

Jack Gray

RANGATIRATANGA



BY DIONE JOSEPH

In this article, Dione Joseph talks to Jack Gray about his perspectives on leadership in dance in his new role as Artistic Director for Atamira Dance Company.



JACK GRAY

Jack Gray, co-founder and recently appointed Artistic Director of Atamira and founder of I-Moving Lab, is highly recognised in the world of dance. Fresh from his trip to the Gold Coast for Festival 2018 he joined me to share his thoughts on rangatiratanga or leadership in te ao kanikani.

If only it could be that simple.

Our conversation offers you a starting point: a collection of reflections, insights and contemplations, collected and collated to present Jack's words and worlds in a way that is unique to him. As always, it begins with:

The future...

We need to ask, what type of leaders are we going to become? How are we going to share knowledge with each other? What kind of tane and wāhine are we growing into? In the world of dance, we are on the edge of ceremony – shared breadth, shared time and shared physicality. This is what we have to offer and equally, this is also what we have to receive.

...depends on our need to SHARE

It's never the same. It can't be. Sharing. Gifting. Tasking. Because a person's nuance as a dancer is particular to them and when they try and teach it to someone else they attempt a likeness – but can it ever be absolute?

I'm intrigued by the process of sharing. Utter authenticity is challenging because in actual fact, you could get people to radically shift their skin to be in alignment with you. This is shape-shifting, to be aware of another's body, spirit and tipuna.

and be aware of LAND

Returning from Australia to celebrate the opening of the Commonwealth Games has been immense. I find when you're not on your own land you don't have the privilege of expectation.

Interwoven: Marks on the Land, Marks on the Body by Fluid Joy Aroha, *I Moving Lab* and *I Land*, was performed on Kombumerri country. Atamira was represented by Jack, dancers Bianca Hyslop and Matiu Hamuera and design collaborator Ruth Woodbury.

A gathering of First Nations artists on Indigenous land it asked me to constantly think about how and what you're giving and how people are hearing that and giving people the space to adjust. For me, I evolve more as a human when I move into spaces beyond my own and that would be the same for any person – getting outside your paradigm where you have a familiar presence and engaging in the spaces of others.

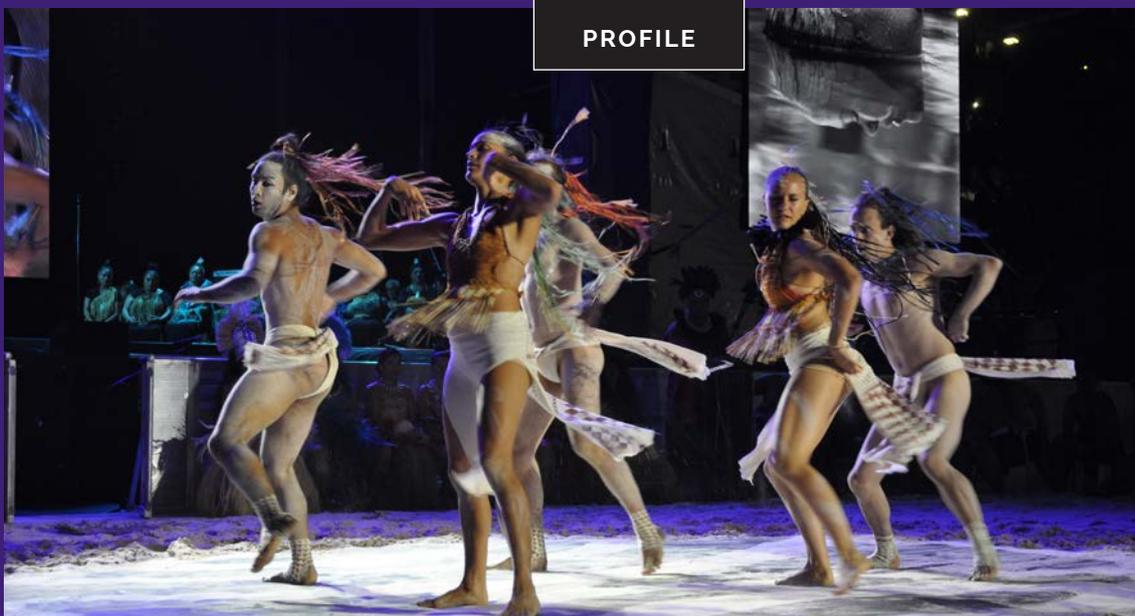
LANGUAGE

Language connects to the physicality of the mouth and the expression of what that means is specific, transformational even. I was aware that in order to be me I needed to encompass the Australian perspective and part of that was also understanding a White Australian perspective.

