



MELBOURNE

# FRINGE

*dis place, dis mob.* Melbourne Fringe 2017.  
Photo by Theresa Harrison.

## DEADLY FRINGE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In 2017, Melbourne Fringe launched its brand-new artist development program, Deadly Fringe. Delivered in partnership with ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development. The program sought to uncover emerging Indigenous voices in contemporary performance. The program was generously supported by Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Trawalla Foundation and the Australian Government – Indigenous Languages and the Arts.

The program aims to fundamentally shift the way in which Melbourne Fringe interacts with the Indigenous community – its artists, producers and audiences. Through an open application process, two artists were selected to present a new work at the Festival. Joel Bray (Wiradjuri) presented the highly acclaimed *Biladurang*, a dance work drawn from the Wiradjuri's creation story of the platypus, and Kate ten Buuren (Taungurung) presented *dis place*, a collective exploration of gentrification and displacement. Joel and Kate were joined by emerging producers Kalinda Palmer (Nyikina & Jabbirr Jabbirr) and Levi Weston (Noongar) who supported the production and delivery of these works as well as the Festival's Creative Program.

The following interviews give an insight into the experience of the participants of the first year of the program. Deadly Fringe will continue in 2018 and recruitment for new participants is underway.

### KALINDA PALMER Emerging Producer, Deadly Fringe

*"Deadly Fringe is a leading example and I think other mainstream organisations can really be inspired. It encourages the inclusion and incorporation of Indigenous arts"*

*and opens up a mutual pathway between mainstream organisations and Indigenous artists.”*

Kalinda Palmer – or ‘Gal’ as she’s known to family, friends and Fringe colleagues - was one of the two Indigenous emerging producers who participated in the first ever Deadly Fringe artist development program. Before Deadly Fringe, Gal had never considered participating in the Festival. Having grown up in the Kimberleys, she had never even interacted with a fringe festival before. She heard about the opportunity through her small but strong networks here in Melbourne, and applied amidst energetic conversation among community.

Broadly speaking, Gal had been working within an Indigenous environment, with Fringe her first formal foray into ‘mainstream’ arts. When asked if this was a deliberate choice, Gal responded:

*“The Indigenous environment is often more welcoming. We want to be involved in our own communities. It’s hard to find who we are. In a big city like Melbourne, projects that have an Indigenous orientation are appealing because of their sense of safety.”*

Through her experience in Deadly Fringe, Gal felt she had strengthened her sense of community and belonging, having only moved to Melbourne a year prior. Gal felt empowered to be part of a cohort of young Indigenous artists with the freedom to shape the program’s delivery and evolution.

While Gal’s contributions to Melbourne Fringe are difficult to measure by conventional standards, her legacy has already permeated the organisation’s practices, attitudes and conversations. Gal connected Melbourne Fringe to community. She influenced the language and guided staff through protocols. She linked broader creative projects back to the program and its intentions. She introduced Melbourne Fringe to Indigenous centres and challenged staff to consider their own work through a different lens. Most significantly, Gal became a role model.

*“There aren’t many emerging Indigenous producers – Levi and I demonstrated to community the possibilities and that there is an entry point for us to come in.”*

Reflecting on the challenges, Gal was always conscious of the role she played within the program. Without guidance from arts elders, she often found herself questioning whether she was allowed to be here, or allowed to be doing this. With this in mind, Gal suggested the incorporation of an Elders Mentorship Program for future Deadly Fringe participants so that Melbourne Fringe can provide a genuinely safe context for Indigenous arts professionals.

For Gal, Deadly Fringe was the beginning of many new friendships and relationships. From day one, opportunities and pathways opened up for her, and she has already begun to incorporate her work at Fringe into her broader producing career. On a tangible level, Gal makes a direct link between her participation in Deadly Fringe and her invitation to participate in the 2017 Refuge Festival at Arts House. On a personal level, Gal feels that her experience has strengthened her sense of community and supported her to firmly establish herself here in Melbourne as a producer and arts professional.

## **LEVI WESTON** **Emerging Producer, Deadly Fringe**

Levi Weston had never heard of a fringe festival before. He was new to Melbourne and looking to re-establish himself in the arts. He was seeking new experiences and saw Deadly Fringe as a chance for Indigenous arts practitioners to be involved in the sector within a supported framework, with opportunities to learn what it took to run a Festival. This was particularly appealing to Levi, whose 10-year plans sees him running his own production company. In his own words, he wants to be Australia’s answer to Tyler Perry.

*“Without Deadly Fringe, I think I would have been too intimidated to leap into the scene here in Melbourne.”*

Going into Deadly Fringe, Levi had plans to discover the inner-workings of a Festival. While he had some experience of this through his work at Yirramboi — First Nations Arts Festival, he wanted to immerse himself in the creative and business processes involved in the delivery of such a large-scale Festival.

