



A Stranger Whispers in Your Ear: DDT/UTP, 1991-2003

By Harley Stumm

Memory: Moving to Casula, June 1995

We're packing boxes for the move from Auburn Town Hall to Casula Powerhouse. Me. Maria Mitar, a fabulous singer who'd performed in last year's *Site: The Homebush Bay Story*, and is now our Community Cultural Development Trainee. And Mona Zaylaa, Administrative Assistant and sometime producer of SuperNats car culture events. Mona's saying, well we can definitely throw THIS out. It's a framed photo of the company founders, in lurid costumes, greasepaint freckles, faces stretched almost beyond recognition. We fall about laughing and pulling faces, pretending to be The Really Interesting Gypsies, as Mona puts the photo in the "to be dumped" pile. I feel guilty, insist we should be more respectful, and rescue it, putting it in the "storage" pile. We try to be more respectful, but we don't want it actually IN the office.

Document: Promotional booklet, February 2000

Urban Theatre Projects engages with Sydney's diverse cultures and communities to make contemporary theatre... Other voices speak in Urban Theatre Projects' work. Voices rarely heard or heard only in other contexts. Voices from all ages and from many backgrounds. To create the space for this speaking, we are creating new forms of contemporary performance, not because novelty is itself a virtue but because only through new forms can these voices speak without distortion.

"Community" is a problematic word. When we hear the phrase "community values" we know we are listening to a conservative politician. Yet we all belong to a variety of communities, some of which we are born into, some of which we choose, some of which we spend our whole lives rebelling against. A few of these communities are institutionalised with official organised structures, while most are as informal as a drink in the pub.

At UTP we put special emphasis on the community context of our work. At a time when the most powerful forces tell us the world is a market, communities are consumers and artists are mere service providers, UTP imagines other relationships. We seek out communities, sometimes to research a performance work, sometimes to include members of that community as collaborators in the performance making. And we have been encouraging contemporary performance artists to move out of the comfortable arthouses and enter into a dialogue with these other voices.

The text above was written by John Baylis (Artistic Director 1997-2001) in early 2000, it could just as easily fit the period at Auburn under Fiona Winning (1991-5), or at Bankstown under Alicia Talbot (from 2001). And there's much in common with the vision of the founders, Paul Brown, Christine Sammers and Kim Spinks.

I'm wondering, not for the first time, in what sense the 2006 Urban Theatre Projects of Alicia and Simon and Bibi is the same company as the 1981 Death Defying Theatre of Chris and Paul and Kim. Or the Auburn DDT of Fiona Winning, Alissar Chidiac and Gabriella Cabral, summed up in one review as "story-tellers' theatre". Or the mid-90s DDT, with its Artistic Direction Committee of Fiona, Gail Kelly and Monica Barone... more community theatre, but do you want hip

hop with that? Of John's era of "intimate spectacle" promenade performance, of formal experimentation, of John insisting that community members invited into a theatre-making process should not be seen as informants or representatives or participants but simply artists, collaborators. Of Alicia's shift to a renewed centrality of "community process", re-engagement with community sector agencies, and desire to create character-based drama from a contemporary performance practice.

But the history won't fit into my attempts at periodising, of defining eras, of saying *here* is when the world changed and the company shifted focus from this to that. There are too many counter-examples to each draft thesis, and not enough time to ponder whether this is a new development, or the reappearance of an old idea. Maybe I should content myself with an easier challenge, to remember some moments, some image-memories, moments that give a sense not only of what the shows looked and felt like, but of how they were made and where they came from. I hesitate to layer this with analysis, as I'm way too closely entangled, but offer instead some documents of the time, which as well as being arranged in loose chronological order, are chosen because they seem to shed some light on the thinking behind those moments. Together, I hope these hint at an outline of the company's historical development, for those seeking such a thing, but certainly they speak volumes about what's distinctive about this company.

