

## Reconciliation? Aboriginality and Australian theatre in the 1990s

Helen Gilbert

In the last decade, Aboriginality has become a significant force in Australian theatre, both in terms of subject matter and performative processes. Not only has there been a vast increase in the number of plays which might be termed 'Aboriginal' but also a concerted effort to put in place structures which will ensure the continued visibility of Aboriginal theatre and Aborigines in theatre, whether local or national. One of the most important infrastructural advances has been the proliferation of amateur and professional groups — including Kooris in Theatre (an ad-hoc collective of Sydney-based practitioners formed in the late 1980s), Ilbjeri (founded Melbourne 1991), Kooemba Jdarra (Brisbane 1993), and Yirra Yaakin Youth Theatre (Western Australia 1992) — devoted wholly or largely to the development and production of Aboriginal performance events. The work of such groups has been supported by various one-off projects and, in some instances, by the active commitment of more established companies to Aboriginal content and/or non-traditional casting choices. At the wider political level, government support in the form of policy directives and funding has also played a role in the establishment of what now seems to be a permanent Aboriginal element in the nation's theatrical culture.

The 1988 bicentennial celebration of European settlement (invasion) put Aboriginal issues on Australian theatre's agenda in an unprecedented way. As well as supporting such events as the Melbourne production of Jack Davis's *The First Born Trilogy*, itself a mammoth project involving the prior development and staging of Davis's new play *Barungin* in Perth, the Bicentennial Authority funded projects by mainstream playwrights Louis Nowra (*Capricornia*), Michael Gow (*1841*), and Stephen Sewell (*Hate*), which dealt directly or indirectly with Aboriginal issues (see Gilbert 1994b). A number of smaller local projects — notably Bob Maza's *The Keepers*, Eva Johnson's *Murras*, and Salamanca Theatre Company's *Copping it Sweet* — consolidated the Aboriginal content of bicentennial theatre in various regions.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, these achievements have been extended by numerous playwrights and practitioners whose work has found an interested audience in a society influenced by events such as the International Year of Indigenous Peoples (1993), the passing of the Commonwealth Native Title Act (1993), and, most recently, the High Court's Wik decision (1996)

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allowing Aboriginal title to coexist with pastoral leases. Although the early 1990s push for 'reconciliation' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians has been somewhat diluted since the Howard government gained power in 1996, there remains in many sectors of the community a general commitment to the movement, and a groundswell of support for Aboriginal cultural production. In this respect, the political and social climate of reconciliation provides one important context within which to assess recent developments such as the diversification of Aboriginal performance styles (particularly the growth of musical theatre), the increase in plays by/about Aboriginal women, the touring of Aboriginal productions to remote communities as well as interstate and overseas, the re-staging of early Aboriginal works along with the creation of new performance pieces, and the appearance of Aboriginal actors (and less often directors) on most mainstream stages, albeit irregularly. In the latter category of developments, Black Swan Theatre Company (Perth 1991) has played a major role, regularly casting Aboriginal actors in various canonical plays as well as staging texts by and about Aborigines.

#### **Aboriginality and cultural politics**

While the recent expansion of Aboriginal theatre has not been manifest evenly across time or place, it does raise a number of important issues which are relevant to the larger performing arts industry in Australia as well as to the specific local communities involved. In particular, the current intense interest in Aboriginality raises questions of authority, ownership, and authenticity, especially when performance projects involve intensive collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners, as is often the case. Such questions are not merely theoretical but often politically and economically crucial even if there is little consensus about what actually constitutes Aboriginality and how it functions within a settler/migrant society which is becoming increasingly multicultural.

In liberal arts circles, if not in the wider Australian community, Aboriginality is now seen variously as an energising, indigenising, and/or hybridising force. For performing arts, as for visual arts and music, Aboriginal culture is often expected to provide an archive of so-called 'traditional' forms which might extend the predictable repertoire of a transplanted Eurocentric theatre, and, at the same time, make that theatre more fully 'Australian'. Critics who regard Aboriginal performance as an energiser inevitably focus on presentational style and laud those productions which strongly convey difference, usually through dance/movement, music, costume, and scenic design. Such productions

