

## **Weaving and Whispers: Miwi Wisdom - The Story of the Play**

When Djon Mundine, co-curator of the TarraWarra Biennial, invited me to write a 2,000 word catalogue essay the 'Whisper in my Mask' catalogue, we talked at length about the 'politics of knowledge' in Aboriginal society: How does one know when one is in the presence of the sacred? How is knowledge of the sacred communicated? To whom and under what conditions?

Djon hoped I could address matters arising from my work with Ngarrindjeri women that had focused on the so-called Hindmarsh Island affair in the 1990s in South Australia and has continued with various projects around collaborative writing endeavours, Native Title, and matters environmental. I was just putting the final touches on the new edition of *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A world that is, was, and will be* (Spinifex 2014) and was reluctant to write yet another piece of prose on the complex of misreadings, misstatements and mischief that gave rise to the proposition that Ngarrindjeri women had fabricated their religious beliefs in order to thwart the building of a bridge from Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island. Perhaps another literary form might engage the reader, might give voice to the women who had been silenced with the label 'liar'? Why not write a play?

Ngarrindjeri are renowned for their weaving: baskets, mats, scoops, and eel traps made from fresh water rushes harvested with care and respect on their *ruwi*, their country, that extends from Cape Jervis, across Encounter Bay, along the Coorong to The Granites in the southeast, takes in Lakes Alexandrina and Albert and the lower reaches of the River Murray, South Australia. I imagined Ngarrindjeri women weavers with whom I have sat for hours on end, late into the night, sharing their stories with an audience. It was those many conversations with Ngarrindjeri, too many of whom have passed away, that inspired the play.

'Weaving and Whispers' is 'work-in-progress' and bears the stamp of many hands. I shared the first draft with Ngarrindjeri at Camp Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA), and colleagues. The responses were enthusiastic. Djon Mundine immediately saw the potential for a performance. Could we perform it? Could we record it? Who would we cast? My first impulse was that Ngarrindjeri would play themselves; that they would tell their stories and weave. After all, this was their preferred way of teaching and learning.

In late June, I met with Victoria Lynn, Director of the TarraWarra Museum of Art and her staff whose support for a performance was thoughtful and generous. The venue was stunning. Maybe we could do the play outside? Overlooking the valley? Realistically I knew that Melbourne weather was too changeable, so we began planning a performance inside the Museum, in one of the display spaces.

After that initial meeting, I drove from Healesville onto Camp Coorong (SA) where the core of the weavers I hoped to cast in the play worked. The play almost cast itself and the women began to inhabit the characters, to mould the text, to share more stories. We rehearsed. I returned to Canberra and we continued rehearsals by

phone. I spent another week at Camp Coorong. There were cast changes as family responsibilities intervened and it was not until a couple of days before the performances, that I knew I had a complete cast. But still we had not all been able to rehearse together. That would have to wait till the night before the première

In the meantime, a chance meeting with the co-directors of Change Media, Jennifer Lyons-Reid and Carl Kuddell who were at Camp Coorong working on their film 'We are Ngarrindjeri' opened up further exciting possibilities for production, documentation and mentoring. Their digital media strategies and collaborative approach melded with my hopes for the 'Weaving and Whispers'. Thus began an intense, productive partnership of crafting words and images.

The creative input of Change Media has been invaluable from the practicalities of making props, through conceptualisation, shooting and editing of moving images as visuals for projection onto multiple surfaces within the TarraWarra Museum space set aside for the performances, to documentation of the performances and Q&A.

The Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority recognised the potential of the play as an educational resource and the Ngarrindjeri media team joined our project.

To bring 'Weaving and Whispers' to TarraWarra, we needed to raise funds to cover travel costs. So, we (Diane Bell, Canberra, ACT and Ellen Trevorrow, Camp Coorong, SA) launched our fund-raising campaign to support the pro-bono work by all involved in the play. In seeking contributions I wrote: 'I'm thinking of this fund-raising as a 21<sup>st</sup> century 'Lamington Drive'. I had thought we were done with cake stalls but we live in bleak times: funds for women's programs, Indigenous projects, legal aid, and the environment are being slashed. In this climate, a play about weaving women is too contentious to fund through conventional channels. So we are coming to you directly. If you insist, I will bake lamingtons though my fruit cakes are better.' I had several request for baked goods.

The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW) supported the 'Ngarrindjeri Women Weavers Project' as a preferred donor fund and thus we could offer tax-deductible status. I gifted a signed copy of my new book to all donations of \$100 or more and within a month we had sufficient to cover the costs of bus, accommodation and food for the cast and team. I am forever grateful to my friends, colleagues and families for their generous contributions.

The play ends on the note of unfinished business of healing and reconciliation in Ngarrindjeri lands and the same is true of the play.

Diane Bell, August 2014

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