



Snow Circus at Possum Flat

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initiator, artistic director



I'd never worked in the snow and I'm not a snow person but I wanted to start playing with neon and I thought, 'How amazing would it look in the snow?' Snow is such a pristine, extraordinary surface to reflect light. But it was a long journey to find the right site. Possum Flat is on Mount Hotham in the National Park: it's rugged, it's in the middle of nowhere and there's no power... but what a beautiful landscape!

The irony of this part of East Gippsland is that there's this tiny space at the top of the mountain where people ski and there's a lot of wealth, developers, all of that. But down the mountain there are remote communities primarily sheep farmers and they are very poor people. None of them really have much to do with the top of the mountain. They don't go skiing. They can't afford to go up there. They have drought, fire, locust plagues and travel large distances but they're tough people and they're passionate about where they live. This was the community I wanted to engage.

I knew there were some really wonderful artists in the Alpine country and I designed things within *Snow Circus* to showcase their skills. We had a bogong moth that was made

from the felt that was made from the wool from the sheep that were bred on the mountain. And then all the dyes were from the trees that grow on the mountains and the moth itself is one of the iconic insects of Mt Hotham. Many of the volunteers had never had an opportunity to work in the arts before. A local welder worked with local artists to construct a Bogong High Plains Rhinoceros Beetle, a huge five metre long sculpture on skis. There were SES volunteers who knew the landscape intimately and had skills in transporting things to inaccessible places and getting me ropes up really high snow gums. And all sorts of tradesmen who were just so capable of thinking through a problem and solving it. And there were skiers, musicians, the local choir, National Parks staff and schools.

And of course, there was the snow groomer! And without him, as it turned out, we wouldn't even have had any snow. The snowfalls were the lowest on record that year and for the first time since 1971, it hadn't snowed at Possum Flat. We'd had to truck it in at the last minute to create the snow ring and the ski run and give the feeling of it. Ten tip-truck loads of snow.

From right across the community people came. Many had shared the mountain for years but met for the first time working on *Snow Circus*. I got funding to bus them in on these special buses and there we were, all together, finally gathered and ready to watch. The fireworks had just been rigged, the neons were all laid in the snow, there was a tight

wirewalker ready to go and then we heard the thunder and saw lightning. And it started raining. Not showers. It was like gale force winds and freezing, pelting rain.

If you'd had an audience from the city, they would've been scattering for their cars and gone. But the high country farmers had come in their Drizabones and hats and they just leaned into the weather. They said, 'We're not going. We're going to stay here and we're going to see this show.' This mob hung in there. No one left.

After half an hour of torrential rain my production person called on the walkie-talkie. 'Catherine, do you want to go ahead?' It was a risky situation. The rain had stopped but the tight wire was wet. The snow was melting. The fireworks guy said if we set off the first firework, then the whole lot could go off. I had to make this split-second decision knowing that if I didn't go ahead, this would never happen again. There was no way we could do a re-run. Do I go ahead, or don't I?

'Let's do it, let's go for it.'

And so off we went. It was only a 17 minute show and in that time, some things didn't happen because of the wetness. The huge rhinoceros beetle skied down the slope that we built and got bogged at the bottom of the hill. All the fireworks started going off in its horns and its wings and then it blew the neons out because the sparks flew over into the ring. Only half the catherine wheels in the snow gums went off and other things. But people didn't know any of that. They didn't know what was planned to happen, so it didn't matter. They just stood and took it in. And the whole thing was so extraordinarily magical.

You never know until it's over how the vision will be. Some things don't work out exactly as you've composed them but others are more amazing by the element of chance. And I think the element of chance in any art form is one of the most profound things. You sometimes get a bonus you never dreamt of.

Around 500 people contributed in some way to Snow Circus through music, costumes, performance or visual arts.

PHOTO: SUSAN PURDY AND JEAN MARC DUPRE

SNOW CIRCUS

