Aboriginal Drama: From Ritual to Theatre

You see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world . . . We've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime.

(Shoemaker, Black Words 235)

Ritual and aesthetic expression in Aboriginal Australia

According to the Berndts, in most Australian Aboriginal groups there existed actions which represented “relatively well co-ordinated and defined sequences, of a repetitive kind, directed towards goals which [were] at least partly explicit” (228), as part of rituals and were considered to be extremely important.

It was believed that “by acting in certain prescribed ways, in accordance with the rules laid down by mythical characters of various kinds who dominated [. . .] the creative] period, human beings can keep in touch with them or with the power which they continue to exercise” (Berndt 229). Hence rituals acted out events (the wanderings and activities of various beings) or instructions incorporated in myths and were concerned with issues of life and death, fertility and the relations between man and other aspects of nature. The correct narration of the
stories, painting of the symbols, singing of the songs and performance of
the rituals, left as legacies by the Ancestral Spirit beings, are designed to
ensure the maintenance of the cosmos and society. Berndt describes
rituals in which the increase of a particular species may be brought
about by calling the appropriate names, or by touching up the cave
paintings relating to it or by imitating the behaviour of the species (*First
Australians* 271). In ritual dancing, an actor performing the actions
relevant to his totem not only lives the part but actually becomes that
totem (Berndt 239).

There is a close association between myth and ritual in Aboriginal
Australia. According to the Berndts, all ritual action and most of the
symbolism are based on myths and even an ordinary ceremony providing
entertainment to the camp may draw on themes and characters from the
major myths (261). Myths are seen as a means of giving life to individuals
and to the groups by connecting them with the Dreamtime and rituals are
myths in action. They establish a connection between past and present,
between the supernatural and the earthly and between people and the
land. Myth and ritual provided the members of an aboriginal community, a
framework through which to perceive the world. It enabled them to see that
they belonged within a scheme, which has continuity as well as
comprehensiveness. Myth as spoken or sung ritual described and explained
what people needed to know about this scheme, while acted out ritual
expressed the same content in a different dimension (Berndt 287-88).
Ritual, which is episodic, is substantiated through spoken statements as well as through material symbolic representations. The Berndts describe Aboriginal ritual as "stylised and symbolic action carried out with specific ends in view, and having additional meanings and implications for social living [. . .]." (Berndt 259). According to them many of the rituals are designed directly or indirectly to safeguard or promote the welfare of the community in general (Berndt 263). All aboriginal religious ritual focussed on life and was oriented around survival -- physical and spiritual. It gave reassurance from the past, hope for the future, an affirmation that man in not entirely helpless, whatever hardships he may suffer, the conviction that he can intervene to some degree, do something to influence the forces which impinge on him (Berndt 288).

**Dramatic performances**

The theatre has always been a part of Aboriginal heritage. Nevertheless it has gone unrecognized by the public in general, since it did not conform to the accepted Western notion of "theatre". The very idea of a theatre building, a solid construction with a managed environment of lighting and heating in which a privileged fraction of a population is segregated or quarantined from the rest of the society, derives from northern Europe and is diametrically opposed to the performance practices of Aboriginals. In religious ritual, the re-
enactment of myths or sections of myths is a dramatic performance in itself. There are differences in sacred and non-sacred performances, in the significance and symbolic meaning of the dancing and posturing and in the matter of participation (Berndt 382). "Corroboree" is the word generally used in English for all Aboriginal ceremonies, rituals and entertainment involving singing and dancing, disregarding great differences between sacred and non-sacred dancing and dramatic performances. According to the Berndts, though a great deal has been written about the dance and corroboree in Aboriginal Australia, few anthropologists have been able to record the complicated and varied dance steps and hand movements. Berndt gives examples of non-sacred ceremonies documented by Basedow. It includes a crocodile ceremony of the Cambridge Gulf people, in which

a row of men stand with legs apart, while a 'crocodile' actor wriggles between them. Reaching the first man he lies flat, legs close together like a tail, arms bent with palms flat on the ground, then raises the front of his body, booming harshly to imitate the cry of a crocodile. (Berndt 382).

A dance at Forrest River in which crow actors hop around an old man representing a carcase; and a popular Fowler's Bay scene in which a man imitates a woman collecting food are also described. It was noted that the lively Melville Island dancing included the buffalo dances with their
vigorous stamping and leaping while the Wogaidj camp dancing, was outstanding for the elegant and graceful hand movements of the women.

The Berndts have also observed that in Aboriginal communities the evenings are nearly always occupied with singing and dancing each song having its appropriate actions. He gives examples of the sandfly sequence in which as the songman claps his sticks and sings and the didjeridu is blown, women stand swaying slightly to the music, making stylised gestures of scratching; the wasp sequence in which they grasp each ear, nodding their heads sideways, as the song tells how the buzzing of the wasp irritates people trying to rest in the midday heat and of one of the Wudal songs in which they imitate a person putting wild honey into a long basket (383).

The dancing may be open or closed to audience participation. Some of the sacred ritual and ceremony was noted to be performed in the main camp, with group participation. In one of the camp ceremonies, which turned out to be a preliminary part of initiation, they observed that "the dancers wear conically-shaped headdresses superimposed with blood and feather down on a basis of brush and human-hair twine, and wear or carry a wanigi object" (Berndt 383). They prepared themselves behind a screen of bushes, and as they danced huge heaps of dry grass were set ablaze, flaming up so that the singing-audience can see the decorations quite clearly.
The basis of many ceremonies, according to them, is a dream; a man, occasionally a woman, claiming to have had a set of songs and dance-steps shown to him in a dream (Berndt 384). It is in the ordinary camp ceremonies that the Berndts have noticed that, “the attitudes of the dancers perhaps come closest to what we (as western Europeans) are used to” (386). The ceremonies included statements about how other people lived, or what people did in other places, as well as about local happenings: the “Afghan” and camel sequences, songs about boats seen at Wyndham, “Chinamen” living there, a fisherman trying to sell his catch (fish made of bark, dangling from each side of a pole carried on a man’s shoulders) etc are examples (385). In one ceremony they noticed that wool bound in a conventional diamond shape was passed from hand to hand among a circle of men reclining around a fire, each in turn peering at it, moving it rhythmically from side to side. It stood for a “paper” read by the manager of one of the East Kimberley cattle stations (Berndt 385). Such dramatic scenes depicting and interpreting the changed circumstances, in which the Aborigines found themselves, have been reported from places all over the Continent. In situations of stress, ceremonies provided an outlet in which the Aborigines tried to look on the humorous side, mimicking the oppressor and proving that they were essentially, undefeated in spirit. Berndt describes one ceremony from Wave hill:

