

Third Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture

Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 23 November 1997

A Passion for Ideas: Black Stage

by Rhoda Roberts

Jungi Kala Widther, Good Afternoon and welcome and thank you so much for being here on this perfect Bondi Beach day. I would just like to acknowledge the Eora Nation whose land I am standing on and I'd also like to thank the Rex Cramphorn Committee whose members are Neil Armfield, Eamon D'Arcy, Tim Fitzpatrick, Gay McAuley, Derek Nicholson, Jill Smith, Kerry Walker and also a hugely big thanks to the Centre for Performance Studies and in particular Laura Ginters who tried to contact me no end in the last few months.

I never actually worked with or knew Rex Cramphorn but I've certainly heard of his work and for me it is a great honour to be standing here to deliver this third memorial lecture.

Last year John Romeril entitled his memorial lecture '[Ringing Heaven](#)' and wrote:

I utterly condemn the opportunistic and Machiavellian behaviour of the Liberal Party, and not just in these past seven hellish weeks, but for decades.

... God, history repeats itself.

As was mentioned, the first lecture was given by Jim Sharman and entitled '[In the Realm of the Imagination](#)'. He goes on to say:

Theatre is a tiny realm of the imagination that nonetheless maintains the power to influence our thoughts, our feelings and our actions in the greater realm of human society.

When I first began as Artistic Director of the Festival of the Dreaming I was really hoping with all my evangelical upbringing there could be some way I could at least contact heaven and get a few tips from my dad, the late Pastor Frank Roberts, Oodgeroo Noonuccal or perhaps Kevin Gilbert. I certainly knew it wasn't going to be an easy task, particularly with the political climate at the time. The knives were out from both sides, digging in, a death threat had been received, human faeces had been left on my doorstep - which made me think how uncomfortable it must have been for them to squat to deliver that pungent little piece of message - and to top it off, the press began labelling it as 'The Festival of the Nightmare'... Great, I hadn't even started looking at product, let alone policy. So I rang a dear friend and colleague, Lydia Miller, frustrated and angry, crying 'What the fuck is going on? I just want to work, do a few changes, maybe change a few opinions, let them see what we're really like. And, if I have time, maybe a few subtle jabs of good humour at Pauline'. We began to talk and we talked about the problems that Uncle Jack Davis might have faced and Nanna (Oodgeroo), the roles Justine Saunders had undertaken. Surely their journey was a lot tougher. And then finally, it got down to us reflecting on our ancestors. How complacent they must think this generation has become.

When you let your imagination place you two hundred years ago, say, on a beach, the froth of the water has turned pink, there is the stench of manure and gun powder, the wailing reaches silence, the children are quiet and in a short twenty-eight seconds two hundred women have witnessed their children massacred and it's their turn for the leering, and the raping, and the silence by violence. Let me tell you, it's deathly loud.

So, I sat back and realised the knives were never going to be as sharp as those swords.

When radio broadcast began coverage of a tragedy with 'the worst massacre Australia has ever witnessed' and Martin Bryant was flown to Hobart Hospital, I thought of the tragedy and also of how devastating for the families, but at the same time I thought: Hello? Just wait a moment; let's look at the history of this nation and the terminology we are using. It was the worst massacre in modern history. So I began the Festival with a passion for ideas and the black stage. Not that many were happy with them at first, but it had to be done, and done our way and I became quite relentless. In fact, I've never worked in such a manner before. God, this was the Olympics. There was so much misinformation circling out from the community. A whole process of education had to be developed and initiated, but there was so much positive that could be gained by both sides. I think the community believed that I had bedded the enemy and when it came to SOCOG I was a bit of an unknown, perhaps a loose cannon. A few yarns, an invitation, honest discussion and open arms resulted in enormous support from many, many areas.

In tandem with the biggest event in the world that takes place every four years, the Festival was a milestone putting our artists up front where they belong. Aboriginal artists today express the tenacity and strength of the people who bore the brunt of colonisation. The Festival gave us the opportunity to invite non-indigenous Australians into a very rare insight of indigenous culture through music, theatre, dance, literature, film and the visual arts in a way that had never ever been seen before. The Festival reinforced our cultural community, our ties and our languages... And yes, folks, languages are spoken in New South Wales.

When the first settlers arrived and they saw a corroboree they labelled it a bush opera. Opera, as we know, is dance, music, story, mime and song. It encompasses many of the arts.

Aboriginal arts have always been holistic and it is often difficult to label and box it into pigeonholes, just as I find it very hard to box and label what is often associated as fringe, community or mainstream arts. It all had a beginning and comes from somewhere - I mean even the old Bard began at the beginning. There are a number of people, all community-based, who paved the way for many, many generations, developing Aboriginal arts and culture. Like all peoples, our culture has developed, changed and adapted since colonisation. However the intrinsic link across the country is that the '90s indigenous artists paint, dance, perform and write about their country and their land.

