate more material through tasks and devising processes. The next two weeks focused on putting material together in search of a structure. The next ten days in Performance Space were devoted to adapting to the larger space, finalising show structure, final lighting and set adjustments, and running the show.

The artistic team created a new work with a diverse ensemble and remained true to the artistic principles that were the goal of the production. The team questioned theatrical conventions and met a number of challenges that were ambitious for a first group work: training an ensemble made up of diverse skills to acquire common ground – a shared movement language; working in a devising process; not relying on lighting as an editing tool by using blackouts to cut from scene to scene; performers that do not leave the stage but carry a complete trajectory throughout the entire show; set and props that integrate into the action: moved by the performers and not technical hands.

Plaza Real brought a largely unknown cast of physical performers to a new work and, in a relatively short period of time, trained them up for a highly physical production. There was much appreciation shown for the creation of an ensemble that was ethnically diverse, employing performers working in a professional capacity as opposed to another community theatre production with a particular ethnic group.

"These are individuals marked by sharp differences of physique and physiognomy, colour, accent and stature, the starkness of their separation broken as they come together.

An ensemble like this, so very different from those of Version 1.0 and De Quincey Co. would be a great asset for Sydney if it became ongoing."

To shop, to die (for)

Keith Gallasch, *RealTime* No.64, Dec '04/Jan '05

The visual aesthetic and design of *Plaza Real* was created with a very small budget yet maintained a distinctive style. The design was successful in integrating with the performance. Inspired by decorative aspects of a shopping plaza, using consumable objects and things present in the theatre, to create a decorative atmosphere.

Impact of the project

Plaza Real had a significant impact on and for its participants in a number of ways:

Artistic Practice & professional development

- *Plaza Real* was a test of the working processes Branch Nebula has been formulating over the past 6 years, by extending the company's working practice to a full-length group work that exemplifies the company's artistic concerns. The project applied artistic processes that had been formulated as creator/performers in previous Branch Nebula productions, to a larger ensemble.
- The production allowed the opportunity for Lee Wilson to extend his professional development as a theatre maker and movement director, into the role of director for the first time. Also, Mirabelle was able to step out of performing and create a totality of vision through her multiple roles as designer of lights, set and costumes as well as co-creator.
- UTP's role as co-producer was an interesting and beneficial experiment for the company, allowing it to lend its wealth of experience in the creation of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaborations to a partner with experience in forms of theatre not usually programmed by the company.
- The opportunity for Alicia to work as dramaturg was very rewarding for her, and for the key creators who do not normally have the resources to work with a dramaturg on an ongoing basis.
- The devising process was of a substantial length, enabling the ensemble to train and develop skills over an intensive period. The ensemble members had not encountered a devising process that carried a sense of responsibility for the material created and have expressed how the breadth of the creative experimentation has benefited their development as professional artists. The ensemble was employed after an audition process, which rarely happens in the industry, as people tend to work with those that they know.
- The two press reviews were of a positive nature and contribute to building Branch Nebula's profile as a company that is committed to creating distinctive hybrid physical performance works.

Co-production & support

- UTP's expertise in all aspects of theatre production was a guiding force for Branch Nebula. The company's provision of facilities for the Stage 2 rehearsals, with their office and rehearsal space in the same building, ensured an efficient use of time and resources.
- Alicia Talbot's role as dramaturg and her experience in the creation and management of a number of productions, provided a solid support and imbued the creative team with the confidence to follow their artistic vision. Additionally, Alicia invited the authors of *Ingenious* (a book about youth cultural forms in Western Sydney), Mandy Thomas and Melissa Butcher, into the rehearsal room to provide dramaturgical feedback. Discussions with Mandy and Melissa around the project's artistic concerns greatly assisted in gaining a deeper understanding of the material.
- By moving into Performance Space a week prior to opening the show, directly impacted on the quality of the production values. The extra time provided much needed adjustment of the work to fit the space, choreographically and technically. For example, the decision to use surround sound effectively placed the audience inside an architectural environment shared by the performers. The integration of lights, set and sound in the production was commented on positively by peers and was made possible by the extra time.

