Nothing rhymes with NGA PARTJI

A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O’HARA

http://www.metromagazine.com.au

http://www.theeducationshop.com.au
Ngapartji ngapartji: I give you something, you give me something

Introduction

*Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* follows the journey of acclaimed Pitjantjatjara actor Trevor Jamieson, as he returns to his traditional country to perform his hit stage show *Ngapartji Ngapartji* to an all-Indigenous audience in the remote Australian Aboriginal community of Ernabella, South Australia.

Trevor has struggled to hold on to his language and culture while living away from his traditional country. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* is a live theatre performance in two languages; its audiences are usually fluent in English rather than Pitjantjatjara. 2,500 kilometres from the recent five-week, sell-out Sydney Festival season, against the magnificent backdrop of the Central Australian desert, Trevor is preparing to face his toughest audience yet.

The film follows the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* team’s journey to Ernabella and the *in situ* performance of their acclaimed show. It is terrible timing for Trevor, whose father, a central character in the stage show, passed away only weeks before. Not only does Trevor have to confront his grief in order to deliver the performance, he also has to grapple with the decision to risk breaking traditional law by saying his father’s name, acting the part of him, and showing footage of him as part of the show. Is Trevor going to get a knock on the head?

Trevor’s family story is one of struggle and survival. From the 1950s, Trevor’s grandfather witnessed British atomic testing spread sickness throughout his land; the performance follows three generations of an Aboriginal family as they grapple with becoming refugees in their own country.

Elders in Ernabella have their own memories of the Maralinga bombs, and Trevor knows that the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* show will be a potent reminder of an issue that people have not talked about in a long time.

As excitement builds in the community and among the company, which is thrilled to be performing for an Indigenous audience in Ernabella, trepidation builds in Trevor as he becomes more fearful of the consequences of telling a story so close to his heart.

Will Trevor’s resolve be his own undoing? We find out.
**Student activities**

**Pre-viewing questions about theatrical performances**

- Why do people attend live theatrical performances in the twenty-first century?
- What kind of theatrical shows attract large audiences today?
- What does a ticket to a live show cost as compared to a movie ticket?
- Why is there such a difference in ticket prices? What are some of the costs involved in creating and performing a stage show?
- How many live shows, whether plays or musicals, have you or your family and friends attended in the past twelve months?
- What do you think the audience attending a theatre performance at a capital city arts festival would be like? Would they be young, old, well-off, representative of the Australian community?
- In what language are theatrical performances in Australia usually presented? When they are not presented in the language of the dominant culture, how is the audience able to follow the details of a story?
- How do you respond to subtitles if you are watching a film or performance in a language other than your own?
- In what form and through what kinds of media are young people today most likely to get their entertainment?
- What are some of the dramatic elements of stage shows put on in schools? Do they often incorporate more than one aspect of performance, such as dance, music and spoken word? What connections do the audience often have with the performers or the cast and crew?
- What differences are there between a film and a live theatrical performance? What advantages (if any) does a film have over a live performance?
Snapshots of some of the featured performers

Trevor Jamieson is the co-creator of and lead performer in Ngapartji Ngapartji. Born in Subiaco, Western Australia in 1975, Trevor is an experienced theatre and film performer and a talented didgeridoo player, guitarist, singer, dancer and storyteller. He appeared in Rabbit-Proof Fence (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and recently in Bran Nue Dae (Rachel Perkins, 2009). During the past five years, Trevor developed his own story in collaboration with Big hART. His performances have won awards including the 2008 Deadly Award for Most Outstanding Achievement in Film, Television or Theatre and the 2008 Sydney Theatre Award for Best Lead Actor for the Sydney Festival season of Ngapartji Ngapartji.

Amanyi Dora Haggie was born in 1938 and speaks Arrernte as well as her first language, Pitjantjatjara. After moving around various stations and communities, she settled in Ernabella where she still lives, painting and creating tjampi baskets. She has been working with Ngapartji Ngapartji since 2006 as a choir member and performer, sharing her experience of the Maralinga bombs with audiences in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. Despite suffering a severe stroke in 2008 she still enjoys performing.