are described as 'fresh', 'new', 'exhilarating', and 'raw',<sup>2</sup> the latter term implying both an appealing purity of form/energy and a concomitant lack of (European) theatrical sophistication. Within this paradigm, Aboriginal performance is exoticised in much the same manner as Asian forms such as Noh and Kabuki since it is seen to offer ways of injecting life into a 'moribund' mainstream theatre (Fischer 1990, 15). This can lead to the appropriation of approved versions of Aboriginality in the service of a non-Aboriginal imperative to produce a vibrant performance culture which may not necessarily address the most urgent needs of Aborigines themselves. Collaborative projects initiated by 'whites' can be particularly tricky to orchestrate in a non-appropriative fashion because such intercultural theatre is often tacitly based on an 'hour-glass' model which posits the uncomplicated transfer of 'grains of culture' from the source group to the target audience (Pavis 1992, 4-6). One intercultural experiment based on this kind of model is the Mudrooroo/Müller project (1991), initially conceived by Gerhard Fischer as an investigation of the ways in which Aboriginal performance might re-animate a European script. In this instance, however, Fischer's Aboriginal collaborators appear to have re-appropriated the project during the rehearsal process, which culminated in a staged reading of what had been transformed into an emphatically Koori script: *The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Proclamation of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with a Production of 'The Commission' by Heiner Müller*.<sup>3</sup>

The indigenising functions of Aboriginality are equally important to a settler/invasor society anxious to legitimise its presence in a country it has sequestered from its original inhabitants. In this formulation, Aboriginal culture, especially in its traditional guises, is now valorised as a conduit to the land and to a very ancient human history; thus the incorporation of Aboriginal elements into mainstream art forms functions to ensure the 'Australianness' of those forms. As far as theatre is concerned, this has meant that productions which exhibit approved versions of Aboriginality are quickly claimed as 'Australian', while expressly confrontational performance by/about Aborigines is relegated to alterity, tolerated out of political correctness but seldom fully engaged with. Hence, Jack Davis's *Barungin* left most reviewers disappointed because of its uncompromising treatment of Aboriginal deaths in custody — this was perceived as a departure from his earlier, 'conciliatory' works — whereas more upbeat texts such as Jimmy Chi and Kuckles' *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) and Roger Bennett's *Funerals and Circuses* (1992) have been praised for their Australianness — and less often their Aboriginality —



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while being enthusiastically welcomed into our contemporary theatre canon.<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that the latter plays are inherently less political in intention or effect but to argue that their expressions of Aboriginality risk co-option by a white Australian society whose current post-colonial position as both coloniser and colonised makes the project of reconciliation particularly urgent. When Aboriginal theatre is identified as a potential export or tourist attraction, its indigenising function becomes even more prominent as discourses of nationhood come into play.<sup>5</sup> In such instances, internal divisions within our overall performance culture are often downplayed to allow the discursive construction of the production/play at issue as representative of the Australian nation. This situation is not necessarily detrimental to the Aboriginal agenda of decolonisation but it does pose the question, once again, of whether or not Aboriginal interests are also being served.

When it is constructed primarily as a source of energy and/or indigeneity for a broadly defined national performance culture, Aboriginal theatre circulates within an epistemological equation that maintains the centrality of the dominant group. This group is then able to influence the terms on which Aboriginality will be admitted to or excluded from Australian stages. All too often, white critics (and presumably audiences) deem Aboriginal performance to inhere in a limited range of signifiers — predominantly tribal dances, didgeridoo music, and dreaming stories — that express a commitment to 'tradition'. What has identifiable links with tradition thus becomes 'authentic' while other theatrical expressions of Aboriginality are frequently ignored, subsumed within narratives of nationhood, or, in some cases, criticised for their failure to deliver the 'real thing'. A very good example of such discursive surveillance is evident in critical responses to Bangarra Dance Theatre's recent work. Their major 1992/3 touring production *Praying Mantis Dreaming* was widely acclaimed for its exploration of traditional material derived from the culture of the Yirrkala people of Arnhem Land. Although this piece included a significant proportion of Euro-American derived movement and music, few reviewers dwelt on that aspect except to read the modern segments as appropriate to a 'tale of traditional Aboriginal *versus* urban Aboriginal values and experience' (Nemeth 1992: 64; my italics). Bangarra's 1994 dance-theatre piece *Ninni* met with a much less enthusiastic response from most critics, many of whom regretted the relative lack of traditional performance elements and claimed that the company's increased emphasis on modern dance made their work 'indistinguishable' from that of other groups (Sykes 1994; McGillick 1994). In both cases, reviewers gauged Aboriginality — or

the lack of it — according to a concept of tradition that reduces Aboriginal culture to its reproducible artefacts while denying the validity of performance that reflects the lived experience of many so-called 'non-traditional' (urban) Aborigines.

