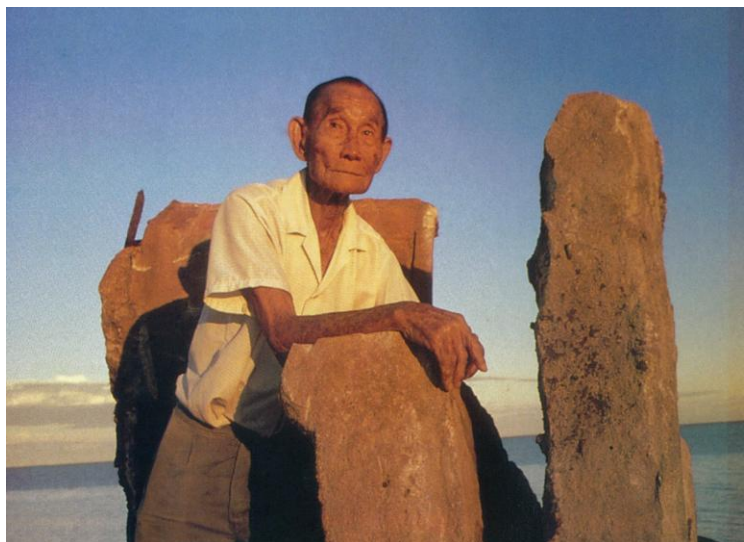


# Jimmy Chi: Hybridity and Healing

## Introduction

Jimmy Chi is the scion of a well-known and respected Broome family, a family whose fortunes fluctuated with the vicissitudes of Broome's history. Jimmy Chi's Chinese grandfather, John Chi, was a successful pearler who had arrived in Australia as a cabin boy around 1872; his Japanese grandmother, Yaie John Chi, was a businesswoman who operated a long soup shop and boarding house. His Scottish grandfather was a pastoralist, his Aboriginal grandmother a traditional Baad woman who witnessed the arrival of the Europeans in the Kimberley.

His father, James Minero Chi, owned various businesses in Broome including a successful taxi service and the first postal service along the corrugated pindan road to Beagle Bay and Cape Leveque. His mother, Lily, was a member of the Stolen Generations who was raised in the Beagle Bay mission and in Broome by the St John of God nuns. As a young woman she worked as a domestic for the manager of the Bank of N.S.W. Being a devout Catholic she worked for the Catholic Church throughout her life, starting up the Bishop Raible Co-op, now the Op Shop, with her friend Rosie Lee, getting 'the money together by making cakes, and cooking at the races and other things' (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., May 24).



*James Minero Chi  
Photo by Melissa McCord,  
in Chenery (n.d.)*

These intrepid individuals are among the founders of present day Broome. Their life stories personalise the facts of history. The extended Chi family exemplify the innovative attitude of people on the frontier who were prepared to take risks and embrace challenge. They were active participants in an era of huge cultural change. They weathered adversities and suffered under the inequities of laws based on racism.

Jimmy Chi himself was the first Aboriginal person from Broome to go to university, with the weight of his community's expectations on his shoulders. After abandoning his engineering degree due to a serious car accident, he felt the shame of letting his community down. Music and the company of his elders brought him through his depression.

Jimmy Chi is therefore uniquely placed to tell the stories of Broome people. The two important musicals he has written with his band Kuckles (named for the popular bush tucker cockles), *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*, which premiered in 1990 and 1996 respectively, also record periods of great cultural change. Indeed, the intervening six years were highly significant ones for Indigenous people in Australia.

This period coincided with Robert Tickner's tenure as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and he records some of the 'momentous initiatives in Australian indigenous affairs' undertaken at the time in his 2001 history, *Taking a Stand*. These were:

... the start of the process of reconciliation; the national response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC); the evolution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC); the establishment of the position of the Aboriginal and Islander Social Justice Commissioner; the fight for the Native Title Act and the National Land Fund; the enhancement of international human rights protection for indigenous people; and the launch of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Inquiry into the stolen generations. (Tickner 2001: ix)

Interestingly, many of these initiatives were designed to remedy the very issues, including Aboriginal deaths in custody, land rights and the Stolen Generations, that were represented in *Bran Nue Dae*. As former Kuckles member Stephen Pigram said:

The time was right for it. I don't know about now, it might be getting a bit old hat, because things have moved on a bit. There's native title. He should write a new one now, gotta have native title in it, CDEP in it. You got to poke fun at that. Cos you can't say 'Govt give us pension check' etc – now everyone gets that \$220 a week wage that you can use for training money. But you can make fun of it in other ways. (Pigram, S. 2005. pers.comm., April 9)

Some of these gains were subsequently eroded after the election of the Howard Liberal Government on March 3 1996. For instance ATSIC was abolished and the reconciliation process reached such a state of stalemate that Patrick Dodson (notably a Broome local) resigned as Chair. Opinion remains divided on the

success of, or indeed necessity for, Mal Brough's 'Intervention'. Hope for a possibility of reconciliation resurged with Kevin Rudd's historic Apology to the Stolen Generations on February 12, 2008.

This study, namely *Jimmy Chi: Hybridity and Healing*, intends to place Jimmy Chi's two musical plays, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*, within an international, national and local context. The plays were preceded by, and provide a narrative for, the songs, written by Chi and his band Kuckles. Both the plays and songs celebrate and give testament to the life experiences of Indigenous peoples of Broome, founded as a pearling port at the base of Dampier Peninsula in the Kimberley district of northern Western Australia.

The works have importance on many levels, as historical documents, as theatrical pieces, and as social processes. As time goes by, and development and population pressures on the Dampier Peninsula increases, the importance of *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road* correspondingly increases as a record of the days of Old Broome.

The goal of this thesis is to record the influences and inspirations which lead to the creation of *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*, in the artists' words where possible, in language which is accessible to the Broome community.

My argument, that Jimmy Chi's work offers new ways of thinking about Indigenous identities, has been developed against the background of both Indigenous theatre before 1990 and the existing critical literature, within a context of post-colonial theory. These strands have been addressed within the text, rather than as separate commentaries.

Where this work differs from existing critical material is in the approach and methodology. For instance Maryrose Casey (2004) has written an excellent history of contemporary Indigenous theatre to 1990, which focuses on how productions actually got to the stage. Similarly, Peta Stephenson's (2007) analysis of the relationship between Indigenous Australians and Asians, *The Outsiders Within*, examines *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road* from that framework.

As my primary research interest is in place and displacement, I chose to contextualize Jimmy Chi's work within its physical location. To this end I lived and worked in Broome and re-enacted the journeys undertaken in the plays. Instead of providing answers, the journeys raised many new questions and sidetracks which have made their way into the research brief.

My job in Broome was with Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, co-ordinating a course in Aboriginal Theatre. Ironically,

this course was first set up as a result of the success of *Bran Nue Dae*. I was privileged to spend many hours with Jimmy Chi and his family, Stephen Pigram, Micky Manolis and Stephen 'Baamba' Albert, as well as many other Broome locals who contributed to the development and performance of Jimmy's work. Both formal interviews and informal discussions with these original creators of the work form the backbone of this study.

The impetus for the study came from watching Tom Zubricki's 1992 film on the making of *Bran Nue Dae*. In the film, Jimmy Chi makes the statement that suffering is a part of life. This simple statement, along with the music, convinced me that Jimmy Chi was an artist that I wanted to know more about.

At that time, I was unaware of the level of suffering endured by Indigenous peoples of the Kimberley. Subsequent reading about the violence and massacres, the colonial policy of 'clearing' the land, the generational devastation caused to families, was heartbreaking. These events reverberate into the present.

The many pressures on the artists and their community, some members of which were my students, seemed overwhelming. I often felt inept and incapable of representing the artists or the material, particularly the complex Indigenous history, which is still continually being uncovered.

Thankfully, there is already a vast storehouse of information on the history of Broome and my thesis is indebted to the works of historians like Val Burton, Hugh Edwards, John Bailey, Susan Sickert and Mary Durack, and sociologists like Christine Choo and Sarah Yu.

The information has been divided into six chapters, with the intention of providing the reader with some background knowledge of the dual histories of Indigenous theatre and of Broome before encountering the annotation of the texts. A chapter describing the physical backstory of the journeys in the plays follows the annotations. The thesis is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1    Brief History of Indigenous Theatre in Australia
  - Development of Indigenous Theatre from corroboree
  - Directions of Indigenous Theatre as a means to self-determination.
  - Practitioners and Innovators
- Chapter 2    History of Broome
  - History of Broome and the Kimberley
  - Development of Broome music and hybrid culture

- Chapter 3    *Bran Nue Dae*: Contextual Annotations  
Explanation of the sources of the songs, sets and plot
- Chapter 4    *Corrugation Road*: Contextual Annotations  
Explanation of the sources of the songs, sets and plot
- Chapter 5    The Road Trip  
Reflections on the research trip retracing the physical journey taken by the characters in the plays *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*.
- Chapter 6    Conclusion: Healing and Hybridity  
Impact of first productions of *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*, locally in Broome and nationally  
Homi Bhabha and Hybridity  
Healing: Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Indigenous Projects for Self-Determination

The process of this study has taken a long time. I have learned a great deal, and not necessarily what I was expecting to learn. I will be ever grateful to Jimmy Chi, Stephen Pigram, Micky Manolis and Stephen Albert for trusting me with their stories.

...this is not just for blackfellas, it's for white people too, that had a problem with standing up for landrights and all sorts of things like that. If people had a problem with it before, when they see *Bran Nue Dae* they come away thinking. You enter their psyche and suddenly they learn a couple of things and they come away thinking about why things are like that. It's not just a healing thing, it's an educational thing to get around the hassles that people have these days. It [ie *Bran Nue Dae*] should have been going for the last 15 years. (Pigram, S. 2005. pers.comm., April 9)

## Chapter 1

### A Brief History of Indigenous Theatre in Australia

The late actor and playwright Bob Maza, in his article *Aborigines and Theatre* (Parsons 1995: 13), stated that Indigenous theatre in Australia was a product of the 1972 Tent Embassy in Canberra: 'From that incident were born National Black Theatre in Sydney, Task Force in Adelaide, Nindethana Theatre in Melbourne, and Noongar Theatre in Perth'. Maza cites the playwrights Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) [sic] as being 'in the forefront of the Aboriginal literary movement'.

However, this definition assumes theatre to be that defined by the Western tradition. It is equally possible to argue that Indigenous theatre is a product of the oral tradition and of the ceremony and ritual of corroboree. As Mudrooroo says in his article *White Forms, Aboriginal Content*: 'Before the Europeans brought a system of writing to Australia, all literature was oral' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1995: 229). Mudrooroo further states that as a British form, writing could only produce a distorted form of Aboriginal culture. Ola Rotimi, Nigerian playwright, writing about his own oral cultural tradition, states that 'drama is the best artistic medium for Africa because it is not alien in form, as is the novel' (1985 quoted in Gilbert & Tompkins 1996:7). Possibly then, theatre, as an oral performative media, is a more appropriate vehicle than the novel for the expression of Aboriginal cultural information.

It is also necessary to distinguish between the notion of 'Indigenous theatre', in the form of theatre produced by white settlers resident or born in the colony of Australia, as promoted by nineteenth century nationalistic magazine *The Bulletin*, and theatre produced by Indigenous Australians.

In this work, I intend to focus on theatre produced by Indigenous Australians, in the context of the '7 Stages' of Indigenous history defined by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman in their play *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996). These stages are given as: Dreaming (Pre-invasion), Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-Determination and Reconciliation, and were interpreted by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman as correlating to the five stages of grief outlined in Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' writings on death, particularly *The 5 Stages of Dying* (Kubler-Ross 1969).

Mudrooroo, in *Writing from the Fringe* (1990: 4), divides Aboriginal history into five periods.

- From the Beginning to 1788
- The Time of the Invasion(s)

- The Utter Conquering of the Aboriginal Peoples
- The Colonial Period
- The Period of Self-Determination

Mudrooroo includes protection and assimilation in his colonial period. Notably, his history has no reconciliation period although he states that post 1988 'activist literature has moved to a literature of understanding'. Mudrooroo sees post - 1988 literature as too accommodating, part of 'an impetus towards a merging into the majority culture...thus the stage of active struggle for an independent identity may be passing' (1990: 14).

Applying these stages to Indigenous theatre produces certain difficulties, in that the playwrights and their subject matter do not fit neatly into these chronological divisions. Jack Davis, for instance, writes predominantly about the protection and assimilation eras, yet he includes scenes from the Dreaming, and his characters behave in a way which focuses firmly on Self-Determination.

## **From Pre-invasion to Genocide: Corroboree**

Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman refer to the pre-contact period of Indigenous Australian history as the Dreaming. However, since my students in Broome were constantly correcting me for using the word as a historical signifier, and explaining that the Dreaming is present time, but a different state of consciousness, I will use the term 'pre-Invasion' for the time before white settlement.

'Corroboree' is another term which requires clearer definition.

'Corroboree' has passed into English as a word for all Aboriginal ceremonies and rituals and entertainments involving singing and dancing, and social effervescence generally. Howitt (1904: 413) says it is probably derived from "some tribal dialect in the early settled districts of New South Wales, and has been carried on by the settlers all over Australia" ....However, it is too vague a term, lumping sacred and non-sacred together in an undifferentiated way... (Berndt & Berndt 1964: 381)

Discussion of the role of corroboree in pre-Invasion Indigenous culture has been mainly in ethnographic or anthropological terms. The question for theatre historians could be whether corroboree should be classed as theatre or ritual. Maryrose Casey ( 2009), in her essay on this question, posits the cultural difficulty of framing public performances of corroboree as theatre.

To just call it theatre risks erasing difference, at the very least erasing links

to the sacred, community and place. The use of the term would, in effect, make these performances part of a norm that privileges European practice as originary. (Casey 2009: 138)

Catherine & Ronald Berndt (1964: 381-7) distinguish between ritual and ceremony, sacred and non-sacred, but point out that the differences are on a continuum rather than being a dichotomy.

There are great differences between sacred and non-sacred dancing and dramatic performance: partly on the basis of more marked solemnity in the first, but also in regard to the significance and symbolic meaning of the dancing and posturing, and the matter of participation. But the dividing line cannot be sharply drawn. Much ritual and ceremony of sacred significance is performed in the main camp, with group participation. (Berndt & Berndt 1964: 382)

The Berndts (notably writing before television reached remote communities) quote and support Spencer's (1914: 32-4) observation that 'in Aboriginal communities the evenings are nearly always occupied with singing and dancing'. Songs and dances belonged (and still belong) to particular language groups and could be 'traded' or passed from one group to another, with the original language being learnt by rote. For instance, a sequence involving camels and an 'Afghan' was traded from the desert up to Victoria River; a series about killing a crocodile travelled from the north-west coast to the Stirling River (Berndt & Berndt 1964: 385). These early recorded songs and dances display the humour that is so prevalent in contemporary Indigenous theatre in the form of parody and the presence of a trickster character.

Berndt and Berndt (1964: 386-87) summarise the content of ceremonies into three major divisions.

1. Ceremonies which involve the re-enactment of myths or stories; these are presented in a stylised form and all actions are symbolically significant.
2. Dance movements, individually or collectively performed, in relation to specific songs, but not having mythical substantiation.
3. Imaginative and inventive dancing and songs composed to translate for public enjoyment, if not information, contemporary events of everyday living.

The first division can be classified as ritual, with a prescribed audience and participants, the second as ceremony, while the third division can be classified,



entertainment, with an open audience. The third division is also an apt description of Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*. Indeed, Uncle Tadpole exhibits many traits of the 'trickster' character.

Candice Bruce and Anita Callaway (1991), art historians, have written an excellent account of the post-Invasion appropriation of the corroboree as entertainment for whites. Bruce and Callaway look mainly at visual representations by white artists, where Aborigines 'have been transformed into magical creatures of the night, who are physically and sexually potent and seemingly untouched by the mighty hand of British colonialism' (1991: 81). They state their intention as not 'to document the nature of the ceremony itself, but rather to analyse what these representations reveal about whites' attitudes to Aborigines and - chiefly – to themselves ...' (1991: 81).

Bruce & Callaway give the example of George Taplin, the chief missionary of Point Macleay mission in South Australia, describing his observation of corroborees.

I have seen dances which were the most disgusting displays of obscene gesture possible to be imagined, and although I stood in the dark alone, and nobody knew that I was there, I felt ashamed to look upon such abominations. (Taplin in Woods 1879: 38 quoted in Bruce & Callaway 1991)

This same speech is quoted by Berndt & Berndt (1964: 381) when discussing the 'misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and prejudices deriving from the (white) writers' cultural background'. Representation of the corroboree as 'abominations' served to support racist notions within colonial Australia, even while Aboriginal people themselves were using corroboree to parody the colonial oppressor, particularly the police. For example, in a corroboree from Wave Hill in the Eastern Kimberley, a policeman, a 'man with chains', is depicted bringing in witnesses for a court case. However the chained 'witnesses' are all attractive young women, whom the policeman is trying to keep for himself, while a swaggie tries to steal the girls one by one (Berndt & Berndt 1964: 385).

This particular corroboree can be viewed as an early example of Aboriginal use of humour to transcend pain. Evidence given to the Roth Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives, completed in 1905, revealed that young Aboriginal women were in fact often detained by police as witnesses, kept in chains, and then sexually abused.

...Roth was talking of the white managers and stockmen taking part in the rape of chained witnesses, often the wives and daughters of the accused who were chained nearby. (Bailey 2001: 36)

A most poignant use of corroboree to repel the invasion was the Molongo, or Mudlungu, ceremony around 1901. This magic dance, the full performance of which lasted five nights, was passed by elders along the trade routes from Northwest Queensland to at least the Great Sandy Desert 'in response to violent dispossession by whites' (Reynolds 2003: 7). According to German missionary Otto Siebert, who watched the whole five day ceremony several times, the main theme of the Molongo was 'to depict how the blacks were shot down' in the belief that 'all those at whom the magic-dance was directed, should be destroyed; the whites and all that belonged to them' (Reynolds 2003: 8). European witnesses of the 'special, sensational' ceremony include surgeon and ethnographer Dr Walter Roth, recording it in Northwest Queensland in 1898, Otto Siebert at Kilalpaninna in 1901, and geographer J.W. Gregory at the Neales River in 1906 (Reynolds 2003: 7).

By the 1830's white appropriation of the corroboree as a purely theatrical entertainment, part of 'the general repertoire of Victorian spectacle', had resulted in it becoming a 'white spectator sport' (Bruce & Calloway 1991: 88). Bruce and Calloway acknowledge the effects of segregation and "Christianization" but contend that the 'most pernicious means of controlling corroboree was appropriation of it as a form of entertainment staged specifically for the benefit and enjoyment of whites' (1991: 86). Governor Lachlan Macquarie staged "feasts" including corroboree as early as 1816, and these were continued annually under Governors Brisbane, Darling and Bourke until 1835. By 1867, corroboree had transposed into 'an amusing spectacle for distinguished visitors', such as Prince Alfred (1991: 91). The culmination of this appropriation was a 1950 ballet by Rex Reid, titled *Corroboree*, in which the white dancers wore 'black tights and blackface' (1991: 92).

Casey places the 'strong moves by government and church authorities to bring the events under regulated white control' as toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a direct result of the success and popularity of Indigenous controlled corroboree-based performances (2009: 127). She notes that by 'the 1850s Indigenous entrepreneurs were attempting to gain access to mainstream European theatres with limited success' (2009: 126). Casey cites Indigenous use of public performance of corroboree as cultural capital, 'one of the few options available to Indigenous people as a resource to barter for money, political recognition and economic survival' (2009: 126).

In terms of post-colonial theory, appropriation and control of corroboree fits well with Terry Goldie's contention that the 'indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chessboard under the control of the white signmaker'. Goldie says the imperialist signmaker only recognises five basic moves, those of sex (e.g. restorative pastoral); violence (that which we fear to become e.g. George Taplin's response);

orality (the indigene's non-writing state therefore implying a different dimension of consciousness); mysticism (inadequacies of the writer's culture); and prehistoric (where the indigene becomes a historical artefact, a remnant of a golden age) (Goldie 1995: 232).

The retrieval of corroboree by Indigenous playwrights becomes therefore a powerful act of cultural reclamation. In Jack Davis's *No Sugar* and Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae*, non-Indigenous characters are excluded from the corroboree by secrecy and lack of knowledge respectively. In these works the Indigene rejects the restriction of the chessboard, and embraces the 'body, voice and stage space as sites of resistance to imperial hegemonies' (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 11).

Helen Gilbert analyses the role of dance in contemporary Aboriginal theatre, particularly Richard Walley's *Coordah* and Jack Davis's *No Sugar*, in her article *Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics* (Gilbert 1995: 341-5). Gilbert contends that dance 'can also function to restore masculine identity through its links with ritual and male initiation ceremonies' (1995: 345).

I agree with Gilbert that in *Coordah* the character Nummy, 'the 'local drunk' and 'trickster' figure, 'escapes the fixity of these roles formed within the dominant discourse of colonization by recreating his Aboriginality through dance performance'. It is Nummy's tragedy that he never gets to perform and thereby realise his status as the true leader of his community.

Gilbert describes a Perth production of Davis' *No Sugar*, directed by Phil Thompson, in which the corroboree scene is moved in order to be adjacent to a speech by A.O. Neville, so that as Neville 'walked tentatively across this ground in his three-piece suit to deliver a speech that situated Aborigines firmly within white historical discourse, traces of the *corroboree* marked his presence as incongruous, invasive, and ultimately illegitimate' (Gilbert 1995: 343).

Gilbert, appropriating Hanna, is less successful trying to place the corroboree in *No Sugar* within a feminist cultural framework.

That *No Sugar* encodes the *corroboree* as a masculine activity (the female characters are denied participation *and* spectatorship) raises some problematic issues: on the one hand, it gives the dance a higher status as cultural production because all societies deem the occupations of men more important than those of women... (Hanna 1987: 22-3 quoted in Gilbert 1995: 344)

In this context Gilbert omits to mention that Billy Kimberley is a real historical

figure as well as a character in Davis' play, and that in representing the corroboree as 'a masculine activity' Davis is providing correct cultural information, thereby giving the scene its power. The actual 'problematic issue' for the characters is that, as an initiated man, Billy Kimberley has betrayed his own responsibilities through his activities as lackey for the colonizer, a 'black crow'. Billy is forced to recognize the futility and superficiality of his alliance with the whitefella in Act Two, Scene Ten, when Mr Neal not only ignores his requests to remove the handcuffs that are binding him, but calls him a 'blithering stone-age idiot'.

Further, elder Indigenous women through texts like *Holding Yawulyu* (de Ishtar 2005) and *We are Bosses Ourselves* (Gale 1983) counter Hanna and Gilbert's claim regarding the relative status of male activity in Indigenous communities.

Davis is a master at using 'the body in space' as a cultural signifier. For instance, in stage directions for several scenes in *No Sugar* (e.g. Act 2, Sc 9, p74; Act 2, Sc 10, p76) he describes Billy as 'pointing with his chin', a Kimberley practice for giving directions. This small movement again places the non-Indigenous audience into the position of outsider, the space normally occupied by 'the Other'.

The imperative to acknowledge the 'owners' of a particular dance or song, as mentioned by the Berndts (1964), is included in the corroboree scene (Act Two, Scene Six):

JIMMY: Eh? That one dance come from your country?  
BILLY: Nah. That one come from long way, lo-o-ong way. *Wanmulla* country. Proper bad fellas.

Later, the entry of Mary is used to explain the cultural position of the dance.

MARY: I bin watchin' youse for nearly half an hour.  
JOE: *Kienya!*  
MARY: I mean listenin', not watchin'.  
JOE: It's all right, wasn't man's business.

The inclusion of this cultural information serves both to reassure the Indigenous audience that correct protocol has been observed and to educate the non-Indigenous audience that such protocol is necessary. In Wole Soyinka's terms, the scene serves the recovery of 'an authentic cultural existence' (Crow & Banfield 1996: 6).

Gilbert goes on to assert that 'most of Davis's predominantly white audience will be tempted to read the performance from culturally subjectified standpoints that

link dance with female activity, thereby seeing the *corroboree* as a feminising practice' (Gilbert 1995: 344). Since Gilbert is discussing dance as performance in this article, and the 'predominantly white audience' she is referring to would be aware of the western ballet tradition as well as Indigenous dancers from David Gulpilil to Stephen Page, I think it unlikely that they would link the corroboree in *No Sugar* with 'female activity'.

Davis encourages the audience to examine the body in space as a cultural signifier and to enter the action from an Aboriginal viewpoint through the perambulatory staging in *No Sugar*. By having to physically follow the actors on their journey through the various scenes throughout the play, the audience is forced to emulate the Nyoongah experience of dislocation.

In Davis's second play, *The Dreamers*, dance is used to represent both the pre-contact period and time-out-of-time, to which Uncle Worru has access. This use of dance is also reflected in the Roebuck Plains scene in *Bran Nue Dae*.

The Roebuck Plains scene is a turning point in the power relationships between the Indigenous and 'non-Indigenous' characters. Marijuana Annie complains of being hot and hungry, Slippery is unable to pronounce Yawuru and Baad words for tucker and shows fear of large goannas. Meanwhile Willie and Tadpole are re-energized at being back in their neighbourhood, traditional lands of the Yawuru people. Willie enjoys cooling off in a waterhole while Tadpole hunts for bush tucker. The appearance of 'traditional Aboriginal dancers' is a sign for celebration: '*boisterous dance with hunting and food gathering movements*'. *Marijuana Annie is spaced out by it all and entranced by what is happening around her; Slippery is frightened of the natives*'. Willie and Tadpole join in the song 'Jalangardi', which names local bush tucker foods, 'mayi and wali and arli', and language groups, 'Karrajarri, Yawuru, Nyikina, Bardi' (Chi 1991: 43).

Since knowledge of the country is held by the Indigenous characters, the scene operates as a rejection of the imperialist notion of the metropolis as the centre of knowledge. Naming Karrajarri, Yawuru, Nyikina and Bardi [Baad] peoples refutes any conception of a homogenous 'Aboriginal' society. Writing in the Yawuru and Bardi languages takes up Ngugi wa Thiongo's position that 'to write in the language of the colonizers was to pay homage to them, whilst to write in the languages of Africa was to engage in an anti-imperialist struggle' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 36). For Karrajarri, Yawuru, Nyikina and Bardi peoples, having their languages 'on the main stage' is a potent act of cultural recognition, which simultaneously gives them 'Insider' status.

While the traditional dancers represent Yawuru people from pre-Invasion times as still present on their country, in 'time-out-of-time', the use of rock music rather than clapsticks and boomerangs counters any interpretation of the scene as a

form of 'Nativism' or claim to an essentialist 'authenticity'.

At the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege. (Smith 1999: 74)

Corroboree remains a powerful theatrical form by which Aboriginal playwrights can recuperate culture, represent their own community histories, and 'write back to the Centre' from a position of authority.

More recently corroboree, known in central Australia as inma, has become a tool of reconciliation through the sharing of culture at theatrical and musical festivals. Unlike earlier appropriations of corroboree, in these Indigenous directed events audiences are educated about, and invited to participate in, cultural protocols.

For example, the 2007 *Festival of the Dreaming* at Woodford featured many versions of corroboree. Tom E. Lewis, Artistic Director of the Djilpin Dancers, Wagilak people 'who dance the Black Crow and Sugarbag Fly song cycles from Bunggul', gives a good description of the contemporary role of corroboree.

The corroboree ground is a theatre, with the fire place as its centre. We warm our spirit at the fire place and around it, and we pass on the stories and sing the songs, thus keeping our history and our culture going. Therefore, the listening ear and the watchful eye of you in the audience, are as important as the people singing and dancing. (Lewis 2007)

Describing the central positioning of inma in the daily life of Tjanpi Desert Weaver women, *The Dreaming* program (2007) states that it 'is at the heart of everything they do'.