Auburn 1991–5

Memory: (borrowed from Fiona Winning) Moving from Bondi to Auburn, 1991

"We moved from Bondi Pavilion to the Lady Mayoress' Room in Auburn Town Hall. We were going to make theatre in the west, in the suburbs, in this place that had the highest proportion of non-English speaking background residents in Australia. The Council liked the idea of having a local professional theatre company – they were even excited about us making shows with local communities. They probably thought we were going to work with the elderly Anglo ballroom dancers who strutted their stuff in the main hall every Tuesday and Thursday. And we might have, but we were also hanging out at the local Turkish and Lebanese lunch places, and talking with the Bannin Cultural Centre and community workers and kids hanging out in the mall. Alissar Chidiac had been a community worker in the area, and she brought a huge amount of knowledge to the company. We got a signwriter to paint "Death Defying Theatre – home at the Auburn Town Hall", on the railway overbridge right in the middle of Auburn. Then Council went a bit cold on us after we announced at a Council meeting that our first show would be made with the Arab Australian community, just after the first Gulf War. But it was too late – we were here. We took over a vacant shop, and that's where Martha Jabour ran screenprinting workshops, and worked with older Arab women and young people to design the show, *Café Hakawati*."

Memory: (borrowed from Fiona Winning) Café Hakawati, 1991

"The show was truly bilingual, in English and Arabic. There was a long joke about Bob Hawke and the non-Arabic speakers only understood the name "Bob Hawke" repeated over and over as the joke unfolded. And you could feel the discomfort in the Anglo audiences rising as the other half of the audience laughed and laughed. But the most powerful moment was when everyone lined up and did a very simple stand and deliver of "where I was when the war broke out". It really nailed that moment, that the world changed, but in a very direct way, everyone just knew that their lives were going to be affected very immediately and directly."

Document: Phuong Tuy Tran in Noelle Janaczewska's Blood Orange, 1992 (performed in English & Vietnamese)

I remember when I began to learn English – began to learn all these words. I soon noticed that only certain parts of my body had English names. Whole areas remained silent. Unnamed, as if they didn't exist. Parts of my body without words (Vietnamese). All the obviously sexual parts of the body, of course! Words I didn't know in Vietnamese either. After a while, I did learn those words in English, and I say them – when I wouldn't in Vietnamese. In Vietnamese some words are used only in private. But in English, once I know the words, I can be more public about my body language.

At school I draw my body in English, and it isn't the way I remember it in Vietnamese. Each language has unnamed

spaces, but those spaces are different in the two languages. In biology lessons, I learn more about my new body language. With maps of bodies in pink and orange. In red and black. Bodies full of lines and arrows and writing. I work very hard to connect this map to myself – to the way I am – but no matter how hard I try, it won't quite fit. I'd like to talk to my mother about all this, but she doesn't speak much English, and is already worried about what I might be learning at my Australian school. My sister can't help either. Pregnant with her first child, her map is even more inadequate than my own. For a while, I worked as an interpreter for the Health Services, and through that job, I began to be a little more public about my Vietnamese body. Now the maps are more filled in – more detailed. I've learned words in both languages for parts of my body I couldn't name before. Each language gives me different things, and the two together give me more than each language on its own. The two maps lie on top of each other – but they're not an exact translation. There's still that dislocation – but I've sort of learned to live with that. My bilingual body tells its stories in English and Vietnamese.

