

theatre

Indigenous theatre: The future in black and white

There's nothing I would rather be
Than to be an Aborigine
and watch you take my precious land away.
For nothing gives me greater joy
than to watch you fill each girl and boy
with superficial existential shit.
Now you may think I'm cheeky
But I'd be satisfied
to rebuild your convict ships
and sail them on the tide.
I love the way you give me God
and of course the mining board,
for this of course I thank the Lord each day.
I'm glad you say that land rights wrong.
Then you should go where you belong
and leave me to just keep on keeping on.

This is one of the songs from *Bran Nue Dae*, a musical which emerged in 1989 from one of the most remote parts of Australia: the port of Broome on the North-West coast. It has since been widely performed and toured, its music recorded and a television documentary broadcast nationally. The song itself has become an anthem for Aboriginal people, a rare unifying force for empowerment. Its quality has appealed equally to white Australians: its tune is infectious and celebratory, creating a tension with the words which expresses both Aboriginal defiance of their situation as a colonised people, and an ironic self-accusation for accepting it. The author is Jimmy Chi, a musician of mixed blood, including Aboriginal, Chinese and Japanese; and the stage show evolved from the songs created by his band, Kuckles, one of dozens of bands which play in the pubs in Broome.

Bran Nue Dae in 1989 was a turning point in the short history of Aboriginal writing for the theatre. Twenty years of evolution in writers, political activists, actors, dancers, singers and song-writers preceded it. It was, surprisingly, only in the 1960s that Aboriginal writers began to be published in numbers recognisable as a body of work.

This occurred as part of a gathering force of activism by a politically aware post-war generation of Aborigines and of young white people, particularly university students. In 1961 Aborigines had finally been given the vote. In 1965 Northern Territory Aboriginal pastoral workers were awarded equal pay with whites; in 1966 the first major land-rights strike took place; and in 1967 a national referendum overwhelmingly voted in favour of transferring judicial responsibility for Aboriginal welfare from the states to the Commonwealth government. Isolated protests over local issues, mainly to do with living conditions on reserves, became by degrees an organised civil rights movement which gained confidence from the parallel movement in the United States.

Encouraged by public statements, individual voices began to be heard. Poetry and song came first, drama followed. The civil rights movement coincided with—or rather shared the same roots as—the anti-British, anti-American, anti-Vietnam War nationalism that changed the politics of Australia in the late 60s and brought into existence, as a by-product, the Australian Council for the Arts, now the Australia Council. Its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (now

Fund) has been an important source of funds for Indigenous arts groups and for the development of individual talent.

Now, after thirty years of growing confidence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have reached the forefront of our arts. Thirty years ago few urban white Australians had ever seen a traditional Aboriginal painting—had rarely even seen an Aboriginal. Few whites knew anything of the Aboriginal way of life, with its complex social order and spirituality, its practical jokes, its ingenious survival skills and its talent for parody. We were not even aware of our own ignorance—until it was exposed by the revelations on stage and on television. Today in Australian theatre, at least in my view, the most important new work is Aboriginal—and will, in due course, be the most widely seen in other countries.

The earliest play from this contemporary movement was Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*, the first half of which was first seen at a private performance in Sydney in 1971. The dialogue was good-hearted and good-humoured and the subject matter small community affairs. I was suddenly overawed at being allowed into the domestic life of a people whose privacy had, for so long and for such good reason, been guarded from white eyes. The play was later performed in Melbourne by the Nindethana Theatre, the first of the black companies. Kevin Gilbert had at that time just been released from gaol. He became a leading figure in the civil rights movement, uncompromising in his ethics and a poet of distinction. He died in 1992, mourned by both blacks and whites. Wesley Enoch is directing *The Cherry Pickers* for the Sydney Theatre Company in 2000.

