



# *Long Grass*

by Vicki Van Hout

produced by Performance Space  
& Intimate Spectacle

*Five people emerge from the tall spear grass. That one, he's feeling no-good sorry way. She bin look after him, but really wants a holiday. Her, she's been here forever. That one, he's run away from payback, waiting for the mob to forget. And her, she's causing trouble ...*

Take a trip to the Australia's "Top End" and discover what it means to live "Long Grass" – the term for Aboriginal people perceived as being homeless and on the fringes, yet living right in the middle of the city. Can such concepts as honour, courage and solidarity exist outside the trappings of a formal postcode?

Indigenous choreographer Vicki Van Hout's powerful new dance theatre work combines weaving, shadow play, text and sparse video, with an idiosyncratic dance language, to find warmth, humour and play in a community at the edge.

Director & Choreographer	Vicki Van Hout
Choreographic Collaborator,	
Cultural Consultant & Voice	Gary Lang
Sound Design	Phil Downing
Lighting Design	Clytie Smith
Dancers	Darren Edwards, Thomas E.S. Kelly, Katina Olsen, Caleena Sansbury, Taree Sansbury
Co-Producers	Harley Stumm (Intimate Spectacle), Tanja Farman & Steph Walker (Performance Space)
Creative Consultant	Ben Graetz
Production Manager	Richard Whitehouse
Stage Manager	Natalie Ayton
Song – <i>Long Grass Man</i>	Solomon Ngangula



## Note by Vicki Van Hout

There are some works that are screaming to be made, which make it impossible to keep quiet. There are so many facets to indigenous society today, so many different ways of living and surviving. The circumstances around Darwin's infamous indigenous 'Long Grassers' or homeless population are diverse, often looked upon with derision or scorn, walked passed, passed over or simply ignored. It is ironic that a race who has survived for thousands of years can be displaced in the country their laws were created to care for so scrupulously.

This is not my story, but it is a paradoxical situation that I felt needed to be told. I sat on it for about five years until I summoned the gumption to just do it.

I approached a local Larrakia man and fellow NAISDA Dance College graduate, Gary Lang to come on board. He acts as a cultural consultant and creative collaborator, generously sharing his experience and local knowledge, without which, we wouldn't have been able to move forward.

The underpinning dance language has been developed from extensive training in dances from the Northern Territory, over a period of 25 years.

"Long Grass" is a complex situation, full of contradictions, comprised of people with one of the wealthiest cultural traditions, yet poorest living conditions. Exacerbated by the ongoing government intervention, they are all but invisible in a city whose population is swollen with tourists.

In the time I have travelled back and forth to Darwin, I have witnessed a people with a strong sense of community, and a generosity of spirit.

Long Grass doesn't aim to judge, but does aim to share a bit of the cultural magic, which can be found in the unlikeliest of places.

## Reviews & Comment (full reviews linked & attached)

*"The choreography is powerful and exhilarating, Van Hout demands a lot of her dancers and they certainly deliver; their movement articulate and expressive. The sound design, played live on stage, matches the dancers in its potent energy. The ensemble sequence depicting the build-up and intensity of the storm is a highlight, especially accompanied by the pounding score. Other highlights include some confronting duets: one uncompromisingly violent, another tragic. However, above all, there is warmth and humour. We get an idea of the sense of community that comes from living "long grass". Lang makes a memorable contribution with his perfectly pitched voice-over, full of humour and insight."*

– Julia Cotton, [Sydney Morning Herald](#)

*Van Hout is at once auteur and collaborator—her vision and choreography are exquisitely distinctive, her creations woven through collaboration... Long Grass is an important work, culturally, sociologically and aesthetically, revealing in observant detail the lives of the dispossessed with humour, bitterness and sadness.*

– Keith Gallasch, [RealTime](#)

*All through the wet season and just into the dry everything magically grows, seemingly overnight. The 'long grass' can be two or three metres high. I remember driving through walls for more than an hour with nothing in sight other than this straw curtain in front of me. In April comes the violent powerful 'knock'em' storms that flatten the grass and clear the line of sight. Watching Long Grass I thought of Vicki Van Hout as an amazing ball of energy like these storms that come out of nowhere to energize, create and be gone again before you can blink.*

– Djon Mundine OAM, [RealTime](#)

## History & Acknowledgments

Long Grass premiered at the Everest Theatre, Seymour Centre, in Sydney Festival, January 14 – 18, 2015.

