



Biographies

Vicki Van Hout
Director & Choreographer

Vicki Van Hout is a Wiradjuri woman born on the south coast of New South Wales. An independent choreographer, performance-maker and teacher, she has worked across a range of performance mediums nationally and internationally. Her work practice emanates from the belief that all cultural information is fluid in its relevance and that we both exchange and adhere to patterns of cultural behaviour and its tacit meanings. Her last full-length show, *Briwyant*, premiered at Performance Space in 2011, and toured to Malthouse Theatre, Brisbane Powerhouse and Darwin Festival in 2012: the first ever national tour of a work by an independent Indigenous choreographer. It was nominated for an Australian Dance Award for Best Achievement in Independent Dance.

Recently awarded the 2014 New South Wales Dance Fellowship for established and mid-career artists, Vicki Van Hout was the first Indigenous winner of the Fellowship. She is currently working on a commission for Carriageworks, as part of *24 Frames per Second*, a major exhibition of screen-based dance works by Australian and international artists, premiering in June.

Gary Lang
Choreographic Collaborator,
Cultural Consultant & Voice/Sound

Gary Lang is a Larrakia man, a graduate of NAISDA Dance College, residing in Darwin. He is a natural storyteller, often sharing unsolicited local knowledge via personal anecdotes. He has intimate experience of the Long Grassers life through family connection. As well as a performer/choreographer, he is a painter and hairdresser. Both occupations complement his heightened sense of aesthetics: his intricate weaving was a part of the elite competitive hair circuit and his paintings consist of equally painstaking attention to very fine detail. He worked as a dancer/choreographer with Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, Bangarra Dance Theatre and Darwin's Tracks Dance Company before founding Gary Lang NT Dance. His works, including *Entrapment* (2004), *Munuk Gapu Freshwater Saltwater* (2008) and *Goose Lagoon* (2010) combine traditional Indigenous stories and performance styles with contemporary dance. He is currently an Australia Council Dance Board Fellow, working on numerous projects, including *Mokoi*, funded by the Dance Board.

For biographies of the other artists, visit
intimatespectacle.com.au/production/long-grass

Thank You

Vicki Van Hout would like to thank the many people who have contributed generously to making this work possible. They include early development collaborators Henrietta Baird, Raghav Handa, Imogen Cranna, Marissa Yeo, Travis de Vries, Eric Avery, Carl Tolentino, Jasmyne Jade Mehrton Johnson and Richard Manner. In Darwin, the community workers, artists and long grassers who talked with and welcomed her, especially Louise Weber and others at Larrakia Nation, and Helen Fejo-Frith from Bagot Community. The crew at Performance Space and Intimate Spectacle – Jeff, Ali, Bec, Steph and Harley; Adam McGowan, Fiona Winning and all at Sydney Festival; Angharad Wynne-Jones and all the Arts House team; Clare Britton and everyone who helped craft the set – Nicole Barakat, Keren Ruki, Cybele De Lemos, Dante, Frances and Xavier Dagostino, Chalali Holness-Kernick, Tom Kelly, Natalie Ayton, Katina Olsen, Emilie Rutherford, Karen Kerkovan, Lisa Maris McDonald, Clytie Smith, Gary Lang, Henrietta Baird, Raghav Handa, Imogen Cranna, Peta Strachan and Dave Ferguson; Garry Lester for wise words and observations; and Steve Howarth at Erth, for a keen eye and sound construction advice.

Arts House

Arts House presents contemporary arts in programs encompassing performance, festivals, live art, residencies and other activities that nurture, support and stimulate cultural engagement. We value work in which artists at different stages of their careers, as well as our diverse audiences and communities, are actively involved in creating an imaginative, just and environmentally sustainable global society.

Arts House's programs include two curated public seasons of multidisciplinary work each year. Approximately half of this work is selected through an Expression of Interest process. We seek artists who are responding to the urgent issues of our time in imaginative and surprising ways, taking artistic risks and offering multiple ways for audiences to engage with or co-author their work.

For more information, please contact us on the details below.

