

## **‘The Black Performance’: Traditional and Contemporary Practices of Australian Aboriginal Drama**

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You see, we’ve always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world... We’ve acted up before magistrates, we’ve acted up before the police, we’ve acted up before social workers; we’ve always done our own mime...—Jack Davis. (as qtd. in Shoemaker 235)

It is not that Aboriginal theatre has fashioned itself in response to commercial, let alone tourist, imperatives. Its sources are far more complex, and it constitutes an important entry point into white culture. The impulse to tell their own stories is of course embedded in Aboriginal culture, but the embracing of white audiences and European traditions of staging signaled an important emergence of pride and self-assertion, claiming a place for themselves in white culture, rewriting white history, asserting the value of their otherness. —Helen Thomson (300-1)

Australia’s, whether in its ‘post’/ ‘neo’-colonial structure, is an ever regularized attempt towards a homogenous tradition of nation making. Such essentialist readings of Australian nationality are no less discerned through its dramatic expressions. However, this national culture that through its covert pedagogical practices tries to naturalize and subsume its marginal nations, is ‘liminalized’ and ‘performed’ from within by the Aborigines. This subversion and appropriation of white Australian drama traditions by the Aboriginal people—an attempt to gain authority over their own representation—is manifested in the Aboriginal Australian drama. In this paper I will talk about the history of such politicized and resistance dramas and its evolution from the traditional Aboriginal practices of ‘Dreamtime’ Corrobooree.

### **A. “Corrobooree”: The Traditional Black Australian Drama**

Perhaps, it can be succinctly stated that Black Australian drama owes its origin to the traditional practice of Corrobooree. The Aboriginal people—the ‘First Nation’ people of Australia—celebrate their ‘Dreamtime’ elements through Corrobooree. Corrobooree, as generally understood, is the expression of the Aboriginal people’s socio-religious being through mime, dance, song and indigenous music. Broadly defined, ‘Dreaming’ is a unique religious concept. Historically it alludes to the period of creation—a distant time in the past that extends beyond the conscious human memory—when ancestral beings were said to have traversed across the continent creating human society and laws and regulations governing it. These laws included Aboriginal living, language, customs and every other aspect of their existence. Magical beings created a wonderful and varied terrain from a flat featureless contour. These ancestors were believed to be shape-shifters at times human and at other times animal, reptile, bird, fish etc. Tired by their work they eventually rested as bodies in the landscape. These myths, formative and instructional in structure, have been revived down the ages through Corrobooree. Their song

and dance forms—the Corroboree—is believed to be ‘given’ to singers and dancers by ‘Dreaming’ beings. The songs narrate the stories of ‘Dreamtime’ and are passed from generations to generations orally. People who own the songs and know the accompanying dances are the traditional owners of the land. Thus, ownership of the Corroboree is a proof of continuous association and an important requirement for land claims of the Aborigines. These song-dances commonly depict the activities of the creation beings in the ‘Dreaming’ era or tell stories about the land and community and their interrelationship. The spectacle of dance and songs are usually performed for special occasion. Corroboree, therefore, stands to incorporate the complete worldview of the Aboriginal People through features and performances primarily spiritual and essentially theatrical. Such theatrical performances take many a form and serve many an instructional purpose. “The Aboriginal Australian Art and Culture Centre” in their online entry briefly highlights the same:

There are the non-secret rituals performed in the camp at night, before an enthusiastic audience of men, women and children. A group of adult men, seated around a small fire, will chant one or another of the ancient songs, while others, their bodies decorated with strange symbols, portray, in a series of spectacular dances, the incidents in the myth. (n.pg.)

Corroboree, if, earlier delineated the oral story-telling of ‘Dreamtime’ that gave vent to the tales of totemic icons and their transcendental powers, were in the post-contact period secularized by the white colonisers to make them become more of tourist events entertaining the white populace. However, ‘tourist’ Corroboree or not, Australia, dominated by stringent laws of the white colony, still had the scope for Aboriginal performances. But, such Corroborees, from the Aboriginal vantage point ‘mimicked’, in a sense most Bhabhaesque, the colonial presence. The post-contact tourist-Corroboree created solidarity and made a nascent political resistance against white oppression. There are examples from the journal entries of various colonialists about how the white life-style and culture were mimicked by the Aboriginal people through Corroborees. Talking about the Nyoongar people Neville Green reminds how they “found the European way of singing very funny” and imitate the same through Corroborees:

They would laugh at it as a combination of silly and effeminate notes, and for weeks afterwards entertain their distant friends, at their casual meetings, by mimicking the tone and attitude of the white man; an exhibition which never fails to draw shouts of applause. (qtd. in Green n. pg.)