Other works followed. The political revue *Basically Black* was

performed in 1972 at the Nimrod Street Theatre in Sydney, with a cast including Gary Foley, Zac Martin and the late Bob Maza, soon to be well-known figures. The revue was a response to a High Court ruling against a traditional claim to land ownership, and the participants were instigators of the Aboriginal Embassy in Canberra—a tent bearing the Aboriginal banner which had been pitched, as a demand for recognition, on the lawn outside Parliament House. Out of that group grew the Black Theatre in Redfern, Sydney. Among the plays I saw in that crumbling warehouse was *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976), a contemporary tragedy by Gerry Bostock. Another was Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man*, the first Aboriginal play to enter the repertoire of the white theatre and in 1982 received with acclaim at an international festival in Denver, Colorado. Through the simple tale of a child's faith it gave white audiences a shock of insight into the despair of life on a country town reserve. Its progress owed much to the pioneering actors Justine Saunders and Brian Syron; and they became major forces in the black theatre movement.

Syron had escaped from an abused childhood to New York in the late 50s, where he became a star pupil at the Stella Adler studio, set for a promising career in Hollywood. But in 1968 he was drawn back to Australia, called home, he said, by the apparition of a tribal elder. He was the first Aboriginal to have had that kind of extensive theatre training and his school in Sydney became a centre for actors, both black and white, who sought a more daring and Indigenous style of expression. He died in 1993, aged only 53.

In 1979, the nudging of a few consciences over the Western Australian sesquicentenary

provided circumstances in which our major black playwright, Jack Davis (1917-2000), could make his mark. Davis found himself writing Kullark, for the theatre-in-education troupe of the National Theatre in Perth. Through a number of metamorphoses a team of actors and dancers emerged in Perth to give a wholly new status to performance by Aboriginal artists. Of national reputation are the actor Ernie Dingo, who made his debut in Kullark, dancer and writer Richard Walley and Steve 'Baamba' Albert. Others, like Kelton Pell (currently performing nationally in Perth's Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre's production *Solid* with Ningali Lawford), are beginning to become nationally familiar. But whites have contributed too, notably the director Andrew Ross, in partnership with whom most of Davis' eight plays evolved, notably *The Dreamers* (1982) and *No Sugar* (1985). Ross founded the Black Swan Theatre Company as a multi-ethnic performance group in Perth in 1991. Western Australia, isolated from the rest of the country and with one of the harshest histories of race relations, has been a major force in the development of black actors of stature.

From the Northern Territory comes Roger Bennett's play about his father's life as a boxer, *Up the Ladder* (1990), which has been in the repertoire of the Melbourne Workers' Theatre since 1995 and was a success at the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in collaboration with Brisbane's Kooemba Jdarra. His *Funerals and Circuses* had its premiere at the 1992 Adelaide Festival where he confronted his audience with the issue of inter-racial marriage (between a white policeman's daughter and a black artist). Bennett's plays and poetry were characterised by humour, music and anger at continuing

discrimination against his people. He died in 1997.

The struggle for self-expression has not been easy. Writing itself, Jack Davis has said, is a political act, a splitting of the mind between one's own thought and the demands of black politics. In consequence some of the early plays are didactic, and anxious in their choice of language. They deal again and again with the state Aboriginal Protection Acts of the early part of the century which denied advancement, forced blacks into white-governed rural ghettos and ordered that children be taken away from their parents and taught assimilation. Other common themes are job discrimination, land rights and the high incidence of black deaths in police custody, a phenomenon about which there was an extensive, heated and finally fairly fruitless judicial inquiry. The deaths continue unabated.

* * *

Aboriginal writers and performing artists have arrived in the western theatre at a time when the form is more diverse than at any other period in its history. Writers today are freer to choose their own form than they have ever been: the only restriction lies in the capacity of their peers to understand it and performers who can realise it. The fact that we have world-class young actors today like Bradley Byquar, David Ngoombujarra, Ningali Lawford, Rachel Maza, Deborah Mailman, Lydia Miller, Leah Purcell, Kylie Belling, Deborah Cheetham, Kevin Smith, Margaret Harvey and Lafe Charlton working with major companies and directors like Wesley Enoch and Noel C Tovey, is an important witness to the rate at which we are putting aside the imitative skills of the past in favour of something more recognisably our own. The progress of Aboriginal

