

# *Bukal*, JUTE Theatre Company

*Bukal* is a First Nations theatre work based on the life of Australia's first Indigenous member of the United Nations, Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. It was developed as part of JUTE Theatre Company's *Dare to Dream* program which produces new theatre works by, about and for First Nations peoples.<sup>1</sup>



*Bukal* by Andrea James with Henrietta Marrie. A JUTE Theatre Company Production. L-R Taeg Twist; Maurial Spearim; Alexis West. Credit: Raw Lens Media Co.

<sup>1</sup> In this document, the terms 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



JUTE is a regional non-Indigenous small to medium theatre company that is providing pathways for the creation of new First Nations works. The pathway of *Bukal*'s creation from initial idea to stage took several years and involved multiple creative development processes. After premiering in 2018, *Bukal* toured to schools and remote communities in Far North Queensland.

This case study is based on research conducted by Central Queensland University that sought to understand the experiences of First Nations performing artists, technicians and creatives connected to JUTE's *Dare to Dream* program.<sup>2</sup> The process of taking *Bukal* from an idea to audiences illustrates insights highlighted in the Australia Council's research study *Creating Art: The makers' view of pathways for First Nations performing arts*. These insights may be useful to other non-Indigenous companies providing pathways for the creation of First Nations work.

<sup>2</sup> Davis S and Walker Y 2019, *Creating Experience: Career trajectories and the development of new First Nations work in the performing arts – Case Studies related to JUTE Theatre Company's 'Dare to Dream' project*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University, JUTE and the Australia Council for the Arts.



## Investing in relationships and building trust, networks and connections

Any non-Indigenous company creating new First Nations-focused work needs to build relationships and trust over time. This may take more time than a standard grant cycle and requires ongoing commitment and reflection. Cultural agency as well as cultural safety need to be considered and accommodated. This requires attention through budgets, timelines, consultation processes, communications and ways of working.<sup>3</sup>

JUTE Theatre Company has embarked on this journey, learning along the way, and attempting to improve its processes and approach through each project and iteration. This was a particular focus through the creative development and staging of *Bukal*.

The idea for *Bukal* came from a conversation. JUTE had already produced *Proppa Solid*, a work by Steven Oliver, and JUTE's Artistic Director and CEO, Suellen Maunder, knew Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. In 2014 they were both at a NAIDOC breakfast when Henrietta said, 'I think I should tell my story on stage'.<sup>4</sup> They began to meet and discuss who Henrietta wanted to support her to tell her story. They approached Rhoda Roberts who 'jumped at the idea'.<sup>5</sup>

When Andrea James came on as the writer, she needed to get to know her subject and become immersed in her story:

Henrietta Marrie with the creative development cast Maurial Spearim Alexis West producer Yvette Walker and Katie Leslie. Credit: Susan Davis.

**“ I could not begin to tell the story before sitting down with Henrietta on Country, that was the start for me... we literally just sat in the rooms for days and talked. Things would come in little bits and you wait, and then I'd write a bit and then say "how's this going, or is it back to the drawing board?" It was really a careful process of going back and forward and listening... it was about following the story and learning and waiting for the time to come.”**

Andrea James, playwright<sup>6</sup>



3 Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.43.

4 Suellen Maunder interview for Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.30.

5 Suellen Maunder interview for Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.31.

6 Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.35, emphasis added.

**Investing in creative development and not rushing works to the stage**

**Bukal** had three creative development phases:

Phase	Focus	Who was involved	How was it funded
<b>Creative development 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working out the story to be told</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Henrietta Marrie, storyteller and subject of the future play</li> <li>Rhoda Roberts, Creative Director</li> <li>Peter Matheson, Dramaturg</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>operational funding</li> <li>existing funding</li> </ul>
<b>Creative development 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shaping the script</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Henrietta Marrie, storyteller</li> <li>Rhoda Roberts, Creative Director</li> <li>Andrea James, Writer</li> <li>Peter Matheson, Dramaturg</li> <li>3 First Nations actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Fairfax Family Foundation</li> <li>operational funding</li> </ul>
<b>Creative development 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refining the script for production</li> <li>Mapping production and design elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Andrea James, Writer/Director</li> <li>Peter Matheson, Dramaturg</li> <li>Yvette Walker, Creative Producer</li> <li>3 First Nations actors</li> <li>Designers engaged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Fairfax Family Foundation</li> <li>CQUniversity (sponsor)</li> <li>operational funding</li> </ul>

JUTE recognises the length of time and resources necessary to create and perform quality new work. The company’s approach focuses on investing in creative development and not rushing work to the stage. Works given a full staging have usually been in development for several years and have gone through multiple creative development phases.