Memory: (borrowed from Fiona Winning) Eye of the Law, 1993-4

“We applied to the Law Foundation for 35 grand, I couldn't believe they funded us to make a show about whether the law was just. We worked with women in prison, young men and women in detention, and domestic violence survivors. We did performance workshops with them, to stimulate stories and dialogues about the legal system. And during the very first discussions among the artists, Ben Grieve told his story about being entrapped at a gay beat – being arrested by this cop who'd initiated sex. And it was perfect, we ended up using Ben's own story. Performing it in schools was just wild. The kids loved the sound, this pumping live hip hop soundtrack from Khaled Sabsabi, a local Auburn artist. But the entrapment story was quite out there. There were lots of questions like, are you gay? can the cops do that? what's a beat? and lots of disgusted sounds during the show. Then there was the story, performed by Alissar, of an Arab woman who comes out of a violent relationship and burns down the family house and is imprisoned, which was an invented story inspired by lots of things we heard. We got a lot of stick for that because of concern, justifiable concern, that we were putting an Arab woman artist in that position and ethnicising domestic violence.”

Casula 1995-9

Memory: On the road for Hip Hopera, September 1995

The DDT truck pulls out of the carpark, with huge graffiti logos announcing *Hip Hopera*. Morgan Lewis, Khaled Sabsabi, Sharline Bezzina, Maria Mitar, Vahid Vahed and Mary Azar are off to Bankstown or Blacktown or Chester Hill, to run a workshop – one of eight a week over three months, spanning music production, rapping, writing, graffiti, video, and performance forms from breaking to capoeira to funkdance to bellydance, with a few tricks borrowed from contemporary performance...

Document: Letter to Community Agencies, August 1995

Hip Hopera is an innovative multimedia project involving young people from Western Sydney of non-English speaking backgrounds in a process of community cultural development. Hip Hopera will spring from the popular culture and the concerns of its makers. It will be an opportunity for young people in Western Sydney to challenge racist stereotypes and stereotypes of “westies”, creating the space and the power for them to represent themselves.

Document: Party, South West Syndicate, in Hip Hopera, December 1995

*for this party we won't be mailing out no invitations...
mr speaker there seems to be an intervention*

*fire'n a couple of shots to get attention
where doin a home invasion on parliament house
we're throwing them over-paid politicians out*

Memory: Hip Hopera, December 1995

South West Syndicate – Shannon Williams aka Brotha Black, Monkey Mark, Mohammed in the wheelchair (copped a bullet in the neck), Dax and Naz – arriving in the huge Turbine Hall in a car inching through the crowd, before they leap onto the stage. Three Little Shits, three brothers aged 11 to 14 rapping “We’re Leb! We’re Muslim! We’re proud!”. The student activist Witches of Hip Hop’s critique of the Brady Bunch (“I wanna see a black face!”). The Notorious Sistas and Doctor Nogood out-toughing the male rappers in camouflage gear. Chris Amituani, natural born performer oozing charisma, escaping the walls of detention at Minda JJ for a few moments through Khaled’s recording and Vahid’s video clip. The whole crew on stage, bursting with energy in the opening freestyle. John Kirkman, Casula Powerhouse Director, not batting an eyelid when people pull out spray cans and start writing live graffiti on the gallery walls, not part of the deal...

Memory: Going Home, September 1996

We’re in the South West Sydney Multicultural and Community Centre in Minto, a public housing estate between Liverpool and Campbelltown, home to lots of Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islanders and Maoris. The director, Lani Tupu, is a mainstage and TV actor. Writer, Roma Potiki, has come over from Wellington, funded by Creative New Zealand. They’re as much outsiders here as I am. We’re trying to run a multi-disciplinary workshop in a cafeteria, and our fantasies of participants devising performance material are foundering, so Roma is interviewing people and writing text from that. Musical Directors, Steve Rangihuna and Lil Harris quickly pull together a band though, and any number of kids wanting to rap. Mollie Thomas, the Coordinator, and her husband Murray, Maori chief and Mormon elder, are watching their fourteen year old grand-daughter Charlene rapping. I’m bracing myself for a disaster, assuming that Mormons and hiphop don’t mix, and we’re going to lose Charlene from the project. But Mollie and Murray have tears in their eyes...