In one scene a policeman, a ‘man with chains’, was shown
trying to bring in 'witnesses' for a court case. The actors here were men, representing attractive young women all roped ('chained') together by the neck in a long line. The policeman led the way, dancing slowly around the clearing; but every now and then when he was looking the other way a small raggedy actor, a 'bagman' or 'swaggie', would come sneaking up from behind and try to take away one of the girls. The policeman, turning and seeing him, would drive him away, kicking at him and lashing out with a stick, with a great deal of noise and commotion: he wanted the girls for himself. The side play gestures and impromptu remarks of the actors, punctuating the singing, kept the audience in a state of hilarious laughter for over an hour. (Berndt 385)

They also point out that in all these performances there is no organised training involved and that the dance steps and movements, songs and organisation of acts are all learnt through observation and practice during the ceremonies themselves (Berndt 386). Based on the content of the ceremonies the Berndts divide them into three major groups:

1. Ceremonies which involve the re-enactment of myths or stories: these are presented in a stylized form and all actions are symbolically significant. The dance, the song and the ceremony as a whole are interdependent.
2. Dance movements, individually or collectively performed, in relation to specific songs, but not having mythical substantiation. These may be regarded as traditional, but as having no specific meaning other than that; it is the dance and the rhythm which count and not the explanation of it.

3. Imaginative and inventive dancing and songs composed to translate for public enjoyment, if not information, contemporary events of everyday living. Many of the dramatic performances with songs and musical accompaniment are of this sort, and they are not necessarily a result of alien impact. Only a small percentage concerns themselves with contact situations; the majority relate directly to the ongoing life of the camp. (386-87)

Aboriginal myths have "outside" and "inside" versions and even children's version. According to the Berndts, this practise of having different degrees of exclusiveness in myth content is quite common in Aboriginal Australia (388). They go on to say that wherever there is a tradition of oral story telling, we can legitimately speak of it as a dramatic art. It is a live, flesh and blood situation in which there is no impersonal barrier between the storyteller and his listeners. In communicating with them directly and personally, he draws on visual effects as a supplement to his spoken words and has at his command all
the local repertoire of gestures, hand and body movements, facial expressions, changes in tone, supplemented perhaps by embellishments of his own (390). As Berndt describes:

He may jump to his feet at a moment of excitement, subside to the ground again, pause, suddenly raise his voice or lower it to a whisper: and he may not object to questions which give him an opportunity to expand or elaborate some particularly interesting theme. But in any case the actual words he uses are only a skeleton, a framework upon which the narrative itself is built up and comes to life. (390)

In considering Aboriginal oral literature, the Berndts suggest that three main aspects be taken into account namely, its form or structure including the sequence of events and incidents and the language in which these are framed; the content or subject matter and the link between a myth or story and its social context. This is applicable in the analysis of contemporary Aboriginal plays too.

Apart from songs and poetic expression, dancing and dramatic performances, and other oral literature they have visual art which includes cave and rock paintings, rock engravings and petroglyphs, paintings on bark and crayon, body painting, sacred objects and emblems, carved human figures in wood, wax and clay figures, pole structures etc. Body painting is an important aspect of rituals. Almost
every part of the body is used for this purpose. Most commonly the face, chest and thighs are decorated with designs spreading across and over the shoulders to the back leaving the neck bare. According to Schechner, each detail of the pattern is linked to ancestral beings, sexual magic or recent events and hence Aborigine body painting is map-making and myth-telling (131). While decorating themselves they sing the relevant songs and retell the myth, and finally comes the ritual (426).

According to the Berndtts, the songs and visual art produced cannot be understood by just hearing the literal meanings of words or by just looking at them. “It is the hidden or symbolic meaning, not the surface meaning, if any, which is the important thing” (412). Aboriginal art was a medium through which messages and ideas were communicated but the way in which it is done and the form it took depended upon the intended audience.

[. . .] attempts are made to say something to certain people -- to women and to children, to all those of a specific social unit, to initiated persons only, to those of a particular age and status, and so on. It may be designed for one or more of these categories, although it may be understood by others within limited degrees. (Berndtts, The First Australians 444).

Realistic and naturalistic expressions existed alongside conventionalised or stylised ones, though the Berndtts consider the latter as more general.
They insist that there is no such thing as universal symbolism in Aboriginal Australia but that the rule is local identification (445).

According to the Berndts, in Aboriginal Australia, art is inseparable from its cultural and social setting. An artist’s production is not just an individual response to an aesthetic urge but must have social significance and use (412). They reiterate the fact that all Aboriginal art was “living art” with specific functions in Aboriginal society that all of them had some kind of mythic association and that one art form was not necessarily produced in isolation but was associated with others (451).

While ritual emphasizes efficacy, theatre emphasizes entertainment. According to Schechner, efficacy and entertainment are opposed to each other, but form a binary system, a continuum.

Table 1

Efficacy – Entertainment Dyad (137-38)

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audience participates audience watches

audience believes audience appreciates

criticism is forbidden criticism is encouraged

collective creativity individual creativity


He goes on to point out that whether one calls a specific performance ritual or performance depends on the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy or entertainment. Moreover changing perspective changes classification (138). Theatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between audience and performers (142).

Philip Parsons in *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia* has mentioned early performances by Aborigines in theatre after colonization. In 1852 the Malcom's Royal Australian Circus in Sydney had advertised that John Jones's troupe included "his two Aboriginal boys". In the 1870's Aborigines had been appearing under pseudonyms. The Sullivans, of Aboriginal and West Indian descent had been well known as the Colleano's and Con Colleano (1899-1973) as "Zeneto, Prince of
Wirewalkers" (9). According to Parsons, the Aborigines probably first appeared on the stage in *The Australian Bunyips* (1857). When actor and manager George Rignold (1834-1912) produced *It's Never Too Late to Mend* from Charles Reade's novel, in 1893, forty Queensland Aborigines appeared in "primitive wild Australian" scenes (9). Rignold’s famous technique was to pose crowds on the stage so as to blend with hundreds more figures painted in perspective on the backcloth (245).

Gerry Bostock recounts how under threat of losing their rations Aborigines from the Reserve of Menindee in New South Wales were brought down to Sydney at the re-enactment of the arrival of Governor Philip. This, according to him, is Black Theatre performance "[. . .] directed by whites, directed by the Bicentenary Committee for 1938"; with the Aborigines "[. . .] playing the ancestors of the Koories in Sydney" (*Aboriginal Writing Today* 68).

Romeril's *Bastardy*, a play about fringe-dwellers, for the Australian Performing Group. In 1974, Charles and Martin and David Gupilil played leading parts in the Old Tote Theatre Company's production of *The Cradle of Hercules*, a play by Michael Boddy about early Sydney (Parsons 9).

**Aboriginal drama**

As Mudrooroo explains in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, "drama" did not exist prior to the arrival of the whites in Australia. The oral tradition that provides the basis of Aboriginal histories has, however, always consisted of song, music, dance and storytelling, elements which inevitably become central to the Aboriginal practice and experience of drama. The development of Western drama from the Greek Dithyramb also points to a similar origin.

