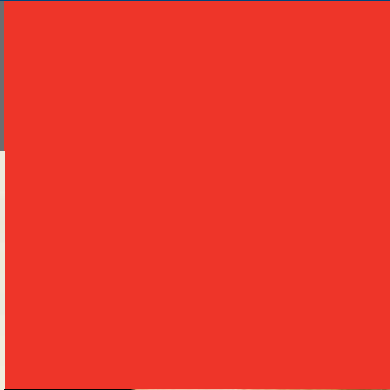


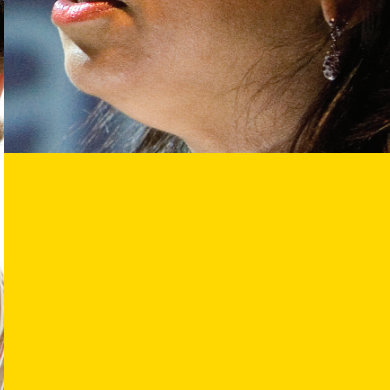
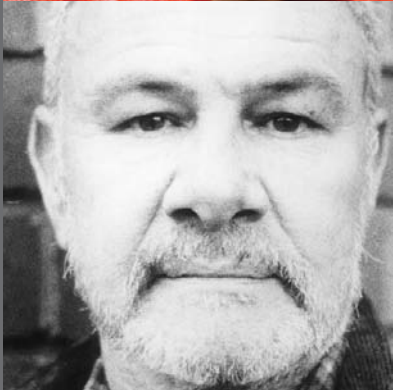


THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

FACULTY OF THE VCA AND MUSIC



**COURAGEOUS
CONVERSATIONS**





COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS



**COURAGEOUS
CONVERSATIONS**

29-30 APRIL 2009

Courageous Conversations
National Talking Circle

The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development
Faculty of the VCA and Music, The University of Melbourne

A selection of papers presented in April 2009 by Terri Janke,
Liza-Mare Syron, Rachael Maza Long, Rick Brayford, Kim Walker,
Wesley Enoch and Sam Cook

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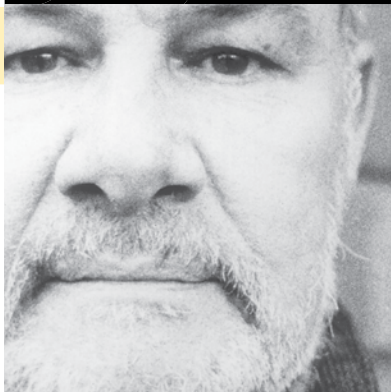
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**NOEL
TOVEY**

**Dancer, Actor, Choreographer
and Director**

Foreword

In April 2009 a group of arts leaders who are all involved one way or another in the business, and I mean the business of Indigenous performing arts, gathered in Melbourne for a talk fest interestingly titled 'Courageous Conversations'.

Courageous Conversations is an important collection of essays. For some, this is in their ability to tell the story of the recent history of the sector, and for others to be bold and brave, to provoke and stimulate the sector into other ways of thinking about what is needed to sustain the future of Indigenous performing arts.

The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Development occupies pride of place on the VCAM campus. Funded privately by a Melbourne family foundation and established in 2002, it can boast a higher retention of Indigenous students than any other tertiary institution in Victoria.

It was here that the participants gathered for the forum.

The word 'renaissance' means a renewal, and in particular a renewal of culture. The Indigenous renaissance that began in the 1970s at the original Eora College of Performing and Visual Arts, which was situated in a back street in Redfern and had as its catalyst Aboriginal culture, has now come full circle.

There is a new generation of young people learning all branches of the performing arts. This is wonderful to see and it is the legacy of the courage of those who paved the way.

I look forward to the day when we have a college and theatre for Indigenous students run by Indigenous teachers who understand both the importance of culture and the art of performing.

**Noel C Tovey
March 2010**



ERSAT



**MICHELLE
EVANS**

The Courage to Speak Out

An overview of Courageous Conversations

Head of The Wilin Centre for
Indigenous Arts and Cultural
Development
Faculty of the VCA and Music
The University of Melbourne

The Wilin Centre's Courageous Conversations National Talking circle was held in April 2009, and its focus was on the Indigenous performing arts.

Ten individuals were asked to present a courageous conversation, as a matter of public record, about the state of the nation's Indigenous performing arts and training sectors. The brief prepared by Wilin for these artists and arts leaders asked them to present their experiences, ideas for the future, and challenges and opportunities for the sector and for training Indigenous artists.

The dialogue was intended to stimulate thinking beyond the glass ceiling of the current infrastructure of the Indigenous arts sector and the group was asked to envision something new. Inherently, this practitioner discourse aimed to provide a safe environment for courageous ideas and conversations.

The 10 voices chosen to speak in this forum were:

- **Lisa Mare Syron – Performer/Director**
Graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts; Director of Indigenous Performing Arts Training at the EORA Centre in Sydney
- **Wesley Enoch – Director/Playwright**
Graduate of the Queensland University of Technology; Director of his own production company, Cookies Table

- **Sam Cook – Producer/Director/Artist**
Graduate of Curtin University; Director of KISSmyBLAKarts™; founding member of the Blak Stage Alliance; Program Director of the Dreaming Festival
- **Terri Janke – Solicitor/Author**
Graduate of the University of New South Wales; Director of Terri Janke and Co
- **Kim Walker – Choreographer/Teacher/Director**
Graduate of National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA); performer/choreographer Sydney Dance Company; CEO/Head of Dance for NAISDA
- **Jardine Kuwait – Musician/Teacher**
Graduate of the University of Adelaide; Founding Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music
- **Diat Aferink – Director/Performer/Playwright**
Founding Director of Kurruru Youth Performing Arts Company, South Australia
- **Rachel Maza-Long – Director/Performer/Musician**
Graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA); Artistic Director of Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative
- **Michael Leslie – Dancer/Choreographer/Teacher**
Graduate of NAISDA; Founding Director of the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts; Founding Director of the Aboriginal Theatre Program at WAAPA; Director of the Michael Leslie Foundation
- **Rick Brayford – Performer/Teacher/Director**
Graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA); Coordinator of the Aboriginal Theatre Program at WAAPA

Were the conversations courageous enough? Did we push the invitation to its limits? Were any iconic ideas articulated? You can decide when you read through the following written papers by seven of the 10 verbal presenters.

But first, I would like to outline the National Statement for the Future of the Indigenous Performing Arts, an outcome of the dialogue, as well as discuss significant themes from the forum and pose suggestions that may probe even further.

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

The context from which Courageous Conversations arose was rich. From Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit to the Northern Territory's Performing Arts Strategy, from the Australia Council for the Arts' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board's *Making Solid Ground* report and consultation to the release of the Platform Paper *Your Genre is Black*, by Dr Hilary Glow and Dr Katya Johanson, published by Currency Press.

The context for the Courageous Conversations National Talking Circle

was plentiful, with ideas about expanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and cultural opportunities globally, establishing Indigenous knowledge centres and Terri Janke's vision of the National Indigenous Cultural Authority. Specifically, in the Indigenous performing arts, the major new and big idea was the call for the establishment of a national Indigenous theatre company.

Published writing in this sector primarily remains the pursuit of non-Indigenous writers. In late 2008, Queensland-based publishing company Currency Press released the latest in its line of Platform Papers. Number 19 in the series, *Your Genre is Black* by Dr Hilary Glow and Dr Katya Johanson, was commissioned by Currency Press to explore the dilemma currently faced by the sector. This platform paper includes the voices of Indigenous performing arts sector practitioners – and yet these practitioners, who fundamentally understand the issues and challenges they face, remain 'consulted' and their ideas framed by non-Indigenous academics.

This issue of 'voice' and authority is a sticking point in the debates and discourse of Indigenous arts. Who speaks? Who is responsible? Issues of nepotism, authenticity, and community outcomes, as well as artistic and cultural excellence, clutter this space of practice. So from this point in our history, with all that has come before us, the group of ten practitioners entered into dialogue.

INDIGENOUS PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

In the learned opinion of Glow & Johanson (2009: 326) the Indigenous performing arts sector grew out of the international black political civil rights movement and has further morphed into an increasingly instrumental tool for policy development. So what does the territory look like today, late in the first decade of the 21st century? Three Indigenous theatre companies are struggling to survive; there is one prestigious major performing arts organisation, Bangarra Dance Theatre; there are numerous community-based dance and performing groups and projects; training courses in the TAFE system; limited training in higher education ...

There has been a lack of sector dialogue over the past 10 years. In fact, outside crucial artform-specific forums such as the Australian National Playwrights Conference, the Victorian Indigenous Playwrights' Conference, the Ausdance Treading the Pathways program and opportunities to bring together delegates at events such as the Australian Performing Arts Market, it is hard to find evidence of a large sector gathering outside the programs of The Dreaming Festival and The Garma Festival. There are too few Indigenous Australian academics writing in the field of Indigenous performing arts, and even smaller numbers acting in the unloved role of critic.

This issue of 'voice' and authority is a sticking point in the debates and discourse of Indigenous arts. Who speaks? Who is responsible?

Yet structurally we remain pigeon-holed, placed in the Indigenous tick-box, in Indigenous roles, in Indigenous arts organisations.

7

This is the state of the sector for which we are training our young people. These are the jobs – few and far between. This means that there is an expanse of opportunity to innovate. This is the place to launch Indigenous voices and Indigenous stories and Indigenous practice – de-colonised – and central to the voice of a true Australian performing arts sector. So is it still important to maintain a separate sector identity in the 21st century? The Courageous Conversations National Talking Circle emphatically asserted that a self-determined sector is certainly most relevant in the 21st century.

THE DIALOGUE THAT EMERGED

The Indigenous performing arts sector is currently facing is a crisis of confidence. Some of the questions raised in the National Talking Circle included: What is our generation's role? What is our contribution? How do we address the structural limitations in which the Indigenous performing arts sector finds itself? The National Talking Circle arrived at an agreement that we are artists and arts workers who are challenged to work in a very antagonistic world. Our confidence of voice is increasing, although still we find ourselves defined solely by our indigeness in this sector. All our Elders who have fought for self-determination and cultural affirmation have given our generation such opportunity.

This opportunity has created space for the Australian Indigenous voice to be

valued in the Australian arts sector. Yet structurally we remain pigeon-holed, placed in the Indigenous tick-box, in Indigenous roles, in Indigenous arts organisations. It seems that there is a crisis of confidence out there in the Indigenous arts sector as a whole – do we want to be defined solely as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander? I think we want to be seen as artists and arts workers, we want to inhabit mainstream roles and move the sector forward in this antagonistic time.

Some of the 10 presenters thought that equality for the Indigenous arts sector would take another 30 years; that this is actually an opportunity to address the industry's structural issues – in effect, to close the gap for the Indigenous performing arts sector. It seems that the forum felt impacted by our communities' contemporary experiences of transgenerational trauma and violence and that this requires engagement. We don't think artists and arts leaders are suitably qualified to approach these complex issues, yet these issues present themselves in the practice of making our work.

The arts sector, as a whole, has been infiltrated by the socio-cultural improvement agenda of successive governments – through the arts we can help with community health problems, address core justice issues, encourage wellbeing and community connectedness. The Indigenous arts sector, in particular, continues to be framed by policy agendas that do not focus on the artistic direction and vision of the

L-R: Michael Leslie, Kim Walker, Terry Janke, Diat Aferink, Liza-Marie Syron, Sam Cook, Jardine Kuwait, Rick Brayford



artists but on the need to measure success through art in terms of other priority areas. Art has become instrumental. The Courageous Conversations forum called for space for choice – choice to work through the arts for social change and choice to create art for art's sake. I am not sure that Indigenous art is ever art for art's sake.

The funding environment in which we find ourselves here in Australia is limited and, therefore, limiting. We need to grow the pie – create new slices of income and new ways to attract and earn money so as to make better and bigger work. The Australian arts sector will always need to be subsidised – that is self-evident. Yet we are faced with political agendas by which we help sustain the state's need to prove worth, measure impact, and understand success.

In her keynote address at the 2009 Garma Festival, Robyn Archer gave a rousing call to artists to beware the 'creative industries' rhetoric' and spoke of the detritus of art – that the end product, what we see on the stage or the wall, in our shops and on the television, is the debris of art. The true value of the art is in the process of making. As Indigenous artists, we can relate to this concept.

MID CAREER

The mid-career artist is one that finds him or herself having achieved success and created a great emerging career, yet now requires regular opportunities to produce work to maintain this success on the road to becoming an established artist. The mid-career artist requires space and time for self-reflection as well as opportunities to meet and work with a range of artists. This time in an artist's career is so important, as it requires the artist to identify the skills needed to continue to build their career. This is often a great opportunity for postgraduate education as well as the essential need for international exposure, leadership development and opportunities.

Artists who have created a solid early career sometimes hit a wall where burnout is inevitable – the pull from family, their dreams, the sector, their cultural obligations can all make Indigenous artists feel like they have to be everything to everyone. This point of understanding their best way of working, their best contribution to community and the world is the maturation point for a mid-career artist. Even the simple step of claiming the title of artist can be an empowering affirmation.

INDUSTRY CHALLENGES

We are operating in 'survival' mode; busy doing our own works on small budgets together with major responsibilities and cultural obligations. We are isolated. Arts advocacy organisations like ANKAAA (the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists), Desert and Ku Arts provide a point of collective voice and action. These are important organisations for our sector and for the future visioning of it. But notice how they are all focused on the visual arts. What about our performing artists? What about our performing arts companies? Queensland's Kooemba Djarra lost funding support from the Australia Council for the Arts and is in a state of revisioning. This is such an important company, 16 years old; its last show was Napranum artist Fiona Doyle's *Whispers of This Wik Woman*. Did the sector get up in arms about this? Yes and no – there were voices that protested the de-funding of a key performing arts organisation, but many voices remained silent, possibly worried about their own future.

If we are busy doing our own work in isolation, and we let companies fade away, what does that say about our sector? Then again, should companies always expect to be funded? Finding corporate sponsors and philanthropic support for our work requires talent in marketing and the translation of company objectives and vision into corporate brand values and core mission aims. The sector has raised issues about whether this – or any – funding compromises our integrity. Yet there is a sense of urgency emanating from the practitioners' Courageous Conversations – a real concern that we may be too late to save this once-vibrant sector. So it seems that what feeds our sector also limits it.

TRAINING AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Indigenous performing artists generally start their training around the age of 17 or 18 years. This is too late to compete for mainstream training opportunities. Mainstream artists, particularly those in the areas of dance and music, start around six or seven (or even earlier). The competition for places, roles and opportunities is fierce. The training opportunities for Indigenous artists who understand and identify their talent at a young age are few and far between. Training costs money and is seen as an extracurricula activity at that age. So how do we address the structural

barriers to developing our Indigenous talented artists from a young age? Is this why we have a stand-alone sector, stand-alone companies, and identified positions and find ourselves forever typecast? Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, said: "Success is the result of what sociologists like to call 'accumulative advantage'." (2008: 30). There are many advantages that our performing artists have access to, such as a wealth of cultural information through connectedness to family and place as well as a political and critical understanding of our collective history as Australian Indigenous people who have experienced and continue to experience colonisation in our own country. However, success in the arts, which could be simply defined by making a living as an artist, continues to rely on the accumulation of opportunities to profile and develop individual talent.

Racism in the Australian arts industry is still a major issue. Indigenous performing artists, playwrights and production crews experience racism ...

Inherently, the work of training Indigenous performing artists is demanding of teachers and practitioners. Training courses become places where Indigenous people are attracted to develop skills, to find out about identity and family, to develop community connections and profile, and to develop self. The competing demands placed on training spaces, courses and teaching staff are further confused by these courses becoming quasi-family, a place

to belong outside of family and community of origin, a culturally safe space. It is true that the psychological dimension of the development of 'family-space' within training/work environments can develop difficult and dangerous situations as well as those that are positive and empowering.

Performer and director Lisa Mare Syron is currently working on her PhD at the University of Sydney. She is particularly interested in what makes the best Indigenous actor training. She thinks there are a few major ingredients – knowledge of Indigenous history, knowledge of Indigenous theatre history, knowledge of cultural values, protocols and processes and perhaps we should be building an Indigenous-specific performance practice. Taking those ingredients seriously, what Syron is promoting is a very culturally-based way of training Indigenous actors, a step apart from the mainstream, and an addition to the traditional way of training actors. She noted that: "Cultural self is important in actor training and a sense of belonging." (Courageous Conversations, 2009). If this is a way forward then it seems that the role of Elders and professionals in the field must be included in this model's intergenerational dialogue and cultural immersion to create space for personal transformation and development.

AUDIENCES

There is demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre; there are many diverse audiences around Australia who will pay to see it. Our own communities cannot always afford to attend. This is a pivotal understanding within the sector, understanding the audience for the work and the role of the work in the development

of the Australian Indigenous performing arts sector. If we create work for our own communities, then the concern needs to be in whether it is accessible for a non-Indigenous audience, which may be the majority of paying audience members. Non-Indigenous audience members bring many perceptions into the performance exchange; mainly a preconception about what Aboriginal theatre is. There is much work to be done in the area of Indigenous audience development, in the education and framing of Aboriginal theatre for the audiences engaging with it. Our small Indigenous theatre companies are doing this work at the coalface, yet there is much we can gain from the work going on in our universities around cultural competence, whiteness theory and Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, that could add another sophisticated level to our work in performing arts.

Racism in the Australian arts industry is still a major issue. Indigenous performing artists, playwrights and production crews experience racism – in-your-face racism, structural racism, and racism born out of ignorance. The discourse of difference and outreach frames our sector; it is this discourse of disadvantage, with its labels, meanings and definitions, that limits our talent and our sector. How can we sidestep this? Challenge this? Move beyond this?

WHAT DO WE WANT?

There are so many gaps in the Indigenous performing arts sector. When the National Talking Circle began to articulate these gaps it was both exciting and daunting, a place whereby through naming what is wanted we collectively chose to act. The major points expressed by the Courageous Conversations National Talking Circle were:

- the need for production professionals, Indigenous agents, Indigenous production companies and creative designers – creative producers are missing from our sector;
- the need to solidify our presence at the performing arts industry's major forum, the Australian Performing Arts Market;
- the need to advocate to fund a remount of classics and extensive repertoire of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre/dance in this country;

Our indigenusness is our source of inspiration, connection and grounding. It is from this solid ground that we move forward together.

- the need to discover alternative economic models by looking to international examples and addressing the issue of income stream from intellectual property and royalties;
- the need for a strategy to combat personal burnout of isolated practitioners in this sector which requires networking opportunities, dialogue and professional development;
- the need to grow our own multidisciplinary arts training college through a network of training institutions by mapping the competencies of each training program and how they can support articulation into each other; and
- the need to create a virtual institute: to build on the strengths of each state, not a campus but a program of training, residencies and touring workshops.

NATIONAL STATEMENT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE INDIGENOUS PERFORMING ARTS

After two days of dialogue, presentations and facilitated conversation, the National Talking Circle arrived at the Wilin Statement on the Indigenous Performing Arts.

Those present agreed to address the needs of the Indigenous performing arts sector by committing to the following:

- innovation through creation of Indigenous performance technique and practice;
- the development of site-specific and place-based work;
- excellence;
- personal cultural understanding and awareness;
- cultural residency and immersion programs;
- networking, sharing and exchange of skills, ideas and experiences;
- a fully-funded ecology to exist for the sector to grow, including training, CCD, cultural immersion and residency programs, small and medium performing arts companies; and
- identification of offshore funding opportunities.

Courageous Conversations created a space for some of the leading voices in our training and Indigenous performing arts sector and training to dream the future. Some of the tensions that continue to have the capacity to destabilise innovation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work is that our sector remains in competition and in comparison with mainstream Australian theatre. This key tension inherent in our sector will continue to be the grist for our mill so we must be responsible for making headway. Our indigenusness is our source of inspiration, connection and grounding. It is from this solid ground that we move forward together.

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**TERRI
JANKE**

Copyright, Connections and Culture

Is there a place in the Australian arts industry for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority?

Terri Janke is an Indigenous arts lawyer, published author and consultant. A significant part of Terri's client base involves the advancement of protection for Indigenous Australian people in respect of intellectual property issues. Terri has been involved in a wide number of matters in representing Indigenous composers, writers, film directors, film producers, artists, and others across many fields of the arts and culture. She has drafted documentation and special provisions in complex commercial documentation to cover cultural attribution and integrity issues for Indigenous peoples. Terri was born in Cairns, Queensland and has family connections with the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula (Meriam and Wuthathi). Terri is on the boards of Tourism Australia, National Indigenous Television (NITV) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

My courageous conversation is about the establishment of a National Indigenous Cultural Authority (NICA) to be the peak advisory body on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights. Here I examine what this might mean for the Indigenous performing arts sector.

Australia recently adopted the *Declaration on the rights of Indigenous people*.¹ The Rudd Government's decision to support this United Nations standard-setting document came after it was adopted by most of the world, over a year before. The document is groundbreaking in that it encapsulates Indigenous cultural rights by stating, in Article 31, that Indigenous people have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions including oral traditions, literature, designs, visual and performing arts. Included within this article, too, is the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

I have been following the debate for greater cultural rights protection for some

¹ United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2007, viewed 5 May 2009, <<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html>>

Indigenous cultural expression is about connections, which for Indigenous people run deep into the heart of Indigenous life.

years now. I wrote a report ten years ago called *Our culture: our future*² which reached the conclusion that Australia needed a new law for protection of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property. This recommendation has never been seriously considered.