As Gareth Griffiths warns, the myth of authenticity can in fact function as another form of colonialist discourse in so far as it "speaks" the indigene within a construction whose legitimacy is grounded not in *their* practice but in *our* desire' (1994a, 83). This observation is particularly relevant to a discussion of Aboriginal theatre since it points to the gap between the processes of signification — here including both rehearsal and performance — and the processes through which an act of representation is read and understood. For better or for worse, contemporary Aboriginal performing arts have proliferated under the banner of theatre consumed primarily by non-Aboriginal audiences. Moreover, as arts which put the Aboriginal body on display, they operate within a representational system which often fetishises visible signs of racial and sexual difference. Hence, the very conditions of reception for Aboriginal theatre tend to facilitate readings which reflect the desires of the mainstream society. And yet theatre can also provide an important space for multiple and specific expressions of Aboriginality, precisely because it is a social *practice* that usually involves complex negotiations at each stage of the production process. In collaborative projects particularly, Aboriginal input into the scripting, the design, the direction, the performance, the management, and the promotion of a piece of theatre not only affects the Aboriginality of the final product but also of the theatre-making process. Similarly, negotiations of different kinds of Aboriginality occur when various indigenous groups work together or when they consult tribal experts on traditional performance styles and techniques. It follows, then, that all performative expressions of Aboriginality are mediated in some way, and that debates about authenticity (as they are currently constituted) cannot offer the most useful frameworks for engaging with Aboriginal theatre as a political and aesthetic practice.

If Aboriginal theatre must be examined in reference to a broader Australian performing arts culture — and this seems both inevitable and necessary at our current historical moment — we need analytical models that can account for the many different forms of interaction between and within the various groups involved, whether as producers or consumers. Such models will be conducive to a genuine process of reconciliation only if they allow expressions of Aboriginality to serve the strategic interests of Aboriginal peoples rather than those of the mainstream

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theatre and its public. At present, the concept of hybridity as it is used in post-colonial theory/criticism seems to provide the most enabling approach to the series of problems I have outlined. Homi Bhabha posits that a hybridising of cultural forms is the unavoidable outcome of any imperial project. In his particular formulation, hybridity is seen as a volatile interaction characterised by conflict between and within the constitutive cultures of colonised societies. Neither a simple fusion of differences nor 'a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures' (Bhabha 1985, 98), hybridity functions as a form of positive 'contamination' that resists the discourses of cultural purity which underpin colonialist relations. In some contexts, hybrid cultural forms circulate historically marginalised knowledges and practices as a means of destabilising the power of the dominant group. This is often the case in theatrical expressions of hybridity, where the deliberate tension between Western and indigenous theatrico-dramatic forms provides an 'in-between' space in and through which traditional narratives and performance practices can be recuperated for contemporary purposes.

For example, *Ningali* (1994), performed by Josie Ningali Lawford from a script she developed with the assistance of Robyn Archer and Angela Chaplin, uses an eclectic mix of Western and Aboriginal storytelling techniques to convey knowledges central to the protagonist's particular historical experience. In a performance that includes stand-up comedy, country and western songs, and syncretic dance sequences, Ningali confirms the continued relevance of her tribe's kinship patterns, her Wambajarri language, and the stories told by her Jabbi and Jaja (grandparents) that have guided her various journeys in Australia and abroad. Tradition functions in such texts as an inheritance through which contemporary Aboriginality can be negotiated, rather than as a form of essentialist difference that determines the status of a play and/or production *vis à vis* predetermined notions of authenticity. The performative rehearsal and re-enactment of a variety of (necessarily) hybridised signs of Aboriginality also facilitates the deconstruction of the colonialist stereotypes which have circumscribed representations of indigenous peoples on Australian stages throughout the history of white settlement. In this respect, Aboriginal theatre introduces into mainstream production and reception processes a degree of ambivalence which, in Bhabha's terms, 'ensure[s] that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicised and read anew' (1988, 21).

