

Environmental performance brings new perspective to the Dandenongs

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By Sarah Liversidge

It has long been a weekend tradition for Melburnians to head to the Dandenongs for a picnic or some Devonshire tea. Townships nestled among giant mountain ash and tree ferns offer tea and scones, craft shops and manicured European gardens. But the history of the land goes back much further than the colonial settlement of the 1850s. Little is known about this history.

This is what local resident, academic and artist Gretel Taylor considered in the development of *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul*, a project combining performance, walks and workshops at Mount Dandenong.

Live performances took place on November 28 and 29 of last year. An interactive sensory walk and art installations are available to the public until the end of January.

Gretel said there is a “European facade” to the Dandenongs and visitors can get a “superficial” experience.

“There’s fake Tudor buildings and a culture of Devonshire tea,” she said. “There is a lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous presence and culture, and instead an overwriting of place with mainly white, European culture.”

In researching the history of the area, Gretel noticed the name Corhanwarrabul appeared several times. In the Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people, it is the name for the entire Dandenong Ranges, and also the ‘two peaks’, now known as Mount Dandenong and Mount Corhanwarrabul.

“I live really close to this place. Nobody even knows the name Corhanwarrabul,” she says.

Gretel also discovered the mountains were “a meeting place for tribes” of the Kulin Nation prior to white settlement.

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Gretel Taylor performing at Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul last November. Photo Laki Sideris

Yarra Ranges Council member Suzanne Earhart attended the event on the Saturday. Murrundindi provided a Welcome to Country which followed on to performances by individual artists, Wurundjeri women's dance group, Djirri Djirri, and a guided sensory walk.

She said the event was "incredibly effective in stripping back some of the layers of the space and revealing the history and environment through performance".

Suzanne said the artists' performances on the day gave way to a new perception of the environment.

"Later, you go back to these places and you don't see them in the same way," she says. "You see more layers, more depths, more meanings."

Murrundindi, who is the ngurungaeta, or head man, of the Wurundjeri people, said the weekend was "unbelievable". He said he was impressed with all the performances but felt "very proud" of the Djirri Djirri dancers, who he calls his "great nieces".

"People get so much out of this kind of stuff... The history of the land, the history of the culture, the history of dance and movement," he said.

Gretel said she wanted to introduce site-specific performance to the audience "as a way of activating the place in new ways", and felt the weekend succeeded in giving the audience a "sense of reverence for place and for Indigenous culture".



Wurundjeri women's dance group, Djirri Djirri, performing at Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul last November. Photo Laki Sideris

Stuart Grant, a founding director of the Environmental Performance Authority (EPA), an “ecological and environmental place-based performance company”, said the EPA was asked by Gretel to facilitate “intensified sensory experiences” for the audience.

“What we aimed to do...was draw the attention of the audience to the senses of the place, things we take for granted like the movement of the air or the touch of the foliage,” he said.

In addition to sensory experiences, Stuart says the EPA aims to explore stories of place in their site-specific performances. Like Gretel, Stuart said knowledge of the Aboriginal history in the Dandenongs is scarce.

“Colonisation sought to erase Indigenous experience,” he said. “With *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul*, we were really aware that the Dandenongs, in white cultural histories, have been a place where the myth of English rural gentility was imposed on Melbourne.”

The EPA members staged a mock colonial picnic at the conclusion of events on the Saturday to demonstrate this aspect of the place.

Gretel said this was in stark contrast to the other performances.

“It was an edgy, unnerving moment,” she said.

Murrundindi said the audience at *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul* were interested in the Aboriginal history of the area.

“After I did the Welcome, people wanted to talk to me and to know the history,” he said. “They didn’t want to go home once I started talking.”

Murrundindi believes people are searching for meaning and are “really reaching out for the spiritual side of [Aboriginal] culture”.



Artists and audience participate in a mock colonial picnic facilitated by the EPA. Photo Laki Sideris

Both Stuart and Gretel agree *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul* attempts to stimulate a greater appreciation of the environment and this could be linked to raising awareness on climate change.

“If you acquaint with something more closely then it makes you care for it,” Gretel said. “A shift may happen in behaviour if you feel more of an affinity with where you are.”

Gretel said the walk led by Murrundindi highlighted an appreciation for the environment from an Indigenous perspective.

“To us the forest landscape can look all the same, but he showed us that all the ingredients for life were right there,” she says.

Stuart said climate change is “the reason [the EPA] exists”.

“We try to foster an appreciation and understanding of the environment for its own sake, where we are just one small part of that environment,” he says. “We think that through performance we can change the relationships between humans and everything else.”

Gretel said the past 12 months has helped foster more opportunities for outdoor performances.

“In this time of COVID, we can’t really go to a theatre. The EPA has been doing outdoor performances for a while and now other groups are looking to do more work outdoors,” she said.

Suzanne said *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul* may inform future Yarra Ranges Council projects including *RidgeWalk*, a large-scale art project that is still in a developmental phase.

“When I first spoke to Gretel about *Dancing Place*, I realised that this is the kind of thing we want to do for *RidgeWalk*,” she said.

“It provided opportunities for local artists for unique storytelling about the cultural heritage of the region celebrated in the natural environment. It brought people together.”

Suzanne also said Gretel and other participants brought an academic research angle to *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul* that could be applied to future council projects.

“We keep saying that these kinds of experiences achieve certain things but that’s just anecdotal,” she said. “Documenting the audience experience can help us in advocacy or seeking further funding.”

Stuart said the EPA have discussed their data gathering techniques used for *Dancing place: Corhanwarrabul* with the council, who have been “open-minded”.

“We would like to offer *Corhanwarrabul* as providing a kind of template for the experiential data gathering analysis and allocation of experiential data for *RidgeWalk*,” he said.

Suzanne hopes things like *Dancing: Place Corhanwarrabul* can continue while *RidgeWalk* is being constructed to “keep up some momentum”.

She also said the council will continue to engage with Indigenous leaders.

“You can’t have a project about human connection to land without looking at a First Nations perspective,” she said.

The *Dancing Place Corhanwarrabul* website, including videos of artists’ performances, can be viewed at <https://dancingplacecorhanwarrabul.com/>.