Pantjiti McKenzie is a senior Pitjantjatjara woman from Ernabella. She was instrumental in the establishment of EVTV (Ernabella Video Television) in the early 1980s, which was one of the first community television stations in Australia. She has made hundreds of films on culture, ceremony, bush tucker and country. She is a senior inma (song) and culture woman and a widely renowned ngangkari (traditional healer) and artist. Pantjiti started working with Ngapartji Ngapartji in 2005 and was instrumental in forming the project’s vision and providing guidance for the Pitjantjatjara language, culture and community components. Pantjiti is a key presence on stage and has been present for every season of the touring production (2005 to 2008). Pantjiti now lives in Alice Springs and cares for her husband, who receives dialysis treatment.

Cultural protocols

Australian film, documentary, news and current affairs television programs are often preceded by advice stating that the program about to be shown may contain images of deceased people. This issue is central to the laws and customs of many Indigenous communities and is something that gravely concerns Trevor Jamieson. Included in this guide (page 11) is information from the ABC’s Indigenous web pages. It provides an explanation of the complexities and importance of this issue for many people.
Watching the film

It may be useful for students, either individually or in groups, to concentrate on one of the strands in this film as they watch the story unfold. As all these strands are visually interwoven to construct the story, students could share their impressions after watching the film. Strands to focus on include:

1. Trevor Jamieson’s story
- Why is Trevor ‘frightened’ about performing *Ngapartji Ngapartji* to the Ernabella people?
- What has happened recently within his family that has increased his anxiety about this proposed performance?
- Where has the show been performed until now and where were most of these audiences from?
- What do the on-screen excerpts from reviews of the performance in Australian capital cities indicate about the critical reception of the show?

2. The Ernabella community
- How is Trevor’s grandfather, Tjamu Jack, an important part of this story? Explain what he did and why his actions are important to the story being told in the production.
- Whose advice does Trevor seek when trying to decide whether he should perform the story in its original form at Ernabella?
- What advice is Trevor given by Kawaki, an Ernabella elder, with regard to telling and showing the story of his father and grandfather?
- How does Amanyi explain how and why the breaking of traditional taboos about deceased people has been regarded in the way it has by some members of the community?
- What does Trevor finally decide to do in relation to his difficulty with breaking cultural taboos?
- Describe the qualities Trevor brings to his performance.
- How is his situation (i.e. living in two worlds) represented in the film?
- What is the final triumph Trevor is able to share with the community?
- What does Trevor’s mother Gail think about what her son is doing?
- In what ways is the story of what happened to the people living in the atomic testing area of South Australia in the 1950s so personal to Trevor Jamieson?
- How is Trevor’s grandmother, Yankunya, integral to this story? Explain what happened to her when Trevor was young.
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Ernabella is at the eastern end of the Musgrave Ranges in the far north-west of South Australia. The people speak Yankunytjatjara, Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra, all of which are languages from the Western Desert language groups of Central Australia.

Ernabella (or Pukatja, its Yankunytjatjara name) is 440 kilometres south-west of Alice Springs in South Australia. It is the oldest permanent settlement on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. The Presbyterian Board of Missions established the mission in 1937 as a buffer against increasingly destructive European expansion into Indigenous country, and to offer education and medical help.

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- How do the Ernabella people respond to the opportunity to see their story performed in their own country and in their own language?
3. The Maralinga atomic tests

This map shows where the atomic tests took place and the location of Ernabella (Pukatja) and its proximity to Maralinga.

Between 1953 and 1965 the British government conducted over 600 nuclear tests in the South Australian desert, including the testing of nine major nuclear bombs.

On the Nullarbor Plains, some 600 miles from Adelaide is the remote and lonely village of Maralinga, the site of an experiment with man’s most revolutionary discovery, the atom bomb. The tests are the result of close British-Australian co-operation. Operation Buffalo is the test’s code name, an apt title in this vast uninhabited area.