Mcnaughton in "Drama (overview)" observes that, hybridity as the bedrock of post-colonial theatre was first theorized by the South African H.I.E. Dhlomo in 1936, that he acknowledged the impossibility of a recapitulationist retrieval of precolonial cultural "purity" and argued that the past can only exist inasmuch as it is "grafted" on to the [westernised] present (*Encyclopedia of Post colonial Literatures in English* 369). Schechner has opined against the cultural zoo approach, which clamoured to preserve the original versions of age-old rituals that, even traditional performances varied greatly from generation to generation.
since the oral tradition, being flexible had absorbed many personal variations within set parameters (146). Jack Davis by combining aspects of Aboriginal oral culture with the conventions of Western theatre redefines concepts of drama and establishes Aboriginal Drama as the most ancient of art forms.

Gilbert and Tompkins, in *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* have observed that in post-colonial societies, traditional enactments often function as key sites of resistance to imposed values and practices, as mnemonic devices that assist in the preservation of history, and as effective strategies for maintaining cultural difference through specific systems of communication -- aural, visual, and kinetic -- and through specific values related to local (often pre-contact) customs (54). They continue:

When traditional performance elements are incorporated into a contemporary play, they affect the play's content, structure, and style, and consequently, its overall meaning/effect. This process, which usually involves a departure from the techniques and assumptions of realism, stretches colonial definitions of theatre to assert the validity (and the vitality) of other modes of representation. As a way of appropriating received forms of drama and adapting them to fit the local experience, the meshing of performance
conventions is one form of what Sylvia Wynter has called folklore's 'cultural guerilla resistance against the Market economy'. (54)

Robert J Merrit in his preface to the second edition of his play The Cake Man says: "Theatre for us, [...] dates back to our rightful place in time [...] It was part of the natural way [...] It moulded our identity and carried our culture from generation to generation" (vii). According to Gerry Bostock, Black theatre is similar to Greek theatre and Shakespearean theatre in that it is political. He cites the example of Euripides' play Trojan Women in which, the lament of Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, on being taken away from her land, to Greece, a place she had no affinity with is very much like the feeling of Aborigines taken away from their reserves to an area out of their tribal existence and that this is political theatre. Using the analogy of Hamlet whose uncle the king had usurped and killed his father and married his mother, he describes the condition of the Aborigine. Surrounded by overwhelming outside forces Hamlet creates an image of himself as a mad man who wouldn't be a threat to taking over the crown, or the reins of government. Sometimes he has to convince himself of his sanity. Quoting from Shakespeare's Hamlet, he illustrates that the feeling of political theatre during the time of Shakespeare relates closely to that of Black theatre.
To be or not to be that is the question

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The stings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them. (3.1.59)

Gerry Bostock says:

Black theatre is political [. . .] It's the experience of living as a black person in today's society [. . .] in the general Australian society, wearing two faces [. . .] present[ing] one face to European society and one face to their black brothers and sisters. If this is not done one could easily lose one's identity and sanity" (64).

So in Bostock's opinion when theatre groups were formed it was to pass on to the younger generation, the knowledge of Aboriginal history, of stories and legends of Aboriginal heroes handed down by ancestors, of the happenings in the reserves etc (Davis and Hodge 67).

Before 1971 there were no Aboriginal plays -- performed, published or unpublished. Kevin Gilbert (1933-1992) became the first black Australian dramatist with his work, *The Cherry Pickers* (1971). According to Jack Davis, Gilbert's first dramatic venture was *The Gods Look Down and Other Sketches* (*Aboriginal Writing Today* 13). Gilbert discovered his
artistic talents while in goal serving a term for the manslaughter of his wife. This play, written behind bars, and smuggled out on toilet paper, focused on "a few important days in the lives of a group of cherry pickers who come together at the same orchard every year to work, celebrate, make love, sing, laugh and reminisce" (Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia 191). Gilbert who himself had been an itinerant seasonal worker before he was imprisoned, depicted the Aboriginal experience of life of the 1960s in their own personal point of view. As Bostock puts it in Davis and Hodge, "what's important to us isn't important in our terms to the rest of society" (68). Katherine Brisbane vividly recalls the opening sequence of the play and its effect on her:

Centrestage was a large, jolly black woman sitting on an upturned tub. As she chatted, the tub gave sporadic jumps and exuded muffled thumps and whines. In due course a child was released from the tub. She had been punished for some misdemeanor. The dialogue was good-hearted and good-humoured and the subject matter small community affairs. I was suddenly overawed with at being allowed into the domestic life of a people whose privacy had, for so long and for such good reason, been guarded from white eyes. (3)

Written in 1968, it was first presented in draft form at the Mews theatre in Sydney in 1971. Gilbert was given parole in 1971 after spending
fourteen years in goal. An activist for proper recognition of Aboriginal entitlement to justice, human rights and land rights, Gilbert played a leading role in the establishment of the Tent Embassy. In 1972 the Nindethana Theatre presented *The Cherry Pickers* in Fitzroy, Victoria, with an all-Aboriginal cast. The play has not been performed since.


Nindethana Theatre which “arose out of the streets of Melbourne” (Bostock, *Aboriginal Writing Today* 67) is the first to talk about contemporary blacks. In Victorian Aboriginal language the name means ‘a place for corroboree’ (67). Bostock considers this theatre, which talks about people in Aboriginal communities, about Aboriginal heroes and about the experience of living as a black in contemporary society, “ the hallmark of black achievement in theatre” (66).

Bob Maza and Jack Charles were involved in community theatre and wrote several revues. In 1972 they appeared in a series of sketches performed at the Melbourne New Theatre entitled *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*. 
In 1971, two drama students Paul Coe of the Aboriginal Legal service and Jenny sheehan from the Independent theatre in Sydney applied to the Australian Council for the arts for a grant to conduct workshops. Their request was rejected for want of "an actor who [. . .] [had] some professional experience" (Bostock 69). So Bob Maza from Melbourne who was involved in the Nindethana Theatre was persuaded to come and establish Black Theatre in Sydney in 1972, then called the National Black Theatre. Gerald Bostock, who had been researching Aboriginal History in Sydney on leaving the army in 1970 after nine years' service, was one of the founding members. People involved in the Black Theatre were also involved in community activities like medical service, legal service, housing projects etc. The Black Theatre began by doing reviews and sketches expressing Aboriginal feelings and thoughts about contemporary society, the Government and the environment, and was performing on the streets, in hotels and even in the lounges of pubs, with the aim of promoting Aboriginal political views through drama.