But the report also included 114 other legislative and policy recommendations. Other than an unsuccessful attempt to introduce Indigenous communal moral rights, most of the initiatives have involved the development of protocols, and the use of contracts by Indigenous people, and supporting industry organisations. Of course, legislative change requires a long-term commitment and with rights-recognition comes the need for rights management infrastructure. In consideration of this, the *Our culture: our future* report included the recommendation for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority to act as a leader organisation for the promotion and administration of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) rights. I took this idea to the Australia 2020 Summit in Canberra in 2008. It received some attention, and most notably the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (ATSIB) examined the idea with 'keen interest and much discussion.'³ This is an indication that national infrastructure is seen as an important consideration in the advancement of Indigenous arts industry.

Now before I focus on promoting the need for good cultural infrastructure, I need to present you with the background.

CONNECTIONS

Indigenous cultural expression is about connections, which for Indigenous people run deep into the heart of Indigenous life. I would like to focus on Indigenous performing arts. What makes Indigenous performing arts different to other Indigenous arts practices? Indigenous dance and songs are connected to the place and to people. Traditional dance and songs come from the land, the sea, and the performers. They come from ceremony. They hold knowledge passed on through the generations. Some are sacred or secret. They are integral to the identity of an Indigenous clan – a manifestation of Indigenous heritage, past and future.

Culture is not static, it evolves and adapts, and Indigenous people must be recognised as the primary custodians of their culture.

In contemporary times, Indigenous dance and songs can be recorded, adapted, digitised and used in many ways. Indigenous people worldwide have complained that their traditional dances and songs have been used and commercialised without recognition of clan ownership, and without integrity. Whilst there may be customary laws

or protocols that say who can dance, or perform a song, or adapt a song, the international copyright laws that give rights to creators do not recognise them. Hence, there is an imbalance in the system, one that allows Indigenous cultural expressions to be exploited.

COPYRIGHT

Copyright protects individual creator's rights and the rights of the owners of recordings in sound and film. It also only protects works for a limited time.⁴ For example, the composer of a song is recognised as the copyright owner of the musical work. As such, he or she can control how that song is reproduced, recorded and adapted. The maker of the recording is recognised as the copyright owner of the recordings. As copyright owner of the recording, the maker can make copies and authorise others to make copies of that recording. But what if a traditional song is used to create the new song? The intellectual property system does not acknowledge Indigenous communal ownership of cultural expressions and knowledge passed down through the generations, and nurtured by Indigenous cultural practice. Sacred knowledge is also not protected.

By way of background, copyright laws grant exclusive rights to authors to use, adapt and reproduce their works without conditions. This is at odds with the Indigenous cultural heritage material. In many Indigenous clans, there are laws that are based on responsibility for cultural heritage, to ensure that it is maintained and protected, and passed on to future generations. An individual or group of individuals may be empowered to act as the caretaker of a particular item of heritage.⁵ The traditional custodians are empowered to protect a particular item only to the extent that their actions harmonise with the best interests of the community as a whole.

This scenario was played out in the composition of the hit song *Sweet Lullaby*. The French composers from the musical group Deep Forest used recordings of a lullaby entitled *Rorogwela* from the Solomon Islands taken in 1970 by an ethnomusicologist, Hugo Zemp. The recording was published by UNESCO in a collection entitled *Solomon Islands: Tatekla and Baegu Music from Malaita*. It was this recording that Deep Forest sampled on their track. There is contested ground between UNESCO, the ethnomusicologist, and Deep Forest's record company concerning who (if anyone) gave rights to Deep Forest to embed the track within the new song. What is clear is that no permission was obtained from the performer or the clan for the use of the traditional song in the new song. According to an article in the *Island Sun*,⁶ the original recording was sourced from Malaita in 1970. No one from Malaita saw any money from this case.

² Terri Janke, *Our culture: our future*, Report on Australian Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights, Michael Frankel and Company, Sydney, 1999.

³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts news, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, 7 July 2008.

⁴ Terri Janke, *Our culture: our future*, Report on Australian Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights, op. cit., p. 51.

⁵ Although in some groups, where customary laws are less intact, there may not be, due to the disruption of cultural practices since colonisation.

⁶ Dionysia Tabureguci, The Pacific's Stolen Identity, *Island Sun*, 25 September 2008, p. 6.

Oral songs and performances are not protected by copyright, and ironically the owner of the recording has rights as the maker of that recording.

Copyright law protects individual rights to a certain extent. In the past 20 years, Indigenous Australians have actively fought for their rights to their art, dances, songs, performances and visual arts. Most notably, cases have been taken to the Federal Court of Australia to do with visual arts appropriated and reproduced on carpets and fabric. These cases have extended the application of copyright but they still operate within the framework of IP laws.

Copyright laws apply to the performing arts, including contemporary and traditional dance, song, storytelling, theatre, poetry and film. As well as many of these works being protected by copyright laws, the people who perform them are also given certain rights in relation to their performances, including moral rights, the right of consent, and copyright in certain sound recordings. In many instances these rights may be given away or not recognised, so I think there is a need for a more concerted rights approach.

CULTURE

It is Indigenous cultural protocol to seek permission and to give recognition of the source of a song or dance. The Australia Council for the Arts has published protocols for the development of Indigenous music, which advise that when performing or recording communally-owned musical works it is important to seek permission from the relevant community owners of the music. Robynne Quiggin, author of the *Music protocols for producing Indigenous Australian music* states:

“Observing customary law means finding out who can speak for that music, so the right people are asked for permission to use the music. For instance, if a musician wanted to use a rhythm or phrase from music belonging to a Torres Strait Island language group or family, it is essential to locate the correct language group or family group from the particular island owning that song or music.”⁷

⁷ Robynne Quiggin, *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian music*, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, 2007, p. 14.

I think we should be asking the cultural custodians, the living people who are the inheritors of that culture.

But recognition of these protocols is ethical or contractual-based. Should the law go further? Should Indigenous clans have the right to control who can perform their songs and dances? What about making

adaptations of traditional songs for new songs or changes to traditional dance steps to create fusion dance? These are all rights that would be controlled by copyright owners if the traditional dance was recognised as a copyright work, but because these dances are old, out of copyright, or oral and performance transmitted, there are no rights for clans to set up consent structures.

Thus the fusion of laws. For example: Can I dance a ‘traditional dance’ in the style of Mornington Island if I’ve been taught how to do a ceremonial dance at an Indigenous dance school by Indigenous Elders? What rights do I get as having learned it? Can I blend my own styles and techniques? Can I innovate? Do I have the right to do this if I come from another Indigenous culture? Who do I speak to to get clearance on whether 1) I can reproduce the dance? and 2) If I can adapt it, to ensure the cultural moral rights are intact? If I do get clearances, how do I share benefits, and how do I keep in contact with the relevant consent-granters?

If someone uses an old recording (like the *Rorogwela* recording in the Deep Forest scenario) but got the recording from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) or the National Film and Sound Archive, which depicts an Aboriginal song from ceremony, who do they speak with to get consent to adapt it, or make some new copyright material out of the old material, or bring copyright back into the derivative work? I think we should be asking the cultural custodians, the living people who are the inheritors of that culture. Perhaps, like the woman from the Solomon Islands, they are still alive and can be contacted. We need to have some sort of infrastructure to allow these people to record their interests, to record the cultural expression rights.

GETTING CONSENT

A National Indigenous Cultural Authority could facilitate consent by being a central place to locate relevant owners of culture.

It could then also assist with payment of royalties between users and owners; to develop standards of appropriate use to guard cultural integrity, and to enforce rights.

It could also manage any disputes between owner groups. For instance, many people wanting to do the right thing culture-wise many not know who is the right group to speak to – a family, a performance group, a land council or a native title representative body. One way is to have the proposed use advertised and invite all interested parties. But one group, the source group, should be consulted and be given attribution for their 'version' or 'source'. So it is not the inspired or pastiche style that you seek consent to, but the expression by the community or clan. For example, it may not be possible to get clearance for the use of a didgeridoo – but a didgeridoo track by the Gamatj clan, performed by a known person, is possible to get clearance for. The use of the authentically sourced material should have greater value than the former. Ways to enhance this authenticity and correct context can be reinforced through education, protocols and use of a trademark.

WANGATUNGA STRONG WOMEN'S GROUP – SHARING THE BENEFITS

Indigenous people who record their cultural heritage are often faced with the dilemmas of copyright law and traditional cultural expression. If I interact with this cultural song, I may own copyright or have some right to share in it, but what about my roles and responsibilities to the collective? How do these get recognised?

In the course of my work, Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people working within the protocols environment have examined ways to share the benefits. Rob Collins, the Indigenous Music Officer at the Australian Performing Rights Association (APRA) said that this was his experience too.⁸ Whilst APRA has Indigenous composers as its members and pays when a new work is created from an old work, the question which often arises, says Rob, is how do we recognise or share the benefits with the owners of the cultural heritage embodied in this work? Rob spoke of a recent example in which the Wangatunga Strong Women's Group from the Tiwi

Islands collaborated with Sydney-based musicians to record and release an album under the name of Ngarukuruwala. The musical works were the women singing traditional songs but with contemporary additions, drawn in from the musical arrangements of the musicians. This new skill, labour and effort drawing on the old for the new, creates a new copyright work that would belong, under conventional copyright laws, with the Indigenous singers perhaps, and the musicians. They would all be entitled to payment of royalties from album sales, and also from the collection of public performance rights by APRA. To reflect the cultural and collective ownership of the traditional cultural expressions, the project team has arranged for a portion of the royalties to go towards a Tiwi Islander community cultural fund.

WHY WE NEED A NATIONAL AUTHORITY FOR INDIGENOUS CULTURE

There are two main arguments that I want to put forward as to why we need a national authority for Indigenous culture.

It makes administrative sense

A National Indigenous Cultural Authority could administer, either directly or by establishing a distribution framework, ICIP rights. Another important function of the National Indigenous Cultural Authority would be to lobby for these rights holders. Experience has shown that industries develop more effectively with the support of a leader authority. Internationally, IP rights themselves could be managed collectively because it makes more sense commercially, and this would allow for the collection of royalties to be done in a structured way.

This deals with the economies of scale but there are also the cultural maintenance reasons – caring for culture. We need to make sure it is appropriately used, properly recompensed, that our Indigenous creators are valued and attributed, and also that our culture is not derogatorily used.

It empowers cultural output and this is about cultural maintenance

The idea behind intellectual property rights laws is that giving creators rights to exclusively exploit their cultural output for commercial gain gives them the incentive to create more works. Could rights for Indigenous cultural expression do the same in the Indigenous arts arena? An important

Indigenous people who record their cultural heritage are often faced with the dilemmas of copyright law and traditional cultural expression.

⁸ Personal communication, Rob Collins, Indigenous Music Officer, Australasian Performing Rights Association, 28 April 2009.

role of the National Indigenous Cultural Authority would be to administer the framework for prior informed consent rights to cultural material. Currently, Indigenous cultural expression and knowledge is supplied and used without a fee. If we charged a royalty on use, just like copyright and other intellectual property, the resulting income could be distributed, through NICA, to the traditional owners and communities, which in turn would support community development, and artistic and cultural development and maintenance. Does it make sense that if we perform a song by an American rap band that royalties are collected and paid to the copyright owners of that song, but when we perform a traditional song, no royalties are payable at all? What is this saying about whose culture is more valuable? By recognising and paying royalties to traditional owners, you are encouraging both the performers and the traditional owners to work within the process of acknowledging rights on the part of the performer and asserting and guarding rights for the traditional owners. I believe that this could foster a process of cultural development, which is, by its very nature, Indigenous.

I often get approached by young artists who are proud to be Indigenous and want to work and interact with cultural heritage, make it more relevant to their lives, interpret it and be part of the cultural continuum, but they are unsure of the processes. Can they adapt a song or theatre piece? Have they contacted the right person? What do they put on the cover of their album when they publish it to stop other people from thinking it's fair game – terra nullius?

If a national system was to be established with a National Indigenous Cultural Authority as a point of contact for rights clearances and payment for uses, corporations would give back to Indigenous communities what they now take for free. More art and culture would be performed and encouraged. Indigenous people would find employment opportunities in not only arts and culture but in management, business, investment and as professional advisers to these industries as lawyers and accountants. This system could promote the practice of culture and the business of culture at the same time.⁹

Other models to draw on include the statutory licensing schemes set up by APRA. These collective copyright management agencies have developed large industries, and are leading cultural organisations which turn over millions of dollars per annum, which they distribute to their membership of copyright owners. Consider the role that these collecting societies play in developing and enhancing Australian creative industries. The roots for this invigoration are based on prior consent models – copyright exploitation rights and the collection of fees. Surely we could make use of these types of models to develop a culturally appropriate organisation to promote Indigenous arts and cultural expression?

CONNECTING CONSENT WITH CULTURE

Do we believe that our Indigenous arts and culture are part of a wider ecology that includes all levels of arts and cultural protection, from training to customary practice and to excelling professionally, like the Bangarra Dance Theatre and Geoffrey Yunupingu? There are three main connections for NICA to deliver that are currently not being addressed by conventional IP systems:

1. connecting prior informed consent networks between users and owners for Traditional Culture Expression (TCE);
2. recognising the cultural attribution of the source community; and
3. respecting the cultural integrity of the work.

Could a National Indigenous Cultural Authority operate to facilitate consent and payment of royalties; to develop standards of appropriate use to guard cultural integrity and support rights holders in enforcing their rights? What effect might this have on our practice? It could help educate, make our jobs easier, promote cultural value and show young Indigenous kids that they have inherited a great wealth of cultural capital that can be made useful.

There are international developments which are leaning towards recognition of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expression rights. In February 2009, the New Zealand Government and the three groups of Iwi agreed to a \$299 million compensation package for the Iwi's historical Treaty of Waitangi claims. The package included designation of ICIP rights in the Ka Mate Haka to one of the Iwi groups, the Ngati Toa. The rights are aimed at cultural redress rather than financial gain, and it is not expected the Ngati Toa will be able to claim royalties under them. They include the rights of acknowledgment of authorship of the Haka, and to negotiate with the Crown to protect the Haka, especially in terms of inappropriate commercial use.¹⁰

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) is the international agency that administers the world's IP laws through treaties. Since 2000, it has been examining traditional knowledge and TCE protection within the IP framework. WIPO has developed a set of draft provisions on TCE including compliance with the "free, prior and informed consent" principle and the recognition of customary laws and practices." Under the WIPO provisions the prior consent of the traditional owners of cultural expressions would be required prior to recording, publication and communication to the public. There would also be moral rights for communities but these would be automatic and not just voluntary.¹¹

Six countries in the Pacific are looking at adopting the Pacific Model Law for the protection of cultural expression. The *Pacific Regional Framework for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expression*

⁹ Terri Janke, *Guarding ground: a vision for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority*, Wentworth Lecture 2008, Terri Janke and Company Pty Ltd, 2008.

¹⁰ Letter of agreement between the Crown and Ngati Tao, Tikaohia Te Marama, February 2009.

¹¹ World Intellectual Property Organization, viewed 7 May 2009, <http://www.wipo.int/portal/index.html.en>.

The vision for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority is to set the state of play, on terms where Indigenous people are able to administrate consent ...

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of Culture¹² establishes 'traditional cultural rights' for traditional owners of traditional knowledge and expression of culture.¹³ The prior and informed consent of the traditional owners is required to reproduce, publish, perform, display, make available online and electronically transmit,

traditional knowledge or expressions of culture. The Pacific Model Law for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture recognises the pivotal role of a cultural authority in administering prior informed consent rights.

Should Australia be examining the possibility of new laws? I consider that this model law would be a great reference point for those seeking the introduction of a National Indigenous Cultural Authority, and such a model may not need legislation but could be established to facilitate negotiated agreements for the use of ICIP, where both parties are willing to recognise ICIP rights, and where there are certain incentives for commercial interest groups to do so; for instance, where use of a branded trademark or authentication label is given as part of the licensed user rights.

CONCLUSION

Should there be infrastructure to support Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights? To undertake its functions, NICA would need to make use of a range of tools which are IP-based. It would need a strong trademark and branding system that promotes cultural authority. In the same way the National Heart Foundation mark is applied to goods that meet criteria for healthy food, the NICA trademark would appeal to consumers who are looking for authentic products and services that are made with fair trade through the sharing of benefits with Indigenous custodians of culture. The mark could be used under licence with the processes of prior informed consent. It would also need contractual copyright management systems established, such as copyright licensing agreements. It would also use other measures such as protocols, benchmarking and Indigenous mediation for dispute resolution.

Keeping track of who owns rights, and who has made use of them, is an important feature of a rights access and management system. A National Indigenous Cultural Authority could manage rights clearances by keeping a comprehensive database of intangible cultural material and list rights holders, so that those who want to negotiate or seek appropriate use can do so by contacting the relevant parties.

The National Indigenous Cultural Authority could develop protocols that set standards for consent procedures, attribution and integrity. Consultation with Indigenous communities will be necessary to develop these protocols. Already a strong framework for protocols has been developed and whilst these are largely ethical in nature, or enforced in funding agreements for projects, protocols provide scope to examine how things might be implemented by a national coordination body, such as the National Indigenous Cultural Authority.

I have put this idea out to the Australian Indigenous arts and cultural sector for further debate. I am undertaking my PHD at ANU's National Centre for Indigenous Studies on these issues. It needs more thought, but we should engage in this discussion. We should really look at the cultural capital we have in our Indigenous cultural and intellectual property and develop systems that empower Indigenous people. The vision for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority is to set the state of play, on terms where Indigenous people are able to administrate consent and receive payment of royalties, to develop standards of appropriate use to guard cultural integrity, and to enforce rights. I believe that it will recognise source, give power to safeguard cultural integrity and unlock a range of economic and social benefits, as well as maintain culture, by allowing Indigenous people to interact with it and grow culture.

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¹² South Pacific Forum, Pacific Regional Framework for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture 2002.

¹³ Secretariat of the Pacific Committee, drafted by legal experts in July 2002, WIPO/UNESCO, Section 6 of the Model Law for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture, South Pacific Community, Noumea, 2002.



**LIZA-MARE
SYRON**

Liza-Mare Syron is a descendent from the Birripi people of Tuncurry NSW, and a graduate of the Victorian College of Arts (Acting). A member of the National Indigenous Arts Reference Group of the Australia Council, Liza-Mare is the Coordinator of Theatre Performance and Practice at the Eora Centre of Aboriginal Studies in Redfern, NSW. Liza-Mare's qualifications include a Masters in Adult Education (UTS), Master of Creative Arts Research (UOW), a Diploma in Dramatic Arts (VCA), and a Certificate in Playwriting (NIDA). She is currently a Doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney in the Performance Studies Department. Her area of research is contemporary Indigenous theatre and performance training in Australia.

The Place of 'Culture' in Actor Training for Indigenous Australians

A recipient of the Australasian Drama Association's Phillip Parsons Award for Performance as Research, Liza-Mare has published the following articles:

- *The Challenges of Benevolence: the role of the Indigenous Actor*. M. Casey & L-M Syron, in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 'Benevolence' No 85, 2005.
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guidelines 2006*. M. Casey & L-M Syron, *Drama Australia*, 2007.
- *'The Bennelong Complex'. Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Indigenous Theatre and Performance Practice and the Cross-cultural Experience in Australia*. Australasian Drama Studies. 'On Lineages, Training, Techniques'. October 2008.
- *Protocols of Engagement: 'Community Cultural Development' Encounters an Urban Aboriginal Experience*. Paul Dwyer & Liza-Mare Syron, in 'About Performance, Playing Politics: Performance, Community and Social Change'. No 9. 2009.

For Indigenous Australians wanting to enter a career in acting there exist a number of institutional training opportunities.

Graduate choices can include community cultural development through theatre practice, working with Indigenous-identified theatre companies, mainstream or professional work in theatre, film, and television, and/or pursuing pathways to further education and training.

I would argue that all directions require a broad knowledge of Indigenous theatre history, cultural values, and Indigenous performance practices. Peers, colleagues, mentors and community also expect that graduates possess some knowledge of these subjects. I will not examine these expectations here; instead I will discuss under what conditions these expectations are perceived, and experienced, and the implications these expectations have for actor training for Indigenous students.

WORDS AND THEIR MEANING

I use the term 'community' to denote an Aboriginal Australian community that exists both within the theatre sector and outside it. I use the words 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably, intending no impropriety. When I use the word 'culture' I am referring to Australian Indigenous culture. I use the term 'mainstream' to refer to the conditions where cultural reproduction of dominant ideologies

take place and I describe those areas that include an Indigenous context as 'identified'.

WHAT IT MEANS TO TEACH ACTING TO INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

In 2005, I co-authored an article with Maryrose Casey entitled *The Challenges of Benevolence: the role of Indigenous actors*. We examined cross-cultural negotiations that occur in theatre productions, focusing on the challenges faced by Indigenous actors during the rehearsal period when engaged in a cross-cultural collaboration with mainstream, non-Indigenous theatre companies. We explored some of the pressures Indigenous actors may experience in rehearsal through whiteness and critical race theories. These theories examine 'whiteness' as the invisible norm against which all other "races are judged in the construction

Whiteness ... is a discursive construct that is made and remade through the continued dominance of Western theatrical norms in Australia ...

of identity, representation, and subjectivity" and further, that 'whiteness' informs assumptions and influences social practices (2005, p. 99). We explored the ways in which whiteness has come to dominate Australian stages, and how it defines the way Indigenous actors and performers engage with these spaces. As a result, we argued that whiteness constitutes what an actor is within a traditional Western theatre context, and that this

acts as a barrier with which Indigenous actors must continually engage (2005, p. 99). The second half of the article was constructed from an argument put forward by performance scholar Phillip Zarrilli that theatre-making "is a mode of social-cultural practice", it is neither an innocent nor neutral activity "separate from or above or beyond everyday reality, history, politics or economics" (2005, p.107). We argued that: "In the rehearsal room, the everyday realities of social-cultural practice intersect with the power relations established by the British and American schools or methods of acting which dominate Australian mainstream theatres" (2005, p. 108).