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• Describe some of the other damaging consequences for the inhabitants of this region, such as contamination and degradation of land, water and air.

• Why is the testimony of people like Amanyi and Pantjiti so important in telling this story?

4. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* at Ernabella

‘We’re battling your country.’
– Mel, Production Manager

‘I’m battling enough of my family now.’
– Trevor, performer

• What are some of the challenges involved in staging a multimedia performance in a place as remote from big cities as Ernabella?

• Describe the setting where the performance is to take place.

• What are some of the positive things about staging the show at Ernabella, for both the community and the forty-eight visiting theatre and production crew?

• How do the children respond to the preparations for the show in their community?

• Why is the change in the weather such a potential threat to the staging of the show?

• How do Trevor, Amanyi, Pantjiti and the other performers dramatise what happened around the bomb test sites so that its significance is clear?

• How is this stage show unlike other forms of entertainment, such as programs we watch on television?

• Despite the seriousness of the story, Trevor is able to engage the audience to respond positively. How is humour used to engage the younger people?

• In what ways is this show a genuinely collaborative performance between cast, crew and audience?
ALEX, TREvor AND SuZY

Director's statement

After working on this unique multilayered project for the last five years, I feel like I know the story of Ngapartji Ngapartji and people behind the show and project intimately. I also know how many stories there are. The toughest thing for me in directing this doco was letting go of the possibilities and working out what realistically could be told in an hour. The strongest elements remained as the main through-lines – Trevor Jamieson’s journey, the remarkable women from Ernabella and the story of the impact of the Maralinga bombs.

Trevor is my friend, a colleague of five years and lead man in Nothing Rhymes With Ngapartji. I met him in 2005 when we ran filmmaking and performance workshops together with young people from town camps in Alice Springs at the start of Ngapartji Ngapartji’s community engagement process. He struck me as an engaging and talented performer with a desire to both make it big in the industry as well as maintain a strong connection to his culture.

In this way, he’s a man that finds himself living between worlds and cultures. He’s charismatic, has an incredible stage presence, a gift for storytelling and is a generally lovable guy with an extraordinary story to tell. Following his personal journey to Ernabella for the Ngapartji Ngapartji show, I was intrigued to see how all these big underlying themes clung off him in every way – language, culture, place, loss, family, the Maralinga bombs, the collision of cultures (past and present) and rapid generational change.

The pressure he felt on tour was especially intense following the death of his father. On top of his terrible grief, Trevor was really frightened about performing the Pitjantjatjara language sections in front of a fluent audience, finding a way through cloudy cultural protocol and risking the consequences of breaking traditional law in order to do the show.

All that pressure and a doco crew to share it with! Fortunately, he trusted us, and I am humbled by the openness and generosity Trevor constantly displayed performing his deeply personal story, which was written and directed by Scott Rankin. To those not really close to him, Trevor plays down the immense pressure that he’s under as a person with different worlds to walk in and big aspirations.

I’m originally from Canberra and lived in Newcastle and Wollombi in NSW, making documentaries on forestry and social/environmental issues in Australia and Papua New Guinea, before moving to Alice Springs in 2003. I’ve loved working with Anangu in Ernabella and other communities in Central Australia with Big hART and on other projects, mainly short films and providing language lessons in a mentor capacity with young Pitjantjatjara people for local communities and the Ngapartji Ngapartji website. I’ve especially enjoyed the opportunity to learn some Pitjantjatjara language through working with speakers and great teachers.

I feel completely awkward about being a spokesperson on anything, but completely passionate about film as a way to tell stories, and really importantly to give insight into ‘otherness’ – other lives, other colours, other people, other worlds, other stories in a non-confrontational way. It was very exciting to be asked by Big hART to direct this documentary. I really wanted to let Central Australia speak for itself and show off the liveliness, the characters, the languages, the complexities, humour, sadness and colour of life here in the region.

