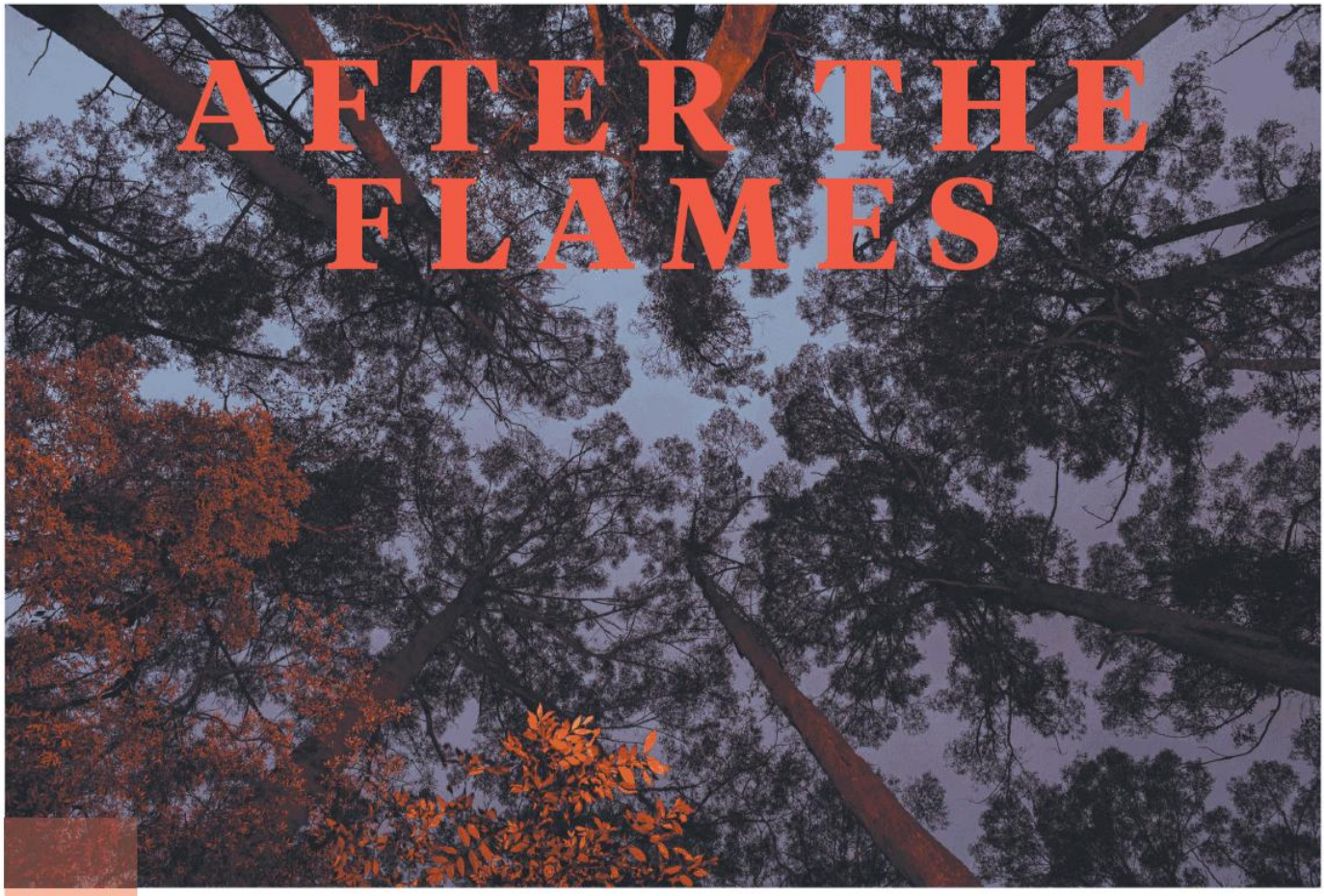
AFTER THE FLAMES



Rémi Chauvin

After last summer's bushfires an immersive sound installation is using raven song to call people back to Tasmania's Huon Valley, writes **Ricky French**

It was right on dusk, in the middle of winter this year, when three cavers emerged from a day of exploring the dolomite catacombs of Hastings Caves in southern Tasmania and stumbled on a scene that left them at first dumbfounded, then incredulous. A group of people were sitting on stumps among the towering stringybarks — some in a seemingly trancelike state — while an inexplicable cacophony of birds roosting ricocheted around the forest. It looked like some sort of pagan ritual.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" cried the cavers, or words to that effect, on realising the birds were not real but some sort of recording.

