



Mark Atkins performing *Mungangga Garlagula* in Melbourne

Mungangga Garlagula

Bunjil Place, Melbourne, Australia

Before didgeridoo player and storyteller Mark Atkins enters the stage to perform *Mungangga Garlagula* (*Yarning By The Fire*), the space is empty and quiet. Correction: night swamp frogs gurgle; blue haze hovers; small yellow globes glow. Such artifice could be mistaken for tasteful set design, but those elements audiovisually graph an embodied Blak landscape, into which Atkins guides the audience.

His six stories – short, Carveresque pendants of surreal and existential calm – are about being present in timelessness. Racial integration, spiritual dislocation, temporal displacement and bodily regeneration are all cryptically folded into his simplistic ‘campfire yarns’. Those small globes are contextualised in the folk tale of the Min Min lights, whose haunting allure he experienced while working on a farm in outback Queensland.

All the stories are less narrated than retold, as Atkins sits by an imagined campfire, swigging water in a tin mug. His riveting voice is granulated by centuries of campfire smoke; his delivery isn’t measured in calculated beats, but breathed like a songline woven by its internal temporality. Atkins neither sounds ‘ocker’ (a crude Australian working class stereotype) nor does he parody such embarrassing tropes. In

place, he manages to stake an Indigenous zone of orality and vocality, powerfully combining the guttural and glottal as if he were a talking tree.

That Atkins’s tales feel so unfettered by coddling quality dramaturgy owes much to the deft musical accompaniment directed by violinist Erkki Veltheim (TURA Music in Perth commissioned the piece from the duo). Each of Atkins’s stories is incorporated into Veltheim’s precise and delicate compositions and arrangements. Most involve an ensemble of stellar performers recorded for playback: Anthony Pateras on piano and synths; Genevieve Lacey on recorders; Vanessa Tomlinson on percussion; Stephen Magnusson on guitars; and Scott Tinkler on trumpet; Veltheim adding live violin playing, Max/MSP-processing and spatialisation.

Atkins often leaves captivating pauses in his speech, allowing Veltheim’s music to dance around his words. The music’s stop/start speed alterations which accompany his drunken tale of losing his boots (later finding them in his car boot) are a stand-out. His spatiotemporal dislocation in trying to find the boots serves as a powerful symbol of Indigenous displacement upon colonial land. Compatibly, Veltheim’s disruption of the ensemble’s fragmented musical gestures evokes a decolonialising force bearing on the assumedly untouchable tenets of free improvisation.

In fact, much of Veltheim’s music levers a sharp criticality into the sonic mise-en-scène of *Mungangga Garlagula*. Far from sober, respectful accompaniment, the music – full of improvised curlicues, atonal interiority and modernist gravitas – activates a discursive response to Indigenous identity. The duo’s considered collaboration highlights interracial complexity by refusing typical humanist tropes which fumble politically correct frames of reference. Melodiousness is avoided, as is terse confrontation. In their place: a moving sono-narrational acceptance of Otherness.

This is most apparent in Atkins’s three didgeridoo performances. Each is accompanied by backing tracks of layered didgeridoo recorded by Veltheim, occasionally mixed with instrumental textures by the ensemble’s individual performers. Listening to these engrossing dimensional realms of bass dronality, it becomes apparent that the term extended technique does not apply to the didgeridoo. Here is an instrument wonderfully alien to European mechanical acoustics and instrumentality.

In these moments, it is like Atkins dissolves himself into a figural presence, sharply instating his drones not simply through sound occupying space, but through being present on land.

Philip Brophy