

↘ This city is a body:

The Migrant  
Project  
DVD

2005-2009



## Director's Note


THE **MIGRANT PROJECT** was a snowball that at its peak, spun out of control. The little package you have in your hands is a symbol of its temporary stabilisation.

Four and a half years have passed since it started in 2005, around casual conversations in alleyways and beer gardens. I am now **writing this in an office** – running a company I founded, initially, as a way of coping with the project's erratic and sometimes tremendous growth.

The idea of **working between cultures and disciplines** has always been a natural impulse for me. It was not out of any desire to be 'innovative' or 'original'. I had grown up familiar with the classical Indian art form of Bharatha Natyam, where movement and music were played out as one – the art form itself born out of temple sculptures and a pamphlet of text and images. In the last years of school, I had started playing music and then expanded my creative interests during University to theatre, film and online media. Multiculturalism was the social norm throughout – and with that came the multiplicity of artistic and

philosophical traditions behind those cultures. Picking away at one idea with a number of creative tools – different media, different cultural influences – is an ancient approach – and it felt much like a natural reflection of the contemporary world, as well.

At that point, however, the opportunities to see or participate in this kind of work in Sydney seemed to be minimal. Mainstream and independent arts companies alike were offering what I saw as segments of the city – a play about refugees here, a concert by Sudanese-Australians there. It was not that these events weren't provoking or enjoyable – but they did leave a gap.



What I felt was missing was a **refraction of the city itself** – a creative project that used as its foundation the acknowledgement that **different groups both collided in and shared the space that was our city** – and that was what we had to deal with, alongside the more neatly packaged art.

So I chatted to ten different colleagues – from very different backgrounds, culturally and artistically – and asked them to embark on a project with me.

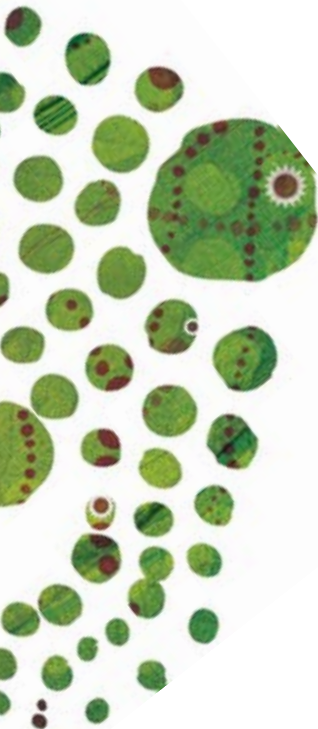
*This city is a body,  
sprawled and slumbering  
between mountains  
and ocean.*

ROBIN DIXON

*I'm Irish-Aboriginal.  
If I get too drunk,  
I punch myself up.*

DR RICHARD GREENTHUN

My only 'rules' were that I wanted to explore Sydney as a city where each member shared a common identity as a migrant.



I wanted to draw attention to an exchange enacting itself on the streets, between the first guardians of this place and those who had travelled to it since; a city built on a history of migration. Thus the title of the project. I asked the collaborators to present something of themselves and where they came from in this context. I felt this to be an inclusive framework that side-stepped notions like 'black and white Australia'. A shared city and a migrant past were the only qualities everyone in our group had in common. I hoped it would be a framework that dug up some of our city's untold stories. I had this naïve notion that we could expand people's idea of the word 'migrant'.

It was my first foray into the professional arts industry and ironically, we got the first grant we applied for. It was the Australia Council Dance Board's 'Take Your Partner Initiative', to develop the first stage of the work in collaboration with former Bangarra dancer Albert David. At the time, I was

ecstatic, grateful and entirely taken aback.

I left the development of the project completely open to the group – what issues we'd explore, what stories we'd tell, what medium or media we would use to share that content. This proved to be the resounding strength and weakness of the project over the next two years. A strength because of the diversity of excellent ideas that built up the project; a weakness because of the friction and confusion that came along with that diversity, in an already under-resourced context.