What the cavers' ears had been drawn to was in fact an artwork titled Hrafn: Conversations with Odin. First opening during MONA's Dark Mofo festival in June, Hrafn (which rhymes approximately with "larfin'") has been granted an extended season as part of Project X, a series of immersive public artworks designed to bring people back to Tasmania's Huon Valley and stimulate the region financially and culturally after last summer's devastating bushfires. A second artwork titled The Aftermath Dislocation Principle by British artist Jimmy Cauty, featuring a miniature dystopian town inside a shipping container, is touring the region, unleashing thought-provoking fringe art on towns such as Geeveston, Dover (where it currently is), Southport, Franklin, Huonville and Cygnet.

While bushfires destroyed more than 200,000ha across Tasmania, the Huon Valley was particularly hit hard due to the smouldering mess left of its only major tourist attraction, the Tahune Airwalk, which brings in about 80,000 people a year. In a shrewd example of thinking outside the box, the arts sector was ushered in to help bind the wound and direct the healing.

The federal government stumped up $1.5m and Tourism Tasmania another $500,000. Project X is curated by DarkLab, MONA's creative projects arm, which perhaps explains the rather left field approach to art that so perplexed the cavers who chanced on Hrafn. The artwork is from British sound artist Chris Watson. You might not have heard of Watson but you would have almost certainly heard his work. He has been David Attenborough's right-hand man for more than 20 years, recording the audio of wildlife for documentaries such as The Secret Life of Mammals, The Secret Life of Birds and Frozen Planet.

Hearing 2000 ravens coming in to roost above your head at dusk in a stunning forest is an other-worldly experience. The birds are northern (or common) ravens, found only in the northern hemisphere, and their calls are nothing like the grating and monotonous "ah-ah-ahhhhh" of ours. They clear their throats and rasp like grandad. They rattle like a child's toy. They grunt like a pig and quack like a duck. They gurgle and groan, honk and croak (the sum of which noises is sometimes called "gronking") and make expressive annunciations in astounding tones and timbres. Importantly, they communicate with each other on a level far more complex than any other species of bird.

Due no doubt in part to their expressive utterings, no other bird is the subject of as much mythology as this powerful black bird, ubiquitous across the globe. Not surprisingly, if a tad unfairly, ravens have long been regarded as evil, harbingers of death or incarnations of souls of the damned. Their genus even gets a hard time with collective nouns. We all know a murder of crows, while fans of British crime writer Ruth Rendell will tell you that a group of ravens is called an unkindness.

Speaking from his home in Britain, Watson says he has always been drawn to the idea that folklore informs science, which can then be reinterpreted into art. "Ravens have always been totemic animals," he says. "They're probably the most intelligent of all birds and they have a language and a culture. What fascinated me was that people in ancient times heard ravens calling in the night, so developed this idea that they were communicating with the raven god."

Hrafn is the Old Norse word for raven. It's onomatopoeic, echoing the birds' call. Watson says he was inspired to create the artwork by a visit to the Saga Museum in Reykjavik, Iceland, where he saw a 17th-century wood cut of the Norse god Odin. The story of Odin goes that he had two ravens, Huginn and Muninn — words that translate as "thought" and "memory" — and that every day he would send the birds out into the world to gather information. They would return each night to perch on his shoulders in the halls of Valhalla and tell him what they'd seen and heard. It's not the only culture that believed ravens were messengers for the gods.

Watson had recorded the ravens before his visit to Iceland. It happened on the Welsh island of Anglesey, at a well-known raven roosting spot. He spent a week there, laying hundreds of metres of cables to record the calls of more than 2000 birds, then mixed them together to create the first incarnation of Hrafn, which was performed for three nights in the Kielder Forest in England's Northumberland. A happy coincidence of funding for Project X and longstanding interest from Dark Mofo ultimately brought a new, remixed version of Hrafn to Tasmania, where it ran for a sold-out season.

DarkLab's creative director Leigh Carmichael says the Hastings Caves location sealed the deal. "Chris never wanted Hrafn in an urban environment, he wanted a true forest. We found this amazing location in the Huon Valley and it allowed us to press on (with) what's been a pretty difficult project."

Part of that difficulty lay in the technical elements. Watson worked with rural NSW arts organisation Wired Lab, which specialises in the full-sphere surround-sound audio technique known as ambisonics. The aim was faithfully to reproduce the sound of the real thing. Watson originally recorded the ravens using spherical microphones, which record sound from multiple angles.

"That's how we hear the world," says Watson. "So when it came to installing Hrafn we arranged 12 speakers 20m up in the canopy to create a hemisphere of sound. It's like a dome of sound over the audience."

