



COVER STORY

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pair buoyed by life, love and art

THE Freemans have had reams and reams of words, pages and pictures devoted to them. It can be a little intimidating when faced with such an archive on Cairns' leading theatre couple.

It would have been, except for the fact the couple are so buoyant with life, enthusiasm and sheer love, for each other and for their art, that it's all too easy to get carried away by their story. That's what writer Denise Carter found – she couldn't help but be swept away by them.

For the rumours that have swirled about their departure from Tjapukai, let's squash this one right away: they are not retiring, either from work or public life. Nor are they selling up and leaving town.

Their plans are revealed on page 6.

The pictures are from their archives and show their

immense cultural contribution to Cairns and tourism.

For readers following our dieters' journeys, one fact is certain: it's a long, slow journey. No wonder our Lose2Winners are getting grumpy: all that effort and the scales don't seem to budge.

The fat fight is a slow and frustrating one, as I've witnessed during the past three years. It's a fact that's not obvious on reality shows, like *The Biggest Loser*. Our contestants can only work the their own time and resources, so let's hope they have a much better week.

And if you're shaping up, here's to a healthy weekend.

Eileen

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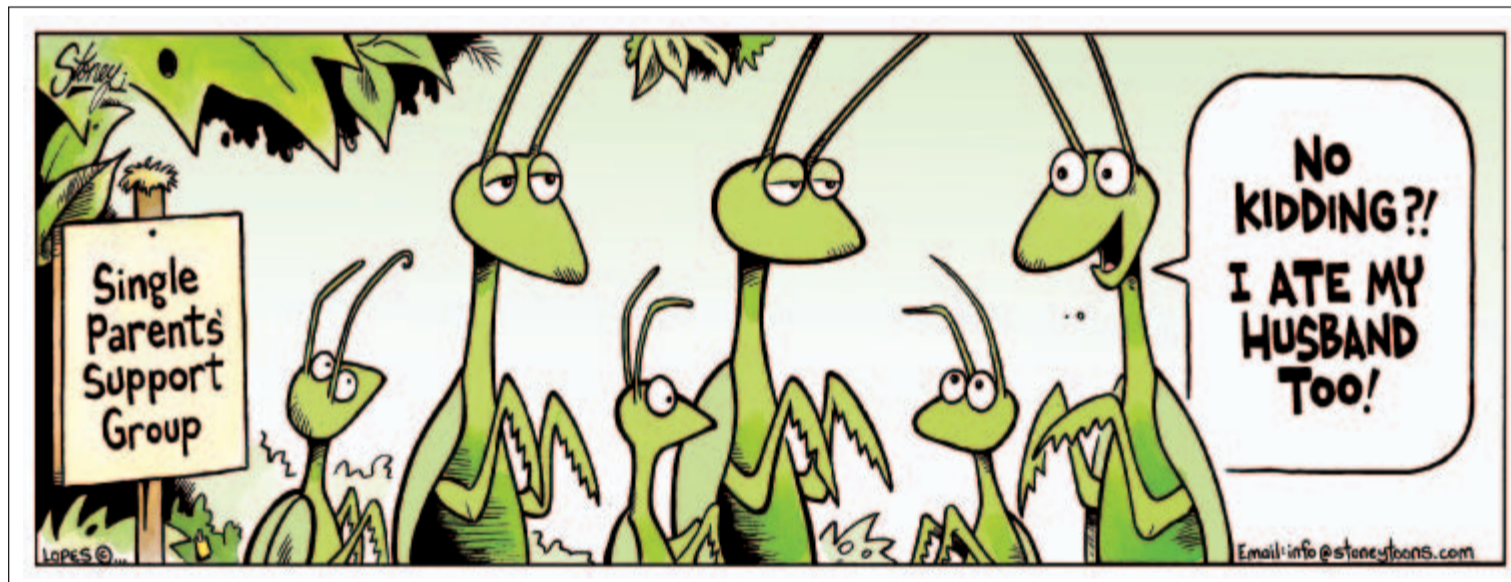
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life's still a stage

Visionaries: Don and Judy Freeman, who created Tjapukai, on their remote property at Kuranda.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS HYDE



The Freemans have sold their shares in Tjapukai after 21 years, but they are far from retired. They tell DENISE CARTER about the birth of their pet project, the glory years in tourism in Cairns and how they are continuing their work in Aboriginal tourism

At Kuranda, where Tjapukai theatre began, Don and Judy Freeman begin their morning with home-made cookies and downed with tea and coffee.

It's an easy start for the couple who created Australia's longest-running show with more than 7000 performances in 25 countries.

Judy pads shoeless through her house decorated with Buddhas and filled with peaceful music and she remarks on the view.

If you turn 360 degrees, you can see nothing man-made through their windows overlooking 20ha. Their property is, indeed, remote.

It takes a snake-like map and the crossing of myriad grids and dirt tracks to get there.

In early September, the Freemans left Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park but they say they haven't had operational

involvement in the past two years, so it hasn't made much difference to their lives. They have already branched into other enterprises and are still involved in Aboriginal tourism.

The end of the Freeman's Tjapukai journey came with a disagreement among partners about the future direction of the business. Don had international plans, whereas other partners were happy with the park's current position.

"The thing you've got to understand about us is we're visionary," Judy explains.

"We've done a lot of things before our time and I guess we want to keep doing it."

Tjapukai, which they describe as one of their children, became a leading light in Aboriginal tourism and won many awards, but its beginnings could hardly

Wonderful memories: Don and Judy Freeman on tour with the Tjapukai team in Europe in 1991 (right) and (below) proudly showing off tourism awards in 1992.

have been more humble.

