

Recent Indigenous Theatre in Australia

The Politics of Autobiography

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Abstract: Over the past decade Australian theatre has seen an increased profile for works written and created by Indigenous artists. This paper looks at the development of Indigenous theatre in Australia and considers how increased mainstream production opportunities have facilitated this expansion of Indigenous theatre practice. Based on the textual analysis of a number of key works, this paper looks at the development of the one-person show as the dominant genre for Indigenous theatre practices, and investigates the relationship between autobiography and the celebration of 'otherness'. This study argues that this theatre work represents a shift away from conventional representations of Aboriginality towards a more self-determined expression of political identity.

Keywords: Australian Indigenous Theatre, Autobiography, Self Representation

Introduction

OVER THE PAST decade Indigenous theatre and film in Australia has flourished. Project development initiatives supported by both the Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission (AFC), along with gradually increasing numbers of Aboriginal graduates from Australia's various performing arts institutions, has prompted this burgeoning area of arts practice (Brisbane 1995, Casey 2004, Gilbert 1998, O'Regan 1996). Other critical factors include the recent high-profile successes of a number of Indigenous theatre shows – both *Stolen* and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* toured the country with sell-out seasons, and were included as compulsory study texts for Australian secondary students (Harrison 1998). A consistent feature of much of this work is its autobiographical nature; many of these plays are one-person shows, and they tend to focus on the telling of intensely personal stories. This paper explores the personal and autobiographical nature of this work as an expression of the political concerns of the artists for whom self determination and self representation are priorities. The work under consideration here is notable and distinctive for capturing the particular nature of Indigenous experiences in order to achieve a new set of negotiated meanings between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.

Non-Indigenous screenwriters and playwrights have long held a fascination for telling the stories of Indigenous peoples. In particular films and plays written, directed and produced by non-Indigenous artists, set in the colonial past, have frequently focused on the suffering meted out to Aborigines at the hands of white colonial masters. *The Chant of*

Jimmie Blacksmith, written and directed by Fred Schepisi in 1978 is a classic of the genre (O'Regan 1996:58). More recently, films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2001) and *The Tracker* (2001) have continued this tradition and can be seen to have emerged out of the reconciliation movement in Australia. In particular, *Rabbit Proof Fence* with its unsettling portrayal of Aboriginal children being forcibly taken from their families under the Aboriginal Protection Act in the 1930s, was seen by many as a powerful critique of Australia's race-based assimilationist policies and occasioned 'an outpouring of sadness...by non-Indigenous viewers' (Potter 2004). In the theatre, non-Indigenous playwrights have also frequently tackled Indigenous stories and themes. The critic Katherine Brisbane sees this work as 'a well-intentioned attempt to acknowledge injustice' (Brisbane 1995). While these kinds of post-colonial critiques by non-Indigenous screenwriters and playwrights make a contribution to the on-going debates within Australia around the issues of race and the history of racism, there remains a significant concern about Indigenous self-representation and self-determination. Indigenous academic and cultural theorist, Marcia Langton, points out that the signifying practices of non-Indigenous cultural producers are critical in terms of informing the broad Australian understanding of 'Aboriginality' such that: 'The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists' (Langton 1993:33).

O'Regan expands on this view when he argues that Indigenous people: '...object to stories that they



do not create, or at least, co-create because such stories impact on them. These stories provide the wider community with ways of “knowing Aborigines” which Aborigines then need to negotiate. The imbalances involved in this “authoring”, see the Aboriginal emerge as a “figure of discourse” (O’Regan 1996:277). Recent work by Indigenous theatre writers represents a shift away from the familiar strategies and figures of conventional discourses of Aboriginality, towards a reconfigured ‘theatre of politics’ in which self-representation becomes a mode of new intercultural discourse between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Langton 1993:84).

The Development of Contemporary Indigenous Theatre

In her study of Indigenous theatre, Maryrose Casey outlines the history of Indigenous production and involvement in theatre. She suggests that contemporary Indigenous theatre started to gain a profile and greater access to Australian main-stages from the 1960s onwards (Casey 2004:4). The civil rights movement in Australia had seen an outpouring of public political protest in the 1960s, and catalysed the development of Australian theatre work. This activity - both political and theatrical - helped to instigate the development and funding of Australian arts, including Indigenous artists who were funded through the Australia Council’s Aboriginal Arts Board (2004:16).