POWER

One of things I'm interested in is to be quiet in my power, generous in my offering and humble in my outlook.

I wanted to be those things because I wanted to shift a bunch of stereotypes around the perceptions of what



INTERWOVEN – MARKS ON THE LAND, MARKS ON THE BODY

happens when people who have been erased from the situation finally get a microphone – it's a whole lot of energy that people don't want to deal with.

We can absorb and we can share and then we can be specific about what information to give – I have my own culture that I will talk to in a particular way and there are people from my art form whom I will talk to in a different way and so on, and it is as it should be because we can never underestimate the opportunity to grow.

...because we all want **SUCCESS**

Everyone involved in our project on the Gold Coast wanted it to be a success. I was conscious that I was tracking a set of information gifted from four different directions: the living, the people around us, our ancestors and of course, the living breathing whenua. Intersecting this I have familiarity with being in a theatre space, a public space and a wānanga space allowing my expertise to be even and balanced.

I realised that in that space I was blessed because I didn't need to shift – I am the same rangatira.

IT'S OBVIOUS...

But, of course, you never say you're a rangatira, you don't think you're a rangatira. Upholding the kaupapa is the priority and maintaining the health and well-being of everyone including myself – because my job is to make things happen.

When I think about sacrifice it's not about what I'm about to give but what I have given in my life to create this moment – and it's necessary to just give it everything you have.

Of course, there was drama. Of course, there was a thread that broke – but I prayed for all these things because I believed that our energy brought about something different.

We work hard because we are only trying to publicise the work we're doing. It might never feature on the cover of TIME magazine, but that's okay. The closest might be reviews, but the voices of the artist are usually spoken 'about' and it's very rare to have the vitality, the tikanga in a public space where our voices are genuinely accessible.

but in COMING TOGETHER

You need to nourish people, feed the people, clean the whare and you need to get up – this is what it is to be a rangatira. We also had these beautiful whāea who were there to shelter and protect us throughout our time and these 27 nannies were so powerful in their own mana.

They were able to share with us, manaaki us and they were so humble because they had so many stories, but they gifted us time, energy and love. We were fed and had beautiful Māori music playing around us – and of course all sorts of disasters were averted because they have control.

In a collective community it's essential we recognise our role. Whether it's to teach a class, do the karakia, review the video – you don't talk about it, you just do it. For example, breakfast was our facilitation into the world.

This was an Indigenous and a multi-cultural space and one in which a dancer from Aotearoa could say, "Wow, I've never danced with an Aboriginal dancer and you're really awesome," and the Aboriginal people were inspired by the amount of culture we shared; we spoke reo, we did our mihimihi and we were very conversant in our practices.

And I asked myself, should this be balanced? Should we share our language in different ways?

...we speak TOGETHER

But we speak together and we speak for all.

On this occasion we were a group and we lead with what was present and potent. *Interwoven* was not a school or a

JACK GRAY IN DEVELOPMENT OF MITIMITI



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testing ground to see who can speak their language or say their prayer – this was people sharing their life force of the moment.

about our WHAKAPAPA

There is something in just 'being', we're not here as Atamira trying to do 10 things on our company objectives; we are being ourselves.

We were living beings, entities of our cultures and we made decisions of what we were giving and why we wanted to give it. Here were beautiful people working on a mauri level from a number of different Indigenous nations.

...it's LETTING GO

A rangatira knows what to let go.

It's about changing the dance landscape.

It's about being aware it has to be done thoughtfully, strategically and in stages.

It's about listening in order to access impressions and insights.

It's about allowing and giving space for whatever is meant to come in

and ultimately, it is OPENING DOORS

We need to open the doors for all thoughts.

Not by merely convincing ourselves, or disproving, but by recognising that it is necessary to be able to translate cultural experience into an intercultural situation, into an inter-disciplinary situation while holding our values.

I don't over explain and I didn't feel whakamā about knowing what I know.

Our stories are multi-generational: for our elders, our contemporaries and our tamariki. Collective viewing is powerful and revealing. That's ceremony, the pasts are reconciled and our stories are birthed in other lands.

These are stories of connectedness, our peoples, our tipuna. These are stories of our collective breathing, vibrating, powerfulness and our collective consciousness as First Nations Peoples allowing the etchings on our spirit, body and land to be one.

This is our karanga. ■