The opportunity for Branch Nebula to share resources with a larger company like UTP has proven to be an extremely effective way of generating new work. The cross fertilisation between the companies has been effective in taking both companies in a new direction.

UTP and Branch Nebula are both committed to developing strategies to rework and tour *Plaza Real*. The companies have been encouraged to resubmit to Mobile States in 2005, after only just missing out in 2004.

Challenges

A production of this type needs time to evolve to its full potential and quality that is essential in attaining a high quality standard and ability to compete on any kind of international level. The inventive aspects of the show are only possible with experimentation and research. Budget constraints mean that time for polishing and honing the material is limited. Effectively what this means is that the show does not start to shape up to a decent standard until the second week of performance or even better another season.

Like Taduesz Kantor before him, but less subtly interventionist, director Lee Wilson prowls the performance space, watching, questioning, disrupting, forcing submission.

To shop, to die (for)

Keith Gallasch, *RealTime* No.64, Dec '04/Jan '05

Lee in the role of director and performer was initially undertaken as an extension of the working practices of Branch Nebula that entail creating as well as performing in their productions. It was also an artistic choice to expose the mechanics of the work by operating sound and controlling the space from on stage.

This role proved to be difficult for Lee in the role of director to attain the outside perspective needed to continue the evolution of the work throughout the season. The work would have been greatly improved by continuing to make changes where necessary.

Mirabelle's role in the production as designer of lights, set, costumes, graphic design and as co-creator, carried on the working methods that Branch Nebula is accustomed to with previous work, however, proved too onerous for a production of this scale.

Management

Some challenges in managing the project arose following the demise of *Carnivale*, with whom UTP had brokered a co-producing relationship. As with UTP's production *india@oz.sangam* in 2003, the companies expected to benefit significantly from the high profile publicity attracted by *Carnivale* and the widespread marketing exposure. UTP had also been depending on a substantial cash contribution.

The Ministry's quick response to support the project in light of *Carnivale*'s cancellation ensured that it could be produced in 2004, with UTP's board also agreeing to further underwrite the production following failure to secure a smaller grant from a philanthropic foundation. The project budget was revised in March 2004 to reflect these developments and, ultimately, UTP was not required to use reserve funds.

Other implications of not being included within *Carnivale* included the impact of reduced marketing and publicity. Although the project received strong press coverage, the additional support afforded by involvement in a larger cultural program was proven through the relationship in 2003 with a largely sold out season. It also affected the timing of the public season. UTP had booked Performance Space for early October, in consultation with *Carnivale*. The first week of the season included the October long-weekend and audiences were hard to generate during this time. The company was aware of this when booking the space, but expected that the marketing of *Carnivale* would support reasonable audience numbers on that weekend, as it had in 2003. We could not change the season dates after learning of *Carnivale*'s cancellation. Audience numbers strengthened in the second week of the season.

Project 2

Karaoke Dreams

A new performance work devised by a professional team of artists working in collaboration with a community based ensemble.

Timeline

Audition Day	6 March
Creative Development	15 – 19 March
Development & Rehearsal	22 March – 15 May
Performance Season	19-29 May 2004

Venue

Rehearsal	UTP's rehearsal space, Hackett House and Bankstown District Sports Club
Performance Season	Bankstown District Sports Club

Artistic Team

Co-Directors	Katia Molino & Alicia Talbot
Visual Designer	Carlos Gomes
Musical Director	Peter Kennard
Vocal Specialist	Jeannie Lewis
Musician	Sean Mackenzie
Lighting Designer	Neil Simpson
Youth Facilitator	Bella Vincent

Production Crew

Production Manager	Jessie Deane
Stage Manager	Clare Britton
Assistant Stage Managers	Mish Grigor, Zoe Coombs Marr & Freya Sant
Follow Spot Operator	Padaric Meredith-Keller

Sports Club Staff

Marketing Manager	Glenn Cushion
Technical Staff	Noel Lightfoot, Bill Pringle & Peter Ruthvan

Performance Ensemble

Victor Areces, Kimberley Aviso, Ruby Baxter, Jenny Chu, Ana Maria Dumitrescu, Boomi Leon-Foxxx, Paul Meverley, Jody Orcher, Cecil Parkee, Natalie Rose, Kaman Sit Tran, Emma Stevenson, Emilie Sysavanh, Melvin Tholley, Jade Waters.