Document: Kita tu Mahea, Charlene Thomas, in Roma Potiki’s Going Home, November 1996

*Here in Australia I was brought up
Isolated from the whanou yo got to get up
Take me home where I come from
Back on the marae just like a big bomb
Wear our mokos with such pride
Head so down yo rise it high
Hear me now what’s on my mind
All these cultures one of a kind
Row our waka with such pride
Learn our mana and traditional tribe
What you see before you is what you get
Ain’t no use in changin what you
gonna forget*

Document: 1996 Artistic Report

Here, filling the spaces of Casula Powerhouse, are the voices and rhythms of forty-three performers; hiphop up against hymns; dance follows dialogue; chants and stories, poetry and poi. From Auckland and Auburn and Apia (and places in the heart). From Randwick and Redfern, from Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands, Aotearoa. The show weaves together

ancestral voices with stories of arriving in Australia, the “land of opportunity”; of hanging out in malls, of returning to a home that is no longer home. From the opening karanga (calling in) to the powerful rapping of young men in detention; from the sixties Maori girl group sounds of the Shevelles to the island sound of a song to the old navigators.

Document: Newsletter announcing new name and new Artistic Coordinator, John Baylis, May 1997

“My work to date has been very much associated with experimentation with theatre forms. I think many people, including artists, have come to see this type of work as being at the opposite extreme to community-based work with its emphasis on accessibility and community ownership. Yet it was just this connection with particular communities that attracted me to Urban Theatre Projects. The freedom to experiment without constraints can become a trap. Working with a community provides a meaningful and responsible context for creation.

“This doesn’t mean the work can be any less innovative. Artists working with communities must still be ready to question their own practice and try continually to press beyond the easy solution, the cliché. And speaking of clichés, it’s often thought that innovation and experimentation in artistic practice means that the work must be obscure, difficult or very very serious. For me, it means that the work is surprising, exhilarating and pleasurable.”

Document: TrackWork, 1997, text from UTP’s Sidney Myer Award Nomination, 2002

TrackWork (1997) was to be performed on railway stations and trains. John inherited the project, conceived by Monica Barone, and engaged Fiona Winning as co-director, and the collaboration between the two embodied the company’s on-going attempts to establish a dialogue between the parallel histories of contemporary and community-based performance. The result, for audiences, was an afternoon spent travelling through western Sydney, from Redfern to Granville via Lidcombe, Auburn, Berala and Cabramatta, changing trains, jostling for a better view, witnessing moments performed or unfolding naturally – sometimes, who could tell.

130 performers, from individuals who had been through training and workshops over months, to bands, groups, choirs, youth theatre companies, and a number of professional artists, ranging from Gravity Feed to an opera soprano and septuagenarian cabaret singer Terry Woo, crooning Begin the Beguine on the steps of Lidcombe Station in a silver lamé suit borrowed from Mardi Gras, while ballroom dancers and a sword-toting Tai Chi master twirled on the platform below. From the surreal (flight attendants taking orders for meals, drag brides being thrown from a limo), to the contemplative (a Vietnamese legend enacted in the heart of Cabramatta), to the political (Indigenous MCs rapping a rebuttal of Pauline Hanson), to the intimate (the stewards paste snapshots of their local hangouts and loved ones on the train windows as the “cultural wasteland” speeds by).

Memory: Making TrackWork, September – December 1997

John and Fiona, Richard Vella, Anthony Babicci and Janine Peacock spending days and days catching trains, looking for stations that were interesting visually, had some kind of social meaning, good sightlines and other practical considerations, and whose timetabling permitted a visit that wasn’t too long nor too short. John poring over timetables and maps, planning a route that would take us to our favourite stations. And then, having finally been given permission to do the gig, after ten months of negotiations and over thirty letters to the Transport Minister and CEO down, learning a week out from opening that real trackwork was scheduled for the opening weekend... and having to come up with a new route, new schedule, and another fifteen minutes material...

