



of us

TOBY FINLAYSON & MATTHEW PRIESTLEY

Toby Finlayson, 28, and Matthew Priestley, 37, are co-directors of a community arts organisation aimed at empowering young indigenous people to reconnect with culture and country. Behind the scenes, they say their friendship could be used as a template for reconciliation.

TOBY: I met Matt in 2002 when I volunteered on a Big hArt [arts company and theatre group] project. He was the principal artist and I was a young punter who wanted to get into community arts. I told Matt about an integrated arts project I had planned and asked him if I could produce it in Boggabilla [his hometown in northern NSW]. It was the first time I'd ever been to an Aboriginal community and I found the level of disadvantage shocking: houses were burnt to the ground, kids with no shoes were running around on streets full of broken glass and most people lived on the poverty line.

I was 21 and pretty full of myself. I was fresh out of uni, gung-ho and ready to save the world. I didn't know Matt very well and didn't know if his community would support my [multimedia] project, but Matt understood I was there to do good things and he facilitated that. A year later we started Desert Pea Media; I do the administrative stuff and he is artistic director.

Our relationship is difficult; like a microcosm of the relationship between white and Aboriginal people around Australia. He comes from a grassroots indigenous community and loses a family member every week, and I expect him to be somewhere at a certain time to start a project. It's hard for me to understand what he has to deal with; I'm not a marginalised Aboriginal

man. Having the same sense of humour helps us. It does irritate me that he refuses to write emails and won't answer his phone but I'm sure it irritates him that I insist he does things the white man's way. It's almost comical the way we work. He's so connected to story. He's *so* Aboriginal and I'm *so* white. All of his processes are about the "proper" Aboriginal way of doing things. Mine are about booking accommodation and making money to sustain the business.

The conflict we experience is both cultural and socioeconomic and it has taken a long, torrid journey to reach a point of trust and love between us, which is constantly challenged. As well as accepting me as a person, Matt looks after me. When drunk, racist Aboriginals pick me, he's got my back. He's acutely aware of the politics and says, "If you have a problem with him being white and in our community, then you have a problem with me."

Matt lost his father a few months ago. I was with him when he found him; he'd slit his wrists. It's been confronting for both of us but Matthew is so staunch. We cry on each other's shoulders; he is free to talk about emotion and fear with me because I'm not connected to the part of him that has to be strong for his family and community.

I respect the way Matt lives love. His whole life is about love for his family, his mob, his people

“
An old blackfella and a little whitefella trying to change the country for the better. We can't work out why people haven't done this before.
”

Bridging the gap:
Toby Finlayson (left) and Matthew Priestly discuss creative ideas.

and my people. He is such a good human being. He dances, he sings, he knows 200,000-year old stories. He's a cultural bank; a really spiritual man. He listens to them old fellas. He listens to his ancestors. That drives everything he does. He believes those old fellas led me to him.

MATTHEW: In 2002 I was putting on a play [called *Handle with Care*] at Parliament House in Sydney when Brother Toby volunteered to help out. I really appreciated it but I had a cast of 96 to manage and so I didn't think too much about him until he came to Boggabilla and asked me to direct a multimedia show. The idea of creating a new entity with Toby excited me. He thought it was fate. But I said to him, "It's not fate ... you were in the right place at the right time because of them old people." I trust my ancestors to show us the way. What Brother Tobes and I are doing is just part of their big plan.

Tobes is helping me to get back to my mob and engage 'em with the culture that's been stolen from 'em. Although he is happy-go-lucky he is serious about sharing the stories we are telling. There's not too many like him. He wants to learn about my culture but he also wants to share it.

Toby gets the bone pointed at him when we are with the blackfellas. When we go into a new community I say, "Now, sit back bro until everyone is real comfortable." But he's one of those energetic, outspoken little fellas. That's what gets him in trouble. My mob used to get a bit offended if we were sitting around in a group and he was bouncing all over the place, but they understand him now. He's one of us.

Both of us come up against racist slander all the time. I'm used to feeling uncomfortable in a room full of whitefellas, but even if we go to a pub in Alice Springs I cop it from my mob because I'm from a different clan group and they still have that mission mentality about looking up to the whitefella. We always have those whispers in the background, but we just brush all that racism bullshit aside because we have bigger fish to catch than those little gammon ones.

Toby and I both believe in the power of film and media as tools of engagement. When Tobes and I cruise around communities helping the kids write hip hop songs we are showing my people you don't have to reinvent the wheel. The wheel is here, but Tobes and I just show 'em how connected they are to that wheel.

Me and him have been through a lot. They call Australia the lucky country but on some of these reserves it's like another planet and not a nice one. What spins him out when he comes to community is that he goes to four funerals in four weeks. Brother Tobes was with me when I lost my old man. He's helped me cope with that, for sure. Toby doesn't have the same pressures as me so it's a release when we are together because we are always doing something positive: like making a film clip or telling a yarn.

Our relationship works but it spins people out. An old blackfella and a little whitefella trying to change the country for the better. We can't work out why people haven't done this before. I'm only 37 but most blackfellas live to about 45, so I don't have much time. That's why Tobes and I are here. We are the messengers who give the yarns to the kids so they are back in the community. I'm still a *nurragah* [poor little blackfella] but because he's a little whitefella it balances my Dreaming with his reality. When the communities see that balance between us it gives them hope. Tobes is my brah; he's my brother. **GW**