With additional ideas and material created by the Bankstown Regional Fellowship of Australian Writers and The Chester Hill Writers Group.

Project Description

Walking into Bankstown District Sports Club, your body is instantly arrested by a dizzying sensory glare: vomit-motif carpet set against the trill of pokies running inane bleeps up and down the octave; coloured lights that flash, and lighter lights that pulse your brain and make the world seem incessantly, fluorescently candied. Young families, old codgers and stilettoed teenage girls gather for a cheap feed, a bit of a twinkle or a sly flirt. Everyone loves a club. What a scene. What a place for a show.

The tone of the work is playful in its surreptitious beginning. Chintzy jazz and lounge piano blend into Bingo numbers rattled off as the stage manager and gold-laméd competitors prance on and off stage. Occasional nods from half interested punters propped sideways suggest that this cheeky pre-show rendition of sports club life draws precariously close to the showman heritage of their local turf. Yet this performance is not about making farce out of popular entertainment, nor is it about the novelty of 'performance' encroaching on Karaoke territory. It is actually about using one form to reframe another, to expand the possibilities of performance and importantly, the people whom performance may or may not include.

The Fun of Fakery

Bryoni Trezise Real Time (RT64 AUG/SEPT 04)

Karaoke Dreams is a new performance work created and performed by an ensemble of community members working in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of professional artists. This new work was presented in the foyer and the Rainforest Lounge of Bankstown District Sports Club.

In the Rainforest Lounge, 13 competitors, including a Chinese ventriloquist (Cecil Parkee), a myriad singers and dancers, a psychic and a band strive to achieve their hopes and dreams through participating in a talent quest. They are all played by an ensemble cast of community-based actors who answered the Bankstown's [UTP] open call.

Set in the club's auditorium, the stage has a 270-degree view, the production giving the audience a 'split-screen' real time view of the onstage performance as well as offstage, behind-the-scenes antics.

It's not surprising, then, that co-directors Alicia Talbot and Katia Molino describe the show as part talent quest, part reality TV show of highlights and off stage lowlights.

"I guess the idea came from the idea of competition and looking at what sort of lengths people go to", Talbot says. "What does competition mean to us in the age of Big Brother and The Block – the idea that you can transform yourself through competition and through people watching? What does that transformation mean in terms of dreams?"

Ben Wild, Metro, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 May 2004

One of the initial provocations for *Karaoke Dreams* was the exploration of hope through the framework of a fictional talent quest. We were interested in how hope may transform people and drive them, how hope may be simultaneously liberating and constricting. Other terms of reference and influences included popular culture, popular entertainment forms, and the phenomena of reality TV and talent quests.

This area of fascination was also integrally linked to the site of Bankstown District Sports Club. The club features a number of highly distinctive and unique themed environments. It has a membership base of over 30,000 and is a prominent organisation within Bankstown and surrounding areas. It has a staff of over four hundred, many of whom have long employment histories with the club and the Bankstown region.

Over an eight-week period an ensemble of 16 worked two to three times a weeks to create the new performance work. These rehearsals were held at UTP's premises, Hackett House, Bankstown and at the Sports Club (about 250 metres from the company). Rehearsals usually involved a physical and vocal warm-up, improvisations, performance devising, writing (song and text) visual design, music composition and costume design and making.

In addition to the core ensemble, Katia and Alicia also consulted with the Bankstown Regional Fellowship of Australian Writers and The Chester Hill Writers Group. Around ten to fifteen community members attend each group. During the consultations the writers group would read and present their existing works and some writers wrote specific material for the show.

The final performance event was part talent competition, part club show and part reality TV, and included a couple of games of bingo for the audience.