writing for the theatre has in the 90s discarded polemic for a deeper psychology. The plays have become more concerned with the emotional and spiritual life of the characters, more confidently experimental in their structure, and more inclined to include the white man and woman in their view of world. Eva Johnson's powerful solo performance *What Do They Call Me?* (1990) is a three-part monologue by Connie Brumby, thrown into gaol for drunkenness, mourning the children who were taken from her in the 50s under the Aboriginal protection legislation; her daughters Regina, now a middle-class married woman brought up unaware of her aboriginality; and Alison, now a social worker, activist and lesbian, who seeks to reconcile the family to each other and their past.

One of the first plays to successfully create rounded white characters was Sally Morgan's *Sistergirl* (1993), about the friendship of two women, one black, one white, in an alcoholics' ward. The play toured nationally from Perth in 1993. Sadly, death dogged the cast and the season ended abruptly in Melbourne and the text was suppressed by the author as a mark of respect.

Ningali Lawford's solo show *Ningali* (created in collaboration with Robyn Archer and Angela Chaplin) was performed all over the world in the 1990s. In it she tells the story of her untroubled childhood in the Kimberleys, the loneliness of a city boarding school, an extraordinary six months as an exchange student in Alaska, the rebellion and trauma of adolescence and racist encounters, and the rediscovery of herself through dance and the emergence of a strong maturity. More than the men, these women have used performance to focus upon the healing process; they have given their audiences lasting

images of power. Two further solo works—part political, part confessional—which celebrate the inner strength of their remarkable performers, have followed Lawford to international acclaim. They are Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony* (written with Scott Rankin) and Deborah Cheetham's *White Baptist ABBA Fan*. Deborah Mailman, whose work *7 Stages of Grieving*, created with director Wesley Enoch for the Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company in Brisbane, has also been around the world. This is the most innovative in structure of all the works so far created. It is written in 18 scenes, in a free-verse form incorporating enactments and film images, a variety of storytelling forms and symbolism.

The most recent black playwright to come to national attention is John Harding, whose play *Up the Road* was first presented by the Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative in Melbourne in 1991. It was further developed by the director Neil Armfield in 1997 for seasons at Melbourne's Playbox Theatre and Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney. Harding's protagonist is, for the first time, a middle-class Aboriginal, Ian Sampson, a Canberra bureaucrat who returns to his home town after a decade for a family funeral. There he faces not only punishment by the woman and now-dead brother he deserted, but finds himself the centre of conflict over government policy and local affairs. Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1998) was a joint production by Ilbjerri and Playbox Theatre in Melbourne. In 1999 it was revived, toured to Sydney and then to London, where it was warmly received as part of the Australia Council's *HeadsUp* Australian Arts 100 festival commemorating the centenary of the act to create an Australian



Aliwa, Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre

Federation. Stolen, again, is a powerful combination of the personal and the political as it tells the stories, in direct unvarnished terms, of five Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families by government order. The production by Wesley Enoch was particularly distinctive—adding to the play's political statement the actors stepped out of their roles at the end of the performance to tell their own stories.

The plays continue to be written, and within them the concealed history of race relations and the themes of reconciliation, empowerment and, more recently, a closer self-examination. They will continue to make an important contribution to a greater mutual understanding and respect; and

especially a recognition of two realities, black and white; and the values of that world which created them.

Katharine Brisbane AM, Hon.DLitt, Publisher, Currency Press.

This essay has been edited from, "The Future in Black and White: Aboriginality in Recent Australian Drama", AULLA (American Universities Language and Literature Association) Conference, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York State, USA, 1994; IDEA (International Drama Education Association) Conference in Brisbane, 1994. The full version, updated from time to time, is available on the Currency Press website

(www.currencypress.com.au) and in booklet form for teachers. Excerpt from *Bran Nue Day* reproduced with permission.