At this festival, a tragic event was transformed by the generosity of the elders into a communal healing ritual. After a male performer from Central Australia collapsed and died onstage, the elder women of the man's community conducted a traditional smoking ceremony for anyone who had been in the audience. This was extended to include anyone at the Festival.

Similarly at the 2008 Bellingen Global Carnival a special Wanampi Inma, or Rainbow Serpent Dance, was recuperated and performed by a group of senior Anangu custodians specifically for the purpose of reconciliation. Cultural protocols included the audience being instructed to either turn their backs or close their eyes during certain phases of the ceremony.

It is an extraordinarily colourful dance with amazing head-dresses and it

calls on the rainbow serpent energy of the land. It is a rain dance, a dance for country and also a special dance about the relationship between men and women in this land. (Program, *Bellingen Global Carnival 2008*)

The intention of the Anangu custodians in reviving and sharing the Wanampi Inma was to instigate reconciliation through shared responsibility for protection of country.

... The core of traditional knowledge is held in the songs and dances of the land and when people learn the songs and dances, they are able to learn something very deep about the essence of this country and our responsibility to care for the land and keep it alive.



*Wanampi inma (Program, Bellingen Global Carnival 2008)*

Acknowledgement of this responsibility may be the central challenge posed by Indigenous playwrights.

## **A Brief History of Indigenous Theatre in Australia (Part 2)**

Strategic essentialism: ‘... a tool by which marginalised peoples can deliberately foreground constructed difference to claim a speaking position’.

Gayatri Spivak in Gilbert & Tompkins (1996: 12)

This section examines the emergence of contemporary Indigenous theatre to 1990 and discusses the work of some of the playwrights involved in ‘claiming a speaking position’. The list is by no means exhaustive and I acknowledge the excellent work done by women like the late Justine Saunders, and many others whose contribution is beyond the scope of this study. The intention here is to place the work of Jimmy Chi in the context of theatrical styles and themes encountered in Indigenous theatre at the time he was writing.

### **From Invasion to Self-Determination**

When contemporary Indigenous theatre emerged in the late 1960s, under the influence of the Black Consciousness movements influencing theatre in America, Europe and Africa, it could trace its roots back to a form of parody that had been recorded from the Invasion era.

We will probably never know just how widely Aboriginal people used ‘theatre’ to depict their experiences and feelings about the Invasion however oral histories and contemporary witness accounts reveal a use of parody which is still in evidence today.

Bruce and Callaway cite the excellent mimicry skills of Bungaree, ‘so-called “Chief of the Broken Bay Tribe”, who was a familiar figure in Sydney Town’. Apparently Bungaree used his skills to impersonate successive colonial governors ‘with astonishing minuteness’ in performances ‘aimed deliberately at the pomposity of white authority’ (1991: 94-95).

Daisy Bates recorded the use of ‘play-play’ by Nyul Nyul people to mimic a confirmation ceremony conducted by the young bishop Matthew Gibney at Beagle Bay Catholic mission in 1901.

Imagine my mingled horror and delight to find Goodowel, one of the corroboree comedians, sitting on a tree trunk with a red-ochred billy can on his head and a tattered and filthy old rug around his shoulders. In front of him pranced every member of the tribe, all in a line, and each wearing a



wreath and veil that were a bit of twisted paperbark and a fragment of somebody's discarded shirt. As they passed Goodowel each received a sounding smack under the ear with a shout of "Bag take um!" Hilarious and ear piercing shrieks of laughter followed each sally. I went back in glee to tell the bishop. He shook his head. "Ah the poor craytures!" was all he said. (Bates, D. quoted in Keffe 2003: 52)

Keffe notes that the 'play-acting was significant in that the mission residents were doing what Aboriginal people did all over the frontier, that is incorporating elements of non-Aboriginal culture and ritual into their own cultural forms' (Keffe 2003: 52).

It is possible to trace a trajectory of this type of appropriation and parody from Bungaree's subversive performances through to shows like *Basically Black* (1972), films like *Babakiueria* (1986) and the depiction of Father Benedictus and Pastor Flagon in *Bran Nue Dae* (1990).

In the late 1960s a more tragicomic form evolved, demonstrated in the works of playwrights like Kevin Gilbert, Eva Johnson and Jack Davis, which combined documentary realism with remembered fragments of traditional culture. The tone evoked both a yearning for what was lost and a desire to educate audiences about the reality of contemporary Indigenous life.

'Documentary realism', where alcoholism, unemployment, incarceration and violence are placed centre stage, rejects imperialist judgements and poses an alternate view of Indigenous life experience. Ownership of negative stereotypes therefore becomes a de-objectifying or rehumanising form of cultural self-retrieval, particularly when alcoholic, unemployed or imprisoned characters are portrayed as loved members of families, as fathers, brothers, sons, uncles etc. I refer to male characters advisedly because they are so often represented onstage as emasculated by the Invasion and its results.

Bob Maza described the effect of this representation on Indigenous audiences.

Characters in black plays are all too quickly branded as stereotypes by non-Aborigines, yet they are precisely what the black writers require. Any less would not be genuine. In Richard Walley's play *Coordah* nearly all the male characters are drunk, unemployed and wasters, yet every Aborigine who saw the play identified with and was moved by these characters because they were their own, warts and all. Aborigines see them not as stereotypes but as victims. (Maza quoted in Parsons 1995: 14)

Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes the significance of this process, 'our attempts to escape the penetration and surveillance of that [Western] gaze while

simultaneously reordering and reconstituting ourselves as indigenous human beings in a state of ongoing crisis' (Smith 1999: 39).

The 'documentary realist' style of theatre has attracted some criticism, for example from Mudrooroo.

'... what happens is that there's too many plays and stories in which the reality is very flat and is only "what they done to us"... I have a big problem with this sort of realism. Aboriginal reality is more akin to surrealism in fact, because it's based on the Dreaming...' (Thompson 1990: 59)

Whether or not characters are represented as 'victims', the 'what they done to us' discourse is a necessary stage in 'the process by which the language with its power, and the writing with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 8). The task of pioneers like Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Bob Maza and Kath Walker [Oodgeroo Noonuccal] was to invade the colonist's stage, situating 'the body, voice and stage space as sites of resistance to imperial hegemonies' (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 12). In an interview on Radio National program *Away!* (2002, 5 April), Wesley Enoch and Rhoda Roberts paid tribute to these 'politically solid and tough' predecessors and acknowledged that younger Indigenous theatre practitioners 'stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before'.

The courage to invade the Invader's space came from two sources – the international 'black consciousness movement' and the election of a visionary and sympathetic federal Labour Government.

International influences on Australian Indigenous theatre, as recounted by Bob Maza, include the 'great orators' of the 1950's, leaders like Anwar Sadat in Egypt, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the USA. In 1976, John Kani and Winston Ntshona from South Africa toured in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, works produced collaboratively with playwright Athol Fugard and which were therefore revolutionary in both their content and their method of production. In 1978 the National Theatre of Papua New Guinea 'presented plays in Motu, Pidgin and English.....the message of self-determination was loud and clear' (Maza quoted in Parsons 1995: 13).

This era of 'black consciousness' was supported by the election of the radical Labour government of Gough Whitlam in late 1972, which brought in both a policy of self-determination for Indigenous people and a flush of arts funding. The optimistic atmosphere of the early 70's produced a burgeoning of Aboriginal theatre – *The Cherry Pickers* (1971), *Basically Black* (1972), establishment of the National Black Theatre (1972), *The Cake Man* (1975) and *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976).

On the west coast, Jack Davis, established poet and editor of *Identity* magazine, also began writing plays. *Kullark* (1979) was followed by *The Dreamers* (1982), *No Sugar* (1985), *Honey-Spot* (1987) and *Barungin: Smell the Wind* (1989). The slogan 'Black is Beautiful' manifested in theatre to 'tell it like it is'.

Like the newly established Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972) and the Black Panther movement, the fledgling theatres and gatherings were loudly and proudly 'black', in theoretical terms placing them in the race-based critical model of post colonial literatures (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 15). The works produced also fit well into Gilbert & Tompkins' 'markers of post-colonial drama', namely:

- acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly ;
- acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-invasion) communities ;
- acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms;
- acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation. (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 11)

Although Mudrooroo criticises 'documentary realism' as 'very flat', the revolutionary aspect of the early works was in placing Indigenous experience centre stage, thereby allowing Indigenous audiences to 'recuperate their histories, traditions, narratives and discourses' (Edward Said quoted in Crow & Banfield 1996: 15).

The first step toward decolonisation and self-determination therefore was to tell the other side of the story. Bob Maza and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, through works like *Tiddalik*, *Mereki* and *The Rainbow Serpent* respectively, reinvented traditional stories from the pre-invasion era for the 'regeneration of the colonised communities' (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 11). Playwrights like Bob Merritt, Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis chose as their subject matter for 'interrogating the hegemony' the era of protection and assimilation, the reign of the missions and the Aboriginal Welfare Boards.

What much of this work had in common was the binary attitude toward race politics inherited from Negritude, which had influenced the Black Consciousness movement (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 21-22). Brian Syron, co-founder of the National Black Theatre, was apparently concerned about this development, since he commented that 'white insularity will not be fought with equally non-productive black insularity' (Syron quoted in Casey 2004: 168).

These plays subverted the European form of 'well-made theatre' by appropriating it to launch an attack on European imperialist practices. The risky nature of this practice has been commented on by Homi Bhabha, as in his note that:

... the dangers of the way in which readings of post-colonial works as socially and historically mimetic foster their reabsorption into an English tradition, domesticating their radicalism by ignoring the important colonial disruptions to the 'English' surface of the text. (Bhabha 1984a quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 34)

Meanwhile, the practical need for achieving production of Indigenous theatre texts required the establishment of national forums and organisations, documented by Maryrose Casey in *Creating Frames* (2004). Casey details the formation of the Aboriginal Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association (AWOLDA) in Perth in the early 1980s and its first conference in 1983, resulting in the publication *Aboriginal Writing Today* (1985), edited by Bob Hodge and Jack Davis.

In 1987 the first National Black Playwrights Conference, instigated by Brian Syron, was held in Canberra, and a second one two years later, with new playwrights like Jimmy Everett, Eva Johnson, Mudrooroo Nyoongar, Vivian Walker, Richard Walley and Archie Weller emerging as a result.

I started the first playwright's conference and two years later when we had the second one you should have seen the work that came through. It was wonderful: there was stuff by Colin Johnson and Richard Walley and Jimmy Chi, it just came in waves – wonderful work, really good work. (Syron quoted in Thompson 1990: 139)

Notably, after this conference process Colin Johnson (later known as Mudrooroo Narogin, then Mudrooroo), Walley and Chi all moved beyond the mode of documentary realism and toward the adoption of magic or 'maban' realism. This term was coined by Mudrooroo to indicate work incorporating representations of the Dreaming, 'maban' being a term used in the Kimberley to denote 'a clever man', or a sorcerer. This stylistic move allowed for a shift from linear 'what they done to us' narratives, empowering playwrights to envision more imaginative representations of Indigenous reality. One effect of this shift was to enable a change of form, as evidenced by Jimmy Chi's appropriation of the musical and use of multi-media.

The potential of the more visionary style has been beautifully described by Caribbean poet Derek Walcott as an 'escape from a prison of perpetual recriminations into the possibilities of a 'historyless' world, where a fresh but not innocent 'Adamic' naming of place provides the writer with inexhaustible material

and the potential of a new, but not naïve, vision' (Walcott 1974b, 1989: 34).

Walcott's notion of a 'historyless' world is not a call to a 'naïve' rejection of colonial history, but a rejection by Indigenous peoples of a reality and world-view defined and named by the colonisers.

In terms of paving the way for younger artists, Jimmy Chi's abandonment of recrimination as a theme and documentary realism as a style in *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road* are major achievements. The characters' journey from a historical 'telling the other side of the story' toward envisioning a new inclusive story could provide a metaphor for the history of Indigenous theatre itself.

## A Brief History of Indigenous Theatre in Australia (Part 3)

### Practitioners and Innovators

This section provides more specific information on a selection of the playwrights and directors mentioned in this chapter. Again, this information is a brief indicator of the achievements of these practitioners and does not attempt to be definitive.

#### Bob Maza

Ironically for someone so identified with the emergence of Indigenous theatre and the reclamation of culture, with his instantly recognisable voice narrating countless Dreamtime stories, Bob Maza has described how as a teenager he felt alienated from traditional culture.

Born on Palm Island, Queensland, in 1939, Bob Maza was one of the first Aboriginal kids in northern Queensland to complete secondary school, and relates the feeling of being caught between two cultures.

We knew that we weren't really part of traditional Aboriginal culture. ...We couldn't talk the language, we couldn't hack too much of the tucker...  
(Thompson 1990: 162)

Maza started doing theatre with Jack Charles in Melbourne in 1971, although 'he had already established a name for himself as an actor in a variety of roles in television police dramas' (Casey 2004: 25). With Nindethana Players they created a humorous revue, *Jack Charles is Up and Fighting* (1972), with its confronting subtitle, 'It's tough for us Boongs in Australia today'. *Jack Charles* 'looked at the clash of white and black cultures from an Aboriginal point of view' (Radic 1991: 196). In 1970 Maza attended the third Pan-African Conference of African peoples in the USA, where he observed the power of Indigenous theatre and developed his vision for Aboriginal theatre.

Black theatre is a natural, spontaneous theatre whose main ingredient is often totally raw talent. Aboriginal theatre for me is theatre for Aboriginal people. If black theatre develops like I'm hoping it will, then it will go back to the sand with fires all around, back into the open. I think that's how you'll see black theatre in the future. (Thompson 1990:163)

As a result he co-founded (with Brian Syron and others) the National Black Theatre in Sydney in 1972 and toured the East Coast, on minimal funding, with a show called *Basically Black*. The show used some scripts from *Jack Charles is Up and Fighting* (Casey 2004: 53).

As well as extensive acting and directing credits, Bob Maza wrote the plays *Tiddalik*, *Rain for Christmas*, *Mereki* and *The Keepers*. In her Introduction to *Plays from Black Australia* (Brisbane 1989: xi), Justine Saunders points out that *The Keepers* 'was the first play produced by the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, an all-Aboriginal production company, and it gave us a sense that Black Theatre in Australia was going to get stronger'.

*The Keepers*, which won Maza the National Black Playwright Award, is set in the period of frontier expansion, yet doesn't fit the mould of Mudrooroo's 'what they done to us' theatre. Saunders says '... *The Keepers* is very moving in the way it shows how it hasn't always been white aggression, but sometimes white ignorance that has helped to destroy tribal culture and beliefs' (Brisbane 1989: xi).

Notably, in the opening scene of *The Keepers* (1988), based on the true story of the meeting between a Scottish family and the last remaining members of the Boandik people of Rivoli Bay in South Australia, Bob Maza parodies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, some of the most blatant examples of appropriation. Maza starts the play with two dancers in bodysuits, one white, one black.

*The black dancer performs a dance of the home of the Boandik, then freezes. The Aboriginal chant fades out and slow, distant Scottish bagpipes are heard. The white dancer performs a dance of Scotland.*

Not only was *The Keepers* first performed in 1988, the same year complaints were made that as 'part of the Australian Bicentennial celebrations..., a troupe of young white women in blackface performed a mock corroboree at the City of Sydney Bicentennial Ball', but the contrast of the rhythm sticks and bagpipes echoes the visit of Prince Alfred in 1867 when the Duke responded to a 'royal command corroboree' by sending 'for his piper to play the bagpipes, much to the astonishment and gratification of the natives' (Bruce & Calloway, 1991: 92).

Maza's role as playwright of *The Keepers* also raises the question of cultural authenticity, since he is a man from Palm Island in Queensland writing about Indigenous characters of the Boandik language group from 'the south east coast of South Australia'. The fact that Maza felt comfortable representing the Boandik is an indication of the shift Australian society has made since 1988 in recognising the multiplicity of Indigenous identities, nations and affinities to country. Bob Maza died in 2000.

## **Brian Syron**

Co-founder of the National Black Theatre, with Maza and Saunders, was Brian Syron, actor, acting coach and theatre and film director. Syron brought an

international perspective to Australian theatre since he had trained with Stella Adler in New York during the early 1960s, with Jerzi Grotowski in Poland, and with Cecily Berry in London.

Brian Syron was a visionary whose influence on Australian theatre cannot be overestimated. He contributed greatly to the establishment of professional and training institutions which fostered the development of emerging artists. As well as co-founding the National Black Theatre, Syron co-founded the Australian National Playwrights Conference with Katharine Brisbane in 1973 and Bondi Pavilion Theatre in 1973. Syron also inaugurated the first National Black Playwright's Conference and the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, both in 1987. Brian Syron foreshadowed the new generation of artists with his belief that the 'arts should be used to focus on what's going on in Aboriginal society, not just apportioning blame' (Thompson 1990: 139). He also believed, with Bob Maza, that the primary audience for Aboriginal theatre should be the Aboriginal community.

What is our obligation, what is our mandate? It's back there in the resolutions of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1972: our mandate is to communicate with our own people first. (Thompson 1990: 139)

These ideas coincided with those of African playwrights like Ngugi wa Thiongo in Kenya (Crow & Banfield 1996: 8) and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, who were engaged with a quest for the recovery of an 'authentic cultural existence' (Soyinka in Crow & Banfield 1996: 6).

Brian Syron was hopeful about the future of Indigenous theatre, due to the emergence of professional training institutions like the National Aboriginal & Islander Dance Institute (NAISDA) in 1976, which he saw as providing Aboriginal performers with discipline and technique.

But I don't think near enough is good enough, I cannot accept an inadequate performance and say, that's our way. *It's not* our way, not at all. I think that's a cop out, coming from the blacks. You have to have discipline, you have to have technique, you have to move forward, you have to understand that you are mirroring a society... (Thompson 1990: 141)

## **Kevin Gilbert**

Kevin Gilbert (1933 – 1993), a Wiradjuri man, used the stage as an extension of his political activism. He was involved in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and in publishing the poetry and testimonies of Aboriginal people in his influential texts



*Inside Black Australia* (1988), *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (1973) and *Living Black* (1978). He emerged as a playwright with *The Cherry Pickers*, billed as 'the first Aboriginal play' when first performed at the Mews Theatre in Sydney in 1971, subverting the Captain Cook Bicentenary celebrations.

As the title implies, the plot focuses on the experiences of a group of seasonal fruit pickers, based on Gilbert's own family, 'and their search for spirituality and justice' (Gilbert 1988: 187).

I went to live in the tents and under 'roof' of flattened square kerosene tins and hessian. Picking grapes, getting wet in the house every time it rained, having no 'kitchen' or water-taps, or electric light, not even a wooden floor, I came to believe more in the truth my Uncles and Aunts taught me.  
(Gilbert 1988: 186)

Like Bob Merritt's *The Cake Man*, *The Cherry Pickers* was written in prison. In 1957 Kevin Gilbert was sentenced to penal servitude for life on the charge of murdering his white wife. He spent fourteen years in NSW prisons, years he dramatised in his second play, *Ghosts in Cell Ten*. Gilbert was an activist of the 'angry young man' mould. However his anger wasn't directly solely at non-Indigenous Australians, he also wanted to expose the 'human desolation that is Aboriginal Australia' (Gilbert 1977: 1).

Aborigines try to believe these fallacies about themselves because they won't face the truth. But you only have to go to any Aboriginal mission or reserve to see the truth: the lack of community spirit, the neglect and abuse of tiny children, and all the rest of it. (Gilbert 1977: 1)

*The Cherry Pickers* has been revived with productions by Wesley Enoch for Kooemba Jdarra (Brisbane 1994) and for the Sydney Theatre Company's 2001 Blueprints Program. This production subsequently did a sell-out six week tour to the UK, including a two week season at The Library Theatre for '*culture shock!*', the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival in Manchester. Wesley Enoch says the play was chosen for Manchester specifically for its toughness, as 'this is what distinguishes Australian theatre'.

Actor Tessa Rose described the direction and delivery of the production as "humorous [sic], bold and sexy".

The prologue is humorous as our characters re-enact Captain Cook, colonists and redcoats using coats and hats as props to depict those characters, but the message being delivered was far from funny.

The boldness of the play is due to Kevin Gilbert not shying away from the atrocities that occurred with the arrival of Cook and the colonisation by his

mob. He wrote history and told it as it was – the rape of our women, the starvation, the murders, and the blatant lack of equality with payment of wages etc. (Rose 2003)

The choice of *The Cherry Pickers* as a text to be revived is interesting, since much of the dialogue now seems so didactic. Nevertheless Wesley Enoch argues for the need for Aboriginal stories to be told by Aboriginal people from many different perspectives (*Away!* radio program 2002).

### **Robert Merritt**

Robert Merritt is most celebrated for his play *The Cake Man* (1975), but his contribution to Indigenous theatre also includes co-founding and coordinating the Eora Centre for the Visual and Performing Arts at Redfern in Sydney. Merritt's screenplay for the film *Shortchanged* was nominated for 'best original screenplay' at the 1986 Australian Film Institute Awards (Schurmann-Zeggel 1997: 1.5 –13). A comparative study of *The Cake Man* and the film *Eora Corroboree* makes for interesting discussion on the dichotomy between urban and country Indigenous experience.

Merritt's goal with the Eora Centre was to counter the despair he saw among Aboriginal youth in Redfern by engendering a renaissance of Aboriginal culture. The theatre teachers were established Indigenous artists like Bob Maza, Brian Syron and Bob Merritt himself, as well as professional non-Indigenous theatre workers such as director George Ogilvie.

In 1985 Corroboree films (Michael le Moignan, Larry Lucas & Yuri Sokol) made a documentary on the Eora Centre. The film is called *Eora Corroboree* and was the first in a series entitled '*Black Futures*'. To watch the film now, more than 20 years after it was made, is a startling exercise. The film is 'framed' by an opening narrative or voice-over in which the anonymous narrator states that in 40,000 years of occupation Aboriginal people 'left almost no mark on the Australian countryside'. Ignoring contemporary information gained from oral histories, anthropology and archaeology, the narrator goes on to say that Aboriginal people 'weren't interested in building, farming or even trade'. Further, the narrator assumes a homogenous Indigenous culture and transposes northern Kimberley culture onto the east coast.

They believed all human and animal life had been beckoned into existence by powerful mystical beings called Wandjina who roamed the countryside in a distant age known as Alcheringa.

Because of this misinformation it is disturbing to read in the accompanying notes

that the film 'has been sold to ABC-television and to educational institutions and government departments around Australia. *Eora Corroboree* has been selected as Australian entrant in two important international film festivals... The film has since secured international distribution' (Corroboree Films Prod, 1985). Criticism of the film's 'framing' is not to deny the important achievements of the Eora Centre, which still operates in Redfern, or the power of the content of the film, in which many students share their stories of being taken from their families and institutionalised under various pretexts. Indeed aspects of the film highlight the extent of the journey undertaken by Indigenous theatre practitioners in the last twenty years. During the film, Merritt and his students watch a televised performance of David Gulpilil's Miningrida [sic] dance troupe. The performance takes place inside a school. At the end of the performance, Merritt turns to his students and asks 'Well, what did yas think of the Stone Age?' He then refers to the performance as 'an export thing, because it's an image that you can lick the stamp, put it on then send it overseas'. Gulpilil's troupe are incorrectly referred to as 'our brothers from Central Australia'. Although Merritt was trying to make a point about the multiplicity of Aboriginal identities, as opposed to stereotypes forced onto Aboriginal peoples, his comment seems to reveal his own internal colonisation process. In a full circle of the process, I watched this film with my theatre students in Broome, for whom culture is paramount, and law and ceremony definitely not 'Stone Age'.

Aboriginal identity has been described by Marcia Langton as a constantly shifting process: 'Aboriginality is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation' (1993: 33 in Helen Gilbert 1998: 52). Dennis Walder (1998:193), discussing Josie Ningali Lawford's one woman performance of her show *Ningali* in London, attributes this process to a 'powerful sense of the dislocating forces inherited from the colonial experience, against which there is a struggle to affirm a sense of identity for indigenous peoples'.

The 'complex process of continually becoming' (Gilbert 1998: 52) is clearly demonstrated in one of the many sad scenes in the Eora film, presented positively as part of a reconnection with nature and cultural tradition, and concerning the learning of the emu dance. Keith 'Chubby' Hall, then Senior Education Officer with the Commonwealth Dept of Education, Aboriginal Education Section, describes learning the dance from his father, who would only perform it when 'charged up'. Hall has in turn passed the dance on to Bob Merritt and actor Athol Compton. When Compton has difficulty learning the dance, he and Merritt go out to Warragamba Lion Park to observe emus moving, and in their account of the communication between Compton and the emu, Compton reveals he has never seen an emu 'in the wild' before.

The impact of the film is to realise both the devastation caused by invasion, genocide and protectionism and the rapid progress of Indigenous arts in recent

years. Due partly to annual visits to country by groups like NAISDA and Bangarra Dance Theatre there is now a rich cross-fertilisation process between traditional and urban Indigenous cultures.

It is also interesting to note how these two texts, *Eora Corroboree* and *The Cake Man*, inform each other. The personal histories told by the students, Bob Merritt's comment that the comparison with Miningrida [sic] dancers 'doesn't look too kindly on us', and Bob Maza's surprise that urban Aboriginals indeed had 'a culture', make the opening scene of *The Cake Man*, where a pre-invasion family live in harmony with nature and each other, all the more poignant. The sense of loss is palpable even while conforming to Derek Walcott's criticism of 'nativism' as the 'schizophrenic daydream of an Eden' (Crow & Banfield: 15). There is also a relationship between Merritt's dismissal of the Maningrida performance as 'an export thing', and the scene in Act One of *The Cake Man* when we first meet Sweet William. He rises from the dead, puts on whitefella clothes and, after sending up the Aboriginal tourism industry by trying to sell a boomerang to the spectator/audience, ironically introduces himself.

See'n I'm a Kuri. The Australian Aborigine, that's who I am....made in England. (Merritt 1983: 12)

Bob Merritt wrote *The Cake Man* while in Bathurst Gaol and it was first performed by the Black Theatre, Redfern in 1975, directed by Bob Maza. *The Cake Man* has the distinction of being the first black Australian drama to be published as a book and the first to be televised. It also toured to the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado.

Although *The Cake Man* draws on Merritt's experiences growing up on Erambie mission outside Cowra, NSW, it is not written in the form of documentary realism. It moves in time and space between the pre-invasion and protection eras, the 'two realities' referred to by Sweet William in the Epilogue. Characters step out of naturalism and directly address the audience. Songs and dreamtime stories are used to express the 'two realities'. Although the pre-invasion era is idealised in Act One, and the harshness of mission life presented in detail, the tone of *The Cake Man* is hopeful rather than bitter. Bitterness is reserved for the institutions of Church and State. Merritt's message is that individuals, as represented by the Civilian, can make a difference by taking their own moral stand.

The 'two realities' are strongly represented by the language used to address Pumpkinhead. Although white society might describe him as a 'little snake', 'little animal', or 'black thieving bastard' with his 'black thieving hand', Ruby always addresses him as 'my good boy'. She joins in the pretence that Pumpkinhead finds coal by the railway line rather than in the Civilian's coalbin so that he can remain a 'good boy' in his mother's eyes. For instance, in Act Two, Scene Three,

Ruby tells Sweet William:

I know ain't no railway coal left since years ago...But you leave him be,  
don't say nothin'll spoil what he thinks I think'.

In his chapter on Indigenous theatre, *Our World A Stage* (1997: 160), Mudrooroo refers to 'the signifier of indigenous drama: the pessimistic ending', and states that the 'ending of *The Cake Man* is a fair example of how Aboriginal plays conclude' (1997: 161). However I think that in his concentration on seeking 'maban reality' in Indigenous theatre Mudrooroo has missed the point with this play. He bemoans the lack of 'a mythical heroic quest into Indigenous reality', and fails to recognise the heroic quality of Sweet William's trip to Sydney. Just by setting out on the quest, Sweet William has regained the respect of his family.

