

Embodying Abolition

Straight talking with Marrugeku

Text: Rachael Swain



Director Rachael Swain is co-artistic director of Marrugeku along with choreographer Dalisa Pigram. Here she reflects on their new work, "Jurrungu Ngan-ga", which was created in collaboration with Indigenous Australian dancers from many Nations and settler dancers from diverse backgrounds. Quotes come from interviews with cast members during the development and touring of the work.

"Jurrungu Ngan-ga" responds to places and peoples that have been targeted by Australia's long-standing neo-colonial appetite for incarceration. "Jurrungu Ngan-ga", meaning 'straight talk' in the language of the Yawuru People, examines the common thread that connects outrageous levels of Indigenous incarceration in Australia to the government's indefinite detention of asylum seekers. The project's creative team interrogate and stage this link as performed in the 'prison of the mind of Australia.' Together they challenge its legitimacy through the lens of what Waanyi writer Alexis Wright explains as "the sovereignty of the mind". That is, an Indigenous sovereignty that is outside the reach of the settler state and its mechanisms of policing. This is performed and staged in "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" through choreopolitical acts of resistance, survivance and straight talking.

Marrugeku is based on the lands of the Yawuru people, the custodians of the lands and waters of Rubibi in the far north-west of Western Australia. "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" is performed by a cast that reflects the intersectional character of the project and the driving ideas behind it: Indigenous Australian dancers from many Nations (both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander), and settler dancers of Palestinian, Filipino and Filipinx and English-Irish heritage. Company members and their families have lived experience of displacement, exile, incarceration and settler privilege.

They share aspects of their own cultural archive through movement that celebrates the fact that they too are 'still fucking here'.

The nine performers of "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" inhabit the prison of the mind of Australia as figments conjured by its own imagination. Each moment channels key events from recent years within Australia's carceral-border regime. These scenes are interwoven within a fabric of Marrugeku's unique intersectional gestural dance language, which seeks to embody the disputed and disrupted site of the border itself. The audience witness scenes of detention brutality, culturally situated acts of resistance and freedom, direct and deeply personal addresses to a security camera and a ritual honouring of names of those who have died in custody on Australia's watch. On this event of 'say-

ing the names' Filipinx trans-femme dancer Bhenji Ra notes: "Often as those folks who are holding those stories, we are expected to be contained by that trauma and then to perform that. But instead we move forward remembering them and enjoying their memory, and that joy becomes our resilience."

After leading the call to say the names, Bhenji Ra's final words in her script, "I'm still fucking here, I'm still fucking here", are drowned out by the beats of the soundtrack as she begins voguing atop the stage, her precise arms moving at turbo speed. Her embodied remembrance honours the voguing community in New York who pioneered the form. "They created a space that is not just about dancing; it's about celebration and about how you keep your communities thriving and alive and how you create a culture that's based on the premise that everyone belongs."

Soon she dips and rolls off the stage and is immediately replaced by Palestinian dancers Feras Shaheen and Issa el Assaad, who perform a fusion of debke and house dance amidst the cheers of the other dancers, who surge around the platform. A security camera continues to survey the scene, which by now resembles an uprising in a prison. Feras and Issa too are soon replaced by Indigenous dancers Emmanuel James Brown (Bunuba/Walmajarri/Gooniyandi/Wangkatjungka) and Chandler Connell (Wiradjuri). They stamp their feet into the mesh of the platform they are dancing on as if it were the dirt in their homelands. Although coming from different parts of the country, they share aspects of their own cultural archive through movement that celebrates the fact that they too are 'still fucking here'.

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Drawing on white-settler Australia's historical founding as a penal colony, the prison is both an instrument of white supremacy and a symbol of a national identity grounded in a colonial imaginary. Indigenous peoples, and their custodial relationship to place (country), embody and represent an internal threat to this symbolic and very real state system of dominance and control. At the same time those seeking asylum and arriving by boat represent an external threat to the very same systems. The passage to Australia by boat of those seeking asylum between 2001–13 led to their subsequent imprisonment in the offshore detention centres on small Pacific states – Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Nauru and the Australian territory of Christmas Island. This policy was alarmingly named the Pacific Solution by successive governments and renamed Operation Sovereign Borders in 2013.

Indigenous Australians are the most incarcerated in the world per capita, and penalties are often excessive. A young Indigenous Australian is more likely to go to jail than to go to university. While we were on tour with "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" in remote



northwest communities, dancer Emmanuel James Brown talked about the challenges facing young people in his home town of Fitzroy Crossing: "The kids don't have much to do here. People that are working for children need to take them out hunting, fishing and learning their cultural dance. I reckon it'll be much better, they would be closer to family and countrymen, where they can be connected. Instead of getting locked up and getting back in the system again where we are still stuck." On stage EJB's expressive movements, choreographed with Dalisa Pigram, embody the pain of the repression of his people as well as the resistance and survivance of his culture as he retains, performs and interprets his Bunuba dance.

As the production progresses this choreopolitical neo-expressionism shifts from a mechanical embodiment of denial to a more trance-like and receptive collectivity. At the same time the dancers' distinctly individual movements continue to be punctuated by retrograde actions and performed glitches that appear to momentarily revisit fragments of colonial imagery / contemporary persecution. Thus the collective language of exchanged gestures does evolve into a new kind of mobilisation, yet one that continues to be ruptured by collapse, loss and re-gurgitated moments of violence.

In the final scene of "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" Feras Shaheen haltingly emerges from the floor. Erratic contorting movements appear to involuntarily erupt from his body. Around him chandeliers fall slowly and topple as they land. The old world is collapsing while

the pain of now is ongoing. During the development of the work Feras Shaheen said: "I feel like dance can be a visual translation of what is happening in society. And you see that in cultural dance, in Palestinian culture, but also in cultures of resistance. Most street dance that I have learned started from a situation. People went to clubs to express themselves because of something they were experiencing, and people were dancing on the street because of something that was going on. The stars that we know today are performing scenarios or periods of time, more than actual dance styles. I definitely think the dance we do can be a representation of the climate we are in."

Through making this work with and for diverse communities we have learnt how contemporary dance processes can engage intersectional and trans-disciplinary performance to make visible, embody, address and help dismantle systems of control, separation and subjugation. "Jurrungu Ngan-ga" exposes and challenges state violence and helps imagine strategies for abolishing Australia's brutal carceral-border regime. 🗡️

This article contains excerpts from Tofighian, Pigram and Swain et al., "Performance as Intersectional Resistance: Power, Polyphony and Processes of Abolition", in *Humanities Journal, Acts of Liberation*, MDPI, 2022.

Marrugeku
Jurrungu Ngan-ga / Straight Talk
 5.8., 20:00 | 6.8., 19:00 | 7.8., 17:00 | Haus der Berliner Festspiele
 Deutschlandpremiere in Kooperation mit Internationales Sommerfestival Kampnagel