– Suzy Bates

NOTHING RHYMES WITH NGAPARTJi
Extension activities

1. Language

‘In 1788, there were about 250 separate Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia, plus dialects. Today, only two thirds of these languages survive and only twenty of them (eight per cent of the original 250) are still strong enough to have a chance of surviving well into the next century’.1

- How often are Indigenous languages heard on film, in theatre or in music as a part of Australian culture?

- The Warlpiri and English language are spoken by the people in the recent award-winning 2009 Australian film Samson and Delilah (Warwick Thornton), while the 2006 film Ten Canoes (Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr) is told in the Ganalbingu language. Why do you think the people who made these films chose to present them in the languages spoken in the communities where the stories are set? What kind of demands does this make on an audience that does not speak the language, whether they are Indigenous or white Australians? (Remember there are many different Indigenous languages and dialects and many Australians whose first language is not English.)

- Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, the multi-award winning singer/songwriter, is from the Gumatji nation and his mother is from the Galpu nation, so they are both first nations’ people from north-east Arnhem Land. He sings all over the world in Gumatji, Galpu, Djam_barang-puyngu and English. The sleeve notes of his CD Gurrumul have the words of his songs in the languages in which he sings them followed by English translations. If possible, listen to some of his songs. Do you think it is important that performers like Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu sing in their own languages? If so, why does it matter and to whom?

Investigate bilingual teaching programs being conducted in some schools, particularly in the Northern Territory. The ABC online Indigenous website provides information about this program; go to <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/stories/s2450065.htm>.

2. Telling stories

Suzy Bates says in her director’s statement that she feels ‘completely passionate about film as a way to tell stories, and really importantly to give insight into “otherness” – other lives, other colours, other people, other worlds, other stories in a non-confrontational way’.

Imagine you have the opportunity to tell an important story about your family life on stage or screen. You are able to incorporate many elements and performance styles into this story.

Devise an outline for your proposal to be submitted to organisations that may be able to fund your project. You could use the following questions as the basis of your planning.

- In what form will you choose to tell your story so that it is vivid, engaging and entertaining and so that it will portray something of the particular qualities of the lives and stories you have chosen?

- Who is your intended audience – fellow students, family, your local community, a national television or feature-film audience?

- Will the story be told in a documentary style or be told as a fictionalised story based on the lives of family members?

- Will your story have a linear narrative structure, i.e. will it begin at the beginning of the story and end with your generation? Will you show recurrent themes and links that are common to people in your story?
The internet as a research tool

When entering terms into an internet search engine it is important to be clear about the source and authorship of any information you find. Ask yourself who put the information up and the nature of their interest in the issue. Accounts of what happened at the time and subsequently will vary in their emphases and interpretation. Some sites will offer opinions, while on others the information presented may not necessarily be accurate and reliable.

This government website at <http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/publications/fact-sheets/fs129.aspx> is a good place to start. Other useful information can be found at <http://www.sea-us.org.au/thunder/britsbombingus.html> and at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s120383.htm> (the ABC link provides an account of the attempted clean-up of the site). Further information about the aftermath can be found at <http://www.maralingaclassaction.com.au>. Many of these websites have links to related sites that you may find useful.

The following is information from the ABC website about cultural protocols regarding deceased members of Indigenous communities.

such as a love of music, dancing or cooking?

• What will be the dramatic centre of your story? Will there be a central theme about continuity or struggle or change, for example?

• Will you have a central figure who is the main storyteller, or will you employ multiple perspectives to tell the story?

• Is there music, dance and singing that are important aspects of the story you want to tell?

• Will you incorporate material and images such as diary entries, photographs or film and video clips in your story? Will they be sourced through your own personal family archive or will they include other material that may be in the public domain, such as newspaper and newsreel footage from different periods?

• In what language or languages will the story be told? Should you consider using subtitles in some or all of the stage show/film?

3. Research

‘Maralinga’ is Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal dialect for ‘field of thunder’. The area was the home of the Maralinga Tjarutja people.