The workshop and devising process led to a two-week performance season at Bankstown District Sports club from 19 – 29 May 2004.

Community Based Collaboration

The community were involved in all aspects of *Karaoke Dreams* including;

- The conceptual and creative development of the work

- Script writing and development
- Choreography and dancing
- Writing lyrics and melodies for songs
- Performing and recording original and pre-recorded music
- Devising all performance elements throughout the show
- Performing in the event
- Publicising the event

Audition

Initially, we held an audition for people interested in participating in *Karaoke Dreams*. This was held on a Saturday morning from 11 – 1. We ran a movement workshop, played a few games, developed some improvisations and people were invited to show us their special skill. Fifteen people attended the audition day. Everyone who attended the audition was invited to take part in the project.

8-week workshops and devising process

Karaoke Dreams continued to interrogate the process of making a work devised by community members collaborating with professional artists.

Following the audition, the artistic team had a week creative development to further develop the concept for the work and to find a shared vocabulary and library of reference points with which to develop the work. As well as the team of professional artists, the creative development was attended by Belinda MacDonald, a young artist from Adelaide who worked with the company during *The Longest Night* at Adelaide Festival 2002. Belinda received an Arts SA grant to observe the company in creative development.

The rehearsal process was two nights a week, with Saturdays as a drop in and additional rehearsal day. We would work Tuesday and Wednesday nights from 6-9 and Saturday's 10-5.

For the first four weeks we devised material with the ensemble through a series of improvisations. Each rehearsal would begin with a vocal and physical warm-up. We would then set provocations for improvisations and groups would devise material, before showing the group. We would also video showings of material. Ensemble members would also be selecting and writing songs with musical director Peter Kennard and vocal coach Jeannie Lewis. Video artist, Fadle El Harris, would come into rehearsal and film individuals and sequences to create the animation sequences that ran throughout the work. Individuals would also consult with Carlos Gomes as to what kind of wearable sculpture they may develop and what persona they may develop or were drawn to.

Rehearsals also included site visits and research at the Sports Club and exploring the venue – both the surrounds of the club and in particular the rock stage and rain forest lounge.

About half way through the process, the co-director's created a loose structure and initial script, based on the material generated from improvisations. Individuals and groups then further developed and formalised their material in response to the structure – rewriting their own segments to better suit them. As an approach to formalise the work we adopted a writing for performance approach. The co-directors would write an outline and community members would respond through writing and devising and performing material around the skeleton, changing it around. The artistic team would artistically respond to the creative offers made by the ensemble and look for new solutions. We would then collect and assemble this material, edit it and change it around and then give it back to the ensemble who would also edit and change it round. This process of co-authoring continued until the opening night.

Impact of the Project

Karaoke Dreams had a significant impact on and for the company in a number of ways:

Community Involvement

An open community based collaboration such as *Karaoke Dreams* engages a diverse range of participants. Each individual is interested in taking part of the project for a number of different reasons. Some want to engage with creative dialogue about the world we live in, some because their friends do, some because of the socialising aspect, and some want to develop as self-determined artists. Each new community work introduces new emerging artists who will continue an ongoing relationship with the company and consolidates and extends existing working relationships.

- Over 20 community members took part in the *Karaoke Dreams* devising and performing process. After the large ensembles involved in *Mechanix* (35-40 community members) and *india@oz.sangam* (30-35 community members), *Karaoke Dreams* was designed to offer a more intensive and intimate experience for an ensemble of creators and makers.
- In developing material for the show, the co-directors also consulted with two local writers groups: The Bankstown Regional Fellowship of Australian Writers and The Chester Hill Writers Group.
- This production enabled an extremely diverse group of people to work together based on a creative challenge. The ensemble included people from diverse cultural backgrounds, gender and experience and an age range from 15-81 years.
- 45% of the community members involved had never worked with the company before. Some of these participants had never engaged in creating and making performance. Others had a diverse range of performing and technical experience.
- For other ensemble members who had been involved with previous projects, *Karaoke Dreams* was a chance to extend their skills and collaborate with different professional artists.
- 7 participants from *Karaoke Dreams*, were part of UTP's next production *Short 'n Sharp 3*, a season of short works by emerging and established artists.
- Building relationships with The Bankstown Regional Fellowship of Australian Writers and The Chester Hill Writers Group, will also support the future development of *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines*, a community based project scheduled for 2005.