Long Grass is produced by Performance Space and Intimate Spectacle. Developments in Darwin were hosted by the Darwin Entertainment Centre.

This project has been supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body; by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW; by the City of Melbourne through Arts House; and by Critical Path, and the University of Sydney's Department of Performance Studies.



## Technical Production Summary

- Duration: 65 minutes
- Venue: Studio theatres ideal, but will suit intimate proscenium theatres
- Stage: Minimum 12m W x 9m D, 6m H to grid
- Company: 11: Choreographer, 5 Dancers, Sound Artist, Vocal Performer, Company/Stage Manager, Production Manager, Lighting Operator.
- Bump in: Open on second night, if lighting pre-rigged prior to company arrival
- Technical: Contact us for full technical specifications.

## Producer & Technical Production Contacts

**Harley Stumm, co-producer, Intimate Spectacle** [www.intimatespectacle.com.au](http://www.intimatespectacle.com.au)  
[harley@intimatespectacle.com.au](mailto:harley@intimatespectacle.com.au) | +614 1133 0654

**Tanja Farman, co-producer, Performance Space** [www.performancespace.com.au](http://www.performancespace.com.au)  
[producer@performancespace.com.au](mailto:producer@performancespace.com.au) | +612 8571 9103 or +614 0505 9628 (mobile)

**Emma Bedford, Technical Production Manager, Performance Space**  
[production@performancespace.com.au](mailto:production@performancespace.com.au) | +612 8571 9110 or +614 2197 9665 (mobile)

**Video Showreel** <http://intimatespectacle.com.au/production/long-grass/>

# The Sydney Morning Herald

## Long Grass review: Vicki Van Hout's refuge of hope grows in expressive dance

Julia Cotton, January 15, 2015



Sydney Festival: Long Grass. Seymour Centre, January 14

★★★★☆

*Long Grass* has had a long gestation period. Director and choreographer Vicki Van Hout took five years before summoning up the courage to take on the contentious issue of displacement among indigenous fringe dwellers.

With the able assistance of cultural consultant and creative collaborator Gary Lang, a company of fine young dancers and the support of many, she has created a powerful and thought-provoking piece of theatre. Although it takes a little while to settle in and adjust to the blend of text, voice-over and dance, it soon becomes an immersive experience.

The set is evocative of the long grass of the title but everything seems to be made of plastic; there is nothing natural here. The screen, woven in the opening scenes, serves as a bed and a shelter and features throughout. It is ingeniously incorporated into the choreography; trapping and tangling the performers as often as serving as protection.

The choreography is powerful and exhilarating, Van Hout demands a lot of her dancers and they certainly deliver; their movement articulate and expressive. The sound design, played live on stage, matches the dancers in its potent energy. The ensemble sequence depicting the build-up and intensity of the storm is a highlight, especially accompanied by the pounding score. Other highlights include some confronting duets: one uncompromisingly violent, another tragic.

However, above all, there is warmth and humour. We get an idea of the sense of community that comes from living "long grass".

Lang makes a memorable contribution with his perfectly pitched voice-over, full of humour and insight. It is surprising that there are only seven performers, five dancers and two musicians. Together, they bring to life a community and enlighten us with stories of living rough, of living "long grass".



## Review: Up there for dancing

Keith Gallasch, RealTime 125, Feb-March 2015

Vicki Van Hout's Long Grass in the 2015 Dance Massive, the fourth of these two-week festivals of innovative Australian dance, follows the appearance of Marrugeku's Gudirr Gudirr ([RT114](#)), a cross-cultural collaboration featuring dancer-choreographer Dalisa Pigram in the 2013 program. Together they signal that contemporary Indigenous dance is becoming both more visible and aesthetically and culturally diverse.

The programming of Indigenous dance has not been easy for Dance Massive given the dominance of Bangarra Dance Theatre (with whom Van Hout has danced) and a paucity of works elsewhere. Pigram (see [interview](#)) and Van Hout are changing this, while the emerging TSI choreographer Ghenoa Gela (whose work appeared at last year's Next Wave and in Force Majeure's developmental workshop season Cultivate and who inventively choreographed the finale of that company's Nothing to Lose; see [review](#)) represents the promise of works to come.