If the British and American approaches to actor training dominate mainstream Australian stages, then it could probably be said that they also dominate our drama schools. Whiteness, as outlined in our article, is a discursive construct that is made and remade through the continued dominance of Western theatrical norms in Australia, which contributes to our national identity as white (2005, p. 99). The questions I then ask are: How do Indigenous acting students find a way to maintain a sense of their own identity as non-white? Further, what is the place of Indigenous cultural heritage and performance practice in actor training in Australia? How do Indigenous students claim space within these essentially white or Western and Eurocentric actor training programs?

The 2005 article examines the discourse in and about the practice of Indigenous performing arts by analysing how Indigenous practitioners describe their practice. It argues that Indigenous practitioners construct a practice based on beliefs that culture, heritage and identity are central to that practice. Further, that Indigenous people do not necessarily see these principles as concepts, but that a type of meaning-making occurs through an experience of them. This experience is heightened when in an intra-cultural exchange with other Indigenous performers or companies, and we argue that this can be described as a community of practice.

MY EXPERIENCE SO FAR

In 2000 I was appointed theatre coordinator at the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, in Redfern, Sydney. I came to this position quite by chance, replying to an advertisement in the *Koori Mail*, a national Indigenous newspaper. The ad read: 'Performing Arts Teaching Opportunities', essential criteria, 'Aboriginality'.

I came to my identity as a person of Aboriginal descent in 1979. I was 16, in my last years at school, and living in Balmain, an inner suburb of Sydney. It was in that year that my father passed away suddenly from a heart attack. In her 2005 article on the passing of a Birripi Elder, Horace Saunders, Erin O'Dwyer states that: "[h]eart attack and stroke is the leading killer of Aborigines, with cardio vascular disease accounting for more than that one in four deaths, 15 times greater than other Australians.¹ Like Horace, who was 49 at the time of his death, my father, Frederick George Kenny, was also a descendant of the Birripi people of Taree in northern NSW. He was just 38 when he died.

My father's uncle, Brian Syron, came to visit me not long after the funeral. He told me that I was Aboriginal, just like that, although it was posed to me more as a question: "Do you know you are Aboriginal?" My response was ambiguous with a shrug of my shoulders, a smirk on my face, and a scratch of the head. I was not quite sure why he wanted to tell me, although many things did click for me at that moment. Like why my mother screamed the time dad brought home a letterbox. It was covered in red, black and yellow stripes, emblazoned with a shield and spear, a gift from his mates at the Electricity Commission. My two sisters and I wondered at its significance and its ability to cause such a storm of emotion from my mother who wanted "that thing" out of the house. It was not until later that I realised it was an object of identification, painted in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, its crest a symbol of a pre-colonial existence, a symbol of something my mother was ashamed of: my father's Aboriginal heritage. Those times were very different in Australia less than 10 years after the referendum. Attitudes towards 'Aboriginality' have since changed, including my mother's.

¹ Erin O'Dwyer, "Spirit of a big-hearted fisherman still lingers close to shore," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 2005, www.smh.com.au/news/National/Spirit-of-a-bighearted-fisherman-still-lingers-close-to-shore/2005/06/04/1117825105813.html

Brian Syron told me that ‘they’ would pay me to stay at school. So, I went on to finish my Higher School Certificate the following year, supported by a small allowance provided by a government policy designed to assist educational outcomes for Aboriginal people. I received \$3 a week, and my mother \$12 a fortnight. I am, as Wesley Enoch has described, “[an adult] who grew up in a time when Aboriginal people were surrounded by a discourse of disadvantage”.² It was from this discourse that many educational, social and political policies evolved, providing Indigenous children and young people with opportunities not afforded their parents; opportunities including financial incentives for parents to keep their children at school, apprenticeships, and Indigenous-identified jobs.

During the late 1970s and early 80s, Brian Syron held acting classes in a small studio on William Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney. He boasted such students as Helen Morse, John Hargraves, Lydia Miller and Rhoda Roberts. Brian’s specialty was the ‘American Method’. He had spent many years studying under Stella Adler at her New York City school during the late 60s. In 1986, at the age of 24, I left Sydney to audition for the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) acting course in Melbourne. Before I left, Brian suggested I change my surname from Kenny to Syron, which he believed would assist my career.

I gained a three-year position in the acting stream at the VCA. I auditioned not because I knew I wanted to be an actor, it was more that I wanted to learn to do something I felt I was good at. Perhaps I was motivated by my uncle’s involvement in the performing arts and the possibility that I could be part of that life too. After all, it did set him apart from his peers. In some ways, I just wanted to improve my prospects. As Cindy Birdwick³ stated at the University of Sydney’s inaugural Indigenous Scholarship award night: “Education is the vehicle to get out of poverty [for Aboriginal people]”. So too was the VCA my chance to explore potential alternatives to my working class roots and lifestyle.

I can say that the policies of the day assisted me to achieve my aims. I am the

only member of my immediate family to gain a degree, and in finishing my thesis, I will be the first to hold a Doctoral qualification. This achievement will contribute both to my family, and to the community in which I work in ways that I cannot now foresee. My achievements were made possible by the support of various Indigenous-targeted programs. In receiving the initial support to complete my Higher School Certificate, I was eligible for further study. I also received numerous university scholarships for Indigenous students, some of which provided me with the means to purchase essential technologies. Most importantly, in my first apprenticeship sponsored by an Indigenous program I learnt many important life lessons that assist me today to produce meaningful outcomes.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Whilst at drama school between 1987 and 1990 I did not identify as a person of Indigenous Australian heritage. It is not always apparent that I am. I am not embarrassed by my heritage, nor do I hide it. At the VCA it was more that it did not seem relevant to the training I was undertaking in skills such as voice, movement, singing, impulse work, textual analysis, and character development and exploration. I learnt to communicate with others, work in a team, use my imagination and embrace conceptual thinking. However, after graduating in 1990 and entering ‘the real world’, these skills no longer seemed to matter in the scheme of finding and securing work. I needed new knowledge about the industry and culture in which I now engaged. The skills learnt at drama school are only one part of securing work as an actor.

I worked sporadically as an actor over the next three years in various professional roles in musical theatre, puppetry, and in television in Melbourne. However, on my return to Sydney in 1993 my identity as an actor, now framed by my heritage, suddenly changed. In Sydney I found myself an agent, who in identifying my name immediately connected me to Brian. Indigenous heritage is not perceived as a set of cultural practices by the entertainment industry; it is instead a commodified identity. The capital I brought to this market place, however, did not include any aspects of my newly-identified racialised identity, and

² Wesley Enoch, NIDA, June 2007.

³ Cindy Birdwick is the President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, an Indigenous community advisory body to state and federal government departments. The award night took place on 5 November 2009 at McLaurin Hall, University of Sydney.



Liza-Mare Syron and Rick Brayford

the subsequent uncertainty I experienced was palpable. A question now emerged for me: What does it mean to be an Aboriginal actor? The answer I promptly experienced in my new role.

In 1994, the Griffin Theatre Company and Sydney Festival mounted *Shark Island Stories*, a short children's show written by non-Indigenous playwright, Mary Morris. Morris is most famous for her stage adaptation of Morris Gleitzman's *Two Weeks with the Queen*. *Shark Island Stories* was an adaptation of *The Flying Emu and Other Stories* by Indigenous writer Sally Morgan. Michael Leslie was involved in the choreography, Bronwyn Bancroft designed the costumes, and the cast of Indigenous actors, dancers, and musicians included John Blair, Gary Cooper, Marlene Cummins, Malcolm Mitchell, Penny Williams, and Pauline McLeod. I remember it began early one morning of the first week sitting on the ferry with Pauline and Marlene on our way to that day's performance. I was grilled relentlessly all day on my knowledge of Indigenous theatre history, culture, and performance practice. I knew Brian was heavily involved in something in Redfern in the 1970s. I was front row with my dad at the age of 14 at the Bondi Pavilion production of Bobby Merritt's *The Cake Man* in 1977. Nevertheless, that was all I knew. That day, sitting with Pauline and Marlene listening to them share their stories, I was ashamed of not knowing my own heritage,

I was ashamed of not knowing my own history, and I was ashamed of my lack of understanding of culture and its place in performance practice for Aboriginal artists and performers.

This feeling of shame made me realise that an experience particular to this group of people existed when they were in contact with each other. I was conscious of my own practice from my training at the VCA coming into the *Shark Island* production, but when I engaged with others who had a very different perception of practice, a new experience emerged for me. This was quite unexpected. When working with other Aboriginal actors a cultural engagement became possible. Each performer brought with them their own experiences of culture and how they felt it contributed to their practice as performers. The cast also shared stories of their experiences of being Aboriginal. I was then able to present my own, as limited as it was, and this experience contributed to a sense of belonging to, and a place in, the production.

The members of the *Shark Island Stories* made me fully aware of my position in relation to this practice by showing me that there was a responsibility to continue to articulate these experiences and knowledges that we were constructing together during the production. It was made clear to me that it was my heritage and destiny to do so. My part was in the receiving of this experience. It then became

my obligation to tell of this experience. In this intra-cultural experience a hierarchy of knowledges existed. Here power was mediated by culture, working towards a mutuality between myself and the more experienced Indigenous members of the production. And although I was one of only two performers trained at a professional acting school – the other was Gary Cooper, the first Indigenous person to graduate from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) – it was clear that being an urban-born black fella, trained in Western performance contexts, that it was I who needed to be positioned outside of this community of practice. Further, that it was the role of the two women to inform me that I knew nothing of this practice and its history.

This was not a defined but defining experience. I suggest that although this is different for each individual, and different in each new context, it is equal for each Indigenous actor under

the circumstances of being present with each other in the context of theatre practice. I can say that in other acting jobs that followed I experienced similar ways of working with other Indigenous actors and performers. It was not always lessons imparted, but knowledge shared on the

way in which each engaged with culture and identity in practice.

The *Shark Island Stories* experience remained with me, suspended in memory until my appointment at Eora College as theatre coordinator, where I was required to reflect on an engagement with notions of culture and identity in performance, but from within a very different context – a training institute. The difference I encountered between practice and training drew me closer to the questions explored here. What is the place of culture in Indigenous performance practice? How do I explore notions of culture within a performance-training program? Further, what is the significance of culture and identity to Aboriginal actors? Having previously experienced how Indigenous actors work together, I was now required to articulate that practice. This I found problematic.

MY ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

When it was made clear to me by my family and other Aboriginal people I had come in contact with that I was of Aboriginal heritage, a sense of uncertainty occurred. My Aboriginal identity seemed something thinly veiled, which revealed itself through my father's own life, my erratic encounters with my uncle, and in connection with other Indigenous theatre practitioners. Within the context of a mainstream acting institute such as the VCA, my identity as a person of Indigenous descent was not present. It did not seem important to the approaches and concepts explored in the training program. In addition, since Aboriginal theatre history played such an insignificant part of the overall curriculum at the VCA my identity remained hidden. Although my uncle did play the main character in one of the first Aboriginal plays to be produced in Australia, having taken this family surname should I have expected my heritage to

be recognised?

My Aboriginality in the culture of a homogenous mainstream actor-training institute held no functional aspect of the drama school experience. It remained only as a fragment of my imagination.

In an Aboriginal institution, however, my identity is conscious, reconstituted over and over with each

... different training contexts contribute to a sense of certainty or uncertainty about one's identity as an Aboriginal person, and subsequently as an Aboriginal actor.

encounter with students and teachers.

The culture of the institute supports my identity as a valued part of my employment. Although this initially caused quite a degree of uncertainty, for how could I be something I knew so very little about, in this inter-subjective encounter between Aboriginal identities I came to know an emerging certainty of what identity and culture meant. In mainstream Australian culture my identity is a contested one. Constructions of Aboriginality often centre on the fantasy of the 'true' or 'authentic' Indigenous identity. Urban identities are often perceived to be in opposition to this fantasy. My identity constantly shifts depending on contexts in which I engage. I suggest that different training contexts contribute to a sense of certainty or uncertainty about one's identity as an Aboriginal person, and subsequently as an Aboriginal actor.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

I want to outline some of the institutional contexts in which Indigenous students engage with actor training. Three 'identified' sites in three states offer acting and performing courses and subjects primarily for Aboriginal

students. The Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, operates in NSW; the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts is in Queensland; and the Aboriginal Theatre course is situated in Western Australia. From these sites Indigenous graduates either move into employment or pursue further training at a 'mainstream' flagship institute such as NIDA, the VCA, or WAAPA. What follows is an overview of the 'identified' institutes, however comparisons will be made by graduates who have engaged with a multitude of sites during their training.

My place of employment, the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, inherits its name from the Eora nation of the Gadigal people who still live in the Redfern area. Eora's history is interesting in that it began life in 1974 as a community college run by members of the Black Theatre Redfern. Members included Bob Maza, Bob Merritt, Lester Bostock, Paul Coe, Betty Fisher, Gary Foley, Carole Johnson, Justine Saunders, and my uncle, Brian Syron, just to name a few. The Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre ran workshops in acting, dance, visual arts and music. In 1984 it was renamed the Eora Centre and introduced general education subjects. Pam Young, an ex-student, recalls: "I started into acting in Redfern, and that was at the old Eora Centre down Regent Street in Redfern on the ground floor; we called it the rabbit burrow because it was so small".⁴ Eora was taken over by TAFE NSW Sydney Institute in 1994, moving to larger premises, and maintained as an Aboriginal College. TAFE introduced more structured general education programs, such as numeracy and literacy, to address a community need for these skills.

Eora is a coeducational tertiary institute in that the student population consists of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. There are about 500 students enrolled each year and over half are Indigenous. Full-time staff at Eora occupy Aboriginal-'identified' positions,⁵ and the majority of part-time workers are non-Aboriginal. The appointment of full-time Aboriginal staff at Eora is a response to the principle of self-determination for Aboriginal people through leadership roles, as determined by the following RCIADIC (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody) recommendation, under 'Educating for the Future': 'Aboriginal people should be involved in the training

courses both at student teacher and in-service levels'. (1998, 295c).

There are two sections at Eora: General Education, and Arts and Media. In each section, some courses are 'identified' and some are 'mainstream'. For example, in General Education the Aboriginal Education Assistant qualification is an 'identified' course only offered to Aboriginal students. In Arts and Media, its counterpart is in Visual Arts known as Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Practices. The rest of the courses are primarily 'mainstream' in that there are no Indigenous-specified subjects or enrolment specifications. The Theatre Performance and Practice Course I deliver is considered 'mainstream' in that it contains no specified subjects on Indigenous culture, heritage, or performance practice.

The Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) in Brisbane offers tertiary training in performance for Aboriginal students. Set up in 1997 and supported financially by the Queensland Government, ACPA is a registered training organisation (RTO) with an independent management structure. The Queensland Department of Education and Training's Indigenous Learning and Arts Strategic Plan currently supports ACPA in principal as a stakeholder. One of the goals of this plan is the strengthening of Indigenous arts and culture.⁶ ACPA develops its own courses and has them accredited by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The student population consists of 99 per cent Aboriginal students. Non-Indigenous staff currently fill management roles, and support staff are mostly Aboriginal. However, this has not always been the case. There are many reasons for this situation and, as Penny Mullins, the current Co-Artistic Director of ACPA points out, within the AQF framework teachers and trainers must hold qualifications in the area of study in order to be employed.⁷ Most Indigenous people who complete their courses primarily enter into employment in their chosen field. During the history of ACPA management roles have shifted between Indigenous and non-Indigenous control. It is not an organisation that requires 'Aboriginality' as an employment criteria. ACPA offers certificate and diploma-level courses in performance that include subjects in music, dance and acting. At diploma level, students can major in one of these disciplines. 'Culture' in performance is explored through 'creative dance fusion', which incorporates traditional Indigenous and contemporary dance techniques.

The Aboriginal Theatre course in Perth is an 'identified' program that is situated within a 'mainstream' performing arts institute, the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). The course is also located inside a higher education context at Edith Cowan University (ECU). A one-year certificate program, it grew out of Black Swan Theatre workshops in the early 1990s run by Michael Leslie. In 1995 the course moved to Broome to complement an already existing program run by Rick Brayford, offering performance training for the

⁴ Interview with Pam Young 2008.

⁵ Aboriginality is a genuine occupational qualification and is authorised by section 14 of the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977.

⁶ Queensland Government, 2008

⁷ Interview with Penny Mullins 2009.

local Aboriginal community. Rick is a non-Indigenous person who has been involved in delivering training to Aboriginal people in the area of acting and performance since 1990. In 2000, the Broome course folded, and ECU offered a home for Aboriginal students to engage with performance training. The course student population is 99 per cent Aboriginal. Guest lecturers are primarily Indigenous, adhering to the following RCIADIC recommendation: 'In designing and implementing programs at a local level which incorporate Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters local schools should, wherever possible, seek the support and participation of the local Aboriginal community in addition to any other appropriate Aboriginal organisations or groups'. (1998, 291a).

The course structure includes one subject that requires students to develop knowledge of local and traditional cultural skills for performance. Yearly cultural renewal and maintenance camps are organised, where students connect with local communities by researching local knowledges. The Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, a branch of the WA Department of Education and Training, has no current strategies for Indigenous education, its main focus being concentrated in the school and employment sectors.

CHALLENGES OF 'IDENTIFIED' COURSES

Some of the challenges these 'identified' courses encounter in negotiating with their educational contexts, as well as initiating a dialogue with acting students and teachers on their experiences of culture within institute contexts, is the beginning of a much larger Doctoral thesis I am undertaking on actor-training in Australia and the Indigenous student experience.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire clarifies, for me, a framework from which to start this discussion: "Men who are submitted to concrete conditions of oppression in which they become alienated 'beings for another' of the false 'being for himself' on whom they depend, are not able to develop authentically. Deprived of their own power of decision, which is located in the oppressor, they follow the prescriptions of the latter".⁸

In Australia, national quality frameworks accredit most educational programs, such as curriculum documents and training

packages. There are inherent problems with generic training packages in the performing arts sector, simply because a 'one size fits all' schematic or 'tick the box' set of skills is not a measure of aptitude or ability in acting. This is not to say that skills are not important to actor training; what I am alluding to here is the ability of the student to synthesise those skills into an ability to act. Along with what others, such as Robert Cohen, define as 'stage presence' and metaphors that describe 'talent'⁹, this ability contributes to a highly developed performing artist. As Ross Prior points out in his research on actor training in Australia, Cohen goes so far as to assert that talent and presence alone can outweigh skill in finding and securing work or being successful.¹⁰ For Indigenous students, it is essential that they make contact with, or are taught about, Indigenous cultural subjects and performance practices. After graduating from these schools, they will be expected to know these things.

These knowledges contribute to what it is to be an Indigenous actor in Australia. Indigenous actors are not universal beings that transcend their identities. They are identified, positioned, and framed as Indigenous actors by the industry and the communities in which they work. This situation requires them to know what that means.

When it comes to developing curricula, those who hold positions within a cultural context or field often determine the content of these programs. Any practices outside of the experience or understanding of those chosen to represent a discipline seems to hold no value within that framework.

Jadah Milroy, an Indigenous student at the VCA, has articulated some of the changes she might make to the VCA course structure, stating that it would be beneficial if institutes could find a way to support the development of an individual's potential in the area they wanted to go, rather than saying they must conform to an institution's belief in what acting is.¹¹

'Mainstream' acting institutes have structured their courses according to personal philosophies, theories and techniques, and institute rhetoric of acting processes and practices. In these contexts, it is easy for Indigenous students to become the subjects upon which others'

Indigenous actors are not universal beings that transcend their identities. They are identified, positioned, and framed ...

⁸ Freire, 1972, p. 129.

⁹ Cohen, 1998.

¹⁰ Prior, 2004, p. 29.

¹¹ Interview with Jadah Milroy October 2008.

... an engagement with Indigenous theatre practice required knowledge ... of Indigenous theatre history, cultural values, and historical performance practices ...

beliefs are imposed. They are no longer 'beings for themselves', conscious of their own existence, but rather 'beings-for-others' to imprint upon.

'Identified' courses, it seems, do much the same except that there is recognition of 'culture' as central to Indigenous performance practice. For me, it was acting in bad faith to accept the limitations of a 'mainstream' curricula, and ignore the Aboriginal context in which I found myself. I felt a responsibility to provide students with the possibility of discovering what is meant by Indigenous theatre practice and in doing this create a dialogue around what that means to them.

ACTOR TRAINING PATHWAYS

The majority of graduates I have spoken to began their engagement with actor training at 'identified' institutes or courses. There is a perception of a strong 'Indigenous focus' provided by these institutes, yet this is not the reality. All these programs maintain the rhetoric of 'culture', although it is not strongly evident in course documents nor is 'culture' something most educators feel comfortable delivering due to its ambiguity. Really what they offer is the condition under which these experiences may occur through an engagement with other Indigenous students, teachers and guest lecturers. What needs to be present to support this experience is the opportunity for students to explore 'Aboriginality' in performance. Further, there needs to be an exploration of how others experience 'culture' and 'Aboriginality' in their practice.