RUBY: You're a good man for wantin' it, Sweet William. No matter anythin'  
else comes. (Act Two, Scene Three)

Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth* (1988: 123), says that the 'usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir.' This exactly describes Sweet William's experience.

Through Sweet William 'seeking to recover what has been lost', Pumpkinhead and his father are reconciled, and there is a playful scene paralleling the happy family scene of Act One. The fact that William is jailed on arrival in Sydney reflects the shooting of the father in Act One. The difference is that in Act Three the Civilian's motion toward kindness is not blocked by Church or State. In contradiction of Mudrooroo's assertion of 'cultural paralysis' and 'pessimism' (1967: 161) there is in Act Three a 'movement towards going, getting or retrieving that maban reality', demonstrated by the restoration of the 'good life family' of Act One. Through the Civilian's act of kindness, Pumpkinhead's world view is restored. He has regained trust in his father as head of the household, belief in the Cake Man, and the threat of being sent by the Welfare to a 'home for bad boys' is removed.

What the ending of *The Cake Man* does highlight is the emasculation of Aboriginal men by protectionist policies. Their role of family provider is replaced by 'the Welfare'. The 'bread ration', collected by Pumpkinhead, is taken from the mission manager's rubbish bin.

WILLIAM: You know what Rube...about me, I ain't never stuck up no white man, and I ain't done not one thing in my whole life is brave. All my life, all

I ever done was be a jacky – boy. (Act Two, Scene Three)

Sweet William's story of the visit of the mystical eurie woman, calling him back to his culture, his dreaming, is offered as an antidote to emasculation, or existence as a 'jacky-boy'. The scene encapsulates Merritt's message that reclamation of culture is the path to reclamation of manhood and an independent identity.

### **Jack Davis**

The most 'successful' articulator of the protection and assimilation period to date has been the late Jack Davis. Davis' body of work includes *The Dreamers*, *No Sugar* and *Barungin* (now usually treated as a trilogy); a children's play, *Honeyspot*, and a monodrama, *Wanghin Country* (1992). He has also published collections of poetry, *The First-born and Other Poems* (1976, Angus & Robertson), and co-edited *Paperbark, a Collection of Black Australian Writings* (1990). In the 1960s he became manager of the Aboriginal Advancement Council's Perth centre, and later editor of the national magazine *Identity*. He also co-founded with Mudrooroo Narogin the Aboriginal Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association.

Jack Davis has often stated that the aim of his work is to expose the truth, however painful. Bob Evans (*Jack Davis smells change on the wind*) quotes Davis' preface in *Meanjin*, 'We cannot afford to hide skeletons in our cupboards. Once the truth is revealed forcefully enough, the bureaucrats, representatives of white society, will no longer be able to deny us our birthright in a place which is still ours, regardless of politics and white notions of ownership'.

Davis' work deserves intensive study in its own right, something not possible in this survey. However I would briefly like to mention Davis' use of what Mudrooroo calls 'maban realism' ('maban' meaning 'clever' as in having knowledge of sorcery) and his influence on the later generation of playwrights, including Jimmy Chi, for whom Davis acted as mentor.

Mudrooroo has invented the term 'maban realism' to describe a style of Indigenous writing in which the Dreaming is integrated into the apparent realism (1997: 161). A good example of 'maban realism' would be Andrea James' *Yanagai! Yanagai!* (2003), in which a central character, Munarra, is cast out from the heavens by her husband, the creation ancestor, Baiami. This character has two spirit helpers in the form of dingos which talk and hunt with spears. As depicted in Dreaming stories, creation ancestors often move fluidly between human and animal forms.

Similarly in Jack Davis' *The Dreamers*, Uncle Worru communicates freely with his long dead friend, Milbart, and the narrative is interspersed with visions of a tribal dancer, who represents 'time outside time', both where Uncle Worru has come from and where he is going to.

The assertion of an alternate version of reality or theory of time is a step toward 'rejecting the claims of the centre to exclusivity' or what Wole Soyinka calls 'the process of self-apprehension' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 17).

Davis' technique of using multiple time zones to retell history has also been adopted by his protégé Richard Walley, a younger Western Australian playwright who began his career performing in Davis' plays.

### **Richard Walley**

Richard Walley is based in Perth and has worked as an actor, theatre director, playwright, musician, dancer and choreographer. He is best known for his plays *Coordah* and *Munjong* and for co-founding the Middar Aboriginal Theatre in Perth.

Walley was inspired to become a playwright both through being frustrated by acting in stereotyped Aboriginal roles written by non-Indigenous writers, and through the encouragement of Jack Davis and Thomas Keneally. Walley acknowledges the influence of Jack Davis, stating 'Jack showed me more or less how to structure a play', and this is evident both in the realist style of his work and use of Aboriginal humour, and his philosophy of using theatre to 'educate as well as to entertain' (Thompson 1990: 68).

*Coordah* in particular shows Davis' influence in its focus on family, representation of multiple periods in contact history and its emphasis on the regenerative power of traditional culture. In other ways, particularly in his insistence on 'blackness', Walley shows the influence of precursors like Kevin Gilbert.

We've learnt their language and we're delivering messages to them in their language. I think the next generation will do this even better, we're going to have our own black movie directors and our own black television writers and our own black camera operators... (Thompson 1990: 69)

Walley's prediction has manifested with Indigenous directors including Rachel Perkins and her movie version of *Bran Nue Dae* (2009) and Warwick Thornton with his award winning film *Samson and Delilah* (2009).

The tradition of re-inventing post-contact forms to represent Indigeneity proudly

continues with the next generations of playwrights. Contemporary playwrights like Andrea James, Ningali Lawford, Leah Purcell, Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman clearly draw on the work of forebears such as Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, for instance in the use of storytelling, realistic characterization and moving between time zones and 'realities'. The point of difference is the adoption of non-linear narrative structures and multi-media forms to tell their stories.

Interestingly, Bob Maza's dream that Aboriginal theatre would return to its roots around the campfire has eventuated with the resurgence and reclamation of corroboree and inma.

The 'great Australian silence' (Stanner 1968) on our contact history is about to resound to a clamour of Indigenous voices.



*Town Beach, Broome*



## Chapter 2

### History of Broome

Historians, novelists, biographers, anthropologists and others have written extensively on the complex history of Broome. I wish to narrow the examination to ask two main questions: what were the factors that led to the development of the particular hybrid culture which exists in Broome, and what were the factors that led to the development of the musical culture in Broome?

Situated at the base of the Dampier Peninsula, Broome is now the largest town of the Kimberley, an extremely beautiful and diverse area in the far north west of Western Australia. Due to its isolation, the Kimberley was one of the last areas in Australia to be colonised by European settlers. The traditional owners of the country on which Broome sits, Gularabulu (Roe 1983: i), are the Yawuru and Djugun people. Other groups from the Broome region include Bardi, Jawi, Nimanburu, Nyul Nyul, Jabirr Jabirr, Karajarri and Nyangumarta people (*Broome Street Guide*).

It must be noted that spellings of Indigenous languages, language groups and place names vary greatly. I will use accepted contemporary spellings, except when quoting authors who use earlier variations. At the time of writing, Baad was the preferred spelling for the Bardi language group (Pigram, S. 2005. pers.comm., April 9).

Certain events, with their repercussions and reverberations, have impacted strongly on the inhabitants of the Dampier Peninsula, including visits by Macassan fishermen; the arrival of European explorers from 1699 and pastoralists and pearlers from the 1860s; the establishment of a cable connecting the town of Broome to Indonesia in 1889 and the arrival of missionaries in 1890. Particular laws, such as the Federal *Immigration Restriction Act* or White Australia policy of 1901; the *Aborigines Act* of 1905 and the *Native Administration Act* of 1936, have also had deleterious effects. Currently the impact of tourism and development is bringing rapid change and incursion into country.

Despite the terrible effects of many of these events, Indigenous people of the Dampier Peninsula have held on to their country, their law, languages and culture, and their family relationships. Indeed, a detailed knowledge of country and genealogy is vital to each person's sense of belonging and ability to claim rights to land. People can often relate their family histories for many previous generations, and know which of their relatives were the first to confront the white arrivals.

The racial make-up of Broome families reflects the multicultural history of the Peninsula, particularly the waves of immigrants who came in search of the riches of pearling. Often, mixed-race families had to fight legal restraints in order to stay together, not always successfully (Sickert 2003: 73-81).

In an interview with Victoria Laurie about the making of *Corrugation Road*, Jimmy Chi said the resultant hybrid culture is 'an example to the rest of the world – and Australia – on how to live with each other. And that's what we're all trying to do' (Laurie 1996: 25).

## **Pre-Contact History**

Coming from a mountainous, rainforest area on the East coast, I found that when I first arrived in Broome I was unable to 'see' the country. The trees seemed insubstantial, small and scrubby. This began to change for me when I attended talks at Minyirr Park, in the sandhills behind Cable Beach, conducted by traditional owners Richard Hunter and Micklo Corpus.

Richard Hunter explained that during Bugarrigarra (the Dreamtime or Dreaming) Minyirr is where human beings were first created, when the spirit beings came in from the reefs and lay down on the warm sand to dry out.

Hunter tells this creation story:

See, from out of here they came – the Naji, Naji beings, spirit beings we call them – here at this site, this ground – Dabberbabberkuu. This is our birthplace. Here it starts – the first being, the first human sound from hands, from feet, from mouth they sing the country, create this song-cycle from sundown salt water to sunrise salt water – a great journey.

For us, this is a very spiritual, special place. As a birthplace it gives us constant renewal; Minyirr is a natural healing place. It is our job to look after this country properly, as we are taught in our culture. (Bloemen & Mason, eds, 2002: Frontispiece)

As a site where three major song cycles originate, Broome has traditionally been a 'place of gathering', as described by senior Yawuru woman, Cissy Djiagween.

People ask, what's so special about Broome? It has always been a traditional place of gathering – Nulungu, a watering place. Every year in the dry season, Aboriginal people from along the coast, and from the desert, would come to trade, reconcile differences, celebrate and ask forgiveness so they could come together as one community. They were welcomed by the Yawuru. (Bloemen & Mason, eds, 2002: 61)

Historian Hugh Edwards, in his book *Port of Pearls* reiterates:

For centuries the flats bordering Dampier Creek and Roebuck Bay were a meeting place for the Njul Njul, Bardi, and Nimanbor tribes from Dampierland and the peninsula, the Nygina from the east to the Fitzroy, and the Yaoro and Garadjeri, south to La Grange. They came for ceremonies, to exchange wives, and to trade. The Djuleun bartered spears and pearl shell and kept their low profile.' [sic, Djuleun = Djugun] (Edwards 1983: 107)



*Roebuck Bay, Broome*

The song-cycles are ritual sequences of poetic songs and dances which follow the Dreaming tracks of the Creation Ancestors. These tracks may traverse the country of many language groups, indeed cross the continent, with individual language groups being responsible for maintaining that part of the cycle which crosses their country. Aboriginal people believe that maintaining the song-cycles through performance of particular songs and dances is integral to keeping both country and human beings alive.

Parallel to the tracks of the song cycles were the trade routes, with incised pearl shell from the Kimberley being a prized item. Burton (2000: 5) says pearl-shell was used by Aboriginal men 'as a body covering for ornamentation in ceremonies and as a cure for various illnesses'. Sickert (2003: 24) mentions that 'it was a sought-after ceremonial object, particularly in rain-making ceremonies'.

A different sort of trade route to the Dampier Peninsula stretched across the sea to the islands of Timor and Indonesia. This route was used by the Macassans in their yearly visits in search of trepang. Keeffe (2003: 30) quotes a 1903 Port Darwin Customs House report to support his claim that Macassan fisherman had been trading with the Yawuru every wet season 'for at least a hundred years'.

Stephenson says the Macassans visited:

the Kimberley coast, known to the Makassans [sic] as Kayu Jawa. The Kimberley region stretched from the east side of Napier Broome Bay [near present day Kalumburu] south-west as far as Cape Leveque [the northern tip of Dampier Peninsula]. (2007: 19)

Macassan visits to Cape Leveque would have impacted most strongly on the Baad people as Edwards notes:

The Bardi had a considerable mixture of Malay from the Indonesian seafarers who came down on the monsoons, and were aggressive warriors and fine seamen'. (1983: 105)

Archaeologist Ian Crawford conducted an expedition between Wyndham and Broome by pearling lugger in 1963, with the principal aim of trying 'to assess the degree of influence of Indonesian fishermen on the Aboriginal culture, in particular on Aboriginal art' (1968: 15). The expedition found two camps with fragments of Macassan pottery and 'three hearths of a type used for smoking beche-de-mer' (1968: 17).

Stephenson adds that although there is archaeological evidence of the Kimberley trepanging sites, 'relatively little is known about the industry in this region' (2007: 19).

Trade between Aboriginal peoples and the Macassans was formally prohibited in 1906 under the influence of the White Australia policy (Reynolds 2003: 13). However the relationships established remained strong and would be reinvigorated during the pearling era.

## **Contact History: Pearling and Pastoralism to 1900**

One of the first European visitors to the Kimberley was William Dampier, buccaneer and explorer, on the British ship the *Roebuck* in August 1699. After a two week stay in the area, Dampier famously recorded in his journal that the Aboriginal people were 'the miserablest people in the world' (Keeffe 2003: 26; Bailey 2001: 15). Along with the attitude purveyed by this comment, Dampier's legacy includes the European place names of Roebuck Bay, Dampier Peninsula and Dampier Creek, and Buccaneer Archipelago.

Stephen Muecke records an extraordinary story related by the late Butcher Joe Nangan about a ship which may have been the *Roebuck*.

...he had a drink of tea and announced, rather casually, that the old people used to speak of a sailing ship coming across Roebuck Plains while it was under water. (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984: 31)

Muecke says this oral history is supported by recorded facts that Dampier's visit coincided with an eclipse of the moon and ten- metre king tides.

Another exploratory vessel, the *Beagle*, visited in 1837. This visit marked the first death of a European in the area when one of the officers was accidentally shot by another (Keeffe 2003: 30).

Meanwhile, down south in Perth, the colony of Western Australia had been founded in 1829. A land grab soon developed on the back of a government leasehold scheme.

In 1864 a Police Inspector Panter led an expedition to the north-west, initially on a search for gold. When this proved unsuccessful he turned his attention to potential grazing land. As a result of his favourable reports to the Colonial Office in Perth, two groups of colonial graziers, the Camden Harbour Association from Victoria and the Roebuck Bay Pastoral and Agricultural Association from Western Australia, began the rush for land which would result in the displacement of the Indigenous owners of the country.

Panter and two of his companions disappeared in the hinterland behind Roebuck Bay, near present day Bidyadanga. A search party and brutal punitive expedition was led by fellow settler Maitland Brown, then aged 21. Brown used revenge as the excuse for murdering Aboriginal people, including the massacre of a family group of about twenty men, women and children (Bailey 2001: 18). Brown later became a Member of Parliament.

Keeffe (2003: 30) and Edwards (1983: 22-23) both describe the attempt by Roebuck Bay Pastoral and Agricultural Association 'to establish a sheep station at Roebuck Bay against the fierce and organised resistance of the Yawuru', resulting in 'the Battle of Roebuck Bay' (ibid). Due to both this resistance and the unsuitability of the country for agriculture, settlement was temporarily abandoned until the discovery of pearl shell.

Accounts differ as to the actual beginning of pearling, but what is clear is that from the beginning the industry was based on exploitation of Aboriginal labour and that Aboriginal people received grief rather than gain from revealing the whereabouts of shell-rich reefs. Pearling as an industry began between the 1861 *Dolphin* expedition (Edwards 1983: 43) and 1866, as an offshoot of pastoralism, when pastoral workers Hicks and Tays on the Pilbara coast observed 'natives...wearing pearl-shell ornaments. They told us they were obtained from

reefs at Nicol Bay River' (Dalton 1964: 20). Pastoralists subsequently began using 'their Aboriginal workers to collect shell by diving for it in shallow waters near the coast' (Reynolds 2003: 131).



*Pearl shell ornaments,  
Lombadina Art Centre*

An initial willing exchange of pearlshell for food and clothing rapidly escalated into an industry where Aboriginal people were forced to dive.

...skin diving was an extremely hazardous occupation. The divers were beaten and were forced to hang by their hands in the rigging all night if they refused to dive. Shark attack, drowning, fever, scurvy, blood poisoning, lung infections and extreme exertion were but some of the dangers faced by the divers. (Sickert 2003: 27)

Both the introduction of deep water diving and discovery of the larger shell *Pinctada Maximus* encouraged the fledgling industry to expand south to Onslow and north to Cossack and Port Hedland. Jimmy Chi's grandfather, John Chi, was among the pearlers who operated from Cossack at this time. A move further north again was warranted by the discovery of 'seemingly inexhaustible quantities of mother-of-pearl shell' in the azure waters of Roebuck Bay and in 1880 Roebuck Bay Settlement was established. The settlement was renamed in honour of Governor Frederick Napier Broome, despite his protests, in 1883 (Burton 2000: 6).

Aboriginal men, women and children were blatantly exploited as cheap labour by both pastoralists and pearlers. The close relationship between the two industries in 'opening up the country' is exemplified by the entrepreneurship of Edwin Streeter, English pearler and jeweller, who 'took up the pastoral lease of Roebuck Plains Station to supply his butcher shop' (Burton 2000: 13). The pastoral leases provided ready sources of labour, since pastoralists 'considered the Aborigines

camped on their stations as theirs' (Bailey 2001: 22). This arrangement was reinforced by the Master and Servants Act, under which an employee was liable to imprisonment with hard labour for breaking a labour contract. Many Aboriginal workers were signed into these contracts unknowingly (Weightman n.d.: 2). Sickert describes how Aboriginal men who had been 'blackbirded' from as far as the Fitzroy River Valley were 'kept at a station owned by the Kimberley Pastoral Company until their dispatch to pearlers could be organised' (2003: 28).

The practice of 'blackbirding', a euphemism for the kidnapping and enslavement of Aboriginal people through 'nigger driving expeditions', developed from the early 1870s to the mid 1890s in response to the increased demand for labour. Professional blackbirders advertised 'to procure and put niggers aboard at £5 a head for anybody or shoot them for the Government at half a crown apiece' (Sickert 2003: 30). Edwards states succinctly that:

'A gun, a horse, a stock-whip, and a set of neck-chains were standard equipment in looking for 'volunteers' for the pearling industry' (Edwards 1983: 45)



*Boab Tree, Derby, used as prison by blackbirders*

Aboriginal women, previously regarded as the most skilful divers as well as onboard sexual companions, were prohibited from employment as divers in 1868 and from boarding vessels in 1871 under the *Pearl Shell Fisheries Act*. This Act also laid out conditions for the employment of Aboriginal men, including the provision that 'they were to be returned to their own country at the end of each season. It had been customary practice to dump them anywhere along the coast, often in hostile territory where chances of survival were low' (Sickert 2003: 28).

Attempts to control the activities of the pearlers did not fare well. The first Inspector of Pearl Shell Fisheries was poisoned before he could make his first

report on illegal activities by pearlers and pastoralists at La Grange Pastoral Station, south of Broome. Juries 'seldom convicted white men for their crimes when it came to cases of murder, abuse or mistreatment of Aboriginal ...people', and the state government was prepared to do little 'to halt indiscriminate killing of Aboriginal people' (Sickert 2003: 23). Dalton (1964: 22) concurs, pointing out that most Justices of the Peace were pearlers themselves.

As an initial reaction to the Act many of the pearlers recruited Malay crews instead of Aboriginals and in late 1875 there were 989 Malays and 493 Aborigines on the fifty-seven vessels licensed out of the Roebuck port of Cossack. With other vessels coming from Fremantle and Shark Bay the true total of Malays in pearling may have been as many as 1800. (Edwards 1983: 47)

Explaining the necessity for recruiting Malays for the Broome industry in 1886, master pearler Streeter did not mention the loss of Aboriginal women as labour and the restrictions on employment of Aboriginal men due to their poor treatment. Instead he claimed that: 'Aborigines were found to be unsuitable for work which necessitated long periods away from the port. During the lay-up period... trips were made to Indonesia, where a recruiting agency had been established at Koepang in Timor' (Dalton 1964: 21-22).

Reynolds (2003: 132) states that the Malay workers were recruited into the industry with the introduction of luggers, which were needed to exploit the new Cossack beds as they were further out to sea than those at Shark Bay.

The introduction of diving dress in the 1880s saw the end of 'swimming divers', and thereby the end of Aboriginal divers, since Aboriginal pearling workers were not interested in wearing diving dress (Reynolds 2003: 132). They were replaced, from the 1890s to the 1930s, by Japanese divers, predominantly from Wakayama prefecture.

Writing in 1904, Van Praag credits the arrival of the Japanese divers with the birth of Broome.

When a pearling fleet from Thursday Island sailed around to the Kimberley coast in 1887, equipped with new diving gear and with seven hundred men of mixed nationalities, including Japanese, Aboriginal-alien contact entered a new phase and the new town of Broome was established. (Dalton 1964: 28)

Dalton supplies the background for the Japanese being on the fleet.

Immigration of Japanese to Australia began in 1885 when an Australian



businessman visiting Kobe met some Wakayama fishermen seeking work. On discovering that they had experience in skin-diving for a certain species of edible shell, he recruited them for the pearling industry. About 500 villagers from Kushimoto and nearby villages left for Thursday Island. When the pearling fleet sailed from there around the north coast in 1887, the long association of the Japanese with Broome began. (1964: 28)

The Broome community retains close ties with the Wakayama prefecture, particularly the village of Taiji. Indeed Broome and Taiji are Sister Cities. One reason for this is that many Japanese divers never returned home, instead finding their resting place in the Broome Japanese cemetery.

Aboriginal people continued to work in the industry by providing 'general unskilled labour onshore; they carried, opened and cleaned pearl shells in the iron sheds on the edge of the bay' as well as performing the 'rougher and casual tasks in the houses of the white elite' (Reynolds 2003: 136).

By 1900, when most Cossack pearlers (including John Chi) had made Broome their headquarters, Broome had become the centre of the pearling industry and the multicultural nature of Broome society was already established. Of 2000 men employed in the industry, 1700 were Malays and Japanese, with the rest of the crews made up of Filipinos, Chinese, Koepangers and Aborigines.

Dalton describes the occupational activities of the various groups.

Within the pearling industry, each of the different ethnic groups is associated with a particular occupation. The Europeans own the luggers; the Japanese are divers; the Malays act as crew and the Aborigines, both full-blood and part-Aboriginal, are usually unskilled labourers who clean and sort shell. (1964: 3)

The 1900-01 colonial census found that 'Asians made up half the settler population in the Northern Territory and Western Australia and more than half in Darwin, Broome and Thursday Island' (Reynolds 2003: xv). An accurate assessment of the Indigenous population was found to be 'impossible' but Reynolds says it may have been between 80,000 and 100,000 in the north. (Reynolds 2003: xv)

The elevated position of Europeans in the pearling industry was protected by laws like the 1886 *Sharks Bay Pearl Fishery Act*, which prevented Asians from holding pearling licences or owning luggers and the 1889 *Pearling Act*, which 'left the issuing of controversial licences to the discretion of the governor' (Bain 1982: 118). As a way around this law, the practice of 'dummying' was initiated. Under this practice 'naturalized aliens' would buy luggers and licences in the name of a

European proxy. The necessary secrecy of the system exposed it to corruption, as John Chi discovered.

When he first arrived from Cossack with his Japanese wife in 1899, John Chi owned a schooner and six luggers. He dug a well and made a camp at the back of Streeter's store.

Of course, afterwards, when he started pearling, well, pearling really did boom, they took everything off him. They wouldn't let him have his licence, see, being Asiatic. There was a chap, a pearl buyer and my father couldn't put the luggers in his own name to get the licence so he put it in this bloke's name. They called it dummying. ...Of course, after that, everything went. The bloke took everything off him. (Jimmy Chi Snr 1981, in Ainslie & Garwood 2002: 48)

John Chi then concentrated on his retail businesses in the lane which still bears his name.

Meanwhile, the pastoralists continued their push into Aboriginal lands.

The 1881 Kimberley Land Regulations 'opened up' the area for lease holding. In the next three years, station holdings were established throughout West Kimberley Aboriginal lands, including the Lower Fitzroy, Liveringa, Mt Anderson and Yeeda. These stations, by law, could not exclude Aboriginal people from passing through areas which were not enclosed, or were unimproved, in order to 'seek their sustenance in their accustomed manner'. (Keeffe 2003: 43)

Keeffe adds that since the initial pastoral concern was sheep grazing 'many of the Yawuru and their inland neighbours, the Bunuba and Nyikina, learned quickly to be shepherds, shearers and wool scourers' (Keeffe 2003: 43).

Displacement from land had a huge effect on the ability to maintain ceremony and culture. Efforts to protect culture included shifting ceremonial objects to camps 'near the homesteads of Roebuck Plains and Thangoo stations, and at Yardugarra, an outstation of Thangoo' (Keeffe 2003: 44).

In less than forty years after the exploratory Panter expedition, Aboriginal people had been effectively displaced from their country. Their skills and labour had been integral to the establishment of the pearling and pastoral industries in the Kimberley, yet they were excluded from any profit and instead relegated to a position of servitude.

## History of Broome (Part 2)

The brutality of race relations in the Kimberley in the 1880s cannot be denied, yet it is also the period in which the foundations for the multicultural society of Broome emerged.



*Traditional fish traps, Beagle Bay, low tide*

With their traditional way of life forever disrupted by the incursions of pearlers and pastoralists, Aboriginal people had no choice but to adapt to their new situation. Although the Catholic missions offered a paternalistic refuge, the primary means of subverting the dehumanisation they experienced at the hands of Europeans was to form alliances with the Asian populace, usually through sexual relationships between Aboriginal women and Asian men.

In *North of Capricorn* Henry Reynolds presents this situation favourably as lonely Asian men finding comfort with Aboriginal women, in a trade relationship that benefited both parties.

The same pattern of relationship was apparent on many points of the coast near Broome. Aborigines camped near inlets and creeks and were regularly visited by lugger crews seeking freshwater, wood and women's company. (Reynolds 2003: 136)

The situation was not viewed favourably by officialdom. In 1889 a special correspondent for *The Age* visiting Broome commented on 'promiscuous intercourse with Aboriginal women' and his fears for the creation of a 'hybrid race' (Reynolds 2003: 129). Just over a decade later, these fears were legislated as the Immigration Restriction Act, commonly known as the White Australia policy. Entrenched into the new Federation was the belief, expressed by Alfred Deakin, that 'Unity of race is an absolute essential to the unity of Australia' (Reynolds

2003: 160). One complication of the birth of mixed race children was that, being born in Australia, they could not be expelled.

Henry Prinsep, Chief Protector of Aborigines, in an attempt to 'prevent the development of a 'mongrel race' in the north, 'mobilized police officers in and around Broome to try to put a stop to socialising between lugger crews and Aboriginal camps' (Reynolds 2003: 138-9).

Yet Prinsep and his cohorts refused to recognise that it was the Immigration Restriction Act which laid the seeds for the dreaded 'miscegenation'. Although the Asian lugger crews were exempt from the Act due to the need of the powerful pearling lobby for labour, their wives and children were not. Hence, Asian men were forced to look for local partners.

Several police officers provided first hand witness accounts to the Report of the Roth Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives, convened due to complaints about poor treatment of Aboriginal people and published in 1905. One testimony came from Constable Bertram Fletcher, a policeman stationed at La Grange, 180 kilometres south of Broome.

