

## **Preparing Ground**

### Project Update 2023

[Preparing Ground](#) is an independent contemporary dance project showcasing First Nations-led responses to colonisation's impacts on Country, climate, language, people and place.

Co-directed by Marilyn Miller, Katina Olsen and Jasmin Sheppard, and produced by BlakDance, *Preparing Ground* is about preparing land for Ceremony, preparing us with the knowledge to survive, and supporting the community to lead change into the future Future.

Here we share an update on the project, as it moves from the on Country research phase into creative developments.

To stay up-to-date with the project in the coming months, please visit the [BlakDance website](#) and follow [BlakDance on Instagram](#).

#### **Key points in this update:**

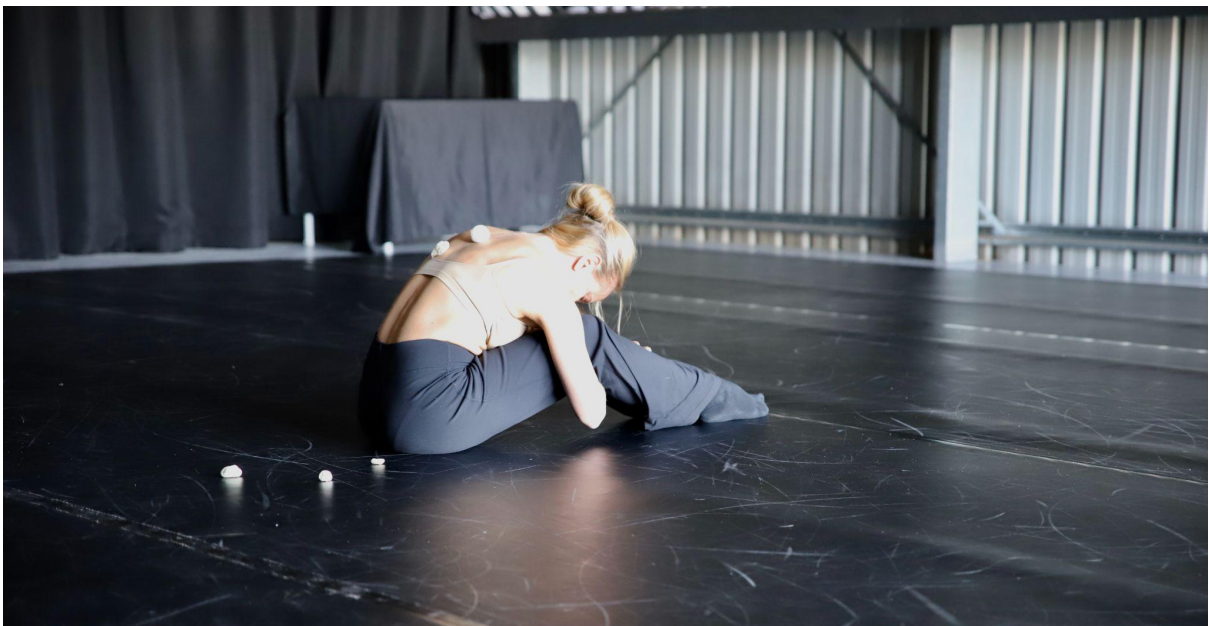
- **Creative Developments are taking place June - October 2023.** These primarily focus on the collaboration between the three co-Directors to develop the dance aspects of the work, alongside drafting design concepts (set / projection / sound).
- **The Community Engagement model,** for engaging communities on whose Country a presentation venue resides, will be piloted with Kombumerri community at HOTA, **May-October 2023.** This 4-stage model supports a core goal of the project - to be a platform for local First Nations voices - supporting communities' self-determined involvement in a presentation, including the invitation to the audience to participate in a social impact activity that takes place beyond the auditorium.
- **Four on Country trips took place between April 2022 and May 2023.** The artists offer their reflections on these below, considering their foundational importance to the project, as well as the impact of these trips on them personally and their artistic practices.
- **A series of interviews with Elders, Traditional Owners and family members** have been recorded as part of the on Country phase of Preparing Ground. These rich discussions form part of the project's storytelling going forwards, supporting ongoing connection to Country and community. We look forward to sharing these with audiences in a range of formats, starting soon.