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ARTS HOUSE 

Presented by Arts House, Performance Space and Intimate Spectacle,
as part of Dance Massive 2015

Vicki Van Hout Long Grass

Arts House, Meat Market

Tue 10 – Sat 14 March 2015

1hr, no interval

This project has been supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body; the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW; Critical Path; the University of Sydney's Department of Performance Studies; and the City of Melbourne through Arts House.

artshouse.com.au
performancespace.com.au
intimatespectacle.com.au

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ARTS HOUSE       

Creative Team

Director & Choreographer **Vicki Van Hout**
Choreographic Collaborator, Cultural Consultant & Voice/Sound **Gary Lang**
Sound Designer **Phil Downing**
Lighting Designer **Clytie Smith**
Dancers: **Darren Edwards, Thomas E S Kelly, Katina Olsen, Caleena Sansbury, Taree Sansbury**
Co-Producers **Harley Stumm** (Intimate Spectacle) & **Steph Walker** (Performance Space); **Tanja Farman** for Dance Massive season (Performance Space)
Creative Consultant **Ben Graetz**
Production Manager **Richard Whitehouse**, with **Emma Bedford**
Stage Manager **Natalie Ayton**
Song, ‘Long Grass Man’ **Solomon Ngangula**

Image **Lucy Parakhina**

Long Grass premiered at the Everest Theatre, Seymour Centre, Sydney Festival, January 14–18, 2015.

Long Grass is produced by Performance Space and Intimate Spectacle. Developments in Darwin were hosted by the Darwin Entertainment Centre.

Performance Space

Performance Space is a cultural agency that facilitates new artistic projects and connects them with audiences across many different sites and venues; from theatres and galleries to non-traditional spaces and site-specific projects. We believe that every space is a performance space.

Intimate Spectacle

Intimate Spectacle is an arts producing company, working with artists across contemporary performance, theatre, dance and live art, to make and tour new works, inviting audiences into new kinds of experiences.

Director’s Notes

This is not my story, but it is a paradoxical situation that I felt needed to be told. I sat on it for about five years until I summoned the gumption to just do it.

I approached a local Larrakia man and fellow NAISDA Dance College graduate, Gary Lang, to come on board. He acts as a cultural consultant and creative collaborator, generously sharing his experience and local knowledge, without which we wouldn’t have been able to move forward.

The underpinning dance language has been developed from extensive training in dances from the Northern Territory, over a period of 25 years.

‘Long Grass’ is a complex situation, full of contradictions, comprised of people with one of the wealthiest cultural traditions, yet poorest living conditions. Exacerbated by the ongoing government intervention, they are all but invisible in a city whose population is swollen with tourists.

In the time I have travelled back and forth to Darwin, I have witnessed a people with a strong sense of community, and a generosity of spirit.

Long Grass doesn’t aim to judge, but does aim to share a bit of the cultural magic which can be found in the unlikeliest of places.

Vicki Van Hout

A Memoir: Knock ’em Down

by Djon Mundine OAM

When I was a little boy on the north coast of New South Wales my brothers and sisters would crawl into the long grass to bend, arrange and ‘weave’ the stalks to make fragile cubby houses there to play in. Other native creatures also did this, and hid there all the time of course. Often there were more than a few deadly snakes but, blind to the danger, we never seemed to encounter them. In the Darwin tropical north bandicoots and native rats build their nests in the grass and live off the stalks, seeds and thriving resident insect-life. Snakes of all kinds in large numbers come to pick them in turn.

In the country town where my family lived in post World War II rural Australia, there were homeless Aboriginal people, a resident population, who lived in vacant unkempt grassed blocks (they never seemed to be able or want to ‘squat’ in the numerous derelict houses). They seemed to drink and party a lot – the ‘goomies’, as they were called. Their presence reminded us of a lifestyle we were possibly one step away from.

Colonial Australia, it seems, has always had a ‘pest’ problem. There has always been the ‘Aboriginal problem’ – authorities used to ‘disperse’ Aboriginals once upon a time. As I’m writing this, a ‘rabbit cull’ is taking place in the dark outside my ranger’s cottage. I can hear the short quiet ‘snap’ of what sounds like 0.22 ‘silencer’ bullets all around me. Darwin has always had a multicultural homeless population – Xavier Herbert’s novel *Capricornia* begins there, but authorities have periodically attempted to eradicate what they saw as freeloading pests – physically shipping people on boats back to what is now Maningrida just after World War II, and kicking out the hippies on their way to London in the 1970s, and Aboriginal people through laws to

do with public drinking in the 1980s. There was a touch of jealousy for this loose life free from the nine-to-five workload, so different yet right in your face. What would happen if everyone lived like this?