Since the 1970s a number of Indigenous theatre artists – notably performers, writers and directors – have come to the fore. A seminal figure to emerge in this period was West Australian Indigenous playwright Jack Davis who, in partnership with white director Andrew Ross, produced a series of groundbreaking works for the Black Swan Theatre Company from the late 1970s to mid 1980s. With plays such as *Kullark* (1979), *The Dreamers* (1982), and *No Sugar* (1986) Davis’ writing for the theatre was celebrated for its representation of the resilience of Indigenous communities in the face of the assimilationist policies of successive Australian governments (Casey 2004; Brisbane 2005). Another significant production was the Broome-based musical *Bran Nue Dae* (1989), written by Jimmy Chi, which achieved unprecedented success during its nationwide tour in 1993-94 (Casey 2004:186). Brisbane argues that the success of this production, its broad appeal and joyous celebration of Indigenous experience, made it a ‘turning point in the...history of Aboriginal writing for the theatre’ (Brisbane 1995).

The 1990s saw the development of three Indigenous theatre companies: Ilbjerri in Victoria in 1990, Kooemba Jdarra in Queensland in 1993,

and in the same year Yirra Yaakin in Western Australia. Casey sees the development of these companies, dedicated to the development and production of Indigenous theatre, within the broad context of the reconciliation movement arguing that the arts have played a ‘pivotal role’ in the process of delivering broader recognition to Indigenous culture and achievements (2004:212). The work of these companies facilitated opportunities for a new generation of Indigenous theatre artists to come to the fore. In particular a new generation of actors, actor/writers and writer/directors have had their work developed and produced on stages around the country.

The growing importance and profile of recent Indigenous theatre can be understood in terms of its relatively recent shift into mainstream theatres. A number of catalysts have facilitated the growing profile of Indigenous theatre; for example, successful productions of Bangarra Dance Theatre have attracted international attention for Indigenous performance arts. The past ten years have also seen a growth in the number of Indigenous theatre artists who have graduated from professional theatre training courses offered by flagship institutions such as the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Sydney, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in Perth. Some Indigenous writers and directors have achieved mainstream opportunities to develop and showcase their work. In the film industry for example, the AFC through its Indigenous Branch has provided project and professional development opportunities for Indigenous writer/directors, including theatre-based practitioners, to develop their screenwriting and directing skills and to produce short film projects. In 2002, another unprecedented collaboration between Ilbjerri and Melbourne’s Playbox Theatre saw the production of six new Indigenous works for a mainstream audience. The season, entitled *Blak Inside*, not only provided work and professional experience for more than forty Indigenous actors, writers, directors, designers and trainees; it also achieved a new profile for this work which had previously experienced ‘a long history of struggle for stage space’ (Mellor 2002:iii). Brisbane argues that there is growing national recognition of Indigenous theatre and because Indigenous artists are ‘at the forefront of our arts...Today Aboriginal drama is...the most important new Australian voice and one which will, in due course be the most widely heard in other countries’ (Brisbane 1995).

One of the outstanding successes of the past decade is the play *Stolen* (1998), written by Jane Harrison and directed by Wesley Enoch. This work was a co-production between Ilbjerri and Playbox Theatre, and is an account of the experiences of five

Aboriginal children who had been forcibly removed from their families. The play looks at how the 'stolen generations' have been traumatised as a result of government policies towards Indigenous people throughout much of the twentieth century. *Stolen* (Harrison 1998) was hailed by both audiences and critics and the production toured extensively around Australia, followed by seasons in London, Hong Kong and Belfast, and a further re-mounting in Australia in 2002. The play was written in response to the 1997 report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which detailed the history of forced assimilation of Indigenous families into white society (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). The play *Stolen* was significant not only because it spoke to current issues around reconciliation, but it insisted that the suffering of Indigenous people be acknowledged as a contemporary reality. Using biographical details, the play presents moving stories of familial and cultural dispossession and in the play's final scene the actors themselves step forward, out of character, and tell their own stories to the audience. In this way, the play integrates the personal with the political; it interconnects biography with autobiography, the individual with the community, and the historical with the contemporary. The interlocking of these elements, and the importance given to witnessing history through lived experience, is a signal feature of much contemporary Indigenous theatre and, as discussed below, makes a distinctive contribution to contemporary political theatre in Australia.