## Creative Developments

June - October 2023

This October, the co-Directors come together with the wider creative team at HOTA and The Art House to collaborate on the development of **Preparing Ground's central aspect - the dance work.**

The creative development period began in June 2023, with a series of solo residencies in Cairns, the Sunshine Coast and Wyong respectively. These have enabled each co-Director to focus on developing their individual choreographic material and approaches, revealed through their time on Country and earlier choreographic developments (2021).



*Image: Katina Olsen: Katina in development at LJ Studios, Nambour - June 2023*

They're joined by Dramaturg Victoria Hunt, who'll support the choreographers to embody **the invitation to journey with them across Country.** We also welcome dancer Audrey Goth-Towney into the project at this stage.

Across this period, the project's designers have been invited to develop draft sound, set and projection concepts, enabling the team to offer a glimpse of the full stage work and test key design aspects in support of future planning. These designs will be refined and fulfilled through further developments from 2024 in the lead-up to the work's premiere.

## Community Engagement pilot

May - October 2023

Alongside the creative development period, *Preparing Ground* is piloting the project's **model for engaging communities local to the presentation venues**.

This 4-stage model centres Indigenous approaches to engagement. The artists spend time on Country and in dialogue with local Elders and community members, respecting local protocols and building interpersonal connections as the foundations for a collaboration.

Through this process, *Preparing Ground* seeks to offer the local community/ies a self-determined voice in its presentation and using the project as a platform to build awareness around local priorities and existing social impact / environmental initiatives. Its development is being supported by community engagement specialist, Jade Lille.

This model will become a core part of the project's **First Nations-led approach to touring**. It also supports engagement with the presentation venue, creating pathways for long-term relationships.



Image: Ellamay Fitzgerald: Graham family gathering at HOTA, May 2023

Through regular touchpoints between May and October with Katina's Kombumerri family, on whose homelands HOTA resides, *Preparing Ground* will collaborate with Elders and Traditional Owners on a First Nations community-led activity that platforms local knowledges and solutions.

Taking place beyond the auditorium, this is an **invitation to audience members to deepen their experience in the project and build greater awareness** of both colonisation's impacts and the work already being done by local First Nations communities. This could include, for example, participating in land management activities with a local Ranger, learning about current efforts to protect or regenerate sites of cultural significance, or attending a language revitalisation class.

## On Country trips

April 2022 - May 2023

During 2022 and early 2023, the co-Directors returned to their homelands—Yalanji, Tagalaka, Wakka Wakka and Kombumerri—to deepen cultural connections and to continue the development of ideas and concepts for the dance work.

They were joined on these trips by family as well as key collaborators, enabling the creation of original content from Country, including sound, projection and choreographic material captured on location.



*Image: Samuel James: Katina and Marilyn at Cooya Beach, April 2022*

### **On Yalanji Country - April 2022**

[In April 2022](#), co-directors Marilyn Miller, Katina Olsen and Jasmin Sheppard returned to Marilyn's homelands: Yalanji Country. They were joined by collaborators Samuel James and Sam Pankhurt, and BlakDance's Simon Cook and Tom Pritchard.

Over two weeks, the co-Directors spent time listening to and moving across Coastal regions, Rainforest and the Savannah, yarning with the Elders and sharing culture, including joining a Kukuyalanji language class and participating in a weaving workshop.