Resources and infrastructure have always been limited and with further funding cuts we have to change our mindsets. Now this is a huge dilemma: do we take corporate money? Do we look at mining companies and other sectors? It's a huge ask for some communities and one we are very much still debating within our own community organisations. But what are the other options? Most community-based organisations are struggling and their

future looks bleak. We need to be afraid; very, very afraid with the current government. If you compare our major companies with their Australian counterparts, there are a number of areas and issues which are hugely different. Bangarra Dance Company, for example, represents a product of over twenty years of nurturing. In a small tin shed in Redfern in 1970s an African-American woman called Carol Johnson began recruiting young people from around the country to train in the classic and contemporary traditions, both in western and Aboriginal dance. It was known as the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre. In the '90s it's known as the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association or NAISDA. I love it in the '90s how all these organisations get longer and longer names.

The majority of the Bangarra company is made up of NAISDA graduates who represent Australia as one of our premier dance companies and not just as an indigenous company. They are continuing to develop links nationally and internationally, but most importantly, they are making changes for our next generation. The bridge between remote and urban communities, for example, has been developed by Stephen Page, working very closely with the Yirrkala community and I believe he has actually made history by employing as his principal dancer Djakapurra Munyarryun. I was amazed that none of the critics picked up on this during the Festival. It is really ground-breaking work, as is his collaborative work now being undertaken with The Australian Ballet. Perhaps the end result will come to fruition in a couple of years. But who knows, the next "Swan Lake" production could have a black principal dancer. After all, I remember reading those stories and I always thought it was the ugly black duck who grew up to be the beautiful swan. Well, that's how I had interpreted it, that story, so who knows?

But here is a company who were about to go under and were unable to finance a new '97 production. The Olympic Arts Festivals commissioned them for their recent work, *Fish*. Now, would they have performed at the Edinburgh Festival this year and toured Asia? Would this have happened to the Sydney Dance Company?

The point I am making is Aboriginal works are often not judged as equal with their counterparts. The reality is it has only been a very, very short time of finance, development, nurturing and resources for only a small number of organisations and companies. There are also so many cultural issues - and I'll try to touch on a few - which were just so big that need to be addressed and taken into account when working with classic Aboriginal work in remote communities and urban-based artists.

The pre-production and approval process, for example, of a new collaborative work is perhaps three months longer. September/October, by the way, is not a good time for a festival as many specific ceremonies and religious practices are in place and need to be respected and observed. We in fact had a lot of support from many communities who actually juggled their dates for their ceremonies so their artists could come down and participate in the festival.

The '90s is a real turning point for Aboriginal art; there is the need to address many issues and art practices, but before I go on to that I'd just like to talk a little bit about what I observed from not being in the industry.

I grew up with this constant talk of the lack of female roles, the glass ceiling, et cetera. I have mentioned this in a number of talks recently but it sort of helps me put my next point

into perspective. When everyone was coming and saying there's no roles for women, you hit forty, you don't get any roles, the glass ceiling, you never get there... My immediate response was to do some research and to begin yelling. You've got the glass ceiling, but we're still at the floorboard level. Now you know why we rip them up and burn them for firewood, because it just makes the process so much easier.

I looked at a lot of articles and work in the '70s and '80s, and the Women's Film Unit showed that with nurturing, development funds and resources plus good honest competition big things can happen. In those days the Jan Chapmans and the Gillian Armstrongs were working on films specifically about women's issues. Now they are making international films about human issues, but what gives these films the edge is that they have women film-makers.

The work has been nurtured, created and set up by elders for over 200 years and now we have the opportunity to appear on the mainstage and in mainstage venues. In fact Belvoir Street was the first and only theatre company that gave us a space in Sydney in 1987 after we started the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust in the mid-80s. We actually had to go to Melbourne to the Victorian Arts Centre to do productions. So now, many of those people open their doors. When would we have had a festival and the opportunity to showcase what we are about? Just who would have financed over four million dollars for an Aboriginal festival had we not had the Olympics? It's a big ask on a very small budget and it's a huge risk.

Pushing for venues such as the Opera House and the Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Theatre was questioned by many and not only in the Aboriginal community, but my big question is; do we always preach to the converted? Should we work on the fringe, on the edge and remain alien to what is labelled the mainstream? Hell, no. Don't get me wrong; I think that the work, for example, in the arts that happens in my own community is more than getting a production or exhibition up. The hope that I see in young faces and the knowledge of our elders and the usefulness, the self-empowerment that comes from projects developed and organisations being set up at grass-roots level fills me with so much pride that perhaps we could sit back very complacently and think we have achieved. I went home for the rehearsal of a production we had in the Festival called *Waiting for Godot*, which was a production that was translated into the Bundjalung language. When this was in progress, in rehearsals, people were just coming in off the streets, little old ladies doing their shopping, never been in a theatre in their lives, but they were simply coming because they could hear their native tongue spoken for about the first time in forty years. Because in those days, it was against the law, so if you were teaching your children language there was a fear of the Protection Board taking your children, so that fear was far too great for most people to continue. However, it was documented by linguists in the '70s and the Bundjalung language is now taught at Monash University... we're trying to get it back home. But to see these little old people and to see young people - nothing to do with the arts - that are actually fulfilled when you hear your own language. It gives you something that I can't explain in words. So I sat there and looked and I thought: shouldn't their voices be taken to often the deaf ears - and the Redhead,² perhaps? Because they are the ones who need to hear what our dreaming cycles are about in the '90s.