Autobiography

A consistent feature of much contemporary Indigenous theatre writing is its emphasis on autobiography. This focus on subjective narratives of personal histories based on lived experience underlines Ghassan Hage's argument that Indigenous people do not see themselves as part of conventional Australian history. Indigenous people, he argues, 'do not relate to and cannot appropriate "Australian history"...because what is posited as Australian history is simply not history from their perspective. In this sense they have their own history – or, more exactly, their own pool of histories...to appropriate memory from' (Hage 2003:91). This emphasis on 'their own pool of histories' is borne out by Watson's analysis of autobiography as a frequent choice for Aboriginal fiction writers because 'its generic status promotes its veracity and its direct link to reality' and, in this sense, provides a 'publicly validated

speaking position deriving from lived experience' (Watson 2002:5). Watson argues that a characteristic feature of the autobiographies of Indigenous writers is the way in which they 'employ the rhetorical power of witnessing', meaning that these writings 'testify from personal observation...to present their accounts of history through their bodies...so that the telling of their stories is, literally, an embodiment of history' (2002:13). Gilbert has a similar view, arguing that 'giving witness' in Indigenous work provides a 'testimonial' declaring the truth-value of subjectivity (Gilbert 2002:326). Gilbert's notion of testimony together with Watson's analysis – the idea of history-telling as a process of embodiment – throws light on the autobiographical practices employed by recent Indigenous theatre-makers. Aileen Moreton-Robinson provides a significant politicised reading of such practices when she argues that: 'self representation by Indigenous women is a political act'. It is political because these are self representations which emphasise the 'practical, political or personal' attributes of a life lived in a society which constructs Indigenous women as 'other' (Moreton-Robinson 2002:3).

Ningali Lawford's work, *Ningali* (1994) which she wrote and performed in the mid-1990s, was a one-woman show directed by Angela Chaplin for Deckchair Theatre in Western Australia. This highly personal account of her life experiences, from her childhood in the Kimberleys to her adult self-discovery through dance and performance, is, arguably, a prototype for the autobiographical one-person show which other Indigenous actor/writers have produced in the last decade such as *Box the Pony* (1997), *I Don't Wanna Play House* (2002), and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996).¹ A number of distinctive qualities emerge from Lawford's work: direct audience address, the use of several languages, and the telling of an intimate and personal story which combines moments of humour with moments of pain and loss. These qualities have come to mark out the genre of staged Aboriginal autobiography and, as Thomson has described it, together make for a performance practice which 'embodies a powerful "talking back", a decolonising act' (Thomson 2001: 25).

Box the Pony (1997) by Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell is another example of the genre of the autobiographical one-woman show. The story is an intensely personal one with Purcell playing herself, as well as a plethora of other characters including her mother and grandmother. She revisits the pub, schoolroom, the meat packing plant and the country

¹ There are numerous other examples of autobiographical theatre work by Indigenous theatre-makers, for example: *Page 8* (2005) by David Page and Louis Nowra, *White Baptist Abba Fan* (1997) by Deborah Cheetham, *Thumbul* (1996) and *Lift 'Em Up Socks* (2001) by Tom E. Lewis, *Gulpilil* (2005) by David Gulpilil and Reg Cribb and *Little Black Bastard* (2005) by Noel Tovey. *Stolen* (1998) is another significant work but is in a different category since it is not a one-person show and is biographic rather than autobiographic.

town beauty pageant of her past. This work mediates stories of racism and violence with moments of irreverent humour and joy. Casey has also noted that the combination in these works, of strong emotion and humour is a characteristic method through which the work offers a 'fearless engage[ment] with contentious and fraught issues that exist under the surface both between indigenous and non-indigenous people, and within indigenous communities' (Casey 2005: 201). As in *Ningali*, this theatre work also emphasises the role of women in Indigenous communities. We see in this story that the three generations of women in Purcell's family have produced a powerful bond, and a kind of resilience that has seen Purcell survive and triumph in her career as a writer/performer. Hage notes that the relation of Indigenous people to injustice is one characterised by 'endurance and resistance' (2003:95) and this is borne out by much of the work which emphasises the cultural significance of endurance.

Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Wanna Play House* (2002) is a journey through Anderson's childhood told in a candid, unsentimental way, and with Anderson playing all the roles including her mother, father and grandmother. Once again the story is intimate and autobiographical as she tells the story of her mother's systematic abuse at the hands of a series of violent boyfriends. There is redemption here, however, when Anderson tells of the mother-daughter bond, and the sense of belonging and community that this engenders. Again the theme here is one of endurance, and also of witnessing. Anderson as a young girl is a witness to her mother's suffering and we as the audience are, in turn, led into the role of witness. There is no hiding from the ugly truths of this testimony. Watson confirms that this is also a rhetorical feature of Indigenous women's autobiographical fiction where the revelation of the unpleasantness of aspects of lived experience is a repeated trope. As a rhetorical strategy it 'makes manifest those hidden and hurtful events of history' and its function is to provoke a response from the reader – 'the uglier the truth, the more emotional impact' (2002:9). Anderson's play evidences a similar approach with its uncompromising portrayal of contemporary Indigenous life and the economic, racial and gender constraints that impact on Aboriginal woman as they go about their daily lives.

The 7 Stages of Grieving

Another significant work is Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's play *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996). Like *Stolen*, this play reached a broad audience; a national tour in 1996 was followed by a fully re-mounted touring production in 2002. It is a

contemporary personal story of an Aboriginal woman reflecting on her family, her culture and traditions, in order to provide what Gilbert calls a 'panoramic view of Aboriginal life' (1998a:92). This work is of particular interest because, like *Stolen*, its setting of a personal story within a specific political and historical context struck a chord with Australian theatre audiences at a time when the issue of reconciliation was high on the public agenda.

The writer and director of this piece, Wesley Enoch, states that it is not a strictly autobiographical work, rather he sees it as a 'constructed autobiography' where the story of the protagonist has a metonymic relationship to the stories of others in the Indigenous community (Enoch 2005). In discussing his approach to the making of work, Enoch outlines his understanding of the materials of story telling through collaborative theatre-making:

There is a sense of gathering, about participation and... respecting everyone's input along the way. And listening with your heart. That sense of thinking: that rings true, that's got a real kind of integrity, that story has a bigger metaphoric meaning than just your life, your story, it's got something else that rings true... you can say that's more of a universal story, or if we put it on stage its more than just one person's story, and [it] can resonate for a whole community (Enoch 2005)

Watson has noted that this 'invoking' of the community's stories is also a familiar device in contemporary Indigenous fiction, and works to imply that while a particular story of individual experience is being told, 'others in the community could tell similar tales' (2002:14).

The 7 Stages of Grieving documents the phases of Aboriginal history from the dreamtime through invasion and genocide to assimilation and then to self-determination and, finally, to reconciliation. It tells this sweeping history through a personal narrative of an Aboriginal woman as she negotiates her life in the present while grieving for the past and the suffering it has inflicted on Aboriginal people. The story of this Aboriginal woman (and the stories she narrates for the audience) simultaneously embody an individual narrative and the larger contextual history of Indigenous oppression and injustice. Enoch has stated that this work's political impact is tied up with its storytelling; he says that the play 'has a very strong political element to it because it is a telling of stories, an empowering of those stories with a political edge to it. But it's still primarily about storytelling, about people' (Bradley 2000:65).

