

# ***A Brief History of Indigenous Australian Contemporary Theatre***

by Maryrose Casey and Cathy Craigie

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*"We are talking about people in our community,  
we are talking about our Aboriginal heroes, and we  
are talking about what it's like to live as a black in  
today's society."*

*- Gerry Bostock, 1977*



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This original work is published  
by the Australian Script Centre,  
trading as AustralianPlays.org  
77 Salamanca Place, Hobart 7004  
Tasmania, Australia  
Tel +61 3 6223 4675  
Fax +61 3 6223 4678  
admin@australianplays.org  
www.australianplays.org  
ABN 63 4394 56892

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drama holds an important place in Australian literature. As a body of work, these texts express unique and specific cultural heritages. Over the last forty years, there have been hundreds of productions of plays by Indigenous writers. Many have toured extensively across Australia and the world. Some, such as Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1997), Andrea James' *Yanagai! Yanagai!* (2003) and Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Wanna Play House* (2000) have been in continuous production for up to ten years. Contemporary Indigenous theatre is produced for multiple and various audiences; sometimes for specific or general Indigenous communities, and sometimes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. There are numerous Indigenous theatre companies focused on producing a wide variety of work. There are: companies that produce public performances of traditional songs, dances, music and stories; companies that develop new work drawing on traditional and contemporary practices; and companies that focus on producing theatre that serves the specific interests of their communities. Others produce work that provides avenues for Indigenous theatre artists to explore the different possibilities at the leading edge of contemporary performing arts.

Not surprisingly, the representation of Indigenous people and stories has featured strongly and consistently in a theatrical tradition that dates back thousands of years before white occupation. In Australia, where Indigenous Australians had been marginalized and presented as a lost and dying people incapable of surviving in the modern world, Indigenous artists claimed performance spaces to demonstrate the humanity, history and survival of Indigenous Australians. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Indigenous theatrical works occupied a prominent place on Australian stages, writers and performers created work that blended Aboriginal performance traditions with European stage conventions in both form and content. Traditional Indigenous performance works alternate rhythmically between speech and silence, between the past and the present and between performance and story. Within these innovations of form, writers such as Kevin Gilbert, Robert Merritt, Gerry Bostock and Jack Davis individually and collectively brought contemporary Indigenous stories into the foreground of Australian

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mainstream culture. In doing so, they were instrumental in raising public awareness of issues affecting Indigenous people.

The first plays by Indigenous Australian playwrights to be commercially produced were primarily concerned with contemporary issues of survival. In the 1970s Gilbert, Merritt and Bostock presented a range of contexts and problems confronting Indigenous Australians. Gilbert's play *The Cherry Pickers* (1968) was the first play by an Indigenous playwright to achieve any profile within the mainstream environment. The text presented non-Indigenous Australians with one of the first examples of Aboriginal-English written by an Aboriginal person as standard language use. Merritt's *The Cake Man* was the next play to gain critical recognition when it was performed in 1975. Both Gilbert and Merritt are of the Wiradjuri people. *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976) by Bostock, from the Bundjalung, followed these plays. Merritt, Gilbert and Bostock all present moments of the daily reality and humanity of modern Aboriginal life drawn from their own experiences. Their ground breaking work was followed by a broad range of plays focusing on further elements of Indigenous life and history. In the 1980s, Bob Maza from Murray Island in the Torres Strait, playfully explored the tensions surrounding Indigenous land rights in his first performance text, *Mereki* (1986). His next play *The Keepers* (1988) uses naturalistic and non-naturalistic elements to explore the destruction of the Boandik peoples in South Australia.

From Western Australia, Noongar writers such as Jack Davis combined stories of contemporary Aboriginal life and history with visual and physical elements that drew on traditional practices. The presence of the past, often in the form of a traditionally marked dancer, moved through, observed and accentuated the present. These types of physical elements were often combined with visual art that represented the story of the land and its people in traditional ways. In *The Dreamers* (1982) which tells the story of the contemporary Wallitch family, an Aboriginal traditional dancer moving to sound of the didjerridu links the present struggles to the spiritual past. In *Kullark* (1979) the re-enactment of historical events literally cuts through a giant image of Waargul the Rainbow Serpent (the creator spirit of the peoples of southwest WA). Taking an entirely different approach to

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telling Indigenous stories through a different performance style is Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) from Kimberly. The play is the story of a young Aboriginal man's journey from Perth back to his home land at Djarinjin (Lombardina). *Bran Nue Dae* blends rock opera, comedy, song, dance and romance to describe how a young Aboriginal man's journey across WA becomes a search for identity, love and security.

Indigenous women writers have also demonstrated a breadth of different approaches in their work. Eva Johnson, a member of the Mulak Mulak people, wrote plays throughout the 1980s and the 1990s. Her texts focus on the Indigenous individual's struggle to overcome colonial subjection. Her plays include *Tjindarella*, *Murras*, *Mimini's Voices* and *What Do They Call Me?* A recurring theme in Johnson's work is the impact of government policies on Indigenous Australian women and children. Jane Harrison, a descendent of the Muruwari people, contributed the seminal work *Stolen* that introduced many non-Indigenous Australians to the impact of the policies of child removal. This layering of form and content in performance, drawing from both the present and the past, has continued in contemporary productions by Indigenous artists in various ways. Jane Harrison's second Ilbjerri commission, *Rainbow's End*, was inspired by Elders' reminiscences of life on the Flats and the establishment of Rumbalara, the Aboriginal housing estate at Mooroopna. Cathy Craigie's *Murri Love* focuses on the joys and tensions of friendships and relationships. One of the powerful voices that have emerged over the last decade is Dallas Winmar from Western Australia. Her works *Aliwa* and *Yibiyung* both explore the struggles of Aboriginal people labelled by the government as half caste. *Yibiyung* is based on her grandmother's life under the Protection Acts.

