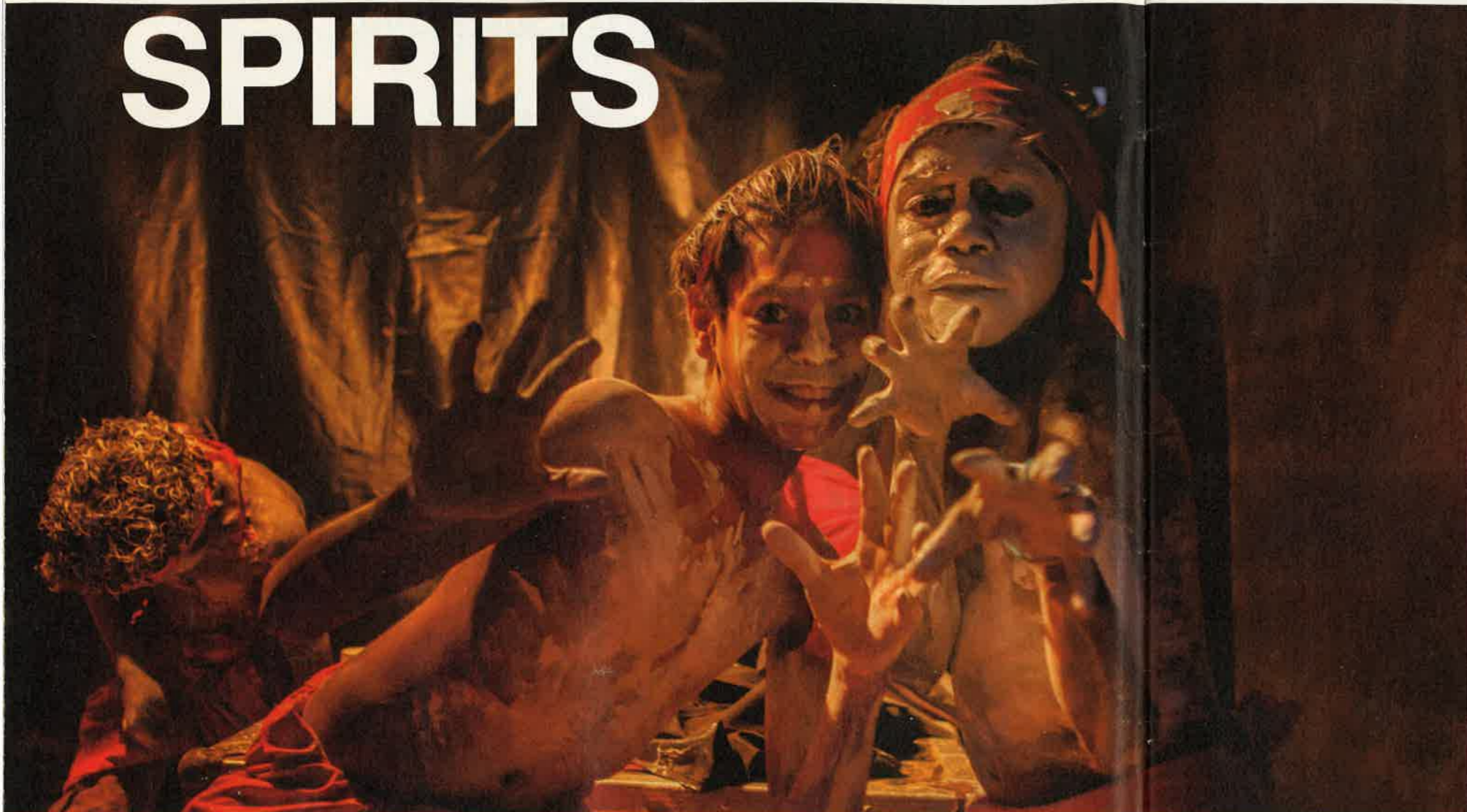


# WALKING *with* SPIRITS



All images by Peter Eve.

**Malkgulumbu has always been a gathering place for the Jawoyn people of south-west Arnhem Land. And for more than ten years, Walking with Spirits has continued this tradition, extending the invitation to the wider community to share in the spirit, song, dance and stories that run through this extraordinary place.**

By Anna Dowd

Local actor and musician Tom E. Lewis, in conjunction with the Beswick Community, first founded Walking With Spirits festival in 2002, but it gained some serious traction when the Australian Shakespeare Company (ASC) came onboard the following year. ASC director Glenn Elston was travelling to Katherine to scout performance locations and met Lewis who told him about the remote oasis. When Elston saw it for himself, he says he knew it was the beginning of a longer commitment.

Since then, Walking With Spirits has become known as one of the most beautiful and intimate festival events in the Dry season calendar. The confluence of ancient traditions, and the production

expertise of the ASC, make the event a truly memorable one, with the staggering beauty of the area's sandstone escarpments over the lake lit to full effect by stage lighting brought up from down South. Additionally, numbers at the festival are kept small – a relatively tiny 350 tickets are sold to respect the country and maintain the intimacy of this exchange.

As Artistic Director of the festival, Lewis says the ethos has always been about partnership and exchange, and visitors are encouraged to join in by dancing with traditional and contemporary songs performed by songmen and clan members from Maningrida across to Ngukurr. "If you don't dance, you never get a feeling of the country," he says. "We dance together here – black and white – and in this way, we make a kind of medicine for each other. There's a lot of understanding gets put into practice here. We all need that medicine. So come and be."

Nothing is separate in this place, he continues. "This land is our church. The dancers not only represent, but enter into the spirits of the animals, plants and seasons. There is a fireplace at the centre. We warm our spirits at the fireplace, and we pass on the stories and sing the songs keeping our history and our culture going."



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For about three months after the festival, he says, the area around Malkgulumbu and Beswick is very quiet. "It's like it's resting, because we've contented it," he says. "We've had people come in, and together we performed the songs and stories. It makes everything calm, like water."

But before then, there is a lot of celebrating to be done. "Come and sit with us, dance with us, swim in the waters, stand in the bush," he says. "We'll look after you. Be open to that spirit."

**Where:** Malkgulumbu (Beswick Falls) **When:** Sat 27 – Sun 28 Jul  
**Cost:** \$145 | \$110 Conc | \$60 Child  
**Info:** [djilpinarts.org.au/visit-us/walking-with-spirits](http://djilpinarts.org.au/visit-us/walking-with-spirits)