

# barbican



Black Arm Band: dirtsong

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4–5 May, Theatre

Black Arm Band:

**Shellie Morris** vocals

**Deline Briscoe** vocals

**Djolpa McKenzie** vocals

**Fred Leone** vocals

**Mark Atkins** didgeridoo

**Michael Meagher** bass

**Greg Sheehan** drums, percussion

**Julien Wilson** sax

**Nigel McLean** violin

**Eugene Ball** trumpet

**Sam Keever** piano

There will be an interval in this concert

Imagine, for a moment, that you have no words. That the language you knew, the mother tongue spoken by your ancestors for tens of thousands of years, has dissolved. Vanished. Been swept away.

For Indigenous Australia, this is reality. Right across the continent, in some of its remotest reaches, small communities of Aboriginal people each have their own ancient languages, which they had developed to contain the land and everything in it. Many such languages are gone, forgotten. Others are being wrested back from the brink of extinction.

Tonight the Black Arm Band – that acclaimed collective of artists intent on promoting and celebrating Australian Aboriginal music (and interrogating mainstream Australian culture) – will sing these words back into being, deliver the stories they tell back to country.

'First nations people in Australia have a very strong link to country,' says singer and rapper Fred Leone, BAB's co-artistic director. 'We are over 350 tribal and language groups and our continent is split by boundaries, much like Europe. Our boundaries have been in existence since the beginning of time.'

Colonisation, extermination and so-called 'assimilation' have all severed the songlines that linked so many tribes to their specific spiritual and traditional homelands: 'The revitalisation of language is crucial for the story of First Nations people,' says Leone. 'Music and arts are key to our survival, to making our culture relevant to our young people.'

Welcome, then, to *dirtsong*, a multimedia journey through Australia's cultural heartland. Sand will shift. Dirt will be dug. Languages – 11 endangered Aboriginal languages from Gumatj and Ngaatjatjara to Peek Whurrong and Yorta Yorta – will be sung and shared. Snippets of text by award-winning Waanyi writer Alexis Wright, with its themes of law, country and belonging, will underline the notion of a community creatively united in story and music, and in the spirit of empowerment, reconciliation and hope. Always hope.

Beloved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) artists such as yidaki didgeridoo maestro Mark Atkins and the singers Shellie Morris, Deline Briscoe and Nicole Lampton will engage in musical conversations alongside whitefella artists including lauded percussionist Greg Sheehan. All before a backdrop of black-and-white cinematography by Natasha Gadd and Rhys Graham of Daybreak Films, shot in urban inner cities as well as outback communities – on country – alike.

'Make no mistake, this is music to send a shudder down your spine and bring a tear to your eye,' wrote *The Age* newspaper of a show that was first performed in 2009 at the Melbourne International Arts festival, and has since wowed numerous festivals around the world, with elements featured in the London 2012 Olympics Festival (namely, Lou Bennett's *Mamiath Mother-Tongue*).

*dirtsong* follows two earlier productions by the supergroup, which was founded in 2006 as a project of the City of Melbourne, inspired by the late ARIA Award-nominated Indigenous Australian musician and writer, Ruby Hunter. The projects *murundak* (2006), a moving paean to Australia's very own black protest movement, and *Hidden Republic* (2008) toured Australia and overseas, appearing at festivals such as WOMAD UK, working with orchestras including the Melbourne Symphony, shining a light on the world's oldest living culture and becoming a bona fide music theatre company in the process.

A host of skilled musicians, composers, directors and technicians have worked with this fluid yet cohesive ensemble: Kev Carmody, Archie Roach, Emma Donovan and Dan Sultan. Aussie folk rock stalwarts like Shane Howard and Paul Kelly. At the heart of them all, and at the heart of BAB, is a deep connection with Indigenous communities across Australia, with remote music workshops and performance programs making a positive impact on over 2500 participants.

So settle back, and open your ears, ears and heart as *dirtsong* starts quietly, in the near dark, with a single beam of light imagining a campfire in another time and place, another culture. Songs such as 'Far Away Home/Gungalaira' – originally written and sung by Archie Roach for the award-winning film *The Tracker* – will be delivered in English and Bundjalung by Shellie Morris; Deline Briscoe will sing the show's eponymous title track ('*dirtsong*/Baiyan Woka')

in Yorta Yorta, telling of the connection between people, song and country in a song written by Lou Bennett from the Echucha, Barma region in Victoria, the heartland of Yorta Yorta country.

The instrumental 'Coming Up Close Now' sees didgeridoo, drums and saxophone invoke a gathering or, to use a Wongi word from the Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie regions of Western Australia, a 'Grungada'. Then there's 'Rainstorm', as sung by Shellie Morris in language from the southern end of Kakadu National Park, and 'Burad' – written and sung in Badjjala by Fred Leone: 'I wrote this for my sons, nephews and nieces in our language,' he says. 'It's about how I learned to hunt by watching Burad, the white-bellied sea eagle, so we know where to fish.'

There's more, of course. Much more. The angelic chorus of Briscoe, Morris and Lampton will sing 'Yarian Mi Tji/What's My Name'. Djolpa McKenzie gifts us 'Dron Wanga', a song in Gumatj, one of the Yolnu Matha languages of northeast Arnhem Land. 'There's Big Land' by Deline Briscoe (with Nicole Lampton), based on a text by Alexis Wright and delivered in Kuku Yalanji, the rainforest country of the Daintree. 'All you people,' she'll sing. 'Come listen to this spiritual connection to land.'

Listen, indeed. Then roll the sounds around on your tongue. Here are old languages made new, and words that need to be spoken.

Programme notes © Jane Cornwell

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