The irony of the grant stemmed from its support at the relatively small and peaceful initiation to the project, in early 2005. By the time *Standing* opened in September 2005, we'd already had our fair share of arguments and creative clashes. Over the next 18 months, dare I say, we descended into a controlled chaos. In 2006, we received a small grant from the Music Committee at Arts NSW, but no further support to develop the work, so we travelled to the Canberra Multicultural Arts Festival with *Drifting*, and then presented our biggest work, *Grounded*, at the Seymour centre with very little support at all. Interest had grown wildly in the project since the early days in 2005 – 23 people performed in *Grounded* in March 2006. (By the end of 2007, over 50 people had contributed to The Migrant Project). I had trouble keeping a lid on it. On top of all that the project was picking up a lot of media interest, with some genuinely interesting previews that opened up ideas of how we might view Sydney and Australia, and reviews that ranged from extravagant praise to extravagant criticism. Thankfully we sold a good amount of tickets in Sydney either way. I started losing my hair, not to mention plenty of sleep, over these years. Even as I

*I think for the first time in our history we have a kind of media which is not controllable. Everybody has tried controlling it, they're putting people in jail, but inevitably it is not controllable.*

IQBAL BARKAT

maintained good financial control of the project, even as we delivered rich and provocative creative works, the **explosion of ideas** and personalities was always what **resounded the most**. It left many of us reeling. In hindsight, this might have been anticipated from setting up a microcosm of a diverse city and inviting everyone to creatively share their personal stories and opinions. But caught up in the whirl of the project, it simply felt **tiring, fascinating, wearying** and **inspiring**, turn by turn.

Behind all this was a colourful political backdrop. If you cast your mind back to the period from 2005-2007, political public relations, under John Howard's Prime Ministership, were often **unnecessarily racial** – or at least that was how many of us received the government's messages at the time. From the strident way the issue of Tampa and detention centres was managed in an election year, to Howard's personal response to the 'Cronulla Riots', the divisive nature of the Citizenship tests, Kevin Andrew's manner in reducing the African immigrant intake, right up to the debacle of the fake pamphlets in Western Sydney just before the 2007 election, **the issue of multiculturalism and race never seemed to fade**. This was remarkable, coming from a man who at the time oversaw Australia's highest ever levels of immigration. There seemed to be little point in debating the virtues of multiculturalism – it was not only here, it was diversifying and settling in its own, ultimately uncontrollable way – whether or not you approved. The debate should have been about the **different methods** we might use to **embrace it** – indeed, *take advantage* of the wealth of **diverse experience** people were bringing into the country – for its social as well as economic benefit.

Of course, this kind of 'post-multiculturalist' approach cannot **yet** be the stance for our government institutions.

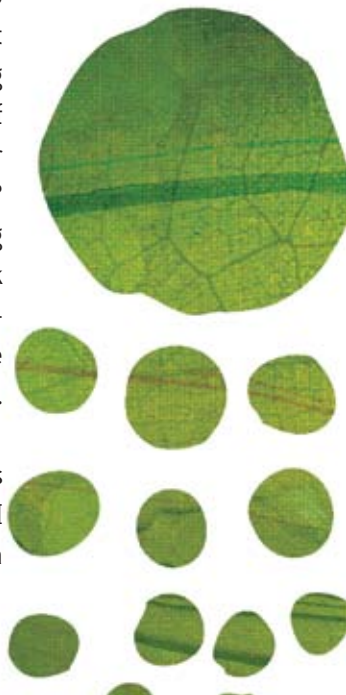
**Currently, the diversity of participation in our arts industry does not come close to matching the level of cultural diversity in the country.**