I knew that an engagement with Indigenous theatre practice required knowledge in the areas of Indigenous theatre history, cultural values, and historical performance practices but I was not sure if I could base my pedagogy on this. According to Prior, most acting

teachers tend to develop meaning and ways of knowing based on their own experiences. They construct meaning based on historically derived frameworks or contexts.¹² In other words, trainers tend to teach how they were taught. However, if the world is perceived according to our positioning of it, I could only deliver a single account of this experience. To construct a more valid way of delivering actor training to Indigenous students, I really needed to seek out how others perceived their practice or accept this limitation.

INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

As I have said, Indigenous performance practice is an elusive phenomenon. It changes with each new contact, manifesting as something different with every new engagement. It is not a fixed experience.

We learn more about a practice within a group of people by their articulation of that practice. Therefore, in discussing how other Indigenous practitioners articulate their practice I will name those things that are perceived as meaningful by them to that practice.

For choreographer Stephen Page linking cultural experiences is central to his practice. He states: "My cultural world, and that of most artistic leaders, revolves around the bringing together of a clan".¹³ And further to that: "The idea of linking urban Aboriginal experiences with traditional culture was at the heart of the Aboriginal Dance Theatre".¹⁴ Contact with other Indigenous performers creates the possibility for 'culture' to be present.

For Leon Burchill, a graduate of both ACPA and NIDA, culture is something that cannot be separated from performance practice. He states: "Of course our culture is such a beautiful culture, such a strong culture, a lot of black fellas say we are natural performers because it has been passed down from generation to generation".¹⁵ Performing for Leon is a cultural activity that is part of his heritage.

According to Wesley Enoch: "Every Aboriginal play by definition needs to have cultural material being discussed, dealt with, referred to and enacted".¹⁶

¹² Prior, 2004, p. i.

¹³ Page, 2003, p. 114.

¹⁴ Page, 2003, p. 115.

¹⁵ Interview with Leon Burchill November 2005.

¹⁶ Interview with Wesley Enoch 2003.

For Enoch, connection to cultural practices in performance is through an engagement with cultural materials. The use of such materials requires knowledge of them, plus an awareness of protocols for engaging with those materials.

Only some of the Indigenous graduates I have spoken with articulate these experiences as central to their overall training expectations. Most students were primarily interested in learning skills with equal importance being placed on knowing Indigenous theatre history, including plays, plus the types of industry contexts where Indigenous theatre practitioners might engage with other Indigenous practitioners in the 'real world'. Ben Graetz, an Aboriginal Theatre and NIDA acting graduate, says that he didn't go to NIDA to study Indigenous skills, but would have liked to know who was out there and what they were doing.¹⁷

Many graduates also described a need for courses to be more flexible for students to explore 'Aboriginality' in performance practice. For example, Andrea James, when discussing her expectations of the theatre-making course at VCA, commented that she wanted to explore her own heritage, work with more "black fellas", and explore her own stories,¹⁸ but felt that there was not a lot of support for this. Yet, for other graduates 'Aboriginality' and cultural knowledge only become significant in the 'real world' of industry and work.

A PLACE FOR CULTURE

Not all 'identified' colleges and courses would agree that 'culture' has a place in institutes. For some, culture belongs to, and in, communities. However not all Indigenous people come from communities. Indigenous student experiences will be as varied as their heritage. Yet, together they construct for themselves what their experiences are and what it is to be Aboriginal. Some institutes talk of the difficulties of engaging Indigenous teachers and trainers or Elders from communities to deliver in a classroom context. However, these conditions seem essential if they are to create the possibility of an experience for students of both 'Aboriginality' and 'culture'.

What 'identified' courses do provide is a solid base from which Indigenous acting students can confidently explore these aspects of training before they enter into

'mainstream' actor training or employment where there is a different learning context. When these experiences do appear again, it is under very distinct circumstances. They occur in a community, listening to mentors, or when working with peers; it is in connection with other Indigenous people that this experience reappears.

However, these experiences alone do not constitute knowledge. One other condition for consideration is an education in Indigenous theatre history, cultural values, and Indigenous performance practices. Together these aspects of a practice contribute to the experience of that practice and in this way become present within an institutional context.

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Not all 'identified' colleges and courses would agree that 'culture' has a place in institutes.

¹⁷ Interview with Ben Graetz June 2008.

¹⁸ Interview with Andrea James August 2008.



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**RACHAEL
MAZA LONG**

Creating Great Art ... Is Australia Ready?

companies. Her stage performances at Company B's home, the Belvoir St Theatre, include leading roles in *Conversations with the Dead*, and *The Dreamers*. She has also worked with director Wesley Enoch in the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and Sydney Festival productions of *The Sapphires*.

Rachael directed *Stolen* for Playhouse/Ilbjerri and again for Malthouse Theatre/Ilbjerri and *Yandy* for Perth's prestigious Black Swan Theatre Company. She was associate director on the Windmill Theatre Company's *Riverland*.

Rachael has also worked as a narrator for ABC Radio National and as Indigenous Liaison Advisor for films such as the multi-award winning *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Rachael also performed in the short films *Nia's Melancholy* with S.F. Tusa and *Aunty Maggie and the Womba Wagkun* with Leah Purcell.

A Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) graduate, Rachael Maza Long, after 20 years in the industry, is now one of the most recognisable faces of the Australian film, television and theatre industries, with credits including the AFI-award-winning *Radiance*, *Cosi* and *Lillian's Story*.

Artistic Director of Ilbjerri, Rachael's television credits include roles in some of Australia's most loved programs such as *Marshall Law*, *Halifax f.p.*, *Stingers*, *SeaChange*, *Heartland* and *A Country Practice*. She also hosted the critically acclaimed *Message Stick* for the ABC.

Rachael has had a long association with Company B, one of Australia's most respected theatre

In my position as Artistic Director for Australia's longest running Indigenous theatre company – 2010 is Ilbjerri's 20th year – I have been able to observe the industry in a way that I had not done before as a freelance artist. I had not realised it was as bleak as it is. I don't profess to be an academic, nor an expert on all things within the Indigenous performing arts. I speak as an individual, my expertise based purely on my own experience in the industry.

The following points give a snapshot of the industry from my perspective:

- there are only three Indigenous theatre companies operating with key organisation status: Ilbjerri (Melbourne), Yirra Yaakin (Perth), and Kurruru Youth Performing Arts Inc (Adelaide). Koemba Djarra (Brisbane) became inoperative in 2008. All companies face an uncertain future with the current changes in arts funding rationale;
- there is a very small pool of actors, as it is almost impossible to sustain a career when you are limited to 'Indigenous' roles; and
- there are only two Indigenous set designers in the country – no sound, no lighting, no costume, no production or project managers, a handful of stage managers, a handful of directors and dramaturgs, and very few produced/established playwrights.

Why is it that still to this day that large-scale productions such as *The Sapphires* (Melbourne Theatre Company) are only being produced by non-Indigenous companies?

EVOLUTION OF BLACK THEATRE: "STILL ON THE FRINGE"

From the establishment of the first Black theatre company in Melbourne in 1971 by founding member, Uncle Jack Charles, we have had a vibrant and exciting four decades of Indigenous theatre in this country. This period has seen our stories told to a wide spectrum of audiences, from community to mainstream to international. For non-Indigenous audiences, these works have been instrumental in breaking down stereotypes and building understanding and compassion, and for Indigenous audiences they are an affirmation and a celebration.

Mostly these stories were unknown outside Indigenous communities, often being heard for the first time by non-Indigenous audiences, and hence the common response: 'I had no idea ...!'.
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Works such as Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*; Rob Merritt's *The Cakeman*; Jack Davis' *No Sugar, The Dreamers, Kullark* and many more; through to Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*; Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony*; Wesley Enoch's/Deb Mailman's *Seven Stages of Grieving*; John

Harding's *Up the Road*; Jane Harrison's *Stolen*; Richard Franklin's *Conversations with the Dead*; Dallas Winmar's *Aliwa* – just to name a few. All have contributed to rewriting our history and our story in a way that empowers, inspires and educates. When Indigenous Australians had no other voice, theatre was an avenue for unedited free speech in addressing issues of injustice and inequality.

But back to my earlier question. Why is it that to this day large-scale productions are only being produced by the larger non-Indigenous theatre companies?

Why is it that Black theatre has always dwelled on the fringes of the Australian cultural landscape? Forever the 'fringe dwellers'. Though our contribution to Australia's story has been significant, we are very much the poorer cousin.

The answers to these questions are intrinsically linked to the ongoing internal complex struggle within the Australian psyche to come to terms with its Indigenous past, present and future. This struggle revealed itself most notably when former Prime Minister, John Howard, refused to say the simple word 'sorry' to the Stolen Generation. Somehow he confused saying 'sorry' for the wrongs of previous governments with a personal admission of guilt. The absurdity being that not one of us would hesitate to say 'sorry' when hearing that someone has lost somebody or something dear to them – at no point would this be understood as an admission of guilt.

To begin to examine this struggle within the Australian psyche to come to terms with its 'Indigenouness' let's look at the seemingly simple definition of the word 'Aboriginal' (and the same applies to the word 'Indigenous'):

Main Entry: ab-orig-i-nal

Pronunciation: \,a-bə-'rij-nəl, -'ri-jə-nəl\

Function: *adjective*

Date: 1667

1: being the first or earliest known of its kind present in a region <*aboriginal* forests> <*aboriginal* rocks>

2a: of or relating to aborigines **b. often capitalised:** of or relating to the indigenous peoples of Australia

synonyms see native

(Source: Merriam-Webster online dictionary)

In reality this definition is far more complex ... under this word festers the long and difficult debate around what actually constitutes 'Indigenous'.

Amongst non-Indigenous Australians this debate is driven by the belief that 'Indigenous Australians' were a primitive, dying race.

I believe this archaic notion still persists today and explains why Indigenous people are not accepted or seen as whole and complex, but rather as one of the two stereotypes that support the abovementioned belief that Aboriginal people are a dying race. These two stereotypes are:

1. The Tribal (such as portrayed by David Gulpilil in *Australia*)
2. The Drunk/The Violent (images/stories perpetuated in the media)

Anyone outside of these stereotypes is simply 'not seen' – they are invisible. Let us call this the 'invisibility' phenomena, 'Australia's blind spot'.

Equally, if not more worrying, is the detrimental practice within Indigenous communities of undermining the integrity and morals of individuals by an obsessive preoccupation with who is or isn't 'really' Indigenous. Even worse, if the individual's Indigenouness is unquestionable, there are other ways to undermine their integrity by the use of concepts and terms such as 'coconut' (meaning black on the outside, white on the inside) or 'Johnny come lately (that is, recently claiming Aboriginality).

The Indigenous communities' obsession with who qualifies as Indigenous reminds me of the Inquisition's obsession with witches. Needless to say, I draw a long bow, but my point is the fear-based hysteria around 'who's really black and who's pretending' is an all-consuming preoccupation, which in my observation has meant too much energy is spent on this issue rather than creating great art.

From this preoccupation came the introduction of the 'Confirmation of Aboriginality' letter. This letter acts as a proof of one's Indigenouness, to be signed by a board member of an approved Indigenous organisation, when applying for government funding for Indigenous initiatives. This process is extremely time-consuming and laborious. It is reminiscent of the many demoralising practices of past governments, such as the 'Certificate of Aboriginality' under the Protection Act, and the 'dog tag', and many people have simply refused to comply. Needless to say, there are many instances where projects are consequently not funded.

BACK TO CREATING GREAT ART! ... IS AUSTRALIA READY?

Is Australia growing up?

Australia appears to be experiencing a subtle, though significant, shift in its evolution as a nation on its path toward maturity. Whether we are simply experiencing the forward step after the recent 11 steps back remains to be seen.

The first signs of this shift were the election of the new Federal Government, followed promptly by the long overdue 'apology' to the Indigenous people of Australia.

The apology was a first step towards healing the past. The starting point on the path of healing is acknowledgement. One needs to first name and own the truth, only then can one begin the journey of healing and letting go. But of course 'sorry' is just a word, which

alone is meaningless – so we wait to see what actions follow.

Is it part of the global trend? Out with Howard, out with Bush, in with Rudd, in with Obama? Someone noted that the US may have voted in a black American for President, but they are just as far off as we are from electing an Indigenous President!

My point is this shift in the global psyche is happening on all levels and the Indigenous performing arts industry is not immune.

THE SHIFTING SANDS OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE

It is impossible to generalise about all Indigenous theatre. It can be said, however, that it has been in a constant state of change and evolution, and though you can't put all Indigenous theatre into one basket, we seem now to be going through a distinct shift in perceptions, attitudes and expectations of what Indigenous theatre is and should/could be.

I feel we are definitely moving into a new era of Black theatre. There is a distinct sense that the industry is maturing. Though I am loath to make generalisations, I feel we are moving from the more simply told yet powerful 'doco-naturalistic' style of theatre to one of 'exploring the art' within the theatre. I feel a strong urge to rip back the wallpaper and see what lies beyond.

But this shift in expectation is not just about the style, but also the expectation for high quality production values and professional standards all round.

To achieve this, we need to address the following issues:

1. Adequate funding

To ensure a vibrant and certain future for Indigenous arts, a real and generous commitment from government is required. Under the current model a huge component of companies' resources are consumed just struggling to survive – the phenomenal amount of hoops and red tapes they need to negotiate for every dollar is absurd. This is an incredible strain on the creative function of the company.

2. Artist development and maintenance

There are issues associated with both the development and sustainability of Indigenous artists. There is a small pool of actors, and there is no disputing the difficulty they all face in generally only being considered for Indigenous roles, which are few and far between. And as there are only three Indigenous theatres in the country,

the majority of their work will be with non-Indigenous companies, which opens up a whole range of issues for Indigenous actors: cultural appropriateness, protocols, and so on. But aside from actors there is a serious absence of Indigenous artists in all aspects of the arts including design, production, and marketing. There needs to be a serious commitment from government to address this gap.

3. Development of new work

I believe there needs to be a dramatic shift in the way we look at developing new works within Indigenous theatre as quite obviously something is wrong. There is no shortage of brilliant yarns out there, but so few make it to either script or the stage. Maybe the Western model of making theatre is just one of many ways. I am very interested in exploring other ways of working.

BANGARRA AS A MODEL FOR SUCCESS?

This shift can be observed in the recent changes coming from arts funding bodies. My understanding is the new focus is about building an industry that is 'Business savvy' ... as Bangarra is to dance. And there is no doubting Bangarra's phenomenal success, both in creating incredible world-standard dance theatre, but more so for having created a niche in the international and national markets for a unique style of dance, when no-one would have thought it possible. Their work is both unique and has absolute integrity, both culturally and artistically.

I would attribute Bangarra's success to:

- top quality product;
- Indigenous cultural integrity (strong links with Yirrkala);
- niche position in national and international markets; and
- business acumen and imaginative funding sources.

There is nothing to say that all Indigenous performing arts organisations could not learn from studying the Bangarra model.

CHALLENGES FACING INDIGENOUS THEATRE COMPANIES

As an audience member, I have attended many different styles and genres of theatre. Needless to say, theatre is very different to dance. There are very different demands on you as an audience member – quite literally you use a different part of your brain for each. Without meaning to sound derogatory, dance is much easier to 'get

... I feel we are moving from the more simply told yet powerful 'doco-naturalistic' style of theatre to one of 'exploring the art' within the theatre.

lost in' than theatre, with its music, images and colours, and glistening muscular bodies. Theatre is primarily word driven and requires the audience members to use their intellectual and analytical brain, which basically requires more energy and concentration.

As well as being theatre, Ibbijerri is Indigenous theatre. So added to the challenges of creating theatre in a country where statistics reveal that only five per cent of Australians go to the theatre, we aim to stage Indigenous stories in a country where, as I said earlier, Indigenous Australians are either seen within the narrow framework of the (usually negative) stereotypes, or are simply not seen at all – 'invisible' ...

This leads me to my next point – the 'contemporary versus the traditional' issue. Where Bangarra has succeeded brilliantly is the beautiful blend of traditional cultural dance with contemporary modern dance.

Though theatre as a form bears little resemblance to traditional cultural forms, and has derived almost entirely from the Western tradition, most Indigenous theatre is an expression of the contemporary Indigenous voice. But because of Australia's struggle to accept all Indigenous people as Indigenous, despite the colour of their skin or their ability – or inability – to speak their traditional languages, Indigenous theatre is stuck, existing somewhere in the 'invisible' territory of the Australian psyche.

THE PATH FORWARD

For the theatre-maker the challenge is to be strong in one's vision, and strong in the conviction to realise that vision with absolute integrity. The vision must come from a truth, here and now, that embraces the diversity, complexity, and the humanity of what it is to be an Indigenous Australian in the 21st century. This vision must be told with a generosity that does not blame or ostracise if it is to be really heard and experienced.

This vision cannot be realised alone, as theatre is a collaborative art form.

For all Australians the challenge is to be open-minded and generous, and have the courage to take off the blinkers. It is only when we are prepared to see us as we are that we will see the path forward.

And the way forward is through training and development, building career paths and maintenance.

Training and development

There needs to be further work in the area of training and development to strengthen the Indigenous performing arts industry. Some ideas that I have been thinking about for action are:

- making links with secondary schools, talent scouting, making contact and providing information;
- making links with tertiary Institutions such as Victoria University, VCA, etc;
- lobbying to reintroduce Koorie acting courses;

- looking at possibilities for bridging courses for training arts workers; and
- establishing links with other key arts organisations to incorporate mentorships and apprenticeships within their programs.

Building career paths

How can an indigenous performing artist build a career with any sort of longevity in the face of the many issues I have explored in this paper? And yet the ability to build a career path, to understand the steps and opportunities, is key to moving this industry forward. The key points of action in this area involve building relationships and loyalty with artists and linking them with other arts organisations. It is up to us Indigenous performing arts practitioners to move beyond the competition and isolation of the industry.

Maintenance

There is a need to provide opportunities to build upon the artistic excellence of indigenous performing artists working at the coalface of the indigenous performing arts industry. I suggest that we source funding to run regular masterclasses and workshops in all artistic fields of endeavour to enhance our artistic energy.

GROWING THE INDUSTRY

As long as all the stepping stones are in place – a gradual growing of the skilled artist pool, increased funding through innovative thinking and lobbying, maintaining high standards regardless of the project, building profile through smart marketing and good product, and building audiences through smart marketing and good product – I feel sure there will be a gradual healthy growth of our industry.

For the theatre-maker the challenge is to be strong in one's vision, and strong in the conviction to realise that vision with absolute integrity.



**RICK
BRAYFORD**

Why Not Shakespeare?

The Recent History of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts' Commitment to Aboriginal Theatre

Rick Brayford is a Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) graduate who has been involved in creating and directing contemporary Indigenous performance for 20 years, including four years in Port Hedland and three years in Broome where he re-established WAAPA's Indigenous Music Theatre program.

Much of Rick's work has been in an instructional director/teacher role working with inexperienced and student performers. Rick has directed numerous productions spanning the works of Jack Davis, Jane Harrison, Marianne Sam, John Harding, Richard Franklin and Julie Jansen, including several new works developed in collaboration with David Milroy (*Swine River*, 2006, *Frankenstein and the Lion of Nemea*, 2007, *Project Petey DNA*, 2008). Rick currently coordinates WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre program in Perth, lecturing in acting and theatre performance. He was the recipient of the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education in 2008.

My perspective comes predominantly from the teaching, coordination and development of Indigenous performing arts vocational training over a 10-year period with the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) Aboriginal Theatre program. I was employed in March 2000, when WAAPA gained a studio space for a minimal fee on Broome's Notre Dame University campus (a campus dedicated to reconciliation) for the purpose of re-establishing what was then known as the Certificate III in Theatre (Aboriginal). This was a reciprocal relationship, characterised by mutual benefit – WAAPA utilised Notre Dame's services and infrastructure and students undertook related Notre Dame programs, such as library and computer skills at no extra cost. In return, Notre Dame students (60 per cent Indigenous) and staff were treated to regular free lunchtime performances, showings and productions.

I was recalled by WAAPA in January 2003 to take over the coordination of the Perth-based program. It is worth noting the physical positioning of WAAPA's Perth-based Aboriginal Theatre course at that time in relation to all other WAAPA courses. The meta-narrative of 'blackfella on the fringes of society' so often the issue presented in contemporary Indigenous theatre was reinforced as I was led to the dedicated studio space; a derelict demountable

situated on the outer perimeter of the university grounds. 'Gubment Well' as the students fondly called it. (Government Well was the setting for Jack Davis's *No Sugar* where the local Northam Aboriginal population camped after the "sun-down curfew" through the 1930s.)

Through the year-long separation from the main WAAPA buildings, the Aboriginal Theatre students understandably felt a little 'out of the action'. Aboriginal students rarely came into contact with mainstream WAAPA students. When they entered the main WAAPA buildings they felt inferior and alienated. Aboriginal Theatre was not included in WAAPA programming or course advertising and except for word-of-mouth, was nonexistent to the outside world.

Hence the vision of development for the Aboriginal Theatre program in Perth was to fully integrate the students into the WAAPA community, raise the course profile and strengthen the reputation of Indigenous performers by presenting regular performances and graduating proficient, apprentice or work-ready performers.

Currently, like all WAAPA programs, we have a fully-equipped, dedicated workshop space in the heart of WAAPA's buildings. These world-class facilities have a clear, positive impact on the student's work ethic and inspiration. They are now saturated in the uplifting energy of fellow WAAPA students every day. The osmosis effect is a welcome addition to their understanding of the training and what can be achieved. The program is now a Certificate IV and although sharing the same WAAPA infrastructure, maintains complete autonomy in its program structure, delivery methods and teachers. The program employs one full-time staff member to undertake coordination and 50 per cent of the teaching load. The program can handle an annual intake of up to 18 students depending on the sum of each individual's requirements, such as relocation and literacy issues. Resources also include a sessional budget for specialist teaching areas (and additional teaching load) plus a modest contingency fund to assist students with any short-term financial difficulties.

