



Embers – capturing the story

CAMPION DECENT
playwright



The big bushfires went through this area of north east Victoria and Gippsland in January 2003. They were the worst bushfires since 1939. It was virtually on the front page of *The Age* every day for a month. It was a huge event in everyone's lives and *Embers* is a play created out of the stories of the people who suffered through the fires and after it.

The way it came about was a moment of synchronicity really. I was talking with Charlie Parkinson (he was the artistic manager of Hothouse Theatre) about wanting to do something using verbatim as a technique. And pretty much the same week, he got a phone call from Upper Hume Community Health Service saying, 'We'd like the arts to be involved in some way in helping support people's recovery after the fires.' So it was really those two ideas coming together. There was a lot of interest in the project from the get-go.

We started out on the road collecting stories towards the end of that year. The health service was instrumental. They assigned a rural recovery support worker to go around with me. Les Hume was his name and he was my foot in the door, I guess. He had his local contacts and it was the bush

telegraph after that. There were many people who wanted to tell their story and a few who didn't want to re-live it.

They were very humble on the whole. You know most of them would say, 'I haven't got much to tell,' and then two hours later, they'd finish telling you this extraordinary story. What I found really interesting was the way these people were experiencing something out of the ordinary but they didn't really understand that. Or even how they'd actually managed to get through it. There seemed to be this super heroic stuff and everyday stuff going on at the same time. People were drawing on reserves they didn't know they had.

The production was first staged in 2006 which felt like a long time for some of the storytellers but we wanted to make sure that we'd raised enough money so that the stories were given the respect and the production values they were due. Verbatim isn't cheap. It's much more expensive to be going out collecting real stories than to have a writer in a garret typing away by himself. As part of the play's development we established a reference group from the community to make sure the play was reflecting the complexities of the experience. Representatives from the community, government, and fire agencies heard drafts read by professional actors. That gave me a chance to hear their ideas about balance and mood and so on. Considering the scale of the project, the numbers involved and the consultation things fell into place relatively easily.

So it struck a lot of chords that were attractive from a funding point of view which makes things easier. I suspect

it was seen as a unique project in that it was trying to respond to a very particular event. It ticked certain boxes, you know? It had a partnership between arts and health and people love those kinds of things. It was regional and so it was reaching people that are not always reached. It has a very personal, emotional strand and it dealt with our relationship to the landscape. And also the fact that we were quite adamant about taking it back out on the road, not just doing it here in Wodonga or Sydney or wherever we could get a metropolitan season but actually getting it out to some of those fire affected townships. I think that was important.

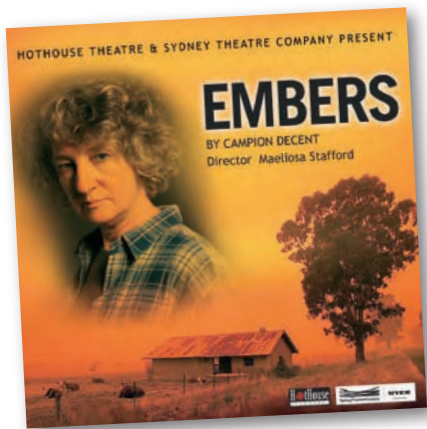
Going back to the towns turned out, in a way, to be the most satisfying aspect of the whole project. We took a show with state theatre company production values to 15 small towns. It required a road crew of six and there were nightly bump-ins and bump-outs and it was ambitious and exhausting. But these people needed to hear back their own stories.

And there were profound experiences dotted throughout the tour. When the people who participated came to see the play, as I think most of them did, they got to see more than their one layer. They saw all those experiences contextualised side-by-side. They took away a sense of, 'Yes, we actually survived and conquered and have now gone forward.'

People talk about life-changing experiences and I guess in a very practical sense *Embers* has changed mine because I've moved from Sydney and I'm now living in this region and working for the theatre company full-time. I'm now artistic manager and there's a clear link between the experiences of that project and the fact that I decided to take the job.

I was at the Sydney Theatre Company when I decided to chuck that in and come and do this. It was much to the horror of some people but there's resilience and honesty and a no-nonsense approach in regional areas that I find really attractive. And admire. When I was hearing these stories for *Embers* I couldn't help but sometimes put myself in their shoes and think, 'How would I have responded in that situation?'

And I'm sure, I'm honestly sure, not as well.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Amber Todd and Matt Zeremes in *Embers*
PHOTO: JULES BOAG

Tracy Mann, Tim Richards and Annie Byron in *Embers*
PHOTO: JULES BOAG

Embers poster