Fletcher told of nightly incursions of the crews from the luggers into the camps seeking to barter tobacco and alcohol in exchange for women. He said that venereal disease was rife in the Aboriginal community and recently eighteen women had died of it, some only sixteen years old. Aboriginal men walked 100 miles from the inland to trade their women for rice, flour, clothes, tobacco and pipes. The women did not go onto the boats willingly, but were forced by their men. (Bailey 2001: 34)

The practice is reflected in local place names like Whistle Creek at Bidyadanga (formerly La Grange Mission) where lugger crews would whistle an all clear for the Aboriginal women.

Constable T.P. Napier detailed his futile attempts to prevent Aborigines and Asian lugger crews from 'trading' at Beagle Bay, on the Dampier Peninsula north of Broome.

I wish to mention that natives in this locality take very little notice of a constable ordering them away, as almost as soon as I go away they come back again. (Reynolds 2003: 140)

Dr Richard Henry Wace, doctor and resident magistrate at Derby, said he had treated 'young girls of 14 or 15 years, who have only just arrived at maturity' for 'specific diseases' after being prostituted to lugger crews (Bailey 2001: 40). Crews included Japanese, Malays, Filipinos, Koepangers and Ambonese

although the 'various nationalities of indentured men preferred to keep to themselves'. Indeed friction between the nationalities led to race riots in 1907, 1914 and 1920 (Sickert 2003: 67-9).

Eventually Aboriginal women progressed from being 'forced by their men' into visiting lugger camps of their own accord, some even living at the camps during the 'lay-up' season. This may have given them some degree of financial, social and sexual independence. Apparently the Malay men were preferred partners for specific reasons. Dalton quotes an unnamed Aboriginal woman:

The Malays are the best of the lot; they really know how to make love. Also, they're not ashamed to be seen with you – not like the Whites and the Japanese. I like going to the Malay camps. When you go there they give you food and everything – there's nothing they won't do for you. Anyway, they're the same colour as we are'. (Dalton 1964: 181)

It was the openness of the Malays in particular to an exchange of culture that contributed to the development of Broome's musical diversity. Whereas the Japanese kept mainly to themselves, even having their own club and hospital, the Malays invited 'to their camps many people from cross-sections of the Broome population' (Dalton 1964: 179).

The differing attitudes of Japanese and Malays may be attributed to their differing social status on the luggers; as divers rather than crew the Japanese could claim higher status both on the boat and ashore. Moreover the Japanese had recourse to the services of 'genteel, well-mannered, quiet and sober' Japanese prostitutes (Sickert 2003: 124).

In the lay-up camps, Aboriginal women learnt Malay songs, played to 'the accompaniment of guitars and piano-accordions', while Aboriginal men learnt both songs and dances, such as the silat, through working on the luggers (Dalton 1964: 179). Many of these old pearling songs are still sung in Broome today, while the martial artform of silat was incorporated into the choreography of Marrugeku's performative response to Broome, *Burning Daylight* (Gallasch 2005).

The Malays in turn learned Aboriginal songs, some of which had particular magical purposes, as outlined by Dalton in a story which also reveals that the Malays would go to great lengths to please a particular girlfriend.

Many Aboriginal women believe that the Malays have special powers to attract them and have love songs with more or less the same magical powers which are attributed to songs used by traditionally-oriented Aborigines. Some of the Malays know of these Aboriginal love-magic

(mondegi) songs. On one occasion, so I was told, a Malay sought to obtain such a mondegi song. He visited an Aboriginal camp and asked the men about this, requesting them to tell him a song which would increase the size of the genitals. He told them: 'My girlfriend said I was too small, so she sent me to you'. (Dalton 1964: 181)

From the outset, the 'mixed race' community of Broome faced official harassment based on illogical racist fears. In 1901 G.S.Olivey was the 'Travelling Inspector of Aborigines'. Despite his own observations of Aboriginal/Asian couples who 'seemed to be happy and contented; their homes were neat, clean and tidy', Olivey regarded relationships between Asian men and Aboriginal women as a 'scandalous state of affairs', 'not desirable in any way', and bluntly stated that the 'system of marrying Asiatics to Aboriginal women should be stopped by law' (Reynolds 2003: 138).

Olivey's views were reinforced by Senator Staniford Smith, who carried out an investigation into the pearling industry in 1902 to ascertain the need for Asian labour. Smith said of Broome: 'Here was gathered together ... the most heterogenous collection of nations, creeds, languages and races I ever saw' (Reynolds 2003: 128). Despite his distaste for the situation, Smith had to support the continued exemption of Asian labourers in the pearling industry from the Immigration Restriction Act on the basis of the expense of white wages.

Clearly, the multi-racial north offended the predominantly white south of the fledgling nation. The pre-existent Asian – Aboriginal relationship, which dated back hundreds of years prior to Invasion through the annual Macassan visits, placed Europeans in the uncomfortable position of Outsider. The White Australia policy, legislated as the *Immigration Restriction and Pacific Islander Labourers Bills*, can be interpreted as an attempt to gain control of the Asian – Aboriginal relationship and claim Insider status. Control of this relationship was seen as important from an economic perspective. At the time of Federation, the relatively small European population living in Broome were an isolated minority, totally dependent on Asian and Aboriginal labour for the maintenance of their income and social standing.

Further legislation attempting to regulate relationships between Asian men and Aboriginal women was passed in 1905. The *Aborigines Act* criminalised sexual activity between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men; the *Native Administration Act 1905 - 36* required that marriages be approved by the Aborigines Protection Board and later by the Native Welfare Department. As Sickert says, these laws 'led to broken relationships, less committed relationships and many children growing up not knowing who their biological father was' (2003: 73).

In her article *Asian Men on the West Kimberley Coast, 1900 – 1940*, Christine

Choo discusses the impact of Western Australian legislation on the lives of Aboriginal women and Asian men in the Kimberley.

Asian men, Aboriginal women and their children were victimised and made scapegoats for the introduction of parts of the harsh legislation of the *Aborigines Act*, 1905 which controlled all those who were deemed to be Aborigines in the state. These three groups were thought to be in need of 'protection', 'segregation', 'containment' or 'exclusion'. The racial prejudice and assumed superiority of the 'whites' was manifested in these policies and in practices which included the labelling of Asians as contaminating foreigners who introduced diseases to the Aborigines and who, through sexual contact with Aboriginal women, increased the 'coloured' population in the north. (Choo 1995: 90)

In contrast to the hedonistic life in the lugger camps and the gambling dens of Shiba Lane was the regulated regime in the mission stations. Established partly to protect Aboriginal peoples from European violence and partly to proselytise, the Catholic Church had begun to establish missions in the Kimberley in the 1890s. A detailed history of these missions can be found in Mary Durack's book *The Rock and the Sand* (1969).



*Sacred Heart Church, Beagle Bay*

Briefly, in 1890 Trappist monks built a mission at Beagle Bay among the Baad & Nyul Nyul people, which was taken over by the Pallottine monks in 1901. The Benedictines settled at Drysdale River in 1908. Lombadina, originally a state ration depot and also on Baad country, was also taken over by the Pallottines in 1910 (Dalton 1964: 25; Bailey 2001: 44). The reformed pearler Sydney Hadley established a Protestant mission on Sunday Island in 1899 (Bailey 2001: 45) while Harry Hunter ran his mission on the adjacent mainland near One Arm Point. Dalton (1964: 26) claims that 'the mission stations in the Broome-Derby area



became centres for inculcating European-Australian culture. They also cared for growing numbers of abandoned part-Aboriginal children, the result of liaisons between Europeans, Asians and Aborigines'. However we know from testimonies of the Stolen Generation that most of the children raised in the missions were not abandoned but were forcibly removed from their parents. A petition to the 1935 Mosely Royal Commission on behalf of 'the Halfcastes of Broome' states:

... we educated halfcastes who have been sent to the Missions have been taken from either our fathers or mothers when we were children by the advice of the Department and by so doing this has been the end of father and mother to us'. (Appendix in Sickert 2003: 180)

Repercussions of the loss of family, culture and language for mission trained Aboriginal people included the creation of new family structures, often with similarly displaced Asian men.



*Main altar with pearl shells,  
Sacred Heart Church, Beagle Bay*



*Interior, Sacred Heart Church,  
Beagle Bay*

Girls trained in domestic skills by the St John of God sisters at Beagle Bay and in Broome usually found work as servants for the pearler masters in Broome. These 'Mission Girls', whose stories are told in Christine Choo's (2001) book of the same name, found themselves caught between old and new worlds when it came to the search for husbands. As educated women, they did not wish to marry 'natives', yet the law prevented them from marrying non-Aboriginal men. Children born of de facto partnerships were deemed illegitimate. Legislation had failed to prevent mixed race relationships; instead it stigmatised the 'half-caste' community, particularly the women.

By 1935, these women were so tired of constant police harassment that they made a submission to the Mosely Royal Commission. In this unsuccessful petition for exemption from the Aborigines Act they state that 'most of us do not wish to live with natives and should not be classed as natives' (Sickert 2003: 76).



This petition should not be read as the women's lack of identification with their 'full-blood' relatives, but rather as a desire for equality under the law. However, there was little chance of a change in the laws which supported the segregation of Broome society, 'based on distinctions of class, race and gender', placing Europeans at the top, economically and socially (Choo 1995: 96).

...the strict social hierarchy which existed was dominated by a small number of European pearling families and other 'whites' at the pinnacle. A middle class comprised a large number of 'coloured' people who included Asian entrepreneurs and indentured workers in the pearling industry, part-Aborigines who had gained citizenship and Aboriginal women who had acquired foreign nationality through legal marriage to foreign men. The underclass largely consisted of the Aboriginal (and part-Aboriginal) population, mainly service workers in lowly-paid jobs and their dependants, usually relatives. It also included destitute Aborigines living in and around Broome. (Choo 1995: 96)

The racism inherent in this social structure, amid continued support for the White Australia policy, was reflected in the tragic 'White Divers' experiment of 1912. In an experiment aimed at eliminating Asian workers from the pearling industry twelve British Navy-trained divers and tenders were recruited to prove the supremacy of the white man in pearl diving. Three died, and most experienced paralysis as a result of 'the bends'. The 'experiment' was a failure, except for those pearling masters determined to keep their Asian crews.

Concurrently, the Bamford Royal Commission conducted an investigation of the pearling industry, with its 1913 Progress Report finding that the industry was 'unquestionably in the hands of the Japanese', and recommending that white labour be imported from Scotland and Greece. It did not address the lack of safety standards or equipment, compensation for crippled workers or 'the failure to pay wages to the Indigenous people' (Bailey 2001: 288).

However World War 1, the alliance of Japan with the British Empire, and nine days in Broome changed the Commissioners' opinions. The final report in 1916 recommended that 'bans on coloured divers and tenders be lifted' (Bailey 2001: 291). Unfortunately war also caused the price of mother-of-pearl to plummet and the industry became depressed. Pearl shell buttons were replaced by buttons made from tin, wood, bone and later plastic.

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and particularly the declaration of war on Japan in 1941, both shattered the pearling industry and fractured the hierarchical social structure in Broome. The war ratified racial disharmony. The Japanese, including Australian born Japanese like Jimmy Chi Snr, were immediately detained and sent to interstate internment camps. Some mixed race

wives and children of Japanese men were also interned, others were evacuated to Beagle Bay. These families lost everything, as their businesses, homes and possessions were confiscated.

Due to their knowledge of the Australian coastline, Japanese pearling lugger crews were classified as prisoners of war, and separated from their wives and children in the camps. Stephenson (2007: 119 -121) relates the devastation this caused to the families concerned. Japanese men who were deported to Japan after the war usually never saw their wives and children again.

The few Japanese who returned to Broome never fully recovered, economically or psychologically. Jimmy Chi has described both the effect of internment on his father, and the racism he faced on his return.

He came back with nothing and when he came back they said - 'What did you come back here for you Jap bastard, you should go back to Japan'. And he was born here. He said 'I've got two good arms and two good legs and I'll work'. ... He went through this... he just had these Japanese stories about what had happened to him. It made you almost think you were Japanese. And suicide and all those things were good. (Chi, J. 2005, pers.comm., 24 May)

The system of evacuation of Broome after the bombing of Darwin in February 1942 also exemplifies inherent racism. First, European women and children were evacuated to Perth by ship, followed by Chinese women and children. Aboriginal, mixed race and remaining Asians were sent to the mission at Beagle Bay (Sickert 2003: 164).

One event which significantly increased anti-Japanese sentiment was the strafing of Broome by Japanese Zero fighter aircraft on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1942. As most residents had been evacuated, the victims were not Broome locals but Allied personnel and refugees from the Dutch East Indies, en route to Perth or Sydney by Catalina flying boat. At the time of the attack, 9.30 am, most of the 15 flying boats were engaged in refuelling on the harbour of Roebuck Bay, with their passengers aboard. Around 50 Dutch men, women and children perished, some trapped in the boats, others trying to swim ashore, as well as 37 Allied servicemen (Prime 1992: 12). Broome airport was also strafed, and 28 Allied aircraft destroyed. The Catalinas can still be seen in Roebuck Bay on days of extreme low tides.

After this event, many more European civilians moved south, some permanently. The pearling industry suffered from loss of labour, equipment and luggers, which had been burnt or requisitioned by the military with no compensation available (Sickert 2003: 168).

Japanese nationals were unwelcome in Broome until 1953, when their expertise as divers and tenders was again needed by the pearling masters. Eventually, Japanese divers, tenders and technicians were able to put their expertise to their own benefit farming cultured pearls. Jimmy Chi's sister Pearl, for instance, married Captain Hiroshi Hamaguchi, former diver and 'the first non-white man to obtain a pearling licence since the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901' (Sickert 2003: 167). Hamaguchi and his sons were prominent operators in the cultured pearling industry until the 1990s.

The current industry, dominated by companies managing pearl farms, is a far safer enterprise than the search for wild pearls which had led to the establishment of Broome and its multi-racial community. Tourist operators promote the history of Broome and the pearling industry as romantic. Tourists can take sunset tours on sleek black luggers which manage to position themselves against the magnificent sunsets on Cable Beach in time for the thousands of camera shutters to click.

The continued poverty of the Indigenous population and their exclusion from the economic boom tells another side of the story. 'Old Broome' has been subsumed into an ever expanding town, where new roads and subdivisions are simply bulldozed out of the pindan and native scrub.

Meanwhile, another threat to the lifestyle of Indigenous people of the Kimberley looms large. Mining, more than any other industry, exemplifies the difference between Aboriginal and European attitudes to the land.

The grave danger imposed by large-scale mining is that it breaks up and removes large chunks of the matrix of all life; and by so doing it does irreparable damage to the huge subterranean battery from which all life is regenerated. Mining, and in particular open cast mining as used for the extraction of iron ore, uranium and also diamonds, brings into the open the innards of the earth, that which in the Dreamtime design was meant to be hidden and remain so, to be glimpsed only occasionally on the surface. (Kolig 1989: 142)

Pro-mining entrepreneurs extol the potential of the industry to supply Indigenous peoples with jobs and royalties. Huge financial interests are brought to bear against impoverished Aboriginal communities trying to protect their country, as with the recent debates over gas deposits off the Kimberley coast. This conflict of interests erupted in 1979-80 as the 'Noonkanbah dispute', and led to the formation of the Kimberley Land Council. The Noonkanbah land rights case politicised many young Aboriginal leaders including Jimmy Chi, Micky Manolis and Peter Yu.

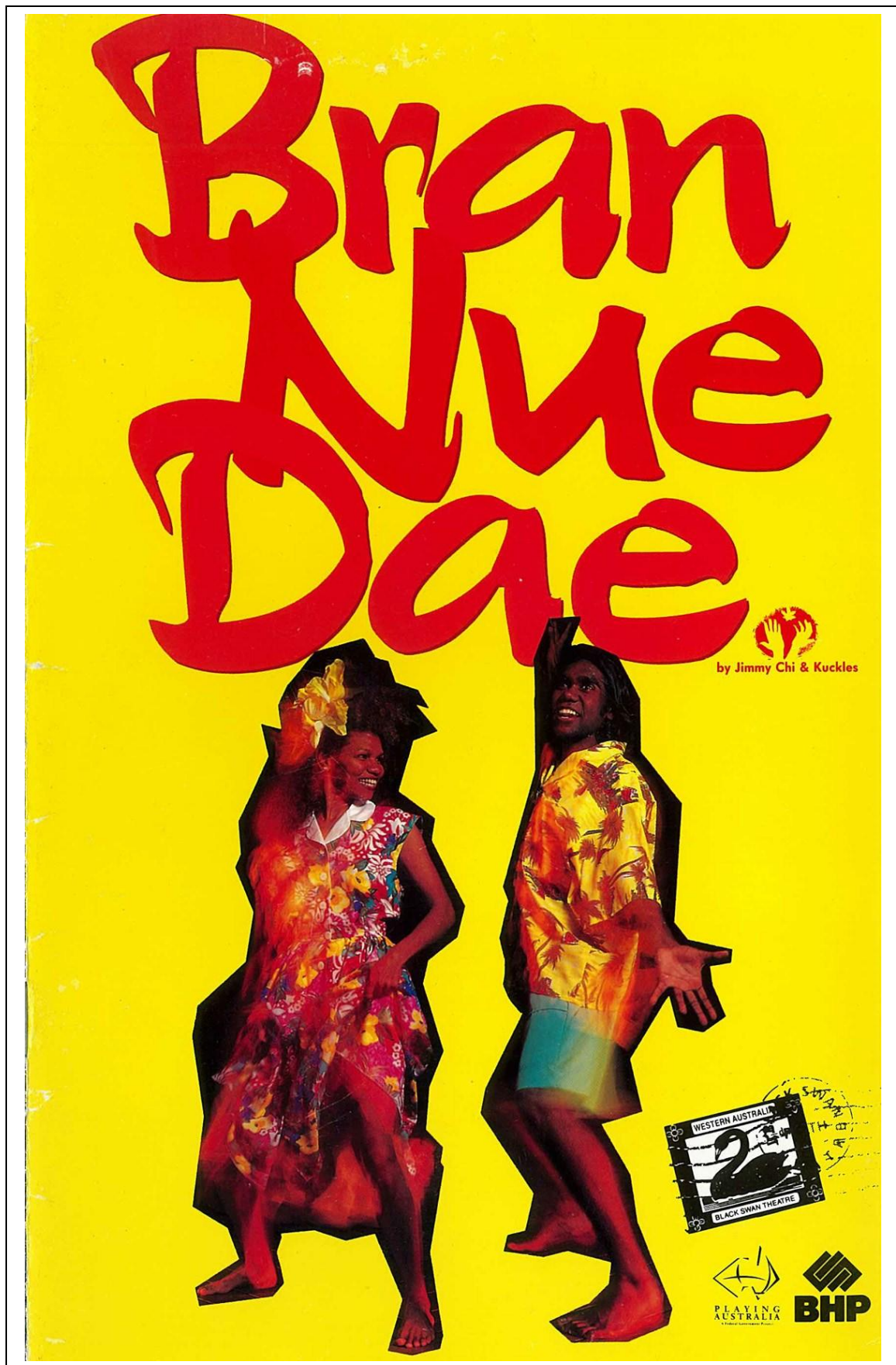
The Noonkanbah leasehold is situated on both sides of the middle course of the Fitzroy River, in the Shire of West Kimberley, on the country of the 'Yangura (or Yangngura, Yungngora – spellings differ widely)' community (Kolig 1989: 7-8). Although the Yangngura had tenure over their land, eight mining companies made applications for 500 mining tenements, searching primarily for diamonds and oil.

The crux of the difficulty became a site chosen by AMAX Petroleum Division and AMAX Iron Ore to drill an exploratory oil well, water well and construct a campsite. This was to be in the relative vicinity of P-hill, a sacred site, and the community alleged that the planned mining activity would endanger the site. (Kolig 1989: 147)

During the dispute, the Yangngura were represented by the West Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, while AMAX had the support of the State Government. In an attempt to counter a trade union ban on the operation, the State Government 'formed a company, commandeered the equipment and transferred it to the site using non-union labour and a considerable police force' (Kolig 1989: 148). This 'convoy' attracted large scale protests, including at the Great Northern Highway turn-off to Broome, where the song *Bran Nue Dae* was performed publicly as a political action.

Unfortunately the optimism of the song and the hope that land tenure would bring a *Bran Nue Dae* were not enough to stop the drilling, which commenced on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1980. Ironically, little of value was found, and Noonkanbah is remembered more for the blockade and protests than any long lasting mining boom.

Nevertheless the legacy of *Bran Nue Dae* continues. Indigenous Kimberley people are increasingly telling their own stories, through songs, theatre and film. Lost histories are being reclaimed and the other side of the story is being told. The thousands of Indigenous people who lost their lives and liberty during European settlement of the Kimberley will be remembered.



Program cover *Bran Nue Dae*, second production

## Chapter 3

### ***Bran Nue Dae*: Contextual Annotations on Act 1**

#### **Introduction**

*Bran Nue Dae*, by playwright Jimmy Chi and Broome band Kuckles, namely Jimmy Chi, Michael Manolis, Stephen Pigram, Patrick Bin Amat and Gary Gower, is a road story, told in a magic realist style, in the form of a musical. Widely applauded as the first Aboriginal musical after its debut at the 1990 Festival of Perth, it was awarded the 1990 Sydney Myer Award for Performing Arts for being “a fresh, boisterous, moving and engaging work” (Broome Museum file, 1998 – 90, vol 3).

Many of the events depicted in the play are autobiographical, lifted from the lives of the author and songwriters and their friends and families. For instance, the names of the main characters, Willie and Tadpole, come from Jimmy Chi’s childhood. Chi’s maternal grandfather was named Jadborr, and he and his wife Connie used to work for the pearler Mr Morgan and his wife. Jadborr used to work around the yard. Since Mrs Morgan couldn’t pronounce the name Jadborr she used to say ‘Willie Tadpole’ instead. Jimmy Chi was reminded of this childhood story by his sister after *Bran Nue Dae* had already been written; he had ‘forgotten it consciously’ but must have remembered it from his childhood (Chi, J. 2006, pers.comm., 16 November).

Chi told Elaine Rabbitt in a 1990 publicity interview for *Broome News*, that *Bran Nue Dae* “... is autobiographical and it is the story of lots of other Broome kids, too”. One of those younger kids was Stephen Pigram, who later helped Jimmy Chi with musicianship on the songs, and was Musical Director for the first production.

So when Jimmy actually wrote the play itself in the late 80’s he already had some existing songs and stuff to work with, and he saw how they fitted in the story that he was creating.

That story is based on some real stuff and some that Jimmy made up. A lot of it is real stories that’s all jumbled together. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., 9 April)

Stephen ‘Baamba’ Albert, who played Uncle Tadpole in the second production, also said Jimmy Chi wrote the play as a vehicle for the songs, rather than vice versa, because Kuckles were ‘the slackest band in the world’, in Jimmy Chi’s words, and no-one would otherwise listen to their songs. Albert describes how, when he first read the script, he was already familiar with many of the songs ‘from

listening to Jimmy Chi writing them, also I used to stay with Kuckles when they were studying in Adelaide' (2006, pers. comm., 20 April ).

However, from its inception the play also had a serious intent, as stated by Michael 'Micky' Manolis (2005, pers. comm., 5 April): 'I think *Bran Nue Dae* is a little bit of a history, its history lesson, told in a funny way'.

*Bran Nue Dae* tells the story of Willie, a young Baadi boy who is expelled from a Catholic boarding school in Perth and travels back to his homeland at Lombadina on the Dampier Peninsula in the company of his Uncle Tadpole and two hippies named Marijuana Annie and Slippery.

Described in contemporary reviews held in the Broome museum file for 1990 as 'the story of an Aboriginal boy's flight from Perth to his homeland, near Broome, and his search for identity, love and security' (Rabbitt, E. 1990), *Bran Nue Dae* is firmly anchored in a particular landscape, or 'country', with place names and visual symbols which resonate with local histories. This resonance imbues the play with multiple layers of meaning, and invests it with special significance for Indigenous audiences from the Kimberley.

The physical journey taken by the characters metaphorically takes them also through the contact history of black and white Australians in Western Australia. The power of 'country' to heal individuals from the trauma of this contact is theatricalised in the last scenes, when all the characters experience self-discovery and a 'homecoming'.

The play is structured in two Acts, divided into twelve scenes, specified by their setting rather than the usual numerical system.

## **Act 1**

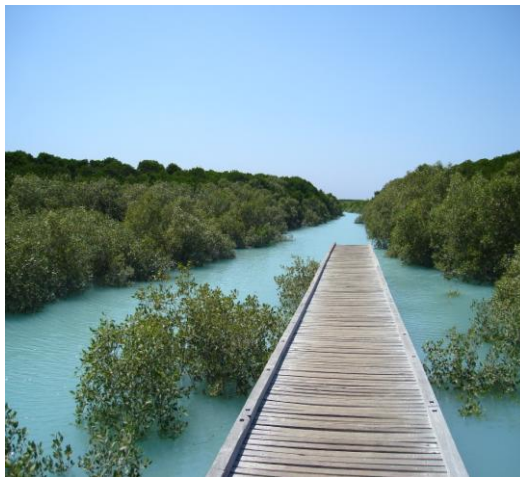
Immediately *Bran Nue Dae* opens at Sun Pictures, Broome, we are transported into the complex cultural and economic history of Broome. Stage directions for the opening scene specify three main elements, being Sun Pictures, signified by two rows of deckchairs, Streeter's Jetty, replete with 'small railway lines', and Kennedy Hill (Chi 1991: 1).

'The Sun Picture Gardens' is the world's oldest operating outdoor picture theatre. Originally built as an Emporium by Japanese merchant Yamasaki Yejiro in 1903, the building's corrugated iron walls also enclosed a 'Japanese playhouse where theatregoers could watch in fascination as actors, resplendent in elaborate hairstyles and costumes, performed tales from feudal Japan' (Sickert 2003:108).



There were many Japanese merchants in Broome providing services to support the pearling industry, and indeed the next owner of the building was well-known pearler, Harry Hunter, who 'commissioned architect Claude Hawkes to design a picture theatre suitable for the local climate' (Sickert 2003:108). Seating arrangements at Sun Pictures reflected the social stratification of Broome society, based on race, with Indigenous patrons having the cheapest and least comfortable seats. This practice continued, despite being illegal after 1967, from 1916 until 1975. Thus the setting read as quaint and exotic by non-Broome audiences had other implications for locals.

So you've got to be really careful who you are talking about when you say we're not angry – that sort of half-caste mob of Broome, and they've been half-caste since late 1800s a lot of them, have been more adept at surviving and getting by. But that mob that were still full-blood mob that used to sit at the back of the picture show here even in the 50s and 60s, they were still treated like the bottom caste in India. All that stuff has got to be remembered you know. And there's still a bit of that today. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., 9 April)



*Streeter's Jetty, Broome, high tide*



*Streeter's Jetty, showing sign and pindan wharf*

Similarly, having Streeter's Jetty projecting towards the audience evokes the peak days of the pearling industry as well as the family history of Jimmy Chi. Streeter's Jetty, which still stands, was built by pearler Edwin William Streeter in the 1880s as an access way through the mangroves to fresh water at the native soaks, or freshwater springs. Eventually Streeter built a store nearby and the 'small railway lines' on the jetty were used to transport goods to and from the luggers.

Jimmy Chi explains that his grandfather, John Chi, a Chinese pearler who had recently moved his luggers and businesses from Cossack to Broome, sourced



the water after consulting the Yawuru owners.

He got some money together from the other Chinese and brought a schooner and six luggers into Broome, the first fleet into Broome. ...

He discovered the water. He would have asked the Aboriginal people, the local Yawuru people. But he used to beachcomb before that, along the beaches from Cossack to upwards. (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., 24 May)

Sickert (2003: 32) corroborates that John Chi sank the well when ... 'the native soaks became unable to cope with the increased demand for fresh water'.