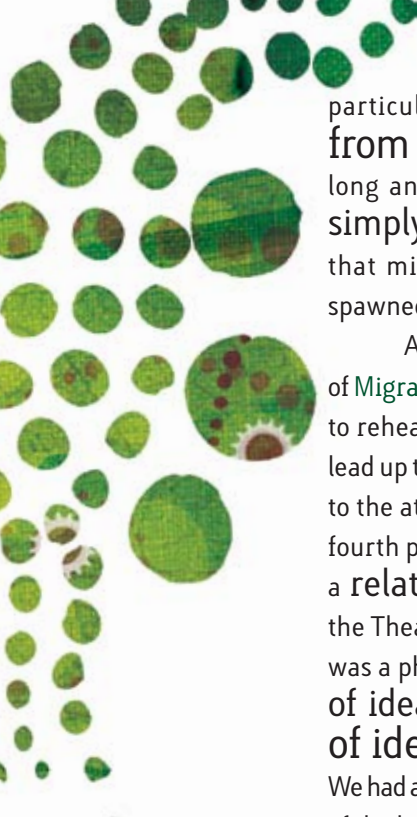
So the Australia Council for the Arts must, for very good reason, specifically encourage cultural diversity in the work it chooses to support. Of course this puts those of us involved in initiatives like The Migrant Project, looking to **extend the meaning of migrant** or **multicultural** to being a descriptor of all people, not just those who aren't Anglo-Celtic, in a strange position. It also confuses those of non-English speaking backgrounds who use 'migrant' as a term of empowerment, of solidarity with other **migrants**. Where do we stand with them? To top it off, most of the other people working in interdisciplinary and site-specific work were focused on a particular culture or issue – they had not matched a diversity of creative influences to a diversity of cultural influences. **So we were isolated in a trifecta of ways**. To be honest, I only use words like intercultural or interdisciplinary because I feel I have to, to give people an idea of how a



*Tarimiba myam gala waba  
(I will live here a long time).*


WILLIAM DAWES /  
PATYGERANG





particular work of ours might **differ from the norm**. It is amazing how many long and technical words you have to use **simply to describe** a creative project that mirrors the make up of the city that spawned it.

At no point until mid-2007 did a group of **Migrant Project** artists have the opportunity to rehearse regularly and consistently in the lead up to an event. This made a big difference to the atmosphere of the overall project. The fourth performance, *This City is a Body*, was a **relatively** peaceful stage, supported by the Theatre Board of the Australia Council. It was a phase that involved the **distillation of ideas** rather than **the explosion of ideas** and the project sorely needed it. We had a lovely, sold out season within the rooms of the beautiful Hyde Park Barracks Museum, with little media interest or extravagant reactions when compared to the heady days of 2005 – 2006. Draw from that what you will.



**The openness** of the project remains its **defining characteristic**; simultaneously its most positive and negative quality. It is, ultimately, **what I love about it**.

The **Migrant Project** reminds me how **thrilling, ruthless** and **satisfying** exercises in true democracy can be. But it will

be quite a while before I return to this type of creative exercise again.

I've learnt **countless lessons** from the project, personally and professionally. You can't rely on subsidies to sustain your independent, creative work, especially if your focus is on **innovating between the lines**. There isn't enough to go around, after the already-established companies receive their portion. Moreover, diversifying your income as a creative person or creative organisation, is a healthy and usually necessary practice. This project has also shown me that **the management of an idea is just as important as the idea itself** – not only in terms of making it a success, but also in ensuring it has an ultimately positive impact for all of those who are a part of it. When it came to writing my Twitter profile, I was proud to list 'Manager' as one of my responsibilities, which is unusual for an 'artist'.

Even though the performances made up the bulk of the first years of The **Migrant Project**, much of the material on this DVD is not from those performances. I have tried to describe the intensity with which the performances drove the project, in the hope of going some way to **providing a context for the raw, earnest, unusual work that is on this DVD**. It has gathered on the side lines, in rehearsals, in between rehearsals, filmed or recorded in little snippets of available time. It is all part of the same journey.