It was born of the couple's love of theatre and their unconventional lifestyle in a basement at Kuranda.

Don may be thousands of miles from his native New York but he has no trouble maintaining his love for theatre.

In New York, he was a theatre producer, director, actor and set designer. He directed plays off-Broadway, designed sets for Broadway and he mixed with the likes of actors William Shatner and Goldie Hawn.

"My first wife was touring with Bill Shatner in a play that came to a theatre I was managing," Don says.

The pair (Don and his first wife) met during that tour, and he followed them around for a summer.

During the flower power era in the early '70s, Don says he "strung a few actors together" performing shows and creating





Exciting times: Don and Judy Freeman, David and Cindy Hudson and the Tjapukai team when they announced they were moving to Caravonica from Kuranda in 1995 (above). The Queen and Prince Phillip visited Tjapukai in 2002 (top, left) and in 1990, to help with Australia's tourism recovery, Tjapukai embarked on a world tour that took in four continents (bottom, left).

and tutored in song. It was from their final production at Kuranda named *The Odyssey You'll Ever See* that Tjapukai was born, when they met David Hudson.

"He was a young guy, a didgeridoo player, who had some dancing experience and he played guitar," Don says.

"He wanted to learn acting and we worked with him for several months and he wrote with us the Aboriginal viewpoint of the gold rush and the coming of the white man and recruited a group of Aboriginal guys in his tribe."

Judy recalls how ground-breaking the show was on opening night.

pulled out when it realised Aborigines would have a share in the company and equal representation on the board.

But the show was a hit and it moved from the basement of its first performance within two years to a purpose-built theatre before transferring to Cairns seven years later.

From the outset, the Freemans brought cast members to tourism exhibitions overseas to showcase their work, so it was a time-consuming passion.

You would think being the owners of such a big enterprise would preclude them from enjoying their own creative

day, *God created tourism*," Don says. "We did the first five days of creation."

"From *Genesis from the Bible*," says Judy.

They played Joseph and Mary and greeted "three wise yen" bearing gifts in duty free bags. "It was crazy," Judy says.

"We had all the captains of industry involved."

It's hard to imagine the show might be over for Don and Judy now they've left Tjapukai.

They take with them their memories and many accolades for their pioneering contribution to indigenous tourism.

There may be more to come, though.

They are not keen to impart what their plans might have been for Tjapukai so I feel they have not yet hung up their theatre hats.

They are still dedicated to working with indigenous people.

They are working on a government program, mentoring indigenous businesses in Cape York and will soon work independently in Western Australia as consultants for indigenous companies.

Don and Judy's three children have grown and left the family home. Now Tjapukai, their "fourth kid", has come of age and left their care.

"Tjapukai got as much attention as our kids," Judy says.

"So I guess when your baby grows up and leaves, yes, there's a certain sadness to it.

"At the same time, we're ecstatic," she says, and they both laugh.

The thing you've got to understand about us is we're visionary ... and I guess we want to keep doing it

"We had the tourism people and we had the local Aboriginal people there," she says.

"The lady who was the Queen of the Tjapukai said to us, 'you know this is the first time anyone has ever done anything for my people. Everyone is clapping for us, when we're always just looking from the back'."

The early years were difficult, the Freemans say, because there was "extreme racism" at Kuranda and people were abusive to them about their enterprise. Even getting funding was a problem.

The couple raised \$10 million privately, which included a \$4 million bank loan.

A venture capital group

talents but, as ever, the Freemans made their own opportunity and used the success of Tjapukai to chase the events market and created lavish productions in which they performed.

"It was the '90s when tourism was easy and there was a lot of money around," Don says.

They produced mystery tours and had shows with dinosaurs and sets so lavish they included stacked-up cars, welded together and spray-painted to mimic coral.

Their final event was for the Australian Tourism Export Council two years ago in front of a symposium of 800 tour operators.

"It was called, *On the seventh*

theatre with local communities.

Canada-born Judy was a dancer, drama teacher and costume designer.

The couple met in Guatemala in 1977 when they each had a one-year-old child and travelled around the world creating theatre.

"Our expertise was in folk theatre," Don says. "And so, we would go into communities in America, Sri Lanka, India and here in Australia, get a community together to write a musical play and then perform it for their peers."

How they came to live in Australia is a combination of chance and determination.

After nine years in India, they drew up a list of countries with a warm climate, a good school system and a democratic, stable government where they would like to settle.

Mauritius, New Zealand's Bay of Islands, Madagascar, Hawaii, the Algarve in Portugal and Ibiza, the party mecca for Europeans, were on the list, but a last-minute impulse drew them Down Under.

In 1982, they were in Bombay with tickets for Ibiza.

"We decided, well, let's go the other way," Don says.

"We ended up in Sydney, bought an old ambulance and fitted it out with a bed and

started up the coast until the pavement ran out, which was Cairns, as far as you could go really in those days."

Attracted by the arts community at Kuranda, they moved up the hill where they lived for a year, writing and performing shows.

As they delve into the seeds of Tjapukai, the pair pull out albums of their early productions and laugh like teenagers, reliving happy moments, reciting dialogue and singing ditties they composed.

They remind me of the couples in *When Harry Met Sally*, as they finish each other's sentences and speak an almost private language of their own.

"The first show was one we brought with us, a sort of busking play," Don says.

"The next one we did was *Babble On Babylon* that was the history of Kuranda."

By the end of their year, based on a promise to continue creating theatre, they were given a visa to stay in Australia.

Brainstorming sessions in a basement resulted in five shows Judy terms "extravaganzas" with casts of up to 70, comprising of farmers, teachers, labourers and "anyone who wanted to be in it" and who were willing to be choreographed in dance