The third element in the opening set, Kennedy Hill, is the only hill in Broome, a large red sandhill and midden overlooking Roebuck Bay and a traditional camping place for Indigenous people of the Dampier Peninsula. It hosts a small Aboriginal settlement, formerly known as Kennedy Hill Reserve, now Mallingbarr Community.

The first characters we meet are teenagers. They are irreverent, lively and speak in Broome slang. Willie is described as a 'deadly' boy from Lombadina, a community on the Dampier Peninsula which was formerly a Benedictine mission on the traditional country of the Baad people. Willie is about to return to Rossmoyne Pallottine Aboriginal Hostel in Perth, the Catholic boarding establishment where many Broome teenagers, including most members of Kuckles, completed their secondary schooling.

Kuckles member, and Musical Director of the second production, Michael 'Micky' Manolis, described his experience at Rossmoyne:

.... it was a place for Aboriginal kids from up north here. So we all stayed there, girls and boys, but the girls had their own section down the road. Us guys we all went to different schools. My brother was going to Aquinas. I went to Trinity with some other boys. We were just boarding there, then we used to come back and do our studies and virtually stay there. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April)

The loneliness experienced by the boarders is expressed in the first song of the play, 'Light a Light', sung by Willie and the Chorus:

There are times when I'm feelin' so fearful, times when I'm cut up and crying inside ... (Chi1991: 3)

This feeling is reiterated by Micky Manolis in describing the origin of the diary scenario:

It was just my little diary that I used to write, because in them days we didn't come home for holidays like the kids do today, we stayed there for one whole year, so we were very lonely children.

We were living at Rossmoyne, with priests like Father Lummen. He was a veteran of the Second World War, he had no toes, he had a few toes missing because he fought on the Russian front. So he became a priest and he used to look after us but he was probably a nice bloke but he probably got desensitized in the war, he must have seen a lot of horrible things. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April)

In the play, Father Lummen, referred to in Micky Manolis's diary as 'Louie the Fly' (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April), and other Pallottine priests, are transmuted into the character Father Benedictus.

He was a priest, a Pallottine priest that looked after us. He used to line us up and it was like military style you know. But I don't think it's his fault, I don't blame him for it, that's what he went through. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April)

Broome is a very Catholic town, where the Church, particularly the St John of God order of nuns and Pallottine priests, has long dominated Indigenous education (Durack 1969). The expectation of Rossmoyne students was that, once educated, they would 'go fort and help your people – dey are crying in dere vilderness' (Chi1991: 4). Father Benedictus voices the benevolent educational goals of the Pallottines in his sermon.

My greatest desire is to see der native  
people be edercated und trained in der  
skills ov der modern world. To become  
citerzens ov dis country dat is truly deres. (Chi 1991: 10)

Willie and the boys are represented as actively resistant in this system. They 'gather' food in the canteen and mimic the Liturgy: 'Yah it is gut to eat at der Lord's table' (Chi 1991: 7). They respond to punishment by satirising the missionaries' colonial practices in the song 'Nothing I Would Rather Be', with its lyrics connecting the Church, the mining board, and loss of land. Jimmy Chi describes 'Nothing I Would Rather Be' as a protest song.

I just wanted to write about Aboriginals, about being Aboriginal. It was a protest song. And then I thought to put it in the play. It was done during the early times of writing. (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., 24 May)

Father Benedictus responds by expelling Willie, who exits '*as if expelled from the Garden of Eden*' (Chi 1991: 16) and stumbles into a 'chorus of fringe dwellers', sitting around a fire in a city park. They and Tadpole, soon to be revealed as Willie's wayward uncle, are singing the sorrowful song, 'A Longway Away from My Country'.

Longing for country is a theme the play returns to many times, with characters expressing their longing through songs like 'Light a Light', 'A Longway Away from My Country' and 'Feel Like Going Back Home'. It is intrinsic both to the autobiographical element of the story and to the original idea for structuring the play as a journey, '... because [of] the thing of going from Perth to Broome all the time and always wanting to come home' (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., 24 May).

For Indigenous people, the notion of country, and missing it, is more than homesickness. As described by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose:

... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease.

... Country is multi-dimensional - it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings: underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time. (Rose 1996: 7-8)

The stage directions in this scene also allude to the effects of institutionalisation on the boarders, in separating them from their culture. When Willie first encounters the fringe dwellers, he is '*attracted by the singing and the company but hesitates, unfamiliar with that lifestyle, and disturbed to find himself a part of it ... embarrassed by TADPOLE, moves away, afraid of throwing in his lot with him and ending up like him*' (Chi 1991:19).

The scene refers to the cultural cost, discussed by Jimmy Chi and Stephen Albert in Tom Zubrycki's 1992 film of the making of *Bran Nue Dae*, of being sent 'down South' to school and missing time spent with 'the old people', learning language and going through Law.

This feeling is a familiar one to Aboriginal people raised in the missions. Christine Choo's 2001 book *Mission Girls* tells the stories of people who were taken from their families, language and culture and placed in missions, particularly Beagle Bay. All the members of Kuckles had close relatives who were members of the Stolen Generation.

My granny and her sister the Pigram's granny got sent to Beagle Bay. There they couldn't find people who spoke their language until they met up with two other girls, that was Datu's [Patrick bin Amat] granny and her sister from Thangoo station. But they didn't know them, but they spoke the same language... That was when that church was getting built. They were little kids then... They just grew up there, and then they came to town and I think they worked for pearling masters. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers.comm., 5 April)

There is a sense that Willie and Tadpole's problems will disappear if only they can get back to their country at Lombadina, and rid themselves of the feeling of dislocation they and the fringe dwellers experience in the city.

So the journey thing – Jimmy uses it a lot – because all displaced and confused Aboriginal people are on a journey. No one's really happy, unless you're on your country, and you grew up there. Even people who were born in their country and they took off to get educated and they've been away 20 or 30 years, they come back and they make humbug. They make humbug because they've been away too long, instead of just settling back in with the mob who've stayed here. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., 9 April)

'Humbug' is a Broome Kriol term meaning 'making trouble', in this case implying that people who have been 'away too long' don't know how to act or show proper respect when they return home.

Tadpole's twenty year exile in the city at least gives him some advantage in being able to manipulate the confusion of city traffic (expressed through very athletic choreography during the song 'Traffic Light') in order to persuade Slippery and Marijuana Annie to drive him and Willie back to Broome. From this point, although the play is usually described as Willie's story, it is Tadpole who propels the action and acts as a guide for both his fellow travellers and the audience. His role is akin to that of the traditional theatrical fool or court jester, who speaks the truth without fear or favour.

The characters Slippery and Marijuana Annie represent the hippies, or 'mung beans', who moved to Broome in the 1970s and 80s. Their attitude toward Indigenous people is summed up in Slippery's line, '..... Aboro-gynal people... Coloured people... native people... the sort of people that I can relate to in this country...' (Chi 1991: 27). Stephen Pigram claims the 'mung beans' were good for Broome:

Well they're more receptive to stuff that's not the norm, they tend to look for spiritual stuff, they got into Aboriginal cultural stuff. People are still here from mung bean days, and they are running Native Title campaigns! (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., 9 April)

Enroute to Broome via the Great Northern Highway the four travellers strike up the tune 'Feel Like Going Back Home'. Written in Adelaide by a homesick Stephen Pigram, 'Feel Like Going Back Home' has become an iconic Broome song, featured in most performances by the Pigram Brothers band. The lyrics of the song, and the stage directions for the Chorus in the play, '*miming handline fishing, kuckling, gambling, dreaming, beach relaxing*' (Chi 1990: 30), conjure the tropical north. However the travellers are rudely jolted from their stoned haze to find themselves not in the north but on the highway outside Roebourne in the arid Pilbara, pulled over by the police and arrested for possession of marijuana.

In his review of the first production for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Duncan Graham points out that:

WA is not a good place for blacks. They form only 2.5 per cent of the population, but these 40,000 figure disproportionately on almost every social scale imaginable. To be born Aboriginal in the West means you're more likely to be sick as a child, have an inadequate education, be unemployed, suffer from several serious diseases, get a criminal record and die young, perhaps in a police cell. (Graham 1990)

This reality is reflected in the real story behind this scene, which again belongs to Micky Manolis.

Then Roebourne had something to do with being in jail. Because that's a real life story too, of getting caught with marijuana plants, because that's what happened to me, driving down from Perth, I had some marijuana plants in my car. ...not Roebourne jail, it was Port Hedland. They just changed it to Roebourne because people died in Roebourne. So that's the significance of that. To tell the story of someone who died in jail. So that idea came from me. ...Yeah. I was with a couple of hippies, but they weren't Marijuana Annie, it was my mate from Perth who's passed away now, he was a hippie. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April)

The travellers are incarcerated in the Roebourne lock-up, made infamous by the 1983 death in custody of young Aboriginal man John Pat, which contributed to the instigation of the 1988 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The lock-up is a small stone building, adjacent to the police station, and part of a cluster of solid stone prison buildings comprising the third Roebourne gaol.



*Roeburne gaol, old police lockup, site of John Pat's death*

Aboriginal men have been gaoled in Roebourne since the 1880s, usually for 'cattle-killing or stealing' (Weightman n.d.: 12). They came mainly from Wyndham, Fitzroy and the Leopold Ranges, and were transported by boat, in heavy neck-chains, with 'batches of prisoners' chained together (Weightman n.d.: 14). Gaoler James Pond described the difficulties of removing iron 'split-link' neck chains in his testimony to the 1904 Royal Commission into the treatment of Aboriginal prisoners. Pond said the split-links were opened by 'hammer and chisel, with the prisoner's neck placed on the blacksmith's anvil' (Weightman n.d.: 14).

I had to superintend and hold the chain while the officer opened the link with hammer and chisel. I was afraid that it might injure the prisoners' necks; these prisoners had no proper necklets. All raw chains. (Weightman n.d.: 14).



*Old Roebourne gaol cell, showing chains and leg irons for prisoners, and museum interpretation*

Pond further described the dangers of chaining men together during transport, 'especially on board ship; if there was a wreck, every life of the twenty might have been lost'.

At Roebourne, neck chains were fastened by Yale locks, with the weight of the chains being from '2lbs, 12 ozs, to 5 lbs, 14 ozs'. They were kept on continuously for the whole length of the sentence, whether working outside in the searing heat or at night when they were fastened to iron bolts and rings in the stone walls (Weightman n.d.: 6).

These Aboriginal prisoners are honoured and remembered in one of the most powerful scenes in *Bran Nue Dae*, when the Chorus wear heavy neck chains while singing 'Linjoo [police] Blues'. Photographic images of the original prisoners are simultaneously projected in the background.

For Willie, his first experience of being in jail serves as a contemporary initiation, and he realizes that, like John Pat, he might not survive it.

This your first time in jail, Willie?

Yeah uncle, I'm man now.

Never min' my boy...legal aid get you out of here.

Uncle, people die in jail I? (Chi1991: 34)

[NB 'I' in Broome kriol means 'ay or isn't that so', (Chi1991: 116)]

After this exchange, Willie is 'pounced on' by the police, 'belted' and shouts in pain as the plaintive song 'Listen to the News', with its refrain - 'Is this the end of our people?' starts up.

In a telephone conversation on 16 November, 2006, Jimmy Chi explained the background to the song, which is another collaboration between Jimmy Chi and Micky Manolis. Apparently, ... 'the song 'Listen to the News' was written in Auntie Katie and Uncle Atchil's old house, in the very early days, about 78 or 77. It was written in response to the Jewish [Israeli] athletes being shot at the Munich Olympics and the riots that followed'. It is inspired by the teachings of Lobsang Lampa and by Jimmy Chi's interest in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and their belief that '... a prophet will come and there will be a Second Coming... Its all Biblical, Christian and Tibetan Buddhist and the works of Lobsang Rampa' (ibid).

Micky Manolis adds:

Yeah, that song *Listen to the News* is written because of newsreels, when you hear things about your people. Similar like if you're Jewish today you might think that song is about you, because you're always on the news. And the more you're on the news, the more people get negative attitudes toward you because you're on the news, no matter who you are. Whether you are a terrorist or not, if you are on the news people will form an opinion about you, whether they hate you or love you. Aborigines are on the news, so people will form an opinion on them, whether they hate them or like them, there's no in between. Some people will adopt an attitude that they are right and they deserve to complain, other people will say they're just a bunch of whingers so they don't deserve anything, and who should care about them? (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April).

When the characters wake, they are on Roebuck Plains, and back in the Kimberley country known to Tadpole and Willie as belonging to their Yawuru countrymen. While Slippery and Marijuana Annie complain of the heat and hunger, Tadpole and Willie are energised. Traditional Aboriginal dancers appear and perform a '*boisterous dance with hunting and food gathering movements*', singing the song 'Jalangardi', in which bush foods – barni, magabala, mayi, wali, aril - are itemised and relished along with the names of various language groups of the Dampier Peninsula– Karrajarri, Yawuru, Nyikina, Bardi [Baad] (Chi 1991: 42-45).

The basis of the barni hunting scene was laid out in the video clip *What Time Low Tide?*, made back in 1986 by Micky Manolis and Kuckles.

That thing came from *What Time Low Tide?* because I used to go making movies there with traditional old blokes to recognise them for passing culture to us. That's traditional country for Yawuru people. (Manolis, M. 2005, pers. comm., 5 April)

Within the context of the play, this scene seems to have a spiritual purpose, with the vitality arising from identification with country. Stephen Pigram has described the connection between hunting and 'coming home'.

You don't really think about it in a second way, it's just a natural thing that you do when you come back home. Even if we go away for a weekend, when we come back we jump in a car and piss off up the coast and go catch a fish. It's a weird thing ... You get that real urgency when you fly over Broome and you see the water and check the tide out – 'Let's go fishing'. Imagine if you stayed away for a month!



It's the act too, it's not just catching a big freezer full of fish and boasting about it. If you can eat it out there too it's even better, it tastes better.  
(2005, pers. comm., 9 April)

Roebuck Plains is a significant place for cousins Micky Manolis and Stephen Pigram as Lake Edarr is the traditional country of their great grandmother. Yawuru people were removed from Roebuck Plains in the 1880s so the country could be exploited for the pastoral industry.

One early leaseholder of Roebuck Plains Station was the entrepreneur and master pearler E.W. Streeter, builder of Streeter's Jetty (Burton 2000:13). Pastoral stations were often used as holding camps for illegal Aboriginal labour forces. For instance, Sickert (2003: 28) describes how Aboriginal men who had been 'blackbirded' from as far as the Fitzroy River Valley were 'kept at a station owned by the Kimberley Pastoral Company until their dispatch to pearlers could be organised'. This fate was shared by many Yawuru people who were removed from Roebuck Plains, including Lake Edarr, to the pearling camps around Broome.

Siting the scene at Roebuck Plains therefore illustrates the function of local knowledge in interpreting *Bran Nue Dae*. Although non-Indigenous audiences can enjoy the scene for its choreography, humour and romance, Indigenous Broome audiences would read the scene from a different perspective.

More simply, Stephen 'Baamba' Albert (2006, pers. comm., 20 April), says that for travellers from Broome 'arriving at Roebuck Plains is telling you you're home'.

## ***Bran Nue Dae*: Contextual Annotations on Act 2**

Act 2 of *Bran Nue Dae* opens at a legendary Broome location, the Roebuck Bay Hotel. The site of 'the Roey' dates to 'the same year the town was declared in 1883, town lots were sold by auction for the princely reserve price of twenty pounds, and the site of the Roebuck Bay Hotel was sold to James William Hope of Fremantle, a physician, in 1887' (*Broome Advertiser* 24 March 2005: 17). The actual Hotel was built by Edwin William Streeter, nominated as 'London pearl merchant', although it 'consisted of only a few sheets of tin iron and not much more' (ibid). In 1904, the Roebuck Hotel was totally destroyed by fire and after rebuilding was combined with the Broome Arms next door, now the Pearlers Bar, to make one hotel (ibid). The *Broome Advertiser* further notes the Indigenous history of the site.

In 1889 the first post-master opened business in a 400-gallon tank, operating on a kerosene tin and the only water was a native well close to where the Roebuck Hotel was to be situated. It seems the location was used as a watering hole for up to 40,000 years before the hotel was built. (*Broome Advertiser* 24 March 2005: 17)

As this site is not far from Streeter's wharf and the current John Chi Lane, these are probably the same 'native soaks' where John Chi sank a well.

As a performance venue, the Roebuck has strongly contributed to the development of Broome music, including bands associated with *Bran Nue Dae*, like Broome Beats, Kuckles and Scrap Metal. Stephen Pigram gives an idea of the atmosphere of performances at the Roebuck.

You've got to realise we were used to playing in pubs all our life, to drunken punters, making them dance, playing to people screaming away. (2005, pers. comm., April 9)

Even the early closing hours encouraged the development of local music, as described by Micky Manolis in an interview with the *Broome Advertiser*.

Manolis said back in the days when the clock struck struck 11 and the pubs shut in Broome the town's music scene really came alive. Kuckles would then move on to a friend's backyard, down to the wharf to play on the back of oil rigs, or to the meatworks quarters and continued playing until into the early hours of the morning. (Tomich 2005)

Post-pub parties were also held out in the sandhills behind Cable Beach, where many of the 'mung-beans', or hippies, lived in tents and shacks.

There were some good musicians amongst them, e.g. violin, fiddle players, some great slide guitarists. They just added to the mix.

...Hill 22 was more of a local place, this side of Cable Beach Club, the biggest hill there. You know as the road turns, going out to Cable Beach, straight in a line with that. Got no idea where the name came from, trying to work it out. It ended up a party place, at the end, especially in the mung bean days, good sing songs, till sunrise, when the pubs used to shut at 11 o'clock...Yeah, and it was good, because you'd meet artists, not just musicians, but painters, poets, all sorts of people, it was brilliant. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)

The Shinju Matsuri programme for August 1990 outlines the musical tradition inherited by the writers of *Bran Nue Dae*.

Music had always been a part of the life of Old Broome during the pearling days. Guitar swapping nights were a tradition. People would meet around a camp-fire and spend the evening singing and playing music. Many different musical influences have come to the fore in the current Broome music scene – the traditional music of the Aborigines, the Koepangers, the Malays, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Filipinos, the West Indies and Europe.

The same article quotes Broome Musicians Aboriginal Corporation, formed in 1985, as estimating that there were 'close to 100 musicians in Broome that we know of and many others that are not known to us at the moment'.

Another influence on the unique style of Broome music was the isolation of the town. Until very recently the Great Northern Highway was dirt, and therefore could become impassable in the wet season. The closest town to the south is Port Hedland, still several hours drive away. As depicted in *Bran Nue Dae*, travellers would arrive at 'the Roey' as if reaching an oasis.

When the travellers of *Bran Nue Dae* eagerly hit the Roebuck, they find a Country and Western band is playing.

Country & Western was really strong, especially Slim Dusty - he was everywhere, Dad used to play it, ABC radio used to play it – incessantly. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)



*Roebuck Bay Hotel,  
Broome*

Just as the pub is about to shut, Rosie invites Willie to join her 'going for kuckle' (Chi 1991: 57) in the mangroves. Kuckles, or cockles, are a popular bush tucker food, and a colloquial term for female genitalia.

The next scene erupts into a song and dance routine which both celebrates and makes fun of sexuality, 'Everybody Looking for Kuckle'.

...Broome's a small place at that time, not like how it is now. We used to do that, either you sat under the tamarind tree ...drinking until 4 in the morning, or you sat under the tamarind tree writing songs until 4 in the morning, or you went down the beach and chase woman until 4 in the morning. (Manolis, M. 2005. pers.comm., 5 April)

'Everybody Looking for Kuckle', 'Everybody Likes a Magabala' and 'Seeds That You Might Sow' are songs which reclaim sexuality as a positive and joyful force in contrast to the repressive attitudes of the missionaries.

The lifestyle of the monks who had made the commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience, and who lived in community without women, represented values which were completely alien to the local people. The Aborigines found it difficult to understand why the monks lived celibate lives because the expression of sexuality was a vital force in Aboriginal life. In the Christian tradition, the expression of sexuality was suppressed, repressed and labelled as evil if it occurred outside the prescribed context of monogamous marriage. The suppression of sexuality strongly influenced the contact between the monks and the Aborigines and other people whom the monks considered to be exploiting the Aborigines sexually. The monks publicly opposed the Aborigines' sexual practices. (Choo 2001: 55-6)

'Everybody Looking for Kuckle's' playfulness is followed by the beautiful love song, 'Nyul Nyul Girl', a love song celebrating Indigenous women and the first song Jimmy Chi performed publicly.

I used to perform 'Nyul Nyul Girl'. It wasn't done properly till we did that Milliya Rumurra tape...What it was written for, it was written very early before I met Stephen or Mick, I was with Dorothy Marshall, Esther Bevan and Mina Williams, they used to be my mates, and Mina is Nyul Nyul, so I wrote the song for them. So it's about her and the other two. (Chi, J. 2005, pers.comm., 24 May)

Nyul Nyul is a Dampier Peninsula language belonging to people of the Beagle Bay area, while Bardi or Baad is spoken further up around Lombadina and One Arm Point. Although the song is called 'Nyul Nyul Girl', it is written and sung in both English and Baad. According to Stephen Pigram (2005, pers. comm., April 9) Jimmy Chi was the first musician in Broome to start writing original material, particularly using language, and was an inspiration to younger musicians.

The romantic mood established by 'Nyul Nyul Girl' is interrupted by the entrance of the Pentecostal Christians singing 'All the Way Jesus'. Jimmy Chi attributes his ability to write hymns to his Catholic upbringing, his days as an altar boy, and particularly to his mother.

Well being exposed to Father Lummen, and the Irish nuns and the Irish priests, they gave you a love of Ireland and the songs... My mother used to sing these old songs, hymns and things like that, Catholic songs, and I just grew up with a love for singing. (Chi, J. 2005, pers.comm., 24 May)

Jimmy Chi's hymns, such as 'All the Way Jesus' and 'Child of Glory', are well loved by the Broome community and 'Lay Me in the Arms of Jesus' is often sung at funerals.

The hymn and Pentecostal procession set up the atmosphere for 'miracles' and a healing. However, although the healing context is Christian, the forgiveness does not come from the Church but from the characters' acceptance of themselves and each other, particularly in the love songs 'Marijuana Annie', sung by Slippery, and 'Sweet Sister', sung by Theresa. In a combination of Hollywood happy ending and Shakespearean comedy, both Marijuana Annie and Slippery discover they have Aboriginal parentage, Tadpole and Willie find they are father and son and Slippery finds out he is Father Benedictus's son and Willie's half brother. The revelations are presented with both poignancy and humour, yet expose serious issues in Broome history, such as the Stolen Generations, displacement of Aboriginal people from their country and pregnancies of Aboriginal women to Catholic priests.

... that's why he [Jimmy Chi] rolled the Stolen Generations thing in with Marijuana Annie because she's taking the journey too. And even Slippery – he's the result of a Catholic priest union with an Aboriginal woman. And that's a true story from around here too, we can't mention names because people would get wild but it's widely accepted. So that's another thing that happened that people talk about these days, you know the Catholic Church coming clean ... but he did sort of absolve everybody at the end, because everybody sort of spilled their heart, they all went to confession in a sense. Everybody was absolved of all their sins.

He took it a bit easy on the Church I reckon, but that's alright, because up until now, in this area, there's never really been a hatred of the Church here. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)

The Catholic Church has played a dual role in the history of the Dampier Peninsula. The missions protected Indigenous people from the excesses of the pearlers and pastoralists but prevented them from practising their culture and

speaking their languages.

And there was a lot of stuff going on, blackbirding and slave labour and basically just abusing women, all sorts of things, so the Catholic Church was a sort of saviour in that respect. And they taught you life skills I suppose. But that's all on the plus side.

On the negative side they didn't encourage language use. They had that old attitude that anything to do with Aboriginal culture and law was all devil stuff ... But that was right up until the 1960's. That was the whole psyche of Australia, they were trying to breed it out of people everywhere.  
(Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)

Mary Durack, in her history of the Kimberley missions, *The Rock and the Sand*, describes Auber Octavious Neville's concept of assimilation as '... a progressive breeding out of the Aboriginal by the pairing of half with quarter-caste or preferably with white', and quotes him declaring, 'with cheerful confidence': 'We are...going to merge the native race into our white community' (Durack 1969: 208). In his role as 'Chief Protector of Aborigines', A.O.Neville was able to legislate his belief in 'biological absorption' or 'assimilation' utilising what is now regarded as the pseudo-scientific theories of eugenics' also espoused by the Nazis (Keeffe 2003: 103).

Though Stephen Pigram implies that the missionaries colluded in the policy of assimilation, Neville's plan included undermining Catholic influence on Indigenous people through appropriating mission lands into government reserves. He also embarked on a campaign for bigger and better native reserves, more stations like Moola Bulla, in East Kimberley, that had been purchased by his department in 1912 to be run for the benefit of the Aborigines. For this purpose he saw an ideal prospect in the Dampierland peninsula, the whole of which area, including Sunday Island, he was anxious to have declared a government native reserve. This proposal entailed making a clean sweep of the three struggling missions and starting afresh on a 'sound economic basis'.  
(Durack, 1969: 208)

Far from being 'for the benefit of Aborigines', Moola Bulla became a place of punishment, where 'troublemakers' were sent to reform. The 'three struggling missions' referred to were those at Beagle Bay, Lombadina and Sunday Island, the first two being Catholic and the third Protestant .

When his plan proved unsuccessful, Neville, in conjunction with the white community of Broome, forced the missionaries to allow trained workers of whom '... a number had shown outstanding ability in various branches of building and carpentry, two or three had learned plumbing, others tailoring, bootmaking,

saddling, baking and butchery' (Durack 1969: 211), to move from Beagle Bay to Broome in order to join the workforce.

Before long every white family in Broome had acquired a mission-educated 'binghi' [derogatory Malay term for Aboriginal, strongly objected to by Jimmy Chi] couple. Some of these had left their children and old people behind; others had transferred in family groups, sent their children to the convent school in town and settled their elder relatives in nearby camps' (Durack 1969: 212).

The near servitude of these Aboriginal couples enabled the white community of Broome to increase their own standard of living and establish themselves at the top of the social ladder, paying a pittance to the mission-trained workers. The workers meanwhile maintained a close relationship with the missions at Beagle Bay and Lombadina, partly because of ties to family who remained behind. These ties are poignantly interpreted in the song 'Town by the Bay', which Jimmy Chi says is about Beagle Bay where his mother grew up, and Broome and Lombadina as well, as they all have 'mission yards', 'like the common gate in Broome, when you first enter the town' (Chi, J. 2006, pers.comm., 16 November).

The song expresses people's fondness for the missions, which for members of the Stolen Generations were their childhood homes.

I suppose when you get taken when you're 5 years old you're not going to remember much before that, you're not going to remember that point when you got pulled away. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)

Stephen 'Baamba' Albert, who went through school with his cousin Jimmy Chi and played Tadpole in the second production, explains the significance of this song in a 1997 video profile, *Artists Upfront: Stephen Baamba Albert*:

'Town by the Bay' is a theme song for me, and probably for all my people here as well. It's a song about a hometown and everybody's got a hometown. It reminds other people of their own place. It's not only our song, it's everybody's song'. (video recording 1997)

Tadpole rallies the reunited family to go on to Lombadina, a community near the tip of Dampier Peninsula where a Catholic mission had been established on the traditional camping place of the Baad people (Durack 1969: 183).

Come on, we gotta go to Lombadina now, come on you old bitches, this not our country. Our country up there. Come on, you young bastards, you gotta go with us too. We family now. (Chi 1991: 78)

Mary Durack says the site already bore the name Lombadina when taken up as a pearling base by Harry Hunter and Sidney Hadley in the 1880's, with the root *lomba* being a Baad word meaning 'open' or 'open to' (1969: 295). It became the property of the Church when Bishop Mathew Gibney purchased the 100,000 acres from Hunter and Hadley in 1892 with the intention of extending the mission area and stock of the main Trappist mission at Beagle Bay.

