

# Imagination, Creativity and Learning:

## ‘Birrarung Ngargee’ and Northland Secondary College

by Michael Winkler

**A**winter’s night. Blazing hand-held torches throw light onto smooth boulders, creating shadows that reach toward the nearby river. Percussive music pushes into the cold air. Voices wind around the rhythms. Dancers appear, sinuous movements linking back in time to the earliest art forms. Puppets parade, their upright bearing echoing the dark skyscrapers that seem to lean closer, eager to look. A story is told. A very old story, in a very new way.

Skilful educators can convert almost any subject matter into valid curriculum. Shelley Scown, coordinator of Performing Arts at Northland Secondary College in Melbourne, says, “I can turn anything into performing arts.” She, and those who work with her, can also perform educational alchemy, turning diverse elements into the gold of learning.

In 2008, students from Northland – a government secondary school with a high Indigenous enrolment – performed the puppet piece ‘Birrarung Ngargee’ (River Gathering) at Birrarung Marr, the important park that nestles beside Melbourne’s CBD. It was a major success, and the students

were then asked to stage the piece at Bunjilaka in Melbourne Museum, twice a day for 16 days through the September school holidays. At this point Ms Scown suspects it could have become an ongoing performance at various venues, nationally and even internationally – but that is where it stopped. Its educational value had come to an end, and the school’s priority is (and must be) learning.

“Art is extraordinary as a tool,” Ms Scown says. “A huge amount of Indigenous students do Art. It is an abstraction - ‘these might be my feelings, but I can present them as an abstraction, which means I can put them out there, not right up close’.

“Performing Arts is amazing also. It includes social relationships, working in teams, engagement. Even if kids don’t think of themselves as performers there is a lot they can contribute to the process. It is not about making actors. It is about making resilient young people with self-discipline and focus, who know what they can achieve so they are not put off by something being difficult, or hard work, or something they have never seen anyone in their family do before.

“The things I assess on in VELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards, the basis for curriculum and assessment in Victorian schools) are building social relationships and working in teams. For me, in the subject area of Performing Arts there is a huge focus on health, on safety.”

Another emphasis, not assessable but integral and invaluable, is the connection to community. Northland Secondary College has students from a wide variety of backgrounds, many attracted by the excellent VET programs, but a central part of its identity comes from being a predominantly Koorie school. Ms Scown explains that it is, "an Indigenous cultural school, but open to everyone. What we take predominantly from the Indigenous stuff at our school is working with each other, who you are and where you're from, and where you're going. If you don't understand people you will be fearful of them, and if you're fearful you will respond in an aggressive way.

"I believe in always trying to get our students out into the community – but we always try to have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students representing our school. Performing Arts is an ideal vehicle for that connection with the community."

'Birrarung Ngargee' is an exemplar of how this can work in practice. There were many elements that went towards making this project a success, but Ms Scown places sufficient lead time and funding near the top of the list. Another element, as with all successes, was the presence of the right people at the right time.

Enter Jacob Boehme. He is a Melbourne-born artist of Narangga (Yorke Peninsula, SA) and Kurna (Adelaide, SA) heritage, a trained dancer and choreographer who has performed and taught both traditional and contemporary Indigenous dances in numerous parts of Australia and on Torres Strait islands. He is also a puppeteer with a Masters in Puppetry from the Victorian College of the Arts.

Mr Boehme contacted the school about devising a project to tell Indigenous stories through puppets. He had applied successfully for funding. Even more crucially, he provided enough time for Ms Scown and her colleagues to start weaving the project into their curriculum.

It was decided that the project would belong to the Year 10 cohort. There were obvious tie-ins for Performing Arts and Art, but it was also woven into SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment, where the students collected stories of families connected to the school) and English, where students wrote autobiographical pieces.

Two Elders visited the school. They were Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Joy Murphy, and Boonwurrung Elder Aunty Carolyn Briggs. Aunty Joy told the story of how Port Phillip became a bay, not a grassy plain. Aunty Caroline told the story of the Yarra River (Birrarung). From these dreamtime creation stories the students teased out three characters based on ideas of internal demons. Drawings became paper maquettes, and finally evolved into three Bunraku-style puppets. (Bunraku is a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre.) Shadow puppets were also created.

Input came from a variety of experts. Dancers worked with senior students (Certificate IV Dance) and some junior



Performing the River Gathering puppet piece

students to teach Indigenous-based moves. Musicians held percussion and vocal workshops to devise music which could be performed live to support the action. The event manager, Margie McKay, is also expert in pyrotechnics. She taught Certificate II Live Theatre and Production students how to devise lit fire lighting, including making torches from hessian and chicken-wire.

Senior English students worked on the scripting and provided some ideas for the puppets' demonic characteristics. There was involvement from a wide cross-section of the school. The actual show featured a dozen Year 10 students plus the senior (Certificate IV) dancers. While many of the performers were Indigenous, there were also students of Maltese, Vietnamese, English and New Guinean background.

The first (and, it seemed, only) performance was for the opening of a major festival in June 2008. However, an invitation was extended from Melbourne Museum to perform a modified version of the piece throughout the September school holidays. Two of the Indigenous students were asked to run puppet workshops for younger children at Artplay. Other invitations started to roll in.

"We were asked to do so many things, it moved outside curriculum and then I couldn't justify them leaving class for it," Ms Scown says. "The previous term it was part of the learning process. The kids were excited by the possibilities – they wanted to buy a bus and put the name of the troupe on the side and travel everywhere performing. I could have resigned and become executive producer for this thing. But we are a school, not a performance company, so it was time to call a halt."

Giving the project a defined end has allowed Ms Scown and her colleagues to reflect on what was gained. "The first



**“Two of the indigenous students were asked to run puppet workshops for younger children at Artplay. Other invitations started to roll in.”**



thing I noticed, for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike, is that they took on the reverence, and the responsibility of holding these stories, and knew that it was something incredibly precious.

“The second thing is that there are kids doing Drama at VCE level this year who would not be doing it if they had not been involved with the show.

“The third thing is that the cohort that did it discovered a higher level of self-discipline. The commitment and focus and discipline involved in putting on these performances meant they had to really step up. They learned that they were part of a team and if you messed up, you let down the team.

“Jacob’s expectations were very high and it was a profound example of what happens when you insist on a very high standard. One girl missed a major dress rehearsal for no important reason and he said, ‘No, you’re not welcome, you can’t have that role any more’. I was right behind him. There is too much emotional investment in it. For it to work you have to feel safe and in a state of trust with each other.”

‘Birrarrung Ngargee’ was a vivid example of quality input producing a quality result. However it was also a fine example of harnessing creativity not just for creative purposes, but also for enhanced learning.

Ms Scown and her colleagues are eschewing the temptation to rest on their laurels or to retrace the same path. Their next project involves working with the Aboriginal Legal Service and Consumer Affairs Victoria. They are making short films which can be used for training, and curriculum links have been made with Media Studies as well as Art and Performing Arts subjects.

“Our kids have come up with stories around graffiti and trespass, fare evasion and hoon laws which are some of the most common things that bring them into contact with the police most often. We are doing work around rights and responsibilities, role playing, having conversations about times that they have put themselves at risk. The students are also learning what their legal rights are. Sometimes we get them to re-enact things that have happened to them or things that they have done, and then perform a different way of managing it. We are also reading through some scripts that Indigenous theatre company Ilbjerri have devised, and will be performing for us. There is a lot going on.”

*Michael Winkler is Dare to Lead’s communications officer.*

More information: [www.daretolead.edu.au](http://www.daretolead.edu.au)