Van Hout is at once auteur and collaborator—her vision and choreography are exquisitely distinctive, her creations woven through collaboration. She's an integrator, drawing on the many Indigenous dance practices people have shared with her across Australia and her fellow artists' ideas and experiences. (She is also a formidable writer, blogging enthusiastically and insightfully for Western Sydney's FORM Dance Projects. The Aboriginal English dialogue in Long Grass is witty and revealing). For Long Grass she invited Darwin dancer-choreographer Gary Lang (whose long established work needs to be seen beyond that city) to work with her as cultural consultant and co-choreographer. Van Hout, with Lang and lighting designer Clytie Smith, created the ring of tall grass, representing the vacant land where homeless and displaced Aboriginals (called "long grassers") gather in Darwin. True to the work's ambivalence about Long Grass culture—at once violent and communal—the tall grass catches the light, sparking in a bleak world. Close inspection reveals the stems and flowerings to be intricately crafted—the knotting and weaving, hours of labour—the kind of detail also evident in Van Hout's design for her first major work, Briwyant in 2011 ([RT103](#)).

A sculptural design centrepiece is of another kind of weave: a bed frame with a mattress support woven from long strips of material by the performers: it symbolises rest, intimacy, sensual seduction, entrapment and boundaries as it cradles and entangles dancers and is deftly manoeuvred about the stage framing action (see the cover of this edition).

The action is discursive; a series of vignettes of Long Grass life played with a laidback naturalism, recorded and live voice-overs (Lang), songs and eruptions of dance. This is dance theatre that really dances; the great power and precision of the highly articulated movement contrasts painfully with Long Grass inertia—drugged states and the incapacities of old age (a funny but finally sad motif). The forceful dancing represents the creative potential of joyous communality, too often distorted into sexual competition and violence—a woman beaten by one man immediately becomes target for another in a harrowing sequence, all the more ugly for its meticulous crafting. The dancers are uniformly superb in solos, duets and groups, Van Hout realising dance for the men with a rich variety of articulation and inflection. Only occasionally does the structure and tempo of Long Grass falter (a drunken night-on-the-town trio) or suggest that it's too discursive.

Long Grass is an important work, culturally, sociologically and aesthetically, revealing in observant detail the lives of the dispossessed with humour, bitterness and sadness. It's a brave work: not everyone will be able to reconcile the portrayal of hopelessness with Long Grass's inherent optimism: a fraught community with ancient if damaged roots is better than none. Not least, it is the fine weave of dance, drama and music, resonant with the design, that makes Long Grass at once tautly and casually cogent, with dance writing hope large upon the stage and on our psyches.

When I was a little boy on the north coast of NSW my brothers and sisters would crawl into the long grass to bend, arrange and 'weave' the stalks to make fragile cubby houses there to play in. Other native creatures also did this, and hid there all the time of course. Often there were more than a few deadly snakes but, blind to the danger, we never seemed to encounter them. In the Darwin tropical north bandicoots and native rats build their nests in the grass and live off the stalks, seeds and thriving resident insect-life. Snakes of all kinds in large numbers come to pick them in turn.

In the country town where my family lived in post WWII rural Australia, there were homeless Aboriginal people, a resident population, who lived in vacant unkempt grassed blocks (they never seemed to be able or want to 'squat' in the numerous derelict houses). They seemed to drink and party a lot—the 'goomies' as they were called. Their presence reminded us of a lifestyle we were possibly one step away from.

Colonial Australia, it seems, has always had a 'pest' problem. There has always been the 'Aboriginal problem'—authorities used to 'disperse' Aboriginals once upon a time. As I'm writing this, a 'rabbit cull' is taking place in the dark outside my ranger's cottage. I can hear the short quiet 'snap' of what sounds like 0.22 'silencer' bullets all around me. Darwin has always had a multicultural homeless population—Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia* begins there, but authorities have periodically attempted to eradicate what they saw as freeloading pests—physically shipping people on boats back to what is now Maningrida just after WWII, and kicking out the hippies on their way to London in the 1970s, and Aboriginal people through laws to do with public drinking in the 1980s. There was a touch of jealousy for this loose life free from the nine to five workload, so different yet right in your face. What would happen if everyone lived like this?