In response to a High Court ruling against a traditional claim to land ownership, Nimrod Street Theatre presented *Basically Black* in 1972 featuring artists like Bob Maza, Gary Foley and Zac Martin. It incorporated some of the sketches from the *Jack Charles* show. The participants were also involved in the setting up of the Tent Embassy on the lawns of the Parliament House.
When the Aboriginal Embassy happened on the lawns of the Parliament House protesting against the land rights statement made by the then Prime Minister Billy Mcmahon, -- namely, “Aborigines have the right to lease their tribal land” (qtd. in Davis and Hodge 70) — Black Theatre was there acting out in the general public the conditions of Aborigines in contemporary society. They performed as street groups, in the marches and in all the political demonstrations. At this time the Black American Movement also influenced them.

Carol Johnson, a former member of the internationally reputed New York Ensemble, visited Australia in 1972 and worked with the National Black Theatre in Sydney. Bryon Syron, the Aboriginal actor, producer, director and performer, studied in New York city with Leslie Uggams (black American actress and activist) and worked with Lloyd Richards (the highly acclaimed black American director of the play *A Raisin in the sun*). Syron believed that the Aboriginal theatre should develop in the way the black theatre has evolved in America in order to become the “soul of the country” (Nelson, *Westerly* 46). Jack Davis argued that, Aborigines should emulate the black American example of achievement and “set up their own presses, their own television media, their own radio stations” (qtd. in Nelson *Westerly* 49). According to one of the characters in his play *The Dreamers*:
There should be more smashin' and burnin' of these cars! We'll make wadjellas [whites] sit up . . . They can't treat us Blackfellahs like that. We'll be like them fellas in America: we'll really get into these bastards. (Nelson, Westerly 49)

However, this piece was deleted from the final version of the play.

Though aware of the essential differences in black white relations in America and Australia (Chesson 148-49), the black movement in the United States became something of a model, and later Fiji and Nigeria did too (Chesson 134). Furthermore, Davis felt that it was time an Australian history from the Aboriginal point of view was produced. The present is rooted in the past, and the wellbeing of Aborigines depends upon a correct and balanced understanding of their own history (Chesson 150).

His trip to Nigeria to participate in the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Nigeria in 1977, modified his feelings, and made his later poems less bitter. According to him it showed him that blacks can exploit blacks just as readily as can any other race, that there is much room for greater tolerance and understanding at all levels of human interaction the world over (Chesson 189). This change of attitude is also reflected in the plays he wrote later.

Federal funding in 1973-74 enabled the Black Theatre group to obtain a factory building on lease, which was then converted into a theatre in the round with seating for hundred. The first production was
the revue *Basically Black* by Bob Maza. The first play staged there was Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man* in 1975. Bostock notes of its performances there:

The audience who'd never been to black theatre and had never been to the ghetto, had to go through the ghetto to get to the theatre, and that in itself was a great psychological advantage to the play, because people were coming there for the first time. . . . in that environment, in Redfern, you were confronting people not only with what was in the play, but what was in the street outside, so that had a dynamic sort of effect on all the audience. (*Aboriginal Writing Today* 72).

Written in 1973-74 while serving a prison sentence in Bathurst goal Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man* is based partly on his own experiences of growing up at the Erarnbie Mission. Described by Katherine Brisbane as the “first speaking portrait of life in an Aboriginal reservation” (3), the play deals with themes like injustice and poor living conditions, loss of esteem and dignity among the men on the reserves and the countervailing warmth and mutual support of Aboriginal family relationships. The main character “Ruby, tells her son [Pumpkinhead] tales of a mythical half-blind man who hands out cakes and other goodies to white boys. One day, she promises, he might see clearly enough to give them to black boys too”. (*Encyclopedia of Aboriginal
First staged by Bob Maza and Brian Syron at the Black Theatre, Redfern in 1975, it became the first Aboriginal play to enter the repertoire of the white theatre. In 1977 funded by the Aboriginal Arts Board of Australia Council and directed by George Ogilvie it had a successful six weeks season at Bondi Pavillion Theatre, Sydney. While at Redfern, "[. . .] audiences, both black and white, found their way into the black domain" at Bondi, "Audiences, both black and white, came from all over the country into the white domain" (Merritt, The Cake Man viii). According to Katherine Brisbane, the play's success owed much to pioneering actors Justine Saunders and Brian Syron. Moreover the cast's immediate identification with the characters gave the performed work a compelling emotional drive (3). It was adapted for television by ABC in 1977 and was published by Currency press in 1978 thus becoming the first published Aboriginal play. The Cake Man went on an American–Canadian tour in 1982 and represented Australia at the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado. It attracted capacity crowds in its forty-one performances. It may be noted that the first Aboriginal plays were written in prison and theatre was used as a forum for protest.

The only other play produced at the Black Theatre before it ceased functioning in 1976 was Gerald Bostock's Here Comes the Nigger. The first Aboriginal play with an urban setting it focused on the threats to the black Australian identity and dealt with the racism of the police, publicans and the populace, and the dangers which even well meaning
whites can pose. The emergence of a sense of black nationhood is shown to be a direct result of having to combat oppression in order to exist. It questions the principles by which white society continues its suppression of the Aboriginal populace and points out that though racism is attributed to social causes, it is used by the ruling sector to maintain economic and cultural dominance in society, and hence is political. (Watego, *Connections* 2:1). Never published in its entirety, two of its scenes had appeared in the journal *Meanjin* 36.4 (1977).

Though initially centred around Sydney, Western Australia has been the centre of dramatic activity since 1979. Jack Davis' first play *The Dreamers* was staged during the Bunbury Arts Festival in 1972 and *Kullark* in 1979 during the West Australian sesquicentenary celebrations.

Cliff Watego observes in "Aboriginal Literature" that, the first five Aboriginal plays performed, evoke the institutionalised stereotyping of blacks and provide an overview of the various forms of dependency upon white institutions that inhibited black advancement (*Encyclopedia of Post Colonial Literatures in English* 3). He goes on to show that in Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* the community of black itinerant fruit pickers are totally dependent upon the white orchard owner for their livelihood, that the blind black poet in Bostock's *Here Comes the Nigger* must rely upon a white female tutor to help him qualify for his Higher School Certificate, that the Aboriginal household in Robert Merrit's *The
Cake Man is rescued from collapse only by the benevolence of a white civilian; that despite the continual efforts of the Nyoongahs in all phases of Jack Davis's Kullark to meet white society on its own patronising terms, white justice operates to reaffirm their inferiority, and that in The Dreamers, social inertia fixes the Wallitch family in a cycle of dependency on alcohol and welfare benefits that serves to conceal their spiritual association with their Dreaming (4).