The Olympic Arts Festivals established a policy very early on; that of Authorship and Control. In fact, I think they thought I was a bit mad when I kept pushing it, but I dug my

heels in because I thought this was something that has to be set up, some sort of legacy and precedent. This is to say that the authorship of the product, activity or event and the control of its development and presentation should be in indigenous hands. This guideline was an aspiration, a goal to strive for and it did not inhibit collaborations or joint artistic ventures between indigenous groups and non-indigenous groups and companies. On the contrary, it encouraged and made them celebratory and unique.

Now, in hindsight there's probably a lot of things that we would change; we would have had a longer production period. But, one of the examples was the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra doing a production, *The Edge of the Sacred*. This was a huge ask from two very, very different companies, different genres, but here was a national orchestra, who most of us believed have been very conservative; their approach to work was that they wanted to wear their blacks - so to speak - and they had a great reputation. But they were prepared to don costumes and have performers dance amongst their instruments. Now this type of relationship can only develop a new Australian approach and combination of work. And, they took into account Aboriginal structures.

The Festival was also committed to a wider understanding of Aboriginal culture. We produced a Protocol Manual was developed, basically addressing issues when dealing with remote, urban and rural communities - terminology, language use. This was a very practical guide - it was pretty basic - but for the staff it was incredibly useful.

All indigenous performers and artists, their language and nation groups were highlighted in all programmes. There were free programmes for every event. With the Festival of the Dreaming's emphasis on the cultures and arts of NSW, the relevant use of language, particularly that of the Sydney region was fostered, reclaimed and encouraged; the Gamarada programme was introduced - *Gamarada (Kamarada)* is a Sydney word meaning 'friend'. It's a protocol programme with great initiative and magnitude of long term importance. By having our elder statespeople representing us at major Olympic events puts the focus on Australia's First Nation Peoples as well as giving national and international recognition. If you go to New Zealand, for example, and they've got some major event on, big VIPS, and they've got their Prime Minister and Governor General and all that up there, they'll always have either a Maori Queen or whoever, representing them who sits on the same level as those dignitaries. We still don't have that in Australia and I'm hoping that by the year 2000 our elder statespeople will be recognised along with the governor generals who will sit amongst them and the Prime Minister will probably sit over there. [Roberts indicated the far side of the room]

Research of Sydney Aboriginal names, places, history and Olympic venues was also undertaken. A young Wiradjuri group from Dubbo called Janagrra performed - a group that had not performed outside their community. They'd only performed in community halls, probably to about 50 people. But what encouraged me to select them for the programme was that they were very young and they were very raw but they had done their research. They had reclaimed a number of dances and steps that had not been seen for many years - which was uniquely NSW. This year celebrates ninety-nine years of ethnographics. We've always said we were the most written, talked and filmed people in the world, and it's true. You should see what they've got in archives. But I believe there is a need for resources to be established to access archives and research dance, music, stories and so forth. Anthropologists have always had a bad name and left an almost

unpleasant taste in our mouths. However, they have left our generation an enormous legacy we need to be reclaiming. For example, where I come from art styles are all parallel lines and geometric shapes, rather than say the central desert dot paintings, and what I'd like to see is that there are areas that are set up so people can research that and start painting traditionally what they would have been painting, say, 150 years ago.

Our next move within the arts is to produce a document outlining cultural issues and different approaches to work and structures of rehearsals and schedules. Many traditional dance companies simply do not perform. They are dancing ceremony. I'll just tell you this little anecdote. For the Awakening Ceremony we were doing the rehearsal and Djakapurra had just come down and he'd just done a ceremony up there, so he was quite emotional and so forth and we wanted him to sing the particular three song cycle that he was singing so the didjeridu players could get an idea of when we were going to place the smoking, because they all come at particular sections, and, you know, if that was John Farnham or something he'd sing a few beats and you'd get the gist of what the music's about. But Djakapurra couldn't do that. He actually had to go through the whole song cycle as he would, as if he was doing it for a ceremony. And by the end of it, the tears were in his eyes and it was just one of the most moving experiences and it was outside the STC³ - we were sitting around there - it was very ironic and a great sight.

Mimi is a good model of a collaborative work involving remote, urban and rural communities, and Stalker's theatre company, a non-indigenous company, who truly, I believe, need to be congratulated for their awareness and their whole growth during this process. Travelling to a remote community can be a very foreign experience and vice versa for those arriving in a city. A number of the indigenous dancers and musicians were urban-based. As well, we had a group from the Kunwinku people of Arnhem Land. Some had not been on a plane, they had never seen a lift, and English was certainly not their first language spoken. Budgets increase when you look at custodians of stories, dance and elders who need to accompany work, as well as liaisons and interpreters. They are just as vital and important as, say, a lighting designer is to a production.