Professional Development

- 50% of the *Karaoke Dreams* ensemble created independent works for UTP's next production *Short 'n Sharp 3*.
- Four of the *Karaoke Dreams* participants were supported by UTP to undertake a week-long master class with internationally renowned artist Bert van Dijk.
- Cecil Parkee, an 81-year-old performer and ventriloquist was invited by Museum of Modern Oddities (MoMO) to perform as part of The Blue Rinse Club, commissioned by Melbourne International Arts Festival. UTP supported Cecil's travel and accommodation in Melbourne.
- Belinda MacDonald, an emerging artist from South Australia received a professional development grant from Arts SA to work with the company during the week of creative development. Belinda was first introduced to UTP as a community participant during the creation of *The Longest Night* for Adelaide Festival 2002.
- In 2005 UTP will focus on the professional development of 15- 20 emerging artists who wish to continue their training and development over the next 12-18mths. 75% of these artists have come to the company through community based collaborations, in particular *Karaoke Dreams* (2004), *india@oz.sangam* (2003), *Mechanix* (2002) and *Asylum* (2001).
- *Karaoke Dreams* continued to develop teams of professional artists who engage with the company in ongoing working relationships. Carlos Gomes, as visual designer for *Karaoke Dreams* was artistic guest director and curator for *Short 'n Sharp 3*.

Partnerships

- *Karaoke Dreams* was an important collaboration with the Bankstown District Sports Club. The project was fully supported by the Club, which embraced the company and enabled us to engage with staff and patrons in the creation of the work. The Club provided considerable cash and in-kind support for the work. In-kind assistance was provided across many areas, including technical support, publicity and marketing. The Club is keen to continue supporting UTP in any way they can and we are investigating

the possibility of utilising venues within the Club for future activities, where appropriate.

- *Karaoke Dreams* has also continued our ongoing partnership with Bankstown City Council, who take an active role in the support of arts and cultural activities in Bankstown.

Contemporary performance in Sydney can get a little heady at times, which is why the 'getting back to basics' approach to theatrical exhibitionism offered by Urban Theatre Projects' (UTP) latest community work Karaoke Dreams came as relief and pure pleasure. Set upon a faux fernery stage, the performers went about making a show of their showiness, one-upping us all in the stakes of watching and making performance. Inspired by the insidious talent quest/reality TV genre that rudely shoves unknown, untalented anybodies into our lounge rooms every night, Karaoke Dreams takes the notion of talent and plays it against expectations. Who do we like? Who do we judge? Who's gonna make it?

The Fun of Fakery Bryoni Trezise Real Time (RT64 AUG/SEPT 04)

Over the last two years Urban Theatre Projects has successfully created and produced three consecutive large scale, site specific community based projects: *Mechanix*, *india@oz.sangam* and *Karaoke Dreams*. These projects have all involved working with large teams of artists and community members.

Part of this rationale has been to open the company up to a new set of people and influences in western Sydney and to create an ongoing dialogue and new working relationships with community members, emerging and established artists and local stakeholders. *Karaoke Dreams* was particularly successful in developing new relationships with community members from the local area and maintaining creative relationships with community members already engaged with the company, below are some of the responses from participants.