**“...the idea of creative developments I think is really important because writers need to hear their work and see their work spatially. So – it’s an intensive process... we find that a week of intensive work with actors on the floor and a dramaturg and a director in the room creates a kind of hothouse – a hothouse process for the development of work.”**

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.36, emphasis added.



*Bukal* by Andrea James  
with Henrietta Marrie.  
A JUTE Theatre Company  
Production. L-R Alexis  
West; Maurial Spearim;  
Taeg Twist. Credit: Raw  
Lens Media Co.

## Ensuring opportunities for First Nations creative control and decision making

JUTE's aim was to engage First Nations people in all creative team roles where possible and to support First Nations-led decision making.

First Nations creatives were engaged as the creative director (Rhoda Roberts) writer/director (Andrea James) and the actors. JUTE also engaged an Indigenous creative producer towards the end of 2017, Yvette Walker. Part of Yvette's role was to assemble the creative team and performers for the 2018 final creative development and premiere performance.

This was the first time the company had engaged someone in this type of role. They had previously engaged Indigenous playwrights, directors, actors and stage managers for particular shows, but there was nobody in a creative producer role in a continuing capacity. Initially they did not have funding support for this appointment and had to stretch their existing budget, though some was later secured.

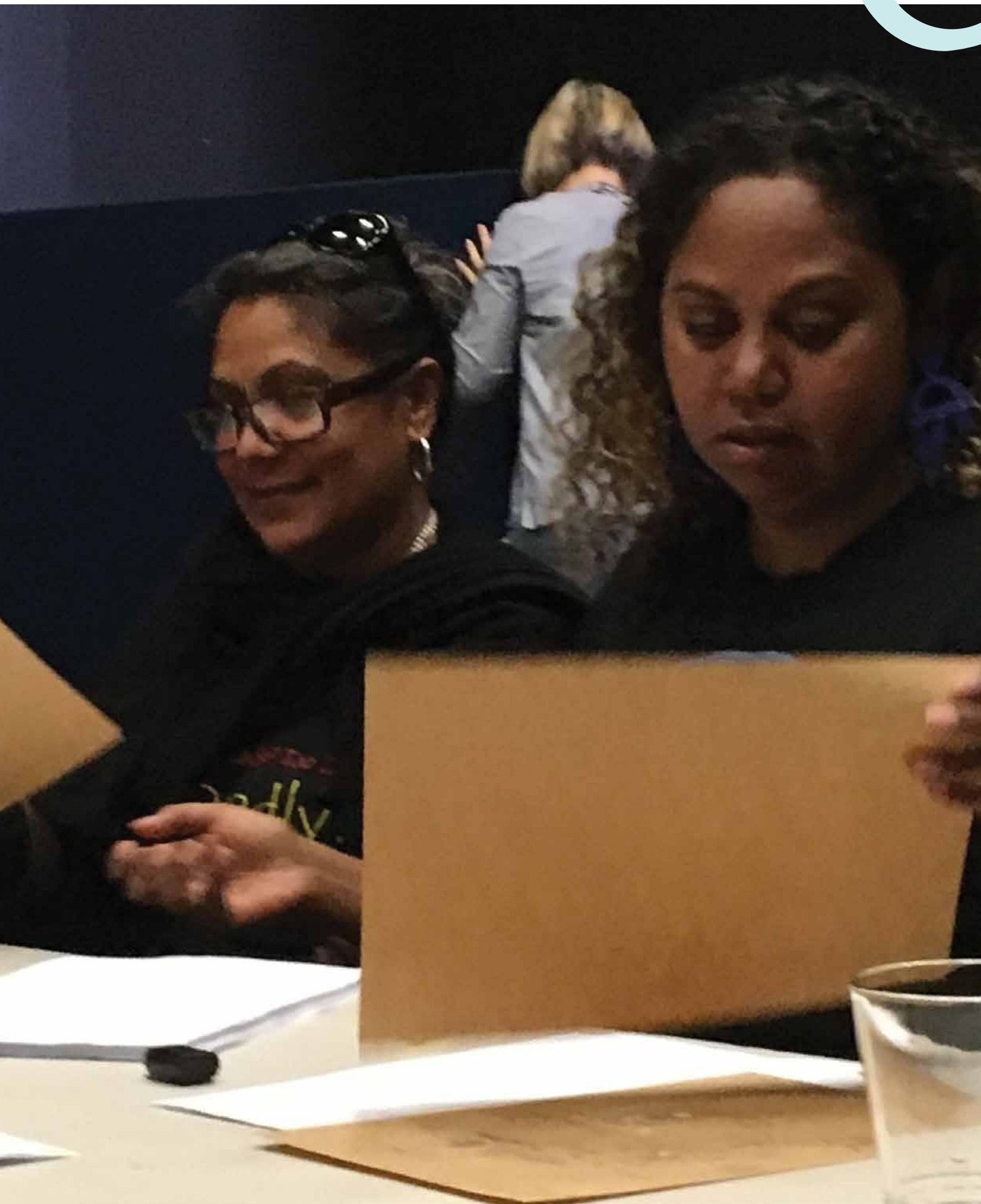
**“The greatest commitment is allowing and enabling Aboriginal people to have their own voice and thank you for that because you had the trust and the faith in the story and you allowed this new voice of young Aboriginal people to tell this story of one of our “because of her we can”, Aunty Henrietta.”**

