

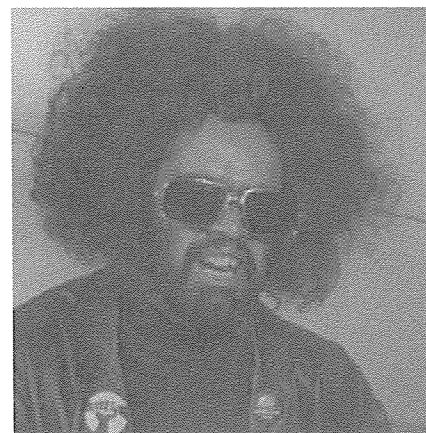
# Flip Side of Tragedy

There's great power in laughter, writes Larissa Behrendt, who speaks here with two prominent Indigenous comedians. But it doesn't always signify a funny situation.

When asked about their thoughts on Eddie McGuire's comments last year about Adam Goodes, the most frequent response I received from my Aboriginal friends was: "Well, you've got to laugh". To an outsider, this might be interpreted as simply laughing the incident off – but there is something very serious about laughing in this context. It is a powerful antidote to the trauma, harm and hurt that comes with racism. It is also not only a source of healing power for the victimised, but also a powerful way to educate the ignorant.

My dad grew up in an orphanage before becoming a street kid, and would always tell funny stories about his various antics and pranks. He would always choose to share an entertaining anecdote over telling you about his past hardships. It was only in the final year of his life that he revealed to me that he had suffered from physical and emotional abuse while living there.

This experience of looking at the funny side through adversity is not unique. Sean Choolburra was a former dancer who turned his hand at being funny. He has worked as a stand-up comedian for just over a decade, and now is the best known Aboriginal comedian. His parents grew up on Palm Island – a place where curfews were imposed, and where segregation thrived. A leprosy colony was built on the next island. "But you wouldn't know it was tragic or horrific", he says, "My mum, dad and grandparents would tell all these funny yarns over tea and dampers. Hearing all these, would have thought they had the



greatest lives growing up. But you got the sense that they wouldn't have survived without our sense of humour."

"The flip side of tragedy is comedy," adds Aboriginal stand-up comedian Kevin Kropinyeri. "We have had to learn to look at our situation. We never had much on the mission... My nana would spend three-month periods in gaol for being off the mission without papers. Laughter is healing and is a way of coping with life."

Every new generation has its influences. Choolburra credits Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor as his, as well as the 1970s sitcom 'Good Times' that, while dealing with issues such as poverty, unemployment and racism, did so with humour and empathy. But he concedes that there is something unique about Aboriginal humour that makes it hard to categorise, while lamenting that there were few Aboriginal stand-up comedians in earlier generations.

The 1986 short film 'Babakiueria' was based on a concept of Aboriginal people discovering white people and their sacred places ("the barbeque area"). Almost three decades later, the hypocrisy of dominant culture views of Aboriginality are a rich source of material, and remains a powerful way of cracking open not just overt racism, but the double standards that lie just under the surface. 'Basically Black' aired on the ABC in 1973 with an ensemble cast that included Gary Foley (left) and Bob Mazza that did sketch comedy. It explored "reverse racism" and included a character called Super Boong (above right). Choolburra concedes that you wouldn't get away with this today. People are too sensitive, and Aboriginal comedians are not as free to use derogative terms to describe

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each other for fear it will be misinterpreted. Who can blame them? In a society where young teenagers are unaware that calling an Aboriginal person an ape can be offensive, and when media commentators who make similar blunders are defended with a chorus of "he's a well-meaning bloke who meant no offense", it is little surprise that Aboriginal comedians take a cautious approach.

Writer Anita Heiss, author of 'Am I Black Enough For You?', observes that "it's fair to say that humour, and our capacity to laugh in the face of adversity has sustained us over two centuries." Heiss acknowledges that she aims for satire when trying to unpack political realities: "hook the audience with satire, then punch them in the guts with their own racism." She observes that Aboriginal women writers such as Vivienne



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Cleven, Melissa Lucashenko, Alexis Wright and Terri Janke are showing the capacity to weave humour into quite serious stories. But the length and nature of a novel allow for layering and exploration. Stand-up is short, sharp and brutal.

Kropinyeri says that, in constructing a performance, "you don't want to re-affirm things to white rednecks." And there is no doubt that the audience will dictate the extent to which he can push the envelope: "I go harder if there is an all black crowd. Blackfellas can handle it because we live it. I love performing for an all-black audience. I don't have to explain things."

This is a concession about the cultural gap between black and white Australia, underlining the fact that comedy can be used to get a message out. Choolburra calls this mix of comedy and content "edutainment":

Hook the audience with satire, then punch them in the guts with their own racism.

"You are educating the audience. You are entertaining, but at the same time hitting those comments that are often on the news – or cultural awareness issues."

Ironically, Choolburra and Kropinyeri both downplay politics in their work. They stay clear of issues such as the Northern Territory intervention, the impact of the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families, and social issues like domestic violence and child abuse. There is nothing funny about them.

Their mainstay for content is the racism alive within Australian society – and their focus on "reverse racism" and identity is far from being safe ground. Choolburra has a sketch where he explores the notion of a full-blooded white person, cutting to the heart of white Australia's fascination with blood quantum. "I've never seen a full-blooded white person before!" he explains with the same enthusiasm and anthropological curiosity with which some Australians see as a more authentic and racially pure specimen.

The comments about Goodes that sparked furore come not from a place of deep, dark racism, but of ignorance and lack of reflection. And this is where Aboriginal comedy can be at its most potent. Once, when I was asked what nationality I was, the kindly Australian's response to my Aboriginality was "Don't worry, you can't tell." I tell it as a funny story. And it sort of is. And sort of isn't. ⑩

Professor Larissa Behrendt is a Eualeyai/Kamillaroi woman. She is the Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Chair of the Bangarra Dance Theatre. She is the author of several books on Indigenous legal issues. She won the 2002 David Uniapon Award and a 2005 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for her novel 'Home'. Her novel, 'Legacy', won a Victorian Premier's Literary Award in 2010. She was named as 2009 NAIDOC Person of the Year.

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