WHAT'S WORKING IN INDIGENOUS ARTS TRAINING?

Effective design of curriculum for Indigenous theatre students is a delicate juggling act. Balancing the extraordinarily high demands of an elitist industry with the needs of students who often face

Great value must be placed on the creation of hope, the generation of a strong work ethic and the establishment of high expectations ...

complex and testing life circumstances are the two sides of the see-saw. Great value must be placed on the creation of hope, the generation of a strong work ethic and the establishment of high expectations through persistent challenges, encouragement and support which are major aims for the program.

Key elements that frame best practice at WAAPA in the approach to curricula include culturally sensitive delivery strategies, flexible pathways with high level outcomes and multiple exit points, authentic workplace learning practices, the implementation of research-led approaches incorporating cultural renewal and maintenance and sensitive but explicit management of literacy difficulties.

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE DELIVERY STRATEGIES

Running a two-semester nine-to-five program could easily be detrimental to the nuances of family and cultural demands. Most Indigenous students are obliged to fulfil family demands as a priority. Many students over 20 years of age from remote regions have children or relatives and Elders for whom they are totally responsible. Such demands are not conducive to the importance of the course's intensity which is the factor that facilitates rapid progress. Intensity maximises the skills-learning in the shortest of periods. When students arrive in Perth we can get them enrolled, accommodated and into class all on the same day, saturating them in the process. For example, two weeks in training is 60 contact hours. It can be easier for many Aboriginal students to find short periods of clear time between obligations and circumstances that may cause extended absence from classes and rehearsals.

FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS/MULTIPLE EXIT POINTS

Although units are interrelated we run them in chronological blocks. Students enrol for the full year but can exit the course with a Certificate II after the first 10 weeks of

study. A Certificate III will take around 20 weeks and the complete Certificate IV will take the full 33 weeks. This flexibility has a definite impact on graduation success, and is especially helpful to parents or guardians and those from remote communities where cultural responsibilities can be extremely demanding. By running chronological blocks we have also created the flexibility for students to return at a later date and pick up where they left off. When students get the call that they must return home they know they can re-enter later and continue from where they were when they had to leave. All students enrol as performers but we are able to rapidly identify anyone with alternative talent and interest such as writing, directing, stage management and design. They can then be assisted into relevant mainstream pathways at WAAPA or elsewhere. The upgrade to Certificate IV in 2006 has successfully created smoother pathways into Bachelor programs.

CULTURAL MAINTENANCE

The curriculum has been designed to provide powerful learning through practice-based research conducted in collaboration with Aboriginal community-based professionals and Elders. The Yanchep National Park project (Yandjet Whispers) is one example of this research-led approach to learning and teaching. Yandjet Whispers was a site-specific theatre piece focused on the very real ecological problems of rising salt and watertable fluctuations. This ecological issue became the tangible hook to ground the student's research and develop the script. Thematic parallels were drawn between the degradation of the park's natural resources (dying tuart forest and threatened underground aquatic creatures) and the condition of Indigenous languages and culture, although the overall message was positive. The experience connected students with diverse people who reflected the mixed cultural nature of the stories and Indigenous history of Yanchep. Yandjet Whispers created a perfect opportunity, especially for urbanised students and those at risk, to renew and/or re-establish Indigenous protocols.

AUTHENTIC WORKPLACE LEARNING

The course has been structured across a full year and this is essential in providing sufficient learning time. We give the students that full year in which to progress and develop the work habits expected by the industry or for entry into ongoing

training. The program has been developed to mirror the best of contemporary industry practice. The students develop their skills and understanding through engagement in practical workshops and rehearsals leading to performance pieces that are shared in both closed and public contexts. Assessment methods are designed to replicate real-world theatre practice, focusing on the use of continuous critical feedback to support step-by-step growth and development. The principal evaluation of achievements is through a range of observable processes and performances attended by industry professionals (who are also potential future employers), fellow mainstream WAAPA students, lecturers and the general public.

MANAGING LITERACY

Poor literacy skills create a significant barrier to performing arts education for many highly creative, intelligent and talented Indigenous students. The curriculum is structured so that students with poor literacy are not outsourced into special catch-up programs. Literacy is integrated into all classes employing the actual texts and associated reading materials directly related to practical skilling. Often, the illiterate student is most fearful of any attempt to improve these vital skills due to habitual failure at school. We rapidly put their minds at ease. Those in the ensemble who can fully understand what the illiterate student may be experiencing are always the greatest assistance in this area of learning. Likewise, for those with attendance problems, the others are always willing to help. The residue from such practises assists in the formation of a tight-knit theatre ensemble often from culturally dynamic individuals from dynamically different backgrounds.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre certificate program used to operate out of Perth and Broome concurrently and this was very successful in catering to the north-western regions of Australia. Students from the Pilbara, Kimberley and Northern Territory could study and remain relatively close to homelands. In 2004 the Broome initiative was closed due to funding cuts, reducing the collective number of graduates and diminishing the critical mass needed to justify the development of an additional year of training. The Perth-based program is now providing the necessary number of

Poor literacy skills create a significant barrier to performing arts education for many highly creative, intelligent and talented Indigenous students.

L-R: Deborah Cheetham, Sam Cook,
Wesley Enoch



graduates in order to warrant a second-year diploma. However, to achieve this under the WAAPA VET structure would necessitate another complete set of resources which does not seem possible given current economic restraints. One alternative may be a transitional training link from student to apprentice by creating a production-based ensemble that would include selected course graduates and an associate director. This associate company would ideally be attached to an existing Indigenous company potentially producing a dynamic range of work spanning creative development and experimental work through to remounts. The past overwhelming preference for funding organisations to fund new work does not encourage companies to return to the Indigenous classics. Mainstream theatre-going audiences see one or two Indigenous plays and think they know about the history, but the history should include a greater celebration of the Indigenous classics that came before. A graduate associate company may be able to pick up this content shortfall through a regular remounting or reworking of Indigenous scripts. This model would generate opportunities for Indigenous production and design students and apprentices, increasing the potential for mentorships and secondments. This approach may solidify a framework for additional on-the-job training and a smoother transition from student to professional.

TRAINING ORGANISATIONS AND MID-CAREER SUPPORT

Training institutions can provide the perfect environment for bridging the gaps in early and mid-career development opportunities, especially in taking risks with new ideas, processes and modes of production at the pre-funding stages. For instance, over the last several years WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre program has supported the development of four new works by David Milroy (*Swine River*, 2006; *Frankenstein and the Lion of Numea*, 2007; short film *Project Petey DNA*, 2008; and *Killer Kane*, 2010). In all four projects, David would regularly bring in drafts and ideas that were workshopped with the Aboriginal students, providing a pre-funding developmental environment. Producing the work under a learning umbrella allowed the writer to take much more risk without the scrutiny of funding acquittals, reviewers and critics. From here the writer is in a

The past overwhelming preference for funding organisations to fund new work does not encourage companies to return to the Indigenous classics.

much stronger position to compete for creative development funding. *Swine River* is a play commenting on the destruction of rock art in the north-west Australian Pilbara where the early script development necessitated student research of current land rights policies and manipulations of those rights by mining companies and corporate interests. The process of scripting and dramaturgy through to production of the working draft within a teaching/learning context served to expose students to the realism of industry practice and ground their knowledge in contemporary issues and policy that directly affect Indigenous communities.

In the case of *Frankenstein and the Lion of Numea* and the short film, *Project Petey DNA*, David Milroy aired concerns that his work was being labelled as contemporary Indigenous and he wanted to contradict this notion by eliminating preconceived judgements about Aboriginality. Although the writer, director and cast were Indigenous, the crew and production and design teams were non-Indigenous and were offered from mainstream WAAPA resources. The treatment of dramatic circumstances and thematic concepts in both pieces suggested that the contexts could be non-Indigenous or of any nationality and still raise the same questions and prompt the same audience reactions.

This incorporation of arts and cultural professionals working within the program

The criteria for successful entry are based on a fixed set of parameters predominantly suited to students from white, middle class socioeconomic backgrounds.

The myth of Indigenous actors as only good for Indigenous roles is still prevalent in the mainstream sector and highlights the gaps in expectations.

is a regular process for the WAAPA curriculum that offers benefits for all concerned and is workable for almost any vocational theatre-training program.

TENSIONS IN THE TRAINING SECTOR

Towards graduation, students are prepared for auditions in professional productions or for ongoing, high-level training. However, there is a chronic lack of pathways for dedicated Indigenous actor training in Western Australia. For most students, if they are to compete professionally in an industry with rigid, well-established rules, then this further training relies on successful auditioning in mainstream three-year programs at institutions such as WAAPA, NIDA and the VCA.

The criteria for successful entry are based on a fixed set of parameters predominantly suited to students from white, middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. A student's entry failure is justified by these same performance criteria being unfulfilled. However, the industry is calling for greater numbers of trained Indigenous performers and it is the educational institution's responsibility to fulfil shortages in the market place. When recruiting, mainstream training institutions should not only consider what the course can offer the student but also what the Indigenous student can bring to a mainstream program dominated by a white middle class student body.

For instance, *In Our Town* by Jack Davis, presented at WAAPA in 2001, could only be staged by having five Aboriginal acting students in the mainstream course. This is the only contemporary Indigenous play with full production and design support that has ever been staged at WAAPA in the mainstream acting program. The non-Indigenous students were exposed to Aboriginal culture and history from an Aboriginal perspective (most for the first time) through this production process.

There are great advantages in dedicated Indigenous training programs being directly connected to a mainstream performing arts institution such as WAAPA. We produce at least one stage production and/or film per year with full production and design support. This support is provided by WAAPA production and design departments as part of the annual production timetable and includes second or third year students and mentors from production and stage management, set, costume, lighting and sound design. Each department has its own minimal budget and adequate resources dedicated to each production.

Having this ready-made support greatly raises the overall quality of Aboriginal theatre and film productions which would otherwise be reduced to workshop status. Another significant advantage is the raising of profile and reputation. Students get the opportunity to work alongside other students in training for their particular areas of expertise. Professional processes and etiquette are greatly enhanced. Without this internal support the Aboriginal Theatre program would be struggling to include these production values without the generation of much greater funding.

There is a significant divide between what we are trying to achieve autonomously through dedicated Indigenous training programs and the additional resources, opportunities and knowledges that may be available to students through the mainstream, non-Indigenous sector. The enormous opportunities that this sector has to offer could be utilised and applied to our advantage. For example, the mainstream programs at WAAPA employ a range of international practitioners who have cutting edge ideas and methods and who may never even get to meet the Aboriginal Theatre students. Why should these students miss out on this additional input and expertise?

The myth of Indigenous actors as only good for Indigenous roles is still prevalent in the mainstream sector and highlights the gaps in expectations. I have been asked by industry professionals on several occasions after Shakespeare showings: "Why are you teaching Aboriginal students Shakespeare?" My response to them is "Why not?". Work on classically heightened text can only serve the skilling of critical analysis, script interpretation and performance technique. Why wouldn't we want to see an Australian Indigenous Hamlet or Juliet performing on the world stage in London or New York?

My experience with ten cohorts of Aboriginal Theatre graduates that have moved on during my time at WAAPA is that they do not want to be pigeon-holed into working only as Aboriginal actors playing Aboriginal roles. They want to be part of the non-Indigenous body of works and to be readily skilled for the added dynamic of work available to non-Indigenous actors. Students need to be introduced to the classics and new works of both non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous writers. We cannot break down colour-bias casting unless we are prepared to groom the up-and-coming generation of artists for the work. New graduates need the opportunities to

penetrate all genres of non-Indigenous works spanning mainstream children's theatre, community, collaborative and fringe theatre as well as choice in the same range of Indigenous performance.

This opinion should not be seen as a threat to the Indigenous talent bank. Many past graduates respond to the call from home and become directly involved in urban, regional and remote community projects, even driving the projects with little funding or external support. Others cannot wait to return to their homelands and get busy planning community-based theatre with their own mobs. The greater the experience and knowledge base within the community, the greater incidence of success in growing these projects into bigger things with greater impact. We need to enable diversity from big to small, experimental to traditional, social activism to esoteric, theatre to ceremony.

Indigenous identity is a powerful force taking many forms at various stages. It is a diversity to be facilitated, not forced, something that grows because people are attracted to different ideas along different pathways. Let's have our own courses reciprocating in the sharing of teachers, resources and performance. We all have a lot to offer each other and this can be achieved without the mainstream sector impinging on our own control and autonomy. I would love to see white fellas chafing at the bit to be involved in our projects and this is starting to happen in the WAAPA environment, not only with lecturers but also the greater student body.

SUCCESS STORIES

Each year the WAAPA Aboriginal Theatre program graduates anywhere between 10 and 18 actors, of which at least 50 per cent are either work or apprenticeship-ready. Many are now established professionals and regular visitors who drop back into workshops and showings to tell stories of their professional experiences, providing support, role-modelling and hope for current students. Several graduates have been employed as tutors back into the program creating a circular model from training, to careers and back into teaching roles. One graduate has co-founded a trans-cultural company, Corazon De Vaca, in collaboration with a Spanish-based director. The company consists of two Nyungah graduates, a non-Indigenous manager and fourth performer. They performed for the 2008 World Expo in Spain and they now have funding to

create a multilingual piece in Madrid. Both the Expo project and the future Madrid project were funded predominantly from Spanish sources. Another graduate has formed her own women's traditional dance company called Kwarbah Djookian, which commands professional fees for each performance and cannot keep up with the demand. This ensemble of four left for China in early May 2009 on a fully-paid tour. Numerous other graduates have regular work or have filtered into WAAPA and NIDA three-year courses or bachelor programs in contemporary performance at Edith Cowan University in Perth.

A recently-signed (2009) Memorandum of Understanding between WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre program and Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company is serving to close gaps between graduate work-readiness and Yirra Yaakin's professional staffing requirements. In the last few years Yirra Yaakin has offered no less than three 12-month contracts and numerous project, production and touring-length contracts to graduates, not only as performers but also in administrative and arts management roles. We also have plans for a project-based graduate associate company attached to Yirra Yaakin. Both organisations are very excited about the additional possibilities this company will offer.

WHICH WAY?

WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre training program exists to serve the needs of professional companies with quality, work or apprentice-ready graduates. The penetration of Yirra Yaakin's professional personnel into student workshops for creative development has established authentic dramaturgical processes for the students whilst allowing Yirra Yaakin to test the waters of new material at the pre-funding stage with a ready-made bank of student performers. New talent can be

**The greater
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identified and skills nurtured and refined for industry requirements.

We must continue to increase access to additional and ongoing training, professional development and employment opportunities. Nourishing the dominant sector with Indigenous up-and-coming professionals will greatly increase chances of regular employment but it necessitates preparing them for this work so they can compete on a level playing field.

The sustainability and growth of both existing Indigenous training organisations and professional companies can only be maintained if audience bases and increased demand can grow along with them. There is a divide between the Indigenous and dominant sectors that serves to block out and separate Indigenous theatre from the mainstream.

Arts policy must cater to the varying needs and diversity of Indigenous artists and projects across the performing arts sector and cease making decisions without the inclusion and consultation of Indigenous policy officers. This means an increase in the placement of informed Indigenous personnel within both the Indigenous and mainstream policy sectors to assist greater inclusion across all areas of the industry. In the current climate of funding scarcity, professional Indigenous companies such as Ilbijerri, Koemba Jdarra and Yirra Yaakin continue to create internationally-recognised performance with support from various government and corporate funding sources.

The many other pockets of contemporary Indigenous production initiatives and training grounds throughout Australia continue to produce small but significant works with little support, many worthy of full-scale development and testament to the unyielding struggle and celebration of contemporary Indigenous theatre and film in Australia. Let's remain open to all possibilities for the benefit of all the mobs, at all levels across Australia. I have great faith that as a high quality critical mass grows so will the voice, cultural maintenance, future direction and sustainability of Indigenous performing arts. And, I reckon, you just try and stop it.

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**KIM
WALKER**

My Courageous Conversation

Kim Walker is the CEO and Head of Dance at NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association) Dance College in New South Wales, and he began dancing as a child with his mother, Margaret Walker AM. Kim's formal dance career started with the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre in 1978. Then, after joining the Sydney Dance Company, he was appointed principal dancer from 1980 to 1990, during which time he danced and performed many lead roles under the artistic direction of Graeme Murphy. While at the Sydney Dance Company, Kim also studied at a number of other companies, including the Alvin Ailey School in New York.

Kim's choreographic career started with the Sydney Dance Company where he created several new works. As a freelance choreographer and director Kim has worked with many major companies and directors in Australia including Opera Australia, Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Richard Wherrett, Neil Armfield, Wayne Harrison and Roger Hodgman. Kim has also undertaken extensive choreographic work for television commercials, musicals, corporate and charity launches and music film clips.

In 1998 Kim was appointed as Artistic Director of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, not only creating a number of new and innovative works but also touring the company both nationally and overseas to great acclaim.

Kim has served as a member of the Arts NSW Dance Board, the Artistic Directorate of HotHouse Theatre, and the Theatre Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. Kim was the recipient of the Individual Award of the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Awards in 1991.

In 2007 Kim was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer/Head of Dance of NAISDA, Australia's National Indigenous Dance College.

I am passionate about NAISDA. It has the power to change lives while at the same time creating artists that are changing the face of contemporary Indigenous dance in the mainstream dance world and in communities around Australia. It is NAISDA's obligation to pass on our traditional and contemporary cultures to future generations and to give them inspiration.

NAISDA – A SUCCESS STORY

The National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association is a great Indigenous success story. For more than 30 years, in different locations and with sometimes 'shaky' funding, NAISDA has survived and grown.

Look no further than Bangarra Dance Theatre for confirmation of our significance. NAISDA's founder, Carole Johnson, conceived the idea of the company and it is through her and the dedication and passion of NAISDA graduate and Bangarra Artistic Director, Stephen Page, that we can enjoy the work of this iconic company today.

Other prominent graduates include Michael Leslie, arts worker, teacher and philosopher; Marilyn Miller, arts administrator; Frances and Gina Rings, choreographers; Lewis Lampton, dance creator with young people; Dijon Hastie, choreographer and Albert David, dancer/choreographer; Lillian Crombie, actor extraordinaire; and so many more, adding not just to the Indigenous arts sector but to the cultural fabric of Australia.

For NAISDA it is not only the high-profile performers and teachers that are important. It is also the alumni who have returned to their communities using what they learned at NAISDA to help keep their cultures strong.

NAISDA'S PLACE IN AUSTRALIA

The organisation now known as NAISDA Dance College sprang from a six-week dance workshop in Redfern in 1975. Carole Johnson, a black American woman touring Australia with the Elio Pomare Dance Company, saw the lack of dance opportunities for Indigenous people and set about doing something about it.

From the beginning, NAISDA Dance College offered uniquely exciting possibilities springing from a fusion of traditional and contemporary Indigenous dance.

Since 1976 large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers have begun their careers at NAISDA. Graduates have gone on to work both in the arts and beyond. As already mentioned, Australia's only Indigenous Major Performing Arts Organisation, Bangarra Dance Theatre, sprang from NAISDA.

NAISDA students are drawn from all over Australia through talent identification programs and an annual week-long audition program, and most students are eligible for Abstudy.

In 2006 NAISDA moved from The Rocks in Sydney to Mt Penang Parklands on the Central Coast of NSW, just outside Gosford. We didn't realise it at the time, but a new school was to be built at the Parklands. Kariong Mountains High School will start enrolling students in 2010. NAISDA will partner with Kariong, enabling younger children to participate in NAISDA's programs.

Today NAISDA is Australia's national tertiary Indigenous dance training organisation, a member of the Australian Roundtable for Arts Training Excellence and a VETAB-registered training organisation that provides ground-breaking delivery of a Careers in Dance curriculum from Certificate II to Diploma level.

We now see NAISDA alumni and graduates teaching all over Australia, undertaking workshops in communities, creating their own companies and new work, dancing in mainstream contemporary companies and working as arts administrators and artists in other fields.

For over three decades NAISDA graduates have been role models for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and have inspired their communities. A Careers in Dance Diploma from NAISDA opens doors to a variety of careers, and the list of quiet achievers in and beyond the arts is long.

In the world of the 21st century, NAISDA Dance College is more relevant than ever as young Indigenous people look to redefine their roles in this very different Australia. However, some aspects of NAISDA never change.

AT NAISDA'S CORE

Traditional culture will always be the heartbeat of NAISDA. For everyone associated with the college, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are central to the NAISDA experience at all times, and all students participate in cultural residencies, both within the college and at remote traditional communities.

It is this immersion in living Indigenous cultures that distinguishes a NAISDA education from that of other tertiary dance training organisations in Australia.

While it is NAISDA's goal to develop opportunities for its students, they also learn self-development and independence. And because they are never isolated from their cultural backgrounds, they are able to explore questions of cultural identity with confidence and pride.

WHAT WE OFFER

NAISDA's Careers in Dance Diploma is a four-year course. There is an annual student intake following a residential audition process. Anyone who is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander from the age of 18 to 30 can apply to enter NAISDA.

We call our students 'developing artists', and they come from all over Australia – from cities and towns, and from small or remote communities. Current developing artists come from Turkey Creek and Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley, Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, and Weipa on the Cape York Peninsula, as well as Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane.

NAISDA is unique in many ways. It accepts students with little or no prior dance knowledge. It also takes students with little or no knowledge of their own culture. This can sometimes be the main reason they come to us.

NAISDA's mandate is to equip young people with the skills required to become

We call our students 'developing artists', and they come from all over Australia – from cities and towns, and from small or remote communities.

We need to create excellent dancers and, even more importantly, arts workers, who use dance as their medium to work with their communities.

professional contemporary dancers. In just four years! It is very difficult to create a dancer with no experience in this time. Difficult, but not impossible if all the stars are aligned for the individual. Body type, talent, and application, application, application. Even if all this occurs, there is only one mainstream Indigenous company



which can cater for them and very few mainstream companies.

NAISDA training has to give developing artists more than just the skills to be dancers: they also need to be arts workers. The training imparts skills that will allow them to flourish in today's arts world as well as use these skills back in their own communities.

NAISDA developing artists graduate with a very special set of skills. They are contemporary dancers, but they are also contemporary *Indigenous* dancers. They have a knowledge of teaching skills, experience working in communities, and working as part of a group. Rare skills in today's artistic environment.

CULTURAL RESIDENCIES

As part of its curriculum NAISDA has a continuing relationship with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. The Aboriginal community on Elcho Island in North East Arnhem Land and the Torres Strait community on Saibai Island in the far north of Torres Strait currently work with the college.

Cultural tutors are selected by these communities and come to NAISDA to teach dance and craft, but also to give developing artists an appreciation of how to live a cultural life. Students then travel to the communities to expand their knowledge of the land from which the dances have been created.

We are privileged to have these tutors with us and honoured to be able

to spend time in their communities. For the 2008 residency, the ABC's Message Stick program followed the developing artists as they went on a journey to Nyinykay, a homeland for some of the Elcho Island families.

These community cultural residencies really fast track the developing artists' understanding of the origins of the dances they are learning, and their relationship to land on which they are dancing. To see the difference in style, technique and passion in the developing artists after the Nyinykay residency was astounding.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

NAISDA needs to grow into the future. We need to create excellent dancers and, even more importantly, arts workers, who use dance as their medium to work with their communities.

We need to create new streams at NAISDA that focus on community dance development, business development, and stage management, so that our graduates have more skills that give them diversity. We need to be able to offer short courses to NAISDA graduates so they can upskill their qualifications. In the 2008 intake I interviewed all the prospective developing artists – yes, some of them wanted to be in Bangarra and shoot for the stars. Fantastic! But others wanted to come to NAISDA to learn more about themselves and their cultures, and then return to their community and use dance to create programs for their youth.

We also need to be able to access students at a younger age and we are well on the way to doing this. In 2008 we had over 80 young people from the NSW Central Coast come to NAISDA for a variety of programs. In 2009, over 50 took part in a cultural residency funded through the Arts NSW Connected program.

Some families in remote communities have no choice but to send their children away to boarding schools for further education as the community school cannot meet their educational needs beyond about year 10. It is NAISDA's plan to build a boarding house so these young people can attend high school, and at the same time live in a culturally supportive environment and be part of the NAISDA dance experience. This will happen in a variety of ways, including weekend classes, cultural residencies and participation in our recently-accredited VET in schools course, which is drawn from our Certificate II curriculum

By 2013 it is our goal to present new Indigenous dance works with sets, sound, lighting, direction and choreography all created from within the NAISDA student body.

and offered one afternoon per week for students in years 11 and 12 in NSW where it forms part of their Higher School Certificate.

This VET course was offered for the first time in 2009, with a small group of students from the Central Coast region.

We need to keep our kids in school and give them reasons to stay there.

We are conducting an audit of our graduates around Australia to establish how many communities we can offer this VET program to as we begin to roll it out across NSW and, in the future, other states.

NAISDA is currently developing a partnership with the Bundanon Trust that enable the delivery of the VET course on the south Coast of NSW.

NOT ONLY DANCE

I mentioned earlier that in four years we attempt to produce professional contemporary dancers. However some young people don't want that as a career option, or find they don't have the aptitude for the rigours of dance.

In 2010/2011 NAISDA will re-accredit all its courses. This is the perfect time to look to the future and further develop what we can offer and to align our courses with modern trends and the needs of developing artists. A 2011 extension to NAISDA dance courses could offer:

- a specific community dance practice unit incorporating teaching and working in both urban and remote communities, two very different scenarios;
- a Contemporary Indigenous Dance Technique (fully developed through NAISDA in 2010);
- deeper in-depth cultural residencies at NAISDA linked with an in-depth cultural understanding course;
- a cultural residency unit that is available as a short course for students from all over Australia;
- development as an artist and self-management skills;
- advanced filming and editing units directly relating to dance in the media;
- music composition for dance; and
- Pilates instructor unit.

By expanding the courses available at NAISDA we will bring together young people with different artistic aspirations. Bring them together, inspire them and the outcome will amaze. By 2013 it is our goal to present new Indigenous dance works with sets, sound, lighting, direction and choreography all created from within the NAISDA student body.

LIFELONG LEARNING: NAISDA/EDUCATING AUSTRALIA FOUNDATION

In the future, NAISDA will have a 'return to learn' strategy for practicing artists to come back to NAISDA to expand their skills.

We are all aware that for many dancers, and artists generally, there is not enough work. NAISDA plans to develop programs that will help our graduates by providing work on a range of projects.

Under the ambitious title of the NAISDA/educating australia Foundation we plan to create a corporate arm of our organisation.

Our mission statement is very bold.

To conserve, maintain and enrich the world's oldest living culture and dance, developing and enriching for future generations our traditional and contemporary performing arts, and sharing these with the world.

To reach out to Australians of every descent, all of them welcome to join us on our journey to the cultural heartbeat of Australia.

To achieve NAISDA's goals through education, outreach and performance, throughout Australia and across the world.

Firstly, through NAISDA/educating australia, NAISDA will be better positioned to pursue corporate funding for alumni development and program enhancement and other activities that will assist NAISDA to achieve its future goals.

Secondly, NAISDA/educating australia will provide the basis for a program that will present opportunities for alumni employment as well as enhancing both alumni and developing artists' skills and prospects.

Thirdly, through NAISDA/educating australia, NAISDA will establish an important new outreach program to all Australians, enabling access to new opportunities to share and learn from the world's oldest living culture.

MOTIVATIONAL ARTS

Recently we learnt that the arts will be included in Phase 2 of the National Curriculum, along with Languages and Geography. Phase 1 included Maths, Science, English and History.

Over many years as an arts worker, and particularly with the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, I have witnessed what a difference the arts can make to young people and how, when integrated with education, they open up avenues students had not thought possible.

I have seen that when arts are a focus of the school day in the circus and remote communities attendances thrive and engagement is 100 per cent. It is the arts and culture that are among the things that will bring our kids back to school and give them inspiration for the future.

For example, at the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, you could not participate unless you were at school. At Mt Penang we want to introduce something similar. Give kids who may not see any reason for finishing high school an opportunity to dance and be involved with their culture while they finish their education.

For young people who wish to go on to NAISDA, they would get recognition for prior learning, but for the other students, involvement in the arts would be the mechanism that keeps them at school and extends their understanding of themselves and their education.

That's both a challenge and an opportunity for NAISDA.

A GREAT STEP FORWARD

One particular challenge is how to incorporate contemporary and traditional Indigenous dance into the HSC curriculum nationally, and particularly, to

identify who can teach these subjects. We have begun a conversation with the NSW Department of Education and Training, but it is a complex topic although of critical importance if young Australians of every background are to grow up with an appreciation and understanding of the ever-evolving Indigenous dance cultures of this country.

Through NAISDA/educating australia workshops will be offered to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous HSC dance students. 'Workshops' implying participation rather than passive learning. Workshops that ensure an understanding of cultural and contemporary Indigenous dance.

Again, a huge challenge, but what an opportunity.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

In 2008 we welcomed a new era in Australia's political history. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has travelled extensively and put forward his aspirations for the world and for our country. A country that we all hold dear as an integral part of our being.

Before his travels the Prime Minister looked to history, to his own land, and promised to right the injustices of the past. We stood side by side as a nation and saw this as a way forward to acknowledge those wrongs and invigorate the future for the youth of today and for future generations.

It is these young people that will instil passion, purpose and pride in future generations.

NAISDA's current vision is to create opportunities. Let's not leave it to fate or chance. We need to make opportunities for as many as possible!

I have mentioned that NAISDA will broaden its scope with re-accreditation in 2000/2011. In the supporting materials that speakers received for our Courageous Conversations we were urged to "... think beyond the glass ceiling of the current infrastructure within the Indigenous arts sector". By 2020 I would like to see NAISDA as an Australian Indigenous Performing Arts College with the same breadth of scope and programs as those offered by the VCA, NIDA and WAAPA, blended with teachings from an Indigenous perspective and a close connection to Indigenous culture.

In the future, NAISDA at Mt Penang Parklands will become a cultural precinct for Indigenous Arts. It's a beautiful site and we have the space to expand and create.

How do you make a dancer in four years? I believe you teach them one style of contemporary dance in tandem with a rigorous physical and intellectual program.

In 2008 NAISDA engaged Australian contemporary dance master Graeme Watson to teach all contemporary classes at NAISDA. Graeme is a master of the Lester Horton technique, which I believe has the ability to fast track bodies into the understanding and muscle memory that is necessary for today's dancers. This is the technique that made me a dancer, but I had to travel to New York to get this training.

Over the next few years NAISDA will become the Lester Horton Centre of Dance in Australia. From this a new breed of dancers will emerge with a sound technical base that will set them apart from other dancers in Australia. From here new work will be created, as they adapt the technique to their own bodies and cultural context.

In 2010 NAISDA will work with Indigenous dance artist Vicki Van Hout to develop a Contemporary Indigenous Dance Technique that will form part of our contemporary teaching. Developing artists graduating from NAISDA will have a unique understanding of this technique which they will be able to integrate into their dance style as well as use as a teaching tool.

An outdoor amphitheatre, with seating for a several thousand, is currently being developed. By 2011 our new dance studios will be completed giving us four state-of-the-art dance spaces, a dedicated physiotherapy and Pilates' studio, student common room, dedicated storage and archives room, refurbished administration buildings and extensive open space.

We will build our new accommodation facilities but we will also build studio accommodation for our existing developing artists as well as refurbishing some existing cottages for senior developing artists' accommodation.



THE FUTURE: IT'S EXCITING

NAISDA is committed to the provision of a learning space that culturally affirms and supports students while advancing their intellectual and performance skills and development.

Integral to the NAISDA learning experience is the unique NAISDA cultural residency program, which enables the sharing of traditional dance and culture by the traditional owners in their homeland communities and at NAISDA Dance College.

Central to the NAISDA philosophy are:

- NAISDA's relationship with its traditional communities;
- the provision of dynamic, relevant and responsive training programs;
- the provision of quality facilities for students and staff;
- recruitment of highly skilled and experienced staff; and
- sound leadership and governance to maximise the organisation's outcomes in line with its strategic plans.

All NAISDA programs are informed by current artistic trends as well as in response to the needs and aspirations identified by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. What is happening in the arts today and the vision for future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is at the core of every NAISDA experience.

Is all this achievable in the present financial environment? Can we really do it? We can if we pull together and create sound strategies with a clear vision for the organisation and for the youth of today and tomorrow.

For the past 30 years NAISDA has created so much and given so many opportunities to so many. It has an obligation to grow and continue to be a leader in the Indigenous arts sector and Australia's cultural landscape.

NAISDA is committed to the provision of a learning space that culturally affirms and supports students while advancing their intellectual and performance skills and development.



**WESLEY
ENOCH**

Everything Old is New Again

Wesley Enoch is the eldest son of Doug and Lyn Enoch who hail from Stradbroke Island. Wesley's directing credits include *Murri Love*; *The 7 Stages Of Grieving*; *Changing Time*; *The Dreamers*; *Radiance* (a co-production with the Queensland Theatre Company); *Purple Dreams* and *Bitin Back* for Kooemba Jdarra; *The Dreamers* by Jack Davis for Company B at Belvoir St Theatre; *Fountains Beyond* for the Queensland Theatre Company; *Stolen*, which premiered at Playbox and has since toured both nationally and internationally; and *Romeo and Juliet* for the Bell Shakespeare Company.

Whilst resident with the Sydney Theatre Company his productions included *Black Medea*; *The Sunshine Club*; *Black-ed Up*; and *The Cherry*

Pickers. 2002 projects included a UK tour of *The Cherry Pickers*, and a remount of *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, co-written with Deborah Mailman, for The Sydney Theatre Company.

Wesley has most recently directed *Riverland* for Windmill Performing Arts, 1975 for the Melbourne Workers' Theatre and *The Dreamers*, *Conversations with the Dead*, *Capricornia*, *Parramatta Girls*, *Paul*, *Yibiyung* and *Man From Mukinupin* for Company B, *The Sapphires* for the Melbourne Theatre Company, *BLACK MEDEA* for Malthouse and *Shrunken Iris*, *Rainbow's End* for Ilbijerri.

Writing Credits include *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, *A life of Grace and Piety*, *The Sunshine Club*, *GRACE* (a short film) and *Cookie's Table* which won the 2006 Patrick White Award and was shortlisted for both the NSW and Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. Wesley conceived and directed *MY SKIN MY LIFE*, the Indigenous segment of the Opening Ceremony of the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

Wesley has been Artistic Director for Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts (1994-97), Associate Artist for the Queensland Theatre Company (1997-99), Resident Director of the Sydney Theatre Company (2000-01), Artistic Director at Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-op (2003-04), and a member of Hothouse Theatre's Artistic Directorate (2002-04), Associate Artistic Director of Company B, Belvoir St Theatre (2006-08), the Artistic Director of the Australian Delegation to the Festival of Pacific Arts 2008 and a Trustee of the Sydney Opera House.

come from Minjerribah across Quadamooka, Yuggarabal and Turrabul – lands lay off to the west of my country and to the east is the wide expanse of the endless ocean. But of course this is not the whole of me. I am Danish, Spanish, English, German, Scottish, Karndu, Nunuccal Nuugi, Gorenpul, Rotomar Islander, Filipino ... and that's all we know of ... that's only six generations. I am the mix of all my ancestors and I acknowledge them all. I am a full person. Not the sum of my parts but the synergy that exceeds any fractioning of a soul.

THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE

My conversation is about the future of Indigenous theatre/arts and I credential myself through acknowledging my family, clan, homeland, language group and as a visitor to this land. This experience is mine and not universal and the challenge for any audience member is to remember this. There is no universal story, no universal language, no universal experience with which to neatly tie up the Indigenous experience of this country. The anecdotal is not universal, the personal can be metaphoric but it cannot be true for all.

DREAMING

When I was growing up it was explained to me that this idea of the Dreaming or Dreamtime or the time before time was not like a dream in that we were asleep and imagining things. It was a time when all the stories that were ever going to be told were created – that there was no such thing as original thought. That everything that was ever going to be thought, spoken, painted, danced, sung ... that every act of creation was created in this time before time and it is just out of reach, waiting.

I was told of the stories of the coming of the horse ... even though the horse did not originally come from this country we have a story for it. The dance I have been taught represents the person on the back of the horse and their hat falling off. I was told that we called the horse the 'yardeman', a name we also use for 'big brother' because the horse was carrying the younger brother on his back.

Also the 'shake-a-leg' ... I was taught that the shake-a-leg, or Waddama, is the action of the butterfly. The story goes that a man who could not speak saw a huge Ulysses butterfly in the forest and tried to explain it



L-R: Liza Maza, Rachael Maza Long, Wesley Enoch

Every generation has their work cut out for them. For my grandparents' generation it was ... basic human rights ... What are the issues of our generation?

to his family. The Elders told him to go and sleep on it and come back with a way of explaining what he saw. He came back and showed them this move ... the movement of the butterfly.

All these stories come from the same time. Everything old is new again. We have a way of seeing the continuum of time through the act of remembering the time before time. Dreaming is such a simplistic way of seeing this concept, but useful ... there is a connection to the subconscious part of us which connects us to the deep root of creation. What we call creating is not about invention – it is about remembering.

This is a very freeing idea for an artist because it doesn't lumber us with the pressure of being original but challenges us to be in touch with the time and place we are in now ... to be open to the stories that need to be told as they are needed. We have inbuilt cultural mechanisms to evolve and make meaning in the world if we choose to use them.

Nothing I write here is original. Some things you will have heard before, some things will just make sense. These are the stories/ideas/solutions that you should act upon ... not because you have proof but because something old has become new.

GENERATIONAL ISSUES

Every generation has their work cut out for them. For my grandparents' generation it was ... the right to live, eat, have children, marry, travel ... these basic human rights. My parents' generation fought for the political developments of the right to vote, right to education, equality in the eyes of the law, and much more. What are the issues of our generation? I think the pressing issue is to be confident in a world we have always seen as antagonistic, to have pride in our cultural continuity and survival, to heal the scars – physical and psychological – in our community and to take up the cultural rights and obligations in a changing world.

Our world is changing. Just a look at the 2006 census results show some interesting trends. For the first time in many generations we have an inverted population chart – over half the Indigenous population of this country is under 25, over 70 per cent of our population lives in urban centres, the average wage for Indigenous Australians is approximately \$33,000 per annum, just under half the population are graduates from high school and almost 20,000 of us have degrees or higher qualifications. I'm not quoting these figures

as proof of anything; God knows I'm neither a statistician nor a great believer in these figures, but they do lend weight to some anecdotal information. In my family we have seen almost all of my 42 first cousins complete high school, where only six of my 12 aunts and uncles did. We mostly have jobs and earn an alright wage (my arts wage is not the best nor is it the worst) and many of my family are buying houses and live in Brisbane, Cairns, Mt Isa and Stradbroke Island.

And I believe we can all think of examples both against and for this assertion, but here goes: we are living longer, our fertility rate is up, our incomes are up, our education levels are up, our housing is improving – I must point out that we still have a long way to go before there is equality of opportunity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. And I am assuming this is the goal ... for Indigenous Australians to be on par with our fellow citizens. We are on track for this. If the developments of the last 30 years are anything to go by, we might be there in another 30 years!

What then? If we achieve this goal in two generations' time, who will we be? What will we be doing?

In recent times we've had more fuel thrown on the argument about identifying as Indigenous to this country. In an opinion piece in Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper, journalist Andrew Bolt raised the issue of skin colour as a definition of Aboriginality. To quote him:

"I'm not saying any of those I've named chose to be Aboriginal for anything but the most heartfelt and honest of reasons. I certainly don't accuse them of opportunism, even if full-blood Aborigines may wonder how such fair people can claim to be one of them and take black jobs.

"I'm saying only that this self-identification as Aboriginal strikes me as self-obsessed and driven more by politics than by any racial reality. It's also divisive, feeding a new movement to stress pointless or even invented racial differences we once swore to overcome. What happened to wanting us all to become colour-blind?"¹

I must admit one of the people he cited is my sister who ran for office in the Queensland State election, who he says was "...looking as Aboriginal, or not, as premier Anna Bligh".

¹ 'White is the New Black', Herald Sun 15/4/2000.

Offensive stuff? Yeah, truly ill-informed and ignorant of the realities that plague our families and go beyond skin colour. Bolt plays into the age-old cast structure – full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste, etc, etc. Things we thought we had moved on from. The last time there were moves to categorise us like this there was an agenda of assimilation and dispersal.

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

The definition of Aboriginality as accepted by the majority of official bodies, including the Australia Council, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and the old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), has a three-pronged approach – you must be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, you must identify yourself as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and you must be identified by your community. These are not easy hoops to jump through, especially given the fallout of the stolen generations, generations of fear and persecution and sometimes secrecy within families. So let's say you get through all that and you are certified as Indigenous – and we all know that the burden of proof lies with the claimant, something that has continued through the Native Title debate. We must provide proof.

Is the colour of our skin going to be what is important? Is the colour of our skin what gives us a blood connection to this land? Is the colour of our skin a sign of the disadvantages our families have experienced?

A SHIFT IN THE DEBATE

I believe we have to shift the debate again. For so many years the debate for our moral rights in this country has been based on disadvantage. Due to our low levels of health, housing, access to education, employment, we have argued for greater assistance and we have been heard. We have gone part-way to achieving better outcomes for our families. The 'white guilt' and 'racist' cards have been drawn on many an occasion to achieve our goals – a better life for our families. But will this paradigm of argument serve us in the future? I don't think so ... not alone.

I believe the true argument has always been cultural. The right to self-determine our futures in a way that gives us choice over our cultural continuity. I must show my hand here. I do not always believe that 'traditional ways' are uniformly appropriate for a contemporary society. Men's and women's business is a very appropriate cultural protocol, a necessary one to observe at times but I also believe that there are some occasions when 'traditional ways' are cited as a smokescreen for crimes and oppression. The cases where individuals abuse family members – sexually, physically and/or psychologically – and evoke traditional practice as a rationale is important to distinguish from the kind of cultural capital I believe our families need.

Some of the stories of distress and anguish coming from some of our families are full of what I call 'Black on Black' issues. The legacy of generations of disempowerment, oppression and displacement can be

seen in almost every Indigenous family I know. We live in a cycle of abuse. Our fathers behave in a certain way, we copy that way and treat our children in that way and they in turn pass these behaviours on to the next generation ... unless we break that cycle. But what is good to pass on and what is not good?

This is a contentious statement given the background of cultural reclamation we are all undertaking in some way, shape or form. To choose not to continue certain cultural practices is a hard thing to decide upon as a group, and individuals and families ultimately choose the right way forward for them. I am arguing not for consensus but for choice and analysis.

Earlier I said there is no universal truth for all Indigenous Australians. We are, and always have been, anarchic – in the true meaning of the word: self-governing groups of families who elude central decision-making government. We work on a local level not a global one.