Although both Jimmy Chi and Stephen Pigram stress that in the plot of *Bran Nue Dae* the particular destination isn't important –

... and that's really what it was about, rather than going from Point A to Point B and places being significant. Lombadina just happens to be out in the bush, so it could be Beagle Bay, or Bidyadanga, because its about getting back to your country. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)

Lombadina, and its adjacent sister community Djarindjin, is a significant destination on many levels. It is traditional country for Willie and Tadpole, as Baad men, but it is also Jimmy Chi's traditional country, through his mother who was born slightly south at Pender Bay. For the traditional owners, Lombadina is one of the few contact sites which has a history based more on co-operation than removal and exploitation.

The beauty of Lombadina is people weren't removed there, like Beagle Bay. Beagle Bay was a place where people got taken to. Lombadina people were rounded up but they were actually living there, that's their country. Lombadina was a place where they settled, for the missionaries, but they were still on their country. They could practise their law, everything, there. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers. comm., April 9)



*Lombadina from old settlement in Djarindjin Hills*



Much of Lombadina's relatively benign contact history can be attributed to Stephen Pigram's Filipino grandfather Thomas Puertollano, who at one time owned the station and, with his wife Agnes, established a market garden there.

In the meantime the Pallotines, finding they had neither the means nor the staff to develop Lombadina, had sold the title deeds and whatever stock was still running on this property to Thomas Puertollano. The hard-working Manilaman had built up his herd as best he could and with the skill passed on to him by Father Jean Marie established a good little garden, the produce of which he sold to the lugger crews. (Durack 1969: 183)

Through the many changing fortunes of the mission, Thomas Puertollano supported it physically, financially and spiritually, sometimes taking work on the pearling luggers, at one time giving up his home for the newly arrived St John of God nuns (Durack 1969: 189). He worked closely with the Trappist missionaries, particularly the horticulturist Father Jean Marie (Durack 1969: 95-6,189), and later with Father Nicholas Emo, who moved to Lombadina in 1910 at Puertollano's invitation. Despite his hard work, he was prevented from succeeding as a station owner because of his racial classification.

His great difficulty, however, was that being classed as an Asiatic he could not obtain a permit either to employ or to exert any authority over the Aborigines. This led to difficulties as Lombadina had always been a central camp of the Bard tribe and the hundred or more natives gathered there expected to be kept in food, clothing and blankets from Puertollano's meagre store (Durack 1969: 183).

After the death in 1915 of his friend, Father Emo, the last of the Trappist monks, Thomas Puertollano sold the property back to the Church and eventually moved with his family into Broome, where he established a popular bakery, and became part of the cross-cultural Asiatic /Aboriginal community which was anathema to A.O.Neville.

In Lombadina, where the Church of Christ the King and other buildings surround an open area of green grass and trees, the characters of *Bran Nue Dae* experience the 'peace and harmony' which belong to that country, and first attracted Thomas Puertellano.

Despite its poverty there was from the beginning an atmosphere of peace and harmony about the remote little mission spread out within sound of the sea and in the shelter of the high white dunes. (Durack 1969: 189)

Slippery says 'its just like Goa'. The characters join in the procession of Christ the King, arriving at the church, where Slippery meets his long-lost father, the priest Benedictus. Benedictus absolves everyone present with the words:

Ve are all fallen angels and ve all haff a multitude of crosses to bear.  
You have come back, und I have come back!  
Der mission is finished! (Chi1991: 83)



*Church of Christ the King,  
Lombadina*

The characters respond with ‘one great sigh, a mixture of regret and relief’ (Chi1991: 83) before following Tadpole into the celebratory song ‘Bran Nue Dae’.

‘Bran Nue Dae’, the song, existed long before the play. It was written by Jimmy Chi and Micky Manolis under a tamarind tree in Broome and Manolis says that when they finished the song, at 4 o’clock in the morning, they ‘felt happy’.

Well, ‘Bran Nue Dae’ was a funny sort of song, that was a funny song, comedy song, it’s supposed to be anyway. It’s supposed to make you laugh. (Manolis, M. 2005. pers.comm., 5 April)

It was first performed publicly in ‘about 1978’, at the first Aboriginal Ball in Broome, as a fundraiser for Milliya Rumurra Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre (Chi, J. 2005, pers.comm., 24 May). However, it was more famously performed in August 1980 ‘on the back of a truck at the Broome turn-off’, by Jimmy Chi, Peter Yu, Michael Manolis and Stephen ‘Baamba’ Albert, during the demonstrations against Amax Corporation. Amax had planned to drill for oil on a sacred site belonging to the Yungngora community at Noonkanbah.

Jimmy Chi (2005, pers.comm., 24 May) cites the Noonkanbah demonstration as his ‘first political action’, and has described the experience as ‘traumatic’. Apparently, at the Broome turn-off Chi was on a drug for schizophrenia which made him feel paranoid. He said that seeing the police coming armed with guns made him think, ‘What’s becoming of my country? It’s becoming like America.’ Chi felt for the old people who were being subjected to this ‘absolutely traumatic

thing', and said that 'we were being subjected to it too'. Jimmy Chi wondered why Aboriginal people had not taken up arms, since other people all over the world had taken the course of violent resistance in response to oppression. He said that he felt Aboriginal people were being trampled on, and poor people were being crushed (Chi, J. 2006, pers.comm., 16 November).

Unfortunately the Noonkanbah protest was unsuccessful, and Amax commenced drilling on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1980. They did not find oil.

Stephen 'Baamba' Albert sees 'Bran Nue Dae' as an optimistic song. He says 'that optimism is the healing part of the show, knowing the sun will come up tomorrow. The characters had something to rejoice about' (2006, pers.comm., 20 April).

'Bran Nue Dae' calls for Aboriginal people to have 'our land back, we want 'em rights, we want 'em fair deal, all same longa white man' (Chi 1991: 84). However constant disappointment in the political process is reflected in Tadpole's comments:

They bin talk about this kind, that kind,  
any kind, every kind, but still same kind... (Chi 1991: 87)

As Sally Morgan reflects in the program for the second production (1993),

Deceit and lies on behalf of government departments, sadness, confusion, lack of identity, breakdown of family ties and culture. The story of my family is not unique. It is echoed a thousand times over the length and breadth of Australia.

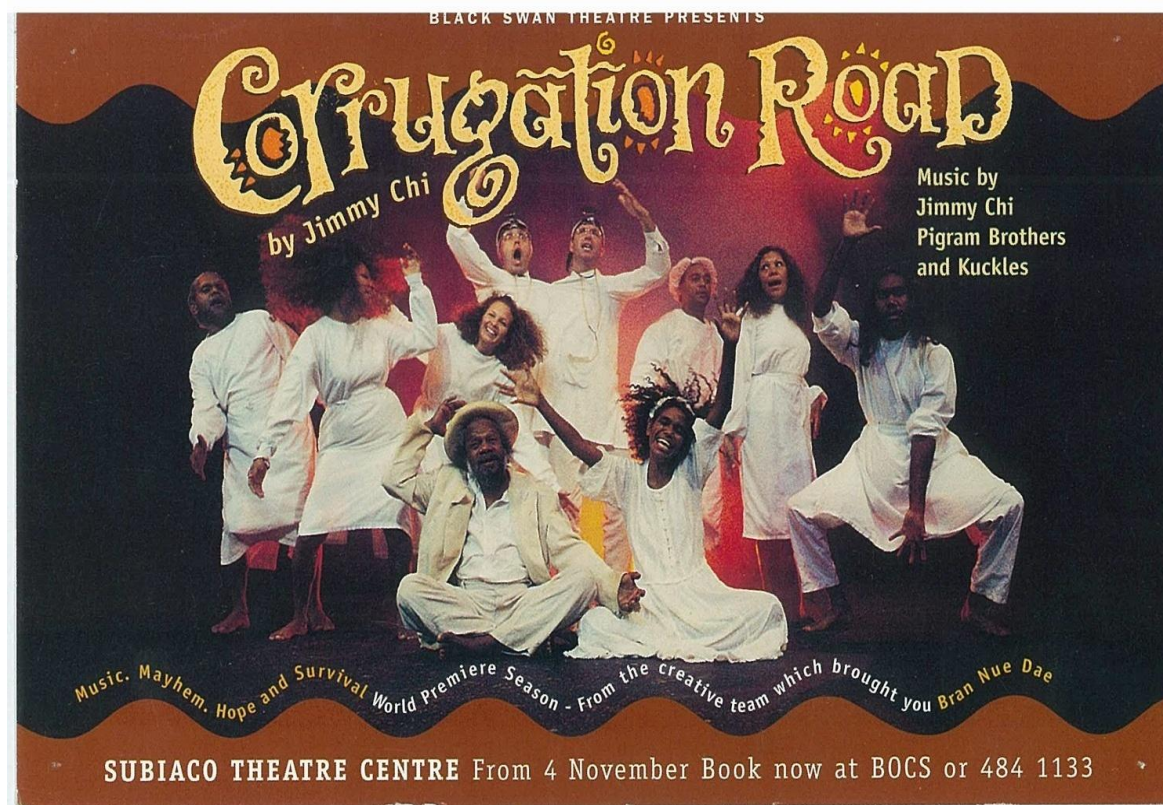
It is important for us to discuss and detail such things, to reclaim the past, our families, ourselves; to have something to be; a framework within which we can exist and learn to be proud. In the telling we assert the validity of our own experience and we call the silence of 200 years a lie.

The play ends with a love song from the three couples, supported by the chorus, 'If I Gave My Heart to You', after which 'the cast goes up to heaven'.

'If I Gave My Heart to You' leaves the audience with a positive message for a future based on reconciliation through individual relationship, openness and honesty

...then you will take my hand  
and understand me, when you really see me. (Chi 1991: 89)

## Chapter 4



Program cover *Corrugation Road*, Black Swan Production 1996

### ***Corrugation Road*: Contextual Annotations**

*Corrugation Road* is the second of Jimmy Chi's two plays and, according to Jimmy Chi (Chi, J. 2004, pers. comm., Dec 10), the more important because of the issues it raises.

Like Chi's earlier play, *Bran Nue Dae*, *Corrugation Road* employs the rich musical heritage of Broome and a humorous, irreverent attitude to examine serious subjects, in this case mental illness, homosexuality and death. The plot also has some similarities to *Bran Nue Dae*, in that the characters travel north on a 'healing journey', a lost daughter is reunited with her mother, and the Shakespearian happy ending depicts the joyous union of three sets of lovers.

Unlike *Bran Nue Dae*, which had a gestation period of some twelve years, *Corrugation Road* was written in six months as a commission from Black Swan Theatre Company in Perth:

Simply because we needed some money, and then we had six months in which to do it. Duncan [Campbell] came in and said, 'You've got to do this thing by this time, it's already advertised'. So I just had to bloody do this thing. (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., May 24)

Jimmy Chi says he felt pressured by the tight time frame, and was dissatisfied with the initial production.

Well the final script I've done, the final performance. That was a lot better. The first production was pretty rushed. I think it left me with a bad taste for writing musical plays. It's only now that I feel like writing again. (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., May 24)

One difficulty in studying the play is that no script has been published. For this reason, this chapter follows closely the original production by Black Swan Theatre Company, the only production to date. The script available from Black Swan, which is the working script for the 1996 Perth Season, is not the final version, and contains many errors, including the spelling of dialogue in the Baad language.

*Corrugation Road* depicts Jimmy Chi's experience of living with mental illness through the main character, Bob Two Bob, who identifies the underlying cause of his illness as child abuse. Notably, Bob's healing does not come through the medical system, which is brutally satirised, but through his relationships and return to his traditional country.

Bob's fragile psychological state is reflected in the structure of the circular narrative, which Doctors Fruitcake and Basketcase describe in the Hellfire Club scene as coming 'direct from Bob's psychosis' (Chi 1996: 24).

Broome identity Stephen 'Baamba' Albert, who played Uncle Tadpole in *Bran Nue Dae* and Bob Two Bob in *Corrugation Road*, says '...*Corrugation Road* is like a pulse, a graph, up and down up and down, up and down... it's like the mind of Bob Two Bob' (Albert, video recording 1997).

In a discussion in April 2007 (Chi, J. 2007, pers.comm., April 16), Jimmy Chi explained that through the Nativity, Easter and Crucifixion scenes the plot follows the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. This would identify Bob Two Bob as a Christ-like figure, whose suffering has worth as a source of compassion and redemption.

The action of the play begins and ends on Iwanj [pronounced Ee-whine], or Sunday Island.



The sea culture of the Bardi and Jawi peoples, who today live mainly at One Arm Point near Cape Leveque close to the southern Kimberley coast, stretches back to the time when the reef flats were developing up to 3000 years ago. Their sea environment is a place of whirlpools, and cyclones are common. The tides that rise and fall up to eight metres each day may reach even twelve knots....William Dampier noted a little of their heritage as fisherfolk : how they travelled out with the tide on their mangrove rafts, caught fish and returned on the incoming tide. (Sharp 2002: 239)

This turbulent physical environment of whirlpools and ring tides is a common motif in the art of Baadi and Jawi people and provides a metaphor for Bob Two Bob's interior world.



*Mooring steps, Sunday Island*



*Oily waters, Buccaneer Straits*

Scenes on Iwanj are contrasted with those in a sterile mental hospital reminiscent of Graylands in Perth, where Jimmy Chi has often stayed. However in Chi's typical magic realist style, this hospital has doctors who are Siamese twins - one straight and one gay, patients who pop up through the floor and a nurse who doubles as a siren.

As Stephen 'Baamba' Albert has commented regarding the use of humour:

Aboriginal humour, especially where I come from, is a healing thing. It comes from everybody, old people right through to young people and it's in our storytelling as well'. (Albert, video recording 1997)

.....

*Corrugation Road* opens with a funeral, the funeral of Bob Two Bob, where Fiona is delivering a eulogy for 'Djarmi Bob' ['Djarmi' meaning grandfather on the father's side in Baad traditional kinship terminology], her 'special sweetheart'. Bob has just fallen from a boat in which the characters are travelling to his home country on Iwanj, or Sunday Island. Fiona delivers the eulogy partly in English, partly in Broome Kriol, partly in Baad, the Indigenous language of the northern Dampier Peninsula.

Sunday Island is situated just opposite One Arm Point and is the traditional country of the Jawi people.

...Jawi are slightly different to the mainland mob. The mainland mob are Baad – not Bardi - Jawi was the Sunday Island mob and the mob from the islands, and most of them are settled in One Arm Point, but there's some mainland people there too. And the language is slightly different to what proper Baad is, there's extra i's, they add extra i's to it. Rocky [ie the late Joseph Rock ] used to tell me all that stuff.

...That's Jimmy's country too, because Pender Bay is part of Baad country, but he's never really lived up there. Aunty Lily came from up there now, Jimmy's mother. (Pigram, S. 2005. pers.comm., April 9)



*Home Valley, Sunday Island*



*Deepwater anchorage for truck loading, Sunday Island*

Fiona describes the timing of her and Bob's births during the Japanese air raids over Broome in 1942. Using a mixture of mime, gesture and props, she translates the Baad / Kriol words for the non-Indigenous audience, for instance gesturing to her breasts when explaining that during the 'big mix up' of the air raid, the babies were first nursed by each other's mother, or holding up oversized underpants to explain the meaning of 'Djowidj'.

The air raids remain a significant point in people's memories and in Broome history, partly because of what they precipitated for the Indigenous and mixed race community of Broome. In fact, most people had been evacuated from Broome after the bombing of Darwin in February 1942. The Japanese had been interned immediately the war broke out, many never to return. Aboriginal, mixed race and remaining Asians were sent to the mission at Beagle Bay (Sickert 2003: 164). The period saw many families broken up, some permanently, and racism entrenched.

Fiona also relates the fates of her three 'mans' – Barry lost to the war in Vietnam, Larry to homosexuality ('dat kine') and Djarmi Bob to 'saltwater'. Unbeknownst to Fiona, Bob is present at his funeral, where the mourners eventually recognise him, pronounce him a ghost - 'Waadar ngaar! Waadar ngaar!' and 'run off screaming'.

BOB : True god ( he looks around for the ghost, realises he is the ghost) I not dead, I NOT DEAD! (Chi 1996: 3)

This story was inspired by a real incident, when people on Sunday Island were holding a service for someone who had disappeared on a fishing trip and 'he came walking toward them with his fishing spear' (Chi, J. 2006, pers. comm., November 22). On stage it serves as a comic ploy to give Indigenous audiences a good laugh at their own fear of ghosts and get everyone offstage in preparation for the next scene.

Bob is spirited away by the Siren, in nurse's uniform, in her first appearance in the play. The Siren plays a dual cultural role. Jimmy Chi says he took the concept from a traditional story about a siren who 'takes men' at Minyirr, or Gantheaume Point, a very sacred regeneration site for the Yawuru people of Broome.

In Broome at a certain time of the year, men aren't allowed to go to Gantheaume Point.... because a siren or woman will take you. This woman appears and takes men. ...No, that's a true story, people have actually seen that. Certain times of the year, might be this time now, winter time or something. I'm not too sure when it is.

...All I know is this bloke, one of my aunties' boyfriend, went there and there's been stories of this bloke seeing this beautiful woman and he's been walking following this woman and they had to hold him back, otherwise he would have gone down the cliff. (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., May 24)

Stephen Albert points out that 'most societies have a siren, when the siren sings you have to decide whether to go to it or not' (Albert, S. 2006, pers. comm., April



20). In this way, she also represents the temptation to suicide.

Alone on stage, carrying a mail sack, Bob sings the title song, 'Corrugation Road', inspired by the story of the late Baad elder, Joseph Rock, the mailman who carried the mail between the Catholic missions at Beagle Bay and Lombadina.

Meanwhile the lights change to red, in Perth it is Christmas Eve, and the chorus reappear as 'shoppers and revellers'. As they sing the Christmas carol 'Silent Night' Bob begins to take presents and a Santa Claus outfit from his sack.

By the end of the scene, Bob has climbed the clocktower and is experiencing a 'delusional episode', represented by the lighting flashing between green and red and the tempo changing from carols to rock'n'roll. He is taken away, stripped of his Santa outfit and left alone on stage, dressed only in baggy white T- shirt and shorts. He is shaking, anxious and agitated. With the stage in darkness except for a spotlight, Bob slowly sings 'Sun Don't Shine', a song about a child 'lost in time' and turning inward.

He wakes in a hospital, where a nurse administers medication to the tune of the bitterly satirical song, *Pop a Little Tablet*, sung by patients who have popped up through the floor.

This song and the next, *Modern Doctor of Psychiatry*, which introduces the Siamese twin doctors Fruitcake and Basketcase, indict the current system of psychiatric treatment which relies heavily on medication at the expense of research and family support.

There's no money for research in Psychiatry  
But lots of money made by the drug companies  
And the drugs bugger you up physically  
And there's never any help for the family. (Chi 1996: 8)

According to Stephen Albert (Albert, S. 2006, pers. comm., April 20), 'the two doctors - Fruitcake and Basketcase - one straight and one gay, are a physical representation of someone who has two different personalities in one body. They are cut in two by Bob Two Bob'. Jimmy Chi (Chi, J. 2007, pers. comm., April 16) says that they 'represent yin/yang, male/female, gay/straight but also the madness of schizophrenia'.

The exchange between the doctors and Bob, and the following song, *Happy as Larry*, express both the trivialization of patient's complaints and Jimmy Chi's frustration with the side effects of medication, which prevent him from working.

Don't you be downhearted  
We'll scramble all your brains  
With a zap zap here, a zap zap there  
And you'll be well again. (Chi 1996: 11)

One of the symptoms Bob describes is hearing voices. In a reference to maladies suffered by pearl divers, Bob also describes seeing hallucinations of a 'golden garden' at the bottom of the sea, with 'mermaids singing'. The doctors surmise he 'was sung by other black people'. Although the doctors dismiss this as 'black magic', to Bob, and Indigenous audiences, it would be a legitimate medical complaint, the result of his work as a 'bush lawyer', or Aboriginal law expert in court.

In an article in the *Broome Advertiser* (Mint 2003) the late Joseph Nipper Roe, senior law man and consultant on Aboriginal cultures at the North West Mental Health Clinic in Broome, spoke about the symptoms and treatment of being 'sung'.

If a client at the centre refers to "lian" (Yawuru) or "ngarlu" (Karrajarri) ...it's a reference to his or her centre of one's being and all that's together there. It refers to the emotions which can either strengthen or weaken the spirit.

The article goes on to say:

...If a client says that he has been "sung" (i.e. hearing voices), Joe usually asks that the other members of the family and the maban man (traditional healer) take a look at the client, as well as the clinic doctors. (Mint 2003)

Mid scene, the lights change to green and a voice-over calls the patients to collect their costumes from 'the occupational therapy centre' for a 'nativity pageant'. The Holy Family is parodied by the entry of Barry and a very pregnant Fiona, looking for 'somewhere to stay'. However they leave as soon as they realize they are in 'a madhouse'. The notion of the happy family and happy Christmas scenario is subverted by a portrayal of domestic violence in the foreground of the nativity scene. Bob tries to intervene, and is again left shaking, depressed and isolated on a black stage.

After Bob sings *Suicidal Blues* the doctors discuss and compare his symptoms and the various treatments, which traverse from traditional home cures like 'prunes, bran and porridge' to the purely medical 'Haloperidol and Stellazine' and alternative cures like Kundalini Meditation, Reiki, Reflexology and Brazilian Toe Massage. The scene clearly represents Indigenous people as informed participants in, and subjects of, contemporary culture.

The doctors' response to Bob's assertion that he wants to kill himself, is merciless:

DR BASKETCASE: That's your business. We will have you tranquillized and isolated. You are disturbing all the patients... (Chi, J. 1996: 18)

However, emerging from mist, with the lights red and white circles projected onto a red stage floor, the Siren answers his call for help with a more seductive relief:

Come let me fascinate you mortal man  
Resist my charmed enchantment if you can (Chi, J. 1996: 19)

Bob is rescued from this temptation by the reappearance of Barry, this time with his band 'in a country and western bar' and singing a version of *Old Time Country Music*. The tempo of the song ranges from happy, to a romantic interlude with Fiona, then to a sad farewell to Barry as he leaves for Vietnam.

As the chorus face upstage waving goodbye to Barry, Bob calls out his dream, a premonition of Barry's death, and promises to 'look after Fiona'. The last verse of the song, describing Barry's death in Vietnam, is sung by Bob, with a spotlight on pregnant Fiona. A campfire suddenly flares on stage and the scene transforms to become Barry's funeral, with the procession doing a 'slow march' and singing *Lay Me in the Arms of Jesus*.

When the lights go down and the procession moves off, Bob is left alone with the siren, who again tempts him to follow her with the raunchy *Show Me What You Got There Big Boy*. As she strips off her uniform to reveal a red lace corset and black stockings, a 'gay bar explodes into full swing' behind her, and a drag artist, named Bruce, takes over the song. As Bruce is 'presented with a huge bunch of flowers' by Fiona's second husband, Larry, Fiona attacks Bruce and rips his wig off:

...He not ooran, he ambar. What you same as dis kine you Boopta. You like 'em mans. Dat what you doin' 'ere? (Chi 1996: 21)

The 'outing' of Larry marks a turning point not only for Larry, but for the history of Indigenous theatre, and encapsulates the difference between Jimmy Chi and earlier playwrights like Jack Davis. Apart from the appearance of the late Malcolm Cole as Captain Cook in the bicentennial year Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, homosexuality had rarely been represented on the Indigenous stage. What these representations have in common is their satirical attitude, because although Larry is rejected by Fiona he joins her in a duet of the song *Quintessential Man*, jointly composed by Chi and Duncan Campbell, with its lines:

I'm looking for the Quintessential Man  
An essential sort of fundamental man  
Who will fix me in his vision and unleash my inhibition ... (Chi 1996: 22)

Larry reacts to Fiona 'king-hitting' him by singing *Tomorrow's Silver Lining*, with the chorus supporting him in a Country and Western style linedance routine:

Everybody knows I like it; you know I'll never change  
Of all the things that I am now, I'll never rearrange...

For though you may not know it, I know just who I am  
I can't live lies or cover up that I'm a real man's man... (Chi 1996: 23)

In an interview with Victoria Laurie, Jimmy Chi stated that part of his inspiration for writing *Corrugation Road* was the suicide of his young gay cousin, a man who had also been through traditional law.

Hopefully the play will create a dialogue for the mentally ill – although we should talk about mental health rather than mental illness. (Laurie 1996: 24 - 25)

The lure of suicide as an escape is again presented in the *Hard Luck City Lullaby* scene. Bob is called by the Siren, who 'throws him onto the street', with 'the street crowd' singing. The lights change to red, 'the scene transforms into the Hellfire Club', and Fiona, dressed in black leather as 'a Madam Lash', sings *Nobody's Lover* and berates Bob for abandoning her. Bob tries to hide on the floor, while the chorus gathers round him threateningly in a representation of paranoid psychosis. With the lights flashing, Bob crawls up the clocktower. He ends up alone on stage on his knees, lit by a red spot on a darkened stage.

Bob appeals to God for help with the beautiful hymn, *Heal Me O Risen Lord*, and is amazed to see the Child appear, singing harmony. This is the turning point of Bob's illness and of the play.

Shaking and at his lowest ebb, Bob finds himself back in the 'care' of Doctors Fruitcake and Basketcase. They dismiss Bob's insight into the cause of his illness, in his view being his childhood abuse, as 'just the ravings of a polar dysfunctional schizophrenic' (Chi 1996: 27). In a poignant appropriation of the Christian iconography associated with the Crucifixion, they 'tie him to the cross, gagging him'.

Bob is also transparently embodying Jimmy Chi's own frustration. He states that he 'can't work' when taking pills, and says he wants to kill himself.

All I can do is feel worthless. I'm afraid to walk down the street. The noise of the cars and trucks scare me. I'm so drugged up that the only thing I can do is sleep and feel worthless. All I want to do is die.  
(Chi 1996: 27 - 28)

Bob is able to break out of his despair and find hope through the recognition of Barry and Fiona's daughter Christina. The soliloquy he recites as he comes back to himself and reality ties together the discordant earlier scenes. This moment of awareness is emphasized by a chorus of the song 'Sun Don't Shine', especially the line 'Time to leave it all behind' (Chi 1996: 28). Bob decides to take Christina back to her mother, on 'a journey of healing' to Broome.

From this point the plot bears certain similarities to Chi's earlier work, *Bran Nue Dae*. Bob's language echoes that of Uncle Tadpole's ('I been drinkin', I been stinkin', but I been thinking...') The characters agree to travel north to Broome, with the Indigenous characters being in control of the journey. Christina, like Willie, is to be reunited with her family. Local stories are integrated into the plot. Sets of lovers overcome their hurdles and get together. The difference is that in *Corrugation Road*, the characters travel further north, past Broome and Lombadina, to Sunday Island.

Before the journey can commence there must be another healing, one which represents Bob's process of psychological individuation. In this scene, Bob loses patience with the doctor's constant arguing and calls out 'Shut up!' (Chi 1996: 29) With the cast in a shocked silence, Bob 'hacks the doctors apart' with a chainsaw. Freed to act as individuals, the 'straight' Doctor Basketcase decides to stay behind with Nurse Stella Pop a Leedle, while the 'gay' Doctor Fruitcake acts as the bus driver for 'all those who believe', namely the Chorus as patients, who jump on the 'bus' bound for Broome, dancing in their 'seats' and singing - / *Believe*.

When the lights next come up the scene has shifted to the Cable Beach Club in Broome, developed by Lord Alistair McAlpine, where Dr Basketcase has meanwhile arrived and is welcoming patrons to a psychiatrists' conference. The guest performers are Broome Regional Aboriginal Theatre, or BRAT, played by Fiona and Larry in costume as cans of Emu Export beer. Larry's speech thanking their 'sponsors', the Multi Cultural Mental Health Centre, 'the triple A - Aboriginal Anxiety Association' and 'the triple I - Indigenous Insanity Institute' (1996: 32 - 33), incisively parodies the various bureaucracies known derisively as 'the Aboriginal Industry'.