To my fellow Sydneysiders: what you will encounter on this DVD are the **opinions, stories and thoughts** of over 50 people who work, live and belong to the same city as you do. I haven't said too much about their amazing contributions because the work speaks for itself – and I don't want to be facetious about it. Suffice to say that I stuck with this project and was always proud to

*To keep clutching at  
a bastard culture for  
the brothers and  
strangers and racists  
that may threaten you.*

lead it because of the **incredible array of contributions** that people made to it. I would not have maintained it if not for the dedication of many people to the idea of the initiative itself.

Four of the people who started The Migrant Project with me – Aimée Falzon, Elias Bakhos, Robin Dixon and Mahesh Radhakrishnan – were still part of the project three years on. We continue to be friends and work with each other today, in different ways. Mahesh is soon getting married to someone he met through the project! Paul Cordeiro and Iqbal Barkat have been subtle mentors for me, of very different sorts, for some important periods in the past four years. Rebecca Sng has stuck through the project as a sound voice and is now the sound chair of our board at CuriousWorks. Stuart Gibson and Gary Lo were inspirations at the start of the project, dedicating great swathes of their time. Latai Taumoepeau also dedicated a great deal of her time to the project in 2006.

**Big love to all who dipped into  
The Migrant Project, the beast that managed  
to surprise us all!**

18th March, 2009

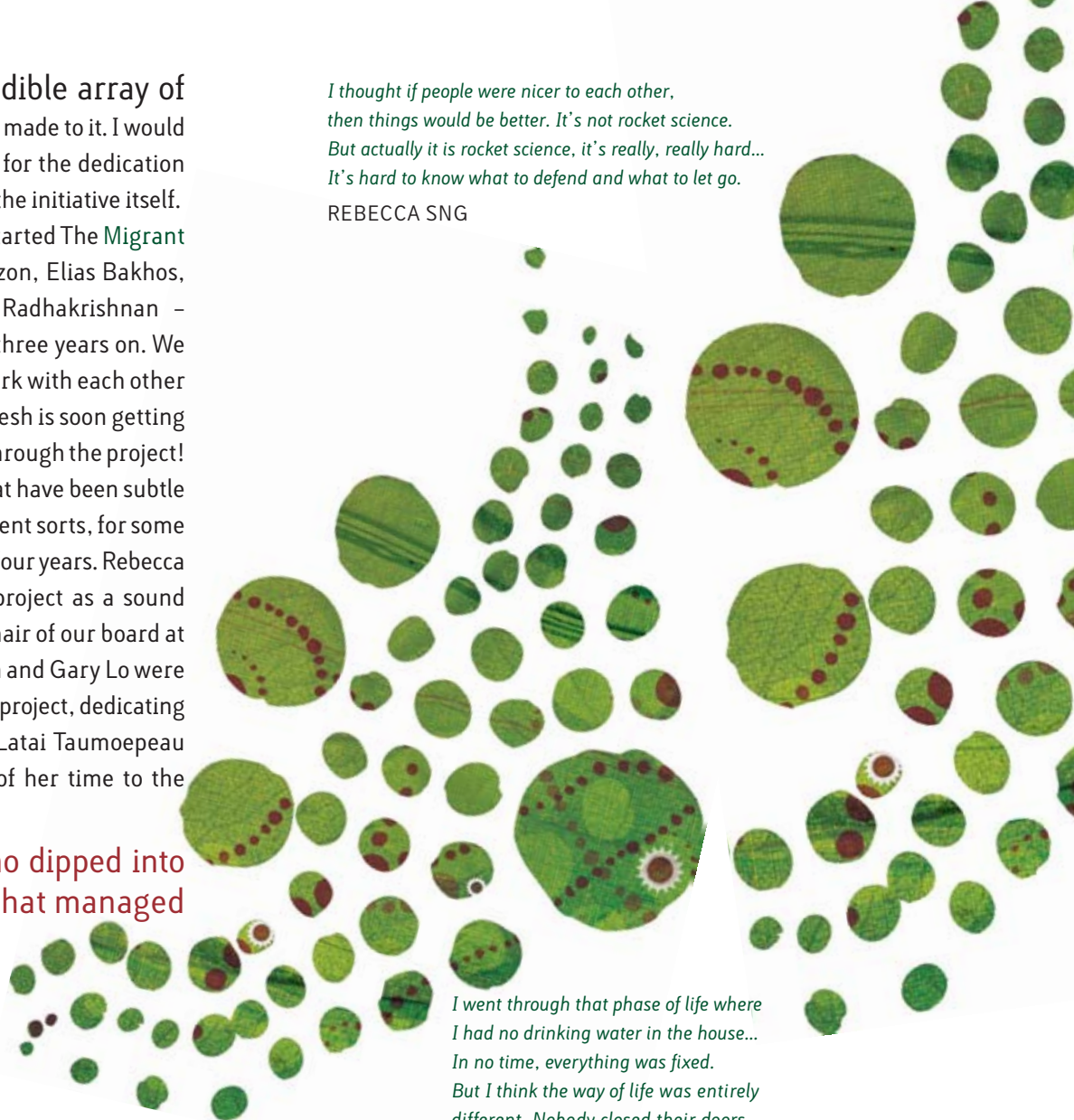
[www.thiscityisabody.com](http://www.thiscityisabody.com)  
[www.curiousworks.com.au](http://www.curiousworks.com.au)