I came to work in Mililingimbi in 1979 and spent scattered time in Darwin as a transit place when passing through to southern cities. In the 1980s when I began to collect autobiographies from local artists at Mililingimbi and Ramingining, early in the tales would be episodes of Darwin sojourns. An historian told me that within two years of Darwin being established Aboriginal people came to live there on the fringe. Most of the senior men had, in their teens, walked the 500km westward, cross-country to Darwin looking for 'the action,' for adventure. Darwin was a freer place then. They sometimes lived in

prescribed areas like Bagot Reserve but as often camped with relatives on beaches and in the many convenient 'long grass' spaces in the centre of the city. Particular community groups had their own site-specific 'grass' sites; Parap, near the Oval, Rapid Creek, Fanny Bay, East Point, and with the hippies on the Esplanade or Casuarina Beaches.

Most expatriate workers I knew experienced their own, often darker, Darwin story: someone they became close to, who went to Darwin to live in the

'long grass' only to be lost and die there. A friend pointed out how walking into the sunset metaphorically was walking toward death. In the Arnhem Land society of arranged marriages and another consciousness, there are countless runaway brides and refugees from family disputes, convenient victims of accusations of sorcery. Many people come to the 'long grass' accidentally—they may have come to Darwin to go to hospital, to attend an education course or a political or church meeting and 'fell in with friends.' People also talked of 'having a holiday' after a big win at cards, or the final payout of a work contract.



It is timely to examine these lives; in other societies they appear romantically and seriously in literature, film and folklore. Outside of Herbert's Capricornia in 1939 and Stephen Johnson's 2000 feature film *Yolngu Boy* it's a subject rarely explored. The experience of Vicki Van Hout's *Long Grass* reminded me of surreal scenes in Fellini's 1969 film *Satyricon*, but less high camp, and also the beauty of the players and positive energy of the music and dance portrayed in Marcel Camus' 1959 *Black Orpheus*, another tale of refugees on the fringe.

I was told recently that all art could be described as form, content and context. *Long Grass* is an immersive, captivating work in form and style that charms, seduces and positively takes you into its arms. Its context, and some of its content, is the existential question posed by Camus and facing many Aboriginal youth today: to commit suicide or not commit suicide; after that everything is simple and structured.

There are many reasons for being depressed and committing suicide and many ways to do it; drinking yourself to death is a common one. I remember a particular man.

A totem is temporal—it exists in a physical site, in time and a season. There was a man from a small almost extinct clan group. We were close friends and at one stage talked about sharing a house due to the housing shortage. He belonged to a 'line of clouds' totem group that included anchovies and stingrays. His name meant a species of stingray. He was also a painter of small, fine pointed subject matter. I remember a year of 'king' tides when schools of small fish would come into the shallows and skip across the water. The tides spilled onto the land such that you could scoop the fish out of the gutters at the side of the coastal road. 'Stingray' had just finished a contract and before he holidayed in Darwin he took a painting with him to make extra money. We joked about the 'mokuy' dead spirit in his painting and how it was a self-fulfilling prophecy in the long grass lifestyle. Within several weeks he'd died there.

All through the wet season and just into the dry everything magically grows, seemingly overnight. The 'long grass' can be two or three metres high. I remember driving through walls for more than an hour with nothing in sight other than this straw curtain in front of me. In April comes the violent powerful 'knock'em' storms that flatten the grass and clear the line of sight. Watching *Long Grass* I thought of Vicki Van Hout as an amazing ball of energy like these storms that come out of nowhere to energize, create and be gone again before you can blink.

***Djon Mundine OAM, of the Bandjalung people, NSW, is an artist, writer, educator and independent curator. This essay was commissioned by RealTime and originally published in RealTime #125, Feb-March 2015.***





# About the Artists & Producers

## **Performance Space** [www.performancespace.com.au](http://www.performancespace.com.au)

Performance Space is a cultural agency that facilitates new artistic projects and connects them with audiences across many different sites and venues: from theatres and galleries to non-traditional spaces and site-specific projects. We believe that every space is a performance space.