Sorry business⁴ has to be taken into account, and particularly from remote communities, and in fact we had a bit of sorry business during the Festival, sadly, but because people were so aware of it, the whole production management was so aware of it, we managed to work through it. With Raymond Blanco who was the choreographer of *Mimi* and worked with Rachel Swain, we sat down with the elders and talked about this, because if there was something that did occur in the community, then the whole troupe would have to go back and we couldn't really do the season without them. So Raymond got permission from the elders to learn the dances so that if that was to occur, he could then re-teach some urban-based dancers those particular dances. There's ways of working around it.

Smaller companies and resources often depend on community service organisations for the use of administration and resources. Issues of funding - and when we talk about funding cuts, we're not just referring to the arts - in regards to housing, health and education, they can determine in a very small community the life of that project.

Very few Aboriginal actors have trained at our national institutions, bar perhaps a handful of actors. Justine Saunders has done one year with NIDA⁵, the late Vivien Walker had been to NIDA and Kylie Belling was at the VCA⁶ - are just a few who come to mind. It

is really only since the beginning of the '90s that we have seen a new generation of WAAPA⁷, NIDA or VCA graduates.

So many like Deborah Mailman and Wesley Enoch, who was recently the Artistic Director of Kooemba Jdarra, are often producing, writing and operating the administration, and at the same time performing on stage. We are also at the point, as indigenous artists, of looking at many issues that affect our lives: alcohol, petrol sniffing, domestic violence, etc. There is still this fear from the community of airing our dirty laundry, so to speak. Yet as artists I believe we have a moral obligation to future generations not to rose-colour our lives. And it's a big ask for those of us working within the industry and often many feel the pressure and the pressure politically from the community and are suffering burnout. We need the financial support, but we also need the emotional and physical support from all sectors of the arts community.

When it comes to critics, and it's an issue I have raised a number of times pre-the Dreaming, I often read reviews that to me seemed to be overviews rather than reviewing of the particular work. And I wonder, is it just a fear of being labelled racist? This level of acceptability perpetuates mediocrity and you know why? Because you've got companies who have been doing work for years and their review is all very glowing, but the work is mediocre, but they think if they can get to this level, then they're doing okay. However, if they were a white company the critics would slam them because they have to get to this level. We need to be able to accept honest criticism from both sides.

But, how can people write regarding a history and a people if they have no education or awareness of a culture and its peoples. However, I must say, bar perhaps a few reviews during the Festival which looked at international groups as well as national groups, most of them were honest. I must admit that I probably would have been a little bit harsher with one or two productions than the critics were. It was really interesting, because as you know, there was a number of international productions that we brought over and I had really assumed that everyone would flock to see the Inuit people or the Maori or the Native Canadian piece and it really surprised me that everyone flocked to the Aboriginal productions and we were in fact having trouble trying to fill these international groups. And it just showed the growth that we have made in this country, because I know five years ago people would have gone and seen the African heritage company before they would have gone and seen an Aboriginal production company. That's good. It wasn't so good for the international groups, but it's good.

I would like to highlight an example of a review that is, I believe, totally ignorant, and I would go so far as labelling it as racist. It was printed in *The Australian* on Friday, September 19; Sonia Humphrey was the critic. She was reviewing *Arsenerit The Northern Lights*. This was a production based on the stories of the Northern Lights and the Arctic. It was from the Silamut Dance Theatre Company of Greenland. There has never been a company from Greenland tour Australia, or in fact the Southern Hemisphere before the Festival of the Dreaming, let alone an indigenous project. It read:

There is also the problem that the language sounds, to the ill-attuned Australian ear, as if the speaker is wearing ill-fitting dentures.

The article goes on to say,

even more frustrating it is clear from the non-verbal elements of the performance that there exists a traditional vocabulary of gesture and movement, no doubt much akin to classical mime which carries much weight and power if you know what it means.

Really? You know, it amazes me when we have productions coming from Europe that are done entirely in their own language, we just go "Bravo!". The reference to the language I find ignorant. Inuit language is very unusual and many areas of the palate are used to get the 'shh' sound. Inuit traditional dance is known for the gestures of mime and mimicry. Free programme notes, as I said, were handed out and it really was only a matter of ten minutes to read to get the gist of the story. The dance piece was very different, and this is what she didn't like in the review. They don't use a lot of music; a lot of the work is done to silence. It's something that we're not used to in this country. The dance steps are very, very different to any style of Aboriginal steps that people might have seen. It's a bit like assuming you are seeing Meryl Tankard and in fact you are looking at the Australian Ballet. Sonia Humphrey had simply not done her homework.