References
Penny Van Toorn, "Indigenous texts and narratives," and May Britt Akerholt, "New stages: contemporary theatre" in Elizabeth Webby ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000

Philip Parsons, General Editor, *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Currency Press, Sydney 1995

Jimmy Chi & Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, Currency Press & Magabala Books, Sydney and Broome, 1991

Wesley Enoch & Deborah Mailman, *7 Stages of Grieving*, Playlab Press, Brisbane, 1997

Anthology, *Plays from Black Australia*, Currency Press, Sydney 1989. Contains Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*; Eva Johnson, *Murras*; Bob Maza, *The Keepers*; Richard Walley, *Coordah*.

Currency Press publishes an extensive list of plays by Aboriginal writers including: Roger Bennett, Jimmy Chi, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Eva Johnson, Robert J Merritt and John Harding.



Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre

Solid

This play tells the story of Graham, a Noongar from the suburbs of Perth who heads north to escape drugs, unemployment and personal tragedy. On the road to Fitzroy Crossing he meets Carol, a Kimberley woman returning home after a long absence in the city to face the traditional law from which she has been running. Two Aboriginal people from Perth but from different worlds, both looking for something new. Starring Ningali Lawford and Kelton Pell.

...two of the best young Australian actors of their generation. ***The Australian***

Aliwa

When the Welfare came sniffin' around wanting to take the kids away, their Mum took the hard road and left her house and community to keep the family together. Almost fifty years later, her three daughters Dot, Ethel and Judith tell a story of love and survival in a very special family.

Yirra Yaakin has crafted a fine piece of theatre, as moving as it is uplifting....a triumphantly gentle piece of theatre.

The West Australian

Yirra Yaakin is one of Australia's leading Aboriginal theatre companies. Based in Perth, Western Australia in the heart of the Noongar Nation, Yirra Yaakin's commitment and energy has inspired an active and diverse range of theatrical, educational and developmental projects, providing the basis for a growing world-class, professional arts company. Yirra Yaakin was the recipient of the Prince Charles Trophy for services to the community in 1997.



Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts

Goin' to the Island

After seven years on the mainland, TJ, a young Murri hothead returns home to Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) to celebrate his 21st birthday. To his surprise his views about sand mining, tourism and the cultural revival of his people are challenged by his extended family. Therese Collie's play uses humour as well as dance and musical forms that range from traditional to reggae and rap. TJ's family chart the Island's comings and goings from the dreaming to the present day to help the young man to understand the strong ancestral and communal ties that keep him goin' to the island.

In its generosity of spirit and its powerful theatricality, this is a play which will delight Murris and whitefellas alike.

Brisbane Courier Mail.

Paradoxes perplex and unsettle as they jangle the expected with the unexpected to create untried symbols and unanticipated meanings. **RealTime**

Acknowledged as Australia's fore-

most Indigenous theatre company, Kooemba Jdarra is committed to producing professional innovative Indigenous theatre that continues the tradition of storytelling by engaging with new forms of expression. At the same time the company provides opportunities for Indigenous artists to present their perspectives and have a voice. The program includes mainstage productions, workshops, touring and regional programs, community cultural development and awareness through training for new and emerging Indigenous artists and artswriters.

Ilbijerri Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative

Stolen

Developed by the company in collaboration with Playbox Theatre, Jane Harrison's play confronts the ugly history of so-called 'integration' policies under which successive Australian governments took Aboriginal children from their families so that they could be raised in white-run institutions. The work developed in consultation with the Victorian Indigenous community, has been written by an Aboriginal playwright and performed by Indigenous actors. Through the stories of five Koori children struggling to survive in a society intent on destroying their culture and their identity, *Stolen* brings to vivid life the complex and controversial issues surrounding the Stolen Generations.

In 1990 a group of Indigenous artists and community members came together to form a professional theatre company for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Victoria. Since then the

company has initiated and developed performances in collaboration with their community. In addition to workshops and playreadings, they have produced two important works—*Up the Road* by John Harding, which had seasons in Melbourne and Sydney in 1991, and *Stolen* in 1998. Both these plays explore complex and controversial issues from an Indigenous perspective for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

Performers: Tammy Anderson, a Moonbird woman, Flinders Island mob in Tasmania; Kylie Belling, Yorta Yorta/Wiradjuri; Glenn Shea, Wathaurong/Ngarrindjeri; LeRoy Parsons, South Coast NSW; Pauline Whyman, a Riverwoman; Director, Wesley Enoch, Stradbroke Island.