*I thought if people were nicer to each other,  
then things would be better. It's not rocket science.  
But actually it is rocket science, it's really, really hard...  
It's hard to know what to defend and what to let go.*

REBECCA SNG

*I went through that phase of life where  
I had no drinking water in the house...  
In no time, everything was fixed.  
But I think the way of life was entirely  
different. Nobody closed their doors.  
Everybody knew everybody.*

KANNU





*Dark continent.*  
LATAI TAUMOEPEAU

**Standing (2005)**

Artists:  
Albert David  
Gary Lo  
Rebecca Sng  
Katy Cuthbert  
Shakthidharan  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Jenni White  
Kishan Jeyendran  
Aimée Falzon  
Cappy Bud  
Phillip Lawson  
Jane Grimley  
Robin Dixon  
Miles Thomas  
Stuart Gibson  
James West

*Filmed by:*  
Iqbal Barkat  
Elias Nohra

*Venue:*  
Performance Space  
Supported by:  
Australia Council for the  
Arts - Dance Board



**Drifting (2006)**

*Artists:*  
Shakthidharan  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Kishan Jeyendran  
Latai Taumoepeau  
Jasmine Sheppard  
Robin Dixon  
Mick Boraso  
Kishan Jeyendran  
Elias Nohra  
Jenni White  
Christina Kenny  
Marcia Beckett  
Aimée Falzon  
Jane Grimley  
Miles Thomas  
Stuart Gibson  
Kate Shanahan  
Glen Purdham

*Venue:*  
Street Theatre, Canberra  
Multicultural Arts Festival



**Grounded (2006)**

*Artists:*  
Shakthidharan  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Kishan Jeyendran  
Mick Boraso  
Elias Nohra  
Latai Taumoepeau  
Jasmine Sheppard  
Robin Dixon  
Marcia Beckett  
Aimée Falzon  
Elias Nohra  
Christina Kenny  
Glen Purdham  
Miles Thomas  
Paul Cordeiro  
Joel Corpuz  
Pat Davidson  
Stuart Gibson  
Habib Hayek  
Hazem Shammas  
Kate Shanahan  
Rebecca Sng  
Iqbal Barkat

*Filmed by:*  
Vincent Tay  
Elias Nohra  
Jeremy Cassar  
Damien Cassar

*Venue:* Seymour Centre

*Supported by:*  
Arts NSW - Music  
Committee





## Villawood Koori Kids (2006-2007)

Cultural Leader: Robby Bell  
Filmmakers: Billy, JJ  
Community: Villawood Koori Kids  
Venue: Woodville Community Centre  
Lonsvale Park