*This return visit and immersion on-Country, was a trip to help consolidate remembering, reconnection, and rekindling of my place within Country, as well*



*as that of the PG team within my ancestral lands; that they will forever have that connection through an apical ancestral context.*

*Yalanji Nation is one of the largest on this Continent, spanning an incredibly diverse and expansive geography. From the oranges, mauves, bright greens of the semi-arid Savannah of the Sunset mob in the West—home of the World Famous Quinkan RockArt—we traverse lands covered in Mountain Ranges and pristine clear rivers bordered by lush deep green Rainforest—predating the Amazon by 80 Million years—before arriving to the Coast with its sandy beaches and Mangroves and the Sea which houses the Great Barrier Reef. This is Yalanji Country.*

*Immersion on-Country provides for a more focused and applied presence whilst there. Consciously making oneself open to Country and being aware of how Country is 'holding' one (in a metaphysical sense), provides for the strengthening of artistic expression when one is working outside of those environs, as it is one's whole being that has had, and can then recall, the experience. The connection to Country is immediate and the expression has integrity, as it is the whole of being that is communicating having been immersed in those particular environs.*

*Given the expanse and diversity of geography that Yalanji is, this experience of our time on Country allows and contributes to the exploration of both movement and performance persona, fundamentally shaping the stage work we are now developing in the studio.*

**Marilyn Miller**



*Image: Katina Olsen: Preparing Ground creative team at Mossman Gorge, April 2022*



Image: Katina Olsen: Aunty Joyce, Jasmin and Carly Sheppard, July 2022

## On Tagalaka Country - July 2022

[In July 2022](#), Jasmin took the project back to her Tagalaka homelands in the Gulf of Carpentaria, accompanied by three generations of her family alongside collaborator Samuel James, BlakDance's Simon Cook and former costume designer, Ruby Langton-Batty.

The team visited sites of historical and cultural significance, including open cut mine shafts, camps and an Aboriginal-owned cattle station, listened to stories from local Elders, and exchanged family histories.

*This trip on Tagalaka Country was a phenomenal moment of Cultural and community reconnection for myself, my Aunty and sister, who both came as family support, and of course, my young son.*

*Tagalaka Country is Gulf Savannah Country. Wide open skies, red dirt with low lying Ironwoods and Acacia everywhere. Its soft beauty also has a strong legacy. Fossilised shells from thousands of years ago dotted all the way throughout, rich Country filled with gold and iron – taken advantage of in early settlement. Sunsets of deep purples, oranges and pinks which take your breath away. The gaggle of thousands of white cockatoos that gather in town each evening. Brolga dancing grounds and grey feathers, the remnants of this shy bird.*



*To date my artistic practice has been on reflecting and examining how the impacts of colonisation have played out within my own family, specifically the loss of community, Culture and Country. These trips to Croydon have unveiled that my story is like so many other Tagalaka people. It has also shown that by physically visiting Country, there are parts of the story that can be pieced together, parts that may have remained separate if those significant moments on Country had never happened.*

*Being quiet with ancestral Country speaks deeply into the heart of its people. That experience will certainly ripple out into the tendrils of my work in Preparing Ground, offering context, understanding, connection, and rich creative ideas.*

**Jasmin Sheppard**



*Image: Katina Olsen: Preparing Ground team in Eidsvold, March 2023*

## **On Wakka Wakka Country - March 2023**

[In March 2023](#), Katina, her Mum and Marilyn travelled to Katina's ancestral lands (her Great Grandfather's line), immersing in the beauty & resilience of Wakka Wakka Country across two weeks. They were joined by Samuel James alongside Tour Manager Denise Wilson, with Samuel Pankhurst following the group's route a few weeks later to capture sound content from springs and mountains alike.

They visited sacred and significant sites, spent time with Rangers and joined a language class and imagined tracing old songlines as they moved between Eidsvold & Bonye Biar/Bunya Mountains.