We have got to a stage where we must debate the difference between class and culture, and not allow ourselves to be defined by our disadvantage alone but what cultural perspectives we have of the world and how we can make this country a better place. When are violence, alcoholism, sexual abuse, and unemployment class issues and when are they cultural issues? Never that easy to pull apart as sometimes one feeds another. But when we see the disintegration of respect and family authority, is that because of culture or class?

VALUING OUR CULTURAL CAPITAL

We have also got to the stage where we must value and demonstrate our cultural capital. Family, stories, dance, song, language, perspectives, protocols, analysis ... what makes us Murri or Koori or Nunga or an Enoch or a Ruska or a Nunuccal Nuugi? What makes us belong to this country? We have to start asking these questions and demonstrating our answers.

There is a nostalgia setting in for the old ways. Old ways of defining ourselves, the old arguments are back to pull us apart. Non-Indigenous Australians may get to the point where they ask why Indigenous Australians are different to them. They may get nostalgic for the old ways of dealing with us ... nostalgic for the paternalism, division and control. A new way forward may be seen in the analysis of the fall of ATSIC.

THE RISE – AND FALL – OF ATSIC

Why did ATSIC fall with very little opposition? Why did the community not get up in arms? Of course, some did, but why did the broader population not challenge this decision? I believe it was because ATSIC was fundamentally a funding delivery mechanism to deal with disadvantage and did not have an all-of-culture approach.

Is the colour of our skin going to be what is important?
Is the colour of our skin what gives us a blood connection to this land?

ATSIC was established as a replacement for the old Department of Aboriginal Affairs. In fact the majority of the old department staff moved straight into the role of staff for ATSIC. It was established through an Act of Parliament in 1989 and set about its business in March, 1990, as a representative body for Indigenous Australians with a charter to ATSIC's objectives as follows:

- to ensure maximum participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in government policy formulation and implementation;
- to promote Indigenous self-management and self-sufficiency;
- to further Indigenous economic, social and cultural development; and
- to ensure co-ordination of Commonwealth, state, territory and local government policy affecting Indigenous people.²

In order to achieve these objectives, ATSIC was to:

- advise governments at all levels on Indigenous issues;
- advocate the recognition of Indigenous rights on behalf of Indigenous people regionally, nationally and internationally; and
- *deliver and monitor some of the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous programs and services.*³

We know that ATSIC quickly became responsible for delivering funds to the families and communities across its defined regions and held elections for different levels of governance – it was a mini government, although it was always operating at the behest of the Federal Government and eventually it was stripped of many of its responsibilities with the ATSIC

Amendment Act of 2002. Originally it also had oversight of other government departments that interacted with Indigenous peoples.

I believe ATSIC was caught in a trap. It continued to behave as the Federal Government's funding body for Indigenous Australia and had to deliver on a brief but it had no real authority. Allegations of nepotism, mismanagement, embezzlement and other legal issues of personal misconduct never really delivered any convictions yet did much to discredit ATSIC and its charter. I believe that ATSIC did not deliver as an elected voice for Indigenous Australia. It busied itself doing the Government's bidding but did not become strategic in its dealing with the whole country.

Imagine an ATSIC press release on immigration policies, on the children overboard scandal, or official Welcome to Country Protocols for every international airport, comments on conservation, land care, the sale

of Telstra ... all things which impacted on Indigenous Australia or could benefit from having an Indigenous perspective articulated. We are sometimes our own worst enemy as we hold our tongue, too timid to tell the world what we know. One of the most political acts for an Indigenous Australian might be to be confident and look the rest of the country in the eye and tell them what we know, to assume the position of equal rather than waiting for an invitation to sit at the table – hard, I know.

Now ATSIC is gone I believe there is a constitutional need to address an historical oversight.

NUNAVUT, CANADA

I am going to digress for a second to talk about 'The Canadian Example'. On April 1, 1999, Canada created a new jurisdiction, Nunavut, which was formed from the eastern part of the Northwest Territories and was officially named Canada's third territory. Nunavut is the realisation of more than 20 years of negotiations and planning by the Inuit of the Eastern and Central Arctic and it occupies about one-fifth of the Canadian

wilderness. While Inuit represent 85 per cent of the population of Nunavut, they have chosen to pursue their aspirations of self-determination through a public government system rather than through an Inuit-specific self-government arrangement.

The status of a 'state' allows Nunavut to have a university, an art gallery and other structures under the federated model of Canada. They get to determine the shape of their services and establish benchmarking which can be analysed by the rest of the country.

The accidents of history have robbed Indigenous Australians from shaping this country.

AUSTRALIAN OPTIONS

I am in no way advocating for Australia to follow the *partitioning* of land for an Indigenous State. But I *am* advocating for an Indigenous State. A Virtual State.

Looking at the structure of the Upper House in Federal Parliament, which has allocated representation based on historical precedent, I see no reason why Indigenous Australia should not be guaranteed representation. Democratic principles do not operate in the Senate – it is a house of review. And why shouldn't the equivalent of the ATSIC Council sit in the Senate and have opinions on all of the dealings of the nation? Operating from our unique cultural perspective rather than having to take sole responsibility for 'closing the gap'.

The accidents of history have robbed Indigenous Australians from shaping this country. Those same accidents of history have given Tasmania the same number of Senators as New South Wales. They have tied the allocation of resources from the Federal Government in an unfair ratio. At the 2005 census the population of Tasmania was 485,300. The population of Indigenous Australia hovers around 528,600.

² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989, Section 3.

³ ATSIC, 'ATSIC at a Glance'; http://www.atsic.gov.au/about_atsic/atsic_at_a_glance/default.asp

No wonder everyone looks so tired and burnt out. Because each company is doing these jobs on a fraction of the resources it takes to do them properly.

A review of our constitution every 100 years, with the view to rewrite our foundation document, could be a valuable tool, so that it reflects the needs of our society and so that we can see a new way forward. A once-in-a-generation opportunity to create models of governance. Not a preamble, not a paragraph, but a new and confident assertion of Indigenous cultural values and perspectives enshrined in the Parliament through strong participation.

Placing an Indigenous cultural framework at the centre of governance in this country can go a long way to addressing issues of environment, economics, social services, community and the future.

These might fly in the face of

democratic and capitalist idylls but should be considered fully before a new era is possible. Where 'sorry' is just the beginning. These are issues of sovereignty.

THE IMPACT ON ART AND THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE

We here know too well that everything is connected. You only have to look at the overworked nature of any Indigenous arts organisation to see a group of people working to fulfil a huge brief. I will talk about theatre in more specifics as that is the area I know best.

Each organisation must endeavour to be a professional theatre company with high standards of production, a community cultural development organisation, a training body, a cultural maintenance and reclamation body, an education centre, a casting agency, and help deliver community aims of health, justice, housing and other social programs through arts as an intervention – if I can use that word.

No wonder everyone looks so tired and burnt out. Because each company is doing these jobs on a fraction of the resources it takes to do them properly. Many times Indigenous arts organisations are compromised by the sheer weight of expectation and the lack of human, financial and artistic resources.

I agree there is a lot of work to do, but I am coming closer and closer to thinking that arts organisations should not be the only players, not the only employers of arts and artists.

For many years theatre has been primarily about storytelling: writing onto the public record our stories of survival, our struggles and our quest for political change. I can see through trends in Australia Council funding a movement away from these older-style political questions. The de-funding of the Melbourne Workers Theatre and Vital Statistics can be seen as

the writing on the wall for Indigenous theatre too. What is the next evolution of Indigenous theatre? For me, I think, it is form. I recently worked on a show where the audience and critics loved the quality of the show, the acting, the design, all the elements, but thought that it was a story they knew already. Like Indigenous theatre needs to deliver newness to the audience, both black and white, and we cannot rely on classic stories. This made me think about story and form. I think the next step is to evolve the form of Indigenous theatre so that it challenges the status quo of actor/audience relationships, the integration of all the artforms, and creates processes that reflect our cultural traditions. The next step is not just the telling of beautiful stories but also how we tell them and where. In the way that individual visual artists have led the way like Dorothy Napangardi, or Emily Ngawareyye, or even Lin Onus ... this exploration of form has kept visual artists evolving.

The forum for this debate is in the theatre, showing new ways of seeing the world. This does not mean the wholesale abandonment of our historical role but it is time to challenge and fuse, investigate and remember the old ways and make them new.

I believe that the arts companies need to focus on this task.

A COMPLEMENTARY APPROACH

But what happens to the other work, such as community cultural development or work in prisons, or shows with health messages? There is talk of a National Indigenous Cultural Authority that would act as an advocate and policy body for an all-of-government approach to Indigenous culture. It would have oversight of places like AIATSIS, museums, language centres, for example, and could be commandeered to act as a reference point for the employment and activation of arts and cultural projects outside the arts.

Arts companies could focus on the arts and participate in a greater cultural debate rather than having to take sole carriage of the idea. There is natural overlap and no one works in a vacuum, but the scenario that continually sees burnout, high levels of stress, and mental illness must be addressed. Ultimately, artists need to feel they are working as the best artists they can be in a community and leave the best teachers and best health professionals to follow up.

I see a world where we have equality of opportunity; that Indigenous Australians "live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (Martin Luther King).

Sovereignty is the key but what form of sovereignty? What we look like in the future – how we exist as a culture – depends on how we live over the next 100 years. What we think is important and how we value our evolution as families and individuals will dictate who our grandchildren think they are and how they value their voices.

As artists, we are the next step. And only we can step up.



**SAM
COOK**

SOS
Save our Sector
Save our Stories
Save our Stages

Sam is currently the Program Director for The Dreaming, Australia's international Indigenous festival, held annually in Woodford, Queensland.

Sam's notable achievements include:

- **Who's Who of Australian Women, 2007-2009**
- **Who's Who of Western Australia, 2007-2009**
- **UK Arts Council Fellowship recipient, 2007**
- **Queen's Baton Relay Runner – Commonwealth Games 2006**
- **Torch Bearer, Olympic Torch Relay, Australia, 2000**
- **Winner, National Aboriginal Youth of the Year, 1999**
- **Finalist, Young Australian of the Year Awards, 1998**
- **Winner, Broome Aboriginal Artist of the Year Award, 1998**
- **Certificate of Outstanding Achievement, Young Australian of the Year Award, 1997**

Listed in the 15th edition of the *Who's Who of Australian Women*, Sam Cook is a social entrepreneur and provocateur under the pseudonym of KISSmyBLAKarts™. A Nyikina sista from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, Sam has been working in publishing for 16 years, theatre for nine, is a trained visual artist and has been arts-inclined ever since she can remember. As the former Executive Producer of Yirra Yaakin she was the force behind an international Indigenous alliance called Honouring Theatre and led the company to national and international awards and acclaim. Sam continues to be passionate about taking authentic Aboriginal theatre from the BLAKstage to the worldstage.

Having spent nearly eight years with the Western Australia-based Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, and five and a half of those years as the CEO, the primary focus of this conversation is from a company perspective. It is important to note that the standpoint I represent sits outside the east coast Indigenous Australian perspective, a perspective often unrecorded.

I can speak from direct experience and 'tell it like it is'. Starting as CEO, I was given a gift of a book entitled 'Procedures', which was entirely blank save for the first page, which had a hand-written note of two words – 'Good Luck'. My journey began. I was also the company's first Executive Producer, an amalgamation of the artistic direction and general management, so I am in the rare position of a 360-degree experience base. These years were marked by implementing structure, forging global pathways and creating award-winning outcomes, all with horrendous venue conditions, ever increasing hoop-jumping and governance difficulties in one of the most macro-managed, systemically-biased regimes known as the Australian arts industry.

I further qualify my perspective by stating that I have consciously chosen a career entirely in the BLAKarts. Within this space, much of my time has been spent attempting to articulate what we feel but have yet to define through our voice and on our terms. The BLAKarts for me are a way forward that recognises cultural authority, understands its own protocols and navigates through the landscape. I have measured my engagement with the non-Indigenous sector because I am an advocate of mutual exchange and quite often there is no genuine or sincere offer of this. So, in framing this paper, first and foremost it is about a BLAKway forward. One that can be integrated into the wider fabric of the Australian identity and have common points of entry, but one that is not assimilated or siloed or marginalised or exploited.

MY INDIGENOUS VIEW OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA

While there is an anthropological tendency to view traditional Indigenous performing culture as primarily song and dance, there is little recording of the various forms of traditional Indigenous theatre in Aboriginal



**It is time to write
our own history.**

and Torres Strait Islander society. It is my belief that this is a clear marker for the origins of marginalisation and separation of Indigenous theatre, which has little relevance to the Indigenous perspective but one steeped in ethnography.

Mask theatre, physical theatre, circus and comedy were very much a part of traditional expression. The campfire, Junba, Corroborree and Bora Grounds, amongst others, served as the stages for significant re-enactments, storytelling and mimicry, often representing spirit and animal forms, generally concluding with a moral or rationale behind various lore and belief. Performance was, and remains, a necessary part of cultural maintenance, wellbeing and survival. The Indigenous view is one of holism and connection, where there is a broader understanding of what constitutes theatre, rather than separation and division into the 'box' psyche of the Western world.

Viewing 'contemporary' Indigenous theatre only from a Western standpoint fails to take into account the deliberate and purposeful adaptation of this form, as it has been incorporated into the cycle of living culture. It also denies the timeline of 'contemporary' Indigenous theatre in being far more rooted in a cultural continuum and traditional Indigenous practise. This is a misleading notion that has been widely written about by non-Indigenous academics whose timelines generally begin in the late 1960s.

So in its broadest context, Aboriginal theatre in Australia is derived from ancient Indigenous culture and tradition. Performance and storytelling are a necessary and critical part of cultural survival, and it can be argued that the Aboriginal theatre industry is a time immemorial artform, which consequently enables comprehension of a bottom-to-top methodology of Indigenous theatre, one that has deeply embedded Indigenous praxis, pedagogy, custom, ritual and technique. It is time to write our own history.

HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL THEATRE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In the little that has been written about Aboriginal theatre there is a tendency to omit the broader national contributions, save for one or two examples. Research is often undertaken and focused around New South Wales, Victoria and, to a lesser extent, Queensland. Knowledge limitations, whiteness and unconscious bias play a role in the back-end of much of these works. While it is not disputed that these attempts are somewhat important in documenting aspects of Aboriginal theatre, the prevalent 'eastcoastcentric' view of the sector ignores the truth that Black theatre in its many forms was happening on a more significant national level than what was recorded, yielding key outcomes and milestones that continue to influence the sector.

In my home state of Western Australia perhaps the best-known example of pre-contact traditional Aboriginal theatre can be found in the Kundu Masks of the Nyangumarta people from the Pilbara. Masks were representations of both animals and spirits and were used in public performance around the campfire at night. At the conclusion of each performance the masks were abandoned on the ceremonial ground. The largest collection of these masks can now be found in the South Australian Museum.

'Contemporary' Aboriginal theatre in Western Australia grew out of a time of political and social struggle. The first recorded community performances were at the Coolbaroo Club (established between 1946 and 1960), which was Perth's only Aboriginal-run club. Productions were of a largely cabaret form providing entertainment for the local Aboriginal community and its supporters amidst the apartheid regime of the day. In the 1960s and 70s the Black civil rights movement was in full swing and the Black political theatre of Australia was born.

While Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* (1968) and the Nimrod Street Theatre production, *Basically Black* (1972) are acknowledged nationally as the first of the Black political theatre at this time, in Western Australia the social-historical theatre movement was taking shape. Led by playwright Jack Davis (1917-2000), the trilogy of plays *The Dreamers* (1973), *Kullark* (1978) and *No Sugar* (1985) were the catalysts for the genre that has dominated Aboriginal theatre industry.

In the 1970s Aboriginal theatre was commonly performed at the then Wellington Street-based Aboriginal Advancement Council and played an important role in the social and political struggle of the day. By the 1980s recognition for Aboriginal playwrights and actors had grown and interest came in the form of mainstream audiences and theatre companies who started producing Aboriginal works.

In 1989 Jimmy Chi redefined the musical theatre genre with his production *Bran Nue Dae* – Australia's first Aboriginal musical – and again with *Corrugation Road* (1996). Produced by the non-

Indigenous company *Black Swan Theatre*, both broke box office records.

In 1992, Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre was created and set about defining an Aboriginal-determined pathway for authentic Aboriginal theatre in Western Australia. A decade later, Yirra Yaakin was recognised as Australia's leading Aboriginal theatre company. It produced a body of works by leading Western Australian Aboriginal artists including Sally Morgan, Lynette Narkle, Geoffrey Narkle, Dallas Winmar, Ningali Lawford, Michelle Torres and David Milroy. Yirra Yaakin also played a role in the development of Australia's first national Aboriginal theatre alliance, the BLAKSTAGEalliance, which was created in 2002.

In 2003 David Milroy's play *Windmill Baby* made history as the first Aboriginal play to win the national Patrick White Award. It subsequently received the 2005 WA Equity Award for best new play, the 2006 Deadly Award and the Kate Challis RAKA award (2007).

2005 saw the birth of the Club Savage Movement, an Indigenous 'art for Indigenous art's sake' expression that remains an underground space for BLAKartists to challenge notions and impositions on their artistic creations.

Western Australia has produced a wealth of talented Aboriginal actors who can be placed into three 'schools': the 'Jack Davis School' launched the acting careers

L-R: Liza Maza, Rachael Maza Long, Michael Leslie



of artists such as Ernie Dingo, Lynette Narkle, John Moore and Kelton Pell; 'Bran Nue Dae' produced Ningali Lawford, Stephen 'Baamba 'Albert and Rohanna Angus; and the 'Yirra Yaakin School' has produced Derek Nannup, Heath Bergersen, Kyle Morrison, Irma Woods,

Cher Williams and Kylie Farmer.

Notable WA Aboriginal theatre artists include Archie Weller, Tasma Walton, Della Morrison, Lanchoo Davy, Isaac Drandage, Melodie Reynolds, Dennis Simmons, Mark Bin Bakar (aka Mary G) and acclaimed lighting designer, Mark Howett.

BLAKSTAGETHEATRE COMPANIES

When I talk about Indigenous theatre infrastructures I am referring to those which are, for the most part, Indigenous-driven, with an Indigenous governance structure and some degree of funding to enable an annual program to be undertaken. This is my definition of BLAKSTAGETheatre companies. Across Australia there are currently six established companies in various stages of development.

To the west there is Yirra Yaakin Aboriginal Corporation, a Perth-based company in operation since 1993. It has produced over 50 plays, employed over 800 Indigenous arts workers, presented over 3000 workshops and won 20 major awards. In the past five years, it has been involved in 36 international events, toured to five continents, toured work nationally and travelled over 45,000 kilometres within Western Australia, never once crossing the border.

South Australia has Karrikarinya Theatre, a fledgling company focusing on adult theatre. There is also Kurruru Youth Arts, Australia's only Indigenous youth performing arts company, committed to providing quality performing arts opportunities across South Australia.

Melbourne in Victoria is home to the longest running company, Ilbijjerri. Established in 1990, its plays explore a range of complex and controversial issues from a uniquely Indigenous perspective, reaching out and reminding audiences of every person's need for family, history and heritage. Ilbijjerri believes in the power of

Indigenous voices and its creative processes support the empowerment of Indigenous artists and communities to tell their stories from their perspective.

New South Wales-based Moogahlin Performing Arts was formed in Redfern in November 2007 by a group of Indigenous theatre artists, educators and community workers in honour of the late

Kevin Smith's request and in memory of the founding members of the Black Theatre. Based at the Redfern Community Centre in the heart of the local Indigenous community, Moogahlin aims to create and tell community-based stories, develop a comprehensive youth theatre program and mount large-scale productions.

Located in Brisbane, Queensland, is Kooemba Jdarra, that state's only full-time professional Indigenous theatre company. The company was incorporated in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous People, and maintains a strong commitment to professionalism and excellence in the arts. It has nurtured the development of over 40 Indigenous actors, and developed skills and creative opportunities for over 25 new Indigenous writers, designers and directors.

Until 2008 there was also Baru Kadal, a dance theatre initiative, playing an important role in the Northern Territory, but it was disbanded due to lack of funding, bureaucratic meddling and politics.

You would imagine that these theatre companies would be lauded and celebrated for their combined cultural capital, but the commonality amongst them all is that BLAKSTAGETheatre companies are in crisis. Not through lack of talent or vision or skills or potential. They are in crisis due to politics, to posturing, to top-down influence, to lack of adequate resourcing, to perceptions, and to systemic and sometimes blatant racism. But more importantly, they are in crisis because there is a complete lack of respect by the wider arts community in acknowledging that the sector exists.

PERCEPTIONS OF BLAKSTAGETHEATRE: A STUDY OF A PRIVILEGED VOICE

Academic 'experts' of our genre present papers with themes such as: 'Mainstream production opportunities facilitate the expansion of Indigenous theatre practice' and 'Development of the one-person show as the dominant genre for Indigenous theatre practice'. Those of us who were actually at the frontline and in the trenches of the BLAKSTAGES throw our hands in the air and wonder at these theories, knowing this 'dominant genre for Indigenous theatre practices', also known as a one-person show, is in reality a reflection of a lack of resources.

More often than not when there is recognition of the BLAKSTAGE it is increasingly in the form of negative punches thrown in the public domain about the companies and the work that is being produced. Many are ill-informed assumptions, that when taken without context, create a tsunami of venom levelled against the companies themselves, suggesting lack of viability or mediocrity. This then creates reason for further marginalisation, further reduction in funding, further diminishment. Often it comes from funding bodies, often it is perceptions from the mainstream, which serve as impetus to develop BLAK-themed works. Often it is from our own mob.