Document: Sidney Myer Award Nomination, 2002

TrackWork was the first of a unique body of works that the company came to call “intimate spectacles”. These site-specific works were deeply rooted in their physical location and their social context. They avoided the derelict warehouses and tourist spaces so beloved by artists and festivals respectively, instead taking audiences on a journey

through working, lived-in urban spaces, shoulder to shoulder with real people going about their business. For the project of making contemporary culture in a region historically silenced and unseen, the choice of place as a key had strong theoretical foundations and political bite.

Other works in this series were: Speed Street (1998), exploring the local impacts of globalisation, and staged in a “bad” residential street in Liverpool, from vacant lots to the balconies of public housing flats; <subtopia> (1999), a subculture themepark in Bankstown, with the audience visiting nine sites inhabited by punks, goths, rappers, ravers, and rockabillys; and The Palais (2000), another promenade work, this time taking the audience indoors to wander through a palace of musical memories and histories in Parramatta Town Hall, peopled by retired and older musicians.

**Document: A manifesto,
from company publicity and
funding applications, 1998**

Western Sydney is a world where haka meets hiphop, where the RSL club is next door to the Mosque, where art happens in theatres and galleries but also on the street, on the train, in jails, in garages and on cable TV... The western Sydney experience goes to the heart of contemporary Australia. It is a geography of street corners, and a geography of nations. This is the contemporary world we live in. This is where we glimpse our future. This is the world our theatre seeks to explore.

Memory: Manifesto made performance, Speed Street, December 1998

We'd met with Martha Jabour, who'd designed DDT shows in the Auburn days, and now works as Living Streets Coordinator for Liverpool City Council, focussed on the Speed Street area. Martha is interested in arts projects with local residents, including the many recently arrived migrants from Kurdistan and Timor, and shows us hysterical tabloid clips about this “worst street in Sydney”. John is thinking about a new show that would rethink that 90s buzzword “globalisation” from a lived experience perspective.

Rolando Ramos directs, Rose Nakad writes, Farzin Yekta makes video, Martha designs, Simon Wise lights. Rolando wants to live and breathe Speed Street, so we set up house in the old child care centre, abandoned when toxic waste started seeping out of the ground.

Document: Traffic Management Plan for Speed Street Closure, December 1998

Through traffic will be diverted via Pirie Street, Nagle Street & Mill Road, by means of signs in accordance with Australian Standard 1742.3. (See map for details of signage) There will also be seven traffic controllers placed as outlined below, attired in safety vests, who will have received the Model Instructions as per 1742.3...

Memory: Speed Street, December 1998

The audience gathers in a church carpark, and as they listen to some introductory text about collisions between the global and the local, an ancient Torana wheels up the street screaming in some low gear and smashes into a parked car. Audience rushes over, abuzz: “Was that real? Or part of the show?” A TV crew appears, trotting out the “streets of fear” script... but they're teenagers. For the next hour, we walk down the street, listen to neighbours on the balconies of walk-up flats, watch choreographed shopping trolleys and mobile scaffold towers, and hear Koori performer Arthur Ridgeway talk of the magic in Speed Street.

I can't think of a UTP show that *isn't* inflected with these themes, these images: place and displacement, home and exile, movement and journey.

Document: Ian Maxwell, “Speed Street”

This is Urban Theatre Projects’ intimate spectacle: an entire suburban street performing itself as we are led through and along it... It is a narrative of place, told in and with space, with the evening folding in around us... Even better, this is a spectacle that stares back at its audience... The entire event, this ‘intimate spectacle’, is itself positioned within this same utterance, holding up a set of narratives - the media, the postcards, the newspapers, the city - about this place, the west, and shouting: “this claims to speak for us, but doesn’t”. And instead, it speaks with its own voices.

Bankstown 1999 –

**Memory: Moving to Bankstown,
February 1999**

Tim Carroll, Bankstown cultural worker and UTP Board member, has been urging us to move to this vibrant but maligned centre. So we’re packing boxes again, sorting through the accumulated detritus of history and administration. We don’t find the Really Interesting Gypsies photo.

