

THEATRE YouTube stars the Chooky Dancers are exploring their lives with help from Shakespeare and *Singin' in the Rain*, writes **Liza Power**.

Stepping stones

NIGEL Jamieson is perched on a plastic chair in the Malthouse Theatre's rehearsal room surveying a graveyard of felled umbrellas. Within minutes, another ragged corpse is hung to the pile.

His slender, long-limbed charges pace the floor furvively, a replacement umbrella appears from the sidelines, and the opening notes of *Singin' in the Rain* spill from a stereo by the window. A dance begins, broilies bloom in unison, Jamieson's grimace softens to a smirk. "The thing is," he shouts over the music, "where these guys come from, no one would bother using an umbrella. During monsoon, there'd be no point, in two minutes you're soaked to the bone."

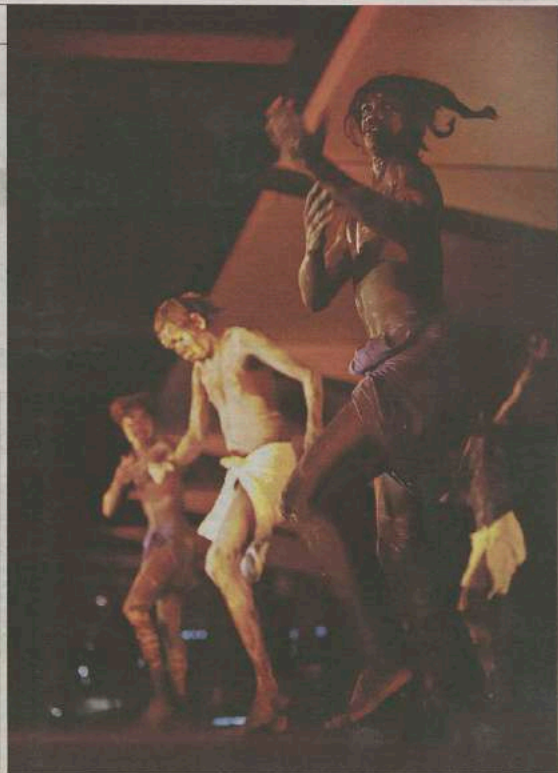
Jamieson's "guys" are Elcho Island's Chooky Dancers, the charismatic young men who shot to fame in 2007 after their cheeky homage to *Zorba the Greek* landed on YouTube and won them fans around the globe. They were inundated with performance invitations — from the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, *Australia's Got Talent*, Greece and the US. So impressed was director Jamieson, whose son played him the online clip, that he booked them to open last year's Sydney Festival. Watching them enthrall a crowd of 40,000 Sydneysiders, Jamieson was hooked: "he wanted to work with them."

At the time, the Chookies manager was Frank Djirimbilpilway, father of the troupe's lead dancer, Lionel. The *Zorba* routine had been devised by Lionel to cheer up his sister; she was unwell and being tended by a Dutch nurse, so the

dance was also a way of expressing thanks. Filmed by Lionel's mother, Margaret, and posted on the internet "for a bit of fun" by Frank, the attention the group garnered took the Chookies by surprise. Indeed, when they performed in the foyer of Darwin's Supreme Court in 2007, six of the nine dancers, who speak English as their third or fourth language, had never left Arnhem Land.

Regardless of his formidable reputation, Jamieson, perhaps best known to Melbourne audiences for *Honour Bound*, his award-winning meditation on the plight of Guantanamo Bay prisoner David Hicks, had a hard time winning the men over. Over the years, plenty of Balanda (white people) have ventured up to Elcho, off the coast of Arnhem Land and also the home of revered musician Geoffrey Gurrumul Yarrimingu, with bright ideas. They invariably ended in disaster, in turn nurturing a deep distrust on Elcho towards, well, white men with big ideas.

Jamieson needed to prove he was worth his salt: he hooked his first flight to Elcho, began reading Richard Tiddgen's seminal Yolngu text, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, and took his first tentative steps into the world of Yolngu thinking. When Jamieson landed in Galwanku, Elcho's only "town", in March last year, he found a 55-kilometre stretch of land called home by a population of 2000, many of whom still hunt traditional tucker (mud crabs, turtles and dugongs). He also found the Chookies sleeping in near-derelict housing, 10 or 12 to a room, on makeshift building and



The Chooky Dancers performing *Wrang Skin* in Adelaide (above and right) and in rehearsal in Melbourne (below and left) in front of Nigel Jamieson and Josh Bond (standing). **PHOTOS: GUY MULLIGAN**

foam mattresses. He describes the experience as "breathakingly intense, in every way you can imagine".