## **Intimate Spectacle** [www.intimatespectacle.com.au](http://www.intimatespectacle.com.au)

Intimate Spectacle is a Sydney-based independent producing company working with artists across contemporary performance, theatre, dance theatre & live art. We connect artists and audiences through memorable, transformative shared experiences, that may be surprising, playful, visceral, always engaging.

### **Vicki Van Hout, Director & Choreographer**

Vicki Van Hout is a Wiradjuri woman born on the south coast of NSW. An independent choreographer, performance-maker and teacher, she has worked across a range of performance mediums nationally and internationally. Her work practice emanates from the belief that all cultural information is fluid in its relevance and that we both exchange in and adhere to patterns of cultural behaviour and its tacit meanings. Her last full length show, *Briwyant*, premiered at Performance Space in 2011, and toured to Malthouse Theatre (Melbourne), Brisbane Powerhouse and Darwin Festival in 2012, the first ever national tour of a work by an independent indigenous choreographer. It was nominated for an Australian Dance Award for Best Achievement in Independent Dance. Vicki was recently awarded the 2014 NSW Dance Fellowship for established and mid-career artists – the first Indigenous winner of the Fellowship. She is currently working on a commission for Carriageworks, as part of *24 Frames Per Second*, a major exhibition of screen-based dance works by Australian and international artists premiering in June.

### **Gary Lang, Choreographic Collaborator, Cultural Consultant & Voice/Sound Performer**

Gary is a Larrakia man, fellow graduate of NAISDA Dance College, residing in Darwin. He is a natural storyteller often sharing unsolicited local knowledge via personal anecdotes. He has intimate experience of the Long Grassers 'life through family connection. As well as performer/choreographer, Gary is a painter and hair dresser. Both occupations compliment his heightened sense of aesthetics as his intricate weaving was a part of the elite competitive hair circuit and his paintings consist of equally painstaking attention to very fine detail. Gary has worked as dancer/choreographer with Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, Bangarra Dance Theatre and with Darwin based Tracks Dance Company, before founding Gary Lang NT Dance. Lang's works such as *Entrapment* (2004), *Munuk Gapu Freshwater Saltwater* (2008) and *Goose Lagoon* (2010) combine traditional Indigenous stories and performance styles with contemporary dance. He is currently a Dance Board fellow working on numerous projects including *Mokoi*, funded by the Dance Board.

### **Phil Downing, Sound Designer**

Phil has worked with Erth Visual & Physical extensively for over a decade; designing soundtracks using an array of unique and conventional instruments. Highlights include *Murder* (MFI commission by Sydney Festival, Adelaide Festival and Ten Days on the Island, 2013), *Garden* (Melbourne Festival & international), *All Mother* (Street Theatre, Canberra), *Gondwana* (National Gallery Canberra / International), *The Nargun and the Stars* (Sydney & Perth Festivals), & *Taniwha* (Auckland War Memorial Museum). Other highlights include: *The Piper* (My Darling Patricia for Sydney Festival, 2014), *Posts in the Paddock* and *Politely Savage* (My Darling Patricia 2005, 2012), *Exchange* music program in juvenile detention (2000), recording and touring with bands (Dogbuoy 1998, *Faker Addicted Romantic* 2005), mastering Quartz Composer (video manipulation program), and producing recordings for himself and others.

### **Clytie Smith, Lighting Designer**

Clytie Smith has over 15 experience working as a production manager and lighting designer for contemporary performance, theatre and dance, predominantly working at Performance Space and Carriageworks with broad selection of Sydney based artists. She worked for the large-scale promenade works for Sydney Festival *Minto Live!* and *Funpark* (2014), and on production for the large scale Indigenous work *Gathering Ground*, history, ceremony, protest in Redfern.