Yet the overall effect is not the cinematic, deafening Hollywood soundscape you might expect but a true call of the wild. It's an authenticity that sings through the forest. Sarah Last, director of Wired Lab, who worked with Watson on the technical logistics, says Watson's strength as an artist is he doesn't let the capabilities of technology overwhelm the work.

"The project was about how best to convey the conversational element of ravens coming in to roost. There's great subtlety to his work, and ironically that becomes very powerful. He's made it about the place where it's installed."

At showtime a guide leads the audience along a path in the forest and over a bridge that signifies the threshold. From here on in there is to be no talking; the next sounds the audience hears will be, as the guide explains, "what Odin heard in the halls of Valhalla".

Daylight drains from the forest as people take a seat on tree stumps and look around to see only trees and thick, deep green understory. The local birds perform something of an opening act, their familiar chirps dancing between the trees. Then a slow drone starts to build in the

Rami Chauvin

Osborne Images

Clockwise from main picture, Hastings Caves State Reserve, the site of Project X; British sound artist Chris Watson, the creator of Hrafn; at showtime a guide leads the audience along a path in the forest and over a bridge that signifies the threshold

canopy, followed by honks and grunts and gronks that can only be the ravens. Their calls mingle with the real birds for a time, until eventually you can't tell what's real and what's not. The ravens' calls gather in intensity and seem to get closer to you, as though they're descending from the trees or shuffling along to make way for new arrivals. There's definite call and response, but also elements of randomness.

The ravens sound at times like a dissonant, percussive experimental music. You may find yourself searching for patterns or rhythms in the gronks, or trying to follow developing textures and themes as the rising tension seeks resolution. New birds enter the scene with startling declarations — a new voice on the block. When the sounds finally dissipate into the trees, all that's left is the distant hoot of a solitary owl — real or recorded? Does it matter? With the forest now black, your ears are ultra-sensitised to the world, an effect that lasts long after the show is over.

The sound and the mythology of the ravens combine to make the bird perfectly emblematic of the dark art endorsed by DarkLab. "Ravens occupy a place between life and death," says Carmichael. "They hover above life and look down, feeding on death."

For Carmichael, Project X is personal. He grew up in Glen Huon, the town that became the epicentre of bushfire crisis. "There was mass anxiety for a number of weeks. I watched it unfold. It was just this huge sense of dread, and it very nearly became an absolute tragedy. People are still struggling with the mental impact."

Watson says his work speaks to Project X's theme of rejuvenation. "Ravens are connected to the spirit world. In Viking times they would fly on to the battlefields and take the eyes of fallen soldiers. It was believed they would then carry their spirits to Valhalla."

The forest at Hastings Caves works as a setting on many levels, not least that it gets the community engaged and gets people outside in nature at a time they normally wouldn't be.

"The site is accessible to anyone but you get a sense you're deep in the forest," says Watson. "And you wouldn't normally say, 'Oh, it's getting dark, let's go for a walk in the forest.' So it gets people into this incredible place at a strange time. You go into the forest in the daylight but then you lose the sense of sight, so you have to listen. And we've evolved to be good listeners. You hear the forest in a different way."

Audience members obviously are not the only ones who hear the forest in a different way. What do the local birds make of the sudden arrival of 2000 phantom birds with British accents? Well, that's what so perturbed the cavers, and it's a question no one really knows the answer to, but Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service did give the project its blessing. Coincidentally, an unrelated study is in progress on the lyre birds common to the area, with researchers interested to learn if the birds will start to mimic the ravens' calls to add to their repertoire. Life imitating art imitating life — and so the line between what's real and what's not may become blurred even further in this increasingly enchanted forest.

Last says Hrafn proves that cultural experiences don't happen in institutions, they are all around us.

"This project is about place-making, it's about drawing attention to the things that make a particular place unique. It really challenges the concept of what public art can be. It might be ephemeral, but it's going to have a lasting impact."

Hrafn: Conversations with Odin *runs until December 22. Details at project-x.net.au*

Continued from Page 13

but they were different. As I say, I collaborated with the people at the publishers, and I was open to their ideas. I think it was a little bit unusual for them, because I imagine some writers just say, 'You're not touching my precious text!'. But for me, it was like, 'I don't mind. It's just a little fun thing. You got any ideas?'. And so I let them guide me into the length of the stories, so I enjoyed working with people as a team on that. And they would send corrections to me, and I would either take them — or completely ignore them.