In the late 1980s new playwrights entered the field of Black Australian Drama. Jack Davis' No Sugar premiered at the Festival of Perth in February, 1985 under the direction of Andrew Ross and his Honeyspot written to celebrate international Youth Year was premiered at the Come Out Festival in Adelaide in March the same year. Davis won the Australian Writers' Guild Aawgie Award for best stage play for No Sugar. This play toured to the World Theatre Festival at Expo 1986 in Vancouver, Canada and was performed at Ottawa, Melbourne and London. In 1987, The Dreamers was revived and provided a counterpoint for the re-enactment of the launching of the first Fleet at Portsmouth during its four-week tour there. In 1987 Bryan Syron founded the National Black Playwrights’ Conference and workshop. Out of it developed the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust (ANTT)

as a means of protecting the Aboriginal heritage in the performing arts, promoting Aboriginal theatre, producing
works by Aboriginal authors, providing a venue for Aboriginal performing artists and making available a permanent platform for political protest and social comment through drama. (*Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia* 21).

It organised a series of productions, which included two concerts, *Survival '88*, and *Not the 1988 Patry*; two plays, Bob Maza’s *The Keepers* and Richard Walley’s *Munjong*; and a television documentary *Black on Black*. The Australian Bicentennial of 1988 saw a wave of Black oppositional writing, including an assertion of the suppressed histories of Australia, especially by Jack Davis. His *Barunjin* had its world premiere at the 1988 Festival of Perth. Richard Walley (*Coordah*), Bob Maza (*The Keepers*), Eva Johnson (*Tjinderella*) all had plays performed between 1984-89. The 1990s had seen new works by Davis, (*In Our Town*) Walley (*Munjong*) and Essie Bennell (*The Silent Years*). Most of these works were written in Western Australia and had the Festival of Perth as its launching pad. Jack Davis and his Swan River (later, Black Swan) Theatre Company have been involved with so many of them.

According to Berwyn Lewis, Davis was attracted to writing plays after he read the works of Chekov and became interested in “telling our simple stories in a new type of theatre” (8). As Davis explains in *Jack Davis- A Life Story*, he had been experimenting with theatre since 1972. In 1975, he attended a theatre workshop held in the Black Theatre, Redfern, Sydney, at the end of which all the participants were expected to produce
something. He considers this as his first venture into professional theatre. The play he wrote for this was *The Biter Bit*. Davis summarises its content as follows:

It is concerned with some Aborigines who come down to Sydney. The first white man they meet is a Sydney con-man who makes it fairly obvious that he is going to take in these settlement suckers. He promises to buy them some cassette-radios at a very cheap price if they will allow him to hold their money overnight. He collects their money and is carefully counting it when a mission-reared cousin arrives and borrows the money to go up to the bar and buy a couple of cartons of beer to bring back to the city slicker’s flat. The Aborigines walk out with the beer and the money, and vanish. The slicker is confronted by the barman and asked to pay for the cartons. Of course, he no longer has any money. The barman winds up his boot and catapults the slicker out into the street (Chesson 179).

Jack Davis had been convinced that writing was the best means of influencing public opinion and bringing about an improvement in the Aboriginal situation and had published two books of poems *The First Born* and *Jagardoo*. He became interested in the possibilities of the theatre after seeing the script of a short play written by Kath Walker. He felt that theatre offered an opportunity to use all the talents of speech
and body movement present in Aboriginal oral literature and dance since time began and that it was an exciting way of reaching a wide audience (Chesson 191). "Theatre, in a bush arena, is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime. There was and is great opportunity for theatre to draw upon the rich Aboriginal oral literature" (Chesson 197).

Davis started writing a long play called "The Steel and the Stone" which was to be the basis of a number of his other plays. One section of this play turned out to be The Dreamers performed in 1972 at the arts festival in Bunbury. The success of a four-month national tour of The Dreamers by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust doing 104 performances led to the commissioning of two more plays -- No Sugar and Honey Spot.

The Western Australian sesquicentenary celebration was the immediate context of the production of Kullark. Ignoring hundreds of thousands of years of Aboriginal occupation of the continent, the pamphlets advertising the event stated that man first came to Western Australia in 1829. Not only did this ignore the Aboriginal contribution to the development of the state, but the very existence of the Aborigines. Moreover, the sesquicentenary sponsored Dorothy Hewett's The Man from Muckinupin as its official play without even considering an Aboriginal playwright. Incensed by this attitude of the celebration committee (WAY '79) Davis wrote Kullark presenting an Aboriginal perspective on Western
Australia’s history of a century and a half of white settlement. At the end of Act one the actors sing:

ALL. Now you primly say that you are justified
And sing of a nation’s glory;
But I think of a people crucified,
The real Australian story. (1.9.39).

In his two plays *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*, Davis created what reviewer Billy Marshall-Stoneking terms a “symphonic folk drama” in which the life of his people is told not only through dialogue but through poetry, song, music, dance and pantomime (Stoneking).

Commissioned by the Australian Elizabethan Trust for the 1985 Perth festival, *No Sugar* was planned to tour Aboriginal communities and settlements of small country places, with audiences sitting all around in a circle, with hardly any special lighting effects and a minimum of props, with the dancers and actors moving through the audience (Chesson 207). The Maltings Theatre in East Perth, which was a great wooden barn formerly used as a warehouse for storing brewery materials, and had huge timber supports and secluded alcoves around the main theatre was used for the first production (Chesson 208). According to the reviewer, Barry Hill “[. . .] you couldn’t imagine that play being performed anywhere but in a theatre that had the audience sitting on the floor and the players calling upon them to shift camp during the play”.

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Barungin was first performed in 1988, the bicentennial year celebrating two hundred years of white occupation and a time of mourning for many Aborigines. This play, meant to counter white euphoria was, according to Mudrooro, Jack Davis's gift to white Australia (viii). It is also set in the context of the contemporary event of John Pat's death and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal deaths in custody (Hodge xiii, Shoemaker 258). According to Jack Davis, though Aborigines only constitute one percent of the Australian population, they represent ten percent of prison inmates, a figure which more than triples in Western Australia (Turcotte, Writers in Action 182). John Pat's case was a notorious case of death in custody. Ruby Langford Ginibi in her book Don't Take Your Love to Town describes the circumstances under which John Pat was arrested:

John Pat sees a black man being hit by an off-duty policeman. Four other police join in, Pat tries to pull the black man away from the fight. A policeman punches him in the mouth. A witness: 'He fell back and didn't get up. I heard his head hit the road.'

Pat was picked up by the hair and kicked in the face. Witness: 'It was like a football kick'. They threw him in the van and went to the police station (256).

Later he was found dead in his cell.
A forensic pathologist found that Pat died from head injuries, which caused a brain haemorrhage. He had received ten blows to the head, half a dozen bruises above his right ear, his lips were cracked, there were scratches on his face, and he had two broken ribs and a tear in the aorta, the major blood vessel leading from the heart. A month later the policeman's clothes have been washed repeatedly. There are traces of blood on the clothes and boots. There is an inquest and two court cases (256).

The four police officers and one police aid, who were tried for manslaughter, were acquitted and reinstated to their positions in the police force. "John pat, at the time of his death, was only sixteen years of age. The coroner said the reason he died was because he had a particularly thin skull for an Aboriginal" (Davis, *Writers in Action* 183).