Often Aboriginal theatre practices have a very different approach, as I said. It's not simply about getting up and performing. Many of you might have attended the Awakening Ceremony at the Sydney Opera House which was the opening event for the Festival of the Dreaming. For me it was a religious ceremony - and it had a very different approach. The review the following day was simply a total misunderstanding of what a smoking ceremony is about. Hello, folks, when you have a smoking ceremony, you use smoke. Mid-week, three non-indigenous Australians had written to the Herald questioning the journalist's view of the evening.

So I suppose my question is, if I see a play or a film and, say, it's based on a gay or a lesbian issue, it more or less is often reviewed by members from that particular community, as well as other reviewers. Yet, when are we going to see in our national broadcast and electronic media Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander critiques? The Festival, on the other hand, sat back and we were incredibly lucky. Our marketing and promotion programme spread nationally, not just across Sydney. We managed to get out to immense sectors of the community and this showed in our attendance of audiences, and we came out looking very good at the end of the Festival. But I have to personally thank Fairfax, the *Sydney Morning Herald* which, if anyone had said I was doing this two years ago, I would have said 'Oh bullshit, I don't want to thank them'. They did a fucking amazing job. Because the reality was, we had out there people reading and seeing from the middle-class milieu the Aboriginal people, the angry black, the flag-waving, oh, here we go again, then all of a sudden, oh right, here comes the Olympics and the blacks are getting the first event? So it was a kind of frightening thing; how do you approach it? Though their articles and their coverage people were informed and were promoted and people did hear about the Festival and certainly learnt more about us.

I hope that a few of you got down to Bar Badu - and if you didn't, well sorry, but you missed the best bit of the Festival. Bar Badu was where we went and had a drink every night and we had performance on during the week as well as individual performers from the various productions and would also get up and do some sort of act. This particular night the Shakespeare8 had a big article in the *Herald* on the production. And every night I went around to all the tables and said 'Hi, I'm Rhoda Roberts, the Artistic Director of the Festival, have you been to something in the Festival of the Dreaming?' and I'd give them a free ticket to get drinks and tell them about what was on that particular night and

there was a little old couple and I really don't mean to stereotype but they were from Mosman, and they would have been in their early 70s and I went over and said 'Hi, I'm Rhoda Roberts... Festival of the Dreaming... blah, blah, blah' and they said 'Oh, we've just seen Shakespeare', and I said 'Oh fantastic, how did you hear about it?' and they said 'Oh, we read the article in the *Herald*. We've never, ever been to Aboriginal theatre and we thought, why not?' and I said 'Did you enjoy it?' and 'Oh, it was fabulous, blah, blah.', I said 'Good. You know, every night we have performance and here are some drink tickets' and they said 'Oh, actually we can't stay, because we've got a friend coming to pick us up' and I said 'Oh, okay, well, have a free drink, and I'm so glad you enjoyed the production' and I said 'What sort of music do you like?' and she said 'Oh, I love the Platters' and I said 'Oh, what a shame, we've got some people tonight and they sing the Platters and dada...' Two hours later I looked up and here they were, not with glass in hand - a bowl. They're still there and their friend's arrived and he's got a drink and this was two hours later and the singers are all their in their deadly red suits - just gorgeous - and here they were, you know, bopping along and I looked at them and they were laughing. Then I looked around at the rest of the audience and it was black, white, Asian, whatever - Australians. I looked around at all these Australians and they were smiling and I thought 'Right. This is what it's about'. We need more Bar Badus.

Black Mary was another thing - and it's great to have Julie Janson, the writer in the audience today. *Black Mary* got a lot of coverage in the press because it was a really interesting story. It is an Australian story - a love story between an Aboriginal woman and one of our heroes, Captain Thunderbolt. It amazes me that we have all these heroes who rob and pillage, Robin Hoods, so to speak. Anyway, they go on to have children, and doing a lot of these interviews and articles, we actually had two groups of family contact us, who said they were related to them. One group's family was related to Captain Thunderbolt and the other was related to Maryanne Ward. Really? We know they both had the same children, so there was one group that identified as white and another group of the family who identified as black. Now, they both came and saw the production and when we actually sat down and talked with them the white family turned around and said 'Oh, reconciliation. Reconciliation is about reclaiming your relatives'. I thought 'This is true Australian work'. What is Australian art? What is it about? No matter how much we might dismiss it, Aboriginal people and convicts, English settlers who are invaders, whatever you want to call them - forged links. And we never get away from that.

The majority of people, as I said, hear information from misinformed television and press media. Yet, as we know, with this current government, so many issues need to be addressed, and addressed very broadly. And as I've said we need to be afraid, really afraid. We have a Prime Minister who cannot publicly apologise for thousands and thousands of children being taken. Well, it looks all right from the papers today with Wik - you never know, but there are all these issues as Australians, whether we're black, white or brindle, we have to address. How do we do that? What is the last bastion? It's the stage.