Digital Media Facilitators:  
Elias Nohra  
Shakthidharan  
Iqbal Barkat

Supported by:  
Foster's Community Grants

## Migrant Project Interviews (2006 - 2008)

Linda Burney  
Filmed by:  
Iqbal Barkat  
Elias Nohra

Ray & Aimée Falzon  
Filmed by:  
Shakthidharan

Bannu & Kannu  
Filmed by:  
Elias Nohra

All interviewed by:  
Shakthidharan

## This City is a Body (2007)

Artists:  
Barbra Drummond  
Latai Taumoepeau  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Robin Dixon  
Aimée Falzon  
Shakthidharan  
Marc Chee  
Paul Cordeiro  
Elias Nohra

Filmed by:  
Iqbal Barkat  
Elias Nohra  
Jeremy Cassar

Conference Speakers:  
Richard Greenthun  
Ross Gibson  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Stuart Willis  
Phillip Ross  
Robin Dixon  
Itu  
Rishi Shankar  
Rahile Ansari  
Johnny Wakim  
Dara Podjarski



Stories are these technologies that wrap up huge amounts of information that must not be lost.

ROSS GIBSON

Filmed by: Shakthidharan  
Audio: Hyde Park Barracks Museum  
Venue: Hyde Park Barracks Museum  
Historic Houses Trust  
Supported by:  
Australia Council for the Arts –  
Theatre Board

## Derubbin Fundraiser (2006)

Producer: Jane Grimely  
Bands: Tapestries of Sound, Asi

## Roxbury Fundraiser (2006)

Producer: Shakthidharan  
Bands: Asi  
Tapestries of Sound

## Earthdance 2005

Katy Cuthbert  
Rebecca Sng  
Gary Lo  
Aimée Falzon  
Shakthidharan  
Jenni White  
Robin Dixon  
Cappy Bud  
Phillip Lawson  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan



## 2007

Mick Boraso  
Shakthidharan  
Jenni White  
Mahesh Radhakrishnan  
Robin Dixon



*Don't scratch your fanny!  
We'll get there eventually.*

AIMÉE FALZON

## Reception Centre (2006)

Writer/Actor: Hazem Shammam  
Cinematographer: Iqbal Barkat  
Editors:  
Elias Nohra  
Shakthidharan

## Ghetto Gospel (2007)

Writer/Actor: Mohammed Hasabro  
Director: Mohammed Hasabro

DOP / Editors:  
Mohammed Hasabro  
Shakthidharan  
Elias Nohra  
Peter Cossey

Crew:  
Peter Cossey  
Elias Nohra  
Shakthidharan

Asi - 'Sold'  
Lyrics by: Shakthidharan  
Music by: Asi  
Performed by:  
Shakthidharan  
Aimée Falzon  
Stefan Kantharajah  
Alon Ilsar  
Marc Chee



*Out here,  
everything is divided.  
Subdivided.*

JENNI WHITE

## 100 Blind Deals (2007-2009)

Writer/Director: Shakthidharan  
Producer: Shakthidharan  
Editor: Shakthidharan  
Cinematography: Vincent Tay  
Production Manager: Iqbal Barkat  
Colour Correction: Vincent Tay  
Sound (Post): Shakthidharan  
Actors:

Hazem Shammam  
Paul Barakat  
Jodine Muir  
Aimée Falzon  
Habib Hayek  
Daniel Younan  
Jacob Younan

Darug Story:  
Dr Richard Greenthun

Music:  
Asi, 'The Crooked Path - Part One'  
Music by: Shakthidharan  
Performed by: Shakthidharan

Asi, 'Kurinji - Part One'  
Performed by: Robin Dixon  
Music by: Shakthidharan  
CuriousWorks 2008

Derwent River Star, 'Dead Roads'  
Lyrics by: Alex Marsh  
Music by: Derwent River Star  
Performed by: Derwent River Star  
Heavy Records 2007



Shoot Credits  
Caparra  
Boom Operator:  
Robin Dixon  
Goddesses:  
Aimée Falzon  
Hazem Shammam  
Assistant: Rachel Jackson  
Continuity: Robin Dixon  
Thanks: Ian & Jessica