- Excellent, Good. Feed back from friends & the audience were truly unbelievable. Everybody in the cast were part "Stars". Everything worked out for the best. It was entertainment at its best & original.
- Final show was fantastic, by the second week the whole cast were into the swing of things! Visually the show was beautiful. The video was eye-catching & hilarious. Helped to get into character. The rock-cave helped to lift the performances. Love the costumes too...
- The performance season was excellent. There was a real sense of camaraderie amongst cast & crew. Helped along of course by the awesome facilities at the Sports Club. Having a chance to perform in this style of performance & in this sort of environment. Working with the production team- superb!! Cecil- what a legend! Dim Sim cute too! Cast was a great mix of personalities, skills & talents... good to work with.
- Working with new people, collaborating with a wide variety of artists, one on one time & having creative control over my character & having the freedom to explore as much as I wished. I felt I was completely trusted & did explore my character even through the performance process. The Artists were all helpful, encouraging & supportive & FUN!!
- The warm ups were lots of fun & I looked forward to doing them each night at both rehearsals & during the Performances. Doing the video & being part of the promotional photo shoot was also a highlight. Just to perform in front of a live audience.
- This made up for everything. I absolutely loved the season!! Prior, I didn't feel the ensemble bond but during this time I felt LOVE!! Everyone bounced

off each other & the Artists & performers were 1!!(very corny I know but I have felt with every UTP show I've been involved in). I enjoy that the performers can feel entirely comfortable with the Artistic Team & vice versa. The performances did have high & low points but personally I felt I explored throughout the entire season & felt satisfied with my work. The lollies, abundance of cake & encouragement were greatly appreciated.

*Feedback from **Karaoke Dreams** participants, June 2004*

Challenges

Karaoke Dreams highlighted a number of challenges that often seem inherent in the creation of community based work and difficult to solve. In response to previous feedback, we tried to investigate a different model for creating the work. In the past, the company has built a community based work over a 12-week part-time period, however, for *Karaoke Dreams* we investigated an 8-week part-time process. This was designed to enable community members who volunteer their time to have a more focussed, tighter schedule of commitment and offer professional artists full time work, rather than part time work over a longer period of time. However, this model wasn't so successful.

Partially we needed to make creative decisions earlier in the process, and community members felt there wasn't enough time to creatively investigate the work, and then rehearse it. As a professional creative team, we may have been able to address this by offering a more developed concept, rather than being caught between trying to leave it open and trying to move quickly in order to meet production deadlines.

- I thought the rehearsal schedule time frame was great even though it seemed to clash with everything for me! Getting a show up in 2 months was a great challenge in itself & very exciting! The discussions about the "vision" of the show were helpful to clear info with all. I felt like my character was already decided long ago & all I could explore were the details within that- this I found as a wonderful challenge! I don't feel I was challenged enough within the process socially, mentally or physically & this sometimes made me feel like my time was wasted. The warm ups were at times unsatisfying. As sometimes after I felt less motivated than when I had initially entered the space. Rehearsals were sometimes slow but as mentioned previously it's all a part of community theatre.
- Rehearsing was fun however devising the piece through improvisation was good for ideas but more guidance is needed. If an idea is liked then it needs to be worked with a director to develop into a level for performance. There needed to be more concrete decisions made & less indecisiveness. Too many changes especially last minute ones. Not enough time.
- Karaoke Dreams was also partially designed to offer a more intensive experience (both in skills development and production values) for people who may be already engaged in forms of popular entertainment, but who may have only had experience in the amateur circuit. However, once again the process fell halfway between trying to meet this need for some of the ensemble members and trying to support first time performers to undertake a devising and performing process. As part of the company's and professional team's feedback, we felt that we should have been more thorough in our recruitment and planning process.
- I do understand the essence of community theatre, however at times I felt like I could have been challenged much more & had more opportunity for exploration during the creative process. Sometimes I felt like I was wasting my time, as there were always constant queries from other cast members. I didn't truly feel the ensemble sensation. This, however, could be due to myself missing many sessions.

Artistic Team

Performer/Devisors

Sally Lewry, Ashley Dyer, Alice Osbourne, Georgie Read, Victor Areces, Kimberly Aviso, Susie Henning, Natalie Rose, Emma Stevenson, Sarah Vongmany, Danielle Leah Teddy, Ruby Baxter, Calista Sinclair, Jules Bell, Stephen Klinder, Karen Therese, Mohammed Ahmed, Arda Barut, Lux Ratnamohan, Ahilan Ratnamohan, Angie Orrego, Melinda Hetzel, Johnny Tran

Artistic Consultant

Carlos Gomes

Musician

Sean MacKenzie

Production Design

Ian Bowie

Video Documentation

Johnny Tran

Stage Managers

Emilie Sysavanh & Padaric Meredith-Keller

Project Description

In 2002 UTP first presented *Short 'n Sharp*, a season of new short performance works made by established and emerging artists. Six works were curated from an open callout for proposals, developed over a six-week period and presented in a three-night season at Bankstown RSL.