Following seasons in Melbourne and Sydney, *Stolen* had a very successful tour to London in 2000 as part of the Australia Council's HeadsUp Australian Arts 100 festival celebrating Australia's Centenary of Federation.



Stolen is extraordinary ... a restless, time-transcending mosaic, dazzlingly realised in Wesley Enoch's production ... as moving as any production in London. **Michael Billington, The Guardian.**



Nura Ward, Nellie Patterson, Fiona Foley, Heidrun Löhr and Aku Kadogo

Ochre and Dust

A performance in an installation

The installation created by Batjala artist Fiona Foley combined with Heidrun Löhr's monochrome and colour photographs, provides an evocative stage setting for two Anangu-Pitjantjatjara storytellers. Nura Ward and Nellie Patterson are senior law women and ambassadors for Anangu-Pitjantjatjara culture. These dynamic women recount tales of their lives and their Tjukurpa (sacred stories or law that created and governs the world). The nature of this work at once provides a soundscape and photo journey through the Pitjantjatjara homelands as well as an interactive backdrop for the storytellers. This collaborative impression of Central Australia conceived by Aku Kadogo pays homage to the ongoing relationship she has with Anangu.

Ochre and Dust was produced for the Perth International and the 2000 Telstra Adelaide Festivals. 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000

Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman / Kooemba Jdarra

The 7 Stages of Grieving

Originally conceived, co-written and directed in Brisbane in 1995 by Kooemba Jdarra's then Artistic Director Wesley Enoch, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* is a solo performance co-written and performed by Murri artist, Deborah Mailman, one of Australia's most accomplished actors of stage and screen, with images created for the production by noted visual artist Leah King-Smith.

7 Stages is an important contemporary performance work. Deborah Mailman tells a collective story which merges personal family history with instances of public grief. The work has toured Australia and internationally to considerable acclaim.



Mailman is a wonderfully open performer... she manages to suggest the whole history of the invasion of her country...through a mix of reminiscence, great comedy, passionate statement and vivid theatricality *The Australian*

Black Swan Theatre Company

Bidenjarreb Pinjarra

West Australian Noongar Aboriginal actors, Kelton Pell and Trevor Parfitt researched, improvised and shaped the story of The Battle of Pinjarra in partnership with whitefellas Geoff Kelso and Phil Thomson. This latest version is presented with the cross cultural, Perth-based Black Swan Theatre Company which has had an ongoing association with Indigenous artists.

The quartet has produced a compelling theatrical work that shakes up traditionally held views of history and discovers clues to what really happened in 1834 when Governor James Stirling led an armed expedition into the territory of the Murray River people, 90 kilometres south of the struggling Swan River Colony in Western Australia.

Bidenjarreb Pinjarra, says Kelton Pell, is "a story about a crucial moment in Noongar history which honours the fallen and sets the facts straight", told through satire, mime, improvised comedy, dramatic conflict and tough physical theatre."

The play had two seasons in Perth, a tour of south-west Australia, Northern Territory, Melbourne and Sydney. In 2000 Black Swan will undertake a regional tour of the work.

There is a wonderful fusion of comic (and the comic is very funny) with the tragic in the way they tell it ... a wonderful mix of wisdom about how life is lived, Bidenjarreb Pinjarra tells us about our past. And we grieve. But then offers us a powerful paradigm for our future. And we hope.

Sydney Morning Herald



REM Theatre

toteMMusic

In this collaboration between Indigenous and non-indigenous artists, a young city dweller is introduced to the spirit and dances of her people by the visit of the Kangaroo Man. toteMMusic explores the balance between traditional and contemporary Australian society. The work premiered at the Lucerne International Music Festival followed by performances at the Flanders Festival, Ghent, and the Zuiderpers Huis, Antwerp. It was included in the Spotlight Program, 4th Australian Performing Arts Market, Adelaide 2000.