Bob enters toward the end of Larry's speech, and serenades Fiona with *Black Girl*, a song Jimmy Chi describes as 'a love song to black women' (Chi, J. 2005, pers. comm., May 24). On his video biography *Artists Upfront: Stephen Baamba*

*Albert*, Stephen Albert gives the song a political context. His interpretation is that:

What used to happen here in Broome is that most of the black women here, they used to go with the other people, Malays, Chinese or white people from Meatworks and all that. Black Girl is our lament. It's black man saying to black woman - 'I'm still good, the black man is still good'.  
(Albert, video recording 1997)

Basketcase and Stella follow with their own love song, 'Backstreet Baby', replete with Stella in a Maori outfit dancing a hula. As this song finishes, Larry and Clarrie Fruitcake 'are caught playing handsies'. They break into a romantic duet of 'Quintessential Man'.

Fiona responds to 'Black Girl' with 'Dis Kine Dat Kine', a song of acceptance and belonging. She starts the song as a bluesy ballad, but midsong the tempo picks up, the chorus join in, dancing, and the song becomes a celebration of the extended family.

It no matter if he Dis Kine  
It no matter if he Dat Kine  
He alla gedda same kine  
He a granny longa me. (Chi 1996: 36 -37)

The three sets of lovers 'all decide to go to Sunday Island', while Fiona and her daughter Christina are joyously reunited. Bob announces:

Come on you mob. We going to Iwanj! We gonna walk the old corrugation road! Let's go. (Chi 1996: 37)

As he and the Chorus begin to sing 'Corrugation Road' the characters set out on what will prove to be a perilous journey. To get to Sunday Island, the travellers must first negotiate the land road between Broome and One Arm Point, still a corrugated, potholed red sand track. However, there is an older 'corrugation road' closer to the coast, the route by which the mail was delivered, on foot, between the Catholic missions at Beagle Bay and Lombadina.

The song and the story of walking the mail along 'the Corrugation Road' belong to the late Baad elder, Joseph Rock.

That song is based on a character, old Joey Rock, who has passed away now. The song is really written about him, in 1990 I wrote it. It's about this old fella called Joseph Rock and I'm singing in the first person as if he's singing it.

... He almost wanted to be in the play. If it was called that, he should be in the play, it should be his story. He couldn't wrap his head around the concept that in the play you could use different people's stories, including his own, and turn it into a completely separate character, like Bob Two Bob. That's just what he couldn't understand. We paid him royalties for it because the windmill bit is Joe Rock's story. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers.comm., April 9)



*The 'Corrugation Road'  
between Broome and  
Lombadina*

In the play, 'the chorus of walkers come to a stop by a windmill and a fire' at a spot described as 'Widong, wild country here', a bit of country between Beagle Bay and Lombadina. Bob climbs the windmill and rattles it to chase away the 'Debil dogs', 'big mob of em' (Chi, J. 1996: 38).

Well Bob Two Bob, on his travel back, actually ends up a windmill with dingos chasing him. So that's what Rocky talks about when he used to walk the mail. He used to hide up the windmill and bang on the windmill to chase all the dingos away. He'd be a little bit scared. (Pigram, S. 2005, pers.comm., April 9)

When Bob comes down from the windmill, he warns the others to 'watch out for those little people', the Girraddid. He then tells a traditional Baad creation story about a battle between Baad warriors and the Girraddid, which resulted in the Girraddid retreating up into the sky to form the Milky Way.

The travellers spend an uneasy night, with a wild wind blowing and the lighting creating a dreamlike atmosphere. On waking, they relate their dreams, which include seeing a pale 'spirit woman' coming out of the bush, and Gooya, 'this old man like Father Christmas' (Chi 1996: 39). Finally, they arrive at One Arm Point, and Bob tells them:

Can't go no further  
We go on a boat now to Iwanj. (Chi 1996: 40)



*Replica of traditional  
mangrove raft, made by  
Phillip Sibosado, Lombadina*

In her book *Saltwater people: waves of memory* (2002), Nonie Sharp describes the strait between Sunday Island and the mainland.

Some tropical waters are smooth 'like grease', especially in the season of the northeast winds; there are also places of myriad whirlpools, rips and tidal currents like Sunday Strait in the Buccaneer Archipelago. The Jawi and Bardi peoples of the area live beside seas with fierce tide races of ten or even twelve knots, described by William Dampier in 1688 as 'five fathom tides'. Songs, dances, emblems received by men in dream visits to various locations are often about tides and whirlpools, '...branching tidal current spinning vessel around, whirlpool getting me'. (Sharp 2002: 27)

She goes on to articulate the relationship of the Baad and Jawi people to their maritime environment.

As sea hunters and collectors of seafood the saltwater peoples know the rhythms and patterns of movement in the sea....The Bardi and Jawi people's detailed knowledge of the local tidal currents enables them to distinguish what they call 'roads' in the sea. These depend on the movement of the tidal currents, which the people know and can name, some twenty of which lie between the Dampier Peninsula and Sunday Strait. In rafts made of mangrove wood, they used to move from site to site for fishing and collecting by riding a series of these currents. (Sharp 2002: 33)



As the travellers embark to cross the dangerous Sunday Strait between One Arm Point and Iwanj, the lights turn to blue, a wind comes up, and there are sounds of waves crashing. With the Chorus swaying on the boat, Bob sings the beautiful pearling song 'Saltwater Cowboy'. When the storm intensifies Bob falls from the boat.

The lights change to purple and orange, Fiona is wailing, and the scene reverts to Fiona delivering the eulogy at Bob's funeral, with Bob, in rags, attesting ' True God, I never bin die'. This time we learn that Bob is real and has been saved by Lulul, the sacred giant shark of the Baad people.

I bin drinkin, and I bin stinkin, and I bin thinking, then I bin sinkin! That Lulul, that shark, he bin bring me back to Iwanj. (Chi 1996: 41)

Lulul is both a creation ancestor and a contemporary protector of the Baad. Some people describe Lulul as a tiger shark, but Jimmy Chi says he is a whale shark (Chi, J. 2006, pers. comm., November 22).

There are many contemporary stories about people being saved by Lulul in recent times, as well as traditional stories about Lulul assisting Baad fishermen by taking the catch back to the people on the mainland, while the fishermen remained out on the islands.

The relationship between past and present has been succinctly described by Nonie Sharp:

Despite the rich diversities among the sea traditions and beliefs of the saltwater peoples of tropical Australia, four common features stand out. The main one is that their spiritual inheritances from the sea link living saltwater peoples with creator spirit beings, sea gods and culture heroes, whose sea journeys mark out marine territories and who remain ongoing presences. (Sharp 2002: 33)

Bob expresses his joy in being alive with the song 'Indiginee', accompanied by a stylized comic dance routine. He follows this with a love song to Fiona, 'Iwanj Girl', sung in a combination of English and Baad, while the Chorus perform a traditional Baad dance involving hand gestures with leaves, and clapsticks. 'Iwanj Girl' was written for Jimmy Chi's daughter Rachael and, in the words of Stephen Albert, 'all other Sunday Island girls' (Albert, S. 2006, pers. comm., April 20). The Chorus drop their leaves and sticks to sing the play's finale, the hymn 'Before the Child Grew Old', with its condemnation of 'progress' at the expense of 'dreams'. The three couples stand in a row at the back, while the Chorus sit cross legged at the front. The lights change to turquoise, in a reference to the waters surrounding the Dampier Peninsula, home of the Saltwater People.



*Old Jetty, Deepwater Anchorage,  
Sunday Island*



*Old power generator, Sunday Island*

## Chapter 5

### The Road Trip

#### Introduction

A component of my research on Jimmy Chi's work took the form of a road trip, completed in April 2005, from Perth to Lombadina on the Dampier Peninsula, re-enacting the journey undertaken by the characters in *Bran Nue Dae*. This trip incidentally mirrors the journey taken by the characters in *Corrugation Road*, but this was not the focus for my research at that time.

This project was facilitated by the assistance of a Creative and Research Publication Grant from the Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. The project was carried out by researchers Kara Jacob and myself, under the title:

*What is Magic? What is Real? Using literature and magic realism to examine liminality and sense of place in the Australian landscape.*

In response to the trip I published a paper entitled *Invisible Country* (2005).

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Travelling the Western Australian coastline from Perth north involves stepping into a new scale of time and space. The landscape is harsh, the skies immense. There is no escaping the fact that Australia is the oldest and driest continent. Evidence of ancient Indigenous occupation abounds in rock art and middens.

Unlike the east coast, many Western Australian rivers are seasonal and bridges often cross dry riverbeds. Tides also have huge fluctuations which often catch people unawares. In the north weather patterns are tropical, so that in the dry season sunny blue days can become monotonous, while in the wet the humidity can be overpowering.

Most towns and the only city north of Perth, Geraldton, hug the coastline and the river estuaries. Traffic on the Great Northern Highway is scarce and seasonal since Grey Nomads have established a well-worn pattern of spending summers in southern beach towns like Esperance and winters in Broome, where the population triples in the dry season.

*Bran Nue Dae* is a play closely linked to the Western Australian landscape through its appropriation of the road trip genre. The physical journey taken by the characters metaphorically takes them also through the contact history of black and white Australians in Western Australia. The play examines questions of cultural identity and belonging. Humour and a magic realist style allow Jimmy Chi to imagine new answers to these questions.

The plot of *Bran Nue Dae* is an interweaving of real stories belonging to many individuals, magically transformed into a universal journey to 'home'. Significantly, the 'non-Indigenous' characters, Slippery and Marijuana Annie, find their own sense of belonging through travelling to the traditional country of their Indigenous road trip companions, Willie and Uncle Tadpole. The magic realist happy ending of the play, where Slippery and Marijuana Annie discover their own Aboriginality and experience the redemptive power of 'human intimacy with landscapes' (Langton in Watson, 2003: 191) moves them beyond any ambiguous citizenship and ties them firmly to 'this place' (Langton in Watson, 2003: 191). In Jimmy Chi's 'gentler society' everyone belongs (Chi 1996).

The road trip genre typically places its characters on a quest for knowledge. Although Slippery and Marijuana Annie eventually uncover the knowledge of their own identity, they begin the journey as an escapist quest for a sensual experience of 'a tropical paradise'. In her attempt to persuade Slippery to go to Broome, Annie says:

...It's a good place, I hear it's  
good out there. Plenty of fishing,  
nice beaches and plenty of people  
who smoke a little bit of this and that. (Chi 1991: 26)

My quest was to discover the backstory of the play by re-enacting the two thousand kilometre journey up the Great Northern Highway. I wanted to experience first-hand the sense-impressions that the characters would have experienced, particularly those in the void between the time the characters leave Perth and reach first Roebourne, where they are locked up, and then Roebuck Plains, not far from Broome.

The ethical complexity of this journey was apparent even before the point of departure, as evidenced by the reflections of earlier travellers.

When Stephen Muecke, Krim Benterrak and Paddy Roe were preparing for their cross-cultural and cross-textual study on Roebuck Plains, *Reading the Country* (1984), they spoke to non-Indigenous 'experts' like scientists and geologists to augment Paddy Roe's first-hand knowledge as a traditional owner. Muecke talks about 'the key' to getting to know the country as a combination of 'having a look at it' and '*communication*'.

We have already done this by talking with people and seeing the diversity of their different readings of the country...Each reading thus produces a partial knowledge of the country, and using the reading is the *only* way to gain access to that knowledge; the country does not offer up the fullness of its meaning to the receptive individual as some romantics and spiritualists would have us believe. (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984: 66-67)

In a chapter on the sources of language and stories (*Sources*), Muecke discusses the idea of '...stories being contingent upon place' and the need to hear stories 'with the spot just under your eye'. He says Aboriginal storytellers have a policy that 'if one is not prepared to take the trouble to go to the place, then its story can only be given as a short version' (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1996: 81).

In this project, our process of preparing to 'have a look at' the country between Perth and Lombadina by collecting written materials like maps, including Norman Tindale's maps of Indigenous language areas, histories and tourist brochures, proved to be problematic. As noted by anthropologist Peter Sutton, maps represent country as colonised space.

Sutton, 'a world authority on Aboriginal art and iconography', makes a distinction between mapping and personal journeying. He 'identifies a fundamental difference between the European meaning of maps and the seemingly "maplike" aspects of Indigenous icons of country. Maps and mapping describe space in a way that depersonalises it. Mapping removes the footprints of named creatures – animal, human, ancestral – who belong to this place or that place. A map can be anywhere. 'Itineraries', however, are actions and movements within a named and footprinted land' (Sharp 2002: 199-200).

The country journeyed through in *Bran Nue Dae*, which privileges Indigenous experience, could be designated as the potentially dangerous liminal space between the 'map' and the 'itinerary'. Journeying through 'footprinted land' can mean unwittingly transgressing protocols. For example, Paddy Roe warned Stephen Muecke and Krim Benterrak about the dangers of disturbing a certain patch of grass on Roebuck Plains.

If you break the grass growing out of the 'boss' spring at *Mimiyagaman* (this grass is the snake's goatee beard), the spirit snake is offended and will drench you with rain wherever you may go. (1996: 79)

The 'space between' resonates with untold stories, with invisibilities. Certain Aboriginal lands on the Dampier Peninsula, for instance the foreshore dunes around Cape Leveque and Hunter's Creek, are protected Baadi cultural sites which are off-limits to non-Indigenous people. Even the reasons for their protection are hidden from 'public' access. Many Aboriginal outstations can be accessed only by unmarked dirt roads, so that their site remains 'invisible' to outsiders.



*Baad protected area, Cape Leveque*



*Hunter's Creek, Dampier Peninsula*

One of the most telling discoveries on the research trip was the thoroughness with which Indigenous people have been made to disappear from the 'mapped' zones through various colonial policies. It was markedly evident that Indigenous people are still relegated to the fringes of town, as in Onslow and Port Hedland, in housing situations closely resembling the old missions and reserves. This situation is represented early in *Bran Nue Dae*, when Willie is expelled from the security of Rossmoyne school. Finding himself homeless in the city, he encounters Uncle Tadpole and other 'fringe dwellers' in a Perth park, where they are gathered around a fire. Willie expresses some embarrassment at finding himself in their situation (Chi 1991: 16).

Perth has always been the wet season retreat for moneyed Europeans living in Broome, even back in the days of the Swan River Settlement. European women often retreated to Perth with their children for the duration of 'the Wet', then returned to Broome by boat for the social rounds of 'the Dry'. By contrast, the first generation of Indigenous Broome people to regularly visit Perth were the schoolkids who, like Willie, went to Perth to attend Catholic boarding schools. The experience must have been totally disorienting.

Until the recent development explosion, Broome was a small town where everybody had a place in the community, however uneasy that place might be. Belonging to a large extended family was, and is, commonplace. Most places in town are accessible by car in five minutes, and trips to just about anywhere feature views of Roebuck Bay. The architecture is two storey at most, dominated by corrugated iron structures, with many older buildings made from asbestos-type sheeting.

By contrast, Perth is a large impersonal city with skyscrapers and a predominantly non-Indigenous population. Access to bush tucker like fresh fish and mud crabs is limited. Even the English spoken is different, since Broome locals communicate in their own unique patois, derived from the various languages spoken in the pearling lugger camps.

Leaving Perth, the first site of significance is Moore River, infamous for the Moore River Settlement, where many Stolen Generation children were institutionalised. The history and practices of Moore River Settlement have been documented in the plays of Jack Davis, notably *No Sugar* (1986), and Philip Noyce's film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002). Where it crosses the highway the river itself is small and insignificant, except for the multitudes of flies.

Regarding the prevalence of Indigenous sites, the pamphlet, *Welcome to country: Respecting Indigenous culture for travellers in Australia* (2004, Aboriginal Tourism Australia), points out:

Wherever you visit in Australia, you travel across and stay in country significant to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

...You may not always be formally welcomed to country, and in some areas it may not be clear whose traditional lands you are visiting or travelling through. Checking with local tourism agencies, local governments, land and community councils, parks and wildlife agencies or local Aboriginal organisations may provide you with this information. This simple act of inquiring about whose traditional lands you are visiting is, itself, a mark of respect.

Although we made an effort in every place we visited to pay our respects by at least finding out the language group of the traditional owners, it became clear that a major challenge in travelling through post-colonial space is in avoiding becoming complicit in the disappearance of Indigenous people.

We wanted our focus to be 'on the people whose bodies, territories, beliefs and values have been travelled through' (Smith 1999: 78) but our experience was that finding even written guides into the 'footprinted land' is not easy when few tourist pamphlets acknowledge the traditional owners of the country. Even when 'local Aboriginal' words are quoted, as in the CALM brochure for Nambung National Park (ie the Pinnacles), the actual language or language group is not mentioned. In many interpretive brochures and facilities traditional owners are represented as absent, as victims or as prisoners.

When we finally encountered a text by an Indigenous author (apart from the script of *Bran Nue Dae*) the writer was a traveller out of his own country. Warrup, a Noongar man, was a guide for the surveyor John Septimus Roe. The piece of writing describes Warrup's journey with Roe in 1839 to rescue some white explorers just south of Geraldton.

*Away, away go we (I, Mr. Roe, and Kinchela), along the shore away, along the shore away, along the shore away. We see no fresh water; along the shore away, along the shore away. We see a paper, the paper of Mortimer and Spofforth. Away we go, away, away, along the shore away, away, away, a long distance we go. I see Mr. Smith's footsteps ascending a sand-hill, onwards I go regarding his footsteps. I see Mr. Smith dead. We commence digging the earth.*

*Two sleeps had he been dead; greatly did I weep, and much I grieved. In his blanket folding him, we scraped away the earth.*

*We scrape earth into the grave, we scrape the earth into the grave, a little wood we place in it. Much earth we heap upon it - much earth we throw up. No dogs can dig there, so much earth we throw up. The sun had just inclined to the westward as we laid him in the ground.*

(Warrup, extract, quoted in Grey, G. 1837, 38 and 39)

Warrup's text covers the foyer wall at the National Trust Café in Central Greenough Historic Settlement, near Geraldton. The writing is very poetic and, although in English, may convey some of the rhythms of his first language. It also represents Warrup as having a caring relationship with John Septimus Roe, and with the men whose bodies he discovers. The wall contains no biographical information on Warrup, other than to describe him as 'a Noongar man'. In the writing he describes other Aboriginal people they meet as 'natives' however he seems to be able to communicate with them in language.

No indication is given of Roe's attitude toward Warrup, other than the survival of his writing. However, Roe seems to have enjoyed the company of Aboriginal women, as he has many descendants in the Pilbara and Kimberley, including Patrick Bin Amat, a member of Kuckles.

Central Greenough Historic Settlement itself, located just south of Geraldton, stands in contrast to the sandhills and predominantly fibro fishing shacks of the small fishing villages like Cervantes and Dongara passed on the road north from Perth. It is a small hamlet of stone buildings, with the Catholic buildings on one



side of the street and the Anglican Church, courthouse and mill on the other. A video at the Café names the traditional owners as Yamatji while the Heritage Trails pamphlet for Greenough / Walkaway says the 'original inhabitants of the Greenough Flats were a tribe of the Noongar Aborigines known as the Yabbaroo'.

Their story is alluded to in the *Greenough River Nature Walk Trail Guide*, under the title, 'A short history of Greenough River from the rivermouth to Westbank Road'.

The Gregory brothers, exploring for pastoral land in 1848, peacefully met with a large group of Aborigines camped beside a freshwater spring in a dense Melaleuca thicket. They named the spring Bootenal, from the Nyungar word Boolungal, meaning pelican. Gregory's glowing reports of good grazing prompted pastoralists to move their flocks to Greenough, and by 1852 William Criddle was watering cattle for the Cattle Company at the Bootenal Spring. The Aborigines soon resented this intrusion and in 1854, large numbers with many from surrounding tribes, gathered in the relative safety of the Bootenal thicket. Making forays at night, they killed cattle and sheep and attacked homesteads. The pastoralists retaliated by forming a posse at Glengarry under the command of the Resident Magistrate. On the night of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> July they rode to Bootenal and drove the Aborigines from the thicket. No arrests were made and no official report given of casualties. Aboriginal resistance in the area was finished. (*Welcome to the Geraldton- Greenough Batavia Heritage Coast*, n.d.)

This extract, which actually describes a massacre while purporting to be a 'history of Greenough River', represents two opposing views of the land. It subverts the notion that the land can ever really be 'depersonalised'.

... At the very heart of the difference lie different ways of being human: in Aboriginal classical tradition the person dwells within a personified landscape which is alive, named, inscribed by spiritual and human agents. It is a 'Thou' not an 'It', and I and Thou belong together. (Sharp 2002: 199-200)

Peter Read (2000) speculates about whether the land holds the memory of events enacted upon it, so forming a tangible link between the dispossessed and the possessors. While discussing Judith Wright's poem *Bora Ring*, Read states that: 'The unlaidd violence of dispossession lingers at the sites of evil or old magic', bringing to mind Wright's (2000: 14) notion of Australia as 'a haunted country'.

This 'hauntedness' is tangible in the police lock up at Central Greenough Historic

Settlement. The first Resident Magistrate, appointed in 1865, was none other than the infamous Maitland Brown, the very same Resident Magistrate who led the 1854 posse at Greenough River, and who was rewarded for his many massacres on Aboriginal people (Dalton 1964 & Bailey 2001) with a seat in Parliament.

From Greenough the Great Northern Highway winds into the harbour city of Geraldton, then onto Carnarvon, with detours into tourist centres like Kalbarrie and Denham, made famous by the Shark Bay dolphins of Monkey Mia. Carnarvon itself, an agricultural centre on the Gascoyne River, is the gateway to the beautiful Ningaloo Reef, accessed via Coral Bay and Exmouth. Ningaloo, as a popular feeding ground for the migratory whaleshark, connects to the *Corrugation Road* story through Lulul, the creation ancestor shark of the Baad people.

Between the towns, the road is long and empty, the land inhabited by termite mounds and strange rock formations. Only through the permanent water provided by the Gascoyne and Fortescue Rivers were early European settlers able to establish pastoral industries and explore the areas further to the north.

The arid Pilbara region centres on the prosperous mining towns of Karratha, Dampier and Port Hedland. The port of Dampier, established by Hamersley Iron in the 1960s, is located near the Burrup Peninsula, or Murujuga. Here in 1868, between 40 and 100 Yaburara people were murdered in a campaign which began with the abduction of a young Yaburara woman by a white police constable (Bednarik, n.d. *The killing fields of Murujuga*). The campaign is known as the Flying Foam Massacres. More recently the Burrup Peninsula has achieved notoriety due to the removal of some of its 40,000 ancient rock engravings to make way for the expansion of the Woodside North West Shelf Gas Project.

The oldest surviving town in the Central Pilbara region is Roebourne, with its original coastal port at Cossack replaced by a new marina at nearby Point Samson. Here the travellers in *Bran Nue Dae* are arrested, drawing attention to a long history of incarceration of Indigenous people in the area and more particularly to the story of John Pat. John Pat was a 16 year old Aboriginal boy whose death in the Roebourne police lock-up on 28 September 1983, after being assaulted by police, precipitated the 1988 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Roebourne and Cossack, known in its pearling heyday as Tien Tsin, stand on the extremely beautiful country of the Ngarluma and seaside Yapurarra peoples. Settlers first arrived in the 1860s and Aboriginal people began to be officially imprisoned soon after the arrival of the Resident Magistrate Robert Scholl in the early 1880s, primarily under the Master and Servants Act as a result of their

resistance to being 'blackbirded' and exploited as labour for the pearling and pastoral industries. Prisoners were chained by the neck, day and night, and forced to build roads and tramlines, ostensibly a 'civilising' practice. The Shire of Roebourne Local History Officer, Llyrus Weightman, in the pamphlet '*The Old Roebourne Gaol, A History*' says that: 'It was widely believed that the Roebourne Gaol was where the 'benefit' of white civilisation could be shown to the 'savage' Aboriginal' (Weightman n.d.: 2).

Both Roebourne and Cossack feature beautifully constructed stone buildings, including the old prisons and lock ups, designed in the 1890s by George Temple Poole. According to the tourist information pamphlet, the design of the third Roebourne gaol 'represents a way in which the state ideology of control of a remote and potentially dangerous population could be expressed in buildings' (pamphlet: *Welcome to the Roebourne Visitors Centre and Museum*). The current Roebourne prison, still holding a majority of Aboriginal inmates, does away with any pretence of architectural elegance but expresses the same state ideology with its fence topped with razor wire.



*Old Roebourne Gaol building,  
now Art & Craft Centre*



*New Roebourne prison*

The old Roebourne gaol has been converted into the Roebourne Visitors Centre and Museum. The cells, which once each held up to 24 prisoners chained by the neck, now hold respectively a Visitor's Wing, containing plastic chairs, a screen and assorted memorabilia; Colonial History, with interpretation & photos of early white settlers; and Hidden Histories, containing photos and artefacts like neckchains. Several photos depict Kianardie, a man of impressive physique who had escaped and outrun the police horses on Eighty Mile Beach. Photos of the new Roebourne gaol also depict Aboriginal prisoners.

Each cell has iron rods running along the walls, quite high, to which the neck chains were attached. How the prisoners slept is not indicated, but after 1902 prisoners were allowed to sleep in the courtyard outside their cells due to 'the intensity of the summer heat' (Weightman n.d.: 8). This courtyard is now full of ornate picnic tables. It is difficult to describe the discordant effect of this tourist paraphernalia juxtaposed against the previous usage of the cells.

The interpretive material in Cell 2 represents one settler family, the Withnells, as particularly resourceful. John and Emma Withnell survived the long sea voyage from Swan River Settlement only to lose all their belongings in the last 30 metres, while bringing them ashore through the swell. The museum has a replica of a whalebone armchair which John Withnell built for his wife Emma, with vertebrae as the seat and other bones as the back and armrests. The family also invented the canvas waterbag. Emma Withnell apparently kept an open house (their first holding was known as Mount Welcome Station) and was a great source of comfort to younger women settlers.

The interpretation fails to mention that the same John Withnell beat an Aboriginal woman named Talarong so severely, for refusing to care for sheep at Withnell's Hillside Station, that 'she retreated into the bush and died of her injuries two days later. No charges were brought against Withnell because, according to the Acting Government Resident, of the 'great provocation' by Talarong in the incident' (Hunt 1986: 99 -100).

Such omissions and silences in the official record, the narrative of imperialist expansion, force Indigenous people into a parallel 'invisible country'. Their participation in the development of vital infrastructures like roads and tramlines, as well as the pearling and pastoral industries, is represented as involuntary, therefore negligible. In fact their labour and knowledge of country was crucial.

As early centres of the pearling industry, Roebourne and Cossack are deeply connected to the history of Broome. Susan Hunt reports:

Serious commercial pearling began in the northern districts in 1867-1868. In 1868, Resident Magistrate Scholl reported that there were twelve pearling vessels working off the northern coast from Tien Tsin Harbour employing thirty whites, and sixty permanent Aboriginal divers, both men and women. Many extra Aborigines also worked as pearlshell sorters, beachcombers and loaders. By 1870, these figures had increased to eighty pearling boats with sixty-seven Europeans and five hundred odd Aboriginal divers. In 1875, Scholl reported that over two thousand people were working as divers off the northern coast, although numbers working in pearling fluctuated greatly from year to year'. (Hunt 1986: 20)

Cossack is a highlight on the Perth to Broome journey. The combination of physical beauty – beach, island with lighthouse, and river – and a palpable sense of living history are magnetic. There is also a connection to Jimmy Chi through his Chinese grandfather, John Chi, a pearler who began his career, and met his Japanese wife, in Tien Tsin.