With Frank Djirimbilpilway as his mentor and guide, Jamieson set about getting his head around the basic tenets of Yolngu life. "Their world is divided into two halves: Dhuwa and Yirritja. A Yirritja boy can't marry a Yirritja girl, and marriage is very strictly laid down. This division extends beyond people; it relates to everything. It's the wind — the east wind is Yirritja and the

west wind of Dhuwa. This river is a Yirritja time of day, and so on. Even songs must be performed in two parts. It's a geometry of simply being."

Curious as to how these ancient beliefs meshed with modern life, he headed to Elcho's colourful Saturday night disco, where the *Zorba* routine drew its first audience. "Half of Elcho's population, that's 1000 kids, are under 21, and the average life expectancy on Elcho is 30. On Saturday night, all these kids come



together and dance, to Beyonce. Shakira, anything you can think of." As he watched, it occurred to Jamieson that amid the flirtation and movement, the disco had profound cultural implications. If teenagers weren't breaking tradition by dancing with a partner of the same moiety (or kinship group), they were certainly stretching it to its limits.

Either way, he had a tantalising starting point for their collaboration. What sprang to mind was *Romeo and Juliet*, the storyline of which offered a loose framework for the Chookies to explore their daily reality. Playing "characters" also provided them with the creative distance they needed to contemplate their own quandaries — but at one step removed. "It tapped into issues they confront every day: wanting the freedom to express their sexuality, choosing to dance with whom ever you please, but also needing to respect tradition. In Yolngu culture, if you follow your passions and your body rather than law, you are nothing. You break the pattern of your relationship with nature. It's the sharp edge of what Yolngu culture says and popular culture promotes."

Soon after Jamieson's visit, however, the project was dealt a serious setback when Frank died suddenly and the Chookies, cancelling all touring commitments, went into an extended period of mourning. Jamieson flew to Elcho for the funeral. "It was a 10-day river of human beings coming and dancing the songlines of all his ancestors and his spirit back across the land."

At the time, he feared the project would be abandoned. But before long, Elcho-raised director Josh Bond assumed Frank's role and development slowly resumed. Last November, rehearsals began in Melbourne. They continued later that month back on Elcho and resumed last month at Arthur Boyd's picturesque Bundanon estate in NSW. In between, Jamieson hunted for his Juliet, who, following tradition, needed to be a Dhuwa girl from outside Elcho. In Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land, he found Barriway Hick, the 18-year-old niece of Barngarla performer Djakapurra Munyarrun.

During the brief, intensive rehearsal periods, Jamieson and Bond also worked on finding ways for Jamieson to communicate with

the dancers, whose limited English meant Bond spent much of his time translating directions into Yolngu. Fortunately, the physicality of the performance lent itself to other forms of dialogue, and Bond, whose background is in circus performance, says a physical language of gestures soon evolved, as did a foundation of respect.

Still, it wasn't until last month, when the production, titled *Ngurrumlinarrmiriyu (Wrang Skin)*, entered into its final rehearsal stages, that Jamieson dared to believe the show would be ready for its premiere at the Adelaide Festival. "We really turned a corner at Bundanon. It's getting three good meals a day, lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, they've got comfy beds to sleep in and they're in a beautiful, peaceful environment. There were so many daily challenges on Elcho; this feels like we're finally giving them a level playing field."

Based around a series of dances, *Ngurrumlinarrmiriyu* draws its influences from as far afield as Bollywood, Yolngu dance and Matsuy (song cycles), Michael Jackson, *Westside Story* — and *Singin' in the Rain*. Bond, who lives between Elcho and Tasmania, has worked variously as a translator, co-director, manager and cultural guide on the project, which was also developed with the advice of the Elcho community and elders. Bond says that while the Chookies were approached by numerous directors after the YouTube hit, the imperative to find "someone who came from the right place" never wavered. "What the dancers do is so special and unique that we didn't want to compromise and have to fit in with someone else's agenda. Nigel has been really amazing in the way he's facilitated the guys in telling their stories, which is what they wanted to do."

Beyond a song and a dance, however, Bond says the performance's message is simple and precise. "It's about mob getting out of community and doing their thing, and while the show is representative of the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives, it's also about spreading a message of healthy living, having a healthy mind and a healthy culture, too."

Ngurrumlinarrmiriyu (Wrang Skin) is at the Malthouse Theatre, March 15-25. malthousetheatre.com.au

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