The performers are drawn from the Torres Strait in the north, through Tennant Creek in the Central Desert, to Western Australia. REM integrates the performing arts into a vibrant, cross-cultural, cross-artform theatre and deals simply with concepts and attitudes that both children and adults relate to and understand.



Queensland Theatre Company

The Sunshine Club

Frank, an Aboriginal serviceman, comes home from World War II to find that although the wider world may have changed, not much is different for him. Harassed by police, barred from hotels and forbidden from dancing with his childhood friend, Rose—the white minister's daughter—Frank decides to take action. With his friends and family he sets up The Sunshine Club, a place where white and black can meet and, above all, dance.

Commissioned by the Queensland Theatre Company, book, lyrics and direction are by Wesley Enoch, music by John Rodgers and featuring a cast of powerful Indigenous performers. The premiere season included Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Brisbane and subsequently the launch of the Sydney Theatre Company's 2000 program.

...with a heart and a brain, a compelling, important take on the musical.

Sydney Morning Herald





The Marrugeku Company

Crying Baby

Founded in 1994 specifically for the project, Mimi, Marrugeku comprises Western Australian urban Indigenous dancers and musicians, non-Indigenous physical theatre practitioners from Stalker Theatre in Sydney and Kunwinjku dancers—story tellers and musicians from Kunbarlanjinja, a remote community in Arnhem Land. Marrugeku's Mimi was extraordinarily successful, playing in urban Australian arts festivals, remote Aboriginal communities and international arts festivals.

Crying Baby is a large scale outdoor intercultural performance incorporating stilts and aerial work, contemporary Indigenous dance and music, installation, weaving, film and contemporary sound art. Blurring the edges between story, history and Djang (or dreaming), its focus is on stories from post contact/colonial times as well as modern life for Indigenous Australians living in remote communities.

Key artists include director Rachael Swain, choreographer Raymond Blanco, visual artist Thompson Yulidjirri, musical director Matthew Fargher, designer Andrew Carter, weaver Yvonne Koolmatie, film director Warwick Thornton. Crying Baby premieres as a work in progress at the Darwin Festival 2000 and in its final form at the Festival of Perth 2001.

A stage beneath the stars of Arnhem Land; an ancient rock face for a backdrop, lit by flickering, dancing light; an ecstasy of voices, of Aboriginal tales and chants; a cast of dancers, actors, trapeze-tumblers and stilt walkers, performing against projected video images, banks of TVs and satellite dishes; a drama unfolding at once on triple interwoven levels, full of half-buried symbols, rhymes and parallels. Such is the spectacle of Crying Baby, the remarkable new production of the Marrugeku Company and the piece de resistance of this year's Darwin Festival.