*Returning to Wakka Wakka Country is always an incredible privilege for me personally. Although most of my direct family were able to stay and work on cattle stations on this land, some of my family were also stolen and taken away from our Country.*

*Wakka Wakka Country forms part of what we now know as the Great Dividing Range stretching from Central to South East Queensland. From eucalypt forests, various gums, ironbark, rosewood, endangered Brigalow, wildflowers and our scar trees scattered within, they demonstrate our unending connection to Country. Humid subtropical Country with the crunch of the leaves under your foot to the cooling Ban Ban Springs down to Bonye Biar/Bunya Mountains, full of our ancient Jurassic era Bunya pines. Misty foggy mornings traversing the waterfalls, ferns, orchids and moss at your feet. These mountain waters feed into significant river systems whilst the Bunya nuts nourish our people. Sky Country here is a thick blanket of never ending tiny campfires of our ancestors sprinkled across the darkness.*

*During this trip, I witnessed my community's strength despite so much devastation from the effects of colonisation through the Wakka Wakka language being taught, land regeneration, community activism & consultation groups, and our land being fought for so the right care and responsibilities can continue. Wakka Wakka are assiduous in looking after Country & community for the future.*

*As an artist, to return to spend time with my Country and my Elders and family, is a rare but urgent opportunity. It's also a responsibility to listen and then use my artistic practice to find ways to platform and action the needs of community and Country. This is what Preparing Ground aims to do.*

**Katina Olsen**



*Image: Katina Olsen: Preparing Ground team with Ranger, Shannon Bauwens at the Bunya Mountains*





Image: Ellamay Fitzgerald: Graham family gathering at HOTA, May 2023

## On Kombumerri Country - May 2023

[In May 2023](#), Katina, her Mum and BlakDance producer Tom Pritchard travelled to Katina's Kombumerri homelands for a week among family, Elders and community. One focus of this period was the continued development of the project's community engagement model - a model that will underpin how this work will tour and engage with communities to enable their self-determined participation in each presentation.

They connected with family through visits to Guanaba, the local Indigenous Protected Area, shared family practices such as catching sand worms on the beach, and hosted a family gathering at HOTA, who generously supported this development period.

*Kombumerri Country is where expansive beaches and glittering oceans meet lush hinterland rainforest ranges, pristine creeks and waterfalls. The place of our sacred native bee, Wedge-tail Eagle and the dolphins that once upon a time helped us when we fished.*

*Forests full of food and medicine, we twist our feet into the sand to find it full of eugarie. Ancient fish trips lie beneath a popular swimming spot beside our sacred mountain; a women's place. Ochre pits lie within the land that lead to our creators' fingers, stone arrangements that watch over this Country - Kombumerri Country.*

*Kombumerri Country is generous. From the plants we tend to the seafood and animals we caught to feast on, our Country teaches us. It is a paradise that nourished and healed us, and continues to do so today.*

*Even with the vast developments and destruction of land and waterways, our Kombumerri people are resilient, our Country is powerful and abundant but needs to be continued to be taken care of and adequate consultations actioned to ensure a sustainable future for us all.*

*I left this trip feeling rejuvenated from Country and filled with pride for my people; every single Kombumerri family member and Traditional Custodian standing tall and working incredibly hard in all their varied fields to maintain and contribute to our Culture against/amongst/with the forces of colonisation and the metropolis of "The Gold Coast".*

**Katina Olsen**

## **Interviews with Elders:**

Central to the on Country phase was the strengthening of relationships to the Elders and Traditional Owners of the artists' homelands, as well as with their family members. We are privileged to continue these relationships throughout the lifespan of *Preparing Ground*, maintaining the connection to Country with each step.

Across this period, we've invited Elders and family members to respond to the ideas behind the project through recorded interviews. This reflects one of the project's core goals: to platform the voices of community at every stage of the work.

These rich discussions form part of the project's archive – a resource that will be shared in the lead-up to *Preparing Ground's* premiere and during presentation seasons in a range of ways, always with the endorsement of those involved.

We look forward to sharing these with you soon.

*Preparing Ground is supported through the Australian Government's Indigenous Languages and Arts program. It is assisted by the Australian Government's Major Festivals Initiative, managed by the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, in association with Brisbane Festival and Sydney Festival, and additional project funding from the Australia Council. Preparing Ground is also supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, and the City of Gold Coast*

*The creative development phase has received additional support from Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC), The Art House (Wyong), HOTA (Home of the Arts), Bulimba-ja Arts Centre, the Regional Arts Development Fund and LJ Dance Projects.*