The success of this project led to UTP seeking further funding from the NSW Ministry for the Arts and Bankstown City Council to continue the initiative and adequately resource the project, in particular employing an artistic consultant to facilitate the program and paying each contributing artist a small fee. *Short 'n Sharp 2 & 3* have followed a similar format to the initial *Short 'n Sharp*; in 2003 Katia Molino was artistic coordinator and facilitator and in 2004 Carlos Gomes undertook the role of artistic consultant.

Short 'n Sharp is part of a strategy of generating more regular performance events in the west, and building a performance culture in which audiences have regular opportunities to attend professional contemporary work. The informal atmosphere and bridging between contemporary performance and popular art forms also appeals to those who may not attend other UTP or theatre events.

Short 'n Sharp is about creating an opportunity for artists to engage in a self-determined artistic practise. Over the last three years, UTP has undertaken three large community based works. In each of these projects (*Mechanix*, *india@oz.sangam* and *Karaoke Dreams*) there has been a core group of participants who are eager to undertake future projects with the company and try out ideas of their own. *Short 'n Sharp* is a unique program that facilitates western Sydney and emerging artists entry into professional practice and offers them a professionally produced forum to present their ideas about the world. In the early to late 90's there were many short work programs offered at key city venues, including Performance Space, Belvoir St, Sidetrack, and The Stables. However, over the last five years, these opportunities have become more limited and outside of youth theatre UTP is one of the few companies to provide a resourced format. In particular *Short 'n Sharp* prioritises support for western Sydney and emerging artists, and in supporting these artist's work the overall program offers a unique insight to local culture and concerns.

Over the last two years *Short 'n Sharp* has followed a similar format

- UTP selects a guest professional artist and theatre maker to work with *Short 'n Sharp* selected artists
- UTP broadly advertises the program, calling for short work proposals from local and emerging artists, with an emphasis on western Sydney artists and works that have a synthesis with the company's core values
- The guest artistic coordinator and UTP's artistic director curate the program, selecting 6-8 works for future development
- Each group of artists works independently, setting their own rehearsal schedule and developing the new works according to each group's conceptual interrogation, aesthetic, skills and interests, with the support of the artistic coordinator

- Each group is able to access rehearsal space, limited technical support and office facilities to support the creation of their work
- The guest artistic coordinator is available to work with each group (15 -20 hours over an eight week period) as artistic consultant, supporting the development and realisation of the work
- Two day technical rehearsal for each group to rehearse in the performance venue and finalise technical details
- Works are presented in a 3-night public season at Bankstown RSL

Short 'n Sharp 3 – September 2004

In 2004, Carlos Gomes and Alicia Talbot selected eight new works to be included in the program, with an additional two works short listed for potential development. These two works were eventually included in the evening's program. Carlos Gomes was interested in creating an event without an MC, to break up the more conventional format of a night of short works. Instead, a pianist, Sean MacKenzie was employed to connect the works musically. Sean first worked with the company during *Karaoke Dreams*.

Carlos worked over an eight-week period with each team of artists, offering artistic support and project coordination. As always, the ten works were vastly different in form, style and content. Some were focussed on storytelling and content while others explored more visual and physical aspects of performance. One audience member anecdotally described the 2004 program as highly political theatre, not political theatre as perhaps we might expect it, but a diverse set of works by emerging artists grappling with contemporary world events and the struggle to represent this artistically.