One of the main voices given a platform for opinion is Rhoda Roberts. With a career in Indigenous arts beginning in the 1980s as an actor, producer, writer

and director in the performing arts, Roberts has worked as a journalist, festival director and producer. Let it be said that she is more than entitled to her own personal opinion.

I feel the greater arts sector is mature enough to have more than one spokesperson. If we look at any form of seniority of voice, we should see Noel Tovey, Jack Charles, Gary Foley, Lynette Narkle and Lillian Crombie being given much greater status, yet this is not the case. Their wisdom and wealth of experience is not included in the discourse.

While I share many of Roberts' views, her endorsement of black theatre by mainstream companies is our point of difference.

There are assumptions that our benchmarks are those of the whitestage, that our stories and audience and critique have to come from white people in order for the work to be meritorious.

I have not dedicated my career to creating palatable work for white audiences. I'm here to tell Black stories for the benefit of Black people, within the context of a global Black and Indigenous majority.

BLAKSTAGE COMPANIES' RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATIONAL ARTS FUNDING: YOU DO THE MATH

National Indigenous funding for BLAKSTAGE theatre has largely sat within the brief of two boards of the Australia Council: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board and the Theatre Board. Some funds are obtained through devolved former ATSIC funding administered by the Indigenous Coordination Centres, lovingly referred to by sectors of the Aboriginal Community as 'Indigenous Chaos Centres', but this is not exclusive to the performing arts and is often only enough to subsidise a non-core business area of youth workshops.

In general, a piecemeal annual budget is pulled together through triennial funding for three of the companies, project funding

I feel the greater arts sector is mature enough to have more than one spokesperson.

for the others, and for those with the right status, philanthropic sources. Sponsorship has never been a strong line item, despite companies being well-positioned to satisfy any triple bottom line. Clearly it is hard to compete against a state theatre company's BLAK-themed production within an annual subscription season.

Currently the combined estimated annual turnover of the BLAKSTAGE companies is approximately \$2.7 million. This is inclusive of their earned income and

does not represent the arts investment.

This combined sector amount pays to keep the doors open for seven companies and for them to be a portal to tell the stories of over 800 tribal groups across Australia, train our youth, mentor artists, tour works, commission work, undertake creative development, pay our practitioners and administrators and present new works. By comparison, this combined figure is around the amount of two productions by a state theatre company or a down payment on an opera.

AUSTRALIAN THEATRE LANDSCAPED BY THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL'S THEATRE BOARD

"The theatre board's role is to ensure that theatre continues to be a vibrant contemporary artform that connects creatively with Australia's various communities. The theatre board does this by supporting activity that contributes to the development of high quality and diverse contemporary theatre.

Most forms of live performance are supported by the theatre board, including outdoor performance, text-based theatre, devised work, physical theatre, site-based work, puppetry, visual theatre, performance art, theatre for young people, circus, contemporary performance, youth theatre and cabaret."¹

¹ Source: Australia Council website: www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/artform_boards/theatre_board

In 2008, implementation of the Australia Council's "Make It New?" strategy occurred. Its main premise was to strengthen theatre as a vibrant contemporary artform by:

- encouraging a diverse yet networked theatre culture within Australia;
- sustaining a number of key organisations to be hubs in this network; and
- empowering an enabling infrastructure for artistic development.

In response to this, a funding round for multi-year companies was deliberated on in September, 2008 and 28 organisations² were supported nationally, receiving a combined investment of over \$16.5 million. Not one of them was a BLAKSTAGETheatre company. Of the seven 'peers' forming the theatre board, not one of them was a BLAKSTAGE practitioner. Nor was there a representative from the Northern Territory or the ACT.

The current distribution of support for theatre-based companies is as follows: NSW, 8 (over \$5 million); Victoria, 7 (over \$4 million); National, 4 (over \$1.6 million); WA, 3 (over \$1.3 million); SA, 3 (over \$2 million); Queensland, 2 (over \$1.8 million); Tasmania, 1 (\$600,000); NT, 0 (\$0); and ACT, 0 (\$0).

For this particular meeting, six 'peers' on the board and five 'participating advisers' resided in the following states: NSW – 4; Victoria – 3; Queensland – 2; SA – 1; Tasmania – 1; WA – 0³; NT – 0; and ACT – 0.

According to the Chair of the theatre board, SA-based Ms Rosalba Clemente:

² This figure is inclusive of organisations in receipt of key organisations' multiyear grants for 2009, co-funded by more than one board and one special initiative.

³ The WA representative did not attend as his own company was up for consideration for the first time. While the rest of the state was enquiring about the process by which you even become a "peer" on the board, which admittedly still remains a mystery, his company received the most allocation out of the three companies in the state.

"This was a pivotal meeting of the Australia Council's theatre board. The decisions that we made will shape the theatre sector in Australia for the years to come ... A number of remarkable things came together in the making of these watershed decisions."⁴

Clearly it helps if your state is well represented by 'peers'. Clearly it doesn't help if 'your genre is black'. Remarkable indeed.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ARTS BOARD [ATSIAB]

BLAKSTAGE companies have been steady recipients of funds from ATSIAB and have had representation at board level. However, of all the boards ATSIAB has the smallest purse and is in place to fund every artform touched by the Indigenous community as well as advocate for the development of protocols and codes of conduct for working with our cultural cache. This results in community, artists, and artforms being pitted against one another for the smallest piece of the pie.

In 2005 a dialogue was undertaken between ATSIAB and representatives from all but two of the BLAKSTAGE companies. A focus was to be placed on the theatre sector and it was collectively promised more opportunities. With a change of management, this was not achieved, a definite blow to the sector which was gaining strength in unity and momentum behind notions of possibility for the BLAKSTAGEalliance. To date, there has been no further offer of the development of any formal Indigenous theatre strategy, which has hampered the sector's development and added to the current state of crisis.

The relationship between the BLAKSTAGE theatre community and ATSIAB has become increasingly fraught by perceptions of gatekeeping, nepotism and lack of transparency. Application processes have become more rigorous with the enforcement of the Confirmation of Aboriginality and organisations' confirmation, alongside support letters from key individuals. Already remote and regional Indigenous Australians are at a disadvantage by often not being in a position to comply with these requirements or solicit support letters from influential individuals. Nationally, every Indigenous person is disadvantaged

National Indigenous funding for BLAKSTAGE theatre has largely sat within the brief of two boards of the Australia Council ...

⁴ Source: Australia Council website: www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/artform_boards/theatre_board

by the Confirmation of Aboriginality. It is a redundant act of systemic racism. This issue is a discussion in its own right and I would encourage rigorous debate around program design and criteria as they relate to the Indigenous arts sector.

This perception is not helped by ATSIAB's 2008 'making solid ground' review, which will see a reduction of key Indigenous organisations funded by ATSIAB, and those who are recipients receiving a decreasing funding allocation over six years, until they reach a sunset clause and are no longer eligible for assistance. This proposed, and very real, shift in the way a national infrastructure is supported did receive significant response from the national Indigenous arts community against its implementation. It was hastily re-branded as a consequence, a national 'consultation' tour was undertaken and its process implemented regardless.

These feelings of gatekeeping and nepotism, whether real or perceived, are perpetuated by individuals' and communities' direct experiences with ATSIAB. It is a widespread sentiment and remains the 'elephant in the room'. The sector suffers from the lack of a 'safe space' in which to air grievances or make disclosures. Requests for a safe space have been ignored by the office of the Federal Arts Minister, right down the line to the CEO of the Australia Council.

THE FIVE MYTHS OF BLAKSTAGETHEATRE

Within this current environment many myths have surrounded the BLAKSTAGE companies. These flow into a general perception of our work being somehow 'less than', our companies being a separatist Western notion of 'community theatre' which somehow is 'less than', our artists being typecast or somehow 'less than'. Without hearing from the companies themselves, or empowering more voices in the sector to engage in national discourse, they remain divisive sentiments that in reality continue the BLAXploitation by those who lean on us for our knowledge and wisdom whenever they wish to dip into Black content and themes. With our sector in a subservient space we are offered only token attachment roles, grasp at financial offers that drag us away from core aspirations, and remain benchmarked against, and vulnerable to, a style of theatre I refer to as an 'Al Jolson' – white writer, white director, white company, with an all-star Indigenous cast.

Myth 1: Mainstream companies produce better BLAK work

Whitestage companies do well-funded theatre. Most companies who touch Indigenous themes and content are the major performing arts companies, and their budget per show is often on par, if not double, the entire annual company budget of a BLAKSTAGE company. They have the capacity to produce six-handers, while a BLAKSTAGE company struggles to produce a three-hander. They can indulge in white translation and adaptation theatre with Indigenous themes, or they can commit to Indigenous writers and sometimes an 'Indigenous director'.

However, the question of whether they produce better BLAK work is fallacious. How could they? They are not Indigenous and have no concept of the process to which authentic Indigenous productions are developed. BLAKSTAGE companies make a commitment to Indigenous processes and methodologies – equal to if not more important than the final outcome. So how is mainstream work superior? It is just money. And if it is just money, then call it something else, because it is not Black theatre, it is passing off.

Myth 2: BLAKSTAGE companies do not produce enough work

BLAKSTAGE companies exist on largely static subsistence funding. They often do not produce annual subscription seasons because they are in survival mode, barely keeping afloat of increased costs and overheads. They produce work and outcomes directly related to these budgets. You get what you pay for, which is one or two main stage theatre shows per annum if we are lucky. Is this enough work? Not really, but it is what you get when you attempt to draw blood from a stone.

Equally, any attempt to produce extant work from back repertoires or the collection of Indigenous theatre classics, such as those by Jack Davis, Jack Charles, Kevin Gilbert and Jimmy Chi, is a high point of contention with funding bodies. This double standard does not apply to whitestage companies who program translations and adaptations that have no real value to the Australian identity, but seem to be beyond reproach by funding bodies with an obsession for a constant stream of new work.

Personally, I heard this loud and clear with the comments levelled at the internationally successful, multi-award-winning commission and play I produced, written by David Milroy, entitled *Windmill Baby*. Quite deliberately, and on the back of this play making Australian history as the first Indigenous script ever to win the prestigious Patrick White Award, it was strategically pitched and picked up nationally and internationally for tours and seasons so that we could maximise the reach and delivery of authentic BLAKSTAGetheatre. As the awards grew and international opportunities for this work increased, we were lambasted and remarks grew in the form of 'they should call themselves the *Windmill Baby* Company because that's all they do'.

The sector suffers from the lack of a 'safe space' in which to air grievances or make disclosures.

What was not understood was that *Windmill Baby* was an attempt to embed a financially viable lifecycle for the company and the sector, so that we could provide ongoing employment and opportunity to artists and practitioners. In reality, it was an effort to look toward a new approach to stabilising earned income beyond workshops and the borderline cultural tourism gigs that had become our dilemma and which were fast becoming artistic and cultural prostitution.

Invariably we were penalised for this and it resulted in declining funding and limited opportunity for other works, which at the time was an ever-growing backlog of three new plays in development. All were unsuccessful in obtaining support from arts funding bodies because it seemed the 'peers' were not convinced we were capable of delivering an annual program of any real scale.

Myth 3: BLAKSTAGE companies are issues-based/ community cultural development initiatives

Not so much a myth, this is an elitist prejudice. The truth is that the health sector currently underwrites the BLAKSTAGE theatre companies in Australia. I can see a direct link to health funding being opened up and available as many of our arts practitioners are now working in this field. Arts funding is so small in comparison, around one-third of what we can receive from the health sector, so we find ourselves in a catch-22. Produce issue-based work to keep afloat so that we can continue to pay artists and do meaningful work with our community, or struggle to produce a main stage production with the ever-diminishing resources available to the BLAKSTAGE sector.

What this does suggest is that the companies are being forced to produce works in accordance with government-influenced agendas. If we don't comply, we don't exist.

Myth 4: BLAKSTAGE companies do not aspire to excellence

We certainly do. Who doesn't want a good review? But we are seeking to develop our own frameworks around excellence so that it relates to our own benchmarks. Indigenous terms of reference and recognition of our contribution are what we are seeking, together with identifying processes and pathways which will feed into the matrix of infrastructure that is needed to undertake necessary steps towards BLAKSTAGE touring circuits, transferable skills networks, joint artist development initiatives and a National BLAKSTAGE Playwrights Conference.

Myth 5: BLAKSTAGE companies are a resource agency for all things Indigenous

We are not. But we are called upon to administer, manage, host, refer, act as an agency, offer cultural workshops, arrange a welcome, dial a di, wheel out an Elder, form a cultural dance group, explain our history, give over our databases, become a label of authenticity, confirm our Aboriginality, explain the history of Aboriginal Australia, explain dot paintings, justify our Blackness, engage in the Blood Quantum debate, take on random study requests, explain explain, lacky lacky, Jacky Jacky.

Governments are often the worst offenders when it comes to leaning on the Black theatre companies. Their staff sometimes hang the 'we fund you' noose around our collective necks forcing us to publicly enrich their gala event or policy launch with a token dash of Indigenous culture. We have inherited this, but it does not mean we have to continue to provide these 'services'.

BLAKSTAGE ARTSWORKER REALITY

As individuals we are burnt out or headed in that direction. Arts administrators and practitioners have an unreal expectation to over-deliver, ultimately ending up being all things to everyone whilst still playing a marginalised role in the greater sector. It is a thankless position; not that we are in this for the kudos and self-congratulation, nor quite evidently, the money. So we leave.

Within some companies there are unresolved tensions between key roles being held by non-Indigenous staff who have no succession in place. This influence and tension cannot be underestimated as often the result is a white-anting of companies themselves and is evidenced by loss of Indigenous staff. It also serves as a risk to the Indigenous governance mechanisms in place, which are vulnerable to being influenced by these individuals into making decisions and introducing processes that do not reflect the core values of the membership.

Independent practitioners also face significant difficulty within the BLAKSTAGE sector. With companies barely able to develop more than one or two theatre shows annually, there is little that can be offered apart from auspicing and access to infrastructure. This serves to create a disenfranchisement within the sector itself, further creating a perception that the current companies are not viable.

No longer can we afford to languish in the wings and be silent about the inequity, diminishment and prejudices we face as a sector ...

BLAKSTAGE – A WAY FORWARD

Within this rather bleak picture, there remains hope for positive change and outcomes. It is well overdue, it is needed, and it is time. No longer can we afford to languish in the wings and be silent about the inequity, diminishment and prejudices we face as a sector, a culture and a community. This is no longer a concern of a few; the world is watching and the greater Australian national landscape is accountable. We operate within a redundant Western infrastructure at the mercy of funders and governments who set the agenda for our expressions. This not-so-cleverly-disguised form of censorship is simply done by directing support to product which toes the line and maintains the status quo.

The following activities should be undertaken to ensure BLAKstage development:

1. Commission an Inquiry

In a similar way to the research and findings undertaken for the Indigenous visual and dance sector, an enquiry into the facts and figures around the national BLAKSTAGE sector is long overdue. It needs to map career pathways for our talent through Indigenous theatre and film so that we do not look at this as competition but as a model that can provide sustainability through the shared cross-skilling of our pool of artists and administrators. Until that time, we have to rely on testimony from those who have been contributing to the sector and this leaves BLAKSTAGE vulnerable to the process of individualising and eliminating voices from the conversation in a way that makes it difficult for real change and economic stimulus to occur.

2. Rebuild the Alliance

We need to open up the concept of the BLAKSTAGEalliance as a peak body to include all segments of the BLAKSTAGE sector, so that our theatre companies can engage in dialogue, strategy and forward-thinking alongside independent producers, actors, directors, administrators, and arts educators, across performing arts genres. We need to move forward, together.

3. Go offshore

Diversification of our income sources to bypass the fraught macro-managed funding regimes and arts funding mechanisms within Australia should be implemented. We have the potential to

build an alternative economy to strengthen our existing companies and create capacity for emerging companies Australia-wide. Equally, the profile of BLAKSTAGEtheatre as the true face of the Australian theatre identity can emerge within a global context and in unity, alongside global Black and Indigenous theatre.

4. Affirm our terms of reference

A consolidation and audit of existing and known BLAKSTAGEtheatre styles, techniques and pedagogy is needed so that we can continue to talk of our process in a way in which defines our points of difference to the whitestages. Equally, this needs to support Indigenous research around our sectoral contribution to address the deficit of Indigenous writings around our genre. This will create the opportunity for the development of codes of conduct that have been pitched as exclusive to Indigenous visual arts, but would have much more credence if it reflected and embraced all creative forms.

5. Resurrect the National BLAK Playwrights Conference

We should build on the history and currency of the global Black playwrights conferences to enable a bi-annual dedicated space to the development of authentic BLAKSTAGEproductions. This can also open the door to a global opportunity within International Black and Indigenous playwrights conferences and seminars that already exist.

6. Mutual partnership with the whitestages

We can further develop the ways in which we will work with the whitestages for the development of the greater vision of Australian theatre on two-way processes, of equity and respect. This relationship is in dire need of being reset so that there is a clear way forward. This would also enable a re-entry into the national performing arts infrastructures and calendars in a way that reflects a real respect for our sector.

A consolidation and audit of existing and known BLAKSTAGE theatre styles, techniques and pedagogy is needed ...

Maza, Michelle Evans, Celeste Liddle, Deborah Cheetham, Lydia Miller, Andrea James, Pauline Whyman, Kyas Sheriff, Kylie Coolwell, Tammy Clarkson, Michael Leslie, Tony Briggs, John Harding, PJ Rosas, Naretha Williams, Cy Fahey, Lionel Austin, Stephen Page, Margaret Harvey, Ursula Yovich, Kamarra Bel-Wykes, Aaron Pedersen, Cathy Craigie, Ben Graetz, Leon Burchill, Gary Cooper, Pauline McCleod, Bronwyn Bancroft, John Blair, Marlene Cummins, Rhoda Roberts, Tom E Lewis, Mia Stanford, David Page, Murial Spearim.

The BLAKSTAGE is: Anthony Johnson, Dalisa Pigram, Derek Nannup, Kyle Morrison, Amy Hammond, Kyle Rotumah, Shakira Walley, Irma Woods, Kylie Farmer, Nestor Dia, Tanya Mead, Jub Clerc, Sylvia Clarke, Ali Torres, Michelle Torres, Mark Coles-Smith, Ingrid Collard, Jamahl Ryder, Maudie Sketchley, Amy Smith, Eva Mullaley, Richard Walley, Sean Dow, Karla Hart, Sandra Clarke, Ernie Dingo, Sally Morgan, Mark Howett, Maitland Schnaars, Sam Pilot-Kickett, Archie Weller, Baamba Alberts, Rohanna Angus, Jimmy Chi, Neville Khan, Trevor Jamieson, Heath Bergersen, Della Morrison, Dallas Winmar, Lynette Narkle, John Moore, Michael Smith, Ningali Wolf, Jude Kelly, Tyson Martin, Sheldon Covich, Jimmy Edgar, Sam Cook, Clarence Ryan, Dennis Simmons Jr, Shareena Clanton, Renee Simpson, David Milroy, Vanessa Poelina, Joe Edgar, Sermsah Bin Saad, Phillip Walley-Stack, Kelton Pell, David Noombuljarra.

AND the countless other I have not mentioned AND the countless others who dream of the stages AND the countless others who have now passed, our forebears, our ground-breakers, our trailblazers.

These are but some of the voices who each have a stake in a courageous conversation, without fear of retribution, and a collective way forward for the BLAKSTAGES, so that we can honour the performing culture that is the foundation of living Indigenous culture and our right to claim a substantial voice in the Australian theatre identity – on our terms!

S.O.S.

**SAVE OUR STORIES – SAVE OUR STAGES
– STRENGTHEN OUR SPIRIT to SAVE OUR
SECTOR.**

S.O.S

ROLL CALL

The BLAKSTAGE is: Vivien Cleven, Nadine Dowd, Amy Rogers-Clarke, Don Bemrose, Nathan Jarro, Janelle Evans, Therese Collie, Daniel Teizler, Deborah Mailman, Jorde Lenoy, Juliette Hubbard, Allan Lui, Odette Best, George Bostock, Ned Manning, Lorna O'Shane, Fiona Doyle, Sam Watson, Sam Conway, Tessa Rose, Mark Sheppard, Stephen Oliver, Lafe Charlton, Jim Everett, Leah Purcell, Bain Stewart, Wesley Enoch, Marcus Waters, Roxanne McDonald, Anthony Newcastle, Rhonda Purcell, Shiralee Hood, Deborah Mailman, Jimi Bani, Gary Lee, Monty Boori Pryor, Uraine Mastrosavas, Diat Alferink, Sasha Zahra, Zack Fielding, Naomi Hicks, Matthew Johnson, Jessica Gray, Felix Kerry, Bradley Harkin, Natasha Wanganeen, Owen Love, Jermaine Hampton, Tamara Watson, Robert Compton, Jared Thomas.

The BLAKSTAGE is: Noel Tovey, Lillian Crombie, Jack Charles, Gary Foley, David Gulpilil, Ray Kelly, Tammy Anderson, Elliot Maynard, Richard Frankland, Janina Harding, Jadah Pleiter, Jane Harrison, Wayne Blair, Jadah Alberts, Glen Shea, Sally Riley, John Harvey, Jim Everett, Maryanne Sam, Tracey Rigney, Rachel Maza Long, Melody Reynolds, Lanchoo Davy, Isaac Drandich, Liza-Mare Syron, Fred Copperwaite, Eva Johnson, Lily Shearer, Donna Morris, Leroy Parsons, Lisa Flanagan, Rod Smith, Brian Andy, Kylie Belling, Kim Kruger, Greg Fryer, Lisa