Speaking about his play *Barungin* Jack Davis points out that it was "[. . .] the way people have had to live, the way people had to survive . . ." (Davis, *Writers in Action* 186) and that writing it (*Barungin*) with anger he was able to spell out the story "[. . .] more clearly than if I had approached it in any other way" (Davis, *Writers in Action* 188). "[. . .] because of the deaths in custody I felt that there had to be some publicity outside what [white] people were reading in the newspapers" (Davis, *Writers in Action* 193).
While in Kullark the action moves from the kitchen of the Yorlah household in a country town in the South West of Western Australia in 1979, to a farm in the Pinjarra area between 1829 and 1834, the Moore River Native Settlement in the 1930s, the Yorlahs' chaff-bag humpy in 1945 (6), and deals with the history of a hundred and fifty years of Black/White relationships, The Dreamers is set "in the home of the Wallitch family, in South Western Australia" (6) in 1982 and Barungin, in Perth, Western Australia during 1988. Both The Dreamers and Barungin have an Aboriginal kitchen, living room and bedroom as its setting and chronicles the history of the urban Wallitch family. No Sugar set in Northam, in the Avon valley and the Moore River Native Settlement during the years 1929, (which marked the centenary of white settlement on the Swan River), to 1934 explores life on the Missions. In Our Town is set ten years after No Sugar, in 1946.

Kullark toured extensively in Western Australia for the Perth Playhouse Company. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust toured the Playhouse Company's reproduction of The Dreamers for seventeen weeks around Australia adapting to venues as different as the Sydney Opera House and the Historic Theatre Royal in Hobart (Blacklock, foreword No Sugar 7). Davis has stated that the thirty performances of The Dreamers in which an "Aboriginal family kitchen" was up in the Sydney Opera House "will always stick in my memory and are a highlight of my career" (Chesson 204). No Sugar, was staged in a semi-promenade
setting in which the audience followed the players on their journey through the action of the play. At Vancouver's Expo '86 the play was performed alongside the Beijing People's Art Theatre from China and the Kirov Ballet from the USSR. In June/July 1988 No Sugar had an extremely successful season at the Riverside Studios in London (Shoemaker 268).

In May 1988 all three plays No Sugar, The Dreamers and Barungin, under the title The First Born, were linked by short scenes in a prologue, and performed in sequence at the Fitzroy Town Hall in Melbourne as a six-hour epic featuring 18 actors (Turcotte 182, Shoemaker 258). According to reviewer Dennis Davison, “the main impression of the trilogy is an authentic portrayal of everyday living, acted so naturally that we are absorbed . . . Davis is neither sentimental nor didactic but an honest realist” (qtd. in Shoemaker Black Words 258). Davis states that the way of life represented in the First Born trilogy “is the way many Aboriginal people live today in Perth” (Davis, Writers in Action 186). The observations made by Dibble and MacIntyre in the case of No Sugar is also applicable to the trilogy as a whole: that it is at the same time both protest play and documentary history, that they may be performed in a traditional Western stage setting but is equally effective in a bush setting as well and that while the plot is European in that it “presents a coherent and continuous narrative, [. . .] is distinctive for not having closure in the European sense, being an episodic series of unresolved confrontations in
which Aborigines are more agonists than protagonists or antagonists" (96).

Davis's plays which, "confront white and black audiences with a truthful, uncompromised picture of urban Aboriginal life" (Davis, Meanjin 46), are structured according to the principle of "Aboriginal Reality" as termed by Mudrooroo. They begin with a symbolic statement. This is followed by the central story or plotline in a naturalistic mode, which continues for some length before breaking down as the symbolic returns in strength (Barungin viii). The Dreamers makes a symbolic statement about the historical displacement and the resultant loss of identity of the Aborigines through the tribal family, and the presence of the Dancer takes the play into the symbolic level. In Barungin while the funeral service symbolises the theme of the play, the presence of mythic elements like the Dancer, the night hawk and the Magpies signals 'Aboriginal reality'. In Writing from the Fringe, he points out that a "recognition of Aboriginal reality as stemming from the Dreaming or Dreamtime, is explicit or implicit and is a trait of Aboriginality. A state, either mental or mythical, [which] lies underneath the ordinary day-to-day consciousness of the Aboriginal character, which sometimes erupts [. . .] to give a surreal quality (172). Though Davis's plays are often seen as merely twentieth century naturalistic European Drama, according to Mudrooroo, "a recognition of an atemporal state in itself leads to mixed genre" (172). -- a hybrid.
Robert Hodge points out that the principle of repetition, whereby the same fundamental patterns recur, under different guises and in different circumstances; and the principle of circularity, which sees beginnings and ends meet in the closure of a circle, as two of the organising principles of Davis's plays (Barungin xiv). According to Carroll, The First Born trilogy evokes a feeling of repetition and of circularity: “Elements are picked up, carried on a little way, then dropped, to be picked up, repeated, pushed a little further until the landscape they occupy is completely filled in” (qtd. in Carroll 105). Hodge observes how, though Barungin begins and ends with a funeral, both are different. The Wallitch family in Barungin continues on from The Dreamers and the Millimurra family of In Our Town from that of No Sugar but no member is the same “yet the structures of the family and of Aboriginal tradition, with its powerful bonds of loyalty and its potential for anger and violence, have continued into the present, with new people [...] filling in new versions of old roles” (Barungin xiv).

Though Davis's plays opens with a reverie, the endings leave one with a feeling of a “progression into pessimism” (Elder 212). After chronicling a hundred and fifty years of Aboriginal experience Kullark ends hopefully with a song, which celebrates Aboriginality and their survival.
BLACK ACTOR. [. . .]

With murder, with rape, you marred her skin,

But you cannot whiten her mind.

They will remain my children forever,

The black and the beautiful kind.

The black and the beautiful kind. (2.6.66)

In *No Sugar*, as the Magpies squawk, Joe and Mary with their baby leave Moore River Settlement and their relatives, to an uncertain future. The translation of Gran’s farewell song, which ends the play speaks only of woe.

Woe, woe, woe.

My boy and girl and baby

Going a long way walking,

That way walking,

That way walking.

Pity, pity, pity,

Hungry, walking, hungry,

Pity, pity, pity,

Hungry, hungry,
Walking, walking, walking,

Yay, yay, yay,

Coo-o-o-o-o-o-o-ooh. (110)

*The Dreamers*, which ends with an elegy to Uncle Worru, recognizes the end of the traditional identity he stood for.

DOLLY. I will let you dream -- dream on old friend

Of a child and a man in September,

Of hills and stars and the river's bend;

Alas, that is all to remember. (2.7.79)

*Barungin* ends with the images of “the concrete floor . . . a cell door . . .

and *John Pat*” (2.9.60) and a grim list of Aborigines who died in custody during the two hundred years of white settlement, read out by Meena.

