

Indigenous Spirits



A Minneapolis troupe and an Australian singing ensemble mix it up to convey their kindred cultures

WARREN HOOPER

Foreground, from left, Stephen Goldsmith, Jayne Hewitson, Jason Crowhurst, Annika Hooper and Emma Taylor, with Australia's Tutti Ensemble.

BY JAIME KLEIMAN

IN MANY WAYS, *NORTHERN LIGHTS/SOUTHERN CROSS: Tales from the Other Side of the World* is a far greater undertaking than simply a musical play about brain trauma and indigenous cultures. An international and cross-cultural collaboration between two arts groups devoted to artists with disabilities—Interact Center for the Visual and Performing Arts, a 17-year-old professional theatre company based in Minneapolis, and Tutti Ensemble, a well-regarded choir in Adelaide, Australia—*Northern Lights/Southern Cross* epitomizes what director Jeanne Calvit calls an embrace of “radical inclusion,” a philosophy that can be traced back to theologians and has been adopted by the performing arts community.

Radical inclusion, explains Calvit, Interact’s artistic and executive director, is about “embracing a lot of different aspects of humanity. I heard that term at a TCG National Conference and took it to describe what we’re doing. We work with marginalized populations, but we also work with professional actors, mixing it all up.” Radical inclusion encompasses the idea that a play can include every genre, any art form, different languages and, yes, artists with disabilities. “It makes for a difficult way to do theatre,” Calvit admits. “Half the people who are actors can’t read from the script—you just have to figure out a way to teach it to them.”

The Tutti choir embraces this concept as well, which in turn impressed Ben McGovern, associate director of studio programming of the Guthrie Theater of Minneapolis’s Dowling Studio, where this ambitious music-theatre work premieres in October.

“*Northern Lights/Southern Cross* encompasses so many things that were really in line with what we wanted to do in the Guthrie’s studio space,” says McGovern. “Because both of these arts groups work with people with disabilities, they naturally have a different perspective about what it means to make theatre. What comes out of that is a great passion and a great personal truth.”

Like Interact, the Tutti Ensemble includes artists with autism, Down Syndrome, mental illness, brain injuries, multiple sclerosis and physical disabilities. Yet Tutti founder Pat Rix, like Calvit, didn’t originally intend to focus on working with marginalized groups. “In my previous life,” says Rix, “I was a composer and playwright working in the theatre. In 1997, a friend asked me if I would start a singing group at a residential center for people with [learning] disabilities. I initially said no.” But her friend kept pressuring her until she took on the project. That none of her choir members could read music—and some couldn’t even read words—gave Rix a “lovely freedom” to create her own work, a theme Calvit echoes when describing Interact’s creation process. So it was only natural that Rix and Calvit, though half a world apart, would form a kinship and want to work with one another. Their first show together, in 2005, was *Between the Worlds*, a play with upbeat music about discrimination told through allegory.

The idea for *Northern Lights/Southern Cross* resulted from a brainstorming session in Bundaleer Forest near the Australian outback. “We were pointing at the sky at the Southern Cross constellation and talking about the way people view their

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From left, Yeon Ju, Mother Mary Thomas, Malcolm Warner, Kevin Kling, Richard Millwood and Sherry Lorentz in *Northern Lights/Southern Cross*.

lives and the kind of knowledge that indigenous people have,” recalls Rix, whose score for *Northern Lights/Southern Cross* includes Western instruments such as cello, oboe, guitar and banjo, combined with a percussion section, marimba, a tin whistle and the Native American birch bark whistle.

“We found commonalities between people in Minnesota who came over from Scandinavia and weren’t prepared for the ferocity of winter,” continues Rix, “and the people who came to Australia from England who perished from the lack of water and from the heat. The hardship of living in this coun-

try was unimaginable, yet indigenous people have survived here happily for 3,000 years. They have an understanding of the land.”

Intrigued by the parallels between their respective native and colonial cultures, Calvit and Rix decided to explore the roles of indigenous peoples who have been alienated from their own land, the “terrible questions of trauma and genocide and disempowerment, and how that could be addressed through art,” says Rix. They needed a playwright, however, and noted Minnesotan storyteller Kevin Kling, whose own experience with trauma left him with a paralyzed arm and brain injury, seemed a perfect fit.

With Kling signed on as a playwright, the project received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation, Travelers/COMPAS Arts and Diversity Fund, Multi-Arts Production Fund and the Minnesota State Arts Board Cultural Community Partnerships Program. A one-and-a-half year cultural exploration of Native American and Aboriginal mythologies and cultures followed, with Kling and Rix going back and forth between continents to prepare the piece’s 2007 Australian premiere,

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which won the Advertiser Critics OscArt (a major regional prize) for best new music-theatre of that year.

In the play, Kling appears as a fictionalized version of himself named Oki, who is haunted by “heyokes” during a sleep-coma following a motorbike accident. Borrowed from the Native American Lakota tradition, a heyoke functions as an instigator—a jester and a satirist who upends expectations with such antics as wearing clothes inside-out or speaking in a backwards language. Heyokes, says Calvit, are “sacred clowns, contraries. They can be very irritating, but they’re there to teach you about your humanity.”

Five years in the making, *Northern Lights/Southern Cross* boasts a cast of almost 70 performers. In addition to Interact’s performance company and Kling, the ensemble consists of performers from both U.S. and Australian indigenous cultures: Larry Yazzie, an award-winning fancy dancer of the Meskwaki/Dine tribes; Alvin Baker, a Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe ceremonial leader, drummer and pipe carrier; and Aboriginal artist Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith, a nationally renowned didgeridoo player, dancer and storyteller. In



Larry Yazzie

COURTESY OF LARRY YAZZIE

the Adelaide production, Tutti members sang Rix’s choral score. Because flying dozens of Tutti’s singers to America proved too challenging, the U.S. version of *Northern Lights/Southern Cross* has been dramatically rewritten for Interact’s singers, who will be joined by members of the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir.

For his part, Kling thinks of the play in epic, mythical terms, a thought process that he believes helped him when he was recovering from his accident. The show, he explains, is “the character’s fictitious myth, but he draws on a lot of my personal experience. For a while when I was in a coma, I thought I was Orpheus, and it makes perfect sense. And when I turned around, I had lost my arm instead of my wife. It’s a show that explores feelings of trauma—global, personal and cultural trauma. And then I would put in something about those ideas that happened in the world between this plane of existence and the next. Here’s where it happens. If this world is visible—if a lake is visible and the wind is unseen, this play happens on the waves.”

Esoteric descriptions aside, *Northern Lights/Southern Cross* is an indisputably large endeavor, by any standards. If the previous Tutti and Interact collaboration is any indication, though, this epic project—comprised as it is of so many seemingly disparate elements—will hit its mark. ☒

Jaime Kleiman is a freelance journalist and actor based in Minneapolis.

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