

Healing Mission

Veronica Williams and her training company has been providing healthcare workers with new insights into emotional health and strategies to reduce violence, abuse, and anti-social behaviour in communities. This series of stories provide examples to the question: What would it look like if these ideas took off?

(Laurel Sanderson, Religious Affairs Reporter, *Sydney Morning Herald*.)

It was toward dusk when I finally arrived at Ngukurr. Not that I could see much on this, my first visit to the community, for the smoke from a welcome to country ceremony lay heavy in the still evening air. But I could see the RV's, hundreds of them I learned later, most of them 'grey nomads' but several families too. Welcomed to country for a very special reason and on one condition – that they provide accommodation for at least two visiting guests for two nights. The invitees were there to experience the premiere of a First Nations theatrical production titled *Healing Mission*, a play written and performed by indigenous people from the community.

Formerly known as Roper River Mission, Ngukurr is a community of some 2000 residents located near the Roper River in Arnhem Land, about 330 km south-east of Katherine. Several years ago, a small but determined group of women wanted to celebrate the centenary of the arrival of missionaries and the setting up of a church and school. It should have been a straightforward undertaking but it wasn't. An equally determined group, mainly men led by an elder that saw little reason to celebrate the event, pushed back. It is unclear what drove their resistance, as best anyone can gather the reasons are a mixture of culture, theology, and a claim that the missionaries did more harm than good. In what seems to be the only stated view of the resisters they claim: "They brought a view of God that is not the God of our country, but one that helps white people get their way". The only celebration they would be part of is one that respected dreaming and the Creator. As a non-believer I think 'good luck with that idea'.

It seems good luck showed up – like amazing good luck. It was luck, for example that enabled the warring factions to arrive at an agreement of sorts and get the show on the road, so to speak. Opinions differ as to how they came to work together, but one version has it that a group of teenage girls, home from boarding school on the Queensland coast, grew exasperated with the discord, which by this time had become community-wide. They took matters into their own hands and proposed an imaginative way forward – write a play about the history of the missionaries, include the story of Ngukurr’s famous Anglican minister from boat-boy to ordained priest, and let the audience decide what was harm and what was good from the missionary endeavour in East Arnhem Land.

Before the audience could decide anything, however, a lot of work had to be done. The best hope of writing a play lay with the girls, but they had returned to boarding school. Curiously, the leader of the resistance, a respected elder, had had years to ponder the role of missionaries. Initially experiencing being their favoured son, he had considered training for ordination in the church, but he began to realise how many deeply-held beliefs would have to be laid aside. He was not prepared to discard his convictions and connection to the spirituality of the land, and as he began to question aspects of white man’s theology the ‘favoured son’ title soon become dangerous exile. While banished from the church he held his status as elder in the community, but playwright he was not.

Now as you know, I had only recently arrived in the community, so gathering insights as to how the play now set for the world’s stage came into being did not come easily. My hasty information-gathering however, did convince me of one thing. Somewhere in the process the movers and shakers had the good sense to search beyond their regions and follow the trails of indigenous people who left homelands and had made their mark in white-man’s world of theatre, music and event management. The search yielded amazing talent, and most

important of all, talented and experienced people who had still retained a deep love of their culture – just waiting to be asked it seemed.

A big ask, but as it turns out, not too big. The playwright for example, herself a Yolnu woman, now a professor of theatre and dance at Macquarie University, enlisted the assistance of her post-graduate students. The students were delighted with the challenge, for they knew that their professor was extremely well connected in corporate, media, and government circles, and they knew also that her passion never failed to bring about great things. Great things like funding for them to travel to Ngukurr to interview the community members of both factions and weave a story that made a rich tapestry of lived experience. A tapestry with threads of such colour and diversity that any differences were beautifully woven into a single transcending whole. A story now ready for the stage, well not quite, a story ready for direction and production.

The professor did not reach the top of her game without having plays of hers directed and produced by people she trusted. People that she could entrust the birthing and coming to stage of her creation with nothing of the cultural sensitivities and subtle nuances missing. People who made themselves available for weeks of working with community where actors had to be cast from raw stock. And people, like the professor, that were passionate and not the kind to give up when things got fractious. Yes, there were resisters still, as there are in every community. Resisters to people from 'outside', to change of lifestyle, to giving up things; the people that could not see the possibilities of something bigger than themselves. Ones that failed to see the amazing opportunity to be proud people once again, to take centre stage instead of hiding behind the theatre in a fog of shame.

And now the stage is set. More than one hundred dignitaries, many personally invited by the professor - although a fair contingent from the girl's boarding school - were there. For many, this was to be their

first exposure to First Nation peoples' story, and certainly their first 'on country'. Reading the invitee list beforehand, it strikes me that rarely, if ever, has an audience been so diverse; members of the political, religious, corporate, academic tribes, merging into a coherent, observant, waiting, and yes somewhat uncertain whole. Guided to their seats by young community members, they lose their tribal identity and become part of a single age-old humanity witnessing the great drama of life played by actors on a mission – to bring together, to rise above differences, and, above all, to heal.