We move into our new office, upstairs from Bankstown Station, perched above the overbridge dividing the Vietnamese south from the Turkish/Arab north. We stand on the balcony, watching people going about their business or just hanging out in the Plaza. We introduce ourselves to our new neighbours. Gary Nguyen, dentist. Glenn & Mick, tattooists from central casting. Over the next few years, we watch a succession of tenants come and go in the other offices. The outsourced education and training providers, who did a midnight flit. The immigration consultant, who did a midnight flit. The mysterious cult of elderly Chinese couples, who would gather to sing, and depart with mops and brooms, laundry baskets, and framed velvet paintings. The production office for *Delivery Day*, a film set and shot in Bankstown, made for SBS TV by Khoa Do, who’d been in our show *Chay Vong Vong*.

**Document: The Ensemble,
in 2000 Program Outline**

In July 1999, we formed an on-going performance ensemble. Over the past few years, our experience has been that every community-based production has resulted in an enthusiastic core of performers who are hungry to do more performance work. The new ensemble will give that chance... It offers a bridge for those with professional aspirations between our community-based and our fully professional work, and its focus will be on support for emerging artists rather than community cultural development. In particular, it will provide ensemble members with training and performance opportunities beyond what a community project can offer.

We’d had a history of taking work into the inner city contemporary scene, with shows at Performance Space such as *Eye of the Law*, *Noroc!*, *Crop Circles*, and *The Query*... “where we explore the themes canvassed in the community work using more complex performance forms”. This time, though, it was a show featuring an ensemble of eight emerging artists from the west: Khoa Do, Claudia Chidiac, Ned Matijasevic, Cicily Ponnor, Anna Nguyen, Tona Nguyen, Bao Khanh, Woody Chamron.

Memory: Acting vs Performing, mid-2000

Nico Lathouris had worked in 70s and 80s avant-garde companies, Performance Syndicate and APG, and now is a performance dramaturg working with untrained young actors in commercial TV and film. He’s come to have lunch and talk about working on our next show, *Manufacturing Dissent*, in a similar role. He’s talking with customary passion about acting, and John says he prefers to think of *performing* – Don’t you think acting suggests pretence and artifice? Whereas to *perform* is to *do*? Nico snorts derisively – To *act* is to take action! To *perform* is just to do a job, a task!

**Document: 2000 Artistic Report,
on Manufacturing Dissent**

The show had an uneasy twofold strategy: to make a piece of politically committed theatre dealing with Australia's current treatment of 'illegal' refugees; and to examine critically the various theories and practices of political theatre that have emerged in the 20th century. Our challenge was to present the issue with passion, while acknowledging that such politically committed work risks becoming patronising, self-important or just plain foolish. It was a tricky thing... In short, we were seeking a post-modern political theatre, one in which we acknowledge the absence of a 'clean' position from which to launch a critique, but one which insists that there are still evils to be fought, and that this fight is a political process.

Document: Manufacturing Dissent, December 2000

BORDER GUARD: We did not invite you to our land

MAN: I have come looking for a new home

BORDER GUARD: What have you done with your old home?

*MAN: I come from a camp on a border
My old home is blackened walls
And the fading echo of my mother's screams*

*BORDER GUARD: Our land is clean and prosperous
Our people are free and compassionate
There are many wanting to come to our land
We have a process
Why did you not wait in your camp on a border
For our process to find you?*

*MAN: Our need was too great
We waited five years for your process to find us
Our pain was too great*

*BORDER GUARD: It is not your decision to determine the size of your pain
You have no perspective
We are familiar with the full range of pain We will examine your pain
We will examine your pain*

