



Black Comedy star Nakkiah Lui on how humour is sparking fresh thinking on Indigenous issues

Monique Schafter
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LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: The person you're about to meet was a self-described "fat Aboriginal kid", still bearing the scars of daily racist schoolyard taunts. Now, the multi-talented Nakkiah Lui is a passionate advocate for Indigenous rights. The former law student turned award-winning playwright and comedian believes the secret to making people understand you is to make them laugh with you. She grew up in Western Sydney and that's where she spoke to Monique Schafter.

NAKKIAH LUI, PLAYWRIGHT & COMEDIAN (Black Comedy): We've identified the final target. Colonised, assimilated, caught in the cycle of Western oppression. ... We are the Aboriginal Liberation Front! We were sent here to save you! Welcome to your Garden of Eden! ...

... I think humour is our most powerful tool when it comes to actually creating some type of social change. I think you can get away with so much if you say something with a smile on your face or if you laugh and I think that's what we do with black comedy a lot, is that we make people laugh, but then we kind of sucker punch 'em with a question.

ACTOR (Black Comedy): These are the essentials you will need. (Inaudible) And a spear.

NAKKIAH LUI: Everything else you need is all around you. It's in your blood. It's in here. Welcome home. ...

... One of the questions I had to myself was: how do I actually make people care about Indigenous stories? And humour does that. If you can get someone to laugh with you, you can get them to care about you and caring about someone is the first step to listening about their story and for their story to mean anything. I was a bit of a nutso kid, I was a bit bananas. I was really, um - I threw a lot of tantrums, I was always really dramatic and argumentative and stubborn and I did, like, a lot of performing arts and theatre and that.

JACK GIBSON, FATHER: I think the key was sort of ADD, I think. We never got it - got her assessed. And I think she's - all of her life she's been pretty boisterous and outgoing and over-the-top. I think we teach the girls to be open, to question things, to always question things and never accept things.

JENNIFER BEALE, MOTHER: Yeah, she went to her first protest when she was about three months old in a pram. That was a black deaths in custody protest.

NAKKIAH LUI: My grandfather couldn't read and write, but he was very much a storyteller and my grandma could read and write and she was an avid reader. So, this idea of storytelling I think is something that is greatly influenced from them.

REPORTER (March 9): The girl's death is the latest in a spring of suspected suicides in the Pilbara and ...

MONIQUE SCHAFER, REPORTER: So last month you wrote a personal piece in The Guardian in response to the horrible news that a 10-year-old Indigenous girl had committed suicide in WA. How hard did that news hit you?

NAKKIAH LUI: The news of the 10-year-old girl passing away was - it was just devastating. As an artist, you do hope that - you are a bit of an idealist. You want - you want to think people can change. But then you hear news like that and you're like: really, how far have we changed?

REPORTER: Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in WA.

NAKKIAH LUI: The mental health issues that are linked with the Aboriginal experience in Australia and, you know, that sense of worthlessness and, you know, that depression and anxiety that comes from being deeply - these deeply ingrained values of existing in a country that said that you weren't here and then did commit mass acts of genocide and violence against you and continue to do - that just affects every Aboriginal person and it affects every Aboriginal person I know. And it was being this little - well I wasn't little, I was fat - this fat Aboriginal kid who was very brown and went - I'm gonna get teary, but - was called Abo every day at high school. And I remember just thinking, "This world has no place for me." And I wanted to write and to act and I just thought, "That's never gonna happen." And I would have been, like - I was a kid, you know? And thankfully, I had this amazing family around me who did install hope and who pushed me and who pushed me and always raised me up and gave me a lot of opportunity. But I thought, like, that kid wanted to kill themselves and that kid thought about it every day. And this is from someone who's had a very privileged background and that was very much linked to my racial identity. I still think about suicide every day and I do in a way that's not suicide ideation, it's just this idea of, "Will things change and should I give up?" And you have to fight that. But, you know, I have so much opportunity and privilege; what about the people who don't? And that must be such a hard battle to fight.

JENNIFER BEALE: I like this one.

NAKKIAH LUI: Classic playwright face.

JENNIFER BEALE: It is, isn't it?

NAKKIAH LUI: Look up into the sky and over the horizon.

JENNIFER BEALE: What are you thinking? Why has mum put me in this stupid hat?

NAKKIAH LUI: I like that hat. I should use that as my head shot.

JENNIFER BEALE: There's just some really nasty people out there and there's some real racist people and it's really sad to think that - you know, when I was growing up, I experienced racism, and as a mother, to be experiencing - see my girls experience the same, it's very hurtful.

JACK GIBSON: I think what Nakkiah does with her work is she's exposing these unequal power relationships. She's exposing Australia for what it is: white. And I'm very, very proud of that.

JENNIFER BEALE: But she's got this gift. Like, a lot of our people have different gifts and hers is the gift of storytelling and educating people.

NAKKIAH LUI: If I am, you know, wearing my Aboriginality on my sleeve, then I need to - I need to make that count.

LEIGH SALES: Monique Schafter reporting.