My father came from China. He ran away and joined the sailing ships as a cabin boy. They were all Italian ships those days. He got as far as Melbourne and went prospecting for gold when the Bendigo, Ballarat goldrush was on. He worked his way right round, Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, all those places. Went prospecting around there, until he came round to Cossack. He met my mother there. (Chi. J (Snr), 1981 Ainslie & Garwood 2002: 48)

It would be easy to romanticize Cossack. It is possible to walk around the ruins of many of the old pearlers' houses and find bits of broken china and old bottles in their rubbish dumps. Some of the stone foundations, for instance of widowed Mrs Peale's boarding house, remain, and there is even an old path to the luggers' camps along the river. Sleeping outside however, being bitten by mosquitoes, sandflies and ants, gave me some impression of what conditions must have been like in the luggers' camps amongst the mangroves. The caretaker of Cossack village also issued a warning about king brown snakes.



*Old Courthouse, Cossack, designed by George Temple Poole.*



*Stone foundations, Mrs Peale's boarding house, Cossack*

Only the more substantial buildings, designed in stone by George Temple Poole, survived the cyclone that destroyed most of the town and caused the pearling industry to move north. One of these buildings is a gaol, with nothing inside the cells except chains.

One of the prisoners here was Yoeda, alias Little Fanny, who 'was among the permanently employed Aboriginal domestic servants in Roebourne between 1879 and 1886. Throughout 1879 and 1880, Yoeda appears in Cossack records on charges of drunkenness and disorderly behaviour and was sentenced to short gaol terms.

During one of Yoeda's imprisonments in 1884, it was alleged by a resident of Cossack that he had witnessed the police drag Yoeda into the cell where she was raped by the men. This allegation was later denied by the police, but the internal records of the Roebourne police station do show that a policeman was dismissed in May 1884 for having 'sexual relations' with Aboriginal women prisoners' (Hunt 1986: 113).

The experiences of Aboriginal women like Talarong and Yoeda, and young men like John Pat and Kianardie, cloud the carefully constructed histories told in tourist brochures. The gaols have become new 'sitting down places' on the songline running south from Broome.

The booklet *Australia's North West, Kimberley and Pilbara Regions Holiday Planner 2005*, describes Port Hedland, the next major town before Broome as 'oresome' and lists the major attractions as 'fabulous fishing, a harbour dinner and cruise, seasonal turtle nesting and mangrove crabbing'. In terms of the plot of *Bran Nue Dae*, Port Hedland was the site of Micky Manolis's original arrest, providing a template for the Roebourne gaol scene.

We arrived in Port Hedland on a Saturday morning and pulled into a waterside park for breakfast. A sign on the beach said the area was a breeding site for flatback turtles and, indeed, three turtles could clearly be seen in the waters just off the rocks.

The major employers at Port Hedland are BHP Billiton, Hamersley Iron Pty Ltd and Woodside Australian Energy and the town is basically a dormitory town for workers at these plants. The companies jointly sponsor the publication *The Pilbara, Cradle of an ancient civilisation*, which respectfully acknowledges the traditional owners of the country as the Kariyarra, Ngarla and coastal Njamal peoples and states it was known by them as 'Jalkawarrinya, the home of the blind water snake' (Quin n.d.: 24).

Many of these traditional owners now live in a small poverty stricken community a long way from town. While we were at the park a carload of Aboriginal fishermen arrived. The car doors were tied together with string and the boot was flapping. The impression given is that the traditional owners are excluded from the wealth gained by exploitation of their country.

Between Port Hedland and Broome the flat spinifex plains country changes subtly. The Highway parallels Ninety Mile Beach and then passes the turn-off to Bidyadanga Community, previously known as La Grange Station, where the lugger crews would whistle signals to the local women. It was also at La Grange that the first Inspector of Pearl Shell Fisheries was poisoned by being fed pulverised bamboo (Sickert 2003: 28).

Bidyadanga community has grown up around a former Catholic mission, and residents come from many language groups, including the Karrajari people, the last 'mob' to walk in from the desert in the 1970s.

Apparently encounters with Indigenous people living a traditional lifestyle were not uncommon for Broome residents driving the long dirt road to Perth. Kim Male, of the early settler Male family, describes a memorable childhood experience in Ainslie & Garwood's collection of interviews titled *Saltwater Cowboys*.

In 1950 we went to Perth by road. It was three hundred and sixty miles more to go around the coast than the inland road so we took the inland road. It was the dry time of the year, October. The road was like two wheel tracks, a piece in the middle. Around behind Anna Plains Station we saw real desert natives in their laplaps with spears, carrying little swags on their backs. They looked a bit fierce at one gate so I wouldn't get out and open it, my old man had to. We had to carry a lot of our own fuel then. God only knows how many gates I opened between here and Perth! (Ainslie & Garwood 2002: 40-1)

The road now is bitumen, and even people choosing to live on outstations have access to corrugated iron housing, water tanks, bores and solar panels for fridges. Nevertheless it is the opportunity to work closely with people still in contact with their language and culture that attracts many people, including the 'mung beans' who arrived in the 1980s and stayed, to live in the Kimberley.

About an hour's drive north of Bidyadanga is Roebuck Plains, where the travellers in *Bran Nue Dae* have their magic realist encounter with traditional people. Roebuck Plains is a historically and spiritually important area for Yawuru and Djugun people from Broome, being one of the earliest sites of dispossession. This area is of particular significance to the Pigram Brothers and to Micky Manolis since it is the traditional country of their shared great grandmother.

Micky Manolis's 1987 film, *What Time Low Tide?*, features a goanna, or barni, hunting scene at Roebuck Plains Station. The film shows a sign on the gate of the station as reading:



Roebuck Plains.  
Trespassers Shot  
Bodies Disposed of  
if not claimed in 14 days.

Roebuck Plains is also where artist Krim Benterrack, writer Steven Muecke & traditional owner Paddy Roe conducted their cross-cultural study (1984).



*Sunset over Roebuck Plains*

My fellow researcher Kara Jacob vividly described our experience there in her travel diary:

And to seal our trip, just as we were crossing Roebuck Plains, with the sun setting to our left, and the full moon rising to our right, the yellow-green grasses on the plains rippling in the afternoon breeze and dappled light, we spied a goanna, a barni, crossing the highway, just like Uncle Tadpole and Willie did – though we didn't chase him or catch him or eat him (or even – letting another opportunity pass us by – photograph him). But then, at least we could say we didn't run him over either. (Jacob 2004 unpub)

From Roebuck Plains it is a short drive into Broome, passing historic sites like Willare Roadhouse, Milliya Rumurra ('Bran Nue Dae' in Yawuru) Rehabilitation Centre, '4-mile' community, the Dampier Peninsula turnoff to the 'Corrugation Road', '1-mile' community, the airport and finally the town centre. Highlights of Carnarvon St, the main drag, are Sun Pictures, Coles, Wing's Store and the memorial statue of the hard hat pearl divers.

Dampier Terrace features Streeter's Wharf, the Roebuck Hotel and the Pearl Luggers, a venue built around two restored luggers which offers talks and films on the pearling industry and sometimes performances by the Pigram Brothers. The outstanding feature of Dampier Terrace of course is the turquoise view of



Roebuck Bay, overlooking Dampier Creek and the mangroves where the luggers would moor in the off season.



*Pearl Lugger 'Sam Male', now housed at 'Pearl Luggers', Broome*

Since Broome Council has a heritage order in place, all buildings in the central part of town, known as 'Chinatown', must be constructed from white corrugated iron. In fact, most houses in Broome are constructed from corrugated iron due to both ease of transport and to the iron's ability to cool down quickly. Most have verandahs, and some are built in the style of the old pearling masters' homes with lattice for shade and shutters against the cyclones. 'Old Broome', with its wide streets, large backyards and laden mangrove trees is being swallowed up by suburbs connecting to Cable Beach, formerly favoured by hippies living in the shacks in the sandhills, now a warren of multimillion dollar mansions.

The 'back story' I discovered on the research trip was one of disappearance -- Indigenous people being made to disappear from their countries, from non-Indigenous view and from the written record. The sense impressions I experienced -- extreme beauty, isolation, heat and sandflies -- were eclipsed by the complexity of Western Australian contact history. Instead of the hundreds of empty beaches I had expected to explore, I found myself most engaged by the gaols and prisons which the imperialists used as tools of their trade in disappearance.

I began to see a central imaginative achievement of *Bran Nue Dae* as being a restoration of balance in the written record. *Bran Nue Dae* celebrates the survival of Indigenous peoples despite the great odds. The sites visited on the journey acknowledge the 'other side' of frontier history. At the same time it offers a guide and a welcome to non-Indigenous Australians to step off the colonial map and into 'footprinted land'.

If it is true that, as Nyaparua Tanner (2004, in *Welcome to country* pamphlet), claims, "Country got ears and country knows its people" does the country long for its people, in the same way that people long for country?

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Hybridity and Healing

When *Bran Nue Dae* was staged at Derby, north-east of Broome, in an ugly civic hall with a shallow stage, the crowd was so dense that director Andrew Ross had to scale a three metre fence to gain access. The audience surged forward, spilling on to the set. Children lay on microphones taped to the floor. Others flopped on the deckchairs to become part of the show. That icon of Western theatre, the gap between cast and audience, vanished.

The show ended in communal dancing. “The healing is underway”, said Chi, standing at the back ... “It started in Darwin [where the tour began] ... It’s coming down the coast. It’s happening. I knew it would.” (Graham 1990)

Jimmy Chi consciously intended that his plays would be vehicles for healing. He has often said that *Bran Nue Dae* was ‘a play to heal the pain’ (Chi 1990, *Bran Nue Dae* program). The pain he refers to includes the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands, the removal of the Stolen Generations and secrecy around the sexual abuse of Indigenous women and children. Chi exposes these issues in *Bran Nue Dae* but approaches them ‘in a conciliatory manner rather than with anger...I believe that anger doesn’t get you anywhere. This is a play of love and hope and humour. Anger only brings retribution’ (Chi 1990, *Bran Nue Dae* program).

Similarly, by telling his own story of dealing with schizophrenia he hoped that *Corrugation Road* would ‘create a dialogue for the mentally ill’ (Laurie 1996).

Chi has described *Bran Nue Dae* as ‘... a release of a lot of unresolved grief that Australia as a nation has’.

It is about harmony and healing, which has been my journey as well as a lot of other people’s. Only through researching our own history, can we find our own truth and knowledge and our own personal God. (Broome Museum file 1990, ‘Festival Hit tours NW’)

The healing that Jimmy Chi intended occurs on a multitude of levels: personal, local and national, material and spiritual. It is aimed toward both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, and also affected the performers themselves. Many performers discussed this healing process in contemporary publicity articles which appeared in regional newspapers as *Bran Nue Dae* toured.

Sylvia Clarke, who led the chorus in the first production of *Bran Nue Dae* and played Aunty Theresa in the second, told journalist Trish Morse: '*Bran Nue Dae* is a healing experience for young and old of all race, colour and creed...Being with this production is like a rediscovery, like the jigsaw of my life is coming together' (Broome Museum file 1990).

Actor Bob Faggetter, who played Father Benedictus in *Bran Nue Dae*, said in a review article that the play works because 'it's about things that come from the guts, from the heart and from the emotions...The important thing about *Bran Nue Dae* is the lack of bitterness' ('Play still winning NW audiences', no publication, n.d.).

'The lack of bitterness', which permeates both *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road* and is so often commented on by reviewers (for example Graham 1990, Banks 1993), stems from Jimmy Chi's personal philosophy. Although brought up Roman Catholic, Chi has studied Buddhism for many years and constantly reads and rereads the works of the mystic Lobsang Rampa (Chi, J. 2004, pers.comm., 22 Sept).

Therefore to discuss Jimmy Chi's work in terms of 'a lack of bitterness' is to say more about the politics of polarity than about the work itself, because this positioning fails to recognise Jimmy Chi's creative envisioning of 'a gentler society' (Chi 1996: 3) where complex personal identities and histories are embraced and celebrated.

The subversive nature of this vision, in 'challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 33) aligns Jimmy Chi with the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris. Harris believed that dominated peoples had the imaginative power to re-order their reality for the sake of survival. He saw the role of artists as important in the creation of a new order, arguing that although 'post-colonial texts may deal with divisions of race and culture which are apparently obdurately determined, each text contains the seeds of "community" which, as they germinate and grow in the mind of the reader, crack asunder the apparently inescapable dialectic of history' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 35).

Through his 'adoption of the positive imaginative reconstruction of reality' Jimmy Chi concurs with Wilson Harris's conception of the role of the writer.

I believe the possibility exists for us to become involved in perspectives of renaissance which can bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history – I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination'. (Harris 1970c: 8 in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1995: 201)

Chi employs many artistic tools in his 'reconstruction of reality'. He appropriates Western forms and genres, like the musical and road trip, and the style of magic realism, localises them through his sense of place and use of Indigenous languages, then uses the forms to satirise the dominant culture. But where it is most evident is in the attitude of the characters to their experiences. Whether imprisoned in schools, jails or mental institutions, Chi's characters are able to laugh at their predicament and move on. They reject victimhood.

Michael Dash, in his essay *Marvellous Realism: The Way out of Negritude* (1995: 200) says that magic realism differs from Negritude in that it 'stresses patterns of emergence from the continuum of history'. Notably, Jimmy Chi's characters exist in the contemporary world. Far from being stuck in a 'prison of history', they navigate their way through a myriad of contemporary contingencies and identities. The musical form gives the characters scope to celebrate the process of adaptation and survival. The road trip genre allows them to arrive at a different physical, spiritual and psychological place from the one they started at.

Like Harris trying to untangle Caribbean identity, Chi writes from a point of hybridity, from Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space' on the boundaries or peripheries of intersecting cultures (Bhabha 1995: 208), stressing that he is 'a contemporary writer writing not just from an Aboriginal viewpoint but also from a white Australian viewpoint' (Chi, J. 2004, pers.comm., 10 Dec). The difficulty of living and writing from this position is represented particularly in *Corrugation Road*. Chi has attributed his schizophrenia partly to the stress of growing up under the pressure of multiple racisms (Zubricki, video recording 1992).

In Chi's work, black – white polarity, which Peta Stephenson (2007: 5) contends has always been a false construct in Australian history anyway, disappears into a more complex identity politics, where recognition of mixed Asian/ Aboriginal/ European ancestry is the norm. The representation of mixed race identity as a positive place to be situated radically challenges the underlying fears and philosophies which resulted in the removal of the Stolen Generations from their families. Many Broome people have thanked Jimmy Chi for writing *Bran Nue Dae* as they felt the play gave them an identity (Chi, J. 2004, pers.comm., 10 Dec).

Indeed, the name of the play has been appropriated for institutions in Broome, such as the *Bran Nue Dae* aged care centre and Milliya Rumurra [*Bran Nue Dae* in Yawuru] alcohol rehabilitation centre.

The embrace of mixed race identity also complicates essentialist notions of authenticity, described by Wole Soyinka as a 'quest for racial self-retrieval' or recovery of 'an authentic cultural existence' (Crow & Banfield 1996: 6). In contrast to the search for a static culturally fixed inheritance Stephenson (2007: 196 – 201) cites the stories of several Indigenous Broome people who have travelled to

places like Indonesia and Japan to meet their pearler fathers and investigate their Asian ancestry.

These heritages become apparent on stage through the living presence of the actors, embodying a multiplicity of Indigenous lineages.

Although authenticity can be harnessed positively as a 'form of articulating what it meant to be dehumanized by colonization', as in naming the loss of family, language and culture through removal, Chi's characters do not seek their self worth in 'an idealized past where there was no colonizer' (Smith 1999: 73). Instead they take responsibility for their own actions and dare to imagine a self-determined future.

It is interesting that Jimmy Chi represents his characters as travelling, as moving through space on their own volition. This is one clear point of differentiation between Chi's work and that of earlier writers like Jack Davis. The perambulatory staging in Davis' *No Sugar* re-enacts the forced removal of the characters from their country. Chi's work resonates with Homi Bhabha's concept of *cultural difference* as a moving space as opposed to *cultural diversity*, which Bhabha defines as 'the recognition of pre-given cultural 'contents' and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism' (Bhabha 1995: 206).

Claiming that 'Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other', Bhabha states:

The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – the place of utterance – is crossed by the difference of writing or *écriture*. (Bhabha 1995: 207)

In Jimmy Chi's case, the act of writing, in English, claims a space for Indigenous stories in the 'place of utterance'. Indeed, one of Jimmy Chi's key methods for creating healing is to tell previously untold stories, for instance the story of children born from relationships between missionary priests and Aboriginal women.

The significance of storytelling as a strategy for Indigenous self-determination has been attested to by Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith.

'The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope'. (Smith 1999: 4)

In her 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith outlines twenty-five strategies or 'projects' for facilitating the four processes required for self-determination for Indigenous peoples. These four processes she names as transformation, decolonization, healing and mobilization as peoples. In turn the processes should lead to certain non-sequential states of being, namely survival, recovery, development and self-determination (1999: 115).

Of the twenty-five projects, many can be applied to Indigenous theatre in general, and to Jimmy Chi's work in particular. These 'projects' include Testimonies, Storytelling, Celebrating Survival, Remembering, Revitalizing, Representing, Envisioning, Naming, Creating and Sharing (1999: 142 – 161).

Smith (1999: 144) claims that 'Indigenous testimonies are a way of talking about an extremely painful event or series of events', in which '...the voice of a "witness" is accorded space and protection'. This would apply to the testimonies given by Chi's characters such as Uncle Tadpole, Marijuana Annie or Bob Two Bob.

However the use of testimony in theatre may be problematic, as pointed out by Maryrose Casey (2004: 193) in her text *Creating frames: contemporary Indigenous theatre*. Casey asserts that in a theatrical context being framed as a 'witness' may denigrate the role of writers or actors as artists. In a discussion on the perception of the professional status of Indigenous actors, Casey reflects on Leonard Radic's description of actors in Jack Davis's *The Dreamers* as 'not so much actors as witnesses' (Radic 1991 in Casey 2004: 193).

The reduction of the work to primarily a form of testimony presenting 'truth' has a range of implications for how the artists are perceived as well as for the ways in which the work is understood. The concept of testimony has associations with truth in the sense of credibility and knowledge, but it has other associations as well...Testimony is not associated with the skilled craft of actors or writers. (Casey 2004: 193)

Radic's perception was associated with 'an extreme form of naturalism' in terms of acting style in Indigenous theatre, which should have been negated by both the magic realist style and musical form employed in *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*. Nevertheless it was apparently necessary to advertise *Corrugation Road* as 'professional' (Casey 2004: 193).

This is ironic, given that one of the more tangible benefits for the Indigenous performers was paid employment and, in many cases, a springboard into the acting profession.

Smith's advocacy of the strategy of testimony accords more with Chi's envelopment of testimonies, storytelling, remembering and naming into envisioning.

Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes. It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying. (Smith 1999: 28)

Similarly, her contention that the project of storytelling contributes 'to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place' (1999: 144) fits well with the redemptive happy endings of both *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*. The representation of non-Indigenous characters and audiences as belonging to the collective story contributes to the reconciliatory aspect of Chi's work. The resultant hybrid marginal space, from which the subaltern speaks to subvert the binary hegemony, becomes a space of 'resistance and hope' for both oppressed and oppressor. Acceptance offers non-Indigenous Australians a chance to 'reassess the self-denigration that portrays us as morally or spiritually deficient' (Read 2000:1).

Jimmy Chi states his vision very simply in the program for the original production of *Bran Nue Dae*.

Through the life of Willie, and through the people he meets, we find a reality and a world that offers hope.

I hope it helps us to find ourselves again as human beings and to accept that we can live happily in this Garden of Eden if we love one another.

It is the exuberance of Chi's vision of 'a gentler society' that sent *Corrugation Road* audiences 'laughing and singing into the night' (Harris 97) and which was recognised by Paul Keating (1993) in his foreword to the program for the second production of *Bran Nue Dae*.

In giving us an idea of the creative possibilities in bringing the indigenous and non-indigenous cultures of Australia together, *Bran Nue Dae* hints at the benefits which might flow from a general reconciliation between black and white Australia.

Jimmy Chi's achievement as a playwright has been summarized by his friend, interpreter and peer, Stephen 'Baamba' Albert:

To me Jimmy Chi has made this country sit up and think about the issues facing this country. Jimmy Chi is a leader who doesn't want to be looked at as a leader, he doesn't want to be known as a leader, but he would like people to understand the problems of this country, whether it be racism, whether it be mental illness, or whether it be being Australian. (Albert, video recording 1997)



*Jimmy Chi in 1992,  
photographed for Tom  
Zubricki documentary*

[aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/bran-nue-dae/notes/](http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/bran-nue-dae/notes/)



## Postscript: The Film

The latest incarnation of *Bran Nue Dae* is the long-awaited film version, premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival in late 2009.

From the opening animations it is clear that the movie version of Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae*, directed by Rachel Perkins with a screenplay by Reg Cribb and Jimmy Chi, is not going to be a typical 'Aboriginal' film. Some of the animated images are recognisable as well-known images from Broome, for example the Chinese fisherman carrying fish on a pole slung over his shoulder (perhaps representing fishmonger Yuen Lick), the priest in a flowing white cassock, and Morgan's camp.

The opening scene in the beautiful pearl shell bedecked church at Beagle Bay, built by Benedictine priests, St John of God nuns and children of the Stolen Generation, takes the audience directly into the Broome story. Well known Broome actor and all-round character, Stephen Baamba Albert, appears as Pastor Flagon, leading the congregation in Jimmy Chi's hymn, 'All the Way Jesus'. From the choir, Jessica Mauboy as the gorgeous Rosie 'makes eyes' at Willie, causing him to imagine her as a temptress surrounded by the fires of hell.

The casting, with its mix of well-known screen stalwarts – Ernie Dingo, Geoffrey Rush, Magda Szubanski – and charismatic newcomers – Rocky McKenzie, Jessica Mauboy, Missie Higgins, Dan Sultan – has enough big names to attract audiences while showcasing young Indigenous talent at the same time. Indeed, the film is both a showcase of contemporary Indigenous performers and a tribute to those who paved the way, as evidenced in the closing credits.

While the film adds some new characters in Lester and Roxanne and presents the songs in a different order, it is mainly faithful to the theatrical production. For instance, many of the lines in the film, such as Father Benedictus's speech about his desire to see 'der native people be edercated', or Annie's testimony and memory of being stolen, come directly from the original script.

Most importantly, the film maintains the humour, energy and vitality of the original musical with energetic choreography by Stephen Page, new arrangements of the songs and a mood-setting score. The overt boisterous sexuality of the play is also retained, with Dan Sultan and Kuckles performing 'Seeds That You Might Sow' in the first Roebuck Hotel scene, the introduction of Magda Szubanski's raunchy garage operator and the innovative condom tree at Port Hedland.

Both visual and verbal cues are used to reference the stage version. For instance, many of the original actors appear in a variety of new roles. Ernie Dingo plays Uncle Tadpole, Stephen 'Baamba' Albert plays the Pastor, Jimmy

Edgar the football coach, Ningali Lawford is Theresa, Trevor Jamieson appears in the Chorus. Behind the stage at the Roebuck Hotel is a sign advertising the band 'Kuckles', and although frontman Stephen Pigram has been replaced by Dan Sultan, Micky Manolis and Patrick bin Amat are onstage. Many Broome locals, including Arnhem Hunter who was the percussionist in the second production and first tour, sit at bar stools. The Chorus also includes many original members, such as Sylvia Clarke, with additions like dancers from Bangarra, Jimmy Chi's daughter, Rachael, and other graduates of the Aboriginal Theatre course inspired by the success of the play.

The use of slapstick, sight gags and satire also pays homage to the play. There is classic comedic high stepping past Father Benedictus's (otherwise known as Benny) door and a line up of five heads when the boys are raiding the kitchen; close-up shots of Benny's eyes opening, rolling and even snapping his sunglasses shut; not to mention the 'vision' of the holy Father, when the Pentecostals look up from their testifying to see Benny standing on top of the sandhills, silhouetted against the sky, arms outreached like the cross.

Silhouettes of Benny's ancient Mercedes dwarfed between road and sky also provide humour, while Uncle Tadpole even shocks himself with the success of his bone pointing.

Intertextuality with the play abounds, such as the use of Cherry Ripes as a comic motif throughout, from the scene where Father Benedictus pulls a Cherry Ripe from behind Willie's ear, to his using them as a bribe with the homeless men, who devour them more hungrily than the boys at Rossmoyne. Rosie and Willie stroll along Dampier Terrace, close to the spot where Jimmy Chi and Kuckles sing 'Bran Nue Dae' with Broome locals in the Tom Zubrickie film. Annie's vest is almost a replica of the one worn by Lynda Nutter as Marijuana Annie.

Some scenes have been given an innovative treatment. The love scene between Annie (notably no longer 'Marijuana Annie') and Slippery, with Missy Higgins as Annie singing Jimmy Chi's 'Afterglow', now takes place in a typical Kimberley gorge replete with waterfall and swimming hole.

The jail scene, although it starts comically, is very moving. In a visual representation of rates of Indigenous incarceration Tadpole and Roxanne do not resist arrest like the others but comply quietly with police procedures. Tadpole tenderly comforts Willie in the outdoor cells, and explains that his dream of 'bush people' was a visit from 'the old people', come to help the travellers. The beautifully choreographed dream scene replaces the projected photographs of chained prisoners in the play's jail scene. The poignancy of the dream experience is underscored by Tadpole singing 'Listen to the news' with its haunting refrain, 'Is this the end of our people?'.

Although Willie retains his line, 'Uncle, people die in jail I?' (Chi 1991: 34), the line about being a man after his brief imprisonment is replaced by Tadpole ordering the despondent Willie to 'Stand up!'

Certain aspects of the play are clarified in the film. For instance, Slippery's surname is changed to Benedictus, allowing for dramatic irony from the moment he 'phones home' from the police station. Annie's memory of being stolen and announcement that, 'I, too, am an Aborigine', is greeted with a howl of laughter and Tadpole's comment, 'Today, we are all Aborigines'.

Like the play, the film *Bran Nue Dae* operates on many levels, so that although the story is accessible and hilarious to new audiences, deeper levels of meaning are available to audiences who saw the play version, and particularly to Broome locals. For instance, a wet season storm interrupting the film at Sun Pictures provides a plot device for Lester and Rosie to get together. Locals would be reminded of the days when the theatre would not only get rained out, but would flood in high tides. These days, the movie is regularly interrupted by low flying planes cruising in to Broome airport.

Similarly, the illegal gambling dens of Shiba Lane are acknowledged in the brief scene when Willie and Rosie peek through a window at some card players.

Rachel Perkins has paid a great tribute to Jimmy Chi with this film. She has attracted new audiences to his work and reinforced his practice of offering audiences new ways of thinking about Indigenous identities. She has successfully showcased the vibrancy and range of contemporary Indigenous performance. In their representation of Indigeneity as a joyous, celebratory and inclusive place to be, Rachel Perkins and Jimmy Chi have created the 'community rituals of healing and well-being' that Mudrooroo (1997: 162) hoped Indigenous theatre would become.

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## **Videos**

*Artists Upfront: Stephen Baamba Albert* (video recording) 1997,  
produced by Des Kootji Raymond and Paul Roberts.

*Bran Nue Dae.* (video recording) 1992, directed by Tom Zubricki.

*Eora Corroboree* (video recording) 1985, Corroboree Films, Randwick, NSW,  
producers Michael le Moignan, Larry Lucas & Yuri Sokol.

*Strike Your Heart* (Broome 1967) (video recording) 1996,  
directed by Wayne Barker.

*What Time Low Tide?* 1987, Broome, WA,  
produced by Michael Manolis & Peter Strain with assistance of Aboriginal Arts  
Board & FTI, Fremantle.

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