Rhoda Roberts, Creative Director, *Bukal* opening night<sup>8</sup>

Cast members see the illustrations for production design.  
Credit: Susan Davis.

<sup>8</sup> Opening night speech, Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 10 July 2018. Cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2018, p.31, emphasis added.





## Challenges with availability of First Nations creatives

Throughout the multiple phases of creative development there were challenges locating available First Nations creatives. Following the first development phase, Suellen tried to engage established First Nations writer and theatre maker Andrea James, but Andrea was already engaged on another project. However, as it took a couple of years to secure funding for the second phase of development, by that time Andrea was available.

When JUTE assembled the production team to begin the rehearsal process for *Bukal*, actors needed to be brought in from elsewhere due to a lack of trained or experienced actors in the region. The commitment from the actors being brought in ranged from six weeks to three months. As well as committing to the rehearsal phase and mainstage production in Cairns, the actors would be leaving on a ten week tour to schools across Far North Queensland straight after the Cairns show.

From the beginning of the production planning for *Bukal*, JUTE's desire to engage a fully Indigenous creative team included designers, technicians and stage managers if possible. It emerged that this was an 'impossible task' even when trying to employ across the national landscape.'

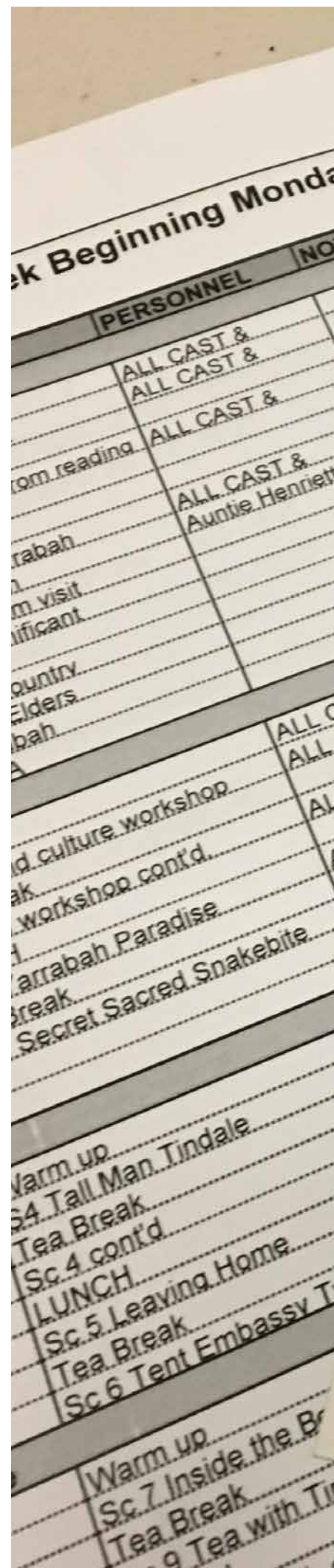
**“Try and find a black lighting designer. I think there's two. One of them works full time at Bangarra.”**