However *In Our Town* shows miscegenation as one possible means for future reconciliation between cultures. While the children’s play *Honey Spot* “explores the possibility of reconciliation through an exchange of experience and cultural capital” (Gilbert, *Jack Davis* 69), *Moorli and the Leprechaun* ends with the notion of shared responsibility.

MOORLI. We live in our land

You and I, one another,

And the land and the sum

Is our Father and Mother.
Be kind and respectful whatever you do
Because we are the guardians
Me, you and you, me, you and you
Me, you and you. (1.20.57)

Both *Honey Spot* and *Moorli and the Leprechaun* speak of friendship between an Aboriginal boy and a White girl, which may be taken as a model for the kind of harmony that could exist if prejudice did not get in the way of friendship. Both plays provide a positive, optimistic view of the potential for intercultural understanding in Australia. ("Honey Spot" *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*)

But his unpublished monodrama *Wahngin Country* remains dark throughout. After repeating some of the poetic pieces, which appeared earlier, in *The Dreamers* and *Kullark*, and which reflected the various stages of the tribal family, it ends with:

So leave us now to continue our crying,

There's nothing left for us now but the terror of dying (22).

*Wahngin Country* (Talking Country), [unpublished] was workshopped by the Black Swan Theatre Company, with Andrew Ross as the director. A one-man show about an itenerant drifter, Michael Pedro Sebastian, commonly known as Old Mick, it is based on incidents in the writer's past observations of friends and relatives as well as anecdotes from the life of the Broome actor Stephen Baamba Albert (Black), who played the
part. Mick’s world is confined to a bench in a Perth inner city park, where he had been living on and off for twenty years. The park is now “his territory, his domain” (qtd. in Farmer).

A musician plays music -- didgeridoo and clapsticks -- in full view of the audience. Many of Davis’s poems are included in this play and are used “to take us back into Mick’s memory and deep into the moods and feelings of Aboriginal people” (Farmer). According to Ross, it also “opens a window into Mick’s mind and adds a new level to the writing” (Farmer). While the reading was staged with a park bench, dustbin and a drift of dead leaves in the vast expanse of the octagon theatre, for the Festival it was set, late at night, under a tree in the grounds of the University of Western Australia (Farmer).

In many of his plays the cluttered and impoverished domestic interior, in which the Aboriginal family subsists is contrasted with the openness of outdoor spaces where the chant and dance or corroboree takes place (Carroll 106). In Kullark, Yagan and family are depicted as occupying the outdoor spaces and only the settlers occupy the interior (a hut). While in the 1930’s the Yorlah family in Kullark and the Millimurra’s in No Sugar occupy bag humpies in camping areas, the contemporary families in Kullark, The Dreamers and Barungin are shown wholly indoors. In In Our Town the park increasingly starts featuring as an aboriginal space while Wahning Country is set wholly in the park with
the park bench as the Aboriginal space. The motif of a physical journey through space, allied with the nomadic need as well as enforced journeys arising out of dispossession and displacement is also built into the structure and form of the plays.

Another feature is a sense of self-deprecating humour -- the singular capacity to smile even while the figurative hurricane strikes. According to Jack Davis, historically Aborigines “learnt to keep themselves alive by laughing” (qtd. in *Black Words* 233). Stanner has noted that the Aborigines have:

[. . .] the humour that is often one of endearment, often one of familiarity . . . it equates people with other people, people with animals and what have you . . . you’ll find that even in urban situations Aboriginal people can recognize somebody way down the street by the way they walk. Because they know peoples’ walks and mannerisms. And those things are more noticed by, and more remembered by, Aborigines than they are by white people (qtd. in *Black Words* 234)

According to Shoemaker, Aboriginal humour derives from the traditions and particular skills of Aborigines, and from such themes as religion, alcohol and gambling. It frequently deflates pretentions, especially those of White Australians and of ‘white-thinking’ Aborigines"
through “the mimicry and mockery of whites and the humorous celebration of their own lifestyle” (Black Words 233).

**Actors/Audience**

Davis’s first professional acting was during the workshop held in the Black Theatre, Redfern, during which they were required to act a part in a play other than one’s own and he describes his role in his biography:

“A young Aboriginal girl hitchhikes from the Northern Territory, arrives in Redfern and finds her way into a pub. I have the job of warning her about the philandering qualities of a white man with whom she has picked up. She is a fresh young girl and her companion, not very keen to give up a good thing, knocks me down. . . . Another young Koorie comes into the fray and knocks the other man down (Chesson 179).

Later Jack Davis acted as uncle Worru in The Dreamers. To Ernie Dingo, on stage Davis seemed to be “the spirit of every Aboriginal elder before him”. “This cheeky old man, who was full of spirit and laughter, tormented the audience and called them into his heart from where he spoke. It occurred to me that he wasn’t acting. His portrayal was real. Jack was saying the very words he wanted to he heard” (Jack Davis 76).

Ernie Dingo describes a scene in which Davis as Uncle Worru wakes up, coughs a heavy smoker’s cough and spits (as his character was meant to
do). He notes that, the audience always gasped in horror. "I'd laugh at their reaction and think kindly of the old men of my past he epitomised. He was showing the reality of the aged men who lived with dirt floors in makeshift dwellings. Poverty is never pretty and death has never required social graces. (Dingo 76-77).

Jack Davis acted as tracker in No Sugar. According to reviewer Barry Hill,

he was the strong presence but he did not dominate. His voice had that Aboriginal evenness that is at first easily mistaken for passivity, but the moment he began to move about and speak, his centrality was clear. Somehow he managed to be the playwright on stage, managing his own lines, the actor of a part in the play, and a modern tribal elder all in one. -- a rich and complex presence (Hill).

Ernie Dingo remembers that Davis also had "to provide the linking music, with the harmonica, between each scene from wherever he was on the stage" (77) and "would play whatever he felt like playing at the time" (78).

The production cast for The Dreamers consisted entirely of Aboriginal people, which included Davis's nephews, nieces and grannies (Ernie Dingo 74). Ernie dingo speaks of their lack of training:

We had no theatrical training to become actors, but his scripts were so close to our upbringing there was no need for
training. We did it like we lived it. And we were proud to know that no theatre training school in Australia could teach us to act like the Aboriginals that he wanted us to be. Proud, upstanding and family. Together. (Jack Davis 78).

Davis's advice to them was to “be yourself, if not, look for someone you know in your own family and play them” (Dingo 78). Davis himself says: “We were all pretty untrained actors but we had one important thing working for us. Most of our cast had lived the life portrayed in the play; all they had to do was relax and be themselves” (Chesson 198). And about their lack of “professionalism”, of breaking the “rules of theatre” Ernie Dingo comments:

We thought nothing of switching from being our larrikin selves, spinning yarns, teasing and joking even in the wings, to instantly becoming our characters with just one step on to the stage. We believed in what we were doing, we just did it in a different way (76).