**Memory: The Cement Garage,
September 2000**

For the first time in memory, we've picked up a work rather than always making our own new shows. We're remounting *The Cement Garage*, made last year by Alicia Talbot at High Street Youth Health Service, using a process she developed there, and that she will continue to refine later as UTP Artistic Director. Three young homeless people find themselves together in a bare space. They suss each other, tangle and snipe, get trashed, and fantasise about being rock stars, or just having a bed for the night. We're touring it through western Sydney in conjunction with youth services. We take it back to High Street, then to Cobham JJ (detention centre), a vacant factory in Campbelltown, PACT Theatre, the loading dock of the Whitlam Library in Cabramatta, on top of a shipping container at Bill Crews' Uniting Church. Tonight I'm watching Morgan Lewis, Lucia Mastrantone and Carlos Russell performing in the backyard of Bankstown Sexual Assault Service. The heavens open, it's bucketing down, the performers are drenched, there's steam coming off the lights. It's Friday night and there's 40 tough kids come to see it, there's a tarp strung to shelter

the audience but they're all drenched too, and they don't move a muscle till the show finishes.

**Document: Caitlin Newton-Broad on The Cement Garage, in Lowdown,
February 2000**

When working with young people who do not have a stable place to stay, or regular life patterns, how do you structure rehearsals? ...The dramaturg is one role in the creative process who has the privilege of looking from the outside, speaking from a safe place and who is the one picking up on authenticity, story, plot and consequence of action... So each week a group of eight were paid a small amount to be content dramaturgs: experts, talkers, shapers and questioners who used their expertise and depth of knowledge to create The Cement Garage...

Memory: The Longest Night, Adelaide Festival 2002

The Festival Director, American artist Peter Sellars, wants to break the major festival mould, showing and commissioning "urgent" work, political work, art made in community. Alicia, still working at High Street, had pitched a proposal for a team of artists to be matched with a community in Adelaide, to make a sequel to *The Cement Garage*. Around this time, John leaves the company. The Festival commissions Alicia's show, and she brings this project to the company with her when she is appointed Artistic Director in August 2001.

So we're at The Parks Community Centre, a sprawling complex that's part "real" community and part welfare-bureaucracy maze, in the poorest postcode in South Australia, a huge public housing estate where the drug of choice is "chroming", inhaling aerosol propellents. We're working with young people from the indigenous and African communities, through the Arts Centre and the Health Service and the Youth Service. Each has its own agenda and politics and process, and the Festival staff are genuine but totally new to this kind of work, and Adelaide's establishment is buying for Sellars' blood because they want proper art. Into this mix, throw a team of nine artists, to devise this show with an open door rehearsal, where young people can drop in and watch and feed back, as well as sign up for more structured sessions where they're paid a small fee for their expertise.

**Document: Notes to Performers in
The Longest Night, Alicia Talbot,
February 2002**

Yes we need to get a proper bong, lets decide what you want to smoke, if you want to smoke, how to create smoke in the bathroom. Also, be very careful with substance and handling. One of the notes we constantly get from the young people is about being careful and not wasting a drop. It is a real tragedy if you do. Go to any lengths to save any form of substance from any wastage. You might have to do dive rolls action moves to save the precious substance.

**Memory: The Longest Night,
Adelaide Festival 2002**

The characters have moved on from Garage: Bernie has a home but her son's been taken away. She's trying to go straight to get Ollie back when old mates (and trouble) show up. A wild night ensues.

As it does in real life. Before the commissioned show, there's a dance-off, with several dozen of our young collaborators performing their own dance and hip hop material in the central plaza. Then the audience are guided through the centre, given a personal tour by our collaborators. Our audience is a mix of middle class Festival goers, international festival directors, and locals from the Parks. The main show is in the Motor Vehicle Maintenance Shed, transformed into a spartan first flat for Bernie. It's the *acting* debut for Shannon Williams, who'd been in *Hip Hopera* and other shows, rapping, and already he and Alicia are talking about an idea for the next show in the series, which will premiere at Sydney Festival four years later as *Back Home*. On opening night, a scuffle breaks out and security staff

intervene. Police arrive later, march into our opening night drinks, and arrest one of the community performers.