It was a real highlight to be given the space and support which made it possible for two emerging artists to work together despite geographical separation... Short 'n Sharp gave us the fundamentals required for us to travel, investigate, learn and create new work. It was a highlight to have rehearsal space, money to cover material costs, publicity, production, administrative and artistic support from UTP, an artistic consultant and a group of provocative young artists. It was also very rewarding and clarifying to be challenged to work within the specific structure of 'short work'.

Melinda Hetzel & Angie Orrego – Short 'n Sharp 3 artists

Working [with an artistic consultant] was a fantastic experience. Carlos was available and easily contactable via phone if advice was needed. Carlos was also fairly easy going – allowing us to create a work we were happy with rather than a work he wanted us to do!

Natalie Rose & Emma Stevenson - Short 'n Sharp 3 artists

Initially, *Short 'n Sharp* was not conceived as only an emerging artists initiative, but was designed as program that would provide performance opportunities for established and emerging artists. However, the majority of artists who respond to the call for proposals are predominantly young and emerging artists; this may be due to the way the call for proposals was framed, the small fees available and the reputation of the event itself (perceived as a platform for emerging artists). This means that sometimes the work is limited in its development, despite the provision of an experienced artist and theatre maker, whose role is to provide provocation and feedback. The selected emerging artists position the artistic coordinator as a mentor or director, and in part rely on them to then solve some of their creative or making problems.

This year, Carlos Gomes was ambitious in curating 10 short works, rather than 6-8 short works (as in previous years). In hindsight, this was too many groups for the resources of the event to manage, both artistically and technically. While we wish to support as many emerging artists as possible, each need intensive support, especially in the last two weeks leading up to the public season. In future, we will be more aware from a company perspective about how many works we can realistically support for each program.

2004 Statistics

- 34 enquiries were received
- 26 written applications were received
- 10 groups involving 24 artists were supported
- 50% of participants had been involved in previous UTP projects
- 50% of the artists were from western Sydney
- 35 % of the artists were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- 65 % of short and sharp artists will be offered further training and professional development opportunities by UTP
- *Short 'n Sharp 3* also provided professional development opportunity for two local technicians, Emilie Sysavanh and Padaric Meredith-Keller, both of whom volunteered for *Karaoke Dreams*. These emerging theatre technicians stage managed the event. Later in 2003, Emilie successfully applied to participate in the Theatre Production course at NIDA.

Project 5

Back Home

A period of research and development for a professional new work.

Timeline

22-26 November, 2004

Venue

UTP Premises

Artists

Shannon Williams and Alicia Talbot

Project Description

Back Home is the third work in *The Cement Garage* and *The Longest Night* trilogy. The conceptual development for this new work has been generated through the key collaboration of Shannon Williams and Alicia Talbot. This collaboration began during *The Longest Night* process when Alicia and Shannon were working in residence in The Parks Community Centre and public housing estate. During this process they were collaborating predominantly with Indigenous and newly arrived African communities. As a result of the overwhelming response within the Adelaide communities, both Shannon and Alicia began to discuss the need for a relevant performance work that focused on the contemporary experiences of men living in western Sydney.

When the work was first conceived, Shannon and Alicia were considering exploring aspects of crime, anger and trauma. However, in the last three years the work has developed and matured and is now focused more on what it is to be a successful man (particularly from Indigenous, Islander and Arabic speaking cultural backgrounds) and deal with the expectations of self, family and community.

Back Home picks up the storyline of Shannon's character from The Longest Night years down the track. He's pretty successful, he's got a job, great clothes and a good place to live, but he still has no access to his kids and the stakes are getting higher...

This work focuses on the friendship of three men who grew up together on the same housing estate and haven't seen each other for years. Like Shannon, they are all pretty successful in one way or another, but getting back together opens up some old wounds – not to mention a whole pile of new ones...

What are the urban rites of manhood and identity? What is it to be a father and to search for your father?

During the one-week research and development phase, Alicia and Shannon re-examined the impetus for *Back Home*, where the idea had originally come from and how it may be positioned in 2005. They discussed a strategy for casting the work and where to locate the geographical development of the next stage. This research and development phase lead to discussions with the NSW Department of Housing and Blacktown City Council to investigate the feasibility of