I came to work in Milingimbi in 1979 and spent scattered time in Darwin as a transit place when passing through to southern cities. In the 1980s when I began to collect autobiographies from local artists at Milingimbi and Ramingining, early in the tales would be episodes of Darwin sojourns. An historian told me that within two years of Darwin being established Aboriginal people came to live there on the fringe. Most of the senior men had, in their teens, walked the 500km westward, cross-country to Darwin looking for ‘the action’, for adventure. Darwin was a freer place then. They sometimes lived in prescribed areas like Bagot Reserve but as often camped with relatives on beaches and in the many convenient ‘long grass’ spaces in the centre of the city. Particular community groups had their own site-specific ‘grass’ sites: Parap, near the Oval, Rapid Creek, Fanny Bay, East Point, and with the hippies on the Esplanade or Casuarina Beaches.

Most expatriate workers I knew experienced their own, often darker, Darwin story: someone they became close to, who went to Darwin to live in the ‘long grass’ only to be lost and die there. A friend pointed out how walking into the sunset metaphorically was walking toward death. In the Arnhem Land society of arranged marriages and another consciousness, there are countless runaway brides and refugees from family disputes, convenient victims of accusations of sorcery. Many people come to the ‘long grass’ accidentally – they may have come to Darwin to go to hospital, to attend an education course or a political or church

meeting and ‘fell in with friends’. People also talked of ‘having a holiday’ after a big win at cards, or the final payout of a work contract.

It is timely to examine these lives; in other societies they appear romantically and seriously in literature, film and folklore. Outside of Herbert’s *Capricornia* in 1939 and Stephen Johnson’s 2000 feature film *Yolngu Boy*, it’s a subject rarely explored. The experience of Vicki Van Hout’s *Long Grass* reminded me of surreal scenes in Fellini’s 1969 film, *Satyricon*, but less high camp, and also the beauty of the players and positive energy of the music and dance portrayed in Marcel Camus’s 1959 *Black Orpheus*, another tale of refugees on the fringe.

I was told recently that all art could be described as form, content and context. *Long Grass* is an immersive, captivating work in form and style that charms, seduces and positively takes you into its arms. Its context, and some of its content, is the existential question posed by Camus and facing many Aboriginal youth today: to commit suicide or not commit suicide; after that everything is simple and structured.

There are many reasons for being depressed and committing suicide and many ways to do it: drinking yourself to death is a common one. I remember a particular man.

A totem is temporal – it exists in a physical site, in time and a season. There was a man from a small, almost extinct clan group. We were close friends and at one stage talked about sharing a house due to the housing shortage. He belonged to a ‘line of clouds’ totem group that included anchovies and stingrays. His name meant a species of stingray. He was also a painter of small,

fine pointed subject matter. I remember a year of ‘king’ tides when schools of small fish would come into the shallows and skip across the water. The tides spilled onto the land such that you could scoop the fish out of the gutters at the side of the coastal road. ‘Stingray’ had just finished a contract and before he holidayed in Darwin he took a painting with him to make extra money. We joked about the ‘mokuy’ dead spirit in his painting and how it was a self-fulfilling prophecy in the long grass lifestyle. Within several weeks he’d died there.

All through the wet season and just into the dry everything magically grows, seemingly overnight. The ‘long grass’ can be two or three metres high. I remember driving through walls for more than an hour with nothing in sight other than this straw curtain in front of me. In April comes the violent powerful ‘knock-’em’ storms that flatten the grass and clear the line of sight. Watching *Long Grass* I thought of Vicki Van Hout as an amazing ball of energy like these storms that come out of nowhere to energize, create and be gone again before you can blink.

Djon Mundine OAM, of the Bandjalung people of New South Wales, is an artist, writer, educator and independent curator. This essay was commissioned by RealTime and originally published in RealTime #125, Feb–March 2015.