Kathryn Durst's illustrations are wonderful. Were you closely involved with supervising the illustration process?
I just liked her work. I just thought, you know what, it's got a special quality. So I chose her, and then I said to the publishers, 'Okay, so can I give her a ring and talk to her about it?'. They said, 'Oh, no, we haven't got her number ...' Anyway, I found out that they had, but they don't like the writers talking to the illustrators, I think because in the past, the illustrators and the writers have had arguments. So I said to them, 'Look, I'm not going to cause any problems, but I don't want to do something where I don't even know the person, and I've never spoken to them. I want to speak to her'. They gave me her number, and I just rang her and surprised her. I said, 'They're a bit worried I was going to be a headache, but I'm not. I just wanted to speak to you, to put a voice to the name.' It was great.

There's a scene in the book where Grandude is playing guitar to the chillers. Did that reflect your own life, playing music for your family — or was home a place for you to have a break from all of that?
No, I've always got a guitar around, or there's always a piano near me, always, in whatever house I'm in. But mainly I just have a guitar handy all the time, if I fancy plonking away. So it does reflect our household. The funny thing was, I'd be playing sometimes — I'd be maybe writing a song quietly over in the corner, kind of thing — and the kids would say, 'Dad, be quiet! We're trying to watch the telly!'. (laughs) Do you realise who is paying for the telly ...? But yeah, I do have a guitar around pretty much all the time. I love it!

I play a little guitar myself, Paul. Do you have any recommendations for songs — or chord progressions — that my son might find soothing before bedtime?
(slowly) Yeeaahh. I mean, if you know Blackbird, that's very soothing. My song, Blackbird, if you do that. And if you're just looking for chord sequences, what came to mind was C, A minor, F, G. It's what we used to call the Diana chords — not because of Princess Diana, but when we were kids, there was a song by Paul Anka called Diana. We used those chords, and we learned it, so we always called them 'the Diana chords'. C, A minor, F, G. Nice.

Thank you. I'll give it a crack.
Good!

You're coming towards the end of yet another productive year in your life, where you've played about 20 stadium and arena shows throughout America. Where does publishing Hey Grandude! sit among your various achievements of 2019?
Well, it's nice, because it's out of left field. It's not something I normally do, and I always like that. I think it keeps your life fresh, if you're lucky enough, to be able to just do something different than the normal routine, you know? So I like to do that, even if it's just going for a walk in the park or something, or going for a bike ride. It was a great freshener in the year. It was something else that I didn't have to think about (while) going on tour. What I love is doing something like Grandude, because it's like a holiday from your day job. I've got my touring, which I love — or I wouldn't do it — and then I've got something like Grandude, which is almost like a hobby. It's a nice little thing. We had a great tour in Australia, by the way. We loved it.

On behalf of everyone who saw that tour (in 2017), thank you. It was marvellous.
Oh, great.

Are you hoping to bring your band back to this part of the world again?
Yeah, definitely hoping to. No plans!

Lastly, Paul: I understand that when you were in school, you were advised to think about becoming a teacher, which you weren't keen on. Yet in living the life you have, you've been a great teacher in your own way, by teaching all of us so many things about art, and music, and love, and the discipline that allowed you to hone your craft. Does that ring true to you?
That's very nice of you to say that. Thanks a lot. I hadn't thought of it like that, actually, but I think it's true. Why I was going to become a teacher was, when you're a kid in school — I don't know if you did it — but you go to the careers master, and he talks to you about what you might do as a job when you leave school. And I just told him the qualifications that I had, which weren't much, and he said, 'It's just enough for you to be a teacher. You go to teacher training college ...' That was what I was looking at, and I thought, 'Oh, okay, I'll do that ...' But the Beatles came along, and saved my life. But it is nice to think that, in some way, I've fulfilled that dream of somehow teaching, but not in the way I'd imagined it.

I bet that careers adviser didn't see 'children's author' in your future, either.
No, that's right.

And neither did you, perhaps.
I certainly didn't. Although we did kind of like all that kind of stuff. When I started writing with John [Lennon], one of the things we did — probably for the same kind of reason, just doing something different — we started trying to write a play. We got a few pages' worth, then we decided, 'This is too hard'. So we did have literary leanings. And what's great is, I've got an archive at my office here [in London], and they collect all [my] old stuff and log it. I was going through it with my guy, my head archive guy, he said, 'What's this? I don't know what this is?' I said wait a minute, and started reading it: 'Bloody hell, that's that bloody play!' So they actually had it from all that time ago. Isn't that amazing?

Wow. What state's it in?
I mean, it's like six pages long or something. It's cute, more than anything. It's just amazing to have that memory actually show up. I thought it was just a memory and that the actual writing of the play itself was gone. Okay, I'm being told to wrap it up. You have a good one — and get some good sleep, now!

Hey Grandude! *is published via Penguin Random House.*