Post-colonial theories of hybridity are not intended to supply a model of reconciliation which merely celebrates diversity within a



multicultural society. As Sneja Gunew (1993) argues, the rhetoric of multiculturalism, in its official versions at least, may actually limit expressions of difference because it tends to homogenise minority cultural production and to proscribe certain versions of marginality. This kind of cultural pluralism also risks instituting hierarchies of difference that promote public acceptance of aestheticised cultural forms — such as the performing arts — while simultaneously disavowing aspects of Aboriginal law, land usage, and kinship systems, all of which might be legitimately regarded as 'culture'. What needs to inform the Australian multicultural formula is the recognition that markers of Aboriginality (and all other cultural affiliations) are always unstable *and* continually contested by both Aborigines and settler-migrants. According to sociologist and film critic Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginality is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation' (1993, 33). Langton identifies three broad categories of 'intersubjectivity' which constitute an 'infinite array' of Aboriginalities: the interactions of Aboriginal peoples within the contexts of their own cultures; the representations of stereotyped and/or mythologised Aborigines by white people who lack significant first-hand knowledge of their subject; and dialogue situations in which 'individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension' (33). This explanation of Aboriginality as a process of continual becoming is particularly useful because it does not seek to locate an authentic culture but instead recognises the specificity of various representations of a cultural *construct*.

#### **Markers of Aboriginality**

If Aboriginality is both difficult to define and radically unstable, choosing criteria by which to delimit the category of Aboriginal theatre becomes an increasingly fraught task, especially given the potential variance of each enactment of a play. Most critics, reviewers, teachers and publishers assign Aboriginality according to authorship, but this itself is a problematic concept, both in terms of the diverse conceptual and technical input which goes into creating any performance text, and also in reference to Aboriginal writing as a form of cultural production. As Penny Van Toorn argues, a theory of authorship can account for Aboriginal texts only if it is 'capable of accommodating transcribed speech, translation, and other modes of collaborative and mediated writing' that point to the 'variety of institutional, cultural, social, and political contexts' in which Aboriginal people produce textual materials (1995, 9). Theatre is only rarely a site of the kind of individual writing that conventional notions of authorship validate, and it clearly involves

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mediation at a number of levels even when devised by a culturally homogenous group. In the case of Aboriginal theatre, these levels of mediation are precisely the points at which hybridisation can and does take place.

An instructive if perhaps controversial example is the Queensland Theatre Company's production of *One Woman's Song* (1993), a play based on the life and writings of Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal. The script, written by white playwright Peta Murray, would obviously fail in most people's judgement to qualify as an Aboriginal text, and yet there is ample evidence to suggest that the *theatrical realisation* of that script was widely received as Aboriginal theatre, even though no reviewers actually describe it in exactly those terms. As well as praising the play for its timely treatment of Aboriginal issues, many commentators focus their attention on the stage presence of Aboriginal actors Lydia Miller, Deborah Mailman, and Neokigai Bonner, who played Oodgeroo at different periods in her life. The creative input of Aboriginal choreographer Michael Leslie is frequently noted as is the musical score devised by sometime composer for Yothu Yindi, Michael Havis. Several reviews also make a clear distinction between the script (regarded as competent and sincere but not inspired) and the overall theatrical event, which was widely lauded for its depictions of Aboriginal culture, and even seen as a celebration befitting the International Year of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>6</sup> Despite the Queensland Theatre Company's limited consultation with Aborigines in the initial stages of the project,<sup>7</sup> it could be argued that the various points of mediation in the production of *One Woman's Song* actually allowed Aboriginal input to suffuse a non-Aboriginal script with markers of Aboriginality, which performed (in both senses of the word) an authorial function and, in turn, *authorised* the resultant production to represent the particular Aboriginal subject at issue. The theatrical text was then given the stamp of approval by Oodgeroo herself, who appeared at the end of the play's opening night to recite one of her best-known poems. While this whole process, including Oodgeroo's own 'performance', was by no means exempt from some of the traps of collaborative cross-cultural work as I have described them above, it does locate Aboriginality at least partly in the conditions of theatrical production and reception, rather than simply viewing it as something necessarily embedded in the script.