Yvette Walker, Indigenous Producer<sup>9</sup>

A First Nations sound designer was engaged, but First Nations professionals could not be found for the mainhouse stage manager, lighting design and production design roles (First Nations stage manager PJ Rosas was engaged as stage manager and tour manager for the tour).

*Bukal* schedule meeting and flyer. Credit: Susan Davis.

<sup>9</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.40, emphasis added.





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# Bukal

by Andrea James with Henrietta Marrie

From the rainforest to the world arena.  
Henrietta Marrie realised on stage.



## 6 - 14 JULY

World Premiere 10th July

## A need for paid mentorships and pathways into other roles

‘I’ve heard PJ say so many times he’s like one of the only black stage managers in the country. **How is that possible when we’ve got so many talented young black fellows who would love to be doing tech stuff when they’re not writing music or performing.**’

Yvette Walker, Indigenous Producer<sup>10</sup>

For *Bukal* an attempt was made to establish a paid internship program to try and appoint some First Nations people with related skills to train them up in technical and production roles, but JUTE was unable to secure the funding in the timeframe. There appeared to be limited scope within current funding schemes to do so, with current initiatives not tending to address these gaps in the production ecology.<sup>11</sup>

‘There are gaps in areas where there are very few experienced First Nations professionals, these include producing, technical production and design. Therefore **specific strategies to recruit and train professionals in these areas are worth investing in. There is also a need to support opportunities at regional, state and national levels and assistance with brokerage, navigation and mentoring.**’

Yvette Walker and Susan Davis<sup>12</sup>

## The opportunity and impact of creating work for schools

*Bukal* was developed through the *Dare to Dream* program which involves touring new First Nations works to regional and remote schools and communities in Far North Queensland including the Cape, and undertaking a one week residency in each community.

The development of *Bukal* as a program that would be toured to schools set some parameters that shaped the work. For example, it would include three actors and run at under an hour. The content had to be engaging and accessible for primary school aged children as well as for adult audiences. The staging also had to be adaptable and demountable so that it could fit in a 4WD trailer to be toured to remote communities.

While some people were concerned the play might be too ‘intellectual’ and distant from the lives of the mainly primary school audiences, the feedback affirmed the importance of the story, the value of the work and its potential to educate and inspire.

‘**I’m all about making a difference and making lives for our people and our kids better... If I can reach young people of today and tomorrow and the future (with my story and this play), I hope to inspire them to go for great heights, dream, dream, but capture those dreams and move forward with them.**’

Henrietta Fourmile Marrie<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.40, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.40.

<sup>12</sup> Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.44, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.26, emphasis added.



Woodford Fest Curtain Call with Henrietta.

## Challenges working outside major cities

Adding to the complexity and expense for JUTE is that their creative teams are often assembled not only from creatives from the local region, but from across Australia. That means flights, accommodation, per diems and more.

*‘...we are a professional company, we need to pay artists. We need to pay them what they’re worth. Often, **we have a lot more costs that surround that because we’re bringing people from outside because we don’t have all those skills in the region. So yeah, it’s expensive.**’*

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>14</sup>

For the second creative development the team were all brought in from elsewhere, including Brisbane, Sydney (and elsewhere in NSW) and Melbourne. Having locally accessible training programs has been an ongoing issue for the region.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.35, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.35.