• The atomic tests conducted at Maralinga and their effects on communities are central to this story. Prepare a report about these tests and their aftermath to be presented as either a talk to your classmates or as a written paper. Include the following information:
  – when and where these tests were conducted
  – which countries were involved in the testing
  – reasons for atomic testing at this time
  – why the Maralinga site was chosen
  – the number of tests and the type of tests that were conducted
  – the people living in the region at the time
  – whether and how the people in the test area, including the Tjarutja people, were informed/ warned/consulted about the program and its effects
  – what happened afterwards
  – inquiries into the testing program
  – the 1984–1985 Royal Commission
  – the cleaning up of the sites
  – land rights issues
  – whether compensation was offered to people affected by the testing (either the local inhabitants or those working at the test sites).
Death in a community

The question of how to deal with members of a community that have passed away is a big issue for the media.

If an individual who died is a significant person in a community or in the broader Australian community, the local media group usually issue press releases relating to how you can use the image, voice or video of the deceased person.

Consultation

Each community deals with the death of an individual differently and therefore you must contact someone from the community or media group and get written permission to use the name, image, voice or video of that person. In some cases some people will need to be removed from archived films, radio pieces and websites. Culturally it is difficult for some family members to mention the deceased person by name. It is best to contact council, media groups etc. to make the liaison with a family member, rather than go to them directly while they are grieving. Some family members in the past have been harassed for interviews while they are in their most important grieving times.

It is worth mentioning that in some communities, in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures, the entire community will shut down for ‘sorry business’ whether you are attending or not. Even if you have gained permission to film, you may find that no one is available on arrival. It is advisable to contact communities prior to your arrival and check before leaving to make sure that the community are able to conduct formal business until the ‘sorry business’ is over with.

Time of Mourning

Many communities have a mourning period where that person’s name and image cannot be used. The time of mourning is different between communities. It can be for a week, year or for an indefinite period of time that you will not be able to use the deceased’s name, image, voice or video. Some communities offer a mourning name e.g. Kumantjayi in parts of the Northern Territory as in the case of Dr Charles Perkins who was called Kumantjayi Perkins.

Permission

If you have been granted permission (in writing), the presenter of the program or the item’s introduction must state that you were granted permission to use the person’s name, image, voice and video for the particular segment you are about to produce.

Permission for who and for how long

It is highly recommended that you also establish whether the permission is a blanket rule for perpetuity. This is to establish whether permission is restricted to the specific segment, state or town and whether it includes later segmentation. Written permission should include the date in which the mourning period ends to assist with archiving and the use of archives.

For example, if the ABC Darwin radio and television journalists are given the right to use the name, image, voice and video of a deceased person, this does not mean that all the other news services for ABC are able to. This mistake was made when the Northern Territory artist Kumantjayi Tjapaltjari died, creating confusion as to the scope of the permission.

It is imperative for you to establish with the family and the community how the material can be used, for what parties and for how long.

Warning:

ABC Television, Radio and Online have a warning that is used in the introduction to most programs. The warning below is copyright of the ABC Indigenous Programs Unit and you are able to seek permission to use this for your own programs. Contact ABC Indigenous Program Unit at ipu@your.abc.net.au

WARNING: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the following program may contain images and voices of deceased persons.”

References and resources

Official film website:
<http://nothingrhymeswithngapartji.com>

The Ngapartji Ngapartji website – contains information about the project and links to further information:
<http://ngapartji.org>

Big hART’s website:
<http://www.bighart.org>

James Waites is a theatre reviewer. He was involved in documenting and photographing the Ernabella production process:
<http://jameswaites.illatech.org/?cat=14>

Review of a 2006 performance of Ngapartji Ngapartji in Melbourne:

The Ernabella Arts Centre site with information about life and art at Ernabella:

Information about Indigenous perspectives in the proposed national curriculum:

Screen Australia site with video clips of the atomic testing at Maralinga in the 1950s. Includes information about the project and the clips.

Ninti Ngapartji, the Ngapartji Ngapartji online language course, includes twenty Pitjantjatjara language lessons:
<http://ninti.ngapartji.org>

Endnote

1 Quote taken from Big River Internet at <http://www.bri.net.au/spoken/word.html>.