The de-emphasising of the playwright's function as the most important locus of Aboriginality allows a wider range of texts to legitimately participate in the theatrical dialogue which seems to me essential for genuine reconciliation. This is not to suggest that the



cultural positioning of the playwright is, or should be, irrelevant — indeed, authorship by Aborigines remains strategically desirable for a whole host of economic and political reasons — but to argue that we must adopt broader definitions of Aboriginal cultural production as long as there are other players in the field of 'intersubjectivity' that Langton has outlined. Production texts which might then be analysed under the rubric of Aboriginal theatre include a number of collaboratively 'authored' plays such as *Murri Love* (1995) by Cathy Craigie and Therese Collie, *Close to the Bone* (1991) scripted by Ned Manning from work done with Koori students at the EORA Centre in Redfern, and *Bidenjarreb Pinjarra* (1994), which was deliberately devised and performed by two Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal actors to give Wetjallas and Nyoongahs equal power and ownership over the product — an account of the 1834 Battle of Pinjarra in which hundreds of Aborigines are said to have been massacred by colonial regiments.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps more contentiously, one could also argue that Louis Nowra's *Capricornia* and his companion plays, *Radiance* (1993) and *Crow* (1994a), along with Nicholas Parson's *Dead Heart* (1993) and Eric Earley's *The Custodians* (1993), might usefully inform a discussion of the field since these plays all foreground Aboriginal characters and have required significant professional interaction between Aborigines and whites during their production processes. There is even a good case for including 'Aboriginalised' productions of classical texts as important sites of intervention in the historical processes that have stereotyped representations of indigenous peoples or simply erased them from our stages. A recent example of such theatre is Black Swan's 1991 production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, which gave Aboriginal actors Kelton Pell, Stephen Albert, and John Moore equal billing with their non-Aboriginal counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

What the diversity of Aboriginal participation in Australian theatre makes clear is the necessity of examining each production in all its processual complexity. This kind of analysis demands that we focus squarely on the performance text rather than giving priority to the written script. It is then possible to delineate a number of markers of Aboriginality that are performed — rehearsed, re-enacted, and constantly reinterpreted — across many different texts and often with very different effects. Such cultural markers should not be seen as defining a fixed body of Aboriginal plays/productions but rather as indicating a politically inflected *practice* that continually (re)produces multiple and mutable instances of Aboriginal theatre.

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Perhaps the most common feature across the range of recent plays by and about Aborigines is an avoidance of wholly naturalistic forms. This is manifest not only in the narrative structures and performance modes of various texts but also in the scenography, which is often stylised to convey symbolic levels of meaning. *Murri Love*, which incorporated non-naturalistic forms only in the scenography, provides an interesting variant to this general pattern. The proliferation of musical theatre, storytelling and dance theatre clearly signals this departure from naturalism, as does the growing number of plays which follow naturalistic conventions to some extent while also subverting their authority with 'wayward' signifying codes borrowed from either traditional or Western forms of representation, or both. Sally Morgan's *Sistergirl* (1992), for example, is largely styled as a naturalistic comedy but the most significant action occurs in the surrealistic dream sequences which reveal Rosy's tragic past, and in her periodic contact with the Birdman, an Aboriginal spirit who portends her imminent passage to the Dreaming. Such theatre hybridises the overdetermined spaces of naturalism to deliberately ruffle the smooth edges of the staged image, and thus challenge its presumed ideological neutrality. Expressions of Aboriginality can then be historicised — or even allegorised — within a specific representational context rather read as fixed or natural. At the same time, non-naturalistic theatre is conducive to the exploration of Aboriginal epistemologies because it welcomes experiment and delights in stylistic promiscuity.<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, facilitates the circulation of marginalised cultural forms, both traditional and contemporary, as well as aiding their strategic adaptations.

Whatever the choice of form, the physicalised presence of Aboriginal actors is an important marker of indigenous theatre. This is an industrial and political issue as well as a representational choice. The visible signs of Aboriginality as ascribed to the performing body will of course vary from actor to actor and according to the theatrical contexts in which that body displays itself, but, if our performing arts culture is to address the historical stereotyping of indigenous peoples, it is strategically desirable to populate Australian stages with actors who identify as Aboriginal and are recognised as such. Aboriginal theatre faces the particular problem of finding ways to emphasise racial difference as a 'scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak 1988: 205) while at the same time refusing to endorse the concept of an essentialised racial biology which remains the cornerstone of imperialist thinking. Brechtian modes of characterisation provide one effective response to this challenge. In the recent Kooemba Jdarra production of Kevin Gilbert's 1968 play, *The Cherry Pickers*