Trevor Graham's documentary, [*Mabo: The Life of an Island Man*](#), was a collaborative work with the Mabo family. Now, they chose him to shoot their lives and that of Koiki - a non-indigenous film-maker: true reconciliation. The response from the arts industry at the AFI Awards brought tears to my eyes, to see the humility of Bonito Mabo accepting an award and the film industry as such giving her a standing ovation. It seems it is the only last platform in this country and they are issues that we're all facing on a daily basis. But we certainly have a long way to go. Legacies and relationships I believe were

established during this Festival. But what it did; it began a journey for Australian to hear the real humour, rhythm, metre and music of the Australian landscape.

Many of our companies and exhibitions are now touring nationally and internationally. But one of the major battles - and this is the next one we're going to get! - is television, more or less the commercial sector, and the major issue we face in the industry: colour-blind casting. Now commercial sectors would be the diet of this nation. But as I write this I note with great joy that Jim Sharman's recent production of the *The Tempest* is a cast of the rainbow. There are people from all different backgrounds and they are good and talented at their craft. They're not there because it's tokenism or quotas, they're there because they're fine performers. Tonight on ABC TV's *Wildside* they have a number of Aboriginal actors working on this, working as good guys and detectives - yeah; good and bad guys. Kevin Smith, Aaron Pederson, Glen Shea just to name a few.

This is a time when Australians are bewildered by the changes around them. We need to embrace each other and truly work together as we head towards the new millenium.

Thank you very much for being here. It has indeed been an honour. I'm not an academic, as you've just realised, but I don't mind a good yarn, and any questions I'll happily talk to you about.

Questions from the Audience

Question: How long did it take you from the first moment from when you were selected to be the Artistic Director to all the productions? What was the time span for that?

RR: Eighteen months exactly. I started in December of '95. I was approached six times for the job, didn't take it initially because I didn't want the pressure or the stress or whatever. And then when I realised that it could become a very folkloric festival I decided that yes, it was an opportunity to take on. There certainly wasn't enough time and as you probably know, people working within the industry, that often it's two to three years out that other artistic directors are appointed, so it was a much shorter process.

Question: Are there any plans for future Aboriginal arts festivals?

RR: I think there is a need, because you only have to look at all the festivals that come out and the level of indigenous works. There's very, very rarely collaborative work and you could really count on your hand - perhaps you might get one visual arts exhibition, or you might get one Aboriginal production as such. So I think that there is a need for a biennial festival, a community or indigenous festival, particularly if it has the collaborative nature of the works, because I think it's more than just an indigenous festival, that it does sort of turn around and go, well it's an Australian festival, and it is pure and simply Australian works.

Question: I'll ask two questions. I'll ask the easy one first. You've kind of answered it partly when you talked about the couple from Mosman, but I was wondering if you had any other examples of how individuals you've met during the course of the Festival have actually expressed how it had changed their attitudes, particularly obviously people of a

white Australian background, and was there a kind of wider resonance, did you any get a sense of political effects spreading out, so to speak?

RR: Yeah, I mean, it's really hard... We did some audience surveys and I'll be really interested to see the result of them. They were done by Lisa Meekison sitting right in the front here, came along and did all our research for us for nothing as a volunteer. Thank you Lisa. I think one of the things that really had an impact was the 'Wimmin's Business' series, because all those women were talking about either children being taken or displacement and it wasn't just from Australia, so I think for a lot of people it occurred to them that this policy actually existed in Canada as it did in Australia - perhaps it didn't make us feel so bad, that there were other countries that were doing it. I went on opening night to one of the shows and the Minister for the Olympics, Mr Michael Knight's wife was in front of me and she's in tears for the whole time and that amazed me and there were people who were really affected. I used to work as a nurse out at Canterbury and I had a little old woman ring me up - I nursed her, when I nursed in my very first year of nursing, and hadn't seen her but back when I was nursing [I had] cups of tea with her and she rang me out of the blue and invited twenty of her friends from her local bowling club - I think it was Greenacre - and they came, and when they came to one production, they came to five. And I said, 'Look I'll get you the tickets', she went, 'No, we're paying for this'. And that was pretty amazing, because this was a group of women who - I mean, if they go to the theatre, they're going to go and see *Showboat*, they're not going to go and see Aboriginal theatre. And the letters. I think the letters were... particularly from a generation, the 25 and under group were quite responsive, which was just great because that's the sort we need to be introducing these people more into theatre - and the visual arts and dance and all the rest of it. So there were some good stories, but there was also people who weren't happy. You can't imagine the people who rang and abused me and some letters that weren't good because they felt that we had no right to be working with the SSO or up in Government House and who did we think we were, and how dare we, and there was 'Dear Mary, Gin, Darcy, Boong', no, 'Mary' was the last one... 'Dear Gin, Mary...', like every sort of derogatory name, how dare you and how dare you refer to me as a non-Aboriginal. And that was interesting - the power of words, the power of terminology. He's really offended that I'm not referring to him as an Australian. That's really interesting.