**Memory: Move to Hackett House,
February 2003**

We've moved again, to Hackett House, still in Bankstown, along with Bankstown Youth Development Service, and Citymoon, Binh Ta and Bruce Keller's Vietnamese theatre company. Bankstown Council has some money from the state government to turn the 70s edifice Town Hall into something useful for contemporary arts practice. In the meantime, the interest on Council's grant helps subsidise rent and renovations, a Tim Carroll brainwave. We tear out tired beige partitions and tattered green carpet, and make our own rehearsal space. After 22 years, no more hiring church halls, no more working around indoor bowlers and crochet groups.

We've taken over Bankstown. At Hackett House, we have performance workshops for *Mechanix*, an outdoor spectacle of objects and inventions, directed by Alicia with Joey Ruigrok. Joey and team are building two seven metre steel towers at our temporary workshop, an old State Rail freight depot just around the corner (more tortuous negotiations!). Eventually, the towers are installed right in the middle of the Old Town Plaza, and the show goes up. Our former neighbours, the tattooists, love the show: "Ahhhhhh.... so THIS is what you do." Councillors say the same.

We'd workshopped the show for four months, with performers, builders, musicians coming once or twice or three sessions a week. Leanne Alcock, state silver medal gymnast, had picked up a flyer at the Gymnastics Club, and is learning high wire with Lee Wilson and Susie Langford. Her mother Lyn, local community worker, is watching, as she's done every session throughout the project. She helps us pack down each night. Helps run the box office. Helps bump out. Is the last to leave the opening night party. Ends up joining the Board.

Looking for an ending, I can't resist the review quotes I've tried to avoid. This time, they just seem to me to sum up this 25 years of theatre-making: scale, space, imagination, invention (and its mother, necessity), people, energy, joy^[e7].

**Document: Mechanix Review,
John McCallum**

They take over Bankstown Plaza – a busy shopping and fast food area by day that, similar to so many precincts across the country, dies after dark. The performers move through the space collecting apparently abandoned objects – shopping trolleys, milk crates, steel drums, old wheels and tyres, lengths of frayed ropes, timber planks, even a Zimmer frame. They have built a sound system and a welded steel structure for their aerial acts. They wheel in a collection of extraordinary machines and a platform of salvaged objects that become drums for a percussion group. 15 minutes into the show, they have built seating out of the tyres and planks, settled us down and created a performance space. Sparks from an angle grinder shoot up behind the dancers. A solo saxophone wails behind us. There are moments of discord when the dances turn into fights. There is a shouting contest in which the lined up performers take turns at falling down when shouted at. A man fronts up and performs a haka. Two women spin in space on lines strung between two towers.

And because it is the night that they want to take over, they start collecting lights – fluorescent tubes stolen from nearby shop awnings, incandescent bulbs they plug into a pattern on the wire panels of the cages, giant plastic balls lit from within, electric torches, arc lights, miners' head lamps and huge factory lights.

**Document: Mechanix Review,
Stephen Dunne**

The work's closing image, with a globe proudly borne dizzyingly high above our heads, is a yearning monument to the benefits of illumination, perhaps a shiny clarion call for our darkening times. That clarion call might be sourced from the refrain of the piece's only song, with its exhortation "Everybody, jump into the sky!"

- ii. Pamela Payne, review of Noelle Janaczewska's Blood Orange, Sydney Morning Herald 1993
- iii. Ian Maxwell, "Speed Street", NSW Community Arts Association 1998 Yearbook
- iv. Funding application, 1998
- v. John McCallum, "Triumph as community reclaims its urban space", The Australian 10/4/03
- vi. Stephen Dunne, "Pleasure in this erection is discovering a tower of meanings", Sydney Morning Herald, 7/4/03