*“You can often become the ‘token’ Indigenous artist; an accidental spokesperson for Indigenous people. You get the label of ‘Indigenous’ - but I’m an artist first.”*

Levi says that he felt safe at Melbourne Fringe. He felt that while in other areas of the sector there can be an inherent segregation between ‘black’ and ‘white’, there were no barriers at Melbourne Fringe. He was not pigeonholed into being “the Aboriginal guy” but instead recognised for his work as an emerging producer across a vast Festival program of creative public works, the open-access program and the artist development program.

For Levi, his contribution to Melbourne Fringe had its greatest impact in the connections he fostered between what he considers to be a ‘mainstream’ Festival and Indigenous communities.

*“They weren’t just seeing black artists, they were seeing everything. Aunties were at the launch, mob were at the Club - the lines were blurred.”*

Reflecting on his experience, Levi is humbled to think about the foundation he has set for the program’s next cohort. The future is already opening up for Levi. Through his work in Deadly Fringe, Levi fostered industry connections across the sector. One such connection at IBJIBERRI Theatre Company has already led to work on a brand-new TV series for the ABC.

*“Having had a break from the arts since 2009, this experience reinvigorated my ambition and my career and gave me a glimpse of what was possible.”*



**JOEL BRAY**  
**Artist, Deadly Fringe**

*“Deadly Fringe was the ideal opportunity for me. I hadn’t considered Fringe before, but the opportunity to make risky work was irresistible.”*

Joel Bray spent most of his Festival time in a hotel room. He was at times naked, but he was never alone. In fact, Joel was performing to sold-out houses every night.

If it weren’t for Deadly Fringe, Joel says that he would not have participated in the Festival at all, which also means he wouldn’t have scooped up three awards for his new work. Joel’s *Biladurang* was awarded ‘Best Performance’, the ‘Arts House Evolution Award’ and the ‘Market Ready Award’ supported by Regional Arts Victoria. Loosely echoing the Wiradjuri story of the platypus, Joel’s work was a dance-theatre piece that explored the idea of ‘no-where’ and considered questions of identity and purpose. For Joel, Deadly Fringe provided the time, resources and support that he needed in order to participate.

Joel’s experience of the sector so far has also come with its challenges. He feels that often funding applications are overly-bureaucratic and “reward an ability to rattle off keywords and regurgitate the arts industry speak, rather than the ability to make work. The language is very white and available to those from privileged backgrounds.” With Deadly Fringe, Joel noticed that the language used in everything - from how the call-out was advertised through to communications with the organisation - was geared towards making the process as accessible as possible.

*“So many opportunities go to people who know the right people. The selection process and the whole support system of Deadly Fringe reversed that and actually connected me to a whole new milieu of artists, programmers and producers in - Melbourne.”*

As Joel puts it, Deadly Fringe has put a ‘rocket-booster’ under his practice. The program provided him with a platform to bring his work to a broader audience and to industry stakeholders and build new opportunities for himself. As a direct result of his participation, he already has new commissions for work, invitations to sit on industry award juries, and has been offered residencies and funding to make new work.



Joel Bray (left) accepts the Melbourne Fringe Award for Best Performance for *Biladurang*.  
Photo by Theresa Harrison.

**KATE TEN BUUREN**  
**Artist, Deadly Fringe**

*"I immediately thought Deadly Fringe would be great for a collaborative approach, a chance for 'dis mob', as visual artists to expand and take our practices to another level."*

