

Dance Rites 2019

They said it couldn't be done, they said it was not feasible, but they obviously didn't know about Maruku! We were given the task of taking 30 Anangu from two communities in the central desert (Docker River and Mutitjulu) to dance at the Sydney Opera House in November 2019. Maruku staff had been travelling out to Docker River fortnightly to practice inma in the sandy karu - (riverbed). As the women sat in the sand singing, the dancers sprung to life. Dancing amongst itara (river red gums) the Tjukurpa was coming alive.

Performers from Docker River and Mutitjulu, along with around seventy others from the region had proudly danced at the ceremony to mark the closing of the climb at Uluru on 27 October. This was a great chance to showcase the Tjukurpa and celebrate. After the celebrations, we continued weekly practices in both communities, the oldies singing until their voices broke and the dancers moving until they dropped.

As the date of the trip to Sydney approached the excitement and nerves grew. Everyone was worried about the long trip, that is everyone but Martha Proddy. This strong-willed elder, in her eighties, was not going to let us leave without her and she indeed turned out to be, not just a barrel of laughs, but one of our power house singers.

We travelled over three thousand kilometres to touch down in Sydney in the midst of a storm. Many of the singers and dancers aboard the plane had not travelled by air before and gave a BIG sigh of relief once we landed. But this was the easy part. We then needed to get these performers to Cockatoo Island in the middle of Sydney Harbour. We managed to get everyone in a car and to the last ferry just in time (Maruku's signature move), with a short stop at McDonalds first. As we boarded the boat, we were welcomed by the ferry skipper who recognised the Pitjantjatjara language immediately and hung out of his window to personally welcome everyone aboard and then farewell us at the island. The magic of the desert is everywhere. On arrival at Cockatoo Island the old people were shown the utmost respect from the young members of other dance groups. Handshakes, waves and friendly smiles. Everyone was allocated a tent and the weary travellers fell asleep to the beautiful song of the local sea birds.

The next morning was go time. There was hardly a second to take in our beautiful surroundings. After several hours of practice on the island we made our way to the Opera House to get ready to perform. Again, we were welcomed warmly and were given front row seats for the performances. This was a competitive dance event and as other mobs from around Australia danced vibrantly and showed off their culture, Anangu sat and observed, enjoying every moment. Even a few showers of cold rain didn't worry them. When it was time for both teams to perform in the first-round heats, they moved flawlessly and proudly through the sand circle. A tear welled up in my eyes from the beauty. Day one of Dance Rites ended with a performance from Oka. They were a little shocked when our dancers pushed their way on stage to bust a move. We then all headed back to our humble island for another night with the screaming seagulls.

After a manic trip for shopping on Sunday morning, we prepared to perform in the second round and both teams eased their way into the finals of Dance Rites 2019. Docker River

ladies danced Minyma Kutjara (two women) and the steps of the opera house erupted with applause. The old people sang again for the Mutitjulu team as Verna Wilson danced Minyma Mamu alone. She captivated hundreds of people as she moved across the sand. After which the rest of the Mutitjulu girls danced Kalingkalingpa (the honey grevillea dance). Despite the brilliance of the performances, backed by the authenticity of the Tjukurpa, we were up against some strong performances from other parts of Australia and neither team was successful in winning an award.

We may not have won the \$20,000 grand prize but everyone was proud to have been able to dance their tjukurpa, share their culture and please their ancestors on the steps of the Sydney Opera House. As we were leaving the Opera House on the final day of Dance Rites, I could hear the younger girls humming the inma songs. When I spoke to these women about the trip and what they would like to do next time, I was met with a short but sharp “next time, no old people and more time for shopping”. To which I responded “Well, someone needs to sing the songs”. “We know them, we can sing” another quick response from the girls. We’ll see.

Dance Rites had a focus on the passing on of knowledge and tradition, and in my view the Maruku teams succeeded. But we need keep it up. Maruku will be working closely with the old and young people of the central desert communities to continue to create opportunities and incentives for dance and inma. Our focus is and has always been preservation of culture through art, storytelling and dance and Dance Rites gave us another forum to showcase the success of this commitment.

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