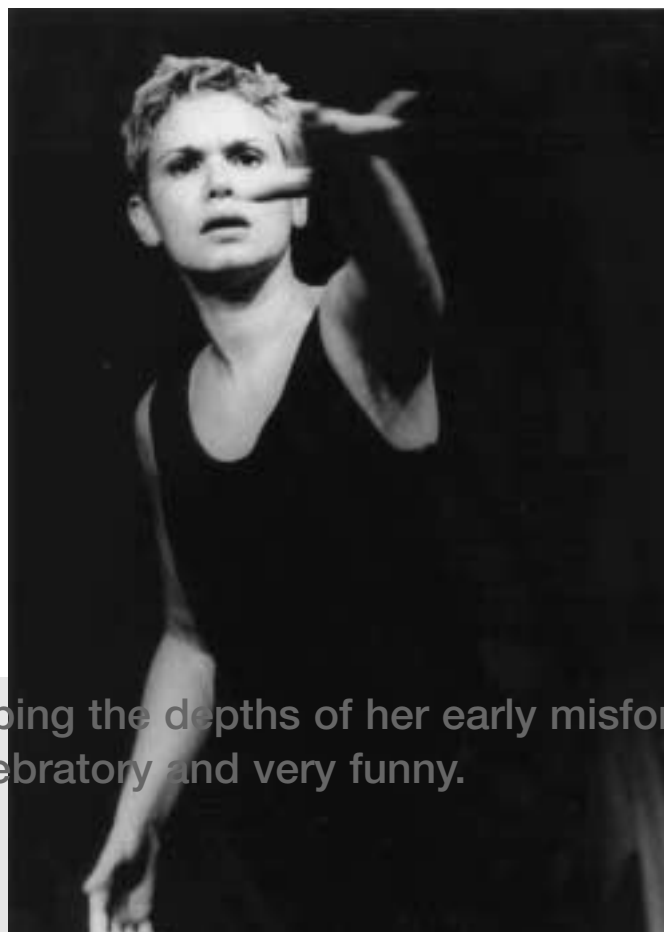
The Australian

Leah Purcell

Box the Pony

Box the Pony, a semi-factual account of Leah Purcell's life, was the smash hit of the 1997 Olympic Arts Festival's Festival of the Dreaming and was critically acclaimed at the 1998 Adelaide and 1999 Edinburgh Arts Festivals. Subsequent seasons were successfully staged in Sydney and Brisbane. At the Sydney Opera House it was part of the Reconciliation celebrations in 2000. The work was included in the HeadsUp Australian Arts 100 festival at the Barbican in London, July 2000.

Leah Purcell (Nation; Waka Waka) comes from a long line of vaudevillians. In 1993 she was cast in Jimmy Chi's ground breaking musical, Bran Nue Dae, which toured Australia. She appeared in theatre works at Brisbane's La Bôte and then moved to Sydney to work as a television presenter. Leah is an official Ambassador for Reconciliation through her music and guest speaking appearances. In 1999 she was voted Best Female Artist at the National Indigenous Awards. She received accolades for her appearance in Belvoir Street Theatre's production of The Marriage of Figaro as part of the Olympics Arts Festival in Sydney in 2000.



While she doesn't shirk from plumbing the depths of her early misfortune, overall the play is raw, cheeky, celebratory and very funny.

Sydney Morning Herald



Deborah Cheetham

White Baptist ABBA Fan

This is a moving, funny and forthright performance based on incidents from the life of Aboriginal opera singer, Deborah Cheetham. From forced removal from her Aboriginal family to her upbringing in the strict confines of a white Baptist family, to her eventual reunion thirty years later with her birth mother, Deborah Cheetham weaves events from her life with songs by Saint Saens, Catalanni and Dvorak as her intimate story unfolds. Commissioned for The 1997 Olympics Arts Festival's Festival of the Dreaming, and produced by Performing Lines, the work's many seasons have included the Christchurch Arts Festival and the Edge, Auckland (New Zealand) and sell-out houses for the Zuercher Theatre Spectakl, Zurich, 1999. The work was included in the Barbican season of the HeadsUp Australian Arts 100 festival in London, 2000.

...with bitter irony, seldom sentimental, her witty torrent of words fascinate the audience.
Solothurner Zeitung, Zurich.

Tom E Lewis and Handspan Visual Theatre

Lift 'Em Up Socks

Tom E Lewis (Warndarrung-Marra, born Ngukurr) began his career in film and TV. Subsequently he performed in theatre productions as well as devising a solo performance, Thumbul. His musical career has taken him all over the world with the George Dreyfus Sextet, the Lewis and Young Jazz duo and The Anthropologists. The reputation of the non-indigenous Handspan is built on innovation in form, technique and content. The company has undertaken 16 international tours to 29 festivals and events worldwide and won the prestigious UNESCO Award for "outstanding contribution to the arts."

Lift 'Em Up Socks began with a collection of marionettes loaned to Lewis for restoration. Amongst the usual European folk tale characters were three Australians including a small Aboriginal boy. Tom E Lewis performs with Rod Primrose, directed by David Bell with puppetry direction by Heather Monk.

It's like learning to understand a new symbolism that converts time, for example, into static, visual symbols. It is a show best enjoyed by allowing the many layers of meaning to unfold.