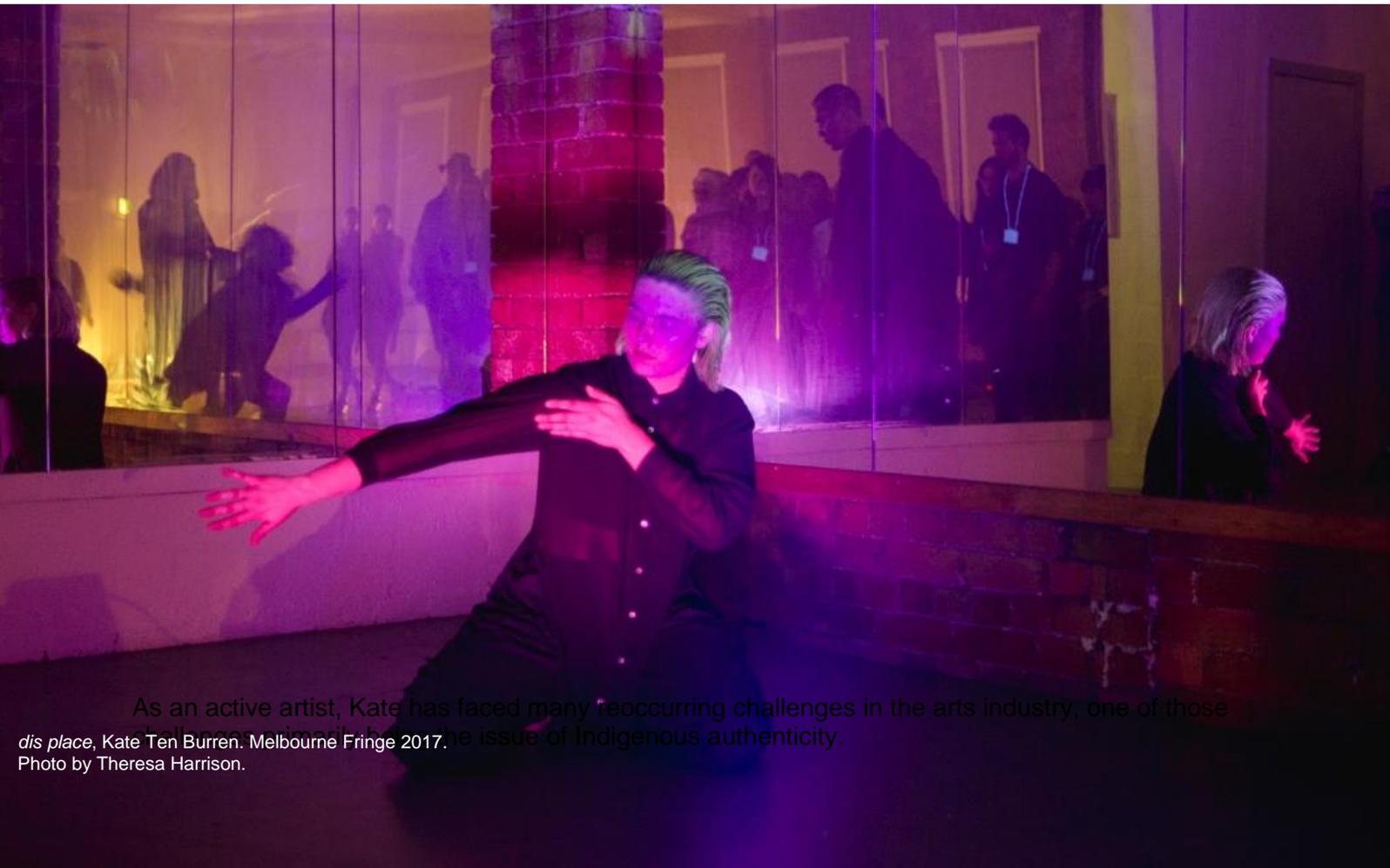
'dis mob' is a creative collective of emerging First Nation artists led by Taungurung woman Kate ten Buuren. Kate produced *dis place* - a one off, atmospheric, 'shivers down your spine' performance, echoing the pain of displacement, colonisation and the hardship and beauty of identity. Kate had never considered Melbourne Fringe before, although all that changed when a friend sent her the advertisement for Deadly Fringe.

Kate instantly noticed that ILBIJERRI Theatre Company was involved with the Festival. This relationship with ILBIJERRI made the program more accessible for Kate and as it was her first time producing a live performance, she often called on ILBIJERRI for advice, cultural guidance, friendship and technical resources.

*"It was really important to have ILIJERRI there as support, partially with cultural protocols as they provided a safe environment. Having a Blackfella organisation acted as a buffer between us and Fringe, opening more doors to connect with mob and other artists within ILBIJERRI too."*

Not only did the partnership with ILBIJERRI grab Kate's attention, the platform of support and resources Fringe offered sparked a sense of flexibility and excitement. Kate applied for the artist position, knowing that Deadly Fringe would encourage experimentation, allowing her to reach for innovation, without feeling limited.

*"The financial support of \$9,000 definitely made our vision possible. A lot of the time we are expected to work for free. In this case it was really important to have financial backing so that we could support our community."*



As an active artist, Kate has faced many reoccurring challenges in the arts industry, one of those challenges primarily being the issue of Indigenous authenticity.

*“People usually expect my work to look a certain way, Fringe was very accepting of our work, as they didn’t project their expectations of Aboriginal Art on to us. There was never that moment with Fringe, where we had to explain why or what our work is. Essentially whatever we were doing, was Aboriginal work because that’s who we are.”*

Overall Kate concluded that her experience was a huge learning curve. From the experience of the performance to the feedback she received, Kate is now turning the conversation to what’s next for *dis place* - is it an exhibition in a gallery, or another live performance? The team is bubbling with exciting new ideas. Kate highly recommends the program to other mob and hopes to see it evolve in the future.

## **DEADLY FRINGE CONCLUSIONS**

Deadly Fringe honoured the cultural and social reform potential of the Arts and the empowerment it brings for artists, audiences and communities. Deadly Fringe amplified the voices, ideas and ambitions of Australia’s First Nations people. Whilst Deadly Fringe is a platform for celebration, Fringe acknowledges that a deeper level of understanding and knowledge transmission must occur across the broader arts when striving for reconciliation.

*Melbourne Fringe Principal Partners:*



*Deadly Fringe is proudly supported by:*