In the 1990s and 2000s many texts by Indigenous writers concentrated on the individual experience, pushing the frame of representation even further. One of the major developments in recent years has been a strong focus on the telling of individual stories, often as monologues directly addressed to the audience. A number of young women performers embraced this form including Ningali Lawford with her show *Ningali* (1994), Deborah Mailman in *The 7 Stages of*

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*Grieving* (1996 – co-authored by Wesley Enoch) and Leah Purcell in *Box the Pony* (1997). Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Wanna Play House* is a semi-autobiographical monodrama which tells the story of the writer's childhood. Anderson, like the other Indigenous women playwrights utilises the monodrama form as a powerful vehicle for talking back. These texts are largely biographical and tell individual and collective stories using many of the elements that have marked Indigenous playwriting and performance: storytelling, music and song, shifts in style and time and the use of Aboriginal languages in the text. These texts for and by women are one more expression of the many innovative performance styles Indigenous Australians have consistently drawn on to tell their stories in ways that respect both the past and the present.

At the same time, a number of men, such as John Harding, Roger Bennett and Richard Frankland, were writing plays focused on the struggles and choices faced by Indigenous men. Other work explores themes perceived as specifically Indigenous as well as more general themes. Work such as Jimmy Chi's *Corrugation Road* (1995), focuses on the experience of mental illness. Ningali and Kelton Pell's *Solid* (2000) explores the ways in which Aboriginal people relate to each other.

Since 2000, the publication of plays by Indigenous writers has steadily increased in range and number. Two collections of Indigenous plays published by Currency Press provide broader access to this important work. *Blak Inside* (2002) includes Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead* and John Harding's *Enuff* as well as *Belonging* by Tracey Rigney. *Contemporary Indigenous Plays* (2007) includes a number of the most adventurous and exciting texts by Indigenous playwrights in recent years. The texts in this collection include Vivienne Cleven's outrageously funny *Bitin' Back* that follows life for an Aboriginal family in a small country town transforming daily struggles into farce that challenges assumptions and stereotypes.

Two leading Aboriginal theatre practitioners and storytellers in Australia at the moment are Wesley Enoch, now Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company and David Milroy. Both have done much to secure a place for Indigenous works

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in mainstream Australian theatre. Wesley Enoch's writing credits include *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996 - co authored with Deborah Mailman) and *Black Medea* (2005), both of which he also directed, and *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* (2007), winner of the 2005 Patrick White Playwrights' Award. While Wesley has moved into mainstream theatre, David has maintained his commitment to the Indigenous theatre sector, primarily through Yirra Yaakin, and continues to tell the unique stories of Western Australia. His play, *Windmill Baby*, winner of the Patrick White Award 2003, inspired by the people round Fitzroy Crossing and set in the Kimberly, engages with the spiritual connection between life and the earth. Milroy created a wonderful female character in Maymay, an old woman who has unfinished business.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Indigenous theatre continues to embrace its rich traditions but to also engage fellow Australians in another side of the story. Cumulatively, the plays and performance texts produced over the last fifty years have changed the understanding of Indigenous Australians and their cultures. The breadth of individual voices represented and expressed within Indigenous Australian playwriting defies any kind of generalisation. They come from all over Australia, from Koori, Murri, Nunga and Noongar writers, from men and women, from urban and rural communities and individuals. Together, they represent the unexpected and intangible elements and variety of contemporary Indigenous Australian cultures.

## ***Cathy Craigie***

Cathy is a Gamilaroi and Anaiwan woman from Northern NSW (Moree and Armidale). She has worked in the arts and media for more than fifteen years in many roles, including arts administrator, artist, writer, producer, creative developer, broker, dramaturg, policy advisor and mentor. As a playwright, Cathy's work has been produced at Belvoir Theatre, Sydney Festival, Out of the Box Festival and elsewhere. One of the original founders of Koori Radio, she has also been Director of the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board and Deputy Director General of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, a member of the Arts Advisory Council of the NSW Ministry for the Arts and Chair of its Indigenous Arts Reference Group, as well as a variety of key positions in other Aboriginal arts, health and housing organisations. Most recently, Cathy curated Guwany, the 3rd National Aboriginal Writers' Festival in March 2011.

## ***Maryrose Casey***

Maryrose Casey lectures at Monash University in the Centre for Theatre and Performance. Her research focuses primarily on racialised performances as a site of cross-cultural communication and negotiation between communities. Her publications include *Creating Frames: contemporary Indigenous theatre* (UQP 2004), *The Doll's Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imaginations*, (ASC, 2005) with Rachel Fensham, Denise Varney and Laura Ginters and *Transnational Whiteness Matters* (Rowman Littlefield 2008) co-edited with Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll. Her forthcoming book *Telling Stories* focuses on a series of case studies of contemporary Indigenous theatre practice within the context of historical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices.