



No2stones

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When the opportunity came up to do the opening for the Regional Arts Australia conference in Mackay in 2006, we discussed the idea of bringing the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and

Australian South Sea Islander cultures together in some way. What often happens in festivals or celebrations is you get South Sea Islander dance groups up there, then you get the Torres Strait Islanders up there, then you get the Aboriginal dancers up there. And they each do their three dances and then it's, 'see you later'.

We wanted to do something that reflected what was really happening here in Mackay because there are these three separate cultures on a public level but on a more personal level and a family level, they inter-relate.

The actual idea came about when we were looking for the best place to have the opening breakfast for the Regional Arts Australia conference and we were down at Lambert's Lookout which is an outcrop overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Aesthetically we liked it. It had energy and we thought it was practical to put on a performance there but when we went to the Elders to ask about the area, no-one knew the story of the land. And that became the first hurdle.

How were we going to represent this place? We were walking along the beach which is full of all these small lucky stones and pumice stones as well that I suspect have been washed up from the Pacific Islands over there. And as we were walking along, Mullum Stone pointed down and said, 'Have a look at that, no two stones are the same.' And it was this throwaway comment that led to a discussion about identity and co-existence. And I guess how everyone in this project was different to each other, that we'd come from different cultural backgrounds. There were young people, old people, people from Slade Point, the local area, people from up the Valley, people from Brisbane, people from other countries.

And so we had the idea. *No2Stones* would be an event known where the three cultures performed together. I remember at our first meeting some people said it was impossible, it would never happen and we were asking for trouble. And so then it became a challenge. It became, 'Well, if that's the case we've just got to do it! We've got to create one story.'

The planning went on for months: weaving, song, dance, costuming, fish netting. There were workshops for children and adults. It was huge for everyone and yes, it was a testing ground but there was a great willingness. Jeanette Fabila, the Indigenous choreographer, worked with each of the leaders of the groups. The idea was for them to be able to show their culture, to work as individual groups but for that then to come together in a contemporary piece. It would

embrace the traditional and celebrate the traditional but also say that we can move forward.

The day came and we were up at 4 a.m. to launch the boats and set up for all the different art forms that were coming together. And then at 6:30, the rain came down. This meant there were issues for the breakfast. It was dangerous to set up the stoves, dangerous for the delegates. And this was hard for the performers but they said, 'Hey listen, we perform in the rain all the time.' Months of work looked like going down the drain.

We made a decision to put it on in the afternoon and spirits were raised. 'Yeah, we'll be back, the rain will stop, the sun will come out and everything will be right.' And then I got a call from Mullum. She said that in the afternoon there was going to be a funeral, the brother of an Elder, and we couldn't go ahead. It would not have gone down well.

You could see the kids' faces. We spent all day cleaning up and I went home to bed where I stayed for two weeks, close to pneumonia.

And then a month or two later, I asked Queensland Arts Council if we could try again. We called a rehearsal and probably 75 percent came back. And after three weeks of getting together again, we put on the show. It gives me goose-bumps now. It was almost like everyone together saying, 'We'll show you!' There was a great deal of courage there.

We created a film that was sent out to all the people who missed the cancelled performance. And in the end we have been left with a sense of hope. If we created this one, we can do others.



LEFT:
No2Stones cast and audience



RIGHT:
Aboriginal cast members of *No2Stones*, Pacific Edge Conference, Mackay 2006
PHOTOS: ARTHUR FRAME AM