### **Darren Edwards, Dancer**

Darren was born and bred in Darwin. He started his dancing career with Gary Lang at the 2006 Dreaming Festival in Woodford QLD. This sparked his love for dance and since then he has performed at the 2006 Deadly Awards, 2007 Dreaming Festival, 2007 Darwin Festival in IMoves, 2007 Strut Festival Perth and the 2008 Quinkan for esteemed Indigenous choreographer Marilyn Miller. Darren was part of the ensemble involved in Goose Lagoon and worked with Gary Lang and OCHRE Contemporary Indigenous Dance Company. Darren performed an acting role in 'Slow Falling Bird' directed by Gail Evans for the Darwin Theatre Company in 2013. His acting career continued in 2014 performing in 'The Hoist' directed by Gail Evans for the Darwin Theatre Company. Darren toured with 'The Gift of Life' through Western Australia in 2014 with Artback NT. Darren was part of the latest Gary Lang NT Dance production – Mokuy (Spirit). This will be Darren's fifth production with Gary Lang NT Dance Company, is currently working with Vicki Van Hout for her contemporary dance piece 'Longgrass' in 2015.

### **Thomas E. S. Kelly, Dancer**

Thomas is a proud Wiradjuri and Bundjalung man from Queensland and New South Wales, Australia. In 2012 he graduated from NAISDA Dance College and has since worked with Graeme Watson, Kim Walker, Taane Mete (NZ), Tairoa Royal (NZ), Jock Soto (USA) and Lina Cruz (CAN). In 2014 he undertook a Jump Mentorship under Vicki Van Hout, completed the NIDA Acting Techniques 1 short course at NIDA, and completed a first stage development on a 25 minute solo work, "Jarrah's Old Uncle", at Campbelltown Arts Centre. He also choreographed *Nyunga* for Short + Sweet Sydney, later remounted twice and extended to a 20 minute piece for the Homeground Festival at the Sydney Opera House. In September 2014 Thomas he was part of a 4 week professional Indigenous Dance Residency in Canada, where he danced and choreographed in the show *Trace* at the Summer Banff Festival, directed by Red Sky's Artistic Director Sandra Laronde.

### **Katina Olsen, Dancer**

Wakka Wakka and Kombumerri woman. Katina has performed nationally and internationally for Bangarra Dance Theatre 2007-10, Frances Rings and Narelle Benjamin's *Forseen* (Debris & The Dark Room) 2011, Tess de Quincey's *No Cold Feet* 2011, *I Am Eora* (Sydney Festival 2012), Erth's *Murder* (MFI commission 2013) and Bernadette Walong-Sene's *Bone Woman...when all is gone* 2014. She received a danceWEB scholarship in 2011 and two JUMP mentorships in 2014: Individually with Philip Channells and Dance Makers Collective with Michelle Silby. Career highlights also include choreographing for the production *Walking into the Bigness* directed by Wayne Blair and Chris Mead, Malthouse Theatre 2014 and *Instar* as part of Dance Makers Collective's premiere work *Big Dance in Small Chunks* at Parramatta Riverside, 2013.

### **Caleena Sansbury, Dancer**

Caleena Sansbury studied dance at National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Association (NAISDA). She travelled to Saibai Island, Torres Straits and Elcho Island, North East Arnhem Land spending time in community learning culture and dance, before graduating in 2013. She worked at Ochre Dance Company on secondment, dancing in 'Dreamtide', performing a duo choreographed by Kristina Chan called 'Two Player Game' and has also worked with Vick Van Hout including in a piece called 'Community phone'.

She has performed in Short and Sweet festival, toured to Vanuatu in 'Yellaka', and to Scotland with Sydney Opera House's Boomerang festival. Caleena has choreographed a dance work for young indigenous children in Nowra performing a collaborated piece called 'Transmit'. Shortly after Caleena completed a two-week internship with Australian Dance Theatre. Caleena has the makings of a great dancer and has an energetic charisma that brings to life her personality on stage with a defined quality in her movement that remains true to her cultural heritage.

### **Taree Sansbury, Dancer**

Taree Sansbury is a recent graduate from NAISDA Dance College, NSW, Australia. Highlights from Taree's time with NAISDA include, performing at the Sydney Opera House for the Deadly Awards, learning from traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and performing works choreographed by Frances Rings, Kristina Chan and Gary Lang in 2013. Upon becoming a freelance dance artist Taree has had the opportunity to be a part of various initiatives including this 2014's Short and Sweet festival, Opera House's 2104 Homeground festival and Won Smol Bag International Theatre Festival in Vanuatu. Taree was a performer in Force Majeure's two-year Culminate/Cultivate program which was closely followed by a three-week internship with Australian Dance Theatre in August 2014.