Short scenes or fragments made up of poems, songs, chants, dances and stories are meditations around the theme of grieving. This grieving for the

familial and cultural loss incurred through past injustices is a rich vein running through the work. The narrator tells us:

Sometimes I let myself go and find myself crying in the dark alone, without my family and home. The pain comes in here, I cry and cry until I can't feel anymore...Then I wake up...and I have got my home...and I have got my family...and I will never have to live through what my Dad has been through (Enoch and Mailman 1996:48)

The themes of weeping, remembrance and the proximity of the past for current generations are all powerfully present in this work. As in *Ningali*, there is also a clear emphasis on the value of family and community ties which are a cause for pride and celebration. In discussing the play, Enoch comments that it reflects the view that 'You may not have land, or language, or culture [but] I do have my family and I have my home and I do have a place that I call my own...often the discourse is about what's been taken from us. How do we shift that to...what is the cultural capital that we have, as opposed to what is missing in our lives?' (Enoch 2005). Finally, at the end of this grieving for past losses and present injustices, there is a cautious sense of optimism around the possibilities for reconciliation. The narrator describes the feeling of walking across the Sydney Harbour bridge in the reconciliation march held in 2000 and the spirit of hope it engendered for many people around the country, 'like a song it caught on...walking across bridges. Who would have thought, eh? I guess we can't go back now' (1996:73).

A further characteristic of *7 Stages of Grieving* (and *Box the Pony*) is the incorporation of untranslated traditional language into the work. This immediately establishes a culturally specific framework through which the works must be viewed and understood, and it privileges the connection between the work and those members of the audience who speak or understand the language. This puts white audiences in the (largely) uncharacteristic position of being the outsiders in this exchange. As a theatrical technique it calls to attention the relationship between language and power and underlines the reality, vibrancy and currency of contemporary Indigenous cultural life. Smith et al. have argued that challenges to the stereotype of Indigenous societies as 'unable to shape their culture

to adjust to new challenges and situations' is an important part of Indigenous struggle for recognition and self-determination (Smith 2000:9). Thus, the cultural forms which are represented in these works (songs, dances, stories, traditional language as well as a hybrid English patois) are not merely relics or atavistic remnants of traditional cultural practices, but very much part of the lively, diverse and contemporary experience of Indigenous Australians. Gilbert suggests that in these works, tradition 'functions...as an inheritance through which contemporary Aboriginality can be negotiated' (1998a:76).

Continual Becoming

The work of these Indigenous theatre-makers demands an acknowledgement and revaluing of Indigenous experience. This involves constructing a challenge to conventional representations of Indigenous people as part of 'nature', or absent from history as implied in some canonical Australian historical accounts.² Some of the work is concerned to acknowledge power relations and to recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent, real, and 'natural'. This theatre practice explores the dichotomy of black/white while at the same time playing with the notion of essential difference/sameness both within Indigenous communities and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most dominant and notable characteristic of this work is that it asserts the ways in which 'otherness', states of marginality, or plurality can be seen as sources of energy and potential change.

While the work of the Indigenous theatre-makers discussed above emphasises the commonality of experience, it is also distinctive for its steadfast insistence on the individual nature of the personal story. Moreton-Robinson explains this paradox in this way:

All indigenous women share the common experience of being indigenous women in a society that deprecates them. Accordingly, there will be common characteristic themes dominant in an indigenous woman's standpoint...Such a standpoint does not deny the diversity of indigenous women's experience. Indigenous women will have different concrete experiences that shape their relations to core themes (Moreton-Robinson 2003: 75).

² The plays represent a rejection of the implicit claims of some colonial histories that there is only one way to read and interpret the past, and seek to show the limitations of this outlook. Colonial histories, such as those written by Manning Clark and Russell Ward, ignored Indigenous history entirely, while the more recent historical work of Windschuttle has sought to downplay the brutality and racism of white settlers against Indigenous populations. Windschuttle argues: 'When it is closely examined, much of the evidence for the claims about massacres, terrorism, and genocide turns out to be highly suspect. Most of it is very poorly founded, other parts are seriously mistaken, and a good deal of it is outright fabrication' (Windschuttle 2001).