This Bhabhaesque ‘performativity’—a kind of resistance to the cultural dominance—at the nascent form became a full grown oppositional tactics at the hand of modern Aboriginal dramatists.

## **B. Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Drama**

Contradistinguished to the European norms and views vis-a-vis Aboriginality, Aboriginal playwrights in contemporary Black Australian drama evolved a genre of writing of self-determination and assertion. It was a distinct diversion from the long standing projection of Aboriginality from a white perspective. Aboriginal writers through this genre celebrated their tradition, culture, identity and negated the romantic and/or negative ‘otherings’ of them and their mis-representation in white Australian history. Such Aboriginal dramas that censored

the European/white constructions of Aboriginality in a way espoused the “twin project” of Michael Dodson:

... at one level, we must understand the motivation behind the historical constructions of Aboriginality, and understand why they have had such a grip over colonising populations; simultaneously, we must continually subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-indigenous people. (6)

The first Aboriginal Australian drama is *The Cherry Pickers* by Kevin Gilbert, written in 1968 while serving a life sentence for murder. *The Cherry Pickers* was workshopped by the New Theatre in 1971 by an all Aboriginal cast and performed shortly after by the Nindethan Theatre in Fitzroy, Melbourne, again by an Aboriginal cast. The play deals with a group of Aboriginal rural workers and their issues of loss of family values and spirituality through involvement in alcoholism and violence; and their sense dispossession and all these through a melange of ‘Dreamtime’ myths, gusty political rhetoric, lewd jokes, and Aboriginal songs. The theme in a way appropriates Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The group of itinerant Aboriginal folks wait for the cherry-picking season and for the arrival of Johnollo and in the meantime entertain themselves and in turn the audience, and thus brews the no-story story of *The Cherry Pickers*. The themes highlighted in this play recur in most Aboriginal plays along with more direct resistive features and political engagements towards white culture and state hegemony. I will talk about this through a few examples, but prior to that it will be more relevant to list the foremost Aboriginal dramatists and their major works. Roger Bennett’s seminal works include *Up the Ladder* and *Funerals and Circuses*. His plays primarily deal with his real experiences in the travelling boxing tents, where his father was a boxing champion between the 1940s and 50s. Wesley Enoch, a Bachelor in Arts in drama and both a director and actor had his focus on the Aboriginal culture and tradition and the intricacies of race relations. His notable works include *Black Medea*, *Riverland*, *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie’s Table*. Founder of Mirimbiak Nations Aboriginal Corporation (MNAC) which was the first Indigenous statewide land organisation lodging all Native Title claims throughout the state of Victoria, Richard F. Frankland has to his credit two remarkable plays: *Conversations with the Dead* and *Walkabout*. Jane Harrison was commissioned by the Ilbjerri Theatre Co-operative in 1992 to write about the “Stolen Generations”—the forcefully removed Aboriginal children. As a result she wrote *Stolen*. *On the Park Bench*, *Rainbow’s End* and *Blackvelvet* are her other plays. Colin Johnson, better known as Mudrooroo is perhaps the most prolific and powerful Aboriginal writer, though his reputation has been mired in controversy pertaining to his ‘true’ Aboriginal identity. He has written several plays including *Big Sunday* and *Mutjinggaba*. But perhaps the most notable 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian playwright is Jack Davis. The plays that earned him international reputations include: *Kullark*, *No Sugar*, *The Dreamers* and *Burungin*.

The political edge, prompted by the urge of self-identity, in Aboriginal Australian drama that I had talked about earlier, in a way most exemplary, could be discerned in Jack Davis’ *No Sugar*. The title of Jack Davis’ play *No Sugar* evolves from an incident at the 1934 Australia Day ceremony where the Moore River Settlement Aborigines are told to sing “There is a Happy Land” by their Chief Protector A.O. Neville to celebrate the ‘Saviour King’ George VI; but instead they sing “No sugar in our tea/Bread and butter we never see....”(No Sugar 4) This

destabilizing resistive move did send a shudder in the colonial discourse. This ‘protest play’ invokes true Aboriginal history in a world of white supremacy by addressing issues of genocide, biological and cultural absorption of the Aborigines, poverty and de-humanizing Reserve life. According to Carroll, *No Sugar* “concentrates on the fragmentation of the Aboriginal family, forced dislocation, and the abuse of authority that Aborigines were subjected to in the camps and reserves.” (102) Set during the Depression years (1929) in Western Australia, near Perth, the play is about the destiny of Milimurra family. The family strives hard to get food for survival like many other families during those tough days. But, however, a pageant is planned by A.O. Neville that will falsely showcase the land as a prosperous and happy. The character Jimmy makes a scathing verbal dissent:

JIMMY. You fellas, you know why them wetjalas [white people] marchin’ down the street, eh? I’ll tell youse why. ‘Cause them bastards took our country ... Bastards! (Davis16)

Though such protests might not have been of much avail in those days, yet what is more important is the subversive and resistive voice of the marginalized group. The drama end with poverty and starvation looming large over the family, as the characters Joe and Mary move towards an uncertain future in search of sustenance:

GRAN. Woe, woe, woe.  
My boy and girl and baby  
Going a long way walking,  
That way walking,  
That way walking.  
Pity, pity, pity,  
Hungry, hungry,  
Walking, walking, walking,  
Yay, yay, yay,  
Cooo-ooo-ooo-oooh.16 (Davis 110)

This sense of iron-will amidst oppression and misery that had still kept the Aborigines and their culture alive and moving owes to a great deal to the Aboriginal people’s innate sense of humour—a fundamental aspect very vividly described in all the major contemporary plays. About the use of humour in contemporary Aboriginal plays Adam Shoemaker says:

Black Australian playwrights have all used humour extensively in their works... none of their plays could properly be termed a comedy. All the Aboriginal plays written so far describe scenes of hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, but none of them is unrelievedly sombre in tone. Humour tempers the seriousness of these plays and concurrently enhances their impact; it rescues them from any danger of being oppressive in tone. (Shoemaker 234)

Humour in Aboriginal plays also serves the subversive purpose of flaunting the white authority. It would be relevant to concur with McGloin:

humour serves an important twofold purpose to undermine white authority and to reinforce agency: Blair [an Indigenous film director] uses humour to chide or subtly mock or ‘take the piss’ out of non-Aboriginal viewers, and contest their perceived ‘knowledge’ of Aboriginal people and their preoccupation with notions of cultural ‘authenticity’. Humour also asserts the agency of Aboriginal subjects through non-confrontational, yet effective, modes of resistance. (McGloin as qtd. in Šourek 43)

What holds true for Aboriginal films is no less true for Aboriginal drama. In the play *Box the Pony*, by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin, humour and verve is devastating and raw, yet quintessentially Aboriginal in being high in spirit and caustic in style.

If the theme of an Aboriginal drama in most cases is one of resistance, protest, search of identity and re-inscribing of history, then it has also fashioned a ‘liminal’ style that has hybridized the canonical white theatrical style by intermingling of Aboriginal components, such as ‘Dreamtime elements’:

Aboriginal drama is characteristic also in structure, form and style (Carroll 103). The cosmological concept known as the Dreaming influences the Aboriginal understanding of time, they see time as something cyclic, as opposed to the linear understanding of time by Western cultures (Edwards 79). The idea of past, present and future is there, but due to the understanding of time as something cyclic, these are blended together. This is often reflected in Aboriginal drama by a non-chronological order of events (expressed with the help of flash-backs or dreams) by which the drama denies the Aristotelian unity of time.

The other of the three Aristotelian unities (introduced in the classical Western drama), often denied in the plays by Aboriginal authors is the unity of place and action. Many of the places are set in a number of locations between which the characters travel throughout the play, for example Davis’s play *No Sugar* is set in almost ten different locations. The unity of action is denied by incorporating many subplots, such as the two storylines in Purcell’s *Box the Pony*. Although none of the plays studied can be termed a comedy, the use of humour is fundamental in the majority of them (Shoemaker 234). (Šourek 92)

Thus, within the limited scope of this paper I had tried to talk about the Aboriginal Australian drama—its evolvment, contemporary practices, major facets and divergence from the ‘standardized’ and ‘canonized’ Eurocentric versions. Australia, an invader/settler colony, is predominantly white in its cultural expressions. But, as has been highlighted, the Aboriginal Australian drama, like many other artistic expressions of the Aborigines, is a confrontational, interrogative, resistive assail at the white national complacency and its nonchalance towards ‘Black’ history. It will be relevant to end with a line from Mudrooroo, who argues in *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*: “Aboriginal plays provide an opportunity for the fringe-dwellers to see themselves for the first time holding centre stage, talking back to the white man.” (120).

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