Question: That leads on to my second question, the difficult one, about some of the themes. You kind of alluded to this at the beginning with *Black Mary*, how some relatives identified with the white side and the black side. It's an issue I think that has this politically correct barrier around it, and that's people who are of part white background and part Aboriginal background, maybe falling between the two, and somewhere in the middle identifying. I think it's an issue that has to be developed and discussed, particularly in theatre and probably books to a lesser extent, particularly in theatre. Now, is that something that you can see developing in the future? Do you know of any projects that are looking at the audience point of view?

RR: Yeah, I certainly hope there is, and I think that that's exactly what I'm talking about when we have to look at issues that affect us as well. I mean, in the Aboriginal community, if someone's Aboriginal and you know their family and the particular community they come from, full stop, end of the road, they're black. Doesn't matter if they've got blonde hair and blue eyes. Now that's really hard for other Australians to accept, that's just the way we are because we've always been like that. But again, for

people were taken and have been raised as white people and then discovered that they have this heritage - that's a very hard thing for them referring to them as being black, and they've got red hair. So there are many issues as we go through that process as a community, but also as a broader community as well. One of the most disappointing things about the Festival was the level of the writing. You know, early on I got a number of scripts and they were kitchen sink drama, very mediocre, and I know why that's happening is that there hasn't been continuous playwrights' conferences and there hasn't been the opportunity for discussion and for writers perhaps to - I don't even know now with the Australian Centre for Playwrights. They invite Aboriginal writers now, but still there's only one or two and we really need to take that on board and make an effort - that's why I say sometimes our generation's become a bit complacent. And that was frightening because there was no one writing being brave or going on the edge a little bit and so we have to start moving there. Apart from the productions that were in the Festival, a lot of new, good works had been workshopped before the Festival, like a new commission or something. And that's why we commissioned works like Deborah Cheetham's and Leah Purcell's, because their story did have an edge.

RR: That's Aboriginal people, I mean, nobody hears our level of humour. That's the whole point, because we can laugh about ourselves. It's a bit like we need, I suppose - I still hate saying the term 'wogs', I have a real problem with that - but *Wogs Out Of Work* was a period of time in theatre that really made us look, and that whole terminology and look at Greek Australians and so forth, has changed and we've seen, right down to *Frontline* now these sorts of different approaches. Perhaps we need to be brave enough, doing that kind of work and we need something like that so that people actually see that we have this level and the ability to laugh at yourself and show that you're not afraid to laugh and that's something we have to be a little bit more brave about.

Audience: ????

RR: Yeah, I'm still counting all those pennies, but we did very, very well. We've actually been able to put quite a lot of money into next year's 'A Sea Change' from this particular festival... Yes! Thank God for that! And Belvoir Street - you know, I love this place and *Black Mary*, I put so much money into that production and I fought so hard because that to me was very dear to my heart, because I've seen that production earlier on at PACT theatre - that was just a story and here was this woman who was intelligent and used to hold press conferences and they couldn't handle it because she actually was articulate and was teaching convicts how to read and write, you know, that was totally against what the nation thought of Aboriginal people in that day and time, and through the theatre, to tell a story like that... and she's a woman, telling this guy how to rob [and she] can change history. And, you know, to have something so tragic happen, not only to that production, but to the cast and the crew was just... I cried that night, I was in tears, to the point of getting really upset and you can't stop and it was just - I didn't know what to do. But, afterwards I thought, well, we had 10 shows, we had 10 shows that sold out, and that was amazing. *Mimi* started having 600 people a night but because there were so many people lining up each night we extended it to 1000, so we had this opportunity where the productions we didn't think a lot of people would come to, that they did, and laughed and kept coming back and so we were able to increase seating and so forth and I [said] let's just put it at 60% and if we sell 60%, great, so given my figures at the very beginning, being very careful, but of course we sold capacity for most things, so that was fantastic and it really says something about Sydney and Australian audiences and we did have

people coming from interstate to see some of the shows as well, and I think that's something now we could look at and even in the theatre, it's a really [important] thing, how commercial do you go? The opportunity through marketing and tourism and working with those sorts of [people], even for a small productions, there's so much out there that we can... and we should, we should be claiming that and taking over as arts precincts and so forth.

Question: You said that you'd set a precedent by organising the Festival. Do you think that the festivals that follow your Festival will go back to a more commercial one?

RR: Well, it's up to the artistic director of those particular festivals, but I really think that having seen what's happened in the [Festival] it was political, but I don't think that really... [everything] as far as I can see these days is political, even theatre. But what it's given us; we had 700 indigenous artists employed in this festival and probably about 550 of those are still working. It's not bad. We've never, ever had that, that level of employment at the one time in a particular period. But what it did was, for us, it opened new doors for the people working in other theatre companies now, simply because people saw them and 'Oh gee they're good'. So it's opened a lot of doors for people. The doors were there, but it's kind of like I suppose... and I'm just hoping that next year, because... Oh God, you know, the amount of work that we have from non-English speaking backgrounds and companies, particularly out in our Western suburbs is phenomenal. It has so much energy, they are the people who are doing the new work. Now if we can sort of continue that sort of the establishment of relationships, say with the STC or Cabramatta or some group out there, the opportunities we had that I think clearly - with those other sectors - it could very well highlight this new Australian work as well. And I'm sure it probably will, because next year is 'Sea Change' which looks at our relationship with the waters and so forth and it is the International Year of the Ocean next year, and there'll be those tall ships... But also 'A Sea Change' as in the change that's occurred in Australia since immigration.