Outdoor Shots  
Rig: Vincent Tay  
Convertible Driver:  
Kate Blackmore

Bankstown  
Production Assistants:  
Elias Nohra  
Aimée Falzon  
Sam Nishanian  
Simone Lahood  
Lil' Peter  
Thanks: Nohra Household

Chapman St  
Boom Mic & Sound:  
Elias Nohra  
Goddesses:  
Aimée Falzon  
Hazem Shammam  
Thanks: Stuart & Peter

The map is wrong,  
the territory is right.

MOHAMMED HASABRO

## The Migrant Project (Overall Project, 2005-2009)

Producer / Director:  
Shakthidharan

Illustrations / Paintings:  
Aimée Falzon

Design:  
Stuart Gibson (2005-2006)  
Shakthidharan (2007-2008)  
Zoe Sadokierski (2009)

Photography: Steven Papadakis

Media and Marketing:  
Shakthidharan  
Polkadot PR (This City is a Body)

## This City is a Body now exists as:

- A solo show ready for touring
- A feature film for screenings and festivals
- An online archive of migrant stories in text and multimedia
- An educational resource kit

Visit [www.thiscityisabody.com](http://www.thiscityisabody.com) or contact [shakthi@curiousworks.com.au](mailto:shakthi@curiousworks.com.au) to learn about how you can use this material in your community.

## This City is a Body (DVD 2007-2009)

Designed & Authored:  
Shakthidharan

Package Design: Zoe Sadokierski

## This City is a Body (The Film 2007-2009)

Director/Editor: Shakthidharan

**CURIOUSWORKS**    
is a storyteller and a collaborator.

Through our **All Around You** program, we collaborate with disadvantaged communities to bridge the digital divide. We also train the non-profit sector in simple, effective ways to boost their activities by leveraging the power of social media. We have built a social media portal, [www.allaroundyou.net](http://www.allaroundyou.net), that is freely available to anyone working with their community. Visit the site and feel free to contact us for support.

**CuriousWorks** also tells stories. Through our **artistic program** we investigate contemporary Australasia from a unique perspective. Our works are culturally and artistically diverse, rich with multimedia as well as contemporary music and performance. They are either housed in our warehouse or a particular site, outside of the traditional theatre or cinema spaces.

Each project in **CuriousWorks'** artistic program has outcomes that feed into the **All Around You** model, and visa-versa. This is a creative loop that is greater than the sum of its parts – and the unique distinction of a company like **CuriousWorks** – that engages in both the community and contemporary aspects of arts, technology and education.



“I just want to make a comment about you **bringing different art forms and cultures together**... and how natural it is, I want to add, that people like you, from different backgrounds, find it almost a must to bring together different art forms, because it is as if one art form cannot **contain**.

In saying that, I want to stress how, for example, the film was extremely powerful, because it **spoke only one language** and it was the filmic language, and it spoke it very well, it was like a **renaissance** there... but it's **one** – it's one medium speaking to its **maximum effect**. The same could be said of the monologue – again, one medium speaking to its best and it was **extremely** powerful.

Why then the rest of the show **in comparison** goes lower – now this is my personal judgement – but, in becoming less powerful, less punchy, less clear, it is also mapping at the same time a new **territory**. And I see you, as a group, exactly **like explorers, going into new territory, whilst you are both the explorers and the cartographers**, so as you move into this new territory... you're actually circumscribing, describing, refining a land that becomes clearer and clearer and clearer as you travel...

I am looking at **you**, getting a sense of **us**, going out into the ocean, and that is **extremely powerful, extremely hopeful**, it is an **incredible** statement that you're making and that you're **bringing us in that journey**... and you're **open**, see here you are, you're absolutely **open**, everything you see, everything you've done, even to this forum, **even the way that you stand**, in front of us, is all about hope courage and vision, I **really** commend you.”