The Indigenous theatre work discussed here is significant for its use of autobiography and personal stories as a means of destabilising and contesting an all-encompassing and fixed Indigenous identity. This underlines what one critic describes as an 'explanation of Aboriginality as a process of continual becoming' (Gilbert 1998:77). Further, while the Indigenous community is often seen by the white Australian community as a single and undifferentiated entity, it is, as Marcia Langton has argued, in fact made up of a great diversity and plurality of voices and experiences, and thus 'there is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community' (1993:11) Casey points out that for many non-Indigenous Australians: '[Indigenous] communities that live and work thousands of kilometres apart are seen as undifferentiated and homogenous', and this is an important point for artists such as Ningali Lawford who sees her work as 'contesting the homogenisation of Indigenous Australians' (2004:266) Langton confirms that this is a key issue arguing that there is an assumption 'that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on' – it is a belief, in other words, that 'there is a "right" way to be Aboriginal' (Langton 1993: 27) Indigenous theatre artists like Lawford and the others discussed here are creating work to destabilise such beliefs. The Indigenous writers discussed here are united in their concern not to assume they can speak for others, or on behalf of anyone else. As such, the work represents a repudiation and deconstruction of essentialism, and the universalising totality of the undifferentiated 'other'.

Langton identifies three key modes of intercultural experiences in the construction of an array of 'Aboriginalities': one category is produced through the interactions between Indigenous people within Aboriginal culture; a second category is constituted in the mythologised, iconic and familiar representations of Aboriginal people produced by non-Indigenous Australians, and the third category is made up of those constructions which are 'generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue'. In this last category, Langton argues, models of 'Aboriginality' are constructed but 'both the Aboriginal subject and non-Aboriginal subject are participating' (1993:35). One of the important achievements of the Indigenous theatre work discussed here is the way in which it produces an intercultural exchange in which the key idea of 'Aboriginality' is re-negotiated and re-made through the deconstruction of conventional, mythologised and iconic representations. Rather than perpetuating the traditions of a white gaze apprehending Aboriginal people as 'object' or

'other', these Indigenous artists are producing work in which they themselves are the subject; they are performing themselves, engaging both Indigenous non-Indigenous audiences around the country in an intercultural exchange, and holding out hope for genuine reconciliation as the result.

Conclusion

This paper has documented the recent increased profile of Indigenous theatre practices within mainstream Australian theatre. This work, which emphasises the importance of self-expression and self-determination, can also be read as an attempt to destabilise the conventional modes by which the stories, images and experiences of Indigenous Australians have been (and continue to be) represented by non-Indigenous Australian filmmakers and playwrights. Indigenous theatre practices seek to address power relations within society and to reinsert marginal histories into canonical histories, and thereby problematising the colonial cannon. This is explicitly political theatre – theatre which takes an engaged and critical stance into the public domain. It is political in the sense that Indigenous autobiographic accounts pull the audience into a relational act of witnessing and this involves the 'necessary transference of political awareness' from performer to audience (Watson 2002:29). As Watson suggests this relational exchange is specifically political because Indigenous autobiographies are written: 'to educate, to initiate change, to witness history through personal lived experience' (2002:38).

This theatre work also makes a significant contribution as political theatre which speaks to key issues in the Australian public domain. First, this body of work repudiates the triumphalist versions of Australia's history which would seek to emphasise accounts of colonial achievement rather than acknowledge the histories of Indigenous experience under colonialism. As Thomson has described it, these works underline 'the stage's unique ability to provide a place for the spoken voice to answer, in public, the denials of Aboriginal experience in Australia's post-contact history contained within the pro-Windschuttle historical polemics' (Thomson 2004:141). Secondly, this work announces its primary interest in asserting the values of diversity. This assertion works to alert audiences to the experiences and stories of contemporary Indigenous peoples which, while inarguably 'Australian', sit outside conventional readings of national identity and the rhetoric of national unity. This highly personal theatre is, unavoidably, also political theatre – because it is taking place within a context where the process of reconciliation has stalled while the

current Australian government refuses to acknowledge and address the many 'unresolved issues between Indigenous peoples and the state' (Dodson 2004:135). Arguably, in the light of these

current political circumstances, this Indigenous theatre practice is a critical endeavour in the on-going struggle to keep the objectives of reconciliation on the public agenda.

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