[Pause]

You can be nasty too, I don't care!

Question: I sometimes wonder whether some black writers get into a development process with white well-meaning dramaturgs who sort of hijack the work and take the rights to it. I've seen one example where a really amazing story was being told in a way that I thought was [like that] and it sort of hijacked it in a sort of a, again pejoratively, in a sort of an STC white style of playwriting. I wonder if you have seen it happen, a process where you actually start to fight back and actually tell a community's story the community's way, rather than kowtow.

RR: It's hard. Two schools of thought. The writer wants to pay his rent and he wants to extend his skills and if he's been working with the STC, then that's great on his CV. On the other hand, that was why I was so insistent that the whole thing of having a policy of authorship and control passed, because of the control of the product. Even if it's being directed by a non-indigenous director, the control of that product is indigenous hands, whether it's through producing, directing, or writing or so forth, curating an Aboriginal arts exhibition, or choreographing a dance piece. And I think that's really important. I think people have to step back, because we're tired of the stories being told, not from our

perspective, but narrated almost. It always happens. David Unaipon was - he's the one on the fifty bucks; if you've got one there - and he's from South Australia, and he in the '30s in fact... Oodgeroo Noonuccal was really our first published writer, but David Unaipon wrote this manuscript for that Angus & Robertson - is it George Angus, I think? He was a good mate of David's. David invented the shears for the sheep and when he died they found all these drawings of helicopters based on the aerodynamics of the boomerang and they labelled him the Leonardo of Australia. That was the background. He wrote this manuscript based on all the stories of his language group, gave them over, which were then given to a guy and his last name was Brown who published a book in 1938, word for word, of David Unaipon's manuscript. It's in the library, actually, his manuscript, along with the published book. No mention, no acknowledgment of David Unaipon. You can pick up that book and go 'Oh great, creation stories from days gone by. I'll read that, oh that's gospel'. Well it is, but [...]. So constantly you're fighting that level of control of the product. On the other hand there's been opportunities where writers... OK, I'll be totally honest here. *Up the Road*: there's a lot of work that needed to be done on that script by Johnny Harding - I love Johnny and it's fantastic, but without Neil Armfield that final production that we saw on the stage wouldn't have been the level... But then, Neil's worked with a lot of Aboriginal actors and so forth, so he has a certain awareness. I don't think you can ever understand. I'll never understand what it's like to be gay, but I hope I'm aware of the issues, but I can never understand it. But Neil does have that awareness and he's prepared to listen, just listen to the language and people and so forth, and that obviously is captured on that production, but I think his level of direction showed as to the script I read initially. I mean it's still a fine script but it needs to be worked. That's really funny, because every Aboriginal woman who read it went 'Oh God, how clichéd' and then we realised no one else has even heard of these clichés. It's really interesting as well... But, yeah, it's like 'be prepared' and that's why I say sometimes the pre-production's going to take longer, the development's going to take longer, but let it go into indigenous hands and work together, because everyone brings something; you don't have to be precious about it; well, I think that showed. One thing, *Mimi* for example, I mean, here was, it amazes me: they put over half a million bucks, the funding bodies who put over half a million dollars into it, and what was going to happen to it, if we had not reinvested in it, to get it to go to the Netherlands festival. What would have happened? And yet, it was one of the most amazing productions. Yes, we reworked it, we got a choreographer to work with them, but it was still an okay production when we saw it, it just needed to be tuned a little bit more. But that's what happens all the time in Australia; you get a production up that doesn't have a long time to work with new commissions or whatever, we put it into one festival, everyone goes 'Oh yeah' and it's gone. We need to be working with these works for three or four years to develop them. After all, that's what Europeans do.

Anything else? Let's go have a drink.

Notes

- [1.](#) This version of the lecture is a combination of Rhoda Roberts' notes and a transcription of the lecture on the day. Square brackets indicate where a section of text was inaudible/incomprehensible and several words have been added to complete the sentence.
- [2.](#) Pauline Hanson
- [3.](#) Sydney Theatre Company
- [4.](#) When a person in a community dies and other members of the community must

return home for the ceremonies associated with this.

[5.](#) National Institute of Dramatic Art

[6.](#) Victorian College of the Arts

[7.](#) Western Australian Academy of the Performing Arts

[8.](#) Production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Noel Tovey.

[9.](#) The season of *Black Mary* was cancelled after some scaffolding (on which the audience was seated) collapsed and several people were injured