## Employing a First Nations cultural consultant

During the creative development of *Bukal*, JUTE decided to engage a First Nations cultural consultant for the company and production. While the company had already engaged an Indigenous producer, the Cairns region was not that person's Country. So, JUTE made the decision to appoint a local Traditional Owner, Carl Fourmile, as a cultural consultant.

**“...it's our intention for all our projects from here on, whether they're Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to have Carl [or another First Nations cultural consultant] as part of that process. So that all the work is always kind of embedded in the idea that we sit on the land of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji people.”**

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the creative development, Carl came in for selected sessions and worked with the actors on various aspects, including showing them a dance and talking about Yidinji culture.

**“...on *Bukal*, he was very much the cultural advisor. He taught the dances, he also provided some song for the show. He consulted with the set designers on...their shields in the show... Basically, they sought permission at every stage of the game from Carl and if Carl wasn't able to give the permission, he sought that from Elders.”**

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.37, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.37, emphasis added.



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## Sharing work with First Nations audiences

On the final day of the third creative development a public reading was staged. A sizeable audience assembled to be part of this milestone experience. The audience included many of Henrietta's family members and friends and other First Nations people from across the community. The work was very well received, with many audience members shedding tears and affirming the power and importance of the work in their unsolicited feedback.<sup>18</sup>

After the premiere, JUTE toured *Bukal* to ten schools in North Queensland which had significant numbers of First Nations students. As part of the *Dare to Dream* program, the work was shown within a one week residency in which the team guided First Nations youth through storytelling workshops about their own daring and dreaming. At the end of the process young people were invited to share what they created with the community.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.38.

19 Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.1.

Visit to Yarrabah by the entire company and Henrietta. Credit: Susan Davis.



## Investing in cultural competence and a two-way cultural conversation

At the very start of the rehearsal process, JUTE instituted an important new process: taking the first afternoon of rehearsals for the whole company to spend time on Country. The cast and crew all travelled out to Yarrabah with Henrietta and Carl and visited key locations within the community where Henrietta grew up. They were welcomed onto Country by other Traditional Owners and Elders and spent time yarning and learning.

“So on the first day of rehearsal, you know you have four weeks of rehearsal plus a week of tech, and that’s usually pretty fraught by the time you get to the technical process. So you feel like you need every second of every day. We gave up a half of that first day to actually go to Yarrabah. **We closed down the office and everyone went to Yarrabah to get a sense of where this story starts.**

*We had the great privilege of Uncle David (Mundrabay) inviting us into his home and allowing us to sit in the backyard under the Hills Hoist with his family. **He kind of welcomed us to country and gave us a sense of what it is to sit and listen.** So that was really amazing for the entire team.”*

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>7</sup>

As well as employing First Nations people as a producer, cultural consultant and in creative roles, JUTE is committed to developing local talent.

JUTE has also undertaken cross-cultural awareness training for the whole company; has a ‘proper’ Welcome to Country for all shows and events; reviews cultural safety across production and touring programs ensuring support structures and processes are in place (especially for the touring team); and supports cultural protocols and business, such as smokings where appropriate.<sup>20</sup>



*Bukal* by Andrea James with Henrietta Marrie. JUTE Creative Development 12-16 February 2018. L-R: Carl Fourmile, Katie Leslie, Andrea James, Alexis West. Taken on iPhone by JUTE staff.

<sup>20</sup> Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.42.



## Reflections and advice for non-First Nations companies:

*“I think be brave is number one. Make a commitment to do it because there’s a whole other audience and a whole other range of stories that people haven’t heard, and so it’s exciting...consult with companies like ILBIJERRI, potentially JUTE given that we’ve got some knowledge now.*

*Just make sure that you’re putting in place appropriate protocols and that the key artists are Indigenous and that they have creative control of the work... be really prepared to learn along the way. That respect goes a long way. I’d say sit down and listen.*

*Get yourself an Indigenous producer. Or at the very least, talk to the key creatives about what their needs are around good protocol.... just do it. You know, you commit to it, your board commits to it, your artistic director commits to it, and you go looking for those stories and you find the way to do them.”*

Suellen Maunder, Artistic Director/CEO JUTE<sup>21</sup>

21 Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.43, emphasis added.



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