After the performance of The Dreamers Davis mentions how, unable to believe that “stalwarts of early [White] society such as Bussell and Molloy would ever have killed Aborigines”, some extremely shocked society ladies called him a liar, a twister of facts (Chesson 195). He goes on to affirm the fact that Bussell did shoot and kill an Aboriginal girl of nine and that Colonel Molloy did lead a revenge party for the death of
George Layman, "Scouring the district destroying blacks by the dozen [...]" and lining the route with their corpses.

Citing Narogin, Carroll points out that while White audiences tend to see the stylized scenes as discursions from, and interruptions to, the pervasive realistic mode of the plays; the Aboriginals, expect more basic repetition of motifs, dialogue, idea, and stylistic nodal points in a theatrical performance, just like the repetitions in traditional chants and the 'sung' part of the corroboree (106).

Hodge and Mishra point out that, while Aboriginal audiences respond to the bawdy realism and earthy dialogue of the plays with the joy of recognition, and a sense of release from the disabling and oppressive stereotype, Whites are given the privilege of entry into intimate areas of Aboriginal life, but with voices and meanings left unexplained and mysterious to the monolingual Whites. Moreover, his theatrical strategy intermittently disables the whites, by juxtaposing the limits of their monologic state to the dialogic mode of Aboriginal culture. (Hodge and Mishra 108-9).

After watching The Dreamers at the Twelfth Night Theatre, Brisbane, Queensland, with Jack Davis playing the role of Uncle Worru, Oodgeroo Noonuccal describes the play as "an outstanding piece of live theatre" (20). She remembers that when asked for her opinion, an actor of non-Aboriginal descent "was lost for words and in a confused way answered 'Well, it's different isn't it?'" while the Aborigines in the
audience had been rolling with laughter at the snide jokes that only Aborigines could understand. According to Noonuccal, "it came through very clearly in The Dreamers that non-Aborigines know little or nothing about our ways" (20).

Speaking of the performance of The Dreamers Davis says how as Dolly completed her lines:

I will let you dream--dream on old friend
Of a child and a man is September,
Of hills and stars and the river's bend;
Alas that is all to remember. (2.7.79)

he had "the satisfaction of seeing more than one colonial descendant wipe away a self-conscious tear" (Chesson 198).

After performances he noticed how the Nyoongahs in the audience didn't want to go home -- "it was their first experience of genuine Aboriginal theatre" (Chesson 199). Davis remembers how he could always sense when there were Aboriginal people in the audience by "a laugh here or there in the theatre, and a slightly different reaction to a situation [. . .] "The Aborigines in the audience were always deeply moved to see themselves in the characters up on stage" (Chesson 203).

Speaking about Aboriginal responses to the play Davis observes: "They were seeing something they could identify with. Some were a little cautious of what they saw, especially those living in comfortable
circumstances, in as much as they saw it as a condemnation of themselves (Davis, Meanjin 47).

In Barungin the Aboriginal members of the audience: “were aware of the fact that these things had happened to their people, but to see it, as it were in a third dimensional effect, which theatre does offer us, I think it had a tremendous impact upon Aboriginal viewers” (Davis, Writers in Action 186). Shoemaker has observed that barriers between the audience and the players break down as Uncle Peegun and Shane actually busk for the theatre patrons and pass around the hat afterwards, saying “You look like a rich mob of people” (Black Words 258)

People also remarked upon the seemingly natural acting ability of the Aboriginal cast, for they were playing out their own experiences using their own speech and behavioural patterns (Davis, Meanjin 45).

Gilbert and Tompkins defines post colonial performance as:

- acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly;
- acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of colonized (and sometimes pre-contact) communities;
- acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms; and
- acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation (Post colonial Drama 11).
Davis through his plays contests colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies, and is part of a “politically motivated, historical-analytical movement [which] engages with, resists and seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in, the material, historical, cultural-political, pedagogical, discursive and textual domains” (qtd. in Gilbert and Tompkins 2). He foregrounds difference as a marker of identity, voice, and hence empowerment. Textual gaps produced by the colonial encounter and by the system of writing are also foregrounded. He reacts to the imperial hegemony through canonical counter discourse, historical recuperation and through decentring manipulations of the English language. History, language, song, music, and dance are all sites of resistance.

Jack Davis's theatre is syncretic. Christopher Balme has introduced the concept of syncretic theatre to describe the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture. The term borrowed from religious syncretism is usually an extended process brought about by friction and interchange between cultures. Theatrical syncretism, according to him, is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or postcolonial experience. It is very often written and performed in a Europhone language but almost always manifests varying degrees of bi- or multilingualism. In his opinion, Syncretic theatre is one of the most effective
means of decolonising the stage utilizing as it does the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements without slavish adherence to the one tradition or the other. It relies heavily on non-dialogic communicative devices: on dance, music, song, iconography and indigenous languages. (Balme 42).

However, I would use the term Theatre of Hybridisation to refer to the theatre of Jack Davis, which is structured in 'Aboriginal reality, though it makes use of Western theatrical conventions. Mudrooroo observes:

Aboriginal drama often begin with [. . .] a symbolic statement and this is followed by the central story or plotline in a naturalistic mode which continues for some length before breaking down as the 'symbolic' returns in strength. I term this method of structure 'Aboriginal reality' (“Black Reality” x)

Boulton sets down two kinds of conventions – “those that make for the intensity and concentration of drama, the violent impact; and those that protect the audience from too violent an experience or that are enforced by mere physical possibility” (Boulton 4). Both kinds are there in Davis's plays.

Davis's plays follow the unity of action but not always the unities of time and place. He divides his plays into acts and scenes and makes
use of devices like coincidences, look outs, letters, flashbacks, narration of events and overhearing of conversations, use of contrasts, surprises, effective silences. Characters are portrayed through what other people say about them, by the nature of the people making the comments and by their own words and actions and are differentiated through their individual speech characteristics like pronunciation, choice of words, sentence construction, tact or lack of it, explicitness, delicacy of language or otherwise (Boulton 110).

In a naturalistic play, the convention is that speech and action should as closely as possible appear to be those of everyday life. Actors represent people behaving naturally, and usually privately, before a large audience, while all the time maintaining the illusion that, as characters, these persons are unaware of the audience's presence. (Raymond Williams 4). But as Mudrooroo describes, Davis's plays are polysemic in nature:

Jack Davis's plays are often accepted as merely examples of twentieth century naturalistic European drama; but I see this as a white reading in that this way the symbolic aspects are relegated to secondary motifs – attempts to break free of the format -- rather than being of primary importance. I do not see them as devices to break down 'realist' frame, but as integral parts pointing to the polysemic nature of Aboriginal drama. ("Black Reality" ix)
Rooted in Aboriginal ritual, his plays are inescapably communal and are cathartic; is educative and is part of a struggle for a better future.
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